



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Transcript

The following transcript represents the views of the speaker and not the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES

Hugh W. Nibley

Abraham's Creation Drama

FARMS

Summary:

Hugh Nibley discusses how Abraham was an ordinary man who held no office and worked no miracles, and yet he was one of the greatest minds of the last forty centuries. Nibley discusses Abraham's relationship with the temple and gives an overview of the ancient temple. He also shows how the Book of Abraham answers what Nibley calls the "terrible questions": Where do I come from? Why am I here? How does the universe figure in the gospel? How did it all begin, and how will it all end? Nibley argues that the vision given to Abraham in the Book of Abraham contains stage directions indicating that the vision is dramatized, and the Book of Abraham includes the script.

Transcript
Pearl of Great Price, Abraham

FARMS
Brigham Young University
P.O. Box 7113
University Station
Provo, UT 84602
1-800-327-6715
(801) 373-5111
www.farmsresearch.com

\$3.00

N-ABL



7

0

For a complete listing of FARMS publications,
call 1-800-FARMS-15 for a FARMS catalog.

Transcript of a lecture presented on 6 April 1999 as part of the FARMS Book of Abraham Lecture Series.

Hugh W. Nibley received his Ph.D. in History from the University of California, Berkeley in 1939. He is emeritus professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University. He is a gifted scholar, educator, and lecturer who has been delighting and motivating Latter-day Saints for decades. A prolific writer, a keen and witty observer, and a relentless critic of the worldly, he has led church members of all ages to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

© 1999 by Hugh W. Nibley

Abraham's Creation Drama

Hugh W. Nibley

This presentation is a summary of research that will appear in a forthcoming book on temples. Full documentation will appear in that publication.

The Pearl of Great Price is rightly named. It contains enormous value in a very small scope. Also, it has long been lying with "purest ray serene" in the dark caves of the ocean, or in a shabby back lot where the merchant discovered it (see Matthew 13:45). Like no other book it contains in its sixty-five pages the answers to the ultimate questions of philosophy, religion, and science. Even more wonderful, it fills those enormous gaps in our records of the past for which science must give an accounting. What was going on during all those lost millennia that the Egyptologist Jan Assmann calls "The Great Forgetting"? We should know, and this book is good enough to tell us.

It is a book of dispensations. Both Joseph Smith and Brother Brigham said we do not know how many dispensations there have been, but the classic number in most ancient records is seven. A dispensation is a time when the heavens are open and truth dispensed or handed out to men. It happened with Adam, Enoch, Noah, "before Abraham was," and after Abraham, with Moses, Christ, and Joseph Smith. Each one of these contributed his own story to this small handbook. Abraham's story is the only apocraphon written in the first person—an oddity not overlooked in the Pearl of Great Price. The key passages to all seven of these books appear at length in our wonderful Pearl of Great Price. Notice that Abraham is squarely in the middle; all things seem to zero in on him. He has been called "the most pivotal and strategic figure in all of human history." In his position he binds all things together and gives meaning and purpose to everything that happened. "The whole world was rent by strife and rancor, and Abraham was like a man who sews together a badly rent garment. It was said that charity was asleep in the world and Abraham awakened it." He joined man to God when he and his wife won souls to God. "Were it not for men like Abraham," said the Lord, "I would not have bothered to create heaven and earth, sun and moon." Converting them was as if he had created them anew. "He was the perfect one who brought man nearer to God." He entered into the covenant the world is based on, as if the world was firmly established for his sake, as if he were the Messiah come to

establish the kingdom of God on earth. "Because I have made known my name to my creatures," said God to Abraham, "I will regard thee as if thou wert associated with me in the creation of the World." "All who receive the gospel from thee," said the Lord, "will be called after thy name, and accounted thy seed." "I blessed Adam and Eve and Noah, and their sons; from now on it is you who shall impart the blessings."

Before we get any further we must see the rest of the picture, for this superman is also Everyman. What office did he hold? We know of none. What miracles did he perform? What dazzling appearances? He lived in the heroic age, a time of great migrations, of epic literature, but we read of no mighty combats, blow-by-blow, or challenges boasting heroic genealogy. His ten trials were Everyman's trials. He was in trouble in business. The grass, water, and grazing rights on which he depended were often withheld from him. He never drove a hard bargain (the first rule of success according to Mr. Marriott), not even with the King of Sodom, or the generous Ephron the Hittite, who would have given him the burial cave for nothing. He yielded to Lot's greedy cattlemen and gracefully withdrew. We never hear of him punishing anyone, though when the time came to get back his nephew's property, he struck the marauding chieftains with brilliant strategy and knockout force. He forbade his children to marry into alien races, but they promptly went ahead and did so.

