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An Introduction to the Book of Abraham

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Abstract: John Gee's long-awaited work on the book of Abraham provides the reader with a plethora of information regarding an important and sacred work within the Mormon scriptural canon. From the offset, Gee emphasizes that his purpose is to "make reliable information about the book of Abraham accessible to the general reader" (ix), and he is largely successful in doing this. My treatment of Gee's work here consists of three parts. First, I will provide an overview and evaluation of the content of *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*. In the second part, I will offer some suggestions for improvement. Finally, I will mention the implications of Gee's work for the reception of the book of Abraham in other Latter-day Saint traditions, with particular focus on my own denomination: the Community of Christ—formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS).



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John Gee. *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*.
Salt Lake City: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2017.

Reviewed by Adam Oliver Stokes

John Gee's long-awaited work on the book of Abraham provides the reader with a plethora of information regarding an important and sacred work within the Mormon scriptural canon. From the offset, Gee emphasizes that his purpose is to "make reliable information about the book of Abraham accessible to the general reader" (ix), and he is largely successful in doing this. My treatment of Gee's work here consists of three parts. First, I will provide an overview and evaluation of the content of *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*. In the second part, I will offer some suggestions for improvement. Finally, I will mention the implications of Gee's work for the reception of the book of Abraham in other Latter-day Saint traditions, with particular focus on my own denomination: the Community of Christ—formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS).

Gee's treatment of the book of Abraham represents a significant departure from previous studies of the book, including Gee's own work in the past. LDS scholarship has previously gone in two directions, focusing either on the historical context of the book or on its theological content, but Gee's work here addresses both of these issues in a single volume. His examination of the context in which the book of Abraham arose as well as its unique theological contributions represent LDS scholarship at its finest. As one familiar with the content of the book of Abraham but largely unacquainted with its historical background, I learned many things about the work that I suspect will be new even to those who have read it for many years.

Gee provides historical information on the ancient owners of the papyri from which the book of Abraham was translated. He identifies the owners as high-ranking Egyptain clergy, which, he argues, serves to strengthen the historicity of the text (a controversial subject as even Gee

admits). He also notes other evidence for the historicity of the book of Abraham, ranging from parallels with other ancient Near Eastern biographies (for example, the autobiography of Idrimi, who lived a century and a half after Abraham) to the evidence for human sacrifice among the ancient Egyptians—an activity that is noted in the book of Abraham but that Egyptology and Near Eastern studies have largely ignored.

Though Gee employs Egyptian and Hebrew philology when necessary, he does so in such a way that does not confuse or overwhelm those unfamiliar with these languages and that is relevant to those, particularly within faith communities, who engage with the Abraham story. For example, he provides background material for the story in which Abraham claims that Sarah is his sister (found in Gen. 20:2–16 and Abr. 2:22–25), noting that the “Egyptian word for sister (*sone*) means both *sister* and *wife*” (102). Most helpful are the annotated bibliographies provided at the end of each chapter in which the reader can find additional information on the topics Gee addresses. This material could have been inserted into the text of these chapters, but in doing so Gee might have easily overwhelmed the nonacademic reader.

I would now like to provide some of my own suggestions regarding some specific issues addressed by Gee. While he indeed does an excellent job of making philological material accessible to the reader, I thought that there were ways he could have improved his use of the philology. This critique applies most notably to his discussion of the Creation narrative in chapters 4 and 5 of the book of Abraham. For those familiar with this section, it provides an account of the Creation similar to the Priestly version, the notable difference being that multiple gods are mentioned in the book of Abraham instead of one. Gee correctly notes that “the notion of multiple gods is not completely foreign to the biblical account” and that the Hebrew “term translated as ‘God’ is *’elohîm*, which has the form of a grammatical plural” (130). I would have appreciated Gee expanding on his explanation here given its significance for those both within the larger Mormon tradition (for example, the Community of Christ) and within anti-Mormon circles who assert that LDS Mormonism incorrectly advocates for polytheism.

In most places in the Hebrew Bible where the term *elohim* is used to refer to the Hebrew God, the definite article (*he*) is placed before it so that the reader knows that the term refers to one particular deity (*ha-elohim* = the god). In Genesis 1, however, the term *elohim* lacks the definite article and as such can indeed be translated to the text that appears in the book of Abraham, namely, “gods.” Had Gee chosen to

explain the use of *elohim* in more detail, he would have strengthened his argument about the theological correctness of the Abraham Creation account considerably.

Another suggestion regards Gee's treatment of the subject of race in the book of Abraham. He correctly notes that "some claim that the Book of Abraham is used primarily to sanction racial bigotry" (163), a notion that anti-Mormon writers indeed often point out in their literature. He then goes on to state that the "Book of Abraham does not discuss race and curses no one with slavery" (164). While the latter point is correct, the former is not. The Egyptians in Abraham are linked not only to Ham but also to the Canaanites (Abr. 1:21), who are explicitly mentioned as being black in Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible (Moses 7:22; JST Gen. 7:29).

Gee does acknowledge that racist interpretations of Abraham start to appear in LDS literature around 1895 (164). With that said, I believe that by dismissing the notion of race in the book, he misses the opportunity to push back on racist interpretations. While the statement that Pharaoh was cursed "as pertaining to the Priesthood" is well known among LDS readers of the text, along with its consequences and connections to the ban on priesthood ordination for men of African descent, I would have welcomed a discussion of the very positive references to the black Egyptians/Canaanites contained in the book of Abraham, such as the statement on Pharaoh being blessed with wisdom and the depiction of the Hamite women as pious martyrs, killed for their devotion to the true God (Abr. 1:26, 11).

I want to close by mentioning my own personal experience with the book of Abraham and offer one last suggestion for Gee to expand on the excellent work he has done here. Though I identify as a member of the Community of Christ, my initial interactions with Mormonism were largely, if not exclusively, with LDS Mormons for whom the book of Abraham is scripture. The first copy of the Book of Mormon I ever owned was the 1981 triple combination, which also contained the LDS Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price, the last of which includes the book of Abraham. Hence, in my own devotionals, I read the book of Abraham in the same manner that I read the Book of Mormon and believed it had the authority of a sacred text. It was not until I became involved in the Community of Christ that I learned that the book of Abraham was the one text from the LDS canon not considered scripture by the RLDS church.

I mention this because I strongly believe that those of us in the RLDS tradition could learn much from the book of Abraham, and I must

admit that I was somewhat disappointed that Gee does not touch on the status of the text in other LDS traditions in his treatment of the book's interpretive history. This is not to say that I ever see the Community of Christ accepting the book of Abraham as scripture, but members should nonetheless be exposed to it as part of the corpus of writings attributed to Joseph Smith. Indeed, there is much overlap between the content found in the book of Abraham and the stories of Abraham found in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, which is considered sacred scripture by the RLDS church.

In spite of this omission, as someone who has always viewed the book of Abraham with fondness, I am very grateful to Gee for this work. It was truly a spiritual experience to absorb the information and insights provided by Gee while at the same time reading the book of Abraham in my now old LDS triple combination. Gee has certainly succeeded in his goal of making the material in Abraham available and comprehensible to readers. His work is a great contribution not only to the field of LDS studies, but also to biblical and Near Eastern studies more generally. He is to be deeply commended for his efforts here.

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