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TEMPLE THEMES IN THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

Stephen O. Smoot

Abstract: *The Book of Abraham is replete with temple themes, although not all of them are readily obvious from a surface reading of the text. Temple themes in the book include Abraham seeking to become a high priest, the interplay between theophany and covenant, and Abraham building altars and dedicating sacred space as he sojourns into Canaan. In addition to these, the dramatic opening episode of the Book of Abraham unfolds in a cultic or ritual setting. This paper explores these and other temple elements in the Book of Abraham and discusses how they heighten appreciation for the text's narrative and teachings, as well as how they ground the text in an ancient context.*

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The hermeneutical tradition of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints bears unmistakable witness to a sustained interest in reading scripture through the perspective of the temple. The Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price have received this interpretive treatment, with a variety of authors offering useful approaches that discern clear temple themes in Latter-day Saint scriptural texts.¹ That Joseph Smith's scriptural translations as well as

1. For representative examples of this Latter-day Saint "temple hermeneutic," see generally Truman G. Madsen, ed., *The Temple in Antiquity: Ancient Records and Modern Perspectives* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984); John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M.

his revelatory outpouring directly influenced the form and content of the temple endowment ceremony as experienced by Latter-day Saints cannot be doubted. For this reason, the Latter-day Saint canon will continue to be explored for meaningful themes and elements that tie into both ancient and modern temples.

Besides the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses, which have commanded the attention of many Latter-day Saint interpreters, the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price is also replete with temple themes. This book, however, has received comparatively minimal analysis as a temple text. With a few exceptions,² Latter-day Saints have typically neglected the Book of Abraham in their discussion of temple texts. This is unfortunate, since, as Terryl Givens rightly observed, “the Book of Abraham that [Joseph] Smith produced was a small text, but it was seminal in the development of his mature theological enterprise.”³ This,

Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 2:197–237; Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 12 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992); Donald W. Parry, ed., *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994); Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *The Temple in Time and Eternity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999); John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999); *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple* (London: Ashgate, 2009); “Seeing Third Nephi as the Holy of Holies of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 36–55; David E. Bokovoy, “Ancient Temple Imagery in the Sermons of Jacob,” in *Temple Insights: Proceedings of the Interpreter Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference*, ed. William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2014), 171–86; Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Book of Moses*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014); *Temple Themes in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014); “The Book of Moses as a Temple Text,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw et al. (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2021), 421–68.

2. For instance, Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005); “Abraham’s Temple Drama,” in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, 1–42; and more recently, Terryl Givens, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 121–40; Richard E. Bennett, *Temples Rising: A Heritage of Sacrifice* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 30–32, 77–78; David Calabro, “The Choreography of Genesis: The Book of Abraham as a Ritual Text,” in *Sacred Time, Sacred Space, and Sacred Meaning*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2020), 241–61.

3. Givens, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, 121.

Givens recognizes, includes the development of Joseph Smith’s temple theology, or his “grand theological project” involving the ordinances of the temple that was “the summit, the culmination, of his entire work of Restoration.”⁴ This paper seeks to provide a few examples of how the Book of Abraham can be read as a temple text, or otherwise how the temple and temple themes feature in the text.

What is a “Temple Text?”

Before we proceed any further, a simple working definition of “temple text” is in order. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, whose contributions to Latter-day Saint temple theology remain indispensable, has provided an effective definition of this category. Drawing on the work of scholars John W. Welch and Margaret Barker, Bradshaw defines “temple theology” as a branch of theology that concerns itself with encountering God or the divine through the signs, symbols, patterns, and ritual instructions of the temple. A *temple text*, then, is a text that is infused — narratively, thematically, and even structurally — with the presence of the temple and temple-related patterns, while *temple themes* are those elements in the text that show a conceptual linkage with the temple.⁵ Extending this definition, a temple text is a text that captures themes, motifs, teachings, or allusions to the temple; a text that grounds its narrative and cosmology in the temple or in sacred space; and a text that interplays with temple ritual (and vice versa); and a text that thematically incorporates the structures and purposes of esoteric ritual that is performed in the temple or other sacred space.

My approach to the Book of Abraham as a temple text in this study highlights two aspects of what makes this book such. The first is how the temple or the idea of sacred space features in the text. As we shall see, temple elements are depicted throughout the story told in the pages of the Book of Abraham, where at key moments these elements are embedded or otherwise feature prominently. The second aspect is how the text in its canonical form interplays with the modern Latter-day Saint temple endowment; or otherwise, how modern Latter-day Saint readers of the Book of Abraham might bring their temple experience and knowledge with them into their engagement with the text.

4. Ibid., 125.

5. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “The LDS Story of Enoch as the Culminating Episode of a Temple Text,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2014): 39–44.

“According to the Appointment of God”: Abraham the High Priest

The Book of Abraham opens in the first-person narrative voice of the eponymous biblical patriarch. “In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence” (Abraham 1:1). From there Abraham goes on to frame his record by giving a short but important glimpse into his motives and intentions. “Finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me,” he writes, “I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same” (v. 2). Avowing that he was already “a follower of righteousness,” and one who possessed “great knowledge,” the patriarch goes on to specify that through his lifelong endeavor to follow God he became “a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers” (v. 2). This priesthood, we are told, was “conferred upon [Abraham] from the fathers”; that is, it was a patriarchal priesthood that was previously held by Adam and other primeval prophets (v. 3; cf. Moses 5:4–12). “I sought for mine appointment unto the Priesthood according to the appointment of God,” Abraham further specifies (v. 4). The theme of Abraham’s priesthood legitimacy is a prominent leitmotif that runs throughout the text,⁶ and readers again encounter this narrative element later in the book (Abraham 1:18, 31; 2:9, 11). The overall point is clear: Abraham can count himself as belonging legitimately to the patriarchal priesthood of his righteous forebearers, in stark contrast to pretenders like Pharaoh (Abraham 1:26–27).

Abraham’s opening frame, wherein he provides his readers with a list of the outstanding attributes and roles he enjoyed (Abraham 1:1–2), finds intriguing parallel with the self-aggrandizing recitations encountered in Middle Kingdom tomb (auto)biographies. These texts “were often limited to an accumulation of clichés that describe an ideal character and the norms of conduct” reflected in the life of the subject. “Sometimes,” however, like in the case of Abraham, “when its author considered the story of his life and career to be edifying and satisfying, an autobiography became a personal history. Such cases are providential for the historian, who often finds detailed information in them.”⁷ One

6. There are at least two other running leitmotifs in the Book of Abraham: the theme of Abraham’s seership (Abraham 1:1; 2:3; 3:1–2, 6, 11–12, 15–18, 21–23, 25; 5:13) and the theme of order and obedience (Abraham 3:25; 4:7–11, 18, 21).

7. Pascal Vernus and Jean Yoyotte, *The Book of the Pharaohs*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 32–33, citing, as examples, the

need only casually review Lichtheim's convenient assemblage to spot the similarities in how Abraham frames the outset of his autobiography with how his contemporaries from the Eleventh and Twelfth Dynasties do the same.⁸ Indeed, no less than the celebrated Twelfth Dynasty tale of Sinuhe, which opens with the eponymous hero cataloging his achievements and high rank, strikes a familiar chord with the opening of Abraham's account, even if it is widely regarded by Egyptologists to be fictional (see Table 1).⁹

But what do these opening lines from Abraham's record have to do with the temple? In fact, the patriarch's mention of his "appointment unto the Priesthood" and his status as a "High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers" at once casts his life's mission and his record in a temple context. By its very definition, *priesthood* as conceptualized in the ancient Near East involved the performance of cultic and related duties in the temple. "In almost the earliest written documents from Mesopotamia are found lists of the titles of officials, including various classes of priests. Some of these are administrative functionaries of the temple bureaucracy and others are religious specialists dealing with particular areas of the cult. Later records make it clear that a complex hierarchy of clergy was attached to temples, ranging from 'high priests' or 'high priestesses' down to courtyard sweepers."¹⁰ Although Latter-day Saints today typically define priesthood in terms of the power and authority to act for God,¹¹ this is not primarily how the Book of Abraham envisions such. The text does speak of Abraham's "right" to the

autobiographies of Weni from the Sixth Dynasty, Khnumhotep from the Twelfth, Ahmose from the Eighteenth, and others from the Third Intermediate Period onward.

8. Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom: A Study and An Anthology*, Orbis Biblicus Et Orientalis 84 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1988); cf. Julie Stauder-Prochet, Elizabeth Froid, and Andréas Stauder, eds., *Ancient Egyptian Biographies: Contexts, Forms, Functions* (Atlanta, GA: Lockwood Press, 2020).

9. But consider the comments in Anna-Latifa Mourad, "Remarks on Sinuhe's Qedem and Yaa," *Göttinger Miszellen* 238 (2013): 69–84, whose methodology in this study to bolster the historicity of Sinuhe is hugely relevant to arguments for the historicity of the Book of Abraham (and the Book of Mormon, for that matter).

10. Jeremy Black and Alan Millard, s.v. "Priest, priestess," in *Dictionary of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Piotr Bienkowski and Alan Millard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 234.

11. See for instance the definition and discussion of "priesthood" provided in *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 67–71.

priesthood (e.g., Abraham 1:1–2, 31), but priesthood itself is imagined more as an “order” (v. 26) and “ministry” (Abraham 2:9) into which people enter (Abraham 2:11) rather than a power that people wield.

Table 1. Comparing the beginning of Abraham to the tale of Sinuhe.

Abraham 1:1–2	Sinuhe (R1–R5) ¹²
<p>⁽¹⁾ In the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my fathers, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence; ⁽²⁾ 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.</p>	<p>⁽¹⁾ The member of the elite, the governor, the dignitary, the administrator of the Sovereign in the land of the Asiatics; ⁽²⁾ a true acquaintance of the king, whom he loves, the follower, Sinuhe, who says: “I am a follower ⁽³⁾ who follows his lord, a servant of the royal chambers and of the elite lady, great of blessing; ⁽⁴⁾ the wife of the king Senwosret in United of Places; the daughter of the king Amenemhat, in ⁽⁵⁾ Exalted of Perfections, Neferu, lady of honor.”</p>

How might this understanding of priesthood in the context of the temple affect our reading of the Book of Abraham? “Priestly service [in ancient Egypt] was prestigious, since the practitioner of cultic duties was filling an essentially royal role, acting as a liaison between humanity and the gods.”¹³ What’s more, “temple reliefs portray the king as the sole practitioner of all divine cults, the quintessential high priest of every god’s temple. Although the king presumably performed cultic activities on special occasions at major temples, a hierarchy of local priests was responsible for performing the daily cultural rituals in temples throughout Egypt.”¹⁴ This understanding casts Abraham’s

12. Rolad Koch, *Die Erzählung des Sinuhe* (Bruxelles: Éditions de la Fondation Égyptologique, 1990), 1–4, translation mine. Richard A. Parkinson, *The Tale of Sinuhe and other Ancient Egyptian Poems, 1940–1640 BC* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 43, observes how Sinuhe’s tale “begins as a funerary Autobiography with the titles held by Sinuhe at the end of his life,” which mark him “as a person of high rank” and resonate with “a formal, elevated, and funerary tone, as befits an Autobiography.”

13. Denise M. Doxey, s.v. “Priesthood,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3:68.

14. Doxey, s.v. “Priesthood,” 70. Psalm 110, an important temple hymn, seems to presuppose a similar situation in ancient Israel.

“appointment” as a “High Priest” in a new and significant light, as his text can now be read as the patriarch’s self-affirmation of his rightful status as God’s emissary on earth and as a refutation of Pharaoh’s attempt to “fain claim” to “the right of Priesthood” (Abraham 1:27). Abraham’s depiction of his pre-mortal election as a “ruler” nicely complements this rejection of Pharaoh’s claim to priesthood authority, thereby reinforcing and highlighting the rhetorical craft the patriarch put into his account.¹⁵ In addition, this understanding amplifies the significance of Jehovah’s covenant with Abraham as described in Abraham 2:6–11 by recasting the blessings of the covenant as specifically temple blessings. Abraham’s role as the intermediary and bearer of this covenant between Jehovah and the nations of the earth can, with this reading, be understood in priestly terms, a point which is made explicit at Abraham 2:11 and further clarified by modern revelation, which affirms that men and women actualize the promised blessings of the Abrahamic covenant by entering into the restored temple priesthood and the new and everlasting covenant (cf. Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–4; 132:1–25, 29–32).¹⁶

“That Order Established by the Fathers”: Pharaoh’s Counterfeit Temple Priesthood

Inextricably linked to the Book of Abraham’s depiction of Abraham as a rightful high priest is the book’s depiction of Pharaoh, Abraham’s rival, as a pretender whose priesthood is counterfeit. In this regard the primeval history or *Urgeschichte* recounted at Abraham 1:21–28 can be read as a foil to Abraham’s own mainline narrative that describes his journey into the priesthood and his covenant with Jehovah. According to the Book of Abraham, “the first government of Egypt was established by Pharaoh, the eldest son of Egyptus, the daughter of Ham, and it was after the manner of the government of Ham, which was patriarchal” (Abraham 1:25). This Ham was the son of Noah who sired the Egyptians (Genesis 10:6–14) and who, through means not entirely clear, incurred a curse upon his posterity Canaan (Genesis 9:18–29). The Book of

15. I have elaborated on this point in Stephen O. Smoot, “‘Thou Wast Chosen Before Thou Wast Born’: An Egyptian Context for the Election of Abraham,” *Religious Educator* 22, no. 1 (2021): 101–21.

16. For additional exploration on this point, consult Jonathan A. Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Kerry Muhlestein, Joshua M. Sears, and Avram R. Shannon, “New and Everlasting: The Relationship between Gospel Covenants in History,” *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 21–40.

Abraham expands upon this enigmatic episode by saying that the curse pertained “to the Priesthood,” so that despite being “a righteous man” who “established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days,” Pharaoh nevertheless “could not have the right of Priesthood,” notwithstanding his attempt to claim it through Noahic succession (Abraham 1:26–27).

Exegetes have long grappled with this pericope, which is frustratingly sparse on detail.¹⁷ One interpretation, however, can be immediately ruled out, which is that Pharaoh’s curse that disqualified him from the priesthood was black skin. *Nowhere* does the text of the Book of Abraham support this reading, despite the arguments of misguided Latter-day Saints who uphold old, threadbare interpretive assumptions on the one hand, and those who wish to dismiss the Book of Abraham as nothing more than Joseph Smith’s racist speculation on the other.¹⁸ The simple fact is that “the Book of Abraham does not discuss race” as conceptualized today in terms of skin color “and curses no one with slavery,”¹⁹ no matter how much people might insist otherwise.²⁰

17. See variously Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 14 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 466–607; Alma Allred, “The Traditions of Their Fathers: Myth versus Reality in LDS Scriptural Writings,” in *Black and Mormon*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 34–49; Givens, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, 134–37; John S. Thompson, “‘Being of that Lineage’: Generational Curses and Inheritance in the Book of Abraham,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 54 (2022): 97–146.

18. See for instance B. H. Roberts, “To the Youth of Israel,” *The Contributor* 6, no. 8 (May 1885): 294–99; B. F. Cummings, “The Negro and the Priesthood,” *Liahona: The Elder’s Journal* 5, no. 44 (April 18, 1908): 1164–67; Milton R. Hunter, *Pearl of Great Price Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1948), 140–42; Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 256–57; Dan Vogel, *Book of Abraham Apologetics: A Review and Critique* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2021), 95–117.

19. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 164. The word “race” does appear at Abraham 1:24 (“and thus, from Ham, sprang that race which preserved the curse in the land”), but the text does not say that this usage of “race” has anything to do with skin color, and indeed the definition of the word in Joseph Smith’s day demands a more nuanced understanding (Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* [New York: S. Converse, 1828], s.v. “race”).

20. From an orthodox Latter-day Saint perspective that takes seriously the declarations of living prophets, any racist interpretation of the Book of Abraham can be ruled out if even only strictly because of the pronouncement of the First

So while we may not be able to say what precisely the curse of Ham (and Pharaoh) is, we can with some confidence say what it isn't. But this leaves us still wondering what any of this has to do with the temple. The answer lies in verse 26, which indicates that Pharaoh sought "earnestly to imitate *that order* established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign" (emphasis added). Recalling the ancient understanding of "priesthood," which is evoked in the next verse, this "order" that Pharaoh meant to imitate can be understood to be the temple priesthood that extended back to Adam. Pharaoh's attempt to establish an ersatz priesthood that rivaled Abraham's was illegitimate not because of his skin pigmentation, on which the Book of Abraham is silent, but simply by virtue of his belonging to the wrong patriarchal lineage.²¹ On this point the text is explicit, informing us without even the slightest hint of the melanin content of his skin that "Pharaoh [was] of that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain claim it from Noah, through Ham" (v. 27). Abraham, by contrast, could rightly claim his authority by virtue of being a descendant of Shem, Noah's firstborn (Genesis 6:10; 10:21–32; 11:10–32), which was confirmed by "the records of the fathers,

Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve made on December 6, 2013. "Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form." See "Race and the Priesthood," Gospel Topics Essays, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>. About the date of this pronouncement, see "New Essays Address Topics on Women, Priesthood, Mother in Heaven," News Release, October 23, 2015, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/new-church-essays-women-priesthood-mother-in-heaven>, which also says of the Gospel Topics Essays, "The 13 essays published to date were prepared through extensive research by men and women Church scholars and carefully reviewed by members of the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and other General Authorities and women leaders to provide an official, authoritative and transparent source of information." Compare Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," *Liahona* 50, no. 11 (November 2020): 94.

21. Abraham's gloss on the name-title Pharaoh at Abraham 1:20 ("which Pharaoh signifies king by royal blood") appears to speak to this very point. Abraham seems to view the significance of the name-title itself as somehow linked with attempting to lay claim to the right to rule. Whether one frames that as either a *royal* or *priestly* right to rule is largely beside the point, since the priestly and the royal are completely enmeshed in the type of priesthood conceptualized in the Book of Abraham and in the ancient Near East.

even the patriarchs, concerning the right of Priesthood” that God had preserved with the patriarch (vv. 28, 31).²²

In short, in the Book of Abraham “there is no exclusive equation between Ham and Pharaoh, or between Ham and the Egyptians, or between the Egyptians and the blacks, or between any of the above and any particular curse. What was denied was recognition of patriarchal right to the priesthood made by a claim of matriarchal succession” (cf. Abraham 1:23, 25).²³ The old racist reading of the Book of Abraham can be safely disregarded and a new reading substituted that situates the text in a temple setting: because of this priesthood denial by virtue of improper lineage, Pharaoh had to make do by instituting a counterfeit temple order and priesthood that was only a poor imitation of what Abraham rightfully inherited from his primeval ancestors.²⁴

“The Altar Which Stood by the Hill”: The Ritual Landscape of the Book of Abraham

Among the unique and important details about the life of the patriarch provided by the Book of Abraham are the references to the geographical fixtures of his homeland Ur. The first chapter of the text explains how Abraham’s idolatrous kinsfolk in Ur had established a syncretic cult that venerated both Northwest Semitic and Egyptian deities and which practiced human sacrifice “after the manner of the Egyptians” (Abraham 1:6–11).²⁵ Embedded in this description at verses 10–11 is the comment

22. The mention at Abraham 1:21–22 that the “blood of the Canaanites” was preserved among the Egyptians through Ham’s descendant Pharaoh somewhat complicates this picture. Abraham’s almost off-hand remark at Abraham 1:21–22 might be read in the context of the Semitic rulers of the Egyptian Fourteenth Dynasty (established either ca. 1800 or 1730 BC). (See Stephen O. Smoot et al., “The Blood of the Canaanites,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 [2022]: 98–100.) Anthropologically speaking, “Canaanites” (an exonymic catch-call) were indeed Semitic-speaking peoples indigenous to the Levant (Syria-Canaan). Genesis 9:22, 25–27 and 10:6, 15–20, however, count Canaan and his descendants as Hamites, not Semites. How to reconcile this discrepancy remains elusive.

23. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 587.

24. Compare the observation in Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 289: “[The] concern in the first chapter of Abraham was with civilizations and lineage more than race. Pharaoh, Ham, and Egyptus figure in one lineage and Abraham in another. The implications for modern race relations interested Joseph less than the configuration of family lines and the descent of authority.”

25. On the identity of the deities described in Abraham 1, consult Kevin L. Barney, “On Elkenah as Canaanite El,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 19, no. 1

that this cult was operative “by the hill called Potiphar’s Hill, at the head of the plain of Olishem,”²⁶ where it gave “thank-offering[s]” in the form of execrative victims upon an altar.²⁷

One of the first scholars to recognize the significance of this passage was Hugh Nibley, who as early as 1969 observed that the description of Potiphar’s Hill being a site of ritual sacrifice qualified the location as a cult site or ritual complex.²⁸ These ancient cult centers, writes a more recent authority, “were the prime location and focus of ritual activity. Temples and shrines were not constructed in isolation, but existed as part of what may be termed a ritual landscape, where ritualized movement within individual buildings, temple complexes, and the city as a whole shaped their function and meaning.”²⁹ Pilgrimages to these ritual complexes are well-attested, as also is the offering of sacrifices.³⁰ From its description

(2010): 22–35; Quinten Barney, “Sobek: The Idolatrous God of Pharaoh Amenemhet III,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 22–27; John Gee, “Four Idolatrous Gods in the Book of Abraham,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 133–52. On “human sacrifice” in the Book of Abraham, see William James Adams Jr., “Human Sacrifice and the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 4 (1969): 473–80; Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee, “An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 70–77; Kerry Muhlestein, “Sacred Violence: When Ancient Egyptian Punishment was Dressed in Ritual Trappings,” *Near Eastern Archaeology*, 78, no. 4 (2015): 229–35.

26. On the location of Olishem, consult John M. Lundquist, “Was Abraham at Ebla? A Cultural Background of the Book of Abraham (Abraham 1 and 2),” in *Studies in Scripture, Volume Two: The Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book Co., 1985), 225–37; John Gee, “Has Olishem Been Discovered?” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 104–7; Stephen O. Smoot, “In the Land of the Chaldeans: The Search for Abraham’s Homeland Revisited,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 33–34.

27. See Stephen O. Smoot et al., “Potiphar’s Hill,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2022): 92–97.

28. Hugh Nibley, “The Unknown Abraham,” *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 18 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 405–18. See also Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 236–37; Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 20 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 171–73.

29. Deena Ragavan, “Heaven on Earth: Temples, Ritual, and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World,” in *Heaven on Earth: Temples, Ritual, and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World*, ed. Deena Ragavan (Chicago, Ill.: The Oriental Institute, 2013), 1.

