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Charles Anthon and the Egyptian Language

Author(s): Stanley H. B. Kimball

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Abstract: This article states that knowledge concerning the Egyptian language was underdeveloped in the 1820s when Martin Harris presented the Book of Mormon characters and translation to Dr. Charles Anthon. While Anthon was a known Egyptian scholar of the period, he nonetheless lacked sufficient knowledge to vouch for the accurate translation of the characters.

CHARLES ANTHON

by Stanley H. B. Kimball
Assistant Professor of History
Southern Illinois University, Alton

Samplings from the volumes available to the American students of Egyptology at the time Martin Harris visited Professor Anthon. This is the type of material with which Professor Anthon may have compared the Book of Mormon characters.

In February 1828 Martin Harris showed Charles Anthon, LLD, a copy of some Book of Mormon characters with a translation of some of them. According to Martin Harris, "Professor Anthon stated that the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian."¹

We have already discussed various interpretations of this remarkable pronouncement of Anthon's. (See *The Improvement Era*, February 1957, p. 80.) It is now our purpose to go more deeply into the possibility of Charles Anthon or anyone in the Western Hemisphere in 1828 vouching for the correctness of a translation from purportedly Egyptian characters.

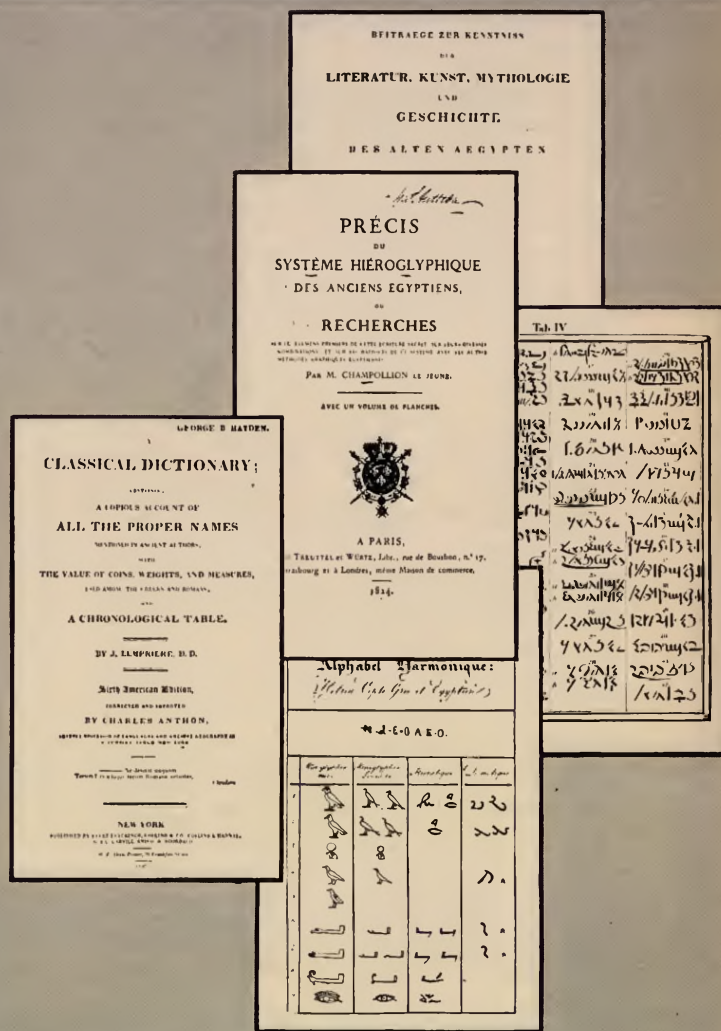
There were several scholars to whom Martin Harris could have gone. In 1828 there were five main centers of learning in the USA: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania (or what later was called by that name), and Columbia College (now Columbia University). The chief classical scholars connected with these institutions of learning were: Robinson, Ticknor, Everett, and Bancroft at Harvard; Kingsley and Woolsey at Yale; and Anthon at Columbia. However, Robinson and Woolsey were in Europe in 1828; Ticknor was primarily interested in romance languages; and Everett was in politics after 1826. Of the remaining practising classicists who were in the country during 1828, Anthon was the best known. His famous edition of Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary* was already in its sixth edition by 1827.

