

THE FACSIMILES OF THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM:

by H. W. Nibley to E. H. Ashment

Three cheers for Brother Ashment! I am glad to see we are making progress. He has very correctly titled his paper "A Reappraisal of the Facsimiles." We need it all the time. If there is any other thing that characterizes the recent appearances in the journals and periodicals today, it is reappraisal.

Everything in Egyptian is being reappraised. The old stories that students have sputtered over for years, or have bluffed their way through, are all being reread and reappraised, especially with an eye to religious, political, historical, philosophical intent and content that may have escaped former generations. What Brother Ashment has shown us is that we do not look with care and we do not read with care. This was all available; you did not need to be an Egyptologist to know any of that, for it was just common sense—except for the interpretation.

I refuse to be held responsible for anything I wrote more than three years ago. For heaven's sake, I hope we are moving forward here. After all, the implication that one mistake and it is all over with—how flattering to think in forty years I have not made one slip and I am still in business! I would say about four fifths of everything I put down has changed, of course. That is the whole idea; This is an ongoing process, and I have some interesting examples of that.

There is a doctoral dissertation that has just come out of Germany by a young man who has taken over a hundred facsimiles matching our facsimile number three, private and so forth and so on, and compared them. The results show that they all look very much alike. But the accompanying inscriptions show that they tell the widest variety of stories. They use the same images to tell all sorts of stories with great freedom. Not uncommonly in a scene in which all is ordinary and familiar, or seems so, a completely unexpected and unorthodox figure will appear, and it changes the interpretation of the whole thing.

Now, facimile No. One is a unique document. I

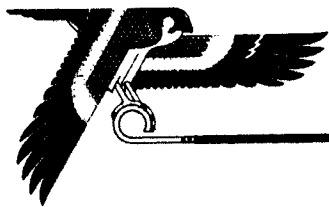
dispute that [i.e., the idea that it is not]. There are plenty of things that are different about it and they are essential things. Most of them may be due to sloppiness, but whatever the reason there are things there that cannot be found in that order and combination anywhere else.

Here is another example: [The proposition that] Anubis is never drawn with a human head. How can we say that: "Never"? Even in Bonnet's Lexikon you can find Anubis drawn with a human head (with the head of a priest clearly drawn beneath the Anubis mask—you see; every Egyptian who looked at it knew that this was a man, a human priest wearing a mask. In the Era for July 1969 there is a reproduction of a figure in exactly the position of our Anubis and with the identical costume, but he has a human head. The point is that it does show that a figure standing in the position of Anubis wearing the same outfit Anubis does, does not have to be Anubis or have his head. However, in this case I think it was.

The point is that the man with the Anubis head is a priest; he is the priest of Pharaoh and he is sacrificing. That is Anubis' business: he is to wrap up the dead and send him on his way; and this is regarded as a form of sacrifice, too. With the incision he makes, the embalming priest is performing a sacrifice. The person has to follow the example of Osiris being sacrificed, and so forth.

You can never say, and I will keep repeating everlastingly, that the final reports are in and we have heard from all the precincts. The thing is full of surprises.

One of Brother Ashment's good contributions here is the reminder that the state of mind of the people—both ancient and modern—who produced the Book of Abraham must be taken into consideration when evaluating it. Also, he makes a valuable contribution to remind us that the Book of Abraham, written by him [Abraham], is a document in itself, the facimiles being



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attached by way of explanation. He showed us that attached nature; the explanations of the papyri are given as Joseph Smith's own and not as Abraham's. One of the most interesting things about the new Apocalypse of Abraham, discovered in 1895, was that it is written in the first person. It starts out: "I, Abraham," and so forth. The same phenomenon marks our Book of Abraham, which begins: "I, Abraham." But in the explanations to the cut, Abraham is in the third person, and Brother Ashment has shown us other reasons for accepting its detachment from the text of Abraham. It is not "myself on the altar," but "this shows Abraham on the altar," with a comfortable detachment. The purpose of the pictures is to illustrate the Abraham story; they are being used as such in the manner of which hundreds of Egyptian autobiographies are illustrated, using conventional scenes with minimal alteration; sometimes they use more, such as in the study I was referring to from Germany; for example, they would use the reception scene again and again and again to describe totally different events taking place. That is, the main theme is the same, but it is a different family, a different occurrence, on a different occasion for a different reason, and so forth—different things going on.

