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## Abraham's Vision of the Heavens

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## ABRAHAM'S VISIONS OF THE HEAVENS

*Jared W. Ludlow*

“If you could hie to Kolob in the twinkling of an eye,” begins a familiar LDS hymn partially based on the revelation Abraham received of the vastness and eternal nature of God’s creations in the heavens above.<sup>1</sup> If one turns to the book of Genesis, however, no such record of Abraham’s vision is found, an interesting omission considering all the contact between Abraham and God in the Genesis account.<sup>2</sup> Yet significant heavenly visions of Abraham are preserved in the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price and in several Jewish, Christian, and “pagan” texts of the first centuries B.C. and A.D.

The question is, then, when texts contain stories about Abraham not found in Genesis, how credible are these stories? Where do these traditions come from? Are they simply creations by later authors, or is it possible that they transmit Abrahamic traditions that did not make the canonical Bible? Are we to ignore and disregard these traditions as false, as mere fabrications by later authors? Or can we, in the spirit of what Joseph Smith urged when talking about the Apocrypha (see Doctrine and Covenants 91:1–6), find gems of truth within the texts that can be beneficial?

In order to discuss possible relationships among texts describing Abraham’s visions of the heavens, this paper will compare the descriptions of Abraham’s visions in the Book of Abraham with these ancient texts according to the criteria listed below. This examination will help show the strong possibility that there was a common tradition about Abraham’s knowledge of the heavens—not presently found in the Bible—upon which the ancient texts and the Book of Abraham drew.

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1. “If You Could Hie to Kolob,” *Hymns*, no. 284.
  2. The closest reference to Abraham seeing the heavens is in Genesis 15:5, when God asks Abraham to count the stars in the heaven above; and so numberless also shall be his posterity. “And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.”

Thus, it may be possible to determine that these preserved traditions are authentic accounts of Abraham passed down through the generations and not solely creative additions by later writers.

### Criteria

Although tracing the threads of a tradition is a difficult endeavor, there may be some criteria to help establish the authenticity of ancient traditions found in later texts. First, to try to avoid proof-texting<sup>3</sup> and falling victim to “parallelomania,”<sup>4</sup> these traditions should be found in *similar contexts* and a *specific time period* (this study will look at Jewish and Christian texts from ca. 200 B.C. to A.D. 200). The more details of a tradition that are shared, the more likely they stem from the same core tradition. It is one thing to say that an ancient prophet had a heavenly vision—numerous examples of prophets could be given—but it is quite another thing to see various texts talking about a specific prophet, Abraham, having a vision of the heavens, learning the governing principles of the stars, and even passing on this knowledge to the Egyptians.<sup>5</sup> “Detailed study is the criterion, and the detailed study ought to respect the context and not be limited to juxtaposing mere excerpts.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, the texts need to be examined to determine if they are *dependent* on each other. If they are dependent, these texts can be further explored to see differences and modifications of the tradition from one period to the next. However, multiple attestations of a tradition in various independent texts raise the strong possibility of an earlier unknown source of the tradition upon which these later texts drew independently.

A third criterion is the *purpose* for which the later authors used this tradition. If all the authors used it to prove the same point, there is a greater likelihood for dependence among texts. If, however, various authors use this tradition for different means, then it seems more likely that they drew upon a common source of the tradition but used it for their own purposes (unless they were in polemics against another text’s use of the tradition).

Thus, the three criteria we will be using in this paper when looking at traditions about Abraham are the following:

- Whether the traditions are found in similar contexts and time period
- Whether the texts are dependent upon each other
- The purpose for the author’s use of the tradition

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3. This term means using a portion of a text out of context to prove a particular point, usually distorting the original meaning of the text.

4. This term was coined to discourage the common practice of citing parallels between texts without any determination of how the parallel texts may have actually been related historically. There needs to be consideration of genre, historical milieu, or other factors to show some type of relationship. See the cautions of Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *JBL* 81 (1962): 1–3, 6–7; and Stephen E. Robinson, “Lying for God: The Uses of Apocrypha,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1986), 133–54.

5. A helpful collection of Abrahamic texts can be found in John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, comps. and eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), hereafter referred to as *Traditions*.

6. Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” 2. An excellent example of the importance of this criterion in our study is found in the *Book of Jasher* 15:22: “And the king [Pharaoh] ordered Abram to be brought, and he sat in the court of the

## Tradition History and Criticism

The critical study of traditions has been common among biblical scholars.<sup>7</sup> Primarily this methodology looks at the adaptation of earlier traditions and stories, either oral or written, by later writers. One of its goals is to determine whether new meanings were applied to older traditions, thereby changing the status of the tradition. Or, asked another way, do later texts preserve kernels of earlier oral or written traditions even if they have been modified creatively by later writers? Douglas Knight stated, “while materials were at points transmitted from one generation to another in a manner that would minimize changes in the *traditum*, in many other instances the tradition was ‘existentially’ applied to the new historical situation, resulting in novel layers of meaning which were incorporated quite naturally into the growing text.”<sup>8</sup> Another scholar has explained the process this way: “Folk traditions do not become completely extinct, but with the change of circumstances they tend to change their form, sloughing one aspect and assuming another, and despite this, or just because of this, they safeguard an important part of their content.”<sup>9</sup>

An example of this type of work is Shalom Spiegel’s work on the Akedah (Abraham’s binding of Isaac). He closely examined the later Jewish legends and lore surrounding this biblical event, primarily in the rabbinical Midrash, and attempted to determine which parts of the Midrash were based on earlier traditions that had been passed down through the centuries. The translator’s introduction to this work explains what might have happened:

As we observe how each age treats the biblical story, we come to appreciate still another possibility: that the biblical account itself may be but the selected, the adopted version of a much more ancient narrative which once upon a time circulated orally and which possibly included elements now no longer in the written record. Can we be sure that such elements have been completely forgotten? Perhaps the biblical author chose to write down not everything he knew but only what seemed fitting to him to record in his time; and what he would not put down in writing, word of mouth and memory might well preserve.<sup>10</sup>

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king’s house, and the king greatly exalted Abram on that night.” Here Abram is being exalted by the Egyptians, which sounds very similar to the depiction in Facsimile 3 of the Book of Abraham; however, the context in the *Book of Jasher* is not Abraham’s teaching astronomy to the Egyptians but his being exalted because the Pharaoh was taken with Sarah’s beauty. The possibility of a connection between these two parallels, therefore, is much weaker than in the other cases mentioned below.

