

Book of Moses Essays #40: Moses 1 in Its Ancient Context: Moses' Vision at the Veil (Moses 1:27–30)

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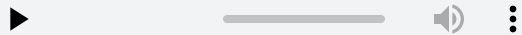
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Figure 1. Walter Rane, 1949–: Jehovah Creates the Earth, 2000

Having traversed the veil, Moses and Abraham experience a comprehensive vision of the earth and its mortal inhabitants through the ages. In both texts, this raises questions for the prophets, but the nature of the questions differs somewhat in Moses 1 than in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (ApAb).

	Book of Moses	Apocalypse of Abraham
The prophet beholds the earth	Moses cast his eyes and beheld the earth (1:27)	“Look now beneath your feet at the expanse and contemplate the creation” (21:1)
The inhabitants of the earth	he beheld also the inhabitants thereof (1:28)	and those who inhabit it (21:1)
The prophet questions God	Tell me, I pray thee, why these things are so, and by what thou madest them? (1:30)	Why ... have you set yourself with [Satan]? (20:7). Eternal, Mighty One! Why did you ordain it to be so? (26:1).

Figure 2. Resemblances for Moses’ Vision at the Veil (Moses 1:27–30)

Moses and Abraham Behold the Earth

The change in perspective as Moses passes upward through the heavenly veil is related in subtle beauty in the Book of Moses. Previously, as Moses stood on the earth, he “lifted up his eyes unto heaven.”^[1] Now, after ascending to heaven, he “cast his eyes” down to see the earth and all of its inhabitants.^[2] Similarly, Abraham is told: “Look now beneath your feet at the expanse [i.e., heavenly veil^[3]] and contemplate the creation and those who inhabit it.”^[4]

Significantly, Kulik notes that “Abraham’s exploration of the heavenly world in a *downward* direction as the heavens open below” is “unique” in the relevant heavenly ascent literature. He writes: “Other visionaries either moved from lower to upper firmaments or wandered in a horizontal direction.”^[5] Remarkably, this feature, unique to ApAb in the pseudepigraphal literature, also appears in Moses 1.



Figure 3. Hypocephalus British Museum 35875 (formerly 8445c)

The translation of Rubinkiewicz is stronger than that of Kulik, indicating that Abraham is not merely required to “contemplate” the creation and the inhabitants of the earth, but rather to “pay attention [to] ... and *understand*” it!^[6] How can Abraham come to understand the universe? In terms that echo the vertical and horizontal divisions of hypocephali such as the one included as Facsimile 2 of the Book of Abraham,^[7] Rubinkiewicz explains:^[8]

If we pay attention to our account, we will see an astonishing thing. Abraham sees the earth peopled by the wicked (v. 3), but he also sees Eden inhabited by the righteous (v. 6); God shows him the sea ruled by Leviathan (v. 4), but Abraham also contemplates the “upper waters” that are above the firmament (v. 5). At the conclusion, he sees people at the left and right of the picture. What should Abraham understand by this vision? The answer is simple: the division between the righteous and the wicked is based on the structure of the world, where both the forces of evil (the earth and the wicked; the sea and Leviathan) and the forces of good (the “upper waters,” Eden) each have their place. The entire universe has thus been projected by God and “it is pleasing to Him” (22:2).^[9]

In other words, as Lehi declared: “it must needs be that there is an opposition in all things” or else “there would have been no purpose in ... creation.”^[10]

The Inhabitants of the Earth

In their visions, both Moses and Abraham seem to have not only seen the inhabitants of the earth but also witnessed the earth’s entire history from beginning to end—like Adam, Enoch, the Brother of Jared, John the Beloved, and others.^[11] Moroni taught that those with perfect faith cannot be “kept from within the veil” (i.e., cannot be kept *outside* the veil^[12]). The veil in question is the *heavenly* veil behind which God dwells in glory, whose *earthly* counterpart is the temple veil that divides the holy place from the holy of holies.^[13]

Consistent with Jewish,^[14] Islamic,^[15] and other^[16] ancient accounts, Abraham and Moses do not receive their cosmic visions until after they have passed through the heavenly veil. This is because the visions in such accounts, derived from a “blueprint”^[17] of eternity that has been worked out before the Creation, are usually described as being depicted *inside* the heavenly veil.^[18] Writes Margaret Barker:^[19]

Those who passed beyond the veil found themselves outside time. When Rabbi Ishmael ascended and looked back he saw the curtain on which was depicted past, present and future. ‘All generations to the end of time were printed on the curtain of the Omnipresent One. I saw them all with my own eyes’...^[20] [Similarly,] Enoch was taken up by three angels and set up on a high place whence he saw all history, past, present and future.

