

Professor Seixas, the Hebrew Bible, and the Book of Abraham

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To what extent were Joseph's study of Hebrew and the translation of the Book of Abraham interrelated?

In the relative calm of the fall, winter, and spring of 1835-1836, Joseph Smith turned to two important intellectual endeavors: the translation of the Book of Abraham and the study of Hebrew with Joshua Seixas. Students of Mormonism have not carefully explored the relationship between these two events. In general, studies of the Book of Abraham have concentrated on Abrahamic legends and Egyptology as keys to the text.¹ The one exception, an essay by Louis C. Zucker entitled "Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew," accurately and thoroughly traced the development of the Hebrew class in the School of the Prophets.² I wish to re-emphasize certain details about Joseph's Hebrew study which suggest the extent to which this study and the translation of the Book of Abraham are interrelated.³

First, Joseph excitedly began studying Hebrew on his own in the winter of 1835, before he started working in earnest on the Book of Abraham—and before the arrival of a Hebrew teacher. *The Documentary History of the Church* notes that on Wednesday, December 30, 1835, Joseph "spent the day reading Hebrew." This was five days before the first Hebrew teacher Dr. Peixotto (the name is incorrectly spelled Piexotto in the D.H.C.) arrived and twenty-seven days before Peixotto's replacement, Joshua Seixas, appeared on January 26, 1836. It was during this period of private study that Joseph first associated Hebrew with the Book of Abraham. On December 31, 1835, before actual translation on the book had begun, Joseph described the characters on the papyrus as

such as you find upon the coffins of mummies—hieroglyphics, etc.; with many characters of letters like the present (though probably not quite so square) form of Hebrew without points.⁴

When Professor Seixas did arrive, Joseph and his friends in the School of the Prophets studied the creation story and other sections of Genesis, including the accounts of Abraham, intensively in Hebrew. For a text they used Seixas' *Hebrew Grammar*, the second edition printed in 1834. The vocabulary and selected sentences presented by Seixas included examples from most of Genesis, part of Exodus, and several of the Psalms.⁵ The *Grammar* indicates that a student was to begin with Genesis, and apparently students moved through

Genesis chapter by chapter. That Joseph and his fellow students followed this order of study is seen in Joseph's statement that he translated Genesis 17 on March 7, 1836, and Genesis 22 plus ten verses of Exodus 3 on March 8.⁶ It was probably while reading in Genesis with Seixas that Joseph wrote:

My soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original, and I am determined to pursue the study of the languages, until I shall become master of them, if I am permitted to live long enough.⁷

It was during this same period that Joseph translated the Book of Abraham. While the fact that Joseph's Hebrew studies and his translation of the Book of Abraham coincided may not prove that one influenced the other, it does show a similarity of context. But the specific impact of Joseph's study of Hebrew on his translation of the Book of Abraham becomes apparent when the creation story in the Book of Moses—Joseph's commentary on Genesis, completed before his study of Hebrew—is compared to the creation story in Abraham. In many cases, the account in the Book of Abraham is more closely related to the original Hebrew than the account in the Book of Moses. In addition, certain details of structure, syntax, grammar, and word usage in the Book of Abraham reflect the particular impact on Joseph of Seixas' *Grammar*.

Comparing Creation Accounts

The differences among the various texts become clear when specific passages are compared. I include the King James Bible because it is a remarkably literal translation of the Hebrew.⁸ Moses 2:6 reads:

And again, I, God, said: Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water, and it was so, even as I spake; and I said: Let it divide the waters from the waters; and it was done.

In the King James version, Genesis 1:6 reads:

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

Abraham 4:6 reads:

And the Gods also said: Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and it shall divide the waters from the waters.

את-אבר-הים-וי-אמר



Many important verses in the Book of Abraham more closely approach the King James and Hebrew texts than the Book of Moses text.



A literal translation of the Hebrew would read:

And *Elohim* said, Be there (or let there be) an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it cause a division (or divide) between the waters and the waters.

The verse from the Book of Abraham more closely resembles the King James and the actual Hebrew versions than the one from the Book of Moses. In the Book of Abraham example, Joseph renders the plural noun *Elohim* and its singular verb as "the Gods . . . said." Seixas on page 85 of his *Grammar* noted that *Elohim* was "a singular noun with a plural form." In the same passage, the word translated "firmament" in the King James literally means "expanse" in Hebrew, the meaning given it by Seixas. Joseph's use of "and it shall" in the verse may be a grammatically incorrect literalization of the Hebrew. In Hebrew, a future verb has a past meaning when used directly after an "and." The Hebrew for "and let it" is literally "and it shall." In the last phrase of the passage, "waters" is rendered in the plural in Abraham, as it is in the King James and the Hebrew texts but not in Moses.