He seemed to be generous to the point of lacking common sense. Instead of sending his servant Eliezer out to look for lost wanderers, Abraham on his one hundredth birthday, old and very sick, went out alone on the hottest day of the year because he thought he might find some wanderer lost in the desert. He found no one but when he got home three men dropped in to visit him; "Lord of the Universe," he cried, recognizing one of them, "is it the order of the Cosmos that I sit while you remain standing?" The scene, as the archaeologist Andre Parrot, the discoverer of Mari, remarks, "is as magnificent as it is strange."

Abraham was the essential Everyman, but never was there a less-ordinary individual. A recent issue of *Time Magazine* (March 29, 1999) is devoted entirely to the study of "The Hundred Greatest Minds of the Twentieth Century." Interestingly, leading the parade side by side are Einstein and Philo Farnsworth. In a list of the twenty greatest minds of the last forty centuries, Abraham must surely make a strong bid for number one. Brief sketches are given in the magazine describing the special traits and qualifications of the hundred geniuses. They give an almost perfect character profile of

Abraham. From infancy he was asking searching questions about God, the cosmos, and the ways of men—embarrassing questions. As he grew older the questions grew more dangerous—he debunked the idols by clever arguments which, worst of all, he applied to the king. This threatened the high social position of the family at court, and they finally volunteered him for sacrifice. If you think this sounds fantastic, you should read the autobiography of Amenemhet, who, or whose ghost, tells how he was murdered during an afternoon siesta by a conspiracy of ambitious courtiers and members of his own family—Abraham's story is thoroughly typical of real conditions at the perilous Court of Egypt. The title of Abraham's biography in the Great Midrash is *lech lecha*, "keep moving!" Perpetual migration was one of the Ten Trials of Abraham, "for the famine waxed sore in the land." In his suffering he knew how to feel for others.

At the age of fifteen he had a job frightening the birds away from the fields; so he invented a plow that covered the seeds as it sowed them, apologizing handsomely to the birds for cutting their rations, but gaining renown for his public service. Wherever he went he planted trees and dug wells for the enjoyment of those who would come after. At Hebron he ran a school for outcasts where he received all comers. He always played fair: "If Abraham does not play fair, who will?" Charity was dead and Abraham revived it. In our obsession with crime, and Western scenarios, the *Hauptthema* is always the pleasure of revenge, watching the bad-guys suffer, but Josephus tells us that Abraham stubbornly pleaded to God to spare the wickedest people in the world because "he felt sorry for them, because they were his friends and neighbors." That is almost inconceivable to us in our modern Sodom and Gomorrah. "It is compassion and forgiveness *alone* that are the unfailing traits of the true descendants of Abraham."

In recognition of his dedicated study of science, God came down personally and instructed him in astronomy; we are told that that is the only case in which God appeared to man and talked with him person to person. Today we can add another one; the youth of Joseph Smith shows astonishing parallels to that of Abraham. Both were curious about everything, especially the stars, asked searching questions that got their families into trouble and made them seek "another place of residence."

Abraham and the Temple

The altar where Abraham and Isaac met the supreme test was on Mount Zion, "The cosmic rock uniting heaven and earth . . . where Adam brought the first sacrifice;

it was the altar of Cain and Abel and Noah; Abraham knew that it was the place appointed for the Temple." Maimonides says that Abraham chose Mount Moriah and dedicated it as the place of the future temple. As the great intercessor, he joined Michael and Abel in a project of work for the dead, established in the temple. It was he who introduced prayers for the dead, another link between God and man. Every follower of Abraham must receive the signs and tokens; Abraham and Isaac, both as offerings on the altar, are the similitude of the Only Begotten, including the special condition that both of them rose unharmed, a similitude of the resurrection. It is to Abraham's bosom that the dead betake themselves to wait for eternity.

Today Jews are claiming Abraham rather than Moses as the founder of their religion, arguing that the covenant of Moses on Sinai was "but the fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham." All the great sacrifices of the past, "lost at the time of the Tower," were restored by Abraham. God summoned Abraham to the site of the altar where Adam and Noah "offered the first sacrifice to me," with the commandment, "It is now your duty Abraham to build it up again!" Maimonides says that God showed the future temple to Adam who had all of its ordinances; everything Abraham does Adam did before him, "Abraham restored what Adam had lost."

The Temple Drama

The ancient state or nation was hierocentric, that is, focused on one sacred place of power and authority, sometimes referred to as "places of emergence," that is, of contact between the Upper and the Lower Worlds, where at the New Year all the people met to rehearse the creation. Regarding this practice, Eliade writes, "It was the . . . sacred place, . . . the celestial prototype, . . . the act of creation which . . . brought the ordered cosmos out of chaos, . . . the sacred marriage, . . . the ritual confrontation with evil as the dragon and the victory of the King, whose triumphant coronation inaugurates the new age of the world and the cosmos." There is an "atoning sacrifice" to "restore the primal unity between God and man and enable the latter to regain the Divine presence." In this, "Reality is conferred through participation in the 'symbolism of the Center': cities, temples, houses become real by the fact of being assimilated to the center of the world. . . . The Temple in particular—preeminently the Sacred Place—as a celestial prototype," the Holy Mountain, "the Mountain of the Lord's House."

