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Abstract: This article compares several ancient and scriptural sources to examine the morality of Abraham claiming that his wife was his sister.



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Abraham in Egypt: A Collation of Evidence for the Case of the Missing Wife

THOMAS W. MACKAY*

Commentators have always been bothered by the morality of Abraham's action while in Egypt, for the patriarch claimed to be his wife's brother, not her husband. Expressions have varied from blatant condemnation ("He was guilty of prevarication and deceit, he lost his perfect trust in God's guardianship; and he endangered his wife's chastity and honour in selfish care for his own safety."¹) to Augustine's uncomfortable dismissal "he silenced a little bit of truth, he didn't say anything false."² One minister called it "unquestionable" that Abraham suffered from his "sinful agreement" with Sarah,³ and a contemporary scholar deplores the action as being a "cynical, utilitarian consideration."⁴ Calvin applauds the end sought (his life); however, he cannot fully excuse the means employed (the lie).⁵ Luther, himself hard pressed to justify the lie, remarks that the scripture is difficult for exegetes to explain:

There have never been any theologians or other readers
whom the passage before us would not have offended, even

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¹Rev. William J. Deane, *Men and the Bible: Abraham: His Life and Times* (New York: Auson D. F. Randolph & Co., [n.d.]) p. 51.

²Augustine *contra Faustum* 22. 34: (PL, 42 422) "indicavit sororem, non negavit uxorem; tacuit aliquid veri, non dixit aliquid falsi."

³Samuel Crothers, *The Life of Abraham the First Missionary* (Chillicothe, Ohio: Ely & Allen, 1847), pp. 67-73.

⁴Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, 2nd ed. rev., trans. John H. Marks (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1963), p. 222.

⁵John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Soc., 1847), p. 360; see pp. 339-65.

among the Jews. It is so amazing, so full of questions and offenses, especially if it is correctly understood; for here offenses both of faith and of morals reveal themselves. . . . The Jews, like those sevenfold asses, the Stoics, interpret this action quite harshly and accuse Abraham of a sin so great that they maintain it was punished among his descendants by the Egyptian captivity.⁶

Skinner,⁷ still uneasy after making every explanation possible, states "lastly, it is assumed that in the circumstances lying is excusable." The gravity of the problem is seen in the implications noted by the Jerusalem Bible:

The purpose of this narrative . . . is to commemorate the beauty of the ancestress of the race, the astuteness of its patriarch, the protection that God afforded them. The story reflects a stage of moral development when a lie was still considered lawful under certain circumstances and when the husband's life meant more than his wife's honour. God was leading man to an appreciation of the moral law but this appreciation was gradual.

This all sounds so very familiar—the utter helplessness of rabbinical, patristic, and contemporary writers to understand Abraham. Every phase of the motifs of sacrifice and obedience represents a stumbling block. In fact, there is no moral or ethical justification for Abraham's actions, despite all the casuistries and sophistries conjured up by learned minds. All the protestations, all the confusion, all the embarrassment only demonstrates the bankruptcy of the world: the story of Abraham has dumbfounded learned commentators for centuries. Now people are beginning to look to Abraham, not Moses, for the origin of the covenant, but their efforts still leave them baffled and only emphasize their discomfort. The Book of Abraham gives us the new material needed for reevaluation leading to understanding.

Whenever confronting a problem, we should first scrutinize the ancient evidence and ascertain just what the limits are to the evidence proper. Frequently this gives us a fresh approach and shows possible weaknesses in our analysis. Also, we often discover that we have somehow failed to consider some very obvious possibilities which are clear in the evidence, but ob-

⁶Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 2: *Lectures on Genesis*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960) pp. 288, 292.

⁷John Skinner, *International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh; T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 249.

scured by presuppositions. We propose here to go back and study the story of Abraham accounts in Genesis, Jubilees, Jasher, Genesis Apocryphon,⁸ and the Book of Abraham.

Genesis and the Book of Jubilees (c. third century B. C.) provide the most abbreviated accounts. In fact, according to Dupont-Sommer, the author of Jubilees takes great care to compress the narrative, as though to suppress everything which might question the loyalty and character of Abraham.⁹ The Book of Jasher (which is purported to be the book mentioned in Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:18) and the Genesis Apocryphon embellish the story with details drawn from Jewish lore¹⁰ and consequently present more expanded versions. Although the Book of Abraham devotes only a small portion of our present text to the sojourn in Egypt, it would seem, to judge from Facsimile No. 3, that Abraham, after recording his revelation of the creation (Chapters 3-5), probably continued his personal narrative. However, the few verses which do remain offer one very interesting point stated by no other source, namely that God *commanded* Abraham to use the "brother-sister" device (Abraham 2:25).

The text of these five accounts is given in parallel columns. A comparison of the sources raises several questions of which the following will be briefly considered: (1) the antiquity of the Book of Abraham; (2) God's intervention and Abraham's "lie"; (3) Abraham's healing Pharaoh; (4) Abraham on Pharaoh's throne; and (5) the wife-sister motif.

