

CHAPTER 13

The Creation

GOD RECOUNTS THE CREATION TO ABRAHAM in a long vision “before [he and his family go] into Egypt, that [he] may declare all these words” (Abraham 3:15). The account begins with a discussion of astronomy, shifts to the preexistence of spirits, and then moves to the creation. The story, however, is interrupted soon after the creation of Adam because that was as much as Joseph Smith published of the Book of Abraham.

COMPARING THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT

The account of creation in the Book of Abraham has a number of similarities to the account in Genesis. In fact, the two parallel each other closely. The Book of Abraham, however, has a number of differences with the biblical account.

The first, most obvious difference is that in Genesis, the creator is “God,” while in the Book of Abraham it is “the Gods.” Since the creation account was something about which the Lord said, “I show these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words” (Abraham 3:15), the audience for this account was the ancient Egyptians, who actually worshipped multiple gods, and whose creation accounts typically featured multiple gods. The notion of multiple gods is not completely foreign to the biblical account either. The Hebrew term translated as “God” is *’elohim*, which has the form of a grammatical plural and is sometimes understood as a plural (as it is in Genesis 3:5), although it is usually translated and thought of as a singular.

A second clear difference is that, while the biblical account separates the various periods into units that it terms *days*, the Book of Abraham uses the vaguer *times*. While the biblical account uses a word (*yôm*) that can refer to both a specific amount of time (from sunset to sunset), the term can also reflect an indeterminate general period of time as well (for example, Genesis 2:17). The Book of Abraham avoids the ambiguity of precision versus vagueness by being completely vague. The precise amount of time for creation is not specified.

Because of his work as a scribe on the Book of Abraham, W. W. Phelps claimed, “That eternity, agreeable to the records found in the catacombs of Egypt, has been going on in this system (not the world) almost 2555 millions of years; and to know that deists, geologists and others are trying to prove that matter must have existed hundreds of thousands of years:—it almost tempts the flesh to fly to God, or muster faith like Enoch to be translated and see and know as we are seen and known!”¹ Phelps’s amount of time may have come from cal-

culating 7,000 years with a thousand years to the day (Abraham 3:4, Facsimile 2:1) because $7000 \times 365 \times 1000 = 2,555,000,000$; but he got the idea that the solar system was more than two billion years old from his interpretation of the Book of Abraham. The Book of Abraham’s use of the term *times* instead of *days* reinforces his reasoning, as does its comment that time in the Garden of Eden “was after the Lord’s time, which was after the time of Kolob; for as yet the Gods had not appointed unto Adam his reckoning” (Abraham 5:13).

A third difference between the two scriptural accounts is how each deals with the end of every division of time. In Genesis, most divisions contain a statement like “And God saw the light, that it was good” (Genesis 1:4). Only once does the Book of Abraham say that the Gods saw “that their plan was good” (Abraham 4:21). Instead, the Book of Abraham contains a parallel statement about obedience: “And the Gods saw that they were obeyed” (Abraham 4:12). These statements are not necessarily repetitious; for instance, after creating the heavenly bodies, “the Gods watched those things which they had ordered until they obeyed” (Abraham 4:18). This implies they had to observe the heavenly bodies for an extended period of time to determine if they were actually following their ordered motions which determined “the reckoning of the time of one planet above another, until thou come nigh unto Kolob, which Kolob is after the reckoning of the Lord’s time” (Abraham 3:9).

A fourth clear difference between the two accounts is that the Book of Abraham is explicit in depicting the creation as the organization of matter that already existed. It starts by saying, “We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell” (Abraham 3:24). So the materials already existed in the planning stage. Then “they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth” (Abraham 4:1). The Gods

1. W. W. Phelps, “The Answer,” *Times and Seasons* 5 (December 1844): 758.

conclude by saying, “We will do everything that we have said, and organize them; and behold, they shall be very obedient” (Abraham 4:31). Therefore, the process of creation is the organization of already existing materials. The biblical account can be read that way as well, but since the attempts to reconcile the biblical text with Middle and neoplatonic ideas of creation that were common soon after the time of Christ, it has not historically been understood that way. Back in biblical times it was more likely to be read the way that most ancient Near Eastern accounts of creation were read, as dealing with the organization rather than the creation of matter.

THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN BACKGROUND

Since the creation account in Abraham was given for Abraham to declare to the Egyptians (Abraham 3:15), it is worth looking at how that account compares with the creation accounts of his day, particularly those found in Egypt.

The order of the creation process in the Book of Abraham is similar to that provided in Coffin Text 80, a text that appears in copies dating from about two hundred years before Abraham down to Abraham’s time, and is the only lengthy creation text we know of from that time. The text begins with everything “in waters, in chaos, in darkness.”² The creator was “one who lit up the sky after the darkness.”³ The creator discusses the time when “I could not find a place to stand or to sit, before Heliopolis was founded so that I could be in it, before reeds were tied on which I could sit, before I made heaven so

that it could be over my head . . . before the divine council existed.”⁴ Then the creator “begat the eldest of his spirits . . . when he separated earth from heaven,”⁵ and then he “made grain.”⁶ Various animals are given life: falcons, jackals, pigs, hippopotami, men, crocodiles, and fish “according to the command of” the creator “so that I may lead them to live with my mouth, which is life in their nostrils. I guided my breath into their throats.”⁷ The account has a number of other details, but it discusses similar topics in a similar order to the Book of Abraham. The potential reference to the preexistence is also interesting. The Egyptian account also differs because it uses alternate names for the creator that might not refer to the same deity. The accounts are close enough for ancient Egyptians to find something in the Book of Abraham that would provide familiar echoes to their own accounts. This follows the idea articulated in the Doctrine and Covenants that God communicates to mortals “in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24).

There are also parallels between the Book of Abraham and contemporary Mesopotamian creation accounts. Some of the parallels are cursory. The myth of Enki and Ninmah refers to the “day when heaven [was separated] from earth,” and it follows with a discussion of the creation of humans by mixing the blood of a God with the clay from which humans were made.⁸ The parallels with the Book of Abraham are more general. They deal with the separation of heaven and earth before the making of mortals but have little else in common.

