

Research and Perspectives:

Abraham in Ancient Egyptian Texts

By John Gee

Since Joseph Smith connected the facsimiles in the book of Abraham with the Abraham of the Bible, some people have wondered if Abraham is ever mentioned in Egyptian papyri. Recent examination of evidence shows that the name of Abraham does indeed appear in late Egyptian texts.

Of course, acceptance of the book of Abraham, like acceptance of all scripture, will always depend on faith (see 3 Ne. 26:6–12), and the only real proof of scripture can come only through the power of the Holy Ghost (see Moro. 10:3–5; D&C 50:17–23). But a knowledge of external factors can help in the search for truth, and a number of Egyptian texts mention Abraham. After gathering dust for many years in various museums and libraries, several of these are now drawing the attention of scholars.

There are dozens of references to Abraham in Egyptian texts, some of which have traditionally, been called “magical,”¹ although many scholars are not sure how to distinguish ancient magic from religion.² The references occur in five different languages—Demotic, Old Coptic, Coptic, Greek, and Hebrew. Here, we mention six of the references to Abraham, dating to the third century A.D., most of which came from Thebes, the place where the Joseph Smith papyri were found, and were originally acquired by Giovanni d’Anastasi, who sold them to several museums in Europe.

1. The first reference occurs in a chapter on how to make a signet ring. One of the steps is to “bring a white stone” and “write this name upon it ... : Abraham, friend of m[an].”³ (PDMxii 6–20; compare Rev. 2:17; D&C 130:10–11; Abr. 3:1.)
2. The second instance of Abraham’s name occurs in a description of how to use a ring to obtain “success and grace and victory.” As part of his invocation, the petitioner says, “O mighty god, who surpasses all powers, I call upon thee, Iao, Sabaoth, Adonai, Elohim, [six other names], Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, [82 more names].” The first four names are Hebrew for “LORD of hosts, my Lord, God.” (PGMxii 270–321.)

3. The third mention of Abraham comes from the same papyrus as the first two references. It is accompanied by a picture, a lion couch scene similar to the one in facsimile no. 1 of the book of Abraham, but this picture is oriented in reverse. Part of the text, a love charm, reads: “Let Abraham who ... I adjure you by ... and incinerate so-and-so daughter of so-and-so. Write these words and draw this image on a new papyrus.” Later in the text we read, “I adjure you spirits of the dead, [by] the dead (pharaohs)⁴ and the demon Balsamos and the jackal-headed god and the gods who are with him.” (PGMxii 474–95, PDMxii 135–64.)

A few explanations are in order: “Balsamos” is probably Baalshammayim (lord of the heavens), an old Phoenician and Canaanite god whom they believed created the earth.⁵ The “jackal-headed god” is most likely Anubis, who usually officiates in lion couch scenes, though he is indistinguishable from his priest, who wears a jackal mask over his head.⁶ The “gods who are with him” might be the Sons of Horus, who are often depicted as jars which hold the mummified internal organs of the deceased. (See facsimile no. 1, notes on figures 5 to 8.) The figure on the lion couch in this papyrus is a woman. The idea of incinerating the woman as a punishment in case the woman does not yield to the man who casts the spell is an old Egyptian formula.⁷

Although removed from the time of Abraham, about two millennia earlier, elements on this papyrus remind one of the three virgins Abraham wrote of who “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.” (Abr. 1:11.)

These first three references all come from the same papyrus. The mention of “Abraham, Isaac, Jacob” assures us that we are dealing with references to the biblical Abraham. Also, these references point to some sort of connection between Abraham and the lion couch, though the exact nature of the connection is obscure.

4. The fourth mention of Abraham is in a papyrus containing many references to Judeo-Christian religion; the same scribe who copied the previous papyrus copied this one, too. A long chapter on using a lamp to get revelation instructs the individual to call out, “O *Khopr-Khopri-Khopr*, Abraham, the pupil of the *wedjat-eye*, four-fold *Qmr*⁸, *creator of the mouth, who created creation, great verdant creation.*” (PDMxiv 228–29.) *The name Khopr-Khopri-Khopr* is an invocation of the creator, which has parallels in older Egyptian texts,⁹ and is possibly related to facsimile no. 2, figure 3. *Qmr* seems to mean something like “creator, creation, mightier, or one who has power over.” Here, “it is very noteworthy that the Patriarch Abraham is called ‘the apple of the *wedjat-eye*.’”¹⁰ The pupil (or apple) here means not student but rather the “iris and pupil” of the eye.¹¹ The *wedjat-eye* was a symbol of perfection, prosperity, preservation, wholeness, completion, health, and resurrection; in Christian times it was the word the Copts used for salvation. It occurs four times in facsimile no. 2 of the book of Abraham (twice in figure 3, and once in figures 5 and 7).

The *wedjat*-eye is frequently mentioned in a closely related group of chapters from the Egyptian Book of the Dead (162–67)¹² that treat the theme of preserving the dead until the time of the resurrection. One of the items discussed in this set of chapters is the hypocephalus—the general class of documents to which facsimile no. 2 belongs. Other connections also exist between the chapter in this “magical” papyrus and facsimile no. 2.¹³

5. The fifth reference to Abraham’s name is linked to a Bible story. (See Genesis, chapter 19.) The chapter in the papyrus places this reference in a love charm (like the third example, above): “The heavens opened and the angels of God descended and destroyed the five cities: Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim and Zoar. When a woman heard the sound she became a salty pillar.” The individual using this charm also calls upon “the great Michael, Souriel, Gabriel, ... Istrael [sic], [and] Abraham.” (PGMxxxvi 295–310.)

