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"And I Saw the Stars": The Book of Abraham and Ancient Geocentric Astronomy

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“AND I SAW THE STARS”

THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM AND ANCIENT GEOCENTRIC ASTRONOMY

John Gee, William J. Hamblin, and Daniel C. Peterson

“The stars are described in a passage which will fatigue most modern readers, though it might fatigue us less if our education had not left us so ignorant of astronomy.”

—C. S. Lewis¹

Traditionally there have been three major interpretations of the astronomical material found in the Book of Abraham.² First, many Latter-day Saints believe that the Book of Abraham contains an accurate portrayal of the universe that can be reconciled with modern relativistic astrophysics and astronomy. In other words, the Book of Abraham describes Einsteinian, or perhaps even post-Einsteinian, astronomy, where no particular object is seen as the center of the universe but any particular object can be viewed as the center for local reference purposes.³ Second, most non-Mormons who have concerned themselves with the question, viewing the Book of Abraham as purely a nineteenth-century document, have attempted to associate the astronomy of the Book of Abraham with early nineteenth-century astronomical speculations. The Book of Abraham would thus represent Copernican and Newtonian astronomy, which was heliocentric, or centered on the

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1. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 91–92.
 2. All unattributed parenthetical references are to the Book of Abraham. If no chapter reference is given, the verses refer to chapter three. We would like to thank Janet Carpenter for her research assistance. Helpful comments on an earlier draft were made by F. Kent Nielsen and Stephen D. Ricks.
 3. R. Grant Athay, “Worlds without Number: The Astronomy of Enoch, Abraham, and Moses,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 8/3 (1968): 255–69; R. Grant Athay, “Astrophysics and Mormonism” (Provo, Utah: BYU 1972), 14–19, lecture given September 1972; H. Kimball Hansen, “Astronomy and the Scriptures,” in Wilford M. Hess and Raymond T. Matheny, eds., *Science and Religion: Toward a More Useful Dialogue* (Geneva, Ill.: Paladin House Publishers, 1979), 1:181–96; Michael D. Rhodes and J. Ward Moody, “Astronomy and the Creation in the Book of Abraham,” in this volume.

sun.⁴ Finally, it is possible to view Abrahamic astronomy as reflecting a geocentric conception of the universe—that is, one centered on the earth. This is the position we will defend in this paper.

We wish to advance two propositions about the text: (1) The text of Abraham 3:1–11 can best be understood as a discussion of the visible heavens rather than as a grand supernatural vision of the entire universe. (2) The text of these same verses makes most sense when read as referring to ancient geocentric astronomy. (Please see Appendix A for a discussion of our methodological considerations.)

Abraham and Ancient Egyptian Astronomy

However one wants to interpret the question of the origin of the text—whether Joseph Smith invented the document, translated an ancient text, or received a revelation independent of any ancient text—Joseph Smith’s opinion of the astronomy of the Book of Abraham is worth noting. According to the *History of the Church*, Joseph stated that the Abraham papyri included a discussion of “the principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients.”⁵ Joseph here is not represented as saying that the Book of Abraham contains an accurate explanation of the principles of astronomy but rather of those principles “as understood by the ancients.” In other words, according to a nineteenth-century view attributed by those who knew him and his thinking, to Joseph Smith, the Book of Abraham presents ancient cosmology, not modern or nineteenth-century astronomy. Thus, efforts by LDS astronomers to reconcile Abrahamic astronomy with modern astronomy are largely irrelevant—as is their inability to do so.⁶

Abraham’s traditional reputation as an ancient astronomer has been previously analyzed.⁷ One of the most interesting texts in this regard is by Pseudo-Eupolemus, as quoted by Eusebius in the fourth century A.D., which states that “While living with the Egyptian priests in Heliopolis, Abraham taught them many things, including astronomy, and other related things. . . . Abraham, having been trained in the science of astronomy, first went to Phoenicia, to teach the Phoenicians astronomy, then went into Egypt.”⁸ Later Islamic traditions about Abraham continue his identification as an astronomer. The brilliant tenth-century Arab historian al-Ṭabarī passes on reports that

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4. For the most recent attempt, see Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” in *The Word of God*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 187–219.
 5. *History of the Church*, 2:286, emphasis added. In *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 60 (1 Oct. 1835) (cf. Dean C. Jessee, ed. *The Papers of Joseph Smith*. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989], 1:102) the phrase “as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients” does not occur. However, its inclusion in the later formal edition would seem to indicate what Joseph’s final understanding of the texts was.
 6. Vogel and Metcalf use the “Mormon astronomers’ inability to harmonize Abrahamic cosmology with modern understanding” (“Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” 218 n. 78) as an indication that the book should be seen as a product of the nineteenth century. In fact, as we hope to show, it is equally difficult to “harmonize Abrahamic cosmology with [nineteenth-century] understanding.”
 7. Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 106–15, discusses much of the material.
 8. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, 9.17.3–18.2 (PG 21:708–9). See also John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 8, hereafter referred to as *Traditions*. See also Jared W. Ludlow, “Abraham’s Visions of the Heavens,” in this volume.

Abraham was given a vision of the creation, in which, among other things, “the seven heavens were opened to Abraham up to and including the throne [*al-‘arsh*] [of God].”⁹

For our paper it is important to note that the purpose of God’s revelation of astronomy to Abraham was to provide him with an introduction to the court of Pharaoh. “I [God] show these things unto thee [Abraham] before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words” (Abraham 3:15).¹⁰ Thus, the purpose of the revelation of astronomical ideas is not necessarily to give Abraham an accurate view of the universe but to provide him a mechanism to attract the attention of Pharaoh. In such circumstances it would make sense for Abraham to be given a geocentric astronomy that would have been intelligible to people of his day.

