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Title Sobek: The Idolatrous God of Pharaoh Amenemhet III

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Abstract The Joseph Smith Papyri have been a hot topic among scholars, especially since the resurfacing of fragments of the collection in the late 1960s. The facsimiles in particular have received much attention in scholarly circles, especially in relation to their accompanying explanations given by Joseph Smith. This article contributes evidence of the accuracy of Smith's explanations, despite his lack of knowledge concerning Egyptology. Specifically, this article discusses the relationship between "the idolatrous god of pharaoh" in Facsimile 1 with the Egyptian crocodile god, Sobek (also known as Sebek, Sobk, and Suchos), and his connection to the Middle Kingdom pharaoh Amenemhet III. Evidence both from historical texts and from archaeology demonstrates the important role Sobek played in the Fayyum region during the reign of Amenemhet III. Sobek was thus a likely candidate for the "idolatrous god of pharaoh" of Facsimile 1 in the Book of Abraham.

SOBEK: THE IDOLATROUS GOD OF PHARAOH AMENEMHET III

QUINTEN BARNEY



FROM THE EDITOR:

Facsimile 1 in the Pearl of Great Price notes that the crocodile was an “idolatrous god of Pharaoh.” Quinten Barney has collected the already well-known (at least in Egyptological circles) instances of the crocodile’s religious significance in ancient Egypt and here presents the material for those of us who are not Egyptologists.



Facsimile 1 in the Book of Abraham is the reproduction of this original fragment of Joseph Smith Papyrus I. Note the crocodile in the lower left portion of the fragment. Joseph Smith Papyrus © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Many Latter-day Saint scholars have connected the crocodile god Sobek of Egypt's Middle Kingdom period with the "idolatrous god of Pharaoh" depicted as a crocodile in Facsimile 1, figure 9, of the Book of Abraham.¹ Exploring this identification further, I look at textual and archaeological evidence that helps illuminate who Sobek was and how he was worshipped. I also document that the Middle Kingdom period (in which Abraham is thought to have lived)² saw the Sobek cult rise in popularity, specifically during the reign of Pharaoh Amenemhet III. This background study puts us in a better position to consider whether the reptilian god Sobek can be plausibly identified as the idolatrous god of figure 9 in Facsimile 1.

The word *sobek* literally means "crocodile." When referring to Sobek as an Egyptian god, the word contains a hieroglyphic determinative of a seated god.³ Sobek is depicted primarily in two ways, either as a man with a crocodile head or just simply as a crocodile.⁴ His place in Egyptian worship appears to have been most prevalent in the Middle Kingdom, even before the days of Amenemhet III. The first mention of Sobek is in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts of Unas, which refer to him by name three times.⁵ The texts speak of Unas as if he has become Sobek, the son of the war goddess Neith. Utterance 317 recounts that Unas (Sobek) "came out of the overflow of the

flood" and that he "causes the grass to become green," bringing "green brilliance." Thus the oldest-known textual evidence for Sobek associates him with water and fertility, characteristics that, as will be shown, were of critical importance during the reign of Pharaoh Amenemhet III.

The textual and archaeological evidence for Sobek multiplies during the Middle Kingdom. The Coffin Texts mention him by name thirty-nine different times, and cylinder seals and figurines of Sobek have been found throughout Egypt.⁶ Theophoric elements in Middle Kingdom personal names—for example, *Sobekneferu* ("beautiful of Sobek") and *Sobekhotep* ("Sobek is satisfied")—further attest an increase in Sobek's popularity, *Sobekhotep* being the name of four different rulers of the Thirteenth Dynasty.⁷

What is this rise in Sobek's popularity attributed to? One factor that cannot be ignored is the relocation of Egypt's capital. During the reign of Amenemhet I, the capital was moved from Thebes to Itjtawy, an unknown location in the Fayyum.⁸ The Fayyum was the only oasis in Egypt that depended on the Nile for its fertility.⁹ Crocodiles were most certainly native to the land, and a large number of crocodile mummies have been unearthed in the region.¹⁰ Here, as anywhere else in Egypt, the Nile was of extreme importance for sustaining life. Moving

Opposite page, above: This Middle Kingdom statue of the god Sobek is a careful depiction of the Nile crocodile. The statue was found at the pharaoh's mortuary temple complex at Hawara (ca. 1820 BC). AN1912.605 Fragment of the god Sobek, XIIth Dynasty, limestone. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Below: Nile Crocodile. Shutterstock/erllre74.



Amenemhet III built this pyramid at Hawara in the Fayyum; it may have been his final resting place. Shutterstock/PRILL.

away from the Nile and relying on canals and irrigation posed a big risk, which might explain Pharaoh Amenemhet III's careful attention to measuring the water levels of the Nile. In addition to building canals and retention walls, Amenemhet III had a Nilometer installed at the Second Cataract in order to record the peak water height each year.¹¹ This enabled the pharaoh to estimate the coming season's harvest and understand the needs of the area.

