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Abstract Review of *Translating the Anthon Transcript* (1999), by Stan and Polly Johnson.

SOME NOTES ON THE ANTHON TRANSCRIPT

John Gee

For years, when individuals have told me that they have translated the Anthon transcript, I have asked to see the result. To date, nobody has sent one to me. But in a recent book, Stan and Polly Johnson have tried to supply a translation and to argue that the Anthon transcript corresponds to Ether 6:3–13 in the present Book of Mormon.

The Johnsons' book can be divided into three sections. The first section (pp. ix–31), which seems to have been written by Polly Johnson, is a glowing testimonial to her husband's translation, a history of the project, and a naive, unsystematic examination of the Anthon transcript. The second section (pp. 33–66), which seems to have been written by Stan Johnson, is the guts of the "translation," a sign-by-sign interlinear translation of the Anthon transcript. The third section (pp. 69–107), also likely to have been written by Stan Johnson, provides the meaning of each symbol in the Anthon transcript and indicates how he translated each one. An incomplete bibliography and indexes round out the book.

Review of Stan and Polly Johnson. *Translating the Anthon Transcript*. Parowan, Utah: Ivory Books, 1999. xvi + 112 pp., with select bibliography and index. \$18.95.

The Good News

The Johnsons have done some things well. Their assumptions are clear: they assume (1) that all Native American writing systems descend from Egyptian writing via the Nephite “reformed Egyptian” (p. 31) and (2) that both Egyptian and Native American writing systems are logographic. If all Native American writing systems actually descended from the Nephite system (which is by no means evident), a comparison of those writing systems to look for root meanings would be a very good approach. The Johnsons also did well to provide a sign-by-sign translation and a catalog of signs with the reasoning behind their interpretation. Thus it is possible to follow their reasoning step-by-step. Anyone who wishes to produce a translation of the Anthon transcript should do the same.

The Bad News

Unfortunately, the few things that the Johnsons did well only accentuate their book’s problems. Typographical¹ and factual errors² abound. For example, they claim that hieratic began in Egypt around 1900 B.C. (see p. 11). In fact, the earliest datable published Egyptian inscription is hieratic and is dated over a thousand years earlier.³ They also date demotic from 400 B.C. to A.D. 100. The earliest demotic inscription, however, is Louvre C 101, dated to the eighth year of Psammetichus I (657 B.C.).⁴ The last dated inscription, found at Philae, is dated to A.D. 457 and is roughly contemporary with the last dated hieroglyphic inscription. Certain handicaps and historical problems that plague the book preclude a favorable recommendation.

1. “Anthony W. Irvins” for “Anthony W. Ivins” (p. 9); “Linda Schelle” for “Linda Schele” (p. 9); “nightsun” for “night sun” (p. 71).

2. For example, the Johnsons claim on p. 9 that Linda Schele “is also an artist, and not a formally trained linguist.” Dr. Schele was an artist and also earned a Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of Texas; see Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 210.

3. See BM EA 35508, in A. J. Spencer, *Early Egypt: The Rise of Civilisation in the Nile Valley* (London: British Museum, 1993), 50.

4. See Heinz-Josef Thissen, “Chronologie der frühdemotischen Papyri,” *Enchoria* 10 (1980): 107.

Polly Johnson's assertions to the contrary (see pp. ix, 7, 13–14, 33), I regret to report that Stan Johnson does not know Egyptian. Proof of this can be seen in the first two entries in his symbol reference (see p. 70); here the two "Egyptian" signs Johnson examined turn out to be parentheses from the dictionary Johnson was using. But this is only the beginning; mistakes in Egyptian abound in the pages of the symbol reference.⁵ Furthermore, every symbol attributed to Akkadian is incorrect.⁶

The Johnsons claim that their translation is endorsed by Hugh Nibley (see p. xi and back cover). It is not. I have spoken with Dr. Nibley. He does not endorse their method, book, approach, translation, or conclusions. What many people fail to realize is that while Nibley often endorses the study of problems, he almost never endorses a particular treatment of an issue.

The biggest reason to be suspicious of this translation, however, is its contents as assumed by the Johnsons. They have not understood what the Anthon transcript is. As I have previously written:

Though the so-called Anthon transcript contains a mere seven lines of text, it contains about eighty different characters; however, since the sample size is small, one is not able to determine whether the script is syllabic (like Ethiopic) or logographic (like Egyptian or Mayan). The transcript was in the possession of Oliver Cowdery who gave it to David Whitmer; it then passed to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints with the rest of David Whitmer's manuscripts. If this is the copy of the characters that was taken to Anthon, then it comes from the part of the Book of Mormon that was translated while Martin Harris was the scribe, and thus is from the missing 116 pages. If this were the case, we should expect it to be from Mormon's abridgment of the Nephite record (see Words of Mormon 1:3–7;

5. Errors occur in figs. A-1, B-1, C-6, C-7, D-4, E-9, E-10, E-11, E-13, G-5, G-6, G-7, G-8, H-1, H-2, H-3, H-4, H-5, H-6, K-13, K-14, M-2g-l, N-2f-k, O-2f-k, Q-3, R-5, S-6, S-7, S-8, S-9, T-1, T-2, U-2, U-3, W-1, W-3.

6. Figs. B-5, K-11, K-12, R-3.

D&C 10:30, 38–42). This would mean that it would be from the handwriting of Mormon (after ca. A.D. 362; see Mormon 3:8–11) and not from the small plates. We would then expect it to be a Semitic language written in an Egyptian script—a Semitic language that had been modified by time and creolization with the American languages, and an Egyptian script that had been modified not only by being engraved on metal plates, but also changed along with the handwriting styles and modifications of the Nephites (see Mormon 9:32). This has then been copied by a nineteenth-century hand in pen and ink.⁷

If the so-called Anthon transcript is the actual piece of paper that Martin Harris took to Charles Anthon, it is safe to assume that the characters came from the text they were then translating (the 116 missing manuscript pages, which contained a record from the time of Lehi to the time of King Benjamin). Thus Ether should not be a logical source for the transcript's contents.

A major obstacle faces those attempting a translation of the Anthon transcript—the corpus is not large enough to render decipherment feasible. The same, of course, is true of the writing on the Phaistos disk and the examples of the Isthmian or Mixtec scripts. There is still some debate about whether scholars have cracked some of the scripts that have a slightly larger corpus, like Linear A and Harrapan. Scripts that actually have been solved—such as hieroglyphic Hittite, Maya, cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, hieratic, demotic, and Ugaritic—all have immense bodies of texts. I cannot recall a single example of someone being able to decipher an unknown language written in an undeciphered script that was attested in only a single, small, monolingual document—and that holds true for the Johnsons.

7. John Gee, "The Hagiography of Doubting Thomas," *FARMS Review of Books* 10/2 (1998): 171–72.