



## CHAPTER 4

# *The Egyptian View of Abraham*

WHEN NEBUCHADNEZZAR CONQUERED JERUSALEM in 587 BC, many Jews fled into Egypt (Jeremiah 43). Other Jews settled in Egypt in the following years. Some assimilated into the surrounding culture, but not all did; a sufficient number retained their faith and established Jewish temples in Elephantine during the Persian Period (525–332 BC) and in Leontopolis during the Ptolemaic Period (332–32 BC). Jewish settlements existed in Elephantine, Edfu, Thebes, Hermopolis Magna, Oxyrhynchos, Arsinoe (Krokodilopolis), Syron Kome, Alexandrou Nesos, Samaria (Kome), Chanaanain, Trikoma, Tebtynis, Herakleopolis, Tebetnoi, Memphis, Demerdash, Leontopolis, Shedia, Xenephyris, Nitriai, Tanis, Pelusium, Athribis, and Alexandria. The Jews brought some of their texts with them; for example, the earliest manuscript of any of the Psalms is a fifth-century BC text written in demotic script and found at Elephantine.

The biblical story of Abraham appears in Egypt by at least the third century BC, when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek



Ryan Shields, Think Spatial, BYU Geography

KNOWN JEWISH SETTLEMENTS IN EGYPT DURING THE PTOLEMAIC PERIOD.

during the reign of Ptolemy II. This translation is known as the Septuagint. Egyptian manuscripts of the Septuagint telling the biblical story of Abraham date as early as the first century BC.

Nonbiblical stories about Abraham circulated in Egypt even earlier. During the reign of Ptolemy I, Hecateus of Abdera traveled to Thebes and learned stories about Abraham from Egyptian priests; he wrote these stories in a book called *On Abraham and the Egyptians*. This work is now unfortunately lost, but Clement of Alexandria, a second-century AD Egyptian Christian, quoted a short passage from it in which the worship of idols is condemned.

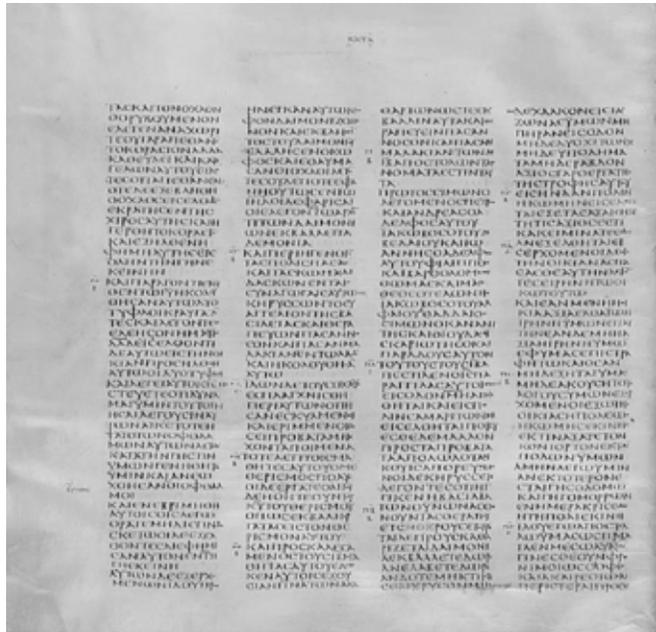
The writer Eupolemus, who lived under Egyptian rule in Palestine in the second century BC, recounts how Abraham lived in Heliopolis (On) and taught astronomy and other sciences to the Egyptian priests. In connection with Abraham, Eupolemus seems to think that the Egyptians descended from Canaan.

In the first century BC, the Egyptian Jew Artapanus wrote an account of Abraham teaching astronomy to the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Philo, a first-century AD Egyptian Jew, claimed that Abraham studied astronomy, the motion of the stars, meteorology, and mathematics, and used his reasoning on these subjects to understand God.

The Testament of Abraham describes Abraham's tour of the next life before he dies. Scholars think that this work was written by an Egyptian Jew around the first century AD. It is notable for its reinterpretation of the Egyptian judgment scene in a Jewish fashion. This text was read liturgically the Sunday before Christmas during the Egyptian month of Khoiak.

A fragmentary and only partially understood text from an Egyptian temple library connects Abraham with an illustration of a body lying on a lion-shaped bed with a jackal-headed figure standing over it. The text has been dated to the third century AD but might be from the second century.



SURVIVING PAGE OF CODIX SINAITICUS, DATING TO THE FOURTH CENTURY AD, WHICH MAKES IT ONE OF THE EARLIEST BIBLICAL CODICES. THE TEXT IS FROM MATTHEW 9:23B–10:17. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Another fragmentary text from Egypt about Abraham describes how the king (the word used is *pharaoh*) tries to sacrifice Abraham, but Abraham is delivered by an angel of the Lord. Abraham later teaches the members of the royal court about the true God using astronomy.

Thus, the Book of Abraham fits comfortably with the literature about Abraham that was circulating in Egypt during the general time period of the Joseph Smith Papyri. In order to assess whether it is something that could have been known by the ancient owners of the Joseph Smith Papyri, we need to know something about those owners.

FURTHER READING

Gee, John. “Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob.” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995): 19–84. This essay is a more thorough examination of the background of the references to Abraham from ancient Egypt.

