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Abstract Review of *Written by the Finger of God: A Testimony of Joseph Smith's Translations* (1993), by Joe Sampson.

Joe Sampson. ***Written by the Finger of God: A Testimony of Joseph Smith's Translations.*** **Sandy, UT: Wellspring, 1993. x + 355 pp. $17.95.**

"Bird Island" Revisited, or the Book of Mormon through Pyramidal Kabbalistic Glasses

Reviewed by John Gee

In this book Joe Sampson sets forth a novel thesis that no one else is likely ever to have come up with. Joe Sampson thinks that the Book of Mormon is a sealed book that must be unlocked with the kabbalistic keys of the tree of the Sephiroth (pp. 87–104) and the so-called "Alphabet and Grammar" from the Kirtland Egyptian Papers (pp. 117–50, 161–279). He does this by proceeding on the dubious assumption that if the revelations restored through Joseph Smith "did not contain the Kabbalistic codes then they could be brought into question as not being authentic restored ancient material" (p. 25). Since kabbalah was a system of scriptural exegesis developed by rabbis "in Provence sometime between [A.D.] 1150 and 1200 but no earlier,"[1] its apparent absence from the Book of Mormon has not bothered either critic or defender before. Kabbalah is a system of interpretation and not of writing and thus any text can be interpreted kabbalistically—though, to my knowledge, no one else has previously found a kabbalistic interpretation of the Book of Mormon profitable. This

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To Jan Colson, Erik Myrup, and Matt Roper, I owe many thanks for helping make this review readable. The above are not responsible for any of the errors, opinions, or incoherencies remaining in the review.

1 Gershom Scholem, "Kabbalah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 10:518, cf. 489.

is not to say that it might not be profitable, but Sampson says so many irrational things that it is difficult to take either his book or his approach seriously. It is somewhere between *1066 and All That*[2] and the Zohar. The first part of this review will gather together many of the elements that would have made a hilarious spoof on the order of Hugh Nibley's "Bird Island"; the last part will deal with the two serious issues of Sampson's thesis, the kabbalistic interpretation of scripture and the Kirtland Egyptian Papers.

Sampson between the Hebrew Pillars

Before you run off to apply this method to your scripture reading, you should know Hebrew. And so, we provide for your further amusement and misinformation, the following list of totally specious instructional items from Sampson's Hebrew grammar.

First of all, in Sampson's view no difference exists between Hebrew and Aramaic (p. 70).[3] So the most important question you can ask yourself is "What kind of language is this, that is Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek and Mayan?" (p. 132). Please pay close attention to the following important features of the language.

Script

"We can watch the Hebrew coming right out of the Hieratic as Proto-Hebrew ideograms are combined, or should I say overlaid" (p. 127). "Tet ט does not appear in the earliest examples of Hebrew or semitic writing at all" (p. 154, but see the chart on p. 157).[4] The Hebrew letter *pē* means "Month [*sic*]" (p. 31).[5]

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2 W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and All That* (New York: Dutton, 1931).

3 Hebrew and Aramaic are different languages, each with their own dialects. They are closely related. Sampson, nevertheless, time and again treats them as identical. Words which are certainly Aramaic are listed as Hebrew. Sampson's lexical treatments are not necessarily trustworthy.

4 Sampson's chart shows that this letter does appear in the early examples of Semitic writing. It also shows up in Proto-Canaanite inscriptions (13th–12th centuries B.C.) and the Ahiram sarcophagus (1000 B.C.) according to The

The Hebrew letter "Shin [has to do] with that which comes forth from the womb, as Shin was derived from the Egyptian hieroglyphic" (p. 125; cf. p. 71).[6] "Hebrew today has points and lines called *dagesh* to mark where the different vowel sounds appear in a word" (p. 121).[7]

Lexicography

אלהים The name Elohim "is most sacred to the Jews and must always be held in such respect that it is never to be spoken out loud" (p. 37) even in the daily *Shema*.[8]

