

The Vision of Moses as a Heavenly Ascent

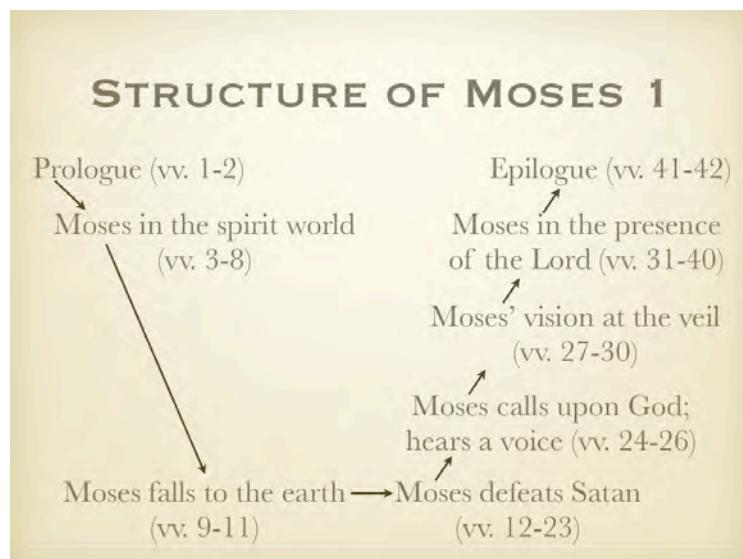
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One of the most remarkable chapters in scripture is Moses 1. Though it serves as a superb introduction to succeeding chapters that describe the Creation and the Fall, its separate prologue¹ and epilogue² signal its status as a revelation that can stand apart on its own. The events described apparently took place sometime after Jehovah called Moses out of the burning bush³ but before he had returned to Egypt to deliver the children of Israel.⁴

Though several of the individual episodes in the chapter are very well known—Moses’ confrontation with Satan, his comprehensive vision of the earth and all its inhabitants, and God’s declaration about his “work and glory”—how all these pieces join beautifully into a coherent whole has been underappreciated in the past. It is now quite evident, however, that the outline of events in Moses 1 fits squarely in the tradition of ancient “heavenly ascent” literature and its relationship to temple theology, rites, and ordinances.⁵ It is significant that this account was revealed to Joseph Smith more than a decade before the full temple endowment was administered to others in Nauvoo.

Although the stories of heavenly ascent are similar in many respects to temple practices, they make the claim of being something more. While ancient temple rituals dramatically depict a figurative journey into the presence of God, the ascent literature tells the stories of prophets who experience actual encounters with Deity within the *heavenly* temple—the “completion or fulfillment” of the “types and images” in earthly priesthood ordinances.⁶ In such encounters, the prophet may experience a vision of eternity, participation in worship with the angels, or the conferral of certain blessings that are “made sure”⁷ by the voice of God Himself. Consistent with the basic temple pattern and stories of heavenly ascent, Moses descends from his first home in the spirit world and then undertakes a step-by-step return to the Father.

The Structure of Moses 1



Prologue. Verses 1-2 provide the kind of opening that Turner calls an “announcement of plot”⁸—not an account of what is happening at the moment, but rather a brief anticipatory summary of the principal events in the rest of the chapter. In this case, the prologue describes how Moses will be “caught up” to “an exceedingly high mountain” where he will receive the glory of God and, after conversing with Him face to face, enter into His presence.⁹

Moses in the spirit world (vv. 3-8). Following the prologue, Moses is given a description of God’s attributes and a confirmation of the work to which he had previously been foreordained as a son of God in the similitude of the Only Begotten.¹⁰ He is then shown the “world upon which he was created”—referring to the preexistent spirit realm—and “all the children of men which are, and which were created”—paralleling the view of organized intelligences given to Abraham.¹¹

Moses falls to the earth (vv. 9-11). Having left the presence of God and no longer being clothed with His glory, Moses falls to the earth—meaning, first, that he collapsed in weakness, and, second, that he descended again to the relative darkness of the celestial world, thus “landing,” as Nibley puts it, “as a natural man.”¹² He is then left to himself to be tested in a dramatic encounter with Satan.¹³

Moses defeats Satan (vv. 12-23). Prefiguring his encounter with Christ in the wilderness, Satan tempts Moses—now in a physically weakened state—to worship him. A context of priesthood ordinances is implied. For example, having banished Satan through the power of the Only Begotten (a motif linked to baptism), Moses is “filled with the Holy Ghost.”¹⁴

