

## Text and Commentary

## THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

*A translation of some ancient records that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt. The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus.*

PROLOGUE—ABRAHAM SEEKS  
THE PATRIARCHAL ORDER

**I**n the land of the Chaldeans, at the residence of my father, I, Abraham, saw that it was needful for me to obtain another place of residence. <sup>2</sup> And, finding there was greater happiness, and peace, and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of

the fathers and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same. Having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of peace, and

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**Heading** This heading was published alongside the text of the book of Abraham in the March 1, 1842, issue of the *T&S* and has appeared, with some modification, in each reprinting of the text. *The writings of Abraham*. The heading as published in the *T&S* describes the text as “purporting to be the writings of Abraham.” The phrase “purporting to be” was dropped in the 1878 edition of the Pearl of Great Price. This should not be taken to mean Joseph Smith or those who assisted him in the translation of the book of Abraham doubted or questioned the authenticity of the text. Rather, “purport” in the Prophet’s day merely meant “to mean, to signify.” *By his own hand*. The idiom “by the hand” is attested as an ancient Egyptian idiom to denote authorship and agency. It also appears in the Hebrew Bible (see, for example, Haggai 1:1; 2:1; Zechariah 7:7, 12; Malachi 1:1) to denote the prophetic agent issuing the word of the Lord (compare 1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; Philemon 1:19). The phrase “written by his own hand, upon papyrus,” accordingly need only be taken here as attributing authorship of the text to Abraham, not necessarily as a declaration that Abraham physically wrote the papyrus manuscripts acquired by Joseph Smith. Ab1 begins: “Translation of the Book of Abraham written by his own hand upon papyrus and found in the CataCombs of Egypts.” **1** The opening chapter of the book of Abraham narrates the patriarch’s life in Ur of the Chaldees, focusing on his escape from the clutches of his murderous kinsmen. It contains much unique material that is not paralleled in the sparse biblical account of the early life of Abraham (see Genesis 11:27–32). **1:1** *In the land of the Chaldeans*. The narrative in the published text of the book of Abraham takes place in the land of the Chaldeans (Ur), Haran, and then Canaan. Abraham never actually sets foot in Egypt in the extant text, although from Abraham 2:21 and Facsimile 3 it is clear this is where the narrative was leading. Although Joseph Smith intended to translate and publish more text, he unfortunately did not accomplish that before his death. The location of Abraham’s Ur of the Chaldees (see Abraham 1:20; 2:1–4; compare Genesis 11:27–32) is disputed. The most popular candidate for Abraham’s Ur is Tell el-Muqayyar in southern Iraq. However, various sites in modern Syria and Turkey have also been proposed. *I, Abraham*. The autobiographical voice and structure of the text parallels the inscription of Idrimi (circa 1460–1400 BC), king of the Amorite city of Alalakh. **1:2** Abraham begins his prologue with a list of titles and attributes. Some of Abra-

desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God, I became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers. <sup>3</sup> It was conferred upon me from the fathers. It came down from the fathers, from the beginning of time, yea, even from the beginning, or before the foundations of the earth 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. <sup>4</sup> I sought for mine appointment unto the priesthood according to the appointment of God unto the fathers concerning the seed.

## THE IDOLATRY OF ABRAHAM'S KINSFOLK

<sup>5</sup> My fathers having turned from their righteousness, and from the holy commandments which the Lord their God had given unto them, unto the worshiping of the gods of the heathen, utterly refused to hearken to my voice. <sup>6</sup> For their hearts were set to do evil, and were wholly turned to the god of Elkenah, and the god of Libnah, and the god of Mahmackrah, and the god of Korash, and the god of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. <sup>7</sup> Therefore, they turned their hearts to the sacrifice of the heathen in offering up their children unto their dumb idols, and hearkened not unto my voice,

