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# Kasia Szpakowska, *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt*

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**Kasia Szpakowska, *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt*. Blackwell, 2008. Bill Brison, *Judas: Beloved Disciple*. Kendal, U.K.: Titus Wilson & Son, 2009.**

Reading these two books over the same period, it is difficult to avoid being struck by the range of methods and approaches scholars employ in attempting to recreate and understand the ancient world. Here we have two contrasting approaches by an archaeologist and a Biblical scholar.

How clear and engrossing were the histories of James Breasted. He fearlessly told his readers how it was in ancient times without worrying that much of what he wrote was based on conjecture or assumptions that, where data were lacking on his subject, it could be supplied from what was known about neighboring civilizations, even though what was known might also have been conjecture.

Today's archaeologist is much more cautious. Though the title does not specify, Szpakowska sets out to present a picture of everyday life of middle class townspeople in the late Middle Kingdom, roughly the century between 1850 and 1750 BC. Since she is trying to reach a more general audience, "university students and the general public as well as scholars," she somewhat selects and modifies translations. She focuses on the town of Lahun, roughly 70 miles south of the Delta, south of Memphis, north of Herakleopolis, where she has done her own research. In order to bring the past to life, she creates a family, identifying the members with actual names used at the time, and featuring the daughter, Hejerit.

All well and good. In addition the book is nicely published, rich in well-chosen pictures along with useful maps conveniently placed. The pictures show some of the artifacts as they actually look but more are drawn from these to give the reader a clearer idea of what is being described. The print is readable.

Szpakowska strives mightily in her writing to describe the daily life in an interesting way, while being careful to state when she is presenting a hypothesis that might explain the findings, and when she is going beyond the town in space or time to provide evidence not directly available to the city, and when this evidence comes from the upper rather than the middle class.

There is much that the general reader might learn. I was struck, for instance, to learn that the method for giving birth was for the mother to squat with her feet placed on two bricks, with the midwife in front of her, and another woman supporting her back (illustrated from a drawing taken from one of the birth bricks) and to learn that this method, taking advantage of gravity, was common throughout the ancient world and into recent times (23-25). A few weeks after reading this, I noticed that, in a novel by Isabel Allende, this method was described as being used by a member of the upper class in late nineteenth century Chile.

Nor had it occurred to me that children running naked in a warm climate, and toilet trained out doors, would not suffer from diaper rash; or that the application of the cosmetic kohl, one type of which had a lead base, was placed between the eye lids

and “gently rubbed across” (52-53); or that besides hieroglyphics found on monuments there was hieratic writing, used by scribes, that looks, from the book’s illustration, much more like handwriting (103-105)

The attempt to combine clarity and interest with veracity, however, often provides too much of a stretch. There is too little evidence from Lahun to cover the range Szpakowska attempts. More often than not she must go outside the town to other cities, sometimes out of the period to the New Kingdom, sometime out of the class to the upper class, with the conjecture that probably the same practice at a modified level would have applied to the family at Lahun.

In these circumstances the life of Hegerit, who is described from her birth to the birth of her own first child, should have been a compelling link. She even gets to write the opening paragraph of each chapter, though she is illiterate, as if from memory (though these paragraphs, in cursive printing, are the only ones that are difficult to read). She remains a distant heroine, however, because so much of the evidence is taken from other times and places. She disappears from the narrative for pages at a time and is not remembered in the index.

While I was reading this study of Egypt, I was also reading the proofs of a very different book concerning a rather well known intercivilizational encounter: *Judas: Beloved Disciple*, on which I had given some previous advice. What a difference there is between these two books in terms of scholarly method and approach.

Whereas Szpakowska is carefully neutral, Bill Brison is passionate. While he is careful to consider many possible objections to his hypothesis, he confidently defends it: “In very slow stages, premise by premise, fact by fact, we move the working hypothesis forward from one of possibility to one of probability to one of reasonable certainty.” While Szpakowska searches the earth and supplements from similar work by others, Brison (not the Bill Bryson of *The History of Nearly Everything*) searches the New Testament in Greek and English and supplements with the work of other Biblical scholars, both early, such as Polycarp, and recent, such as R. E. Brown, who believes the Gospel of John could have been written by a single theologian as early as 70-85 AD.

Perhaps it is better to write hypotheses, for there appear to be two, the second more controversial than the first. The first is that Judas, not John, was the beloved disciple. The second is that Judas, not John or a community of scholars, was the author of the *Gospel According to John*.

That Judas was an important disciple close to Jesus has been inferred by other scholars and popularized by the Kazantzakis book *The Last Temptation of Christ* and the film, directed by Martin Scorsese, made from it. Brison reviews the evidence, even the chapter in which The Beloved Disciple asks Jesus who would betray him, and Jesus hands a morsel to Judas (15: 23-30). He also confronts the difficulty that Judas had been reported to have committed suicide by Matthew and Luke (Matthew 27: 3-10; Acts 1: 15-20).

But his case depends on the assumption that Judas was the author of the Gospel, and that it was written as it was for that reason. Brison accepts the chronology of most scholars that this is the last of the Gospels to be circulated, somewhere around 90 AD, but believes that it was written years or decades earlier.

Much of this is conjecture, of course, particularly Brison's construction of a Life of Judas, but no more so than the imaginative conjectures of archaeologists, historians and civilizationists on the origins of agriculture or, for that matter, Szpakowski's life of Hegerit.

That Judas might be the author of *John* is especially controversial since it would mean that the Gospel usually considered to be more than any of the others, the product of the later Christian community, was actually the only one written by a first hand witness of the ministry and the crucifixion. More than that, Brison bolsters his case from a conversation between Jesus and Peter about a man Brison considers the Beloved Disciple, a conversation held after Jesus's resurrection (21: 20-23). (Brison does acknowledge, however, that this chapter may have been a later addition.)

Editors have rejected Brison's manuscript out of hand as being ridiculous or impossible, but Brison's appendix includes letters from established scholars and church authorities who, while recommending further investigation and not endorsing, believed the book should be published. The final product, imaginatively illustrated by the way, is certainly an intriguing read.

So two scholars investigating the Ancient Near East, as unlike one another as would seem possible, have produced books demonstrating the breadth, methodologies and imagination involved in contemporary scholarship.

Matthew Melko

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