



Type: Magazine Article

---

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

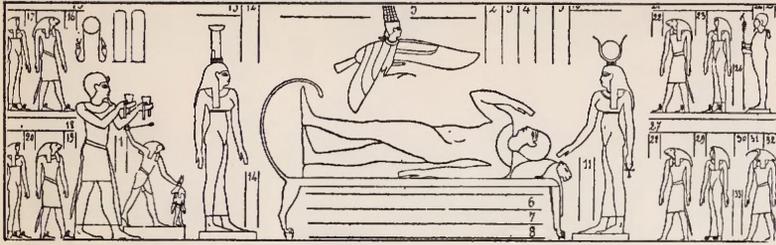
Author(s): Hugh Nibley

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 72, No. 5 (May 1969), pp. 87-91

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

---

---



The "lion couch" scene from the Temple of Opet, discussed in this article. (After M. de Rochemanteix, in *Bibliothèque Egyptologique*, Vol. 3, [1894].)



"Abraham's Offering," a painting by Jan I. Levens

A New Look at the  
Pearl of Great Price  
Part 8  
(Continued)

# The Unknown Abraham

By Dr. Hugh Nibley

● *The Paradox of Abraham and the King*: In a recent translation and commentary on the so-called "Sensen" papyrus of the Joseph Smith collection (*Era*, Feb. 1968, p. 40-H), Professor Klaus Baer of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago pointed out "that

'Facsimile No. 3' reproduces a part of the same manuscript that 'Facsimile No. 1' does," and that No. 3 follows No. 1 in normal sequence.<sup>1</sup> This is very important in view of the wondrously strange interpretation given to both vignettes in the Book of Abraham,

“A growing number of studies show that ‘Egyptian art is not essentially a funerary art’ ”

the equally strange turn of events in Jewish Abraham traditions, and the peculiar way in which “lion-couch” scenes of the type of Facsimile 1 are regularly followed by a coronation scene in the Egyptian record. In the Pearl of Great Price version we first find Pharaoh’s agents somewhere in Canaan trying to sacrifice Abraham on an altar, and in the next scene we see the hero not only safe and sound but actually sitting on Pharaoh’s throne in Egypt, wearing *his* crown and bearing *his* royal insignia!

Here, if ever, is a paradox. And yet the *same* paradox meets us in the old stories of Abraham’s dealings with Nimrod and Pharaoh. In one scene we find both Nimrod and Pharaoh doing their level best to put Abraham to death, and in the very next scene, behold, Nimrod and Pharaoh are loading their erstwhile victim with royal gifts and honors! In the Egyptian presentations (to be considered below) we are shown the king and/or god lying helpless upon the lion-couch, beaten by his cruel rival and at the very point of death, praying desperately for deliverance; and in the very next scene, the scene that always follows, the same king is sitting safely restored and triumphant on his throne.

What has brought about this miraculous turning of the tables? In every case it is the same thing—the direct intervention of God, who sends a delivering angel in response to the prayer of the man on the altar. The reader can study the story for himself in the Book of Abraham; now let us see what happens in the Nimrod legends and their predecessor, the Genesis Apocryphon.

Briefly, this is the story. Abraham is bound on a specially constructed altar (to be described herein-after) and raises his voice in prayer to God. As the priest brings the knife near to the victim’s throat, God sends an angel who offers to rescue him from his dire predicament; but Abraham refuses the proffered help, saying that it is God and God alone who will deliver him. At that moment God speaks to Abraham, the earth trembles, fire bursts forth, the altar is overthrown, the officiating priest is killed, and a general catastrophe fills the land with mourning. All this is so close to the Book of Abraham story, in which we are even told how “the Lord broke down the altar of Elkenah, and of the gods of the land, and utterly destroyed them, and smote the priest that he died;

and there was great mourning in Chaldea, and also in the court of Pharaoh . . .” (Abr. 1:20), that one is tempted to play a game with the reader: we have deliberately omitted all footnotes at this point—they will come later—so that the reader can amuse himself by locating sources for the story just told among writings available to Joseph Smith. We know of none.