THE ANTIQUITY OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

Dupont-Sommer assents to the affinities of the Genesis Apocryphon with Jubilees, although he is somewhat reluctant

⁸Nahman Avigad and Yigael Yadin, eds., *A Genesis Apocryphon. A Scroll from the Wilderness of Judaea* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press of the Hebrew University, 1956); Geza Vermes, *The Dead Seas Scrolls in English*, rev. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965); Theodor Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1964). For a fairly complete bibliography, see Christoph Burchard, *Bibliographie zu den Handschriften vom Toten Meer* (BZAW, 76 [1957] and 89 [1965]). Jubilees is included in R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 2 Vols. (N.Y.: Oxford U. P., 1963). An old translation of Jasher has been recently reprinted: *The Book of Jasher* (Salt Lake City: J. H. Parry & Co., 1887).

⁹A. Dupont-Sommer, *Essene Writings from Qumran* (Cleveland & N. Y.: World Publishing Co., 1962), p. 285, n. 4.

¹⁰Many of the stories may be found in Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 5 Vols., trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913).

to accept the opinion of Avigad and Yadin (in the *editio princeps*) that "the scroll may have served as a source for a number of stories told more concisely" in the Book of Enoch and the Book of Jubilees.¹¹ These last two books may be attributed to the fourth, third, or second centuries B. C.;¹² consequently the *composition* of the Genesis Apocryphon would antedate those, even though the scroll itself, "the earliest Aramaic example of pseudoepigraphic literature that has come down to us,"¹³ is dated between 50 B. C. and 70 A. D.¹⁴ It should be obvious that the date of any given manuscript of ancient literature is hardly ever the date of *composition*, and that the date of composition will not always be the origin of any particular element. The Homeric question should be sufficient to warn us about that! To cite merely one specific example of how an ancient account can be preserved for centuries without leaving any written trace, even among literate people, the story of the two pieces of the coat of Joseph, related by the Book of Mormon and by Tha'labi (an Arab writing in the eleventh century A. D.),¹⁵ must have been passed

¹¹Avigad and Yadin, p. 38 (italics theirs).

¹²Cf. W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), pp. 266-67.

¹³Avigad and Yadin, p. 39; cf. Manfred H. Lehmann, "1 Q Genesis Apocryphon in the Light of the Targumim and Midrashim," *Revue de Qumran*, 1 (1958-59), p. 251.

¹⁴Avigad and Yadin, p. 38; Geza Vermes, *Studia Post-Biblica*, Vol. 4: *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism. Haggadic Studies* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961], p. 96, n. 2) prefers the second century B. C., as does H. H. Rowley ("Notes on the Aramaic of the Genesis Apocryphon," *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver*, ed. D. W. Thomas and W. D. McHardy [N. Y.: Oxford U. P., 1963], pp. 116-29), but H. E. Del Medico (*The Riddle of the Scrolls* [London: Burke, 1957], p. 178) had tried to date it to the second century A. D. See also E. Y. Kutscher, "Dating the Language of the Genesis Apocryphon," *JBL*, Vol. 76 (1957), pp. 288-92; P. Winter, "Das aramäische Genesis-Apocryphon," *TLZ*, Vol. 82 (1957), pp. 257-62; E. Y. Kutscher, *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, Vol. 4: "The Language of the 'Genesis Apocryphon.' A Preliminary Study," *Aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. C. Rabin and Y. Yadin (Jerusalem: The Magnes of the Hebrew University, 1958), pp. 283-96 (reviewed by G. Molin, *Revue de Qumran*, Vol. 1 [1958-59], pp. 284-85). J. W. Döve ("Lamech's Achterdocht in 1 Q Genesis Apocryphon," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift*, Vol. 15 [1960-61], p. 414) asserts that "1 Q Gen. Ap. is een essense midrasj." Matthew Black (*The Scrolls and Christian Origins* [N. Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961], p. 193) calls attention to the anthropomorphic god of G. A. 22. 27 (cf. Gen. 15:1; n.b. Acts 7: 2) as differing from the targums, which eschew anthropomorphism.

¹⁵Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1964), pp. 177-80. The Testament of Zebulon Vol. 4. 10 (cf. Marc Philonenko, "Les Interpolations chrétiennes des *Testaments des Douze Patriarches* et les Manuscrits de Qoumrân," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses*, vol. 39 [1959], p. 33) is not relevant.

on for more than sixteen centuries in the Near East, and even longer if it remounts historically to the actual event! As to the Abraham story, Vermes assures us that "Genesis Apocryphon is securely established within the current of tradition whose origins, inherited eventually by targumic and midrashic literature, must derive from *an earlier age*."¹⁶

Naturally this does not mean that everything in the Genesis Apocryphon is factual or even that all of it antedates the fourth century B. C. Nevertheless, there are some considerations that ought to be made. First, the earlier portion of the Genesis Apocryphon account is related in the first person. Second, the earlier part of the narrative is "rich with haggadic amplifications."¹⁷ Third, the later portion is told in the third person, and, fourth, it adheres much more strictly to the biblical text. It seems, therefore, to be a conflation of biblical narrative and extra-biblical stories. This indicates that Genesis Apocryphon, as we know it, was probably composed some two to four centuries before our extant copy was made, and it includes some old accounts not in Genesis. But it is not necessary to suppose that if one source gives a fuller story than another the longer version *perforce* is a more recent expansion of the shorter account.¹⁸ Where Genesis Apocryphon does not follow the strict biblical narrative on Abraham, it relates a lengthy first person story from old Jewish lore.

