



Type: Magazine Article

A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price: Conclusion: Taking Stock

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 73, No. 5 (May 1970), pp. 82-94

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

Taking Stock

By Dr. Hugh Nibley

● “Look here upon this picture and on this”: The long discussion of the Follies of 1912 with which this series opened has turned out to be no idle sparring for time or waste of paper. Who would have thought that the pattern of 1968 could follow that of 1912 as closely as it did? Let us briefly summarize the situation as we found it to be in 1912.

At that time it was claimed that the pronouncements of five of the greatest scholars of all time had “completely demolished” all grounds for belief in the divine inspiration or historic authenticity of the Book of Abraham and, through it, the Book of Mormon. It turned out, however, that Bishop F. S. Spalding in gathering and manipulating the necessary evidence for his determined and devious campaign had (a) disqualified the Mormons from all participation in the discussion on the grounds that they were not professional Egyptologists, (b) sent special warnings and instructions to his experts that made it impossible for any of them to decide for Joseph Smith, (c) concealed all correspondence that did not support the verdict he desired, (d) given the learned jury to understand that the original Egyptian manuscripts were available, which they were not, and (e) said that Mormons claimed them to be the unique autographic writing and sketching of Abraham—which they did not, (f) announced to the world that Joseph Smith was being tested on linguistic ground alone, specifically as a translator, though none of his experts ventured to translate a word of the documents submitted, and (g) rested his case on the “complete agreement” of the scholars, who agreed on nothing save that the Book of Abraham was a hoax.

The experts (a) did not agree among themselves at all when they spoke without collusion; (b) with the exception of Breasted, they wrote only brief and contemptuous notes, though it was claimed that they had given the documents “careful consideration”; (c) they admitted that they were hasty and ill-tempered, since they at no time

considered anything of Joseph Smith’s worth any serious attention at all; (d) they translated nothing and produced none of the “identical” documents, which, according to them, were available in countless numbers and proved Joseph Smith’s interpretations a fraud. They should have done much better than they did, since they had everything their own way, being free to choose for interpretation and comment whatever was easiest and most obvious, and to pass by in complete silence the many formidable problems presented by the three facsimiles. Those Mormons who ventured a few polite and diffident questions about the consistency of the criticisms or the completeness of the evidence instantly called down upon their heads the Jovian bolts of the *New York Times*, accusing them of “reviling scholars and scholarship.” A safer set-up for the critics of Joseph Smith could not be imagined. And yet it was they and not the Mormons who insisted on calling off the whole show just when it was getting interesting. It was not a very edifying performance.

The project of 1968 may have been carried out with more sophistication than that of 1912, but in the last analysis the demonstration rested more than ever before on an all-out appeal to authority. If anything, the public today is more prone than ever to accede to the pressure of official persuasion and more easily overawed by the mystique of sciences that have become specialized to the point of total incomprehensibility. This can be seen in the declaration of half a dozen intellectuals that after a lifetime of belief they have finally and suddenly become convinced by the authority of one Egyptologist that Joseph Smith was a fraud. The remarkable thing is that these people would be outraged at the suggestion that they accept any demonstration whatever against the Prophet by experts in their *own* fields without thoroughly examining the evidence for themselves. Yet it is with an audible sigh of relief that they commit their brains and their immortal souls into

the hands of a young man recently out of graduate school, the lone practitioner of a discipline of which they know nothing. Rustics and adolescents might be excused for being bowled over by the sheer majesty of unassailable authority, but those thinking people must have been desperately determined to get something against Joseph Smith, who, while unable to accept the unanimous opinion of five of the greatest scholars of the past, rested the most important decision of their lives on the purely intuitive deduction of a single scholar whose credentials they made no effort to examine.

Since the basic charges against Joseph Smith emerging from the study of the newly found papyri have not been discussed in the pages of the *Era*, it may be well to review them briefly here. Two documents of the Joseph Smith Papyri were identified and translated in 1967/8, the one comprising sections from the Book of the Dead, the other being the much rarer but still not unknown “Sen-sen” Papyrus or “Book of Breathings.” Neither of these texts contained the same reading matter as the Book of Abraham, but who said they should? A single scholar announced that the text of the Book of Abraham was supposed to be a translation of the “Sen-sen” Papyrus, and, since it was not, “Abraham” was a hoax. It is on this claim alone that announcements have gone forth to the press that the fraudulence of the Pearl of Great Price has at last been established.

What supports the idea that the Book of Abraham was thought by Joseph Smith to be a translation of the Breathing Certificate? Two things: first, that the “Breathing text” was originally adjoined to Facsimile 1 on the same strip of papyrus, and second, that the symbols from the “Breathing text” are interpreted bit by bit in a writing known as “the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar” in which the interpretation turns out to be the same as the text of the English Book of Abraham. It looks like an open-and-shut case, but only if one is determined

to look no further. The demonstration was simply a matter of matching up the edges of two pieces of papyrus and of matching up certain symbols (whether one could read them or not made no difference whatever) with passages from the English Book of Abraham. That the latter cannot possibly be a translation of the symbols has been brilliantly apparent to everyone who has ever bothered to compare them—and they are already compared for our convenience in the “Alphabet and Grammar.” No slightest knowledge of Egyptian is necessary to convince anybody that when a symbol as brief as CAT is “translated” by an involved paragraph of over one hundred words, we are not dealing with a “translation” in any accepted sense of the word. If it isn’t a translation, what is it? Looking closer we soon discover that the text of the Book of Abraham in the “Alphabet and Grammar” has simply been copied down without alteration or hesitation, making it perfectly clear that that translation was completed *before* it was ever set down beside the characters from the “Sen-sen” Papyrus, and that what we have before us in the “Alphabet and Grammar” does *not* represent an attempt at translation. We notice further that nothing in the “Alphabet and Grammar” is in the handwriting of Joseph Smith, and that strangely enough a number of different handwritings are involved—showing that something was going on which we do not understand today. We also learn that the “Alphabet and Grammar” was never given out as an official or inspired document, was never meant for publication, never placed before the Church for approval, never discussed for the record, never explained to the world as the facsimiles were. Did Joseph Smith *really* translate the Book of Abraham from those symbols? Of course not! Well then, what is wrong? What is wrong, according to one expert, is that he *thought* he was translating them. And how does the expert know that? Before going in for mind reading, it might be well to make a closer examination of the whole problem. Whenever scholars have a suspected ancient document to test, as Friedrich Blass says, the *first* thing to do is to examine the *content* of the document and see if it fits into the ancient setting to which it is ascribed. This is exactly what our experts have *not* done. The question that constantly comes to mind as one considers their determined assaults on the Pearl of Great Price is, *Why don't they ever pour their water on the fire?*