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ham's titles are shared by Jesus (see, for example, Hebrew 4:14–16), thereby signifying the patriarch as a type of Christ. **1:3** Ab1 omits "it was conferred upon me from the fathers; it came down from the fathers," making the sentence read: "I became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers from the beginning of time . . ." *First Father*. The 1902 and 1921 editions of the text read, "Our first father." The 1981 edition corrected this to read, "Or first father," bringing it into conformity with Ab1 and the 1842 printing. **1:4** The theme of priesthood and rightful priesthood succession is prominent in the text. Pharaoh makes claim to a counterfeit priesthood (see Abraham 1:25–28), and the covenant Abraham enters into with God includes explicit stipulations related to priesthood (see 2:9–11). **1:5–7** *The idolatry of Abraham's kinsfolk*. Joshua 24:2 preserves a brief mention of the idolatry of Abraham's father, Terah. The idolatry of Abraham's kinsfolk is a common motif in extra-biblical Jewish and Islamic accounts of the life of the patriarch. *Elkenah . . . Pharaoh*. The names Elkenah and Libnah are given as Elkkener or Elkeenah and Zibnah in the Kirtland-era manuscripts (as at Abraham 1:13, 17, 20, 29), while the name of the god Korash is either omitted or rendered here as Koash in Ab4. The name Elkenah is attested in Northwest Semitic and Anatolian inscriptions as *Elkurniša*. It appears as a male personal name in the King James Version of the Old Testament (see Exodus 6:24; 1 Samuel 1:1, 4, 8, 19, 21, 23), but not as a deity's name. It is a shortened version of an epithet meaning "God, creator of earth" (*'ēl qōnēh 'āreš*). Libnah is plausibly attested in texts from ancient Ugarit and is likely derived from the Semitic root *lbn*, meaning "to be white" (as in the Ugaritic *labanu* or the Hebrew *lābēn*). Mahmackrah remains unattested and the origin of the name unknown. It might be identifiable with the name of a deity found at Beth-Shean rendered in Egyptian as *Mkr* or *M'kr*, but this remains uncertain. Korash is perhaps attested in ancient Hittite as *kurša*, a type of bag that was a symbol for a deity and so was treated as such. The name Pharaoh derives from Egyptian and means literally "great house" (*pr-š*). This god could plausibly be the crocodile deity Sobek or the falcon deity Horus (Facsimile 1, fig. 9 would suggest the former), both deities anciently having been associated with the Egyptian monarch and both of whose iconography is attested at sites such

but endeavored to take away my life by the hand of the priest of Elkenah. (The priest of Elkenah was also the priest of Pharaoh.)

#### HUMAN SACRIFICE IN THE LAND OF CHALDEA

<sup>8</sup> Now at this time it was the custom of the priest of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, to offer up upon the altar which was built in the land of Chaldea, for the offering unto these strange gods, men, women, and children. <sup>9</sup> And it came to pass that the priest made an offering unto the god of Pharaoh, and also unto the god of Shagreel, even after the manner of the Egyptians. (Now the god of Shagreel was the sun.) <sup>10</sup> Even the thank-offering of a child did the priest of Pha-

raoh offer upon the altar which stood by the hill called Potiphar's Hill, at the head of the plain of Olishem.

<sup>11</sup> Now, this priest had offered upon this altar three virgins at one time, who were the daughters of Onitah, one of the royal descent directly from the loins of Ham. These virgins were offered up because of their virtue; they would not bow down to worship gods of wood or of stone. Therefore, they were killed upon this altar, and it was done after the manner of the Egyptians.

#### CHALDEAN PRIESTS MAKE AN ATTEMPT ON ABRAHAM'S LIFE

<sup>12</sup> And it came to pass that the priests laid violence upon me that they might slay me also, as they did those

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as Ebla in northern Syria during Abraham's day. **1:8–9** *Human sacrifice*. Although the offering of human life to the idolatrous gods was done “after the manner of the Egyptians,” it was said to be done in the land of Chaldea. The modern terminology of “human sacrifice” does not appear in the text. Only once is this practice called “the sacrifice of the heathen” (1:7). Otherwise, it is called an “offering” or “thank-offering” (1:9–10). The extent to which peoples of the ancient Near East practiced what is sometimes today called “human sacrifice” remains debated. Ritual or sacred violence is attested among the Egyptians of Abraham's day in the form of execration rituals in which enemies and other threats to Egypt were ritually destroyed. These rituals were mainly carried out on effigies but in at least one documented case on an actual human victim. Trespassers of sacred space, rebels against the king, and desecrators of tombs were also deemed worthy of capital punishment by the ancient Egyptians. *Egyptian presence in the land of Chaldea*. The text mentions a “priest of Pharaoh” conducting these sacrifices “after the manner of the Egyptians” (1:10–11), suggesting some level of awareness of Egyptian culture and religion in Abraham's homeland. (But note that the ethnic origin of this priest is not given, only that he served the god Pharaoh mentioned in the text.) Based on the current archaeological record, this detail converges much better with a setting for Abraham's Ur in modern Syria or Turkey than with the site of Tell el-Muqayyar in southern Iraq. **1:9** *The god of Shagreel*. The identity of this god is unknown, but the name suggests for itself a Semitic origin. **1:10** *Potiphar's Hill*. The name Potiphar derives from Egyptian and means “the one whom [the god] Re has given” (*p3-di-p3-r*; compare Genesis 39:1). The apparent association between Shagreel, the god of the sun, and Potiphar's Hill at Abraham 1:9–10 would be appropriate since Re was a solar deity in ancient Egyptian religion. *The plain of Olishem*. Adjacent to Potiphar's Hill is the plain of Olishem, which has been persuasively identified as the toponym Ulishum (or, variously, Ulishum, Ulissum, and Ullis) mentioned in inscriptions from the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (circa 2254–2218 BC). **1:12–14** In a cruelly ironic inversion of the story of the