The heavenly veil corresponding to the firmament of the Creation is sometimes represented as a shining pavement on which the Lord stands^[21] or as the “sea of glass” where God resides.^[22] Islamic and Jewish sources imply that the unenlightened might mistakenly confuse such a crystal pavement with water.^[23] Such descriptions also relate to the white stone that will be given to the Saints “whereby things pertaining to a higher order of kingdoms will be made known.”^[24]

Jesus Himself, when He was tempted in the desert saw “all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time,”^[25] an experience that Barker recognizes as “a characteristic of the temple mystics’ overall view of history.”^[26] Islamic tradition preserves the same motif in the story of how “Adam took out the cloth and spread it out. Upon it were the forms of the prophets [i.e., the pious] and the pharaohs [i.e., the wicked], rank after rank.”^[27]

Moses and Abraham Question God

Now standing in the presence of God, Moses asks about the Creation: “Tell me, I pray thee, why these things are so?”^[28] However, in an important divergence from Moses 1, *ApAb*, Abraham asks two questions of a somewhat different nature, the first about the origin of evil in the world (“Why ... have you set yourself with [Satan]?”^[29]) and later the other about the origin of evil in humankind (“Eternal, Mighty One! Why did you ordain it to be so?”^[30]).

Moses will receive a partial answer to his question about “by what” God made these things through a vision of the Creation.^[31] He will also be told something about “why these things are so.”^[32]

As with Moses, the answer to Abraham’s first question will be found in his vision of the Creation and the Fall. However, the answer to his second question will come he sees the unfolding of the history of Israel.^[33] Scholars, especially those who date this section of *ApAb* to the years following the destruction of the temple, see the subsequent material as the sort of thing that a first-century redactor might have inserted into a potentially pre-existing heavenly ascent text as a means of providing a plausible context for the theological questions he aimed to answer for his contemporaries.^[34]

By way of contrast to *ApAb*, the questions about Creation posed by Moses are more universal and timeless.^[35]

In the mystical Islamic work *The Mother of Books*, a petitioner also prays with a “typical list of questions”: “My Lord, how did the high king create all these spheres and palaces? From where did he make the spirits? What was the origin of his creation?” and receives an answer similar to the one given to Moses: “The creation of these realms is hard to fathom. Not everyone knows the way to knowledge, and its secret [is] well-concealed.”^[36] The *Gospel of Philip* specifies the mechanism of concealment in asserting that it is the “veil [that] at first concealed how God controlled the creation.”^[37]

Conclusion

Joseph Smith may have been alluding to an ineffable experience of seeing behind the veil like that of Moses when he wrote the following to William W. Phelps:^[38]

Oh, Lord, when will the time come when Brother William, Thy servant, and myself, shall behold the day that we may stand together and gaze upon eternal wisdom engraven upon the heavens, while the majesty of our God holdeth up the dark curtain until we may read the round of eternity, to the fulness and satisfaction of our immortal souls? Oh, Lord, deliver us in due time from the little, narrow prison, almost as it were, total darkness of paper, pen and ink;—and a crooked, broken, scattered and imperfect language.

We are told that Moses discerned his vision “by the spirit of God.”^[39] By this we comprehend that the power behind Moses’ experience was “not just God’s ability to produce a comprehensive vision, but an ability to change Moses so that he could comprehend it.”^[40]

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://interpreterfoundation.org/moses-1-and-the-apocalypse-of-abraham-twin-sons-of-different-mothers/>.

Further Reading

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Notes on Figures

Figure 1. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/image/jehovah-creates-earth-rane-fa3141a?lang=eng> (accessed July 6, 2020).

Figure 2. Copyright Jeffrey M. Bradshaw.