The Mormons are deeply concerned only with what they accept as scripture. Non-Mormons, raised in the tra-

dition of the Infallible Bible, are unable to conceive of a man's being a prophet and at the same time a fallible mortal; they persist in thinking as they did in 1912 that the discovery of any slightest flaw in Joseph Smith's character or his work must necessarily bring the whole structure of Mormonism down in ruins. It isn't that way at all: all men are subject to vanity, said Joseph Smith, and all must be allowed a generous margin of error to be themselves. But there *are* points on which no such freedom is allowed; there are writings that the Mormons accept as inspired scriptures, and these include the explanations to the facsimiles in the Book of Abraham. Why have not the Egyptologists concentrated on them? Naturally in 1968 priority went to the newly found papyri, which had never been translated and about which many people were understandably curious and impatient. But when it soon became apparent that those documents did not contain any of the text of the Book of Abraham as we have it, it was time for the Egyptologists, having done their work and done it well, either to bow out of the scene or to go on to the more important and essential problems of the facsimiles. All but one wisely chose the former course, recognizing that it was not their business as Egyptologists to pass judgment on matters of divine inspiration or revelation. The one exception did not hesitate to convert his doctoral gown into the starry robe of the clairvoyant and announce that Joseph Smith *thought* the papyri on hand contained the text of the Book of Abraham, which makes him both deceived and a deceiver. On this highly intuitive conclusion rests the whole case against Joseph Smith.

Still, 1968 saw definite progress over 1912. For one thing, more is known now about the original documents, which display a measure of originality and oddity that the scholars of 1912 categorically refused to recognize, and for which the Mormons cannot be held wholly responsible. It is now generally conceded, as was not the case in 1912, that Egyptian documents can sometimes bear a number of different interpretations at once, all being valid, and that one and the same document can be at one and the same time both highly stylized and highly personalized, conventional and yet unique, to suit a particular purpose or occasion. It is also generally believed now, as it was not in 1912, that there really was an Abraham. On such points the authorities of 1912 were convinced that the final word had been spoken. But they were wrong—the door is still wide open.

The Open Door: The decision of the scholars to avoid the facsimiles and their explanation was dictated by caution and experience. By choosing their own fires to fight, they remain masters of the situation. Any attack on the facsimiles, on the other hand, promptly turns into a stunning demonstration of the limitations of Egyptology. The fact is, as we shall soon see, that nothing is known about documents of this type, to say nothing of these particular documents, each of which is unique in a number of essential points. Still worse are the disturbing number of instances in which Joseph Smith's supposedly wild guesses happen to have anticipated the best knowledge of the Egyptologists. This is strikingly brought home in the case of Facsimile No. 2.

In the mid-1880s Professor Samuel Birch of Oxford gathered together every example he could locate of those round “hypocephali” of which Facsimile No. 2 is a good example. His project called for the collaboration of all interested Egyptologists throughout the world in an attempt to come to some agreement as to what these peculiar objects represented. The Joseph Smith hypocephalus was not among those studied, and the work went forward happily uninhibited by any reference whatever to it or to the Prophet. So it came about that when certain eminent Egyptologists 28 years later found themselves confronted by Joseph Smith's interpretation of Facsimile No. 2 and were asked to give an opinion of it, they had their work already done for them. All any of them had to do was to point to the impressive study of 1884 and its well-publicized results, which were well known to all of them, and say, “Here, my friends, you have the answer. This is what a hypocephalus is really about!” How did it happen, then, that *none* of the experts of 1912 so much as mentioned Dr. Birch's model study and its enlightening results? Can it possibly be because the findings of 1884 were in surprising agreement on every main point with Joseph Smith's interpretation of *his* hypocephalus? We have yet to discuss Facsimile No. 2, and here we are getting ahead of the story; but also we may have here an explanation of why the experts do not choose to pour their water on the fire. It only burns more brightly when they do.

The last Egyptologist to leave the scene in 1968 banged the door resolutely behind him. But the catch did not hold; it was very weak. The conclusion that Joseph Smith was wrong because he thought that the “Sen-sen” Papyrus actually contained the full text of the Book of Abraham rests on

exceedingly indirect and dubious evidence. What the "Breathing Certificate" contains is one question, and it has been partially answered. What its contents have to do with the Book of Abraham is a very different question, which cannot be answered by a knowledge of Egyptian alone. The "Book of Breathings" has been studied for many years and by many scholars. To this day, the conclusions reached by de Horrak, Brugsch, de Rougé, Chabas, and others about a century ago still hold: (1) though the "Sen-Sen" Book is easy to translate, nobody can even begin to understand it; (2) it presents truly astonishing affinities to certain passages and teachings of both the Old and New Testaments; (3) its ideas and expressions cannot be confined to any one period of Egyptian history; (4) it remains a complete enigma.