One other point needs to be made here. Some will wonder why the Lord, instead of revealing to Abraham the “true” nature of the cosmos, would teach him the “false” system of geocentric astronomy found in the Book of Abraham. Two principles may help to explain this. First, the Lord tends to speak to humans within the limits of their understanding. “These commandments are of me,” he says in Doctrine and Covenants 1:24, “and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding.” Secondly, the geocentric view of the cosmos is not, strictly speaking, false. If modern relativistic physics has taught us anything, it is that there is no absolute space, and thus no privileged point for observation of the cosmos except as has been established by convention. The geocentric system was abandoned, in the last analysis, not because it was incorrect but because, as it had developed with its cycles and epicycles, it was too complex and cumbersome. And even then, scientists were able to abandon it only because a new and less cumbersome and more accurate alternative—essentially the Keplerian and Copernican theory—was available to replace it. But it would still be possible today, in light of modern relativistic physics—and if we were willing to subject ourselves to the difficulty of doing so—to construct a description of the universe that assumes the earth to be at the center. Indeed astronomical observations are of necessity made from a geocentric point of view and converted into a nongeocentric point of view.

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9. Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār Ma‘rifa li al-Ṭibā‘a wa al-Nashr, 1978), 7:160. Later Muslim mystics also saw the Throne of God as being associated with the furthestmost heaven. See James Winston Morris, *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 61–62, who speaks of “the two intimately connected meanings that the original Arabic expression (*al-‘arsh*) conveyed to Sadra’s readers. The ‘Throne’ was at once the empyrean, the incorporeal dimension of reality lying ‘beyond’ (that is, in no place) and encompassing the material cosmos, and at the same time the noetic ‘heart’ (*qalb*) or innermost reality of man. In the language of the philosophers, both meanings referred to aspects of the divine Intelligence or Nous (*‘aql*).” At *ibid.*, 61 n. 67, Morris refers to “famous Prophetic sayings to the effect that God’s Throne or ‘House’ was ‘the heart of the man of true faith’ (*qalb al-mu‘min*).” *Throne* in Sadra is both *qalb* and empyrean, enclosing the “Pedestal”—or “Footstool”—which is the sphere of the fixed stars; *ibid.*, 224 nn. 259, 262.
10. Cf. Facsimile 3, which shows, “Abraham . . . reasoning upon the principles of Astronomy, in the king’s court.” That astronomy was a “royal art” that particularly concerned kings is explained by A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 224–25. On the spread of “royal astronomy” through the ancient world, see Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 73, 206–7.

Visible Cosmos or Cosmic Vision?

Let us turn first to proposition 1, that *the text of Abraham 3:1–11 can best be understood as a discussion of the visible heavens rather than as a grand supernatural vision of the universe*. A careful reading of these verses reveals numerous phrases that support the assumption that Abraham is describing the heavens as visible from the earth.

First and most important is the fact that nowhere in verses 1 through 11 is there any mention of a supernatural vision. On the other hand, there are many statements that imply an ordinary view of the sky from earth. Although Abraham used a Urim and Thummim, it is not described as a visionary instrument but rather as an instrument by which God *talked* to Abraham (“the Lord said unto me, by the Urim and Thummim” [Abraham 3:4]). No *vision* through the Urim and Thummim is mentioned. Likewise, in verses 3, 5, and 6 the Lord is talking to Abraham. Again, no supernatural vision is implied. Verse 11 confirms this interpretation, where Abraham summarizes his experience up to that point, “Thus I, Abraham, talked with the Lord, face to face, as one man talketh with another; and he *told* me of [his] works” (emphasis added).

Numerous references are also made to the fact that Abraham is *standing* on the earth (Abraham 3:3, 4, 6, 7, 9), and that God and Abraham are discussing things that Abraham can see with his own eyes (“behold thine eyes see it” [Abraham 3:6] and “I saw the stars” [Abraham 3:2, cf. v. 16]). Furthermore, Abraham is talking with the Lord at night, when the stars would be visible: “And it was in the night time when the Lord spake these words unto me” (Abraham 3:14).

In his discussion of the heavens, Abraham also consistently describes the function of the sun, moon, and stars as ruling and giving light to the earth (“the greater light which is set to rule the day, and the . . . lesser light which is set to rule the night” [Abraham 3:6] and “all the stars that are set to give light” [Abraham 3:10; cf. v. 5]). Abraham’s discussion of these heavenly bodies is thus again from the perspective of someone viewing the visible night sky from the earth.

The assumption that verses 1 through 11 refer to the visible heavens as seen from the earth is all the more striking when compared to the supernatural vision described as beginning in verse 12. “And he [the Lord] said unto me: My son, my son (and his hand was stretched out), behold I will show you all these. And he put his hand upon mine eyes, and I saw those things which his hands had made, which were many; and they [the astronomical bodies] multiplied before mine eyes, and I could not see the end thereof” (Abraham 3:12). Our understanding of this passage is that only at this point does a supernatural vision of the universe begin. At first Abraham “saw those things which his [the Lord’s] hands had made, which were many,” which we interpret as referring to the visible heavens described in verses 1–11. Then, “they [the things the Lord had made, i.e., stars] multiplied before mine eyes.” Here Abraham sees the stars visible from the earth increase in number, until he “could not see the end thereof.” The implication from this final phrase is that up to this point Abraham could indeed “see the end thereof,” which again implies an examination of the visible heavens from the earth.

In summary, the language of verses 1 through 11 consistently implies that what Abraham is seeing is the heavens visible from the earth at night. No supernatural vision is implied until the Lord touches the eyes of Abraham in verse 12. Given the lack of explicit reference to a supernatural vision up to verse 12, the burden of proof would seem to rest largely on those who maintain

that verses 1 through 11 are a supernatural vision. The further implication of this is that Kolob, mentioned in verses 3, 4, and 9, is a star visible from the earth.

The Geocentric Worldview

“Had I been present at the Creation, I would have given some useful hints for the better ordering of the universe.”