30. Lauren Ristvet, *Ritual, Performance, and Politics in the Ancient Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); William H. Stiebing Jr., *Ancient*

of ritualized activity by a dedicated priesthood in the service of a select group of deities to its mention of sacred architecture at the site, in every appreciable aspect the portrayal of the activity going on at Potiphar's Hill in the Book of Abraham qualifies the location as a cult center.³¹ This added context to the inaugural narrative of the Book of Abraham affects our reading of the text in two primary ways. First, it provides "local color" to the historical and geographical setting of the Book of Abraham — the text's *mise en scène*, as Nibley and Rhodes rightly recognize.³² Second, it throws Abraham into a sacred, ritual landscape and his narrative into a temple context wherein the patriarch is not just narrating his escape from the clutches of his murderous kinsfolk in Ur, but also their profane ritual practices and sites.

This second point is reinforced when we consider Abraham's near sacrifice being next to a hill or mountain. "In ancient civilizations from Egypt to India and beyond," writes Richard J. Clifford in his landmark study, "the mountain can be a center of fertility, the primeval hillock of creation, the meeting place of the gods, the dwelling place of the high god, the meeting place of heaven and earth, the monument effectively upholding the order of creation, the place where god meets man, a place of theophany."³³ As already recognized and discussed with insightful clarity by Nibley, with its depiction of Potiphar's Hill the Book of Abraham marks the location of the ritual sacrifice of the patriarch as the sacred *Urhügel*, "the first land to emerge from the great waters and the place where the sun first rose on the day of creation" in the ancient Egyptian

Near Eastern History and Culture, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 215; cf. Billie Jean Collins, "Anatolia," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, ed. Barbetta Stanley Spaeth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 100–108; Alice Mouton, "Animal Sacrifice in Hittite Anatolia," in *Animal Sacrifice in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. Sarah Hitch and Ian Rutherford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 239–52.

31. See additionally the observations in Richards Durham, "Potiphar's Hill and the 'Canopic' Complex of the Gods" (unpublished manuscript, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, 1960), BX 8624.32 .D93p no.1–2.

32. Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 171–73. This in turn helps readers ground its depiction of the patriarch in a realistic ancient setting. See John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, "Historical Plausibility: The Historicity of the Book of Abraham as a Case Study," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 63–98.

33. Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 5.

cosmic imagination.³⁴ That the temple was and is conceptualized as “the architectural embodiment of the cosmic mountain” needs no additional elaboration. So commonplace is this notion “that it has become a cliché within Near Eastern scholarship. The theme is extremely common in ancient Near Eastern texts.”³⁵ What we thus encounter in Abraham 1 is the narration of a ritualized struggle for cultic legitimacy between Abraham and Jehovah on the one hand and Pharaoh and his array of false deities on the other; a cosmic battle for nothing less than total supremacy over both the divine and human realms.³⁶

“Behold, My Name is Jehovah”: Theophany, Name, and Covenant

Twice in the Book of Abraham the patriarch receives a revelation of God’s true name, Jehovah, in connection with theophany and covenant.³⁷ In both instances the revelation comes at a moment of trial and in a ritual setting that is accompanied by gestures involving the hand. The first occurred when the Lord intervened to rescue Abraham from being sacrificed by his idolatrous kinsfolk. “And as they lifted up their hands upon me,” the patriarch writes,

that they might offer me up and take away my life, behold, I lifted up my voice unto the Lord my God, and the Lord hearkened and heard, and he filled me with the vision of the Almighty, and the angel of his presence stood by me, and immediately unloosed my bands; And his voice was unto me: Abraham, Abraham, behold, my name is Jehovah, and I have

34. Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 171; cf. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 412–13. On the primeval hillock in Egyptian cosmology, see James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 10, 25, 32, 46, 50–51, 53, 58, 60, 63, 69n101; *Middle Egyptian: An Introduction to the Language and Culture of Hieroglyphs*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 160–161. Compare with Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*; Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 113–20, who provide abundant examples of parallel conceptions in Syria-Canaan.

35. John M. Lundquist, “The Common Temple Ideology of the Ancient Near East,” in *The Temple in Antiquity*, 59.

36. See also Smoot, “Thou Wast Chosen Before Thou Wast Born,” 111–14, where I elaborate on the Book of Abraham as containing anti-Egyptian polemic.

37. See Stephen O. Smoot et al., “The Name of the Lord,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2022): 107–12.

heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee, and to take thee away from thy father's house, and from all thy kinsfolk, into a strange land which thou knowest not of (Abraham 1:15–16; cf. Facsimile 1, Figs. 1–3).

At this crucial juncture in the narrative (the climax to the text's opening pericope), the “angel of [the Lord's] presence” — referring perhaps to the Lord himself acting in his capacity as a divine deliverer — in a “vision of the Almighty” declared his true name to Abraham.³⁸ What immediately follows this revelation is also striking from a temple context and carries with it unmistakable covenant connotations. “Behold,” the Lord told the patriarch, “I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee. As it was with Noah so shall it be with thee; but through thy ministry my name shall be known in the earth forever, for I am thy God” (vv. 18–19). This great theophany that Abraham experienced — wherein he learned the Lord's true name and received a commission to take that name to all nations, thus extending and democratizing the blessings of the covenant — includes elements that harken to the temple, including the imagery of the handclasp as a token of recognition,³⁹ the reception of a new (divine) name,⁴⁰ and another invocation of priesthood.

38. Compare Genesis 22:11, 15, where “the angel of Lord” calls to Abraham from heaven to arrest his attempted sacrifice of Isaac. In addition to the apparent intertextual allusion between these two texts, also note the language of covenant and blessing present in vv. 11–19, as well as the new name Abraham bestows upon the site in v. 14.

39. On which, see Todd M. Compton, “The Handclasp and Embrace as Tokens of Recognition,” in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1990), 1:611–42; Stephen D. Ricks, “The Sacred Embrace and the Sacred Handclasp in Ancient Mediterranean Religions,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 37 (2020): 319–30; David Calabro, “The Reach, the Handclasp, and the Embrace: Gestures of the Gods in the Ancient Egyptian Abydos Formula,” in *Seek Ye Words of Wisdom: Studies of the Book of Mormon, Bible, and Temple in Honor of Stephen D. Ricks*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Gaye Strathearn, and Shon D. Hopkin (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2020), 291–310.

40. On which, see Truman G. Madsen, “Putting on the Names’: A Jewish-Christian Legacy,” in *By Study and Also By Faith*, 1:458–81; Bruce H. Porter and Stephen D. Ricks, “Names in Antiquity: Old, New, and Hidden,” in *By Study and Also By Faith*, 1:501–22; Alex Douglas, “The Garden of Eden, the Ancient Temple, and Receiving a New Name,” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament* (2013 Sperry Symposium), ed. Jeffrey R.

The second occasion where the Lord revealed his name to Abraham was just before his flight into Canaan during a covenant ceremony involving himself and his nephew Lot. After the death of his brother Haran due to famine in the land of Ur and the backsliding of his father Terah (Abraham 2:1–5), Abraham writes how he and Lot “prayed unto the Lord” (v. 6). In this ritual setting “the Lord [again] appeared unto [Abraham]” in theophany and renewed his covenant with him established in the previous chapter. As John Gee has shown, the covenant pattern or form of Abraham 2:6–11 finds comfortable parallel with covenant or treaty patterns known from Bronze Age sources.⁴¹ What is significant for our purposes is the content of that covenant, which again features temple elements. In verse 8, after once again declaring his name as Jehovah, the Lord informed Abraham that his “hand shall be over [him]” so that he would become “a great nation” and a “blessing” through “this ministry and Priesthood” (v. 9). The recipients of this blessing would also receive the patriarch’s name as a token of their own entry into the covenant: “And I will bless them through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father” (v. 10). The culmination of these priesthood blessings would be the blessing of “all the families of the earth” with “the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal” (v. 11).

