



CHAPTER 15

Doctrinal Debris of the Book of Abraham

STORIES ABOUT ABRAHAM CIRCULATED THROUGHOUT the ancient world. These come from all periods of Abraham's life, and more than a hundred of them deal with the period of Abraham's life covered by the Book of Abraham. Many of those preserve details that are found in the Book of Abraham but not in the Bible. They also contain elements that are not part of the Book of Abraham and sometimes even contradict it. Used with care, these stories can provide indirect evidence of the Book of Abraham.

The various stories about Abraham are interrelated, which allows scholars to trace intellectual genealogies. Although many of the accounts are anonymous, most of them are attributed to specific authors. The attributed accounts remind us that the unattributed accounts were also written by specific authors. Communities do not write texts; people do. We often know more about individual authors who wrote these texts than just their name. Sometimes we know that

a particular author was the student of, or was influenced by, another author. Some of the same details about Abraham are passed down from one author to another within his or her sphere of influence.

Not all authors treated their sources the same way. Some authors retold the tales they read in their own words, adding more vivid and imaginative details. Other authors repeated their sources word for word. Some authors expanded their stories, while others abbreviated them, and still others left them unchanged. This makes it difficult to come up with a general theory that covers all cases. Even within general categories, general trends are not universal. For example, while Muslim authors tended to expand their sources, not all do. Latin fathers tended to repeat Jerome's account verbatim, but this is not universal either. The idea that the stories tended to expand over time, while true in some respects, is often not true in specific cases.

It would also be a mistake to suppose that the Abrahamic stories can be studied within a specific religious tradition. The ancient world was cosmopolitan, and Jews, Christians, and Muslims interacted with each other's traditions about Abraham, not only with their own.

For example, the story that Abraham was rescued from fire in Ur of the Chaldees is a common motif in accounts of Abraham's early life. It, along with Abraham's rejection of idolatry, is among the most common elements in these accounts. This story of rescue agrees with the Book of Abraham. But in most of the accounts God himself rescues Abraham; only a small minority of the accounts agree with the Book of Abraham in having an angel rescue Abraham. Furthermore, some of the accounts have Abraham launched into the fire by means of a catapult (which is not in the Book of Abraham), and these are sometimes elaborated even more. Indeed, some accounts include a lengthy dialogue between Abraham and the angels who wanted to save him, in which he refuses their help because God himself will save him—all while he is flying through the air on his way to the flames. By comparison, the Book of Abraham's account is rather sober.



PORTRAIT OF WILLIAM WHISTON (1667–1752), BRITISH MATHEMATICIAN AND TRANSLATOR OF THE WORK OF FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS. AFTER SARAH HOADLY (1676–1743) [PUBLIC DOMAIN], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Even if the core of these elements compares with the Book of Abraham, one might wonder how much of that was available to Joseph Smith in 1835. The most commonly cited examples are Josephus and the Book of Jasher. Josephus was known to Oliver Cowdery and theoretically known to Joseph Smith, but it is not clear that Joseph Smith actually read much, if anything, out of Josephus before he translated the Book of Abraham. While some elements of the Book of Abraham agree with Josephus, there are important disagreements as well. Josephus does not mention the attempted

sacrifice of Abraham in Ur. Josephus does say that Abraham reasoned on astronomy, but the whole of his reasoning was the following: "If [said he] these bodies had power of their own, they would certainly take care of their own regular motions; but since they do not preserve such regularity, they make it plain, that in so far as they co-operate to our advantage, they do it not of their own abilities, but as they are subservient to Him that commands them, to whom alone we ought justly to offer our honor and thanksgiving."¹ The second example, the

1. Josephus 1.7.1 (translation of William Whiston; this was the translation available to Joseph Smith).

Book of Jasher, is an anachronistic example since it was not published until 1840—too late to influence the Book of Abraham in 1835.

It is difficult to argue that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Abraham using Abrahamic stories because most of them were not available to him, and those that were often contained details that do not match the Book of Abraham. On the other hand, the ancient existence of a Book of Abraham can explain why these stories existed. Since the stories have had a number of details changed, what was said about the Apocrypha applies to them as well: “There are many things contained therein that are not true, which are interpolations by the hands of men” (D&C 91:2). They are thus not necessarily accurate sources for history about Abraham and his day.

These stories, in various degrees of distortion, show how ancient religious people understood and interpreted Abraham’s story. Latter-day Saints have their own history and tradition of interpreting the Book of Abraham. That history illuminates why the Book of Abraham is important to Latter-day Saints.

FURTHER READING

Gee, John. “An Egyptian View of Abraham.” In *Bountiful Harvest: Essays in Honor of S. Kent Brown*, edited by Andrew C. Skinner, D. Morgan Davis, and Carl Griffin, 137–56. Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2011. This provides the text and translation of an Egyptian account of Abraham’s early life that was missing from Tvedtnes’s, Hauglid’s, and Gee’s volume. It also discusses how this account compares to other accounts.

Nibley, Hugh. *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2009. Reprint of Nibley’s 1968–70 series of arti-

cles, which series was the first to use extracanonical stories that parallel the Book of Abraham.

Tvedtnes, John A., Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee. *Early Traditions about Abraham Relevant to a Study of the Book of Abraham*. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001. This is a collection and translation of the various accounts of Abraham’s early life.