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A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price: Part 7: The Unknown Abraham (Continued)

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Part 7
(Continued)

The Unknown Abraham

By Dr. Hugh Nibley

Potiphar's Hill: One of the most interesting aspects of the many stories of Abraham's narrow escape from a sacrificial death is the strange and puzzling setting of the drama. There has never been any agreement among commentators as to just where all this is supposed to have happened. The Book of Abraham puts it on Asian soil under Egyptian hegemony. To Dr. John Peters, who had actually supervised archaeological diggings in Babylonia, the overlapping of Egyptian and Chaldean elements in the Book of Abraham "displays an amusing ignorance," since "Chaldeans and Egyptians are hopelessly mixed together, although as dissimilar and remote in language, religion and locality as are today American and Chinese."¹ Though Mercer rushed to the defense of Peters, his unfortunate remark played right into the hands of the Mormons, for with the progress of archaeology, the cultural and religious ties between Egypt and Mesopotamia have become steadily more conspicuous and significant. Within a few years of Peter's pronouncement, Jacques de Morgan entitled an epoch-making study of the early royal tombs of Abydos "The Chaldean Origin of Pharaonic Culture in Egypt."² In this vast field of comparative study, all that concerns us here is the situation depicted in Facsimile No. 1, the location of the story being pinpointed for us in graphic detail in Abraham's account.

First we are taken to the far-flung area known as Chaldea (see Abr. 1:20, 30; 2:1), and then to what would seem to be a more limited territory designated as "the land of Chaldea" (Abr. 1:8). The common

expression "the land of So-and-so" nearly always limits an area to the region around a particular religious or political center, and this would appear to apply in the present case as the camera brings us closer to a still more limited area within the land of Chaldea, namely "the land of Ur, of Chaldea." (Abr. 1:20.) This is not the well-known city of Ur, for what we see is an open plain, "the plain of Olishem" (Abr. 1:10), and as the camera zooms in still closer we are swept to one end of the plain and our attention is directed to a hill; finally at the foot of the hill we are brought to rest before an altar at which a priest is in the act of making a sacrifice. (Abr. 1:9-11.) According to the other accounts, the plain was full of people at the time, and Abraham was the victim.

Of recent years attention has been drawn increasingly to the significant fact that all the main events of Abraham's life seem to take place at ancient cult-centers.³ The patriarchs, O. Eissfeldt observes, "seem to have worshipped at established cult-places, where they set up their own altars," and though many problems are raised by this strange situation, the study of those cult places and their activities offers "a great deal that gives the authentic picture of the Patriarchal Age."⁴ J. C. L. Gibson suggests that Abraham's family probably only visited Ur as pilgrims, and observes that such a world-famous center of pagan worship offered a peculiarly "appropriate setting . . . for Abraham's confrontation by a God who was greater than Sin. . . ."⁵ Professor Albright has pointed out that in all the wanderings and vicissitudes of Abraham's career, "only

places are mentioned which are known to have been important in the donkey caravan trade of that age."⁶ These would also be cult places. But one must distinguish between the daily liturgies of local shrines and temples and the great year-rites at which vast numbers of people assembled. According to all the traditions, it was at the latter type of celebration that Abraham was offered up, and the legends throw some light on the kind of place chosen for the rites. The main fixtures are a plain and an elevation.

In one account we learn that the King of Sodom and the other kings round about used to repair "to the valley of Sava, the place where all the star-worshippers were wont to assemble," and that there on one occasion Abraham was honored by being placed upon a high tower-like structure made of cedar while the people hailed him as "their king, a lord and a god"; Abraham, however, refused to play the game, telling the people that they should take God for their king instead of a mortal.⁷ The fact that the people already had kings presiding at the ceremonies, and the ritual setting of the event, including the cedar tower, which ample parallel instances show to be a sacrificial pyre, make it quite clear what kind of king Abraham was expected to be—a substitute and sacrificial king. We are reminded of Abraham the royal victim in Facsimile No. 1, followed by Abraham on the royal throne in Facsimile No. 3. Even more striking is the resemblance to King Benjamin on his tower at the great year-rite of Zarahemla, laying down his office and telling the people that instead of him they should take God for their king.⁸ This is another reminder that there are probably far more authentic Hebrew traditions in the Book of Mormon, including extensive quotations from ancient writings (Benjamin's speech is full of them), than anyone has so far suspected.

