

EGYPT AND JOSEPH SMITH

1. What is the Prophets attraction to Egypt?

He was not attracted to it—he was lead to it. Though no one realized it in 1830, Palestine was very much in the zone of Egyptian influence, economically and culturally, in 6000 B.C. That had to show in the record and the Book of Mormon clearly reveals it. Joseph Smith did not search for exotic papyri—they came to him, including the only hypocephalus in the western hemisphere.

The study of the Bible has always been philologically based, and the languages surrounding Israel were closely related to Hebrew; nothing could be more natural than for scholars to turn to the oldest of those languages in search of biblical origins. In Mesopotamia, Abraham's homeland, they thought they had the answer. But Abraham turns his back on Mesopotamia and his face towards Egypt. Only within recent years has the primacy of Egypt in the Patriarchal narratives been recognized. That is because western civilization beginning with the Greeks was prejudiced against pharaonic Egypt as an odd and alien land where people worshipped monkeys and crocodiles—the very essence of idolatry and paganism for the Greeks and Jews whose own religious baggage comes largely from Egypt, but from Alexandria which was hostile to the old Egyptian culture. The New Testament was claimed entirely by the Hellenists, who ignored its Egyptian connections, since confirmed by the rich Coptic finds.

If Rabbinic Judaism owes much to the Babylonian Captivity, the mosaic religion owes even more to Egypt, where the Hebrews had a much more congenial sojourn, The Egyptian element definitely dominates in Genesis an Exodus and the apocryphal writings, especially those about Abraham.

Ties between Israel and Egypt are at their closest in the marriage of Joseph and Asenath—the great-grandson of Abraham with the daughter of the second most important Egyptian, the High Priest of Heliopolis. The rabbis found the flat historical statement in Genesis 41:45; 46:21 quite unacceptable and invented a number of legends to prove that Asenath was not Egyptian at all; yet the most important manuscripts of the story of Joseph and Asenath confirm her Egyptian blood. The descent of most Latter-day Saints from Enoch, the elder son of Asenath, obliges them to give the lady respectful consideration. As children of Abraham we cannot dodge the Egyptian involvement. If there is one thing that the most recent documents have brought out it is that Egypt has been sold short in biblical scholarship.

2. Why have the vast majority of people never known the gospel?

One should rephrase the question: Why have no mortals save the fabulous city of Enoch ever had the gospel in its fullness? Those accepting the covenants of the Old and New Testaments were “a small and peculiar people”, and even they were only given the knowledge “in part”. They held to those covenants only for brief periods of time and in

small communities. The Prophets routinely deplore the failure of the People of Israel to live up to the teachings and commandments. When the scriptures became the property of the Doctors of the Jews and Christians, they became the subject of showy intellectual and rhetorical exercises which entirely defaced the doctrines and ordinances.

In restoring what he called “the ancient order”, Joseph Smith pointed out that scraps and fragments of that order had survived in various places throughout the world and where they were observed and respected they were a source of consolation and advantage to people. But every restoration of the gospel was soon followed by apostasy, so the world by its own choice has remained in darkness.

But cannot the human race flourish happily quite oblivious to the claims of the Gospel? The answer is emphatically that it cannot. The constant theme of literature and philosophy is that man lives in a state of constant uncertainty and misgiving. Men are never free from fear of something after death or, worse yet, nothing after death. They either pray for deliverance or resign themselves to lives of quiet desperation. Along with a nightmare sense of going nowhere is an obsessive sense of inadequacy and guilt in a world where things are always going wrong. A vast amount of documentation in comparative religion confirms the universal offices of the Scapegoat, Meriah, Pharmakos, etc.

Did the Gospel grow out of this need for deliverance, or was the need an aftermath of its withdrawal or loss? In either case, the scenario has always involved the whole human race, but whether they realize it or not can only escape their predicament through the teachings of the Gospel. God holds those teachings in reserve, and portions them out to whatever people are ready to receive it and to whatever degree they can accept it.

3. What is the relationship between the Osiris myth and the Abrahamic story?

The Osiris myth belongs to a remarkably uniform body of dramatic presentation found throughout the world in ancient times and usually designated as the Year Rite, inseparably connected with the idea of coronation, succession to divine power and a renewal of life. The origins of the cult, though endlessly debated are entirely unknown whether in the Egyptian Mesopotamian or “primitive” versions.

All are agreed that in Abraham’s time, thanks apparently to a prolonged drought in the world, the religious observances had regenerated into rites of a desperate and bloody nature. Abraham’s involvement in the business was first indicated in modern times in the Book of Abraham where his participation is extremely reluctant. His ancestors had possessed the Religion of the Patriarchs going back to Adam but the world, including his own family, had lost it. “From Noah to Abraham ten generations,” goes the ancient saying, “and there was none who truly worshipped God.” “...As it was with Noah so shall it be with thee,” says the Lord in the Book of Abraham. Abraham’s parents regarded his teachings of the Gospel as base betrayal, believing that their religion was in the pure line of descent from the Fathers. And in fact both teachings had a common source, though one was corrupted. Another corrupted version was the Mysteries of Osiris.

