

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 59 · 2023 · Pages 33 - 52

The Hamites: The Pre-Restoration Monotheism of the Children of Ham in the Book of Abraham

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Offprint Series

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

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THE HAMITES: THE PRE-RESTORATION MONOTHEISM OF THE CHILDREN OF HAM IN THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

Adam Stokes

Abstract: *This article examines the treatment of several personages identified as Hamites in the Book of Abraham. It proposes that, in contrast to traditional readings of the text, Hamites are featured positively in the Book of Abraham. This is particularly true of the daughters of Onitah and of Pharaoh himself, both of whom are presented as righteous people practicing an early form of monotheism. While I do not claim that the Book of Abraham is completely free of elements possibly deemed to be racially problematic, until now, the positive depiction of the Hamites in the text has largely been overlooked.*

It has become in vogue as of late to attack the Restoration by attacking the Book of Abraham (hereafter BoA). One sees this in the recent *CES Letter* published by Jeremy Runnells and in the frequent discussions of the BoA from numerous critics of the Latter-day Saint faith.¹ While most of these arguments against the BoA have been thoroughly rebutted by Latter-day Saint scholars,² one argument that has not received adequate

1. See J. T. Runnells, *CES Letter: My Search for Answers to My Mormon Doubts* (self-pub., 2017), <https://cesletter.org>. Runnells discusses the BoA in the section entitled “Book of Abraham: Concerns & Questions.”

2. See, for example: John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017); Stephen O. Smoot, “Framing the Book of Abraham: Presumptions and Paradigms,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 47 (2021): 263–338, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/framing-the-book-of-abraham-presumptions-and-paradigms/>; and the list of resources at “Scholarly Support for the Book of Abraham,” Interpreter Foundation, August 25, 2020, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/blog-scholarly-support-for-the-book-of-abraham/>.

attention is the charge that the BoA is an explicitly racist, particularly anti-black racist, document.³ John Dehlin, for example, makes this contention in several of his online presentations.⁴

Scholars who have acknowledged this concern take two positions. The first is that those passages in the BoA that appear to have racist content were not original to the text. This is the view taken by Dan Vogel in his work *Book of Abraham Apologetics*.⁵ He argues that the passages referring to a priesthood curse and traditionally applied to black persons of African descent in the history of interpretation were themselves interpolations made by W. W. Phelps to ameliorate pro-slavery opponents of the early church.⁶

The second position is that taken by scholars such as John Gee that racist readings of the BoA are not original to the text but were added later in the history of interpretation and evolved into non-canonical

3. For a scholarly discussion of this issue, see K. E. Norman, “The Mark of the Curse: Lingering Racism in Mormon Doctrine” *Dialog: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32 (1999): 119–36. For official responses from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day-Saints to racial issues that to some extent involve readings of the BoA, see, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, “Race and the Priesthood,” Gospel Topics Essays, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>.

4. See John Dehlin, “Book of Abraham,” *Mormon Stories*, <https://mormonstories.org/truth-claims/the-books/book-of-abraham/>. Dehlin writes: “The Book of Abraham constitutes a theological justification for the LDS Church’s long-standing racial discrimination against African-Americans, now admitted by the Church to be error or mere policy — though it was considered doctrine until 1978. The lifting of the race ban, as well as the Church’s *Race and The Priesthood* essay, effectively repudiate standing LDS scriptural doctrine. For generations, many LDS prophets reiterated a doctrine professing that those who were valiant in the pre-existence were born white (and able-bodied) while those less valiant and excluded from the council of gods in heaven were likely black and therefore unworthy of priesthood ordinances and temple attendance. The doctrine has since been disavowed.”

5. See Dan Vogel, “Race,” chap. 4 in *Book of Abraham Apologetics: A Review and Critique* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2021).

6. Vogel, *Book of Abraham Apologetics*, 119. Concerning American chattel slavery as the context for the material on the Hamites in the BoA, Vogel writes, “While not addressing slavery directly, Abraham supports the white supremacist ideology of slave owners. It speaks disapprovingly of Ham’s interracial marriage as ‘forbidden’ (Abr. 1:23). Because of Ham, the ‘curse’ of a black skin was ‘preserved’ through the Flood (Abr. 1:24). Delegitimizing Pharaoh’s patriarchal government because he was ‘cursed ... pertaining to the Priesthood’ (Abr. 1:26) ensured that blacks could never be rulers in the patriarchal government that Smith was proposing for his Zion.”

