

# The *Book of Abraham* and the Islamic *Qisas al-Anbiyā'* (Tales of the Prophets) Extant Literature

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## INTRODUCTION

PERHAPS THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL and intensely contested revelatory claim of Joseph Smith Jr. is his translation of ancient papyri ostensibly written by the hand of Abraham. The *Book of Abraham*,<sup>1</sup> as the record is called, purports to be an autobiographical account of the ancient patriarch illuminating many specifics of his early life and ministry on which the Bible is mute. Bold though this assertion might be, recent scholarship into apocalyptic and pseudepigraphal sources provides compelling textual parallels to the *Book of Abraham*.<sup>2</sup> While considerable analysis of the *Book of Abraham* has been done in light of ancient Egyptian and Jewish extra-Biblical sources, little scholarly exploration has occurred in medieval and classical Islamic texts. This deficit is largely due to the relative

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1. *The Pearl of Great Price*, (Salt Lake City, UT: Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 1:16-17, hereafter referred to as *Abraham*.

2. See M. D. Rhodes, "A Translation and Commentary of the Joseph Smith Hypocephalus," *BYU Studies*, (Spring, 1977): 350-399; Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 2000); Hugh Nibley, "The Facsimiles of the *Book of Abraham*," *Sunstone* (December 1979): 49-51; John Gee, "A History of the Joseph Smith Papyri and the *Book of Abraham*," transcript of a lecture presented on 3 March 1999 as part of the FARMS *Book of Abraham* Lecture Series; M. D. Rhodes, "The Joseph Smith Hypocephalus... Seventeen Years Later," FARMS Publications, 1994; and Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Prophet Joseph Smith Papyri, An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1975).

linguistic inaccessibility of many of these sources, and Mormon scholarship on the *Book of Abraham* has tended to evaluate primary texts in languages other than Arabic—the dominant language of Islam. The intention of this essay is to explore one particular genre of classical Islamic literature that has had virtually no analysis in Mormon scholarship: the *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Tales of the Prophets, or *Qīṣāṣ* in abbreviation). After placing the *Qīṣāṣ* in its proper historical and cultural context, an attempt will be made to analyze a particular period of the life of Abraham through the *Qīṣāṣ* accounts while noting various convergences and similarities to the first chapter of the *Book of Abraham*. Following an outline of various parallels to consider, the reader is challenged to decide what these parallels might mean, how they might be explained, and what significance should be attributed to them. Are they due to textual borrowing by Joseph Smith of manuscripts possibly available to him during the mid-nineteenth century? Can they be explained as a mere matter of coincidence or peculiar accident? Perhaps these parallels are explained by some sort of collective unconscious that connects and converges nearly all human modes of religious expression. Or, do these parallels indeed illustrate Joseph Smith's prophetic calling in bringing the *Book of Abraham* to light?<sup>3</sup>

One thing is certain. These parallels, and others like them, are truly amazing and difficult to dismiss easily by rational or scholarly means. And, given the various Islamic exegetical genres embodied in *Tafsīr*, *Hadīth*, *Tarīkh*, *Ādab*, as well as the *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* literature, Islam is capable of providing its own shaft of light by which to evaluate not only the *Book of Abraham*, but also other various aspects of the restored Gospel.<sup>4</sup> Considerable room is left for LDS scholarship to explore the enormous wealth inherent in the Islamic tradition.

3. For a thorough summary of perils and possibilities of this kind of study, see Douglas F. Salmon "Parallelomania and the Study of Latter-day Scripture: Confirmation, Coincidence, or the Collective Subconscious?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 2 (Summer, 2000): 129-156.

4. *Tafsīr* can be translated as "exegesis" or "commentary" particularly as it relates to the Quran, examining expressions and the meaning of words and phrases philologically. An extensive *Tafsīr* literature base has developed during the post-Quranic period with the intention of trying to better understand and explain the essence and meaning of the Quran. *Hadīth* means a story in oral tradition as well as any narrative bearing on the prophet Muhammad's acts, sayings, customs, habits, beliefs, and doctrine. The most famous and authoritative *Hadīth* collections, namely the two *sahīhs* of Bukhārī (d. 870 AD) and Muslim (d. 874) are replete with Jewish and Christian materials. *Tarīkh* translates as era, chronology, or historical work. In this context, it more specifically refers to the history compendia of the development of Islam. Much of the Muslim historical compendia and historiography infuses a sizeable mass of myths, legends and folklore, usually presented in Talmudic-Midrashic garb. *Ādab* is a general descriptor for a wide range of Arabic literature—fictional, poetical, artistic prose, or other types of creative Arab *humanitas*.

### THE *QIṢĀS AL-ANBIYĀ'* GENRE

Anyone who probes into the highly oracular Qur'an, the primary sacred scripture of all Muslims, will immediately detect that its main narrative fibre is interwoven with numerous but sporadic extra-Biblical narratives, allusions, legends, myths, parables and proverbs. The Qur'an (Recitation) is a series of divine revelations given to Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah over a period of 22 years (610-632 AD). The Qur'an exercises a profound influence on Muslims as it is to them the eternal, immutable Word of God and the definitive source for direction in all areas of human endeavor. Every *sūra* (chapter), *āyah* (verse), *kalima* (word) and even *shakla* (vowel marking) has been fervently studied and interpreted. In the years following Muhammad's death, and with the rapid expansion of the Islamic empire, Muslims felt the understandable need for explanation and elaboration on the many passages within the Qur'an. Little wonder that a vast exegetical base comprised of different genres arose in the post-Qur'anic period since the transcendent revelations enshrined in the Qur'an envelope not only the spiritual dimensions of faith and the religious obligations of the faithful, but also instructions on the political, social, and economic requirements of the Islamic community.