—Alfonso the Wise, King of Castile, A.D. 1221–84,
after studying Ptolemaic astronomy

Our second proposition is that *the text of verses 1–11 can best be understood as referring to geocentric astronomy.*

Before we examine the passages from the Book of Abraham on this topic, it is important to present a brief discussion of the nature of archaic views of the geocentric cosmos. In antiquity there were four versions of the geocentric worldview. The first was the view that the earth was the center of the universe and that celestial phenomena—sun, moon, stars, planets, etc.—surrounded and encompassed the earth in a single undifferentiated heaven.¹¹ The second variation included a celestial hierarchy where there was a single expanse of heaven, but within that expanse there was an ordering of celestial phenomena, one planet or star above the other. Thus, the sun was thought to be higher above the earth than the moon, many planets were above the moon, and the stars were usually seen as the highest of all. Nonetheless, in this system all cosmic bodies were thought to have been contained in a single, undifferentiated heaven. The third version of geocentric cosmology was the transfer of this celestial hierarchy to a series of multiple differentiated heavens. The mention of multiple heavens in the Old and New Testaments is a good indication that those peoples conceived of such a universe.¹² In the final version, these multiple heavens were structured into a series of concentric spheres, varying in number depending on the specific version of astronomy.

Throughout this paper, when we refer to ancient geocentric cosmology or astronomy, we will be referring to the broad geocentric idea. Since our purpose in this paper is only to show that the Book of Abraham describes a geocentric universe, it is not necessary at this point to make technical distinctions between the four versions. However, we feel the Book of Abraham presents a clear indication of a geocentric cosmology with a celestial hierarchy, and probably differentiated heavens, but has no clear discussion of the later formalization of this cosmology into a system of celestial spheres and thus probably best matches the third geocentric system. Further study should

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11. See, for example, the view of the heavens from the tomb of Seti I reconstructed in James P. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (New Haven: Yale Egyptological Seminar, 1988), 1–7. Similar views can be seen in Pyramid Text 215 §149, in Kurt Sethe, *Die altaegyptischen Pyramidentexte* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1908), 1:85.
 12. There are numerous examples, including Deuteronomy 10:14; 1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 11:4; Isaiah 14:13–14; 2 Corinthians 12:2, to name only a few. Unfortunately, the singular/plural distinction for the words for heaven is often ignored in English translations of the Bible. It is also worth noting that the Septuagint, New Testament, and Christian authors were unique in classical Greek in their use of the plural *ouranoi* “heavens”; Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1273; Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 593–95.

help determine exactly which form of geocentrism best matches the Book of Abraham. Although there were many variations in detail, all ancient geocentric cosmologies conceived of the earth as the center of the universe. (That is, after all, what the term *geocentric* means.)

Variations on this worldview were held by all civilizations of the medieval Mediterranean basin. The most brilliant description of the geocentric universe is found in Dante,¹³ although similar views were held by the Byzantines.¹⁴ Medieval Muslim astronomy was also geocentric, as evidenced by both scientific treatises,¹⁵ and accounts of the famous *miʿrāj*, Muḥammad’s ascent into Heaven,¹⁶ in which some scholars find antecedents to Dante’s more famous heavenly ascent.¹⁷ Early Christian gnostics held similar views of the nature of the universe,¹⁸ as did the Jews.¹⁹

All of these medieval versions of the geocentric universe ultimately derive from the classical Greek model of Ptolemy (second century A.D.). Although this final version of the geocentric view of the universe is frequently therefore called Ptolemaic, it in turn derived from various forms of geocentrism described by pre-Ptolemaic writers. Among the Greeks a full description is found in Aristotle, with earlier fragmentary discussions in the writings of Plato, Pythagoras, Leucippus, Democritus, and nearly all the other pre-Socratic philosophers.²⁰

Although there is no explicit evidence to indicate that the Egyptians conceived of a universe of concentric spheres as did Ptolemy, they nonetheless clearly held one of the other geocentric views of the universe.²¹ And while no ancient Egyptian text provides a complete discussion of

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13. See Dante’s *Paradiso*; for an English translation of Dante with an excellent commentary, see Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, trans. and ed., *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962). For Dante’s geocentric astronomy, see M. A. Orr, *Dante and the Early Astronomers*, 2nd ed. (London: Allan Wingate, 1956).
 14. For a brief discussion of Byzantine astronomers’ dependence on Ptolemy, see Olaf Pedersen, “Astronomy,” in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1982), 1:613, and references discussed therein.
 15. The third epistle of the tenth-century Brethren of Purity gives a fine summary of geocentric astronomy as understood among the Arabs. *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-ṣafāʾ* (Dār Ṣāwir and Dār Bayrūt: li-Ṭibāʿa wa-al-Nashr, 1957) 114–57. Muslim philosophical texts also presuppose it: Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī’s tenth-century treatise *Mabādīʾ Arāʾ Ahl al-Madīna al-Fāḍila*, now conveniently available in a dual language edition as *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, ed. and trans. Richard Walzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). In the eleventh century, the philosophical system of al-Kirmānī presupposes a geocentric cosmos—see Ḥamīd al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd-Allāh al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat al-ʿaql*, ed. Maḥmūd Kamāl Ḥusayn and Maḥmūd Muṣṭafā Ḥilamī (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, 1953).
 16. For an interesting introduction to the *miʿrāj* literature, see Marie-Rose Séguy, *The Miraculous Journey of Mahomet: Miʿraj nameh*, trans. Richard Pevear (New York: G. Braziller, 1977).
 17. Miguel Asin Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, trans. and abrid. Harold Sunderland (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1926).
 18. See, for example, 1–2 *Jeu; The Apocalypse of Paul*, in Douglas M. Parrott, ed. and trans., *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979); Irenaeus, *Contra Haereses*, 1.30 (PG 694–704).
 19. Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, 14.45; 17.54, in F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, trans., *Philo* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 1:32–33, 40–43.
 20. For an excellent introduction to Greek astronomy, see D. R. Dicks, *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970). On Aristotle’s astronomy, see *ibid.*, 190–219; on Plato, see his *Republic* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1982), 501–3, 10:16–17ff. ; and Dicks, *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle*, 92–150; on the Pythagoreans, see *ibid.*, 62–91; on the pre-Socratics, see *ibid.*, 39–61. For drawings of the models of Leucippus and Democritus, see Orr, *Dante and the Early Astronomers*, 53–65.
 21. For the general view of the universe of Egyptians, see James P. Allen, “The Cosmology of the Pyramid Texts,” in *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven: Yale Egyptological Seminar, 1989), 1–28; Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 1–7.