Figure 3. Photographs by Stephen T. Whitlock of Hypocephalus of Hor (2005), whose owner may have been "the same as the owner of the Book of Breathings papyrus in the Church collection" (M. D. Rhodes, *Joseph Smith Hypocephalus ... Twenty Years Later*, p. 2), i.e., the source of Facsimiles 1 and 3 of the Book of Abraham (see M. D. Rhodes, Hor). For more on the nature and function of the hypocephalus, see *Essay #34*, Note on Figure 6.

Endnotes

[1] Moses 1:24.

[2] Moses 1:27–28.

[3] The KJV term “firmament” in Genesis 1:6, 7, 8, 14, 15, 17, 20 translates the Hebrew term *raqiaʿ* (רָקִיעַ = “expanse”) which describes how the waters were “‘divided’ between the surface of the earth and the atmospheric heavens that surround it” (B. R. McConkie, *Christ and the Creation*, p. 11). Figuratively, however, it alludes to the veil that divided off the Holy of Holies in the temple (see, e.g., the selection of sources summarized in L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:51), corresponding to the veil in the heavenly “temple” (P. S. Alexander, 3 Enoch, 45:1, p. 296 n. a).

[4] A. Kulik, *Retroverting*, 21:1, p. 26.

[5] A. Kulik, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, p. 1469 n. 19:3.

[6] “*Prête attention maintenant à l’espace sous tes pieds, et comprends (mon) dessein*” = “Pay attention now to the space beneath your feet and understand my design” (R. Rubinkiewicz, *L’Apocalypse d’Abraham*, 21:1, p. 171). Cf. Daniel 9:23: “Understand the matter, and consider the vision.”

[7] For more on the hypocephalus and possible allusions to its general imagery in *ApAb*, see *Essay #34*. For more on allusions to circular maps of the cosmos in the ancient Enoch literature, see *Essay #24*. In addition to the right-left mirroring that evoked for Hugh Nibley the opposing hosts of the righteous and the wicked described in *ApAb* (see H. W. Nibley, *Abraham 2000*, p. 45; H. W. Nibley *et al.*, *One Eternal Round*, pp. 596, 597), the circle is “divided by straight lines into three horizontal zones. ... The upper part of the hypocephalus represents the earth and sky, while the lower part, which is reversed, represents the netherworld or realm of the dead, which together depict the entire universe” (*ibid.*, p. 595). See also pp. 286–288.

[8] R. Rubinkiewicz, *L’Apocalypse d’Abraham*, p. 171.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 171 n. adds: “This idea is not unique, for it is also found in the *Testament of Naphtali* 2:7–8” (see H. C. Kee, *Testaments*, p. 811).

[10] 2 Nephi 2:11, 12. Lehi specifically connected the universal need for opposition to the symbolism in Eden: “it must needs be that there was an opposition; even the forbidden fruit in opposition to the tree of life; the **one being sweet and the other bitter**” (2 Nephi 2:15). Intriguingly, the Lord expresses a similar sentiment in Moses 6:55: “And the Lord spake unto Adam, saying: Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and **they taste the bitter, that they may know to prize the good**” (emphasis added).

[11] D&C 107:56, Moses 7:4–67, Ether 3:25, 1 Nephi 14:25, 1 Nephi 14:26, Luke 4:5, M. C. Thomas, Brother of Jared.

[12] Ether 3:20; cf. Moses 1:27.

[13] P. S. Alexander, 3 Enoch, 45:1, p. 296 n. 45a.

[14] Gershom Scholem wrote descriptively that “this cosmic curtain, as it is described in the Book of Enoch, contains the images of all things which since the day of creation have their pre-existing reality, as it were, in the heavenly sphere. All generations and all their lives and actions are woven into this curtain. ... [All this] shall become universal knowledge in the Messianic age” (G. Scholem, *Trends*, p. 72).

[15] For example, Islamic tradition speaks of a “white cloth from Paradise” upon which Adam saw the fate of his posterity (M. i. A. A. al-Kisa’i, *Tales*, p. 82). For a description of an account by al-Tha’labi, see H. W. Nibley, *Teachings of the PGP*, 10, p. 117.

[16] See, e.g., H. W. Nibley *et al.*, *One Eternal Round*, pp. 188–585; H. W. Nibley, *Abraham 2000*, pp. 42–73.