In response to a desire on the part of the illiterate masses who had no access to the erudite literature of the '*ulāma'* (religious scholars), there arose a tradition of folk narratives elaborating on the exemplary lives of the prophets and saints recounted in the Qur'an. The popular tradition of the *Qiṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Tales of the Prophets) served a dual purpose of satisfying, first, a pious wish to be edified by the moral lessons intrinsic in the stories, and second, a simple desire to be amused and entertained. Fertile sources of legendary materials for these tales were the Talmudic-Midrashic folklore legends<sup>5</sup> and also the scattered writings of the Patristic Fathers since Jewish and Christian communities existed within Dār al-Islām (the sphere of Islam).<sup>6</sup> The *qāṣṣ* (pl. *quṣṣāṣ*, "narrator") not only recited the Qur'an and expounded on its contents, but also at times performed the duties of the *imam* (religious leader) in leading the congregational prayer. The primary charge of the *qāṣṣ*, however, was to deliver homiletic sermons drawing on interpretative readings of the Qur'an and

5. The man who is reputed to have introduced into Islam numerous Judaic legends and narrative motifs derived from aggadic and midrashic folklore is the famous *Kā'b al-Aḥbār* (d. ca 652), originally a Yemenite Jew converted to Islam in the early days of the caliphate, and a teacher of 'Abd Allāh Ibn 'Abbas (d. 687) known as the father of Quranic exegesis, see "*Kā'b al-Aḥbār*" *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 317.

6. For early Christian apocryphal material refer to E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. L. McWilson, 2 vols. (Cambridge: J. Clarke & Co., n.d.).

*Hadīth* (oral traditions of the prophet Muḥammad). These sermons appealed to all social strata from the uneducated populace on the street to the elites in the great mosques of the empire.<sup>7</sup> Ideally, the *qāṣṣ* would be thoroughly grounded in *kalām* (the religious sciences) and augment his narratives with sound traditions and extensive *isnād* (chain of transmitters).<sup>8</sup>

The first literary collection of the traditions of the pre-Islamic prophets was in the form of Quranic commentary (*tafsīr*). Muslim scholars developed a sophisticated system of evaluating the reliability of the chain of transmitters from whom these stories originated. A distinctive sub-discipline known as *'ilm al-rijāl* (the science of men) developed, which accumulated all obtainable information pertaining to every individual referred to in the *isnāds* of the growing *Hadīth* and *Qīṣāṣ* traditions. To prevent the possible fabrication of plausible-sounding *Qīṣāṣ*, the *isnād* evaluation process became a crucial gauge of authenticity. Thus, the *quṣṣāṣ*, particularly of the first generation, provided reliable and authentic lines of transmission categorized as *mahmūd* (good, sound).

It was not until the tenth century that the various and disparate materials on prophetic legends were collected into an independent literary work. The oldest extant work systematically chronicling the creation story and the lives of important Islamic figures is *Mubtada' al-Dunyā wa-Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* (The Beginning of the World and the Stories of the Prophets) by Ishāq ibn Bishr (d. 821). The *Mubtada'* was extremely influential in the compilations of more recognized works such as *Tarīkh al-Rusul wa' al-Mulūk* [Chronicle of Apostles and Kings], by Muḥammad ibn Jafar Al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), and the *'Arā'is al-Majālis: Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* [Brides of the Sessions: Tales of the Prophets] by the Quranic exegete Abū Ishāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Al-Thālabī (d. 1036). From these works, the genre proliferated in all parts of the Muslim world—Persia, Central Asia, Eastern Anatolia, and even the Indian subcontinent. Versions of these stories abound, forming a fascinating corpus that is remarkably consistent given the vast number of cultural contexts from which the stories were sifted.<sup>9</sup>

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7. J. Pederson, "The Islamic Preacher: *wā'iz, mudhakkir, qāṣṣ*," *Ignace Goldhizer Memorial Volume*, ed. S. Löwinger and J. Somogyi (Budapest: n.p., 1948), 226–251.

8. *Isnād* is the chain of ascriptions by which a report is authenticated. A *sanad* (pl. *asnād*) is a "prop" or "backing," in the sense of a person who has transmitted a report. The *isnād* typically relates to the connection of the chain of transmitters of a given *Hadīth* or *Qīṣāṣ*.

9. Some of the available printed versions of the *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* are: Al-'Āmilī, 'Abd al-Sāhib al-Ḥasanī, *al-Anbiyā': ḥayātuhum, qīṣāṣuhum* (Beirut: al-A'lamī, 1391/1971); Ibn Bishr, Ishāq, *Mubtada' al-Dunyā wa-Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Bodleian Library, Oxford: Huntington 388, fols. 106B–170B); Ibn Kathīr, Ismā'il ibn 'Umar, *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub

*THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM AND THE QIŞAŞ AL-ANBIYĀ'*

Although permeated with Islamic Qur'anic symbolic interpretation, the *Qişاش al-Anbiyā'* literature is markedly similar in specific points to the *Book of Abraham* as revealed to Joseph Smith. Of particular note are the similar chronology of events in the pre-migration period of Abraham's early life and the details and sequence of certain episodes which are not found in the biblical record of Genesis. An invective against the *Book of Abraham* leveled from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, primarily by evangelical anti-Mormons, was that Joseph Smith had imitated existing Jewish apocryphal writings available in his day which touch upon Abraham's pre-migration period. Since, as some argue, the *Qişاش* literature has its roots in the Talmudic-Midrashic and later Rabbinic traditions,<sup>10</sup> an argument can be made that the *Book of Abraham* and the *Qişاش* are similar only because they are derived from similar Jewish sources—sources that may have been available to Joseph Smith to plagiarize circa 1835 when the *Book of Abraham* was allegedly translated. However, the only two known pseudepigraphical sources to which Joseph Smith could have remotely had access were the *Antiquities of the Jews* and the *Book of Jasher*, translated from the original languages into English in 1602 AD and 1751 AD respectively. While some parallels do exist between these two works and the *Book of Abraham*, there are sufficient differences to dismiss the argument. Details in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, which parallel the *Book of Abraham*, are limited to Abrahamic astronomy.<sup>11</sup> The *Book of Jasher* parallels the *Book of Abraham* in various points (i.e. the idolatry of his father, Abraham condemned to die, spared by the Lord, etc.).<sup>12</sup> However,

