



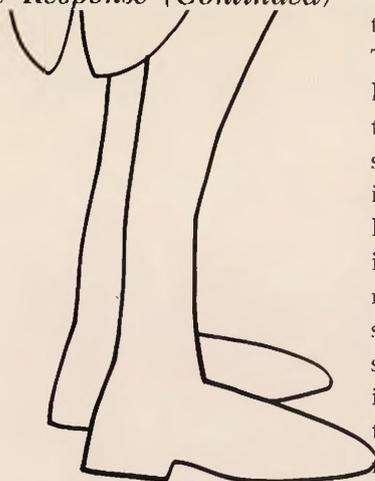


# A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price

By Dr. Hugh Nibley



## Part I. Challenge and Response (Continued)



The third spurious proposition is Bishop Spaulding's announcement that "the original text with the Prophet's translation are [sic] available for our investigation."<sup>141</sup> This statement, as Professor Pack noted, "is a very misleading one. In the first place, we do not have the original text, at most only three small fragments of it. . . . In the second place these fragments cannot be considered as forming part of the text of the Book of Abraham."<sup>142</sup> But Dr. Pack has overlooked the most important point of all, which is that the "three small fragments" themselves are by no means the *original* text. And that is an all-important point, since if our experts are to pass judgment on Smith's understanding of any document, they must absolutely see what it is that he is interpreting or translating. As we shall see, the experts accused Joseph Smith and the Mormons of making significant alterations in their reproductions of the Facsimiles, and even of out-and-out invention of some of the figures: without the originals we cannot test these very grave charges. Professor E. J. Banks, discoursing at the University of Utah, pontifically declared that "the Mormon elders made a fatal mistake" when they talked about papyri, because "the inscriptions are not upon papyrus, but upon small clay objects . . .," which news went abroad to the

Spalding leads them in a chorus of denunciation of the Prophet sung in perfect unison, but when the parties undertake to sing solo without his direction, strange things begin to happen.

world in the pages of the eminent *Literary Digest*.<sup>143</sup> Again, only if we have the originals can we give a definitive reply to such wild accusations. In 1842 an article in the *New York Herald* actually declared that the papyri did not come from Egypt at all, but were "discovered, we presume by Joseph Smith's grandfather."<sup>144</sup> Only the original documents could prove to the world that they were not forgeries.

When we come to discuss the Facsimiles one by one, we shall have occasion to note what drastic alterations they have suffered through the years at the hands of their various copyists. Here let us briefly indicate by way of illustration the sort of indignities that these much-reproduced documents have had to put up with. To cite a recent example, the 1965 printing of George Reynolds' and J. M. Sjodahl's valuable *Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price* is adorned by a dust jacket depicting in greatly magnified form the impressive figure of a lion-headed deity seated on a throne in a boat—obviously Figure 3 in Facsimile 2. But in earlier engravings of the facsimile, as well as in other hypocephali resembling it, the figure has not a lion's head, which makes no sense, but the head of an ibis, which makes very good sense. Again, the crocodile that lurks at the bottom of Facsimile 1 was actually turned into a *cat* in the official English reproduction of 1842! In earlier reproductions Figure 2 in Facsimile 2 is seen holding a long staff, surmounted by the well-known jackal standard, but in later editions of the *Pearl of Great Price*, including the one in use today, the staff has disappeared with the result that many Latter-day Saints insist on seeing in the jackal (turned upside down!) the figure of a bird. It is as if the Mormons had felt that these drawings, since they are mere symbols anyway, may be copied pretty much as one pleases.

But when Bishop Spalding sent by far the worst copies of all to his eight judges with the announcement that they were in a position to criticize "the original text," he was way out of bounds. As recently as 1963 an eminent Egyptologist mistook the *wdjat*-eye of Figure 7 in Facsimile 2 for a *fan*—an egregious blunder justifiable solely on the grounds of bad copying. Until scholars have access to the original documents, their conclusions based on the old engravings can only be regarded as tentative.

(4) Another mistaken premise, and one by which almost everybody is taken in, is, in the words of the *New York Times*, that "the sacred Mormon text was susceptible of accurate and complete analysis," and had actually received the "thoughtful consideration of the world's foremost Orien-

## We Should Explain

● The first draft of this series of articles was written some years before the Church came into possession of the recently acquired papyri, and had already been slated to appear in the *Era* when big news broke. They were never meant as an examination of the new evidence, though they do provide a necessary approach to it. Since the new problems could not be dealt with instantly, and the preliminary material was already at hand, it was decided to release the historical background material while working on the other.

