

THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF GENESIS: THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM AS A RITUAL TEXT

David Calabro

Since the first publication of the Joseph Smith Papyri in *The Improvement Era* in 1968, academic studies on the Book of Abraham have dwelt almost exclusively on whether the book accurately translates (or does not translate) an Egyptian text from the papyri, as judged by philological and/or archaeological criteria. At least two major volumes and a host of scholarly and semi-scholarly articles have been devoted to this rather narrow topic, most of which adopt a strongly polemical (and at times, acrimonious) stance.¹ This debate has had the unfortunate effect of reducing Joseph Smith's achievement to a clump of true or false propositions. This is evident in a statement by Robert Ritner on the Book of Abraham: "As an episode in American religious history and early 'Egyptomania,' the text is still of interest; no investigator seeking ancient evidence should waste his time."² Ritner here judges the Book of Abraham's value only in terms of a true/false relation to the papyri. The text thus represents only an "episode," not an enduring work of literature in its own right. This position, while understandable given Ritner's primarily philological concerns, seems to miss the fact that the Book of Abraham is read as scripture by millions of men and women worldwide in dozens of languages. Indeed, the Book of Abraham's readership after only 200 years likely outnumbers that of the Book of Breathing (the main relevant text found on the Joseph Smith papyri) in its 2,000 years — not to mention that the popularity the Book of Breathing now enjoys is because of its association with the Book of Abraham. Surely the Book of Abraham is interesting as more than a good or bad attempt at translating ancient Egyptian. Although Latter-day Saint apologists do not tend to belittle the book, in marshalling ancient parallels as "evidence" they set up a similarly Boolean discourse.

In the present essay, I wish to depart from the debate on Joseph Smith's merits as a translator and focus instead on the Book of Abraham

as literature—in particular, as ritual literature. The category of ritual literature includes narratives comparable to the Book of Abraham, such as *Enuma Elish* in ancient Mesopotamia, the Memphite Theology in ancient Egypt, portions of the book of Leviticus, some apocryphal narratives like the Greek *Life of Adam and Eve*, and the words of institution read during the Eucharist in Orthodox Christian churches. I believe that we can profitably understand the Book of Abraham, like these other examples, as a narrative crafted to a ritual context.

The Book of Abraham occupies an unusual position as both ancient and modern scripture. On one hand, it is true that Joseph Smith revealed and published the book to a nineteenth-century audience. The book represents a key stage in his restoration of priesthood ordinances, along with certain Book of Mormon passages, the Book of Moses, some sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, and the modern temple endowment. Yet on the other hand, the book's setting in time is ancient from beginning to end. Joseph Smith put forward the book as ancient scripture derived from the Egyptian papyri. The book is in the first-person voice of Abraham, and its style is exotic, as would befit a translation of an ancient record. Like the Book of Moses, the Book of Abraham instructs the modern reader by transporting him or her to a remote time and place—and, I would argue, by leading him or her vicariously through ritual performances belonging to that ancient context.

Several features of the Book of Abraham point to its being a ritual text. Among its distinctive characteristics is the presence of pictures that are an integral part of the book (one of them, Facsimile 1, is actually referenced in the text of chapter 1). All three pictures included in the Book of Abraham depict ritual scenes, and the second contains material that, according to the accompanying words, “is to be had in the Holy Temple of God” (Facsimile 2, Explanation, fig. 8). Another characteristic of the book is a high frequency of explicit gestures. Both the verbal text and the accompanying pictures are full of gestures, many more than are found in the parallel parts of Genesis. A third characteristic of the book is its extensive focus on cosmology, including arcane names of stars and planets in the third chapter and in the second facsimile. All these things—the iconography, the gestures, and the focus on cosmology—contribute to an overall impression that the Book of Abraham is intimately related to temple ritual. At the same time, the Book of Abraham is by no means a transcript of our modern ordinances, and the precise way in which the book relates to ritual is not obvious.

The ritual nature of the Book of Abraham has been explored at length by Hugh Nibley. In Nibley's interpretation, Abraham 3–5 is a “temple drama” composed by Abraham.³ It begins with a “descriptive recitation” in the first part of chapter 3 (Abraham 3:1–21)⁴ and then proceeds to a reenactment of events in the premortal council, including stage directions to actors who played the parts of God, the Son of Man, and others (Abraham 3:21–28).⁵ Finally, the events of creation are depicted in the form of ritual dances or “ballets” (Abraham 4–5).⁶ Facsimile 3, according to Nibley, “may well be a copy on papyrus of the funeral stele of one Shulem [figure 5 in the facsimile] who memorialized an occasion when he was introduced to an illustrious fellow Canaanite [i.e., Abraham, shown as figure 1] in the palace ... Shulem is the useful transmitter and timely witness who confirms for us the story of Abraham at court.”⁷ The event in progress during Shulem's introduction is a coronation ritual in which members of the royal court impersonate deities.⁸

