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THE CREATION OF HUMANKIND, AN ALLEGORY?

A NOTE ON ABRAHAM 5:7, 14–16

Richard D. Draper

Many people are curious about beginnings, especially the beginnings of humankind. Conservative Jews and Christians look to the book of Genesis for information. Latter-day Saints do the same thing, but many with trepidation. They believe there are some things in the account that are not to be taken literally. Joseph Fielding Smith expressed his reservations by saying that “the Lord has not seen fit to tell us definitely just how Adam came for we are not ready to receive that truth.”¹ He promised that the “time will come when we shall be informed all about Adam and the manner of creation.” Most do agree that the account as told in our modern-day Genesis is close to Moses’ original but also believe that the creation narrative includes a mixture of reality and metaphor. Therefore, they give Moses credit for creating both the historical and allegorical portions of the narrative. This paper looks at the contribution the Book of Abraham makes to this idea.

The book of Genesis has no problem telling its reader precisely how Adam came to be. It recounts how God said to another, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them” (Genesis 1:26–28). The record is also clear as to the method. Concerning Adam, it states, “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). The method of Eve’s creation is equally explicit: “And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman” (Genesis 2:21–22). A literal reading of the text insists that God molded Adam as a brick before enlivening him and then transformed one of Adam’s ribs into a woman.

1. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:110.

Through Joseph Smith, Latter-day Saints have additional scriptures that deal with the advent of humankind on the planet. A revelation the Prophet received between June and October 1830 restored material that originally belonged to Genesis but had become lost.² The question is, does this new material change the Genesis account of humankind's creation in any essential way? The answer is no. From it, we learn that God "said unto mine Only Begotten, which was with me from the beginning: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and it was so. . . . And I, God, created man in mine own image, in the image of mine Only Begotten created I him; male and female created I them" (Moses 2:26–27). Except for learning that Jehovah was the unnamed person whom God addressed in Genesis, the scripture adds nothing new to this portion of the creation account. The same is true when the text describes the actual advent of Adam. It says matter of factly that "I, the Lord God, formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul, the first flesh upon the earth, the first man also" (Moses 3:7). The change from Adam being made "of the dust of the earth" to "from the dust of the earth" seems insignificant. The basic outline of the narrative remains the same. This is also true of the creation of Eve. According to the restored material, God said that "the rib which I, the Lord God, had taken from man, made I a woman" (Moses 3:22). The only difference between the two accounts is a voice shift from third to first person. In both, God makes Adam's rib into a woman.

The agreement between the two accounts has not persuaded all Latter-day Saints to take them literally. One of the earliest to take exception was Parley P. Pratt. In his work *Key to the Science of Theology*, Pratt wrote that due to apostasy:

Man was no longer counted worthy to retain the knowledge of his heavenly origin. . . . At length a Moses came, who knew his God, and would fain have led mankind to know Him too, and see Him face to face. But they could not receive His heavenly laws or bide His presence.

Thus the holy man was forced again to veil the past in mystery, and in the beginning of his history assign to man an earthly origin.

Man, moulded from the earth, as a brick.

Woman, manufactured from a rib.

Thus, parents still would fain conceal from budding manhood the mysteries of procreation, or the sources of life's ever-flowing river, by relating some childish tale of new-born life.³

With these words, Elder Pratt rejected the literal reading of the Genesis and Moses texts and suggested a new understanding. At the same time, he explained why Moses chose to hide the real story behind symbols: Israel was too spiritually immature to handle the truth. To protect them, Moses veiled the secrets of creation.

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2. See Moses 1:41. Joseph Smith received a revelation in June 1830 that he called the "visions of Moses," comprising chapter one of the Book of Moses in the current Pearl of Great Price. The information contained therein has no biblical counterpart, but it does give the setting through which Moses gained an understanding of the creation story. Joseph Smith's understanding came as part of the Prophet's work on his "plainer translation" of the Bible. We do not know the date when he finished his work on Genesis 2, but it is likely it was well before September 1830, when the Prophet went to Fayette, New York, for conference. See Robert J. Matthews, *"A Plainer Translation": Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1985).
 3. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1893), 55–56.