Many people have asked impatiently why the Church has not put the papyri into the hands of the learned. The answer is simple: it is because they have already been in the hands of recognized scholars for many years, although no Latter-day Saint was even aware of their existence until about two years ago. At no time have the manuscripts not been just as available to Egyptologists as they are now to members of the Church. Since the Church obtained them, they have been made available to everyone. It is not the Mormons who have kept the documents out of the hands of the scholars but the other way around. If it had not been for Professor Aziz S. Atiya, we should still know nothing about the papyri; he is in a very real sense their discoverer.

With the sudden appearance of the long-lost papyri and the great surge of popular interest in the *Pearl of Great Price* and in things Egyptian, it was necessary, before everything else, to take precautions against certain basic misunderstandings. First of all, a preliminary notice was in order—just enough to make it clear that we were quite aware that some of the fragments were obviously from the *Book of the Dead* and that Joseph Smith had engaged in extensive speculation about some of the writings which, in the present state of our knowledge, no one is obligated to accept as scripture. Along with this we took the calculated risk of offending both defenders and critics of the *Book of Abraham* in order to forestall premature speculations and hasty conclusions.

The critics of the *Pearl of Great Price*, like those of the *Book of Mormon*, have always had a weakness for instant solutions. As soon as anyone starts putting a long equation on the blackboard or begins to demonstrate the steps in the solution of an involved problem, these students cry out, "Never mind all that—you are only stalling; give us the



Many proofs of the experts' conclusions were promised—

but none ever came.

answer!" They would prefer to have the teacher say, "Students, I am a mathematician, and the answer is zero because I say so. Class dismissed." This has been the ingratiating method of the Pearl of Great Price critics from the beginning. But it is not enough to tell people what we think the answer is to this particular problem; we want them to see why we believe our answer is right, and to understand how it has been derived. We have been taken to task for quoting in reply to the Egyptologists of 1912 the observations of Mormons who were not Egyptologists. We quoted them because what they said was to the point, and the Egyptologists never answered them. One does not have to be a meteorologist to report that the sky is clear or that it is snowing.

As an example of how complicated the issues can become, we call attention to the March 1968 issue of a privately but widely circulated news sheet, "The Salt Lake City Messenger," announcing in characteristically sensational headlines "The Fall of the Book of Abraham." At last!

The publishers of the news sheet were kind enough to provide the reader with a demonstration of their Egyptology at work, in the form of a transcription and translation by a Mr. Hewards of a section of one of the LDS papyri. The picture of a swallow on the fragment makes it possible for even the rankest amateur like this writer to spot at once the corresponding passage in Budge's much-published translation as Chapter 86 of the Book of the Dead. The student who takes the pains to compare Budge's translation of Ani, Mr. Hewards' purported translation of the LDS fragment, and the LDS fragment itself will soon discover that Mr. H. is not translating the LDS fragment at all, but simply paraphrasing Budge. The papyrus of Ani and the LDS fragment are much alike, but they are far from identical, and whenever the two differ it is the text of Budge that Mr. H. translates, in the language of Budge, and NOT the LDS manuscript, which he claims to be reading. Space will not allow here the presentation of the many passages in the translation in which this is glaringly apparent.

This is another example of a principle that has been only too fully illustrated in Pearl of Great Price criticism, namely, that it is easy to fool the public on matters of which the public knows nothing. No one is more eager than this writer to get out of the critical Slough of Despond and start discussing the wonderful discoveries that are now casting a strange new light on the Book of Abraham. But before we can do that, we must deal with a lot of preliminary questions that others have raised.—H.N.

talists."<sup>145</sup> How much thoughtful consideration they gave is apparent in the exceeding brevity of their letters, in which they still had time to drop such revealing tags as, "It is difficult to deal seriously with Joseph Smith's impudent fraud . . ." (Sayce); ". . . notes to his facsimiles cannot be taken seriously by any scholar . . ." (Mercer); "The 'Book of Abraham,' it is hardly necessary to say, is a pure fabrication . . ." (Mace); "His interpretations are of course all rubbish!" (H. Woodward, 1903); ". . . the professed explanations are too absurd to be noticed . . ." (Petrie); ". . . rather comical . . . amusing ignorance . . ." (Peters).