D. Redford begins the most recent comprehensive history of Egypt by noting that

that nation first "bounced overnight, as it were, out of the Stone Age and into urban culture " and also that for "this Quantum leap . . . no satisfactory answer has been given." Yet he unconsciously provides the explanation when he tells us about the great popular Assembly going back in Egypt to prehistoric times, "All the community, high and low, the ancestral 'souls' and town gods, and local numina . . . all convene to lend their approbation to the incarnate god-king." There is no need to ask why they went to all that trouble, for they realized that the only hope of continuing life indefinitely was to be born again from time to time, following the example of the Sun who, of course, represented the King, who had to overcome the powers of darkness in a ritual contest, celebrate a brilliant new coronation and marriage, and get on with the usual affairs. Every year in a hundred ancient capitals the creation was dramatized with joyful celebration at the prospect of a new life; singing, dancing, feasting, and drinking were the order of the day, as the angel chorus sings at the beginning of *Faust*: Everything was *herrlich wie am ersten Tag*, "as glorious as on the Day of Creation."

But does all this singing, dancing, dramatizing, preaching really make it happen? The performance at the temple was a preparation, a training, a school, and a theater, teaching by precept and example. They knew it was not the real thing. Shakespeare apologizes repeatedly in his great, super-spectacular, *Henry V*, begging the pardon of the audience, "Can this cockpit hold/The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram/Within this wooden O the very casques/That did affright the air at Agincourt?/But pardon, gentles all." He excuses himself for the sheer gall of daring to stage a great battle with "five or six ragged foils engaged in brawl ridiculous." Still, he is performing a service as he concludes, "Yet sit and see, minding *true* things by what their mockeries be." The whole thing is just a mockup, as a stage is, a make-believe, frankly, a mockery. But still it will give you an idea of the "*true* things" it is supposed to represent.

So it is with the temple. Anyone who has taken a guided tour through an LDS temple before its dedication, or seen the extensive guide to the building published by Joseph Fielding Smith, may recognize the situation. Outside, the temple is boxed to the compass, oriented to the whole universe; we are often told today that the ancient temple was nothing but a "scale-model of the universe," a place where we take our bearings in eternity. But what about the Provo Temple? While it was building, I was shocked to notice that it was not so orientated. I was upset, since Brigham Young made such an important thing of that arrangement, and I wrote to the brethren about it. Then it

occurred to me that Brigham Young also reminded the Saints that they should not be scandalized if one temple had two towers and another only one. In Provo the architect, while displaying the building itself as an arresting spectacle, took advantage of the phenomenal view from the temple—strictly following the directions of the compass would have spoiled all that. I readily accepted the margin allowed by taste and practicality. While temples are still in the planning stage to suit various climes and settings throughout the world, we need not be alarmed at sundry shifts and alterations. For this is not the final real temple, the ideal future temple of the Temple Scroll. This is a training center, a school for precepts and a showplace for examples (see D&C 109). Here we do not receive crowns of glory but only the promise that if we are true and faithful the day will come when we shall be eligible for such.

To resume the temple tour, the first room is the creation room, where we are introduced to the reality with which we have only recently become accustomed of a world waiting to be born, “empty and desolate, because they had not formed anything but the earth” (Abraham 4:2). And then cloud-covered darkness, from which we escape into the infinite expanse of the starry heavens to learn that this earth is made of the same materials and on the same pattern and following the same physical laws as “other worlds which we have hitherto formed.” This teaches us a basic principle of Mormonism, that we are living in the physical universe. Though medieval and modern theologians vigorously condemn “Cosmism,” i.e., the inclusion of the visible universe in the plan of eternal life, there is, to quote the Egyptologist G. Van der Leeuw, “a human inclination in general as well as Christian . . . to base trust on one’s salvation in the cosmos . . . only when the human passion of a divine Savior has a cosmic background, does salvation seem sufficiently assured.” Hence, Lovejoy can conclude that in religious writings of any period the language of *acosmism* . . . is never to be taken too seriously.” So Origen, first and best informed of all theologians, declares triumphantly, “When finally, by the grace of God, the Saints shall reach the celestial place, then they shall comprehend all the secrets of the stars; God will reveal to them the nature of the universe, etc.” This is the teaching of the early brethren of which Origen is an authority; but his own Alexandrian training breaks through at the end of the passage when he appeals for “perfect knowledge, purged of all that is physical and corporeal.” And since the scriptures tell us nothing about the heavens, he recommends consulting another Alexandrian, Philo, the great allegorizer, on the subject.