Brigham Young also rejected the biblical account. He told the Saints, “When you tell me that Father Adam was made as we make adobes from the earth, you tell me what I deem an idle tale.” He went on to explain that “Mankind are here because they are the offspring of parents who were first brought here from another planet, and power was given them to propagate their species.”⁴

Latter-day Saints are not the only ones who insist on viewing portions of the Bible in a less-than-literal way. Men and women have been doing this kind of thing with sacred texts at least from the first millennium B.C. The ancient Greek noun for proclaiming an idea with a meaning other than the one readily apparent was ἀλληγορία. The verb describing this action was ἀλληγορέω and product of the action was ἀλληγοούμενα. From the noun ἀλληγορία comes the English word *allegory*. All these words denote speaking or writing in such a way the hearers or readers should not take literally.⁵

The Greeks recognized two types of allegory: one the conscious creation of the author and the other something superimposed by the critical reader. Today, we refer to the former as “allegoric” and the latter as “allegoristic.”⁶

Elder Pratt argues that the account of humankind’s creation was allegoric: Moses deliberately created the symbolism to veil reality. Though Brigham Young does not say anything about Moses per se, he does view the Genesis account as highly symbolic. Why did these two men believe this? Their idea does not seem to have come from Joseph Smith. Nothing in the Prophet’s public teachings suggests that he took the Bible account any way but literally. During midsummer of 1830, he received the creation material found in Moses chapters three and four, which follows the Genesis account of humankind’s creation closely and, thereby, reinforces the accuracy of the Bible. In 1831 he corrected the Savior’s genealogy as given in Luke 3:38 from reading “Seth, which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God” to “Seth, which was the son of Adam, who was formed of God, and the first man upon the earth” (JST Luke 3:45). The Prophet’s change suggests he felt Luke would be more accurate if it conformed to Genesis.

In 1835 the Prophet received the Egyptian papyri from which he translated the Abrahamic materials found in the Pearl of Great Price. As will be discussed below, they too followed Genesis and reinforced its accuracy. The Prophet’s translation was published in 1842. From 1831 to 1842, he said nothing about the creation of Adam. Then in the 1 April edition of the *Times and Seasons*, he declared, “When God breathed into man’s nostrils he became a living soul, before that he did not live, and when that was taken away his body died.”⁷ In a discourse given on 9 July, the Prophet again broached the subject, asking in whose image Adam and Eve were created. He answered, “In the image of Gods created they them, male and female: innocent, harmless, and spotless, bearing the same character and the same image as the Gods.”⁸ Joseph Smith’s language in both of these statements echoes that of Genesis and suggests that he held to the creation account.

4. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 104–5.

5. See Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (1964; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 1:260–63 and J. Gwyn Griffiths, “Allegory in Greece and Egypt,” *JEA* 53: 89, 99.

6. See Griffiths, “Allegory,” 89.

7. *Times and Seasons*, 1 April 1842, 746.

8. The discourse was recorded by James Burgess and is here quoted from Kent P. Jackson, ed., *Joseph Smith’s Commentary on the Bible* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 7.

Later statements show that he continued to hold this view. In August of 1842 he asked, “What was the design of the Almighty in making man? It was to exalt him to be as God.”⁹ His language suggests he viewed Adam as made, not conceived and born. In May 1843 he noted that “the 7th verse of C[hapter] 2 of Genesis ought to read God breathed into Adam his spirit or breath of life, but when the word ‘ruach’ [rûah] applies to Eve it should be translated lives.”¹⁰ Though he explains how to understand *ruach* (rûah), Joseph Smith did not argue against any of the essentials in the account. Both statements show he continued to support a literal interpretation of Genesis, Moses, and Abraham.

Joseph Smith’s last-known public comment on Adam’s creation took place on 7 April 1844, in what has become known as the King Follet Discourse. The Prophet noted that “Adam was created in the very fashion [that is, image] of God.”¹¹ He further stated that “God made man out of the earth and put into him his spirit, and then it became a living body,”¹² or, as another source recorded it, “God made a tabernacle and put a spirit into it, and it became a living soul. (Refers to the old Bible.) How does it read in the Hebrew? It does not say in the Hebrew that God created the spirit of man. It says ‘God made man out of the earth and put into him Adam’s spirit, and so became a living body.’”¹³ All the above suggests that Joseph never moved from a literal interpretation of Genesis.