Another report of what seems to be the same tradition tells us that south of Sodom and Gomorrah there was a broad plain half a day's journey long, where every year the people of the whole region would gather at a spot marked by green meadows and a spring to indulge in four days of promiscuous and orgiastic rites during which every young woman was expected to make herself available to any who approached her.⁹ This is the well-known fertility aspect of the year-rite, not overlooked in the Book of Abraham, which tells of princesses being sacrificed "because of their virtue" as part of the ceremonies. (Abr. 1:11.)

In these accounts the setting is typical of the ancient cult-places with their broad "plain of assembly," the elevated mound, hill, or tower (hence pyramid and ziggurat), and the altar for sacrificing. As we have noted, the legends emphasize the importance of having the sacrifice of Abraham take place at the great



New Year assembly, with Abraham as a more or less routine victim, a situation clearly reflected in the Book of Abraham. (Abr. 1:10-12.)

But why *Potiphar's Hill*? As Richards Durham observes, "this would indeed seem (at least in the thinking of a good many adverse critics of Joseph Smith) to be a highly unsophisticated borrowing from Genesis 37:36 . . ."—a desperate attempt to fill up the story with something that sounds Egyptian.¹⁰ But the name is not confined to the Bible and seems to have definite ritual associations.¹¹ It is found on a small limestone stela of the early 21st Dynasty belonging to one Putiphar and containing also the names of his sons Petusir and Petuneit.¹²

This illustrates well the nature of those names beginning in *Petu-* *Puti-* *Poti-* (eg., *pa-di-*) meaning "given of" or "appointed by" such-and-such a god. Putiphar means "The one whom the god Re has given," or has appointed, while his sons Petusir and Petuneit are the gifts of Osiris and Neith respectively.¹²

Scholars have not been able to agree as to whether the Potiphar who bought Joseph (Gen. 37:36, 39:1) has the same name as the Potiphara whose daughter he married (Gen. 41:45, 40; 46:20). F. Cook suggested that the last syllable of the latter name may refer not to Re but to Pharaoh, "if we take *pr* here in the meaning of the Palace or metaphorically the Sovereign."¹³ But it is agreed that the name of Joseph's father-in-law should be "Given of Re" because he was the high priest of Heliopolis or On, the center of prehistoric Egyptian sun worship.¹⁴ The cultic significance of the name is also indicated by its appearance on a sacred *wdat-eye* amulet, cut in Aramaic letters which date it to the end of the seventh century B.C., about the same time as the Ptuiphar stela.¹⁵

Potiphar's Hill would be "the hill of the one whom Re has given, or appointed," which makes good sense since Re is the sun and we are explicitly told that Potiphar's Hill was a sun shrine, the "god of Pharaoh" being worshiped there in company with a god who definitely was the sun. (Abr. 1:9.) Classical historians have recorded that the Egyptian name of Joseph, son-in-law of the priest of On, was Peteseiph,¹⁶ and that Moses not only went by the name of Osarsiph but was himself "a priest of Heliopolis."¹⁷ Peteseiph, plainly suggested by *Io-seph*, could mean "He (God) has given increase," while Osarsiph would be "Osiris is increase." What is noteworthy here is the intimacy between the family of Abraham and the Potiphar complex. We must not overlook the fact that the name *Iwnw* or Heliopolis, occurring twice in the inscription around the rim of Facsimile No. 2, definitely associates the facsimile with the Heliopolitan cult.

