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## **Pressing Forward with the Book of Abraham**

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## PRESSING FORWARD WITH THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

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Stephen O. Smoot

*Abstract: The Book of Abraham continues to attract scholarly attention. New findings in the fields of Egyptology, Near Eastern archaeology, and Mormon history have highlighted the complexity surrounding the origins of the Book of Abraham and its relationship to the Egyptian papyri that came into the possession of Joseph Smith in 1835. A new introductory volume on the Book of Abraham by John Gee, An Introduction to the Book of Abraham, is an excellent resource that may help laypersons and scholars alike navigate this rapidly developing area of study.*

Review of John Gee. *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*. Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book. 2017. 184 pp. + index. \$19.99 (print) and \$11.99 (e-book).

Hugh Nibley once quipped that the controversy surrounding the Book of Abraham was “a great fuss . . . being made about a scrap of papyrus.”<sup>1</sup> Were it not for the fact that it is tied up in religious polemics involving Joseph Smith, founder and first prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, outside of a handful of Egyptologists who specialize in Greco-Roman funerary texts, there would probably be little concern for the text identified among the surviving Joseph Smith Papyri as the Book of Breathing — what the ancient Egyptians called the *š’t n snsn ỉr.n ʿIst n snỉ.s Wsỉr*, or the “document of breathing

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1. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed., The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 16 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005), xxv.

made by Isis for her brother Osiris.”<sup>2</sup> But because the text is tied to a book of scripture purporting to be “a translation of ... the writings of Abraham, while he was in Egypt,”<sup>3</sup> there has been an unusual amount of interest (to say nothing of a boisterous fracas) among laypersons for this unassuming “scrap of papyrus.”

Anyone — layperson and scholar alike — wishing to better understand the Book of Abraham and the associated Joseph Smith Papyri faces a daunting problem. As Nibley astutely observed:

Consider for a moment the scope and complexity of the materials with which the student must cope if he would undertake a serious study of the Book of Abraham’s authenticity. At the very least he must be thoroughly familiar with (1) the texts of the “Joseph Smith Papyri” identified as belonging to the Book of the Dead, (2) the content and nature of mysterious “Sen-sen” fragment, (3) the so-called “Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar” attributed to Joseph Smith, (4) statements by and about Joseph Smith concerning the nature of the Book of Abraham and its origin, (5) the original document of Facsimile 1 with its accompanying hieroglyphic inscriptions, (6) the text of the Book of Abraham itself in its various editions, (7) the three facsimiles as reproduced in various editions of the Pearl of Great Price, (8) Joseph Smith’s explanation of the facsimiles, (9) the large and growing literature of ancient traditions and legends about Abraham in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Greek, Slavonic, etc., and (10) the

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2. Or possibly the “letter of fellowship made by Isis for her brother Osiris.” See the discussion in John Gee, “A New Look at the ‘*nh p3* by Formula,” in *Actes du IXe congrès international des études démotiques, Paris, 31 août–3 septembre 2005*, ed. Ghislaine Widmer and Didier Devauchelle (Paris: Institut Français D’Archéologie Orientale, 2009), 136–38; Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 95–130; François-René Herbin, *Catalogue of the Books of the Dead and Other Religious Texts in the British Museum, Volume IV: Books of Breathing and Related Texts* (London: British Museum Press, 2008), 1–3; Foy David Scalf III, “Passports to Eternity: Formulaic Demotic Funerary Texts and the Final Phase of Egyptian Funerary Literature in Roman Egypt,” (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 2014), 12–28.

3. “Book of Abraham,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1841): 704, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-abraham-and-facsimiles-1-march-16-may-1842/1>.

studies and opinions of modern scholars on all aspects of the Book of Abraham.<sup>4</sup>

Spending the effort and time needed to get a handle on each of these complex, interlocking issues may very reasonably seem like a bridge too far. Thankfully, Latter-day Saints can benefit from dedicated scholars like John Gee, an Egyptologist who has studied the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri extensively, leaving voluminous writings on the subject in his academic wake.<sup>5</sup> Gee's latest offering, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, is the culmination of decades of previous scholarship.<sup>6</sup> It is a book that fills a gaping void, as there have heretofore been no introductory works on the Book of Abraham that are accessible to a general audience while still grounded in rigorous scholarship.

"The goal with the *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*," Gee explains, "is to make reliable information about the Book of Abraham accessible to the general reader" (ix). The book accomplishes this goal. This is something to celebrate, since many past treatments on the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri are often too technical (and thus riddled with academic jargon only comprehensible to scholars), too general or amateurish (and thus riddled with inaccuracies), too hyper-focused on a single aspect or issue of the controversy, or too scattered across various publications, some more accessible (and

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4. Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed., The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 14 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2000), 154–55.

