

Hidden in Plain Sight

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The three pictures in the Book of Abraham are unique in all of scripture. We suspect they must have some great purpose, since they are so unusual, so striking--the first visual aids in scriptural history. But these pictures do more than illustrate events from the life of Abraham. They point to Egypt--illustrating its idolatry, but also illustrating a connection between Egyptian drawings and such concepts as "Holy Priesthood" or "the grand presidency in Heaven."¹ Many believers are content to ignore these strange images, trusting that some day the experts will tell us what they mean. The explanatory notes to Facsimile No. 2 invite the world to take a crack at interpretation, saying, "If the world can find out these numbers, so let it be."² This phrase sounds a note of skepticism about the world's chances of success, implying that many of the messages of the facsimile are beyond the reach of scholarship.³ What is the Lord's purpose in setting these obviously mysterious pictures before us? Are they intended as one more test of faith? Are they merely illustrations, or do they convey gospel knowledge?

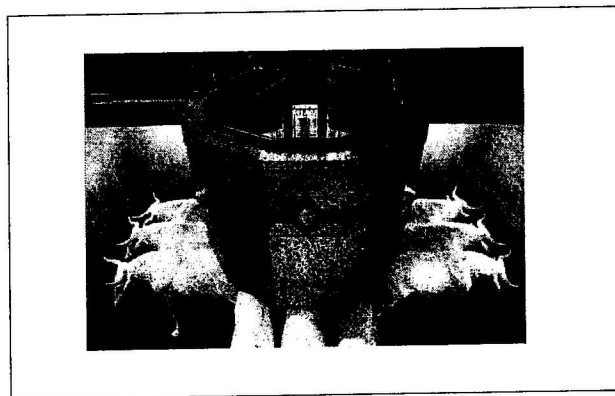
If we can discover previously unsuspected connections between the facsimiles and the Gospel, it supports the position that the pictures are properly included in the scripture. It also undercuts the claims of skeptics that these pictures fell into the hands of Joseph Smith by random circumstance and bear no relationship the religious claim about them. Parables and fairy tales have shown us that mysteries can be hidden in

1 Book of Abraham, Facsimile No. 2, Note to Fig. 3, and Facsimile No. 3, Fig. 1.

2 Book of Abraham, Facsimile No. 2, Fig. 11.

3 See Book of Abraham, Facsimile No. 2, Fig. 8.

through. What is the word *sea* doing here? John the Revelator has seen in vision a “sea of glass.” And what is the connection between the earth and the sea? Perhaps we can get help with the answer from another place in the Bible where the word *sea* appears. In 1 Kings 7:23-25 we find a description of the sea that was constructed in Solomon's temple: “It stood upon twelve oxen, three looking toward the north, and three looking toward the west, and three looking toward the south, and three looking toward the east.” So here we have four directions and a multiple of four animals. In this case they are carrying the “sea,” reminding us that our four strange figures were under the lion couch.



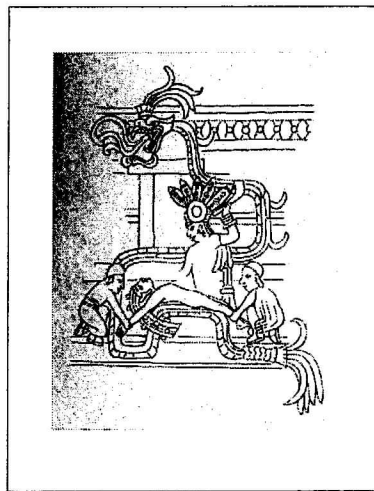
One additional tie between the sea and the earth is the activity that takes place in this font. The surface of the water can be identified with the surface of the earth since the candidate is buried beneath the water and raised in imitation of resurrection.⁹ Thus we see a reason for the long-standing policy that the baptismal font must be placed in the lowest floor of the temple so the surface of the water and the surface of the earth are on one plane.

A somewhat subtle example of the relationship between baptism and the four corners of the earth is found in Mark 16:15-16, where Christ is speaking to his

⁹ Romans 6:3,4.

remaining eleven apostles after his resurrection: “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” Here we have the waters of baptism being carried on the backs of what should have been twelve apostles to the four corners of the earth. It is the the event for which the sea in Solomon's Temple is a symbolic representation.