But back to our tale of wonder, for what happens next is stranger yet. Nimrod, baffled in every attempt to dispatch his arch-rival, is convinced at last that Abraham possesses a power greater than his, and suddenly turns from cursing the prophet to honoring him, humbly soliciting the privilege of personally offering sacrifices to the God of Abraham. More surprises: Abraham refuses the astonishing offer, saying, “God will not accept from thee after the manner of thy religion.” To this Nimrod replies, “O Abraham, I cannot lay down my kingship, but I will offer oxen, and after that time [he] left Abraham, whom God had delivered from his power, in peace.”<sup>2</sup> Here we have the strange paradox of a king who was, as the Book of Abraham puts it, blessed in the kingship “with the blessings of the earth, and with the blessings of wisdom, but cursed . . . as pertaining to the Priesthood.” (Abr. 1:26.) This puts everybody in an embarrassing situation: the proud monarch has made an unheard-of concession to Abraham, but Abraham refuses to meet him half way—he *cannot* give him what he wants. It was a painful and awkward impasse to which there was only one solution: Nimrod loaded Abraham with royal gifts and ordered his entire court to pay obeisance to him, after which “the king dismissed Abraham.”<sup>3</sup> In the oldest version of the story, Pharaoh, after being rebuffed and offended by Abraham, whom he had “sought to slay,” swears a royal oath to him, loads him with the highest honors, and orders him out of the country.<sup>4</sup>

We can appreciate the king’s position, which is well explained in an apocryphal story of Joseph in Egypt. Pharaoh complains to Joseph that when the two of them ride out together in the royal chariot, the king cannot tell whether the people are cheering him or Joseph. This is an impossible situation, since there can be only *one* king in Egypt; and so the Pharaoh regretfully orders Joseph to descend from the chariot. Even so, Nimrod-Pharaoh cannot deny that Abraham’s power is superior to his own, yet he *cannot* give up his kingship, nor can he take second place to any man in his own kingdom. And so he does that strange and paradoxical thing: he bestows the highest honor—kingly honors, including a purple robe and a royal escort—on his guest, and then banishes him from the country. Abraham must leave, even if he leaves with

the honors of victory and the trappings of a king. Such was the equivocal position and baffling behavior of a ruler who was, according to the Pearl of Great Price, both blessed *and* cursed.

*O, Dry Those Tears:* But what about the Egyptian sources? After all, the facsimiles are Egyptian. First of all, we look, of course, for *lion-couch* scenes, and soon discover that they are available in quantity. We also discover that there is quite a variety of such scenes, of which only a few resemble our Facsimile No. 1. It is these that interest us particularly, and it is gratifying to learn that a number of highly qualified Egyptologists have recently turned their attention to just these particular items and discovered first of all that they are *not* properly funerary. Indeed, a growing number of studies are now correcting the "other-worldly" myopia of Egyptological thinking in general, showing us that "Egyptian art is not essentially a funerary art" but is "entirely oriented towards the living,"<sup>5</sup> that rites performed for the dead king were really "a replica of the daily ceremonial toilet of the living king,"<sup>6</sup> that even such thoroughly funerary stuff as the Coffin Texts were largely "of a non-funerary character," and that "many, if not all, of the Coffin Texts were primarily used in *this* life. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

These non-funerary materials turn up in graves and coffins only because they have been adapted to the funerary situation. Sethe explains how an old Heliopolitan coronation text could be converted into a "typical text for the dead" by describing the king's ascension to heaven in terms of his coronation,<sup>8</sup> and notes that though the Pyramid Texts are all found in tombs, many of them are not *Totentexte* at all but describe birthday celebrations, royal banquets, royal progresses, etc.<sup>9</sup> The freedom with which the Egyptians borrowed texts and pictures originally describing one situation to illustrate a totally different situation provides the student with unlimited opportunities for speculation and reconstruction,<sup>10</sup> in which, to quote S. Schott, "it is often difficult to distinguish pictures of this world from those of the eternal world, since death itself passes as 'repetition of life' and the dead participate actively, especially in the great festivals, just as they would during their earthly existence."<sup>11</sup> Of particular interest is the recent study of A. Bakir, who after examining the early tomb-pictures in general comes to the surprising conclusion that "there is no evidence that a connection is intended with the hereafter. What is intended is rather a record of the deceased's activities in this world, the purpose clearly being to establish the *identity* of the owner of the tomb, and to provide a biographical survey of his achievements."<sup>12</sup> It was considered especially important to

