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Getting Ready to Begin: An Editorial*

HUGH NIBLEY**

The publication of the Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri has now begun to bear fruit. Two efforts at translation and commentary have already appeared, the one an example of pitfalls to be avoided, the other a conscientious piece of work for which the Latter-day Saints owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Dee Jay Nelson.

CONTENTS OF *WHAT* PAPYRUS?

The first of the two studies can be dismissed with a few words. It appeared in a local newssheet, *The Salt Lake City Messenger,* for March, 1968, as a clincher to what was blatantly called "The Fall of the Book of Abraham." Bearing the heading "Contents of Papyrus," the study was meant to be an eloquent denunciation of people who misrepresent ancient documents, for it was conspicuously adorned with the image of a pair of scales with the resounding quotation: "A false balance is abomination to the Lord: but a just weight is his delight." (Prov. 11:1)[1] Those apocalyptic scales, a silent rebuke to all who presume to depart a hair's breadth from the full measure of truth, invite us to put the publishers to the same rigorous tests which they have sought so zealously and so long to impose on others. Here, on page four of the *Messenger,* is a picture of one of the fragments of the newly acquired "LDS" or "Joseph Smith Papyri," along with an impressive-looking transliteration and what is proclaimed to be "Mr. Heward's translation of *this* text." One does not have to search very far to discover that it is not a translation of "this text" at all. The picture of the swallow on the fragment makes it easy to spot it at once as Chapter 86 in illustrated editions of the *Book of the Dead.* E. A. W. Budge long ago translated the famous papyrus of the *Book of the Dead* known as the *Papyrus*

*Because of the continued high interest in the Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri since they were given to the Church, we have invited Dr. Nibley to write this editorial for our readers.

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[1]*The Salt Lake City Messenger* (Modern Microfilm Co.), March, 1968, p. 4.

of Ani; this work appeared in a number of editions and is available in most school and public libraries. Mr. Heward freely admits making use of Budge, but if we compare three texts, namely (1) Budge's translation of the *Papyrus of Ani*, (2) Mr. Heward's purported translation of the LDS Papyrus, and the (3) LDS Papyrus itself, it becomes at once apparent that Mr. Heward has simply followed Budge's translation of the Ani Papyrus all the way, even when it differed radically from the LDS Papyrus which he was supposed to be translating.

Thus at the very outset we read in Budge "Here begin the chapters of making transformations," and in Mr. Heward, "Here begins the spells for making transformations," while in the LDS Papyrus "Here begins . . ." is omitted, the ending of the name Khonsu in black ink being followed immediately by "A chapter . . ." in red ink and in the *singular*. So of course one wonders from which manuscript the "spells" in Mr. Heward's translation are taken, from the LDS Papyrus or the Ani Papyrus to which Dr. Budge had already supplied a useful translation. Again we read identical translations in Budge (line 6) and Heward: "I am like Horus, the governor of the boat," whereas the LDS Papyrus reads, "Horus is in charge of the sacred bark": in Budge's text a simple ideogram has been taken to indicate *dpt*, "boat" as well it might; but in the LDS Papyrus the name of the boat is written out—it is the sacred *Wia*-bark—and the subject of the sentence is not "I" but "Horus." In the next line Budge translates "I have advanced for the examination," and Mr. Heward gives the identical rendering for the J.S. Papyrus, though the latter says "I have come with a message"—*shm.n=j m wp(w)t*, as against *shm.n=j r sip*; they are not the same at all, and there can be no doubt which text Mr. Heward is translating and whose translation he is giving us. Again in line 11 Budge reads *khsr=j istw=j* as "I have put away utterly my offenses (or sins)," and that is exactly how Mr. Heward renders the corresponding passage of the LDS Papyrus, though the text is quite different: *khm.n=j isftw*—"I have not known transgressions." As a final example of dozens which we could supply, Mr. Heward follows Budge almost word for word in line 10 of the Ani text: "I have purified myself, I have made myself to be like a god." This passage is *entirely* missing from the LDS Papyrus, though the text at this place is well preserved. It should be noted that Mr. Heward

seldom follows Budge exactly, but consistently changes the reading just a little, that is, enough to make the translation sound like his own though he never does so where a grammatical point is at issue, e.g., he never once departs from Budge's now outmoded rendering of the verbs. To copy someone else's paper and hand in the work as one's own has ever been a common practice in the schools; most students have been guilty of it at times—but rarely in essays devoted to the subject of false and just balances. We recall that it was this same Mr. Heward who circulated handbills at a general conference in 1967, pointing the accusing finger at Joseph Smith and proclaiming his own total and unflinching dedication to the truth at all times and at any price. This time Mr. Heward has preached even a more eloquent sermon than he intended on the importance of a true and just measure.

