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One Side of a Nonexistent Conversation

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Abstract Review of *The Papyri of Abraham: Facsimiles of the Everlasting Covenant* (2002), by Thomas D. Cottle.

One Side of a Nonexistent Conversation

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As new research comes out on a subject, it is useful to have an occasional summary of the state of affairs. Two recent attempts have been made to summarize the state of research on the Book of Abraham: one from the anti-Mormon perspective and the other—the book under review—from a Latter-day Saint perspective. Unfortunately, both were already seriously out-of-date when they appeared.[1] Though the work under consideration has certain merits, it also contains a number of errors.

Talking Past Each Other

Thomas Cottle, an amateur enthusiast who once served in a temple presidency, approaches the Book of Abraham from the perspective of a believer. He is vaguely aware that the Book of Abraham is controversial

1. The other summary, besides the book under review, is Robert K. Ritner, "The 'Breathing Permit of Hôr': Thirty-Four Years Later," *Dialogue* 33/4 (2000): 97–119, which appeared in spring 2002. As inadequate as the following work may be, the best summary to date is probably John Gee, *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000).

Review of Thomas D. Cottle. *The Papyri of Abraham: Facsimiles of the Everlasting Covenant.* Portland, Ore.: Insight, 2002. xv + 229 pp. $14.95.

but gives the controversy no heed. He claims that "the leading scholar in substantiating Abraham and his works was Hugh W. Nibley, with other contributors being Michael Dennis Rhodes, H. Donl Peterson, Michael Lyon, Jay M. Todd, and John Gee, to name a few. Their contributions on the Book of Abraham and facsimiles have quieted all serious opposition to this theological work" (p. xiv). Would that that were so!

Cottle's naiveté on this point touches on a more important point in Book of Abraham studies. Latter-day Saints do not generally pay any attention to what outsiders or critics may say about the Book of Abraham. On the other hand, we should not imagine that anti-Mormons[2] bother to read what members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have to say about any of their own scriptures, especially the Book of Abraham. There is simply no conversation taking place on the subject of the Book of Abraham. The two sides, if we can call them that, are not talking to each other; they are talking to themselves.

There is nothing wrong with the various sides talking to themselves so long as they do not pretend to be engaged in dialogue. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ in general have no pretensions about holding any dialogue with critics. They simply do not, for the most part, care what their critics say. Seeing themselves in a position similar to that of Nehemiah, they generally respond by "saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (Nehemiah 6:3). They want to understand their scripture and, while they appreciate the insights that scholars have to offer, they think that prophets, rather than scholars, are the final interpreters of prophetic scripture. Anti-Mormons, on the other hand, make a pretense of addressing the Saints, even though they are largely engaged in propaganda for the purpose of boundary

2. While a few of the authors mentioned in this list might choose to describe their activities otherwise, they are "anti-Mormon" because they fight against the Church of Jesus Christ, which is the root meaning of the term. In the nineteenth century, those who fought against the Church of Jesus Christ designated themselves "anti-Mormon," and I see no reason not to apply the same term to their followers who are engaged, although sometimes more politely, in the same activity.

maintenance. Because anti-Mormons are not genuinely interested in dialogue, they do not bother to state the position of members of the Church of Jesus Christ with accuracy; in some cases, anti-Mormon caricatures of that position are not even recognizable.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ are mostly interested in the content of the Book of Abraham. Anti-Mormons are dismissive of its content and concentrate on its production, a subject to which most Latter-day Saints are indifferent; they do not care what besides revelation is involved. Suppose for a moment that some people disagreed with Francis Ll. Griffith's translation of Papyrus Rylands IX and, furthermore, argued that his translation was completely bogus. Suppose further that in their efforts to demonstrate that it was a fraud they scoured Griffith's notebooks, as well as those of his student, Alan Gardiner, but they neglected to examine Griffith's translation. As strange as this approach sounds, it is the typical anti-Mormon approach to the Book of Abraham. This also illustrates why members of the Church of Jesus Christ and anti-Mormons are not engaged in any authentic sort of dialogue; they simply talk past each other.