5. Most of Gee's Book of Abraham research can be accessed on the Neal A. Maxwell Institute's website at <https://publications.mi.byu.edu/people/john-gee/>. See also 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; John Gee, "Joseph Smith and Ancient Egypt," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2015), 427–48; "Shulem, One of the King's Principal Waiters," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 383–95; "Book of Abraham, facsimiles of," in *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 54–60; "Book of Abraham, selected non-English words in," in *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, 63; "Book of Breathings," in *Pearl of Great Price Reference Companion*, 69–70.

6. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and the Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2017).

affordable) to a popular audience than others. *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* largely remedies this problem. Gee upholds his scholarship but does not drown his prose in academese and focuses on the important issues without becoming pedantic. This is complemented by the book's affordability and accompanying charts, images, and sidebars that helpfully enhance readability.

The organization of *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* flows logically and keeps the reader's attention. Gee begins with an overview of the background of the Joseph Smith Papyri (1–12), their acquisition by Joseph Smith and their chain of custody from his death to their return to the Church in 1967 (13–42), the content of the Abrahamic narrative Joseph translated (43–48), the relationship between the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri (83–86), and evidence for the historicity of the text (87–142). Gee provides overviews of what we know about the ancient owners of the papyri (57–72) and the contents therein (73–82). He additionally discusses the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham (143–156) and the role of the Book of Abraham as scripture in the Church today (163–74). The book concludes with an FAQ that summarizes the main points and findings of his research (175–184). I do not think it's an exaggeration to say that John Gee is perhaps one of the few people alive who could do all of this basically by himself. That he can cover each of the issues identified by Nibley as necessary to know to discuss the Book of Abraham intelligently is a monument to his scholarly acumen.

Some aspects of Gee's work on the Book of Abraham may appear iconoclastic from a conservative Latter-day Saint perspective. For instance, Gee argues that "the Book of Abraham ... presents a geocentric astronomy, like almost all ancient astronomies, including ancient Egyptian astronomy," as opposed to a modern scientific cosmology (116). If we follow Gee's proposition that the Book of Abraham reflects a cosmology that would have been comprehensible to the ancient Egyptians (cf. Abraham 3:15), then we should not concern ourselves with proving that the Book of Abraham is reconcilable with modern science, since such attempts miss the point of the text.<sup>7</sup> This may seem jarring at first for Latter-day Saints who have inherited fundamentalist assumptions about scriptural concordism — belief that Scripture, when

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7. See for instance Michael D. Rhodes and J. Ward Moody, "Astronomy and the Creation in the Book of Abraham," in *Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant*, ed. John Gee and Brian M. Hauglid (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 17–36.

properly interpreted, will always agree or concord with modern science<sup>8</sup> — but when properly understood, Gee’s argument actually strengthens belief that the Book of Abraham is ancient.<sup>9</sup> After all, if the Book of Abraham was written sometime during the second millennium BC, would it not make more sense for it to reflect a pre-scientific worldview and understanding of the cosmos?<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, some of Gee’s arguments are sure to rankle those who want to read the Book of Abraham as pseudepigrapha. Besides arguing for the Book of Abraham’s historicity (87–105), Gee challenges recent attempts by source critics to reduce the book down to a mere pastiche of Joseph Smith’s imaginative speculations and reworking of the Genesis creation account (136–138).<sup>11</sup> Gee does not dispute that the author of Genesis “had some access to written or oral sources,” but he rather questions “whether or not source criticism can correctly identify those sources” (137). He insists that “[i]f one accepts the historicity of the Book of Abraham, then one cannot accept the validity of source criticism. Likewise, if one accepts the validity of source criticism, then one cannot accept the historicity of the Book of Abraham. The two are incompatible” (138). While I am personally not sure the two are entirely incompatible (I am open to various theories for a possible transmission or redaction of the Book of Abraham that may allow for an intertextual relationship with Genesis), Gee’s bigger point is one worth considering:

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8. In fact, Gee even questions the foundational premise of concordism. “Should our understanding of scripture necessarily match our understanding of science? Whether our understanding of the stories of God’s dealings with men, which are designed to help us come to an understanding of things that God thinks we ought to know and act on, should necessarily match human theories that for the moment have not yet been proven false is a matter that is at least open to debate. It is not obvious that the two things should have to match on any given point at any given juncture in time. When they do, that is something to be grateful for” (139–140).