Classicists, in the days before the birth of Egyptology and other specialized studies of the ancient world, did not limit themselves strictly to Greek and Roman studies. Their field included most of the other ancient civilizations as well. It is not, therefore, surprising that Harris would have sought out a classicist to judge the characters. Indeed, only this type of scholar could have been expected to have had this special type of training. And so it was that Martin Harris either sought out or was directed to Charles Anthon. That this visit between

¹Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith 2:64.

Harris and Anthon took place is too well documented to be discussed here. Francis W. Kirkham has done exhaustive research on this matter and presented it in his *A New Witness for Christ in America*.²

²Following is an interesting non-Mormon reference to Harris's visit with Anthon: "He [Harris] carried [them] to New York City, where he sought for them the interpretation and bibliographical scrutiny of such scholars as Hon. Luther Bradis, Dr. Mitchell, Professor Anthon and others. . . ." Pomeroy Tucker, *Mormonism, Its Origin, Rise, and Progress* (1867), p. 42. Quoted in Francis W. Kirkham, *A*



AND THE EGYPTIAN LANGUAGE

Now to examine more closely Anthon's capabilities for having given a favorable report to Harris respecting the characters and their translation. The best source of judging Anthon's knowledge of Egypt in general and the Egyptian language in particular is from his own writings. Fortunately Anthon was very prolific, producing nearly one volume annually during his forty-seven years with Columbia College, 1820-1867. He was "the principal classical bookmaker of his time."³ Unfortunately for us, the vast majority of this output was after February 1828 and therefore not of much help. One very significant book, however, was published in 1825 and went through six or more editions by 1828; in fact, this was the book that established Anthon's reputation as one of the foremost classicists in the USA. The work was the above mentioned *Classical Dictionary*, by J. Lempriere, corrected and improved by Charles Anthon. (See illustration.)

Lempriere was a British classicist of the day and his work long remained a popular English authority on mythology and history. Today Lempriere is not thought very highly of as a scholar, and indeed there were far better classicists than he on the continent, especially in Germany. Lempriere's work was, notwithstanding, very popular. His dictionary had already seen twelve editions in England and four in this country. American scholarship, in those days, came to this country from German scholars like Heyne and Wolf. In fact Anthon was one of the first American scholars to acquire and practise the rigorous and strict discipline of German scholarship, although he never studied in Germany.

Anthon was fully aware of the limitations of Lempriere but was equally conscious of the great respect Lempriere's dictionary had in this country. So that the reading public, however, would be well aware that he had not merely reworked Lempriere, he wrote the following in the preface to the sixth edition of his "corrected and improved" version of Lempriere's work:

New Witness for Christ in America, third edition, enlarged, 3 vols. (Independence, Mo., 1951), vol. 1, p. 161.

This Luther Bradis, 1783-1863, was a diplomat, statesman, and student of languages. He lived in Franklin County, New York, and served in the New York state assembly, 1827-1830. He had relatives in and around Palmyra and on occasion visited them. It is therefore entirely possible that Harris may have consulted with Bradis and that it was Bradis who suggested he talk with Anthon and Mitchill in New York City. The writer has located eleven boxes of the private papers of Luther Bradis and is currently searching them for any information relative to early Mormonism.

³John Edwin Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, (Cambridge, 1908) vol. 3, p. 466.

