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A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price: Part 1: Challenge and Response (Continued)

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A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price

By Dr. Hugh Nibley

Part I. Challenge and Response (Continued)

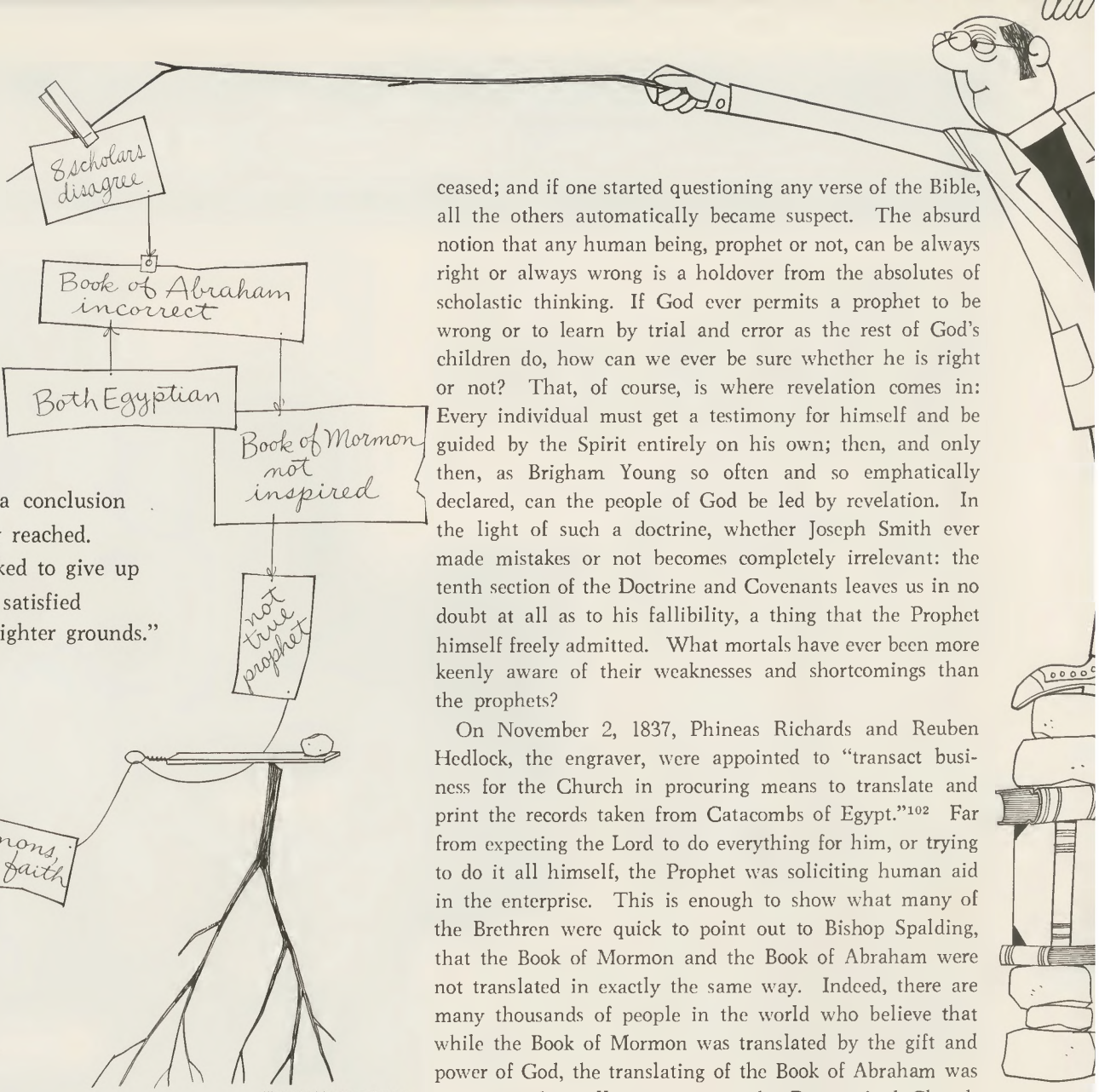
● Some Spurious Propositions: (1) While the experts judged the Facsimiles in light of certain basic misinformation, the general public was also beguiled by a number of specious propositions. The first of these was that the test of the engravings in the Pearl of Great Price effectively destroyed all claims of the Book of Mormon to authenticity.