9. It likewise defuses anti-Mormon arguments that because the Book of Abraham’s cosmology is not (seemingly) reconcilable with modern science, it is therefore fraudulent.

10. I have made a similar point in Stephen O. Smoot, “Council, Chaos, and Creation in the Book of Abraham,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 28–39.

11. Source criticism is the effort to identify and reconstruct hypothetical sources underlying the books of the Bible, including the first five books of Moses. Some have applied source critical tools to the Book of Abraham and have argued for results that complicate traditional beliefs about the text’s authorship. See David Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 191–214.

when it comes to the Book of Abraham, do we grant the text any evidentiary precedence against other theories? And if so, how much?

While much of what Gee offers might not be especially new or ground-breaking for most who have followed the discussion and scholarship on the Book of Abraham, he nevertheless brings fresh insights to the text that will be appreciated by both seasoned and novice readers. He identifies, for example, the presence of an Egyptian pun at Abraham 3:17–18 that nicely develops the Lord’s revelation to Abraham (117).<sup>12</sup> Concerning the Abrahamic covenant in Abraham 2:6–11, Gee points out that the form of the covenant “has several features that appear in other covenants and treaties of the ancient world” (108). Accordingly, “the covenant in the Book of Abraham follows the pattern of treaties and covenants in his day and not the pattern of later times. The covenant pattern is thus an indication that the text dates to Abraham’s day” (111).<sup>13</sup>

Gee also explores how Abraham calling Sarah his “sister” rather than his “wife” (Abraham 2:22–25; cf. Genesis 12:10–13) would have been ambiguous to the ancient Egyptians rather than intrinsically dishonest (102).<sup>14</sup> On the contested issue of Abraham’s homeland, Gee mentions

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12. Paronomasia, of course, is characteristic of both Hebrew and Egyptian literature. For their part the Egyptians were “very fond of puns,” as evidenced, for instance, by Spell 85 from the Book of Dead: “I came into being ... in this my name of Khepri” (*ḥpr.n.ī ... m rn.ī pwy n Ḥpri*). Thomas George Allen, trans., *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth By Day*, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 37 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1974), 4. Paronomasia, however, was not restricted to religious texts. Egyptian narratives abound with puns and wordplay. One thinks immediately of Sinuhe (*s3 nḥt*, “son of the sycamore”) being greeted as *s3 mḥyt* (“son of the north wind”) upon returning from his escapades in Syria or of the shipwrecked sailor extolling his companions for their ability to see (*m33*) like lions (*m3w*). James P. Allen, *Middle Egyptian Literature: Eight Literary Works of the Middle Kingdom* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 16, 145. See further Antonio Loprieno, “Pun and Word Play in Ancient Egyptian,” in *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, ed. Scott B. Noegel (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2000), 3–20.

13. Here Gee is drawing from the seminal work on ancient Near Eastern treaties and covenants undertaken by Kenneth A. Kitchen and Paul J. N. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012).

14. By the Eighteenth Dynasty the word for “sister” (*snt*) is attested along with the conventional *ḥmt* and *ḥbswt* as a word for “wife.” Terry G. Wilfong, “Marriage and Divorce,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald B. Redford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:342; cf. Jaroslav Černý, “Consanguineous Marriages in Pharaonic Egypt,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 40 (1954): 23–29. This should come as no surprise, as “brother-sister



an article published by a non-Mormon Turkish archaeologist excavating Oylum Höyük, which posits a possible connection between the site and the Book of Abraham (104).<sup>15</sup> Finally, Gee’s mainstream Egyptological work on the family history and occupation of Hor — the ancient owner of the Book of Breathings recovered in the Joseph Smith Papyri — is summarized in the book and is sure to raise laypersons’ appreciation for how the Book of Abraham could plausibly fit an Egyptian *Sitz im Leben* in Ptolemaic Thebes (57–72).<sup>16</sup>

While most of Gee’s arguments are persuasive, some of his positions appear debatable. His discussion of the timeline of the translation of the Book of Abraham is one such debatable point. Gee believes the extant text of the Book of Abraham was translated by the end of 1835. “Joseph revised the translation preparatory to its publication in 1842, but other than that, no evidence has survived that he worked on the translation of the existing Book of Abraham after 1835” (15). In this Gee appears to be following a translation timeline for the Book of Abraham laid out

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marriage had extensive mythological precedent for the Egyptians” in the forms of the divine sibling-spouse pairs Shu/Tefnut and Osiris/Isis/Nephthys. Wilfong, “Marriage and Divorce,” 2:343. And besides all of this, Genesis 20:12 identifies Abraham and Sarah as half-siblings. See the commentary offered by Yael Shemesh, “Lies by Prophets and Other Lies in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Society* 29 (2002): 88–89. It is also interesting to note that the so-called Genesis Apocryphon (cols. XIX–XX) features Abraham being told in a dream to instigate the deception. For a translation see Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader: Volume 1*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 533–36.