2. Coffin Text 80, in Adriaan de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935–63), 2:28.

3. Coffin Text 80, in de Buck, *Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 2:30.

4. Coffin Text 80, in de Buck, *Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 2:33–34.

5. Coffin Text 80, in de Buck, *Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 2:39.

6. Coffin Text 80, in de Buck, *Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 2:40.

7. Coffin Text 80, in de Buck, *Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 2:42–43.

8. Enki and Ninmah 1–37, in W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 334–337.

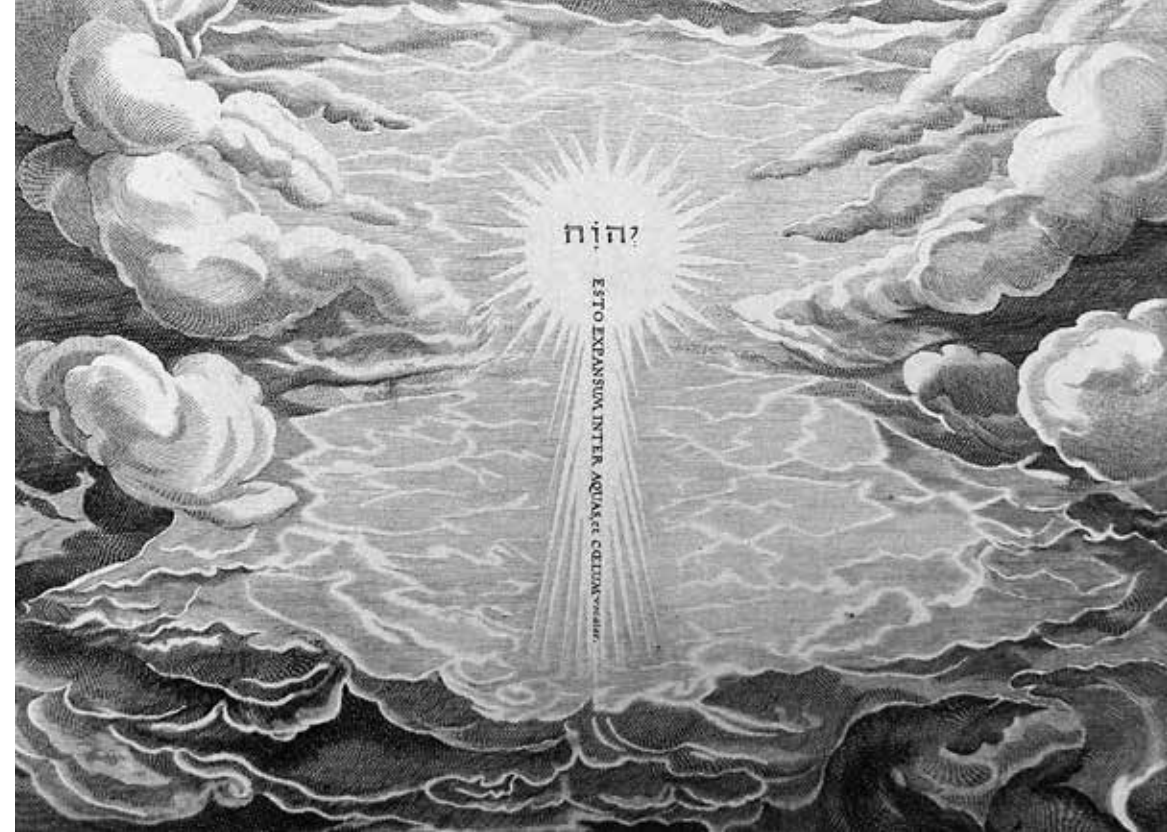
Another contemporary Mesopotamian text also talks about how “when heaven was separated from earth, its steadfast companion” that “the plans of heaven and earth were established.”⁹ In order to relieve the gods of their work, it was proposed, “Let us slaughter the All-gods and let us build humans from their blood. Let the gods’ work be their work.”¹⁰ Like the Book of Abraham, the separation of heaven and earth occurs early in the creation and humans are created afterward. Though the explicit purpose of life between the two accounts is similar, for the Babylonians, the purpose of life was to do heavy labor for the benefit of the gods so that the gods would no longer have to work. In the Book of Abraham, life is a test to “prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (Abraham 3:25). Such a test may include serving God or their fellowman and might involve hard work, but it may also involve many other things—and it involves more than simply being a slave to take over menial tasks. The Book of Abraham promises rewards for obedience which are missing from the Babylonian text.

The Babylonian Atrahasis epic begins after the creation of earth and discusses only the creation of humans. “In their assembly they slaughtered Weila who had the plan. From his flesh and blood [the birth goddess] mixed the clay” and from it produced man.¹¹ The treading of the clay became the beating of the heart. The purpose of creating humans was so that they could take over the heavy labor from the gods.

9. KAR 4 1, 4, in Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 352.

10. KAR 4 25–27, in Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 354. Unfortunately, none of these lines is preserved in the Old Babylonian copy so we are following the much later Neo-Assyrian version presuming that the gist of the two was more or less the same.

11. Atrahasis I 223–30, in W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 58.



Creation. Genesis cap 1 v 10. *De Vos*, by PHILLIP MEDHURST. IN THIS PICTURE THE RENAISSANCE INCORPOREAL GOD SEPARATES THE WATERS BELOW FROM THE WATERS ABOVE. THE LATIN TEXT READS, “LET THERE BE AN EXPANSE BETWEEN THE WATERS AND HEAVEN.” WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

So Mesopotamian creation texts from the time of Abraham all mention the separation of heaven and earth. In the Book of Abraham this is done in two stages. First, “the Gods ordered the expanse, so that it divided the waters which were under the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so, even as they ordered. And the Gods called the expanse, Heaven” (Abraham 4:7–8). Second, “the Gods ordered . . . the waters under the heaven [to] be gathered together unto one place, and let the earth come up dry; and it was so as they ordered; and the Gods pronounced the dry land, Earth” (Abraham 4:9–10).

Another similarity with the Mesopotamian creation texts is that the creation of man is connected with the sacrifice of a god. In the Book of Abraham this is mentioned obliquely: “The Lord said: Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. And another answered and said: Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first” (Abraham 3:27). Latter-day Saints connect this with other accounts of the preexistence to equate the one “like unto the Son of Man” with the premortal Jesus and the other with Lucifer (see Moses 4:1–4) and that the creation of man was dependent on the Son of God being willing to offer himself as an atonement for humans. The parallel, however, is with Latter-day Saint interpretation of the Book of Abraham and not the text of the Book of Abraham as we currently have it. That might be different if we had the full Book of Abraham.

