



Type: Magazine Article

Were the Brass Plates Written in Egyptian? - I

Author(s): Thomas W. Brookbank

Source: *The Young Woman's Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (April 1921), pp. 204–208

Published by: Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association

Abstract: Looking at a variety of cultural and linguistic aspects to support his point of view, the author defends the Latter-day Saint belief that the brass plates were written in Egyptian.

Were the Brass Plates Written in Egyptian?

By T. W. Brookbank.

I.

According to the opinion of some people, and they are not numbered solely among unfriendly non-“Mormons,” there is no good and sufficient reason apparent why the Jewish scriptures should have been recorded, according to Book of Mormon claims, in two entirely different systems of writing—one Hebraic, with which the Israelities were familiar, and the other Egyptian, which made use of hieroglyphical characters, and with which God’s people in the later periods of their history must have generally lacked practical familiarity. They see no more need for one copy of the Jewish scriptures to have been written in Hebrew for the use of Hebrews, and another copy to have been written in Egyptian for the use of those same Hebrews, than there is now a necessity to have a copy of the New Testament translated into English for the benefit of English speaking people, and another copy translated in Chinese characters for instance, for our further use and service. Moreover, hieroglyphical writing is far more difficult than where an alphabetical system is practiced, and it goes without saying that a great deal of time and energy would have to be expended in study and practice before proficiency in the use of hieroglyphics could be attained, and so, granting that some Hebrew might have wanted a copy of the scriptures to be kept in his family and among his descendants, it is highly improbable that he would not make use, when writing it, of his familiar and easy native method; but, on the contrary, would resort to a difficult, hard-to-be-understood, for-

eign method. Some of our opponents, following out the line of argument just indicated, conclude there is no ground whatever for the belief that there ever was a copy of the Jewish scriptures written or engraved in Egyptian hieroglyphics as the “Mormons” contend, and, as a consequence, Joseph Smith was an impostor, and the Book of Mormon is a fraud.

A late opponent of this work, when stating his views in regard to this matter, says that the Jews had such a profound love for their language that not one of them could ever think of giving up his own tongue for that of the Egyptian which, he says, the “Mormons” must maintain some of them did do or the Hebrew scriptures never could have been written in Egyptian. Hebrew was claimed to be the language which was used in the garden of Eden, and was regarded by many of the Israelites as a sacred form of speech, and, so the gentleman says, so intense was their love for it that, though they were in bondage to the Egyptians, they would not, even under that condition of life, think for a moment of discarding their own tongue and of adopting that of their hated masters instead.

In the remarks which are to follow the purpose of the writer is to show not only that there was a number of Israelites—probably thousands of them in the aggregate—who did acquire a knowledge of the Egyptian, but, further, to manifest that the recording of the Hebrew scriptures in Egyptian was a most natural thing to occur, and so their being written in that language, as the Book of Mormon claims, is far

more easily and satisfactorily accounted for than their non-existence in that form could be reconciled with certain facts which are to be considered in the progress of this article.

To re-state briefly the position occupied by the gentleman referred to above, we find that he scouts the opinion, which he says some "Mormons" hold, that the Israelites or, at least, a large number of them learned the Egyptian language during the 215 years of servile life which they passed in the land of the Pharaohs. He says the Israelites would not have honored their oppressors by adopting their speech.

Well, it does seem to a layman that 215 years is a long time for a people to live in the midst of a foreign nation without getting acquainted fairly well with the speech of the natives, and the question whether or not a community so situated, and held in bondage or slavery, is going to honor their masters and oppressors, and to what extent is one that the slave-drivers always settle among themselves, and in a very summary manner according to their own way of thinking. The masters decide whose will, wishes, and convenience are to be observed, and they dictate what the slaves shall do and what they shall not do. The relationship which existed between the enslaved Israelites and their Egyptian oppressors makes it logically certain that there was a ready means of communication established between the respective people in general. It is illogical for one to suppose that for more than two centuries the Egyptian masters made their wishes and commands known to their Israelitish slaves through Hebrew interpreters, and it is equally illogical for one to assume that for such a great length of time the masters condescended to learn the speech of the slaves in

order that there might be available a direct means of communication for the transaction of all business affairs which pertained to the one party as slaves and to the other as masters.