If such individuals could not take the thing seriously, they should have turned the assignment over to others who would be willing to do so if only for the sake of argument. When the Mormons objected to the offhanded and contemptuous treatment this very important subject was getting, Dr. Mercer replied by admitting that "ill-temper was shown," that "animus [was] evident," and that "several of the scholars were disgusted with what they sincerely believed to be an imposition. . . ."<sup>146</sup> He also admitted that "the reply of each scholar was brief, very little time being devoted to a study of the Prophet's work in general." He could, however, readily explain both their haste and their superficiality: as to the first, "it required only a glance to find out that the interpretation and the translation were absolutely wrong in every detail." As to the second, "the scholars felt that linguistically . . . the subject was not worth much of their valuable time. Hence their brief replies."<sup>147</sup> However, the Mormons could rest assured that they had received the full treatment, since the final estimate, presented by Mercer himself, was given "as sincerely and as scientifically as possible."<sup>148</sup>

How strange then, that Bishop Spalding, joining his voice with Mercer's in the final benediction, defends himself by declaring that his "pamphlet makes no pretention of being a scientific treatise."<sup>149</sup> Wiltsoe the scientist was properly amazed. Here, surely, is a strange turn of things after all that talk of "thoughtful consideration" and "accurate and complete analysis." "I was amazed, therefore, to read in your letter, your vigorous refusal to become classed as scientific, and your denial of any intent to conduct such an inquiry." This opens the panel of judges to the charge of "careless superficiality. Your work has only begun. You must either admit defeat or you must carry on to the end."<sup>150</sup> Again the impulsive Mercer admitted that there was more to be done, but met the challenge only with clumsy evasion in the declaration "that many proofs of the

correctness of his conclusions could be furnished if desired."<sup>151</sup> But when the Mormons were most outspoken in their desire, none of the many proofs were forthcoming.

The Spalding party cannot have it both ways. They cannot claim a calm, thorough, scientific investigation while admitting ill-temper, haste, and indifference. We are not interested in the reasons, however valid, for denying "accurate and complete analysis" to the Facsimiles; we are only interested in the fact that it was denied. Granted that the experts had the best reasons in the world for not bothering to give thoughtful consideration to the documents, by discussing those reasons Mercer has effectively refuted Bishop Spalding's claim that thoughtful consideration *was* given. Also, we are not interested in *why* the authorities could not read the hieroglyphs; their excuses are perfectly legitimate, and what they amount to is an admission that the problem is too hard for them—they have flunked the test. Very well, we may dismiss them without prejudice; they cannot be held responsible if they are given a text to read that is, for whatever reason, beyond their capacity. But in leaving the room, let them not boast of their triumphs, and gloat over what they consider the manifest incapacity of others. After Mercer's long reply, the experts absolutely refused to discuss the matter any further; even Professor Breasted, "who seems very much interested in the matter," according to Mercer, ". . . thinks that there is nothing further to add. . . . thinks it almost useless to reply."<sup>152</sup> "Almost" is not good enough with so much at stake; Dr. Widtsoe could make allowances for the scholars, "busy men who are anxious to get back to their work," but hardly for Bishop Spalding, who had started and engineered the whole thing: "It was your investigation, not theirs."<sup>153</sup> Just when the Mormons "hoped for an exhaustive discussion" after the very brief preliminaries, Spalding banged the door, deftly evading all the real questions, as Sjodahl observed, while "at the same time the pamphlet is being circulated, and the impression goes out with it that it is unanswered and unanswerable. . . . This, we say, is the impression which the Bishop permits to go forth, by ignoring the other side of the argument."<sup>154</sup>

(5) Another basic proposition of Dr. Spaulding, and one that is vital to his case, is that among the experts there is practically complete agreement as to the real meaning of the hieroglyphics.<sup>155</sup> Aside from the fact that none of the hieroglyphics had been read is the not minor consideration that the experts agreed on one point only—and they were agreed on that before they ever heard from Bishop Spalding.

They "join without a dissenting paragraph in the condemnation" of Smith.<sup>156</sup> That is easy enough to explain without even any reference to religion: Joseph Smith as a rank outsider was bound to call forth "sundry expressions of contempt at the efforts of a non-professional translator,"<sup>157</sup> for, as R. C. Webb observes, it is only natural "that a person trained in any given line should view with impatience the efforts of one not so trained."<sup>158</sup> This is particularly so in the case of Egyptologists, for reasons already noted; also, they are incurable individualists, and even more impatient of each other's ignorance than most professionals—the one thing that could make them close ranks and agree was the intrusion of an outsider.<sup>159</sup> "They agree, to be sure, in denouncing Smith's captions," wrote Webb, "but this is not surprising—denouncing Smith is a sort of habit—but they disagree on all other points."<sup>160</sup>

Presidents Francis M. Lyman and Joseph J. Cannon in the British Mission had commented on this interesting phenomenon some years before, when some English Egyptologists had given their opinion of the interpretation of the Facsimiles: "We were very much struck by their unity in declaring the Prophet's interpretations bosh, rubbish, and the extremely wide differences between their own interpretations."<sup>161</sup> It was the same in 1903 as in 1912: perfect unanimity in denouncing Joseph Smith, and disagreement in everything else. Here we see the wisdom of having no collusion among the experts—Spalding leads them in a chorus of denunciation of the Prophet sung in perfect unison, but when the parties undertake to sing solo without his direction, strange things begin to happen.