Some have argued that Joseph Smith hinted at another understanding of the text in his 16 June 1844 talk when he asked, “Where was there ever a son without a father? And where was there ever a father without first being a son? Whenever did a tree or anything spring into existence without a progenitor? And everything comes in this way.”¹⁴ However, Joseph Smith was not looking at Adam’s creation; he was teaching about the plurality of the Gods. Though one could argue that Joseph’s thought would include Adam, it does not prove the point.¹⁵

Admittedly, during the last year of his life, the Prophet was expanding LDS theology in a dramatic manner, and he may have taught some things off the record. It is of note, however, that only one contemporary of the Prophet, Benjamin F. Johnson, mentioned hearing him actually teach “that *God was the great head of human procreation*—[that He] was really and truly the Father of

9. Ibid. This statement was made in a discourse delivered on 27 August 1843 and recorded by James Burgess.

10. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. and eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 203.

11. Jackson, *Commentary*, 8.

12. Ibid., 10. This is how William Clayton recorded the words. Wilford Woodruff recorded them as, “God made a tabernacle and put a spirit in it, and it became a human soul” (ibid., 11). Though the wording is somewhat different, both accounts agree that Joseph Smith held to the creation account in Genesis. For a comparison of the various accounts of the King Follett sermon, see Ehat, *Words*, 340–62, and Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl, *The Prophet Joseph Smith’s King Follett Discourse: A Six Column Comparison of Original Notes and Amalgamations* (Provo, Utah: BYU Printing Service, 1983).

13. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 352–53.

14. Smith, *Teachings*, 373.

15. An account made by Josiah Quincy in the spring of 1844 gives some supporting evidence that Joseph Smith understood the Garden of Eden story in a literal sense. According to Mr. Quincy, the Prophet showed him some of the papyrus material. Quincy reported that, “Some parchments inscribed with hieroglyphics were then offered us [by Joseph Smith]. They were preserved under glass and handled with great respect. . . . Here

both our Spirits and our Bodies.”¹⁶ Johnson supplies no information on when, where, or with whom he heard this idea. Therefore, it is impossible to verify his statement. If Joseph Smith were teaching the idea, one would expect others to have noted it.¹⁷ In light of the documentary record, it may be that Johnson’s memory slipped, especially since his statement came more than sixty years after the Prophet’s death. During those intervening years a good deal of interesting and even startling things had been taught about Adam, God, and their involvement in the creation of humankind. Since his is the only preserved account, one must question how accurately he remembered.

As noted, Brigham Young was another contemporary of Joseph Smith who insisted that the creation accounts of humankind should not be taken as they read. Only nine years after the Prophet’s death, he said, “suppose Adam was made and fashioned the same as we make adobies; if he had never drunk of the bitter cup, the Lord might have talked to him to this day, and he would have continued as he was to all eternity, never advancing one particle in the school of intelligence.” Going on, he questioned, “Supposing that Adam was formed actually out of clay, out of the same kind of material from which bricks are formed; that with this matter God made the pattern of a man, and breathed into it the breath of life, and left it there, in that state of supposed perfection, he would have been an adobie to this day. He would not have known anything.”¹⁸ Thus did Brigham Young deny that God created Adam like a brick. Six years later, as noted above, he stated his belief that Adam and Eve were transplanted to the earth from another planet “to propagate their species.”¹⁹

we have the earliest account of the Creation, from which Moses composed the First Book of Genesis.’ The parchment last referred to showed a rude drawing of a man and woman, and a serpent walking upon a pair of legs. I ventured to doubt the propriety of providing the reptile in question with this unusual means of locomotion. ‘Why, that’s as plain as a pikestaff,’ was the rejoinder. ‘Before the Fall snakes always went about on legs, just like chickens. They were deprived of them, in punishment for their agency in the ruin of man’” (Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past from the Leaves of Old Journals* [Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1883], 386–87, as quoted in *The Pearl of Great Price, Studies in Scripture*, vol. 2, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson [Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985], 92).