Essentially, I agree with Nibley that the Book of Abraham is a ritual text in the sense that it contains actions to be performed and words to be uttered in a ritual performance. However, my approach to the book's ritual function differs from Nibley's in some ways. In Nibley's view, the book's function is discontinuous, with stark transitions from the autobiographical narrative of the first two chapters to the dramatic script of chapters 3–5, and from there to the memorial narrative of Facsimile 3. Nibley treats each of these sections as if they are separate documents with different origins and uses. In his view, only chapters 3–5 were intended for ritual use; the other portions are mainly descriptive. Although these different parts do correspond to transitions in the narrative, the narrative is coherent from beginning to end, and there is no evidence at all of the book being redacted from different ancient sources. It seems to me, therefore, that positing a single ritual function for the book as a whole is more consistent with the text. Chapters 3–5 are narrative and not prescriptive—they contain a vision Abraham received, which he recounts in the first-person voice characteristic of the rest of the book.⁹ The ritual function, I would argue, rather than being given prescriptively in the manner of stage directions, is implicit in the overall structure of the book—especially in the interplay between the text and images. In my view, the entire narrative was meant to be recited as part of a ritual performance, along with a minimal dramatization employing gestures mentioned in the text.

My purpose here is to lay out a new approach to the Book of Abraham as literature, taking account of its qualities as a revealed ritual text. In this

approach, the primary source is the Book of Abraham as revealed by Joseph Smith. This means that I grant the explanations of the facsimiles published under Joseph Smith's editorship in *Times and Seasons*, and I consider the vignette in Joseph Smith papyrus 1 (= Abraham Facsimile 1) as an illustration of the near-sacrifice of Abraham as narrated in Abraham 1 (where the picture is explicitly referenced). I am well aware that these explanations are not accepted among Egyptologists. In the approach I am advocating, however, one must seek to understand the Book of Abraham on its own terms.

In what follows, I will first present arguments for the ritual context that the Book of Abraham presupposes. Then I will detail how this ritual understanding plays out in the narrative, first in terms of the overall structure, and then with particular attention to ritual gestures that feature in the book.

1. Ritual Context

The Book of Abraham is basically a narrative of Abraham's life, corresponding to the account in Genesis 11–13. But unlike Genesis, the narrative is related by Abraham in the first person. Nested within this narrative is Abraham's account of a vision he witnessed which includes events of the premortal council and the creation, corresponding to the first few chapters of Genesis. Unfortunately, the text breaks off in the midst of the vision, just after the creation of Adam and the naming of the animals, so we do not know the intended extent of the vision nor of the account of Abraham's life. It is an open question whether the incomplete nature of the book is attributable to the original text, to a subsequent deterioration of the source material, or to an interruption of the translation process. However, Joseph Smith's explanation of Facsimile 3 relates it to an event that lies beyond the end of the text in chapter 5, namely Abraham's lecture on the principles of astronomy before the Pharaoh's court in Egypt.

The strongest evidence that the Book of Abraham was set within a ritual context is the relationship between Facsimile 3 and the book as a whole. According to Joseph's Smith's explanation, Facsimile 3 shows Abraham sitting on the Pharaoh's throne, "reasoning upon the principles of astronomy" before a small audience consisting of the Pharaoh, his son, the king's waiter, and the prince's servant. The content of the discourse, "the principles of astronomy," relates to the content of chapter 3, in which God reveals principles of the cosmos to Abraham, including the names of several heavenly bodies. The connection between

God's revelation to Abraham in chapter 3 and Abraham's lecture before the court in Facsimile 3 is made explicit in Abraham 3:15:

And the Lord said unto me: Abraham, I show these things unto thee before ye go into Egypt, that ye may declare all these words (Abraham 3:15).

Chapter 3 and the third facsimile are identical in terms of the manner in which they are presented and received. In both the text and the facsimile, Abraham is relating what God said to him about the cosmos; there are two intended audiences, one within the text (the Egyptians) and the other outside the text (we who are hearing or viewing it).

The parallel between chapter 3 and the third facsimile becomes even more instructive when we examine the iconography of Facsimile 3 more closely. The inner frame of the facsimile represents a canopy painted with stars to represent the night sky.¹⁰ This corresponds to Abraham 3:13–14:

And he said unto me: Kokaubeam, which signifies stars, or all the great lights, which were in the firmament of heaven. And it was in the night time when the Lord spake these words unto me: I will multiply thee, and thy seed after thee, like unto these.¹¹

Figure 1 in the facsimile is labeled as "Abraham sitting upon Pharaoh's throne ... with a crown upon his head, representing the Priesthood, as emblematical of the grand Presidency in Heaven; with the scepter of justice and judgment in his hand." Yet this figure clearly has divine characteristics; aside from the fact that the crown is said to be "emblematical of the grand Presidency in Heaven," one cannot miss the similarity between this figure and the seated personage in Facsimile 2, figure 3, which is said to represent "God, sitting upon his throne, clothed with power and authority, with a crown of eternal light upon his head."¹² The rest of the explanation for this figure implies that God is shown in the act of revealing key words of the Priesthood to Abraham, as he had done to the other patriarchs (compare also Facsimile 2, figure 7). Thus, as Abraham is relating the words of God, he is shown arrayed as if he were an actor playing the role of God.

Facsimile 3 also shows three Egyptians who constitute the audience which Abraham is addressing. The central figure in the audience is figure 5, labeled as "Shulem, one of the king's principal waiters."¹³ All other figures in this scene face figure 5; figure 4 leads him by the hand and faces backward toward him, and figure 6 seems to be guiding or following him with both hands touching his waist. Figure 5 is also the only one in the scene who directly faces Abraham. Also note that figure 5 is larger in

proportion than all other figures in the scene except for Abraham, which heightens the sense of connection between these two figures.