7. For some introductions and overviews to tradition-historical theory, see Douglas A. Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel* (Missoula, Mont.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 1–32; Knud Jeppesen and Benedikt Otzen, eds., *The Productions of Time: Tradition History in Old Testament Scholarship*, trans. Frederick H. Cryer (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1984), 127–33; Walter E. Rast, *Tradition History and the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 1–32, 72–77.
8. Douglas A. Knight, “Tradition History,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:638.
9. Umberto Cassuto, *Biblical and Ancient Oriental Texts*, vol. 2 of *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1975), 2:81.
10. Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial. On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*, trans. Judah Goldin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), xvii.

By examining later traditions, one can find “faint echoes” or an “archaic cliché” of earlier versions of the story.<sup>11</sup> Spiegel explained how there might be several attempts at recording a tradition: “Either [there are] variant readings due to errors in the course of transcription and oral transmission; or different versions of a tradition; or additions or expansions by different homilists as they attempt to harmonize and unite kindred themes.”<sup>12</sup> Spiegel felt that many times the impetus for revised traditions was contact with foreign influences: “And it also happens that in time, owing to forgetfulness, traditions get lost, and the loss is recovered through contact with an alien culture.”<sup>13</sup> Perhaps by examining the traditions related to Abraham’s visions of the heavens, we can get a sense of the earlier sources of this tradition, either oral or written, that these texts might have been drawing on and the possible impetus for their later appearance.

### **Book of Abraham Account**

The Book of Abraham begins with a description of Abraham’s early years in Chaldea within an idolatrous family and his subsequent journeys to Haran and finally Canaan. When the famine worsened in the land of Canaan, Abraham was told by the Lord to go down into Egypt. As Abraham journeyed south towards Egypt to escape the famine, the Lord granted him a tremendous heavenly vision of all the works and creations of His hands (see Abraham 3:11–12). The Lord specifically stated that he was showing these things to Abraham before he went into Egypt so “that ye may declare all these words” (3:15).

Abraham’s vision of these creations seems to have occurred in two stages. First, the text states that Abraham had the Urim and Thummim and saw the stars and specifically Kolob (see 3:2–3). The Lord also communicated with Abraham “by the Urim and Thummim” as He shared with him the reckoning of the Lord’s time (3:4). The second stage of Abraham’s vision seems to begin in 3:11, when Abraham “talked with the Lord, face to face, as one man talketh with another; and he told me of the works which his hands had made.” The Lord stretched out his hand and “put his hand upon mine [Abraham’s] eyes, and I saw those things which his hands had made, which were many; and they multiplied before mine eyes, and I could not see the end thereof” (3:12). (In both stages of the vision, Abraham’s body remained on the earth since throughout the vision the Lord referred to the earth upon which Abraham *stood* [see 3:5, 6, 7; see also 3:3, 9].)

From this vision, Abraham learned many significant things about God’s creations and the laws that keep these celestial bodies in their proper sphere and order. He learned that there are governing planets that control all the other planets in their revolutions, and that nearest to the throne of

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11. *Ibid.*, 57–58.

12. *Ibid.*, 89.

13. *Ibid.*, 118. For this phenomenon, Spiegel used the example of small, short-lived plants planted around the time of the New Year, which were used for asking for blessings. This practice seems to have been a pagan rite that Jews adopted; then Jews in the Diaspora reinstated the custom under influence from Christians. This phenomenon also explains the reappearance and revival of haggadot “which, to be sure, in almost all details can be explained by ancient midrashic sources, but which in the course of time either disappeared or were put out of sight, and the very recollection of them was lost, and in the Christian environment of the Middle Ages rose again to the surface and in full light” (Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 120 n. 153).

God was the great one, Kolob, “which is the grand center which governs all the suns and systems of suns ‘which belong to the same order’ as our earth and those that move with it.”<sup>14</sup> Abraham was told that “Kolob was after the manner of the Lord, according to its times and seasons in the revolutions thereof; that one revolution was a day unto the Lord, after his manner of reckoning, it being one thousand years according to the time appointed unto that whereon thou standest” (Abraham 3:4). God continued his discourse by discussing celestial bodies closer to Abraham’s location and understanding: the rotations of the moon and earth. The moon rotates slower on its axis than the earth and therefore has a longer reckoning of time than the earth (see 3:5, 7).

Despite all the astronomical knowledge given to Abraham through this vision,<sup>15</sup> the vision and explanation of these celestial bodies seem to have been primarily a background for the more important principles God wanted to teach Abraham: that there will always be a higher level in the order of things until one reaches God. In other words, just as the planets are governed in a certain order, so too are the intelligences. There are various levels of intelligences, some intelligences governing others, until one comes to the Lord God, who is “more intelligent than they all” (3:19).

As the Lord continued to teach Abraham, he revealed some significant details of the premortal existence. Many “noble and great ones” were foreordained to be rulers because the Lord “saw that they were good” (3:23). Abraham was shown a glimpse of the beginning of this earth’s creation when one who was like unto God told the others who were with him, “We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell” (3:24). The purpose for this earth’s existence was then given: “And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” (3:25). A brief glimpse of future judgment was also related: those who keep their first estate shall be added upon, “and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever” (3:26). Finally, Abraham gave a brief synopsis of the presentation of God’s plan in a council in heaven, Jesus’ meek acceptance of his mission as the Savior, and the subsequent rebellion of Satan and those who refused the plan (3:27–28). A more detailed description of the creation of the earth closes out the Book of Abraham (see chapters 4–5).

There are a few other parts of the Book of Abraham that can help us understand more about Abraham’s knowledge of the heavens. In addition to the revelations and visions given Abraham in chapter 3, part of Abraham’s astral knowledge apparently came from a record of the fathers he was preserving: “But the records of the fathers, even the patriarchs, concerning the right of Priesthood, the Lord my God preserved in mine own hands; therefore a knowledge of the beginning of the creation, and also of the planets, and of the stars, as they were made known unto the fathers, have I kept unto this day” (1:31).<sup>16</sup> Facsimile 3 is very

14. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 265.

15. Perhaps Abraham had a personal interest or background in astronomy; thus the Lord worked through his interests to teach him other principles.

