Abraham in Non-Biblical Traditions
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Nearly two millennia ago, Isaiah counseled those who seek the Lord to “look unto the rock whence ye are hewn…. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you” (Isa 51:1-2). Since Isaiah’s day, many have come to look upon Abraham as one of the most prominent figures in religious history. Significantly, Abraham is viewed today as the father to Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. In addition to their scriptures, these three religions have also produced a variety of nonbiblical traditions about Abraham. Nonbiblical traditions are writings about prophets, mostly biblical prophets, that were at first orally transmitted and later written down. Many deal with aspects of the lives of the prophets that the scriptures do not address. Hence, it is advisable to proceed with caution when using these materials.¹

Latter-day Saints have been given extrabiblical scriptures about Abraham in Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and Abraham’s own writings contained in the Book of Abraham. The Book of Abraham, especially, includes unique elements concerning Abraham that are not found in the Old Testament. Interestingly, nonbiblical traditions from Judaism, Islam, and Christianity lend support to many of these unique elements.

The following is a select list of elements about Abraham from the Book of Abraham not found in the biblical account.

1. **Terah’s idolatry** (cf. Joshua 24:2): “My father was led away by their idolatry” (Abr 1:27); “My father turned again unto his idolatry” (Abr 2:5).

2. **Abraham brought to be killed or sacrificed because he would not worship idols**: “The priests laid violence on me, that they might slay me” (Abr 1:12; cf Facsimile 1).

3. **An angel came to rescue Abraham**: “The angel of his presence stood by me, and immediately unloosed my bands” (Abr 1:15).

   ¹ Note the Lord’s response to Joseph Smith’s question concerning the translation of the Apocrypha (D&C 91).

4. **The priest (or leader) was smitten or died**: “The Lord … smote the priest that he died” (Abr 1:20).

5. **Abraham was knowledgeable about astronomy, which he learned from ancient records**: “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” (Abr 1:31).

6. **Abraham was allowed to sit on a king’s throne**: Facsimile 3, figure 1.

More unique elements are found in the Book of Abraham, but these six will suffice for a comparison with nonbiblical traditions.²

Some nonbiblical traditions parallel elements of the Book of Abraham more obviously than others; however, this is not an exercise to prove that the Book of Abraham is true. A confirmation must, of course, come through the Spirit.

There are at least two reasons for comparing nonbiblical traditions with the Book of Abraham. First, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, many traditions were transmitted from early, even ancient, periods and have most likely retained some elements of antiquity. Support for the Book of Abraham as an ancient text can be strengthened if some of the nonbiblical traditions give further evidence that many “plain and precious things” have been taken out of the Bible (1 Ne 13:28–29; cf. Moses 1:40–41). This also demonstrates that some of these plain and precious things continued to circulate among ancient peoples and were preserved (albeit in fragmentary form) through later generations.

**Terah’s Idolatry**

Terah’s idolatry, as well as the general idolatry of Abraham’s day, is a common theme in the non-biblical traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For example, in the Book of Jubilees, a Jewish text written in the second century B.C., we read: “And the lad [Abraham] began understanding the straying of the land, that everyone went astray after graven images and after pollution. And his father taught him

² For a list of unique elements as well as a compilation of various traditions, see John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., Traditions about Abraham Relevant to the Book of Abraham (Provo, UT: FARMS, forthcoming).

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writing. And he was two weeks of years old. And he separated from his father so that he might not worship the idols with him."

In an early-fifth-century Christian text by Epiphanius (died A.D. 403), bishop of Salamis on the island of Cyprus, we read, “Terah had set up a rival to God by making one [idol] with his own sculpture,” and in an eighth-century Muslim text: “Azar [Terah] used to make idols which his people worshipped.” Other traditions suggest Terah had once repented and then turned back to his idolatry. In *Apocalypse of Abraham* 26.3, Abraham is asked, “Why did your father Terah not obey your voice and abandon the demonic worship of idols until he perished, and all his house with him?”

Abraham Brought to Be Killed and Rescued by an Angel; Perpetrators Killed

In nonbiblical traditions Abraham refuses to worship the idols of his father and the people and consequently is ordered by a wicked king, most often Nimrod, to be bound and cast into a fire. A general outline of the story of Abraham will explain the circumstances that led up to this event.

The Abraham stories usually follow a similar format: Astrologers tell Nimrod that a boy would be born in his kingdom who will threaten his idolatry and rule. Nimrod gives an edict that all infant boys are to be killed. Abraham’s mother, fearing this edict, hides the newborn Abraham in the cave where he was born. Abraham is miraculously preserved, receiving sustenance by sucking his fingers or through angelic ministration. Abraham ages at a rapid pace. He leaves the cave and sees the sun, moon, and stars and comes to the realization (revelation) that the king and his people are laboring in idolatry. Abraham preaches against the idols of the people.

Many of the stories have Abraham going into the king’s palace, or into Terah’s home, and smashing all of the idols with an axe, leaving the axe in the hands of the largest idol. When the people return, they ask Abraham who destroyed the idols. Abraham tells them that the largest idol destroyed the smaller idols. The people see their folly in worshipping idols that cannot move, see, or hear, but they become angry with Abraham for exposing their idolatry. Nimrod then commands that Abraham be thrown into a fire. The people are commanded to gather as much wood as possible. A large bonfire is lit, and it burns so hot that no one can get near it. In fact, some people try to throw Abraham into the fire but are burned and die. So a catapult is built to which Abraham is fastened, and he is propelled into the air toward the fire. An angel meets Abraham in the air and accompanies him into the fire. The fire changes into a meadow or garden, or sometimes into water. Only the bands which bind Abraham are burned, thus setting him free. Abraham then enjoys a conversation with the angel. Nimrod asks Abraham to come out to him. He confesses to Abraham that he is very close to worshipping Abraham’s God but cannot because he would lose his kingdom.

