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New Nibley Volume Explores the Book of Abraham

An Approach to the Book of Abraham, volume 18 in the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, is now available. This volume contains Nibley's early work on the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri and is his closest look at Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham. In chapter 5, Nibley is at his best as he has Mr. Jones, the curator, conduct Dick and Jane through an imaginary museum in which the most important lion-couch scenes have all been gathered together in a single hall. Mr. Jones possesses a handbook that tells him all. In a conversational manner, he discusses the various figures of Facsimile 1, calling upon the best Egyptological knowledge of the time to explain their importance and setting.

Among the diverse essays in this volume are the remaining portions of his three-year series of lengthy articles from the *Improvement Era* (1968–70), “A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price.” Produced at a breathtaking pace and originally published in a wide variety of places, Nibley's work, though preliminary and provisional, still remains basic reading for anyone interested in the Book of Abraham. In the late sixties, when the surviving Joseph Smith Papyri became available to scholars and Church members, most Church-related periodicals were eager to include in their publications something about them by Nibley. Because these articles tended to be repetitive, they have not all been included. Some of the best of them, which appear here, were originally published in *BYU Studies*, *Sunstone*, and the *Ensign*.

John Gee, scholarly editor of the volume, discusses in his introduction the four decades of Nibley's work on the Joseph Smith Papyri and the Book of Abraham. Gee explores how Nibley, a historian trained in Classics, though not an obvious choice of someone to elucidate the meaning of a handful of Ptolemaic Egyptian papyri in hieratic, became the man for the job. After helping to vastly enhance the holdings of the library at Brigham Young University in Classics and in Egyptian, Nibley had a prompting one day in the stacks: he should go back to Berkeley and study Egyptian.

Nibley applied for a sabbatical and spent the 1959–60 academic year in Berkeley teaching classical rhetoric and studying Egyptian and Coptic from

Klaus Baer, “a very able and eager young professor.”¹ Gee quotes Nibley's description of the process of being “badgered and bullied six hours a week by a fellow twenty years my junior, who was trying to knock the simple *elements* of Egyptian and Coptic into my head. It was all very elementary: my teacher would say after he had given a particularly brilliant demonstration that any Egyptian child of ten would probably laugh himself sick at our solemn and laborious attempts to reconstruct the language. He knew the whole thing was not on an advanced but a childish level.”² Nibley continued his studies of Egyptian so that when the papyri scraps from the Metropolitan Museum of Art were turned over to the Church in 1967 he was prepared to enter the debate about their contents and write knowledgeably about them.

“The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers” originally appeared in *BYU Studies* in 1971; this article has been updated by Brian M. Hauglid, who checked the still-unpublished manuscripts among that set of papers, dating to the Kirtland and Nauvoo periods. Critics have claimed that these documents, composed of Egyptian and Book of Abraham manuscripts, contain incriminating evidence that Joseph Smith translated the Book of Abraham from the Egyptian symbols that accompanied it. Nibley herein examines the assertions made for and against the authenticity of the Book of Abraham.

Nibley's typically richly footnoted writings are enhanced by the illustrations prepared by Michael P. Lyon. According to Nibley, “Until now, no one has done much more than play around with the bedizening 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.”³ ♦

Notes

1. Hugh Nibley, “Intellectual Autobiography,” in CWHN 17:17.
2. Hugh Nibley, “Nobody to Blame,” in CWHN 17:133–34, emphasis in original.
3. Hugh Nibley, “Conclusion: Taking Stock,” in CWHN 18:599, emphasis in original.