The next room is the Garden of Eden, the scene of the greatest primal drama of them all. Now it becomes even plainer that the whole thing is a stage-set; everything has been properly set up and we are ready for the play to begin. Where is the stage? The room itself is the stage; it is an auditorium filled with seats for everybody, but the audience is part of the play. They are all actors, each in the imaginary role of Adam or Eve. Each individual, in fact, who is not visiting the temple for the first time, has taken the name and is playing the part of another person; he speaks for him, thinks for him—it is all by proxy, and that makes us all actors, role-playing. The Lord left his peace and blessing when he departed after the drama of the last supper. For it was a drama too: He explained to the Apostles that they were to think thereafter of the wine and the bread as something far more than wine and bread, and think of him as if he was present. One of the oldest Egyptian ritual plays, the so-called Ramesseum Drama, is careful to explain to the audience that each of the properties represents something else—the carnelian stones are blood, the green stones are bread, etc. The “mysteries of Godliness” are things understood only by those who have been initiated and taught (Matthew 13:11).

Why do we call the temple a school? The initiatory ordinances make that clear. We begin there with the first requirement, that our brain and intellect be clear and active—we are there to learn and to understand, bring your brain with you and prepare to stay awake, to be alert and pay attention; also to come often for frequent reviews repeating the lessons to refresh our memory, for you cannot leave without an examination—you have to have learned some things and be able to repeat them.

A famous saying of Aesculapius is that “All Egypt is a Temple.” Indeed, everywhere you look in Egypt, you are faced with teaching devices boldly displayed on the outside as well as the inside of the many sacred edifices. The temple, like the medieval cathedral, presents us on every hand with symbols to remind and instruct the worshipper.

Leaving the Eden room we go into the dismal world in which we are now living, to take care of certain matters that have to be expedited in this world. Then we pass on to a better world. Thus we progress by going higher and higher for each new chamber. It was exactly so in the Egyptian temples. The final ascent takes us to the place of transition where we take the step into the next world. In the wonderful temple at Dendera the devotee makes his departure from the roof into the world above. The

newly discovered Temple Scroll calls the large assembly room at the top of the temple at Jerusalem, the model temple of the future, "the Room of the Golden Veil," because the veil was hung from one side to the other. One reaches it in Manti by a spiral ascent, a freestanding stairway that defies gravity, supported only by its own weight—the neat expression of an idea.

Today the various steps of creation are made vivid to us by superb cinematographic and sound recordings, showing the astral, geological, and biological wonders described by the actors, and the vast reaches of time that the gods called "days" before "time was measured unto man." Along with that, we are regaled by Kurt Bestor's haunting background music that touches the feelings without intruding on the attention of the audience. Yes, the temple is a theater and no one directs it so well as Abraham. He gives us the creation story and the plan of salvation in a privileged personal showing. He did not have the visual and sound effects that we do, but he had the common resources of all the Ancients—the song, dance, and recitation.

The Sacred Dance

The Greeks called the great yearly celebration the *Panegyris*, meaning everyone in a circle. Singing and dancing are the natural modes of expression among "primitive" people throughout the world, and the ring dance is universal.

Philo, in his work on the creation, says the true initiate during the rites moves "in the circuit of heaven, and is borne around in a circle with the dance of the planets and stars in accordance with the laws of perfect music"—the music of the spheres. Lehi in vision "thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God" (1 Nephi 1:8). From that meeting he saw twelve appointed agents descending to earth; "their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament" (1 Nephi 1:10), transferring the glories of heaven to earth with the preaching of the gospel.

Lucian, a clever Syrian who wrote in Greek and spoke for the whole Near East, reports that "You cannot have a single ancient *teleten* (high religious celebration, a mystery) without an *orchesis* or pantomime dance." Plato says dancing is mandatory at every public offering, and Athenaeus says no respectable dinner party could be without song and dance. The Old Testament is rich in dancing situations. Israel came out of

Egypt dancing and the victory dances that followed were by choruses of maidens (see Exodus 15, 20f; 1 Samuel 18:6). We read of a company of prophets carrying instruments (see Psalm 149:3); they danced as they prophesied. There was a daily procession around the altar in the temple with song and dance in which both David and Solomon participated. In the dance of the water drawers, "Pious men and men of affairs danced with torches in their hands, singing songs of joy and praise, with a full orchestra of Levites. Rabbi Simeon Ben Gamal juggled eight torches in the dance. The Song of Songs was a competition between two choirs of maidens (Song of Songs 7:1, 2). The rival maiden choruses got David into big trouble when one sang "Saul has slain his thousands," while the others topped with "But David his tens of thousands." Just such competitions took place in Greece, preserved in the "Maiden Songs" of Alcman.