A WELCOME BEGINNING

It is a different story when we come to Mr. Dee Jay Nelson's work, the *Joseph Smith Papyri*.[2] This is a conscientious and courageous piece of work—courageous because Brother Nelson has been willing to do what Gardiner advises all Egyptologists to do: to set up a target for others to shoot at. Aware of the delicacy of the problem, Nelson has been careful to consult top-ranking scholars where he has found himself in doubt. He has taken the first step in a serious study of the Facsimilies of the Pearl of Great Price, supplying students with a usable and reliable translation of the available papyri that once belonged to Joseph Smith. This is the sort of thing that the experts of 1912 should have undertaken but did not. But it is, we cannot too strongly insist, the FIRST step in the serious study of the Pearl of Great Price and NOT the LAST step! The philological and historical questions raised by the Book of Abraham are legion if one takes that book seriously. Of couse, if one does not take it seriously there are no questions at all—and such has ever been the position of the opposition. It was in perfect confidence that Joseph Smith could not possibly have know anything whatever about Abraham in Egypt that the experts made their definitive pronouncements in 1912. But we who do take it seriously are quite within our

[2]Dee Jay Nelson, *The Joseph Smith Papyri* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., 1968).

rights in asking a great many questions. Any serious study of the Book of Abraham calls for the reading of many sources, and these can be classified in four main cultural areas:

JOSEPH SMITH LITERATURE

First there is the Joseph Smith literature. The official text of the Pearl of Great Price is all that we are bound to accept as scripture, but the understanding of it may be furthered by studies of other writings of Smith related to this one. Here are some of the questions to be dealt with: Just how, when and where did Joseph Smith acquire the mummies and papyri? Where are they all now? Under what circumstances did he translate Egyptian writings? What measure of inspiration did he claim for his translations? How extensive are his works relating to the Pearl of Great Price? Where are they? What did he intend to teach us by introducing the Egyptians onto the scene? How did he distinguish between the various classes of Egyptian text? These are the problems that have been dealt with through the years by LDS students of the Pearl of Great Price, but little progress has been made because the sources have remained locked up in archives and museums. Today however, some students seem to be getting their teeth into some solid material.

However, as we noted in a preceding issue of *BYU Studies,* these questions are of a preliminary nature.[3] The presence of the papyri now shows beyond a doubt that Joseph Smith did possess genuine Egyptian documents—how he got them is interesting but is quite aside from the main issue, which is whether his story of Abraham in Egypt is true or not. The most exhaustive study of the printing presses on which the works of Homer have been published would never help us in the least in solving the Homeric question, and if we knew every detail of the modern vicissitudes of the documents of the Pearl of Great Price we would be none the wiser as to its historical reliability.

THE EGYPTIAN SOURCES

These must be studied in order to place the LDS Papyri in their proper historical setting and perspective. Are the LDS

[3]Hugh Nibley, "Prolegomena to Any Study of the Book of Abraham," *BYU Studies*, Vol. 8 (Winter, 1968), pp. 171-194.

materials typical? Typical what? What is the nature of Egyptian funerary literature in general? What known papyri are most closely related to these? What are the dates of the various fragments? How much is known about Egyptian cryptograms? It has long been known that the characters "interpreted" by Joseph Smith in his *Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar* are treated by him as super-cryptograms; and now it is apparent that the source of those characters is the unillustrated fragment on which the word *Sen-sen* appears repeatedly. This identifies it as possibly belonging to those writings known as *The Book of Breathings,* though that in turn is merely "compilations and excerpts from older funerary spells and burial formulas."[4] This particular excerpt, if it is such, has still not been located among known versions of the mysterious book. Though our text is a short one and clearly written, Mr. Nelson, who certainly intends to supply the best translation available, must beg off for the moment: "I do not attempt a continuous translation at this time." Instead he is satisfied "to indicate particularly lucid phrases and passages." The following complete quotation of these "particularly lucid" items[5] will show what he is up against:

> ". . . the summer comes, Khensu (Moon God) . . ." This might also be translated, ". . . the summer. Khensu comes . . ." . . . the name of one of the parents of Ter. . . . ". . . flesh . . . ?? . . . near his heart therein . . ." . . .the name of the Book of Breathings. The word book (literally "writings") is spelled in an acceptable but unexpected way. . . . "she is like the king and also like the God Ra." . . . the word sensen, "breathings. . . ." "Hail Osiris Ter, who is true of word, daughter (or son) of . . . ."[6]

And that is the story—still a lock without a key. The most likely key is the Osiris story; yet, as J. Cerny observes, "no systematic exposition of the myth is known from Egyptian sources . . ."[7]—and that in thousands of papyri that talk about little else! What, the student of the Book of Abraham would like to know, is the relation between a royal funeral and a coronation? What have both to do with the sacrificial victim? For that matter, what is Egyptian religion all about? The

[4] H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der aegyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952), p. 59.
[5] Nelson, *Papyri,* p. 41.
[6] Cerny, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (London, 1952), p. 35.

answers to such questions have taken a new and interesting turn in our day, and they are far less positive and dogmatic than they were only a few years ago.