16. The book of *Jubilees* mentions that Abraham copied and studied the Hebrew books of his father (12:27; see *Traditions*, 18). “Several centuries later, in the brief introduction to the compilation *Sefer Ha-Razim* (late third to early fourth century A.D.), it is said that the ‘books of the mysteries’ were given to Noah by the angel Raziel and passed on to Abraham, Isaac, and eventually Solomon.” James E. Bowley, “The Compositions of Abraham,” in *Tracing the Threads: Studies in the Vitality of Jewish Pseudepigrapha*, ed. John C. Reeves (Atlanta: Scholars

significant for understanding Abraham's connection with the Egyptians and astronomy. According to the explanation given for this facsimile, Abraham is sitting upon the Pharaoh's throne and "is reasoning upon the principles of Astronomy, in the king's court." The teaching of Abraham's knowledge of the heavens to the Egyptians is prevalent in several Jewish texts but completely absent from Genesis. Facsimile 2 portrays many of the items that Abraham learned from his vision of the heavens in Abraham 3.

### Extracanonial Accounts

Some of the most significant facets of Abraham's vision in the Book of Abraham can also be found in ancient Jewish texts.<sup>17</sup> These texts, like the Book of Abraham, relate accounts of Abraham's seeing the heavens and God's creations; having a great knowledge of the stars and passing that knowledge on to the Egyptians; learning about future judgment; and glimpsing the premortal existence. Turning now to some extracanonial traditions about Abraham, we are able to see the similarities in various accounts of Abraham's visions of the heavens.

#### *The Apocalypse of Abraham*

The *Apocalypse of Abraham*, a first or second century A.D. Jewish text, is remarkably similar to the Book of Abraham in its bipartite structure. The first part discloses Abraham's father's idolatry and Abraham's refusal to follow, and the second part details the visions Abraham was given of the heavens and events related to God's plan.

The *Apocalypse of Abraham* begins with a discussion of Abraham's being raised in an idolatrous household and struggling to come to know the true God. In the midst of his struggles (portrayed somewhat comically as Abraham used some of his father's gods to destroy the other gods and then when his father confronted him about the destruction, Abraham blamed it on the surviving gods), God revealed himself to Abraham and told him to "Go out from Terah, your father, and go out of the house, that you too may not be slain in the sins of your father's house" (8:4).<sup>18</sup> (Immediately after Abraham went out of the house, "the sound of a great thunder came and burned him [Terah] and his house and everything in his house, down to the ground" [8:6].)

The second part of the *Apocalypse* relates the visions Abraham had of the heavens. The Lord told Abraham he would show him "the things which were made by the ages and by my word, and affirmed, created, and renewed."<sup>19</sup> And I will announce to you in them what will come upon those who have done evil and just things in the race of man" (9:9–10). An angel arrived to escort

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Press, 1994), 215; see also *Traditions*, 85. The Qur'an also refers to writings of Abraham (sura 53:36–37; 87:18–19); see *Traditions*, 291–97.

17. Some parallels between these texts, particularly the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the *Testament of Abraham* and the Book of Abraham have been mentioned in earlier LDS works, most notably Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 10–35. See also Michael D. Rhodes, "The Book of Abraham: Divinely Inspired Scripture," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 120–26, and *Traditions*.
18. Translations of the text are from Ryszard Rubinkiewicz, "Apocalypse of Abraham," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 1:681–705. Pertinent parts of this translation can also be found in *Traditions*, 52–66.
19. Could this be referring to stages of God's creative processes? Affirmed—spiritual creation, created—physical creation, renewed—restoration to pre-fall conditions?

Abraham on his visionary journey and made an interesting statement regarding predestination (or foreordination).<sup>20</sup> “Behold, I am assigned (to be) with you and with the generation which is predestined (to be born) from you” (10:16–17). In other words, there was a foreordination of those who would be born of Abraham’s lineage. The angel then stated that they would ascend “to show you (what) is in the heavens, on the earth and in the sea, in the abyss, and in the lower depths, in the garden of Eden and in its rivers, in the fullness of the universe. And you will see its circles<sup>21</sup> in all” (12:10). Michael Rhodes has pointed out that the first part of this phrase (“what is in the heavens, on the earth and in the sea, in the abyss”)

is almost an exact translation of the Egyptian words in the left middle portion of Facsimile Number 2 of the book of Abraham (figures 9 and 10). He is shown “the fullness of the whole world and its circle,” in a picture with two sides. This is a good description of the object depicted in Facsimile Number 2 (called a hypocephalus by Egyptologists). This document even describes the four animal-headed figures labeled number 6 in Facsimile Number 2 [*Apocalypse of Abraham* 18].<sup>22</sup>

As they were preparing to ascend from the earth, a figure named Azazel,<sup>23</sup> chief of the fallen angels, confronted Abraham. Then the angel accompanying Abraham seemed to make an allusion to Satan’s rebellion in the pre-earthly council when he said to Azazel, “For Abraham’s portion is in heaven, and yours is on earth, for you have selected here, (and) become enamored of the dwelling place of your blemish. Therefore the Eternal Ruler, the Mighty One, has given you a dwelling on earth. Through you the all-evil spirit (is) a liar, and through you (are) wrath and trials on the generations of men who live impiously. . . . You cannot deceive him [Abraham], because he is the enemy of you and of those who follow you and who love what you wish” (13:8–10, 13–14).

Later in the vision we find another discussion of Azazel when Abraham saw the Garden of Eden and Azazel (Satan) tempting Adam and Eve. Abraham asked why God allowed Azazel such dominion when his works could ruin humankind on earth (see 23:12). God responded, “Those who desire evil, . . . over them did I give him dominion, and he was to be beloved of them” (23:13–14). This is very similar to the description of Satan’s rebellion in Abraham 3:28, “and the second [Satan] was angry, and kept not his first estate; and, at that day, many followed after him.”

After the confrontation with Azazel, Abraham ascended to the heavens into a glorious light, and various aspects of God’s creations were shown to him. “I [Abraham] saw there, on the fifth (firmament), hosts of stars, and the orders they were commanded to carry out, and the elements of earth obeying them” (19:9). God asked Abraham to count the stars, which Abraham declined to do

20. Although there is a distinction between “predestination” and “foreordination” in LDS theology today, it is not always clear from the translations (most done by translators who have no notion of “foreordination”), or even from the primary sources, which meaning is most correct.

21. According to the translator’s footnote, this last phrase is “obscure, perhaps corrupt. Possibly ‘in the fullness of the universe and its circles, and you will see . . . in all.’” Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” 695 n. 12c. The reference to “circles” may be an allusion to the revolutions and rotations of celestial stars, similar to what Abraham saw in the Book of Abraham.