Another supporting example comes from Meso America.¹⁰



In this glyph we have the same elements which are present in Facsimile No. 1: a sacrificial victim, a priest, a table altar, and four little corner men, which in this case are represented as actual humans, two holding the arms and two holding the legs of the victim. The feathered serpent takes the place of the bird. In this glyph there is no question of embalming. The victim is clearly being sacrificed. Idolatrous gods demand

¹⁰ Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Vol II: The Way of the Seeded Earth, Part 1: The Sacrifice*, Harper & Row, 1988, 41. The notes to this picture contain the following: 'The Heart Offering. Line drawing from a wall panel, Temple of the Warriors, Chichen Itza, Yucatan. Mayan Postclassic Period, A.D. Eleventh-fifteenth centuries. The victim, painted blue (the sacrificial color), is stretched across an upward-curving altar (to elevate the breast) by four old men called *chacs*, one to each arm and leg, who are also painted blue. The altar is here pictorially identified with the dragonlike "Feathered Serpent" emblematic of Quetzalcoatl (Mayan, Kukulcan), ... (quetzal - "quetzalbird"; coatl = "serpent").'

actual human sacrifice as the Book of Abraham alleges regarding Facsimile No. 1. The God of Heaven requires only a “broken heart and contrite spirit” of the baptismal candidate, or in other words, a willingness to be sacrificed.¹¹ It is not the purpose of this article to argue for or demonstrate the relationship between Egyptian and Mayan religion or hieroglyphs. But the parallels between the Facsimile No. 1 and this glyph are interesting, at the least.

These connections may not rise to the level of a proof of anything. The truth of the latter-day scripture has been demonstrated to my satisfaction many times over in many different modes of understanding: logical, symmetrical, intellectual, historical, administrative, practical, spiritual, and life sustaining, to name a few. Not to mention that it all tastes good and gives purpose and meaning to life. But going to the trouble of setting forth the connections we have discussed here may motivate believers to take the scriptures seriously.¹² Some truths only appear after a diligent search. If we take lightly the gifts we are given, we may not be given more. “for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have.”¹³ An additional benefit is the hint that the ancient and modern worlds are far more connected than the modern mind is inclined to believe. The relationships touched upon here help to explain why these ancient and strange pictures are not out of place in the scripture.

11 D & C 20:37, Psalm 51:17, Micah 6:7,8 This is an important point in light of the recent trotting out of that old atheist war horse: the claim that much of the bloodshed in the world is the result of the influence of religion (Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*). We can distinguish true religion from murderous and bloodthirsty idolatry. But in our anxiety to avoid the claim that we are promoting violence, we cannot deny the doctrine of sacrifice which is central act of the atonement and necessary for anyone who wants to imitate the Savior through baptism.

12 2 Nephi 11:4.

13 2 Nephi 28:30.

jars labeled with and perhaps placed under the protection of idolatrous gods? The clear implication is that the deceased will be needing the organs again when his body is reconstituted and revived or resurrected.

The same four figures appear in Facsimile No. 2 though not in jar form. In Facsimile No. 2, the figures are identified in the notes as representing, “the earth in its four quarters.” Here again, modern scholarship has verified this interpretation of the figures,⁷ each representing one of the cardinal directions.

In the Bible, the four quarters of the earth and the reconstitution of physical bodies come together in Ezekial 37:9,12 which says:

Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. . .

Therefore prophesy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.

The identification of the four winds with the ends of the earth is implied in Matthew 24:31: “And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” And finally from Revelations 7:1: “And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth...”

Interestingly, in Revelations 4: 6-7, four beasts are described: one like a lion, one like a calf, one with the face of a man, and one like an eagle. In this same verse 6 of Revelations appears “a sea of glass like unto crystal” which the Doctrine and Covenants tells us is, “the earth, in its sanctified, immortal, and eternal state.”⁸ So we are back to where we started with the four beast like figures and the earth, but our journey is not yet

⁷ Hugh Nibley, op. Cit. 61-62.

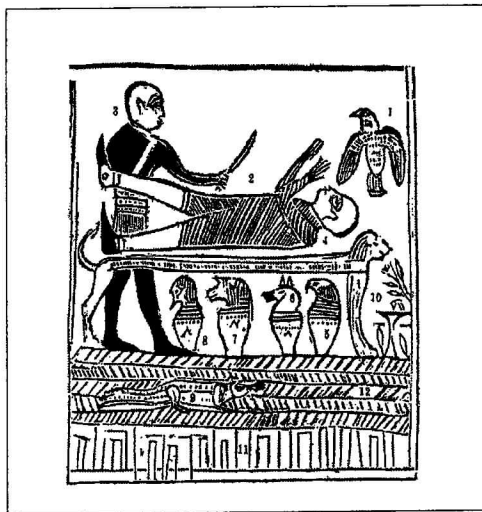
⁸ D&C 77:1

plain sight, only revealing themselves to those with the key of knowledge. The figures on Facsimile No. 1 have just this kind of multiple meaning. What follows is not a translation. Nor is it a replacement for other readings. It is an attempt to reveal unsuspected dimensions. It is an argument that there is more here than meets the eye.

