



Type: Magazine Article

A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price: Part 2: May We See Your Credentials?

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 71, No. 5 (May 1968), pp. 54–57

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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Illustrated by Dave Burton

A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price

Part 2. May We See Your Credentials?

By Dr. Hugh Nibley

● At this point of the journey some footsore tourists are asking their amateur guide why he insists on leading the party through the Dismal Swamp instead of taking them right to the Giant Redwoods. It is because the Book of Abraham criticism has never gotten out of the bog; we must become familiar with its depressing terrain because we and all the other critics of that book are still stuck in it. The situation today is virtually identical with that of 1912; even the presence on the scene of some of the original papyri, including those used by the Prophet in preparing the text of the Book of Abraham and the Facsimiles

with their commentaries, has not raised a single new question, though, as we shall see, it has solved some old ones.¹

If the knowledge of Egyptologists is greater today than it was in 1912, their authority is less, for it is doubtful whether any living scholar could or should ever hope to enjoy the enormous prestige of a Petrie, Meyer, Breasted, von Bissing, or Sayce. But the appeal is still as much as ever to authority, and that is why it is now high time that somebody ask the question that has never been raised by anybody yet, namely, just how well equipped Dr. Spalding's illustrious jury really

were, individually and collectively, to make a pronouncement on the Book of Abraham. That, after all, is the crux of the whole business, and it will remain so as long as it is assumed that whoever knows most about a subject must have all the answers. Bishop Spalding's boast was that he had made "an extensive inquiry among the scholars of the world," and had enlisted the services of "leading scholars throughout the civilized world," his work being thus "an anthology of opinions of authoritative scholars . . . judgments of the world's greatest Egyptologists."² At no time did the Mormons or anyone else ever chal-

lunge the right of the committee to its claims to learned preeminence. "I took no issue with the Egyptologists," wrote Dr. John A. Widtsoe. ". . . I shall not allow myself to be drawn into any discussion of the meaning of Egyptian hieroglyphics, which you have agreed to make clear to us."³

The big question of the authenticity of the Book of Abraham is one that must be broken down into many smaller questions, and the questions that will occur to various investigators differ greatly, depending on their various lines of approach. An Egyptologist will ask questions that would never occur to a layman, a Bible student will ask questions that one indifferent to the Bible would never think to ask, and a believer will ask questions that mean little or nothing to an unbeliever. Among such questions, that of the competence of any jury to judge of the inspiration of the Pearl of Great Price is entirely irrelevant. Whatever competence any such jury may have is bound to appear inevitably in the nature of the questions *they* ask and the answers they supply. But since in this particular case the board of experts asked no questions (!), and since the professional standing of its members turned out to be not merely the principal but the *only* support for the Spalding thesis, the question of their competence, no matter how impertinent or embarrassing it might be, cannot be avoided. It is the one question that should have been asked before all others, and it so happens that it is also the one question that nobody ever asked.

If "in a matter of this kind [as Spalding puts it] most of us must form our judgment from the opinions of competent experts," the question for all to keep in mind at all times is whether or not the experts have bridged the gap between our world and the world of Abraham. That gap may not be as wide today as it was half a century ago, but it is just as absolute. This is no paradox. Traveling in the "red rock country," one sometimes comes upon an abrupt canyon

with sheer walls hundreds of feet high, and must either turn back or seek to find the head of the canyon and go around it. This can make a trip to Canyonlands a very frustrating experience. It makes little difference whether the walls that drop off at our feet are 100 or 1,000 feet high, and it makes no difference at all whether the big gap is 50 feet wide or a mile across—in either case you are stopped cold.

So it is with the Book of Abraham. We either have the knowledge requisite to understanding it all the way or we do not, and we would be just as far from the mark in claiming such knowledge today as the scholars were in 1912. Knowing a lot is not enough: we have heard moving stories of wandering Arabs who have died of thirst in the night only a few feet from water. It makes no difference how far one has come or how near one may be to the water—he who has not gone all the way cannot drink. None have discoursed more eloquently than the Egyptologists themselves on their perennial predicament, which is that though they may be much nearer their goals than they once were, like the benighted Arab they have no means of knowing how much nearer or even whether they have been moving in the right direction or not. Their uncertainty is echoed in a remark of de Rouge: "Champollion had to contend all his life against lively and obstinate opposition. He died, and scholarship stood still for twenty-five years," for the great man's critics "did not even have the courage to profit by his discoveries."⁴ The whole history of Egyptology is, as Maspero observed from time to time, a warning against that peculiar overconfidence that is born of a safe and timid conformity. And it is doubtful if any other Egyptologist ever exemplified more fully the predicament of the specialist in that field than Professor S. A. B. Mercer.