So we should not be shocked when we find Abraham composing a ballet on the creation. The Greek name for it was *chorus*. Aeschylus, the first and greatest writer of sacred plays, choreographed his own dramas. In fact, the chorus *was* the play; it was the chorus that was awarded the prize; the author's first step in celebrating the sacred rites was to "ask for a Chorus." Plato says in the Laws that "The Chorus was nothing more nor less than the *educating* (*paideia*) of the people." It was the chorus that sang and danced the creation song. We all know the challenge to Job when he was moping and wailing: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth, when the Morning Stars sang together, and all the Sons of God shouted for joy?" We consistently ignore the words that follow: "Answer me, for thou knowest!" Job was there and the Lord is reminding him that his sufferings and the defects of this world are for a purpose. In the Battle Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the same speech is addressed to the Army of Israel when they are downcast after a defeat, saying in effect, "Remember how glad we were to come down here? Bad times were to be part of the picture."

I have shown elsewhere that the round-dance of the creation drama takes the form of the prayer circle in the temple. The recently published *Testament of Job* brings it vividly to mind. Job himself is not committed to any tribe or nation; like Abraham he was just one of the "men of the East." It has long been generally accepted that the Book of Job is authentic theater. The texts go back to the fifth century.

In the opening lines of the *Testament*, Job tells his three virgin daughters and seven sons to form a circle around him (the second son's name is Choros). "Make a circle around me, and I will demonstrate to you the things which the Lord expounded

to me, for I am your father Job who is faithful in all things." According to Rabbi Eleaser, "Abraham built three altars specifically in order to instruct his children and fortify them against apostasy." Job next tells the circle how the Lord, after healing him of his awful ailments, said, "Arise, gird up thy loins like a man!" "And the Lord spoke to me in power, showing me things past and future." He tells the girls that they will have nothing to fear in this life from the adversary, because the garments they wear are "a power and a protection from the Lord." Then he tells them to arise and gird themselves to prepare for heavenly visitors. "Thus it was that when one of the three daughters . . . arose and clothed herself . . . she began to utter words of wisdom in the angelic language, and sent a hymn up to God, using the manner of praising of the angels. And as she recited the hymns, she let the Spirit make marks [*charagmata*, cuts or rents] on her garment."

The next girl girded herself likewise and recited "The Hymn of the Creation of the Heavens," speaking "in the dialect of the Archons [the council in heaven]." The third girl "chanted verses in the dialect of those on High . . . and she spoke in the tongue of the Cherubim," her words being preserved as "the prayers of Amaltheias-Keras." Recently Cyrus Gordon has compared the three daughters of Baal and their Greek equivalent the Three Graces, to which we might add Abraham's three virgins (see Abraham 1:11-12).

We now turn to another medium. Just as it is impossible to present the vast panorama of the creation in its enormous stretches of time without the aid of Stephen Spielberg and our modern techniques, we find ourselves obliged to fall back on the age-old procedures of voices offstage, describing the scene and the situation by solo voices or various combinations. We still do this in the temple teachings. In the Book of Abraham also we have both the descriptive recitation and the spectacular choral dance themes.

Of the former, the factual recitation, Abraham gives us the most marvelous text of all, the miraculous third chapter of the book which answers with astonishing economy the most fundamental and baffling questions of our existence. I consider this a miraculous chapter because of its brevity and the astonishing expanse of knowledge it covers. Here are some of the "terrible questions" and their answers:

1. *The inevitable Where do I come from?* The spirits "have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end . . . for they are gnolaum, or eternal" (Abraham 3:18).

"And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them. . . . Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born" (Abraham 3:23). It is strange that the doctrine of premortal existence should be so hard for the world to accept. If it is possible for us to be here now, it is just as possible for us to have been there then. Neither proposition, as Roger Penrose has shown, can be proved by algorithm or allegory, yet we have to accept their reality.

2. *Why am I here?* "We will make an earth whereon these may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them; And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon . . . and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever" (Abraham 3:24, 26). The oldest Egyptian creation drama, the Shabako Stone, says that when the earth was adorned and ready to receive its inhabitants, "a law was given" by which every action of every creature would be judged: "To him who does what is agreeable (loveable, *merr.t*) shall be given a life of eternal rest or happiness (*ankh n hr-htp*, rest, peace, happiness), while to him who does what is hateful (detestable, *mesdj.t*) shall be given death and condemnation (*mt.n.hr h(b)t* = condemnation, disfavor). Note that it is not necessary to categorize what is good and bad: everyone knows it; it is the Golden Rule; there is no need for centuries of probabilistic head-splitting to define and assign precise numerical values to degrees of good and evil.

3. *How did it all begin?* It is *Sia*, "intelligence," awareness, that comes first. But it is lost without *Hui*, "authoritative utterance," "communication." As the Lord made clear to Moses, "there is no end to my *works*, neither to my *words*" (Moses 1:38). The one is incomplete without the other; and this is made very clear in the oldest Egyptian creation drama, where God "conceives in his mind" and then "utters with his mouth," communicating his intention to the council of the gods at each step of the creation. This is the very modern doctrine of Anthropism. Without *Sia*, intelligence, awareness, what would exist? And if it were confined to one mind only, what would be accomplished? The Creator must communicate that others may share his "most glorious and beautiful" works of creation, to bring about "the immortality and eternal life of man."