22. Rhodes, “The Book of Abraham: Divinely Inspired Scripture,” 123.

23. For a brief discussion on the identification of Azazel as a demon figure see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 3:1020–21.



because as a mortal he could not. Then God gave Abraham the promise of numberless posterity, which we know as part of the Abrahamic covenant: “As the number of the stars and their power so shall I place for your seed the nations and men” (20:5; cf. Genesis 18:18). The addition of “and their [the stars’] power” to the normal phrasing of God’s promise of numberless posterity to Abraham is noteworthy.<sup>24</sup> This phrase and *Apocalypse of Abraham* 19:9, “and [Abraham saw] the orders they [the hosts of stars] were commanded to carry out, and the elements of earth obeying them,” echo the idea found in the Book of Abraham that greater stars had power or governed over lesser stars (see Abraham 3:2–6; 4:14–17).

The next portion of the vision consisted of seeing the inhabitants of the world. As Abraham looked upon the inhabitants he saw half of them on one side and half on the other. He asked God about this phenomenon and God responded, “This is my will with regard to what is in the light<sup>25</sup> and it was good before my face. And then, afterward, I gave them a command by my word and they came into existence. Whatever I had decreed was to exist had already been outlined in this and all the previously created (things) you have seen stood before me” (*Apocalypse of Abraham* 22:1–3). Although these sentences may be corrupted in the present text and it is difficult to establish with certainty the referents for some of the pronouns, it does seem likely that this passage is talking about a premortal existence or at least a preliminary spiritual creation for God’s works. God then went on to explain that there were different groups of people because some had been “set apart” and “prepared” to be born of Abraham and to be called “my people” (22:5), hearkening back again to the notion of foreordination found in the Book of Abraham.<sup>26</sup>

The final stage of the vision dealt with the last days when evil upon the earth would be punished.<sup>27</sup> Regarding the wicked, God told Abraham, “My judgment will come upon the heathen who have acted wickedly through the people of your seed who have been set apart for me” (29:14–15). After the wicked are destroyed, only the righteous will remain. “And then from your seed will be left the righteous men in their number, protected by me, who strive in the glory of my name toward the place [the temple] prepared beforehand for them, which you saw deserted in the picture. . . . And they will rejoice forever in me” (29:17–19). This future promise to the righteous sounds

24. This term could also be translated as “host.” See Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” 699 n. 20c. Either definition seems to fit with the claim that follows above.

25. According to Rubinkiewicz, this word might be missing a letter, in which case it would mean “council, counsel” (“Apocalypse of Abraham,” 700 n. 22b). This then might hearken back to the council in heaven. Another interesting speculation is that it could refer to the intelligence with (or around) which God created the spirit bodies, since, according to Doctrine and Covenants 93:29, intelligence is the *light* of truth (emphasis added).

26. This verse is the only one mentioned here that may be a later interpolation (by the Bogomils? See Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” 684). However, the interpolation seems to fit more possibly with the first part, linking God with Azazel, and not with this second part, which is found in similar form earlier in the text (see 10:17).

27. There is also some discussion about the temple and its destruction at the hands of the heathen (undoubtedly alluding to the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70). One interesting part of the discussion for LDS readers is the relationship between the temple and priesthood. “This temple which you have seen, the altar and the works of art, this is my idea of the priesthood of the name of my glory, where every petition of man will enter and dwell” (25:4). “The priesthood of the name of my glory” perhaps alludes to the original name of the Melchizedek priesthood, “the Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God” (D&C 107:3).

similar to the one given in the Book of Abraham for those who keep their first and second estates: “[They] shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever” (Abraham 3:26).

### Other Extracanonical Accounts

There are many sources that definitively point to Abraham’s having a superior knowledge of the stars, although the details of how he gained this knowledge are not as clearly given as in the Book of Abraham. The book of *Jubilees*, a second or first century B.C. Jewish text, states that

in the sixth week, in its fifth year, Abram sat up during the night on the first of the seventh month, so that he might observe the stars from evening until daybreak so that he might see what the nature of the year would be with respect to rain. And he was sitting alone and making observations; and a word came into his heart, saying, “All of the signs of the stars and the signs of the sun and the moon are all in the hand of the Lord.” . . . And he prayed on that night, saying: “My God, the Most High God, you alone are God to me. And you created everything, and everything which is was the work of your hands.” (*Jubilees* 12:16–17, 19)<sup>28</sup>

As Abraham came to know the true God, he learned that the stars, sun, and moon were in the hands of the Lord. He also saw that everything was the work of God’s hands. These ideas, and even their unfolding to Abraham during the nighttime,<sup>29</sup> find close correlation to the account in the Book of Abraham where Abraham came to know the works of God’s hands and learned that everything was ultimately governed by the Lord (see Abraham 3:11–12, 14, 16, 18).

Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century A.D., gave an account of Abraham from the sources and information he had. “Berossus mentions our father Abram without naming him, when he says thus: ‘In the tenth generation after the flood, there was among the Chaldeans a man, righteous and great, and skilful in the celestial science’” (*Jewish Antiquities* 1.7.2). Josephus also included a description of how Abraham came to know that the stars did not govern themselves, because of their irregular phenomena, but were governed by God: “If [said he (Abraham)] these bodies had power of their own, they would certainly take care of their own regular motions; but since they do not preserve such regularity, they make it plain that so far as they co-operate to our advantage, they do it not of their own abilities, but as they are subservient to him that commands them, to whom alone we ought justly to offer our honour and thanksgiving” (1.7.1). Josephus also related that Abraham conferred with the Egyptians and “delivered to them the science of astronomy” (1.8.2) and “he was admired by them, in those conferences, as a very wise man” (1.8.2).<sup>30</sup> Again there are some interesting parallels with the Book of Abraham: Abraham became learned in

28. Translation from Orval S. Wintermute, “Jubilees,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:35–142; see *Traditions*, 17.

29. Another pseudepigraphic text, *4 Ezra*, contains a brief allusion to Abraham’s having learned the extent of God’s plan during the night. “And when they were committing iniquity before you, you chose for yourself one of them, whose name was Abraham; and you loved him and to him only you revealed the end of times, secretly by night” (3:13–15). Translation from Bruce M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:517–59. See *Traditions*, 61.

30. Translation from William Whiston, *The Works of Flavius Josephus* (Baltimore: Armstrong and Plaskitt, 1830), 1.7.2. (Although this may not be the most up-to-date version of Josephus, it is interesting for its date. If Joseph Smith had read Josephus, it would have been from a work similar to this one.) See *Traditions*, 47–49.

the workings of the stars in heaven and passed this knowledge on to the Egyptians, thereby gaining great respect (cf. Abraham Facsimile 3).