Important as the construction of aqueducts and canals were, the amount of water brought in by the Nile was ultimately believed to be up to the gods, not the pharaoh. Sobek's relation with water and the Nile leave no question as to why he would take on such an important role for Amenemhet III.¹² From as early as the Pyramid Texts, we have seen that Sobek was associated with fertility and the Nile.¹³ The Coffin Texts, which will be discussed later, also establish Sobek as being "Lord of Water."¹⁴ Without the favor of Sobek, Amenemhet III believed his capital and kingdom would be vulnerable to destruction.

The construction of a temple for Sobek was eventually under way. The Hammamat Inscriptions from the Twelfth Dynasty speak of a "house of Sobek" that was commissioned by the pharaoh. In the nineteenth year of his reign, the pharaoh sent for material to be brought back from Hammamat to "Ankh-Amenemhet," most likely the mortuary temple of the king located in Hawara.¹⁵ The inscription reads as follows: "His majesty sent to bring for him(self) monuments from the valley of Hammamat, of beautiful black (basaltic) stone as far as 'Ankh-Amenemhet,' living forever and ever; at the house of Sobek of Crocodilopolis: 10 statues of 5 cubits, upon a throne."¹⁶ If following the Nile, this journey would have been roughly seven hundred miles roundtrip.

The early historian Herodotus visited the Fayyum in the fifth century and wrote of the mortuary complex as being "greater than can be described."¹⁷ He noted that it had twelve enclosed courts, as well as fifteen hundred rooms aboveground and fifteen hundred rooms below ground level. The Egyptians would not allow Herodotus to enter the underground rooms because they were "the sepulchers of the kings who originally built [the] labyrinth, and of the sacred crocodiles," but he was able to see the rooms aboveground and the walls "full of sculptured figures."¹⁸

Herodotus was not the only one interested in the labyrinth at Hawara. Some of those sculptured figures most likely seen by Herodotus, as well as other important findings, were later excavated by Flinders Petrie between 1887 and 1911. A recent publication by Tine Bagh shows a few of Petrie's important finds from his excavations of the temple complex that date to the Twelfth Dynasty reign of Amenemhet III. The abundance of evidence pointing to Sobek worship led Bagh to the opinion that we should be able to "easily visualize large motifs of King Amenemhat III offering to Sobek."¹⁹ Along with the many reliefs and inscription fragments that concern Sobek, Petrie uncovered some broken pieces of stone that originally belonged to statues of Sobek. In total, parts belonging to three different Sobek statues were found.²⁰ The statues provide at least two, and possibly three, pieces of evidence that illuminate Sobek's role as a god: a feathered crown, the *was* scepter, and possibly an *ankh*.

The feathered crown uncovered by Petrie has two tall plumes (Egyptian *šwty*) on top of a base. Bagh interpreted the base to be the "red crown of Lower Egypt" (Egyptian *deshret*) because of a protruding part sticking up out of the middle.²¹ Also on this crown are the sun disk, *uraeus*, and cow and ram horns. A reconstructed statue depicts Sobek with the *was* scepter (representing power and dominion) as well as an *ankh* (representing life).²²

In addition, Nigel Strudwick has published a translation of a lintel inscription of Amenemhet III that parallels the statues found by Petrie in date and design. The lintel, which Strudwick believes to have originated in the Fayyum, includes the phrase "King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands, Nimaatre (Amenemhet III), Beloved of Sobek of Shedyt."²³ The translation by itself is important, as it provides evidence that the pharaoh had found favor

in the eyes of the god and was thus seen as “beloved” of him. Also significant, and in close relation to the statues found by Petrie, the determinative sign following the name *Sobek* is not the usual crocodile. Instead, it is a crocodile adorned as the statues are with crown, sun disk, scepter, and even an *ankh*. These two examples together attest to a powerful Sobek who oversees the protection and life of Lower Egypt.

Archaeological evidence is not the only source for understanding Sobek’s importance to the Egyptians of the Middle Kingdom. Two textual sources from the Middle Kingdom add insight into Sobek’s role and provide more evidence that Amenemhet III worshipped this god. An ancient Egyptian myth in spell 158 of the Coffin Texts has Sobek playing a key role. Re announces that Horus is injured because his mother, Isis, has cut off his hands and cast them into the river. Re suggests that Sobek might fish them out again. This Sobek does by devising a fish trap to retrieve the hands of Horus.²⁴

Sobek here is undoubtedly shown as having power over the waters. It is interesting to note that Re himself did not retrieve the hands but summoned Sobek to do it. Re later says, “Hidden are the mysteries concerning this fish-trap,” suggesting that Re is not as familiar with the things related to water as Sobek is.²⁵ This example in the Coffin Texts shows that while Re was the solar deity, Sobek was the god



Pharaoh Amenemhet III, who was concerned with the critical, life-giving water of the Nile, made the fertile Fayyum the center of his power. Bob Cronan, Lucidity Info Design, LLC.

of the water and thus of great importance to Amenemhet III in his Fayyum capital.