The Jews and early Christians alike had a special reverence for Heliopolis. When the Jews in Egypt under the leadership of Onias undertook to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 19 by building a temple in Egypt after the pattern of that at Jerusalem, the spot they chose for the sacred edifice was the site of the ruined temple of Heliopolis.¹⁸ And the early Christian Clementine writings go to "the altar of the sun" at Heliopolis to find their most compelling illustration and proof of the reality of resurrection in the tradition of the Phoenix bird.¹⁹

Heliopolis ("Sun City"), the On of the Old Testament (eg., *Iwnw*), was "the most important cult-center of Egypt."²⁰ A great "Megalithic" complex of prehistoric antiquity, it was the model of the "normal pyramid complex" of later times, though instead of the usual pyramid at its apex, it had "a rather squat obelisk perched on a square base like a truncated pyramid. The obelisk recalled a very ancient stone at Heliopolis known as *bmbn*, etymologically perhaps 'the radiant one,' which undoubtedly symbolized a ray or rays of the sun."²¹ This monument stood on a raised platform, and directly before it stood "a large alabaster altar."²¹ Here at "the periodic renewal of the kingship . . . the gods of the two halves of the country assembled to honor the Pharaoh," their images taking up their positions in a row before the altar in the "vast Jubilee court," the place of assembly.²²

The great central stone and its bases, from which the later pyramids were derived, "was the specific Heliopolitan form of the Primeval Hill," either resting on or representing the "High Sand," the first solid ground to emerge from the waters of the flood on the day of creation.²³ Though the design of this monument differs from place to place, it is always the Primeval Hill from which the sun arose on "that momentous sunrise of the First Day."²⁴ The common Egyptian verb *khai*, used to signify the appearance of the King in glory, "is written with a hieroglyph depicting the sun rising over the Primeval Hill," for "the concepts of creation, sunrise, and kingly rule are continually merged."²⁵ Not only was the hill the central object of every solar shrine, but "each and every temple was supposed to stand" on the Primeval Hill.²⁶

Nothing of the old Heliopolitan complex has survived, and its reconstruction is based on copies of it (as Gardiner calls them) in other places. But Egyptian ritual and literature often give us fleeting glimpses of the setup at On. Thus a late Egyptian romance tells of a fierce contest between the champions of Pharaoh and the ruler of Ethiopia, both rivals bearing the name of Hor, in which the false pretender from the south is "cast down from upon the hill on the

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east of On” to sink into the waters of death at its foot.²⁷ The losing ruler must in the end submit to a terrible beating, which was originally meant for Pharaoh himself, i.e., the King’s rival is sacrificed in his place after a ritual combat at the Sun-hill of On.²⁷ We see the same motif in the Metternich Stele, which tells how “Hor was pierced in the field of On on the north of the altar,” but was miraculously healed. This refers to the New Year’s combat between Horus and Seth for the rule of the world, only instead of the hill, it is the plain and the altar which receive mention.²⁸

If Heliopolis was the most venerable of sun shrines, it was by no means the only one; at least six kings of the 5th Dynasty are known to have constructed their own complexes, “each with its own name, like ‘Pleasure of Re,’ ‘Horizon of Re,’ ‘Field of Re.’”²⁹ Note that all the names end with Re. So does the name of Potiphar, “Given of Re.” The predominance of the name of Hor or Horus in the stories (Horus being the type of the living Pharaoh mounting the throne) suggests another cult-place and one closely tied to Abraham. For Phathur or Petor, if it is not actually a corruption of Potiphar, means perhaps “Given of Horus,” and was originally the name of Aram Naharaim, Abraham’s native city, when it was first settled by Aram and his brother Rekhob—there is much in the story to indicate that Phathur was an old cult-place.³⁰ If the story shows a fine disregard of chronology, we must remember that nothing makes a hash of chronology like ritual does, since ritual deals with real but *repeated* events.

