



2022

Conclusion

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Recommended Citation

Smoot, Stephen O.; Gee, John; Muhlestein, Kerry; and Thompson, John S. (2022) "Conclusion," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 61: Iss. 4, Article 52.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol61/iss4/52>

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Conclusion

Ask the Right Questions and Keep Looking

As the preceding has shown, the Book of Abraham is an inexhaustible source of exploration and critical investigation, and the work of scholarly examination into this book shows no signs of slowing. On the contrary, we see multiple welcoming avenues for additional study. The net result of this review, in the meantime, has been the (re)discovery of numerous points of convergence between the Book of Abraham and the ancient world and theological and narrative aspects of the book that invite more sustained investigation. We hope that our guide has been helpful in orienting readers on these and related matters pertaining to the Book of Abraham and that it suggests some ways in which we might make progress.

There is still much that we do not know when it comes to how precisely Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints itself takes no official position on this point other than to affirm that the translation was accomplished by the gift and power of God (something we, the authors, also affirm). There are also remaining questions surrounding Joseph Smith's explanations of the facsimiles and the ancient world of Abraham. This guide does not presume to answer all the questions people have had or may yet have about the Book of Abraham, its contents, and the manner of its translation. We freely acknowledge that the tools of scholarship at this time do not confirm every claim made in or about the Book of Abraham, and we emphasize that the various lines of evidence explored in this treatment do not somehow "prove" the Book of Abraham is true. We are, of course, well aware of the controversy that still surrounds the Book of Abraham, and we do not presume that this offering has once and for all settled the debate. But what we have seen nevertheless does help us plausibly situate the Book of Abraham in the ancient environment from whence

it purports to derive, informs how we might approach the text going forward, and positively affects our evaluation of Joseph Smith's claims to prophetic inspiration. Just as intellectual honesty demands we acknowledge the remaining gaps in our understanding and the ways in which the Book of Abraham still lacks verification based on available evidence, so too does it demand that this positive evidence not be overlooked, ignored, dismissed out of hand, or downplayed, even if it is inconvenient for certain worldviews and ideological commitments.

Although it should be evident that we tend to favor certain theories over others when it comes to explaining the nature and translation of the Book of Abraham, we do not presume to impose our understanding on others as an article of faith. We are happy to acknowledge that Latter-day Saints can in good faith come to different conclusions about the nature of this book of scripture and "pursue a faithful study of the Book of Abraham from different backgrounds and approaches."¹ In fact, we welcome these different approaches and encourage a multitude of voices to contribute to the conversation.

We also cheerfully embrace what Hugh Nibley articulated some time ago as an important strategy for any careful reader of the Book of Abraham. As Nibley so memorably expressed it, the key to approaching the Book of Abraham, or any other scriptural work, for that matter, is to ask the right questions and keep looking.² Future discoveries may bolster, qualify, or even undermine some of the points we have raised in this volume. This special issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly*, like every other work of scholarship, has a shelf life and will one day need updating or replacement. But this we welcome, because we are confident that future generations of disciple-scholars asking the right questions and answering those questions with the best available evidence will provide an even better case for the Book of Abraham than what we have offered at this time with what we currently know.

1. Robin Scott Jensen, Kerry Muhlestein, and Scott C. Esplin, "Discussing Difficult Topics: The Book of Abraham," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 3 (2020): 117.

2. Hugh Nibley, "The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Response," in *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, ed. John Gee, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 18 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009), 499.