16. Fred C. Collier, ed., *Patriarch Benjamin F. Johnson’s Letter to Elder George F. Gibbs*, *Doctrines of the Priesthood*, vol. 7, no. 5 (Salt Lake City: Collier’s, 1990), 25.
17. The only clue to the setting Johnson gives is that the Prophet was stressing the need for love and unity. According to Johnson, it was in this context that Joseph Smith presented the idea that God was the father of all both spiritually and physically. Therefore, all are brothers and sisters, the Prophet concluded, and the Saints ought to practice love and unity. Among the recorded sermons of the Prophet, none are devoted either fully or in part to this topic, though he does briefly mention it on at least one occasion. That being the case, there is no way of checking up on Johnson. The lack of such a sermon casts doubt on Johnson’s memory. The problem with this conclusion is, of course, that it is an argument from silence, but it is, taking a look at the many who recorded Joseph’s words, a very loud silence. It is true that Joseph Smith may have taught the idea to a closed group. Johnson claimed that he was privy to esoteric information the Prophet shared with few others. That only makes it all the more difficult to check up on Johnson. The public record, however, is clear, and in it, Joseph Smith stayed true to the Genesis account.
18. *Journal of Discourses*, 2:6.
19. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:285. Brigham Young’s views about Adam have become known as “The Adam-God Theory.” It lays well outside the scope of this paper to address the Adam-God issue. Others have discussed it in detail. See for example, Rodney Turner, “The Position of Adam in Latter-day Saint Scripture and Theology” (Provo, Utah: master’s thesis, BYU, 1953) and David John Buerger, “The Adam-God Doctrine,” *Dialogue* 15/1 (1982):14-58. For the

Clearly, Brigham Young, like Parley P. Pratt, took Moses' account in an allegorical vein, insisting that "God has made His children like Himself to stand erect, and has endowed them with intelligence and power and dominion over all His works, and given them the same attributes which He Himself possesses. He created man, as we create our children; for there is no other process of creation in heaven, on the earth, in the earth, or under the earth, or in all the eternities, that is, that were, or that ever will be. . . . There exist fixed laws and regulations by which the elements are fashioned . . . and this process of creation is from everlasting to everlasting."²⁰

Elder Pratt's and President Young's views square with one another. But the apostle adds a dimension we do not get from the president: that it was Moses who created the allegoric account. On this point, Elder Pratt seems to stand alone. There is a logical appeal to his thinking. However, the question naturally arises, why use allegory to tell the creation story? It seems logical, given the conditions under which Moses labored, that he would veil the truth from an Israel that was only a breath away from idolatry and its attendant immorality. To suggest that God created humankind through the act of procreation may have allowed some to see truth in the fertility religions in the area. Moses wanted his people as far from idolatry as possible and went to lengths to assure it. Clearly his declaration that "the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God" (Deuteronomy 4:24) shows him operating in this way. How could Israel make a graven image of glory?

Yet as appealing as Pratt's theory is, it does not work. Latter-day Saints possess an additional account of the creation that antedates that of Moses by a half millennium or more, and that record is yet based on an even older account. The record is that of Abraham.²¹ He tells us that he wrote "for the benefit of my posterity that shall come after me" (Abraham 1:31). He states that his sources were "the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs" who wrote "concerning the right of Priesthood" and who

purposes of this paper, it should be noted that Brigham Young never claimed that he received the material either by revelation or from Joseph Smith. In fact, he neither fully explained his ideas nor attempted to reconcile them to the scriptures. As was his custom, he simply declared his views and left it to others to accept or reject them. As Hugh Nibley wrote: "He sometimes made statements that surprised or even offended those who tended to accept his every utterance as doctrine, but with a New Englander's passion for teaching and learning, he plunged ahead" (Hugh Nibley, "Teachings of Brigham Young," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4:1609).

Even today, some may be concerned about a prophet expressing his own ideas. The Brethren of the nineteenth century, differing from those of the twentieth, felt much more free in expressing their personal views publically and in a forceful manner. As Rodney Turner has written in addressing the Adam-God problem, "When speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, a prophet's word is as the word of the Lord himself. . . . But a prophet is not a pope." He goes on to say that what a prophet says is "not an *ex cathedra* pronouncement that is infallible" when the Holy Ghost is not acting. "When the prophet speaks without inspiration, his word may or may not prove correct." For a more full discussion on this see Turner's work, "Adam-God Controversy" (unpublished statement prepared by BYU, April 1983), copy in possession of the author. See also Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:203.

20. *Journal of Discourse*, 11:122.