Latter-day Saint folklore.⁷ In my review several years ago of Gee's excellent *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, I commended him for at least discussing the issue of race in his commentary.⁸ At the same time, I noted that Gee limited his response to anti-BoA critics by not going further to address what in my view are high praise/positive depictions of people of color (by this I mean who apparently or likely were people of color) in the BoA.⁹

Relatively little has been said regarding the persons of color in the BoA. Many of these figures are linked directly with the person of Ham mentioned in the Book of Genesis. While the Yahwist genealogy presented in Genesis 10 depicts Ham as the ancestor of various Mesopotamian and Canaanite peoples, there exists a long history of interpretation in the Abrahamic traditions which views Ham as a primary ancestor for persons of black African descent.¹⁰ In the era of early American Protestantism out of which the Restoration arose, this view of Ham was thoroughly ingrained in the theology and commentaries of many white European Christian denominations.¹¹ That Joseph Smith both knew of and held the position that Ham was the ancestor of the black race specifically is seen in both his "Inspired Translation," more commonly known as the Joseph Smith Translation and his general writings and teachings. For example, the Prophet's rendering of Genesis 9:26 identifies the curse on Ham's progeny as "darkness": "And he said cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the

7. John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2017). Gee notes that "the Book of Abraham does not discuss race and curses no one with slavery" (164). He also notes that racialist interpretations of the text are largely absent prior to 1895 (164). Also see Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 6–8, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Noah_s_Curse/eA0TDAAAQBAJ.

8. For my review of Gee's work, see Adam Stokes, "Review: An Introduction to the Book of Abraham," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2018): 202–205.

9. *Ibid.*

10. For an excellent overview of Jewish, Islamic, and pre-modern Christian views associating Ham with the black African race and metaphorical "blackness" more generally, see D. M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

11. For the influence of the "curse of Ham" on early Protestant Christian theology during the era of the European and American slave trades, see B. Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997): 103–42.

Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant and a veil of darkness shall cover him” (JST Genesis 9:30).¹²

A “veil of darkness” is also mentioned with respect to Satan’s influence of the earth in a verse in the previous chapter (now Moses 7:61) and can be understood to refer to spiritual darkness. Stephen Smoot, for example, notes that the Moses 7 does not specifically mention *skin* when it says that “blackness came upon all the children of Canaan” (v. 8) or that “the seed of Cain were black” (v. 22), leaving open the possibility that a non-physical blackness was meant. Smoot also observes that:

Moses 1:15 describes how Moses could detect Satan’s deception because the latter’s “glory” was “darkness” unto him compared to God’s own incomparable glory. In OT1 [an original manuscript of the Book of Moses] this passage reads that Satan’s glory was “blackness” unto Moses, thus providing a clear thematic link with Enoch’s prophecy later in Moses 7.¹³

While noting that there is a possibility that the “darkness” upon the people of Canaan was metaphorical, I propose that such language would be understood by Joseph and his peers as being related to race. Thus, regardless of what might have been intended in the wording of the revelations Joseph received or in whatever ancient documents might be behind the Book of Moses, I propose that the veil of darkness over Canaan in the Joseph Smith Translation and the blackness that came upon the children of Canaan in Moses 7, in light of widespread views in Joseph’s day, seems likely to reflect the tradition that Canaan was an ancestor of African peoples. Even if they were not meant to be understood as black, it is worthwhile to consider what the Book of Abraham tells us about its Hamites.

Admittedly, Joseph’s views on racial issues were not static, but an early view expressed in an 1836 letter to Oliver Cowdery also links race to the curse on Canaan, stating that modern slavery was related to that curse and that the slaves were “sons of Ham.”¹⁴ If that view was held in 1836, any references to Ham that the Prophet encountered in his

12. Joseph Smith, “Old Testament Revision 1,” June 1830–ca. 7 March 1831, *Joseph Smith Papers*, Chapter 8 [text related to Genesis 9], p. 25, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-1/28>.

13. Smoot, “Framing the Book of Abraham: Presumptions and Paradigms,” 303.

14. Joseph Smith, “Letter to Oliver Cowdery, circa 9 April 1836,” *Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-oliver-cowdery-circa-9-april-1836/2>.

translation of the BoA associated with the Joseph Smith Papyri would likely have been understood by him as referring to black people. Another statement attributed to Joseph Smith suggests that the curse upon Canaan remained upon his posterity “until the present day,” though accuracy of the quotation is unclear, since it was recorded ten years after his death.¹⁵

It is my purpose in this paper to provide another response to BoA critics, particularly their position that the BoA is a racist document. I should note from the offset that this is not a paper about the priesthood “curse” in the BoA that was later used to justify withholding the priesthood from persons of black African descent. I have already discussed this issue in part in another paper, “The People of Canaan,” dealing with the material in Moses 7.¹⁶ Rather, I want to argue here that when examined apart from any outside interpretation and within the context of the BoA itself, the depiction of the Hamites cannot be deemed racist. On the contrary, as I will argue in this paper, the Hamites are by and large depicted positively as early monotheists.

