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Shulem, One of the King's Principal Waiters

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Shulem, One of the King's Principal Waiters (Facsimile 3, Figure 5)

Figure 5 in Facsimile 3 of the Book of Abraham is identified as “Shulem, one of the king’s principal waiters.” We don’t know anything more about the man Shulem beyond this brief description because he does not appear in the text of the Book of Abraham. Presumably, if we had more of the story, we would know more about how he fit in the overall Abrahamic narrative. However, there are some things we can say about Shulem and his title “the king’s principal waiter.”

First is Shulem’s name. This name is “widely attested in Semitic languages” from the time of Abraham.¹ This includes attestations in Old Akkadian, Old Assyrian, Old Babylonian, Middle Babylonian, Eblaite, and Ugaritic.² Additionally, Shulem’s title “the king’s principal waiter” is arguably attested in ancient Egypt. In particular, the title “butler of the ruler” (*wḏpw n ḥkꜣ*) is a fairly close match to “the king’s principal waiter” and is attested during the time of Abraham.³

But what would a Semite like Shulem be doing in the royal court of Egypt, as depicted in Facsimile 3? In fact, there is evidence of Asiatic migration into Egypt during the time of Abraham. “A number of Asiatics residing in Egypt are also observed in texts dating to [the time of Abraham],” observes one scholar. “They list Asiatic retainers, dancers, singers, and other workers. . . . They further point to the presence of institutions for the coordination of relations between Asiatics and the local population. As some Asiatics bear Semitic names, it is likely that Levantines were still migrating into Egypt at this time.”⁴ After Abraham’s day, “in the Rammeside

1. John Gee, “Shulem, One of the King’s Principal Waiters,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016): 383.

2. Gee, “Shulem,” 383–84.

3. Gee, “Shulem,” 385–87.

4. For a collection and summary of the relevant evidence, see Anna-Latifa Mourad, *Rise of the Hyksos: Egypt and the Levant from the Middle Kingdom to the Early*

period a number of Canaanites rose to prominence in the Egyptian palace administration, and the position of 'royal butler' was a popular career path in this respect."⁵ It could be that Shulem is at least one instance of this trend predating the later Rammeside period.

In fact, the Egyptian "Fourteenth Dynasty was 'a local dynasty of Asiatic origin in the north-eastern Delta' who are notable as 'kings with foreign, mostly West Semitic, names.'"⁶ Once again, not only the names of the rulers but also members of elite households show signs of Semitic origin during this time.⁷ "So from Shulem's name and title . . . we can surmise the following: From the form of his name, [it would appear] that Shulem lived during the late Middle Kingdom or the Second Intermediate Period [ca. 1800–1600 BC]. Shulem was [likely] not a native Egyptian. He was probably a first generation immigrant. He [likely] served in the court of a Fourteenth Dynasty ruler, who was probably not a native Egyptian either."⁸ This evidence reinforces the overall historical plausibility of the Book of Abraham and may help make sense of Joseph Smith's identification of this figure in Facsimile 3.

Further Reading

Gee, John. "Shulem, One of the King's Principal Waiters." *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 19 (2016): 383–95.

Second Intermediate Period (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015), 19–130, esp. 124–30, quote at 126. Compare Rachael Thyrsa Sparks, "Canaan in Egypt: Archaeological Evidence for a Social Phenomenon," in *Invention and Innovation: The Social Context of Technological Change 2: Egypt, the Aegean, and the Near East, 1650–1150 BC*, ed. Janine Bourriau and Jack Phillips (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), 25–54.

5. Sparks, "Canaan in Egypt," 44.

6. Gee, "Shulem," 384, quoting K. S. B. Ryholt, *The Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period c. 1880–1550 B.C.* (Copenhagen: Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies, 1997), 94, 99; compare Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 132; Kathryn A. Bard, *An Introduction to the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt*, 2nd ed. (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 216.

7. Gee, "Shulem," 384–85; compare Barry J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 28–29; Kerry Muhlestein, "Levantine Thinking in Egypt," in *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel: History, Imperialism, Ideology, and Literature*, ed. S. Bar, D. Kahn, and J. J. Shirley (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2011), 206–8; James K. Hoffmeier, "Egyptian Religious Influences on the Early Hebrews," in *Did I Not Bring Israel Out of Egypt? Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier, Alan R. Millard, and Gary A. Rendsburg (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 9–10; and Garry J. Shaw, *War and Trade with the Pharaohs: An Archaeological Study of Ancient Egypt's Foreign Relations* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen and Sword Archaeology, 2017), 49–51.

8. Gee, "Shulem," 387.