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I Have a Question

Questions of general gospel interest answered for guidance, not as official statements of Church policy.

What, exactly, is the purpose and significance of the facsimiles in the book of Abraham?

Dr. Hugh Nibley, professor emeritus of Ancient Scripture, Brigham Young University Since the purpose of the facsimiles depends on their significance, and vice versa, and both on the authenticity of the explanations given by the Prophet Joseph, a number of preliminary questions must be answered to lay a foundation for scenes vastly removed from our own experience. Since the writer is expected to answer this question standing on a street corner, so to speak, he will have to forego his usual passion for footnotes; but be assured, all propositions can be substantiated.



Q: Are the three facsimiles related to each other?

A: Definitely, by all being attached to one and the same document, namely, the Joseph Smith Papyri X and XI, which contain a text, of the Egyptian Book of Breathings.

Facsimile No. 1 is followed immediately on its left-hand margin by Joseph Smith Papyrus XI, which begins the Book of Breathings. Someone cut them apart, but the fibre edges of their two margins still match neatly. Facsimile No. 1 thus serves as a sort of frontispiece.

Q: How about the others?

A: A Book of Breathings text that closely matches the Joseph Smith version (and there are precious few of them) is the so-called Kerasher Book of Breathings. It too has a frontispiece, only in this case it is the same as our Facsimile No. 3, showing that it too is closely associated with our text.

Q: Where does Facsimile No. 2 come in?

A: It is a "hypocephalus," placed under the head of a mummy to preserve the heat of life in it. Books of Breathing were designed for the very same purpose.

Q: In the Book of Breathings do the pictures actually illustrate the text?

A: They may, but usually don't. The Egyptians did not seem to expect it.

Q: But according to Joseph Smith, the facsimiles do illustrate episodes from the life of Abraham.

A: Two of the facsimiles, Nos. 1 and 3, are episodic; No. 2, as the Prophet explains, was drawn to teach Abraham's non-Egyptian associates some Egyptian ideas about astronomy. It is 1 and 3, therefore, that concern us as history.

Q: Are they history?

A: Facsimile 1, we are told, represents Abraham's rescue from the sacrificial altar by an angel in response to his prayer . . .

Q: May I interrupt here? Some important elements of the picture in our modern book of Abraham are missing from the original. Where did they come from?

A: I have treated that matter elsewhere but let me just make two points: (1) The papyri were in public display for years, during which time R. Hedlock's printed engraving was also diligently circulated. Those who viewed the Egyptian artifacts were often hostile; but as nobody ever pointed out discrepancies between the engraving and the original, we need more proof to show there were any. (2) Quite enough of the original remains to allow for meaningful study. The critics who worked hard to prove what the missing parts should be were wasting their time, because they were determined to identify Facsimile No. 1 with an embalming scene. It can't be done.

Q: Why not?

A: Because there are literally hundreds of "lion-couch" scenes that more or less resemble this one, and yet they are not all the same scene. No two Egyptian tombs, temples, or texts are exactly alike. Even in ritual compositions the artist was free to emphasize or minimize any aspect of a stereotyped scene. Since slavish copying is far easier than even limited originality, the differences are certainly intentional.

Q: Wouldn't that be terribly confusing?

A: Not to people grounded in the fundamentals. The Egyptian, wrote H. Frankfort, "considered it a particular nicety that symbols should possess multiple significance—that one single interpretation should not be the only possible one." (*Cenotaph of Seti I*, 1:29.) Hence one cannot say dogmatically that a certain Egyptian drawing depicts such-and-such an event, and nothing else. A lion-couch represents a standard Egyptian embalming table, but at the same time it is a standard domestic bed and a standard altar of sacrifice. And why not? One is put to sleep on all of them, and with the same intent—that of rising again. Of all the scenes resembling our Facsimile 1, the most striking are those found in the temple of Opet and

the tomb of Seti I. The king lies dead on the lion-couch in both cases, having been overcome by the powers of death, but also in both cases he is shown just on the point of stirring to life again. A historical event? Yes, indeed.

Q: How, historical?

A: It took place as a dramatic presentation, a ritual—not once but countless times. Whatever Pharaoh does, from washing his mouth in the morning to leading an army into Asia, follows prescribed ritual forms and is recorded as an organic part of the history of the universe.

Q: And what has this got to do with Abraham?

A: Surprisingly, everything. Here the coincidences begin to pile up in a spectacular manner. Important early Jewish, Christian, and Moslem texts tell of the attempted sacrifices of Abraham and Sarah, heretofore unknown, but precisely the main concern of Joseph Smith's Abraham. At the same time comparative studies have brought to the fore certain dominant ritual and mythological patterns that pervade all of the ancient Near East, foremost among them the sacrificial death and miraculous revival of the king.

Q: And where is Abraham?

