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Chapter 12

A Wanderer in a Strange Land

Abraham in America, 1800–1850

Andrew H. Hedges

In recent years, critics of Joseph Smith have charged that very little, if any, of what the prophet taught and practiced was unique on the American scene. From major themes taught in the Book of Mormon to plans for establishing a Zion society in Missouri, all his "innovations," so the argument goes, resonated with the ideas and movements of his contemporaries. More a charismatic leader than a restorer or creator of doctrines and ideas, Joseph at best modified existing philosophies and practices and at worst borrowed them wholesale.[1]

The Book of Abraham provides scholars with an excellent way to put this increasingly strident charge to the test. First published in Nauvoo in 1842, the Book of Abraham purports to be nothing less than the autobiographical writings of the ancient patriarch himself, originally written in Egypt several thousand years before Joseph Smith came on the scene.[2] Although brief and incomplete—Joseph indicated there was much more to the record than the five chapters he translated and published in 1842—the book is replete with insights into Abraham's character, his covenant with God, his understanding of astronomy, and his understanding of the creation. No mention is made of some of the more pivotal and riveting experiences in the patriarch's life so ably described in the biblical text, including the command to sacrifice Isaac, his rescuing Lot, and his taking Hagar to wife.[3] In general terms, however, the narrative of the Book of Abraham follows the outline of the

1. For examples of this argument, see John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993); and Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990).
2. For an overview of current theories about the date of the papyri and the date of the text of the Book of Abraham, see John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 23–28.
3. If the papyri contained Abraham's account of these events, they had not come to light by the time Joseph was killed in 1844.

biblical narrative as far as it goes, with Abraham leaving the land of his nativity in the midst of a famine, entering into a covenant with the Lord, traveling to Canaan, and moving on to Egypt.

This paper looks at how Joseph's contemporaries understood Abraham and compares their understanding and use of the Abraham narrative with the focus, content, and Latter-day Saint use of the Book of Abraham. From the outset, such a comparison is fraught with peril because the thousands of sermons of the time that were recorded comprise only a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of sermons delivered at various pulpits in the United States during Joseph's lifetime. Most of what people heard or thought about religion during this period—including the Abraham narrative—was never recorded, so any reconstruction of the religious culture of the times is necessarily based on woefully incomplete evidence and cannot even begin to circumscribe the full scope and variety of religious experiences and ideas that made up that culture. As difficult to surmount as this obstacle may be for the historian, however, it is important to note that early America was a very literate place and that the printed word did ensure at least some degree of uniformity in how most Christians used and interpreted the Bible. Publishing religious pamphlets and books and the collected sermons of eminent lecturers had been a big business over the course of the colonial period, with the works of noted authorities, reformers, and scholars being published and republished, and read and reread, by several generations of Americans. By the late colonial and early national periods, these writings, taken together, constituted a sort of American Christian midrash of the Bible with acceptable interpretations of its doctrines and events. Quoted in newspapers, incorporated into children's reading primers, read at church, and collected and debated in a growing number of biblical commentaries, parts of this collected and generally accepted wisdom were available, in one form or another, to most Americans by Joseph's time, even those of relatively modest means and education.[4] Although the full variety and richness of the American religious experience was distilled into popular literature by educators, clergy, and biblical commentators, this corpus of religious literature gives us at least a basic understanding of what Americans were teaching and thinking about religion and the Bible—and Abraham—in the early nineteenth century.

Comprising fifteen printed pages in the 1981 edition of the Latter-day Saint scriptures, the Book of Abraham represents, at the very least, a tremendous interest in the ancient patriarch among early Latter-day Saints.[5] If the critics' accusation that Joseph Smith merely copied or modified the ideas and concerns of his contemporaries is correct, we would expect to find this same

4. Evidence suggests that Joseph Smith himself, for example, whose means and education as a youth were as modest as anyone's, ran into at least one Bible commentary in his early life. Emma Smith's uncle, Nathaniel Lewis, who doubted Joseph's use of the Urim and Thummim, owned a copy of Clarke's commentary, a popular biblical commentary of the time. At one point, Lewis apparently asked Joseph if "anybody else [could] translate strange languages by the help of them spectacles?" When Joseph allegedly answered in the affirmative, Lewis reportedly responded, "I've got Clarke's Commentary, and it contains a great many strange languages; now if you will let me try the spectacles, and if, by looking through them, I can translate these strange languages into English, then I'll be one of your disciples" (Emily C. Blackman, *History of Susquehanna County Pennsylvania* [Baltimore: Regional, 1970], 104–5).
5. In comparison, the *full* Genesis account of Abraham comprises twenty printed pages in the 1981 LDS edition of the Bible.