It may seem rather odd that Spalding's purpose in his great campaign against the Facsimiles was to discredit not them but the Book of Mormon. Yet such is the case, as the first sentence of his book proclaims. In going about his work in such a devious way, our author pays high tribute indeed to the Book of Mormon, a purportedly historical work of over 500 pages in length in which, it would seem, he can discover no direct or obvious proof of fraud to save him all this trouble.

Devious is the word: The Mormons must abandon their faith, so ran the argument, because Joseph Smith was not a true prophet; he was not a true prophet because the Book of Mormon was not divinely inspired; it was not divinely inspired because it was not translated correctly; we know it was not translated correctly because Joseph Smith could not read Egyptian; we know this because he translated the Book of Abraham incorrectly, and both it and the Book of Mormon "were translated from the same Egyptian, and if the translator be found to have completely failed in the translation of one book, our faith in his translation of the other must necessarily be impaired";[95] we know he translated the Book of Abraham incorrectly because he did not understand the Facsimiles in the Pearl of Great Price; we know that he did not understand the Facsimiles because eight scholars gave interpretations that differed from his. "Here is a string of inference for you!" wrote John Henry Evans; ". . . never was a conclusion more tortuously reached. Never was man asked to give up a belief that satisfied him, on slighter grounds."[96]

Concealed in the Spalding syllogism are yet more spurious propositions. Take his main argument, for example: "If the translation of the 'Book of Abraham' is incorrect, then no thoughtful man can be asked to accept the Book of Mormon, but, on the other hand, honesty will require him, with whatever personal regret, to repudiate it and the whole body of belief, which has been built upon it. . . ."[97] Now it is not just the Book of Mormon that must be thrown out because eight men fail to see what Joseph Smith saw in three ancient engravings, but everything the Prophet ever taught. By the same token the good Bishop has no choice—when he learns from the higher critics, whom he so ardently endorses, that the Old and New Testaments are not what they pretend to be, but laborious compilations swarming with historical and philological misconceptions—but to renounce the Bible as a whole (for after all, if one verse is faulty, must not our faith in the others "necessarily be impaired"?) and with it "the whole body of belief, which has been built upon it."

We are further asked to believe that if Joseph Smith could have made a wrong translation on one occasion, it would follow inevitably that he had never at any time had a true gift of translation. But as an editorial in the *Deseret News* pointed out, "If a mistake should be proved in the translation of the Egyptian documents, that would not in any way affect the translation of the Book of Mormon."[98] Spalding insisted, as Professor Pack noted, under what is termed the spirit of fairness, that Joseph Smith be declared a false prophet if he makes a single failure: all his successes must be repudiated.[99] Pack further observed that "the Latter-day Saints should not, and for that matter do not, maintain that Joseph Smith was infallible."[100] And J. M. Sjodahl explained that the Prophet like any other mortal was free to make "mistakes in the translation of the Egyptian documents."[101] Indeed, Mormonism was intro-



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Illustrated by Dave Burton

duced to the world with the unheard-of announcement, on the title page of the Book of Mormon, that it is quite possible for a book of holy scripture to contain "the mistakes of men."

