Historical Authenticity

Interest in the translation of the Book of Abraham or the relationship of the Joseph Smith Papyri to the Book of Abraham are attempts to deal with a more basic question about the Book of Abraham: Is the Book of Abraham authentic? Did the events that are told in the text really occur? Did Abraham write it? Is it what it purports to be? These are different ways that the basic question can be asked. Most people would like a simple answer to this question: yes or no. Others would like to find some middle ground between these simple answers. For purposes of clarification, we can split the basic question into three specific questions:

1. Is the Book of Abraham inspired?

2. Is the Book of Abraham ancient?

3. Is the Book of Abraham authentic; i.e., was it actually written by Abraham?

Theoretically, one could take each of these questions as independent and assign a different yes or no answer to each question. There would then be eight different possible combinations of answers to the three questions. But the questions are not independent and thus some of the possible combinations are not logically coherent: for example, if the text were actually written by Abraham, it cannot be modern. So there are only four logically coherent positions:

1. The Book of Abraham is modern fiction and a fraud. It is not inspired, not ancient, and not authentic. Joseph Smith made it up. This is largely the position taken by those who are not members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

2. The Book of Abraham is inspired fiction. It is inspired, but neither ancient nor authentic. Joseph Smith was somehow inspired to write it (whatever that may mean to the individual), or there might be inspiring parts of it, but it is not historical.

3. The Book of Abraham is ancient pseudepigrapha. It is inspired and ancient but does not relate actual historical events. This theory presupposes that some ancient author later than Abraham wrote a story about Abraham (the Testament of Abraham is an example of such a work). This was then translated by Joseph Smith, who would have had to be inspired since he at least started the translation of the Book of Abraham before he had studied any ancient languages.

4. The Book of Abraham is ancient autobiography. It is inspired, ancient, and authentic.

Positions about the historical authenticity of the Book of Abraham are somewhat independent of the theories about how the Book of Abraham relates to the Joseph Smith Papyri (discussed in the previous chapter). For example, those who think that the Book of Abraham is derived from the papyri that we currently have might disagree on whether the Book of Abraham is modern fiction, or an ancient pseudepigraphon or an ancient autobiography. On the

JOSEPH SMITH TRANSLATED THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM FROM AN UNSPECIFIED PAPYRUS. PAINTING BY AN UNKNOWN PAINTER, CIRCA 1842. THE ORIGINAL IS OWNED BY THE COMMUNITY OF CHRIST ARCHIVES. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

other hand, those who view the Book of Abraham as a translation of papyri in Joseph Smith's possession (whether or not we still have them) and those who view the Book of Abraham as an inspired restoration of writings of Abraham that were lost or destroyed after he wrote them might both agree that the Book of Abraham is an authentic ancient autobiography written by Abraham.

While each of the four positions on the historical authenticity of the Book of Abraham is logically coherent, not all of them are intellectually stable. Historically, the middle ground positions—that is, inspired fiction and pseudepigrapha—have not been stable. That is, sometimes individuals have held particular intellectual positions about the Book of Abraham, but over the course of time their own intellectual position has drifted, or they have been unable to pass their intellectual position on to their students or children. They have tended to move toward seeing the Book of Abraham as modern fiction. Because all the positions are internally logically coherent, it may seem odd that the middle-ground positions have been incapable of being passed down to succeeding generations. Those intermediate positions may

depend on too fine a distinction or too subtle a nuance than the simple yes or no answers to the question of historical authenticity of the Book of Abraham. Or it may be that once one has surrendered the idea that Joseph Smith received revelation of actual authentic ancient content that there is no longer an anchor for one's faith to keep it from drifting. Be that as it may, in the past only the positions of ancient autobiography or modern fiction have proven intellectually stable and transmissible to the next generation.