It is clear enough that Abraham’s escape from the altar took place on Asiatic soil, which was at the time under Egyptian domination. The officiating priest, though properly “the priest of Elkenah,” was “also the Priest of Pharaoh.” (Abr. 1:7.) This was only a temporary state of affairs, however, for Abraham’s “now at *this* time it *was* the custom . . .” definitely implies that at the time of writing it was no longer so. Theodor Boehl’s observation that when the curtain rises on the patriarchal dramas “Egypt no longer rules Canaan” suits well with the picture in the Book of Abraham where Pharaoh rules in Canaan only at the outset.³¹ Also consistent with the modern reconstruction of the picture is the mixture of outlandish “strange gods” (Abr. 1:5-6, 8), among whose number was counted “a

god *like unto* that of Pharaoh” (Abr. 1:13), a clear implication that Pharaoh’s authority is being honored on non-Egyptian territory. We are reminded of the situation in Byblos, where Pharaoh’s god and glory came and went in the temples, depending on whether Egypt had power locally or not.

That we have to do with an overlapping of Egyptian and Canaanitish or Amorite customs is apparent from the double nomenclatures used in Abraham’s story. The holy place was “called Potiphar’s Hill,” a very proper designation for the indispensable central object, the sun hill, of a shrine operating on the pattern of Heliopolis under the auspices of Pharaoh. But the plain itself, having existed from time immemorial, bore its local Semitic name, “the plain of Oli-shem.” (Abr. 1:10.) But since Oli-shem can be readily recognized by any first-year Hebrew student as meaning something like “Hill of Heaven,” “High-place of Heaven,” or even possibly “Sun-hill,”³² the Plain of the High Place of Heaven was probably a holy center before the times of Egyptian influence. This is borne out by Abraham’s careful specification that the sacrifices were made “even after the manner of the Egyptians” (Abr. 1:9), clearly implying that there was another tradition. We learn in verses 8 and 9 that “at this time” *two* deities shared the honors of the great shrine, the one “the god of Pharaoh” and the other “the god of Shagreel,” who, we are flatly told, “was the sun” (*ibid.*).

Note, however, that it was not Shagreel who was the sun but “the god of Shagreel.” And who was Shagreel himself? Another happy guess: The old desert tribes, whose beliefs and practices, as A. Alt has recently demonstrated at length, are of primary importance in understanding the background of the Abraham traditions,³³ worshiped the star Sirius under the name of *Shighre* or *Shaghre*, and Shagre-el in their idiom means “Shagre is God.” Sirius is interesting in ritual because of its unique association, amounting at times to identify, with the sun. Shighre, according to Lane’s *Dictionary*, designates *whatever* star is at the moment the brightest object in the heavens, and it has recently been discovered, as R. Anthes notes, that “the heavenly Horus was a star as well as the sun . . . whatever body happens to be presiding over the sky.”³⁴ The King of Egypt in the rites of On is able, “with the Dog Star (Sirius) as guide,” to find the place of resurrection at “the Primeval Hill, an island . . . pre-eminently suitable for a resurrection from death.”³⁵ The most important event in the history of the universe, according to the Egyptians, was the Heliacal Rising of Sirius, when Sirius, the sun, and the Nile all rose together on the morning of the New Year, the Day of Creation, as officially proclaimed from the

great observatory of Heliopolis.³⁶ Without expanding on the theme, it will be enough here to note that the sun, the hill, and Sirius are inseparably connected in the rites, as they are in the Book of Abraham, where we find "the god of Pharaoh, and also . . . the god of Shagreel . . . the sun" receiving sacrifices side by side at Potiphar's Hill. (Abr. 1:9.)