As we have seen, the Bishop's right-hand man throughout the controversy was the "Reverend Professor C. A. B. Mercer [Spalding got the initials

wrong], Ph.D., Western Theological Seminary, Custodian Hibbard Collection Egyptian Reproductions." The 32-year-old Mercer, with his shiny new two-year-old Ph.D. degree from Munich, had just transferred from a seminary in Kansas to the one in Chicago, there to become "Professor of Hebrew and the Interpretation of the Old Testament."⁵ It was Mercer who, after the others had withdrawn, encouraged his superior to carry on: ". . . in this particular case I think you are right in following up what you have already done; and I shall be glad to help you as far as my time will permit. . . ."⁶

Mercer not only spearheaded the attack in 1912 but, interestingly enough, he is the one man who has returned to the fray in our generation, having written as late as 1953 confirming his position of 1912.⁷ At last report he was still going strong, and we wish him well, for he was not only a man of great courtesy and kindness but in 1956 sold his splendid Egyptian library, the fruit of a long lifetime of diligent collecting, to the BYU at a price that can only be described as generous. This has put us in possession not only of all of Dr. Mercer's published works, but also of nearly all the Egyptian sources he used in preparing them. Since then we have spent many hundreds of hours among Mercer's books marked with his own countless penciled annotations, and so have come to feel that we know him well, having acquired a very strong and clear impression of the method and depth of his scholarship. Fortunately we can leave all comments on these to authentic Egyptologists whom we quote below.

Of all Bishop Spalding's helpers, Dr. Mercer was by far the hardest on the Mormons. Had he taken any other position than that of absolute certainty of his own sufficiency and fierce and unrelenting denunciation of Joseph Smith, to whom he conceded not the slightest glimmer of sense or integrity, Dr. Mercer would not have been the legitimate target he is, or invited by way of rebuttal examination

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of his boasted competence, for never was there a man who was more sure of his scholarship, more wholeheartedly dedicated to the learned establishment as such. The young seminarist is quite intoxicated with the importance of being a recognized scholar; he never lets us forget that he is a scholar speaking with the authority of scholarship. Above all, he prides himself on competence as a linguist. “I speak as a linguist,” he wrote in 1912, “when I say that if Smith knew Egyptian and correctly interpreted the facsimiles which were submitted to me, then I don’t know a word of Egyptian. Any pupil of mine who would show such absolute ignorance of Egyptian as Smith does, could not possibly expect to get more than a zero in an examination in Egyptology.”⁸ “If he [Dr. Widtsoe] knew anything about linguistic work of the nature of hieroglyphics he would not ask such question, for any ancient linguist knows that the unanimous testimony of eight scholars is the same as that of eighty and eight.”⁹ Any linguist knows nothing of the sort, but what a production Dr. Mercer makes of it!

When in 1953 a zealous collector of anti-Mormon tidbits asked Professor Mercer whether he still maintained his position as of 1912/13, the Doctor replied by letter, “I am sure that my views on the subject have not changed, because the translation was so clear-cut.”¹⁰ Still harping on translation, the “clear-cut” translation—and nobody had translated a word! In dealing with the Mormons Mercer clings to the linguistic issue because it is there alone that he has the Mormons at a complete disadvantage. “This will be a purely literary and scientific test.”

“The animus evident . . . is purely because of linguistic, and not because of religious reasons. . . . the scholars felt that linguistically . . . the subject was not worth much of their valuable time. . . . They condemned it purely on the linguistic grounds,” and the Mormons deserve “a scorn which was due to the crudeness of the linguistic work of the Prophets,” etc.¹¹ “The translations were absolutely wrong in every detail,” Mercer had declared, and he should know, since all Egyptian documents “can be read with comparative ease.”¹²

The Mormons, whom Mercer dismisses as mere “laymen in things Egyptian,” need not feel too badly under the lash of his scorn, however, for Mercer’s own colleagues, including the foremost Egyptologists of the time, were not spared his withering rebukes, nay, even fellow members of the Spalding committee do not escape his two-edged sword of science and scholarship.