virgins upon this altar. (And that you may have a knowledge of this altar, I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record.)<sup>13</sup> It was made after the form of a bedstead, such as was had among the Chaldeans, and it stood before the gods of Elkenah, Libnah, Mahmackrah, Korash, and also a god like unto that of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. (14 That you may have an understanding of these gods, I have given you the fashion of them in the figures at the beginning, which manner of figures is called by the Chaldeans, Rahleenos, which signifies hieroglyphics.)

#### JEHOVAH DELIVERS ABRAHAM

<sup>15</sup> And as they lifted up their hands upon me, that they might offer me up

and take away my life, behold, I lifted up my voice unto the Lord my God, and the Lord hearkened and heard, and he filled me with the vision of the Almighty, and the angel of his presence stood by me, and immediately unloosed my bands.<sup>16</sup> And his voice was unto me, "Abraham, Abraham, behold, my name is Jehovah, and I have heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee, and to take thee away from thy father's house, and from all thy kinsfolk, into a strange land which thou knowest not of."<sup>17</sup> And this because they have turned their hearts away from me, to worship the god of Elkenah, and the god of Libnah, and the god of Mahmackrah, and the god of Korash, and the god of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Therefore,

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binding of Isaac (see Genesis 22), here it is Abraham who is almost sacrificed. But unlike the loving, trusting relationship displayed between Abraham and Isaac as father and son in the Genesis account, here the idolatrous priests lay violence on Abraham against his will. **1:12** Ab1 interlineally inserts "I will refer you to the representation at the commencement of this record"; Ab2 reads "that is lying before you" and sublineally inserts "at the commencement of this record." The references to Facsimile 1 in the text of the book of Abraham (compare Abraham 1:14) were apparently a secondary insertion on the part of Joseph Smith or one of his scribes and not original to the revealed text. **1:14** Referring to Facsimile 1 (as at 1:12). The gloss "which signifies hieroglyphics" appears for the first time in the *T&S* printing of the text, suggesting that it comes from Joseph Smith or one of the clerks in the printing office at the time of publication in 1842. In Ab2 and Ab3 the word is rendered Kahleenos. It is unknown what language the Chaldeans of Abraham's day spoke. **1:15** In another intertextual nod to the story of the binding of Isaac, "the angel of the Lord" stops Abraham from "stretch[ing] forth his hand" and sacrificing his son in the Genesis account (see Genesis 22:10–11), whereas here "the angel of [the Lord's] presence" saves Abraham from the idolatrous priests who had "lifted up their hands" to slay him. **1:16** Even though the "angel of his presence" stood next to Abraham (compare Facsimile 1, fig. 1, where this figure is called the "Angel of the Lord"), from this verse it is clear that Jehovah delivered the patriarch, thus implying that the "angel of his presence" is Jehovah Himself (compare Genesis 16:9–14; Exodus 3:2). **1:16–17** *Abraham*. The Kirtland-era manuscripts and the *T&S* give the name as Abram instead of Abraham, and the Lord continues to address the patriarch as such. The name was changed to Abraham in the *MS* printing in 1842. *Jehovah*. Like Moses on the mount (see Exodus 3), here Abraham receives the revelation of the Lord's true name (compare Joseph Smith Translation, Exodus 6:3). *Strange land*. The "land which thou knowest not of" refers to the land of Canaan. "Strange" in this sense means "foreign" or "unknown." *Mahmackrah*. Rendered Mah Mach-rah in Ab2 and

I have come down to visit them, and to destroy him who hath lifted up his hand against thee, Abraham, my son, to take away thy life. <sup>18</sup> Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee. <sup>19</sup> As it was with Noah so shall it be with thee; but through my ministry my name shall be known in the earth forever, for I am thy God.”