21. As with the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith never explained how he translated the Book of Abraham. Some have suggested that when he came to the creation material he was influenced by the accounts with which he was already familiar, and that as a result, he did not make a literal translation but rather a paraphrase of already existing material. However, the fact that Joseph did not lift the story whole cloth from the Old Testament but preserved various distinctive features throughout his translation of Abraham suggests that he was dealing with parallel but unique material and not simply copying what already existed.

gave “a knowledge of the beginning of the creation, and also of the planets, and of the stars, as they were made known unto [them]” (Abraham 1:31). Therefore, Abraham says that he would “delineate the chronology running back from myself to the beginning of the creation, for the records have come into my hands, which I hold unto this present time” (Abraham 1:28).

Abraham’s account, then, conveys the creation story as the fathers handed it down. It could conceivably run all the way back to Adam, since Abraham states the record contained his own priesthood line, which also “came down from the fathers, from the beginning of time, yea, even from the beginning, or before the foundation of the earth, down to the present time, even the right of the firstborn, or the first man, who is Adam, or first father, through the fathers unto me” (Abraham 1:3).

Concerning the creation of humankind, this very ancient record reveals that “the Gods took counsel among themselves and said: Let us go down and form man in our image, after our likeness; and we will give them dominion. . . . So the Gods went down to organize man in their own image, in the image of the Gods to form they him, male and female to form they them” (Abraham 4:26–27). Speaking specifically of Adam, Abraham records, “the Gods formed man from the dust of the ground, and took his spirit (that is, the man’s spirit), and put it into him; and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul” (Abraham 5:7).

Abraham’s account differs from those based on Moses’ writings in three distinct ways: (1) it shows that others beside God and Christ were involved in the creation process;²² (2) it clarifies that God put Adam’s spirit into Adam’s body; and (3) it explains that God breathed into Adam’s nostrils after putting man’s spirit into Adam.

Note that these details do not change the method of Adam’s creation. Abraham’s record follows that of Moses in insisting that Adam was made from the dust of the ground. The account of Eve’s creation also duplicates that in Moses: “And the Gods caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam; and he slept, and they took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in the stead thereof; And of the rib which the Gods had taken from man, formed they a woman, and brought her unto the man” (Abraham 5:15–16). The only change in this account is that the Gods were involved in her creation. The way the story is told, there is every suggestion that Abraham wanted it taken literally. In other words, Abraham, like Genesis and Moses, leaves no room for allegory.

The Book of Abraham forces us to conclude that Moses did not create an allegoric tale due to the weakness of a faithless Israel. Nor was Abraham its creator. Why would he want to veil the truth from his posterity? If the records of the fathers reached all the way back to Adam, then the story preserved by Abraham and Moses was the “official” account from the beginning. If there were any additional materials or alternative views, they have not survived to discount the original account.

The first-person account revealed to Joseph Smith and preserved in the Book of Moses, along with the ancient account preserved in the Book of Abraham, suggests that God determined how the prophets told the story. The books of Moses and of Abraham act as witnesses that the account as it stands in Genesis is the word of God. Therefore, even though the Book of Abraham ends abruptly with Adam naming the animals, the parallel between Moses and Abraham is so close that we can, with confidence, recreate the rest of Abraham’s narrative. Very likely the Gods would

22. Elohim may not have been directly involved at all. According to Abraham 3:24, the Savior said “unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there.”

continue to operate, telling Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the serpent would tempt them, and Eve would succumb and coax Adam to partake of the fruit. The Gods would then assign cherubim with the flaming sword to guard the tree of life and cast the man and his wife from the garden.

The point is that Abraham's record parallels that of Moses, and even if more had been published in the *Times and Seasons*, it would have brought little new to the account of the creation and the fall. What we have in Moses, then, is the story as it has been handed down from the beginning.

Allow me to repeat a point for emphasis. Genesis, Moses, and Abraham preserve the "official" account of humankind's entrance into the world as revealed by God. He has not seen fit to reveal more. No official statement of the First Presidency or public revelation by church leaders annuls the story as told in the scriptures. Does that force us to accept the account as historically accurate, or is there some room that God himself has given us an allegoric account? He has promised us that "in that day when the Lord shall come, he shall reveal all things—Things which have passed, and hidden things which no man knew, things of the earth, by which it was made, and the purpose and the end thereof" (D&C 101:32–33). Given that, it seems that until he comes, the Lord will give us no more than what we have, and that what we have is sufficient for his purposes. In conclusion, Abraham's record shows us that Moses did not create the tale but gave it to us as God gave it to him.