———. “Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts.” *Ensign* 22, no. 7 (July 1992): 60–62. This article examines references to Abraham found in an Egyptian temple archive.

———. “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.

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 discusses the ancient traditions about Abraham being an astronomer.

Muhlestein, Kerry. “Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion.” In *Achievements and Problems of Modern Egyptology*, edited by Galina A. Belova, 246–59. Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2012. This work examines the use of biblical figures and stories in the native Egyptian religion.

———. “The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I.” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 20–33. This essay examines the background of native Egyptian usage of biblical figures and stories at the time the Joseph Smith Papyri were written.

Nadig, Peter C. “‘We Beg You, Our King!’ Some Reflections on the Jews in Persian and Ptolemaic Egypt.” In *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, vol. 3. of *Studies in the Book of Abraham*, edited by John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid, 83–93. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005. This article discusses the political standing of Jews in Egypt during the Ptolemaic period.

Porten, Bezalel, and John Gee. “Aramaic Funerary Practices in Egypt.” In *The World of the Aramaeans II: Studies in History and Archaeology in Honour of Paul-Eugène Dion*, edited by P. M. Michèle Daviau, John W. Weavers, and Michael Weigl, 270–307. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Press, 2001. This article examines the known corpus of Aramaic funerary inscriptions from Egypt. Some of those who left Aramaic inscriptions were Jewish immigrants. The inscriptions reveal interesting features of Jews and other Aramaic speakers assimilating into the surrounding Egyptian culture.

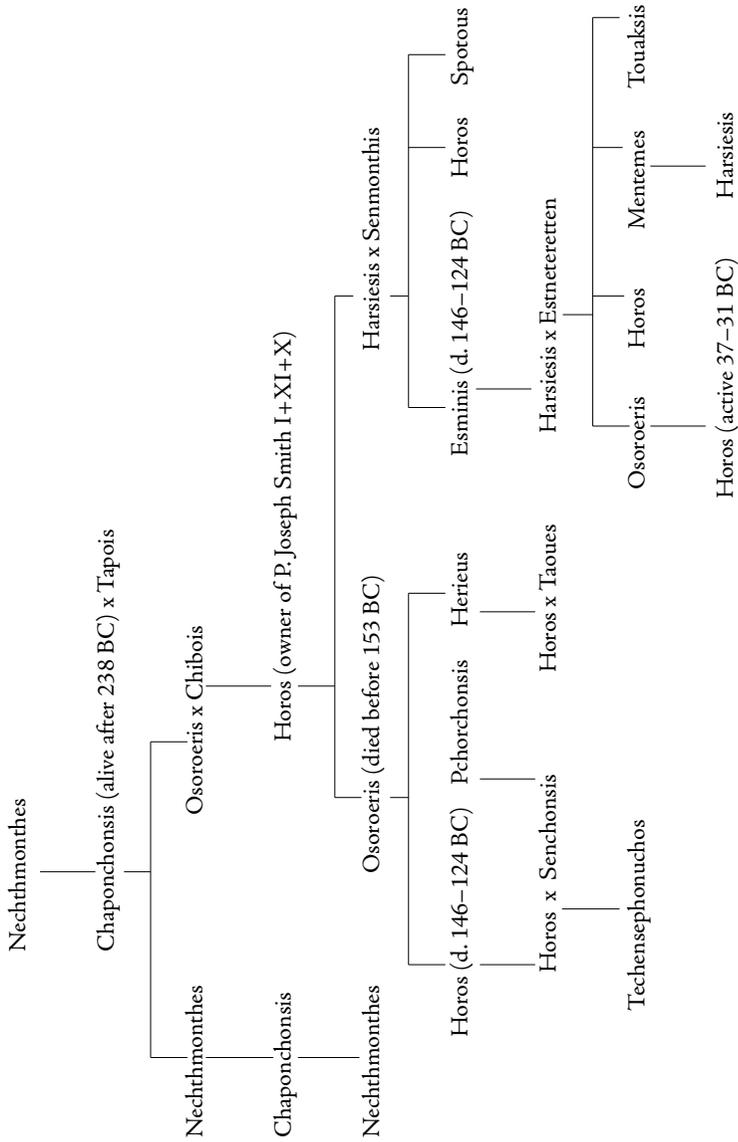
Tvedtnes, John A., Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee. *Early Traditions about Abraham Relevant to a Study of the Book of Abraham*, vol. 1 of *Studies in the Book of Abraham*. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001. This is a collection and translation of the various accounts of Abraham’s early life. It includes all of the texts mentioned in this chapter with the exception of one. It also includes a large number of other texts from ancient times dealing with Abraham.

Vittmann, Günther. *Ägypten und die Fremden im ersten vorchristlichen Jahrtausend*. Mainz: Phillip von Zabern, 2003. This book examines the evidence of foreign groups in Egypt, including Jews, using a variety of evidence, including evidence from Egyptian documentation.

Winnicki, Jan K. *Late Egypt and Her Neighbours: Foreign Population in Egypt in the First Millennium BC*, translated by Dorota Dzierzbicka. Warsaw: Institute of Archaeology of Warsaw University,

2009. This is an examination of foreign groups in Egypt, including Jews, using papyrus documents in Greek.

# GENEALOGY OF HOROS



GENEALOGICAL CHART SHOWING THE FAMILY OF HOROS.