Here we touch upon a basic misunderstanding that is at the root of most criticism of Joseph Smith. The sectarian world simply cannot understand how it is possible for a prophet of God to make a mistake. They could never see, for example, why Brigham Young, if he was really a prophet, would need to experiment with sugar beets or silkworms: why should a prophet experiment? Shouldn't God reveal to him exactly what to do in every instance, so that he need never, never make a mistake? A glance at the Bible would have shown any searcher that that is not the way God works. But for conventional Christianity the Bible itself was an all-or-nothing proposition, absolutely perfect and complete, devoid of the slightest suspicion of human error. It had to be that way, since revelation had ceased; and if one started questioning any verse of the Bible, all the others automatically became suspect. The absurd notion that any human being, prophet or not, can be always right or always wrong is a holdover from the absolutes of scholastic thinking. If God ever permits a prophet to be wrong or to learn by trial and error as the rest of God's children do, how can we ever be sure whether he is right or not? That, of course, is where revelation comes in: Every individual must get a testimony for himself and be guided by the Spirit entirely on his own; then, and only then, as Brigham Young so often and so emphatically declared, can the people of God be led by revelation. In the light of such a doctrine, whether Joseph Smith ever made mistakes or not becomes completely irrelevant: the tenth section of the Doctrine and Covenants leaves us in no doubt at all as to his fallibility, a thing that the Prophet himself freely admitted. What mortals have ever been more keenly aware of their weaknesses and shortcomings than the prophets?

On November 2, 1837, Phineas Richards and Reuben Hedlock, the engraver, were appointed to "transact business for the Church in procuring means to translate and print the records taken from Catacombs of Egypt."[102] Far from expecting the Lord to do everything for him, or trying to do it all himself, the Prophet was soliciting human aid in the enterprise. This is enough to show what many of the Brethren were quick to point out to Bishop Spalding, that the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham were not translated in exactly the same way. Indeed, there are many thousands of people in the world who believe that while the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, the translating of the Book of Abraham was not inspired at all; at any rate, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has never accepted it as scripture.[103] Some of Joseph Smith's contemporaries claimed that he used the Urim and Thummim in translating the Book of Abraham, but others denied it.[104] Who can draw the line between insight and inspiration, believing, as the Latter-day Saints do, that all knowledge comes from God at various levels of revelation? "Joseph studied diligently and worked the figures over, bit by bit, quite as an uninspired translator might have done," wrote N. L. Nelson.[105] "He now redoubled his efforts," wrote Sjodahl, a Church historian, "to understand them, . . . and in seven years his translation of the Book of Abraham was ready for the press."[106] The idea that "the translation came to him very largely as the result of persistent study"[107] is borne out in a story that the late Preston Nibley used to tell of how in 1906 he visited the Nauvoo House in company with President Joseph F. Smith. President Smith (as Elder Nibley recollected with his remarkable memory) recalled with tears the familiar sight of "Uncle Joseph" kneeling on

"The Prophet's work on the Egyptian alphabet was never presented as revelation."

the floor of the front room with Egyptian manuscripts spread out all around him, weighted down by rocks and books, as with intense concentration he would study a line of characters, jotting down his impressions in a little notebook as he went.

"This afternoon," the Prophet reported, "I labored on the Egyptian alphabet, in company with Brothers Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps, and during the research, the principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients unfolded to our understanding."[108] Here the Prophet received information on two different levels, according to a procedure prescribed by revelation: ". . . you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right. . . ." (D&C 9:8.) The revelation may or may not confirm one's studied conclusions. Joseph Smith's work, here mentioned, on the Egyptian alphabet was never accepted or even presented to the Church as revelation, and no one is bound by it;[109] but the zeal and application of the brethren was rewarded by a revelation that far transcended any intellectual efforts of man. It is this revelation that is comprised in the Pearl of Great Price, and it is by it and others like it that one may judge the Prophet Joseph, and *not* by such preliminary gropings as the so-called Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar, which was never completed, never released for publication, and, so far as we have been able to discover, never even mentioned in public. Granted that diligent searching and study may be a preliminary to receiving revelation, the revelation when it comes is certainly not to be judged by them. We are not only permitted but also instructed to cast about for possible solutions in our minds before the real solution is given us, and if we find Joseph Smith doing just that, we should not rush to point out possible flaws in his preliminary speculations as proof that he was not inspired.