Moses calls upon God and is answered by a voice from behind the heavenly veil (vv. 24-26). Continuing to press forward, Moses “calls upon the name of God” in sacred prayer. Since the moment he “fell to the earth,” Moses could no longer speak face to face with the Lord, having been “shut out from his presence.”¹⁵ Following his prayer, however, Moses is answered by a voice from behind the heavenly veil enumerating specific blessings.¹⁶ In his discussion of early Christian and Jewish temple rituals, Tvedtnes notes that “prayer opens the veil to allow one to enjoy the presence of God.”¹⁷

At the heavenly veil, Moses sees the earth and all its inhabitants (vv. 27-30). While “the voice is still speaking,” Moses looks at the heavenly veil and there beholds every particle of the earth, all of its inhabitants, and then sees “many lands; and each land was called earth.”¹⁸

Moses stands in the presence of the Lord (vv. 31-40). The culminating sequence of the vision begins in verse 31 when Moses, having continued to inquire of the Lord,¹⁹ comes to stand in His presence. God then speaks with Moses face to face, describing His purposes for this earth and its inhabitants.²⁰ Moses is then shown the events of the Creation, the Fall, and how the Plan of Redemption was given to Adam and Eve.²¹

Parallels to Moses 1 in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*

Some of the most remarkable parallels with Moses 1 are found in an account of a heavenly ascent called the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.²² The document is thought to be Jewish in origin, though it has been preserved by Christian hands.²³ In its current form, it is usually dated to within a few decades after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, but may contain elements that are older. It is noteworthy that the first publication of an English translation was in the Church's *Improvement Era* magazine in 1898.²⁴ The illustrations shown below accompany the *Codex Sylvester*,²⁵ the oldest independent source for the *Apocalypse*. Steve Whitlock and I went to Oxford last spring to take photographs of these illustrations from a rare facsimile of this manuscript. Though the second of the three illustrations below previously appeared in an article by Hugh Nibley, so far as I have been able to learn, the full set of six illustrations has not appeared in print for more than a century.

A high mountain. Like the book of Moses, the first chapter of the *Apocalypse* proper begins with a scene on a high mountain. As Thomas observes, the essential thing in such accounts is to suggest “a place that is suitably high for temple activity.”²⁶

A vision of the spirit world. In both Moses 1 and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, following a brief description of the attributes of God, the prophet is promised a view of the things of eternity. Though in somewhat different sequence, both accounts include a vision of the spirit world. The book of Moses says that he is next shown the “world upon which he was created”—referring to the preexistent spirit realm—and “all the children of men which are, and which were created.” Likewise, in the *Apocalypse*, Abraham will be shown “a great crowd of men, and women, and children” before they “came into being.”²⁷

In the book of Abraham, the Lord points out the many “noble and great ones” that were chosen before they were born.²⁸ Likewise, in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, a premortal group of spirits is “set apart... to be born of [Abraham]” and to be called “[God’s] people.”²⁹



A fall to the earth. Following their initial vision, both prophets experience a “fall to the earth” that leaves them vulnerable to the will of the Adversary. Abraham is made to say: “I... fell down upon the earth, for there was no longer strength in me,” closely paralleling the words of Moses 1 where “he fell unto the earth” and lost his “natural strength.”³⁰ Shown above is Abraham lifting the fallen Abraham by the right hand.

Defeat of the Adversary. As in the book of Moses, the prophet experiences a frightening encounter with the power of evil. Moses says, “Get thee hence, Satan; deceive me not,”³¹ while Yahoel is made to say, “Depart from [Abraham]! You cannot deceive him.”³² After multiple attempts to make him leave, the Tempter is finally rebuked and forced to depart.



Heavenly ascent. The statement that Moses was “caught up,”³³ phrased in what is called the “divine passive,”³⁴ reveals that his ascent was accomplished by God’s power and not his own.³⁵ A parallel that ties Moses’ experience to that of Abraham in the *Apocalypse* is found in 1 Nephi 11:1 where Nephi was “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain, which [he] never had before seen.”³⁶ Nephi later said that “upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains,”³⁷ just as the *Sylvester Codex* shows Abraham being raised up to heaven on the wings of a bird. Once again, Yahoel grasps Abraham’s wrist by the right hand.³⁸

A voice at the veil. In Moses 1:27, we are told: “And it came to pass, as the voice was still speaking, Moses cast his eyes and beheld the earth.” Remarkably, the book of Moses phrase “as the voice was still speaking” parallels a nearly identical phrase—“And while he [the angel] was still speaking”—in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.³⁹ In both cases, the phrase seems to be a code expression having to do with an exchange of words as one is preparing to pass from one side of the heavenly veil to the other.⁴⁰ In the case of the *Apocalypse*, the phrase immediately precedes Abraham’s recitation of certain words taught to him by the angel in preparation for his ascent to receive a vision of the work of God. In such accounts, once a person has been thoroughly tested, the “last phrase” of welcome is extended to him: “Let him come up!”⁴¹ Significantly, following Abraham’s ascent, when he passes back through the heavenly veil in the opposite direction on his return to the earth, the expression “And while he was still speaking” recurs.⁴²