It is imperative, even if it is somewhat embarrassing, to keep in mind that the scholars of 1968 are quite as human as those of 1912. They still cannot speak of Joseph Smith but what their voices shake with emotion, and they still change the subject with awkward haste whenever he is mentioned. More important, they are still constitutionally incapable of conceiving even for a moment and by the wildest stretch of the imagination that he might be right. The history of education makes it clear at every step that *all* scholarship has a religious orientation—the atheism of Eduard Meyer was just as charged with religious emotion as were the oddly varied but powerfully conditioned opinions of Mercer, Sayce, or von Bissing. It is sheer nonsense to pretend that one's scholarly opinions rest on an intellectual plane aloof from any religious influences. A sincere attempt to maintain such an impossible posture would require at the very least that one leave all questions of revelation and inspiration strictly out of the discussion of Joseph Smith's writings, which calls for a degree of detachment that none of the critics, in 1912 or 1968, was ever able to achieve.

The Big Picture and the Little Picture: It is important to specialize. It is sound professional policy to deal with something that nobody else understands. But there are natural limits to specialization: inevitably one reaches the point at which the study of a single star cannot be pursued further until one has found out about a lot of other stars. The little picture starts expanding into a big picture, and we soon discover that without the big picture the little one cannot be understood at all. In the study of the ancient world the big picture, long ignored by scholars, has been coming into its own in recent years. For

generations students worked with meticulous care on their little specialized pictures in the confident hope that in the end each little piece would fit together with others to give a larger and clearer picture of the world and all that's in it. The idea worked: the separate studies did show a tendency to fit together and fall into patterns. Instead of gratifying the scholars, however, this alarmed most of them, fearful of the dissolution of sacred departmental bounds. Within the limits of his specialty the expert is lord and master; small wonder if he treasures and defends those limits.

As we see it, the main issue all along between the Latter-day Saints and the learned has been that of "the Big Picture" versus "the Little Picture." The best chance of catching Joseph Smith or anybody else off base is to detect him in some slip visible only to the eagle eye of the specialist with a microscope. That is perfectly legitimate, of course, provided the specialist lets the rest of us look through his microscope and provided he himself knows just what he is seeing. On both scores the Egyptologists have been deficient. The rest of us don't know how to operate the microscope—we will have to take their word for what they see; and as to their understanding and interpretation of it, well, who are we to judge what we can't even see? Professor Breasted was able to dismiss the whole Book of Abraham with devastating finality by simply observing that the Egyptians were polytheists and the Jews monotheists; within a limited framework this is so, and no picture was large enough to hold both systems in 1912—but today it is a different story, and the sweeping declaration of Breasted gives a completely distorted image which, ironically enough, the Book of Abraham corrects. Again, the idea of Abraham sitting on Pharaoh's throne (Facsimile No. 3) caused the experts to roar with laughter in 1912—since when does Pharaoh, of all people, allow others to sit on his very own throne? Ever since prehistoric times is the answer now. Up until this very writing the present author had never thought to connect the Book of Abraham with a lengthy study published by him in the *Classic Journal* 25 years ago, in which he cited a dozen instances in which nonroyal individuals were permitted to sit on kingly thrones during the observance of certain rites common to many ancient civilizations, including that of Egypt. Today the principal emphasis in studies of Egyptian and Canaanitish religion is on those very rites, with special attention to the honored (and usually doomed)

guest on the king's throne. Here is a "Big Picture" of which no one dreamed in 1912.

How much Egyptology depends on the Big Picture, and how reluctant most Egyptologists are to recognize it, is strikingly illustrated in Professor de Buck's work on Egyptian dramatic texts. Of one such text he wrote, "... a large part of this interesting text is utterly unintelligible. The first complete lines tell a clear, coherent story, but after a few lines the drift of the narrative is completely lost." The meaningless text is quite intact, however—what is wrong? De Buck explains: "This text . . . belongs to a literary genre of which only a very few examples are known to us, viz., the so-called dramatic texts." With no master-plan to follow, the great de Buck can produce only such a translation as he describes as "in large part . . . little more than incoherent words and disjointed phrases."¹ Professor de Buck was able to spot this strange and puzzling text only because it fitted into a larger category of papyri first recognized by the learned and imaginative Sethe. It was also de Buck who while editing the Coffin Texts recognized Spell 312 as substantially the same writing as Chapter 78 of the Book of the Dead, both being derived from an older lost dramatic text of considerable importance. The foremost American authorities on the Book of the Dead have passed over Chapter 78 time and again without seeing anything more in it than Budge saw more than sixty years ago, and as far as they were concerned the melodrama of the Hawk to the Rescue might have gone undiscovered for centuries. For Egyptologists in general, as specialists' specialists, have always been suspicious of anything resembling a Big Picture, preferring the safe method of Professor Battiscombe Gunn, who insisted on treating every Egyptian text as a complete, self-contained, independent, isolated entity.

Of course there is something to be said for tending strictly to the day's assignment; one can overdo the Big Picture, as amateurs and cranks are liable to do. But the fact remains that the Great Egyptologists have all been those who were willing to venture farther than other men and risk the censure of their colleagues in a quest for wider vistas and associations. The safe conservative majority still prefer to explain the whole magnificent complex of Egyptian civilization as a fortuitous and haphazard accumulation of junk, and Egyptian religion as an amalgamation of cult objects thrown together from countless local shrines where their original primitive significance had

been forgotten long before the fusion. Even though the Egyptians were able to impose on the structure a wonderful consistency and uniformity of style while at the same time achieving a technical skill that fills us with awe, still, most Egyptologists insist on seeing in the whole stunning performance only a majestic facade with nothing behind it. Because of this attitude, according to Bleeker in his recent study of Egyptian festivals, Egyptologists "have not succeeded in presenting a satisfactory description of ancient religion. Evidently, they have not asked themselves what their approach to this religion ought to be. They have obviously studied this ancient religion from the viewpoint of a modern European"—or worse still, of the modern American scientist with the evolutionary chip on his shoulder.

