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On Ancient Egypt

Thomas K. Hinckley

Brigham Young University has announced it will display the exhibit, "Rameses II: The Pharaoh and His Time", at the Bean Museum 25 October through 5 April 1986. Rameses II reigned 67 years in the thirteenth century B.C. There are 72 artifacts in the exhibit which is judged to be more significant than the King Tutankhamen exhibition that toured in the last decade. We have assembled a booklist for those who would like to do some reading before they study the artifacts.

Egypt, throughout its five millenia, has held a place in our world far more important than its size, position, resources, science, or politics have ever accounted for. Egypt was not the only highly organized and diversified river basin agricultural empire; there were, after all, the Tigris/Euphrates, the Indus, and the Hwang Ho/Yangtze cultures. There are some agricultural advances that set Egypt apart from the other cultures of the time: the Egyptians, perhaps because of their broader interests, were the first to discover the utility of the solar year (corrected by the helical rising of Sirius) and hence could maximize their agriculture in relation to the beginning of the growing season and the flooding of the Nile.

However, in spite of this, Egypt is not remembered today for her agriculturally based empire, for her political ascendance over the ancient world, nor even for her calendar that lasted four thousand years before it was modified (not changed--only modified). And any of the ancient civilizations can claim better site and situation than Egypt. As much as we are embarrassed by it in this day, there is only one thing that can account for our fascination with the crown of ancient civilizations, with things Egyptian, and that one thing is religion.

Take away the pyramids, the sphinx, the mummies royal and mundane, the books of the dead, the obelisks, the colossi, and the temples, and all that is left is a faceless river flowing through trackless sand. None seem able now to encompass the sweep and scope of Egyptian religion, or even less, its meaning. We are nonetheless faced with the reality that every major orthodox religion has its sacred beginnings and parallels in Egypt. What is the Old Testament without Egypt?

Because we have not understood the ancient Egyptian texts, sacred and secular, we have, in intense scepticism, relegated them to the level of superstition or mere magic. Who, in the twentieth century, prior to Aschiem and Zondek (1926) would have believed that the ancient Egyptians had a urine test for pregnancy? It was not until the work of Julius Manger at the Pharmacological Institute in Wartzburg in 1933 that an incredulous world was ready to believe that the Egyptian urine pregnancy test also accurately determined the sex of the fetus. Can we believe other things Egyptian?

In a world generally considered without antecedents--the 'now' generation--it is sometimes useful to allow our progenitors to become the protagonist and confront us with questions of meaning. Ours too is a Rameside age. We also claim to be the pinnacle of civilization and have also chiselled everyone else's names from the monuments of time, in order to insert our own. Where is our culture going?

So we are going again to render homage to Rameses II, the last golden pharaoh before the decline. Who could ever dream that that great pharaoh would ever deign to make his presence felt in obscure Provo? One has only to recall that in our lifetimes 100
million dollars was spent at Abu Simbel to raise the Rameses colossi above the waters rising behind the high Awan Dam to know how important Rameses II still is. Does Rameses have anything to say to us?

Perhaps my interest in the thirty-three-century-dead monarch is the close correspondence between his world and mine. (I mean, the mummies who have been blood-typed are B like me.) Not since his day has anyone so successfully erected such a monolithic state religion as has the United States, where we boast that there is no such thing as a state religion but where in fact we worship scientific humanism. We demand that it be the only religion discussed in our schools. We have a vast array of scientific journals and magazines that vigorously defend biological evolution (which may require more faith than creation), that argue against entropy where it conflicts with evolution, and that suppose we can discover all the secrets of life and maintain absolute control over all forms of life in spite of mounting evidence to the contrary. On PBS we are subjected to a plethora of brilliant documentaries that all take as their basic premise that their bleak atheistic ‘scientific’ view can explain all and fix all. And Yuppies are their high priests. The savants of the industrial-military establishment never appeal to their God of our Fathers; they appeal to the credulity of the taxpayer first, and then to the dumb gods of fission/fusion who can only produce a cultural confusion. Valhalla and Heaven were long ago compacted in a scientific black-hole (listen to Asimov huff and puff at the Life After Life books). Do not mourn the loss. Science will figure out how to stop cells from ever aging. And in the meantime you can have your body frozen by space-age technology to be thawed when all disease is conquered. I prefer the ritual of the Book of the Dead. The quest for immortality is just as great in the modern United States as it ever was in ancient Egypt. We have lavished vast sums on medicine to extend our lives, but have changed life expectancy little in the last half-century. For that matter Rameses II lived to be 77, a male born this year has a life expectancy six or seven years shorter.

My liberal friends press persuasively for space colonisation so that when (1) the earth is consumed in holocaust, life can continue. At least in the ancient litany darkness neither prevailed nor consumed.

The ancient ritual text,

A ramp to the sky is built for him, that he may go to the sky on it . . . He flies as a bird, and he settles as a beetle on an empty seat that is in the ship of Re . . .

might well be graven on the walls of NASA.

Pharaoh’s priesthood taught him the secrets of placing 100,000 men under covenant to build an immortal tomb. And we, in a world where covenants no longer have much validity, have schools to train taskmasters. Servants who are not willing shall be constrained.

We tend to think those mouldering tombs and temples a waste, yet we shall have bricks to build our technological palaces and elitist temples though all the mud and straw in the world be consumed.

And to those who have studied paleopathology—causes of death anciently—the parallel of our culturally induced maladies will be obvious. Rameses II died of severe arteriosclerosis caused by the same abuse of alcohol, the same over indulgence in meats and fats, and the same stress due to the pressures of life at court as we endure. The royal mummies have our same anthracosis, about the same number of caries caused by the same carbohydrates. They even had our same stress-induced constipation. One wonders if the TV witch doctor is actually more skilled than The Royal Shepherd of the Anus. Egypt was not plagued with venereal syphilis: the examination of 25,000 mummy skulls proved that. Nor were they subject to carcinoma. These two killers flourish in our industri-culture. Israel leaving Egypt was given a health code; we have only been given FDA and EPA.

So what are we going out in the desert to see? Our dead past? A colleague says, ‘Egypt represents the affirmation of life and its perpetuity’. As a citizen of Latter-day Egypt, it is this sacred mystical celebration of life that is important. We might, as we view our three-millenia-separated worlds, contemplate our future.
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