preoccupation with Abraham evidenced elsewhere in America and in a large enough part of Joseph's culture that he would feel the need to make it part of "his" church. We would expect, too, to see Abraham filling the same roles in nineteenth-century LDS theology, worship, and religious instruction that he filled in other churches. And finally, we would expect the Book of Abraham to reflect early American ideas regarding Abraham's character, his relationship with God, and the seminal experiences in his life. Granting the critics' contention that Joseph could, and did, modify the ideas of his contemporaries at many points, we might expect to see a few innovations of sorts along all three of these lines but nothing that wouldn't ultimately be visibly grounded upon well-known ideas of the time. In short, if the critics' charge is correct, we would expect to find very little difference between the focus, content, and Latter-day Saint use of the Book of Abraham and what Joseph's religious contemporaries were teaching about, and doing with, Abraham.

Abraham in the Polls, 1630–1850

A discussion on the first of these points—that is, on Abraham's relative importance in the religious culture of Joseph Smith's time—requires a brief review of how the ancient patriarch had been perceived by earlier generations of Americans. Without question, Abraham's career in America got off to a good start. The English Puritans who settled New England in the early part of the seventeenth century carried with them the idea that they were reestablishing the "covenant society" that had existed between ancient Israel and God. Viewing themselves as the modern Israel and America as the new promised land, this first generation of Puritans found much in the Abraham narrative and its emphasis on covenant with which they could identify and frequently alluded to the ancient patriarch and his seed in their sermons, laws, and public statements.[6] Introspective to a fault and wary of mankind's native ability to do anything good, these early Puritans' chief concern was that they keep their part of the covenant—that God would keep his end of the deal was a given. To keep themselves on the straight and narrow, they passed and enforced strict laws based on the legal sections of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and churchgoers were warned on a regular basis that they, like Israel of old, would forfeit the blessings of the covenant if they fell into error.[7]

The religious fervor of these first English immigrants failed to reproduce itself in succeeding generations of colonists. Lacking their fathers' soul-searching zeal and unable to square Calvin's unfavorable evaluation of human nature with Enlightenment thought, colonists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were a far more liberal lot than their fathers would have approved of and had rejected in large measure the strict legalism of the 1630s and 1640s. In spite of this cooling off toward religion, however, the idea that America was heir to the promises given

6. Perry Miller, "The Old Testament in Colonial America," in *Historical Viewpoints,* ed. John A. Garraty (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 1:96–98. Miller has waded through more sermons, published and unpublished, of the colonial period than any other historian, and I am indebted to his research and conclusions for the generalizations I am giving here concerning Abraham's significance in the culture of colonial America.
7. For examples of New England laws based on the Pentateuch, see *An Abstract of the Lawes of New England as They Are Now Established* (London: Coules and Ley, 1641), reprinted in Peter Force, comp., *Tracts and Other Papers, Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America, from the Discovery of the Country to the Year 1776,* vol. 3 (New York: Peter Smith, 1947).

to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived on but with an important shift in focus reflective of the more liberal attitudes of the time. Rather than fearing that they lacked ability to fulfill their part of the covenant, later colonists began looking anxiously for signs that God was fulfilling his. This shift in focus became more pronounced as tensions mounted between the colonists and the crown in the 1760s and 1770s, with many preachers and ministers finding the parallels between the colonists under British rule and the Israelites under Egyptian rule so compelling that they explicitly identified themselves with captive Israel.[8] The anticipation at this point was that God would emerge from his hiding place in a show of strength and keep his part of the bargain by delivering his people from their oppressors; feeling they had already lived up to their part of the covenant, colonists were not concerned at this point about their worthiness for this deliverance. Secure in their new home, prosperous, and confident, Revolution-minded Americans no longer identified themselves with the wandering, introspective Abraham with whom the early Puritans found so much in common but with Abraham's seed of several hundred years later—numerous, powerful, and ready to reap the blessings promised to the fathers.

Abraham's popularity in America, and his relevance for Americans, continued to lose ground following the Revolutionary War. This was partly because the covenant between God and America had, in everyone's eyes, so obviously been fulfilled in the nation's independence from England. With the covenant having run its course to its successful conclusion, there was simply nothing more to be gained for Americans by invoking it in their behalf or by identifying themselves with God's ancient covenant people. Replacing this centuries-old concern with the covenant and its fulfillment was a growing preoccupation among ministers and laymen alike with *personal conversion*—that is, the degree to which individual Americans demonstrated, both publicly and privately, their acceptance of a personal Savior and his teachings. Beginning about 1800 and lasting for some fifty years, this national preoccupation with personal conversion—dubbed the Second Great Awakening by historians—found its expression in protracted "camp meetings," highly emotional revivals, and large numbers of people joining and forming various churches. Underlying the entire movement was a renewed interest in the New Testament, with its emphasis on baptism, rebirth, and Christ.[9] Denominations like the Presbyterians and Congregationalists, which had previously emphasized the need for an educated clergy teaching their laymen the gospel of the ancient covenant, suddenly found themselves being outstripped by Baptists, Methodists, and break-offs from their own ranks who repudiated the Old Testament bias of traditional American Christianity by teaching that salvation was a function of giving one's heart to Christ rather than of adherence to an ancient code of laws. Denominations split and fragmented over the issue, with the increasingly fewer conservatives accusing the rising generation of ministers of "throwing away the Old Testament."[10] While the orientation toward the New Testament was nationwide, the fires of revival burned most fiercely in the western, "frontier" regions of the country, which included, as the century wore on, upstate New York, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri.