record "activities connected with the deceased's office in this world,"<sup>12</sup> in particular (as we learn from numerous funerary steles and biographical tomb inscriptions) those occasions which brought him into proximity with the Pharaoh—always the height of human bliss and attainment.

Now according to the Book of Abraham and the legends, the Patriarch enjoyed at least two significant contacts with Pharaoh, and that is the sort of thing that no Egyptian would fail to immortalize in some sort of biographical text—funerary or otherwise. We learn from Jubilees (39:6) that the descendants of Abraham living in Egypt used to *read* his story to their children, and there is no reason to deny the many reports that Abraham did write a biography—a number of early apocryphal writings claim the honor of being that book, which is now lost. Could the facsimiles be biographical in nature? If so, their obviously ritual "canonical" appearance would effectively obscure the fact. Gardiner is suspicious of all "hackneyed representations" put forth by the Egyptians as historical pictures, because they "may merely belong to the world of imagination and make-believe."<sup>13</sup> By the same token, however, they *may* be authentic history; the great battle and festival reliefs, no matter how hackneyed and unreliable in their details, are at least the best evidence that certain important battles and festivals really did take place. For all their stereotyped monotony, they are recollections of actual historical events. Likewise, if our facsimiles seem rather conventional and unimaginative, it is because, as we have insisted all along, the events they indicate are (aside from the restricting conventions of Egyptian art) of a strictly ritual nature, but that does not prevent their being historical as well. The long-established article of faith, that pictures found in tombs represent "never the real world, but only the Other World, the land of religious imagination,"<sup>14</sup> must now be abandoned in favor of the proposition that most of those pictures show things that really took place in the world of the living.

*The "Lion-couch" Museum:* It is a happy coincidence that leading Egyptologists should very recently have chosen the lion-couch motif as a specific lead to exploring the baffling relationships between history, ritual, and myth in the Egyptian record. Let us imagine that the most important lion-couch scenes have all been gathered together in a single hall of the museum, where we have gone to view them. Dick and Jane are being conducted through the museum by the curator, Mr. Jones, who shows them things and tells them stories. Mr. Jones has a handbook that tells him everything.

To help readers understand the complex issues, the author gives explanatory dialogue

*Dick:* Look, Jane, look! Here is a wonderful picture of a man on a bed that looks just like the man and the bed in Facsimile No. 1.

*Mr. Jones:* That is a famous relief, found in the temple of Opet at Luxor.

*Jane:* But why is it in this dark room?

*Mr. Jones:* This is one of three chambers, arranged (according to the infallible handbook) "like three stations in the divine epoch."<sup>15</sup>

*Jane:* What's an epoch?

*Mr. Jones:* An important story. These pictures tell a story. If you will come here to the opposite chamber, the one on the south side, after passing through the middle room (which has a special meaning of its own), you will notice that it is a counterpart of the first room; only here, instead of lying on a bed, the man is sitting on a throne. This is the happy ending of the story that seems to be going so badly in the other room. Let us go back there again: According to Professor Varille, "a famous scene in the sanctuary shows 'Osiris who is in the midst of Thebes' [that's what he is called in the inscription] in the aspect of a young man stretched on a bed which had the form of a lion; he is in the act of reviving." You can tell that, because he "begins to bestir himself, bending his right arm and raising his left foot."<sup>16</sup>

*Dick:* Why does he hold his hand like that?

