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Prolegomena to Any Study of the Book of Abraham

Hugh Nibley*

On November 27, 1967, the Metropolitan Museum of Art presented to the Church as a gift certain Egyptian papyri once owned and studied by the Prophet Joseph Smith. This was a far more momentous transaction than might appear on the surface, for it brought back into play for the first time since the angel Moroni took back the golden plates a tangible link between the worlds. What we have here is more than a few routine scribblings of ill-trained scribes of long ago; at least one of these very documents was presented to the world by Joseph Smith as offering a brief and privileged insight into the strange world of the Patriarchs. It was such a strange world that the Egyptologists who were asked to express their opinions of the Prophet's teachings could only snort and sputter with disgust. And they will probably do the same again, for the Lord plainly does not intend to let the matter rest there.

It is almost certain that having the papyri waved under our noses will have somewhat the same effect on LDS educators that the success of the first Sputnik had on American education in general. Through the years, it will be recalled, the educationists could always reassure themselves: "Since the public is paying our way, if the public is satisfied with what we are doing, that is all that counts—and the public had better be satisfied, because after all we are the experts!" With no one to call them to account, the schoolmen had a nice thing going, until out of the dark blue came the ominous little bip-bips. In the same way a few faded and tattered little scraps of papyrus may serve to remind the Latter-day Saints of how sadly they have neglected serious education. There is no shortage of people publishing books and articles, holding learned symposiums, and giving classes and lectures in the mysteries of the Pearl of Great Price, but the precious papyri

*Dr. Nibley, professor of history and religion at Brigham Young University, has written widely on many Church subjects.

themselves, the subject of so much wise discourse through the years, are greeted with an abashed silence. It is said that when the Chinese in their first naval encounters with Europeans found their ships no match for steamboats, they proceeded to erect funnels on the decks of their junks, in which they would burn straw, thus rivaling the formidable appearance of the enemy. The mock steamboats no doubt satisfied the Chinese and made a fine impression as long as they did not have to come up against real steamboats, and such has been the way of our Mormon scholarship, assiduously aping the learning of the world in its safe and comfortable isolation. It would have been possible through the years to have obtained from time to time the services of the world's best Egyptologists and archaeologists for but a fraction the cost of, say, a local billboard campaign to add luster to the image of the University. Not only has our image suffered by such tragic neglect, but now in the moment of truth the Mormons have to face the world unprepared, after having been given a hundred years' fair warning.

We cannot evade our responsibility by calling for caution. If you want to be cautious, forget about the Book of Mormon, forget about the Pearl of Great Price! Once you have accepted Joseph Smith's interpretations of the Facsimiles in the latter you have thrown caution to the winds, and you had better start thinking of some defense—for in making those interpretations the Prophet challenged the world to do its worst, and through the years the leaders of the Church have accepted without qualifications the proposition that if the world can prove Joseph Smith mistaken we shall have to accept its findings. Wholly committed and given fair warning, the Mormons have deserved even the unfair verdict that the world passed against them and the Prophet in 1912, when eight professional scholars condemned Joseph Smith's interpretations of the Facsimiles as utterly absurd; for had any of the Saints during the past century ever taken the pains to check up on the actual state of Egyptian studies in the world, it would have been an easy thing to show how abysmally inept the performance of Dr. Spalding's panel of experts really was.

The deciphering of hieroglyphics has always been a favorite playground for those seeking a shortcut to Faustian celebrity. Even the great Leibniz was convinced that he had dis-

covered the key to Egyptian in Armenian, and a long procession of lesser lights in the days before Joseph Smith had come up with their various solutions and each in his time has been duly discredited. The most remarkable of these was the learned Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680),¹ who deserves mention because his name has often been mentioned in studies of Joseph Smith. Indeed, when some of the Egyptologists who condemned the Prophet in 1912 later talked things over among themselves in Chicago, they came to the conclusion that Smith could best be explained as another Athanasius Kircher, and some Egyptologists (notably E. A. W. Budge) even maintained that Joseph Smith actually got his ideas in the Book of Abraham from Kircher. But if Joseph Smith ever saw one of Kircher's books on Egypt, which is doubtful since even in his day those books had become exceedingly rare collectors' items, and if he had been able to read Kircher's awkward Latin, his own ideas must have borne some resemblance to those of Kircher—which they do not. Actually it would be hard to find a more complete contrast between any two men than between these two.

To be brief, Kircher from first to last had everything going for him. Hailed as the prodigal of the age, he received the almost universal support and applause of the learned of all lands, including even America, and the substantial assistance of Popes and Emperors. From the age of thirty to the end of his long life he was completely free to devote himself to study without interruption, and was never denied anything he asked for. So far this hardly suggests the career of Joseph Smith. Kircher's life, according to his biographers, was completely uneventful, "laborieuse et banale," and though he got off to a flying start he was soon overcome with "disgust and lassitude" and, unable to abide the criticism that was inevitably aimed at his claims to omniscience, became a misanthrope and recluse.² Even less like Joseph Smith.