THE JEWISH SOURCES

We must never forget that the Pearl of Great Price is supposed to be telling its story through the mouths of ancient Hebrew patriarchs. There is a rich and for the most part but recently published literature of Abrahamic legends and traditions in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Syriac, Coptic, etc., which contains very old stories astonishingly like the Abraham history in the Book of Abraham, even to small details. This raises many questions: How old are these stories? Where do they come from? How are they related? Could they possibly have anything to do with the real Abraham? It is only in our own generation that scholars have agreed to answer in the affirmative the question, whether there ever was a real Abraham. Could Joseph Smith have had access to any of these accounts? To which ones? Through which channels? It is significant that Joseph Smith's learned critics with the exception of Budge seem completely unaware of the existence of the Abraham traditions. How do these traditions relate Abraham to Egypt? How do they relate Pharoah to other lands, especially Canaan? Here are things that bear looking into.

THE CLASSICAL SOURCES

The Book of Abraham attributes certain rites and customs to the Egyptians to which the Classical writers, especially the Greeks, furnish an important commentary. They tell of strange doings in Egypt that clearly match those in the Abraham story and raise such questions as Who was the Pharoah with whom Abraham had his run-in? How is he related to other Pharoahs of whom like stories are told? Was he a native Egyptian? How did he get to be king? Why was he worried about his priesthood? How, when, and where were rites of human sacrifice introduced into Egypt? Who were some of the sacrificial victims? Why were strangers allowed to sit on Pharoah's throne? How are ritual, myth, and history connected in these stories? How are they connected in the Book of Abraham? What is the significance of the recurring cycles of these stories? At what periods are they to be dated?

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

We have often been asked during the past months why we did not proceed with all haste to produce a translation of the papyri the moment they came into our possession. Well, for one thing others are far better equipped to do the job than we are, and some of those others early expressed a willingness to undertake it. But, more important, it is doubtful whether any translation could do as much good as harm. Recently Professor R. Anthes, commenting on A. Piankoff's excellent translations of the funerary literature from the tomb of Tutankhamen, wrote: "I may say frankly that I wonder what a reader not very well acquainted with Egyptian religion may possibly get out of the study of these texts and pictures. He may find in them scattered ideas which appeal to him in one way or another, but he will hardly know if his interpretations harmonize with what the Egyptians actually thought." The layman is not alone in his perplexity, however, for Anthes goes on to note that a "certain helplessness in the face of these mythological records is unavoidable to both laymen and Egyptologists."[7]

A translation, according to Willamowitz's classic definition, is "a statement in the translator's own words of what he thinks the author had in mind." But who today really knows what the Egyptians who wrote the *Book of the Dead* had in mind, when even T. G. Allen, supreme in the field, notes that most of the funerary texts we possess were written by Egyptians who did not understand the original sense of the texts? Nay, it "may be that even in their original state," according to Allen, "the sanctity of the spells proper was furthered by intentional obscurities."[8] Which pretty well puts them beyond our reach indefinitely. "The words we use to render Egyptian terms," wrote the great Maspero, "make us commit many involuntary errors . . . and we always end up by missing the point and falling back on our own contemporary ideas. . . ."[9] It often happens, Ed Naville observed, "that a sentence that is easily understood philologically, whose vocabulary and grammar present not the slightest difficulty, nonetheless presents a strange and even burlesque appearance; we have understood

[7] R. Anthes, in *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 20 (1957), p. 92.
[8] T. G. Allen, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 2-3.
[9] G. Maspero, in *Bibliotheque Egyptologique*, Vol. 1, p. 22.

the form, but have not yet penetrated to the idea that lies hidden behind it."[10] Hermann Kees describes all the funerary literature as "entirely disorganized collections of unrelated sayings," and notes that the Egyptians of the New Kingdom who filled papyri with ancient formulae had not the remotest idea of what those formulae were about.[11]

Naturally modern scholars were early led to the conclusion that the very ancient literature of the Egyptians, and especially the funerary literature, was necessarily a lot of primitive mumbo-jumbo; but today they are not so sure. It was because scholars had "no knowledge of its inner relationships and no deeper insight into its religious content" that they were long unable even to make a beginning of the serious study of the *Book of the Dead.* According to W. Czermak: "The scholars had absolutely no concept of the spiritual setting (*Landschaft*) of the book."[12] But how are we to know whether Professor Czermak himself understands the Egyptians? In seeking for clues to Egyptian texts, Gardiner reminds us, the "most valuable of all, especially in historical texts and stories, is the logic of the situation."[13] We are forced back on this because the writings are not self-explanatory. But the logic of the situation completely fails us in those funerary texts in which, as A. Shorter puts it, "one gathers the impression that the compilers . . . included anything religious suitable for recitation as a spell regardless of its contents."[14] In this literature we have, to follow Kess, "nothing but the shattered remnants of a lost age once vividly alive."[15] And in trying to put together the pieces the greater our ignorance the more readily we are guided by our preconceptions.