*Mr. Jones:* Because he is praying as well as waking up. In a little while we shall read his prayer. Notice also that the position of the hand and even the feet, according to the handbook, is "the position of prayer."<sup>17</sup> Prayer is indicated whether the hands are turned in or out; the accepted way is to show both hands in the same position.<sup>18</sup>

*Jane:* This is much nicer than the Abraham pictures. The hands there are a mess.

*Mr. Jones:* Yes. In Egyptian pen-pictures "the hand is rarely drawn true to nature. . . . In hasty drawings . . . many times . . . there is no means of distinguishing a right hand from a left hand"—it is that bad.<sup>19</sup>

*Jane* (pointing to figures in the forecourt): The ladies are raising their hands like that, too. Are they praying?

*Mr. Jones:* Some have suggested that the hands of the man in Facsimile No. 1 are in the position of "bereavement," but that is silly, since the dead person is never the bereaved. Look, sometimes they're weeping

but not always: at Denderah the lady standing by the couch with her hand in the same position says, "I raise my hand to protect thy members."<sup>20</sup> Sometimes the ladies are neither praying nor weeping but making magical passes to restore the dead.

*Dick:* Is the man dead?

*Mr. Jones:* He is and he isn't; that's just the wonder of it. It says here that the death chamber is also the birth chamber, or rather "the place where Osiris is begotten . . . where he dies to be reborn."<sup>21</sup> Here "death is conceived as the beginning of a new life." In other words, the man on the couch is both the dead king, Osiris, and the living king, Horus.<sup>22</sup>

*Jane:* How can he be both? Who is he, anyway?

*Mr. Jones:* Perpend. "The temporal father of the young Horus is Osiris who revives in his son, whose spiritual father, however, is the life-giving Amon."<sup>23</sup>

*Dick:* So he's three people at once?

*Mr. Jones:* He's more people than that—he's the king, too!<sup>23</sup>

*Jane:* That's silly.

*Mr. Jones:* No. The picture is telling us more than just what happened at one moment. This one picture recounts a whole series of events. The man on the couch is in great distress, he has been beaten by his enemy, he is on the point of death; he cries out to his father Amon to come to his aid, and sure enough, there is Amon, the bird flying above him. Some say it is his own soul returning to him, and it can be that also. That is the nice or annoying thing about Egyptian, as Professor Speleers says: one thing can be a number of different things at the same time—which doesn't make very good sense to us. But the man's return to life is only part of the answer to his prayer: notice that just behind the lady Isis, a real fight is going on. A man with the head of a hawk is about to club the daylight out of a contemptibly small long-eared creature whose arms are tightly bound to his sides. He is the Typhonian beast, the Seth animal, Death, the arch-enemy of the man on the couch, and he is now about to get the same type of punishment he handed out—the tables have been turned, the prayers have been answered, the hawk Horus has come to rescue his father from death. It is very much the same drama that meets us in Facsimile No. 1.

*Dick:* How do you know all that?

*Mr. Jones:* Because this is not the only lion-couch picture. If you will step over here, you will notice a number of reliefs in which the lion-couch appears not just in one scene but in a number, and also that these scenes go together and show the unfolding of some sort of ritual or drama. Here is the most famous of all, the series discovered by Mariette at Denderah,<sup>24</sup>

and here are others from the tombs of nobles at Thebes, and more from the tombs of Rameses IV and Rameses IX.<sup>25</sup> This should teach you when you have seen one "lion-couch" scene not to take it for granted that you have seen them all. Any one of them can be understood only as part of a longer story. Look, here is a coffin with three lion-couch scenes on it, and here is another with the same three scenes. Notice how different the episodes are: in one the mummy simply lies in state; in the second, Anubis is working busily over it; and in the third, the lion has started to walk with bold strides; the figure on the couch is also walking, and grain is springing up exuberantly all around him—a very different story from pictures one and two!<sup>26</sup>

*Jane:* It looks dark and scary.

*Dick:* This Opet room is dark and scary too!