Thus we have two basic roles represented in this facsimile, which we may call the roles of production and of reception. Figure 1 is the central figure in the production role, but all the figures in the scene except figure 5 are involved in this role. Similarly, figure 5 is the central figure in the reception role, but all figures except figure 1 are involved in this role. These two roles may be represented in the facsimile by the direction of the face and the direction of the body with its gestures. While all faces in the scene are turned toward figure 5, all bodies and gestures in the scene are turned toward figure 1, the only figure not standing or gesturing.

In a previous essay on the Book of Moses, I introduced the concept of *lamination* as a tool for understanding ritual narrative texts.¹⁴ Lamination occurs when frames of discourse within and outside the text are collapsed, with the result that the distinction between frames becomes blurred. Lamination allows a religious narrative to serve as a “mythological precedent” for a ritual. Participants in the ritual can then experience it as if they are reenacting the narrative. Facsimile 3 is a textbook example of lamination. It collapses the roles of God, Abraham, and the Pharaoh, who are involved in the production of the discourse.¹⁵ It also collapses the roles of Shulem, the principal character beholding Abraham and receiving his discourse from within the scene, and us, the external viewers who are also receiving the discourse.¹⁶

In all this, Facsimile 3 reflects the collapsed discourse frames of the book itself. In both the book and the facsimile, Abraham is addressing God’s words to an audience of Egyptians, whose role we, as the ultimate recipients of the text, occupy. Indeed, if Facsimile 3 stood at the end (that is, the far left) of the hieratic text corresponding to the Book of Abraham, as most scholars who have studied the papyri believe, then the text of the narrative may be understood visually as an extension of Facsimile 3.¹⁷ The hieratic characters of the text face to the right, like the enthroned Abraham, so that one reading the text faces, as it were, each character in succession. The reader thus moves through the text toward Abraham, facing him like those on the right side of Facsimile 3.¹⁸

In short, there is a very close relationship between Facsimile 3 and the Book of Abraham itself. But how can we interpret this relationship in terms of an actual ritual performance? I would suggest that the narrative of the Book of Abraham is precisely the spoken content of the ritual depicted in Facsimile 3. The narrative is given in the form of a recitation by the ritual performer playing the double role of Abraham

and of God sitting on his throne.¹⁹ The facsimile shows an initiate, the waiter Shulem, following in the footsteps of Abraham by receiving the divine revelation.²⁰ The Book of Abraham, then, would be analogous to a Christian anaphora, providing the text to be recited during a ritual performance, and the facsimiles would illustrate how the performance was to be choreographed.

2. Structure of the Narrative

In our current edition of the Pearl of Great Price, the Book of Abraham is divided into five chapters. These chapter divisions are not original to the text but were introduced in the 1902 edition, which was prepared by James E. Talmage.²¹ In terms of the production of the book as evident from the manuscripts and from the 1842 publication in *Times and Seasons*, there are three major sections of the book: Abraham 1:1–2:18 with Facsimile 1; Abraham 2:19–5:21 with Facsimile 2; and Facsimile 3.²² An analysis of the book's content suggests a division into sections that are different from both the original sections and Elder Talmage's chapters. The analysis is complicated to some extent by the incomplete nature of the book, but the basic outlines are clear. Basically, the extant portion of the narrative consists of two major parts. The first is Abraham's journey to Egypt as described in chapters 1–2, the first scene of which corresponds to Facsimile 1. The second part of the narrative, Abraham's sojourn in Egypt, is represented only by Facsimile 3; presumably, if we had the complete book, there would be text corresponding to this facsimile. Between these two parts of the narrative is a long section in which God gives Abraham a revelation on the cosmos and the creation. The extant text of this section is found in chapters 3–5; we cannot be sure how much more of the revelation is missing. Corresponding to this is Facsimile 2, the round image identified in Egyptological studies as the hypocephalus of Sheshonq.²³ The basic structure of the Book of Abraham, then, consists of an essentially bipartite narrative with a large transitional section, making three sections in all. This can be tabulated as follows:

Section	Text	Illustration
Journey from Ur to Egypt	Abraham 1–2	Facsimile 1
Revelation on Cosmos and Creation	Abraham 3–5	Facsimile 2
Abraham in Egypt	(not extant)	Facsimile 3

Abraham's respite on the border of Egypt is a mere moment in the chronology of the narrative, yet this is clearly a crucial moment, as the space devoted to it is disproportionate to the remainder of the

narrative — as if we zoom in to behold every detail, like Abraham himself. That this takes place on the border of Egypt as well as at the transitional point between major sections of the narrative suggests the concept of *liminality*. This term, developed in ritual studies by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, comes from the Latin word *limen* “threshold.” It refers to a common feature of ritual, in which there is a transitional stage in a progression from one state to another. This in-between stage is called the *liminal* stage.²⁴ Chapters 3–5 of the Book of Abraham can be understood as a liminal stage of the narrative, as Abraham is being prepared to fill the role of God in revealing the secrets of the cosmos to the Egyptians. I would suggest this corresponds to a liminal stage of instruction in the ritual performance for which the book is crafted.