Blindness to larger contexts is a constitutional defect of human thinking imposed by the painful necessity of being able to concentrate on only one thing at a time. We forget as we virtuously concentrate on that one thing that hundreds of other things are going on at the same time and on every side of us, things that are just as important as the object of our study and that are all interconnected in ways that we cannot even guess. Sad to say, our picture of the world to the degree to which it has that neatness, precision, and finality so coveted by scholarship is a false one. I once studied with a famous professor who declared that he deliberately avoided the study of any literature east of Greece, lest the new vision destroy the architectonic perfection of his own celebrated construction of the Greek mind. His picture of that mind was immensely impressive but, I strongly suspect, completely misleading.

It is against the wider background of religious traditions and ceremonies common to most of the Ancient East that the facsimiles in the Book of Abraham begin to make real sense, and that Joseph Smith's explanation of them scores one bull's-eye after another. Interestingly enough, it was the jury of 1912 that insisted on forcing the Big Picture on the attention of the world. For there was just one thing on which they all agreed regarding the facsimiles, one thing alone on which none of them hesitated for a moment to speak with absolute certainty and finality: Whatever the facsimiles might be, or whatever they might mean, according to this verdict, they could not possibly have anything whatever to do with Abraham. By bringing Abraham into the picture so forcefully, they pushed out the walls to take in more territory than their specialties warranted. It was safe

enough for them to do that then, for they all considered the biblical Abraham to be a mere myth and some of them had written books and articles to prove it. But now that Abraham has become a real person, we are obliged to test the facsimiles in the light of the extensive archaeological and literary materials that are today bringing to life the man and the world in which he lived.

This takes us beyond the range of the Egyptologists and breaks their monopoly. They take comfort in the proposition that if Joseph Smith can be debunked in any one area, it makes no difference what evidence might seem to support his position in another. That argument is valid, however, only if the disclosures in the one area have been complete and exhaustive, which has been anything but the case. Here the experience of 1912 should teach us a lesson. Never were men more confident that enough was known by them on one point at least to prove Joseph Smith hopelessly and irredeemably wrong; satisfied with that, they considered the problem solved. Yet it was precisely on that one point, the possibility of ties between Abraham and the facsimiles, that their position was weakest, since, as it turned out later, they knew virtually nothing at all either about Abraham or the facsimiles. The same tendency to settle for premature conclusions was apparent in 1968. For example, when the experts offer a possible or plausible explanation of some figure in the facsimiles, e.g., a crocodile or a bird, they invariably put forward their explanation as the one possible answer, excluding all others. Egyptologists of all people should be the first to acknowledge that one possible explanation of a bird, while perfectly acceptable, by no means excludes from the Egyptian mind other equally valid explanations of the same object.

To avoid looking seriously into the countless possible explanations of this or that figure, the Egyptologist today can shrug his shoulders and declare with some impatience that "of course, anybody who is determined to do so can make out a case for Joseph Smith or anything else." Whether this is true or not (and we seriously doubt it), the man who makes such a statement has painted himself into a corner; for as long as one can make out a case, no matter how flimsy, for Joseph Smith, the case *against* him cannot be considered closed. The writer's own purpose in snooping around in the stacks has been simply to throw out suggestions and hint at possibilities. Not for a moment does he insist that any of his own explanation, e.g., of the figures



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in Facsimile No. 1, is correct. It is enough that an explanation is conceivable, enough to show that many possibilities remain to be considered, to keep the door open. Until far more work has been done, the idea of discrediting Joseph Smith on the strength of one completely demonstrated point must yield to the opposite reasoning: Whenever any evidence favors the Book of Abraham, conflicting evidence may be discounted until further investigation, since the chances of such agreement are much rarer than the almost unlimited possibilities of disagreement.

We frankly prefer the Big Picture to the single-shot solution, having found it to be far more foolproof than any little picture. Composed as it is of thousands of little images, the big one can easily dispense with large numbers of them without suffering substantially. It is a huge overall sort of thing, supported by great masses of evidence, but nonetheless presenting a clear and distinct image. No one can be sure of a little picture, on the other hand; at any moment some new discovery from some unexpected direction may wipe it out. Let us take a brief distant view of the Big Picture of Abraham that is just beginning to emerge from the fog. Here is a long-forgotten body of apocryphal stories about the Patriarch, the oldest and most important being of very recent publication—and neither this author nor any of his colleagues had ever heard of them before 1968! We read of desperate people seeking security in a world of drought and famine by rushing to the supplication of idols. We read of their sordidly materialistic civilization, their greed, meanness, and inhospitality. We read of their horrible sacrificial rites, of the offering up of their children to idols. We read of their great ceremonial assemblies at huge ritual complexes, of the royal victims offered, of princesses compelled to compromise their virtue or suffer death. We read of kings insecure on their thrones and determined to establish and retain a royal line, seeing their worst enemy and opponent in Abraham. We read of constant tension between matriarchal and patriarchal traditions; of a king who coveted priestly authority above all things and tried to buy it from Abraham; of hungry migrants driven from place to place and crisis to crisis; of rites and ordinances all directed to combatting an all-pervading drought and assuring the fertility of the land and prestige of the king. We read of Egypt in Canaan and Canaan in Egypt, culturally, politically, and especially religiously. We read of a peculiar altar built for the sacrificing of Abraham, of how he prayed for deliverance and at the last

moment was rescued by an angel, who accomplished his mission by smiting the assembly with a disastrous earthquake. We read of the strange humiliation and conversion of the king, and of Abraham's yet stranger refusal to let him share in his priestly functions. We read of kings and princes doing obeisance to Abraham, clad in royal insignia at the behest of the king, who shortly before had tried to put him to death. We also read of Isaac and Sarah going through much the same experience as did Abraham, placed upon the altar or the lion-couch, praying in a single voice with Abraham for deliverance, saved at the last moment by an angel.

