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The Crocodile God of Pharaoh in Mesopotamia

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IN THE FAMOUS ANTI-MORMON crusade against the book of Abraham in 1912, one of the individuals involved asserted that the book of Abraham could not be true because “Chaldeans and Egyptians are hopelessly mixed together, although as dissimilar and remote in language, religion and locality as are American and Chinese.”¹ This exaggerated opinion was seconded by the Reverend Samuel A. B. Mercer: “I challenge any intelligent person who knows Chaldean and Egyptian history to read the first chapter of said book [of Abraham] without experiencing the same feeling. Chaldea and Egypt are hopelessly mixed. . . . No one can believe that Abraham made such a blunder in his geography.”²

Though in Mercer’s day scholars studied both Mesopotamian and Egyptian disciplines, they knew nothing of the interactions between the two cultures. In 1971, however, the Egyptologist Georges Posener completed a lengthy and detailed survey of the available evidence and concluded that cultural interactions and interference of Egypt in the area of Syria and Palestine were extensive, even though the precise nature of the “domination by the pharaohs” during the Middle Kingdom “still eludes us; fifty years ago it was barely suspected.”³ Yet some critics who



Detail of Facsimile 1 from the book of Abraham, showing the crocodile god

clearly should know better are still using the same arguments as Mercer and Peters.⁴

Confirmation of the connections that Posener discovered can be seen in recent archaeological evidence found at Ebla. The cult of the Egyptian crocodile god Sobek flourished during the Middle Kingdom (2040–1640 B.C.), as is attested by royal and personal names during the twelfth (1991–1783 B.C.) and thirteenth dynasties (1783–1600? B.C.),⁵ temple building,⁶ and commemorative scarabs.⁷

In the archaeological site of Ebla in Syria, also known as Tell Mardikh, were found several images of Egyptian gods stylistically datable to the Middle Kingdom, and dated by the

archaeologists to MB II (1750–1650 B.C.),⁸ the time period to which most scholars who believe Abraham existed date him. Among these gods were Osiris, Hathor, Horus, and Sobek. This provides concrete archaeological evidence that Egyptian cults existed in Mesopotamia, Abraham’s homeland. Thus the book of Abraham accurately describes an aspect of the ancient world about which Joseph Smith could have known little or nothing.

NOTES

1. John Peters, letter to Franklin S. Spalding, in F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith, Jr., As a Translator* (1912), 28.
2. Samuel A. B. Mercer, “Joseph Smith As an Interpreter and Translator of Egyptian,” *Utah Survey* 1/1 (1913): 33.
3. Georges Posener, “Syria and Palestine c. 2160–1780 B.C.,” *Cambridge Ancient History*, 1.2:550, 549.
4. Stephen E. Thompson, “Egyptology and the Book of Abraham,” *Dialogue* 28/1 (Spring 1995): 156–60.
5. Jürgen von Beckerath, *Handbuch der ägyptischen Königsnamen* (1984), 67–73, 159–61, 200–11, 220–2; William Kelly Simpson, *Papyrus Reisner I* (1963), 89–90; cf. Simpson, *Papyrus Reisner II* (1965), 59, and *Papyrus Reisner IV* (1986), 41–2; and William C. Hayes, *A Papyrus of the Late Middle Kingdom in the Brooklyn Museum* (1955), 23–4.
6. Dieter Arnold, *Die Tempel Ägyptens* (1992), 97–8, 186.
7. *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 56 (1957): 81–95; and 63 (1965): 197–200.
8. Paolo Matthiae, Frances Pinnock, and Gabriella Scandone Matthiae, *Ebla* (1995), 458–60, 476–7.

Based on research by John Gee.