It is very improbable that any of the Israelites, save little children, who went out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses, did not have a knowledge of the Egyptian, notwithstanding what our friend says about the contemptuous bearing of the Israelites towards their captors and oppressors, and their intense love for the Hebrew.

Remarks thus far apply only to the Israelites in their community capacity, but coming now to individual examples, we find that one of Abraham's wives, Hagar, was an Egyptian. Solomon, too, married an Egyptian woman. She was the daughter of one of the Pharaohs. It is therefore quite probable that these two famous Israelites acquired considerable knowledge of the Egyptian speech, and, further, we would like to have the gentleman explain how Moses, who was brought up as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, got along with his foster-mother all the days he likely lived at her home without a knowledge of her form of speech. Did she always have to speak to him through an interpreter? And when he had anything to say to her did she get his meaning in the same round-about way? It certainly must be perceived by all fair minded people that this Moses, who later became the great leader and law-giver of the Israelites, doubtless had a very good knowledge of the Egyptian language, and Aaron, too, who became the chief spokesman when Moses went before Pharaoh to demand the release of the Lord's chosen people from bondage, must have been thoroughly familiar with the king's form of speech or he could not have acted in the capacity

of a fluent speaker of the Egyptian. Although it is thus apparent that Moses and Aaron must have been familiar with that language as it was spoken, still that fact does not warrant a bald statement that they were able to write it also, yet it is very probable that both of these famous Israelites, and Moses in particular, had a good knowledge of many of the written forms.

But, further, we find that Joseph was 110 years old when he died in Egypt. He was seventeen years of age when he was sold as a slave by his brothers to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officers, and hence he lived in Egypt ninety-three years. Joseph governed in that land, with greater or less authority, for eighty years, and so must have been a servant or slave for thirteen years, during which time, one may safely conclude, his master took good care that Joseph learned the native speech, and this particularly in view of the fact that there was then no prospect that Joseph should ever have the least use for any language save the Egyptian. After he attained to a position of influence and power in the land of the Pharaohs, his duties left him no choice but to familiarize himself thoroughly with the speech of the natives, both spoken and written. It is a mere waste of time, in order to make it apparent that Joseph must have had this knowledge, to do more than call attention to the fact that it was this very man who, for a long period of time, was occupied wholly with Pharaoh's business, and for years ruled in Egypt as the prime minister of the king. If we doubt that Moses and Aaron had a knowledge of the Egyptian in its written form, we can not question, in reason at all, that Joseph could read, write, and speak it, and there were others, also, known

to us as Israelites who, without doubt, could do the same. In this connection we find that at the age of thirty years Joseph married the daughter of an Egyptian priest, and within four years after this union Manasseh and Ephraim were born—sons of a Hebrew father and an Egyptian mother, and in the home where those boys were born and reared the native speech of the land was used without the shadow of a question. When the children of Joseph arrived at a proper age to be placed in charge of instructors, their teachers would be Egyptians, and they would become familiar with the native language of their mother, and the adopted speech of their father, which was Egyptian. This would come to pass just as naturally as boys of present times acquire a knowledge of the language used by their parents and by their youthful associates. Being the sons of Pharaoh's prime minister, Joseph would likely make a correspondingly strong effort to fit them to occupy high prospective positions of state, and a good degree of proficiency in the writing of the language they would have to use, could not be omitted. When Ephraim was about six years of age, Jacob, and those of his descendants who were living with him in Caanan, went into Egypt; but as their occupation as shepherds was held in abomination by the Egyptians, the new arrivals were separated to themselves, and assigned the land of Goshen for their dwelling place, and under these circumstances the sons of Joseph had but little opportunity to learn the Hebrew through association with their Hebrew relatives.