The chorus of voices from the East is surprisingly joined by another from the West, a mass of classical lore all going back to Minoan and Mycenaean times. It depicts the same distracted world as that of the Abraham legends, the same desperate, famine-ridden people seeking to stem the all-pervading drought and make the waters flow by the same great public ceremonies; it tells us of that strange breed of kings who tried to put their noble guests to a ritual death on cunningly devised altars in order to save their own lives and restore fertility to their afflicted lands; it tells us how the scheme failed when a noble, suffering, godlike, traveling stranger turned the tables and was miraculously delivered from the altar at the last moment, while the officiating priest of the king himself paid the sacrificial price. Fittingly, these old stories all point to Egypt as the scene and Busiris and Heracles as the actors in the primal version of this strange drama, Heracles being the standard substitute for any suffering hero whose real name was forgotten. Vital to the understanding of such traditions is the now recognized interplay of ritual and history in the ancient world, where great ritual events were major historic milestones and typical historical events were duly ritualized. This means that there can be no objection to the picture of Abraham on the altar as an authentic stereotype; and indeed, the Book of Abraham beats us to the punch when it explains that Abraham was by no means the only noble victim to suffer ritual death on that peculiar lion-shaped altar. The legends that recall the same situation, therefore, offer powerful confirmation of the event.

Each of the vignettes that have just flashed by us—a very incomplete list indeed—has a double link, one with the historical and archaeological record indicating that there was something behind it, and the other with the Book of Abraham. What more do you want? Joseph Smith was certainly on

the track of something. The newer studies of Abraham are much concerned with his Asiatic background and with the mysterious kings of Genesis 14. Most mysterious of all is his archrival, the enigmatic Nimrod whom the legends identify with Pharaoh or the father of a Pharaoh and with an Asiatic upstart king who seized the throne of Egypt. There were a number of such kings, and the name of Nimrod is closely tied with certain Asiatic or Libyan dynasties that ruled in Egypt, the most illustrious of the line being that Shishaq I, who reintroduced human sacrifice in Egypt and had particularly close family and other ties with Israel. He was the son and the father of a Nimrod, and both names occur frequently. The only time the name of Abraham has ever turned up in an Egyptian document was when Breasted and others spotted it on a stele of Shishaq I, found in Palestine. The identity of the name has been questioned, of course, but never disproven. In the light of such things one can only ask whether it is pure accident that the name of Shishaq (or Sheshonq) occurs on Facsimile No. 2; if there was ever an Egyptian family in which one would expect the name of Abraham to be remembered, it would surely be that of the Sheshonqids. The presence of writings attributed to Abraham in the hands of the Sheshonq family is in itself by no means an unlikely situation, but of course absolutely nothing has been proven as yet. That is just the point: wherever we look the Big Picture stretches out, a huge, dim patchwork sprawl of history and legend awaiting the explorer of future generations. Far beyond our scope or grasp, it is enough at the present moment to show that it is *there*.

There are those who deplore the study of such things as "esoteric" and "exotic." By very definition the unknown is always exotic and the little-known is always esoteric; the terms are relative—to the departmental philosopher even Latin may be esoteric and Greek positively exotic. Now the office and calling of scholarship and science is to investigate the unknown, and people who engage in such work are not ashamed of admitting that it intrigues them—it is exciting and even romantic stuff; the motion is always away from the commonplace and familiar to the strange and wonderful. The established academician with his tried-and-tested platitudes and truisms is welcomed to his world of preaching and posturing, but the greatest appeal of the gospel in every age has been that it is frankly wonderful—one glorious surprise after another.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price is the way they knocked the walls out of the narrow religious edifice of Western Man of the early nineteenth century. Without them Mormonism might well be charged, as it has been, with being nothing but a segment of a narrow isolated sub-section of Protestant Christianity. With them, it breaks into the Big Picture in the grand manner, for while one of these books takes us as far away in time and place as it is possible to get in human history, showing God's dealings as it were with men of another world, the other by choosing an Egyptian provenance cuts for us the largest possible slice of the religious experience of the race.

O, ye of little knowledge!—The trouble with the little picture is that one can never be sure of it. It is outlined by the areas that surround it, and if one ignores them, the lapidary perfection of the small picture is little more than a glorified doodling. "The case at issue," writes the most helpful of the critics of 1968, is "what are the facsimiles?" And indeed, until we know exactly what the facsimiles are, it makes no difference what we may think Joseph Smith *thought* they were. The question can be answered at various levels, and any number of *partial* answers are possible. That is typical of Egyptian questions, as Professor Bleeker shows at length in his new book on the festivals. Here are some points he makes:

(1) An understanding of Egyptian religion can best be achieved through the study of the festivals, since these supply us with the abundance of documents we need. (P. 141.)

(2) These documents, however, are only pictures, for which no written explanations are available, aside from very brief labels, for "the Egyptian . . . felt no need to explain them. . . ." (P. 142.)

(3) Accordingly, in spite of our monumental compilations of pictures and texts, "extremely few facts are known about the festivals of even the well-known gods." (P. 33.) The Egyptologist must be reconciled to the fact that "there will always be gaps in his knowledge and that his insight will always prove inadequate. For the data with which he is working are scanty, uninformative, and sometimes extremely difficult to explain." (P. 1.)

(4) Hence the usual practice has been for the Egyptologist simply to describe what he sees and let it go at that: "There has yet to be written a critical analysis of the fragmentary data and a satisfactory interpretation of these ceremonies [including that

baffling business on the lion-couch, incidentally!]. . . . As a rule, the authors . . . are content with a factual description bereft of any thoroughgoing explanation." (P. 94.) Most Egyptologists, in fact, pride themselves on sticking to purely descriptive observations and avoiding the pitfalls of speculation.

(5) But that gets them nowhere: "It is meaningless to collect data," says Bleeker, without asking "what did the Egyptians believe?" (P. 141.) There is no escaping it: "One must learn to think as an Egyptian in order to understand his religion [p. 142]. . . . One must learn to think Egyptian" (p. 1). But this leaves us all in a dilemma: How does one go about learning to think Egyptian, and how does one know when one has succeeded? Living teachers we have none; we can only learn to think Egyptian by a thorough understanding of the Egyptian books, which of course cannot be understood until we *first* know how to think Egyptian. Alexander M. Stephen spent long years among the Hopis and in the end admitted that he had never been able to so much as peep under the blanket of Hopi religious thought. Even if an Egyptologist were to fly through time and live among the ancient Egyptians, we would still have no guarantee of his capacity to "think Egyptian." It is impertinent to claim mastery of a mode of thought when no control exists to confirm or refute our claims.