There are other important verses in the Book of Abraham which also more closely approach the King James and Hebrew texts than the Book of Moses text. Abraham 4:16, with the exception of the word "organize," is identical to the King James and the Hebrew. It differs, however, from Moses 2:16. Abraham 5:6 also accords with the King James and Hebrew but not with Moses, as does Abraham 5:9 and Abraham 5:14. Abraham 5:14 is perhaps one of the most interesting variations between the books of Abraham and Moses. In the King James, the Hebrew plural verb "let us make" is retained. In Moses, "I will make" is substituted. The Book of Abraham with its consistent emphasis on the plural nature of *Elohim* uses "let us make" and "we will form."

To many students of the books of Abraham and Moses, the greater similarity of the creation account in Abraham to the King James version rather than the creation account in Moses has long been apparent. That the King James is a rather literal rendering of the Hebrew text takes on new significance when the translation of the Book of Abraham is related to Joseph's concurrent study of Hebrew with Professor Seixas.

Grammatical Similarities

The use of the Hiphil form of the Hebrew verb is essential to understanding the way Joseph expressed the Book of Abraham account of creation which corresponds to the first chapter of Genesis. The sense of the Hiphil is causative. For example, the verb "he ruled" becomes "he caused or made to rule" when placed in the Hiphil. The verb "to divide" is uniformly cast into some form of the Hiphil in the telling of the creation story. The Hebrew Bible does not say God divided the light from the dark-

ness. It used the Hiphil and therefore states that God caused the light to be divided from the darkness. This point was clearly made by Seixas in both his general discussion of verb forms and his specific treatment of participles and imperatives in his *Grammar*.⁹ He did not, however, give a student the choice of using either "caused" or "made" to express the Hiphil. He used only the word "cause" to translate the Hiphil.

This point of grammar is reflected throughout the first events of creation in the Book of Abraham. In Abraham 4:4, the Gods "caused" the light to divide the day from the night." The Gods in Abraham 4:17 "cause to divide the light from the darkness." In each case, the verb "to divide" is expressed by Joseph in a Hiphil-like sense.

Joseph's application of a Hiphil-like verb form is a significant factor which separates the Book of Abraham from both the Book of Moses and the King James versions of the Bible. It places the Book of Abraham in harmony with the text of the Hebrew Bible and indicates a further influence of Seixas' Hebrew class on Joseph's thought.

Use of Key Words

Perhaps the most specific indications of the impact of Seixas and the Hebrew Bible on the creation story in the Book of Abraham are the spellings and definitions given to certain key words. In his article Professor Zucker noted that four words used in the facsimiles which accompany the Book of Abraham and also in the first three chapters of the book are definitely Hebrew: *Libnah* is a Hebrew word for moon and is used to signify a pagan god, *Kokaubeam* or *Hahkokaubeam* is the Hebrew term for stars, *Shaumahyeem* is Hebrew for heavens, and *Raukeeyang* is a Sephardic transliteration, the pronunciation used by Seixas, for *raukiah* or firmament or expanse.¹⁰ In his use of these terms, except for *Libnah*, Joseph was perfectly open. He identified them as Hebrew equivalents of the Egyptian symbols which he claimed to translate. He was in essence showing off his Hebrew, as he would later do in the King Follet Discourse.

A not-so-obvious but more important application of knowledge gained by Joseph from Seixas is found in Abraham 4:1, 2, and 6. In Abraham 4:1, what would be the word *shaumayem* in the Hebrew Bible is translated as "heavens." In both the Book of Moses and the King James version of the Bible the singular, "heaven," is used. Seixas correctly translates the noun into English as a plural as did Joseph.¹¹ Abraham 4:2 renders the Hebrew words *tohu* and *vohu* as "empty" and "desolate," exactly as Seixas suggested on page 78 of his *Grammar*. "Empty" and "desolate" are so different from the terms used in Moses and the King James version that no other source than Seixas can be readily posited for their origin. Equally unusual is the translation of what would be

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ



The Book of Abraham is a dynamic document, an original and living theological work.



mirahephet in the Hebrew as “brooding” in Abraham 4:2. Though “brooding” is given as a meaning for *mirahephet* in various lexicons (and even appears in Robert Boyle’s *Skeptical Chemist*), it was not a popular rendering for Genesis 1:2. It is, however, the only translation given by Seixas for *mirahephet* (see *Grammar*, page 32). In Abraham 4:6, what would be the Hebrew *raukiah* is expressed as “expanse,” the meaning assigned to it by Seixas on page 21 of his *Grammar*. All of these usages are strong evidence that Joseph was influenced by both Seixas and the Hebrew Bible.

Only in the case of the key word *Elohim* is Seixas’ impact unclear. Because it is common for Hebrew lexicons, grammars, and Bible dictionaries to note that *Elohim* is a plural noun, it may be that Joseph discovered it in his Hebrew studies before Seixas arrived. Seixas’ class, however, undoubtedly reinforced Joseph’s understanding of the noun even if it did not initially introduce him to its plural form.¹²

Some Differences

Though the creation story of the Book of Abraham bears some remarkable similarities to the Hebrew Bible and to concepts found in Seixas’ *Grammar*, it also displays some marked differences. In Abraham, the Gods speak to each other, prepare, and organize. They do not create. They perform their creative tasks in a rational order, forming woman before animals (not the order of Genesis or Moses).