### THE LORD SMITES THE FALSE CHALDEAN PRIEST

<sup>20</sup> Behold, Potiphar’s Hill was in the land of Ur, of Chaldea. And 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 (which Pharaoh signifies king by royal blood).

### THE DISCOVERY OF EGYPT

<sup>21</sup> Now this king of Egypt was a descendant from the loins of Ham and was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by birth. <sup>22</sup> From this descent sprang all the Egyptians, and thus the blood of the Canaanites was preserved in the land. <sup>23</sup> The land of Egypt being first discovered by a woman, who was the daughter of Ham, and the daughter of Egyptus (which in the Chaldean signifies Egypt, which signifies that which is forbidden). <sup>24</sup> When this woman discovered the land it was under water, who afterward settled her sons in it; and thus from Ham sprang that race which preserved the curse in the land.

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Mahmachrah in Ab3, Ab4. **1:18–19** The Lord promises Abraham that He will lead him by the hand, put His name on him, and give him priesthood power. The covenantal language and temple imagery of these verses is unmistakable. The reference to Noah hearkens to the covenant made in Genesis 9:8–17. **1:20** In an overt act of iconoclasm that would have been tantamount to decide in an ancient Near Eastern mindset, the Lord destroys the Chaldean idols and, for good measure, slays the idolatrous priest. This signals the abject impotence of the false gods of Abraham’s rivals. **1:21–24** *The discovery of Egypt*. Origin myths were prevalent in the ancient Near East. Some of the common elements in ancient myths include the presence of a primordial flood, a description of the origin of humanity, and an etiological explanation for the condition of the world. These themes are echoed in these passages. Abraham’s understanding of the prehistoric origins of Egypt are best viewed in the context of the religious milieu of his day and age. *The blood of the Canaanites*. A dynasty of Semitic or Levantine (“Canaanite”) rulers was established in the Nile Delta of Lower Egypt sometime around 1800–1725 BC. This was followed by another dynasty of Semitic kings known commonly as the Hyksos. The mention of the king of Egypt in Abraham’s day being a “partaker of the blood of the Canaanites” could perhaps be a reference to a ruler from either of these dynasties. Alternatively, it could be a reference to the pre-Flood Canaanites mentioned at Moses 7:6–9. *Egyptus*. The name of the daughter of Ham in Kirtland manuscripts is given as Zeptah. The name arguably derives from Egyptian, meaning “son of [the god] Ptah” (*s3-ptḥ*). The name is said to signify “that which is forbidden” in Chaldean, not Egyptian. As with the gloss at Abraham 1:14, it is possible that this is something of a folk etymology or poetic metonymy, much like how centuries later the name Babylonian (“Chaldean”) came to mean something like “superstitious” and was associ-

## THE COUNTERFEIT PRIESTHOOD OF PHARAOH

<sup>25</sup> Now the first government of Egypt was established by Pharaoh, the eldest son of Egyptus, the daughter of Ham, and it was after the manner of the government of Ham, which was patriarchal. <sup>26</sup> Pharaoh, being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father, who blessed him with the blessings of the earth, and with the blessings of wisdom, but cursed him as pertaining to the priesthood. <sup>27</sup> Now Pharaoh being of that lineage by which he could not

have the right of priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would vainly claim it from Noah, through Ham, therefore my father was led away by their idolatry. <sup>28</sup> But I shall endeavor, hereafter, to 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.

