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Figure 3 of Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham as it first appeared in print on March 1, 1842. Image via the Joseph Smith Papers website.

JANUARY 10, 2020 BY BMC TEAM

The Idolatrous Priest (Facsimile 1, Figure 3)

Book of Abraham Insight #29

The explanation accompanying Figure 3 of Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham identifies it as “the idolatrous priest of Elkenah attempting to offer up Abraham as a sacrifice.” In order to gauge the validity of this interpretation from an Egyptological perspective, a number of considerations need to be taken into account.

The first issue to resolve is the matter of the lacunae or missing pieces in the original papyrus fragment. As printed in the March 1, 1842 issue of the *Times and Seasons*, Figure 3 is shown as a standing figure with a bald head and a drawn knife. In the original papyrus fragment, however, the areas with the bald head and knife are currently missing. At some unknown point by some unknown person, an attempt was made to fill in the missing head of Figure 3, although no such attempt was made to fill in whatever is missing in the figure's hand. Determining whether the figure in the original papyrus is accurately represented in Facsimile 1 is important as it may affect the interpretation of this figure.



A side-by-side comparison of Figure 3 in Facsimile 1, right, and the original papyrus fragment, left. Image via the Joseph Smith Papers website.

First, there is the question as to whether the knife being held by Figure 3 could plausibly have been in the original vignette or illustration. “The existence of the knife has been doubted by many because it does not conform to what other Egyptian papyri would lead us to expect,”¹ and so some Egyptologists have denied the possibility that the knife was original to this illustration (even if others have had no objection to the possibility).² At least two different nineteenth-century eyewitnesses who examined the papyri, including one who was not a Latter-day Saint, however, reported seeing “a Priest, with a knife in his

hand”³ or “a man standing by him with a drawn knife.”⁴ The significance of this is that the presence of a knife in the original papyrus “has here been described by a non-Mormon eyewitness whose description of the storage and preservation of the papyri matches that of independent contemporary accounts. It also matches the description [another eyewitness] made before Reuben Hedlock made the woodcuts of the facsimiles. This gives us two independent eyewitnesses to the presence of a knife on Facsimile 1, regardless of what we might [otherwise] think.”⁵ As such, despite our unconscious or even conscious assumptions about what we think should be on the original papyrus, “it is not valid to argue that something does not exist because it does not correspond to what we expect.”⁶

Furthermore, the crescent shape of the knife in Figure 3’s hand is consistent with the shape of ancient Egyptian flint knives which were used from prehistoric times to the Middle Kingdom (and thus Abraham’s day) in, among other activities, “ritual slaughter” and execration rites.⁷ This reinforces the likelihood that the knife was original to scene.



The knife in Facsimile 1 (bottom left) is consistent in shape with recovered flint knives (top left) and depictions of flint knives (top right, bottom right) from the Middle Kingdom. Images via, starting at top left and running clockwise, Petrie (1891), Pl. VII; Griffith (1896), Pls. VIII, IX; the Joseph Smith Papers website.

Second, there is the question of whether Figure 3 originally had a bald human head as depicted in Facsimile 1 or a black jackal headdress, as proposed by a number of



Egyptologists.⁸ That the figure originally had a jackal headdress seems likely, since traces of the headdress over the left shoulder of Figure 3 can be detected in the surviving papyrus fragment.