This is not to say that the BoA is completely absent of features that may be deemed racially problematic, especially in regard to understandings of race and the priesthood. I am also aware of the arguments made by scholars that these aspects of the BoA may not be as problematic as they initially seem. In his excellent article for *Interpreter*, John Thompson proposes that within the ancient Near Eastern context from which the BoA arose, the term “curse” often relates to disinheritance within a family.¹⁷ The next generation is also considered “cursed” because it does

15. The statement is associated with an 1841 letter written by Wilford Woodruff, in which he wrote that Joseph, after hearing some errant preaching by an elder, said many things in response, and also “spoke of the curse of ham for laughing at Noah while in his wine but doing his harm.” Additional text about a curse persisting on the posterity of Canaan was added to that statement in 1854 by George A Smith and the Historian’s Office. The reasons for the addition are unknown. See “Discourse, 7 November 1841, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff,” *Joseph Smith Papers*, p. 109n10, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7november-1841-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/1#full-transcript>. The expanded statement is now found in works such as Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 193–94, <https://scriptures.byu.edu/stpjs.html>.

16. See Adam Stokes, “The People of Canaan: A New Reading of Moses 7,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-Day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 47 (2022): 159–80, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-people-of-canaan-a-new-reading-of-moses-7/>.

17. John S. Thompson, “‘Being of that Lineage’: Generational Curses and Inheritance in the Book of Abraham,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-Day Saint*

not inherit what its ancestors no longer have to give.¹⁸ Furthermore, the status of being disinherited may be temporary, not permanent. In short, the “curse” mentioned in the BoA contains no racial element nor is it perpetual. Thompson also notes that it is only possible to misread the BoA as racist when one misinterprets the Book of Moses in conjunction with it.¹⁹ Several relevant statements in the Book of Moses are frequently misunderstood, as I have shown.²⁰

In response to arguments critical of the BoA, I would point out that the history of interpretation of the BoA, while perhaps not corresponding to the book itself, has had such grave implications that it has made the BoA a racially problematic text. A parallel can be found in American literature with Mark Twain, where the uproar among certain 20th- and 21st-century readers about several racial epithets in his novels has masked and, in some ways, suppressed the anti-racist/anti-White supremacist messages promoted in Twain’s writings. Furthermore, to address Thompson’s point more specifically, even if the “curse” in the BoA refers to disinheritance, it has implication for one’s lineage (because they cannot inherit what the ancestor no longer has to give). That disinheritance can be associated with an ethnic group is a function of profiling, not a function of the law which must be blind racially. The law requires genealogies to prove inheritance, not mere ethnic association. Since all of the Hamites are descended from Ham and/or related to Pharaoh and inasmuch as Ham was identified in the history of interpretation as the ancestor of black Africans, there is still the potential for the BoA to appear to be racially problematic. However, the overall depiction of the Hamites in the BoA should not contribute to such concerns. The descendants of Ham are depicted in a positive light in the BoA. This lends support to the idea that inferiority of the Hamites was not related to any limitations in the priesthood.

In spite of any priesthood prohibition, the Hamites parallel a type of monotheistic spirituality in their beliefs and their practices. This is explicitly noted in Abraham 1:26, which we will discuss in more detail later. What are the elements of this spirituality? Perhaps the best criteria for answering this question can be found in the Latter-day Saint Articles of Faith. In many ways, the structure of these articles parallels that of the

Faith and Scholarship 54 (2002): 97–146, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/being-of-that-lineage-generational-curses-and-inheritance-in-the-book-of-abraham/>.

18. *Ibid.*, 102.

19. *Ibid.*, 106–107.

20. Stokes, “The People of Canaan: A New Reading of Moses 7.”

biblical Ten Commandments.²¹ In each, there are statements that apply specifically to certain persons while others can be applied and accepted universally. For example, in the Decalogue, the first four commandments refer to interaction between the God of the Bible and His people (e.g., the House of Israel and those who accept Him as God), while the last six are general rules and codes of moral conduct that can be valued as sound rules regardless of one's religion.

A similar pattern appears in the Latter-day Saint Articles of Faith. The first three read:

1. We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.
2. We believe that men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam's transgression.
3. We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.²²

The other ten articles (4–13) are more specific in their content in that they are deal with the specific ordinances and scriptures of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. One sees these universal first three articles reflected in the theology and behavior of the Hamites in the BoA: faith in the true God, accountability for one's own sins (or avoidance of individual sinning in the case of Onitah's daughters) and salvation that requires obedience. In short, there exist more examples of Hamites observing these behaviors and regulations than practicing wickedness in the BoA. This paper will discuss two examples found in the text: the daughters of Onitah and the Pharaoh of Egypt.