their views of the cosmos,²² numerous references make it clear that their worldview was fundamentally geocentric.²³ For example, Queen Hatshepsut says that the god Amun “has given to her [Hatshepsut] what the Sun-disk encircles (*šnn.wt itn*), that which Geb and Nut enclose.”²⁴ The phrase “what the Sun-disk encircles” strongly implies that the earth was seen as the center of the universe. This idea goes back at least as far as the Middle Kingdom (and thus to the approximate time of Abraham), when a similar idea is manifest by Sinuhe, who says of the Pharaoh, “Fear of you resounds in the lowlands and the highlands, since you have seized that which the Sun-disk encircles (*šnn.t itn*).”²⁵

Variations on this geocentric worldview were nearly universally held until the revolution of Kepler and Copernicus in the sixteenth century, which replaced geocentricity with heliocentricity.²⁶ “Having removed the earth from the center of the universe, Copernicus placed it among the planets in a position where it was now difficult to regard it as the obvious recipient of influences from other celestial bodies. . . . One century later, when Newton succeeded in giving an account of the mutual interactions of all celestial bodies in terms of light and gravitation, [geocentric] astrology as a serious subject was bound to disappear.”²⁷ Thus, by the nineteenth century, all western astronomy was Copernican and Newtonian. Even the nineteenth-century occultists and astrologers, who maintained more elements of the archaic worldviews than any other segments of nineteenth-century society, accepted heliocentricity and modified their practices and theories accordingly. Thus, Joseph Smith lived in a world universally dominated by heliocentric, Copernican, and Newtonian cosmology. If Joseph is to be considered the author of the Book of Abraham under the influences of the astronomical speculations of his day, we would expect to see a heliocentric worldview espoused in the text.

The Book of Abraham as Geocentric Astronomy

A careful reading of the Book of Abraham, however, shows that the text is describing a geocentric system. The clearest indication of this geocentricity is found in the frequent references to a hierarchy of celestial bodies, each one higher than the preceding and all above the earth. The most explicit statement of this comes from Abraham 3:17: “Now, if there be two things, one above the other, and the moon be above the earth, then it may be that a planet or a star may exist above it.” Likewise, the moon is elsewhere stated to be above the earth: “[The moon] is above or greater than that [the earth] upon which thou standest” (Abraham 3:5). Furthermore, we find that “one planet [is] above another” (Abraham 3:9). The text does not describe any object as being below

22. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 1.

23. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 3–7. Hugh Nibley, “The Hierocentric State,” in *The Ancient State*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 105, briefly discusses this topic.

24. Deir al-Bahri in Adriaan de Buck, *Egyptian Readingbook* (hereafter *Readingbook*) (Leiden: Netherlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1963), 48.15; cf. Gebel Barkal Stela in *Readingbook*, 59.3, cf. *Readingbook*, 54.10, 112.6; Kurt Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie Urkunden des Aegyptischen Altertums 4* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1906–14), 4:82.13; 102:11.

25. Sinuhe, B 212–13.

26. Copernicus published a preliminary outline of his heliocentric theory in the 1530 *Commentariolus*. The complete system was laid out in 1543, in *De revolutionibus orbium caelestium*.

27. Olaf Pedersen, “Astrology,” in *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 1:609a.

“the earth upon which thou standest” (Abraham 3:5, 7). To us it seems very difficult to interpret this language as anything other than geocentric, and this alone should suffice to prove the geocentric perspective of the text. However, there is a great deal of additional evidence pointing to the geocentric perspective.

The higher position of the various planets or stars correlates to a longer time span. Thus, we find that “the set time of the lesser light [the moon] is a longer time as to its reckoning than the reckoning of the time of the earth upon which thou standest” (Abraham 3:7). The higher the planet or star, the greater the length of its reckoning. Thus, “there shall be another planet whose reckoning of time shall be longer still; And thus there shall be the reckoning of the time of one planet above another, until thou come nigh unto Kolob” (Abraham 3:8–9). The basis of the reckoning of time is given with the example of Kolob “according to its times and seasons in the revolutions thereof” (Abraham 3:4). Thus, the length of the reckoning of a planet is based on its revolution (and not rotation). Those planets or stars that are higher have a greater “point of reckoning, for it moveth in order more slow” (Abraham 3:5). It therefore moves in revolution above the earth. This is a geocentric description.

God is consistently said to “go down” to the earth or is described as being “above” the earth (Abraham 2:7; 3:21). “I [God] now, therefore, have come down unto thee [Abraham]” (Abraham 3:21). God likewise descends to create the earth and mankind (see Abraham 3:24; 4:26–27; 5:4); “The Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down . . . and organized and formed the heavens and the earth” (Abraham 4:1; see 5:4). God’s revelations likewise must descend through the various heavens: the explanation for figure 7 of Facsimile 2 has “God sitting upon his throne, revealing through the heavens the grand Key-words of the Priesthood.” (Facsimile 2, explanation to fig. 7, cf. 3:21).²⁸ From the perspective of ancient geocentric cosmology, all of this was conceived literally; God is indeed above the earth in or above the highest heaven and needs to physically descend, or send messages, down through the heavens to arrive at the earth.

