



## CHAPTER 16

# *The Role of the Book of Abraham in Latter-day Saint Scripture*

TO LATTER-DAY SAINTS, THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK of Abraham are far more important than the contents of the remaining fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri. What we read in the book is more important than how we got it. When discussing the Book of Abraham, people of other faiths generally take no note of the role that the Book of Abraham plays in the tradition of Latter-day Saint scripture. They ignore why Latter-day Saints think the Book of Abraham is important, and they concentrate on aspects that have little or no relevance to Latter-day Saints.

For example, some claim that the Book of Abraham is used primarily to sanction racial bigotry. This is because the Book of Abraham says that Noah blessed Pharaoh “with the blessings of the earth,

and with the blessings of wisdom, but cursed him as pertaining to the Priesthood. Now, Pharaoh being of that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain claim it from Noah, through Ham” (Abraham 1:26–27). A close reading of the text, however, does not sustain claims of racism. Nineteenth-century Protestants understood Africans as being descendants of Ham based on a selective reading of Genesis 10:6–20, which lists not only many African areas but also most of the Fertile Crescent and even the island of Cyprus and the Indo-European Hittites as being descendants of Ham. Those Protestants understood descendants of Ham as having black skin. Some Protestants further used Genesis 9:25 as an excuse to promote the slavery of Africans. While some Latter-day Saint converts from Protestantism continued in that understanding, nowhere does the text of the Book of Abraham support that interpretation. The Book of Abraham does not discuss race and curses no one with slavery. Furthermore, Latter-day Saints do not use the text in this fashion. Racist interpretations were not originally applied to the Book of Abraham. At the time the Book of Abraham was translated, the Saints were persecuted in Missouri in 1835–38 in part because they were abolitionists and were willing to baptize those of different races into the Church. Just after publishing the Book of Abraham, Joseph Smith ran for president of the United States in 1844 on an anti-slavery platform. Racist interpretations of the Book of Abraham first appeared in the Church in 1895, but were officially discontinued in 1978.

When the Book of Abraham was first published, Latter-day Saints focused on a different aspect of priesthood in the Book of Abraham. An early Latter-day Saint, Reuben Miller, used “the translation of the book of Abraham” to show rival claimants to the leadership of the Church after the death of Joseph Smith “that in all the different Dispensations since the days of Adam, when a Dispensation



KIRTLAND TEMPLE, KIRTLAND, OHIO. PHOTOGRAPH BY KEN LUND.

of the Priesthood was committed to any of the ancients, the *grand keys and key-word, were in all cases given.*” Since others who wanted to lead the Church “claimed a Dispensation of the same Priesthood, but held not the key-words, and ordinances of the same,” Miller rejected their claims on the basis of the Book of Abraham and the ordinances of the temple.<sup>1</sup>

Miller saw a connection between the Book of Abraham and the temple and he is not the only one to do so. It may not be coincidence that Joseph Smith began translating the Book of Abraham just

1. Reuben Miller, *James J. Strang, Weighed in the Balance of Truth, and Found Wanting, His Claims as First President of the Melchisedek Priesthood Refuted* (Burlington, WI: n.p., 1846), 4.

before the dedication of the Kirtland Temple and the introduction of some temple ordinances at that time, and that he published the excerpts we now have of the Book of Abraham just before he introduced the temple endowment in Nauvoo. The Book of Abraham thus serves, in a way, as an introduction to the ordinances of the temple and the covenants made there.

One of the important uses of the Book of Abraham by Latter-day Saints is its particular wording of the Abrahamic covenant. This wording clarifies how Abraham's seed will bless "all the families of the earth" (Abraham 2:11).

The largest effect that the Book of Abraham has had on Latter-day Saint thought is its concept of the premortal existence and the purpose of life. Although other Latter-day Saint scriptures discuss the premortal existence, the Book of Abraham provides the clearest explanation of this key Latter-day Saint doctrine. The Book of Abraham explains that God organized all the spirits of this world "before this world was" (Abraham 3:22), explains its purpose (see Abraham 3:24), and states that this earthly existence was to "prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:25). The Book of Abraham thus provides Latter-day Saints with their most succinct statement on the purpose of mortal existence.

