

The Book of Abraham

by Jeff Cool

On page 7, Mrs. Hansen relates some of the supposed facts surrounding Joseph Smith's translation of *The Book of Abraham* from some Egyptian papyri beginning in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1834. She informs us that Joseph Smith's credibility was in question among the Saints in 1834 when a traveler named Chandler came to town selling Egyptian mummies and papyri. She states that "Joseph used this event to resurrect his plummeting popularity and to restore his stature as a seer by asserting he could translate the ancient writings."

From what source this particular historical setting is derived is unknown, since Mrs. Hansen gives us no source for it. While it may be true that dissenters existed among the Saints at any given time, it is not evident from available records that there was a church-wide questioning of his leadership at that time, nor that his claim of translating ancient records was intended by him to be used to salvage his reputation, especially since the translation was not published until eight years later. One wonders why the supposedly disgruntled people were willing to reserve judgment for so long while at the same time relocating 800 miles across the country to Far West, Missouri, then suffering the loss of all their property (and in some cases, their children or their own lives) when driven from Missouri, and then putting all their effort into building a city in a disease-infested swamp in Illinois in order to stay with the church until they could read the translation in 1842.

Mrs. Hansen states that Joseph Smith introduced three new doctrines (the plurality of gods, eternal progression to godhood, and pre-existence of men's spirits) in the text of the Book of Abraham, which she apparently believes are wrong, if anything can be told from the context of her writing. We shall examine each of the three doctrines separately.

While it is true that the doctrine of the pre-existence of men's spirits can be found in the Book of Abraham, the Latter Day Saints were aware of and believed in this doctrine long before they read the Book of Abraham. It can be found in the King James Version of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the book of Doctrine and Covenants, all of which the Saints read before 1842. For a more comprehensive look at this doctrine, its Biblical justification, and its existence in original Christianity, please see page ???.

Since Mrs. Hansen gives chapters 3-5 (presumably in the LDS Pearl of Great Price version) as a reference for the plurality of gods doctrine, we must assume she is referring to the part of the Book of Abraham in which the creation story is told. Reading from paragraphs 23, 24, and 29 in the original (Times and Seasons 3:720-721), it says: "And then the Lord said, let us go down; and they went down at the beginning, and they organized and formed, (that is, the Gods,) the heavens and the earth.... And they said, the Gods, let there be light, and there was light.... And the Gods took counsel among themselves, and said, let us go down, and form man in our image, after our likeness..." In analyzing this part of the Book of Abraham, it would do well to compare it with the corresponding phrasing in the KJV Bible to see whether it contradicts the Bible. KJV Genesis 1:26 says, "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." In this phrase we see that the KJV reference to God being singular is followed immediately by phrasing which seems to indicate that the word "God" is actually plural. Indeed, when we go back to the original Hebrew word for God in this phrase, it is Elohim; and we find that this word is both singular and plural, and could have been translated either way.

This makes for a beautiful explanation that the Trinity is the "God" of Genesis, since the Trinity is both singular and plural. Joseph Smith believed, and Latter Day Saints believe today, this is the "God" referred to in Genesis, as can be seen in the Inspired Version rendering of this verse: "And I God, said unto mine Only Begotten, which was with me from the beginning, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..."

So as to the question of whether or not Joseph Smith was introducing a new doctrine in the Book of Abraham with different gods than referred to in the Bible, let's hear his own answer, given eleven days before he died:

"Now you know that of late some malicious and corrupt men have sprung up... and they declare that the Prophet believes in a plurality of Gods... and this proves that he is fallen.... I have always and in all congregations when I have preached on the subject

of the Deity, it has been the plurality of Gods.... I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and/or Spirit, and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods." --Thomas Bullock report of the June 16, 1844 meeting in a grove east of the Temple in Nauvoo, quoted in Ehat, Andrew F., *The Words of Joseph Smith*, Grandin, 1991, p. 378.

It appears that Joseph Smith's translation of this part of the Book of Abraham is in agreement with the original Hebrew of the Bible, simply with the plural form being chosen.

Mrs. Hansen gives no specific reference in the Book of Abraham for the doctrine of "eternal progression to Godhood." We believe there is no such doctrine in it, for we find none.

Mrs. Hansen also stated that the manuscripts were later found by Egyptologists to be a funeral papyrus, thus invalidating Joseph Smith's claim that it was a writing of Abraham. There are several facts we would like to point out about the Book of Abraham which have bearing on whether or not this assertion is true.

Since Joseph Smith published the Book of Abraham in 1842, many ancient writings about Abraham have emerged (mostly from the Middle East) which have all the basic elements of the Book of Abraham's story line, none of which were available in Joseph Smith's day. For example, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* was published in Russia in 1863 from a Slavonic manuscript, the source of which scholars believe is at least as old as the second century, A.D. (Box, George H., *Apocalypse of Abraham*, New York: SPCK, 1918, preface); the *Testament of Abraham* was published in 1892 from a Greek text which scholars believe is at least 2000 years old (Nickelsburg, George W. E., ed., *Studies on the Testament of Abraham*, Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976, 9); and the *Genesis Apocryphon* in the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1947, which scholars believe is at least 2000 years old (Wise, Michael O., *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*, Harper Collins, 1996, introduction). A brief list of some of the textual similarities will illustrate the point, and the reader is invited to investigate the texts and compare further as he or she desires:

The Book of Abraham*

Paragraph 1:

"...I, Abraham...desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness...and to keep the commandments of God..."

