

# Of the Pearl of Great Price

## THE EGYPTIAN CONTEXT

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The air of mystery and romance that has always surrounded things Egyptian has never failed to attract swarms of crackpots, cultists, half-baked scholars, self-certified experts, and out-and-out charlatans.

“New Look at the Pearl of Great Price” (February 1968): 15

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Granted its mind-expanding scope, is the Egyptian experience at all relevant to the modern world? The answer is no, and neither is Mormonism relevant to the distracted modern world, which has no concern with the things of the eternities and will soon be forgotten.

*Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 14*

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Life is too short to devote years of study to learning that what went on with the ancients was just more of the same. It is too short to let us live both our lives and theirs from day to day *unless* they have something to add to the story, something we do not have, something quite wonderful and unexpected. Of all people the Egyptians are most likely to supply us with such matter.

*Abraham in Egypt, ix-x*

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The great attraction of Egypt was at all times the exciting combination of religious *and* scientific thinking, mantic and sophic, intuitive and intellectual, the ancient and the progressive. The solid and visible achievements of the ancient Egyptians bade the observer take their message seriously, as it does us today. The Egyptians, Theophrastus observed, are, on the one hand, the most rationally minded of all people, and yet they live in an ambiance submerged in ancient and recondite religious lore. This tradition is deeply religious and at the same time persistently intellectual—the perfect example, one would say today, of the “bicameral” blend.

*Abraham in Egypt, 107*

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There is no exclusive equation between Ham and Pharaoh, or between Ham and Egyptians, or between the Egyptians and the blacks, or between any of the above and any particular curse. What was denied was recognition of patriarchal right to the priesthood made by a claim of matriarchal succession.

*Abraham in Egypt, 219-20*

## JOSEPH SMITH'S ROLE

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Among the Kirtland Egyptian Papers is a small cloth-bound book inscribed "W. W. Phelps, Diary Vc. 1835," containing original renderings of the Bible, of which the Church Historian writes: "These passages of Scriptures from the Bible do not appear to have any connection with the Inspired Revision by the Prophet Joseph Smith. This is no doubt the result of research and study done by Wm. W. Phelps." And why not? Joseph Smith encouraged others to obtain all the gifts that God has bestowed on man.

"The Meaning of the Kirtland Egyptian Papers," 393

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The Mormons are deeply concerned only with what they accept as scripture. Non-Mormons, raised in the tradition of the infallible Bible, are unable to conceive of a man's being a prophet and at the same time a fallible mortal. They persist in thinking . . . that the discovery of any slightest flaw in Joseph Smith's character or his work must necessarily bring the whole structure of Mormonism down in ruins.

It isn't that way at all. All men are subject to vanity, said Joseph Smith, and all must be allowed a generous margin of error to be themselves. But there *are* points on which no such freedom is allowed. There are writings that the Mormons accept as inspired scriptures, and these include the explanation to the facsimiles in the book of Abraham.

"New Look at the Pearl of Great Price" (May 1970): 83

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

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The book that concerns us was purposely called "The Pearl of Great Price," that term being both in scripture and apocrypha the designation of a treasure that is both hidden and inexhaustible. Being hidden, it must be searched out and dug up—brought out of the depths by the strenuous and determined efforts of whoever would possess it. Being inexhaustibly vast, it can never cease to be a source of new wonders to the inquiring mind.

In the past this treasure has been treated more or less like a convenient bit of pocket money, a ready fund of occasional texts to be dipped into for self-serving commentaries. That is not the purpose of the scriptures, which is to tell us what we do not know and often do not want to know.

The Pearl of Great Price is unique among scriptures in that its message is available only to that extent to which God's children choose to make it so, but at the same time it is capable of conveying knowledge of undreamed of scope and significance.

“New Look at the Pearl of Great Price” (May 1970): 94

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The recent flowering of comparative studies that look into long neglected or newly discovered apocryphal writings makes it clear that the concept of recurrent dispensations of light and darkness, restoration and apostasy, is valid for every age of recorded history. Nowhere is the pattern set forth more clearly than in the epic sweep of the Pearl of Great Price.

Surprisingly, the perennial pattern presented there is not limited to Jewish and Christian traditions, but extends to the oldest ritual literature—epic and dramatic—of the human race. Chapter one of our book of Moses is as much an introduction to world literature in general as to our conventional scriptures.

“A Strange Thing in the Land,” *CWHN* 2:155

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Find the author of the book of Moses and you have found the author of the Book of Mormon. All other candidates may withdraw. And yet, what a difference! The one is a collection of the writings of pious sectaries in the wilderness—the Rekhabite motif resounds on almost every page: chronicles and annals, letters and sermons, commentaries, hymns and meditations; the other, the voice of Moses booming down the corridors of time as he transmits to us the words that come down to him from the beginning—he sings Enoch's songs, and Noah's and Adam's, to which Abraham's is added in another book.

“To Open the Last Dispensation,” 4

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The book of Enoch was given to the Saints as a bonus for their willingness to accept the Book of Mormon and as a reward for their sustained and lively interest in all scriptures, including the lost books. They were searchers, engaging in eager speculation . . . , ever seeking like Adam and Abraham, for “greater [light and] knowledge” (Abraham 1:2).