Merits . . .

In keeping with the typical position of members of the Church of Jesus Christ, in his book Cottle tells the story of Abraham and then proceeds with a commentary on the facsimiles. He weaves his narrative from the Book of Abraham and from biblical and a few extrabiblical sources, which include (in chronological order): The *Genesis Apocryphon,* the book of *Jubilees,* writings of Flavius Josephus, and the *Book of Jasher.* Before the publication of Cottle's book, however, a work came out containing over thirty times this number of noncanonical accounts that Cottle could have taken into consideration.[3] The increase in the number of known traditions about Abraham raises the question of why Cottle should privilege the late *Book of Jasher* over other, earlier accounts.

3. John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, comps. and eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001).

Cottle's commentary on the facsimiles simply uses them as a springboard to talk about various tangential topics. It is not an Egyptological commentary, nor even an Egyptologically informed commentary, on the subject, although there is nothing particularly objectionable about the doctrinal content. Since he is writing for Latter-day Saints, there can be no objection to that part of his commentary; it is only when he makes pretenses of an Egyptologically informed commentary that his display of specious learning causes problems. Cottle hopes that because of his commentary "individuals will no longer respond to the facsimiles like a statement made by Shakespeare. 'I cannot too much muse such shapes, such gesture, and such sound expression, a kind of excellent dumb discourse.'" (p. xv).[4] I fear that his commentary does not fulfill his objectives, but, ironically, his Shakespearean quotation becomes self-descriptive.

. . . And Demerits

As with most self-published efforts, Cottle's work contains a number of errors, some of which are minor and others of which significantly detract from his work. The most serious problem is his use of images without permission, including all of appendix C. Even when he does include a permission statement, it is invariably not from the entity that owns the copyright. This is, unfortunately, a common problem with publications on the Book of Abraham, including most anti-Mormon publications.

Examples of other errors include:

"Ldy" for "Lady" (p. 173)

"Ta-khred-Khonsu" for Senchons (*t3-šr.t-ḫnsw,* Σενχωνς)[5] (p. 173)

"Wst-wrt" for Esoeris (*is.t-wr.t,* Εσοηρις)[6] (p. 175)

4. The quotation is from William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 3.3.38–39.

5. Erich Lüddeckens et al., *Demotisches Namenbuch* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1980–2000), 15:1144.

6. Ibid., 2:76.

Authors' names are often deleted (pp. 195, 200, 204, 207–8, 217, 222). John Gee is changed into "John A. Gee" (p. 191) and also into Stephen Ricks (pp. 191, 227).

Some errors are less obvious: "Where Abram lived exactly is not known. It was possibly the great cultural center of Tanis, the capitol of Egypt for 350 years, but to date, the location of this city has not been found" (p. 14). Actually, Tanis (San el-Hagar) has been under excavation since the end of the nineteenth century and during World War II yielded spectacular finds of undisturbed royal burials rivaling or surpassing those of King Tutankhamun.[7] Tanis was a royal city for an extended period, but that period began about the time of Saul, long after the days of Abraham.

Final Note

Insofar as one can overlook historical and philological inaccuracies in a commentary on the facsimiles and the author's uses of the facsimiles as a springboard for homiletics, one might find this book useful. If one is looking for something else, one should look elsewhere.

7. For overviews, see Geoffrey Graham, "Tanis," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3:348–50; and Ian Shaw and Paul Nicholson, *The Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Abrams, 1995), 282–83. Excavation reports include W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Tanis* (London: Trübner, 1885–88); Pierre Montet, *Les nouvelles fouilles de Tanis* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1933); Pierre Montet, *La nécropole royale de Tanis* (Paris: n.p., 1947–60); Pierre Montet, *Le lac sacré de Tanis* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1966); Georges Goyon, *La découverte des trésors de Tanis* (Paris: Perséa, 1987); Philippe Brissaud, comp., *Cahiers de Tanis* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1987). For reused monuments at Tanis, see Eric P. Uphill, *The Temples of Per Ramesses* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1984), 8–95, 129–52.