What Does Elijah Have to Do with Abraham?

Before discussing these examples, it is important to address what may be viewed as a concern for some of my readers. This “elephant in the room” is the fact that I myself am not part of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints but am a member of a smaller Restoration denomination known as the Elijah Message church. As with many other,

21. These articles of faith are also accepted by the Community of Christ (RLDS) church and have heavily inspired the creeds of other Restoration traditions such as the Elijah Message and Temple Lot churches.

22. The Latter-day Saint Articles of Faith here are taken from *The Pearl of Great Price: A Selection from the Revelations, Translations and Narrations of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2013).

smaller, Restoration traditions, we do not officially accept the BoA (or the Pearl of Great Price in general) as scripture, though we do accept the Book of Mormon and the Bible.²³

One might therefore raise the very legitimate question as to why I am discussing the BoA at all. To answer this, allow me to provide some background in regard to my history within the Restoration. I have discussed some of this in my review of Gee's *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* and it bears further discussion here. I came to the Restoration later in life than most. I was in my early 30s and happened by chance to obtain a beat-up, worn-down copy of the Book of Mormon from a used bookstore. This book did not contain only the Book of Mormon but also the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. I would learn later that this version of the scriptures was called the "Triple Combination."

I assumed that all Restoration traditions believed that these three books were scripture and when I later joined the Community of Christ I was surprised to learn that the BoA was rejected by them (even though it was referenced and cited in early RLDS literature).²⁴ At the same time, the Community of Christ did accept the "Inspired Version" or Joseph Smith Translation as scripture, and in reading it, I noticed many parallels between its depiction of Abraham and the depiction of that patriarch found in the BoA. Just as Brigham Young has influenced all of the Restoration (either directly or as a response to him), so I would argue that the BoA has influenced all Restoration views of Abraham. This is particularly the case with the BoA's presentation of Abraham as inheriting a primordial priesthood. Hence, knowledge of the BoA can aid all Restorationists in better understanding this biblical figure.

Furthermore, and in relation to this, the BoA is part of the larger corpus of Joseph Smith's Old Testament traditions. All Restorationists accept the Book of Mormon and by doing so accept to some extent the view presented in 1 Nephi that many "plain and precious" truths have been taken out of our modern translations of the Old Testament (and the manuscripts they are based on). If we want to engage with the restored,

23. The Elijah Message church follows the same canon as the Temple Lot church from which it arose. This canon is more restrictive than either that of the Community of Christ or the Strangite traditions in that it also does not accept the Doctrine & Covenants as scripture (in preference for the 1830 Book of Commandments).

24. See Joseph Smith and Heman C. Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Lamoni, IA: Board of Publication of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1897), 1:568–69.

most accurate version of the Hebrew Scriptures, we must accept the BoA as well. In this respect, I have very much been influenced by the work of W. Jeffery Marsh who argues that Joseph Smith’s Old Testament includes not only the material in the RLDS “Inspired Version” but also references to Old Testament figures and events found in the Doctrine and Covenants *and* the BoA.²⁵

Lastly, and at the risk of bringing in some views that may be deemed “heterodox” by my own tradition, I firmly believe in the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith. To fully understand this calling and its benefits to the larger world we must be intimately familiar with all of his writings including those outside of what some Restoration traditions may officially deem as scriptural “canon.” Perhaps this sentiment is not as heterodox as it seems given that all Restoration traditions, including my own, believe in continuing revelation throughout time and that a completely closed canon never exists.

Study 1: Onitah’s Daughters

We are introduced to Onitah’s daughters in the opening chapter of the BoA. In this chapter, narrated by Abraham himself, the reader is immediately drawn into a horrific world of human sacrifice in service to the various idols of the Egyptians. Abraham informs us that the sacrificial altar was located on Potiphar’s hill and that the sacrifices were officiated by the priest of Elkenah. The patriarch then notes:

Now this priest had offered upon this altar three virgins at one time, who were the daughters of Onitah, one of the royal descent directly from the loins of Ham. These virgins were offered up because of their virtue; they would not bow down to worship gods of wood or of stone, therefore they were killed upon this altar, and it was done after the manner of the Egyptians. (Abraham 1:11)

Three things are of note in this passage in looking at the depictions of the Hamites in the BoA. First, that the daughters of Onitah are persons of color might be suggested with the statement that they descended “directly from the loins of Ham,” relying, as previously noted, on the presumption that such a connection with race was at least likely to have been understood by Joseph and his peers. Again, Ham