אש "As a verb אש [*sic*] is rendered as *is* or *are*" (p. 125).[9]

יסוד The Hebrew word behind "ordained" in D&C 50:26 (!) "is יסוד *Foundation*" (p. 112).[10]

כן Apparently millions of Jews throughout the centuries have been misspelling the Hebrew word for "yes" because of "an error in transliteration from the Greek in the septuagint [*sic*]" (p. 68).[11]

Egyptian

Since, according to Sampson, Egyptian is the same as Hebrew, we should look at the dialect of Egyptian that is Hebrew. From

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Israel Museum, Jerusalem, "The Alphabet" (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 1981).

5 This is a typographical error, one of too many in this work. It should read "mouth."

6 Sampson's chart on p. 31, of course, contradicts this.

7 The *dagesh* indicates that a letter should be doubled; see E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 55–56.

8 While this is true for certain pious Jews, most do not consider this to be as sacred as the tetragrammaton.

9 Sampson has the verb יש in mind. The two words are etymologically unrelated.

10 There is no Hebrew original for this section of the Doctrine and Covenants.

11 The Septuagint does not transliterate this word into Greek. The etymology for this word is certain, and Sampson simply does not have any evidence for his assertions.

Sampson's point of view, "Joseph Smith knows Hebrew backwards and Egyptian hieroglyphics at their foundation" (p. 143). First, "the Egyptian system of the papyrus was built upon a foundation of Five or, even better, a mathematics of proportions kept in fractions" (p. 137).[12] "Hieroglyphics can only be fully understood by dissecting the component ideograms back out to their basic parts from which they were created. Mayan, Egyptian, and Chinese are all examples" (p. 152).[13] This is because "Egyptian hieroglyphics were developed out of the same school of thought that Melchizedek was speaking from" (p. 141). So when we see the hieroglyph for two mountains, we should think "Mountain or wickedness (we are reading this backward, should be valley or lower regions)" (p. 141).[14] Of course, the famous two lands of Egypt, "upper and lower Egypt, . . . were types of the upper heavens and lower hells" (p. 141).[15]

If this does not make sense, just remember that "if this [Chinese?, the so-called "Alphabet and Grammar"?[16]] is a

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12 Mathematically, this sentence makes no sense as any proportion can be expressed with a fraction. Egyptologically it makes no sense at all; the Egyptian numbers use a base ten system, not a base five system.

13 Egyptian and Chinese can both be understood without dissecting the hieroglyphs. Of course, it does not hurt if one knows where the parts came from. But hieratic words were read as a unit without dividing the words into various glyphs or recognition of what the original glyph was. This is most clear from the way ligatured hieratic is transformed into demotic. In demotic, though the shapes of the words resemble the earlier hieratic, there is no way to figure out what the original hieroglyphs were from the demotic ligatures, but the word can still be read. To use an English example, one does not need to know that the letter *a* was originally an ox's head to read it.

14 This glyph is used both to write the word *ḏw* "evil" and the word *ḏw* "mountain." I can think of no spellings of any Egyptian words for "valley" that use this glyph.

15 This is simply false. Upper and Lower Egypt refer to the lower lands of the north by the sea, and the upper lands of the south, upstream. If the Egyptians wanted to talk about heaven and hell, they certainly had the vocabulary to do so quite plainly.

16 I cannot find the antecedent for the word *this* from Sampson's text and have supplied the two most likely nouns, although neither one makes sense.