8. Mark A. Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History,* ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 40–44.
9. Miller, "The Old Testament," 99–100.
10. Ibid., 100.

The Old Testament was not forgotten or completely neglected during this period, conservatives' accusations notwithstanding. But it certainly was, on the whole, receiving far less emphasis than it had in the past. Abraham, who had been a figure of towering importance to the early Puritans, suffered with the rest of the Old Testament, being recognized—when he was recognized at all[11]—for his interesting history, but little else. What all of this means for our present discussion is that between 1835, when Joseph purchased the Abraham papyri from Michael Chandler, and 1842, when the Book of Abraham was published, Abraham's stock in American religious culture was at an all-time low, making Joseph's concern with the ancient patriarch, and the publication of his record, all the more noteworthy and unique.

Making Use of Abraham

What we have discussed so far has been the trend in Abraham's relative importance and significance in the history of American religious thought. While his importance relative to other biblical figures and religious concerns steadily diminished over the course of the colonial and early national periods, it would be a mistake to conclude that by Joseph Smith's time it had evaporated altogether. Ministers and laymen continued to refer to Abraham in various contexts, and for various reasons, long after the flames of the revivals and camp meetings had dimmed the light of his star. This later Abraham was not the man he had been earlier, however, and he was vastly different from the Abraham of the Latter-day Saints.

Sources

Relatively few sermons or books devoted solely to Abraham were in print in America in the first half of the nineteenth century. The majority of those that were available had been written and published in England before making their way to American shores. One of the more popular was Henry Blunt's *Twelve Lectures upon the History of Abraham,* published in London in 1831, and part of the author's series of books on various biblical figures.[12] Blunt reviews the seminal events in Abraham's life and uses them as springboards into discussions on various religious topics, providing historians with a wealth of information on how Abraham was seen and used by at least some of Joseph's contemporaries.[13]

11. Reflecting the biases of the time, Parley P. Pratt recorded in his autobiography how, under his mother's direction, he began his study of the scriptures by reading about Joseph in Egypt, David and Goliath, Saul and Samuel, and Samson and the Philistines before studying the life of Jesus. The absence of any mention of Abraham is not accidental. See Parley P. Pratt, ed., *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 2.
12. Henry Blunt, *Twelve Lectures upon the History of Abraham* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1831). Blunt wrote books on the history of Jacob, Elisha, Paul, and Peter as well.
13. Other monographs on Abraham from this era include Charles Bowles, *A Sermon on the Covenant of Grace, which God made with Abraham* (Oxford: W. E. Chapman, 1841); George Frederick Tavel, *Christian Faith Illustrated by the Faith of Abraham* (London: Deighton and Sons, 1824); Samuel Waters, *Meditation on Abraham's conduct in sending his servant to take a wife for his son, Genesis xxiv chapter* (Worcester, Mass.: Isaiah Thomas, 1793); David Peabody, *The Patriarch of Hebron: or, The History of Abraham* (New York: J. C. Meeks, 1841). All these except Bowles are quite rare today, and I have been unable so far to obtain copies of any of them.

Shorter lectures on Abraham were also in print during Joseph Smith's lifetime. Two of the more popular were William Whiston's "Dissertation Concerning God's Command to Abraham to offer up Isaac his Son for a Sacrifice" and Richard Watson's entry under "Abram" in his *Biblical and Theological Dictionary.* Whiston appended his Abraham "Dissertation" onto his 1737 English translation of *The Works of Flavius Josephus,* a work first published in England and so highly acclaimed that it went through several editions in both England and America over the course of the next century.[14] His lecture on Abraham, although brief and limited to his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, nevertheless has some points of interest to students of the Book of Abraham. Watson's brief discussion of Abraham recounted Abraham's experiences before attempting to delineate what these events teach us about Abraham himself and how they apply to people of a more modern age.[15] Like Blunt's *Twelve Lectures,* his entry provides historians with important information about the role Abraham played in Joseph Smith's America.

