

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 56 · 2023 · Pages 259 - 264

**A New and Most Welcome Resource for
Book of Abraham Studies**

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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A NEW AND MOST WELCOME RESOURCE FOR BOOK OF ABRAHAM STUDIES

Quinten Barney

Review of Stephen O. Smoot, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, and John S. Thompson, “A Guide to the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2022). 302 pages.

Abstract: *The new and special issue of BYU Studies containing “A Guide to the Book of Abraham” provides a welcome and easy-to-read approach to the historicity and issues surrounding the Book of Abraham in a way that will engage those beginning their studies in the Book of Abraham just as equally as those who have already become familiar with the subject.*

Anyone who knows me well knows of my interest and deep love for the Book of Abraham and Egypt in general. If the books on my bookshelf don’t give it away, surely the life-sized sarcophagus, Rosetta Stone, or framed Facsimile replicas in my office at work will. Thus, when I hear of a new article, book, or podcast coming out dealing with the Book of Abraham, I’m usually one of the first to jump on it. For that reason, I was excited to read the most recent issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly*, which has been titled “A Guide to the Book of Abraham.”¹ Coming in at a solid 300 pages, this special issue is the result of the combined efforts of authors Stephen O. Smoot, Kerry Muhlestein, John Gee, and John Thompson. There are numerous reasons why I believe *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* deserves a place on every Latter-day Saint’s bookshelf, which I will go into below, but before I suggest the value this volume holds, let me first provide a brief overview of its contents.

1. Stephen O. Smoot, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, and John S. Thompson, “A Guide to the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2022), <https://byustudies.byu.edu/journal/61-4/>.

What's in the Volume?

A Guide to the Book of Abraham is divided into three main sections, with a fair number of illustrations throughout. The first of these sections, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Abraham” happens to be the shortest of the three sections, although its five essays are comparatively lengthier than those found in the other two sections. As the section’s title suggests, these five chapters deal primarily with the historical context in which the Book of Abraham was produced. More specifically, it seeks to help answer questions relating to the papyri Joseph Smith possessed, how he translated them, the relevance of the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” and the relationship between the papyri and the Book of Abraham. A final chapter in this section focuses on the influence (or, rather, lack thereof) of the Book of Abraham on the controversial priesthood ban that was in place in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints until 1978.

The next section, “The Book of Abraham in the Ancient World,” contains over thirty chapters that present some of the evidence for the Book of Abraham being an authentic text from antiquity. Much of this evidence comes from the examination of the actual text of the Book of Abraham, including evidence of Egyptianisms, chiasmus, ancient etymology, and more. While the authors later acknowledge that these pieces of evidence are not able to “prove” the truthfulness of the Book of Abraham, the thirty-plus essays in this section nevertheless leave readers with no excuse to not take the Book of Abraham’s claim of historical authenticity seriously.

Lastly, the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham are treated in a series of thirteen essays in the final section, including an important opening chapter that presents and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of various methodological approaches that have been used for studying the facsimiles. The remaining chapters of this section focus primarily on the iconographic elements of the facsimiles and their accompanying interpretations in the Pearl of Great Price.

What Value Can *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* Offer to Readers?

I’ll get right to the point: I highly recommend *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*, and believe it to be a valuable new resource for those who wish to deepen their understanding of anything related to the Book of Abraham or the Joseph Smith Papyri. I can provide a handful of reasons for this recommendation, though space permits me to name just a few of them here.

To begin, *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* helps remedy what the authors rightly observed as being one of the biggest hurdles in understanding the Book of Abraham. Namely, that much of the scholarship related to the Book of Abraham not only “spans decades” and is “scattered throughout multiple venues (books, journals, videos, podcasts, conference proceedings, and so forth),” but is often “very technical” (p. 7). I can attest from experience to the reality of these issues. For example, I recall as an undergraduate being invited to help edit transcriptions of some unpublished Hugh Nibley lectures on the hypocephalus that had been given in 1990, and had been inaccessible to the public for over two decades! I further remember learning how complex some studies of the Book of Abraham can be when I read about mathematical equations that could be used to obtain an approximate length of an original papyrus scroll when all you have to work with are surviving fragments. Technical indeed!