al-*Hadītha*, 1968); Ibn Khalaf al-Nīsābūrī, Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Mansūr, *Qişاش al-Anbiyā'* (Teheran: Majmū' ai Mutūni, 1340/1961); Al-Jaza'irī, al-Sayyid Ni'mat Allāh, *al-Nūr al-Mubīn fi Qişاش al-Anbiyā' wa' l-Mursalin*, 2 vols. (Najaf, 1374); Juwayrī, Muhammad *Qişاش al-Anbiyā'*, ed. Hajj Sayyid Ahmad Kitābchī (Teheran, n.d.); Al-Kisa'i, Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah, *Qişاش al-Anbiyā'*, trans. Thackston Wheeler, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1997); Majlisī, Muhammad-Bāqir, *Hayāt al-Qulūb Dār Qişاش wa-Ahwālāt-i Payghambarān-i 'Izām wa-Awṣiyā'-i Īshān*, 3 vols. (Teheran: Chāpkhāna-i Islāmiyya, 1373); Al-Najjār, 'Abd al-Wahāb, *Qişاش al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār Ihya' al-Turāth al-'Arabī , n.d.); Al-Rabghūzī, Nāṣir al-Dīn ibn Burhān al-Dīn, *Qişاش al-Anbiyā': An Eastern Turkish Version* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn, *'Ismāt al-Anbiyā'* (Cairo: Silsilat al-Thāqafa al-Islāmiyya, 1383/1964); Al-Thā'labi, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, *'Arā'is al-Majālis: Qişاش al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Rakhiyya al-Kutub al-'Arabīyya, n.d.); Al-Rāwandī, Sa'id ibn Hibat Allāh, *Qişاش al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: n. p., 1968).

10. David Sidersky, *Les Origines des Légendes Musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des Prophètes* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1933).

11. "[Abraham] communicated to them [the Egyptians] arithmetic, and delivered to them the science of astronomy," see Josephus F. "Antiquities of the Jews," *The Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. Whiston George (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1981), 8:2, 33.

12. See chapters 9-12 of *Sefer ha-yasher* [*The Book of Jasher*] (Thousand Oaks, CA: Artisan Sales, 1988).

other details found in the *Book of Abraham* are not found in the *Book of Jasher* (i.e., other non-idolators executed for their beliefs, the sacrifice of children including a daughter of royal decent, Abraham praying to God at the moment of his imminent demise, an angel of the Lord appearing and ministering to Abraham, etc.), but are in agreement with some of the *Qīṣāṣ* literature. It is equally important to note that no English translation of the *Talmud* was in existence before 1876, or that the first and unabridged English translation of the *Midrash* was not available until 1939.<sup>13</sup> Parts of the *Mishnah* were available in English after 1843, whereas prior to that year it was accessible only in classical Hebrew, Latin, and German.<sup>14</sup> Even the more widely known, yet comprehensive, *Legends of the Bible* was not compiled, translated, and made available to English reading audiences until 1909.<sup>15</sup> While the *Book of Abraham* account does indeed share common elements found in aggadic Jewish sources, it, in reality, aligns more closely in detail and symmetry with the Islamic tradition.<sup>16</sup>

However, the only Islamic source known to be available in English in Joseph Smith's day was the Qur'an, there having been at least one translation, produced in 1734 by George Sale. The Qur'an, however, omits important points in the Abraham pre-migration narrative that are found in both the *Qīṣāṣ* genre and the *Book of Abraham*. In addition, numerous allusions in the Qur'an to the prophets of Israel are not presented in a running narrative, but rather are sporadic and non-linear. Readers of the Qur'an not reared in the Islamic tradition would find it difficult to synthesize a sustained, coherent narrative on the life of Abraham, let alone plagiarize its contents. It is difficult to demonstrate in any authoritative fashion that Joseph Smith knew much of anything about Islam beyond the name of Muḥammad.<sup>17</sup>

The biblical account gives few details of Abraham's early life. The biblical story of Abraham begins with a reference in Genesis to his birth to his father Terah and then proceeds directly to the time when Abraham

13. See H. Polano, *Selections from the Talmud* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Hafelfinger, 1876), i; and H. Freedman and M. Simon, *Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino Press, 1939).

14. See Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), v-vi.

15. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909).

16. An argument can be made that the Islamic *Qīṣāṣ* pendant and the *Book of Abraham* were, in fact, *not* derived from similar Jewish sources. There is evidence that certain elements of the Islamic narratives of Abraham were actually accepted later into post-Quranic Judaism, making the transfer of affect from Islam to Judaism, not vice versa. See Shari Lowin, "The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives" (Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Chicago, October 2001).

17. A. H. Green, and L. Goldrup, "Joseph Smith, An American Muḥammad? An Essay on the Perils of Historical Analogy," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6:1971, 48-55.

takes Sarai to wife and departs Ur of Chaldea.<sup>18</sup> The Genesis narrative covers the first 75 years of Abraham's life in only a few sentences. Relying on the Bible alone (likely the only source on the life of Abraham available to Joseph Smith), one learns virtually nothing of Abraham's early life and cultural milieu other than an oblique reference in Joshua 24:2 to his ancestors's idolatry. Fortunately, the *Book of Abraham*, along with an abundance of other authentic Jewish, Christian, and Islamic extra-biblical sources, provides details of the early life of Abraham and elaborates his motivation for leaving the residence of his father, Terah, in Ur of Chaldea.