This brief outline of the nonbiblical traditions contains several of the previously listed unique elements in the Book of Abraham: Abraham’s life is in jeopardy, an angel rescues him, and perpetrators are killed. Examples from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim written traditions giving some form of the above outline are numerous. Some of these traditions vary considerably from each other, but the general outline is the same.

Even in oral tradition we can see this form of the story. For example, while traveling in Turkey recently I visited Urfa (ancient Ur), the traditional birthplace of Abraham, and learned of a Muslim oral tradition of Abraham being cast into a fire. Gabriel accompanies Abraham into the fire, which turns into water. The logs of the fire are then transformed into carp. In Urfa, very near a cave where Abraham was traditionally said to have been born, is a pool of water with many carp. To this day, Muslims believe that these carp are descended from those that were transformed from the logs in the fire.

Abraham and Astronomy

Nonbiblical traditions are replete with stories of Abraham gaining and sharing his knowledge of the

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3 Most traditions relate that Abraham grew in a day as if a month and a month as if a year. In this tradition, Abraham appears to be fourteen years old, one year per day in a two-week period.

4 *Jubilees* 11:16. This tradition, as well as all others cited in this study, can be found in the forthcoming *Traditions about Abraham*.

5 *Proem II* 3.7.

6 Ishaq ibn Bishr, *al-Mubtada*; MS Huntington 388, folio 165B:7–8; my translation.
heavens. For instance, Artapanus (ca. 100 B.C.) said that Abraham “came to Egypt with all his household to the Egyptian king Pharethothes, and taught him astrology” (i.e., astronomy).7 In another early Jewish text attributed to Eupolemus, who often quoted Artapanus, we read, “Abraham excelled in nobility and wisdom; he sought and obtained the knowledge of astrology and the Chaldean craft.”8 Muslims, who were probably originally inspired by Judaism, give a little more variation to this theme. In most of their traditions, Abraham, upon leaving the cave in which he grew up, sees a bright planet such as Venus or Jupiter and exclaims, “This is my Lord!” When the planet moves out of view, Abraham concludes that this could not be God. He then sees the brighter moon and exclaims, “This is my Lord!” with the same results. Finally, Abraham sees the sun and goes through the same process. Abraham learns that none of these is God but that God alone controls them all. In the Recognitions of Clement (chapter 32), an early Christian text, Abraham is an astronomer who “was able, from the account and order of the stars, to recognize the Creator, while others were in error, and understood that all things are regulated by His providence.” Some of the traditions also suggest that Abraham taught astronomy to the Egyptians, had knowledge of the Creation, and saw premortal spirits.9

Abraham on a King’s Throne

One of the most unique elements in the Book of Abraham is Abraham sitting on Pharaoh’s throne (Facsimile 3). Although circumstances differ in nonbiblical traditions, several texts suggest or imply that Abraham was allowed to sit on the throne of a king. In a Jewish midrashic commentary on the biblical phrase “the valley of Shaveh, which is the king’s dale” (Gen 14:17), it is noted that “it was so called because there all the peoples of the world became unanimous” and said to Abraham: “‘Thou art king over us, thou art a god to us.’ But he replied: ‘The world does not lack its king and the world does not lack its god.’”10 A more direct example of Abraham sitting on a king’s throne comes from al-Rabghuzi, a Turkish Muslim, who relates that when the Egyptian king desired Abraham’s wife, “The king seated Abraham on a throne, and Sarah sat down close to him.”11 Later, as Abraham was about to leave Egypt, the king said: “Stay with me, and I will grant you the kingship over Egypt; I will be your servant.”12

Conclusion

As we have seen, nonbiblical traditions from Judaism, Islam, and Christianity lend varying degrees of support to the Book of Abraham as an ancient text. Over the past several years as I have analyzed and compared these and other nonbiblical traditions with the Book of Abraham, I have been impressed that most of the unique elements in the Book of Abraham can be supported to one degree or another by nonscriptural traditions. I find that this makes not only a strong statement about the antiquity of the Book of Abraham, but it also says much about the inspiration of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The majority of these traditions were not available to the Prophet during his lifetime. Looking at the Book of Abraham within the context of nonbiblical tradition underscores the influence this great patriarch, Abraham, has had upon ancient and modern peoples. For the Latter-day Saint, the unique aspects of the Book of Abraham can greatly assist in following the Lord’s modern injunction to “go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham” (D&C 132:32).

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7 For most people in antiquity, astrology and astronomy were the same science.

8 Eupolemus 3.

9 For examples of Abraham teaching astronomy to the Egyptians, see Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 1.8.2; Syncellus 5. For the Creation, see Jubilees 12.19; al-Tha’labi 2.1. For premortality, see Apocalypse of Abraham 19.6–7; 21.7—22.5; and al-Tabari, 216. See Traditions about Abraham for these and other examples.

10 Midrash Rabbah Gen 42:5. See also Midrash Rabbah Gen 55:6; Deut 2:33; Eccl 4:14.

11 Al-Rabghuzi, 65.

12 Ibid., 69.