If we have not yet located the site of the doings indicated in Facsimile No. 1, we have at least been given a pretty good idea where to look and an even better idea of what to look for. "Much careful thought has of late been devoted to . . . questions connected with the sun-temples," wrote Gardiner, "but only with limited success through the lack of positive evidence."³⁷ Certain main features stand out clearly, however, and if we are not obliged to leap to conclusions, we are obliged by what little we have seen to look further. At the great complex of Niuserre, examined by Burchardt, we see all the gods "from all over the land" standing in order before the altar that stands at the foot of the Hill of the Sunrise.³⁸ Is that not much the situation that meets us in the Abraham story? In both cases there is a shrine devoted to the worship of the sun, entirely under the auspices of Pharaoh, held at a sacred Hill of the Sun whose theophoric name ends in Re, which stands at the head of a vast flat assembly place, by a sacrificial altar, before which stand the images of the deities of the whole land. (Fac. 1, Figs. 5-8, Abr. 1:13; Fac. 2, Fig. 6.) All such holy places have their origin and prototype in Heliopolis, and that goes for Abraham's shrine as well, as the name Potiphar makes clear; as at On, so at Potiphar's Hill, the sun and Sirius were worshiped side by side.

Only recently has the common meeting ground of Mesopotamian and Egyptian religion become vaguely discernable—in Canaan. Until 1929 no direct connection was known between the cults of Mesopotamia and Egypt, but in that year was discovered at Tel-el-Chassul in what was once Canaan the now famous mural with its eight-rayed disk representing either the sun or Sirius in an impressive cult scene.³⁹ M. H. Segal suggests that it was the Israelites, and Abraham in particular, who furnished an important link between the great year-rites of Babylonia and Egypt, since "it may be conjectured that the principal beliefs associated with these two festivals [the principal year-rites] in Judaism were already well-known to ancient Israel in Egypt from their Mesopotamian heritage."⁴⁰ Abraham, Cyrus Gordon reminds us, "was not an isolated immigrant, but part of a larger movement from Ur of the Chaldees [and similar communities] into Canaan," which carried strange gods to Ugarit on the Syrian coast "and even penetrated through

Canaan into Egypt."⁴¹ The mixing of gods and nations, especially those of Egypt and Canaan, was the order of the day in Abraham's time, and nowhere is the phenomenon more clearly in evidence than in the Book of Abraham.⁴² O