The change in perspective as Moses passes upward through the heavenly veil is related in subtle beauty in the book of Moses. Previously, as he stood on the earth, Moses had “lifted up his eyes unto heaven.”⁴³ Now, after ascending to heaven, he “cast his eyes” down to see the earth and all of its inhabitants.⁴⁴ He witnessed its entire history from beginning to end like Adam, Enoch, the Brother of Jared, John the Beloved, and others.⁴⁵ Moroni taught that those with perfect faith cannot be “kept from within the veil” (i.e., cannot be kept from passing through the veil⁴⁶)—meaning the heavenly veil behind which God dwells, whose earthly counterpart is the temple veil that divides the holy place from the holy of holies.⁴⁷



In the presence of the Lord. Although depictions of God the Father on the throne appear in some early Christian sources, such depictions were avoided in other times and places. In the illustration above, the figure seated on the throne is the risen Jesus Christ. His identity is indicated by the cruciform markings on His halo. Behind the Lord sits a figure, whose identity may relate to the statement that “Michael is with me [God] in order to bless you forever.”⁴⁸ Beneath the throne are fiery seraphim and many-eyed “wheels” praising God, recalling a vision of Ezekiel.⁴⁹ The throne is surrounded by a series of heavenly veils, representing different levels of the firmament separating God from the material world—the latter signified by the outermost dark blue veil.

Vision at the veil. The comprehensive visions of Moses and Abraham are perfectly in line with ancient accounts that speak of a “blueprint” of eternity that is worked out in advance and “printed” on the inside of the heavenly veil.⁵⁰ Writes Barker:

Those who passed beyond the veil found themselves outside time. When Rabbi Ishmael ascended and looked back he saw the curtain on which was depicted past, present and future. ‘All generations to the end of time were printed on the curtain of the Omnipresent One. I saw them all with my own eyes’...⁵¹ [Similarly,] Enoch was taken up by three angels and set up on a high place whence he saw all history, past, present and future.⁵²

Vision of the Creation and the Fall. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* describes how the Abraham ascended, and then looked down to see the affairs of what is called in modern revelation the “kingdoms of a lower order.”⁵³ The Lord’s voice commanded him to look, and veils were opened beneath his feet: “And while he was still speaking the expanses under me, the heavens, opened and I saw on the seventh firmament upon which I stood fire spread out... And I looked... downward to the sixth firmament... [and] the sixth firmament... removed itself... [and] I saw... the fifth (firmament).”⁵⁴ Then, as did Moses, Abraham seems to have seen the heavenly plan for creation—“the creation that was depicted of old⁵⁵ on this expanse” (21:1⁵⁶), its realization on the earth (21:3-5), the Garden of Eden (21:6), and the spirits of all men with certain ones “prepared to be born of you [i.e., Abraham] and to be called my people (21:7-22:5)”⁵⁷ When Abraham is told again to “Look... at the picture,” he sees Satan inciting the Fall of Adam and Eve (23:1-14),⁵⁸ just as Moses saw these events following his own heavenly ascent.

A Coincidence?

A close examination of the details of the account of Moses’ heavenly ascent in the context of its overall structure throws important light on the significance of temple ordinances performed in our day. Parallels with other ancient texts, such as the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, confirm the basic temple pattern, and constitute an impressive witness of the antiquity of the text restored by Joseph Smith’s revelations. Hugh Nibley concluded as a result of his study: “These parallel accounts, separated by centuries, cannot be coincidence. Nor can all the others.”⁵⁹