There are two more spells, however, that add even more compelling reasons for Amenemhet III’s interest in Sobek. Both spells 268 and 285 of the Coffin Texts speak of “becoming Sobek, Lord of the winding waterway.”²⁶ Although “winding waterway” accurately describes the Nile, that is not the only possible interpretation. In ancient Egyptian religion, when people die, their souls cross a winding



Amenemhet’s name appears in the cartouches on either side of the lintel. His other royal name, Nimaatre, is centered between the unusual depictions of the god Sobek. bpk, Berlin / Aegyptisches Museum, Staatliche Museen / Art Resource, NY.



An outstanding example of Egyptian portraiture, this is a realistic depiction of the care-worn face of Amenemhet III, a pharaoh of the Twelfth Dynasty. Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY.

canal in what seems like an aquatic obstacle course as they establish themselves in the afterlife.²⁷ This is of interest because suddenly Sobek becomes the lord not only of the waterway of the Nile but also of the winding waterway of the heavens.

Spell 636 is a spell for a man to establish himself in the realm of the dead. It speaks of a person's "double" (or *ka*) as being in the water with Sobek and as traveling in the sky with him. The role of the "Lord of the winding waterway" as mentioned in spells 268 and 285 is here shown as being a companion in the water to the soul that is crossing the great waterway of the heavens into the afterlife. These examples from the Coffin Texts affirm Sobek's role in relation to the waters of the earth, but they also establish that his role does not end there. His connection with the heavens and afterlife is another reason why Amenemhet III would dedicate his worship to Sobek, because Sobek could help the pharaoh not only in this world but in the next world as well. In this light it is interesting to note that the depiction of the crocodile in Facsimile 1 is interpreted therein as being in the heavens (see the explanation in fig. 12 of the facsimile).

Another example of Sobek's importance to the Middle Kingdom pharaoh comes in the form of a papyrus titled "Hymns to Sobek." This papyrus (containing two hymns) was found in a box with other papyri at the bottom of a Thirteenth Dynasty tomb shaft at the Ramesseum.²⁸ Translator Alan Gardiner

concluded that the hymns were copies of an original that came from the Fayyum. Addressing Sobek, these hymns contain much of what we find in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, but they also offer unique material on Sobek's relationship to the pharaoh.

The hymns begin by hailing Sobek as he who "did shine forth from the Primeval Waters," followed by various other epithets referring to his power and majesty.²⁹ We read further of Sobek "coming when summoned," bringing "the gods all at once," and taking "rulership of heaven."³⁰ These hymns depict a reliable god ruling the heavens with authority to summon all other gods to a divine council.

We find mention of the pharaoh toward the end of the first hymn:

King Amenemhet III has given this thy beautiful face so that thou may look at thy [mother] Neith and so that thou may show mercy to the gods. (Incense on the fire!) It is for Sobek the Shedytite, Horus dwelling in Shedyt, lord of myrrh, delighting in the giving of incense. May thou be merciful to King Amenemhet, through whom thy face is happy on this day.³¹

A few interesting things about the connection between Sobek and the pharaoh can be drawn from this passage. First, we see that Pharaoh Amenemhet III has given Sobek a face, meaning he formed the face of Sobek through the creation of some sort of divine image. We note that the hymns are directed to the image of Sobek, and the parenthetical statement "Incense on fire!" further indicates that this is a formal temple ceremony taking place. We can easily visualize the possible scene in which these hymns were involved: Pharaoh Amenemhet III had instructed a statue of Sobek to be made for the "house of Sobek" located in the Fayyum. After the completion of this statue (or statues), Amenemhet III then had hymns written in order to give praise to the god and plea for mercy on his behalf. The recitation of these hymns (presumably by the priests) and the burning of incense are key elements of an important ritual dedicated to the god Sobek. The anticipated result of the ritual was the god's granting of mercy to the pharaoh and protection and fertility for Egypt.