I have already described how Facsimile 3 encapsulates the performance of the Book of Abraham as a whole. This facsimile also represents the narrative structure of the book in pictorial form. The revelation of chapters 3–5, spoken by the seated figure to the audience before him, may be imagined as floating in the conceptual space between figures 1 and 4. This space is occupied not only by the hieroglyphs mentioning the recitation but also by the small offering table (figure 3) representing “Abraham in Egypt.” This offering table functions on many levels as a liminal symbol, standing between the mortal and divine spheres, the two stages of the performance, and also the two stages of the narrative. To the right of the offering table is Shulem, following in the footsteps of Abraham as he received the revelation before entering Egypt. His legs are apart, indicating movement. This corresponds to chapters 1–2 of the narrative. To the left of the table is Abraham himself, now enthroned and revealing God’s words to the Egyptians. This corresponds to a later portion of the narrative, now missing, in which Abraham is in Egypt. The facsimile thus visually expresses the book’s basic progression from a state of physical movement, through a transitional stage of anticipation and revelation, and finally to a state of blessedness.

3. Gestures

As mentioned above, the Book of Abraham is full of ritual gestures, many more than the biblical Book of Genesis. In fact, the portions of Genesis that are parallel to the Book of Abraham contain no references to ritual gestures at all. The one reference to a ritual gesture in fairly close proximity to these portions is in Genesis 14:22, in which Abraham describes having lifted his hand to God and entered into a covenant not to take any of the spoils of war. This statement by Abraham occurs

after the sojourn in Egypt, although he may be referring to an event that occurred at some prior time, possibly during the period covered by the Book of Abraham (I discuss this in greater detail below).

In contrast to the paucity of ritual gestures in Genesis, the Book of Abraham, including the facsimiles, contains no fewer than sixteen distinct instances of ritual gestures. These confront us from the very first facsimile, as Abraham lifts his hands in prayer from the altar on which he is to be sacrificed. Abraham's lifting of hands as shown on the facsimile complements the lifting of his voice as described in the text: "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" (Abraham 1:15).²⁵

These gestures belong to the ancient milieu that the Book of Abraham invokes. Many of them would appear unusual in a modern setting. Yet there is striking consistency between the gestures mentioned in the text and those depicted in the facsimiles. Some of them are identical.

These gestures, I would suggest, are also part of the ritual performance that accompanies the recitation of the book. This is implicit in the salvific role of these gestures in the narrative. Each occurs at a pivotal point in the narrative. They mark Abraham's passage from one stage of the narrative to the next. If the narrative serves as a mythological precedent for the scene in Facsimile 3, as I have argued, the gestures would have to be performed in order for the ritual to be efficacious. The book gives meaning to these gestures in terms of the narrative, so that to perform the gestures is not only to employ their inherent ritual functions, but also to act out Abraham's story. Thus the gestures within the text serve as both choreography and commentary. I will now turn to an examination of the gestures that I think are most crucial to an understanding of the book's ritual function.

3.1. From Ur to the Border of Egypt (Abraham 1–2; Facsimile 1)

In Abraham 1:18, the Lord, having rescued Abraham from the uplifted hand of his enemies, gives him a promise that sets the theme for the narrative that follows: "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." The ritual gesture of leading another by the hand is characteristically Egyptian, being commonly depicted in introduction scenes in Egyptian art.²⁶ Facsimile 3 shows this same gesture, as one of the participants (said to be the "Prince of Pharaoh") leads the initiate by the hand.²⁷ The performance of this gesture in the ritual, as depicted in the facsimile, may enact the very event the Lord refers to in Abraham 1:18.

In the schematic logic of the facsimile, the gesture moves the principal actor (Shulem) toward the figure representing Abraham enthroned “with a crown upon his head, representing the Priesthood,” which matches the sense of Abraham 1:18 (even though a human agent performs the gesture instead of the Lord himself).

In a new location, Haran, Abraham receives a second theophany and message from the Lord. Here the Lord tells Abraham the following:

For I am the Lord thy God; I dwell in heaven; the earth is my footstool; I stretch my hand over the sea, and it obeys my voice . . . My name is Jehovah, and I know the end from the beginning; therefore my hand shall be over thee (Abraham 2:7–8).

The two gestures in these verses are parallel. The Lord first affirms to Abraham his control over the cosmos, as realized through his powerful hand gesture of stretching out the hand. Then the Lord affirms his omniscience with respect to time, and he says that his hand, likely in the same gesture, will be over Abraham. In both cases, the gesture may be understood as a sign used to accompany authoritative speech. Just as Jehovah can command the sea with the outstretched hand gesture, he will command Abraham with the same gesture, and it will be to Abraham’s benefit, since Jehovah knows the end from the beginning. In the second instance, the gesture may have an additional connotation of blessing or protection. A gesture of stretching out the hand with the palm facing outward is frequently encountered in ancient Egyptian art, often in a ritual setting.²⁸

The Lord’s statement in Abraham 2:7–8 is thematically linked to his statement in the earlier revelation, in Abraham 1:18: “My power shall be over thee.” Just as the Lord’s power will be over Abraham, his hand will also be over him. The correlation between “power” and “hand” in these verses may be understood as a kind of exegesis of the gesture: as the Lord’s hand represents his power, his raising of the hand over Abraham to issue his authoritative command suggests that his power will be over Abraham to protect and bless him.