*Mr. Jones:* It is supposed to be. It "represents the western heaven in which the god is supposed to die and which will also be the tomb in which he will rest. . . ."<sup>27</sup>

*Dick:* That's gloomy enough.

*Mr. Jones:* But that isn't the whole story—let us read on: "But he only dies in order to be reborn; he falls beneath the blows of his enemies only to triumph with greater splendor."<sup>27</sup>

*Jane:* But are these real people?

*Mr. Jones:* This one is: come over here to this other temple, the Temple of Seti I. Here you see the very same lion-couch scene, only in this case we know that the man on the couch is a real person; it is King Seti I himself. "Seti I," says the handbook (1965), "dressed in a shroudlike garment . . . stretched out on a bed ornamented with lion heads."<sup>28</sup>

*Jane:* Why is his face green?

*Mr. Jones (reading):* "The king's face is shown painted green because he was considered dead."

*Dick:* So he was dead after all.

*Mr. Jones:* Not so fast! That one word written above the bed is "Awake!" And the man is doing just that. Here in the lower register "the king has turned from his back, and the posture resembles that of a sphinx rather than a mummy or a dead person."<sup>28</sup> He is just about to get up and dress, in fact, look how "below the bed there are spread out the royal regalia . . . of which the king would presently take possession after his rebirth."<sup>28</sup> And what do you think he is going to do after he puts on all that royal regalia?

*Dick and Jane:* Sit on the throne.

*Mr. Jones:* Right. That is the next act. Now look at this scene. It is the same thing again, this time much older, from the great shrine of Niuserre. Remember that was a center of Sun-cult, with its imposing

Hill of the Sunrise, and its altar of sacrifice and all the rest.<sup>29</sup>

*Dick:* Just like "Potipher's Hill," in the Book of Abraham, eh?

*Mr. Jones:* It certainly looks like it.<sup>30</sup> Do you see what that suggests? That this lion-couch business took place on just such a great ritual occasion and at just such a place as that described in the Pearl of Great Price. The guidebook says this relief of Seti I showing the king on his back represents nothing less than "the supreme moment of the Sed-festival . . . the climax of the festival. . . ."<sup>31</sup> ○