[17] P. S. Alexander, 3 *Enoch*, 45:1, p. 296 n. 45a. The English term “blueprint” is an apt choice to describe the vision of Rabbi Ishmael (*ibid.*, 45:1, p. 296 [cf. 45:6, pp. 298–299]):

Come and I will show you the curtain of the Omnipresent One, which is spread before the Holy One, blessed be he, and on which are printed all the generations of the world and all their deeds, whether done or to be done, till the last generation.

Citing precedents in translations of similar visions in Jewish tradition, Kulik translates the relevant term in *ApAb* 21:2 as a “likeness” or In 22:1, 3, 5; 23:1, and “many other instances” he translates it as “picture” (East Slavic *obrazovanie*) (A. Kulik, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, p. 1470 n. 21:2).

[18] For more on this subject, see, e.g., M. Barker, *Beyond*; M. Barker, *Boundary*; J. M. Bradshaw, *God’s Image 1*, *Moses* 1:27b, pp. 62–63.

[19] M. Barker, *Temple Theology*, p. 28. See also M. Barker, *Boundary*, pp. 215–217.

[20] P. S. Alexander, 3 *Enoch*, 45:6, p. 299.

[21] E.g., Exodus 24:9–10; Daniel 10:6; *Doctrine and Covenants* 110:2.

[22] Revelation 4:6, 21:18, 21; *Doctrine and Covenants* 130:8–9, 137:4; Ezekiel 1:22, 26.

[23] A. I. A. I. M. I. I. al-Tha’labi, *Lives*, pp. 534–535; J. Dan, *Mysticism*, 1:276–279; W. J. Hamblin *et al.*, *Solomon’s Temple*, pp. 131, 270; G. W. E. Nickelsburg, 1 *Enoch* 1, 14:10, p. 257; B. M. Wheeler, *Prophets*, p. 270; *Qur’an* 27:38–44. See also 1 Kings 10:1–13; Ezekiel 1:22; Exodus 24:10; Revelation 21:18, 21.

[24] *Doctrine and Covenants* 130:4–11; cf. Revelation 2:17; J. M. Bradshaw, *God’s Image 1*, *Commentary* 3:19–b, p. 177; *Figure 4-4*, p. 219; *Endnote 4-9*, p. 299; *Endnote 4-22*, p. 304; *Excursus 53: Comparative Explorations: Jewish and Christian Analogues*, p. 679. See also *Commentary* 1:6–g, p. 48 and 2:1–e, p. 94 regarding God’s timelessness and the scope of divine knowledge.

[25] Luke 4:5.

[26] M. Barker, *Hidden*, p. 95.

[27] M. i. A. A. al-Kisa’i, *Tales*, p. 82.

[28] *Moses* 1:30.

[29] A. Kulik, *Retroverting*, 20:7, p. 25.

[30] *Ibid.*, 26:1, p. 30.

[31] See *Moses* 2.

[32] See *Moses* 1:39.

[33] A. Kulik, *Retroverting*, 27:1–31:12, pp. 30–35. Nibley nonetheless sees resemblances between these passages in the *Apocalypse* and the Books of Moses and Abraham (H. W. Nibley, *Abraham 2000*, pp. 25–26).

[34] For example, R. Rubinkiewicz concludes, consistent with most recent scholarship: “Our pseudepigraphon was written after 70 CE, because the author describes the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. chapter 27)” (R. Rubinkiewicz, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, p. 683).

[35] Demonstrating that similar questions are not unknown elsewhere in the heavenly ascent literature, we note this example from the Islamic *Mother of Books*: “My Lord, ... From where did he make the spirits? What was the origin of his creation?” (W. Barnstone *et al.*, *Mother*, p. 685).

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 685.

[37] W. W. Isenberg, *Philip*, 84:23–25, p. 159.

[38] J. Smith, Jr. *et al.*, *Documents* 2, July 1831–January 1833, Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832, p. 320, spelling and punctuation modernized. Cf. J. Smith, Jr., *Documentary History*, 27 November 1832, 1:299.

[39] *Moses* 1:27.

[40] F. B. Salisbury, *Creation*, p. 65.