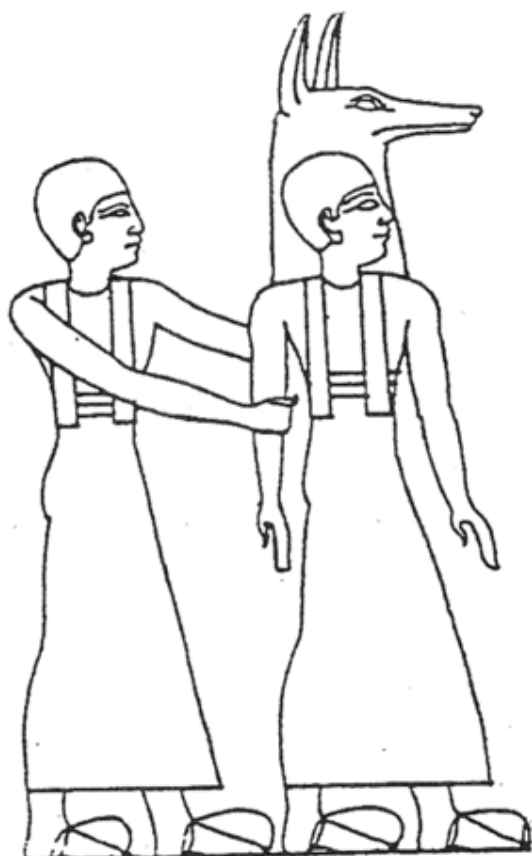
The faint remaining traces of what appears to have been the jackal headdress of Figure 3 in Facsimile 1.

With these considerations in mind, the question of identifying Figure 3 comes into play. Some Egyptologists have identified this figure as a priest,⁹ while others have insisted it is the god Anubis.¹⁰ That the figure is Anubis seems plausible on account of “the black coloring of the skin” and the faint remaining traces of the jackal headdress over the figure’s left shoulder.¹¹ However, without a hieroglyphic caption for this figure,¹² this identification should be accepted cautiously, as Anubis is not the only jackal-headed, black-skinned figure attested in Egyptian iconography.¹³

What’s more, the question as to whether the figure is a priest or the god Anubis (or another jackal-headed god), or whether it originally had a bald human head or a jackal head, appears to be a false dichotomy. “The practice of masking for ritual and



ceremonial purposes seems to have been important in Egypt from the earliest times and continued to be an element of ritual practice into the Roman period,¹⁴ and “priestly impersonators of Anubis regularly appear in funerary ceremonies, and are styled simply Inpw, ‘Anubis’ or rmt-Inpw, ‘Anubis-men’ . . . [or] ink Inpw, ‘I am Anubis.’”¹⁵ At the non-funerary Hathor temple of Deir el-Medineh is a depiction of a ritual taken from chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead which shows “the king offering incense, and a priest masked as Anubis beating a round frame drum.”¹⁶



A famous image from a relief at the temple of Hathor at Dendera, left, shows in “false transparency” a bald priest wearing an Anubis mask being assisted by another priest in his ritual duties. Image from Sweeney (1993), 102. An actual example of this type of mask, right, resides in the Pelizaeus-Museum in Hildesheim, Germany. Image via www.globalegyptianmuseum.org.

Similarly, frescoes at the site of Herculaneum depict “ceremonies of the cult of Isis as held in Italy in the first century CE.”¹⁷ This ritual scene features a number of priests and priestesses, including one figure who has been variously interpreted as the god Osiris or a priest dressed up as the god Bes and disguised with a mask. “Although the Herculaneum dancer probably represents a masked participant impersonating the god,



the matter [would have been] theologically unimportant” to the ancient viewers of this scene, since the priest “masked as Bes” performing the ritual would, for all intents and purposes, have assumed the identity of the god himself in that ritual capacity.¹⁸

The potential significance of this for Facsimile 1 has been explained by Egyptologist John Gee:

Assume for the sake of argument that the head on Facsimile 1 Figure 3 is correct. What are the implications of the figure being a bald man? Shaving was a common feature of initiation into the priesthood from the Old Kingdom through the Roman period. Since “complete shaving of the head was another mark of the male Isiac votary and priest” the bald figure would then be a priest. Assume on the other hand that the head on Facsimile 1 Figure 3 is that of a jackal. . . . We have representations of priests wearing masks, one example of an actual mask, literary accounts from non-Egyptians about Egyptian priests wearing masks, and even a hitherto-unrecognized Egyptian account of when a priest would wear a mask. In the midst of the embalmment ritual, a new section is introduced with the following passage: “Afterwards, Anubis, the stolites priest wearing the head of this god, sits down and no lector-priest shall approach him to bind the stolites with any work.” Thus this text settles any questions about whether masks were actually used. It furthermore identifies the individual wearing the mask as a priest. Thus, however the restoration is made, the individual shown in Facsimile 1 Figure 3 is a priest, and the entire question of which head should be on the figure is moot so far as identifying the figure is concerned. The entire debate has been a waste of ink.¹⁹

