

# Book of Moses Essays #35: Moses 1 in Its Ancient Context: Moses Falls to the Earth (Moses 1:9-11)

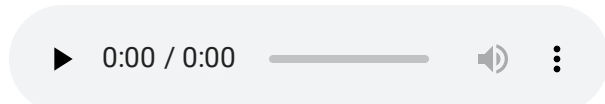
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Book of Mormon Central Staff with Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David J. Larsen, and Stephen T. Whitlock

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Figure 1. Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455): *Creation of Adam*, from *Gates of Paradise*, 1425–1452

Though most readers will be much more familiar with the well-known masterpiece of Michelangelo showing Adam's creation being effected by the fleetingly light touch of the index fingers of God and the reclining Adam, the version of the scene executed by Lorenzo Ghiberti above, which includes a firm handclasp whereby the Lord can raise Adam up on his feet, is more faithful to ancient Jewish and Christian tradition.<sup>[1]</sup> In Rashi's commentary on Genesis 2:7, the revered Jewish exegete connects the themes of creation and atonement to the idea of standing in God's presence:<sup>[2]</sup>

God took [Adam's] dust from the place of [the temple altar, signifying His] wish that [Adam might] gain atonement, and that *he may be able to stand*.



In contrast to cattle, which Rashi said “do not stand to be judged”<sup>[3]</sup> (in other words, are not held accountable for their actions<sup>[4]</sup>), Jewish accounts of Adam’s creation specifically highlight his first experience after being filled with the breath of life:<sup>[5]</sup> namely, the moment when God “stood him on his legs.”<sup>[6]</sup> According to Avivah Zornberg, it is in the ability to stand in the presence of God that one specifically demonstrates the attainment of full “majesty and strength.”<sup>[7]</sup>



Figure 2. *The Harrowing of Hell from the Exultet Roll: Codex Barberini Latinus 592. (f. 4) , ca. 1087*

Medieval artistic convention makes it clear that Christ was imagined by at least some Christians as raising the dead to eternal life by the same gesture that was used to create Adam and stand him on his feet in Ghiberti’s sculpture.<sup>[8]</sup> Similarly, we note the Old Testament literary formula that nearly always follows descriptions of miraculous revivals from figurative or literal death with the observation that they “stood up upon their feet.”<sup>[9]</sup>

More generally, in Christian iconography this gesture is used in scenes representing a transition from one state or place to another. For example, a depiction at the Church of San Marco in Venice shows God taking Adam by the wrist to bring him through the door of Paradise and to introduce him into the Garden of Eden.<sup>[10]</sup> Another Christian scene shows God taking Adam by the wrist as he and Eve receive the commandment not to partake of the



Tree of Knowledge.<sup>[11]</sup> Likewise, scripture and pseudepigrapha describe how prophets such as Enoch,<sup>[12]</sup> Abraham,<sup>[13]</sup> Daniel,<sup>[14]</sup> Ezra,<sup>[15]</sup> and John<sup>[16]</sup> are grasped by the hand of an angel and raised to a standing position in key moments of their heavenly visions.<sup>[17]</sup>



Figure 3. Stephen T. Whitlock, 1951–: Tree Near British Camp, Malvern Hills, Worcestershire, England, 2009.

Significantly, Jewish writings tell of how Adam lost the divine ability to stand through his taking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. For example, in an account that plays on the nuances of Hebrew terms for standing, we read:<sup>[18]</sup>

Before the sin, Adam could “hear God speaking and *stand on his legs*... he could *withstand* it.”<sup>[19]</sup> ... In another midrash, God says, “Woe Adam! Could you not *stand in your commandment* for even one hour?”

It is by being raised by the hand to the upright position that we are made ready to hear the word of the Lord. It is no mere coincidence that before heavenly messengers can perform their errands to Ezekiel,<sup>[20]</sup> Daniel,<sup>[21]</sup> Paul,<sup>[22]</sup> Alma the Younger,<sup>[23]</sup> and Nephi<sup>[24]</sup> they

must first command these seers to stand on their feet.<sup>[25]</sup> As biblical scholar Robert Hayward has said: “You stand in the temple,<sup>[26]</sup> you stand before the Lord,<sup>[27]</sup> you pray standing up<sup>[28]</sup> —you can’t approach God on all fours like an animal. If you can stand, you can serve God in His temple.”<sup>[29]</sup> If you are stained with sin, you cannot stand in His presence.<sup>[30]</sup>

## Moses Falls to the Earth

With the context above in mind, we are ready to understand the significance of the “fall” and “raising” of Moses and Abraham.