Where translation is concerned, Joseph Smith also operated on two levels, with no danger of confusing the two. At no time did he claim that the gift of tongues is constant or permanent; like all gifts of the Spirit, it is bestowed when and as God chooses. The Prophet stated publicly more than once that he had to study languages the hard way, like anyone else, when not actually receiving revelation.[110] And so we must allow him the luxury of having his own ideas about things, and making his own mistakes and his own translations as long as he plays the game fairly and never presents them as binding on others.

Since Bishop Spalding's avowed purpose is to test the Book of Mormon with the strictest objectivity and scientific rigor, he is off to a poor start in asking us to judge it entirely on the merits of another translation, undertaken under different circumstances and by a different method, and in turn to judge that *other* translation solely on the basis of a third source, the three Facsimiles, which were *not* an integral part of the Book of Abraham. But what has all this got to do with translating anyway? This brings us to—

(2) Bishop Spalding's second spurious proposition, which is that he is testing the Prophet's competence as a *translator*; indeed, the title of his book is *Joseph Smith Jr. as a Translator.* His whole object, as he explains it, is to show that "the whole body of belief" based on Joseph Smith's teachings must be "repudiated" because "the *translation* of the 'Book of Abraham' is incorrect."[111] What, then, are we to think when we search through the interpretations of Joseph Smith that Spalding submitted to the authorities, and also the interpretations that they sent back to him in reply, and discover that in all of them *there is not a single word of translation!* "It may be said," wrote S. A. B. Mercer in summing up the position of the critics, "that not one of the jury pretended to translate the poorly copied hieroglyphics," instead of which they "interpreted the figures," a very different thing, as Mercer admits.[112]

Dr. Spalding's experts, with Dr. Mercer in the lead, insist from first to last that the whole issue is a linguistic one. "I speak as a linguist," wrote Mercer, "when I say that if Smith knew Egyptian and correctly interpreted the facsimiles . . . then I don't know a word of Egyptian, and Erman's Grammar is a fake, and all modern Egyptologists are deceived."[113] As for the others, they "did not condemn the Prophet's translations because of religious prejudices. . . . They condemned it purely on linguistic grounds," expressing "a scorn which was due to the crudeness of the linguistic work of the Prophet."[114] Almost everyone, including the Mormons, has been fooled here,[115] taking it for granted that we have a band of learned linguists carefully examining the work of Joseph Smith as a translator. We have nothing of the sort. There is a serious discrepancy here between the claims of the experts and their performance.

In the first place, it is claimed that Egyptologists (and Spalding's experts are supposed to be tops) can read Egyptian with the greatest of ease. Professor E. J. Banks, who spent some time in Salt Lake City in 1915 in a mopping-up operation for Bishop Spalding, made much of this. "At the time Smith's translation was made," he wrote in *The Christian Herald,* "no man could prove that it was not correct, for the hieroglyphics could not then be read; but now they are as easily read by scholars as the page of an English book."[116] "The Book of Abraham was Smith's weak point," he wrote elsewhere, propounding a thesis that was to be repeated in our own day: "He did not foresee that in time the Egyptian hieroglyphics . . . would become as clear as English characters; that the Egyptian drawings would be perfectly intelligible, and that the deception would become like an open book."[117] And then comes the announcement: "Since then the Egyptian language

"Only B. H. Roberts took the experts to task for not translating the hieroglyphics."

has become perfectly intelligible."[118] One member of Spalding's jury declared that "Egyptian characters can now be read almost as easily as Greek,"[119] and another (Mercer) could say, "We have many documents from all Egyptian periods, from earlier than 3,000 B.C. down, and they can all be read with comparative ease."[120]

Well, then, why didn't they translate the hieroglyphics on the Facsimiles? Only B. H. Roberts took them to task on this. "It should also be remembered," he wrote, "that these savants in their interpretation of the facsimiles . . . give us no translation of what might be thought, by the layman, to be the 'script' of the text, namely, the small characters around the border. . . ."[121] "If, as one of the jury declares, 'Egyptian characters can now be read almost as easily as Greek,' one wonders how it is that one or the other of the plates was not completely translated and its story exhaustively told. Can it be that the Egyptologists are not as sure of their knowledge of ancient Egyptian script as . . . Dr. Mace would lead us to believe they are?"[122]