The connection between astronomy, Abraham, and the Egyptians is also found in a few Hellenistic Jewish fragments which have been preserved in the writings of Eusebius.<sup>31</sup> Artapanus, who lived before 100 B.C., said that Abraham “came to Egypt with all his household to the Egyptian king Pharethothes, and taught him astrology.”<sup>32</sup> An unidentified writer, termed Pseudo-Eupolemus, recorded that “Abraham excelled all in nobility and wisdom; he sought and obtained the knowledge of astrology and the Chaldean craft, and pleased God because he eagerly sought to be reverent. . . . When famine came on the land, Abraham moved to Egypt with his whole household and dwelt there. . . . Abraham lived in Heliopolis with the Egyptian priests and taught them much: He explained astrology and the other sciences to them, saying that the Babylonians and he himself had obtained this knowledge. However, he attributed the discovery of them to Enoch.”<sup>33</sup>

Another writer, Vettius Valens, may also preserve an early source for the connection of Abraham to astronomy. “Vettius Valens claims to recount part of Abraham’s composition in his own massive astrological compendium entitled *Anthologiae*, for which he culled material from many ancient sources.”<sup>34</sup> One of these sources, Hermippus of Smyrna (third-century B.C. Peripatetic and Alexandrian student of Callimachus),<sup>35</sup> talks about Abraham in a discussion on the ninth locus, one of the loci that were part of an alternative horoscopic system. The ninth locus deals with matters concerning religion and travel, of which Vettius Valens cites Abraham as an expert:

On traveling from the works of Hermippus:

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31. Another possible source of Abraham and astronomy is Pseudo-Orpheus (Recension B) cited in Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 124:  
 [Orpheus tells Musaeus about God, that no one can] see Him; for around [Him] a cloud has been fixed . . . Except a certain unique man, by descent an offshoot of the Chaldeans. For he was knowledgeable about the path of the Star, and the movements of the spheres around the earth, in a circle regularly, but each on its own axis.  
 [This Chaldean, Abraham, understood] how He guides the winds [that is, spirits, subsidiary forces] around both air and water. (21, 27–31)  
 Cited in James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 139. See also *Traditions*, 12.
32. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.18.1; translation from John J. Collins, “Artapanus,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:889–903. See also *Traditions*, 7.
33. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.17.3–4, 6, 8; translation from Robert Doran, “Pseudo-Eupolemus,” in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:873–82. See also *Traditions*, 8–9.  
 The *Genesis Apocryphon* also mentions Abraham teaching something about Enoch to the Egyptians: “Goodness, wisdom and truth and I [Abram] read to them [Egyptian officials] the book of the writings of Enoch.” (XIX, 25, as deciphered by Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, “Some Observations on the *Genesis Apocryphon*,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 [1960]: 288.) See also the discussion in Ben Zion Wacholder, “How Long Did Abram Stay in Egypt?” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 35 (1964): 54.
34. Bowley, “The Compositions of Abraham,” 229. See also *Traditions*, 476–77.
35. Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 150–51.

(1) Neither Petosiris nor the well-known king in their treatises explain the locus concerning traveling which is difficult to comprehend, except having spoken only this in regard to this *locus*: 'In regard to the time-degrees, they said that if anyone is of the maleficent (planets) he will make his geniture in travels and annoyances.' (2) Which is true, but beyond these they have nothing else in relation to the *locus* concerning travel. (3) But the most wonderful Abramos in his books about this *locus* has shown us both the explanations of others and ideas of his own, both originating other things and testing them, especially in matters of genitures prone to travelling, which have the following theories regarding these things.<sup>36</sup>

In talking about the importance of this work, Bowley has shown how this might be one of the earliest references to Abraham and astronomy (except for perhaps Berossus cited by Josephus mentioned above). Bowley also related how this tradition had a long life:

The entire text of Vettius Valens *Anthologiae* 2.28–29 raises many fascinating questions regarding the astrological traditions associated with Abraham and their extensiveness and availability. . . . this important text of Vettius Valens, and the supporting testimony from Firmicus Maternus, clearly show that the portrait of Abraham depicting him as an eminent astrologer was long-lived (Hermippus to Firmicus) and widely disseminated. Like the more traditional and pious portrait of Abraham, this astrological Greek portrait was supported by pseudepigraphic writings. In fact, with Hermippus of Smyrna as the first witness, it would appear that the penning of Abraham's astrological treatise preceded the composition of any other "Abrahamic" work.

We have then, in the motley collection of texts and testimonies consisting of the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Testament of Abraham*, the Sethian work mentioned by Epiphanius, and the statements of Vettius Valens and Firmicus Maternus, evidence for the diverse threads of Abraham's compositions which weave their way through Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious traditions and through the records of pagan historiography and astrology.<sup>37</sup>

Philo, the Jewish philosopher of the first century A.D., related stories of Abraham's knowledge of the stars in his various treatises. In *De Cherubim*, he said that Abram "delighted in the lofty philosophy which investigates the events which take place in the air, and the sublime nature of the beings which exist in heaven" (1.2.4).<sup>38</sup> In other treatises, when discussing Abraham's name change, Philo tried to show the difference between a mere "astronomer" and one who is a wise man through the learning he has gained from the heavens.<sup>39</sup>

The addition of the letter A, by one single element, changed and reformed the whole character of the mind, causing it, instead of the sublime knowledge and learning of sublime things, that is to say, instead of astronomy, to acquire a comprehension of wisdom, since it is by the knowledge of things above that the faculty is acquired of mounting up to one portion of the world, that is to say, to heaven, and to the periodical revolutions and motions of the stars; but wisdom has reference to

36. Translation from Bowley, "The Compositions of Abraham," 231–32.

37. Bowley, "The Compositions of Abraham," 232–33. For Vettius Valens, see *Traditions*, 476–77; for Firmicus Maternus, see 478–84; for Epiphanius, see 197–98.

38. Translations for Philo taken from Charles D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 80. See also *Traditions*, 35.

39. Philo seems to be making the same point in another treatise when he says the Chaldeans are great astronomers but questions their motivation for studying the stars when they aren't yet able to comprehend everything around them here on the earth (*De Somniis*, 1.10.53–54, 57; Yonge, *Works of Philo*, 369). See *Traditions*, 35–43.

the nature of all things, both such as are visible to the outward senses, and such as are appreciable only by the intellect, for the intellect is the wisdom which gives a knowledge of divine and human things and of their principles.<sup>40</sup>

This point is similar to the teaching that was given to Abraham in the Book of Abraham: he was shown the stars and all their revolutions but then learned the governing principles behind them that have greater significance for the progress of man.