6. A sixth reference to Abraham in the papyri has the petitioner calling out, “I call upon thee, the creator of earth and bones and all flesh and every spirit and the one who stands upon the sea and shakes the heaven, who separated the light from the darkness [compare Gen. 1:4; Moses 2:4; Abr. 4:4], O great mind, lawful administrator of the universe [see explanation to facsimile no. 2, notes on figures 1, 3 and 7], eternal eye, daimon of daimons,¹⁴ god of gods, the lord of the spirits [compare Abr. 3:22–23], the fixed planet¹⁵ [compare explanation to facsimile no. 2, notes on figure 5], Jehovah [compare Abr. 1:16], hear my voice.

“Thou canst not misunderstand my voice in Hebrew: [many foreign words] Blessed is my Lord, the God of Abraham. I babble in a foreign tongue.” Here the petitioner switches to speaking in Hebrew, though the text remains in Greek characters.

These are some of the more than two dozen references to Abraham found in texts from Egypt. All have come forth since Joseph Smith translated the book of Abraham. Much work remains to be done before these texts and their implications are fully analyzed and understood.

Though these texts tell us nothing directly about Abraham, they do tell us that there were traditions of Abraham circulating in Roman Egypt. Traditions, we must remember, often stem from older truths: “One cannot assume that earlier documents are to be preferred over later ones, or that to date a document pronounces a verdict on the age and historical value of its contents. The verdict must rest with each individual unit of tradition studied for itself.”¹⁶ Even if we had a manuscript for the book of Abraham in Egyptian, dating to Abraham’s time, the critics still would not accept the book of Abraham. Those who seek to know the truth of the book of Abraham will have to wait upon the Lord.

Notes

1. 1. The texts for this article come from the following sources: Karl Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae*, 2 vols., Leipzig: Teubner, 1928–31, hereafter designated PGM; F. L. Griffith and Herbert Thompson, *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden*, 3 vols., London: H. Grevel, 1905, hereafter designated PDM xiv; and Janet H. Johnson, “The Demotic Magical Spells of Leiden I 384,” *Oudheidkundige mededelingen uit het rijksmuseum van oudheden te Leiden* 56 (1975):29–64, hereafter designated PDMxii. Translations are available in Hans Deiter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
2. 2. David E. Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), II.23.2:1510–16. Some scholars advocate dropping the term “magic” in favor of “religion”; see Reinhold Merkelbach and Maria Totti, *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri religiösen und magischen Inhalts*, vol. 17, band 1 of *Papyrologica Coloniensia* (Opladen West-deutscher Verlag, 1990), 1; Stephen D. Ricks, “The Magician as Outsider: The Evidence the Hebrew Bible,” in Paul V. M. Flesher, *New Perspectives on Ancient Judaism*, vol. 5 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 125–34.
3. 3. The restoration is the Greek word *philen[or]*.
4. 4. *Neukoi* can refer to the dead in general or specifically to certain dead pharaohs. See Manetho, *Aegyptiaca*, fragments 2.2, 7a.
5. 5. See Harold W. Attridge and Robert A. Oden, Jr., Philo of Byblos: *The Phoenecian History*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981, 40; 81 n. 49.
6. 6. Christine Seeber, “Maske,” *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, 7 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1977–89), 3:1196–99.
7. 7. See J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 1; Paul Smither, “A Rammesside Love Charm,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 27 (1941): 131–32.
8. 8. On this writing see Robert K. Ritner, “Hermes Pentamegistos,” *Göttinger Miscellen* 49 (1981): 73–75.
9. 9. See Papyrus Bremner-Rhind 28.20–21, in Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Papyrus Bremner-Rhind (British Museum No. 10188)*, vol. 3 of *Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca*, Bruxelles: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Elisabeth, 1933, p. 69.
10. 10. Theodor Hopfner, “Der Religions-geschichtliche Gehalt des grossen demotischen Zauberpapyrus,” *Archiv Orientalní* 7 (1935): 118.

11. 11. Hildegard von Deines and Wolfhart Westendorf, *Wörterbuch der medizinischen Texte*, 2 vols., vol. VII/2 of *Grundriss der Medizin der Alten Ägypter*, Berlin: Akademie, 1962, 2:1004.
12. 12. See Jean Yoyotte, “Contribution à l’histoire du chapitre 162 du Livre des morts,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 29 (1977): 194–202.
13. 13. For example, compare Papyrus Leiden I 383, VI.25 with Book of the Dead 162; Leiden I 383, VI.35 with Book of the Dead 164 (the myth is detailed in the Book of the Cow); Leiden I 383, VII.30 with facsimile no. 2, figure 6, and Book of the Dead 162; see also Marie-Louise Ryhiner, “A Propos de trigrammes panthéistes,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 29 (1977): 125–37.
14. 14. *Daimon* in the sense of Socrates’s *daimon* in Plato’s *Apology* 31D. This is the personal divinity who guides an individual; see also Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tr. John Raffan, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985, pp. 179–81; James Riddell, *The Apology of Plato*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1867, pp. 101–9.
15. 15. For *aion*, “world,” as planet, see Irenaeus, *Contra Haereses* I.30; II.17.5; and A. J. Welburn, “Reconstructing the Ophite Diagram,” *Novum Testamentum* 23/3 (1981): 262–65; it possibly goes back to Plato, *Timaeus* 38B–E.
16. 16. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981, p. 70.

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