A synoptic view of Jehovah’s declarations at Abraham 1:15–19 and Abraham 2:6–11 reveals a multiplicity of common thematic elements in the two speeches, reinforcing the narrative connectedness of these two passages and their shared covenant context (see Table 2).

Chadwick, Matthew J. Grey, and David Rolph Seely (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2013), 36–48. Note that in the Kirtland-era manuscripts and in the *Times and Seasons* first printing of the Book of Abraham, his name is declared as Abram, not Abraham, when the Lord speaks to the patriarch, indicating that he and his wife Sarai had not as of yet received the new names that were bestowed upon them at Genesis 17. See Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, ed., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2018), 197, 209, 223, 309.

41. Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 107–13.

Table 2. A comparison of thematic elements common between Abraham 1:15–19 and Abraham 2:6–11.

Abraham 1:15–19	Abraham 2:6–11
<p>(15) And as they lifted up their hands upon me, that they might offer me up and take away my life, behold, I lifted up my voice unto the Lord my God, and the Lord hearkened and heard, and he filled me with the vision of the Almighty, and the angel of his presence stood by me, and immediately unloosed my bands;</p> <p>(16) And his voice was unto me: Abraham, Abraham, behold, my name is Jehovah, and I have heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee, and to take thee away from thy father's house, and from all thy kinsfolk, into a strange land which thou knowest not of;</p> <p>(17) And this because they have turned their hearts away from me, to worship the god of Elkenah, and the god of Libnah, and the god of Mahmackrah, and the god of Korash, and the god of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; <i>therefore I have come down to visit them, and to destroy him who hath lifted up his hand against thee, Abraham, my son, to take away thy life.</i>⁴²</p> <p>(18) Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee.</p> <p>(19) As it was with Noah so shall it be with thee; but through thy ministry my name shall be known in the earth forever, for I am thy God.</p>	<p>(6) But I, Abraham, and Lot, my brother's son, prayed unto the Lord, and the Lord appeared unto me, and said unto me: Arise, and take Lot with thee; for I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make of thee a minister to bear my name in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice.</p> <p>(7) For I am the Lord thy God; I dwell in heaven; the earth is my footstool; I stretch my hand over the sea, and it obeys my voice; I cause the wind and the fire to be my chariot; I say to the mountains — Depart hence — and behold, they are taken away by a whirlwind, in an instant, suddenly.</p> <p>(8) My name is Jehovah, and I know the end from the beginning; therefore my hand shall be over thee.</p> <p>(9) And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee above measure, and make thy name great among all nations, and thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations;</p> <p>(10) And I will bless them through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father;</p> <p>(11) And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee; and in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed (that is, thy Priesthood), for I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal.</p>

42. The parallel in Abraham 1:17 and 2:7 is on a conceptual but not thematic or lexical level. In the first instance, the Lord declares his supremacy over the false priesthood of Elkenah and the other idolatrous gods worshipped at the cult site at Potiphar's Hill. In the second, the Lord affirms his command over the forces of nature, which to Abraham's contemporaries would have been understood to fall

The emphasis seen in these two passages is that of a conceptual interplay between theophany, name, and covenant accompanied by the ritual gesture of giving and receiving the hand. Not only does God *lead* Abraham by the hand and extend his hand *over* the patriarch as a ritual gesture (Abraham 1:18; 2:8), but also the imagery of the outstretched hand is evoked to demonstrate God’s dominion over the cosmos (Abraham 2:7), and the hands of Abraham’s seed are said to “bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations” (v. 9). Later in another theophany and night vision God both *stretches out* his hand to display the cosmos and *puts* his hand upon Abraham’s eyes to grant the patriarch power to see “those things which [God’s] hands had made” (Abraham 3:11–14). Indeed, even Abraham’s enemies are said to *lift up* their hand(s) against the patriarch (Abraham 1:7, 15, 17) in an inversion of the covenant imagery just encountered.⁴³ This repeated depiction of the hand as being involved in fluid, dynamic gestures in a variety of contexts — including not just as a literary motif to express a sense of power and action but also explicitly in the context of theophany and covenant — is significant for our reading of the Book of Abraham as a temple text;⁴⁴ especially in light of the ancient ritual settings in which giving and receiving the hand or placing offerings in the hand(s) plays an important role.⁴⁵

“I, Abraham, Built an Altar”:

Abraham’s Dedication of the Land of Canaan

The Book of Abraham narrates how the patriarch built altars as he traveled from Haran into the land of Canaan. The text describes two such altars: one built in the land of Jershon (Abraham 2:17) and a second in the land of Canaan near Bethel (v. 20). A third altar is implied at Shechem but is not overtly mentioned; instead, there the patriarch is said to have

under the domain of various deities or divine agencies. By asserting his dominion over these (false) gods in Abraham 1 and over the forces of nature in Abraham 2, Jehovah asserts his total, universal sovereignty. He is, so to speak, the only God in town, and so it is with him that Abraham enters a covenant.

43. Notice again the allusive parallel with Genesis 22:10–12.

44. See additionally Calabro, “The Choreography of Genesis,” 249–53.

45. Calabro, “The Reach, the Handclasp, and the Embrace,” 291–310; Stephen O. Smoot, “The Symbolism of the Cupped Hand in Ancient Egypt and Israel: Iconography, Text, and Artifact,” in *The Temple: Symbols, Sermons, and Settings*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2023), 99–116.

“offered sacrifice” and to have “called on the Lord devoutly” (v. 18).⁴⁶ This first instance of Abraham building an altar in the Book of Abraham finds no parallel in the biblical account of Abraham’s wanderings, while the second does (cf. Genesis 12:7–8). Contained in the biblical record is mention of Abraham building altars at additional locations, including explicitly at Shechem (Genesis 12:4), Hebron (Genesis 13:18) and Moriah (Genesis 22:9).

This detail of Abraham building altars as he settled the land of Canaan recasts the narrative in a new temple light. For one thing, the Book of Abraham, building on but also going noticeably beyond what seems to be depicted in Genesis, explicitly frames the patriarch’s building activity in a ritual context. Each time in the Book of Abraham when the patriarch builds an altar — first in Jershon, then implicitly at Shechem, and finally near Bethel — there immediately follows a ritual performance. At Jershon Abraham “made an offering unto the Lord, and prayed that the famine might be turned away” (Abraham 2:17); at Shechem he “offered sacrifice” and “called on the Lord devoutly” (v. 18); and finally at Bethel he “called again upon the name of the Lord” (v. 20). What’s more, at Shechem Abraham experienced a theophany where the Lord appeared to the patriarch and made a prophetic announcement that his seed would inherit the land (v. 19; cf. Genesis 12:6–8). The Book of Abraham thus clearly depicts Abraham’s altars as places of both ritual action (prayer and sacrifice) and theophany.⁴⁷

The cumulative narrative effect of this, as Matthew L. Bowen has recognized, is that the account of Abraham’s wanderings in Canaan can be easily couched in a temple context. As he writes, “Substantial parts of Genesis 12–22 [and Abraham 2] illustrate how Abraham ‘templifies’ the Promised Land — its re-creation as sacred space — by Abraham’s building altars at Shechem, Mamre/Hebron, Bethel, and Moriah.”⁴⁸ That Abraham’s altar-building in Canaan plays on temple imagery cannot be doubted. The ritual actions connected to each site are clear enough in the text, and the obvious meaning of the name Bethel (“House of El/God”)

46. On the significance of the location of Shechem in the “plains of Moreh” (Abraham 2:18), see Stephen O. Smoot et al., “The Plains of Moreh,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2022): 117–20.