4. *How does the real universe figure in the gospel?* Ever since Alexandria all the clergy have condemned "Cosmism." But Abraham puts us into the real universe forever: "He said unto me: My son, my son. . . . And he put his hand upon mine eyes and I saw those things which his hands had made. . . . And I could not see the end

thereof" (Abraham 3:12). It was all real and visible; this is the latest definition of universe—everything.

5. *The question of the Big Bang: How did it all begin and how will it all end?* Intelligent beings "existed before, they shall have no end, they shall exist after, for they are gnolaum or eternal" (Abraham 3:18). It is the *En Sof* ("without end") principle of the Rabbis and Penrose—an idea beyond definition but not beyond our conception.

This brings up a theological question to which only the Book of Abraham offers a clear solution, namely the problem of hierarchy. This was the secret of Egypt's strength and stability, a strict hierarchial order of everything, which everyone respected. If it was hard for Satan to subject himself to any other being, it is still hard for the individual human to recognize his inferiority to another. Again and again we are reminded of the strangely obvious principle that one thing can be above another. This, according to Miss Lichtheim who collected all the Egyptian philosophical statements, is the number-one axiom of Egyptian reality—things are *not* equal, one thing is always different from and either greater or lesser than another. Again and again Abraham takes the trouble to remind us of what should be obvious: "Now, Abraham, these two facts exist, behold thine eyes see it. . . . And where these two facts exist, there shall be another fact above them" (Abraham 3:6, 8). "If two things exist, and there be one above another, there shall be greater things above them" (Abraham 3:16). Why is he so insistent on anything so obvious?

In our competitive society every ego aspires to assert itself and it does that by comparison with something. Thus the deadly Christological controversy in which the Athanasians accused the Arians of belittling the Son of God by making him inferior to the Father, while the Arians accused the Athanasians of insulting God by making the Son equal to him. Does the Son envy the Father, or is the Father jealous of him?

Abraham removes the mean invidious element and makes the order of things accessible to all: "if there be two spirits, and one shall be more intelligent than the other, yet these two spirits, *notwithstanding* one is more intelligent than the other, have no beginning; they existed before . . . they shall exist after. And the Lord said unto me: These two facts do exist, that there are two spirits, one being more intelligent than the other; there shall be another more intelligent than they; I am the Lord thy God. I am more intelligent than they all" (Abraham 3:18–19). One cannot plead that he is a latecomer, that others came early and got the jump on him: "*Ye were also* in the

beginning with the Father; that which is Spirit, even the Spirit of truth" (D&C 93:23). Opportunity is not a matter of early arrival, for "Man was *also* in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be" (D&C 93:29). This nullifies the whining excuse of Omar Khayyam that God created us that way, and there is nothing that we can do about it: "He who did man of baser metal make, etc." Who is responsible then? It is all in my own hands. Intelligence was not created, it unfolds; no matter how backward I may be I can rejoice in my ignorance, knowing that wonderful things are awaiting my discovery. When I am honest, i.e., intelligent enough to search out and dwell upon the things I do not know or in which I have been mistaken, rather than preening myself on the little I do know, surveying such latent discoveries is like children waiting to open packages on Christmas morning.

6. *The sixth teaching of Abraham is relativity.* Five times in our remarkable third chapter we are reminded that everything that he sees is to be understood only as viewed from the place "upon which thou standest" (Abraham 3:4, 5, 6, 7, 9). Like Einstein's man on the boat who thinks that the dock is moving away from him, so Abraham must remember his real position relative to the universe. In all that the Lord showed him, Abraham has still only a limited view. When Moses asked to see more than the scope and range of mission assigned him, he was sharply rebuked: "Worlds without number have I created; and I also created them for mine own purpose" (Moses 1:33). "But only an account of this earth, and the inhabitants thereof, give I unto you" (Moses 1:35). In the next verse Moses apologizes: "Be merciful unto thy servant, O God, and tell me concerning this earth . . . and then thy servant will be content."

Our temple drama began like the book of Job, the Gospel of John, and Goethe's *Faust*, with the "Prologue in Heaven." In the temple today the prologue is spoken offstage, i.e., in another world far removed from our present one. We hear the council in heaven discussing the plan to organize a world "like unto the other worlds we have hitherto formed." They will "take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon *these* may dwell" (Abraham 3:24). The definite pronoun "*these*" plainly points to or indicates something, showing that the drama is in progress. Then they appoint two others from among those who stood "among those that were spirits" (Abraham 3:23). Again the definite pronoun that calls our attention to parties who are not mentioned but are obviously indicated by gesture—these are stage directions.