25. See W. Jeffery Marsh’s excellent work on the bible revisions of *Joseph Smith, The Joseph Smith Translation: Precious Truths Restored* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2002).

was specifically understood as the father of the black African race in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition. Based on this interpretation, these women would be classified as black themselves. Secondly, with the exception of Abraham himself, the text depicts the daughters as the first non-idolaters encountered in the entire story apart from Abraham, even above Abraham's own relatives who are presented as idolatrous (Abraham 1:5–6). It is said that they refused to “bow down to worship gods of wood.” The phrase “gods of wood” is relatively rare in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:28; Isaiah 37:19; Daniel 5:5) but does appear in the Apocrypha, most notably in the Epistle of Jeremiah.²⁶

The Epistle of Jeremiah 1:38:

*Lapidus de monte similes sunt **dii illorum, lignei, et lapidei, et aurei, et argentei: qui autem colunt ea, confundentur***

Their gods are like the stones from the mountain, wood and stone and gold and silver. Whoever worships them will be confused.

The Epistle of Jeremiah 1:54:

*Etenim cum inciderit ignis in domum **deorum ligneorum, argenteorum et aureorum, sacerdotes quidem ipsorum fugient, et liberabuntur***

For when fire will burn in the house of their gods of wood, silver and gold, those priests will flee from them and they will be burned.

The Epistle of Jeremiah 1:56:

*Non a furibus, neque a latronibus se liberabunt **dii lignei, et lapidei, et inaurati, et inargentati: quibus hi qui fortiores sunt***

The gods of wood, and stone and lined with gold and silver cannot free themselves from thieves and robbers, who are these who are stronger?

As seen in all of these references, the phrase “gods of wood” functions as a critique of idolatry inasmuch as this involves worshipping images and objects that have no power to influence human affairs whether for good or bad. This theme is also highlighted in the BoA in Abraham's own experiences where Jehovah and his angel rescue the patriarch from

26. All translations of Latin texts are mine unless noted as otherwise. For the Latin, see “Letter of Jeremiah 1,” The Latin Vulgate with Apocrypha, Bible Study Tools, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/vula/letter-of-jeremiah/1.html>.

the power of the false gods of Egypt. It is, however, noteworthy that it first appears in this passage about the Hamite daughters of Onitah. It is in and through their example, as noted by Abraham, that the reader is first educated about the folly of idol worship.

The patriarch's reference to the daughters of Onitah being "offered up" is noteworthy as well. Abraham clearly understands these women as martyrs for their beliefs. Within the larger context of Joseph Smith's Old Testament, the women represent a rare example of "named" martyrdom in biblical history. Like Abel, who brought an offering to the Lord (Moses 5:20) and whose blood was eventually offered up to the earth as a witness against his brother Cain (Moses 5:36), so the daughters of Onitah offered up their bodies as a testament to their fidelity in the one true God. In this respect, Abraham's comments exhibit very high praise of these women.

In addition to their worship of one God, a larger aspect of monotheistic spirituality is implied in the actions and fate of the daughters of Onitah, who gave their lives for righteous principles. While we do not know what their actual faith was, Abraham praises them for their "virtue" in that they refused to bow down to idols (Abraham 1:11). The usage of "virtue" in this context implies spiritual strength and courage, and one may see the text as implying that they gained salvation through their faith. While not explicitly mentioned by Abraham, one can make this inference in looking at other restoration scriptures as the telos of their decision to reject the false gods of Egypt. The book of Alma in the Book of Mormon contains a very similar story of martyrdom. Alma 24 makes reference to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies who reject the violence of their fellow Lamanites and choose to be martyred rather than take up arms against them. Towards the end of the story, the narrator, Mormon, states that "we know that they are blessed, for they have gone to dwell with their God" (Alma 24:22).²⁷ The text implies that the daughters of Onitah also received the blessing of dwelling with God in consequence of suffering for their beliefs.

Study 2: Pharaoh

The Pharaoh of Egypt in the BoA is perhaps the most controversial character in the book for a variety of reasons. The reference to him as being "cursed ... as pertaining to the Priesthood" (Abraham 1:26) was often cited in support of the priesthood ban on black males of African

27. All quotations from the Book of Mormon from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

descent prior to the revelation of Official Declaration 2 in 1978. Some “Mormon fundamentalists,” such as the late Ogden Kraut, used the passage to justify the priesthood ban even after it was lifted in 1978.²⁸ Furthermore, there is some confusion as to whether Pharaoh is the actual name of an individual Hamite male or a royal title. Abraham 1:26 appears to suggest the former but the (positive) description of this Pharaoh does not correspond to the wicked Pharaoh and his priests who desire to sacrifice Abraham.