47. Compare Genesis 12:7–8; 13:3–4; 14–18; 22:9–14.

48. Matthew L. Bowen, “‘Where I Will Meet You’: The Convergence of Sacred Time and Sacred Space as the Etiological Function of the Tent of Meeting,” in *Sacred Time, Sacred Space, and Sacred Meaning (Proceedings of the Third Interpreter Foundation Matthew B. Brown Memorial Conference, 5 November 2016)*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw (Orem: The Interpreter Foundation, 2020), 10.

further hints at why Abraham may have chosen that site specifically to feature a newly dedicated altar to Jehovah. It was, after all, “the site of an important Canaanite sanctuary to the god El, head of the pantheon.”⁴⁹ What better way for Abraham to undermine his idolatrous Canaanite neighbors than to repurpose an already existing shrine? So likewise, the altar at Shechem (but *not* the one at Jershon⁵⁰) was built to cleanse the “idolatrous nation” of Canaan and its land from ritual pollution (v. 18). The outcome at Shechem is the same as at Bethel: Abraham “ignores the prior pagan sanctity of the place and builds an altar to his own God, thus endowing the site with a new religious history.”⁵¹ Having himself nearly been sacrificed on an altar at Potiphar’s Hill (Abraham 1:8–12), Abraham turns the tables on his idolatrous foes and abolishes their profane ritual practices by strategically placing altars around and in the promised land of Canaan, thereby (re)creating and dedicating the land into new sacred space for an ascendent Jehovah to claim for himself and his covenant people.⁵²

“To Be Had in the Holy Temple of God”: Facsimile 2 and the Temple

A word on Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham seems appropriate to our present undertaking, especially in light of the explanations given to figures 3, 7, and 8–11 by Joseph Smith. I shall keep my observations brief, since fuller treatments of how Facsimile 2 — the hypocephalus of Sheshonq — relates to the temple have already been provided.⁵³ Suffice it to say for now that here we encounter a textbook example of

49. Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 92.

50. Jershon appears to lie somewhere outside the land of Canaan proper — seemingly closer to Haran — based on the description given at Abraham 2:16. There Abraham’s first altar was built to save the party from a severe famine (v. 17). Like any good Bronze Age pastoralist, Abraham and his family would have attributed this famine to divine wrath, thus necessitating the construction of the altar as a means of effecting divine appeasement and protection. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 175–78, draws a connection between the famine and the Chaldean practice of human sacrifice described in Abraham 1.

51. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary*, 92.

52. Compare Abraham 1:20, where the Lord smashes the altar of Elkenah, destroys the idolatrous images, and, for good measure, slaughters the priest. Readers are left with no doubt as to which deity might claim ritual legitimacy and martial dominance.

53. See especially Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*.

the reciprocal relationship shared between scriptural text and temple ritual, since the canonical explanations to these figures both inform and are themselves informed by the Latter-day Saint temple experience. As important and interesting as the ancient Egyptian understanding of these figures are and how that may converge with Joseph Smith's explanations to the facsimile⁵⁴ — something I shall touch on briefly in this discussion — our primary concern here is to explore a few of the ways in which the Prophet, as an inspired syncretist and gifted seer, reappropriated this ancient Egyptian iconography to interplay with and otherwise provide graphic representation for both the revealed text of the Book of Abraham and its temple themes and for the modern Latter-day Saint temple liturgy.⁵⁵

Figure 3 of Facsimile 2 Joseph Smith identified as “God, sitting upon his throne, clothed with power and authority; with a crown of eternal light upon his head; representing, also, the grand Key words of the Holy Priesthood, as revealed to Adam in the Garden of Eden, as also to Seth, Noah, Melchisedek, Abraham and all to whom the Priesthood was revealed.”⁵⁶ A similar interpretation is given to Figure 7, which is said to be “God sitting upon his throne, revealing, through the heavens, the grand Key words of the Priesthood; as, also, the sign of the Holy Ghost unto Abraham, in the form of a dove.”⁵⁷ The main operative temple element in both of these interpretations is that God is revealing

54. On which, consult Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 236–345, and more generally Tamás Mekis, *The Hypocephalus: An Ancient Egyptian Funerary Amulet*, Archaeopress Egyptology 24 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2020).

55. Note the explanation for Figure 2 of Facsimile 2: “Stands next to Kolob, called by the Egyptians Oliblish, which is the next grand governing creation near to the celestial or the place where God resides; holding the key of power also, pertaining to other planets; *as revealed from God to Abraham, as he offered sacrifice upon an altar, which he had built unto the Lord*” (emphasis added). This appears to be a reference to Abraham building an altar and offering sacrifice narrated at either Abraham 2:17 or 2:20. It further appears to make a narrative connection between Abraham offering sacrifice and his revelation about Kolob and other celestial bodies as described in Abraham 3. The explanation to Figure 3 of Facsimile 2 likewise speaks of “the grand Key-words of the Holy Priesthood, as revealed to Adam in the Garden of Eden, as also to Seth, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, and all to whom the Priesthood was revealed.” There is no reference to God revealing the key words of the priesthood to Abraham or the other patriarchs in the extant text of the Book of Abraham but is perhaps a veiled reference to the language of Abraham 2:9, 11.

56. “A Fac-Simile from the Book of Abraham, No. 2,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (March 15, 1842): insert between 720–21.

57. *Ibid.*

the keywords of the priesthood. This seems to reflect Joseph Smith’s interpretation or understanding of the seated deity in the proximity of the *wedjat* (*wḏꜣt*)-eye in both of these figures.

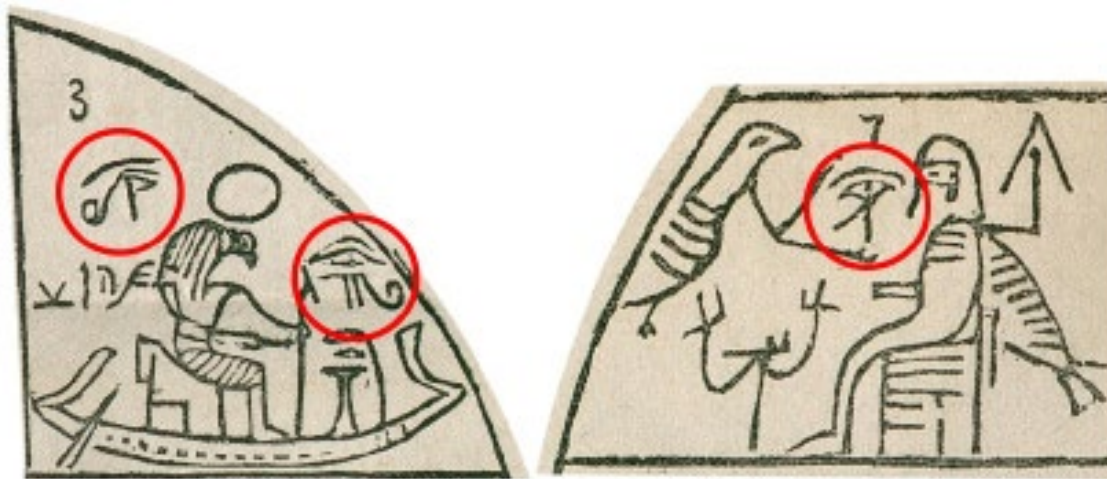


Figure 1. Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham, figures 3 and 7.⁵⁸
The *wedjat*-eyes have been circled in red in both figures.