Things being thus decided, the Lord said "Whom should I send?" Here we

should note that every one of the thirty-one verses in Moses 1 begins with the word *And*. This in our narrative is the so-called *waw*-conversive, which converts the past to a future tense, giving it the sense of stage direction: "The Lord *shall* say." To his question "one answered [or one shall answer] like unto the Son of man," obviously stepping forward, "Here I am, send me." The action is clearly indicated, but why "one *like unto* the Son of man?" Why not simply the Son of man? Because plainly this is not the real character but an impersonation of him, one taking his part: "*like* the Son of man."

"And another answered and said: 'Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first. And the second was angry, and kept not his first estate; and, at that day, many followed after him' (Abraham 3:26–28). Here we have a drama that was played out at the New Year in the temples of Egypt. Dozens of texts still exist, recounting the rivalry of the two leaders, sometimes taking the form of a litigation before the court of the council in heaven, sometimes the form of a knock-down-and-drag-out duel. But it always ends with the expulsion of the aspiring party. (These dramas include the Shabako Stone, the Ramesseum Drama, the Celestial Cow, the Contendings of Horus and Seth, etc.) At this point the chorus divides into two, the usual half-choruses that engage in an antiphonal contest. The losers follow the leader off the stage. End of first act.

We now get to the ballets. They start with all useful vegetation, the first step in making the earth—formed, divided and beautified, with vegetation thereon—habitable for man." The Gods say, "Let us prepare the earth to bring forth grass; the herb yielding seed; the fruit tree yielding fruit, after his kind . . . and it was so, even as they ordered" (Abraham 4:11). This script was made for order for a ballet. The oldest dances in the world have to do with planting and harvesting (in Egypt the *haker* dance), the subject of much study in the 1920s and 1930s as fertility rites. This episode of the plants ends a period: from "morning until the evening they called day; and it was the third time" (Abraham 4:13). End of ballet.

Now a quite different dance. "And the Gods organized the lights in the expanse of the heaven." We have already mentioned the torch dances in Israel, and many of us fondly recall the lively fire dances at the LDS Polynesian Center. The key word is "organized." That means everything arranged from subatomic particles to molecules, to organizing the family, an army, a church, or a galaxy. Here we see the mazy motion of the dancers' chorus and semichorus, as they divide the day from the night and organize

themselves into groups to take position, "To be for signs and for seasons, and for days and for years" (Abraham 4:14). Again it says not "to be signs," but to be *for* signs, and for days, and for seasons and for years; they are taking their places for the benefit of man. "And the Gods organized the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; with the lesser light they set the stars also . . . to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to cause to divide the light from the darkness" (Abraham 4:16–17). Is all that repetition necessary? This is not a laborious tale for the simpleminded, but the unfolding of a splendid pageant, the Dance of Life, the ever popular torch dance. Not long ago we used to laugh our heads off at the idea that God created the stars and their motions for the benefit of puny man. Today the shoe is on the other foot. Now we are asked to believe how the unimaginable raging forces of the universe, completely uncontrolled and undirected, should zero in on this little planet with nothing but the most benevolent results, adjusting a score of fine-tuned constants to each other with unerring accuracy in defiance of entropy. Not long ago it was believed that such a coincidence was so rare that it could have happened only once in the universe, i.e., that this could be the only possible habitable world. But today it seems that the main concern of astronomers is coming to be life on other worlds. Carl Sagan resented the suggestion of any mind equal to his own elsewhere in the universe and yet he designed a missive to be sent into outer space with a message to whom it may concern.

It was all for an appreciative audience, for "the Gods watched [these] things which they had ordered until they [were] obeyed" (Abraham 4:18). The thing was done properly, and then the lights go down: "It was from evening [to] morning that it was night; and . . . from morning until evening that it was day; and it was the fourth time" (Abraham 4:19).

Next the Dance of the Waters, always a favorite. In the oldest Greek play the chorus is made up of water maidens, the Oceanids; they sail above the stage weeping for poor Prometheus and shedding their tears over the Caucasus. The episode is reflected in the Enoch drama of the Pearl of Great Price, where the hero asks, "Why do the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as rain upon the mountains?" It is an equally poetic and dramatic passage from the same antediluvian milieu—for both tales are an immediate preparation for the flood. There is a stunning mural from Thebes depicting the water maidens imitating the waves of the Nile, though quite unaware of

the Rhine Daughters.

This prepares us for the waters to “bring forth great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters were to bring forth abundantly after their kind; and every winged fowl after their kind.” The impression is that all life began in the waters and that there was an element of the experimental in the undertaking, with the Creators watching the developments until they “saw that they would be obeyed, and that their plan was good” (Abraham 4:21).