#### VARIOUS PARALLELS TO CONSIDER

##### *Idolatry of the Fathers*

While Genesis is silent on the subject, the first chapter of the *Book of Abraham* describes the pervasive idolatry of Abraham's time. Abraham laments the transgressions of his people and makes explicit reference to his ancestors or "fathers" in *Abraham* 1:5: "My fathers, having turned from their righteousness, and from the holy commandments which the Lord their God had given them, unto the worshiping of the gods of the heathen." Several Islamic sources, including Quran 21:51-54, reinforce the *Book of Abraham* account with passages such as: "We gave Abraham aforetime his rectitude—for We knew him—when he said to his father and his people, 'What are these statues unto which you are cleaving?' They said, 'We found our fathers serving them.' He said, 'Then assuredly you and your fathers have been in manifest error.'"<sup>19</sup> Nasir al-Dīn ibn Burhan al-Dīn Al-Rabghūzi, a thirteenth century Turkish jurist, recounts Abraham's people as saying, "Would you turn us away from the faith of our fathers and introduce us to another religion?"<sup>20</sup> Also Ismā'il ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, a famous fourteenth century Syrian religious authority, identifies both *al-āba'* wa *al-ājdād* (*fathers* and *ancestors*) in referring to those guilty of idol worship prior and during Abraham's day.<sup>21</sup>

18. Genesis 11:26-31.

19. See also Quran 26:69-76, trans. Arthur Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); see also Al-Kisa'i, Muhammed ibn 'Abd Allah, *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, trans. Wheeler Thackston (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1997), 140; Al-Ṭabarī, Muhammed ibn Jarīr, *Ta'īrkh al-Rusul wa'l-Mulūk*, vol. 2, trans. William Brinner (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 52; Al-Tha'labī, Ahmad ibn Muhammed 'Arā'is al-Majālis: *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Rakhiyya al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya, n.d.), 65; Al-Najjār, 'Abd al-Wahab, *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, n.d.), 79.

20. Al-Rabghūzi, Nasir al-Dīn ibn Burhan al-Dīn, *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā': An Eastern Turkish Version* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 99.

21. See also Ibn Kathīr, Ismā'il ibn 'Umar, *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiya* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Hadītha, 1968), 177.

A further detail omitted from Genesis is any comment concerning the religious convictions of Abraham's own father, Terah. As pointed out in *Abraham* 2:5, Terah (or Āzar, depending on the textual source)<sup>22</sup> was himself a worshiper of idols: "my father turned again unto his idolatry."<sup>23</sup> The preponderance of Islamic *Qīṣāṣ* sources points out that Terah not only worshiped idols, but had turned idolatry into a lucrative trade: "[Abraham's] father made his living by making idols, and he gave them to his sons to sell them."<sup>24</sup>

### ABRAHAM'S SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE

A significant point of comparison between the *Book of Abraham* and the Islamic *Qīṣāṣ* is the specific allusion to *special knowledge* acquired by Abraham. *Abraham* 1:2 records that Abraham desired "to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge." Why? So that he might better "keep the commandments of God." According to Islamic sources such as Qur'an 19:42-43, it is also recorded that Abraham received *special knowledge* of God and His creations that was unavailable to those who did not believe in Allāh (or *the God*). Sustained by that knowledge, Abraham tried to guide his people back to the paths of righteousness by calling them to repentance: "Oh my father! to me hath come knowledge (*al-'ilm*) which hath not reached thee. So follow me: I will guide thee to a Way that is even and straight."<sup>25</sup> Al-Rabghūzi renders the event thus: "Listen to what I say; I will guide you on the right road. . .the truth has been revealed to me about many *mysteries*, therefore follow me. . .I am summoning you to the right path."<sup>26</sup>

### CELESTIAL MYSTERIES REVEALED

Intrinsic in those mysteries, Abraham was, according to *Abraham* 1:31, instructed and shown by the Lord "a knowledge of the beginnings of creation, and also of the planets, and of the stars."<sup>27</sup> The third chapter of the *Book of Abraham*, in particular, informs its readers of Abraham's vast revealed knowledge of the astronomical sciences. It is interesting that while the Genesis account says nothing of Abraham's celestial reve-

22. See Al-Rabghūzi, 94; Ibn Kathīr, 171; Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is al-Majālis: *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'*, p. 65. I.e. a pseudo-etymology based on *az* = "to go astray."

23. See also *Abraham* 1:16-17.

24. See Al-Rabghūzi, 94; Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is al-Majālis: *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'*, 65; Al-Ṭabarī, p. 54.

25. Qur'an 19:42-43 (Ali trans.), italics mine. See also 6:80-81;

26. See Al-Rabghūzi, 97, 99, italics mine; see also Al-Najjār, 79-80; Ibn Kathīr, 171, calls this knowledge '*ilm al-nāja'* (useful knowledge).

27. See also *Abraham* 3:1-17, and Facsimiles 2 and 3.

lations, multiple Islamic texts clearly portray him as possessing divine astronomical and theological information. Qur'an 6:75 reads: "So also did We show Abraham the power and the laws of the heavens and the earth, that he might (with understanding) have certitude."<sup>28</sup> Commenting on this passage, Ibn Bishr, a ninth century Muslim historian writes, "The stars and [God's] power in them were seen by Abraham. This is before he had been shown the kingdom of the heavens."<sup>29</sup> An eleventh century collector of legends, Abū Ishaq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Al-Tha'labī, informs his readers that even at an early age Abraham "pondered the creation of the heavens and the earth."<sup>30</sup> 'Abd Allah ibn 'Umar Al-Baidawi, a thirteenth century Muslim scholar from Persia, writes that Abraham "saw wondrous things concerning the heavens [and] wondrous things concerning the earth."<sup>31</sup> Al-Rabghūzi, a thirteenth century Turkish jurist, tells of a vision Abraham had in which the "Lord removed the veils from the seven spheres of heaven and earth for him. So Abraham saw everything from the dust of the earth to the high throne of heaven."<sup>32</sup> Abū 'Abd Allah Muḥammad ibn Ahmad Al-Tarafī, an eleventh century Arab chronographer writes: "[God] showed [Abraham] the signs of the heavens and the earth; indeed, the seven heavens gaped open before him even to the throne, and he contemplated them, and the seven earths were opened before him and he contemplated them. . . and he saw the grandeur of God in them. He saw his place in Paradise." The experience described in Al-Tarafī is very reminiscent of Abraham 3:10-11 where Abraham "came near unto the throne of God. . . [and] talked with the Lord face to face." It is also interesting to note that the Arabic word used in Qur'an 6:76 for *star* is pronounced *kawkab*, a strikingly close equivalent to the word used for *star* in Abraham 3:13 which reads: "Kokob, which is star."