Those interested in learning how the best minds in England and America interpreted Abraham during Joseph's time also had recourse to several excellent commentaries, whose authors systematically examined both the Genesis account and the New Testament references to Abraham verse by verse, providing their readers with pages of notes in the process. Three commentaries commonly used by scholars, ministers, and churchgoers alike in early America were the multivolume sets by Thomas Scott, Adam Clarke, and Matthew Henry. All three authors were university-trained scholars, and one need read only a page or two of their work to see that each was bringing several years' worth of intense research to his study. Originally published in 1706, Henry's work was the most dated by Joseph Smith's time but was still recognized by Clarke as one of the most "orthodox, generally judicious, and truly pious and practical" commentaries available in the early nineteenth century.[16] Clarke, the most scholarly of the three, used the Hebrew and Septuagint texts extensively in preparing his commentary on Abraham, as well as various rabbinic sources. Scott was a bulwark of faith and conservativeness, deferring more to the "standard of truth, or the rule of duty" than to variant readings or traditions for his information.[17] All three drew freely on the insights of earlier commentators in their respective efforts to provide their readers with the most plausible, up-to-date interpretation of the scriptures, and all three had gone through several revisions and editions by Joseph Smith's time.

Abraham's Role in Nineteenth-Century America

Using these sources as our guides, it is evident that Abraham filled at least two important roles in early nineteenth-century America, notwithstanding his diminished importance relative to other biblical figures and religious concerns. First, some of Joseph's contemporaries advocated reading

14. William Whiston, *The Works of Flavius Josephus. . . .* 2 vols. (Philadelphia: J. Grigg, 1835). All subsequent references to this book are to this 1835 Philadelphia edition.
15. Richard Watson, *A Biblical and Theological Dictionary* (New York: Lane and Scott, 1851), 9–13.
16. Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: With a Commentary and Critical Notes* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, n.d.), 1:10. Clarke died in 1832, yet his commentary continued to be published, unaltered in content, for several decades. The edition used here was probably published after his death.
17. Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible; Containing the Old and New Testaments, . . . with Explanatory Notes, Practical Observations, and Copious Marginal References,* 6 vols. (London: James Nisbet, 1866), 1: b5.

about Abraham purely for his story's literary value.[18] This tendency—small at first, but growing over time—had its roots in the literary flowering that swept the nation following the Revolutionary War. Fueled, historians argue, by the young nation's desire to develop a unique American literary tradition that celebrated the ideals of individualism, morality, and social order, this interest in literature found expression in the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and others.[19] The Genesis account of Abraham fit neatly into this celebration of American ideals: a foreigner holding his own in Pharaoh's court and among the idolatrous Canaanites; his deference to Lot for the sake of peace; his courage in recovering Lot after the battle of the kings; his obedience to God, even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his own son. These resonated with the ideals of self-reliance, courage, order, and religious commitment receiving such emphasis in America at the time. Recognizing these traits in Abraham, however, came at the expense of remembering his religious significance. In the eyes of the age's secular literati, the Abraham story's value lay in it being an "authentic history of a great and powerful prince"[20] and not in any information it gave about God's covenants with mankind or the role Abraham's seed would play in the history of the world. Through these lenses, the patriarch was simply another Natty Bumppo—remarkable and exemplary in his inner goodness and strength but little more.

This tendency to view Abraham's history as little more than a good story was rather limited, for most Americans were willing to concede Abraham's prophetic calling. Similarly, most of Joseph's contemporaries accepted the idea that Abraham knew of Christ and his role as Savior of the world.[21] Consequently, a far more popular and widespread view of Abraham was that he was an excellent example of Christian living, worthy of the notice and emulation of all striving to walk the strait and narrow path.[22] Five of the six commentators we are examining here, for example, spent the majority of their time drawing little lessons from Abraham's story, tediously delineating how, at almost every turn, Abraham shines as the quintessential Christian, or how events in his history reflect deeper principles of the gospel.[23] Commenting on Abraham's building an altar after having

18. Blunt, *Twelve Lectures,* 2.
19. Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800–1860* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1927), and Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England, 1816–1865* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1936).
20. Blunt, *Twelve Lectures,* 2.
21. With the exception of Whiston (whose topic does not lend itself to a discussion of Abraham's knowledge of the Savior), the commentators mentioned above argue that Abraham knew of Christ and his role. They derive this information not so much from the Genesis account but from the several New Testament references to Abraham that suggest Abraham's knowledge of the Savior (John 8:56; Galatians 3:16). Using Hebrews 11:17–19 as his guide, Watson suggests that it was Abraham's "intentional offering up [of] Isaac, with its result, [that] was probably that transaction in which Abraham, more clearly than in any other, 'saw the day of Christ, and was glad'" (Watson, *Biblical and Theological Dictionary,* 12). Armed with these scriptural assurances of Abraham's personal knowledge of the Savior, several of the commentators suggest that the God who appeared to Abraham from time to time was Jesus Christ himself. See Blunt, *Twelve Lectures,* 26–29; Scott, *Holy Bible,* 1:H7–8, I2; Clarke, *Holy Bible,* 1:94–95.
22. The title of George Tavel's sermon—*Christian Faith Illustrated by the Faith of Abraham*—reflects this use of Abraham; see note 13 above for bibliographic information.
23. The exception is Whiston, whose discussion of the command to sacrifice Isaac is largely limited to a defense of Abraham's willingness to comply with such a terrible and repugnant directive.