Professor George Barton innocently gave the game away when he wrote: "In reality these disagreements are simply marks that the scholars wrote without collusion."<sup>162</sup> Precisely; on particular points on which they comment without collusion and without reference to Joseph Smith, they fail signally to agree; but when they mention Joseph Smith, it is in a context of prior understanding in which they have seen eye to eye all their lives.

The Mormon amateurs had a field day listing the points of disagreement that emerged every time the authorities ventured to give scholarly opinions of their own—apart from their one common article of faith about Joseph Smith. In reply, the Spalding party was forced to fall back on the most desperate and bankrupt authoritarianism, insisting that while to the amateur the differences might appear glaring enough, "the expert sees no discrepancy,"—"an argument [writes Webb] unworthy of him [Mercer] or of

## “On not a single point do all the authorities agree, and no two of

any other person professing to be a careful scholar.”<sup>163</sup> We need not list all the points of disagreement here;<sup>164</sup> it will be enough to give a sampling of opinions regarding Facsimile 1:

*Deveria* (whose authority is later accepted by Spalding): “. . . the soul of Osiris in the form of a hawk . . . Osiris reviving on the funeral couch. The god Anubis bringing about the resurrection of Osiris.”

*Petrie*: “. . . the well known scene of Anubis preparing the body of a dead man. Figure 1 is the hawk Horus. Figure 2 is the dead person. Figure 3 is Anubis.”

*Breasted*: “Number 1 depicts a figure reclining on a couch, with a priest officiating. . . . The reclining figure . . . represents Osiris rising from the dead. Over his head is a bird, in which form Isis is represented.”

*Peters*: “Apparently the plate . . . represents an embalmer preparing a body for burial. At the head the soul (Kos) is flying away in the form of a bird. . . . In the waters below the earth I see a crocodile waiting to seize and devour the dead if he be not properly protected by ritual embalming.”

*Meyer*: “. . . the body of the dead lying on a Ba’ (bier) . . . the soul in the shape of a bird flying above it, and a priest approaching it.”

*Lythgoe*: “. . . merely the usual scene of the mummy upon its bier. The idolatrous priest . . . was [Dr. Lythgoe explained] merely the familiar figure of the god Anubis, ‘protector of mummies’ . . . leaning over it in a position as if to keep it from harm.”

Professors Sayce, Mace, and Mercer have nothing whatever to say about Facsimile 1, which made the Mormons wonder, since precisely these three were the most outspoken of all in denouncing Joseph Smith, thus seeming to confirm the rule that the less real knowledge one has, the more one must rely on bluster and invective.

This leaves us with six brief statements (one by the outsider *Deveria*) pointing out only the salient and obvious features of a thoroughly familiar scene. On not a single point do all the authorities agree, and no two of them agree on all points. What to some is just a dead man is to others Osiris himself; what to some is an ordinary priest or embalmer about to cut open a cadaver is to others Anubis himself, leaning over the body to protect it; what to some is a body being laid away is to others a man rising from the dead; what to some is a man’s soul flying away is to another the Horus hawk approaching and to yet others the lady Isis.

It was entirely fitting and proper for the Mormons to make the most of these discrepancies, for they are by no means minor ones. The scholars go out of their way to hammer home the point that the things which Joseph Smith had misinterpreted were painfully obvious to any scholar. The learned jury had been allowed to make the problem as easy as possible for themselves—and us—and had chosen to interpret only the easiest, most familiar, and most important figures in the drawings, telling us that if Joseph Smith had known the first thing about Egyptian he could not possibly have missed the meaning of everything as he did. They felt as the critics of 1845 felt, that “the whole thing is too gross to bear patiently, too painful to laugh at,” in view of the “familiar and now understood ideographic character of Egyptian. . . .” That is why Mercer could write: “It is complained that the scholars did not interpret all the figures of these facsimiles. . . . They probably felt as I did, that their time was too valuable to spend on such scientific work as that of Joseph Smith’s guesses [which] . . . cannot be taken seriously by any scholar.”<sup>165</sup>