In Abraham 2:9, the Lord gives Abraham a promise regarding his posterity:

And thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations.

Here the Lord employs the imagery of Abraham’s seed carrying the Priesthood as if it were a physical object and presenting it to people of

other nations. This imagery recalls the characteristically Egyptian ritual gesture for presenting objects, with the hand held forward in cupping shape, the object sitting upon the cupped hand. The hand not holding the object is typically also raised, the palm facing outward. This gesture is used for the ritual known as the Presentation of Maat, in which the Pharaoh offers a small statue of the goddess of justice and truth to a deity, as well as for the offering of incense and other objects to deities.²⁹ Egyptian iconography also depicts deities offering things to humans, and humans offering things to the Pharaoh, all with the same gesture.³⁰

3.2. “Near to Enter into Egypt” (Abraham 3–5; Facsimile 2)

The next gesture we encounter in the text is in Abraham 3:12. Here the Lord, while speaking with Abraham face to face, says “My son, my son,” while stretching out his hand. The Lord then puts his hand upon Abraham’s eyes, and Abraham sees the things the Lord’s hands have made. There are many interesting things about this gesture sequence in comparison with other scriptural passages. For instance, note that the contact gesture corresponds to the Lord’s explicit avowal of a father-son relationship between him and Abraham. In general, Northwest Semitic and Egyptian ritual gestures involving contact between the participants also include an element of kinship between them. There is a close similarity between this scene and that of Moses 1:1–8. There, too, the Lord talks with his prophet face-to-face, states that the prophet is his son, and shows him a vision of the cosmos. The gesture of putting the hand on the eyes is not found in Moses, but we do find this gesture in Genesis 46:4 in an instructive context. There Jacob, contemplating the journey to Egypt, receives this word from the Lord:

I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up *again*: and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes.

The gesture here refers to closing the eyes of the dead. Although nothing in Abraham 3:12 suggests that Abraham dies, it is certainly significant that the gesture has this association. Note that in both cases, a *descent* (Abraham 2:21; Genesis 46:3–4) into Egypt is at hand, and just as the Lord calls Abraham his son, there is also a father-son relationship between Jacob and Joseph (although the places are reversed). Putting all this together, it could be that the gesture in Abraham 3:12 imitates a gesture performed by the nearest of kin on the body of the dead, marking a symbolic passage into the realm of the dead or into a state in which one can behold God’s creations. After all, Moses, after receiving

his vision, “fell unto the earth,” and it was “many hours before Moses did again receive his natural strength like unto man” (Moses 1:9–10).

In terms of the ritual performance, we can note the obvious fact that the two participants have to be in very close physical proximity to perform this gesture. The face-to-face encounter is the quintessential liminal moment, in which the two principal participants are directly at the threshold that divides mortal from deity in ritual space and ritual sequence.

Facsimile 2 shows many ritual gestures. Most relevant to our purpose here is figure 7, which shows an enthroned personage raising his arm to the square with a compass-shaped object above the upraised hand.³¹ The flying creature in front of this personage presents an eye in one cupped hand while raising its other hand with the palm outward; this two-part gesture, as discussed above in the context of Abraham 2:9, is characteristically Egyptian. In this case, the flying creature presents the eye to the seated figure’s mouth, which agrees with the fact that the eye (both here and in figure 3) is said to represent “the grand Key-words of the Priesthood.” One also notes that there is a close resemblance between figures 3 and 7, as also between these two figures and figure 1 of Facsimile 3. Once again, this shows the conflation of God and Abraham as part of the overall lamination of the narrative with its ritual context.³²

3.3. Abraham in Egypt (Facsimile 3)

We have already discussed Facsimile 3 in some detail, including the leading by the hand and its possible role as a fulfillment of Abraham 1:18. It remains for us to examine the main gesture of this scene, the raising of the hand with the palm facing outward, performed by figures 2, 4, and 5. Klaus Baer, describing figure 5, says that this figure’s “hand [is] raised in adoration.”³³ This analysis of the function of the gesture, however, is not satisfactory. The principal Egyptian gesture of adoration is the raising of both hands with the palms outward—the *dw3* or *ibi* gesture, as we see in Facsimile 1 (figure 2) and Facsimile 2 (figures 22 and 23). There is also a one-handed gesture of respect that is sometimes performed by people, including those being led by the hand, when entering the presence of an enthroned deity. In this latter gesture, the shoulder is inclined toward the one being adored, with the arm reaching toward the ground. I am not aware of any example in Egyptian art in which the raising of one hand with the palm outward, as shown in Facsimile 3, is necessarily to be understood as a gesture of adoration. This gesture, common both in Egypt and in the Levant, is best understood as a performative marker—it accompanies speech that brings about a new

state of affairs by means of the speech itself, like saying “I hereby ...” We have already seen examples of this gesture above, accompanying the issuing of an authoritative command and the giving of an offering. These two actions have in common the fact that they are performative: one might say “I (hereby) command you ...” or “I (hereby) give you ...,” and even if the one doing the commanding or giving does not use these words, the commandment or gift is assumed to have the same force as if these words were used. Another common context in which this gesture is used is that of oath-taking. In fact, it is this gesture to which Abraham refers when he describes his oath to the king of Sodom:

And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lifted up mine hand unto the LORD ... that I will not *take* from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and that I will not take anything that *is* thine (Genesis 14:22–23, KJV).