'Reformed Egyptian,' then that might explain how the term Zip became the Proto-Mayan word for virgin" (p. 132).[17]

History according to Sampson

Sampson has an interesting version of history that explains these language shifts. "Scientists calculate that it takes 2.5 billion years for the universe to turn completely one time" (p. 139). Though he has no daughter mentioned in the scriptures, Abraham "may have named his daughter after the home planet that he found by 'Urim and Thummim' " (p. 108). "Lehi, a prophet of the House of Joseph, was familiar with both Hebrew and Egyptian and used Egyptian demonic [*sic*] (shorthand form of hieroglyphics) characters to write a 'reformed Egyptian' Hebrew-based hybrid language" (p. 119).[18] "It was in this city [On/Heliopolis], at the time of the height of Israel's power, that there was a functioning Jewish Temple complete and authorized by the Levites" (p. 119).[19] "Pythagoras and Lehi were contemporaries in the same land" (p. 121).[20] "The name of Venus among the Persians was Mitra [*sic*]. Herodotus informs us that her [*sic*] name among the Scythians was Artim pasa. Mitra [*sic*] is Artim" (p. 131).[21] "Barnabas was probably a member of Christ's Sanhedrin" (p. 32).[22] And to add some speculative latter-day mind reading, Sampson informs us that "Joseph [Smith] believes that with the aid of Urim and Thummim the ancients were able to look as far as the center of this universe" (p. 139).

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17 A friend of mine, a student of the eminent Yale Mayanist Michael Coe, said upon reading this passage, "No wonder Michael Coe thinks Mormons are on the lunatic fringe."

18 Demotic, in spite of its nickname, is not "demonic." Sampson's sample of demotic characters (p. 5) is authentic but not coherent, as he has taken one from one place and another from another, but almost never an entire word.

19 There were Jewish temples in Egypt at Elephantine and Leontopolis, both dating to periods after the Jewish exile. If Sampson has made a major discovery, he ought to provide evidence.

20 Pythagoras and Lehi were contemporaries but not in the same land.

21 Mithra was not Venus. Herodotus mentions no "Artim pasa."

22 Sampson seems to mean that Barnabas was one of Christ's Seventy. The Sanhedrin is a different, Jewish body.

You might think that these things are not so, but it does not matter. "If I were a God," Sampson informs us, "all knowing, all loving, this is exactly how I would do it" (p. 153).

However, enough silly trivia; Sampson is trying to set forth a program of scriptural study.

The Kabbalah Game

Joe Sampson is only playing games with his readers. Beginning with the third chapter he informs his reader that he "will now start to play the Kabbalah game in earnest" (p. 15). Apparently he thinks that several of the "*Book of Mormon* prophet[s] play this game" (p. 55; cf. p. 61). "Round and around we go" (p. 126) and where this leads Sampson himself seems to have no idea. For him this is "really fun" (p. 127) even if it is a nightmare for his reader. "If you don't know the rules of this game you miss all the fun" (p. 131). Sampson has his fun at the reader's expense since he never provides a complete list of his rules. Apparently he does not feel the need to, since "little children of many nations learn very early the different rules of the game in their native tongue, before they are three years old" (p. 155). From what I have been able to make out, here is a list of Joe Sampson's rules to the Kabbalah game:

1. "The key to ideographic meanings is to be found in finding the relationship of each consonant to the Father א and Mother ב letters. . . . To each of the sounds of power were [*sic*] attached an ideographic symbol which relates to the scriptural context of the eternal meaning of the sound" (pp. 151–52). "The compounding or overlapping of ideographic symbols to form in an artistic way, or to hide a language or message within another language, is a technique used to form complex hieroglyphic glyphs" (p. 152). Translation: Each letter has a specific hidden meaning associated with its shape and sound.

2. "The reconciliation of the combined meanings of these letters [in a word] produces the definition of the word created" (p. 152).

3. "Reverse the order of the ideograms and positives can in many cases be turned into words of negative context" (p. 152). This Sampson refers to as *tumarah*. "The Greeks loved this little

tumarah trick. They took the Egyptian Goddess Neitha [*sic*] reversed the letters and produced Athene [*sic*]" (p. 131).