What might we say about the *wedjat*-eye that could illuminate Joseph Smith’s interpretation as it pertains to the keywords of the temple?⁵⁹ First, it might be helpful to know the meaning of the word. In Egyptian, *wḏꜣ* means “hale, uninjured,” and also “well-being,”⁶⁰ or otherwise “wohlbehalten, unverletzt, unversehrt sein.”⁶¹ The word can describe the health or wholeness of the physical body, the soul, or even an individual’s moral character.⁶² In the Ptolemaic period the word meant “whole or complete” and also “perfect,” and appears in ritual settings where the *ib* (“heart”) is said to be *wḏꜣ* when the words of the ritual are “spoken exactly” (that is, properly executed).⁶³ In Coptic, true to its Egyptian roots, the word οὐχαῖ came to mean “healthy, whole” and, significantly

58. *Times and Seasons*, March 15, 2842. The *wedjat*-eye features prominently in both of these figures. In Figure 3, the seated figure in the boat is flanked front and back by the *wedjat*-eye; in Figure 7 it is presented to the seated figure. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy of the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

59. See Stephen O. Smoot et al., “God Sitting Upon His Throne (Facsimile 2, Figure 7),” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2022): 259–63.

60. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1962), 74–75.

61. Rainer Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch Ägyptisch-Deutsch (2800–950 v. Chr.)* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1997), 231–32.

62. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1958), 1:399–400; Hannig, *Großes Handwörterbuch*, 231.

63. Penelope Wilson, *A Ptolemaic Lexicon* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 283.

from a temple perspective, “salvation, saved” in the Christian theological sense.⁶⁴ In the colophon to the Discourse on Abbaton, to name just one of several possible examples, we read of the monk who secured ποϋχαλιντεφυγγη (“the salvation of his soul”) for writing and donating the book to the monastery of St. Mercurius in Tbo.⁶⁵

Beyond its etymology, we can also say something about how the *wḏꜣt*-eye functioned in Egyptian religion. In its Egyptian context the *wḏꜣt*-eye was imagined as the “whole” or “sound” eye of the god Horus used in the process of revivifying his father, the god Osiris, and so it held a pronounced apotropaic function. In this regard the eye appropriately symbolized the divine restoration and renewal of the body.⁶⁶ But the *wḏꜣt*-eye was more than this. It “could represent almost any aspect of the divine order,” observes Geraldine Pinch, “including kingship and the offerings made to the gods and the dead.”⁶⁷ It also appears in temple contexts. In Ptolemaic temple inscriptions the term is connected with “saving and protecting the body, or being saved in the temple.”⁶⁸ The phrase *dī wḏꜣ* (“giving *wḏꜣ*”) is used in one Demotic creation text “as something the creator god does to the gods while eternally rejuvenating them, a usage reflected in prayers for mortal individuals,” and it appears in the temple graffiti of petitioners requesting blessings.⁶⁹ Joseph Smith’s syncretistic recontextualization of the iconography of the *wḏꜣt*-eye for a Latter-day Saint temple setting is thus entirely appropriate and finds solid grounding from both an ancient Egyptian and an ancient Christian perspective. (What’s good for Coptic Christians is good for Latter-day Saint Christians.) With this understanding, therefore, Latter-day Saints may better appreciate how the figure of the *wḏꜣt*-eye in Facsimile 2 relates to their own expectation for eternal life and resurrection in God’s

64. Wolfhart Westendorf, *Koptisches Handwörterbuch* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1977), 287; Richard Smith, *A Concise Coptic-English Lexicon*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholar’s Press, 1999), 39; John Gee, “Some Neglected Aspects of Egypt’s Conversion to Christianity,” in *Coptic Culture: Past, Present and Future* (Stevenage: Coptic Orthodox Church Centre, 2012), 51–52.

65. E. A. Wallis Budge, ed., *Coptic Martyrdoms, Etc., in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* (London: The British Museum, 1914), 1:248–49.

66. Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 314.

67. Geraldine Pinch, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology* (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 131.

68. Gee, “Some Neglected Aspects of Egypt’s Conversion to Christianity,” 51–52.

69. *Ibid.*, 52.

presence obtained through the keywords of the priesthood as revealed in the temple liturgy.⁷⁰

Figures 8–11 of Facsimile 2 Joseph Smith left untranslated, commenting instead that these figures contain “writings that cannot be revealed unto the world” because they are “to be had in the Holy Temple of God.”⁷¹ The hieroglyphs that appear in both the manuscript and published versions of Facsimile 2 appear legible enough for us to secure a fairly reliable reading.⁷²

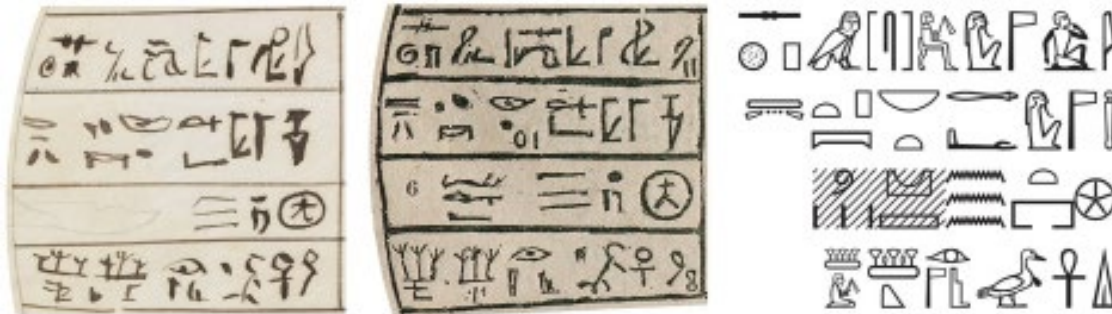


Figure 2. Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham, figures 8–10.⁷³

Translations of these figures have, accordingly, been offered by Nibley and Rhodes,⁷⁴ Mekis,⁷⁵ and most recently Gee,⁷⁶ with a substandard presentation of the text offered by Ritner.⁷⁷ There is broad agreement in

70. Furthermore, on Figure 7 of Facsimile 2 as being a protector of the temple, See Jorge Ogdon, “Some Notes on the Iconography of Min,” *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar* 7 (1985/6): 29–41.

71. “A Fac-Simile from the Book of Abraham, No. 2.”

72. See “Copy of Hypocephalus, between circa July 1835 and circa March 1842,” The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/copy-of-hypocephalus-between-circa-july-1835-and-circa-march-1842/1>.

73. The version on the left was copied circa July 1835–March 1842 and served as the basis for the published version of Facsimile 2 in the *Times and Seasons*, middle. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Courtesy of the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The transcription on the right is mine. Compare Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 327; Mekis, *The Hypocephalus*, 208.

74. Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 327; cf. Michael D. Rhodes, “A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (1977): 264–65; “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus...Twenty Years Later,” FARMS Preliminary Report (1997), 4–5.

75. Mekis, *The Hypocephalus*, 113, 208.

76. John Gee, “Hypocephali and Gates,” in *Aegyptus et Pannonia* 6 (Budapest: The Ancient Egyptian Committee of the Hungarian-Egyptian Friendship Society, 2020), 33–34.

77. Substandard because of his perplexing omission of any hieroglyphic transcriptions. Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri, A Complete*

the translation of these figures, but problematic transcriptions of the hieroglyphs in both the unpublished and published versions of Facsimile 2 give rise to some disagreements, as noted in my translation (see Table 3).

Table 3. Translation of Figures 8-11 of Facsimile 2..

Original	Translation
<i>ī ntr šp(s) m sp</i>	O noble ⁷⁸ god at the first
<i>tp(y) ntr ʕ nb{t} pt tʕ</i>	time ⁷⁹ — great god, lord of heaven, earth,
<i>dwʕt mw [dw.w]</i>	the underworld, the waters, [and the mountains] ⁸⁰ —
<i>dī (?) ʕnh bʕ Wsir ššk</i>	may the soul ⁸¹ of Osiris-Sheshonq ⁸² live!