Here Abraham may be referring to the very event being re-enacted by Shulem in Facsimile 3.³⁴ In any event, the gesture very likely has the same function of taking an oath as part of a covenant.

4. Conclusion

I have argued here that the Book of Abraham presupposes a ritual context like the one shown in Facsimile 3. In this ritual, a seated person recites the text of the Book of Abraham to an audience of initiates. In the course of the recitation, the seated person takes on the role of Abraham, speaking in the first person as he narrates his adventures to the audience. When the recitation reaches chapters 3–5, at the point where Abraham is about to enter into Egypt, a shift in the roles of the participants occurs. Now the seated person takes on the additional role of God, who speaks in the first person as he reveals aspects of the cosmos, the council in heaven, and the creation. The initiates facing the seated person then take the part of Abraham, receiving the revelation as Abraham himself did. During the course of the ritual, the initiates also perform ritual gestures mentioned in the narrative, including leading by the hand and raising the hand to make a performative utterance. The latter may accompany the taking of an oath in connection with receiving the Abrahamic covenant (as described in Genesis 14:22–23), although the incomplete nature of the text precludes certainty on this. Likewise, it is possible, though not certain, that at some stage of the ritual the initiates complete the cycle of shifting roles by sitting on the divine throne.

This ritual reading of the Book of Abraham helps to place the book in the historical context of the Restoration as a follow-up to the Book of Moses and a prelude to the temple endowment. It also illuminates the Book of Abraham as an instructive example of interplay between narrative and ritual, with features such as lamination and liminality that tie the narrative to its performative context. In the particular case of the Book of Abraham, ritual gestures serve as pivots in the ritual performance, connecting the participants with the narrative.

This study also suggests a shift of orientation in our view of the Book of Abraham in relation to the academic world. Previous studies, even those which seek to defend the book, end up presenting it as a potentially embarrassing attempt at translating ancient Egyptian. But the book does not really belong in the arena of Egyptian philology. Much ink has already been spilled over the book in that arena; we have learned much about the Joseph Smith papyri in the process, but very little about the revealed text which millions of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints worldwide read as scripture. Approaching the book on its own terms as a ritual narrative, however, allows us to move the discourse to an area in which the book makes a clear contribution to scholarship. In particular, the book has great value for comparative research, for it is not only a revealed ritual narrative but an exceptionally well-documented one: we have original English manuscripts, other materials that featured in the revelatory process (including the papyri), and eyewitness accounts describing parts of the process. Nibley and others have already registered the book's astonishing similarities to the apocryphal literature of late antiquity, much of which literature may also fall in the category of revealed ritual narrative. From my own preliminary research, I am convinced that a comparison of the Book of Abraham with apocryphal literature can be instructive in building a typology of revelatory text creation. Those who study apocryphal texts, whose origins remain enigmatic, stand to gain much from comparison with a well-documented modern example. A typological project along these lines may also shed light on other religious narratives, including portions of the book of Genesis and the Qur'an. I have outlined here some aspects of the Book of Abraham's complex lamination of text, iconography, and (implied) ritual performance. To the extent that we continue to examine this book and apply its insights to the religious literature of other traditions, we will find it worthy of respect.

Notes

1. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, second edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005); Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013). The articles are too numerous to cite here; many can be found in the bibliographies of the aforementioned books.
2. Robert Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 119.
3. Hugh Nibley, “Abraham’s Temple Drama,” in *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 18. Note that Nibley’s studies on the Joseph Smith Papyri touch only indirectly on the interpretation of the Book of Abraham itself, as Nibley considers the Book of Abraham to be separate from the now-extant portions of the *Joseph Smith Papyri*. See Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*.
4. Nibley, “Abraham’s Temple Drama,” 22–23.
5. Nibley, “Abraham’s Temple Drama,” 29–31.
6. Nibley, “Abraham’s Temple Drama,” 31–33.
7. Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, second edition (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 451.
8. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 382–453.
9. It is possible that chapters 3–5 are a veiled description of a ritual drama in which Abraham participated, perhaps at a wilderness shrine near the border of Egypt. But in any case, the description is presented as narrative, even though it implicitly functions as “stage directions” (to use Nibley’s term).
10. See Baer, “Breathing Permit of Hor,” 126.
11. This echoes the words of Genesis 15:5.
12. From an Egyptological standpoint, the seated figure in Facsimile 3 is identifiable as the god Osiris, the king of the netherworld. See Baer, “Breathing Permit of Hor,” 126. The divine figure in the boat in Facsimile 2, figure 3, appears to be the sun god Re. Note that according to Ritner, this figure was originally missing from the hypocephalus and was inserted from a vignette in the Book of the Dead of Ta-sherit-Min (Papyrus Joseph Smith 2). It is curious, however, that hypocephali

