

CHAPTER II

Abrahamic Astronomy

THE THIRD CHAPTER OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM is perhaps the hardest for modern readers to understand. The first part seems to be describing something about astronomy, while the second part talks about the preexistence. If the relationship between the two seems obscure to modern readers, it is because it was intended for an ancient audience rather than a modern one. Abraham chapter 3 is part of a long vision containing instructions that God gave to Abraham when Abraham had “concluded to go down into Egypt” (Abraham 2:21). God specifically told him, “Abraham, I show these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words” (Abraham 3:15). Thus, Abraham 3 should be read as instructions in preparation for dealing with the Egyptians. It was directed toward the Egyptians of Abraham’s day rather than a modern audience.

The astronomy in the Book of Abraham uses as its point of reference “the earth upon which thou standest” (Abraham 3:3, 5–7). It

mentions various heavenly bodies, such as “the stars” (Abraham 3:2), among which is Kolob (Abraham 3:3–4). These provide a fixed backdrop for the heavens. Among the stars are various bodies that move in relation to the fixed backdrop, each of which is called a “planet” (Abraham 3:5, 8) or a “light” (Abraham 3:5–7), though since the sun and moon and certain stars are each also called a “planet,” we should not think of them as necessarily being what we call planets. Each of these planets is associated with “its times and seasons in the revolutions thereof” (Abraham 3:4). These lights revolve around something, and that is the fixed reference point, “the earth upon which thou standest” (Abraham 3:3, 5–7). The Book of Abraham thus presents a geocentric astronomy, like almost all ancient astraromies, including ancient Egyptian astronomy.

Each heavenly body, with its revolution, is associated with something called a “set time” (Abraham 3:6, 10) or “the reckoning of its time” (Abraham 3:5), which seems to be its revolution around the earth and for the earth, its rotation. The greater amount of time is associated with a higher orbit and thus being “above or greater than that upon which thou standest in point of reckoning, for it moveth in order more slow; this is in order because it standeth above the earth upon which thou standest” (Abraham 3:5). The higher orbits are larger and take more time to traverse; thus, the longer the time of revolution, the higher the light is above the earth.

The ancient Egyptians associated the idea of encircling something (whether in the sky or on earth) with controlling or governing it, and the same terms are used for both. Thus, the Book of Abraham notes that “there shall be the reckoning of the time of one planet above another, until thou come nigh unto Kolob, . . . which Kolob is set nigh unto the throne of God, to govern all those planets which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest” (Abraham 3:9; emphasis added). The Egyptians had a similar notion, in which the

CHART OF PLANETS

Ancient Planet	Time of Revolution (synodic period, rounded)
Moon	29½ days
Mercury	88 days
Venus	225 days
Sun	365 days = 1 year
Mars	2 years
Jupiter	12 years
Saturn	29 years

sun (*Re*) was not only a god but the head of all the gods and ruled over everything that he encircled. Abraham’s astronomy sets the sun, “that which is to rule the day” (Abraham 3:5), as greater than the moon but less than Kolob, which governs the sun (Abraham 3:9). Thus, in the astronomy of the Book of Abraham, Kolob, which is the nearest star to God (Abraham 3:16; see also 3, 9), revolves around and thus encircles or controls the sun, which is the head of the Egyptian pantheon.

The conversation between Abraham and the Lord shifts from a discussion of heavenly bodies to spiritual beings. This reflects a play on words that Egyptians often use between a star (*ach*) and a spirit (*ich*). The shift is done by means of a comparison: “Now, if there be two things, one above the other, and the moon be above the earth, then it may be that a planet or a star may exist above it; . . . as, also, if there be two spirits, and one shall be more intelligent than the other” (Abraham 3:17–18). In an Egyptian context, the play on words would strengthen the parallel.

The first chapter of Abraham narrates how Abraham had been in trouble with the Egyptian government for speaking against the official religion. His family “utterly refused to hearken to [his] voice”