Although it may not be obvious at first glance how this relates to the temple, a closer look at the underlying context of this brief inscription and attested parallels reveals something significant. For starters, the ordering of the epithets attributed to the unnamed deity in these lines,

Edition: P. JS 1-4 and the Hypocephalus of Sheshonq (Salt Lake City: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2011), 222-23.

78. Nibley and Rhodes read *šps* as *šdr* (“sleeping”). This reading is less likely than the one preferred by Mekis, Gee, Ritner, and myself of *šps* (“noble”).

79. That is, the primordial time of creation.

80. Nibley and Rhodes follow the reading of the printed facsimile, which filled in the lacuna with the hieroglyphs for *f* and *ʕ* stacked on top of each other, to form the reading *mw=fʕ* “his great waters.” Again, this reading is less likely than the one preferred by Mekis, Gee, Ritner, and myself of *dw.w* (“mountains”). But consider also the intriguing alternative suggestion of David Calabro, “The Choreography of Genesis,” 257-58n23, who reads Figures 8-9 as *ir pt tʕ dwʕt mw=fʕ*, “he who made heaven, earth, and the Duat — its (i.e., the earth’s) great waters” with the comment that this reading “relates directly to the visionary and cosmological content of Abraham 3 ... [and] may bear similarity to the creation theme of Abraham 4-5.” Calabro further notes, “The term ‘great waters’ does not appear in the creation account in Genesis, but it does appear in Abraham 4:9-10, where it describes the primordial waters out of which land emerged. The phrase ‘its great waters,’ with the masculine suffix pronoun referring to the masculine noun ‘land’ (the words for ‘heaven’ and ‘Duat’ are feminine), could thus be understood as a gloss relating the Egyptian concept of the Duat (the netherworld, understood in Egyptian cosmology as the source of the Nile inundation) to the cosmology of the Book of Abraham.”

81. Read by Mekis and Ritner as *sʕnh* (*s*-causative of *ʕnh*; “cause to live...”) instead of the prospective/optative *dī ʕnh*, which is favored by Nibley and Rhodes and myself. The first figure on the far right seems unlikely to be *s* as read by Mekis and Ritner, although admittedly it also does not look entirely like *dī*.

82. Ritner implausibly argues that traces of *n* in the name of Sheshonq/Shishak are detectable underneath the first *šʕ* sign. Instead, the two strokes underneath appear to be an unidentifiable sign on the right and *k* on the left.

most likely the god Amun,⁸³ finds near-verbatim attestation on the pylon gates of both the Amun and Khonsu temples at Karnak.⁸⁴ The reference to the “first time” (*sp tpy*; “first occasion,” “first instance,” etc.), is also noteworthy for understanding this inscription as having a temple context, since “frequent are the instances in temple inscriptions in which the historical temple is equated with the *st n sp tpy*, the *Seat of the First Occasion*.”⁸⁵ The phrase was used to describe the Luxor Temple, for example, “first and foremost a creation site and as such [a site that] had a primary role to play in the grand drama of the cyclical regeneration of Amun-Re himself. The god’s rejuvenation was achieved through his return to the very place, even the exact moment, of creation at Luxor; and the triumph over chaos represented by the annual rebirth of the kingship ensured Amun’s own re-creation.”⁸⁶ So too was it used to designate the “Holy of Holies” of the temple (*st dsrt nt sp tpy*; “the sacred place of the first time”).⁸⁷ The conceptual link between the “first time” of creation and the temple is clear from the ancient Egyptian perspective.

Then there is the benediction of the concluding line: “may the soul of Osiris-Sheshonq live!” It is not difficult to suggest the appropriateness of this invocation for a Latter-day Saint temple context. “A common theme of all Egyptian funerary literature is the resurrection of the dead and their glorification and deification in the afterlife, which is certainly a

83. Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 326–27, believe the deity in question is Osiris, but this is unlikely, as in other hypocephali (e.g., Mekis, *The Hypocephalus*, 110–113), the identity of this god is explicitly said to be Amun.

84. Gee, “Hypocephali and Gates,” 33–34.

85. E. A. Reymond, *The Mythical Origin of the Egyptian Temple* (Oxford: Manchester University Press, 1969), 300.

86. Lanny Bell, “Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44, no. 4 (Oct. 1985): 290 and n217a.

87. James K. Hoffmeier, *Sacred in the Vocabulary of Ancient Egypt*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 173. Compare Margaret Barker, *Creation: A Biblical Vision for the Environment* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 73, who observes that in the biblical cosmic imagination, “Day One [of Creation] was the holy of holies, the state beyond time and matter, and the earliest picture of Christian worship is set in the holy of holies.” Barker, *Creation*, 73–101, then proceeds to catalogue numerous biblical and para-biblical writings illustrating this important point. All of this, of course, fits rather nicely with a Latter-day Saint temple perspective and with the Book of Abraham, which narrates the pre-mortal council and Creation in a context that easily lends itself to a temple setting.

central element of our own temple ceremony.”⁸⁸ By reconsidering this line from the perspective of the modern Latter-day Saint temple, we begin to see both the logic behind Joseph Smith’s explanation of these figures in Facsimile 2 as well as how the text may be brought to bear on temple ritual and vice versa. This may also explain why Joseph Smith may have intended to display the Egyptian papyri and the published translation of the Book of Abraham in the Nauvoo temple upon its completion.⁸⁹ With this methodology a symbiotic relationship between text and temple begins to manifest, so that the Latter-day Saint participant in the temple informs and is informed by these lines in the facsimile. Barring the Latter-day Saints from partaking in this universal habit of religious syncretism as it pertains to their ritual performances in the temple, or somehow insisting that such is illegitimate, is nothing short of special pleading.

Conclusion

In this treatment I have shown how the Book of Abraham can be profitably read as a temple text, or how themes and narrative elements might be identified in the text that amplify its relevance to the Latter-day Saint temple experience. Each of the points discussed in this paper

88. Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 327; cf. Rhodes, “The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus ... Twenty Years Later,” 12: “Since the designated purpose of the hypocephalus was to make the deceased divine, it is not unreasonable to see here a reference to the sacred ordinances performed in our Latter-day temples.” One need look no further than the Book of Breathings among the Joseph Smith Papyri to encounter this expectation for the postmortem divinization of the deceased in other forms of funerary literature besides hypocephali. “The beginning [of the Document of Breathing], which [Isis] made [for her brother, Osiris to cause his soul to live, to cause his body to live, to rejuvenate all his limbs] again, [so that he might join] the horizon with his father, Re, [to cause his soul to appear in heaven as the disk of the moon, so that his body might shine like Orion in the womb of Nut, and to] cause [the same] thing to happen to the Osiris Hor, justified.” Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 28.

89. An anonymous visitor to Nauvoo in 1840 met with Joseph Smith and, among other things, was shown the Egyptian papyri and mummies kept in his house. According to the published report of the encounter, when the visitor observed “what an ornament it would be to have these ancient manuscripts handsomely set, in appropriate frames, and hung up around the walls of the temple which you are about to erect in this place,” the Prophet replied, “Yes, and *the translation* hung up with them.” See “A Glance at the Mormons,” *Alexandria Gazette*, July 11, 1840, [2], emphasis in original.

can rightly be more fully explored, and I welcome additional study to that end. Suffice it to say for now that this reading both helps ground the Book of Abraham in the ancient world from whence it derives and provides readers with new insights that may inform their encounter with the book as sacred scripture. If nothing else, it should, I hope, encourage readers not to abandon the text because of controversies related to its translation or production. While shallow or perfunctory readings of the Book of Abraham will, regrettably, remain all too common among those who obstinately refuse Joseph Smith the courtesy of taking him even somewhat seriously and on his own terms — be that out of either commitment to ideological priors or just good old-fashioned anti-Mormon spite — that should not stop us from digging deeper into this inexhaustible text that has unmistakable and important ties to God's holy temple.

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