So the Egyptians were much freer than we think. This is a thing we overlook, too. We think of them just as the popular artists, dancers and so forth, have us thinking the Egyptian people always moving in painfully angular and strained positions; everything has to be at a forty-five degree angle or an Egyptian cannot do anything. In the same way Egyptology has always confined Egyptian to a painfully limited scope of ideas and expressions. But they were much freer than we think.

Incidentally, concerning the last thing Brother Ashment said: It is a very good conclusion of what went on. I have written material which is just a continuation of what he has told us. It goes along like this: But was not Smith in on it? He was indeed sharing his ideas with others for both works—the Alphabet and Grammar and the translations (connected with it) were purely speculative and exploratory. How do we know that? Because the five men participating each makes his own contribution; no two of their interpretations are identical and the whole thing is quite fluid as Brother Ashment says, for corrections were made with the Phelps manuscript.

The most ambitious version of the grammar, Phelps' of course, ground to a halt after a single page. His equally ambitious alphabet was given up after a page and a half, before the second letter was completed. Then what is behind it? Obviously, they are trying to do what they say they are—to produce an alphabet and grammar of the Egyptian language. Nothing said about the translation of Abraham. Their interest in such an enterprise was perfectly legitimate and understandable. They had priceless Egyptian manus-

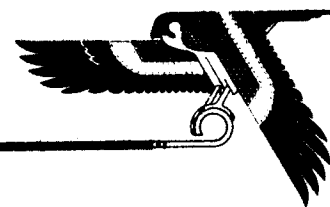
cripts in their possession and were irresistibly drawn to search for clues. The decipherment of Egyptian was a problem which excited many of the time. Brother Ashment hit it on the head when he wrote "it seems that he (Joseph Smith) felt challenged by the papyri to decipher ancient Egyptian."

This is more than a surmise. Among the Kirtland papers we have some of Phelps' independent attempts at translation of the Bible. In Section 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants we learn how eager Oliver Cowdery was—one of that group—to get into the engravings of old records which are ancient. The instructions given Cowdery in the matter are extremely important: he is not to expect power to translate to come to him as a gift, but must first study it out in his mind and only then must he ask if it be right—no guarantee of acceptance. This is the process we see going on in these Egyptian exercises. They were studying it out in their own minds. They got a blind alley here and they immediately dropped it. This is very important.

It is important also to note that the prophet had a real interest in ancient languages, perfectly legitimate, and studied them the hard way, but only after he had completed all of his inspired translations. Thus, he studied Hebrew and German along with the brethren and looked about for a Greek teacher. But that lively interest in ancient languages blossomed in Kirtland only after he finished his new translation of the Bible, translating the Book of Abraham at the same time—by the same method, incidentally. Greek and Hebrew dictionaries and grammars were available for their studies, but what about Egyptian? They would have to make their own, exactly as the great Joseph Justus Scaliger urges his students to make their own dictionaries and grammars of Greek, Latin, and more exotic languages. Joseph Smith's translation of the Old Testament is one thing, his Hebrew and German lessons from the writer's great grandfather long after were something else. Likewise, his translation of the Book of Abraham was one thing while his discussions and speculations and intellectual flights with the brethren in Kirtland were again something else. You mean they were interested only in making a grammar? Well, that is the wildest suggestion of all! Just look at the documents. Could anyone possibly use them for anything? Just try it! It has been wildly proclaimed that the grammar showed how Joseph did his translations—the precise *modus operandi*. Let someone show us how the *modus operandi* worked. To date no one has tried to turn the key, understandably, since it will not fit into any lock.

Aside from the wild nature of the stuff, we have seen that it is not nearly enough alphabet and grammar to be of use to anyone. The point is that they were giving it the old college try. Joseph Smith always did. They were challenged to do it. The Lord said "do your best" to Oliver Cowdery; "you wanted to translate—

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you have to work on it first and then I will let you know."