One significant difference between the Mesopotamian creation texts and the Book of Abraham is that in the Mesopotamian accounts, humans begin living when the treading of the clay becomes the beating of the heart. In the Book of Abraham “the Gods formed man from the dust of the ground, and took his spirit (that is, the man’s spirit), and put it into him; and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul” (Abraham 5:7). The Egyptian accounts also emphasize that the sign of human life is the breath of life in their nostrils.

THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM AND SOURCE CRITICISM

Because of similarities between the Book of Abraham’s account of the creation and the biblical record, some have assumed that the Book of Abraham is based on Genesis as opposed to assuming that Moses’s account might have been based on Abraham’s.

In the late nineteenth century, a theory called source criticism developed, arguing that the Pentateuch (the five books attributed to Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) was composed by a number of different authors in separate books and then shuffled together in such a way that the separate accounts told one story. This combining of accounts supposedly took place sometime after the Babylonian exile. Source critics claim that their modern separation of the biblical text into narrative strands somehow matches hypothetical ancient sources. This theory has gained wide acceptance in certain quarters even though no manuscript evidence supports it. Since no manuscripts actually attest these hypothetical sources, source critics have no way of testing whether their theories actually work or whether they are simply baseless speculation. Even those who accept that Moses wrote the book of Genesis must either posit that Moses received all of the information about his ancestors directly from God or that he had some access to written or oral sources for that information. So the question is not whether whoever wrote the Pentateuch had or used sources, but whether or not source criticism can correctly identify those sources. Various source critics using the same methods come up with different sources for the same text, and none of these can be verified by actual ancient manuscripts. Actual tests of source criticism—where scholars have used source criticism to predict sources for a text and then the actual sources have been discovered—have usually failed. Therefore, source criticism is less a scientific theory than a scholarly dogma.

The acceptance of source criticism as it is normally understood conflicts with the acceptance of the historicity of the Book of Abraham. Most source critics, for example, attribute Genesis 1 and 2 to separate sources and claim that they were combined after the destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century BC. If the Book of Abraham is historical, then the basic narrative in Abraham 4 and 5, which paral-

els Genesis 1 and 2, existed long before source critics say it was created. If one accepts the historicity of the Book of Abraham, then one cannot accept the validity of source criticism. Likewise, if one accepts the validity of source criticism, then one cannot accept the historicity of the Book of Abraham. The two are incompatible.

The method of source criticism was developed at a time before sources from the ancient Near East were generally known and accessible. The textual presentation of what might appear as two different creation narratives is actually standard in early Mesopotamian accounts of primeval times.

CREATION AND SCIENCE

Because people assume that scripture, as the word of God, tells the truth, and that modern science also provides truth, we have a tendency to expect the two to tell the exact same story. Sometimes they do and sometimes they do not. When they do not, we assume that something is wrong either with science or with scripture. What we fail to realize is that the two sources are different in their nature, methods, and purposes.

Scripture is a collection of texts written by fallible mortals to the best of their ability, providing a record of God's dealings with some men and women. Even when recording the actual words of God, God has given those words "unto [his] servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24). God does not provide mortals with things as he understands them because "man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend" (Mosiah 4:9). The scriptures are thus given to us so that we might come to an understanding, and as we grow closer to God, that understanding grows more perfect. Fur-

thermore, the scriptures are not given as some sort of grand encyclopedia that answers every possible question that mortals might have. Instead, they focus on important truths that God thinks we should know because conforming our lives to those truths will bring us joy. Scriptures do not organize these truths in some systematic fashion; instead, they are told by means of various stories and other devices. They thus constitute neither theology (systematic human reasoning about divine things devoid of revelation) nor history (ordered narration of human events) as those academic disciplines think of themselves. These scriptures are then read, understood, and explained by fallible mortals who may or may not understand them.

Philosophers of science argue that science as a method can only prove things to be false—it can never prove things to be true. Those theories that are susceptible to being proven false by various tests are said to be scientific. If a theory cannot potentially be proven false, then it is not considered scientific. Sometimes it can take hundreds or thousands of years, but over time, as various theories are proposed and tested, most scientific theories eventually end up being proven false. Those theories that are taken as true are simply those that have not yet been shown to be false. The idea is that by eliminating the false theories, eventually what survives is that which is true. Over the years, the number of theories that have not yet been proven false accumulate, furnishing us with a broad and widely accepted body of knowledge that is taken as true, though, in principle, the right experiment or observation could change any individual portion of that knowledge overnight. Nonetheless, science has produced a broad and largely stable body of knowledge that has proven effective in providing amazing and useful technological advances.

