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A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price: Part 2: May We See Your Credentials? (Continued)

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A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price

By Dr. Hugh Nibley

● Shortly after the Spalding affair Dr. Mercer made his first solid contribution to Egyptology. With dramatic detail he reports in the *Receuil de Travaux*²⁷ how “during the summer of 1912 when the writer was in a quiet New England village,” he discovered a collection of Egyptian antiques brought hither by Lt. Commander Gorringe in 1879 but since ignored for lack of “scientific interest in Egyptian antiques.” The prize piece was a long inscription, which had been known from another but damaged fragment that had been translated in 1905 by A. B. Kemal.

Mercer’s great discovery allowed him to supply the complete text, which Kemal did not have. But in furnishing the missing lines Mercer simply sent in a photograph, without any translation or commentary. This

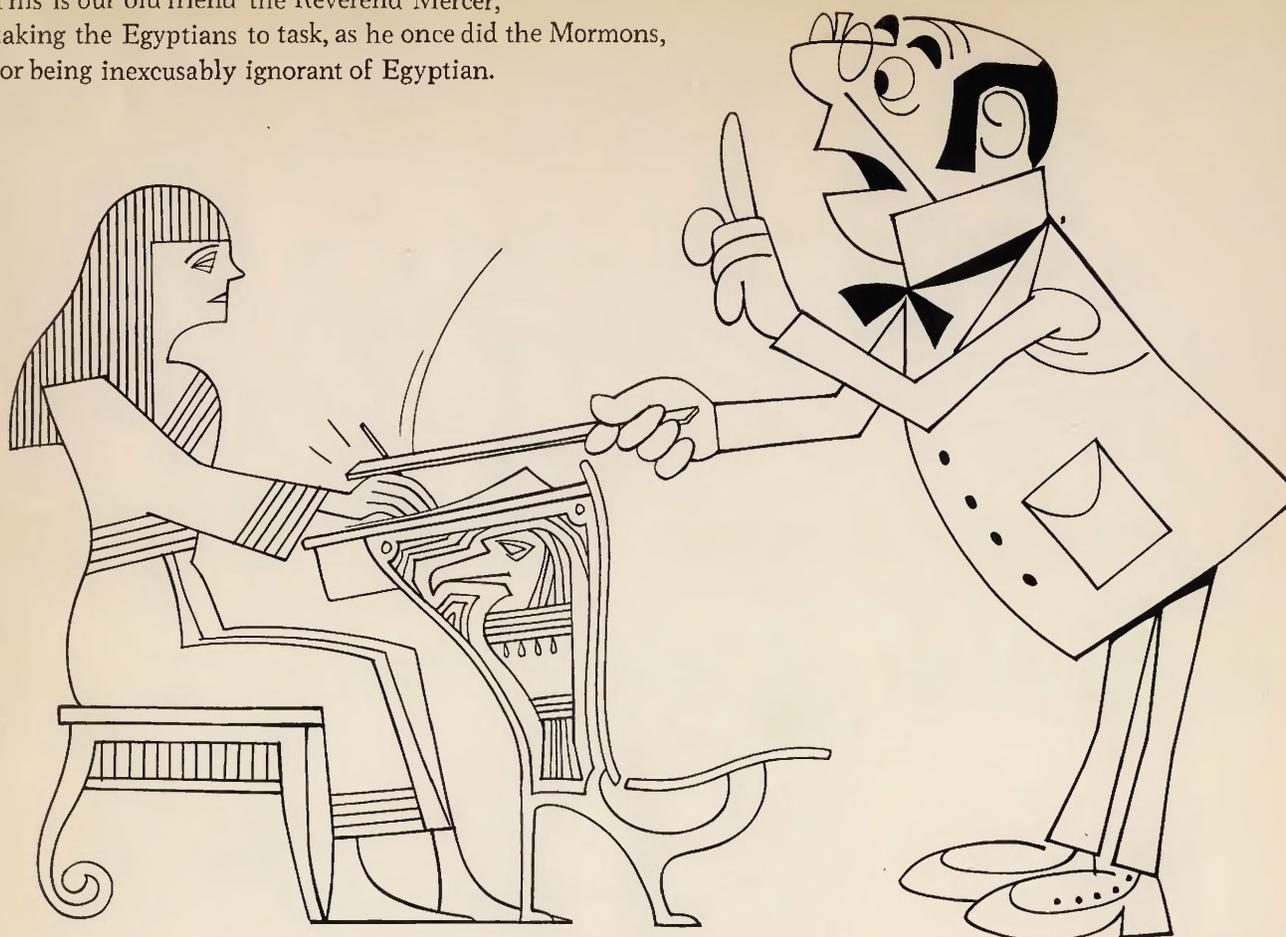
Part 2. May We See Your Credentials?