28. George Sale comments: "That is, we gave him a right apprehension of the government of the world, and the heavenly bodies, that he might know them all to be ruled by God," *The Koran*, trans. George Sale (London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1836), 1:140n76.

29. Ibn Bishr, Folio 164B, trans. Brian Hauglid.

30. Al-Tha'labī, 65. See also Al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, *Ta'rīkh al-Rusul wa' al-Mulūk*, vol. 2, trans. William Brinner (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 51: "For Abraham, one day of growing up was like a month, and a month was like a year. Abraham had been in the cave for only fifteen months when he said to his mother, 'Take me out that I may look around.' So she took him out one evening and he looked about and thought about the creation of the heavens and the earth"; Al-Kisa'i, 138.

31. Al-Baidawi, 'Abd Allah ibn 'Umar, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa-Asrār al-Tarwīl*, trans. Brian Hauglid (n.p., 1902), 2:35.

32. Al-Rabghūzi, 93. See also Al-Ṭabarī, Abū Jafar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr, *Jāmi' al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qurān*, 30 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa li al-Ṭibā'a wa al-Nashr, 1978), 7:160, which reads "the seven heavens were opened to Abraham, up to and including the throne [of God]"; Al-Tarafī, Abū 'Abd Allah Muḥammad ibn Ahmad, *Al-Tarafī: Storie dei Profeti*, (Genoa, Italy: il Nuovo Melangolo, n.d.), 72-75. See also Abraham 3:2-14 and facsimile no. 2.

### A MESSAGE REJECTED

Despite Abraham's admonitions, *Abraham* 1:5 expresses that his people "utterly refused to hearken to [his] voice," or as conveyed in the Qur'an 6:80, "His people disputed (*ḥājja*) with him." Genesis provides no details of Abraham's relationship to the people of Ur of Chaldea. However, *Abraham* 1:7,15 describes not only how his people "turned their hearts" away from Abraham's message, but also how they "lifted up their hands upon [him], that they might offer [him] up and take away [his] life." Muḥammad ibn 'Abd Allah Al-Kīsa'i and other medieval Islamic writers record, as does the *Book of Abraham* account, the collective contempt the people had for Abraham's blatantly sacrilegious conduct. The people appealed to the king to have Abraham destroyed, "Oh King, burn him as he has burned our hearts."<sup>33</sup> Al-Rabghūzi wrote, "His people joined against Abraham, saying, 'burn him and stand by your gods.'"<sup>34</sup>

### ABRAHAM'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER

Important insights into Abraham's relationship to his father are missing in the biblical record. We learn from the *Book of Abraham* that Abraham's greatest critic and adversary was his father, Terah. In both the *Book of Abraham* and the Islamic *Qisas* accounts, Terah was incensed because Abraham was unwilling to pay proper deference to his father's patron gods. His anger was murderous: "My father . . . had determined. . . to take away my life."<sup>35</sup> The *Book of Abraham* is ambiguous as to how Terah intended to kill Abraham. Islamic narratives provide a more specific explanation. Several Islamic *Qiṣaṣ* sources record how Terah intended to stone him to death: "Oh Abraham, do you not acknowledge my gods? If you do not refrain from these actions I will stone you to death."<sup>36</sup> Qur'an 19:46 notes Terah as saying: "What, art thou shrinking from my gods, Abraham? Surely, if thou givest not over, I will surely stone thee."<sup>37</sup>

### NIMROD AS PHARAOH?

*Abraham* 1:6,13 records that among the pantheon of gods, Abraham's people worshiped one in particular: "the god of Pharaoh" or "a god like unto that of Pharaoh." A sub-argument leveled by critics of Joseph Smith

33. Al-Kīsa'i, 147. See also Quran 21:68; Al-Ṭabarī, 58; Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is al-Majālis, 67.