When Joseph was about fifty-six years of age, and Manasseh and Ephraim were not far from twenty-five and twenty-three respectively,

Jacob died; but before he passed away he pronounced a blessing upon these two grandsons as we find recorded in the forty-eighth chapter of Genesis, and then sent word to his sons, and likely to all his descendants in Goshen—Gen. 49:1, 2—that he was going to hold a special service of prophecy, and acquaint them with what should befall them in their posterity in the distant future. When his people arrived in Jacob's presence, he proceeded with the service of blessing, and Joseph's turn coming at last, as the youngest of the brothers, he heard from his father's lips that remarkable prediction, remarkable and astonishing, too, it surely must have seemed to Joseph. It is recorded in Gen. 49:22-26. When Joseph was informed that his branches should "run over the wall," how could he fail to understand that at a future day some of his descendants should be separated from other people of the Israelitish stock, even as a wall separates what is within its enclosure from that which is outside the wall, and that communication between the people who remained in the home-land and those who went somewhere abroad should be cut off? How could he fail to interpret this part of his own blessing in conjunction with the blessings which had previously been pronounced on the heads of his sons and particularly upon Ephraim who was told that he, in his posterity, should become "a multitude of nations in the midst of the earth?" Gen. 48:19. He would know that, in the limited area of Caanan, a multitude of nations could not be established, and when he, Joseph, was told that his blessings prevailed above the blessings of his progenitors, even unto the bounds of the everlasting hills, he doubtless saw that the land

which should be occupied by his descendants was far larger than that wherein his father had dwelt before going down into Egypt, and he could scarcely fail to see that symbolic wall of separation grow to the magnitude of a mountain both in height and thickness, and something had to be done to meet the extraordinary prospective conditions of life when his posterity came face to face with them as realities, and how soon or at what time in the future his descendants should have to live under the prophetic condition of isolation, he may not have known, but circumstances around him would indicate that it was far distant.

Now, who can suppose for a moment that those glorious prophecies, which Joseph and his sons received at the hands of Jacob, were not written down that not one word of them should be forgotten? Their character as a practical covenant which the Almighty had entered into with Joseph and his sons, insured that they would be recorded as soon as the work could be done. Recorded, then, as they certainly would be, in which of the languages represented by principals at that meeting should the record be written? There was quite a large family altogether present, all deeply interested in the prophecies which Jacob had just uttered, and the blessings which he had pronounced along with them. Some of the members of this family understood the Hebrew, but they likely did not have a knowledge of the Egyptian in its written form. Other leading members of the family evidently were in a practical way quite familiar with the Egyptian language spoken or written but apparently had no extensive knowledge of the Hebrew one way or the other, and this latter class was represented by those most conspicuously

blessed by the Patriarch Jacob, and their interests in his prophetic utterances were bound to be jealously safeguarded, and we may be sure that these of the others were also. It is not reasonable to assume that Manasseh and Ephraim and that Egyptian mother would banish from their hearts their natural desires to have those glorious promises and blessings recorded in their familiar language—the Egyptian—which they all doubtless could read and understand, but instead of that be satisfied to have them written down in Hebrew only, of which at best they had apparently not more than superficial knowledge. On the contrary, is it not highly probable that in order to satisfy the wishes of all the parties concerned, one copy of Ja-

cob's prophecies was written in Hebrew and another copy in Egyptian? But if any are disposed to contest this sensible proposition, and claim that only one copy was needed in order to supply every requirement of the people, let it be Hebraic or Egyptian, in the form of speech used, then, since the Egyptian speaking members of Jacob's family were the ones most pre-eminently blessed on that occasion, why shall we not conclude that, under these circumstances, it was very natural that the sole copy should be written in Egyptian not in Hebrew, and that this plan was carried out, and from that copy Moses at a later date translated what he needed concerning this matter when he wrote the Pentateuch?

(To be continued.)

Serenade

By Josephine Spencer.

There is a river deep and wide,
'Tis known alone to me—
The jewelled ripples of its tide
Pulse restless as the sea.

Fair fleets of ships sail on its breast
Full masted to the wind,
Or anchor in dismantled rest
As blows it cold, or kind.

Smooth beds of verdure pave its
banks
Set thick with rainbow blooms,
One side a sunlit meadow flanks,
And one a forest's glooms.

Uncharted—upon no man's land
Hath it a place or part;
Its space within a dream is spanned,
Its source within my heart.

And thus—unknown, unseen, un-
guessed,
A sore, sweet mystery—
By master forces subtly pressed,
My love flows out to thee!