Philo seems to make an allusion to Abraham's vision of the heavens in his most extensive work dealing with Abraham, *De Abrahamo*. Philo talked about the Chaldeans' addiction to the study of astronomy and their mistaken idea that the world itself was the god, "their impious philosophy comparing the creature to the Creator" (15.69).<sup>41</sup> Then, alluding to Abraham's deliverance from this false doctrine, Philo said:

The man [Abraham] who had been bred up in this doctrine, and who for a long time had studied the philosophy of the Chaldaeans, as if suddenly awakening from a deep slumber and opening the eye of the soul, and beginning to perceive a pure ray of light instead of profound darkness, followed the light, and saw what he had never seen before, a certain governor and director of the world standing above it, and guiding his own work in a salutary manner, and exerting his care and power in behalf of all those parts of it which are worthy of divine superintendence. (15.70)<sup>42</sup>

This appears to be another example of Abraham learning that governing principles exist in the heavens above and that some planets and individuals have influence and power over others (see Abraham 3:3, 19).

The *Testament of Abraham*, another first-century Jewish text, contains a lengthy description of a heavenly ascent vision that Abraham was given just before his death.<sup>43</sup> This vision actually came as a result of Abraham's attempts to delay his death by requesting to see and learn more about God's creations. Abraham requested that Michael, the archangel sent to escort Abraham's soul to the heavens following his impending death, send a communication to God to allow him, while still in his body, to see "all the inhabited world and all the created things which you established, master, through one word" (9:6).<sup>44</sup> Chapter 10 then details Abraham's ascension over the earth and his vision of all the inhabited world and all its sins. Because Abraham began to destroy all the wicked sinners he beheld, the Lord told Michael to escort Abraham to the first gate of heaven to see the judgments and recompenses so that he could "repent over the souls of the sinners which he destroyed" (10:15). The rest of the heavenly vision focuses on the judgment of souls, the divi-

40. *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin*, III, 43, Yonge, *Works of Philo*, 855–56. See *Traditions*, 43.

41. Yonge, *Works of Philo*, 417. See *Traditions*, 39.

42. Yonge, *Works of Philo*, 417. See *Traditions*, 39.

43. Similar to the Book of Abraham and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Testament of Abraham* has a bipartite structure, with first a lengthy narrative section of Abraham's personal life and then a description of Abraham's visions. (The presence of the preliminary narrative section has always puzzled scholars because it seems somewhat unnecessary for understanding the succeeding visions.) The *Testament of Abraham*, however, does not talk about Abraham's childhood or youth, nor his idolatrous family.

44. Translations taken from E. P. Sanders, "Testament of Abraham," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:871–902 (Recension A).

sion between the righteous and wicked, and descriptions of those who have charge of the future judgments (Adam, Abel, the Twelve Tribes, and Enoch, in chapters 11–14).

The *Testament of Abraham*, therefore, is primarily concerned with the future judgment of the soul and thus does not have many overt parallels with the Book of Abraham. The principle of judgment is touched upon only lightly in the Book of Abraham, when God reveals to Abraham that those who keep their first and second estates will be added upon. However, the *Testament of Abraham* does preserve an account of Abraham's seeing all the inhabited world and all created things, just as the Book of Abraham and the *Apocalypse of Abraham* relate.

Turning to some rabbinical discussions on Abraham,<sup>45</sup> *Midrash Rabbah Genesis* interprets Genesis 15:5 where God had Abraham look at the stars to see if he could number them.

AND HE BROUGHT HIM FORTH WITHOUT—HA-HUZAH (xv, 5). R. Joshua said in R. Levi's name: Did He then lead him forth without the world, that it says, AND HE BROUGHT HIM FORTH WITHOUT? It means, however, that He showed him the streets of heaven, as you read, *While as yet He had not made the earth, nor the outer spaces*—HUZOT (Prov. viii, 26). R. Judah b. R. Simon said in R. Johanan's name: He lifted him up above the vault of heaven; hence He says to him, LOOK (HABBET) NOW TOWARD HEAVEN, HABBET signifying to look down from above. The Rabbis said: [God said to him]: 'Thou art a prophet, not an astrologer,' as it says, *Now therefore restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet* (Gen. xx, 7).

In the days of Jeremiah the Israelites wished to entertain this belief [in astrology], but the Holy One, blessed be He, would not permit them. Thus it is written, *Thus saith the Lord: Learn not the way of the nations, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven*, etc. (Jer. x, 2): your ancestor Abraham wished to entertain this belief long ago, but I would not permit him. (*Midrash Rabbah Genesis* 44:12)<sup>46</sup>

From this brief excursus on Genesis 15:5, the only possible biblical allusion to Abraham having a vision of the heavens in Genesis, we see a further tradition that Abraham saw heavenly things before they were even created. There is also a distinction drawn between being an astrologer and a prophet; Abraham was not an astrologer but had been taught from above while looking "down" on the works of God's hands (*Midrash Rabbah Genesis* 38.6).<sup>47</sup>

## Implications and Conclusions

Traditions about Abraham abound in Jewish, pagan, Christian, and Muslim texts.<sup>48</sup> Many of these traditions stem from and elaborate on experiences found in the Genesis account of Abraham. Some traditions, however, are not based on what we have in the present text of Genesis. Are these traditions simply later creations by later authors, or is it possible that they transmit Abraham

45. The dating of Midrash is always difficult because although the texts may have been written down later, most scholars believe they preserve accounts from earlier periods.

46. Translation from Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis 1* (1939; reprint, London: Soncino Press, 1961), 1:367–68. See *Traditions*, 99.

47. The notion that Abraham was raised above the vault of the heavens is also found in Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus*, 3:454. See also *Traditions*, 104.

48. Because of space, a much higher possibility of dependence on earlier texts, and later dates, most of the Christian and Muslim texts were not dealt with here. A good sampling of these traditions can be found in *Traditions*.

traditions that did not make the canonical Bible cut (or were purposely removed—that is plain and precious truths?) yet were passed down through the generations reappearing in these later texts?