If we look at the rest of the description of Pharaoh in Abraham 1 outside of the comment on the Priesthood, we find that Abraham speaks very positively of him and provides the reader with numerous insights about his character:

Pharaoh, being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father, who blessed him with the blessings of the earth, and with the blessing of wisdom. (Abraham 1:26)

At the first, Abraham establishes that Pharaoh is a righteous man. In any description, the trait that introduces the person is often the one viewed as definitive of that person’s character. Hence, Pharaoh’s righteousness is not just one of many aspects but *the* one that encapsulates his being and defines the manner in which he rules over Egypt. As Abraham notes, Pharaoh used his righteousness to rule his people “wisely and justly all of his days.” The patriarch also mentions that Pharaoh sought to emulate the “order established by the fathers.”

What is this order? The priesthood, along with all the covenants, rites, doctrines, and patriarchal government could be considered part of this “order.” Looking specifically at the issue of the priesthood, it is said to have begun in the reign of Adam and as other Latter-Day scriptures tell us, this is the priesthood given directly from God to Adam and passed down through his progeny (D&C 84 and 107). While the Pharaoh does not hold this priesthood, his emulation of it provides perhaps the best example in the BoA of a proto-monotheistic spirituality. This would include, as with the daughters of Onitah, belief in the existence of one true God and faith in this one God towards salvation.

28. O. Kraut, “Lineage of the Priesthood,” Ogdenkraut.com, November 1998, http://ogdenkraut.com/?page_id=145.

Lastly, Pharaoh receives a blessing for righteousness (Abraham 1:26). Again, much commentary has been given as to what Pharaoh is not blessed with, but little has been written on what he is given: “the blessings of the earth” and “the blessings of wisdom.” What do these two things mean? Neither phrase is found in the Old Testament, but Latter-day scripture may provide insight into how they are to be understood.

We have a potential parallel to Pharaoh in the figure of Nephi in the Book of Mormon. If we interpret the phrase “blessings of the earth” to refer to the earth abundantly yielding its resources to human hands and for human use, Nephi fits this description perfectly. In numerous passages, he works the earth to bring forth what he needs from it through the favor and providence of God.²⁹ Of course, this naturally fits the oft repeated promise from the Lord in the writings of Nephi that his people would “prosper in the land” if they would keep the commandments (1 Nephi 2:20, 4:14; 2 Nephi 1: 9, 20, 31, 4:4) The words of Alma in a sermon to a group of humbled people on the hill Onidah also come to mind, as he urged them to “cry unto [God] over the crops of your fields, that ye may prosper in them” and to “cry over the flocks of your fields, that they may increase” (Alma 34: 24–25).

The Ur-Knowledge of the Hamites

We have already seen several features of what I refer to as reflecting a proto-monotheism and monotheistic spirituality among the Hamites described in the BoA. This spirituality includes the following elements: belief in the existence of only one true God, faith towards this God, and a righteousness that has God both as its source and as the rewarder of it. All of these features are attested to not only in the Latter-day Saint Articles of Faith but are integral features of the theology of The

29. One sees this most notably in 1 Nephi 17, where Nephi is instructed to build a ship to carry his family across the sea. Though up to this time, the Lord provided provisions for his family, when he needs to use the elements of earth to build his ship he encounters no problem — outside of his brother’s complaints — in doing so.

And it came to pass that I Nephi did make bellowses wherewith to blow the fire Of the skins of beasts. And after that I had made bellowses That I might have wherewith to blow the fire, I did smite two stones together that I might make fire ... And it came to pass that I did make tools of the ore Which I did molten out of rock. (1 Nephi 17:11, 16)

Nephi’s ease with creating things from the elements and materials provided by nature can be understood as a mark of divine favor and one that is passed down to his progeny.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well. Church president Joseph Fielding Smith discusses the righteousness necessary for eternal progression, noting that:

If we will continue in God; that is, keep his commandments, worship him and live his truth; then the time will come when we shall be bathed in the fulness of truth, which shall grow brighter and brighter until the perfect day.³⁰

These features bring us to another, related question. The Hamites, as described in the BoA, are separated from the rest of the progeny of Noah by their apparent inability to receive the priesthood. (This relies on common reading of Abraham 1:27 as indicating that Pharaoh could not have the priesthood, though Alma Allred argues that the inability to have “the *right* of Priesthood” may refer to the right to preside rather than the ability to have the priesthood at all.³¹ John Thompson, however, offers reasonable arguments against that position.³²) Consequently, they are unable to receive the teachings and knowledge that the Melchizedek priesthood and its ordinances confer regarding the nature of God and humankind’s relationship to the deity. Hence, how did they inherit the particular beliefs and practices that led them to reject idol worship in a world where that was the norm and to seek to imitate the God’s order?