34. Al-Rabghūzi, 101.

35. Abraham 1:30.

36. Al-Rabghūzi, 97. See also Al-Ṭabarī, 55; Ibn Kathīr, 171; Al-Najjār, 83.

37. See also Quran 26:86.

and the *Book of Abraham* is the wide use of "Pharaoh" as the proper name for the ruler of Chaldea. Extant Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources identify the ruler of Chaldea as Nimrod, not Pharaoh. Equating Nimrod and Pharaoh does not necessarily discredit the text, particularly with a careful alternate reading of *Abraham* 1:20 which reads that the title of "Pharaoh signifies king by royal birth." Thus, the term Pharaoh could be used to designate any ruler or king regardless of geographical location and may simply have been a euphemism Abraham purposefully harnessed to illustrate the might and power of the ruler of the Chaldea to his intended audience, the Egyptians.<sup>38</sup> Certainly Nimrod's power as a ruler is described in the Islamic texts as being extremely great. Ismā'il ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, a fourteenth century historian and traditionist, characterizes Nimrod's immense influence and power by characterizing him as "*malik al-dunyā*" (king of the world). Hugh Nibley addresses this apparent discrepancy in detail.<sup>39</sup> In various Jewish legends, particularly in the older Hassidic versions, Nimrod carries the title of Pharaoh.<sup>40</sup> Another plausible reading of *Abraham* 1:23 is: "Egyptus, which in Chaldean signifies Egypt, which signifies that which is forbidden." Therefore, the appellation "Pharaoh of Egypt" could possibly be interpreted essentially as "king of that which is forbidden." What is it that is forbidden? *Abraham* 1:27 makes it clear that that which is forbidden is to imitate the patriarchal government of the Priesthood of God without proper authorization and divine sanction. Nimrod, then, could certainly qualify for the title of Pharaoh, since he himself was of the lineage of Ham acting in the name of God (also claiming the divine dominion of God) and was disqualified from the rights of the priesthood (see Genesis 10: 6, 8). *Abraham* 1:27 reads: "Pharaoh being of that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain claim it from Noah, through Ham, therefore my father was led away by their idolatry." In various Islamic sources "king worship" has been portrayed as common practice among the people of Abraham. Al-Kisa'i quotes Terah as saying, "My son, have you a lord other than Nimrod, who possesses the kingdom of the earth in its breadth and length. . . . do not speak evil of our king and god."<sup>41</sup> Ahmad ibn Muḥammad Al-Tha'labī calls

38. *Abraham*, 29.

39. Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 2000), 227-231.

40. Bernard Chapira, "Légendes Bibliques Attribuées à Ka'b al-Abar," *Revue des Études Juives* 69 (1919), 101 as cited in Nibley, 227. Evidence also exists illustrating the social, cultural, and religious influence of Egypt in the area of upper Mesopotamia (where recent research points to a northern, rather than a southern Ur), see Cyrus Gordon, "Where is Abraham's Ur," *Biblical Archeology Review* (June, 1977): 52. Also see Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 234-247.

41. Al-Kisa'i, 139.

attention to an interchange between Abraham and Terah thus: "Abraham asked his father, 'Who is your god?' And his father replied, 'Nimrod.' And then Abraham asked him 'Who is Nimrod's god?' And Nimrod responded, 'silence!' (*āskut!*)."<sup>42</sup> Al-Rabghūzi reiterates, "Abraham asked: 'who is my father's god?' [His mother] said: 'Nimrod. . .Nimrod is the god of us all.'"<sup>43</sup>

### HUMAN SACRIFICE IN ABRAHAM'S DAY

There is a clear indication in *Abraham* 1:8 (and not in the Biblical record) that human sacrifice accompanied the pagan ritual worship of Abraham's day. Abraham relates that there were ritual "offering[s] unto these strange gods, men, women, and children." Indeed, an incident is related in *Abraham* 1:11 of the offering of "three virgins at one time." Few Islamic accounts speak of human sacrifice, but Al-Kisa'i records several incidents of men, women, and children being killed or maimed because of their choice to follow Allāh. The first is an incident where an "old woman. . .believed in Abraham's God. . .When news reached Nimrod, he ordered her hands and feet to be cut off."<sup>43</sup> In another instance, it is recorded that, "more than a thousand of the people of Cuthah-rabba believed in Abraham. Nimrod ordered them to be rounded up and thrown to the lions."<sup>44</sup> *Abraham* 1:11 also describes how a daughter of "royal descent directly from the loins of Ham" was sacrificed on an altar because she "would not bow down to worship gods of wood or of stone." *Abraham* 1:7 also describes the sacrifice of children to idols. Al-Kisa'i relates a remarkable story of a small girl being executed because she would not surrender to idol worship: "Abraham turned and saw a slave-girl in the palace. She was nursing Nimrod's small daughter. Suddenly the girl lept from her mother's lap, faced Nimrod and said, 'Father, this is God's prophet Abraham. And Nimrod ordered her cut to pieces."<sup>45</sup> This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Nimrod, according to Genesis 10:6,8, is a direct descendent of Ham, thus making Nimrod's daughter a royal descendant from the loins of Ham.

### SENTENCED TO DIE

As related above, Abraham himself was condemned to die. The mode of Abraham's execution portrayed in the *Book of Abraham* differs

42. Al-Tha'labī, 65. See also Al-Rabghūzi, 94.

43. Al-Kisa'i, 141.

44. Ibid. See also Al-Ṭabarī, 4.

45. Al-Kisa'i, 142. See also Knappert, Jan, *Islamic Legends: Histories of the Heros, Saints and Prophets of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 75-78, where Nimrod orders his own daughter to be tortured by his executioner.

from the Islamic accounts. *Abraham* 1:7,12 notes that Abraham was condemned to die at the hands of a wicked priest upon a sacrificial altar: "And it came to pass that the priests laid violence upon me, that they might slay me also, as they did those virgins upon this altar." By contrast, multiple Islamic sources report that Abraham was condemned to die by fire.<sup>46</sup> Certain Islamic writers, however, have questioned whether Abraham was in fact actually thrown into the fire or whether the incident was merely allegorical.<sup>47</sup> Many accounts speak of a building, catapult, or other structure in which Abraham was bound and shackled for execution. In any case, it is recorded in the *Book of Abraham* and in various Islamic sources that Abraham called out to God as he was about to die. *Abraham* 1:15 recounts: "And as they lifted 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." Muhammad ibn Jarīr Al-Tabarī, a tenth century historian, relates, "They brought Abraham and set him on top of the pyre. . .[he] raised his head to heaven. . .[and] said 'O God! You are alone in heaven and I am alone on earth.'"<sup>48</sup> Al-Kisa'i, Al-Rabghūzi, and Al-Tha'labī all have similar accounts.