(Continued)

is remarkable. He had understandably begged off where the poorly copied hieroglyphics of the Pearl of Great Price were concerned, but here was his first great chance to shine as a linguist and a scholar. This thing was his discovery, and it was the practice and privilege of Egyptologists who discovered texts to publish them in the *Receuil de Travaux* with their own translations and commentaries. But never a word of translation or commentary from Mercer. He had room for a long description of the document and a picturesque account of how the inscription was found, with

the usual pompous references to science and scholarship, but as to the linguistic aspects of the thing—complete silence. In the same spirit of dash and caution, Dr. Mercer, in his last rebuttal against the Mormons, noted in passing: “It might be added also on the basis of the few easier hieroglyphs which were copied correctly, the Prophet’s interpretation is found incorrect.”²⁸ But true to form he never indicated what those few correctly copied hieroglyphs were or what they said. Instead, he assures us that “many proofs of the correctness of his conclusion COULD be furnished if desired,”²⁸ and lets it go at that. Indeed, we have been unable to find a translation by Mercer of any Egyptian writing that had not already been translated and published by someone else.

This is our old friend the Reverend Mercer, taking the Egyptians to task, as he once did the Mormons, for being inexcusably ignorant of Egyptian.



Illustrated by Dave Burton

When Isaac Russell, a non-Mormon, put in a word in defense of the Book of Abraham, Mercer was quick to light into him.

"A man who will . . . jumble up opinions of thirty years ago with the correct views of recent years, cannot escape contradicting himself and being considered by any scholar a dilettante of the worst type."²⁹ Forty years later the same Mercer was being taken to task by the reviewers for being hopelessly dilettantish and out of date in *his* scholarship, but even in his youth his buoyant confidence in his linguistic powers led him to extend himself far beyond the bounds of prudence. Within a decade of blasting the Book of Abraham, Mercer had published, among other things, translations and commentaries of Egyptian, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin texts bearing on the

Bible (1913), an Ethiopian liturgy (1915), Sumero-Babylonian sign lists (1918), an Egyptian grammar (1920), an Ethiopian grammar (1920), an Assyrian grammar (1921), and books on the Babylonian and Assyrian religion (1919) and Egyptian religion (1919).

We know of no savant, including even the immortal Athanasius Kircher, who has ever equalled such a performance for sheer daring.

The reader may be interested to know how Mercer's efforts were accepted by the learned world. Only two years after 1912 Mercer brought out a work on an Ethiopian liturgy, of which F. Praetorius, the world leader in the field, wrote: "The writer's knowledge of the Ethiopian language is at present, however, totally inadequate. The numerous errors of transla-

tion which he commits provide the reader at times with real comic relief."³⁰

If Mercer keeps at it, however, "it may be possible for him at a later date to get out a critical edition instead of just a photograph . . . and to answer some of the questions which he has here dealt with prematurely." In other words, Mercer bites off more than he can chew.³⁰

Fifteen years later Mercer was still having difficulty following the advice of Praetorius, for H. S. Gehmann in reviewing his Ethiopic text of Ecclesiastes notes that as long as Mercer is merely reproducing the text all goes well, "but in his further discussion of the Ethiopian version he is not so fortunate . . . and makes statements which upon analysis are seen to be contradictory or at least not clear."³¹