The Book of Abraham employs the first person, as does Genesis Apocryphon, and the nature of the history and especially the creation ritual are so sacred that the Pearl of Great Price Abraham might not have been circulated as widely as other, possibly abridged, versions. Yet, both the Book of Abraham and Genesis Apocryphon agree in employing the first person *and* in narrating an instance of God's intervention to protect the righteous. The nature of the differences and similarities of the Pearl of Great Price (PGP) account to our

¹⁶Vermes, p. 123 (italics ours); cf. J. T. Milik, *Studies in Biblical Theology*, No. 26: *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judaea*, trans. J. Strugnell (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1959), p. 31: "The Genesis Apocryphon . . ., even if it contains sections translated verbatim from the Hebrew of Genesis, is no true Targum nor Midrash. Rather it is an ambitious compilation of traditional lore concerning the Patriarchs. . . ." n. b. Lehmann, p. 249.

¹⁷Vermes, p. 96.

¹⁸Cf. *infra*, pp. 8, 9. See Hugh Nibley, "The Unknown Abraham," *Improvement Era*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Jan., 1969), pp. 26-27.

other sources would therefore indicate that (quite apart from the palaeographical date of the papyrus Joseph Smith used and not worrying about *how* he used it) the *story* antedates these other sources.

GOD'S INTERVENTION AND ABRAHAM'S "LIE"

The revelation and commandment to Abraham to claim that Sarah was his sister is related in varying—thought not contradictory—terms by the PGP (commandment by the Lord's voice) and Genesis Apocryphon (a dream interpreted by Abraham). Dreams were a regular means of divine communication in the Old Testament, and so Genesis Apocryphon does not need to specify that this one came from God. Rather it leaves the *interpretation* to Abraham. Since the identification of Abraham and Sarah with the cedar and the palm is an established part of the tradition,¹⁹ this aspect of the dream presents no difficulty. Still, it is left to Abraham's ingenuity to devise the "she is my sister" trick. In contrast to all other sources, the PGP specifies that God told Abraham what he was to do. He was therefore acting by commandment, and to do otherwise would have been just as much a sin as for Nephi to have failed to kill Laban.²⁰

To understand the internal conflict this divine injunction may have caused Abraham, we need only to recollect his statement at the beginning of the PGP account:

And, finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same; having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of peace, and desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God, I became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers. (Abraham 1:2)

So here we have a righteous man who desires perfection and who has just received the promise of land, a righteous, numerous posterity, etc.²¹ Now the Lord tests Abraham—and Sarah!

¹⁹Avigad and Yadin, pp. 23-24; Lehmann, p. 257; cf. Ps. 42-3; Vermes, p. 112.

²⁰1 Nephi 4:5-19, 34.

²¹Abraham 2:6-11.

It is strange that the one thing which would have averted the need of "covering up" for the great patriarch of the House of Israel should have dropped out of later tradition and should appear only in modified form in Genesis Apocryphon. At any rate we do have here an instance of an account, given by revelation through Joseph Smith, being corroborated in a certain measure by one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. It would indicate that at the time of composition of Genesis Apocryphon, the story of God's intervention *before* Abraham entered Egypt had not yet altogether been lost from the tradition. The importance of establishing the concept that Abraham was acting under God's directive cannot be overstated. (1) It vindicates the patriarch of an action where his righteousness is seriously questioned. (2) It pictures the patriarch deeply grieved not at his own mistake (as many would have it) but at what has happened *despite* his following explicitly what God had commanded. We can now understand that (3) Abraham's sojourn in Egypt was a period of severe trial where he adhered strictly to what God had directed, and (4) that Abraham continued to trust in God even in times of serious adversity when it seemed as though the covenant would never be fulfilled. Hence, instead of viewing Abraham as jeopardizing the covenant, we rather see him relying on God when *God* seems to be effectively terminating the covenant. Or, to put it more bluntly, Abraham's trial when ordered to sacrifice Isaac was preceded by at least one other similar instance when, *because* he was doing what God had instructed him to do, his covenant seemed doomed to extinction while he was in Egypt. *Both* times he chose to honor and obey God. *Both* times he proved that his loyalty to God and his confidence in God's knowledge and power were stronger than any impulse to turn against God in time of crisis. By faith he retained the covenant, recovered Sarah, and returned with great wealth to his promised land. He had been tested, tried, and proven worthy of his blessings. His trial in Egypt prepared him for the time when God instructed him to sacrifice his son, and Abraham, it will be remembered, had nearly been sacrificed himself.²² One other aspect of the trial must not be overlooked. The

²²Abraham 1:5-20; cf. fac. 1; see also Hugh Nibley's discussion of human sacrifice and the pharaonic cult in the *Improvement Era*, Vol. 72 (Feb-Sept, 1969).

sojourn in Egypt was to prove *Sarah's* willingness to obey her husband in his righteous obedience, and she too showed herself faithful. Abraham's covenant was not for himself alone but in conjunction with Sarah. Hence both Abraham and Sarah were tested in Egypt.