4. "Ideograms are not just linguistic, they are mathematical in nature and can be used as such to interrelate ideas with mathematics" (p. 152). This is called Gematria. Besides the usual numerological manipulations, Sampson has come up with new uses: "The Arabic word for 'five' is *hams*, which sound reminds us that Egypt was the land of the children of 'Ham' " (p. 138).

5. "The chaining of triplet letter combinations (roots) in alphabetical order, forms strings of related words and concepts, so as to have encoded, the holy language with the basic instructions of the overall script and plot of the passion play we call this creation. These strings of related words and ideas form the outline and undergirding structures of parable and prophecy" (p. 152; example on pp. 299–300).

6. "The word *mysteries* is used . . . as a flag for the reader to let him know that the text which is going to follow is of Kabbalistic approach" (p. 54).

7. The words *crown*, *wisdom*, *knowledge*, *understanding*, *mercy*, *justice*, *strength*, *severity*, *beauty*, *victory*, *splendor*, *glory*, *power*, *foundation*, and *kingdom* are the "ten key words [*sic*]" found in "various combinations or orders" comprising what "are known as Paths of Wisdom" (p. 35). These are the nodes on the Sefiroth.

8. "The rule is that the word must be repeated four times for the encoding to be complete" (p. 55), "seven being the number of completion or wholeness" (p. 57).

Now do you understand?

Actually, I must confess that there really is a deep, hidden, secret message lurking through the pages of the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and even the Bible. It consists of interrelated concepts repeated over and over that can, if heeded, not only completely change someone's outlook on life, but one's life itself. We have been trying to keep this a secret for years, but since Joe Sampson has come so close, we might as well reveal the secret. The key, however, is not hidden in the Sefiroth but in Moses 6:52. The chapter number is the number of days of work in the week in the Ten Commandments; the verse number is the number of weeks in a year. Any-

one who searches through the scriptures for the concepts covered in this verse will see that these are much more pervasive than the Sefiroth concepts Sampson advocates.

Misconceptions about the Kirtland Egyptian Papers

Joe Sampson bases much of his text on interpretations he thinks he has culled from the Kirtland Egyptian Papers. The Kirtland Egyptian Papers are a collection of documents in the Church archives written by Warren Parrish, Oliver Cowdery, and William W. Phelps. Two of the documents have Joseph Smith's handwriting on them. They date from the Kirtland period with the exception of two drafts of manuscripts of the book of Abraham in the handwriting of Willard Richards which date from the Nauvoo period. Critics of the Church and the book of Abraham assume that because several of the documents are in the hands of men who served at some time in their lives as Joseph Smith's scribes, all of these papers are the work of Joseph Smith. Sampson also assumes this. This and other assumptions that Sampson and others make cannot hold under historical scrutiny and deserve analysis here.

Sampson states, "It appears from Joseph Smith's diary entries that he spent much of his free time during the period of October through the middle of December of 1835 working on the 'alphabet to the Book of Abraham, and Grammar of the Egyptian languages as *practiced by the ancients*' " (p. 120). But this is demonstrably false. Between October and December 1835 Joseph Smith mentions exhibiting the papyri fifteen times,[23] translating four times,[24] transcribing once,[25] but the "Egyptian alphabet" was mentioned only once.[26] The original entry in the handwriting of Oliver Cowdery deserves careful examination: "October 1,

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23 Entries for 3, 19, 24, 29 October; 17, 23, 30 November; 7, 10, 12, 14–16, 20, and 23 December 1835. All journal entries for this time period may be found in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 1:102–81; 2:45–124. References will simply be to the date in the journal and history manuscripts.

24 Entries for 7 October; 19–20, 25 November 1835.

25 Entry for 26 November 1835. This might be Kirtland Egyptian Papers Egyptian manuscripts #8–9, although #6–7 might also be included.