pitched his tent between Bethel and Hai (Genesis 12:8), Clarke, for example, exclaimed, "How few who build houses ever think on the propriety and necessity of building an altar to their Maker! The house in which the worship of God is not established cannot be considered as under the Divine protection."[24] Many of the lessons drawn reflected the early nineteenth century's concern with conversion. Abraham's willingness to leave Ur, for example, was a lesson for all that "*[i]mplicit faith* in the promise of God, and *prompt obedience* to his commands, become us, not only as HIS *creatures,* but as *sinners* called to separate from evil workers and wicked ways, and travel, by that faith which worketh by love, in the way that leads to the paradise of God."[25] Interpreting Abraham's history this way was immensely popular during Joseph's time, and examples to this end from all five commentators could be multiplied "exceedingly."[26]

As flattering as all this may seem for Abraham, it must be noted that these commentators used the lives of all worthy biblical figures in essentially the same way they employed the Abraham narrative—that is, as examples of righteous living. Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and a host of others met the nineteenth century's ideal of a pious man, and the commentators spared no pains pointing out the hundreds of lessons these narratives contained for the aspiring or practicing Christian. Teaching and learning the proper duties of Christian living by using the life stories of pious individuals as guides was such a popular practice during this time that ministers and laymen alike began searching for more modern examples of piety. The result was a unique genre of literature whose subject matter was the lives and dying speeches of exemplary Christians of the colonial and early national periods.[27] Viewed in this context, the commentators' praise for Abraham is a little less flattering. The patriarch was simply one of dozens of good examples of Christian living, ancient and modern, to which people had recourse for instruction but was not really distinctive in any way. His experiences with the divine were instructive but not pivotal or revolutionary.

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24. Clarke, *Holy Bible,* 1:95.
25. Ibid., 1:97.
26. Henry excelled at this didactic method, drawing moral lessons from events ranging from Terah's death in Haran to Abraham's being informed by a Sodomite of Lot's capture. Commenting on the former, Henry intoned, "Many reach to Charran, and yet fall short of Canaan; they are not far from the kingdom of God, and yet never come thither," while the latter demonstrated that "[t]he worst of men, in the day of their trouble, will be glad to claim acquaintance with those that are wise and good." Matthew Henry, *An Exposition on the Old and New Testament . . . with Practical Remarks and Observations* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 1:85, 94.
27. One of the more popular was Sereno Edwards Dwight's *Memoirs of the Rev. David Brainerd; Missionary to the Indians on the Borders of New-York, New-Jersey, and Pennsylvania* (New Haven: S. Converse, 1822). Brainerd's missionary diary was billed as "probably the best manual of christian experience, ever yet published," and the editor opined that the missionary himself "would probably be selected by all denominations of christians as the *holiest missionary,* if not the *holiest man,* of modern times" (Dwight, *Memoirs,* 9, emphases in original). Other examples of this literature include Experience Mayhew, *Indian Converts: or, Some Account of the Lives and Dying Speeches of a considerable Number of the Christianized Indians of Martha's Vineyard, in New-England* (London: n.p., 1727); *The Pleasures of Piety in Youth Exemplified, in the Life and Death of Several Children* (Boston: Lincoln and Edmands, 1819); *Accounts of the Happy Deaths of Two Young Christians* (Boston: Willis, 1819); *Early Instruction Recommended in a Narrative of the Life of Catherine Haldane: with an Address to Parents of the Importance of Religion* (New Haven: Sidney's, 1819), 9, 13–23; George Hendley, *A Memorial for Sunday School Girls, being the Second Part of an Authentic Account of the Conversion, Experience, and Happy Death, of Twenty-five Children* (Boston: Samuel T. Armstrong, 1819).

The Abraham of the Latter-day Saints played a far more significant and distinguished role. As an important source of information on such doctrines and issues as the nature of God and the Godhead, premortal life, the creation, the Savior, priesthood, covenants, the purpose of life, and Satan, to name a few, Abraham stood out for Latter-day Saints—at least following the publication of the Book of Abraham—as one of the "noble and great ones" in a sense few of Joseph's fellow Christian ministers could have appreciated.[28] As the recorder of these otherwise lost doctrines and teachings and as the one through whose lineage these and other doctrines of the gospel would be taken to all the world in the latter days, Abraham towered above other biblical figures in the minds of the Latter-day Saints. Far more than just another good example, Abraham, for the Saints, was one of the most important figures in the history of the world, and his relationship with God one of the most pivotal and far reaching.