ABRAHAM'S HEALING PHARAOH

Genesis Apocryphon recounts a healing by the laying on of hands, and we can substantiate from other sources that this was well within Abraham's right and power. Hence the healing scene may well be an authentic story antedating the introduction of the Mosaic Law. In Galatians 3:8 Paul affirms that the gospel was taught to Abraham,²³ and we know that Melchizedek ordained Abraham.²⁴ The order of the Priesthood Abraham held—sufficient for exaltation²⁵—includes the keys of such spiritual blessings as the healing of the sick.²⁶ So it was within Abraham's right to perform such a miracle—provided that he had already received the Priesthood prior to entering Egypt. The Book of Abraham intimates that he did, but when and from whom? What, then, did he receive from Melchizedek? Was it the keys of presidency (which seems to be the most important aspect of the birthright he transmitted) in a patriarchal order?

Dupont-Sommer observes that the Old Testament prophets imposed their hands for many purposes—but not for healing.²⁷ This is understandable since the O. T. is almost entirely the record of the House of Israel under the Law of Moses, that is, without the Melchizedek Priesthood.²⁸ Yet even so there was some knowledge of healing, for Josephus informs us that the Essenes healed the sick,²⁹ and in Jubilees x. 12-14,³⁰ angels teach Noah about medicines to combat sickness sent by evil spirits. Dupont-Sommer also cites the Prayer of Na-

²³Cf. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* [cited TPJS] (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1959), p. 60.

²⁴D&C 84:14; TPJS, pp. 322-23; cf. Gen. 14:18-20.

²⁵D&C 132:29.

²⁶Jas. 5:13-15; D&C 42:43-44; cf. D&C 66:9; 84:68.

²⁷A. Dupont-Sommer, "Exorcismes et Guérisons dans les Ecrits de Qoum-rân," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, 7, Congress volume, Oxford, 1959 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), p. 251 and n. 1.

²⁸TPJS, p. 181; D&C 84:19-27.

²⁹Jos. *Bell. lud.* Vol. 2, p. 136.

³⁰Vermes (p. 124) identifies Jubilees as an Essene recension.

bonid, fragments recovered from Qumran cave IV,³¹ as an example of exorcism and healing. His assertion is that the therapeutic stories are rather late—Essene—accretions to the legends. There are, to be sure, very definite affinities with New Testament miracles: (1) sickness is associated with and caused by sin; (2) healing includes exorcism of the evil spirit and therefore a forgiveness of sins preceding the healing; (3) prayer is often offered before the ordinance of the laying on of hands; (4) the healing is effected through the authoritative laying on of the hands.³²

These are precisely such similarities as we would expect to find in a full dispensation. And in the parallel story related in Gen. 20, Abraham is instrumental in healing Abimelech (Gen. 20:17-18). Certainly *this* account is not Essene. So there is an ancient tradition which appears in a different form in different sources intimating that Abraham did heal at least one person of royal station. Genesis Apocryphon may well be recording an early account of some historical event when it has Abraham tell how he healed Pharaoh. In light of our other evidence, we need not assume that Dupont-Sommer has correctly identified the origin of the story. Certainly an amplified version need not always be presumed to be more recent than the simple one, especially when dealing with historical material;³³ the Book of Mormon offers familiar evidence which confutes that assumption.

With our new collation of sources, we can reevaluate the evidence. For example, scholars have regularly condemned Josephus and Eupolemus for claiming that Abraham taught

³¹Dupont-Sommer, pp. 253 ff; cf. J. T. Milik, " 'Prière de Nabonide' et autres Ecrits d'un Cycle de Daniel. Fragments Araméens de Qumrân 4," *Revue Biblique*, Vol. 63 (1956), pp. 407-411.

³²Dupont-Sommer, pp. 252, 261; see also D. Flusser, "Healing through the Laying-on of Hands in a Dead Sea Scroll," *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 7 (1957), pp. 107-108; W. H. Brownlee, *The Meaning of the Qumrân Scrolls for the Bible* (N. Y.: Oxford U. P., 1964), pp. 120-21; H. Nibley, "Qumran and 'The Companions of the Cave,'" *Revue de Qumran*, Vol. 5 (1965), pp. 195-96; Geza Vermes, "Essenes-Therapeutai-Qumran," *Durham University Journal*, n.s. Vol. 21 (1959-60), pp. 97-115; Geza Vermes, "The Etymology of 'Essenes,'" *Revue de Qumran*, Vol. 2 (1959-60), pp. 427-43; J.-P. Audet, "Qumrân et la Notice de Plin sur les Esséniens," *Revue Biblique*, Vol. 68 (1961), pp. 346-87; H. G. Schönfeld, "Zum Begriff 'Therapeutai' bei Philo von Alexandria," *Revue de Qumran*, Vol. 3 (1961-62), pp. 219-40; Geza Vermes, "Essenes and Therapeutai," *Revue de Qumran*, Vol. 3 (1961-62), pp. 495-504.