Here it is helpful to defer to one of the most popular theologians today, the late great C. S. Lewis. In his Narnia series, he contrasts the evil white witch who has usurped power in the land of Narnia with Aslan, the righteous lion who is the true ruler of the realm. The witch boasts that she knows of the “deep magic” that gives her the power to defeat and kill Aslan. A little later, a very non-dead Aslan replies that he knows of a “deeper magic” and a deeper knowledge that predates the time of the white witch.³³

In a similar manner, the Hamites have inherited a type of ancestral knowledge about God and righteousness. This is alluded to beyond the BoA throughout the Restoration scriptures and the writings of the

30. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011).

31. Alma Allred, “The Traditions of Their Fathers: Myth versus Reality in LDS Scriptural Writings,” in *Black and Mormon*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 45–46.

32. Thompson, “Being of that Lineage: Generational Curses and Inheritance in the Book of Abraham,” 139–44.

33. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950).

Prophet Joseph Smith. For example, we find references to the BoA in the *Lectures on Faith*, a collection of teachings that are generally understood to at least reflect the influence of Joseph Smith, though several people assisted in writing.³⁴ Lecture 2 discusses the dissemination of information about God through the centuries beginning with Adam and Eve. An awareness of God and to some extent God's laws was evident even in those personae concealed from God's presence:

Adam, thus being made acquainted with God, communicated the knowledge which he had unto his posterity; and it was through this means that the thought was first suggested to their minds that there was a God; which laid the foundation for the exercise of their faith, through which they could obtain a knowledge of his character and also of his glory. Not only was there a manifestation made unto Adam of the existence of a God, but Moses informs us, as before quoted, that God condescended to talk with Cain after his great transgression in slaying his brother, and that Cain knew that it was the Lord that was talking with him; so that when he was driven out from the presence of his brethren, he carried with him the knowledge of the existence of God. And through this means, doubtless, his posterity became acquainted with the fact that such a being existed.³⁵

The depiction of Ham in the Restoration scriptures is also worthy of mention here in relation to this issue. The Book of Moses makes several references to Ham's piety (and that of the sons of Noah in general):

And it came to pass that Noah and his sons hearkened unto the Lord and gave heed and they were called the sons of God. (Moses 8:13)

And thus Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord; for Noah was a just man, and perfect in his generation; and he walked with God, as did also his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. (Moses 8:27)

34. See Larry E. Dahl, "Authorship and History of the Lectures on Faith," in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University), 1–21, <https://rsc.byu.edu/lectures-faith-historical-perspective/authorship-history-lectures-faith>.

35. J. Smith (by attribution), "Lecture 2," *Lectures on Faith* (Independence, MO: Price Publishing, 2006).

As evident in these passages, Ham not only knew of the existence of a true God but actively followed the commandments of this God in contrast to the rest of the children of Adam. Furthermore, like Enoch, it is said that he also “walked with God,” undoubtedly receiving a knowledge about divine things which he passed on to his descendants. Unfortunately, later in life Ham appears to have broken his covenant and was disinherited by his father, which affected the ability of his posterity to receive the priesthood “through Ham.”

Human Sacrifice: A Racist Depiction of the Hamites?

I want to discuss more generally here the content of the first chapter of the BoA in which Abraham discusses the plot to take away his life and his deliverance from the Hamite Egyptians through the intervention of Jehovah’s angel. The reference to sacrifice is one that critics of the BoA can misconstrue and point to as a racist caricature of an African people. Doubtless most Westerners are familiar with old Tarzan serials and films that depict the protagonist’s African opponents as always prepared to engage in human sacrifice (usually of Tarzan’s girlfriend Jane). Do we have a similar trope at work here, lending to the accusation that the BoA is a racist text, or is something else happening?

Firstly, it should be noted that Abraham chapter 1 finds parallel with other stories involving the Egyptians and human sacrifice. The most significant of these is an ancient legend about Hercules and his sojourn in Egypt.³⁶ Any Latin student who has read Jennings’s Latin grammar or Ritchie’s *Fabulae Faciles* is familiar with this story. In Ritchie’s work we read:

De Hercule haec etiam inter alia narrantur. Olim dum iter facit, in fines Aegyptiorum venit. Ibi rex quidam, nomine Busiris, illo tempore regnabat; hic autem vir crudelissimus homines immolare consueverat. Herculem igitur corripuit et in vincula coniecit. Tum nuntios dimisit et diem sacrificio edixit.