When the great Breasted, Mercer’s teacher, published his *Dawn of Conscience*, one of the freshest and most original works ever written about Egypt, Mercer, as editor and reviewer of the short-lived journal *Egyptian Religion*, could only report, “There is very little that is new revealed in this book,” and chided its author for “excessive use of superlatives . . . which cannot fail to irritate a bit, especially when some of the superlatives are not justifiable.”¹³ Mercer never explains why the superlatives are not justified, unless it is because true, sound, cautious scholars are never guilty of using superlatives. He objects to Breasted’s dating of an important document as “an example of too many assumptions

by him,” justifying his criticism not by contrary evidence but by the sage and learned platitude that “origins and borrowings are very difficult things to determine and establish.” He should have thought of that when he so lightly brushed the Facsimiles aside. Dr. Mercer cautions us that in reading the work of Breasted “the student must be on his guard against the results of an enthusiasm, legitimate in itself, but not always helpful in attempting to arrive at sound conclusions.” All very patronizing, very much the cautious scientist and scholar. He tells us that Breasted’s “‘messianism’ cannot be found in Egyptian texts no matter how sympathetically they may be studied and interpreted. Breasted has done his best to find it, but the reader may be left to judge of his own success.”¹⁴

Again, instead of doing any real work in showing where Breasted is wrong, Mercer leaves the decision with the reader—an odd procedure indeed for one who worships authority and merely tolerates the layman. As in his dealings with the Mormons a decade earlier, Mercer in his reviews in *Egyptian Religion* rarely gives the reader anything to go on but his opinion—but when it is his opinion against that of a giant like Breasted, what are we to think?

In another review Dr. Mercer criticized S. H. Hooke for employing exactly the same method in defense of “patternism” that Mercer himself had recommended in attacking the Pearl of Great Price: “After formulating his theory Hooke gets six scholars, experts in their own department of Oriental research, to try to illustrate or prove his theory.” This method he finds al-

together too "imaginative" and untrustworthy.¹⁵ But was it not Mercer himself who only a short time before had insisted that "the unanimous opinion of the scholars is unassailable," and that "the practical agreement of eleven admittedly competent Orientalists" should be final proof, and that "the unanimous testimony of eight scholars is the same as that of eighty and eight"? Speaking exactly as if he were attacking the Mormons, Mercer notes that Professor Blackmann in attempting to support "strikes a deadly blow at the pattern theory of the editor" by suggesting that "the original 'pattern' was not a product of Egypt but an importation thither."¹⁶ Yet Egyptian origin is not an essential condition to the pattern theory at all—Mercer has missed the point, but how familiar his scolding sounds! Shortly before this Mercer had dismissed in two sentences A. Jeremias's truly remarkable work, *Der Kosmos von Sumer*, with crushing finality: "Of course, Dr. Jeremias has his own special and peculiar ways of interpreting ancient cosmic ideas. . . ."¹⁷ Of course, indeed—that is just what made Jeremias a great scholar, but for Mercer it is the unpardonable sin of deviating from the respectable conventions of the establishment: no explanations are indicated; Mercer dismisses Jeremias with a magisterial wave of the hand.

He is even more patronizing in dealing with Arthur Weigall, who had been the inspector-general of antiquities for the Egyptian government since 1905, with an impressive list of important archaeological publications to his credit. "Weigall's academic preparation did not enable him to enter very deeply into more intricate problems of editing and translating texts and commenting upon them. . . . his lack of training in philology led him into serious difficulties."¹⁸ Always the language business. More serious is his casual dismissal of the work on Egyptian religion of one of the greatest of all Egyptologists, Hermann Junker: "But curiously enough," says Mercer, speaking of Junker's fundamental thesis, "he

believes he has found evidence to prove a primitive belief in one great world god. This to my mind shows a complete misunderstanding of the nature of primitive thought and understanding."¹⁹ Just where has the great Junker failed? ". . . his idea of a primitive universal god in ancient Egypt [is] an idea which really has no foundation in fact."²⁰