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Endnotes

- ¹ Moses 1:1-2.
- ² Moses 1:42.
- ³ Moses 1:17.
- ⁴ Moses 1:25-26.
- ⁵ For a complete commentary on Moses 1, see J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image, pp. 32-81. See also J. M. Bradshaw, Ezekiel Mural; H. W. Nibley, Teachings of the PGP, 17, p. 205.
- ⁶ H. W. Nibley, Apocryphal, p. 312; cf. pp. 310-311. See W. W. Isenberg, Philip, 85:14-16, p. 159.
- ⁷ 2 Peter 1:10.
- ⁸ L. Turner, Announcements, pp. 13-14.
- ⁹ Moses 1:31.
- ¹⁰ Moses 1:3-7.
- ¹¹ Moses 1:8; cf. Abraham 3:22-23.
- ¹² H. W. Nibley, Assembly, p. 128.
- ¹³ Moses 1:9-23.
- ¹⁴ Moses 1:24.
- ¹⁵ Moses 1:19.
- ¹⁶ Moses 1:25-26.
- ¹⁷ J. A. Tvedtnes, Rituals.
- ¹⁸ Moses 1: 27-28, 29.
- ¹⁹ Moses 1:30.
- ²⁰ Moses 1:35-40.
- ²¹ Moses chapters 2-5.
- ²² For a detailed description of these parallels, see J. M. Bradshaw, God's Image, pp. 694-696. See also H. W. Nibley, To Open.
- ²³ A. Kulik, Retroverting, pp. 2-3; R. Rubinkiewicz, Apocalypse of Abraham, pp. 681-683.
- ²⁴ E. H. Anderson *et al.*, Abraham.
- ²⁵ P. P. Novickij (Novitskii), Otkrovenie Avraama.
- ²⁶ M. C. Thomas, Brother of Jared, p. 391.
- ²⁷ A. Kulik, Retroverting, 21:7, 22:2, p. 26.
- ²⁸ Abraham 3:22-23.

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- ²⁹ A. Kulik, *Retroverting*, 21:7, 22:5, pp. 26-27.
- ³⁰ Moses 1:9-10.
- ³¹ Moses 1:16.
- ³² A. Kulik, *Retroverting*, 13:12-13, p. 20.
- ³³ Moses 1:2.
- ³⁴ K. L. Barney, June 21 2006.
- ³⁵ Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:2; 1 Thessalonians 4:17; Moses 7:27.
- ³⁶ Cf. Exodus 19:3; Ezekiel 40:2; JST Matthew 4:8; Revelations 21:10; Moses 7:2.
- ³⁷ 2 Nephi 4:25.
- ³⁸ R. Rubinkiewicz, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 12:10, p. 695. Cf. H. W. Nibley, *Abraham* 2000, p. 18; *Genesis* 15:9ff.
- ³⁹ R. Rubinkiewicz, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 17:1, p. 696.
- ⁴⁰ Compare H. W. Nibley, *Message* 2005, pp. 449-457.
- ⁴¹ M. E. Stone, *Fall of Satan*, p. 47; cf. *Revelation* 4:1: "Come up hither"; *Matthew* 25:21: "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."
- ⁴² R. Rubinkiewicz, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 30:1, p. 704.
- ⁴³ Moses 1:24.
- ⁴⁴ Moses 1:27-28.
- ⁴⁵ D&C 107:56, Moses 7:4-67, Ether 3:25, 1 Nephi 14:25, 1 Nephi 14:26, Luke 4:5, M. C. Thomas, *Brother of Jared*.
- ⁴⁶ Ether 3:20; cf. Moses 3:26.
- ⁴⁷ P. Alexander, 3 Enoch, 45:1, p. 296 n. a.
- ⁴⁸ A. Kulik, *Retroverting*, 10:17, p. 18. The figure may also represent Metatron. "Metatron was merged with two other heavenly figures, (1) the archangel Yaho'el (P. Alexander, 3 Enoch, 1:4, p. 257, 48D:1(1), p. 313), and (2) translated Enoch... From other texts, however, we know of an angel Yaho'el quite independent of Metatron (e.g., R. Rubinkiewicz, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 10, pp. 17-18)" (P. Alexander, 3 Enoch, p. 244).
- ⁴⁹ Ezekiel 1.
- ⁵⁰ H. W. Nibley, *Teachings of the PGP*, 10, p. 117; cf. J. Smith, Jr., *Documentary History*, 27 November 1832, 1:299.
- ⁵¹ P. Alexander, 3 Enoch, 45:6, p. 299.
- ⁵² M. Barker, *Temple Theology*, p. 28. See also M. Barker, *Boundary*, pp. 215-217.
- ⁵³ D&C 130:9.
- ⁵⁴ R. Rubinkiewicz, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, 19:1, 4-5, 9, pp. 698-699; cf. *Abraham* 3:1-18.
- ⁵⁵ I.e., formerly shadowed, sketched, outlined, prefigured (*Ibid.*, p. 699 n. 21a).
- ⁵⁶ Cf. *Abraham* 5:3-5.
- ⁵⁷ Cf. *Abraham* 3:22-23.
- ⁵⁸ R. Rubinkiewicz, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, pp. 699-701.
- ⁵⁹ H. W. Nibley, *To Open*, p. 15. Nibley also cites extensive parallels between Moses 1 and S. C. Malan, *Adam and Eve*.