In my view, however, *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* helps to fix these issues of scattered sources and technicality by bringing the most significant and relevant scholarship on the Book of Abraham together into one volume and presenting it in bite-sized chunks that be easily digested by both scholar and lay-reader alike. Of course, the authors can only include so much in 300 pages. However, should anyone feel themselves thirsting to go deeper after reading each essay, they’ll be pleased to find that there are plenty of footnotes, suggested readings, and even a selected bibliography that can guide readers to more in-depth study.

A Guide to the Book of Abraham also addresses — and in my view satisfies — the most frequently raised objections related to the Book of Abraham. Both the merely curious as well as those whose faith has been rattled due to the Book of Abraham will most likely find many answers to their questions and concerns in this new volume. I’m certain that there will, of course, be a select group who will disagree with some of the conclusions presented in this book. However, I think that the majority of those who are genuinely seeking to understand the Book of Abraham and its history will appreciate the vast range of subtopics discussed in *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*.

Another aspect that makes this work of value is that it is the result of the combined efforts of four scholars who have experience and training in biblical and Egyptological studies. Their combined credentials hold significantly more weight than any subreddit celebrity or blogger who proudly proclaims themselves an expert on the subject simply because

they've read Ritner or Runnells. Three of the authors of *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* hold PhDs from such universities as Yale, UCLA, and the University of Pennsylvania, while another is finishing up his PhD at the Catholic University of America. All four of them hold various degrees in near eastern or ancient near eastern studies and are familiar with the relevant languages necessary for properly understanding the Book of Abraham. In addition to their schooling, several of the authors have served as directors, members, chairmen, and editors of a variety of both national and international boards, committees, and journals in Egyptology. In short, the authors are neither dumb nor ignorant, and they are more than qualified to address the topics covered in *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*.

Some may rightly ask if *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* provides anything new beyond what is already found at Pearl of Great Price Central (pearlofgreatpricecentral.org). Those who wonder will be pleased to find that not only does this volume have an additional nine essays not found on the website, but the existing essays have been revised and updated. These updates, according to the authors, have been made in order to “incorporate feedback from readers, update material in response to advances in scholarship, take into consideration constructive critiques, expand some material that was at first kept deliberately short, and include new material that could not appear in the initial run of the Insights due to constraints in Pearl of Great Price Central’s publishing schedule” (p. 8). Thus, while the authors readily admit that this volume has a shelf life, and that “future discoveries may bolster, qualify, or even undermine some of the points we have raised” (p. 284), *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* nevertheless stands as the most recent and up-to-date compilation of scholarship on the Book of Abraham at this time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I'll share one final observation that explains why I feel readers ought to familiarize themselves with the content of *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*. My own fascination with Book of Abraham studies has brought me into many conversations with critics and believers of the Book of Abraham alike. Such conversations have allowed me to observe that many of those who have raised issues with the Book of Abraham have often, when pressed, betrayed merely a surface-level knowledge of the very issues they had raised. As a result, their passion far exceeds their understanding. Unfortunately, this lack of understanding of Book of Abraham issues is also shared amongst the many believing members

I have spoken with, who have accepted the Book of Abraham on what appears to be faith alone.

While faith should not be faulted, I do believe that all members would do well to hearken to the charge in D&C 88:118 to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith,” and familiarize themselves with the challenges relating to the Book of Abraham. On this note, it would be wise to remember the caution given by Elder Ballard recently to seminary and institute teachers when he said, “gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue.”² For these and many other reasons, I highly recommend readers everywhere to read and become familiar with the contents found in *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*.

Quinten Barney received a BA in Ancient Near Eastern Studies at Brigham Young University, where he studied Biblical Hebrew and Middle Egyptian. He has written articles on the Joseph Smith Papyri, the Book of Abraham, Joseph of Egypt, and the Book of Mormon. He is currently employed with the Seminaries and Institutes program of the Church, and resides in American Fork, Utah, with his wife Barbara and their two children, Eli and Asher.

2. Elder M. Russell Ballard, “By Study and By Faith,” *Ensign* 46, no. 12 (December 2016): 22.