- do often depict divine figures in boats in this upper right portion. See Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 236, 268–69.
- 13 For the central role of figure 5 in the scene, and the identification of this figure as the owner of the text, see Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 386, 450–51. In Egyptological terms, this figure is Hor, the owner of the papyrus.
 - 14 David Calabro, “Joseph Smith and the Architecture of Genesis,” in *The Temple: Ancient and Restored*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2016), 165–81.
 - 15 In terms of Levinson’s analysis of discourse structure, God is the Author, Abraham is the Relayer, and the Pharaoh is the Sponsor. See Stephen C. Levinson, “Putting Linguistics on a Proper Footing: Explorations in Goffman’s Concepts of Participation,” in *Erving Goffman: Exploring the Interaction Order*, ed. Paul Drew and Anthony Wootton (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 161–227.
 - 16 The collapsing of participant roles may help to explain the curious fact that those labeled as the Pharaoh and the Prince are both obviously female (this would likely have been even more obvious in Joseph Smith’s time, given the prevailing hairstyles then as compared to now). One could speculate, for instance, that the figure labeled as the Pharaoh, who stands behind the enthroned Abraham, also represents Abraham’s wife Sarah. If this is so, it would resonate with similar scenes in Egyptian art (such as the judgment scene on the Book of the Dead papyrus of Hunefer, now in the British Museum), in which Isis stands behind the enthroned Osiris, raising one hand with palm outward and saying *in ksnt = k* “I am your sister” (compare Abraham 2:24–25). On the collapsing of roles in Facsimile 3, including the apparent gender-switching, see also Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 382–453.
 - 17 For the placement of Facsimile 3 at the end of the Hor Book of Breathings, see Gee, *Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 11, 13; Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 171–77. In my estimation, a careful study of the hieroglyphic columns and hieratic lines on this papyrus would reveal that the characters face toward the right and that the lines are to be read from right to left, even if the one studying the papyrus had no prior experience with ancient Egyptian texts. Joseph Smith was, however, familiar with ancient languages running from right to left, as is evident from his own statements about the Book of Mormon plates; see *History of the Church*, 1:71; *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 7.

- 18 The playful interaction between text, image, and viewing audience is true to ancient Egyptian sensibilities. For a much earlier example of the same kind of interaction, see Janet Richards, “Text and Context in Late Old Kingdom Egypt: The Archaeology and Historiography of Weni the Elder,” *JARCE* 39 (2002).
- 19 The hieroglyphs above this figure’s head, as interpreted in Egyptological studies, indicate that he is giving a recitation, but they do not give the words of the recitation. See Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 173. Nevertheless, Reuben Hedlock’s engravings are extremely rough, so confidence on the reading is ill-advised.
- 20 The fact that figures 1 and 5 both bear the name Osiris, as spelled out in the hieroglyphs above their heads, reinforces the connection between these two figures. The identical nature of these two sets of hieroglyphs might have been evident even to a close reader who did not know how to read Egyptian, particularly if the reader had access to the original (as opposed to Reuben Hedlock’s copy).
- 21 Brian M. Hauglid, *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2010), 16.
- 22 Hauglid, *Textual History*, 6, 22.
- 23 The content of Facsimile 2, as Joseph Smith understood it, relates directly to the visionary and cosmological content of Abraham 3, as is clear from the Explanation published with the facsimile. Although Joseph Smith’s knowledge of the hieroglyphs is a contentious issue, it can also be noted that at least part of the text on the hypocephalus may bear similarity to the creation theme of Abraham 4–5. According to Ritner, *Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri*, 272, figures 8–11 read, “O noble god from the beginning of time, great god, lord of heaven, earth, underworld, waters [and mountains,] cause the ba-spirit of the Osiris Sheshonq to live” (compare the references to “the beginning” and “the heavens and the earth” in Abraham 4:1). The hieroglyph which Ritner and others read as *nb* “lord” in figure 10 actually looks more like the eye hieroglyph for *ir* “make” (compare the instance of this hieroglyph in *wsir* “Osiris” in figure 8). The word could thus be read as a participle “he who made.” For the bracketed portion of Ritner’s rendering, he notes that “garbled traces of [*p*]*f*” from figure 2 “have been recopied to fill the end” of figure 9. However, by a remarkable coincidence, this filling-in produces a reading that could relate, again, to the text of the Book of Abraham: *ir pt t3 dw3t mw=f* “he who made heaven, earth, and the Duat—its (i.e., the earth’s) great waters.” The term “great waters”

does not appear in the creation account in Genesis, but it does appear in Abraham 4:9-10, where it describes the primordial waters out of which the land emerged. The phrase “its great waters,” with the masculine suffix pronoun referring to the masculine noun “land” (the words for “heaven” and “Duat” are feminine), could thus be understood as a gloss relating the Egyptian concept of the Duat (the netherworld, understood in Egyptian cosmology as the source of the Nile inundation) to the cosmology of the Book of Abraham.