³³For instance, the account related in Gen. 18 appears "to belong to a longer and more personal story of Abraham" (James Barr, "Theophany and Anthropomorphism in the Old Testament," *Supp. to V. T.* [cited *supra*, n. 27], Vol. 7 (1959), p. 38.

the Egyptians astronomy.³⁴ Nevertheless the cosmology of the PGP indicates just such a possibility, particularly since Abraham interrupts the Egypt sojourn account to relate how, through the Urim and Thummin (Abraham 3:1) and the "records of the fathers" (Abraham 1:31), he learned of the universe and the creation. We may assume that after concluding the creation account and possibly a brief sketch of the earlier dispensations he continued his personal history. One other thing is relevant: Facsimile No. 3 notes that Abraham is sitting on Pharaoh's throne with the consent of Pharaoh teaching the Egyptians astronomy!³⁵

But the fact that he is represented as sitting on the throne is indeed strange, for that was the prerogative only of Pharaoh. In the May 1956 *Improvement Era*, Hugh Nibley applied to Facsimile No. 3 Helck's study of Egyptian royal succession, a process of adoption.³⁶ Some of the striking features are (1) the Pharaoh and his son are represented as women, since (2) coronation scenes always include two women (goddesses) to effect the transmission of authority; (3) the scene takes place in Egypt, (4) on Pharaoh's throne; (5) Abraham is wearing the sacred Atef crown and (6) holding the "Heqat-scepter . . . 'the Scepter of justice and judgement.'"³⁷

Was Pharaoh trying to make some sort of agreement with Abraham to share the rule of Egypt with him if he would share the Priesthood? Does the coronation scene help explain the extensive presents and great wealth which Abraham received from Pharaoh? Also, what is the significance of Pharaoh bestowing *purple* (regal) clothing to Sarah? Is this, too, relevant? We must remember, Cyrus H. Gordon informs us,³⁸ that Abraham was a *basileus*, or king, of the Homeric type, and that he was quite at ease in the company of kings. And so, when he left Egypt, Pharaoh provided a royal escort.

³⁴Jos. *Ant. Lud.* Vol. 1, p. 167; Eupolemus is paraphrased by Alexander Polyhistor whom Eusebius quotes (Euseb. *Praep. Ev.* Vol. 9, 17 [PG, p. 21, 708C-709A]).

³⁵*Times and Seasons*, Vol. 3, No. 14 (Whole Number 50; May 16, 1842), pp. 783-84.

³⁶W. Helck, "Rpt auf dem thron des Gb," *Orientalia*, n.s. Vol. 19 (1950), pp. 416-34.

³⁷Hugh Nibley, "There Were Jaredites," *Improvement Era*, Vol. 59 (1956), p. 310.

³⁸Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham of Ur," *Hebrew and Semitic Studies*. . . [cited *supra*, n. 14]. esp. pp. 78, 82.

THE WIFE-SISTER MOTIF

E. A. Speiser³⁹ concludes that the wife-sister motif is very ancient and, in fact, remounts to the Patriarchal Age. It is therefore relevant to consider extra-biblical evidence, and in so doing, Gordon notes a striking parallel in the three Genesis accounts of the "disposable-wife" (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:6-11), Helen-Menelaus-Paris, and the Kret epic. Incidentally, on the basis of literary criticism, the PGP presents elements of the Abraham story even more explicitly and accurately than Genesis in the Patriarchal Narratives, elements which Gordon dates to the thirteenth or fourteenth century B. C.⁴⁰

Speiser has written concerning a special legal adoption process among the Hurrians whereby one's wife "could have simultaneously the status of sister."⁴¹ After examining the evidence of the cuneiform sources, Speiser applies the custom to our biblical narrative and concludes that "Sarah was Terah's daughter by adoption, which is why the relationship was not duly recorded in Genesis 11. At all events, Sarah had adequate credentials to qualify, in one way or another, as Abraham's sister in the broader sense of the term."⁴² Yet all this is but a weak apology, a dodge. The ambiguity of the dual usage of "sister" was used to disguise the situation to Pharaoh, for he was duped as Abraham and Sarah and the Lord knew he would be.

There are many other things which need to be considered, and those who want to dispose of the Book of Abraham are doing justice neither to themselves nor the ancient evidence. Abraham's account is essentially a dialogue on priesthood—authority from God—vs. authority through Nimrod. The disappearance of this history caused later compilers to confuse and change the story to such a point that it no longer portrays

³⁹E. A. Speiser, "The Wife-Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives," *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1963), pp. 15-28.

⁴⁰Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (N. Y.: W. W. Norton, 1965), pp. 131-55, 228, n. 1; cf. T. B. L. Webster, *From Mycenae to Homer* (N. Y.: W. W. Norton, 1964), pp. 64-90, with other references at n. 2, p. 64. See also Cyrus H. Gordon, "The Patriarchal Age," *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Vol. 21 (1953), pp. 238-43; Cyrus H. Gordon, "The Patriarchal Narratives," *J.N.E.S.*, Vol. 13 (1954), pp. 56-59; cf. Leonard Wolley, *Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins* (N. Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936).