## FAMINE IN THE LAND OF CHALDEA

<sup>29</sup> Now after the priest of Elkenah was smitten that he died, there came a fulfilment of those things which were said unto me concerning the land of Chaldea, that there should be a famine in the land. <sup>30</sup> Accordingly, a famine prevailed throughout all the land

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ated with soothsaying and astrology (compare Daniel 2:2, 10). *The curse of Ham*. The mention of Ham and the “curse in the land” appears to be a reference to the enigmatic account of Noah and his sons in Genesis 9:18–27. The precise nature of this curse is not specified, although it involved some kind of restriction to holding the priesthood based on the description at Abraham 1:26–27. These verses have in the past been (mis)read to justify a ban on men of African descent from holding the priesthood, even though the text says nothing about the curse and priesthood restriction being associated with skin color. From the immediate context it is apparent that the issue is more along the lines of rightful priesthood succession rather than skin color (compare Abraham 1:3–4, 25–27, 31). The racist reading of these verses that links worthiness to hold the priesthood with skin color has been officially rejected by modern leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See further the commentary at Moses 7:6–8. **1:25** The Kirtland-era manuscripts render the name Egyptus as Egyptes, probably reflecting how it was pronounced by Joseph Smith and contemporaries. **1:26** Pharaoh is described as a “righteous man” who enjoyed some blessings but was unauthorized to hold priesthood. Unlike the hardhearted and murderous Pharaoh of the Exodus account (see Exodus 1:15–22; 5; 7–9), the Pharaoh of this text is portrayed as sincere but misguided. **1:27** Pharaoh is treated as a personal name at Abraham 1:25, but in this instance appears to be a title held by multiple individuals (comparable perhaps to the Caesars of ancient Rome or the Nephis of the Book of Mormon). Although there appear to be a few rare earlier attestations, it did not become commonplace to refer to the Egyptian monarch with the title of pharaoh until after Abraham’s day. **1:29–30** The famine serves as a literary element that drives the narrative forward and gives Abraham motivation to leave his ancestral home. In the Genesis account the motivation for the flight of Abraham and his family is not specified (Genesis 11:27–12:5).

of Chaldea, and my father was sorely tormented because of the famine, and he repented of the evil which he had determined against me, to take away my life. <sup>31</sup> 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 even unto this day. And I shall endeavor to write some of these things upon this record, for the benefit of my posterity that shall come after me.

#### ABRAHAM FLEES CHALDEA (GENESIS 12:1-5)

**2** Now the Lord God caused the famine to wax sore in the land of Ur, insomuch that Haran, my brother, died. But Terah, my father, yet lived in the land of Ur, of the Chaldees. <sup>2</sup> And it came to pass

that I, Abraham, took Sarai to wife, and Nehor, my brother, took Milcah to wife, who was the daughter of Haran. <sup>3</sup> Now the Lord had said unto me, “Abraham, get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will show thee.” <sup>4</sup> Therefore I left the land of Ur, of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and I took Lot, my brother’s son, and his wife, and Sarai, my wife. And also my father followed after me, unto the land which we denominated Haran. <sup>5</sup> And the famine abated, and my father tarried in Haran and dwelt there, as there were many flocks in Haran. And my father turned again unto his idolatry, therefore he continued in Haran.

#### THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT (GENESIS 12:1-3; 17:1-14)

<sup>6</sup> But I, Abraham, and Lot, my brother’s son, prayed unto the Lord, and the Lord appeared unto me, and said

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**1:31** Foreshadowing the Creation account in Abraham 4–5. *Records of the fathers.* Some apocryphal Jewish works depict Abraham as having had ancestral records from which he gained knowledge and wisdom. In one of these works, Abraham teaches the Egyptians out of the book of Enoch, while in another he learns from ancestral records the language of Adam (said to be Hebrew) and of the Creation.

**2:1** The name is rendered Nahor in both the Kirtland and Nauvoo-era manuscripts. **2:3** As with 1:16–17, the name is given as Abram in the manuscripts and *T&S* printing. **2:4** The city (and land) of Haran has been widely identified with a city by the same name in southern Turkey near modern Urfa (*Şanlıurfa*). The name is attested in records from ancient Ebla. According to this verse, it appears that the city (and land) got its name from Abraham himself in memory of his brother who perished in the famine mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. **2:5** Abraham’s father reverts to his idolatry, forcing Abraham to leave him behind, thereby fulfilling the commandment he received from God to leave his “country” (that is, his homeland; *’āreṣ*), his “kindred” (that is, his ethnic group; *mōledet*), and his “father’s house” (that is, his family; *bēyt ’āb*). This both raises the stakes of the narrative and demonstrates Abraham’s great faith, as he obviously sacrificed much to secure the blessings promised to him by God. **2:6–11** *The Abrahamic covenant.* As promised at 1:18–19, and in parallel with Genesis 15 and 17, here Abraham enters a covenant with God. In its most basic definition, *covenant* in the