Now there are great bodies of Egyptian religious texts, like the Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts, and there are also huge albums of pictures, like the Medinet Habu reliefs or the vignettes from the Book of the Dead, and there can be no doubt that some of these texts go together. But since they are not *found* together, we can only guess which goes with which. We cannot prove, for example, that the texts we cited to illustrate the lion-couch scene really belong to it; but neither can anyone prove the opposite in the present state of our knowledge.

So the Egyptologists in confining themselves to purely descriptive activities are doing the safe thing. But no science is content with mere description, and the more descriptive sciences have hit upon a way of making up for their deficiencies. It is showmanship—what would any learned profession be without it? The scholars of 1912 played a shrewd game when they conducted the public as it were into the awesome recesses of the Egyptian Museum and there, pointing with mute eloquence to a lot of things that looked something like the facsimiles, let the world draw its own conclusions, that these things in some mysterious way



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proved Joseph Smith a fraud. The main purpose of the expedition was to silence criticism; you must admit that the Egyptian Collection for sheer mass and charge is intimidating to a layman, an overpowering demonstration of the boundless accomplishments of science. The visitor is embarrassed by the riches that surround him and made crushingly aware of his own ignorance. And when a tall, dignified man bustles through the halls with a paper in his hand, he can only whisper with religious awe to whoever is with him, "There goes the Curator, the Man Who Knows!" And right here we have the crux of the matter, which is that the curator does not know. Let us refer again to the festival reliefs, the most numerous and impressive objects ever to come under the surveillance of a curator. Nothing is more familiar to the Egyptologist than these wonderful scenes of offering and presentation repeated over and over again hundreds of times. Yet Professor Bleeker assures us that no real explanation of them, ancient or modern, is available, that all we shall ever know about them is what we can guess by looking at the mute pictures themselves—"a lock without

a key." (Pp. 16-18, 104, 144.)

It would appear that the experts of 1912 did not know enough to suspect the limitations that crowded them on every side. Knowing nothing, they thought they knew everything, and in a way they did. For how can a man be charged with ignorance who knows all that is known, and hence all that there is to be known, on a subject? The rock upon which scholarship builds its house is that maxim dear to the heart of A. E. Housman: "Among the blind a one-eyed man is king!" The Egyptologist is in the enviable position of being able to say with stately simplicity, when confronted by a word or sentence he cannot read, "It cannot be read," and retire from the scene with enhanced rather than damaged prestige.

As we pass through the hallowed halls of the museum, avidly reading the labels on everything, we begin to feel a vague sense of annoyance with the little tags and snippets of information that are being handed out to us. These prim little inscriptions rarely do more than describe what we can see for ourselves. As our feet become hotter and our enthusiasm cooler, we wonder if Bleeker was not right when

he said that it is meaningless merely to collect data and describe things. Even the evolutionary rule doesn't explain very much in Egypt: "It is doubtful," wrote Bleeker, "whether there is any point in inquiring into the development of ancient Egyptian thought, as Breasted in particular has done" (p. 8), the trouble with that being that one simply reconstructs the past according to one's preordained pattern. The tags and labels in the museum, like those hypnotic—nay, stupefying—captions to the pictures in nature and travel magazines, impart an air of intimate knowledge (few suspect how often they are totally inaccurate!), and seem designed to indicate with a few modest words the boundless treasures that repose under the lid. But don't be fooled: the reason they tell us so little is simply that they have no more to tell. "The great voids and flaws in the tenuous fabric of our knowledge," writes Paul Weiss, are "now covered by illusive verbal wrappings, which insinuate knowledge when there is none."³

From the museum we turn to the "Sen-sen" Papyrus. What are we told about it? Again the familiar tags and

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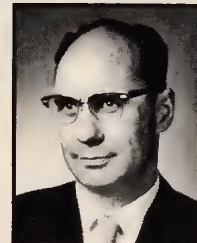


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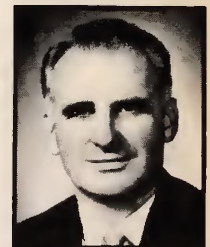
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snippets: The lady's name refers to the Theban moon-god, son of Amon and Nut; Amon-Re, king of the gods, is the chief deity of the great Temple of Karnak at Thebes; Min Bull-of-his-Mother is a common epithet of the fertility god Min; Khons the Governor is an epithet of Khons; "justified" is the usual epithet placed after the name of a deceased person; the title Osiris is given to the deceased in all mortuary texts after about 2200 B.C.; Re is the sun god. Osiris joins him in his daily circuit around the earth; Nut is the sky goddess, sister and wife of Geb; natron was used by the Egyptians instead of soap. . . . And so on and so on. It is all in the handbook, as routine and predictable as a knee jerk, the Approved School Solution that leaves us none the wiser, "factual description bereft of any thoroughgoing explanation," as Bleeker puts it. If we are not given anything of solid and arresting value, it is because there is nothing of that kind to give. If there is any reality behind the facsimiles, Egyptology has yet to discover it.

The last page of the latest and one of the best of Egyptian grammars (de Buck's) warns the student that Egyptian cultic texts are full of errors, due to the process of transmission, but what is worse, that "even where the translation is assured, the content remains for us a sealed book." At the same time, the latest studies of the best-known and best-documented Egyptian rites—the Opening of the Mouth (Otto), the Heb Sed (Bleeker), and the royal sacrifices (Derchain)—all insist with great emphasis that, contrary to what has always been assumed, virtually nothing is known about any of these rites or in all probability ever will be known. Since the matter of our three facsimiles is undeniably related to these rites, since the categories to which these scenes belong (lion-couch, hypocephalus, and presentation) have never been carefully studied, and since the specific place of each of the three scenes within its category has never been examined, it is nothing short of chicanery for anyone to pretend that he knows what the facsimiles are about. It is perfectly legitimate to speculate and guess about these things, but not to pontificate about them—not for anyone.