"In presenting a new edition of Lempriere's dictionary to the notice of the public, the editor feels himself called upon to tender his sincere acknowledgments of the very flattering patronage which has been extended to his labours. The rapid sale of the previous impression has induced him to spare no efforts toward rendering the present volume still more deserving of public patronage, both as regards typographical appearance and the nature of the additions which have been made to the work itself. Not only have all the articles previously altered or added been carefully revised, and, whenever it appeared requisite, materially enlarged, but many of them have also been written anew; and, besides this, important and extensive additions have been still further made to the work. It was stated in the preface to the fifth edition that the whole number of additions which had been appended to the volume amounted to above three thousand: in the present edition they exceed four thousand."

It is clear then, that this book may be legitimately used as a criterion of Anthon's learning and acquaintance with various subjects.

But which of the book's four thousand subjects are we interested in and which have value in determining Anthon's acquaintance with Egyptian? Reading through, his reference to Egypt is most disappointing. It is only a short geographic sketch of the country. However, farther on in the *preface* Anthon states, "The articles on which the most labour has been bestowed are the following: . . . Memnonium . . . Nilus . . . Pyramides . . . Thebae. . . ." Turning to these and other entries in this *Classical Dictionary* we find Anthon referring to the following writers and authorities: Bruce, Davison, Mary Wortley Montagu, Salt Belzoni, Lacroze, Denon, Jablonski, Mannert, and finally Champollion. Anthon writes in reference to Champollion, "This writer, in his elaborate treatise on the Hieroglyphics of Egypt. . . ."⁴ Definite evidence is thus produced that Anthon was familiar with the early works of the greatest student of the Egyptian language of the period, the man upon whose work much of subsequent advance in Egyptology was made. Anthon does not identify the exact title of this book by Champollion, but Champollion had written only one book by 1827 that could have been an "elaborate

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 480.

treatise on the hieroglyphics of Egypt" and that was his famous *Précis du système Hiéroglyphique des Anciens Egyptiens*, Paris, 1824.

In the previous article in *The Improvement Era* on this subject it was suggested that "Among the books Anthon and Mitchill may have been acquainted with were . . . and Champollion's *Précis*. . . ." Also in the same article it was suggested that someday the libraries of Anthon and Mitchill may be found and give some clue as to their owners' acquaintance with the Egyptian language. The writer has been successful in locating Anthon's library. After his death in 1867, Anthon's private library was purchased from his maiden sister by Cornell College,⁵ Ithaca, New York. We also have a good idea what was in his private library. Some years after Anthon's editing of Lemprière's *Dictionary* he felt well enough established to publish his own classical dictionary. In the fourth edition, 1842, of Anthon's *Classical Dictionary* he provided a "List of Works, exclusive of the classics, forming part of the author's private collection, and which have been consulted for the purposes of the present edition." This list included the following works:

Abulfedae Descriptio Aegypti, Arabice et Latine, ed. Michaelis, Gotting, 1776; Champollion, *Précis du Systeme Hiéroglyphique*, 2 vols., Paris, 1824; Henry, *Lettre a Champollion le Jeune*, &c., Paris, 1828; Jablonski *Opuscula*, ed., & c., T. G. Te Water, 4 vols., 1804-13; Kennedy, *Researches into the Origin and Affinity of the Principal Languages of Asia and Europe*, London, 1828; H. Murry, *Historical Account of Discoveries and Travels in Africa*, 2 vols., Edinburgh, 1818; Perizonius, *Origines Babylonicae et Aegyptiacae*, 2 vols., Ludg. Bat. 1711; Prichard, *Analysis of Egyptian Mythology*, London, 1819; Seyfarth, *Rudimenta Hieroglyphics*, Lipsiae, 1826; *Brevis defensio*, &c., Lipsiae, 1827; *Beiträge zur Kenntniss der Litteratur, &c., des alten Aegypten*, heft. 1, Leipzig, 1826; Witsius, *Aegytiaca*, Basil, 1739.