15. See further Stephen O. Smoot “‘In the Land of the Chaldeans’: The Search for Abraham’s Homeland Revisited,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017): 7–37.

16. John Gee, “History of a Theban Priesthood,” in «*Et maintenant ce ne sont plus que des villages ...* » *Thèbes et sa région aux époques hellénistique, romaine et byzantine*, ed. Alain Delattre and Paul Heilporn (Bruxelles: Associations Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 2008), 59–71; “Execration Rituals in Various Temples,” in *8. Ägyptologische Tempeltagung: Interconnections between Temples*, ed. Monika Dolińska and Horst Beinlich (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 67–80; “The Cult of Chespsichis,” in *Egypt in Transition: Social and Religious Development of Egypt in the First Millennium BCE*, ed. Ladislav Bareš, Filip Coppens, and Květa Smolárisková (Prague: Czech Institute of Egyptology, 2010), 129–145. See also Stephen O. Smoot and Quinten Barney, “The Book of the Dead as a Temple Text and the Implications for the Book of Abraham,” in *The Temple: Ancient and Restored*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry, The Temple on Mount Zion 3 (Salt Lake City and Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2016), 183–209.

by Kerry Muhlestein and Megan Hansen.<sup>17</sup> I am not confident that this timeline for the translation of the Book of Abraham is as certain as these authors, including Gee, would have us suppose. The key piece of evidence that contradicts this timeline is the appearance of transliterated Hebrew words in Abraham 3 that are clearly drawn from Joshua Seixas' Hebrew classes offered in Kirtland, Ohio, beginning in 1836.<sup>18</sup> Their appearance in the Book of Abraham as well as the text's recognition that *'elōhīm* (God) is technically a plural noun in Hebrew (cf. Abraham 4:1–12, 14, 16–18, 20–22, 24–29, 31; 5:2–5, 7–9, 11–16, 20), it could be argued, would seem to indicate that Abraham 3 onward was translated after Joseph Smith studied Hebrew in 1836.

Muhlestein and Hansen believe this can be reconciled by understanding the transliterated Hebrew words in Abraham 3 as interpretative glosses added by Joseph Smith in his preparations for the publication of the Book of Abraham in 1842 after he initially translated the text in 1835.<sup>19</sup> While this is possible, it remains speculative. It seems we simply do not know enough at the moment to stake out any definitive answers. Further work, such as that being undertaken by Brian Hauglid and Robin Jensen with the Joseph Smith Papers Project may bring additional light to this issue down the road.<sup>20</sup> While Gee's position is arguable, I believe readers should at least be aware that this remains a contested point.

Whatever I found questionable in *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, however, did not dramatically detract from the overall quality of the book. With something as perplexing and often vexatious as the Book of Abraham, there is inevitably going to be disagreement on many points. But whether you agree or disagree with all his conclusions, there is no denying that Gee possesses a qualified scholarly voice in this discussion that is worth listening to. *An Introduction to the Book*

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17. Kerry Muhlestein and Megan Hansen, "'The Work of Translating': The Book of Abraham's Translation Chronology," in *Let Us Reason Together: Essays in Honor of the Life's Work of Robert L. Millet*, ed. J. Spencer Fluhman and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, and Deseret Book, 2016), 139–62.

18. Matthew J. Grey, "'The Word of the Lord in the Original': Joseph Smith's Study of Hebrew in Kirtland," in *Approaching Antiquity*, 249–302.

19. Muhlestein and Hansen, "'The Work of Translating,'" 149–153.

20. Brian M. Hauglid, "The Book of Abraham and Translating the Sacred," *BYU Religious Education Review*, Winter 2017, 12–15; Robin Scott Jensen, "The Joseph Smith Papers and the Book of Abraham," *BYU Religious Education Review*, Winter 2017, 16–17. Note especially the translation timeline laid out by Hauglid, "The Book of Abraham and Translating the Sacred," 13.

of *Abraham*, alongside the Church's Gospel Topics essay,<sup>21</sup> is therefore my new default recommendation as an excellent primer resource on the Book of Abraham.

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21. See "Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/topics/translation-and-historicity-of-the-book-of-abraham?lang=eng>.