Also these (events) among others were told about Hercules. While he was journeying, he came to the border of the Egyptians. There a certain king, named Busiris, reigned at that time. But this most cruel man was accustomed to sacrificing

36. The Greco-Roman references to Egyptian sacrifice have apologetic implications especially in regard to BoA critics and opponents who claim that human sacrifice was not practiced in ancient Egypt. Those implications will not be addressed in this paper.

men. Therefore he seized Hercules and put him in chains. Then he sent messengers and decreed a day for the sacrifice.³⁷

In addition, as noted by John Gee and Kerry Muhlestein in their extensive work on this topic, there exists epigraphical and archaeological evidence for human sacrifice in Egypt during the Middle Kingdom period (2000–1750 BCE).³⁸ This era is contemporaneous with the period scholars traditionally assign to the historical Abraham (2000–1800 BCE).³⁹ Among the examples given by Gee and Muhlestein is a boundary stone erected by Pharaoh Ugaf with the inscription “anyone who shall be found inside these boundary stones except for a priest about his duties shall be burnt.”⁴⁰ Also mentioned is an account given by Sesostris I (1953–1911 BCE) who notes that as a penalty for plundering an Egyptian temple “[the knife] was applied to the children of the enemy (*ms.w hrwy*), sacrifices among the Asiatics.”⁴¹

Archaeological evidence includes a depository in Mirgissa, which, as Gee and Muhlestein note, contained “various ritual objects such as melted wax figurines, a flint knife, and the decapitated body of a foreigner slain during rites designed to ward off enemies. Almost universally, this discovery has been accepted as a case of human sacrifice.”⁴² Gee and Muhlestein argue that as with the account of human sacrifice in the Book of Abraham, in both the inscriptions and archaeological evidence, “the pharaoh is involved and the sacrifice is under his orders” and “sacrifice could take place both in Egypt proper and outside the boundaries in areas under Egyptian influence.”⁴³

37. G. Steadman, *Ritchie’s Fabulae Faciles* (Middletown, DE: Geoffrey Steadman, 2012). Translation mine.

38. J. Gee and K. Muhlestein, “An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 20, no. 2 (2011): 70–77.

39. General consensus exists among biblical scholars is that Abraham lived around 2000 BCE based on cultural and historical parallels between the Abraham narratives in the Hebrew Bible and events occurring in the Levant region in the 2nd millennium BCE. There are some notable objections to this view, however. See A. R. Millard, “Abraham” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 1* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 35–41. The historical person who inspired the legends and myths of Hercules lived about 700 years later around 1300 BCE, based on the date given by the ancient historian Herodotus.

40. Gee and Muhlestein, “An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 72.

41. *Ibid.*, 73.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, 74.

We can clearly observe a tendency towards degeneracy in the culture of the Hamites in the BoA. The righteous rule of the original Pharaoh of Egypt had become perverted and corrupted into the sacrifice of human beings. At the same time, there remained Hamites such as the daughters of Onitah who opposed this practice even at the cost of their lives. Furthermore, this degeneracy, rather than being directed or unique to a particular race or ethnic group, is seen with all the sons of Adam throughout the Restoration scriptures. The Book of Moses notes, for example, that:

God cursed the earth with a sore curse, and was angry with the wicked, with all the sons of men whom he had made; For they would not hearken unto his voice, nor believe on his Only Begotten Son, even him whom he declared should come in the meridian of time, who was prepared from before the foundation of the world. (Moses 5:56–57)

Perhaps the most notable example of continued degeneracy resulting in the utter destruction of a particular people is found in the Book of Mormon with the Nephites. Like the Israelites in the Old Testament book of Judges, the Nephites move through a repeated cycle of apostasy and repentance throughout their sojourn in the new promised land. However, towards the end of their empire, they became totally corrupted and completely lost divine favor, resulting in their enemies, the Lamanites, being victorious over them. Again, this pattern of corruption from original righteousness is not a theme exclusive to the Hamites but occurs throughout God's history with humankind. As such, this theme in the BoA should not be interpreted as a racist description of a Hamite indecency.

Conclusion: No Racism Detected

In this paper, I have argued that when examined apart from the history of interpretation, particularly Mormon folklore, no racism is detected in the depiction of the Hamites in the BoA. As also noted, this is not to say that the BoA does not have features that may be deemed racially problematic, especially in regard to understandings of race and the priesthood, but the overall presentation of the Hamites is not an issue. On the contrary, Hamites such as the daughters of Onitah and the first Pharaoh himself are portrayed as righteous, God-fearing individuals. In many respects, their behavior reflects a monotheistic spirituality in as much as it expresses faith in one true God towards salvation

combined with righteous living. These righteous Hamites in the BoA provide an example for readers to emulate. Their behavior also supports the Restoration's central claim that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been known to all people and in all ages.

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