In 1929 Mercer published an ambitious book on Egyptian religion that was reviewed by Hermann Kees, a leader in that field: "It is superficially written and in many passages one comes upon familiar ideas of Maspero [to whom the book was dedicated]. But because Maspero never lost contact with the real world of Egypt one is all the more disturbed by the lack of any smell of Egyptian earth."³² "To uphold his theories . . . Mercer must schematize mercilessly [*grausam schematisieren*]; his reconstruction of the beginnings is "a peculiarly artificial picture," and to explain the distribution of the cults of Egypt "Mercer must invent the most remarkable migrations."³² Kees notes that "the unnatural way in

which things are constructed" is "typical of this whole school of inventing religious history." Kees refers to his own classic work, *Totenglaube der Aegypter*, as "a book with which Mercer is of course [*freilich*] not acquainted." He takes note of "Mercer's peculiar way of putting questions and his naive and off-hand conclusions."

Our own impression after working for some years among Dr. Mercer's books and notes is obligingly put into words by an Egyptologist whom few may challenge: "The book is pleasant [*nett*] to read . . . but it brings no advance," for, "granted that Mercer has taken the trouble to read and cite all sorts of things, the whole thing is done in a disturbingly superficial way [*bedenklich oberflächlich*]."³³ What Mercer's work does give us of value, Kees decides, is "unfortunately" a demonstration "of how urgent is the necessity for anyone who wishes to undertake the study of Egyptian religion and especially of its beginnings, first of all to handle at firsthand the raw materials presented by the local cults of the land and by its topography . . . and such a study would do greater honor to the memory of Maspero than Mercer has with his International Society of Gods."³⁴ There is a sting in that!

Almost twenty years later Mercer returned to the lists with another and a bigger book still on Egyptian religion, and again it fell to the lot of Hermann Kees to review it. He begins by taking Mercer to task for ignoring much recent archaeological work while making archaeology his defense.³⁵ Especially Dr. Kees "must express profound concern [*grundsätzliches Bedenken*]" with Mercer's failure to explain the *why* in all his glib syncretism. Kees is franker than ever: "Mercer should have omitted things which he did not understand, including annoyingly frequent references to 'confusion' in Egyptian thinking."³⁶ This has become an important factor in the study of Egyptian religion today: more and more the

scholars are recognizing that the strangeness and obscurity in the Egyptian texts is probably less due to their ignorance and inability to think clearly than to our own. Kees notes that Mercer displays his usual diligence in the business of collecting and cataloging material, but he never digests it, his work being marked by "triviality and irrelevance that predominate over a real grasp of material." He comments on Mercer's weakness for making sweeping and pontifical statements "which constantly run the risk of being easily refuted."³⁶ In concluding his study with a long list of some of Mercer's many mistakes, Kees says he is trying to avoid giving to "the well-intentioned reader a heightened dread of the labyrinth of Egyptian Religion and its incomprehensibility."³⁷

But Hermann Kees was not the only one. Writing in another journal, H. Bonnet, the author of the invaluable *Reallexikon der Aegyptischen Religion*, reviewed the same work by Mercer, noting first of all that the author "misses the basic significance [*grundlegende Bedeutung*] of Egyptian Religion," because he "collects a lot of unconnected data which are never brought into proper relationship," even while he continues to cling to his favorite but long outdated theories of Egyptian prehistory, "his entire study being controlled by a theory which is not only non-essential to the History of Egyptian Religion" but applies to a field "in which we can never count on achieving clarity."³⁸ In short, Dr. Mercer misses the point of everything. The assertion that we can *never achieve certainty* in some matters of Egyptian religion is an important one, and was stated even more emphatically in a long review of Mercer's *History of Egyptian Religion* by the eminent Eberhard Otto. This work, Otto writes, as "the fruit of a long and industrious scholarly career . . . shows us that a presentation of Egyptian religion which avoids a subjective attitude, but whose foundation lies outside