The leopard-skin robe worn by Figure 3 would also be consistent with identifying this figure as a priest (specifically a class called the *sem*-priest), who is “recognizable by his leopard-skin robe” and certain hair styles. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly for Joseph Smith’s interpretation of Facsimile 1, the ritual clothing of the *sem*-priest had a clear connection to the god Anubis defeating chaos and evil, personified as the god Seth, through violence. “Papyrus Jumilhac, dating to the Ptolemaic Period (ca. 300 BC), attempts to explain the significance of the leopard skin through a myth that relates the misdeeds of the god Seth. As told in the papyrus, Seth attacked Osiris and then



transformed himself into a leopard. The god Anubis defeated Seth and then branded his pelt with spots, hence the robe commemorates the defeat of Seth."²⁰ Also in Papyrus Jumilhac, Anubis transforms himself into a giant snake who brandishes two flint knives.²¹



Image from the Roman period tomb of Siamun at Gebel al-Mawta, featuring Siamun, seated on the left, his wife, standing on the right, and his son as a priest wearing a leopard skin-robe and cap. Image from Venit (2015), 142.

Even if some “issues concerning the accuracy of both the artwork and the copying [of Facsimile 1]” remain unanswered at the moment (issues which, unfortunately, “are routinely clouded by shifting the responsibility of the artwork from the engraver, Reuben Hedlock, to Joseph Smith, without adducing any evidence to identify a particular individual with the responsibility for the restorations”²²), the identification of this figure as a priest is not outside the realm of possibility from an Egyptological perspective.

Further Reading

Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2009), 287–296, 494–495.

John Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob,” *FARMS Review of Books* 7, no. 1 (1995): 80–83.



Footnotes

- ¹ John Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 186.
- ² On the conflicting Egyptological opinions, see Friedrich Freiherr von Bissing, in Franklin S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., As a Translator* (Salt Lake City, UT: Arrow Press, 1912), 30, and George R. Hughes in Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2009), 144, who saw nothing inordinate with Figure 3 holding a knife; but contrast with Klaus Baer, “The Breathing Permit of Hôr: A Translation of the Apparent Source of the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1968): 118n34; Stephen E. Thompson, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28, no. 1 (1995): 148–149; Lanny Bell, “The Ancient Egyptian ‘Books of Breathing,’ the Mormon ‘Book of Abraham,’ and the Development of Egyptology in America,” in *Egypt and Beyond: Essays Presented to Leonard H. Lesko upon his Retirement from the Wilbour Chair of Egyptology at Brown University June 2005*, ed. Stephen E. Thompson and Peter der Manuelian (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2008), 25n27, 30.
- ³ William I. Appleby journal, 5 May 1841, reprinted in Brian M. Hauglid, ed., *A Textual History of the Book of Abraham: Manuscripts and Editions* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 278–282, quote at 279, line 7.
- ⁴ Henry Caswall, *The City of the Mormons; or, Three Days at Nauvoo, in 1842* (London: Rivington, 1842), 23.
- ⁵ Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 186.
- ⁶ Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 208n38.
- ⁷ Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago, Ill.: Oriental Institute, 1993), 163, see additionally 163–167; Marquardt Lund, “Egyptian



Depictions of Flintknapping from the Old and Middle Kingdom, in Light of Experiments and Experience,” in *Egyptology in the Present: Experiential and Experimental Methods in Archaeology*, ed. Carolyn Graves-Brown (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2015), 113–137; Carolyn Graves-Brown, “Flint and Forts: The Role of Flint in Late Middle-New Kingdom Egyptian Weaponry,” in *Walls of the Prince: Egyptian Interactions with Southwest Asia in Antiquity: Essays in Honour of John S. Holladay, Jr.*, ed. Timothy P. Harrison, Edward B. Banning & Stanley Klassen (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 37–59; William M. Flinders Petrie, *Illahun, Kahun and Gurob: 1889–1890* (London: David Nutt, 1891) 52–53, Pl. VII; F. Ll. Griffith, Beni Hasan, Part III (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1896), 33–38, Pls. VII–X.