What if anything do these differences add to Abraham? First, they make the text describe what a group of Gods might do. Corporate divinities would discuss, prepare, and organize. Group action requires cooperative procedures, and the alterations in the text of Abraham provide them. Second, the Gods must order the creation in a rational manner. The Gods could not speak of forming a helper for man and then set the idea aside until the various kinds of animals were established in the garden. The “correct” order would be to form the gardener, then his helper, and finally the animals. Then and only then could everything be named.

These changes in the creation story show that Joseph did more than merely translate from Hebrew. The Book of Abraham is a dynamic document, an original and living theological work which brings the traditional Bible text into harmony with belief in a plurality of Gods.

Summary

Joseph Smith’s study of Hebrew with Joshua Seixas and the translation of the Book of Abraham are not two events associated simply because they occurred at the same time. They appear to be related in content as well as context. The creation story in the Book of Abraham seems

to have roots in the Hebrew Bible and in Seixas’ *Grammar* as well as in Joseph’s creative or prophetic gifts. The creation as described in Abraham differs markedly from the similar story presented in the earlier Book of Moses. The most striking differences between the two being (a) Abraham’s closer textual resemblance to the Hebrew Bible and (b) its expression of the plurality of Gods, a central Mormon doctrine.

If Joseph’s study of Hebrew was as important in the formation of the Book of Abraham as this brief essay hopes to indicate, then scholars of that book would do well to turn for a moment from the examination of Egyptology and Abrahamic legends to look closely at Joseph’s study of Hebrew in the School of the Prophets during the fall, winter, and spring of 1835-1836. There lies, perhaps, one of the principal keys to the Book of Abraham and hence to Joseph’s theological development.

Notes

1. These two approaches appeared almost as soon as the rediscovery of the Joseph Smith Papyri by Professor Attya in 1967. In *Dialogue* 3:2 Grant Heward and Jerold Tanner attacked Joseph Smith on the basis that his translation did not accord with the meaning of the Egyptian symbols found in the papyri. In the same issue, Hugh Nibley pointed to Abrahamic legends as the ultimate validation of the text. Recently, Edward Ashment in “The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Reappraisal,” *Sunstone*, 4:5/6, continued research into the Book of Abraham’s relationship to Egyptology. He was able to show for the first time that Joseph incorrectly restored the facsimiles.
2. Louis C. Zucker “Joseph Smith as a Student of Hebrew,” *Dialogue* 3:2, pp. 41-55. As a former student and loving friend, I respectfully dedicate this essay to Dr. Zucker.
3. Except for these details, I will not recount the story of Joseph’s Hebrew studies and refer the reader to *ibid*.
4. D.H.C., vol. II, p. 348. The use of the technical term points for the Hebrew vowels indicates that Joseph and Oliver had made some progress in their Hebrew studies by this time. Four days after Seixas’ arrival, January 30, 1836, Joseph showed him the papyri. Joseph was happy to announce that Seixas declared them “original.” Joseph seems to imply that this meant Seixas concurred in the Abrahamic nature of the texts. Seixas probably intended only to declare that the papyri were genuine Egyptian antiquities.
5. The *Grammar* indicates that Gen. 1 was the first text studied, p. 85. Sentences like “and to Seth there [be] was born a son” and “go out from the ark,” pp. 87 and 89, indicate that the students moved on through the book chapter by chapter. Among the final four sentences “who caused thee to eat manna,” from Exodus appears p. 100. The Twenty-Ninth Psalm is included in the text of the *Grammar*, pp. 15 and 16.
6. D.H.C., vol. II, p. 405.
7. D.H.C., vol. II, p. 396.
8. To a Hebrew reader the similarities between the Hebrew text and Abraham are readily apparent. I have invoked the King James translation and its literalism to illustrate this point to the non-Hebrew reader. I do not intend to imply that the King James translation was an intermediary between the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Abraham. Richard Howard posited that the King James translation was a source for the Book of Abraham in “A Tentative Approach to the Book of Abraham,” in *Dialogue* 3:2, pp. 88-92. My contention is that the similarities in the two books arise from their relationship to the Hebrew original.
9. Seixas, *Grammar*, pp. 28 and 39.
10. Zucker, “Joseph Smith,” p. 51.
11. Seixas, *Grammar*, p. 78.
12. It is obvious from the *Grammar* that Seixas would have disagreed with Joseph’s belief in the plurality of Gods. Seixas represented *Elohim* as expressing the plural of majesty not of person. B. H. Roberts in D.H.C., vol. IV, p. 54, calls attention to the Book of Abraham as the first unimpeachable source for Joseph’s teaching of the plurality of Gods.

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