The lack of a coherent or stable middle ground on this issue, like that of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon, has proven difficult for those who would like some sort of rapprochement or a dialogue between the two poles. A dialogue requires some common ground, something that can be agreed upon, and on the basic issues of historical authenticity there is no agreement whatsoever between believers and nonbelievers. For those who view the Book of Abraham as modern fiction, the notion of discussing archaeological or ancient evidence for the Book of Abraham makes as much sense as discussing the archaeology of J. R. R. Tolkien's Gondor or the location of Jane Austin's Pemberley; they are fictional and never existed, so it makes no sense to treat them as real. Nonbelievers might be willing to debate whether or not the works are inspired because the term is malleable and can mean different things to different people—they might see the source of the inspiration as God, the devil, Joseph Smith's imagination, his environment, or something else—but the idea that the work might be ancient and that Joseph Smith's inspiration could have some actual authentic content is usually something that nonbelievers are unwilling to consider or discuss. Consequently, debate on the Book of Abraham has always centered on the process of translation rather than on the text itself; in this area there is a common set of facts and some feel that they can settle the question of historical authenticity in the negative

without ever having to deal with the actual text. To those interested in discussion or dialogue with nonbelievers, discussions of historical authenticity of the ancient scriptures revealed through Joseph Smith are obstacles that get in the way of the common ground that they wish to cultivate. Some might prefer to bracket those issues (that is agree not to discuss them or otherwise exclude them from discussion), others wish to adopt or be seen as adopting a neutral stance, others might be uninterested in them, and still others might have already tacitly surrendered on the issue. Whichever the position those who wish for dialogue with nonbelievers take, the effective result is that discussion of the historical authenticity of ancient scriptures is out of the question. Whether intentionally done or not, the historical authenticity of ancient scriptures is surrendered in the interest of dialogue. Because questions of historical authenticity interfere with finding common ground, those who prioritize engaging in dialogue sometimes manifest hostility toward those who wish to support the historical authenticity of ancient scriptures.

The Book of Abraham provides an example of this tendency. Abraham refers to "the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs, concerning the right of Priesthood" (Abraham 1:31) which had "come into my hands, which I hold unto this present time" (Abraham 1:28). These records contained "a knowledge of the beginning of the creation, and also of the planets, and of the stars, as they were made known unto the fathers" (Abraham 1:31), from which Abraham could "delineate the chronology running back from myself to the beginning of the creation" (Abraham 1:28). So Abraham took these records to be historical, reliable, and true. Because of these records, Abraham both "sought for mine appointment unto the Priesthood according to the appointment of God unto the fathers concerning the seed" (Abraham 1:4), and recognized that his fathers had "turned from their righteousness, and from the holy

commandments which the Lord their God had given unto them, unto the worshiping of the gods of the heathen" (Abraham 1:5). This worship was mandated both by "custom" (Abraham 1:8) and by "the court of Pharaoh" (Abraham 1:20). Abraham sought to persuade his fathers of their error (Abraham 1:5, 7). He found, however, that "their hearts were set to do evil, and were wholly turned to" the fashionable gods of the day (Abraham 1:6), whom Abraham characterized as "these dumb idols" (Abraham 1:7). He also found that his fathers "utterly refused to hearken to my voice" (Abraham 1:5). Instead they "endeavored to take away my life by the hand of the priest of Elkenah" who also represented the civil power and the civic religion as "priest of Pharaoh" (Abraham 1:7). In Abraham's case, those who were more interested in getting along with the customs of those in power at the time rather than following the historical records that testified otherwise, sought to kill Abraham.

Some claim that those interested in historical authenticity are trying to prove that the scriptures are true beyond any doubt. This is not usually the case. No scholarly test can prove a suspect document authentic. Scholarly tests can show a document to be a fake or can be inconclusive but cannot show that it is authentic. The best that can be done is to show that a document is plausible in the setting which it claims for itself; this is called historical plausibility. This is done by comparing the document with other textual and archaeological evidence from the correct time and place, to see if it fits within the setting that it claims for itself. To test the claims of the Book of Abraham, one needs to compare what it says with other evidence from Abraham's time and place. In this matter, small details such as the form of names and the location of places become extremely important. Historical plausibility is established by showing that the details are correct. Historical plausibility does not preclude the existence of alternative hypotheses or explanations.

Thus, discussion of the ancient background of the Book of Abraham or other ancient scriptures requires a knowledge of the ancient world, something that not everyone possesses. People can compare the scriptures only against a background that they know, which for a modern person is, first and foremost, a modern perspective. If one is versed in nineteenth century history, then one will see nineteenth century parallels. To recognize nineteenth-century BC parallels, one would have to know something about the world in the nineteenth century BC, which is very different than that of the nineteenth century AD, a period much closer to the world in which we live. Those who look at the text only through a nineteenth-century AD background will thus see only nineteenth-century parallels and will tend to conclude that the text is from the nineteenth century, and thus modern by default.