⁴¹Speiser, p. 17.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 26; cf. Abraham 2:2; Genesis 20:12.

clearly the extent of God's approval and direction of Abraham's life; witness the difference between Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham (Gen. 16:1-3) and the Lord commanding it:

God commanded Abraham, and Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the law; and from Hagar sprang many people. This, therefore, was fulfilling, among other things, the promises.

Was Abraham, therefore, under condemnation? Verily I say unto you Nay; for I, the Lord, commanded it.

(D. & C. 132:34-35)

CONCLUSION

In summary, we find that by collating our ancient sources, the evidence leads us to several conclusions:

(1) The story told in the Pearl of Great Price appears to be much older than the others.

(2) There is strong literary evidence that the 'disposable wife' motif was well-known in the second millenium B. C.

(3) Genesis Apocryphon seems to present a simplified form of the PGP account to which other, probably later, embellishments were added.

(4) One of the early elements of the Abraham tradition was God's intervention to instruct Abraham to disguise being Sarah's husband.

Other elements we may well suspect to be early are (5) the healing of Pharaoh and (6) the subsequent coronation of Abraham.

(7) Also, one other very common idea is consequently brought into question: the evolutionary development of morality in the biblical world.

There are indeed, many aspects of the life of Abraham which cry for clarification, and it seems a shame that there are so few LDS scholars willing to examine intelligently the myriad of problems. However slothful *we* may be in the study of the ancient world, Joseph Smith did not hesitate to bring forth new evidence about antiquity, evidence which remains new and virtually untouched after so many years. We are amazed both at Joseph Smith's lack of trepidation and at his accuracy in giving us long-lost information about that great Patriarch, Abraham.

Five Accounts of Abraham

Book of Abraham Chapter 2:21-25	Genesis Chapter 12:9-20, 13:1-2	Book of Jubilees Chapter 13:10-11, 13-15	A Genesis Apocryphon Column XIX, 9-27 Column XX, 2-34	The Book of Jasher Chapter XV, 1-33
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Abraham Journeys South

21. And I, Abraham, journeyed, going on still towards the south;

I went away . . . and I travelled towards the south . . . until I came to Hebron (at the time) of the building of Hebron. And I dwelt [there two] years.

and there was a continuation of a famine in the land;

10. And there was a famine in the land:

10. . . . and there was a famine in the land.

There was a famine in all this land

1. And in that year there was a heavy famine throughout the land of Canaan, and the inhabitants of the land could not remain on account of the famine for it was very grievous

Famine

and I, Abraham, concluded to go down into Egypt, to sojourn there, for the famine became very grievous.

and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land.

and hearing [there was] prosperity in Egypt I went . . . to the land of Egypt . . . I [came] to the river Karmona which is one of the branches of the River . . . now we . . . our land. [I cro]ssed the seven branches of the river which . . . Now we travelled across our land and entered into the land of the sons of Ham, into the land of Egypt.

2. And Abram and all belonging to him rose and went down to Egypt on account of the famine, and when they were at the brook Mitzraim they remained there some time to rest from *the fatigue* of the road.

Abraham Decides to Go South

22. And it came to pass when I was come near to enter into Egypt, the Lord said unto me: Behold, Sarai, thy wife, is a very fair woman to look upon:

23. Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see her, they will say—She is his wife; and they will kill you, but they will save her alive; therefore see that ye do on this wise:

24. Let her say unto the Egyptians, she is thy sister, and thy soul shall live.

25. And it came to pass that I, Abraham told Sarai, my wife, all that the Lord has said unto me—Therefore say unto them, I pray thee, thou art my sister, that it may be well with me for thy sake, and my soul shall live because of thee.

11. And it came to pass when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon:

12. Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive.

The Lord Warns Abraham

During the night of our entry into Egypt I, Abram, dreamt a dream. And behold, I saw in my dream a cedar and a palm tree . . . men came and sought to cut down the cedar, and to pull up its roots, and to leave the palm tree (standing) alone. The palm tree cried out saying: Do not cut down this cedar tree, for cursed be the man [who shall pull up its roots.] And the cedar was spared because of the palm tree, and was not [cut down.]

Abraham Warns Sarai and Others in Company

I woke from my dream during the night and said to Sarai my wife: I have dreamt a dream . . . [I am] afraid [because of] this dream. She said to me: Tell me your dream and I shall know. So I began to tell her this dream . . . that they will seek to kill me and will spare you. On that day all prosperity . . . in all things . . . Say to them concerning me, "He is my brother", and I shall live because of you, and my soul shall be saved because of you . . . of me and to kill me. Sarai wept that night because of my words.

3. And Abram and Sarai were walking at the border of the brook Mitzraim, and Abram beheld his wife Sarai that she was very beautiful.

4. And Abram said to his wife Sarai, Since God has created thee with such a beautiful countenance, I am afraid of the Egyptians lest they should slay me and take thee away, for the fear of God is not in *these* places.

5. Surely then thou shalt do this, Say thou art my sister to all that may ask thee, in order that I may be well with me, and that we may

13. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee.

live and not be put to death.
6. And Abram commanded *the same* to all those that came with him to Egypt on account of the famine; also his nephew Lot he commanded, saying, If the Egyptians ask thee concerning Sarai say she is the sister of Abram.