#### DELIVERANCE BY ANGELS

In response to Abraham's plea, an angel appeared to offer comfort and release to Abraham. The *Book of Abraham* identifies the angel only as the "angel of his presence."<sup>49</sup> In most Islamic accounts it was the angel Gabriel who appeared to Abraham: "Gabriel met him. . .[and] brought a golden throne and clothed Abraham and clothed him with garments from Paradise."<sup>50</sup> This account has conspicuous similarities to other aspects of the *Book of Abraham*, such as Facsimile 3 no.1, in which Abraham is depicted as sitting on a throne.<sup>51</sup> Al-Rabghūzi describes an encounter Abraham has with the King Dhū al-'Arsh: "and the king seated Abraham on a throne."<sup>52</sup> Other Islamic *Qiṣāṣ* texts, such as Ibn Kathīr, Al-Tabarī, and Al-Tha'labī, mention Gabriel as well as other angels identified as

46. Qur'an 21:68; Al-Rabghūzi, 101; Al-Kisa'i, 147; Al-Tabarī, 58; Ibn Kathīr, 181-182; al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is al-Majālis, 67; al-Najjār, 80. Many accounts speak of a building, catapult, or other structure in which Abraham was bound and shackled for execution.

47. See 'Abdullah Yusef 'Ali, *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran* (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 1409/1986), 809; Maulana Muḥammad 'Ali, *The Holy Quran: Arabic Text, Translation and Commentary* (Lahore: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islām, 1951).

48. Al-Tabarī, 59. See also Al-Kisa'i, 147; Al-Rabghūzi, 103; Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is al-Majālis, 67.

49. *Abraham* 1:15; Facs. 1, no. 1.

50. Al-Kisa'i, 147-148. See also Al-Tha'labī, 'Arā'is al-Majālis, 67.

51. *Abraham*, 41, Facs. 3, no. 1.

52. Al-Rabghūzi, 112.

*Malak al-Matr* (Angel of Rain) and/or *Malak al-Żill* (Angel of Shade) who offer Abraham comfort and assistance by offering either to put out the fire by water or to shade him from the intense heat.<sup>53</sup> By all accounts, the angel is specifically sent to deliver Abraham from danger.

Another noteworthy aspect of this particular incident is that once the angel or angels appeared, *Abraham* 1:15 records that “the angel of his presence stood by [Abraham] and immediately unloosed [his] bands.” Intriguingly, Islamic *Qīṣāṣ* support this image, for example Al-Rabghūzi’s account: “Gabriel arrived bearing a prayer-rug from Paradise and spread it out in the middle of the fire. Abraham sat down on that rug, and the fire burned away Abraham’s fetters.”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, as Al-Ṭabarī’s version depicts: “Gabriel came to Abraham while he was being tied up and shackled. . .the fire burned nothing on Abraham except his fetters.”<sup>55</sup> Al-Thā’labī makes an explicit point that it was indeed the *angel* who played an active role in Abraham’s delivery and not God alone.<sup>56</sup> The only Biblical allusion to Abraham’s deliverance from death is an ambiguous reference in Isaiah 29:22 about “the Lord, who redeemed Abraham.”

#### GODS AND PRIESTS DESTROYED

*Abraham* 1:20 also tells of the destruction of various idolatrous gods after the attempted sacrifice of young Abraham: “And the Lord broke. . . the gods of the land, and utterly destroyed them.” The Islamic accounts of the story of Abraham, without exception, also record the destruction of the idols. The difference in the Islamic renderings is that the idols were destroyed directly by the hand of Abraham. Abraham, disgusted by the evils of idolatry, Al-Kisa’i records, entered “the idol-temple, where the people had put tables of food before the idols. . .breaking the arm of one, the leg of another, the head of yet another—until he had shattered them into pieces.”<sup>57</sup>

A further point of resemblance between the *Book of Abraham* account and those of the ancient *Qīṣāṣ* literature is that once Abraham was delivered from death, the Lord “smote the priest that he died.”<sup>58</sup> We learn from some of the *Qīṣāṣ al-Anbiyā'* literature that the name of the person, or official, who was the architect of Abraham’s execution was “Hayzan,”

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53. Ibn Kathīr, 183; Al-Ṭabarī, 60; Al-Thā’labī, ‘Arā’is al-Majālis, 68.

54. Al-Rabghūzi, 104.

55. Al-Ṭabarī, 61. See also Ibn Kathīr, 183; Al-Thā’labī, ‘Arā’is al-Majālis, 68.

56. Al-Thā’labī, ‘Arā’is al-Majālis, 68.

57. Al-Kisa’i, 146. See also Quran 21:57-58; Al-Rabghūzi, 98; Al-Ṭabarī, 56; Ibn Kathīr, 179; Al-Thā’labī, ‘Arā’is al-Majālis, 66.

58. *Abraham* 1:20.

of Kurdish origin. Al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and Al-Tha’labī all report that Hayzan was immediately destroyed when “God caused the earth to swallow him up.”<sup>59</sup> Al-Rabghūzi renders the name of the antagonist as Hārān and upon building the fire to burn Abraham “that very instant he burned to ashes.” While there are slight discrepancies in the details of some events in the *Qiṣaṣ* and the *Book of Abraham*, these variations seem quite natural and even reasonable to anyone with a general acquaintance with the basic laws of oral storytelling. Stories recorded only in human memory are doubtlessly more fluid than accounts that are textually fixed. Islamic narrators did not firmly adhere to any fixed, transcribed, literary text. Rather they told their tales in a free, extemporaneous manner. This helps explain the differences not only between the *Book of Abraham* and the *Qiṣaṣ*, but also between the various *Qiṣaṣ* works themselves.