Abraham the Man

The Book of Abraham commences with Abraham's experiences in Ur and closes with his account of the creation, which information he apparently received prior to entering Egypt during the famine. This corresponds to a mere twenty verses in the Genesis account (Genesis 11:26–12:13). None of Abraham's experiences recounted after Genesis 12:13—including his experiences in Egypt, his relationship with Lot, the birth of his children, and the command to sacrifice Isaac—are mentioned in the Book of Abraham. Relatively few points of contact exist, therefore, between the Abraham of the papyri and the Abraham of Joseph's contemporaries. The points of contact and comparison that do occur, however, demonstrate clearly that Joseph's inspiration for the Book of Abraham was something other than the ideas of his fellow countrymen.

Focus of the Book of Abraham versus Contemporary Emphasis

That so little of Abraham's history is part of the Book of Abraham is noteworthy in itself. While the commentators of Joseph's time drew lessons from virtually every step Abraham took, the events that received their greatest attention took place after his return from Egypt. His magnanimity with Lot, his courage against the kings, his pleading with the Lord in behalf of Sodom—these were the events Joseph's contemporaries dwelt upon. That which received the greatest attention, predictably, was the near-sacrifice of Isaac. The entire text of Whiston's popular "dissertation" revolved around the lessons taught in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son. Blunt categorized the command to slay Isaac as "Abraham's greatest and severest trial" and prayed that "every portion of this affecting and improving narrative" might be carried to the hearts of his listeners.[29] Clarke, Scott, and Henry had lengthy discourses on the faith and obedience demonstrated in Abraham's willingness to carry out this command and commended this story to their readers with special urgency.[30] If Abraham

28. John Gee has explored the role played by the Book of Abraham in the restoration of the gospel to an extent, but more work needs to be done in this area. See John Gee, "The Role of the Book of Abraham in the Restoration" (transcript, Ancient Scriptures and the Restoration Conference, FARMS, 1997).

29. Blunt, *Twelve Lectures,* 203.

30. Clarke, *Holy Bible,* 1:138–42; Scott, *Holy Bible,* 1:K4–K8; Henry, *Exposition,* 128. Henry concludes his commentary on Abraham's picking up the knife to slay Isaac by crying, "Be astonished, O heavens, at this; and wonder, O earth! Here is an act of faith and obedience, which deserves to be a spectacle to God, angels, and men" (Henry, *Exposition,* 128).

were known for any one thing during Joseph's time, it was his straightforward obedience to this dreadful command—a command the Book of Abraham falls far short of ever addressing.

Covenant in the Book of Abraham versus Contemporary Views

Noteworthy, too, is these commentators' understanding of the covenant God made with Abraham. Using Galatians 3:16 as their guide,[31] all who addressed the topic agreed that the way in which Abraham and his seed would be a blessing to the earth was through the Savior.[32] With the exception of Scott, who quoted an earlier commentator to the effect that much good has been wrought in ages past by many of Abraham's seed,[33] none interpreted this part of the covenant to refer to anyone other than Christ. And even Scott, notwithstanding his insights into all that the seed of Abraham had done in the past, was silent regarding future roles of Abraham's seed. While the Book of Abraham account of this promise (Abraham 2:11) alludes to the Savior as well, its repeated references to "the Priesthood" that would be held by Abraham's seed suggests that many of Abraham's descendants would be involved in taking "the blessings of the Gospel" to "all the families of the earth." Other modern-day revelations do much to flesh out the role that Abraham's seed—individuals and whole tribes—are to play in the salvation of the world.[34]

The commentators also largely agreed in their interpretation of the Lord's covenant promise to give Abraham and his seed the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession. Unable to reconcile the promise with the hard fact that Abraham's seed through Isaac was not in possession of Palestine in the early nineteenth century, the commentators went to great lengths to show that the promise of an eternal land of inheritance was not to be taken in the literal, earthly sense. Clarke, for example, argued that the word "forever," as used in God's promise to Abraham, meant "a *hidden, unknown period,* such as includes a *completion or final termination* of a particular *era, dispensation,* &c."[35] Armed with this definition, he was then able to save the Lord from the apparent embarrassment of not having come through on his promise by arguing that "it is literally true that the Israelites possessed the land of Canaan till the Mosaic dispensation was terminated in the complete introduction of that of the Gospel." Even then, he suggested, the whole problem is avoided simply by viewing the phrase "everlasting possession" to refer to the (undefined) "spiritual blessings pointed out by the temporal covenant."[36] Scott, similarly, interpreted "everlasting" in this context to mean "*perpetual,* and *unalterable* [only] *while the same state of things continues*" and argued that Abraham's seed would inherit the land "till the coming of the Messiah, when, according to the whole tenour of prophecy, that state of things was to terminate."[37] Henry, apparently less threatened than the others by the Lord's apparent failure to make good on this promise in the literal sense, made no attempt to find any sort of literal, earthly interpretation for this part of the covenant, arguing that "here, where [the land of Canaan] is promised for an everlasting possession, surely it must be looked upon as a type of heaven's happi-