The interpretation we place on a figure is not necessarily limited to what scholars tell us that figure represented to Egyptians. As Jacques Derrida has taught us, we can draw more meanings from a text than the author intended to put into it. An example of this is the interpretation a psychiatrist places on the stories told by her patient. What the patient intends by the story and what the doctor learns from it can be worlds apart. And when an author does intend a pun, a reader must know both meanings to get the message. Another example of seeing multiple possibilities in a single image comes directly from Joseph Smith's comments to Facsimile No. 2: The note to Fig. 5 explains a single image by connecting it to a planet, the sun, a grand key, a governing power, and perhaps the revolutions of Kolob. Whatever else this explanation does, it certainly encourages us to be expansive in considering the possible meanings for the images of the facsimile generally.

There is a undeniable connection between Facsimile No. 1 and the ordinance of baptism. This claim may seem startling at first. The notes to Facsimile No. 2 make explicit that there is a connection between Facsimile No. 2 and the ordinances of the temple, saying, " Fig. 8. Contains writings that cannot be revealed unto the world; but is to be had in the Holy Temple of God." Thus it is not impossible that there be a connection between Facsimile No. 1 and an ordinance, even a temple ordinance.

Since Facsimile No. 1 is a picture, let's start by comparing it to another picture, a picture of a baptism.



One connection between the pictures is that each contains a priest. The knife in the hand of the priest in the facsimile reminds us that sacrifice is the oldest and central function of the office of priest in all the world's religions. One need only reflect on what went on in the courts of the the Temple of Solomon or Herod's Temple to have this fact driven home. Imagine the basins filled with the blood of the slaughtered and dismembered animals which were brought for sacrifice. Imagine the white priestly linens, spattered red with this blood. The function of the priest is to sanctify the operation. To change what looks like killing into an event with religious meaning. Think of the poor rabbi who has the job of presiding over the events of the slaughterhouse so that the finished product can be sold under the label "kosher."

The position of the hands of the priest in the baptism picture reveals that

here also a sacrifice is under way.⁴ Though the person to be sacrificed is vertical in the baptism picture, everyone who has witnessed a baptism knows that he will soon be laid out under the water. Everyone who knows about baptism will also be able to supply the bird which is present in the facsimile but is missing from the baptism picture. In the words of Mark 1:9-10: “And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the spirit like a dove descending upon him.”

Under the influence of these parallels, it is tempting to see the River Jordan in Facsimile No. 1 when one looks at the crocodile swimming along, but the notes indicate that this stream is intended to represent the expanse of heaven.⁵ So we must look elsewhere for the waters of baptism and for this we need to embark on an extended analysis of the four figures under the lion couch. The notes to the facsimile call these four figures idolatrous gods, a verdict that has been confirmed by modern scholarship.⁶ But this is not the end of our inquiry, only the beginning. Like the cow in Facsimile No. 2 which is many things including a grand key, these four strange figures can be the key that opens the meaning of Facsimile No. 1, if we have the patience to find the right door.

It may not be obvious from Facsimile No. 1, but innumerable real world examples found in the tombs of Egypt make it clear that these four figures are jars into which the internal organs of the deceased person were placed. Why preserve organs in

4 The modern day witness in court doesn't imagine a knife in his hand when he raises his hand and swears to tell the truth, but he probably also does not realize that by this action he is saying, “upon my life I promise to tell the truth.”

5 Facsimile No. 1: Note to Fig. 12.

6 Hugh Nibley, *The Three Facsimiles from the Book of Abraham*, FARMS, 1980, 64: “[Joseph Smith] was right on both counts, if one was to take the great Budge seriously. Of the same figures on the Lady Meux Hypocephalus he wrote, 'These jars under the protection of Isis, Nephtys, Neith and Serqet, and represented the south, north, east and west respectively.' (Budge). At the same time they are idols 'dedicated to the 4 genii of the underworld... who represented the 4 cardinal points,' (Budge) the very words used by Smith.”