In the Church today, the Book of Abraham is generally the most concise, clear, and cogent description of the preexistence. The earliest mention of the premortal existence in LDS scriptures is found in the Book of Mormon in Alma 13 (translated in 1829 and published in 1830), but this is hardly the clearest explanation of the subject. The Book of Moses (see Moses 4:1–4), which was revealed in 1830 and published in 1851, also contains a clear reference to the preexistence and the war in heaven, but it only explicitly refers to the premortal existence of Christ and Satan. The preexistence of

the devil and his angels is also mentioned in Doctrine and Covenants 29:36–39, which was revealed in September 1830 and published in 1833. Doctrine and Covenants 38:1 (revealed in January 1831 and published in 1833) refers only to "all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made." Doctrine and Covenants 49:17 (revealed in March 1831 and published in 1833) does not clearly state whether man or the measure of man has a premortal existence. The premortal existence of man is discussed in Doctrine and Covenants 93:29–35 (revealed in May 1833 and published in 1835). Yet Abraham 3:21–28 (revealed in 1835) puts it all in perspective by discussing man's inclusion in the grand council before the world began and the consequences of man's obedience or disobedience during his first and second estates.

Once man's position in the eternities was put into perspective, Joseph began to preach it. While in Liberty Jail he wrote to the Saints: "How vane and trifling, have ben our spirits, our Conferences our Coun[c]ils our private Meetings our pri[v]ate as well as public Conversations to low to mean to vulgar to condescending, for the dignified Characters of the Cald and Chosen of God, according to the purpose of his word will from befo[re] the foundation of the world, to hold the keys of the mistres [mysteries] of those things that have ben kept hid from the foundation until now."<sup>2</sup> Around August 1839 Joseph was more explicit: "The Father called all spirits before him at the creation of Man & organized them. He [Adam] is the head, was told to multiply, The Keys were given to him, and by

2. Joseph Smith, letter to the members of the Church in Quincy, Illinois, and to those scattered abroad, 20 March 1839, in Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 397.



CUTAWAY RECONSTRUCTION OF LIBERTY JAIL ON THE ORIGINAL SITE. LIBERTY JAIL IS A FORMER JAIL IN LIBERTY, MISSOURI, WHERE JOSEPH SMITH JR. AND OTHER ASSOCIATES WERE IMPRISONED FROM 1 DECEMBER 1838 TO 6 APRIL 1839, DURING THE 1838 MORMON WAR. PHOTOGRAPH BY KEN LUND.

him to others & he will have to give an accounts of his Stewardship, & they to him. The Priesthood is everlasting.”<sup>3</sup>

The Prophet continued to make such statements until his death. For example, in January 1841 Joseph explained that “spirits are eternal. At the first organization in heaven we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed, and the plan of salvation made and we sanctioned it. We came to this earth that we might have a

3. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 9.

body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body. The Devil has no body, and herein is his punishment. He is pleased when he can obtain the tabernacle of man and when cast out by the Savior he asked to go into the herd of swine, showing that he would prefer a swine[']s body to having none.”<sup>4</sup>

In February 1841, Thomas McIntire recorded, “Joseph said that before the foundation of the Earth in the Grand Counsel that the Spirits of all Men ware subject to opression & the express purpose of God in Giveing it a tabernicle was to arm it against the power of Darkness.”<sup>5</sup> In March 1841 Joseph again taught, “The spirit or the intelligence of men are self Existant principles he before the foundation [of] this Earth—& quotes the Lord[']s question to Job ‘where wast thou when I laid the foundation of the Earth’ [as] Evidence that Job was in Existing somewhere at that time[.] he says God is Good & all his acts is for the benefit of infereir inteligences—God saw that those intelegences had Not power to Defend themselves against those that had a tabernicle therefore the Lord Calls them together in Counsel & agrees to form them tabernicles so that he might Gender the Spirit & tabernicle together so as to create sympathy for their fellowman.”<sup>6</sup> These statements were made a year before the publication of the Book of Abraham showing that Joseph Smith had been thinking about what he had learned from his translation of the Book of Abraham.

A year after the publication of the Book of Abraham, Joseph again preached the doctrine of the premortal existence: “The design of God before the foundation of the world was that we should take

4. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 60.

5. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 62.

6. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 68.

tabernacles that through faithfulness we should overcome & therby obtain a resrection from the dead, in this wise obtain glory honor power and dominion for this thing is needful, inasmuch as the Spirits in the Eternal world, glory in bringin other Spirits in Subjection unto them, Striving continually for the mastery, He who rules in the heavens when he has a certain work to do calls the Spirits before him to organize them. They present themselves and offer their Services. When Lucifer was hurled from Heaven the decree was the he Sould not obtain a tabernacle not those that were with him, but go abroad upon the earth exposed to the anger of the elements naked & bare.” This sermon was also recorded by Willard Richards, who quoted language taken from the Book of Abraham: “Organization of Spirits in the eternal world—spirits in the eternal world are like spirits in this world, when those spirits have come into this [and] risn & received glorified bodies, they will have an ascendancy over spirits who have no bodies, or kept not their first estate like the devil. Devils punishment, should not have a habitation like other men.”<sup>7</sup>

Franklin D. Richards, who later compiled the Pearl of Great Price, noted of the sermon: “As man is liable to enemies there as well as here it is necessary for him to be placed beyond their power in order to be saved. This is done by our taking bodies (keeping our first estate) and having the Power of the Resurrection pass upon us whereby we are enabled to gain the ascendancy over the disembodied spirits. The mortification of satan consists in his not being permitted to take a body.”<sup>8</sup> The phrases first estate and second estate derive from the Book of Abraham (see Abraham 3:26–28) and do not occur elsewhere in the Restoration scriptures.

7. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 207.

8. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 208.

The Book of Abraham forms a background for the funeral discourse given for King Follett. The Prophet noted that he learned some of the things he spoke of in the King Follett discourse “by translating the papyrus now in my house.”<sup>9</sup>

In one of his last sermons before his death, Joseph Smith again referred to the Book of Abraham, stating that “every man who has a calling to minister to the Inhabitants of the world, was ordained to that very purpose in the grand Council of Heaven before this world was—I suppose that I was ordained to this very office in that grand Council.”<sup>10</sup> George Laub reported it this way: “Brother Joseph Smith was chose for the last dispensation of Seventh Dispensation. The time of the grand council Set in heaven to organize this world Joseph was chose for the last & greatest Prophet to lay the foundation of gods work of the Seventh Dispensation.”<sup>11</sup> Samuel W. Richards recorded, “At the general & grand Council of heaven, all those to whom a dispensations was to be committed, were set apart & ordained at that time, to that calling.”<sup>12</sup>

The Church leaders completely absorbed this teaching that Joseph had received from the Book of Abraham and taught in his discourses. In 1845 William Clayton recorded, “It has been a doctrine taught by this church that we were in the grand council amongst the Gods when the organization of this world was contemplated and that the law of government were all made and sanctioned by all present and all the ordinances and ceremonies decreed upon.”<sup>13</sup> In

9. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 380.

10. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 367.

11. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 370.

12. *Words of Joseph Smith*, 371.

13. Andrew F. Ehat, “‘It Seems Like Heaven Began on Earth’: Joseph Smith and the Constitution of the Kingdom of God,” *BYU Studies* 20 (Spring 1980): 269.

1857 Brigham Young said that Adam received his mission before the foundation of the earth “in the grand council, and performed the mission assigned him there.”<sup>14</sup> Orson Hyde also discussed the premortal existence and compared it to the life of immigrants before they came to a new country.<sup>15</sup> It was not until 1888, ten years after the Pearl of Great Price was published in the United States and eight years after it was canonized, that leaders of the Church such as Orson F. Whitney started connecting the doctrine of the grand council in the preexistence with the Book of Abraham.<sup>16</sup>

The Book of Abraham was published in 1842, but most Church leaders gained their understanding of its core teachings from the Prophet’s sermons. These they took west with them, and it was not until after the Book of Abraham became part of the Latter-day Saint canon that the teaching about the preexistence was again tied to the Book of Abraham. The secondhand impact had nevertheless been profound, and thus there were no doctrinal shifts when it was canonized. The Book of Abraham had simply come home.

#### FURTHER READING

Gee, John. “The Role of the Book of Abraham in the Restoration” (Transcript). Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997. Surprisingly little has been written about the use of the Book of Abraham by Latter-day Saints. This preliminary article notes how the doctrine of the preexistence was taught by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo and connected with the Book of Abraham. That doctrine continued to be

taught after the Saints moved west as a doctrine of Joseph Smith, but its connection with the Book of Abraham was lost. Only about ten years after the Book of Abraham was canonized in 1880 was the doctrine again associated with the Book of Abraham.

Nibley, Hugh. “Abraham’s Temple Drama.” In *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, edited by Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks. Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999. The author sees the vision that Abraham experiences in Abraham 3–5 as a type of temple experience.

14. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:351–52.

15. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:315.

16. Orson F. Whitney, in *Collected Discourses*, 1 (24 June 1888).