Professor Mercer's angry reply to this was to accuse Roberts of being an amateur: as "a layman in things Egyptian, he confuses the interpretation of figures with the translation of hieroglyphs. . . ."[123]—which is exactly what Mercer did when he repeatedly declared, on the basis of the interpretation of figures alone, that the experts had proven that Joseph Smith had failed as a translator of hieroglyphics. Mercer went on to explain that "while the translation of ignorantly copied hieroglyphs is a precarious proceeding, the interpretation of Egyptian figures is a comparatively simple matter."[123] Precisely, and that is exactly why we are pleased that Dr. Spalding has called upon the world's foremost authorities, the few men who *can* master the more "precarious proceeding" while leaving the "comparatively simple" guessing games to the less magnificently endowed. "It would be an excellent move," R. C. Webb suggested, "if some of these experts should make a translation of these inscriptions, of which they know so much, but which, according to others again, are illegible."[124] He also pointed out the interesting fact that Joseph Smith did not rush into giving a translation of any of the hieroglyphs —why not, since in his day they were perfectly meaningless anyway, and no one could call him to account? This, combined with the exceedingly *un*obvious interpretations that the Prophet gave to many of the more obvious figures, suggests to Webb that Smith was neither one of those naive enthusiasts who interpret Egyptian inscriptions like simple picture-writing, nor a sly deceiver who could easily have exploited those illegible little squiggles that made no sense even to Spalding's experts.[125]

But why didn't any of the Spalding jury translate any of the hieroglyphics on the Facsimiles? It was an embarrassing question. Of course they protested that the figures were too badly copied to be legible[126]—that was their escape hatch; but unfortunately they were very careless about locking it, for there was no agreement as to what was legible and what was not. "Did you not notice in the letters received by you," Dr. John A. Widtsoe asked Bishop Spalding, "that some of the scholars were unable to read the characters surrounding the main picture, while one declares them to be the usual funeral inscriptions? Did you not know that M. Deveria seemed able to decipher many of them? As a scientific investigator, why did you not satisfy us on this point?"[127] "How can it be," he asked elsewhere, "that from Mr. Deveria to Dr. Barton some imply that they are able to read the hieroglyphics easily; others only with difficulty, and some not at all? . . . Why is such Egyptian darkness hovering over the translation of Plate 2? Is it probable that Egyptologists cannot read it? Some have so stated."[128] Mr. Webb struck close to home when he said, ". . . we may judge of the finality of the 'scholarly' conclusions, which are now being featured as the 'death warrant' of Smith's reputation as a translator, by the ability of these scholars to translate on their own account. . . . I want to call your attention to the Professor's [Mercer's] easy avoidance of . . . the question of whether the hieroglyphic figures on Plates 2 and 3 are really legible or not." And he goes on to point out that whereas Sayce and Petrie declared the characters totally illegible, Professor Breasted believed they could be readily identified.[129]

The Mormons were well within their rights when they chided the critics for giving up so easily: to ask them to give up their religion on the authority of a test which the experts themselves were unwilling or unable to carry through to the end was too much. After all, "ignorantly copied" hieroglyphs are nothing new in the experience of any Egyptologist—they are the rule rather than the exception,

an occupational hazard with which the specialist must live on familiar terms. "Scholars should not shrink from translating difficult texts," Sir Allan H. Gardiner admonishes his colleagues. "At the best they may be lucky enough to hit upon the right renderings. At the worst they will have given the critics a target to tilt at."[130] But to set themselves up as targets was the one thing that the Spalding jury was determined to avoid. They placed themselves in a very awkward position by speaking with great confidence, even arrogance, of documents they could not read; they would flunk Joseph Smith in a test they could not pass themselves. They could not very well refuse to take the test, either, because in claiming intimate familiarity with the material they provided the solution to the problem of the badly copied hieroglyphs.