Anthon listed other volumes relative to Egypt that

⁵Anthon's will bequeathing everything, including his private library, is on file in the New York City Hall of Records, Liber 167, p. 476. Cornell College had just been founded in 1865 and consequently had not been able to build up much of a library. They therefore desired the excellent one of Anthon.

were published after 1828, and in the fourth edition of his dictionary he devotes twenty double column pages to Egypt, including the language. This would indicate that his interest in Egypt was of long duration and that he kept up with the latest developments. It is conceivable that the visit of Martin Harris had something to do with Anthon's continuing study of the language.

The writer has been able to secure on inter-library loan from Cornell several of these books about Egypt. Only two of the volumes could be proved definitely to have been owned by Anthon. Fortunately this was Champollion's two volume *Précis*. (See illustration, p. 708. Note Anthon's signature in upper righthand corner.) Hopefully the books were searched for marginalia, but none were found. Anthon was known to be neat and fastidious and apparently did not mark his books. How interesting it would have been to run across a notation that such and such a page or illustration resembled the strange characters presented to him by an upstate farmer by the name of Harris.

In summation then we know that Martin Harris actually did consult with Charles Anthon, that Charles Anthon was acquainted with the latest discoveries pertaining to the Egyptian language, and specifically that at least a full year prior to the visit by Martin Harris, Anthon had studied the work of Champollion. However, this does not prove that Anthon knew Egyptian, only that he was familiar with its appearance and general structure. Champollion himself was just beginning to "break" the language and could actually translate little more than royal titles and demonstrate the inner relations between the hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic systems with Coptic.⁶ His *Grammaire* and *Dictionnaire* appeared much later, in 1836 and 1841 respectively. Therefore not too much weight can be given the statement by Anthon that "the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian," except that he saw the similarity between the Book of Mormon characters and hieratic or demotic (Continued on page 765)

⁶Champollion's famous *Précis* contained philological results of his discovery, but very little actual translation. Not until after 1827 was he able to do much translating.

My small one mounts her lively broom
With laughter, riding into the night
Between a lad in robber's mask
And one all draped in goblin white.

HALLOWEEN PRANKS

BY JEAN RASEY

Being a tot with small concern
For earthbound ghost or bandit bold,
She acts as witches do who ride
Where moon is red and stars are gold.

Her broomstick makes the street a sky
With rooftops over which to soar.
She sweeps a high and windy path
Collecting treats from door to door.

Charles Anthon and the Egyptian Language

(Continued from page 710)

Egyptian. B. H. Roberts writes, "Of course in the transcripts the professor [Anthon] would doubtless recognize some Egyptian characters of the hieratic Egyptian, and in the translation would also find a right interpretation of those characters . . . but beyond this I do not think he could give much confirmation as to the correctness of the translation."⁷

Several efforts have been made to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon characters are in fact Egyptian. Honorable as such attempts are and fascinating though they may be, the net result is generally a striking comparison of the similar characters and an ignoring of the dissimilar characters. By this very method it may be "proved" that we speak Russian in this country. Even a reincarnated Egyptian could not have translated the "Anthon Transcript," because the "reformed Egyptian" writing and language was such that "none other people knoweth our language." (Mormon 9:34.)

In conclusion it has been shown that the two men to whom Martin Harris showed the "Anthon Transcript" were actual people of importance, and that Anthon, in particular, would have been one of the few men in the Western Hemisphere capable of noting the similarity between the characters on the transcript and Egyptian. The real significance of the event, however, lies in our understanding of the fulfillment of Biblical and Book of Mormon prophecies (Isaiah 29 and 2 Nephi 27.)

⁷B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), vol. 1, footnote, pp. 101-102.

Melchizedek Priesthood Page

(Continued from page 755)

visit we might use pages 9 to 11 for discussion, taking up point by point the suggestions given there. Then it is suggested that we turn with the parents to pages 12 and 13, urging them to read these pages over themselves. It might become too personal if we spend too much time on each of these points the same evening, and the inactive people might feel we are "pouring it on." It

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