Hugh Nibley describes what happened to Moses following his initial divine encounter:<sup>[31]</sup>

As soon as we leave the Prologue in Heaven, we find [Moses] in the dark. The presence of God withdrew from Moses, and his glory was not on Moses. The lights go down. As he was left unto himself, he fell to the earth. Remember, Joseph Smith says, “I found myself lying on my back. ... I had no strength.” It’s the same thing here. ... So as the play opens we have Moses lying there in the dark and dreary world, all alone and out cold, the picture of helplessness; he has reached the bottom.

	Book of Moses	Apocalypse of Abraham
<b>Fall and loss of strength</b>	Moses... fell unto the earth... And... it was for the space of many hours before Moses did receive his natural strength (1:9-11)	I... fell down upon the earth, for there was no longer strength in me (10:2)

*Figure 4. Resemblances for Moses Falls to the Earth (Moses 1:9–11)*

Consistent with Nibley’s description, the table above describes how both Moses and Abraham experienced a “fall to the earth” that left them vulnerable to the will of the Adversary.<sup>[32]</sup> Abraham is reported as saying: “I ... fell down upon the earth, for there was no longer strength in me,” closely resembling the description in Moses 1 where we are told that he “fell unto the earth” and lost his “natural strength.”<sup>[33]</sup>





Figure 5. Abraham Falls to the Earth and Is Raised by Yaho'el

While modern readers might easily skim over the description of the fall and the raising of the two prophets, thinking it of little interest, it was clearly a significant event to the ancient illustrator, who found it important enough to include it among the six passages he highlighted with visual depictions.<sup>[34]</sup> The drawing depicts Abraham being raised up out of sleep—or perhaps death<sup>[35]</sup>—by the hand of Yaho'el, who, using the right hand, lifts him firmly by the wrist.<sup>[36]</sup> The rays emanating from hand of God<sup>[37]</sup> impart the spirit of life, recalling the creation of Adam, when God “breathed ... the breath of life” into the first man, and he became “a living soul.”<sup>[38]</sup>

Nibley describes what happens next:<sup>[39]</sup>

As [Moses] begins to receive his natural strength, he pulls himself together and he says to himself this great truth, “Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed.”<sup>[40]</sup> ... He has seen what is up there, and he has seen what is down here. ...

That’s the end of that act. A new scene is when a new character enters. Now, the play begins because you have to have an antagonist and a protagonist in a play. Now Satan enters the scene. Notice, when the hero is at his lowest, when he is the most helpless, that is the time that Stan strikes. ... Satan does not play fair.

In the next *Essay*,<sup>[41]</sup> we will describe how, in remarkably similar fashion, Moses and Abraham defeat Satan.

This article is adapted from Bradshaw, Jeffrey M., David J. Larsen, and Stephen T. Whitlock. “Moses 1 and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*: Twin sons of different mothers?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 38 (2020): 179-290.  
<https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/moses-1-and-the-apocalypse-of-abraham-twin-sons-of-different-mothers/>

## Further Reading

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## Notes on Figures

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*Figure 1.* Public Domain.

[https://arthive.com/artists/3821~Lorenzo\\_Ghiberti/works/198490~The\\_creation\\_of\\_Adam\\_and\\_eve](https://arthive.com/artists/3821~Lorenzo_Ghiberti/works/198490~The_creation_of_Adam_and_eve) (accessed June 18, 2020).

*Figure 2.* Public domain. <https://combonianum.org/2013/04/03/fp-francais-52013-2/> (accessed June 18, 2020). Note that Jesus is depicted as having two right hands. As evidence that this is not a simple error on the part of the illustrator, we note that both Jewish midrash and the art of Dura Europos depict God protecting Israel with two right hands (see C. H. Kraeling, *et al.*, *Synagogue*, p. 83 n. 251. Cf. H. Freedman, *et al.*, *Midrash*, Exodus, 22:2, p. 276; R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art*, p. 145).