An examination of the texts containing accounts of Abraham's having a heavenly vision and passing astronomical knowledge on to the Egyptians indicates a possible earlier tradition. Two major facets of this tradition are (1) Abraham came to know God through the stars and learned that the stars were governed by God or higher powers;<sup>49</sup> and (2) Abraham taught astrology to the Egyptians. The first facet is found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Jubilees*, Philo, and Josephus. The second facet is found in Artapanus, Pseudo-Eupolemus, Josephus, and Vettius Valens. Other possible facets of this tradition include Abraham's having a heavenly vision of God's creations (found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Testament of Abraham*, and *Midrash Rabbah Genesis*) and a notion of future judgment (found in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and *Testament of Abraham*). The *Apocalypse of Abraham* is the only Jewish text to discuss foreordination, Satan's rebellion, and premortal existence in the context of Abraham's heavenly vision.

Returning to the criteria mentioned at the beginning, what is the possibility of there actually having been an earlier source for these traditions? The first criterion was that the parallels from the texts had to be found in similar contexts. This discussion has not focused on random excerpts talking about prophets learning about the stars or on Hebrew prophets teaching the Egyptians but has focused specifically on Abraham and his heavenly visions during his wanderings from Chaldea to Egypt. This study has also tried to stay within a specific historical period (ca. 200 B.C.–A.D. 200). All these texts connect Abraham with knowledge of the stars (heavens). Some texts, but not all, connect this knowledge with teaching the Egyptians. Thus, it opens the possibility that there were two streams of the tradition that connected Abraham with astronomy (facets 1 and 2 mentioned above).

The second criterion was the question of dependence between the various texts, particularly ones carrying similar facets of the tradition.<sup>50</sup> The first facet is found in a variety of texts that have little connection in provenance, genre, and language with each other; thus, the likelihood of dependence is slight. The dependence of texts containing the second facet is harder to determine because many of the texts come from similar genres, perhaps similar provenances (Palestine), and were all written in Greek. Because of these difficulties, the question of dependence between these texts has been debated by scholars. Since Josephus is held to be the latest of these works, if there is dependence, it would be manifested in his works. Ben Zion Wacholder, however, felt that "as there is no reason to believe that either Artapanus or Josephus was dependent on Pseudo-Eupolemus,

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49. Louis Ginzberg specifically mentioned the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (chap. 7), (see *Traditions*, 56) *Jubilees* (12:17) (see *Traditions*, 17), and the rabbinic sources (*Midrash Rabbah Genesis* 39) as stressing the fact that Abraham arrived at the notion of monotheism through reasoning about the heavenly bodies and their creator who directed them. See *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937), 5.210 n. 16; and 217–18 n. 49.

50. There is a paradox in the question of dependence when looking at the development of a tradition. On the one hand, if all later texts are dependent on an earlier text, then it is possible that the author of the earliest text creatively introduced a motif that was picked up by later writers. On the other hand, there will often be signs of dependence of a later text on an earlier one, and this provides data to see how traditions are adapted for different audiences. If, however, it can be shown that two texts share the same notion of a tradition independently of each other, then it is possible to hypothesize about an Urtext from which these facets were drawn.

it must be assumed that the belief concerning Abraham's mastery of the Chaldaean science was a major motif of Jewish folklore."<sup>51</sup> In other words, there was a common notion among ancient Jewish texts that Abraham had a great knowledge of astronomy; and some texts even describe, most likely independently of each other, Abraham's passing that knowledge on to the Egyptians.

The third criterion was the purpose for which the authors used this tradition. If they all used it to prove the same point, then there is greater likelihood of dependence on each other. It is interesting to see the difference in views of these writers with regards to Abraham and astronomy. Some, such as Philo, the author of *Jubilees*, and the rabbis, mention Abraham's knowledge of astronomy as a negative characteristic. Abraham was much more than an astronomer, and whatever learning he achieved through astronomy was of a lesser value than the spiritual knowledge he gained from God. These writers' efforts to distance Abraham from mere astronomy seem to demonstrate that there was an existing, vibrant tradition of Abraham's knowledge of the heavens that they were clarifying or reacting against. Artapanus, Pseudo-Eupolemus, and Josephus elevate Abraham's knowledge of astronomy to one of the greatest gifts Abraham passed on to the Egyptians.<sup>52</sup> The other texts merely seem to relate accounts of how Abraham gained great knowledge of the heavens, without rendering any judgment. Thus, there was a variety of purposes for using this Abrahamic tradition. Therefore, it is less likely they were dependent on each other.

As has been shown above from a great variety of texts (historical, philosophical, religious, Jewish, Christian, and pagan) found in many different locations, there are many documents that relate that Abraham had an extraordinary knowledge of the heavens that came to him primarily from heavenly visions. He had a notion of the governance of the stars and their revolutions and understood that this governing principle applied as well to God and spirits. He had visions of God's creations, both physical and prephysical (spiritual). He knew of foreordination and that Satan had rebelled in a pre-earth council. He gained knowledge of future judgment. He passed on his astronomical knowledge to the Egyptians and was honored by them. All these aspects of Abraham's knowledge found in ancient texts but lacking in the book of Genesis have strong parallels in the Book of Abraham. (Perhaps special note should be made of the many parallels between the *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the Book of Abraham.) As Hugh Nibley has stated, "After viewing many texts from many times and places all telling the same story, one emerges with the conviction that there was indeed one Abraham story."<sup>53</sup>

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51. Ben Zion Wacholder, "Pseudo-Eupolemus' Two Greek Fragments on the Life of Abraham," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 34 (1963): 103. The question of "motif" should also be addressed. Tradition history criticism draws a distinction between traditions and motifs. If a simple idea is found in various texts, then it is likely a motif. If, however, a set of ideas are found together in various texts, then one can talk of a tradition. The aspects of Abraham's heavenly vision seem to fall into the tradition category, rather than motif, because they contain more than Abraham's merely being an astronomer: he comes to know God, learns governing principles, etc.
52. However, it should be noted there are significant differences between these three texts. Josephus mentions Abraham's teaching the Egyptians; Pseudo-Eupolemus says he taught the Egyptian priests; and Artapanus says he taught the Pharaoh. Thus, the different audiences may show different purposes for each of the authors. See Louis H. Feldman, "Abraham the Greek Philosopher in Josephus," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 99 (1968): 154; Carl R. Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors. Vol. 1: Historians* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), 180–81 n. 12.
53. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 23.