Some argue that the historical details are irrelevant and that the only important thing is the doctrine or teachings of a book of scripture. While the doctrine or teachings may be the most important thing, they are not the only important thing. The scriptures are a record of the dealings of God with certain men and women who kept records. They contain some general statements or statements that can be made general about ways for us to become closer to God and to know what his will is that we can then apply to our own lives. But these statements are embedded in an historical context of how other individuals applied them to their lives. The story is part of the message and the details are part of the story. Part of the value of seeing general rules in the scriptures is seeing the actual application of those rules. The rules lose their validity if the stories in which they are said to apply did not occur. For example, the Book of Mormon is another witness of Jesus Christ. It tells how Jesus Christ administered to people in ancient America. If the Book of Mormon is merely fictional, then its witness of Jesus Christ is a false witness. One

cannot trust or have faith in stories of God's deliverance if those stories are not in fact true. Thus, while the teachings of the scriptures may be the most important thing, those teachings lose their force if they are not historical, if they are not true.

Historical authenticity is thus not a minor issue or one that can be neglected. This is also true in the case of the Book of Abraham. The Book of Abraham and its teachings are inextricably woven into the fabric of Latter-day Saint thought. Its veracity and historical authenticity cannot be rejected without major consequences. (These will be explored further in chapters 12 and 16.) Surrendering the historical authenticity of the Book of Abraham undermines teachings of vital importance to Latter-day Saints that help them navigate their way in the modern world.

While we live in a modern world, Abraham did not. Those who wish to understand the Abraham who wrote the Book of Abraham need to learn about the world in which he lived.

FURTHER READING

Gee, John, and Stephen D. Ricks. "Historical Plausibility: The Book of Abraham as a Case Study." In *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson, 63–98. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2001. This article examines the use of historical plausibility as a method for assessing the historical authenticity of a document using the Book of Abraham as an example.

Hamblin, William J. "An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe's Assumptions and Methodologies." *Mormon Studies Review* 6, no. 1 (1993): 436–525. This article, though dealing with a specific case, discusses the general problem of dealing with the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon as an ancient text.

It also points out that virtually no scholarship is neutral; almost all scholarship is defending a particular point of view and thus constitutes apologetics of one sort or other. The question then becomes what point of view is being defended.

Maxwell, Neal A. "All Hell Is Moved." In *1977 Devotional Speeches of the Year*, 179–81. Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1977. This article was originally a talk given to BYU faculty and students when the author was the Commissioner of Church Education. Elder Maxwell warned that "the Saints—meaning you and I—must not make the mistake of assuming the existence of any truce between the forces of Satan and God." To believe so, he maintains, is "a very great delusion, and a very common one." He outlines what to expect of coming intellectual challenges and gives prescriptions for what to do about them.

Midgley, Louis C. "No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon." In *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson, 149–70. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2001. This article points out that the search for a middle ground between viewing the Book of Mormon as an ancient text or a modern fraud is ultimately impossible and therefore futile. Issues with the Book of Abraham are similar to the Book of Mormon.

———. "The Utility of Faith Reconsidered." In *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, edited by Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks, 140–46. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002. This article discusses what happens when Latter-day Saints adopt intellectual positions that oppose the notion that the gospel is simply true and how the argument that it does not matter if what is taught is actually true as long as it is useful undermines itself.

Nibley, Hugh W. "Nobody to Blame." In *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*, edited by Stephen D. Ricks, 125–41. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2008. Originally a letter written to a graduate student, Nibley combines half a century of personal observation with his knowledge of history and outlines the basic issues and common responses of members of the Church to learning as well as describing the consequences of those responses. Though some of the details have changed with time, the basic outline of the issues is still true and relevant.

Oaks, Dallin H. "Alternate Voices," *Ensign*, May 1989, 27–30. This article, originally a talk given in the general conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, discusses the relationship of the Church to various alternate viewpoints about the Church and the obligations that scholars and members have in dealing with unofficial sources of information about the Church.

———. "The Historicity of the Book of Mormon," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson, 237–48. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2001. This article makes that claim that the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon is a fundamental issue for the Church. He argues that "the issue of the historicity of the Book of Mormon is basically a difference between those who rely exclusively on scholarship and those who rely on a combination of scholarship, faith, and revelation."

Packer, Boyd K. "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 1–18. In this article Elder Packer gives counsel about how to deal with certain intellectual issues relating to the Church. He points out that the covenants the Latter-day Saints have made have a significant impact on the positions that they should take on some intellectual issues.