*Figure 3.* Copyright Stephen T. Whitlock.

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Figure 5. Photographs of the originals of the illustrations are from *Otkrovenie Avraama* (*Apocalypse of Abraham* or *ApAb*), which comprises pages 328–375 of the *Codex Sylvester*. The *Codex Sylvester*, “the oldest and the only independent manuscript containing the full text of *ApAb*” (A. Kulik, *Retroverting*, p. 3), is known to scholars as manuscript “S.” It is the only illustrated manuscript of *ApAb*. Photographs of the illustrations from the original manuscript are published in this article for the first time with the kind permission of the Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv drevnikh aktov (RGADA — Russian State Archive of Early Acts, formerly TsGADA SSSR = Central State Archive of Early Acts) in Moscow. We express our sincere gratitude to Evgeniy Rychalovskiy, Head of the Publication Department and Vladislav Rzhetsky of the German Historical Institute in Moscow, for their assistance on 4 and 6 December 2019. Within the RGADA collection, the *Codex Sylvester* is catalogued as folder 381, Printer’s Library, no. 53, folios 164v-186. The six illustrations can be found in these folios: 182v, 174, 172v, 170v, 168b v, and 168a.

Photographs of the illustrations from a rare printed copy of the first facsimile edition (1891) were taken on 26 April 2009 and are © Stephen T. Whitlock and Jeffrey M. Bradshaw. We express our special thanks to Carole Menzies and Jennifer Griffiths who facilitated our access to the facsimiles for filming purposes in the Taylor Bodleian Slavonic and Modern Greek Library, Oxford University, Oxford, England. The facsimile edition was originally published as N. Novickij (Novitskii, P. P., *Otkrovenie Avraama* and later as a reprint. Whitlock’s Image IDs are as follows: ApAb-OX10, ApAb-OX19, ApAb-OX20, ApAb-OX26, ApAb-OX30, ApAb-OX33, ApAb-OX50. For this article, the photos have been enhanced digitally for readability and size consistency, and a colored mask has been added to the backgrounds of all photos except ApAb-OX10.

## Endnotes

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[1] For a more extensive discussion of the ancient symbolism of the sacred handclasp and embrace, see J. M. Bradshaw, *What Did Joseph Smith Know*, pp. 16–33.

[2] Zornberg’s translation of Rashi, Genesis 2:7, in A. G. Zornberg, *Genesis*, p. 16. Compare Rashi, *Genesis Commentary*, 2:7, p. 23; J. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah* 1, 14:8:1, p. 156.

[3] Zornberg’s translation of Rashi, Genesis 2:7, in A. G. Zornberg, *Genesis*, p. 16. Compare Rashi, *Genesis Commentary*, 2:7, p. 23.

[4] A. G. Zornberg, *Genesis*, p. 16. See *Essay* \*\* for a discussion of traditions regarding the serpent having legs prior to the Fall.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[6] E.g., M.-A. Ouaknin *et al.*, *Rabbi Éliézer*, 11, p. 78; J. Goldin, *Fathers*, 1, p. 11.

[7] A. G. Zornberg, *Genesis*, p. 23.



[8] See also J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image 1*, pp. 471-473, 681-686; J. M. Bradshaw, *Moses Temple Themes*, pp. 38-39.

[9] Ezekiel 37:10. Cf. 2 Kings 13:21.

Alma the Younger experienced a fall and a figurative death when he and his companions were visited by an angel, and a rebirth three days later when his mouth was opened and he was again able to stand on his feet: "I fell to the earth; and it was for the space of three days and three nights that I could not open my mouth, neither had I the use of my limbs... But behold my limbs did receive their strength again, and I stood upon my feet, and did manifest unto the people that I had been born of God" (Alma 36:10, 23; cf. King Lamoni and his people in Alma 18:42-43, 19:1-34).