Sonnet for Peace

By Mildred N. Hoyer

*Even as I pray this prayer for
peace,
Within me other unknown wars
are raging.
They do not stop because I bid
them cease,
Yet I dare ask miraculous
assuaging
Of universal conflict by divine
Decree, as if this peace could
come before
A vanquishing of forces, deep
within
The heart, that breed and scat-
ter seeds of war.
What kind of madness is it,
then, that sends
Me to my knees to offer up a
plea
For something you have placed
within my hands?
O, give me grace and wisdom
now to see
My need to rise, to use your
power for good
Within — without — for peace,
for brotherhood.*

the sphere of science is an impossibility . . . and it shows us the reason why it is now and perhaps always will be impossible to write a *history* of Egyptian religion."⁴⁰

Instead of coming to grips with the problems he has raised, Mercer, according to Otto, leaves all the necessary explaining "to casual scattered remarks." The avoidance of a real method of coping with immensely hard problems "gives his description a rather disjointed and uncoordinated nature."⁴⁰ Since he can't escape facing certain problems of origins, Mercer, according to Otto, simply gets rid of them by thrusting them back into a dim prehistory where he posits a series of invasions or migrations, following Sethe's lead.⁴¹ Instead of going to the basic sources, Otto observes, Mercer relies on "secondary sources," and even then fails to treat his sources critically. "He is often unclear, sometimes in matters of fundamental importance." "Many of his apodektic [sic] statements should not go unchallenged . . . many of his interpretations of names cry for refutation by the philologist,⁴¹ his genealogies "contain many errors or theories no longer recognized today," and his work "belongs to an age of research whose scholarly goals are not in every point the same as those of the present generation of scholars."⁴²

In his seventies Mercer, undaunted and undeterred, undertook a work that would intimidate the greatest Egyptologist—a translation and critical commentary on one of the oldest, largest, and most difficult books in the world—the Egyptian *Pyramid Texts*. Rudolph Anthes begins his review of this ambitious work by pointing out the dangers and hardships that attend any attempt at "translating a paragraph of these texts, in which each word is weighty, is a venture."⁴³ Mercer is again charged with underestimating the intelligence of the Egyptians when he sees, for example, in the mysterious Enneads only a demonstration of their muddled thinking, and affects

"The Egyptians didn't know Egyptian," charges our old critic.

to detect in *Pyramid Texts* "a lack of common sense on the part of the Egyptians of the Third Millennium."⁴¹ Instead of accusing the Egyptians of ignorance, Anthes advises, "we should rather acknowledge the fact that we are not yet equal to the *Pyramid Texts*, although they represent excellent manuscripts."⁴⁵ (Italics ours.)

Mercer often attributes his own failure to come through to "corruptions in the text, mistakes in writing, errors in grammar and syntax, contradictions and confusions, expressions which seem ridiculous, and illogical expressions."⁴⁶ This is our old friend the Reverend Mercer, taking the Egyptians to task, as he once did the Mormons, for being inexcusably ignorant of Egyptian. But Professor Anthes will not go for this; it is not the Egyptians but ourselves who are ignorant, and Mercer's introductory statement that "we have not yet a definitive text" of the *Pyramid Texts* "is plainly misleading and I feel compelled," writes Professor Anthes, "to refute it."⁴⁶ There are imperfections enough in the translation—"imperfections of this kind, I am sorry to say, do occur in the translation"—but they are not due to any Egyptian incompetence. "Perhaps Professor Mercer was right in undertaking this task, for which—if I may say so frankly—hardly anyone is fully prepared," but instead of chiding the Egyptians, "the problematical situation of our understanding should have been indicated more often than it has been."⁴⁶