7. And yet with all these orders Abram did not put confidence in them but he took Sarai and placed her in a chest and concealed it amongst their vessels, for Abram was greatly concerned about Sarai on account of the wickedness of the Egyptians.

They Enter Egypt

14. And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt,

11. And Abram went into Egypt in the third year of the week,
[Then we journeyed onward, I and] Sarai, towards Zoan. . . . in her soul that no man would see her . . .

8. And Abram and all belonging to him rose up from the brook of Mizraim and came to Egypt; and they had *scarcely* entered the gates of the city when the guards stood up to them saying, Give tithe to the king from what you have, and then you may come into the town; and Abram and those that were with him did so.

9. And Abram with the people that were with him came to Egypt, and when they came they brought the chest in which Sarai was concealed and the Egyptians saw the chest
10. And the king's servants approached Abram, saying, what hast

thou here in this chest which we have not seen? Now open thou the chest and give tithe to the king of all that it contains.

11. And Abram said, this chest I will not open, but all you demand upon it I will give. And Pharaoh's officers answered Abram, saying, It is a chest of precious stones, give us the tenth *thereof*.

12. Abram said, all that you desire I will give, but you must not open the chest.

Egyptians Discover Sarai's Beauty

the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair.

After these five years . . . three men, princes of Egypt . . . Pharaoh of Zoan concerning [me] and concerning my wife, and they gave . . . goodness, wisdom, and truth. And I cried out before them . . . my words . . . in the famine which . . . not . . . and they came to the place as far as . . . to her . . . my words . . . much food and drink . . . wine.

13. And the king's officers pressed Abram, and they reached the chest and opened it with force, and they saw and beheld a beautiful woman was in the chest.

14. And when the officers of the king beheld Sarai they were struck with admiration at her beauty, and all the princes and servants of Pharaoh assembled to see Sarai, for she was very beautiful.

Servants Tell Pharaoh of Sarai

15. The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commanded her before Pharaoh:

. . . how . . . and beautiful is her face! How . . . fine are the hairs of her head! How lovely are her eyes! How desirable her nose and all the brilliance of her countenance . . . How fair are her breasts and

And the king's officers ran and told Pharaoh all that they had seen and they praised Sarai to the king;

how beautiful all her whiteness!
How pleasing are her arms and how
perfect her hands, and how desirable
all the appearance of her hands!
How long and slender are their
fingers! How comely are her feet,
how perfect are her thighs! Neither
the virgin, nor the bride led into
the marriage chamber, is more beau-
tiful than she. She is fairer than all
other women. Truly, her beauty is
greater than theirs. Yet with all this
grace she possesses also abundant
wisdom so that whatever is in her
hands is perfect.

Pharaoh Takes Sarai

and the woman was taken
into Pharaoh's house.

And he dwelt in Egypt
five years before his
wife was taken away
from him.

When the king heard the words of
Harkenosh and of his two compan-
ions, for all three spoke as with one
mouth, he desired her greatly, and
he sent out at once that she be
taken. Seeing her, he was amazed
by all her beauty, and he took her
to be his wife and sought to kill
me. Sarai said to the king, "He is
my brother", that I might be spared
because of her. And I, Abram, was
spared because of her and I was
not slain.

and Pharaoh ordered her to be
brought, and the woman came before
the king.

15. And Pharaoh beheld Sarai and
she pleased him exceedingly, and he
was struck with her beauty, and the
king rejoiced greatly on her account
and made presents to those who
brought him the tidings concerning
her.

16. And the woman was then
brought to Pharaoh's house,

Abraham Prays to the Lord

And I, Abram, wept aloud that
night, I and my nephew Lot, be-

and Abram grieved to the Lord to de-
liver her from the hands of Pharaoh.

cause Sarai had been taken from me by force. I prayed that night. I begged and implored and I said in my sorrow, while my tears ran down: Blessed art Thou, O God Most High, Master of all the worlds. Thou art Lord and King of all things and Thou rulest over all the kings of the earth and Thou judgest them all. I cry now before Thee my Lord, against Pharaoh of Zoan the king of Egypt, because of my wife who is taken from me by force. Judge him for me, and I shall see Thy mighty hand lifted against him and against all his household, that he may not defile my wife this night (separating her) from me. And they shall know Thee, my Lord, that Thou art the Lord of all the kings of the earth. I wept and was sorrowful.

Sarai Prays

17. And Sarai also prayed at that time and said, O Lord God thou didst tell my Lord Abram to go from his land and from his father's house to the land of Canaan, and thou didst promise to do well with him if he would perform thy commands; now behold we have done that which thou didst command us and we left our land and our families, and we went to a strange land and

to a people whom we have not known before.

18. And we came to this land to avoid the famine, and this evil accident has befallen me; now therefore, O Lord God, deliver us and save us from the hand of this oppressor, and do well with me for the sake of thy mercy.

The Lord Protects Sarai

19. And the Lord hearkened to the voice of Sarai and the Lord sent an angel to deliver Sarai from the power of Pharaoh.

20. And the king came and sat before Sarai and beheld an Angel of the Lord was standing over them, and he appeared to Sarai and said to her, Do not fear for the Lord has heard thy prayer.