At all times the whole discussion of the facsimiles in the Book of Abraham and the papyri that go with them has hinged on one point and one alone: Who really knows? We will readily grant that Professor X can read Egyptian as well as anybody else can, but is that enough? Is it even relevant? Every eminent Egyptologist has commented with dismay on the circum-

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stance that one can read a text readily and even glibly without having the vaguest idea of what it is about. The only chance of progress in such a state is, as de Buck points out, to seek the widest possible associations—a procedure of which most Egyptologists are deeply suspicious.

Unexplained Territory: It is only the last step that counts, as the French say, and so far nobody has taken it. The hopes for a quick decision with the finding of the Joseph Smith Papyri were blasted when it became apparent on the one hand that those documents do not contain the Book of Abraham, and on the other that the connection between the so-called Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar and the Book of Abraham is anything but clear. The work has hardly begun, but people still seek the safe and easy solution of authority and ask with impatience, "Can't you spare us all that speculation and surmising and comparing and illustrating and simply give us the results?" The anti-Mormons have been only too glad to do just that, but we must never let them make us forget that proof is a process, not an answer, and that there is no such thing as total knowledge. A thing is proven when the individual is convinced, but no one can ever share just the thoughts and experiences that add up to proof in the mind of another. This writer cannot go very far along the road with the Egyptologists, to be sure, but he cannot escape the responsibility of going on his own *just as far as he possibly can*. The same obligation rests on every other person who would pass judgment on Joseph Smith. For centuries astronomers described the craters of the moon and the rings of Saturn, but their explanations of those phenomena were no better than the thoughtful guesses of anybody else. Today all that the experts can do with the facsimiles is to describe them—what they really say remains anybody's guess. Egyptologists would do well to heed the maxim of the most famous of Egyptian sages, the immortal Ptah-hotep: "Be not arrogant because of thy knowledge, and have no confidence in that thou art a learned man. Take counsel with the ignorant as with the wise, for the limits of art cannot be reached, and no artist fully possesseth his skill. . . ."

Many Latter-day Saints have not been too happy with the Joseph Smith Papyri, which instead of giving them all the answers only set them to work on a lot of problems with which none of this generation is prepared to deal. But it was the Mormons who started this game, and it is their responsibility to keep it going. They can never again

leave the field without forfeiting the game. The opposition have been only too glad to call a halt at any time; they were in an unseemly hurry to blow the whistle in 1912, and that should have tipped the Mormons off. But the Mormons did not realize the strength of their own position and relapsed into silence, not from any fear of controversy (they do not have to issue daily bulletins from the rooftops, as their enemies have done), but out of preference for smoother and easier roads of knowledge.

In 1833 the School of the Prophets at Kirtland adopted a basic curriculum of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and for a time some of the brethren, following the example of the Prophet, seriously came to grips with those languages. The program was violently interrupted, but it was enough to serve notice that the Mormons intended to study the hard way and to take advantage of all the resources that are available for the study of the scriptures. God had told Oliver Cowdery in no uncertain terms that revelation follows study and may never be claimed as a substitute for it. (D&C 9:7-8.) The bringing forth of the papyrus fragments in 1967 was a reminder to the Saints that they are still expected to do their homework and may claim no special revelation or convenient handout solutions as long as they ignore the vast treasure-house of materials that God has placed within their reach.

So far we have only taken a preliminary view of a few problems raised by Facsimile No. 1, and hardly even mentioned Facsimiles 2 and 3, which in their way are even more challenging and enlightening. We have dealt entirely in possibilities, never in certitudes, possibilities being all we need to keep the door open. "The method of critical discussion," says Karl Popper, "does not establish anything. Its verdict is always and invariably 'not proven.'" As long as a single aspect of any problem raised by the Book of Abraham remains unexamined, as long as there is the remotest possibility that any slight detail of any significance may have been overlooked, as long as a single possible relevant text remains unread, we must hold our final word in abeyance.

A few years ago a librarian in Salt Lake City revived the dormant issue of the facsimiles in the Book of Abraham by proclaiming with great force in a series of lectures that the one fatal mistake that Joseph Smith made in all his career of deception was to publish a commentary on Egyptian documents that would someday be an open book to science. The librarian had it backwards. It would be hard to find any



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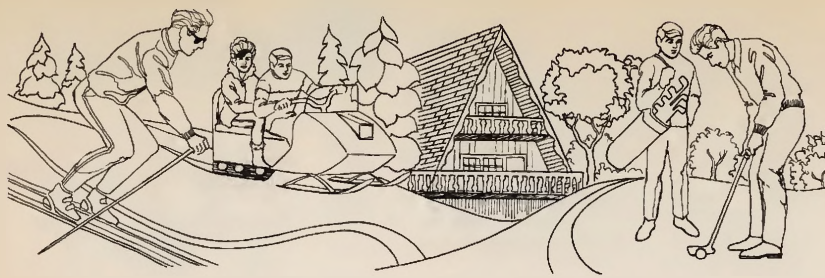
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document that Joseph Smith or anyone else could have selected, whose nature and purpose is more effectively locked up from the scrutiny of the learned. To the eye of the candid unbeliever the Prophet may be considered particularly lucky in having hit upon these singularly enigmatic objects as the subject of his discourses, and to have been thrice lucky in coming up with a history of Abraham that fits so nicely with the old Abraham legends and traditions about which he knew nothing. Whether it was luck or not, we cannot in all fairness deny him the advantage of our own very real ignorance by continuing to conceal it. It is on the absurd assumption of a whole and solid knowledge of the facsimiles and on that alone that the case against Joseph Smith rests at the moment.