Paragraph 2:

"My fathers having turned from their righteousness,... unto the worshipping the gods of the heathens, utterly refused to hearken to my voice..."

Paragraphs 5 and 6:

"...the Lord...his voice was unto me, Abram! Abram! Behold, my name is JEHOVAH, and

The Apocalypse of Abraham*

Chapter 1:

"On the day I...was testing to find out which god is in truth the strongest, I Abraham..."

The Genesis Apocryphon*

"You are indeed the eternal God for me..."

The Apocalypse of Abraham

Chapters 6 and 7:

"I answered and said, 'Father Terah...fire is more venerable than your gods...but neither will I call it god, because it is subject to the waters... But I will not call them god either, for the waters subside under the earth... But I will not call it a goddess either, for it is... subordinated to man... But hear this, Terah my father, let me proclaim to you the God who created all things.'"

Chapter 8:

"...the voice of the Mighty One came... saying...'Abraham, Abraham!... You are

I have...come down to deliver thee, and to take thee away from thy father's house... because they have turned their hearts away from me... and to destroy him who hath lifted up his hand against thee... and the Lord broke down the altar...of the gods of the land, and utterly destroyed them..."

Paragraphs 16, 19, and 21:

"I, Abraham, had the Urim and Thummim,... and I saw the stars also that they were very great... and I saw those things, which his hands had made, which were many; and they multiplied... and I could not see the end thereof: sun... star... moon... stars... in the firmament of heaven.... And the Lord said... I rule over all the intelligences thine eyes have seen..."

Paragraph 22:

"Now the Lord had shewn unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones, and God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said, These, I will make my rulers; for he stood among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good and he said unto me, Abraham, thou art one of them, thou wast chosen before thou wast born."

Paragraph 15:

"...the Lord said unto me, Behold, Sarai, thy wife, is a very fair woman to look upon,... therefore... let her say unto the Egyptians, she is thy sister, and thy soul shall live."

searching for the God of gods... I am he. Go out from Terah,... go out of the house, that you too may not be slain in the sins of your father's house.' ...the sound of a great thunder came and burned him and his house...down to the ground..."

Chapters 19, 20, and 21:

"And he said, 'Look at the expanses which are under the firmament to which you have now been directed and see that on no single expanse is there any other but the one whom you have searched for or who has loved you.'... I saw...hosts of stars... I saw the likeness of heaven... I saw the earth..."

Chapters 21 and 22:

"And he said to me, 'Look... and understand the creation that was depicted of old...' And I saw there a great crowd of men and women and children... And I said, '...What is this picture of the creation?' And he said to me, '...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.' ...And he said to me, '...Those on the right side of the picture are the people set apart for me of the people... these are the ones I have prepared to be born of you and to be called my people.'"

The Genesis Apocryphon

"I, Abram, had a dream the night of my entry into the land of Egypt... I began to explain it to her and I also explained its significance. I said, '...men will come intending to kill me while sparing you. [Therefore]...say concerning me, "He is my brother." Thus I may live because of you...'"

*All quotations from the Book of Abraham are taken from *Times and Seasons* 3:703-706,719-722,783-784. All quotations from the Apocalypse of Abraham are taken from Charlesworth, James H., ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol. I*, New York: Doubleday, 1983, 689-705. All quotations from the Genesis Apocryphon are taken from Wise, Michael, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation*, New York: Harper Collins, 1996, 76-84.

The ancient Abraham writings that have come to light have the same basic elements in their story: there is the jealousy of a king who fears for his priesthood and kingship because of Abraham. Abraham is sentenced to death and placed on an altar to be sacrificed; he then prays for deliverance and an angel

appears, who destroys the altar and kills the priest who intended to sacrifice Abraham. These are also all the elements that are found in the Book of Abraham.

Further, when a group of scholars attempted to determine the origin of one of these Abraham writings (the *Testament of Abraham*), they came to the conclusion that the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* was the basis for the *Testament of Abraham* (Nickelsburg, George W. E., ed., *Studies on the Testament of Abraham*, Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976, 9, 19, 32, 33). The *Book of the Dead* is an ancient Egyptian writing which has turned up in many different archaeological digs in recent decades, but in Joseph Smith's day was unknown.

The papyrus Joseph Smith had was later easily identified by Egyptologists as a copy of the *Book of the Dead* (also known as the *Book of Breathings* and which Mrs. Hansen refers to as "a funeral text for a man named Hor"). Due to the many parallels found between the two writings, scholars have determined that the *Book of the Dead* was the basis for the *Testament of Abraham*. Joseph Smith, by divine revelation, stated that the *Book of the Dead* which he had obtained was a "Book of Abraham."

So without any ancient Abraham literature or knowledge of Egyptology available to him in 1834, how did Joseph Smith know when he saw Michael Chandler's copy of the *Book of the Dead* that it was really a writing about Abraham? Either he was the best guesser the world has ever seen, or he was a prophet. The reader may judge for him- or herself.