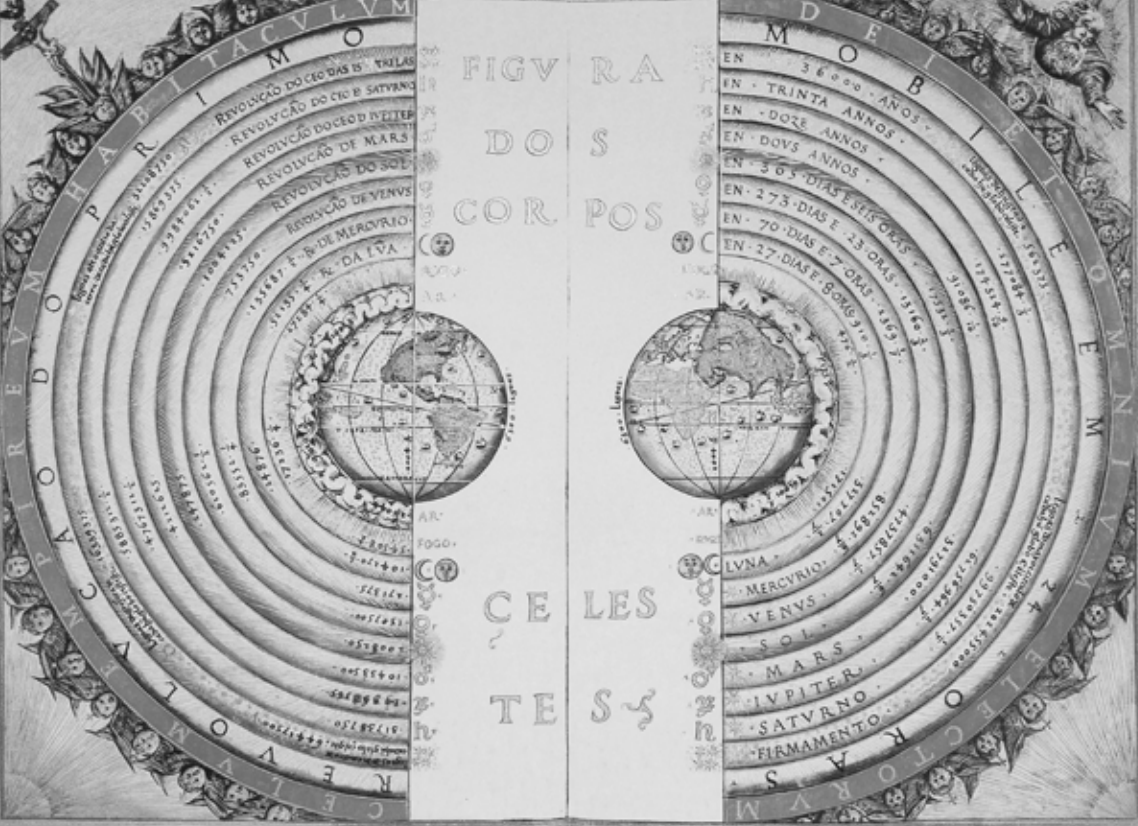


CHART OF PLANETS VISIBLE TO PREMODERN ASTRONOMERS WITH THE PLANETS' FIXED TIMES. BY PORTUGUESE COSMOGRAPHER AND CARTOGRAPHER BARTOLOMEU VELHO, 1568 (OWN WORK, PUBLIC DOMAIN), BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

(Abraham 1:5) and as a result he was nearly sacrificed and had to move to Haran for safety. While he was there, the Egyptian dynasty changed, but pharaonic ideology had not. Speaking against the pharaoh or the religion was a capital offense, so God revealed to Abraham an implicit rather than explicit critique of Egyptian religion. He taught him an astronomy which, like Egyptian astronomy, was geocentric, where the various heavenly bodies revolved around and governed the earth. So, in Abraham's astronomy, the star "set nigh unto the throne of God" (Abraham 3:9) encircles and thus controls not only the earth but also the sun, the head of the Egyptian pantheon. This argument, however, must be worked out; it is not obvi-

ous. It allowed Abraham to provide an indirect critique of Egyptian religion. Therefore, at least two of the revelations that the Lord gave Abraham before he went into Egypt were to prevent him from being put to death.

The Egyptian play on words between *star* and *spirit* allows the astronomical teachings to flow seamlessly into teachings about the preexistence which follow immediately thereafter.

FURTHER READING

Gee, John, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson, "And I Saw the Stars . . ." *The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy*. In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*. Vol. 3 of Studies in the Book of Abraham, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 1–16. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005. The authors argue that the astronomy in the Book of Abraham reflects the astronomy that would be comprehensible in Abraham's day and thus is a geocentric astronomy.

Ludlow, Jared W. "Abraham's Visions of the Heavens." In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*. Vol. 3 of Studies in the Book of Abraham, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 57–73. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005. This article surveys ancient traditions about Abraham being an astronomer.

Muhlestein, Kerry. "Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians: An Approach to Abraham 3." *Religious Educator* 10, no. 1 (2009): 33–50. Reprinted as Muhlestein, Kerry. "Encircling Astronomy and the Egyptians: An Approach to Abraham 3." In *By Study and by Faith: Selections from the Religious Educator*, edited by Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson, 149–67. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2009. This article inverts the astronomy argued by

Gee, Hamblin, and Peterson and argues that Abraham's astronomy is actually centered on Kolob, not on the earth.

Rhodes, Michael D., and J. Ward Moody, "Astronomy and Creation in the Book of Abraham." In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*. Vol. 3 of Studies in the Book of Abraham, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 17–36. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005. The authors argue that the astronomy in the Book of Abraham reflects post-Einsteinian astronomy and can thus be reconciled with modern science.