A: Just two steps away. First, the king at the end of a certain period had to undergo sacrificial death; being ritually resurrected in the person of his son. That was not pleasant, but there was a way out: a substitute on the altar of sacrifice. This was done often and regularly, at the completion of a set cycle. And now we come to Abraham.

The oldest Abraham legend describes a great king who aspires to rule the world. Abraham insists that it is God who really rules the universe; for this irreverence to authority the hero is made to serve as a sacrificial victim. But on the altar Abraham prays and God sends an angel to deliver him; the altar is overthrown (by an earthquake in some versions) and the officiating priest perishes. The king is now convinced and reverences the patriarch. Which takes us to Facsimile 3.

Q: How?

A: Countless studies of the substitute king have noted that the business of the substitute was to sit on the king's throne while the real king was being held by Death and the Underworld. During that dark interval the false king, representing the adversary, ruled the world, only to be put to death at the end of the appointed time. Well, Abraham is

Facsimile No. 1



the substitute king.

Q: Specifically Abraham?

A: The substitute was not just anybody but the most exalted adversary that could be found. He had to be an outsider, a prince, and have red or brown hair. According to the legends, Abraham was all of these.

Q: Hold on! You said the substitute sits on the throne *before* being dispatched. Abraham sits on the throne *afterwards*.

A: Which is exactly as it should be; the *false* king first claims the throne, then suffers; the *real* king is first humiliated, then glorified. Abraham represents *true* divinity and kingship, while the tyrant is only a pretender. This is the lesson of the facsimiles also.

Q: Abraham on the throne?

A: Yes, in the rabbinical version the king is so overwhelmed by Abraham's miraculous delivery



Facsimile No. 3

that he orders a special throne erected for Abraham, and commands all his courtiers to bring their children to be instructed in astronomy by the man on the throne. This is the same queer situation we find in Facsimile 3, with "Abraham sitting upon Pharaoh's throne, by the politeness of the king," even while "Abraham is reasoning upon the principles of astronomy, in the king's court."

Q: Does it make sense to have Pharaoh allow someone else to sit on this throne?

A: To *us* it doesn't, but when we look a bit further, we discover that the Pharaohs actually *did* let other people sit on the throne.

Q: How come?

A: According to an important study on the subject by Wolfgang Helck (*Orientalia* 19:416-34), when the king in the Old Kingdom needed someone to represent him in an important assignment he was unable to officiate in personally, he would endow his chosen agent with his own kingly power and authority by allowing him to function as "Rep'at on the Throne of Geb." At first only the king's son and heir, the true Rep'at, was entrusted with such awesome dignity; but soon, with growing administrative pressures, some of the great lords were allowed the privilege.

Q: I can see the need for such authority, but

what was the rationale?

A: The principle of substitution, of course. The Rep'at figured as the substitute for the king after his "ritual murder" in the Sed-festival. (Helck, p. 432.) In theory the throne must always pass from father to son, and so the Rep'at who sat on it bore the royal insignia and held a written document bestowing on him plenary power to rule the world. But since the regent had to be a legitimate Rep'at, and since the regent was often a queen-mother, many, if not most, of the Rep'ats were women!

Q: Does that explain those two ladies, labeled "Pharaoh" and "Prince of Pharaoh"?

A: Yes. I have asked very young children to point out the ladies in the picture, and they have never failed. So you may well ask, couldn't Joseph Smith recognize a female when he saw one? Have you ever wondered why the Egyptologists who were so eager to get rid of Joseph Smith never pointed to this egregious indiscretion? I strongly suspect that it was because they sensed that he was very much on the right track. The "Prince of Pharaoh" here is the lady Maat, who can represent *anyone* while acting as "lieutenant" for Pharaoh and is the very embodiment of legitimate rule and succession. The woman designated as "Pharaoh" is the lady Hathor-Isis, mother, sister, and bride of the Pharaoh, and the ultimate source of his authority. These two ladies must be present in any coronation scene, when there is a transmission of royal power. To show Pharaoh and the prince in their own persons would actually confuse the issue. All very interesting, but you had best wait for a book.

Q: To appear maybe in 1990? Where would you say we stand at present?

A: Today Abraham is being hailed by scholars of all denominations as the key figure, next to Christ, in the story of God's dealings with men. The facsimiles confirm the book of Abraham and place before our eyes a present and tangible tie with the patriarch himself. It is not farfetched. Joseph Smith's presentation is now receiving powerful confirmation from four directions: (1) the newly published Abraham documents and legends, (2) the classical sources which, now read in a new light, back them up, (3) the Egyptian ritual sources disclosing heretofore unsuspected riches, and (4) the vast spread of studies in comparative religion and literature, showing that the events set forth in the text and facsimiles of the book of Abraham actually belong to well-established routines found all over the ancient world.

Q: What would you say is the significance of the whole thing?

A: Without such documents as the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price, as Eduard Meyer observed, the Mormons would be just another church. The purpose of such books is not to "prove" Mormonism to the world, but to proclaim and elucidate the universal vastness and scope of its teachings. □