Next comes the great animal show. Everyone’s favorite. It is the circus-parade of course, splendidly displayed on the walls of Paleolithic caves of Lausanne, etc., it meets us on the prehistoric Standards and Palettes of Egypt and Mesopotamia from the First Dynasty right through the cosmic chorus of Aristophanes, the bestiaries and mummings of the Middle Ages and the fancy dress *Faschings* along the Rhine. It takes us back to the earliest drama of Adam and the animals. He lives with them on intimate terms. He must have because he called them all by name and they were all around him in overwhelming force. He was living in another world then, and we don’t know how long it lasted since “as yet the Gods had not appointed unto Adam his reckoning” (Abraham 5:13). This was before he entered with Eve into the Garden and the covenant of marriage. It was the earth’s turn to bring forth new types of “beasts after their kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after its kind; and the Gods saw they would obey” (Abraham 4:25). Again the moment of testing; it is as if new ideas were being tried out in the new world.

Before the wonderful photographic images of today, the creation drama was conveyed by dialogue offstage. After Satan’s dismissal, “the Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning . . . and formed . . . heavens and the earth. And the earth, after it was formed, was empty and desolate, because they had not formed anything but earth; and darkness reigned upon the face of the deep” (Abraham 4:1–2). These are the two pictures we get of lifeless worlds, painted on the walls of the creation room: “the earth . . . empty and desolate, because they had not formed anything but the earth.” This we see in Mercury and Venus. This corresponds to dense cloud-coverings on other planets, soon to explode into torrential rains (Mars and Europa). Both conditions are clearly displayed in our older creation rooms. Then “darkness reigned upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of the Gods was brooding upon the face of the waters” (Abraham 4:2). “Brooding” implies a long time of preparation for life as we

know it. In the fifth chapter we learn that no plants were growing on the earth because it had not yet rained (see Abraham 5:5). Up to this point we are still in the council and planning stage. This raises an interesting question which at present is the object of debate among Quantum scientists, namely, which world is the real world? According to one school of thought, we cannot say a thing exists until we are aware of it. Recently the eminent French Egyptologist Philippe Derchain has noted that the Egyptians were convinced that if they ever stopped thinking about the universe it would cease to exist. This is the Copenhagen doctrine that "Light does not exist until we see it." It is also called "the anthropic principle."

There are two parts to the temple ceremony, the dramatic and the pragmatic. So far we have only mentioned the first. The play is ended by the appearance of heavenly messengers who now bid farewell to the artifice of the antique theater and engage us in a new type of learning. Everything up to this point has been by way of explaining our position in *this* world. The dramatic motifs of the temple and its ordinances are found throughout the world from the very earliest times. President Joseph F. Smith pointed this out when he noted that we find everywhere broken remnants of teachings familiar to Latter-day Saints, going back to a time before world apostasy. Where does the gospel differ from all the rest? There is no difference at all where their teachings are true. An old maxim of Mormonism states that all religions have some truth that we share with them. The first part of the endowment, the drama, is found throughout the world. Shakespeare sees the point when he says, "*All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players.*" We are all actors in this world, "merely players," and nothing else. This was also Abraham's predicament; then according to Martin Buber his life was "an ever-new separation from the world and from his own people; his entire history is a consequence of choices and partings." He no sooner settled down to living in a place than he had to leave. If all the men and women "have their exits and their entrances, and each man and his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages," and if each part is completely different—the baby, the schoolboy, the lover, the soldier, the magistrate, the senior citizen, and then, "last scene of all, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans eyes, sans teeth, sans taste, sans everything," if all that is so, which is the real you? Shakespeare got this from Solon, the wisest of the Greeks, who wrote an ode on the seven ages of man and concluded that "all are miserable upon whom the sun shines down."

But now comes the serious business of our temple. The antique temple drama ends in nothing. The stage lights go out and the house lights go up. Now *we* must be introduced to the rites and principles that will carry us far beyond this world. We are introduced to special messengers, teachers and guides, and told to pay heed to their counsel, which will continue to lead us on the way of life and salvation. Significantly, those instructions are all in the nature of restrictions and limitations to be set on what could be the exercise of unlimited power through unlimited time. Satan wanted power all for himself: "because that Satan . . . sought . . . that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down" (Moses 4:3). And so like the Ten Commandments the promises and covenants of the temple seem strangely negative to the vanity and arrogance of men. The first is obedience, the restraint on the individual's power. The second is restraint on possession of things; the eternal spirit cannot be attached to them—one must be willing to sacrifice. The third puts restraints on personal behavior, it mandates deportment, self-control to make oneself agreeable to all. The fourth is restraint on uncontrolled appetites, desires and passions, for what could be more crippling on the path of eternal progression than those carnal obsessions which completely take over the mind and body? Finally, the fifth covenant is limitation on the innate selfishness of the other four—everything you have must be set apart to the everlasting benefit of all.