31. "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ."
32. Henry, *Exposition,* 86, 129; Clarke, *Holy Bible,* 1:94, 141; Scott, 1:G2, K6.
33. Scott, 1:G1.
34. 2 Nephi 3:4–21; D&C 133:26–34.
35. Clarke, *Holy Bible,* 1:99.
36. Ibid., 1:114.
37. Scott, *Holy Bible,* 1:H6.

ness, that everlasting rest which remains for the people of God."[38] Needless to say, these ideas contrast sharply with that of Abraham 2:6 and other scriptures coming through Joseph Smith, which suggest that God's promise to Abraham regarding land will be very literally fulfilled in the latter days.[39]

The Book of Abraham parted company with nineteenth-century commentators regarding the Abrahamic covenant in at least one other respect. Good Protestants that they were, these men viewed the covenant as evidence for the doctrine of "free justification by faith,"[40] and took some pains to show how Abraham, "[a]s a sinner, . . . was justified before God by faith alone."[41] Abraham 2:11, in contrast—and in keeping with Latter-day Saint theology generally—makes no such claims; indeed, the Book of Abraham avoids the justification question altogether. The Abrahamic Covenant as taught in Abraham 2 is just that—a covenant between God and man in which the Lord promises great blessings, both spiritual and temporal, to those willing to keep his commandments in all things.

Egypt and Stars

Astronomy, Egypt, and the idolatry of the Egyptians play prominent roles in the Book of Abraham. Abraham 1 and 3 are devoted almost entirely to these themes, while two of the three facsimiles (1 and 3) depict high and low points of Abraham's involvement with the Egyptians along these lines. In contrast, the Genesis account mentions very little about Abraham's contact with the Egyptians, limiting its discussion to his and Sarah's brief sojourn there during the famine in Canaan (Genesis 12:10–13:1) and mentioning nothing about idolatry or Abraham's understanding of astronomy. Abraham's involvement with these things is discussed, however, in several nonbiblical sources—sources that were available and known to English and American scholars during the first half of the nineteenth century. These include *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Targum Onqelos,* the writings of Philo Judaeus, the works of Rashi, the Qurʾān, and the works of Josephus. Admittedly, few scholars and even fewer laymen could read these works,[42] but the traditions they contained about Abraham and his knowledge of astronomy or his conflict with idolatry were well enough known to find their way into the talks of several Latter-day Saints in early Utah.[43]

As accessible as these nonbiblical traditions were, the commentators of the time gave them only passing notice—if they noticed them at all. With the exception of Whiston, all the commentators

38. Henry, *Exposition,* 107.

39. In Abraham 2:6, the Lord tells Abraham, "I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make of thee a minister to bear my name in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice." Compare 2 Nephi 10:7 and Mormon 5:14.

40. Watson, *Biblical and Theological Dictionary,* 12.

41. Scott, *Holy Bible,* 1:K6. Cf. Scott, *Holy Bible,* 1:H5; Henry, *Exposition,* 107; and Bowles, *A Sermon on the Covenant of Grace, which God made with Abraham.*

42. Clarke's impression was that although these traditions were "easily found," few scholars took the time to read them because most were "written in the corrupt Chaldee dialect, and in general printed in the *rabbinical character*" (Clarke, *Holy Bible,* 1:5). This limitation did not apply to the works of Josephus, however, which William Whiston had translated into English in 1737 and which contains interesting traditions about Abraham's stand against idolatry and his teaching arithmetic and astronomy to the Egyptians.

43. John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, comps. and eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), xxiii–xvi.

examined here note Abraham's father's idolatry, apparently using Joshua 24:2 as their source. Watson alone referred to "Arabian and Jewish legends" that speak of Abraham's "early idolatry, his conversion from it, and of his zeal in breaking the images in his father's house" but quickly dismissed these sources as unreliable.[44] None of these commentators mentioned the available traditions concerning attempts to sacrifice Abraham himself, as far as I have been able to find, and only Whiston mentioned human sacrifice in Egypt specifically.[45] Whiston, too, was alone in discussing Abraham's wisdom—meaning his knowledge of arithmetic and astronomy—and his teaching it to the Egyptians.[46] Whiston's alertness to Egyptian idolatry and Abraham's knowledge is nothing remarkable, as he had come across these traditions while translating the works of Josephus. What is remarkable, however, is that Scott, Blunt, Clarke, and Watson, who wrote their commentaries long after Whiston's work was completed, and who had access to numerous other sources discussing Egyptian idolatry and Abraham's knowledge of astronomy, failed to include this information in their own work.[47] Why this material was neglected is hard to say,[48] but it is clear that what little interest had been manifested during colonial times in these and related topics had largely evaporated by the time Joseph Smith acquired the papyri.