Professor Anthes is one of a growing number of Egyptologists who now suggest in all seriousness approaching Egyptian religious writings with the idea that after all they might make sense, since the Egyptians were not complete fools: "There exists some incongruity," he notes, "between the sober effectiveness of the Egyptians in the Old Kingdom, which is apparent

mainly in politics, architecture, and art, and what seems to be their inability for clear thinking in religious matters. This incompatibility is striking, the more so since government and religion did represent a unity which we may call governmental theology."⁴⁷ Professor Anthes objects to the illogic of saying (a) that everything the Egyptians did was part of their religion; (b) that their achievements were prodigious; (c) that their religion was ridiculous. That simply won't go down with Anthes and others, though the old school of Egyptologists still clings to it. Even Gardiner, a brilliant representative of that school, showed some signs of weakening toward the end of his wonderful career, when he was willing to concede that Egyptian religion was "as alluring as a will-o'-the-wisp by reason of its mystery and even in spite of its absurdity";⁴⁸ and he suggested that while it was most dangerous to take seriously such "unmitigated rubbish" as some of the Egyptian hymns, it was still also dangerous (though, of course, less dangerous) to take an "unsympathetic and even patronizing attitude towards the myths and religious practices of Pharaonic times."⁴⁹

In reviewing Mercer's *Pyramid Texts*, T. G. Allen, the foremost student of Egyptian funerary literature, did not mince words: "Would that the contents of these handsome volumes were fully in keeping with their appearance!"⁵⁰ The defects of those contents "spring from two main sources: faulty translation of German and violation of Egyptian grammatical principles." What a blow! It is bad enough for an Egyptologist to be criticized for ignorance of Egyptian in making translations from Egyptian, but when the reviewer recognizes his dependence on other sources and notes that it is in German that he is at fault, one wonders how this could have been

"Egyptology is in an atmosphere of somewhat dazed and bemused speculation."

received by the scholar who often lectured others on their ignorance of language. "Mistranslations of German are various," says Allen. "Egyptian grammar is often mistreated." Again Mercer is charged with superficiality: "Mercer himself states, that analysis of the utterances [in the *Pyramid Texts*] has not 'been too meticulous in unessential matters'; the truth is that his definition of 'unessential matters' has been far too liberal."⁵⁰

In his pointed remarks about German, Professor Allen was no doubt hinting at what the great French Egyptologist Dom E. Brioton said more openly in reviewing an earlier book of Mercer's on the *Pyramid Texts*, that Mercer's work on the *Pyramid Texts* simply follows Sethe, the great master in that field, who had already translated them into German. Because of this lack of originality, Brioton concludes, "This investigation can bring no new light." Moreover, Brioton observes that the method followed by Mercer cannot possibly lead to the conclusions he has adopted.⁵¹ Mercer has prefixed to his *History of Egyptian Religion* the remarkable statement that Sethe had placed at the introduction of his own history of the same subject: *Wer es nicht glauben will, mag es nicht glauben*: "Who doesn't want to believe it does not have to." This had not been an attempt on Sethe's part to disarm criticism, however, for he stated his position with a characteristic frankness that Mercer does not follow, when he said in a preceding sentence: "This is how for thirty years the Egyptian religion has appeared to my eyes, or, if you will, to my imagination [phantasie]; the whole thing is completely hypothetical."⁵² This would place Sethe today in the camp of Karl Popper, but one would hardly expect such an admission from the confident

Mercer—and one does not get it.

In the same year that his vast work on the *Pyramid Texts* appeared, this remarkable man published *Earliest Intellectual Man's Idea of the Cosmos*, in which he brought his Babylonian philological studies into conjunction with his Egyptian to compare the earliest religious concepts of both lands. Of this work the Sumerologist Salonen wrote that to Mercer, "Sumerian conditions may well be quite hazy. Specifically as regards Sumer . . . the book contains annoyingly many mistakes, incongruities and blunders. . . . Sumerian and Babylonian names often appear in wrong forms."⁵³ Salonen then gives some examples of what he calls Mercer's "other outrageous mistakes!" He finds "the book is confusedly written and is full of tautology . . . the part relating to Sumer could safely have been omitted."⁵⁴ In particular, "chronology does not seem to be one of Mercer's strong points, hence information which has been doomed several decades ago."⁵⁵ This recalls Mercer's own onslaught on a massively documented work on ancient chronology some years before: ". . . of course no self-respecting chronologist will for a moment agree. . . . one feels that with all that has been said, we shall still feel safer under the guidance, in Egyptian matters, of Meyer and Breasted."⁵⁶ Here again, instead of giving the reasons, Mercer had simply appealed with his lofty "of course" to authority, though the chronologies of Meyer and Breasted were even then being seriously questioned.