Question Time: Ever since the services of professional Egyptologists were enlisted to contribute to the downfall of the Prophet, beginning in 1845, one stock question has been addressed to the Mormons with tireless persistence: "The scholars have spoken; why don't you do the honest thing and accept the verdict of the experts?" The answer should be clear by now: "Why don't you do the honest thing and find out how much the experts really know?" Both questions are perfectly legitimate. During the past hundred years the general public has known next to nothing about the moon, and yet when an intelligent and dedicated man who has spent his life gazing at the moon offers to tell us just how our satellite originated, the ignorant public hesitates to accept his opinion as binding or final. Why? How can we ignoramuses in all honesty question the learned specialist for a moment?

Well, for one thing, if we are honest we must admit that our knowledge is far too limited to permit us to judge of the man's competence—and that is exactly what he is asking us to do when he solicits our assent. Then too, we feel that our expert is going too far: we are willing enough to accept his purely descriptive statements about the size, specific gravity, motion, etc., of the moon, but when he presumes to tell us things bordering on ultimate origins, common sense admonishes caution. Science, as we are often told today in the scientific journals, only describes things—it does not explain them; an observation is not in itself an explanation. And so while we applaud the skill of the scholar who translates an Egyptian text, we draw the line when that same scholar almost overnight becomes an expert on Mormonism and the mind of Joseph Smith and hands down his ultimate

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decisions on Last Things purely by virtue of his command of a very limited, dubious, and tentative stock of rules of Egyptian grammar.

Also, while we must admit that an astronomer's ideas about lunar origins and an Egyptologist's idea about the facsimiles may be learned and plausible enough, the fact remains that the vital information necessary to prove their theories one way or another is simply not available—a limitation attested by the inability of the best astronomers and Egyptologists to agree on such matters. Gardiner recommended that Egyptologists set up their theories and their translations as targets to shoot at and then do their best to falsify them. That is the one fruitful scientific method, but where the Book of Abraham is concerned, the Egyptologists, though confronted by the most baffling examples of what their most speculative of sciences has to deal with, have chosen to declare their opinions sacrosanct and beyond question or discussion, even though the documents at hand go far beyond the domain of their competence in every direction. They have done a nice preliminary tidying-up job in one corner of the field—the sort of thing they are good at—and for that they have our sincere thanks. But they have not touched upon the main problems, except for a few purely personal and emotional outbursts; and as for really getting into the substance of the Book of Abraham, it would be as unfair to expect them to do that as it would be to credit them with having done it.

Who, then, is to decide these weighty matters? That is just the point: Is it necessary to decide here and now? The Mormons have always hesitated and asked for time, waiting (though rarely seeking) for further light and knowledge. Significantly, it has always been the Egyptologists, usually the very soul of caution, who have insisted on a once-for-all, here-and-now, before-we-leave-the-room decision and have been desperately determined not to prolong the discussion. That is still their policy, and it forces us to return upon their own heads the routine question that the world would confound and demolish us: You scholars have spoken; why don't you do the honest thing and admit that you don't know a blessed thing about the facsimiles, that you haven't made even a superficial study of them either to examine the categories to which they belong or the peculiarities of the individual documents? Why not admit that the relationship between the "Alphabet and Grammar" and the Book of Abraham is an enigma, full of odd contradictions and unexplained anomalies? Why not admit that you

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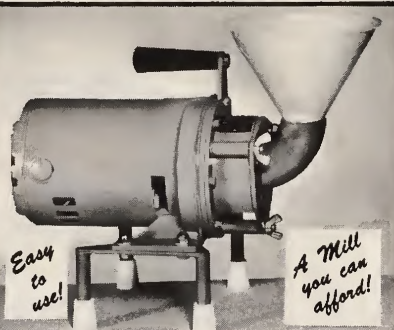
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are not privy to the mind of Joseph Smith? That the test of the Book of Abraham lies in what it says, not in the manner in which it may have been composed, and that a thorough test of its contents would require a scope of research that no scholar today has any intention of undertaking, a scope of knowledge that few if any scholars today possess? Why not recognize that there is a vast amount of literary material that presents remarkable parallels to the matter in the Book of Abraham, and that no scholar has made the slightest effort to look into the problems that these correspondences raise? Why not admit that the figure of Abraham is shrouded in mystery and that the search for the real Abraham has just begun? Why not admit, in Gardiner's words, that "what is proudly advertised as Egyptian history is merely a collection of rags and tatters," and, if one admits so much, that it is far too early in the game to convert those few rags and tatters into robes of academic omniscience?

Until now, no one has done much more than play around with the bedazzling treasury of the Pearl of Great Price. "They" would not, we could not make of the Book of Abraham an object of serious study. The time has come to change all that. The book that concerns us was purposely called "The Pearl of Great Price," that term being both in scripture and apocrypha the designation of a treasure that is both hidden and inexhaustible. Being hidden, it must be searched out and dug up—brought out of the depths by the strenuous and determined efforts of whoever would possess it. Being inexhaustibly vast, it can never cease to be a source of new wonders to the inquiring mind. In the past this treasure has been treated more or less like a convenient bit of pocket money, a ready fund of occasional texts to be dipped into for self-serving commentaries. That is not the purpose of the scriptures, which is, to tell us what we do not know and often do not want to know. The Pearl of Great Price is unique among scriptures in that its message is available only to that extent to which God's children choose to make it so, but at the same time it is capable of conveying knowledge of undreamed of scope and significance. ○

(Conclusion)

FOOTNOTES

¹ In H. Frankfort, *The Cenotaph of Seti I at Abydos* (39th Memoir, Egypt. Exploration Soc., 1933), Vol. 1, p. 82.

² C. J. Bleeker, *Egyptian Festivals* (Leiden: Brill, 1967; Suppl. to *Numen* No. XIII), p. 1.

³ Paul A. Weiss, "Living Nature and the Knowledge Gap," in *Saturday Review*, Nov. 29, 1969, p. 21.

⁴ A. Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians* (Harper Torchbooks, 1966), p. 56.