

# Book of Moses Essays: Introduction to the Book of Moses

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*Liz Lemon Swindle, 1953-: Go with Me to Cumorah, 1997<sup>[1]</sup>*

The eminent Yale professor and Jewish literary scholar Harold Bloom called the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham two of the “more surprising” and neglected works of Latter-day Saint scripture.<sup>[2]</sup> With the great spate of publications over the decades since fragments of Egyptian papyri were rediscovered in the Metropolitan Museum of Art,<sup>[3]</sup> we have begun to see a remedy for the previous neglect of the Book of Abraham.<sup>[4]</sup> Now, gratefully, because of wider availability of the original manuscripts and new detailed studies of their contents, the Book of Moses is also beginning to receive its due.<sup>[5]</sup>

What did Professor Bloom find so “surprising” in the Book of Moses? He said he was intrigued by the fact that many of its themes are “strikingly akin to ancient suggestions.” While expressing “no judgment, one way or the other, upon the authenticity” of Latter-day Saint scripture, he found “enormous validity” in the way these writings “recapture... crucial elements in the archaic Jewish religion.... that had ceased to be available either to normative Judaism or to Christianity, and that survived only in esoteric traditions unlikely to have touched [Joseph] Smith directly.”<sup>[6]</sup> In other words, Professor Bloom found it a great wonder that Joseph Smith could have come up with, on his own, a modern book that resembles in so many ways ancient Jewish and Christian teachings.

We are persuaded that competent wielding of the tools of scholarship can be of immense value in increasing our understanding of both ancient and modern scripture. Moreover, we see no reason why the same methods of comparative analysis that are sometimes employed to argue that Joseph Smith used nineteenth-century sources as aids in translation cannot also be used to discover *ancient* affinities to modern scripture. While such arguments are not the *sine qua non* of the believer’s testimony, they have their place in cracking open by a hair the doors of faith for a skeptical world. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has said:<sup>[7]</sup>

Our testimonies aren’t dependent on evidence — we still need that spiritual confirmation in the heart ... — but not to seek for and not to acknowledge intellectual, documentable support for our belief when it is available is to needlessly limit an otherwise incomparably strong theological position and deny us a unique, persuasive vocabulary in the latter-day arena of religious investigation and sectarian debate. Thus armed with so much evidence of the kind we have celebrated here tonight, we ought to be more assertive than we sometimes are in defending our testimony of truth.

To that point I mention that while we were living and serving in England, I became fond of the writing of the English cleric Austin Farrer. Speaking of the contribution made by C. S. Lewis specifically and of Christian apologists generally, Farrer said: “Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”<sup>[8]</sup>

To help readers increase their understanding and appreciation for the Book of Moses, [Pearl of Great Price Central](#) is assembling a series of resources:

1. A collection of frequently asked questions (FAQ) addressing general topics relating to the Book of Moses (See <https://interpreterfoundation.org/book-of-moses-essays-000b/>);
2. A series of short *Essays* highlighting convergences between the Book of Moses and the ancient world (See <https://interpreterfoundation.org/book-of-moses-essays/>);
3. A bibliography of books and articles on the Book of Moses;
4. Occasional blog posts addressing specific topics relating to the Book of Moses
5. A study edition of the Pearl of Great Price — incorporating doctrinal, historical, and comparative commentary — to facilitate a close, engaged reading of the scripture text
6. A conference entitled “Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses,” scheduled for September 18-19, 2020. For evolving details, keep your eye on <https://interpreterfoundation.org/conferences/2020-book-of-moses-conference/>.

We hope these resources will edify readers by summarizing currently available evidences for the reality of the Restoration in the Book of Moses and, more importantly, by faithfully echoing its witness of Christ and His eternal Gospel.

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## Endnotes

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[1] With permission of the artist and the kind permission of Karalyn Fugal of Repartee Gallery and Pat Williams of Deseret Book. Published in L. L. Swindle *et al.*, Joseph Smith, p. 44.

[2] H. Bloom, *Names Divine*, p. 25. Hugh Nibley concurs with this assessment, noting that the Pearl of Great Price “has received less attention than the other writings and has been studied only superficially” (H. W. Nibley *et al.*, *One Eternal Round*, p. 18).

[3] H. D. Peterson, *Story*; H. W. Nibley, *New Look*.

[4] See, e.g., the bibliography on the Book of Abraham at Pearl of Great Price Central.

[5] Forty years ago Richard P. Howard (R. P. Howard, *Restoration* 1969) and Robert J. Matthews (R. J. Matthews, *Plainer*) began publishing their pioneering studies of the Joseph Smith Translation or JST, of which the Book of Moses is an extract. The wide availability of Matthews’ exhaustive study, in particular, was very effective in abating the qualms of Latter-day Saints (T. E. Sherry, *Changing*), who had not yet had an opportunity to compare the RLDS (now Community of Christ) publication of Joseph Smith’s “Inspired Version” of the Bible (J. Smith, Jr., *Holy Scriptures*) with the original manuscripts. Such qualms proved by and large to be unfounded. Matthews clearly established that recent editions of the “Inspired Version,” notwithstanding their shortcomings, constituted a faithful rendering of the work of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his scribes—insofar as the manuscripts were then understood (R. J. Matthews, *Plainer*, pp. 200-201; see also K. P. Jackson, *Book of Moses*, pp. 20-33). Four years later, in 1979, the status of the JST was further enhanced by the inclusion of selections from the translation in the footnotes and endnotes of a new LDS edition of the King James Bible. Elder Boyd K. Packer heralded this publication event as “the most important thing that [the Church has] done in recent generations” (B. K. Packer, *Scriptures*, p. 53; cf. B. R. McConkie, *Sermons*, p. 236). Twenty-five years later, in 2004, with painstaking effort by editors Scott Faulring, Kent Jackson, and Robert Matthews and the generous cooperation of the Community of Christ, a facsimile transcription of all the original manuscripts of the JST was at last published (S. H. Faulring *et al.*, *Original Manuscripts*). In 2005, as an important addition to his ongoing series of historical and doctrinal studies, Kent Jackson provided a detailed examination of the text of the portions of the JST relating to the book of Moses (K. P. Jackson, *Book of Moses*). Richard Draper, Kent Brown, and Michael Rhodes’ verse-by-verse commentary on the Pearl of Great Price, also published in 2005, was another important milestone (R. D. Draper *et al.*, *Commentary*). Others have also made significant contributions. Taken together, all these studies allow us to see the process and results of the Prophet’s work of Bible translation with greater clarity than ever before. See Royal Skousen for a review of these recent studies of the original JST manuscripts (R. Skousen, *Earliest*). For additional references, see the bibliography on the Book of Moses at Pearl of Great Price Central.

[6] H. Bloom, *American Religion*, pp. 98, 99, 101.

[7] J. R. Holland, *Greatness of the Evidence*.

[8] A. Farrer, *Christian Apologist*, p. 26.

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