FOOTNOTES

- ¹In F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith as Translator*, p. 28.
²J. de Morgan, *La Préhistoire Orientale*, Vol. 2 (Paris, 1926), Ch. 6.
³The relationship of the Patriarchs to these ancient centers raises many problems, discussed by A. Alt, "The God of the Father," in his *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), pp. 3-77.
⁴O. Eissfeldt, in *Ex Oriente Lux*, Vol. 17 (1963), p. 161.
⁵J. C. L. Gibson, in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 7 (1962), p. 58. The importance of the moon-cult in the Abraham histories has been greatly overdone, according to E. König, in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 22 (1931/2), p. 124. Actually the legends say nothing of the moon-cult but tell only of a showdown between Abraham and a king to whom he was obnoxious. König notes in this connection (p. 126) that "it is not true . . . that the importance of the Bible lies in monotheism."
⁶W. F. Albright, *Archaeology, Historical Analogy and Early Biblical Tradition* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana, 1966), p. 126.
⁷Midrash Bereshit Rabba, Vol. 42, pp. 4, 7, 8; Vol. 53, pp. 2-4, cit. in M. J. bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, Vol. 2 (Frankfurt, 1914), pp. 170f.
⁸Mosiah 2. We have treated the subject at length in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (1957), Ch. 23, and in *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake, Deseret, 1967), pp. 279-83.
⁹Sefer Ha-Yashar, pp. 35b, 36a, in bin Gorion, Vol. 2, pp. 211f.
¹⁰R. Durham, "Potiphar's Hill" and the "Canopic" Complex of Gods (private issue), pp. 1-2. This work should be better known.
¹¹Because it is found only in late Egyptian documents, scholars have concluded that the biblical story of Joseph must contain anachronisms, but A. Hamada, in *Annales du Service*, Vol. 39 (1939), p. 273, and J. Leibovitch, *ibid.*, Vol. 43 (1943), p. 89, show that the Egyptian forms of the name they study indicate that the name has come down from much earlier times.
¹²Hamada, *op. cit.*, p. 274.
¹³*ibid.*, p. 276, with disapproval.
¹⁴Leibovitch, in *Annales du Service*, Vol. 43, p. 89.
¹⁵*ibid.*, pp. 87-89.
¹⁶Chaeremon of Alexandria, cited by Josephus, *contra Apionem*, I, 290.
¹⁷*ibid.*, I, 26.
¹⁸Josephus, *Ant.*, Vol. 13, 3:1-3.
¹⁹Clemens Romanus, *Ep. ad Cor.* 1:25; *Constitutiones Apostolicae*, 5:7; cf. Pliny, *Nat. Hist.*, Vol. 10, p. 2 (2-5).
²⁰H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon*, p. 543.
²¹A. H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, pp. 85-86.
²²Gardiner, *ibid.*, and *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 30 (1944), p. 27.
²³H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 153.
²⁴*ibid.*, p. 154. Cf. H. R. Hall, in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 10, p. 187.
²⁵Frankfort, *op. cit.*, pp. 57, 151-52; cf. Gardiner's Sign-list, N 28.
²⁶Frankfort, p. 81; Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, pp. 85f; *Apostolic Constitutions*, 5:7.
²⁷F. L. Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis* (Oxford, 1900), pp. 61-64. The waters were the great Acherousian marsh bordering on "Heliopolis, the Gate of the Sun," Diodorus, Vol. 1, p. 96.
²⁸C. E. Sander-Hansen, *Die Texte der Metternichstele* (Copenhagen, 1956), p. 50, Spruch IX, lines 89-90. Sander-Hansen renders the altar-sign as a proper place-name, Hotep, but the symbols mean literally "the place of the altar," the basic meaning of the htp-sign being "altar," *Woerterbuch*, Vol. 3, p. 183.
²⁹Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, p. 85.
³⁰Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1, p. 299. The name of Rekhob alone would guarantee its religious background. On the origin of Near Eastern cities as cult-places, see our study in the *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 19 (1966), pp. 599ff. The spelling Phethur is after *Sefer ha-Yashar*, 42b-43a. Certainly the old center of Ptho (Pitru) from which abominable rites of prostitution of the cult of Balaam were imported into Israel and which lay "towards the borders of Anatolia" was a cult center; see Z. Mayani, *Les Hyksos et le Monde de la Bible* (Paris: Payot, 1956), p. 188. Ptho would be the later (Coptic) form of Pet-hor.
³¹T. Boehl, in *Ex Oriente Lux*, Vol. 17, pp. 131f.
³²Gesenius, *Hebrew-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1952), p. 752; "ul, 'height,'" p. 1029f: "Shamah, Shami, 'visible heavens, sky,'" etc. Philo, in Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*, X, 1, says that "the Egyptians think the Sun is the only God, and call it Beel-sham," meaning Lord of heaven but definitely designating the sun.
³³A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford, 1966), pp. 31ff.
³⁴R. Anthes, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, p. 159; already Breasted, *Religion and Thought*, p. 101, noted that the rising dead is a star—the brightest star, but he is also the sun.
³⁵Frankfort, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
³⁶Plutarch, *De sollicitudine animae*, 20, in T. Hopfner, *Fontes historiae religionis aegyptiacae*, p. 265; Diodorus, I, 11. Chalchidius, cited in Hopfner, p. 512, says the Egyptians measured the small and the great year by Sirius, which they called *ach*, i.e. the symbol of the sun rising over the Primeval Hill. See R. Faulkner, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, pp. 159f.
³⁷Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs*, p. 86.
³⁸*ibid.*, pp. 85-86.
³⁹A. Mallon, in *Melanges Maspero*, Vol. 1, i, pp. 55-59.
⁴⁰M. H. Segal, in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 53 (1962), p. 254.
⁴¹C. Gordon, *Before the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
⁴²The situation is dramatically described by C. Gordon in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 13 (1954), pp. 58f.