- 24 See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 19–21, 182–84; Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–111.
- 25 Rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise, Abraham is doing a gesture known from Egyptian hieroglyphs and iconography as *dw3* or *i3i*, a gesture that accompanies praise as well as prayer in general. Interestingly, in the text itself the people trying to kill Abraham, rather than Abraham himself, “lift up their hands.” However, Abraham 1:17 uses the phrase “him who hath lifted up his hand against thee,” indicating that “their hands” in verse 15 means “one hand of each of them.” This accords with what Facsimile 1 shows: the priest lifts up one hand with the knife to kill Abraham.
- 26 The gesture is also frequent in Mesopotamian introduction scenes. By contrast, leading by the hand is virtually unknown in Levantine iconography and literature. Certain passages of the Hebrew Bible interpreted as references to leading by the hand, such as Psalms 63:7–8; 73:23–24, are probably referring instead to a handclasp between confronted persons. See David Calabro, “The Divine Handclasp in the Hebrew Bible and in Near Eastern Iconography,” in *Temple Insights*, ed. William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 83–97. The same gesture also occurs in D&C 112:10, a passage that likewise refers to God leading his servant.
- 27 In Egyptological terms, this figure is the goddess Maat.
- 28 Brigitte Dominicus, *Gesten und Gebärden in Darstellungen des Alten und Mittleren Reiches* (Heidelberg: Heidelberger Orientverlag, 1993), 91–93. At first glance, the gesture to which the Lord refers may be understood as a different gesture, that of raising the hand with the fist in smiting position. The Lord could then be saying that he will protect Abraham by going to battle for him against the sea,

the latter being understood as a source of evil. This would resonate with Abraham's Levantine background. In fact, the Ugaritic "Baal au foudre" stela shows the god Baal performing this gesture, while a smaller figure (perhaps a king or priest) stands beneath him, as if he is under Baal's protection. In Ugaritic mythology, Baal's foe is the god Yam, whose name means "sea." This would also connect the gesture the Lord describes with the one by which Moses parted the sea (Exodus 14:16, 21). However, this gesture is incompatible with Abraham 2:8, since it would mean the Lord will perform the gesture against Abraham. In addition, at least in the Levant, there is no evidence that this gesture was accompanied by speech, especially not a commandment as implied by Abraham 2:7. See David Calabro, *Ritual Gestures of Lifting, Extending, and Clasping the Hand(s) in Northwest Semitic Literature and Iconography*, unpublished University of Chicago dissertation (2014), 627–36. Thus Abraham 2:7–8 most likely refers to the gesture with the palm outward.

- 29 See Emily Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1997).
- 30 James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), nos. 45, 52, 551.
- 31 The V-shaped object above the seated personage's hand corresponds to the crook in Egyptian depictions of the god Min. However, the object is drawn without any detail, and what would be the handle of the crook is floating in space rather than connecting with the hand, so the object appears more like an abstract compass shape than a crook. Also note that in depictions of Min, what might be taken here as a hand outstretched to receive is actually an erect phallus. James R. Harris suggests that the phallus in the Abraham facsimile signifies "eternal virility," the promise of "eternal increase." See Harris's discussion of the facsimiles in H. Donl Peterson, *The Pearl of Great Price: A History and Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1987), 54.
- 32 Joseph Smith's explanation states that the scene in Facsimile 2, figure 7, "represents God sitting upon his throne, revealing through the heavens the grand Key-words of the Priesthood; as, also, the sign of the Holy Ghost unto Abraham, in the form of a dove." There is some uncertainty here as to whether the enthroned

figure in the scene is “God sitting upon his throne” or Abraham. Note that the explanation for this figure closely resembles that of figure 3, which, according to Joseph Smith’s explanation, is “God, sitting upon his throne,” and also “the grand Key-words of the Holy Priesthood, as revealed to Adam in the Garden of Eden, as also to Seth, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, and all to whom the Priesthood was revealed.” As I understand the relationship between these two figures, figure 3 shows God revealing the Key-words (represented by the eye), while figure 7 shows Abraham receiving them by means of the flying creature, a seraph or winged uraeus. One may compare this scene with Isaiah 6:5–7. Here Isaiah, after seeing God sitting upon his throne, exclaims that he is “undone” because he is “a man of unclean lips.” A seraph then flies from God’s throne to Isaiah and presents a coal from the temple altar to his lips, saying that thereby he is purified from his sins. Isaiah is then able to hear the voice of the Lord and is ready to go among the people and prophesy. The words “God sitting upon his throne” in the explanation for figure 7, rather than describing the personage in this figure, refers back to the explanation for figure 3 and means that the two figures are to be understood as contemporaneous and interlinked, like split-screen cinematic depictions of two sides of a telephone conversation. I admit that this interpretation does not account for what is meant by “the sign of the Holy Ghost ... in the form of a dove.” One possibility is that this refers to the stick figure at Abraham’s feet, underneath the flying creature. It is also worth considering that what is obviously a *Wedjat* eye in Egyptological terms may actually be the dove, as the rendering of this object here and in figure 3 is as much like a dove in profile as it is like an eye.

- 33 Baer, “Breathing Permit of Hor,” 126.
- 34 Many aspects of Genesis 3:22–23 are uncertain. Abraham does not say when the gesture took place. Some interpreters assume he is actually lifting his hand to swear as he is speaking with the king of Sodom (the New Jerusalem Bible, for example, translates as “I swear by God Most High ...”); however, he may be referring instead to a prior event in which he lifted his hand to enter into a covenant, perhaps even prior to his sojourn in Egypt. In this case, the pronoun *thine* in verse 23 may refer not to the king of Sodom but to the Lord. The relative pronoun *that*, occurring twice in this verse in the phrase “that I will not take,” is not found in the original Hebrew; the word

may therefore be omitted, and the first part of verse 23 (before the word *lest*) could be read as a direct quote.