#### OTHER ANCIENT RECORDS

Finally, *Abraham* 1:28, 31 refers to certain “records of the fathers” that came into Abraham’s “hands” and were “preserved.” The Old Testament makes no mention of Abraham possessing any such records or writings. However, according to Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, God revealed many written records, or “ṣuhuf,” to Abraham and the other prophets. Al-Ṭabarī writes: “‘How many books did God reveal?’ He said, ‘One hundred and four books. To Adam He revealed ten leaves (ṣuhuf), to Seth fifty leaves, and to Enoch thirty leaves. To Abraham he revealed ten leaves.’”<sup>60</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Ali ibn Al-Ḥussayn Al-Mas’ūdī supports this claim in his tenth century work entitled *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma’ādin al-Jawhar* (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems): “Ibrahim died in Syria, one hundred and seventy years of age: God revealed to him ten sacred books.”<sup>61</sup>

Other events could certainly be cited from additional Islamic sources that provide impressive and curious parallels to the arcane details of Joseph Smith’s Abrahamic text. This paper purposely confines itself to the first chapter of *Abraham* and to a single category of Islamic literature, that of the *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* pendant. Other *Qiṣaṣ* sources offer remarkable parallels to other episodes in the *Book of Abraham* about which the Biblical record says little or nothing: Abraham’s missionary labors in Haran and subsequent conversion of many “souls,” related in *Abraham*

59. Al-Ṭabarī, 58; Al-Rabghūzi, 106. See also Ibn Kathīr, 182. Al-Tha’labī provides a slight variation on the name of the Kurd to be “Haynūn,” ‘Arā’is al-Majālis, 67.

60. Al-Ṭabarī, 130.

61. Al-Mas’ūdī, Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Ali ibn al-Ḥussayn, *Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma’ādin al-Jawhar*, trans. Aloys Sprenger, *El Mas’udi's Historical Encyclopaedia, Entitled "Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems."* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1841), 1:86.

chapter 2; a further elaboration of his special astronomical interests and knowledge, portrayed in *Abraham* chapter 3; his vision of creation, described in *Abraham* chapter 4; and many other comparable details of Abraham's life and ministry.

### CONCLUSION

So, what is to be made of these remarkable yet puzzling parallels that seem to be uniquely shared between latter-day scripture and the Islamic tradition? Might the existence of the parallels only confirm that Joseph Smith was eclectically brilliant and resourceful enough to gain access to or had knowledge of the texts in question, and that he merely borrowed from existing sources? As noted earlier, Joseph Smith could not have known about these parallel Islamic texts, at least so far as can be determined by scholarly means. The relevant *Qīṣāṣ* sources, or even their Jewish and Patristic literary counterparts, were linguistically unavailable to Smith in the mid-nineteenth century. These sources were unavailable even to the best scholars of that period.

Perhaps the existence of these parallels is simply a matter of coincidence. However, the striking *number* of details finding convergence between the *Book of Abraham* and the *Qīṣāṣ* make a "coincidence" argument highly unlikely. If what was under question were a *single* phrase, idea, or term that matched another text separated by time and place, perhaps then a coincidence might logically occur. But what do we make of over a dozen unique and distinct parallels taken from a single genre of ancient literature? If the parallels were a single isolated idea gathered from a variety of cultures and sources, removed from their own historical and theological milieu, and then artificially synthesized to the point of being effectively unrecognizable to the original authors, then one might argue that virtually every concept or idea can be paralleled somewhere else. However, in the case of this essay, the task has been limited to a single category of self-referenced literature, from a single religious tradition, and from a distinctive period of Abraham's history. Each parallel illustrated considered here can in most cases be triangulated to multiple sources within a finite body of Islamic literature thus minimizing possible over-selectivity.

Then, if Joseph Smith's Abrahamic parallels cannot be explained rationally or by scholarly means, perhaps they can be explained by some sort of preternatural phenomena. Some observers of human spirituality suggest that parallels between different religious communities might be due to an "essential unity of all religious experience," or the "collective unconscious."<sup>62</sup> That is, there exists a certain continuity in the religious

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62. Salmon, 130.

nature of all humanity, and Joseph Smith, when writing on the life of Abraham, was drawing on some sort of Jungian trans-conscious logic for his images and ideas. While this might be helpful in explaining various abstract convergences of rituals, archetypes, myths, religious symbols, and general ideological themes separated temporally and culturally, it is not very useful (or convincing) in explaining shared, but circumscribed details of a person's (Abraham's in this case) individual history found in multiple textual contexts.

A final possibility that must be allowed is that the above parallels might just indeed reveal Joseph Smith's prophetic insights. The *Book of Abraham* has undergone intense and sometimes hostile scrutiny since the 1840's. Had the book been merely a fabrication of an unlettered young man from upstate New York, it should have collapsed decades ago as a transparent scam. The preface of the *Book of Abraham* asserts that it is a revelation "of some ancient records, that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt—the writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt."<sup>63</sup> For Joseph Smith—a man of only a few years of formal general education, and even less philological and linguistic training—this would be a bold and even reckless claim unless he indeed had a prophetic calling. However, as scholars delve into ancient extant texts that have been uncovered since the death of Joseph Smith, the *Book of Abraham* receives fascinating and compelling support. Recent analysis of the *Book of Abraham* has shown that the text resonates with other authentic sources from antiquity to which Joseph Smith could not have had access. Even the scant extra-biblical sources possibly available to Joseph Smith contain important deviations from the details found in both the *Qisāṣ* and the *Book of Abraham*.

*Quran* 87:18-19 affirms, "All this is written in earlier scriptures; the leaves (*suhuf*) of Abraham and Moses." While the *suhuf* of Moses are generally recognized by most Muslims as the Pentateuch, certain Islamic exegetes assert that "no book of Abraham has come down to us."<sup>64</sup> Is it possible that the *suhuf*, or leaves of holy writ, referred to in the *Quran* are some of the papyri "of Abraham while he was in Egypt," and revealed to Joseph Smith in 1835? Given the preponderance of scholarly discoveries from non-scriptural sources, it is an assertion that is becoming demonstrably more defensible and certainly more faith affirming.

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