Since hearing Brother Ashment I have to make some changes in what I have said already. Do I have to hang my head and go hide or something like that because I have been discredited? These things are being found out all the time. There are lots of things that Brother Ashment pointed out that I should have noticed; but I notice I could point out a lot of things that he has not noticed.

But who can do all that stuff? We, like them, have to do what we can, and certainly the main thing is to move on into unexplored territory, and go into it with the careful, meticulous examination that he has. Thank you, Brother Ashment! That is all I will say for now.

Editors' Note

The preceding response has been printed as given at the 1979 Sunstone Theological Symposium by Dr. Nibley. However, he wished to make some additional comments and to clarify a couple of his points made earlier. Therefore, some paragraphs were omitted from the oral response as given and have been altered slightly for inclusion in this addendum. This was done primarily for the purpose of elucidation, not for altering the position or point of view. The following, then, constitutes a written addition to Dr. Nibley's response which we publish at his request.

The Sunstone Symposium on August 24-25, 1979 was not the time or place for a serious discussion of things Egyptian. We could have gone on for days arguing about what *might* have been contained in the missing parts of the three Facimiles in the Book of Abraham, while ignoring the parts of the Facsimiles that are not missing. In view of the enormous mass of documentary material which Joseph Smith has put into our hands for testing, this business of going far out of the way to dig up highly dubious information is inexcusable.

The two rules to follow here 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. For example, at present some non-LDS scholars are taking very seriously such questions as, Is there anything to the proposition [suggested long after J.S. published it] that Abraham wrote an autobiography in Egypt or under very strong Egyptian influence? Are the Testament of Abraham and the Apocalypse of Ab-

raham attempts (cir. the 1C A.D.) to reproduce the autobiography? Was it originally illustrated by vignettes from the Egyptian Book of the Dead? Believe it or not, all these questions are being answered in the affirmative today by serious students. Has anyone noticed that the first appearance in English of the Apocalypse of Abraham, in the same year it was rendered by Bonwetsch into German, was in the pages of the Improvement Era, with due notice of resemblances to the Book of Abraham?

Egyptologists, even more than other scientists, have always lived in a world of invidious comparison, every one of them concerned first and foremost with the impression he is making on others. Moreover, because very few people study Egyptian, which is not even written in a decent alphabet but with mysterious little pictures, it has always been easy for students of the subject to bamboozle the public. With Joseph Smith, they have had a field-day, never being required to produce any evidence beyond their credentials.

So to our point number two: *keep looking!* One eminent Egyptologist objected that the idea of the hawk as a messenger, "the angel of the Lord" in Facsimile No. 1, was alien to the Egyptians. Just as he made that statement an article appeared in the Zeitschrift fur Aegyptische Sprache on the subject of the Hawk as a Messenger in Egyptian tradition. Again, competent EGYPTOLOGISTS PROTESTED THAT nothing is known of an Egyptian interpretation to match that given for Fig. 4 on Fac. 2: 1) Raukeeyang expanse or firmament of the heavens, 2) a numerical figure... signifying 1000, 3) functioning in the measure of time in the cycles of the universe. A trip to the Woerterbuch III, 230, would have shown the word, written with the ship symbol 1) called "its soul is a thousand fold," 2) measuring the passing of time at the New Year, and 3) representing the expanse of the starry heavens. Of these things and much, much more we speak in what we hope is a forthcoming book.

If there is a possibility that the Book of Abraham is authentic, then there is something seriously missing in our knowledge of the Egyptians. The latter possibility has always haunted Egyptologists and intrigued the public.

The Egyptian Abbaton has always had an irresistible fascination for any who have come in sight of it, inviting the wildest excesses of speculation. To put Egyptology on a sound footing it was felt necessary to call a halt to this sort of thing: The Ermans and the Gardiners shut the door with a resounding bang. Unfortunately, in so doing they also locked themselves out of the temple, and threw away the key. How can we expect a science to make progress when the inviolable rule of research is to limit all inquiry to what we already know? Is it any wonder they have so little to teach us?

HUGH NIBLEY