Creation

In light of the Genesis and nonbiblical accounts of Abraham's life, the Book of Abraham's emphasis on the creation is even more exceptional than its lengthy discussions on Egypt, idolatry, and astronomy. Two of the Book of Abraham's five chapters are devoted entirely to the creation, yet none of the sources available in the early nineteenth century (at least as far as I am aware) contained any traditions suggesting that Abraham had a detailed knowledge of the creation. If such sources were available, certainly none of the commentators examined here referred to them, suggesting that the idea was completely original (at least as far as Americans living in the early nineteenth century knew) with Joseph Smith.

Sarah

One of the more interesting, if less significant, points of comparison between the Book of Abraham and the commentators is Abraham's telling Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister rather than his wife. This deception on the part of an otherwise exemplary individual elicited a variety of responses from Joseph's learned countrymen. Henry viewed Abraham's instructions to his wife as "[a] great fault," rooted in a "jealous timorous fancy he had" about how the Egyptians

44. Watson, *Biblical and Theological Dictionary,* 9. Blunt is so bold as to conclude that "in all probability in his earlier years, Abram himself [was] idolatrous." Although he only cites Joshua 24:2 as evidence, his willingness to conclude thus may reflect a familiarity with the numerous nonbiblical traditions that would support this charge. Blunt, *Twelve Lectures,* 4.
45. Whiston appealed to various Greek authors for his information on human sacrifice in Egypt; see "Dissertation," 543.
46. Ibid., 548. In my efforts to find mention of Abraham's familiarity with the stars and his teaching the Egyptians, I examined each commentator's observations on Genesis 12:10–30; 15:5; and 22:17.
47. Henry's commentary predates Whiston's work.
48. My own guess is that such topics had little relevance for a nation preoccupied with personal conversion and proper Christian living.

would respond to Sarah's striking beauty.[49] Scott, similarly, found "the conduct of Abram . . . exceedingly culpable, and inconsistent with the character of 'the father of the faithful.'" "His counsel to Sarai could arise from nothing but distrust and unbelief," he intoned, "[a]nd his language implied a strong dependence on the success of his carnal policy."[50] Jumping to Abraham's defense, Clarke argued that "Abram did not wish his wife to tell a *falsehood,* but he wished her to suppress a part of the *truth,*" while Watson saw the whole affair as "perhaps no more than an act of common prudence, as the Seraglio of the Egyptian monarch was supplied by any means, however violent and lawless."[51] One gets the impression that there were as many interpretations of Abraham's conduct here as there were commentators, but accusers and defenders alike seem to agree that Abraham was acting on his own recognizance at this point.

The Book of Abraham's account of this story, of course, clears Abraham of any wrongdoing by simply pointing out that Abraham was not acting on his own. As the record makes clear, it was the Lord who "informed" Abraham of his wife's beauty, who warned Abraham that the Egyptians would indeed kill him if they knew he was her husband, and who commanded him to have her tell the Egyptians that she was his sister (Abraham 2:22–25). Abraham was obeying, that is, more than he was lying, and that which evoked such strong statements and opinions from among Joseph's learned contemporaries was a nonissue for the Latter-day Saints.

Conclusion

Critics' charges that Joseph Smith borrowed and adapted popular ideas in the production of Latter-day Saint scripture and doctrine are unfounded in the case of the Book of Abraham. The Book of Abraham was published when American interest in the ancient patriarch was very limited. When Abraham was invoked by religious Americans at this time, he was usually being used as an example of pious Christian living and was hardly distinguishable from the hundreds of other such examples—ancient and modern—from which aspiring and practicing Christians were taking their cues. The Book of Abraham recounts very few of the events in Abraham's life that Joseph's contemporaries found most noteworthy but rather focuses on events and topics—like his experiences with idolatry and his knowledge of astronomy—that, although known through nonbiblical sources in the early nineteenth century, received only minimal attention from scholars and laymen outside the church. Had the ideas of his neighbors been Joseph Smith's inspiration for the Book of Abraham, in short, the book would have been a very different thing than it actually is.

49. Henry, *Exposition,* 88.

50. Scott, *Holy Bible,* 1:G2–3.

51. Clarke, *Holy Bible,* 95; Watson, *Biblical and Theological Dictionary,* 10.