If the hieroglyphics were so badly copied as to be totally illegible, B. H. Roberts asked, "how may the learned gentlemen pronounce upon them with such certainty . .?"[131] " . . . none of them offers an interpretation of the inscriptions [of Facsimile 2]," J. M. Sjodahl observed. "This is all the more remarkable because they all agree that the object is very familiar to Egyptian scholars."[132] The experts weren't so helpless after all. In fact, the solution was staring them in the face: the pictures could be easily interpreted, Dr. Mercer observed, "because the *same* figures are to be found on many similar Egyptian papyri where the text can be easily read."[133] If a scene is badly drawn, we have only to go to many better-executed drawings of the same scene to discover how it should look and how it should be interpreted. And the same, of course, holds true of the hieroglyphics that go along with the pictures. Many important Egyptian writings occur in numerous copies found in tombs or on the walls of temples; literary classics, copied over and over again as exercises by schoolboys, have often come down to us in a variety of hands. So every Egyptologist is bound at some time in his life to spend a good deal of time comparing badly written or damaged texts with better ones to find out what the clumsier scribe is trying to convey.

Hence, Bishop Spalding's learned jury hardly needed Dr. Widtsoe to suggest that since "the museums on both sides of the water" are stocked with papyri identical to those in the Pearl of Great Price, "they might have been examined to secure the counterparts of Joseph Smith's 'hieroglyphs.' "[134] Isaac Russel, another layman and a non-Mormon, suggested the same procedure in cracking the code of the hypocephalus (Fac. 2): "Another worthwhile phase of the matter would perhaps be now to turn to hypocephali and collect and compare *all* of them."[135] That, after all, would be the sensible way to go about it. Since Professor Breasted had stated as his principal objection to the claims of Joseph Smith that the scene in Facsimile 1 occurs "unnumbered thousands of times" and that of Facsimile 3 "is depicted innumerable times" in Egyptian art,[136] it was only fair of the Mormons to ask him to supply them with just *one* such identical scene for study: "If the doctor would kindly refer such to any books or museum collections in which a few of these 'scores' could be found and studied, he would confer a distinct favor."[137] But no such assistance was forthcoming, though Breasted had declared himself to be immensely interested in the subject. Dr. Mercer gives himself away when he announces that "while the *figures* are copied fairly well, the *hieroglyphs,* with the exception of some simple signs, are incorrectly copied . . . the unusual and complicated signs are always wrongly copied."[138] This means that Mercer is in a position to give us the correct version of the badly copied texts since he knows what the proper characters should be, and with it, of course, a translation. Why doesn't he? Here a word is in order on the translation of Egyptian in general.

"They never did get around to testing Joseph Smith as a translator."