Our purpose in this long digression about Dr. Mercer has not been primarily to discredit the authority of one whose authority has for years been used as a club to beat the Book of Abraham withal, but rather to provide us laymen with an instructive intro-

duction to the limitations and pitfalls of Egyptology in general. What we have just beheld is the spectacle of some of the world's foremost Egyptologists laying down the law to one of their colleagues who in turn was never backward in laying down the law to them. From this it should begin to appear that we are not here moving in a world of cold, indisputable scientific facts at all, but rather in an atmosphere of somewhat dazed and bemused speculation. And the puzzlement and bewilderment are if anything greater among the specialists today than they were in 1912. ○

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

²⁷The Corringe Collection of Egyptian Antiques," in *Recueil de Travaux*, Vol. 36 (1914), pp. 176-78, with photograph.

²⁸*Utah Survey*, Vol. 1, p. 11.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁰F. Praetorius, in *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländ. Gesellschaft*, Vol. 70 (1916), p. 263, viewing Mercer's *Ethiopian Liturgy, Its Sources, Development and Present Form* (Milwaukee, London, 1915): "Völlig unzureichend sind aber zur Zeit noch des Verfassers Kenntnisse der äthiopischen Sprache. Die von ihm erwarteten zahlreichen Uebersetzungsfehler wirken zuweilen wie erheiternde Scherze." It would be hard to put it stronger than that.

³¹H. S. Gehmann, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 52 (1932), p. 260, reviewing Mercer's *The Ethiopian Text of the Book of Ecclesiastes* (London: Luzac, 1931).

³²H. Kees, in *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Vol. 84 (1930), p. 191, reviewing Mercer's *Etudes sur les Origines de la Religion de l'Égypte* (London: Luzac, 1929).

³³*Ibid.*, p. 192.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 193.

³⁵H. Kees, in *Orientalia*, Vol. 20 (1951), p. 98, reviewing Mercer's *The Religion of Ancient Egypt* (London: Luzac, 1949).

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 99-100: ". . . ein neues Grauen vor der Wirrnis ägyptischen Glaubens und seiner Unverständlichkeit. . . ."

³⁸H. Bonnet, in *Orientalische Literaturzeitung*, 1953, No. 8, pp. 355f.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 355: "The content and scope [Anspruch] of syncretism are a sealed book to Mercer, and so he attains no insight whatever into the inner life of Egyptian religion and the forces and goals that move it. In spite of the abundance of material supplied therefore, his presentation offers the reader little of value."

⁴⁰E. Otto, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12 (1953), p. 215.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁴³Rudolph Anthes, in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 74 (1954), p. 35, reviewing Mercer's *The Pyramid Texts in Translation and Commentary* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1952, 4 vols.).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 36f.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁸A. H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford Paperbacks, 1961), p. 427.

⁴⁹A. H. Gardiner, in *Revue Egyptologique*, Vol. 11 (1957), p. 55.

⁵⁰T. G. Allen, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 13 (1954), p. 119.

⁵¹E. Brioton, in *Revue Egyptologique*, Vol. 13 (1961), pp. 148-49.

⁵²K. Sethe, *Urgeschichte und älteste Religion der Ägypter* (Leipzig, 1930), pp. 2-3, Bonnet, *op. cit.*, p. 355, comments on Mercer's use of the phrase.

⁵³A. Salonen, in *Orientalische Literaturzeitung*, Vol. 54 (1959), p. 570.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 572.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 571.

⁵⁶In *Egyptian Religion*, Vol. 1, pp. 37-38.