



The Book of Abraham, Revelation, and You

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I have spent almost two decades studying the book of Abraham and its history. I wish to use this book as an example to discuss an important issue: the relationship between knowledge and revelation.

While education is valuable and important, as we become increasingly educated, we must guard against the tendency to respect the world's methods of learning more than God's. As Jacob says:

“O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, . . . supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. . . .

“But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:28–29).

The academic learning process is only a tool—and a tool with limitations. The knowledge we currently have is limited,



and we need to keep improving it. This means that many things we are currently convinced of could be overturned in the future. If we forget the limited nature of what we learn by the academic process, we leave ourselves open to the danger of trusting in man's wisdom more than God's. Let me provide some examples from my own studies.

Although academic research can provide helpful information, revelation from God is the most trustworthy and valid source of knowledge.

Human Sacrifice in Ancient Egypt

Joseph Smith tells us that Facsimile 1 in the book of Abraham depicts a priest of Egypt attempting to sacrifice Abraham. For some, a problem has arisen because Egyptologists long taught that the Egyptians did not engage in human sacrifice. As a graduate student in Egyptology, I believed all the academic publications that said this, and I confidently taught it. Then I learned of some archaeological remains in an Egyptian fort that seemed to be an example of human sacrifice in ancient Egypt. As I studied more, not only did I become convinced that it *was* human sacrifice, but I became so fascinated that I devoted years to studying it.

During my research, I came to realize that the Egyptians often *did* engage in human sacrifice. As a result of my studies and those of others, the practice of human sacrifice in ancient Egypt is now generally accepted by my colleagues in Egyptology. As I continued examining this phenomenon, I learned that the situation described in Abraham chapter 1 is exactly the kind of situation in which we would expect a human sacrifice to occur, based on the Egyptian evidence. That is, those attempting to stop the practices of the Egyptian

cultic system were sacrificed. It became clear to me that the very thing that had bothered some people about the story of Abraham's near sacrifice was actually a point that *supports* the authenticity of that story. All we had to do was look at it more closely.¹

Sadly, before we had come to understand that our earlier position on human sacrifice was wrong, some members of the Church began to question their testimonies over this very issue. They trusted in something they thought they knew from the academic process more than the spiritual witness they had received by revelation from the Holy Ghost that the Pearl of Great Price was scripture. By the time the academic process caught up to revelation, some had left the Church. I wish they had listened to Peter, who cautioned the Saints, "Seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the [world], fall from your own steadfastness" (2 Peter 3:17).

Revelation as a Source of Knowledge

There are many similar examples we could look at. Let me mention just one more. Some have maintained that it is unrealistic to suppose there were writings about Abraham in Egypt because the Egyptians knew nothing about him. We have now learned that a significant group of Egyptian priests were indeed collecting stories about Abraham, Moses, and other biblical figures.²

While we could spend a great deal of time showing many more examples of incorrect assumptions and providing additional evidence that supports what Joseph Smith taught, we would be missing the larger point. Instead, we must learn that





revelation is the most trustworthy and valid source of knowledge. When we do so, we come to sift our learning through the gospel rather than sift the gospel through our learning. Doing this saves us from falling into difficulties caused by things we learn about the book of Abraham, Joseph Smith, social issues, or anything else we may encounter. The key is to remember that revelation is our most trustworthy source of learning and that we should not abandon it when we discover that, based on our current understanding, something doesn't seem to make sense.

Those in the world will deride such a stance because they have not had experience with it, and thus it makes no sense to

them. As the Apostle Paul taught, “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

An experience from my own life demonstrates why we should not let the world devalue that which we have learned through the Spirit.

While I was at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), studying Egyptology, something in my knee started to cause me horrible pain. Deep within that knee I could feel a small particle grinding against other tissues. The doctors at the UCLA Medical Center could not feel the lump themselves,



so they took various kinds of X-rays and MRIs. Nothing showed up. As a result, none of the doctors believed there was anything inside my knee; they thought it must be some other problem, such as nerve damage. Some even tried to treat me for these other imagined problems.

Because I kept insisting that there really was something inside my knee, I was finally referred to the head of orthopedic medicine. He was willing to make an incision in my knee and see if he could find anything. Through this incision, he found a piece of cartilage that had been chipped off and had started to gouge the surrounding tissues. Its removal completely cured me.

According to the best practices and technology available, there was nothing in my knee. Because most of the doctors would trust only what they themselves could feel or see or what technology told them, they did not believe there was an actual, physical object causing me pain. Yet, using senses available only to me, I could feel there was indeed something inside my knee. It was both real and powerful. In the end, my senses (which were not available to their empirical processes) were right.

Thus it is with revelation. I know from revelation that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God who translated the book of Abraham by inspiration. Receiving such revelation is a real and powerful method of learning truth, a method I refuse to ignore or dismiss just because others haven't experienced that same method of learning.

When There Are No Answers

In my years of research, I have found academically satisfactory answers to most questions that

have arisen surrounding the book of Abraham. Carefully examining assumptions and pursuing knowledge—while placing a premium on revelation as the most trusted source of truth—have helped me find answers to those things I have carefully and painstakingly investigated. I still have a few questions about the book of Abraham for which I have not yet found an academically satisfying answer, based on the current state of Egyptology. But I am not concerned about this. I remember what God told Oliver Cowdery: “Behold, I have manifested unto you, by my Spirit in many instances, that the things which you have written [or, in my case, read] are true; wherefore *you know* that they are true” (D&C 18:2; emphasis added).

I *know*, through the same kind of revelation Oliver Cowdery experienced, that the book of Abraham is inspired. I trust that sooner or later the academic process will catch up, and I will find satisfactory answers to all my questions. I have seen this happen numerous times throughout my life and have full confidence that it will happen again in the future. I can expect this not only because of my past experience but also because I trust so fully the revelatory method of learning. I recommend this as a model in everything we do. ■

NOTES

1. See Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee, “An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2011), 70–77.
2. See Kerry Muhlestein, “The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2013), 20–33; and Kerry Muhlestein, “Abraham, Isaac, and Osiris-Michael: The Use of Biblical Figures in Egyptian Religion, a Survey,” in *Achievements and Problems of Modern Egyptology*, ed. Galina A. Belova (2011), 246–59.



CONFIDENCE IN THE IMPRESSIONS YOU FEEL

“I witness that as you gain experience and success in being guided by the Spirit, your confidence in the impressions you feel can become more certain than your dependence on what you see or hear.”

Elder Richard G. Scott (1928–2015) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “To Acquire Spiritual Guidance,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2009, 7.