Stars Nearest God

The Book of Abraham describes the stars in general, and Kolob in particular, as being near the throne of God. Note that Kolob is not itself the throne of God nor the planet or star where God lives. That the stars in general are near to the throne of God is implied in Abraham 3:2, which states, “one of them [i.e., one of the stars, referring to Kolob] was nearest unto the throne of God,” and verse 16, “Kolob is the greatest of all the Kokaubeam [stars] that thou hast seen, because it is nearest unto me.” The most simple and intelligible reading of these verses is that the stars in general were near the throne of God but that Kolob in particular was the nearest to the throne of God of all the stars. Be this as it may, the text explicitly states that at least the star Kolob was near

28. The figure is also said to represent the otherwise unknown “sign of the Holy Ghost unto Abraham, in the form of a dove” (Facsimile 2). This is certainly linked with the descent of the dove at the baptism of Christ (Matthew 3:16–17; Mark 1:10–11; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:32), in which there is a literal coming-down from the heavens, which have been parted to allow passage and to allow God to speak from his throne above. It is worth noting the omnipresence of the verb *anzala/yunzilu/inzāl* (“to send down”) in the Qur’an as a description of the revelations of God.

the throne of God. “Kolob is set nigh unto the throne of God” (Abraham 3:9); “Kolob is . . . nearest unto me [God]” (Abraham 3:16); “Kolob, [is] . . . nearest to the celestial, or the residence of God” (Facsimile 2, fig. 1).

As noted previously, Ptolemaic geocentric astronomers generally viewed the stars as the outermost celestial sphere, furthest from the earth and nearest to God. It is interesting to note here that the Book of Abraham shows greater parallels to the more archaic fifth century B.C. cosmological models of Leucippus and Democritus than it does to the second century A.D. model of Ptolemy. According to both, the universe above the earth is divided into four zones, in ascending order: moon, planets, sun, and stars according to Leucippus; moon, sun, planets, and stars according to Democritus.²⁹

Dante’s description of his journey through Paradiso, a classic example of celestial hierarchy in Ptolemaic astronomy, nicely matches Abraham’s astronomy in broad terms. Dante passes through the seven heavens or celestial spheres—I. Moon (Paradiso ii–v), II. Mercury (v–vii), III. Venus (viii–ix), IV. Sun (x–xiv), V. Mars (xiv–xviii), VI. Jupiter (xviii–xx), and VII. Saturn (xxi–xxii), finally arriving at the eighth heaven, that of the fixed stars (xxii–xxvii). The ninth heaven is the Crystalline Heaven (“*Primum Mobile, mobile primo*”), where the angels abide (xxvii–xxix), and the tenth heaven (the Empyrean) is the celestial residence of God (xxx–xxxiii).³⁰ The important thing to notice here is that the eighth celestial sphere is that of the fixed stars. In other words, the stars are the closest of all the visible heavenly bodies to God.

More to the point, for our purpose here, is the celestial hierarchy described in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, which, as Nibley has shown, bears remarkable resemblance to parts of the Book of Abraham.³¹ In the nineteenth chapter of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, God and his throne reside in the eighth firmament (19.6).³² Abraham is standing on the seventh firmament of heaven, which in this version is the abode of the angels. Abraham looks down through the crystalline firmament and sees in “the fifth (firmament), [the] hosts of stars.”³³ Here again we see the same pattern: the earth at the center of the universe, with a series of concentric spheres culminating in the sphere of the stars, which is the closest to the residence of God, exactly as described in the Book of Abraham.

To summarize this point, many ancient systems of astronomy—including that of the Book of Abraham—despite whatever differences in particulars, agree that the celestial zone of the stars is the highest of all celestial bodies and therefore is nearest to God.

29. See Dicks, *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle*, index, for references to these two astronomers; Orr, *Dante and the Early Astronomers*, 55–56 for diagrams.

30. Sayers and Reynolds have a foldout chart of the heavens at the end of their translation of *The Divine Comedy*. An adequate discussion of the fascinating relationships between Dante’s cosmos and the Book of Abraham would require a lengthy separate paper.

31. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 8–40.

32. R. Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 1:698–99.

33. *Ibid.*, 1:699; *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 19:9. See also *Traditions*, 57.

Governing Stars

The Book of Abraham also describes stars as “governing” the heavenly bodies below them. According to Abraham 3:3, in general, the stars “are the governing ones,” while, in particular, God “set this one [the star Kolob] to govern all those [celestial bodies] which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest [the earth]” (Abraham 3:3). Verse 9 agrees that “Kolob is set . . . to govern all those planets which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest.”³⁴ Furthermore, the sun is said to be “one of the governing planets” (Facsimile 2, fig. 5).³⁵ Throughout the ancient world the governing role of celestial bodies was conceived in similar terms. God sits on his throne in the highest heaven giving commands, which are passed down by angels through the various regions of heaven, with each region governing or commanding the regions beneath it. Thus, from a geocentric perspective, it makes perfect sense for the star Kolob, being the nearest celestial body to God, to govern the celestial bodies beneath it, and ultimately, to govern the earth at the center of the entire system.

This is made explicit in numerous ancient texts.³⁶ *The Apocalypse of Abraham*, which dates to roughly the same period as the Joseph Smith Papyri, tells us that “the host [of divine beings] I [Abraham] saw on the seventh firmament commanded the sixth firmament and it removed itself. I saw there, on the fifth (firmament), hosts of stars, and the orders they were commanded to carry out [by the beings on the sixth and seventh firmaments], and the elements of the earth [below them] obeying them” (19:8–9).³⁷ Unfortunately, so little has survived of Israelite astronomy that it is impossible to determine their views of the celestial realms. By at least the Christian period, however, Judeo-Christian astronomers had similar views.³⁸ In the astronomy of the gnostic *Apocalypse of Paul* we find Paul in the sixth heaven being told to “Look and see the rulers [*eniarchē*] and powers [*niexousia*]. . . . Give him the sign [*symion*] that you have, and he will open [the gate to the seventh heaven] for you.”³⁹

Likewise, the medieval Jewish Kabbalists (in thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Spain), interpreting the biblical tradition, reflect precisely the same concept. “The stars below [God] exist because of the influence that spreads out from the supernal mystery [God], for all is in the image of the upper world . . . Therefore, all the stars and planets in the height of the firmament are there to direct the world that is below it, and thence the levels spread out so that they are ready to guide the stars below [God], for none of them exists under its own authority . . . they all exist under authority from above.”⁴⁰ As a general rule, the divination techniques of astrology, found widely throughout the ancient world, were based on the fundamental assumption that the stars and the planets, being

34. Cf. Facsimile 2, fig. 1, where “[Kolob is] first in government, the last pertaining to the measurement of time.”

35. A further discussion of the governing role of celestial bodies is found in the explanation of Fac. 2, fig. 5.

36. Plato, in his *Republic*, describes a vaguely similar system, 10:616ff. Irenaeus, *Contra Haereses*, I.5, I.30 (PG 7:491–504, 694–704). A. J. Welburn, “Reconstructing the Ophite Diagram,” *Novum Testamentum* 23/3 (1981): 261–87.

37. Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” 1:699. On the original date of the text, see p. 683. See also *Traditions*, 57.

38. For a Jewish version of these ideas, see Philo, *De Abrahamo* 15.69, in Colson and Whitaker, trans., *Philo*, 6:38–39. See also *Traditions*, 39.

39. *Apocalypse of Paul*, 23:20–24, in Parrott, ed. and trans., *Nag Hammadi Codices V, 2–5 and VI*, 60.

40. Zohar II, 232a, in Isaiah Tishby and Fischel Lachower, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 2:662. See also *Traditions*, 154–63.

gods themselves—or, from a monotheistic perspective, being higher than the earth and nearer to God—acted as transmitters of the will of God to the earth. Thus, from a wide variety of ancient perspectives, celestial bodies were seen as governing the earth.

Planets as Stars

In the Book of Abraham, there is a seeming confusion between the uses of the terms *stars* and *planets*.⁴¹ The key phrase in this regard is Abraham 3:13, which discusses the “stars, or all the great lights, which were in the firmament of heaven.” This verse is essentially a catalog of celestial bodies: “And he [the Lord] said unto me [Abraham]: This is Shinehah, which is the sun. And he said unto me: Kokob, which is star. And he said unto me: Olea, which is the moon. And he said unto me: Kokaubeam, which signifies stars, or all the great lights, which were in the firmament of heaven.” What is conspicuously absent from this catalog are the planets. However, as we interpret it, the phrase “all the great lights . . . of heaven,” should be understood to include both the stars and the planets. This is consistent with most ancient systems of astronomy, where the planets were seen as *planetes asteres* or “wandering stars.”⁴² According to Dicks, in Greek “*astron* is a general word (as indeed is *aster*) which can be applied indifferently to the fixed stars, the planets, the sun, and the moon.”⁴³ Likewise, in ancient Egyptian astronomy, the planets are consistently viewed as special types of stars but stars nonetheless. For example, Venus was called *sb3 d3*, the “crossing star”; Jupiter was the *sb3 rsy (n) pt*, “southern star (of) the sky”; and Saturn was called *sb3 izbty d3 pt*, “the eastern star which crosses the sky.”⁴⁴ The Babylonians also refer to planets as a special category of star.⁴⁵ In general, the planets are called the gods which “keep changing their positions.”⁴⁶ For example, Saturn is called MUL ^dUTU = *kakkab šamaš*: the “Star of the sun.”⁴⁷ Likewise, Mercury and Mars are called stars.⁴⁸

Thus, the Book of Abraham’s seeming “confusion” of planets and stars is in fact perfectly acceptable when viewed from an ancient perspective.

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41. Other examples of the imprecise use of astronomical terminology include reference to the “planet which is the lesser light” (Abraham 3:5), obviously referring to the moon. Joseph Smith’s explanations for Facsimile 2 likewise state that “this is one of the governing planets . . . and is said by the Egyptians to be the Sun . . . which governs fifteen other fixed planets or stars” (Facsimile 2, fig. 5). This latter phrase is somewhat problematic from the view of ancient and modern astronomy. What exactly is a “fixed planet”? However, this seeming problem derives from Joseph Smith’s modern interpretations, not from the ancient text of the Book of Abraham.
 42. Liddell, Scott, Jones, and McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1411; Jude 1:13 makes reference to those who fall away from the Church as “wandering stars,” *asteres planetai*. Philo, *De Opificio Mundi* 17.54, contrasts the *aplanon* with the *planeton asteron*, in Colson and Whitaker, trans., *Philo*, 1:40–43.
 43. Dicks, *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle*, 65. Vogel and Metcalfe (217 n. 64, 218 n. 75) are disturbed by the fact that the Sun is called a “moving planet,” which of course does not fit with nineteenth-century ideas but which perfectly matches geocentric thought.
 44. Otto Neugebauer and Richard A. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts* (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1962–69), 3:175, 177, 178.
 45. In general, all the planet names include the ideogram MUL, meaning *star*, in Hermann Hunger and David Pingree, *MUL.APIN: An Astronomical Compendium in Cuneiform* (Horn, Austria: Verlag F. Berger and Söhne, 1989), 80, MUL.APIN 2.1.38.
 46. *Ibid.*, 80, MUL.APIN 2.1.40.
 47. *Ibid.*, 80, MUL.APIN 2.1.39; cf. *ibid.*, 86, MUL.APIN 2.1.64–65.
 48. *Ibid.*, 83–84, Mercury, MUL.APIN 2.1.54–59; *Ibid.*, 85–86, Mars, MUL.APIN 2.162–63.