26 Entry for 1 October 1835.

1835. This after noon labored on the Egyptian alphabet, in company with brsr. O. Cowdery and W. W. Phelps: The system of astronomy was unfolded."[27] It has been generally assumed that the "Egyptian alphabet" is the Kirtland Egyptian Papers Egyptian manuscript (hereafter KEPE) #1 or the so-called Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar.[28] This is highly unlikely as (1) KEPE 1 is in the handwriting of W. W. Phelps and Warren Parrish;[29] (2) it was four weeks later, on 29 October 1835, that Warren Parrish "commenced writing for me [Joseph Smith];"[30] (3) the title of the manuscript is "Grammar & aphabet [*sic*] of the Egyptian language."[31] If any of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers are to be identified with the documents referred to in the journal entries it would be KEPE 3–5, in the handwritings identified as those of W. W. Phelps, Joseph Smith, and Oliver Cowdery and bearing the titles (apparently lost in the case of deteriorated KEPE 5) of "Egyptian alphabet."[32] Thus there is no solid evidence that Joseph Smith worked on KEPE 1, the so-called Alphabet and Grammar, during this period of time, or at any period of time.[33] It was never presented as scripture or as revelation to the Saints and they are not under any obligation to defend it, believe it, or even understand it.[34] I find nothing in Sampson's study or in his

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27 Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 60; see also Jessee, ed., *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:45. The handwriting is identified on ibid., 2:43 n. 1, and Jessee, ed., *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 649 n. 7.

28 The most reliable guide to the Kirtland Egyptian Papers is still the chart in Hugh Nibley, "The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers," *BYU Studies* 11/4 (Summer 1971): 351. The chart identifies each manuscript in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, the handwriting on each, and gives the official number in the Church Archives that should be followed to avoid confusion.

29 Ibid.

30 Jessee, ed., *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:112–13; 2:56.

31 Nibley, "Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers," 351.

32 Ibid.

33 *Pace* Frederick M. Huchel, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 153. Huchel has identified the wrong documents, and his citations, covered above, do not demonstrate what he claims.

34 On 8 April 1843, Joseph Smith said: "I make this broad declaration, that whenever God gives a vision of an image, or beast, or figure of any kind, He always holds Himself responsible to give a revelation or interpretation of the meaning thereof, otherwise we are not responsible or accountable for our belief

reproduction of Robert Fillerup's work in the appendix that convinces me that Sampson understands the material at all.

Sampson, like others, assumes that the Kirtland Egyptian Papers are Joseph Smith's working papers in producing the book of Abraham because there are four manuscripts of the book of Abraham among them. It is, however, quite unlikely that they can be so classified. Were they Joseph Smith's working papers for the book of Abraham, we should expect that they would show the marks for the revisions that Joseph Smith made on his translations of the book of Abraham on 9 March 1842 in preparation for its publication.[35] None of the manuscripts show these marks. Therefore, none of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers can be said to be Joseph Smith's working papers for the book of Abraham.

As for Sampson's dubious assumption that "Joseph Smith with 'Urim and Thummim' looked at the *Book of Breathings* [sen-sen] and saw the *Book of Abraham* encoded there" (p. 70), one would have thought that the critics had demonstrated the impossibility of that idea long ago.

Sampson's book has the makings either of a satire or a work of scholarship, but this book is both and neither. The premise upon which this book is based—that the kabbalah was used to write the Book of Mormon—is wrong to begin with and Sampson's errors in his scholarship and assumptions guarantee that this book will mainly be used as a source for logical errors. In fact, this book would be extremely funny except the author considers it an expression of his testimony (pp. 313–16). If you cannot take a man's testimony seriously, it ceases to be funny. It becomes sad.

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in it." Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 291; Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949), 5:343. Even if one were to take the Kirtland Egyptian Papers as revelation, they are not self-explanatory, were never set forth as revelation or scripture, and Latter-day Saints are simply not responsible for believing in them; see also Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christian?* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 12–21; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 204–5; M. Gerald Bradford and Larry E. Dahl, "Doctrine: Meaning, Source, and History of Doctrine," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 395–97.

35 Jessee, ed., *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:367.