Falling in weakness after a vision of God is a common motif in scripture. Daniel reported that he "fainted, and was sick certain days," and of a second occasion he wrote: "I was left alone... and there remained no strength in me... and when I heard the voice of his words, then was I in a deep sleep on my face, and my face toward the ground" (Daniel 8:26; 10:8-9). Saul "fell to the earth" during his vision and remained blind until healed by Ananias (Acts 9:4, 17-18). Lehi "cast himself on his bed, being overcome with the Spirit" (1 Nephi 1:7). Of his weakness following the First Vision, Joseph Smith wrote: "When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven. When the light had departed, I had no strength..." (JS-H 1:20). See also discussion of A. Kulik, *Retroverting Apocalypse of Abraham* 10:1-4, p. 17 below.

[10] See J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image 1*, p. 683 figure 53-11.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 228 figure 4-10.

[12] G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch* 1, 1 Enoch 14:24, p. 267: "And one of the holy ones came to me and raised me up and stood me [on my feet]"; G. W. E. Nickelsburg *et al.*, *1 Enoch*, 71:3, p. 93: "And the angel Michael... took me by my right hand and raised me up"; P. Alexander, *3 Enoch*, 1:5, p. 256: "He grasped me with his hand before their eyes and said to me, 'Come in peace into the presence of the high and exalted King'; *ibid.*, 48A:2, p. 300: "I went with him, and, taking me by his hand, he bore me up on his wings."

[13] J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image 1*, p. 684 figure 53-13.

[14] Daniel 8:18: "he touched me, and set me upright"; Daniel 10:9-10: "then was I in a deep sleep on my face, and my face toward the ground. And, behold, an hand touched me, which set me upon my knees."

[15] B. M. Metzger, *4 Ezra*, 10:29-33, p. 547:

As I was speaking these words, behold the angel who had come to me at first came to me, and he looked upon me,; and behold I lay there like a corpse and I was deprived of my understanding. Then he grasped my right hand and strengthened me and set me on my feet, and said to me, “What is the matter with you? And why are you troubled? And why are your understanding and the thoughts of your mind troubled?”

I said, “Because you have forsaken me! I did as you directed, and went out into the field, and behold, I saw, and still see, what I am unable to explain.”

He said unto me, “Stand up like a man, and I will instruct you.”

[16] Revelation 1:17: “I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me.”

[17] In Alma 19:29–30, the raising of two individuals who have fallen in rapturous vision is performed by mortal women.

[18] A. G. Zornberg, Genesis, p. 23.

[19] Zornberg’s translation. Compare H. Freedman *et al.*, Midrash, Numbers 1, 11:3, 5:419.

[20] Ezekiel 2:1–2: “And he said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee. And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me.”

[21] Daniel 10:11: “O Daniel, ... understand the words that I speak unto thee, and stand upright: for unto thee am I now sent.”

[22] Acts 26:16: “But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness.”

[23] Alma 36:7–8: “And behold, he spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet; and we all fell to the earth, for the fear of the Lord came upon us. But behold, the voice said unto me: Arise. And I arose and stood up, and beheld the angel.”

[24] 3 Nephi 11:19–20: “And Nephi arose and went forth, and bowed himself before the Lord and did kiss his feet. And the Lord commanded him that he should arise. And he arose and stood before him.”

[25] Nickelsburg explains (G. W. E. Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch 1, 14:24-15:1, p. 270):

The seer must be rehabilitated and accepted into the divine presence before he can receive his commission. Restoration by an angel becomes a typical feature in visions, where, however, it is the angel whose appearance causes the collapse.

See also Joshua 7:6, 10–13:

6 ¶ And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads .... 10 ¶ And the Lord said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? 11 Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. 12 Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you. 13 Up, sanctify the people, and say, Sanctify yourselves against to morrow: for thus saith the Lord God of Israel, There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you.

[26] E.g., Deuteronomy 10:8, 18:7; 2 Chronicles 29:11.

[27] E.g., Luke 1:19.

[28] See, e.g., Luke 18:13.

[29] Notes taken by David J. Larsen on a unpublished talk by Robert Hayward (R. Hayward, Aramaic Paradise).

[30] E.g., 1 Esdras 8:89–90.