Higher and Slower

The Book of Abraham not only describes the universe as a series of revolving astronomical bodies in ascending order above the earth but also tells us that the further from the earth a given celestial body is, the slower will be its speed of revolution around the earth. The text of Abraham 3:7–9 is quite clear on this point: “Now the set time of the lesser light [the moon] is a longer time as to its reckoning than the reckoning of the time of the earth upon which thou standest. And where these two facts exist, there shall be another fact above them, that is, there shall be another planet whose reckoning of time shall be longer still; And thus there shall be the reckoning of the time of one planet above another, until thou come nigh unto Kolob, which Kolob is after the reckoning of the Lord’s time.”⁴⁹ Here we have, quite clearly described, a hierarchy of celestial bodies, one above another, with the higher celestial bodies moving more slowly than the lower. This is, of course, precisely how many ancient geocentric models described the movement of the heavens. In the Ptolemaic version of the universe, the ordering of the celestial bodies in their concentric spheres was based on their speeds. Thus, although the exact periods may differ slightly according to different astronomers, we find that Saturn has the longest period (about 29 and a half years), Jupiter the next (11 years, 315 days), Mars almost two years, the sun, Venus, and Mercury each about a year, and the moon the shortest period, the lunar month.⁵⁰ Thus, the closer to the earth, the faster the cycle; the further from the earth, the slower the cycle. This is precisely what is described in the Book of Abraham’s “there shall be another planet whose reckoning of time shall be longer still; And thus there shall be the reckoning of the time of one planet above another, until thou come nigh unto Kolob” (Abraham 3:8–9).

Dante, in his medieval rendition of the geocentric system, tells us explicitly that “Likewise the eight and nine [spheres of the Celestial Rose revolved], each [sphere] moving more slowly according to its distance from the central point.”⁵¹

Thus, the cosmology of the Book of Abraham once again matches perfectly with archaic views of the universe.

The Sun, Moon, and Stars Created for the Benefit of the Earth

The Book of Abraham mentions three purposes for the creation of the sun, moon, planets, and stars:

- (1) To give light to the earth: “The stars that are set to give light” (Abraham 3:10; cf. 3:13); “And the Gods organized the lights in the expanse of the heaven . . . to give light upon the earth” (Abraham 4:14–15; cf. 3:17).
- (2) To rule over periods of time: God established the “set time of the greater light which is set to rule the day, and the set time of the lesser light which is set to rule the night”

49. Cf. Abraham 3:5, “for it [the moon] moveth in order more slow [than the earth]; this is in order because it standeth above the earth upon which thou standest.” According to our interpretation, the phrase “[Kolob is] first in government, the last pertaining to the measurement of time” (Facsimile 2, fig. 1) means that Kolob is the highest celestial body (furthest from the earth and closest to God) and therefore has the slowest period of revolution around the earth.

50. For specific figures and references see Orr, *Dante and the Early Astronomers*, 294.

51. Dante, *Paradiso* xxviii 34–36.

(Abraham 3:6); “And the Gods organized the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night” (4:16).

- (3) To provide “signs” for the earth: “And the Gods organized the lights in the expanse of the heaven . . . to be for signs” (Abraham 4:14).⁵²

Thus, we see that the Abraham cosmology is not only literally, physically geocentric, but it is earth centered in the sense that all the heavenly bodies are viewed in terms of their utility for the earth and those who dwell upon it. In a sense, even though Abraham is being given something of a course in astronomy, he is receiving it from a very limited perspective. As the Lord said to Moses, “Only an account of this earth, and the inhabitants thereof, give I unto you” (Moses 1:35).

In summary, we find six basic characteristics of the universe as described in the Book of Abraham. The Abrahamic universe is explicitly geocentric; the stars are seen as furthest from the earth and nearest to God; the stars and other celestial bodies govern the earth; planets are a type of star; the higher celestial bodies in the hierarchy move more slowly than the lower; and all celestial bodies are conceived as having been created for the benefit of the earth and mankind. All of these ideas make perfect sense only from an ancient geocentric perspective. They are fundamentally incomprehensible from the Copernican and Newtonian heliocentric perspective of the nineteenth century and the relativistic Einsteinian perspectives of the twenty-first century.

52. The parallels to Genesis 1:14–18 should be noted. In the Babylonian tradition, all of the *Enuma Anu Enlil* writings center on how to interpret the signs of the heavens. For the entire text in cuneiform and transliteration, see Charles Virolleaud, *L’Astrologie Chaldéenne* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1908–12). For a recent discussion and current bibliography, see Francesca Rochberg-Halton, *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination: The Lunar Eclipse Tablets of Enuma Anu Enlil*, *Archiv für Orientforschung* 22 (Horn: Verlag F. Berger, 1988). In the New Testament, the coming of the Magi to the newborn Christ is initiated by astronomical signs (see Matthew 2:1–12.)

Appendix A: Methodological Considerations

It is important to consider some methodological issues surrounding the study of the astronomy in the Book of Abraham. A number of methodological caveats should be made:

- (1) If our goal is to attempt to determine the best possible setting for Abrahamic astronomy, all three possible sets of parallels must be considered. It is insufficient to examine only possible parallels to twentieth-century, nineteenth-century, or ancient cosmologies. Indeed, if someone studies only nineteenth-century documents, he will, remarkably enough, only discover parallels to nineteenth-century documents. Parallels and differences from each of the possible settings of the Book of Abraham must be examined and cataloged, and then each set of parallels and differences should be compared. Only then can we begin to form some conclusion as to which setting best accounts for each group of possible parallels and differences. Thus, we must not only demonstrate that a single parallel exists but show that one particular set of parallels is more significant and coherent than another set of parallels.
- (2) The astronomy of the Book of Abraham must first be examined as a single, unique system of thought. We must ask, “What is the nature of the cosmology described in the text of the Book of Abraham itself?” If such a unique and consistent cosmology cannot be found in the text, this fact should be noted. Only after we have attempted to understand Abrahamic astronomy as an independent system—or shown that no such system exists—should we begin to examine possible parallels to other astronomical systems of thought. Only then is it possible to examine parallels to other Latter-day Saint cosmologies (the Book of Mormon, Book of Moses, or Doctrine and Covenants), nineteenth- and twentieth-century astronomies, or ancient cosmologies.

One of the great weaknesses of Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe’s approach to the issue is that they fundamentally beg the question of origins by assuming that all of Joseph Smith’s writings—be they scriptural or nonscriptural, purportedly ancient or clearly nineteenth-century, allegedly revealed or clearly his personal opinion—come from the same source: Joseph Smith’s imagination. Given this assumption, they conclude that all of these ideas should somehow form an interrelated whole. But this, in fact, is one of the disputed issues. We believe that a careful examination of early cosmologies from LDS scriptures revealed within a few years of each other shows a wide range of conflicting astronomical ideas.