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Klaus Baer, in *Dialogue*, Vol. 3 (Autumn, 1968), p. 127; cf. 113, 133f.
- <sup>2</sup>Quote is from Tha'labi, *Qissas al-Anbiyah*, p. 55; sources in H. Schützinger, *Ursprung u. Entwicklung der arab. Abraham-Nimrod Legende* (Bonn, 1961), pp. 30f.
- <sup>3</sup>Pirke R. Eliezer, c. 16c; other sources in B. Beer, *Leben Abrahams*, p. 18.
- <sup>4</sup>*Genesis Apocryphon*, XX, 9. Pharaoh seeks to slay Abraham to possess Sarah (22); he is told that Abraham cannot pray for him unless he gives up Sarah (26-27); he angrily complains that Abraham has tricked him (as Nimrod does) and orders him to leave the country, but first bestows royal honors upon Abraham (30-32). The *Genesis Apocryphon* represents portions of one of the original seven scrolls found near the Dead Sea in 1947 that have been translated and appear in the book *A Genesis Apocryphon*, by Nahman Avigad and Yigael Yadin. The book tells part of the story of Abraham's sojourn into Egypt.
- <sup>5</sup>J. Capart, in *Chroniques d'Égypte*, Vol. 32 (1957), p. 177.
- <sup>6</sup>A. M. Blackman, in *Rec. de Travaux*, Vol. 39 (1921), p. 47; and in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 5 (1918), p. 124; J. Cerny, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, p. 102.
- <sup>7</sup>W. Federn, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19 (1960), pp. 245f, 250. (Italics added.)
- <sup>8</sup>K. Sethe, *Übersetzung u. Kommentar zu den altägypt. Pyramidentexten* (Glückstadt-Hamburg, 1934), Vol. 1, pp. 118f, 121.
- <sup>9</sup>Thus coronation rites in *Pyramid Texts* No. 220:191ff, 222:199-206; birthday celebrations in No. 220, banquets in No. 223:214a; a royal progress in No. 223:215b and 224.
- <sup>10</sup>Thus, while some say that the famous Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus was originally a coronation rite for Sesostris I and later adapted to the funeral of Amenemes I, others reverse the interpretation: it was Sesostris's funeral and Amenemes's coronation! W. Helck, in *Orientalia*, Vol. 23 (1954), p. 383; H. Altenmueller, in *Ex Oriente Lux*, Vol. 19 (1966), p. 440.
- <sup>11</sup>S. Schott, *Das schoene Fest vom Wuestentale* (Mainz: Akad. der Wiss., 1952), p. 7. Quite recently it has been shown that Papyrus Salt 825a, heretofore dismissed as "a somewhat uninteresting manual of magic," actually "contains the remains of an authentic ritual" of considerable interest and importance; J. G. Griffiths, in *Jnl. Eg. Arch.*, Vol. 53 (1967), p. 186; H. Altenmueller, in *Chron. d'Égyptol.*, Vol. 42 (1967), p. 81.
- <sup>12</sup>A. Bakir, in *Jnl. Eg. Arch.*, Vol. 53 (1967), pp. 159f. The "series of depictions" was "tantamount to the use of narration," being elaborated "according to the theme and according to the space available" (p. 160).
- <sup>13</sup>A. H. Gardiner, in *Jnl. Eg. Arch.*, Vol. 36 (1950), p. 7.
- <sup>14</sup>Ed. Naville, *Das Aegyptische Tottenbuch* (Berlin, 1886), p. 20.
- <sup>15</sup>M. de Rochemonteix, in *Bibliothèque Egyptologique*, Vol. 3 (1894), p. 185.
- <sup>16</sup>A. Varille, in *Annales du Service*, Vol. 53 (1955), p. 111.
- <sup>17</sup>L. Klebs, *Reliefs . . . des mittleren Reiches*, VII-XVII . . . (Heidelberg, 1922), p. 177.
- <sup>18</sup>H. Mueller, in *Mitteilungen des deutschen Instituts in Kairo*, Vol. 7 (1937), pp. 70, 94.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60.
- <sup>20</sup>Rochemonteix, *op. cit.*, p. 276.
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 317.
- <sup>22</sup>A. Varille, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111. He is Osiris, Re, "the King himself," and several versions of Amon, according to Rochemonteix, *op. cit.*, pp. 272, 274-75.
- <sup>24</sup>M. Mariette, *Denderah*, IV, 65, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 75, 88, 89, 90, reproduced in R. V. Lanzone, *Dizionario di Mitologia Egizia*, V. Plates 268ff, along with other lion-scenes, and in E. A. W. Budge, *Osiris*, N.Y.: University Books, 1961), Chapter XV.
- <sup>25</sup>C. Maspero, in *Mémoires de l'Inst. Français d'archéol. Orientale du Caire*, Vol. 5 (1894), p. 446 (Tomb of Montouhikhopsouf), p. 515, and Pl. iii (Tomb of Neferhotpu), Pl. IX (Tomb of Aba).
- <sup>26</sup>J. Capart in *Chron. d'Égypte*, Vol. 19, p. 195, figs. 26-28 (Coffin of Moutardis), 29-30 (Djed-Bastet-Ioufankh).
- <sup>27</sup>Rochemonteix, *op. cit.*, p. 268.
- <sup>28</sup>E. Uphill, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 24 (1965), p. 379.
- <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 177-78; H. Schaefer, in *Aeg. Ztschr.*, Vol. 37 (1899), pp. 1-9, and L. Borehardt, *ibid.*, Vol. 38, pp. 94ff.
- <sup>30</sup>*Era*, Vol. 72 (March 1969), pp. 76ff.
- <sup>31</sup>Uphill, *op. cit.*, pp. 377, 379.