[31] H. W. Nibley, *Teachings of the PGP*, p. 215.

[32] Moses 1:9–11; A. Kulik, *Retroverting*, 10:1–3, p. 17. For a broader exploration of the significance of this motif, see J. M. Bradshaw, *Standing in the Holy Place*, pp. 80–81, 118–120.

[33] Moses 1:9–10.

[34] Translation of caption: “I heard a voice saying, Here Oilu, sanctify this man and strengthen (him) from his trembling and the angel took me by the right hand and stood me on my feet and said to me, stand up oh friend of God who has loved you.” Kulik’s translation of the corresponding text in *ApAb* reads: “And when I was still face down on the earth, I heard the voice of the Holy One, saying, ‘Go, Yaho’el, the namesake of the mediation of my ineffable name, sanctify this man and strengthen him from his trembling!’ And the angel whom he sent to me in the likeness of a man came, and he took me by my right hand and stood me on my feet. And he said to me, ‘Stand up, <Abraham,> the friend of God who has loved you, let human trembling not enfold you. For behold I am sent to you to strengthen you and to bless you in the name of God.” (A. Kulik, *Retroverting*, 10:3–6, pp. 17–18). For similar accounts in the heavenly ascent literature, see C. Mopsik, *Hénoch*, pp. 170–171 n. 1:16. In 3 *Enoch*, the angel who raises Rabbi Ishmael to his feet is Metatron (*ibid.*, 1:7–10, pp. 99–100). Comparing that experience to the one recounted in *ApAb*, Mopsik notes that Yaho’el is one the names of Metatron and that he is the angel of resurrection (*ibid.*, pp. 170–171 n. 1:16; pp. 261–262 n. 18:21).

[35] In the Ezekiel mural at Dura Europos, the “hand from heaven” is specifically associated with the “revivication of the dead” (H. Riesenfeld, *Resurrection*, p. 34; J. M. Bradshaw, *Ezekiel Mural*, pp. 22–23). In a formula repeated throughout the rabbinical literature, the “Key of the Revival of the Dead” is mentioned as one that “the Holy one ... has retained in His own hands” (H. Riesenfeld, *Resurrection*, p. 12).



[36] The scene recalls Rashi's exegesis of the account of how the children of Israel fell back at the power of the voice of God at Sinai, after which "the angels came and helped them forward again" (A. G. Zornberg, *Genesis*, pp. 32-33. See Rashi, *Exodus Commentary*, pp. 240-241). Compare John 18:4-6, where the arresting guards fell back when Christ declared His divinity. On the symbolic significance of these and similar events, see J. M. Bradshaw, *Standing in the Holy Place*, pp. 82-87.

[37] In classic iconography, the gesture being given by God represented the spoken word. This is consistent with the mention of the heavenly voice in the caption. In medieval Christianity, the meaning later changed to that of blessing (H. P. L'Orange, *Cosmic Kingship*, pp. 171-183).

[38] Moses 3:7. See the insightful discussion regarding the creation of Adam in this context in A. LaCocque, *Trial*, pp. 60-64. Nibley also cites a resemblance with Abraham 1:18 ("Behold I will lead thee by my hand"), and sees a corresponding theme in the Book of Abraham when Abraham is delivered from the altar (H. W. Nibley, *Abraham 2000*, p. 16, see also p. 42):

The expressions "loose the bands of Hades" and "him who stareth at the dead" signify the nature of the deliverance and are both typically Egyptian, the latter of which Box finds quite bizarre. Facsimile 1 is a very proper illustration to the story.

In a personal communication, Jeff Lindsay noted that arising from the dust in this fashion "can refer to entering into a covenant relationship, receiving life, reigning power, authority, and resurrection" (J. D. Lindsay, August 5 2019. Cf. J. D. Lindsay, *Arise*, Part 1). See J. M. Bradshaw, *What Did Joseph Smith Know*, pp. 18-33 for a discussion of the handclasp and the embrace in the context of ritual and heavenly ascent.

[39] H. W. Nibley, *Teachings of the PGP*, pp. 215-216.

[40] Moses 1:10.

[41] See *Essay* #\*\*.