- (3) A clear distinction must be drawn between parallels and causality. The existence of a parallel alone is fundamentally irrelevant. Parallels do not prove causes; rather, they indicate that there is possible reason for searching for causality. A causal and temporal connection between the time and place of the creation of the Book of Abraham and any proposed nineteenth-century parallel must be established for such a parallel to be seen as significant. For example, claiming that the ideas in the Book of Abraham derived from private unpublished journals or astronomical texts in foreign languages is highly implausible. However, the discovery of parallels to ancient materials to which Joseph Smith could not have had access, is extremely relevant. The very existence of

such an ancient parallel, even if the specific temporal and geographical causal link is unclear, is fundamental to our case since our goal at this point is only to show that the Book of Abraham derived from an ancient setting otherwise unspecified rather than to attempt to specify the exact time and place of its origin and transmission.

Thus, we believe that those who argue for a nineteenth-century origin for the text have a greater burden of proof in terms of demonstrating temporal and geographical causality for possible parallels than those arguing for an ancient origin of the text. The goal of the nineteenth-century advocate is not to explain that the Book of Abraham originated at an unspecified time and place in the nineteenth century, but that Joseph Smith, at a specific time and place, was decisively influenced by a well-defined set of nineteenth-century ideas. The advocate of antiquity, on the other hand, need only show that the Book of Abraham exhibits unique parallels to widely or universally held ancient astronomical ideas, which were not accepted or known in the nineteenth century.

- (4) Differences between systems of astronomy are as significant as, if not more significant than, possible parallels. Thus, we find there are six characteristics of Abrahamic astronomy given in the Book of Abraham. It may be possible to show that two or three of these are parallel to nineteenth-century astronomical ideas. But the fact, as we hope to show, that Abrahamic cosmology is geocentric, while no nineteenth-century cosmology was geocentric, is far more significant than any possible parallels with the nineteenth century.
- (5) It is inadequate to show that a single isolated element of Abrahamic astronomy has possible parallels to ancient, nineteenth-, or twentieth-century astronomical thought. Rather, it must be shown that the Abrahamic system of astronomy *as a whole* parallels or does not parallel geocentric, nineteenth-, or twentieth-century astronomy. Thus, the discovery of one or several parallels between Abrahamic and nineteenth-century astronomy is fundamentally irrelevant unless one can show that Abrahamic astronomy, *as a whole*, matches some single system of nineteenth- or twentieth-century astronomy, rather than evoking mild parallels with bits and pieces of several incompatible nineteenth-century astronomical speculations. The Book of Abraham is most likely to be related to that system of astronomy that shows the greatest number of parallels to the Abrahamic system as a whole.
- (6) Parallels between nineteenth-century or ancient astronomy and Abrahamic astronomy should be unique. Thus, the fact that planets are said to move in Abrahamic astronomy and that nineteenth-century astronomers also believed that planets moved is irrelevant, since ancient astronomers held exactly the same belief. The truly significant parallels are those unique either to the nineteenth century or to antiquity and also found in the Book of Abraham. Thus, the geocentricity of the Book of Abraham, which was unique to antiquity, is a striking and important parallel.
- (7) Parallels should preferably be established between the most widely accepted astronomical thought of the nineteenth century or antiquity rather than with obscure or unique ideas. Many ideas in the Book of Abraham may in fact be unique. However, for the purposes of trying to establish a general historical context, we should attempt to show

that the fundamental astronomical ideas of the Book of Abraham, however unique in their actual manifestations, fit the general intellectual milieu under consideration. Thus, the fact that a single obscure and unique text from the nineteenth century or antiquity—which contradicts widespread commonly held astronomical ideas of those respective times—parallels a passage in the Book of Abraham should not be given decisive weight in the debate unless we have powerful and specific reasons for linking that text directly to the Book of Abraham. Furthermore, such parallels should not be isolated but should form part of a larger whole. Thus, showing that three ideas in the Book of Abraham have parallels with ideas from three separate and obscure nineteenth-century astronomical speculations is largely irrelevant.

- (8) This leads us to the important distinction between establishing parallels with universally held ideas of a given time and parallels with specific unique ideas. In our paper we adduce both types of parallels: universal and specific. Both are relevant to the study of the Book of Abraham as a possible ancient document. For some of the points we make below, such as geocentricity, we attempt to establish that the ideas found in the Book of Abraham were extremely widespread, if not universal, in antiquity. In these cases, it is methodologically sound to examine a wide range of texts covering a broad spectrum of cultures and times. If an idea such as geocentricity is found in texts ranging from 2000 B.C. to A.D. 1500, and in every culture in antiquity, it is quite clearly a universal ancient idea, and the fact that the Book of Abraham parallels this idea while differing with nineteenth-century heliocentricity is extremely significant. For other issues, we will examine largely specific and unique parallels to Jewish and Egyptian astronomy. A final point in this regard is that the paucity of ancient astronomical texts and references often forces us to also extend our search for parallels through space and time.
- (9) Finally, we should be aware that any document can be misconstrued by reading it out of its proper chronological and cultural context. Assumptions and theories can indeed control the evidence. Vogel and Metcalfe make this point quite nicely when they state, “We sometimes read certain passages from the scriptures unaware that we are coloring them with our modern views. As a result, much of the original historical context is obscured. When we read the scriptures, we need to keep in mind that they have come to us from a different time and cultural setting.”⁵³ Although they are using this phrase to justify the examination of possible nineteenth-century parallels, this dialectical sword cuts equally both ways. If the “original historical context” of the Book of Abraham is indeed to be found in antiquity, looking only for nineteenth- or twentieth-century parallels obscures the real meaning of the text.

53. Vogel and Metcalfe, “Joseph Smith’s Scriptural Cosmology,” 211.