The archaeological and textual evidence combine to establish the highly important role of Sobek for the Middle Kingdom pharaoh Amenemhet III. If Abraham did indeed live during the Middle Kingdom, then the title given to the crocodile in Facsimile 1 would by no means be out of place. With Egyptology being in its infancy in Joseph Smith's day (and him lacking any education in that field), it is remarkable that Smith

made what only in recent decades has proved to be such a compelling connection between the crocodile and the pharaoh of Facsimile 1. This study supports the idea of a crocodile being an “idoltrous god of Pharaoh” during the time of Abraham, with Sobek being a very likely candidate. ■



Quinten Barney is currently an undergraduate student seeking a BA in ancient Near Eastern studies at Brigham Young University, where he has taken courses in Hebrew, Egyptian, and Spanish. He currently serves on the council for BYU Students of the Ancient Near East (SANE).

NOTES

1. For example, James R. Harris, *The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham, a Study of the Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri* (Payson, UT: Harris House Publication, 1990), 37; see also John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, “Need for Historicity: Why Banishing God from History Removes Historical Obligation,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 78–81. Scholars have translated the god’s name variously as *Sobek*, *Sobk*, *Sebek*, and *Suchos*.
2. William F. Albright, Ephraim A. Speiser, and others have argued for an early second millennium date for the time of Abraham, corresponding to the Middle Kingdom period (about 2055–1650 BC). Their arguments are conveniently gathered in P. Kyle McCarter Jr., “The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” in *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2011), 1–34.
3. See Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 218; see also Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1962), 221.
4. Wilkinson, *Gods and Goddesses*, 220.
5. “Utterance 308 & 317,” in *The Pyramid of Unas, Bollingen Series XL 5, Egyptian Religious Texts and Representations*, trans. Alexandre Piankoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968) 3:18, 25.
6. Jean Yoyotte, “Le Soukhos de la Maréotide et d’autres cultes régionaux du Dieu-Crocodile d’après les cylindres du Moyen Empire,” *Bul-*

letin de l’institut français d’archéologie orientale 56 (1957): 81–95.

7. Ian Shaw, ed., *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 480–81.
8. Shaw, *History of Ancient Egypt*, 158.
9. Shaw, *History of Ancient Egypt*, 169.
10. See Marco Merola, “Letters to the Crocodile God,” *Archaeology* (November–December 2007): 22–27; and Nigel Strudwick, *Hieroglyph Detective* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 104–6.
11. Fred G. Bratton, *A History of Egyptian Archaeology* (London: Hale, 1967), 112.
12. At least two Egyptian gods, Sobek and Hapy, have much to do with the Nile waters and fertility. Although they have much in common, it is not hard to see why Sobek took precedence for Amenemhet III. Whereas Hapy was associated more specifically with the inundation of the Nile and vegetative fertility, Sobek was associated with water in general (including locations where crocodiles would reside) and with procreation and vegetation. See Wilkinson, *Gods and Goddesses*, 106, 218–19.
13. Piankoff, “Utterance 317,” 18.
14. “Spell 285,” in *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, trans. Raymond O. Faulkner (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips, 1973), 213.
15. Archaeological finds by Flinders Petrie show that epithets and reliefs of Sobek are not limited to his temple in Crocodilopolis but extend to the mortuary complex of Amenemhet III as well. See Tine Bagh, *Finds from W. M. F. Petrie’s Excavations in Egypt in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, ed. Anne Marie Nielson (Copenhagen: Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, 2011), 105–7.
16. “Hammamat Inscriptions,” in *Ancient Records of Egypt*, trans. James H. Breasted (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906), 1:313. The term *Ankh-Amenemhet* is most likely

referring to the pyramid-temple at Hawara. The phrase of *Crocodilopolis* is not used here as a proper noun to indicate the location of the temple, but as an adjective belonging to *Sobek*.

17. David Grene, trans., *The History: Herodotus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 139.
18. Grene, *Herodotus*, 140.
19. Bagh, *Petrie’s Excavations*, 107.
20. Bagh, *Petrie’s Excavations*, 109.
21. Bagh, *Petrie’s Excavations*, 110.
22. J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 13, 145.
23. “A Lintel of Amenemhet III,” in Strudwick, *Hieroglyph Detective*, 104–5.
24. “Spell 158,” in Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 136–37.
25. “Spell 158,” in Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 136–37.
26. “Spell 268 & 265,” in Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 203–4, 213.
27. For a detailed description of the journey of the deceased, see Gregory Shusha, *Conceptions of the Afterlife in Early Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2009), 54–60.
28. Alan Gardiner, trans., “Hymns to Sobk in a Ramesseum Papyrus,” *Revue d’egyptologie* 11/2 (1957): 43.
29. This is my own translation from the first column of transcription provided in Gardiner, *Hymns*, 57. Gardiner translates the verb as “didst arise,” while I translate it as “did shine forth” owing to the determinative for *sunlight*.
30. My own translations here do not differ from those provided by Gardiner. The transcriptions for these attributes can be found in columns 17, 70, and 105 of Gardiner, *Hymns*, 57–58.
31. My own translation from the transcription of columns 36–42 in Gardiner, *Hymns*, 57.