But what of his work? Of the forty-four learned volumes that came from his pen, nothing remains that is considered to be of the slightest use of anybody! Of his numerous works on

¹P. Marestang, "Athanasie Kircher," *Recueil de Travaux*, Vol. 28 (1906), pp. 22-36, also in Vol. 30 (1908); and J. Janssen, "Athanasie Kircher 'Egyptologue,'" *Chroniques d'Egypte*, Vol. 19 (1943), pp. 240-247. See also R. C. Webb, *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 16 (1913), pp. 1088-89.

²Marestang, *Recueil de Travaux*, Vol. 28. pp. 23-25.

Egyptology the greatest, the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, a work in four folio volumes on which he spent more than twenty years of hard work, is, to quote his biographer, "folie"—in it all conceivable types of information "jostle each other in complete confusion. We look in vain for any overall plan, order, or logic to the work as a whole. After careful study, one finally comes to the conclusion that a vain desire for erudition and a truly infantile display of scientific learning were all that guided the pen of Kircher."³ Against all this we have the Book of Mormon, composed with a vocabulary of only 3000 words, making no attempt to be profound or clever, but a miracle of clarity and condensed coherency. Kircher, to be sure, was, like Joseph Smith, deeply religious, but again with a diametrically opposed orientation; for while Kircher never allowed that a single syllable of the Bible could possibly be the subject of any questioning whatever, Smith shocked the world not only by adding scriptures to the Bible, but by declaring that the Scriptures are marred by the mistakes of their human custodians, even the first verse of the Bible having been altered by "some old Jew without any authority." And while Kircher quite wrongly claimed a perfect knowledge of many exotic languages, while the world stood by and applauded, Joseph Smith made no secret of his fallibility and claimed to know no language but English. Finally, in the few cases in which Athanasius Kircher was proven right—no matter how he managed it—he has been given full credit for his performance, while Joseph Smith in the many, many cases in which he scores a direct hit (again, no matter *how*) is never given any credit whatever.

The example of Kircher is less significant for the light it throws on Joseph Smith than the warning it provides for the youth of Zion, who have been only too prone to follow Kircher instead of Smith both in their scholarly and their religious procedures. In the first place, because Egyptian is written in pictures, the custom has been quite general, ever since Horapollon introduced it in the 5th century, of seeking the key to hieroglyphics in attributing a symbolic interpretation to each of the little pictures and then fitting the symbols together to make a kind of sense out of them. That was Athanasius Kircher's method, and through whole decades he toiled away

³*Ibid.*, p. 31.

with vast patience and finesse establishing subtile and profound connections between the little images in the inscriptions. With deep logic and method (after all, he was a Jesuit), he worked out every point and when he was through was able to view the results of his work with immense satisfaction: after all, if hundreds of individual figures in an inscription make good sense independently, and then fit together in a pattern that makes perfectly good sense as well, then surely that cannot be an accident—the chances against such a perfect coincidence of figures and meanings by mere accident are infinitesimal. One has seen the same logic applied in our own day to dubious, damaged, scanty, and isolated figures on New World surfaces, which have been duly declared to be Egyptian glyphs and interpreted by the Kircher method, with the added element of phonetic manipulation as the final touch to this intriguing fun-game. It is strange how those who will hastily excuse themselves from sitting down to a brief examination in elementary Egyptian—say five English-to-Egyptian sentences and vice versa—will hold forth with professional assurance on the meaning of Egyptian cryptograms of the most abstruse and difficult sort. Here let Kircher be an example and a warning to us all.

Even more dangerous was Kircher's habit of giving heartfelt thanks to God for inspiring him in the perpetration of his philological horrors. This kept him going for years—but it was really a form of cheating. The student who tells me that if I refuse to accept his inspired interpretations of the Facsimiles, or the Anthon transcript, or of Book of Mormon geography, or Indian glyphs I am holding in contempt the doctrine of continued revelation is cheating too, just as is the one who accuses me of denying the power of prayer when I give him the "D" he deserves instead of the "A" he prayed for. What these people forget is that revelation is nontransferable. If I dream that my great-grandfather lived in Halifax, that may assist me substantially in my genealogical researches, but the Genealogical Society will not be in the least interested in my dream, not because they do not believe in revelation, but because they know that a man's revelations are strictly his own affair: many a revelation has led to documentary proof in genealogy, but Salt Lake is interested only in the documents. Kircher used the appeal to divine aid as a shortcut, to spare

him the work he could have done himself but didn't. If there is any moral principle that is highly characteristic of Mormonism it is the doctrine that God expects us to exhaust the resources at hand before appealing for supernatural aid: Joseph Smith, our greatest prophet, in his short lifetime exerted himself strenuously to learn what he could of Hebrew, Greek, and German. If he was not immune from studying the hard way, why should his present-day followers seek religious shortcuts to omniscience as did Athanasius Kircher?