Mr. Dee Jay Nelson is quite right when he tells us (p. 6) that "to project those thought processes as expressed in written hieratic and hieroglyphic writings into literal English would present a bewildering phraseological maze which would have meaning only to a skilled Egyptian philologist." But what would they mean to him? Many years ago this writer learned that if he could not make a thing clear to a five-year-old child

[10]Ed Naville, *Das aegyptische Todtenbuch* (Berlin, 1886), pp. 2-3.
[11]H. Kees, *Totenglauben . . . der alten Aegypter,* (Leipzig, 1926), pp. 14f.
[12]W. Czermak, in *Zeitschreft fur aegyptische Sprache,* Vol. 76 (1940), p. 9.
[13]A. H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharoahs* (Oxford, 1961), p. 24.
[14]A. Shorter, *The Egyptian Gods* (London, 1937), p. 64.
[15]Kees, *Totenglauben,* p. 451.

it was because he did not really understand it himself. Professional jargon and phraseological mazes are the scholar's refuge from the importunities and the too-searching questions of the layman, but they do have their purposes—they warn the idle onlooker to keep a respectful distance while the research is still going on, and they are a constant reminder to the professional himself that he has not yet got the answers that will make it possible to state the case in clear and simple terms. Professor Kees notes that even T. G. Allen's translation of the *Book of the Dead* can be a stumbling-block to the reader who wants to know "how far the original content of the ancient utterances remained a living thing and hence can be taken as evidence for the belief in the hereafter in the time of decadence."[16]

In his dealing with funerary texts, the student's best friend, formulaic repetition, can become his worst enemy. For he hails every oft-recurring phrase as an old and familiar friend and thereby gets the completely misleading idea that he understands it. The very commonest words and formulae, those which the student happily races through, are the very ones on which the experts have been least able to agree through the years. We have missed the meaning of these terms, Naville suggested, "because we always analyze an expression by breaking it up into component parts which we then translate literally, and so are led astray. Analysis can be destructive."[17] Actually our translations are not translations at all, but simply a business of exchanging one set of symbols for another. And until we know the meaning of the original symbols, it is hardly likely that our transcribing of them into a laborious technical jargon is going to reveal their meaning.

We will never know by exactly what process Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon or the Pearl of Great Price. The scholars who commented on the Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham in 1912 agreed and insisted that they were not indulging in a study of revelation, that such a study was beyond their competence, they having been consulted purely in their capacity of linguist and scientist. One is free to criticize the product of a purported revelation, and even to make inferences as to the authenticity of inspiration in the light of what

[16] H. Kees, in *Orientalische Literaturzeitung*, 1961, Nr. 9/10, p. 482.
[17] Naville, *Todtenbuch*, p. 25.

it gives us; *but one may not reverse the process,* as all the critics of Joseph Smith have done. "Look," they say, "here is this Joe Smith sitting behind a blanket and dictating to a half-educated Oliver Cowdery—can a sound or rational book possibly be composed in such a fashion?" And therewith the problem of the Book of Mormon is considered settled, without anyone's having to take the pains to read the book for himself to see whether or not it is sound and rational. What concerns the critic of a painting is the final product, not the preliminary sketches; yet today certain parties are saying, "Look, here are the author's notes to the Book of Abraham! Can the writer of those notes possibly have known anything about Abraham in Egypt?" Again the answer is to be found not in psychological imponderables but in the pages of the Book of Abraham.

In the Pearl of Great Price Joseph Smith opened the door to the study of other worlds. He was not permitted to follow up the studies he initiated, but he invited and urged others to do so. Of the four lines of investigation mentioned above, only one is the monopoly of the Egyptologist, and that is not necessarily the most important one. To date the cosmological teachings of the Book of Abraham have had far greater influence than its antiquarian oddities, and those teachings command greater respect at the present time than ever before.[18] Who can say, then, what surprises await the student who at last undertakes a serious historical study of the book? It would now seem that the Latter-day Saints are being pushed by force of circumstances through the door they have so long been reluctant to enter. And to Mr. Dee Jay Nelson goes the credit of being the first to make the plunge.

[18]Walter Sullivan, *We Are Not Alone* (New York: Signet Books, 1966), p. 280; in the conclusion of his book that won the International Non-fiction Prize for 1965, Mr. Sullivan, the science-editor for the *New York Times,* includes a lengthy quotation from the Pearl of Great Price, not, of course, to prove that there is life on other worlds, but to show that the Mormons have long been teaching what scientists are now coming around to.