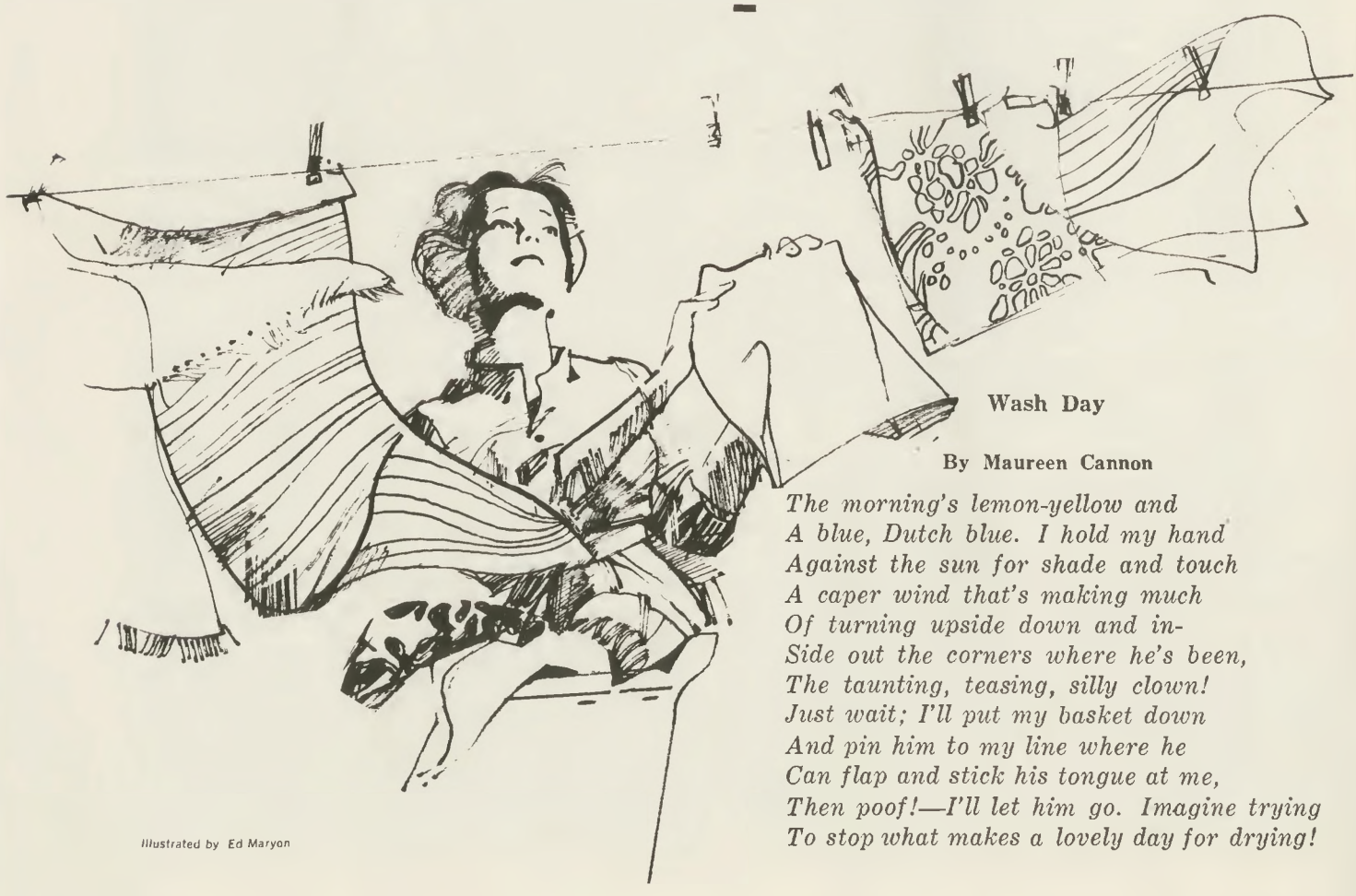
". . . it is unsafe," writes Professor Albright, "to rely on any translations of Egyptian historical texts which appeared before Breasted's *Ancient Records* (1906), since Breasted was the first historian to take full advantage of the tremendous progress in the knowledge of Egyptian achieved by Erman and Sethe after 1880. It is equally unsafe to depend on any translations of Egyptian religious texts made before about 1925, since that year marked the publication of the first volume of the great Berlin dictionary. . . . The first reliable English translations of Egyptian religious texts appeared in Blackman's *Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* (1927), and Breasted's *Dawn of Conscience* (1933)."[139] Since that was written there have been more important changes, but where does that leave our experts of 1912? Elder Richard W. Young pointed to the current issue of the *Britannica,* which stated that the Egyptologist who has long lived in the realm of conjecture

"is too prone to consider any series of guesses good enough to serve as a translation," and forgets to insert the notes of interrogation which would warn workers in other fields from implicit trust.[140] Implicit trust in his eight Egyptologists is exactly what Dr. Spalding had and what he demanded of all others: with anything less than implicit trust his whole project collapses. And they never did get around to testing Joseph Smith as a translator. ○