Which brings us to the subject of Joseph Smith's Egyptian Grammar, because a surprising number of people have recently undertaken studies of that remarkable work. This writer, however, has never spent so much as five minutes with the Egyptian Grammar, and does not intend to unless he is forced to it. When parties in Salt Lake procured and reproduced photographs of this document, they advertized it with the usual sensationalism as a "Hidden Document Revealed. Joseph Smith's Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar suppressed for 130 Years Now Comes to Light. This document proves that Joseph Smith did not understand Egyptian and that the Book of Abraham was a work of his imagination!" Joseph Smith never pretended to understand Egyptian, nor that the Book of Abraham was a work of his scholarship: if this document as advertized proves anything it is that some people will go to any length of skulduggery to make a case out of nothing. For if the so-called Alphabet and Grammar were meant as an inspired communication it would have been published as such, not "hidden" or "suppressed for 130 years." It was hidden and suppressed for the same reason that Brigham Young's laundry lists are hidden and suppressed, because it was nobody else's business. Let us allow Joseph Smith at least for the time being the luxury of a moment of privacy, of a little speculation on his own there on his hands and knees in the front room of the Mansion House, with papyri spread out around him on the floor. The fact that he kept his notes strictly to himself is evidence enough that they were his own private concern and were never meant as a message to the Church.

This is a very important point. The whole attack against the Book of Abraham in the past has been based on the perfectly false principle that whatever a prophet does must be of a supernatural nature and whatever he says must have the

authority of scripture, and that hence if a prophet ever betrays the slightest sign of human weakness or any mortal limitation he must necessarily be a false prophet. This silly doctrine is a projection of the deeply-rooted sectarian belief that since the Bible is inspired by God there cannot conceivably under any circumstances whatever be the slightest suspicion of a flaw or inaccuracy in its pages; in other words, whatever God has anything to do with must necessarily be absolutely perfect. It was precisely his rejection of this view that brought the wrath of the Christian world down upon the head of Joseph Smith in the beginning. The sectarian world has never been able to see how it is possible to have revelations and still learn by trial and error: If Brigham Young experimented with silkworms and sugar beets, they argued, doesn't that prove he is a false prophet? Because aren't prophets infallible, and don't they know everything? Why experiment, then? The Pearl of Great Price itself admirably illustrates the issue. The Facsimiles now in use are extremely bad reproductions, far inferior to the first engravings published in 1842. Am I, then, as a member of the Church bound to consult the present official edition and that only, and regard it as flawless, bad as it is, because it is the official publication of the Church? Who is responsible for the present state of the book? In 1903, James E. Talmage, appearing before a senate investigating committee explained:

Mr. Worthington: . . . Let me ask you particularly about the Pearl of Great Price. Have you had anything to do with the revised edition of that work?

Mr. Talmage: I made the revision. The last edition of the Pearl of Great Price, one of the standard works, as it now appears, has been revised by me in this way: The matter has been compared with the original manuscripts, and the division into chapters and verses, and the references given are my own.⁴

The senators wanted to know just how much authority Dr. Talmage carried in his own inspired writings and he told them:

Mr. Worthington: Let me ask you about . . . the *Articles of Faith*. You say you were authorized by the high church officials to prepare such work . . . and it was approved by a committee of high officers of the church, appointed by the presidency. Is that work, or anything in it, binding upon any member of your church?

⁴*Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections . . . in the Matter of the Protests Against the Hight of Hon. Reed Smoot . . . to hold his Seat*, (Washington, D.C.:U.S. Government Printing Office (1905), Vol. 3, p. 5.

Mr. Talmage: Oh, in no sense.

Mr. Worthington (referring to earlier remarks of Talmage): It would have to be submitted to the church conference and adopted by them before it would bind any Mormon?

Mr. Talmage: Most assuredly . . .

Mr. Worthington: Is there any publishing house authorized to publish works and send them out, which works bind the church as an organization?

Mr. Talmage: No such publishing house could be named . . .

Mr. Worthington: The *Deseret News* has been spoken of here frequently as the organ of the church. Has anybody in your church the power to put in the *Deseret News* anything which is not in the standard works, that shall bind the people of your church, if it has not first been approved by the people?

Mr. Talmage: No one, not even the president of the church. . . . No one could make anything binding by simply publishing it in the *Deseret News*, or any other medium, or any other form.⁵

From this it should be perfectly clear to all that no one is bound by anything outside of the four standard works, and that to make an issue of the so-called Egyptian Grammar is to insist on a doctrine of infallibility that is diametrically opposed to the teachings of the Church.

Now to the papyri pictured in this special section of *BYU Studies*. These accompanying photographs convey their own message. Like the three Facsimiles which have been thrust on the attention of the learned world for nearly 130 years, they are anybody's game. If contemporary Egyptologists have anything to say about them, we eagerly await their comments. Today, however, the literal translation of any Egyptian religious text tells no more about what was really going on than the conversion of an exceedingly technical scientific explanation into mathematical symbols would enlighten the mind of one completely ignorant of science and mathematics.

Leading students of Egyptian religion assure us that all these years during which we have been translating a set of symbols into a mechanical jargon, we have really had no understanding whatever of the real nature of the symbol or the meaning of the jargon. Any serious study of the Book of Abraham Facsimile must take it up from there.

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 24-26.