Should our understanding of scripture necessarily match our understanding of science? Whether our understanding of the stories of God's dealings with men, which are designed to help us come to an

understanding of things that God thinks we ought to know and act on, should necessarily match human theories that for the moment have not yet been proven false is a matter that is at least open to debate. It is not obvious that the two things should have to match on any given point at any given juncture in time. When they do, that is something to be grateful for.

If God's purpose in teaching Abraham about the creation was to "show these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words" (Abraham 3:15) so that the Egyptians could "come to [an] understanding" of divine things (D&C 1:24), then ancient Egyptians should not necessarily have needed to understand things the way that modern scientists do. Nevertheless, some scientists think that the cosmology in the Book of Abraham more or less matches their understanding of the creation of the world.

Abraham's reasoning on creation and astronomy provided him with a means of teaching the gospel to the Egyptians. The occasion is depicted in the third facsimile from the Book of Abraham. The interpretation of the facsimiles will occupy our attention next.

FURTHER READING

CREATION ACCOUNTS FROM ABRAHAM'S DAY

Allen, James P. *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts*. New Haven, CT: Yale Egyptological Seminar, 1988. This book is a collection of translated Egyptian creation accounts with a discussion of some philosophical ideas associated with them. The gathered accounts come from different time periods, so not all of them were necessarily circulating in Abraham's day. The collection is not comprehensive because many creation accounts (such as Esna and Edfu) were not included, and some (such as those

from Tebtunis) were discovered after the publication of the volume; but the missing accounts all postdate Abraham's day, though they are more contemporary with the Joseph Smith Papyri.

Ferrara, A. J. "A Hodgepodge of Snippets: Some Thoughts on Narrative Now and Then." In *Approaches to Sumerian Literature*, edited by Piotr Michalowski and Nick Veldhuis, 47–66. Leiden: Brill, 2006. This article looks at how plays on times form an indispensable part of Sumerian literature, particularly cosmological prologues. These plays on times fool modern scholars into thinking that there are separate narrative pieces that have been grafted together rather than seeing this as a standard ancient pattern of narrative presentation.

Lambert, W. G. *Babylonian Creation Myths*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013. This book collects the major creation accounts in Akkadian with critical editions of the texts in Akkadian and translations. Most of the accounts in the volume come after the time of Abraham.

Lambert, W. G., and A. R. Millard. *Atra-Hasis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969. This is the original publication of the contemporary Mesopotamian creation account closest to the Book of Abraham. It is not included in either Lambert's or Lisman's later collections because it is known primarily for its extensive account of the flood. Although there have been some improved understandings of passages in the text since this publication, the volume has held up rather well.

Lisman, Jan J. W. *Cosmogony, Theogony and Anthropogony in Sumerian Texts*. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013. This book contains a collection of Sumerian texts discussing creation while providing both the Sumerian text and translations. While Sumerian died out as a spoken language before the time of Abraham, it continued to be used as a language of learning until about the time of Christ. The texts in

this collection span a wide range of times, and some of them were composed by nonnative speakers of the language. Only four of the texts analyzed in this collection date from the time of Abraham, and one of them has been assigned the wrong date. Even though Sumerian in general predates the time of Abraham, it cannot be assumed that a text in the collection predates or dates to the time of Abraham, so care and discernment need to be used in utilizing these texts for historical reconstruction of ideas about creation in Abraham's day.

SOURCE CRITICISM

Peterson, Daniel C., and John Gee. "Editor's Introduction: Through a Glass, Darkly." *FARMS Review of Books* 9, no. 2 (1997): v–xxix. This article looks at some of the problems and failings of source criticism.

SCIENCE AND CREATION IN THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

Lewis, John S. "The Scale of Creation in Space and Time." *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 71–80. This article argues that it is inappropriate to try to read ancient scriptural accounts as though they were arguing for scientific concepts which were unknown when the authors wrote them. This is particularly true for creation accounts. These accounts should be seen as attempts of prophets to express their experiences in the imperfect language they had available to them.

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 an account of the creation that can be reconciled with modern science.