And we have been told that if we stop seeking we shall not only find no more but lose the treasures we already have. That is why it is not only advisable but urgent that we begin at last to pay attention to the astonishing outpouring of ancient writings which is the peculiar blessing of our generation. Among these writings the first peculiar blessing of our generation. Among these writings the first and most important is the book of Enoch.

“A Strange Thing in the Land,” *CWHN* 2:95

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The real question is not whether Joseph Smith knew Egyptian—no one has claimed that he did; or whether the book of Abraham is translated from the Book of Breathings—that, by universal admission, is impossible; or whether Joseph Smith was interested in producing an Egyptian grammar—he emphatically says that he was; or that the Alphabet and Grammar came to nothing—the men of Kirtland found it useless almost immediately and forgot it; or who is an Egyptologist and who is not—no one challenges their translations; but the true significance of the old texts and pictures remains a mystery to the expert and layman alike. . . . It is not Joseph Smith but the book of Abraham that is on trial.

“Judging and Prejudging the Book of Abraham,” 244

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The two rules to follow. . . are (1) to ask the right questions, and (2) to keep looking. What is the one question which the book of Abraham confronts us with before all others? Simply this: Is it a true history? I believe that it is and have always believed it. I am biased. Other people believe that it is not and have always believed that. They have never been able to take the question seriously, let alone look for an answer. So there is a deadlock. We can stop there.

But if either side from idle curiosity should feel inclined to step away from square one, the Big Question must be broken up into little questions that are easier to handle.

“The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham,” 51

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So far no one has asked how [Joseph] Smith came to produce a history of Abraham which can be matched at every point from a wealth of ancient sources—Jewish and Christian apocrypha, Talmud, Mishna, even Gnostic, Hasidic and Cabbalistic writings, Moslem commentators, sectaries of the desert such as Mandaeans and Qumran people, even the church Fathers and Classical writers.

“Phase One,” 105

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Today scholars are becoming aware of an elaborately interlacing mesh of ancient writings from various far-flung centers of culture and religion, which were formerly thought to be completely independent and disconnected productions. These support and explain each other in strange and surprising ways, and right in the center of the great complex is the Book of Breathings.

“What Is ‘The Book of Breathings?’” 187

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As in a hall of mirrors, the Book of Breathings seems to be reflected in an endless procession of documents that fade out of sight in either direction. Behind it lie the Egyptian funerary and temple texts that go back to the

beginning, and after it comes an equally impressive succession of early Christian and Jewish writings that move on down through the patristic literature to our own day.

*Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 255*

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What happens to Abraham and what he does is of enduring effect in the history of the whole human race, past, present, and future. He is one of those key figures in whom all the events of the past are brought into focus as by a burning-glass and whose actions are in turn projected into the future as an ever-expanding image.

What we see here is a moment of immeasurable significance in the history of the race. The messenger-bird is there to represent the Ruler of All. The crocodile is no less necessary to represent the ancient opposition in all things. The lion is (in early Jewish and Christian parlance) the relentless force that consumes all material things. The lotus is the symbol of the righteous man's pilgrimage through a hostile and dangerous world. Everything has a meaning, and the pillars and expanse of heaven remove the whole story from this transient world to its proper relationship in the eternal plan of things.

"New Look at the Pearl of Great Price" (October 1969): 88

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To begin with, Abraham was in the world, a wicked world very much like our own. From childhood to the grave, he was a stranger in his society because he insisted on living by the principles of the gospel and preaching them to others wherever he went, even if it meant getting into trouble. Those principles, teachings, covenants, ordinances, and promises were alien to the world, which was bitterly hostile to them. So Abraham's whole life, as is often stated, was a series of trials or tests, and by example and precept he tells us how to come through victorious.

His object? Not to conquer or impress but to bless all with whom he comes into contact, ultimately shedding the blessing that God gave to him upon the whole human race. For that he is first of all the magnanimous, the great-hearted, the ever-hospitable Abraham, who always does the fair and compassionate thing no matter how badly others may behave toward him. He is the friend of God because he is the friend of man, pleading on his knees for Sodom and Gomorrah. That is the *moral* pattern for all men to follow.

Only by "doing the works of Abraham" can we hope to establish a better order of things on the earth, that order of Zion lost since the days of Noah. This takes courage, tact, unfailing faith, and the constant aid of divine revelation.

It entails more than human contrivance or human wisdom—Abraham must acquire ever more and more knowledge. The guiding principle is intelligence, an awareness of things as they are: the physical world, the structure and nature of the cosmos, and the spiritual realities that are behind everything. For Abraham, everything is a prelude to what lies beyond.

*Abraham in Egypt, 249*

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We must do the works of Abraham. And then we are told specifically in the Doctrine and Covenants that that means sacrificing, if necessary, your own life. Abraham was willing to do that, and everyone at some time or

another will have the opportunity to show that he'd be willing to do that.

"The Faith of an Observer," 28