⁸ Théodule Devéria in Jules Remy, *Voyage au pays des Mormons* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1860), 2:463; Bell, “The Ancient Egyptian ‘Books of Breathing,’ the Mormon ‘Book of Abraham,’ and the Development of Egyptology in America,” 30.

⁹ James H. Breasted, Friedrich Freiherr von Bissing, and Edward Meyer in Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., As a Translator*, 26, 30; George R. Hughes in Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 144; John Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob,” *FARMS Review of Books* 7, no. 1 (1995): 80–83; Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 34, 288, 494–495.

¹⁰ Devéria in Jules Remy, *Voyage au pays des Mormons*, 2:463; William Flinders Petrie in Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., As a Translator*, 23; Baer, “The Breathing Permit of Hôr,” 118; Thompson, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham,” 114; Michael D. Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 18; Bell, “The Ancient Egyptian ‘Books of Breathing,’ the Mormon ‘Book of Abraham,’ and the Development of Egyptology in America,” 23.

¹¹ Rhodes, *The Hor Book of Breathings*, 18.

¹² There appears to have been one hieroglyphic caption above the arm of Figure 3 in the original vignette preserved in Facsimile 1, but it is too damaged to read.

¹³ As noted in Gee, “Eyewitness, Hearsay, and Physical Evidence of the Joseph Smith Papyri,” 208n38, the figure could potentially be the jackal-headed god Isdes (who,



incidentally, wields a knife). See Christian Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 1:560–561, and additionally Diletta Dantoni, *Il Dio Isdes* (BA thesis, University of Bologna, 2014), 8–9, on the identity of the god Isdes as judge and punisher of the dead.

¹⁴ Penelope Wilson, “Masking and Multiple Personas,” in *Ancient Egyptian Demonology: Studies on the Boundaries Between the Demonic and the Divine in Egyptian Magic*, ed. P. Kousoulis (Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 77.

¹⁵ Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 249n1142; cf. Wilson, “Masking and Multiple Personas,” 78–79.

¹⁶ Alexandra von Lieven, “Book of the Dead, Book of the Living: BD Spells as Temple Texts,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 98 (2012): 263.

¹⁷ Robert K. Ritner, “Osiris-Canopus and Bes at Herculaneum,” in *Joyful in Thebes: Egyptological Studies in Honor of Betsy M. Bryan*, ed. Richard Jasnow and Kathlyn M. Cooney (Atlanta, GA: Lockwood Press, 2015), 401.

¹⁸ Ritner, “Osiris-Canopus and Bes at Herculaneum,” 406; cf. Wilson, “Masking and Multiple Personas,” 79–82, who discusses the use of masks in ritual and role playing and what that may have signified to the ancient Egyptians.

¹⁹ Gee, “Abracadabra, Isaac, and Jacob,” 80–83, citations removed; cf. [A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri](#) (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 36–39, internal citations removed; Michael D. Rhodes, “Teaching the Book of Abraham Facsimiles,” *Religious Educator* 4, no. 2 (2003): 120; Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 34, 288, 494–495; Günther Roeder, *Die Denkmäler des Pelizaeus-Museums zu Hildesheim* (Hildesheim: Karl Curtius Verlag, 1921), 127, Pl. 49; Deborah Sweeney, “Egyptian Masks in Motion,” *Göttinger Miszellen* 135 (1993): 101–104.

²⁰ Emily Teeter, *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24–25.



²¹ P. Jumilhac 13/14-14/4, in Jacques Vandier, *Le Papyrus Jumilhac* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1962), 125–126.

²² Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 39.

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