This is a very serious challenge indeed, but Dr. Mercer does not bother to show us what the real factual foundation is: against Junker's solid and original work he is content to place the opinions of contemporary anthropology.²¹ We may excuse him for thrusting aside W. E. Oesterley and T. H. Robinson's famous *Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament* as practically worthless;²² but when he chides the immortal A. Erman for negligence in his specialty we wonder if he may not be going too far: "Like many other Egyptologists who have written on the subject, Erman uses such terms as 'monotheism' in a very loose sense, without defining what he understands by 'monotheism,'"—though Erman had written a whole book on the subject. Mercer is good enough to explain that he believes in "modern, scientific monotheism," whatever that is.²³

The last of the auxiliary troops to rush to Dr. Spalding's assistance when he found himself entangled in the contradictory statements of the other

experts was Professor George A. Barton. And how does Dr. Mercer deal with Dr. Barton? Of his *Semitic and Hamitic Origins*, the Reverend Mercer writes: ". . . all such collections of deductions, possibilities and probabilities are doomed by nature to be superceded," and this particular book "contains too many fanciful as well as bold deductions for its destiny to be otherwise."²⁴ In dealing with Egypt in particular, according to Mercer, Dr. Barton "has very often fumbled very badly." "Throughout the book there are far too many hypotheses without adequate foundation . . . the reader must be on guard to check every statement, and especially all words and phrases in Egyptian, Coptic, etc. . . . as for French, German and English the misprints and errors are legion."²⁵ He recommends that any future edition of the book "should be rigorously revised," and "while for students of Semitic origins the book will be found of considerable value, when used with caution, the same cannot, however, be said of students of Egyptian origins."²⁶ As ever, Mercer plays up his role as that of super linguist and Egyptologist. Barton's worst offense, however, is that when he comes to treat the Sumerian flood story he does not even refer to Mercer's work on the subject; and though he mentions Mercer's own work on Babylonian religion, "he cannot have read the book which he so lightly brushes aside."²⁶ ○

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

¹⁵Even the astonishing disproportion between the bulk of the Book of Abraham and the brevity of the text from which Joseph Smith seems to have derived it was noted as long ago as 1915 by the last of the official Spalding supporters, E. G. Banks, in *The Literary Digest*, July 10, 1915, p. 66: ". . . the hieroglyphic inscription is very short, but Smith's translation of it covers thirty pages of printed matter."

¹⁶Quoted in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 691.

¹⁷*Era*, Vol. 16, p. 617.

¹⁸M. de Rouge, in *Bibliothèque Egyptologique*, Vol. 26, p. 228.

¹⁹For vital statistics, see the *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1 (Sept. 1913), No. 1, p. 3, and *Who's Who* (London), 1967.

²⁰Quoted in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 611.

²¹This letter, dated Feb. 19, 1953, has been circulated by LaMar Petersen along with his own letter to Dr. Mercer, dated Dec. 16, 1952. (BYU File M1268.)

²²*Era*, Vol. 16, p. 615.

²³*Era*, loc. cit., and pp. 455-56, 617; *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, p. 30.

²⁴See above, note 7.

²⁵All from the *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, pp. 7-11.

²⁶*Era*, Vol. 16, p. 612.

²⁷S. A. B. Mercer, in *Egyptian Religion*, Vol. 2 (1934), p. 70.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, Vol. 1 (1933), p. 84.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 38.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 75.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, Vol. 3 (1935), p. 64.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 65.

²¹Dr. Mercer has great confidence in his own capacity to see into the mind of the primitive: ". . . and just as the imagination of children is less restrained than that of grown-ups, so the imagination of primitive men was vastly more active than our own. So the men of Egypt saw heaven as an immense friendly cow standing over them. . . ." S. A. B. Mercer, *The Religion of Ancient Egypt* (London: Luzac, 1949), p. 21. In the margin of one of J. Cerny's works on the religion of the Old and Middle Kingdoms, Dr. Mercer has written one eloquent word: "Absurd!" In his own work, Mercer accepts without question the once fashionable but long-outmoded theory of animism as the key to the understanding of early Egyptian religion; *ibid.*, p. 299.

²²In *Egyptian Religion*, Vol. 3, p. 115.

²³*Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 160.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 160f.

²⁵*Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 161.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 162.