21. And the king approached Sarai and said to her what is that man to thee who brought thee hither? And she said, "He is my brother."

16. And he entreated Abraham well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and men servants, and maid servants, and she asses, and camels.

Abraham Receives Gifts from Pharaoh

22. And the king said, It is *incumbent* upon us to make him great, to elevate him and to do unto him all the good which thou shalt command us; and at that time the king sent to Abram silver and gold and precious stones in abundance together

with cattle, men servants and maid servants; and the king ordered Abram to be brought and he sat in the court of the king's house and the king greatly exalted Abram on that night.

Plagues

17. And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife.

13. And it came to pass when Pharaoh seized Sarai the wife of Abram, that the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

And on that night the Most High God sent a spirit of affliction, an evil spirit, to afflict both him and his house. He was afflicted and all his household, and he could not approach her and he knew her not. He was with her for two years, and at the end of those two years, the plagues and afflictions became greater and more grievous upon him and all his household. Therefore he sent for all the sages of Egypt, all the magicians, and all the healers of Egypt, that they might cure him and all his household of this plague. But not one single healer nor magician nor sage could come to cure him, for the afflicting spirit had afflicted them also, and they fled.

23. And the king approached to speak to Sarai, and he reached out his hand to touch her, when the angel smote him heavily, and he was terrified and he refrained from reaching to her.

24. And when the king came near to Sarai, the angel smote him to the ground, and acted thus to him the whole night, and the king was terrified.

25. And the angel on that night smote heavily all the servants of the king and his whole household, on account of Sarai, and there was a great lamentation that night amongst the people of Pharaoh's house.

Pharaoh Discovers that Sarai Is Abraham's Wife

26. And Pharaoh, seeing the evil that befell him, said, Surely on account of this woman has this thing happened to me and he removed

himself at some distance from her and spoke pleasing words to her.

27. And the king said to Sarai, Tell me I pray thee concerning the man with whom thou camest here; and Sarai said, This man is my husband and I said to thee that he was my brother for I was afraid, lest thou shouldst put him to death through wickedness.

28. And the king kept away from Sarai and the plagues of the angel of the Lord ceased from him and his household; and Pharaoh knew that he was smitten on account of Sarai and the king was greatly astonished at this.

18. And Pharaoh called Abram, and said, What is this that thou hast done unto me? Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife?

19. Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife:

Then came Harkenosh to me, beseeching me to go to pray for the king and to lay my hands upon him that he might live, for [the king had dreamt] a dream. Lot said to him: Abram my uncle cannot pray for the king while Sarai his wife is with him. Go therefore, and tell the king to send back to her husband the woman who is his wife. Then he will pray for him and he will live. When Harkenosh heard the words of Lot, he went to the king and said: All these plagues and afflictions with which my lord the king is smitten and afflicted are be-

29. And in the morning the king called for Abram and said to *him* What is this thou has done to me? Why didst thou say, She is my sister, *owing to which* I took her unto me for a wife, and this heavy plague has *therefore* come upon me and my household.

Pharaoh Summons Abraham

cause of Sarai the wife of Abram. Let Sarai be restored to Abram her husband, and this scourge and the spirit of festering shall depart from you. He called me and said to me: What have you done to me with regard to Sarai? You told me "She is my sister", whereas she is your wife. And I took her to be my wife.

Pharaoh Gives Back Sarai

now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way.

Behold your wife who is with me. Depart, and go hence from all the land of Egypt.

30. Now therefore here is thy wife, take her and go from our land lest we all die on her account.

Abraham Heals Pharaoh

And now pray for me and my household that this evil spirit may depart from me. I prayed for him, and I laid my hand upon his head, and the plague went from him, and the evil spirit departed from him, and he lived.

Pharaoh Bestows Gifts

14. And Abram was very glorious by reason of possessions in sheep and cattle, and asses and horses and camels and men servants, and maid servants, and in

The king rose up to tell me . . . and the king swore to me an oath that . . . and the king gave to her much [silver and gold], and much raiment of fine linen and purple . . . before her, and Hagar also . . . and he appointed men to lead me

And Pharaoh took more-cattle, men servants and maid servants and silver and gold, to give to Abram and he returned unto him Sarai his wife.
31. And the king took a maiden, who he begat by his concubines,

silver and gold exceedingly. And Lot also his brother's son, was wealthy.
15. And Pharaoh gave back Sarai, the wife of Abram

out of [all the land of Egypt.]

and he gave her to Sarai for a handmaid.

32. And the king said to his daughter, It is better for thee my daughter to be a handmaid in this man's house than to be a mistress in my house, after we have beheld the evil that befell us on account of this woman.

Pharaoh Has Abraham and Sarai Escorted to the Border

20. And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.

1. And Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south.

2. And Abram *was* very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold.

and he sent him out of the land of Egypt. . . .
And I, Abram, went away with great flocks and with silver and gold, and I went out of Egypt together with my nephew Lot. Lot also had great flocks, and he took a wife to himself from [among the daughters of Egypt.]

33. And Abram arose, and he and all belonging to him went away from Egypt; and Pharaoh ordered some of his men to accompany him and all that went with him.