What we have here, the experts assure us, is “a well known scene” (*Petrie*), “merely the usual scene” (*Lythgoe*), “a very familiar papyrus . . . (the) true meaning is quite obvious and constant . . .” (*Mercer*), “. . . available in untold thousands” of copies (*Breasted*). Since all our authorities have seen untold thousands of reproductions of this very scene, one might suppose that they had long since come to perfect agreement as to just what it represents. Even the layman, we learn, is without excuse in such a simple matter, for “five minutes study in an Egyptian gallery of any museum should be enough to convince any educated man of the clumsiness of the imposture,”<sup>166</sup> while “by comparing his notes with any elementary book of Egyptian language and religion” Smith’s folly “becomes unquestionably evident.”<sup>167</sup> The whole thing is just too easy for words, and that is why we may be permitted to raise an eyebrow when the authorities start giving their various opinions, or hesitating to give them. “The things that puzzled the inspired Mormon translator,” the *Times* article reports, “were no puzzle at all to Dr. Lythgoe.”<sup>168</sup> Three cheers for Dr. Lythgoe. Only why do his explanations sound so radically different from that which was propounded by his learned colleagues? (*To be continued*)

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>163</sup>F. S. Spalding, *Joseph Smith as Translator*, p. 18.

<sup>164</sup>F. J. Pack, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 335.

<sup>165</sup>E. J. Banks, in *The Literary Digest*, July 10, 1915, p. 66.

<sup>166</sup>R. G. Bennett, in the *New York Herald*, April 3, 1842, p. 2.

them agree on all points."

<sup>145</sup>New York Times, Magazine Section, Dec. 29, 1912, p. 12.  
<sup>146</sup>S. A. B. Mercer, in *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, pp. 9, 12.  
<sup>147</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.  
<sup>148</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4.  
<sup>149</sup>F. S. Spalding, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 611.  
<sup>150</sup>John A. Widtsoe, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 616.  
<sup>151</sup>S. A. B. Mercer, in *Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, p. 11.  
<sup>152</sup>S. A. B. Mercer, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 611.  
<sup>153</sup>John A. Widtsoe, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 458.  
<sup>154</sup>J. M. Sjodahl, in *Era*, Vol. 16, pp. 1100-01.  
<sup>155</sup>Bishop Spalding labors this point in *Era*, Vol. 16, pp. 615-16.  
 "Their comments do not vary in any consequential particular," *New York Times*, Magazine Section, Dec. 29, 1912, p. 5.  
<sup>156</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 4.  
<sup>157</sup>R. C. Webb, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 453. As an outsider Joseph Smith could only prejudice the experts by not using their terminology, even when giving the same interpretation as theirs; *ibid.*, p. 1079.  
<sup>158</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1077.

<sup>159</sup>In 1947 an attempt was made to organize an international society of Egyptologists, such a society as exists in almost all professions; the attempt was a complete failure. For an example of Egyptologists speaking of each other in much the same terms in which Spalding's jury spoke of Joseph Smith, see A. Wiedemann, in *Receuil des Travaux*, Vol. 8 (1886), p. 143; A. Piehl, *ibid.*, pp. 74-83, and Vol. 8 (1887), pp. 191ff; also Wiedemann, *ibid.*, p. 196, and E. Chassinat, Vol. 20 (1889), pp. 1-31.  
<sup>160</sup>R. C. Webb, in *Era*, Vol. 17 (1914), p. 321.  
<sup>161</sup>Report of Junius F. Wells, in *Era*, Vol. 16, pp. 341ff.  
<sup>162</sup>C. Barton, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 614.  
<sup>163</sup>R. C. Webb, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 1080.  
<sup>164</sup>There are lists by B. H. Roberts, in *Era*, Vol. 16, pp. 320f. and Vol. 17, pp. 317-20.  
<sup>165</sup>S. A. B. Mercer, in *Era*, Vol. 16, p. 613.  
<sup>166</sup>*New York Times*, Magazine Section, Dec. 29, 1912, p. 4.  
<sup>167</sup>S. A. B. Mercer, in Spalding, *Joseph Smith as Translator*, p. 29.  
<sup>168</sup>*New York Times*, loc. cit.



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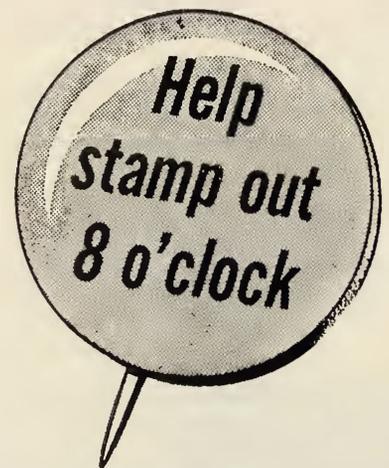
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