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

[95]S. A. B. Mercer, in *The Utah Survey*, Vol. 1 (Sept. 1913), p. 5.
[96]John Henry Evans, in *Era*, Vol. 16 (1913), p. 346.
[97]F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith as Translator*, p. 18.
[98]*Deseret News*, Dec. 17, 1912, p. 4.
[99]F. J. Pack, in *Era*, Vol. 16, pp. 337-39.
[100]F. J. Pack, in *Deseret News*, Dec. 21, 1912, p. 105.
[101]J. M. Sjodahl, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 327.
[102]*Documentary History of the Church*, Vol. 2, pp. 520-21.
[103]C. E. Haggerty, *A Study of the Book of Abraham* (BYU Thesis, 1946), p. 21.
[104]See Wilford Woodruff's *Journal* for February 19, 1842.
[105]N. L. Nelson, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 604.
[106]J. M. Sjodahl, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 604.
[107]F. J. Pack, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 335.
[108]*DHC*, Vol. 2, p. 286.
[109]We have treated this theme in *BYU Studies*, Spring 1968.
[110]See Hugh Nibley, *The Myth Makers* (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1961), pp. 271-72. The whole Caswall story was an attempt to discredit Joseph Smith as a translator.
[111]F. S. Spalding, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13, 18.
[112]S. A. B. Mercer, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 612.
[113]*Ibid.*, p. 615.
[114]S. A. B. Mercer, in *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, p. 7.
[115]See C. H. Haggerty, *op. cit.*, p. 22. T. E. Lyon, *Introduction to the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1948), p. 221, holds that since the engraver of the facsimiles was "unfamiliar with the Egyptian language," the inaccurate results attest only "the reality of the existence of the manuscript and the translation" rather than the authenticity of the one and the correctness of the other.
[116]E. J. Banks, in *The Literary Digest*, July 10, 1915, p. 66.
[117]E. J. Banks, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 774.
[118]*Ibid.*, p. 775.
[119]A. C. Mace, quoted by B. H. Roberts, in *Deseret News*, Dec. 19, 1912, p. 10.
[120]S. A. B. Mercer, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 612.
[121]B. H. Roberts, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 321.
[122]B. H. Roberts, in *Deseret News*, Dec. 19, 1912, p. 10.
[123]S. A. B. Mercer, in *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, p. 25, and *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 612.
[124]R. C. Webb, in *Deseret News*, July 5, 1913, p. 4.
[125]R. C. Webb, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 436.
[126]Mercer, *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, p. 24. We treat this theme later.
[127]John A. Widtsoe, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 457.
[128]*Ibid.*, p. 618.
[129]R. C. Webb, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 1078.
[130]A. H. Gardiner, in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 32 (1946), p. 58.
[131]B. H. Roberts, in *Salt Lake Tribune*, Dec. 15, 1912, reprinted in *Deseret News*, Dec. 19, 1912, p. 10.
[132]J. M. Sjodahl, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 329.
[133]S. A. B. Mercer, in *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, p. 9.
[134]John A. Widtsoe, in *Era*, Vol. 16, pp. 456-57.
[135]J. Russell, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 1099.
[136]Spalding, *Joseph Smith as Translator*, p. 26.
[137]R. C. Webb, in *Deseret News*, July 5, 1913, Section 3, p. viii, Col. 4.
[138]S. A. B. Mercer, in *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, pp. 8-9.
[139]W. F. Albright, in G. E. Wright and F. V. Filson, *Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, 1945 ed., p. 12.
[140]R. W. Young, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 462, citing *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1910 ed., s.v. "Egypt," p. 55.



Illustrated by Ed Maryon

Wash Day

By Maureen Cannon

The morning's lemon-yellow and
A blue, Dutch blue. I hold my hand
Against the sun for shade and touch
A caper wind that's making much
Of turning upside down and in-
Side out the corners where he's been,
The taunting, teasing, silly clown!
Just wait; I'll put my basket down
And pin him to my line where he
Can flap and stick his tongue at me,
Then poof!—I'll let him go. Imagine trying
To stop what makes a lovely day for drying!