So, what might be the relationship between these texts and the Book of Abraham? Because the texts seem to draw upon sources of earlier traditions about Abraham, is it possible that the Book of Abraham did likewise, especially since the papyrus fragments are dated to the same period as many of these texts?<sup>54</sup> Some critics of the Book of Abraham claim Joseph Smith simply “made up” these stories<sup>55</sup> or used existing apocryphal accounts to form the Book of Abraham.<sup>56</sup> Yet only a few of the texts with only part of the tradition mentioned above had been discovered and published by the time of Joseph Smith,<sup>57</sup> and even these probably would not have been accessible to him either because of distance (they were in Europe) or published language, and they contain only a few points of the tradition analyzed above.<sup>58</sup> The similarities in traditions of all these ancient texts—most of which were not even discovered or published in the early 1800s—with the Book of Abraham provides support for the authenticity of the accounts and visions in the Book of Abraham, thereby disputing the notion of its being a nineteenth-century creation by Joseph Smith. In other words, some of the accounts and visions these texts record about Abraham were passed down through the generations and ap-

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54. See Kevin Barney, “The Facsimiles and Semitic Adaptation of Existing Sources,” in this volume, for a discussion of the dating of the Joseph Smith Papyri.
55. An example of a scholar’s basing the Book of Abraham on Joseph’s imagination: “It [the Book of Abraham] reflects in a large measure some of the strange religious and philosophical concepts of the early nineteenth century; and more than any other of his works, it reflects the inner workings of Joseph Smith’s mystical mind at its best. The Book of Abraham, then, is not a product of the ancient Middle East as the title implies—and the Saints insist.” Wesley M. Jones, *The Book of Abraham—A Product of the Nineteenth Century* (Oakland, Calif.: n.p., 1966), 1.
56. Hugh Nibley has written: “[E. A. W. Budge stated that] ‘the letter press [of the Book of Abraham] is as idiotic as the pictures, and is clearly based on the Bible, and some of the Old Testament apocryphal histories.’ . . . As to those apocryphal sources, why have all his other critics overlooked them, insisting that the whole thing is ‘a pure fabrication,’ ‘simply the product of Joseph Smith’s imagination’? As we wrote some ten years ago, ‘What could Joseph Smith have known about Old Testament apocryphal histories? Budge was possibly the greatest authority on apocrypha of his day, but that was because he spent his days in the British Museum among original manuscripts to which no one else had access. There were indeed a number of important apocrypha published in Budge’s day—but in the 1830s? Who has access to the apocryphal Abraham materials even today?’ . . . Now if Budge insists that the Abraham story in the Pearl of Great Price is *clearly based* on Old Testament apocryphal histories, it deserves to be treated with some attention. What, the relatively uneducated Joseph Smith using sources of which none of the experts save only Budge, the most learned and productive Orientalist of his time, was aware? What a flattering accusation!” (*Abraham in Egypt*, 2).
57. For the pre- and post-Joseph Smith publication dates of works containing Abraham traditions, see Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 47–48. Of the sources discussed above, publications of Josephus, Philo, Eusebius, and *Midrash Rabbah Genesis* may predate Joseph’s Smith work on the Book of Abraham, whereas the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Jubilees*, Vettius Valens, and the *Testament of Abraham*—as well as English versions of Philo and *Midrash Rabbah Genesis*—appeared after Joseph Smith. See also *Traditions*; the introductions to each section offer relevant information.
58. Another thought by Nibley: “Absurd as it seems to labor a point as obvious as Joseph Smith’s ignorance of a literature that has always been recondite and is still largely unknown even to experts on Abraham, it has been nonetheless necessary because of the growing practice of assuming offhand that Joseph must after all have had access to this and that apocryphal source whenever such a source strongly confirms some statement of his—a phenomenon that occurs with disturbing frequency” (*Abraham in Egypt*, 48).

peared in these later texts among other material creatively put together by later authors for a specific purpose (many in reaction to or interplay with Hellenism).<sup>59</sup>

But even if these traditions are of ancient origin, does that automatically make the Book of Abraham true? Even as archaeologists uncover evidence proving places and figures in the accounts of the Bible, this does not automatically mean the Bible is the word of God revealed through prophets. For this assurance of scriptures, a further criterion is needed, a testimony through the Spirit.<sup>60</sup> Yet even though a testimony of the Book of Abraham should come through the Spirit so that it may be properly internalized and confirmed, a study of ancient parallels can be a nudging confirmation as we walk down the path of faith.

It appears, therefore, that these texts may be preserving traditions that were passed down about Abraham, especially since similar materials are found in a variety of texts whose dependence on one another, or on a contemporary common source, seems unlikely. Although we do not know completely why these accounts were not preserved in the Bible, it seems certain that they were preserved in other fashions and revealed in their purest form in the Book of Abraham through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

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59. What are some possible models for the existence of “portions” of light amongst “main courses” of darkness? (1) Recollections passed down (my grandfather said his grandfather said) and thereby changed. (2) Inspiration of certain principles to later writers (but what of the other parts of their writings?). (3) People/groups going off without complete gospel or authority (cf. Mulekites and Lamanites in the Book of Mormon). (4) Cutting and pasting by later writers using these traditions for their own agendas, therefore found amongst divergent beliefs (cf. What Gnostics did to early Christian writings). Elder Neal A. Maxwell has stated: “One must recognize doctrinal debris for what it is—remnants of revealed religion, pieces of powerful principles that are as traceable as pieces of ancient pottery.” *Deposition of a Disciple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 78.
60. Perhaps related to this criteria is what Edward J. Brandt stated: “[Determining ancient traditions] requires a measuring rod or standard, as it were. For the Latter-day Saints the primary standard consists of the standard works of scripture—the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. The theological perspective and the historical-scriptural view are dependent on these standard works, most of which came as a result of the revelatory experiences and labors of the Prophet Joseph Smith” (“The Book of Jasher and the Latter-day Saints,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, 308). Therefore, for LDS scholars, the first criterion should be measuring these traditions against the standard works. This comparison may appear to be a circular argument, attempting to “prove” the Book of Abraham stories by analyzing Abraham traditions against them, but the truthfulness of the Book of Abraham will certainly not be proved by this paper, nor through any other intellectual endeavor. These traditions will not prove the Book of Abraham, but they may help eliminate some possible explanations (like Joseph Smith’s having made up these stories *ex nihilo*). If one has a testimony of the Book of Abraham, however, one can then use the Book of Abraham and other scriptures as standards against which other traditions can be measured. Otherwise, we would have to accept all the divergent beliefs that are found in context with the Abraham traditions examined above. If the Book of Abraham says that Abraham had a vision of the heavens and passed on his knowledge to the Egyptians, and we believe this record to be from an ancient source, then we have another text to compare with the others in examining the existence of this tradition in antiquity.