Abraham does not take the rites of Osiris seriously. It is very much against his will that he plays the role of Osiris on the altar; the Book of Abraham is very careful to point out that the whole story is of a ritual nature. Abraham is our model in all things, we are to “do the works of Abraham” which works go back to Adam. Every Egyptian in the rites of the temple identified himself with Osiris, just as every Hebrew as a mortal was an Adam. In a Coptic ritual text found on a large potsherd the familiar pattern occurs but the initiate instead of calling himself “the Osiris So-and-so” designates himself as “the Adam So-and-so”.

Abraham’s unpleasant involvement with Osiris is given to us because it is definitely a well-attested part of the Abraham story and is valuable evidence for the authenticity of the record.

4. What is the pattern we must follow to become sons of God, to gain eternal life?

That is set forth in the Scriptures: faith, repentance, baptism, charity, and all the ordinances of the Temple that follow. They are set forth in the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price, all of which follow exactly the same line, and each of which contains for the initiated all the ordinances known to us so far.

5. How do the three Facsimiles relate to that pattern?

The three Facsimiles are not meant to teach us the Gospel, but to strengthen the testimonies of Abraham’s offspring during their long stay in Egypt when they were exposed to all the enticements of a superior culture, to which they often yielded. We are explicitly told that the PGP has been given to the church in these days as a bonus for accepting the Book of Mormon.

The one true religion cannot overlook the existence of other beliefs and practices that have been followed by the vast majority of the human race over many centuries. It cannot be a localized provincial religion such as Roman Catholicism and the extremely limited Protestant sect. That does not mean that it must have a large membership, but that its doctrine should acknowledge and seek to understand the full scope of human experience. Thus Abraham treats the knowledge of the Egyptians and the morality of Pharaoh with reverence and respect; he doesn’t share their beliefs but understands their position. Today the existence in prehistoric times of an “archaic religion” or “ancient wisdom” is ever more strongly suspected as comparative studies to accumulate. Mormonism is not only a world religion, it is the World Religion.

6. What specifically is the Hypocephalus?

Studies of other hypocephali that resemble it closely show that it is a highly symbolic model of the cosmos, meant to confirm a link between this world and other and higher worlds. At present I am making available some heretofore unrecognized information about the hypocephali. The answer to the question requires a more thorough and systematic presentation than can be undertaken here.

Joseph Smith's Explanations of the Figures introduce us to the all important cosmological component of religion, which was very conspicuous in the early Jewish and Christian writings, but which has been vigorously condemned and suppressed by both the Rabbis and the Doctors of the Church since the 4th Century. The bringing of the real universe into the picture is an essential step in the restoration of the Gospel.

The hypocephalus as Joseph Smith explains it correlates time and space and indicates a flow of energy among celestial bodies as it actually was understood by the Egyptians and indicated in the hypocephali. These plans or diagrams show how scientific information was conveyed in a system of notation quite different from our own mathematical and scientific signs and symbols but quite as valid and even more graphic than our own. The hypocephalus is a reminder that there can be worlds—real worlds—we know not of, an idea which is just now being introduced into the pulpits and journals of Christian churches, with an increasing awareness that all life throughout the entire universe is interconnected. That lesson was first made clear in the Abraham hypocephalus.

7. What is the appeal of Light to the Egyptians? What does the Sun represent?

The answer to this should be self-evident. Who does not prefer the reassuring safety of light to the paralyzing obscurity of darkness? The Egyptian recognized, as we do, that all life comes from the sun; its energy reaches us in the most immediate sensation as light. Light and life are thus literally inseparable: the Light of the World is the Life of the World.

The Egyptians recognized that energy can take various forms but light was the most intimate, direct, gratifying, exhilarating. Vision is the highest form of awareness which is understanding or intelligence; what is visible is comprehensible. The Egyptians experimented with various ways of understanding light; sundials, obelisks, mirrors, apertures in walls, pyramidions, etc. Life was half-symbolized and half-captured in the Benben, the akhw-figures, Phoenix, Wdjat-eyes, Scarabs, Solar discs or globes, and was thought to be captured in materials such as quartzite and rose-red granite.

But after all it was not light that was their obsession but as every Egyptologist knows it was life. The single premise of religion is the possibility that there is more life for us than what we go through here. Only the Egyptians were honest enough to recognize that that alone is the fundamental question and to spend their days looking for a real answer to it. In the process, as Hornung points out, they may have come nearer to an answer than modern science has.

In one important respect Joseph Smith's concern with things Egyptian was unique. For hundreds of years Egypt has had an irresistible appeal to quacks, mystics and crackpots of all sorts—those with an appetite for the occult, for shortcuts to omniscience, for spooking and bourgeoisie, etc., have used the secret of the Egyptians for full effect. There is not the slightest trace of any of this in Joseph Smith, though he is accused of having an incurable appetite for just such things.