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## A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price: Part 6: Facsimile No. 1, A Unique Document

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# A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price

PART 6

FACSIMILE NO. 1  
A Unique Document

By Dr. Hugh Nibley

● *Stating the Question:* — The two-page spread in the December 29, 1912, issue of the *New York Times*, to which we have often referred in the course of these articles, finds an authentic echo in an article by Wallace Turner appearing in the same newspaper under the dateline of July 15, 1968. The crux of the article is Mr. Turner's statement concerning the newly acquired papyri: "There is no question that Smith worked from these papyri; the question is whether his writings based on them were actual translations or pure fabrications." But what Mr. Turner calls *the* question is itself meaningless until we know exactly what is meant by "worked from" and "based on," that is, until it can be shown whether the Book of Abraham really depends for its existence on these papyri, and if so, exactly how and to what extent Joseph Smith made use of them. The evidence in known documents is entirely inadequate to permit a definitive answer to these questions, all answers to date resting on the capacity of the critics as mind readers.

From the very beginning this writer has been rightly accused of

an almost callous unconcern for the newly located papyri (all except the one matching Facsimile 1) as evidence for or against the authenticity of the Book of Abraham. Equal indifference to the so-called Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar springs neither from misgivings nor indolence, but from a principle which has been taught in the Church from the beginning and which cannot be too strictly enjoined on all students of the gospel, namely, that a Latter-day Saint is bound to accept as true scriptures *only* the standard works of the Church.<sup>1</sup> The wisdom of such a rule is readily apparent to anyone who considers what endless confusion would reign without it in a church in which all are encouraged to seek and receive personal revelation, and are also enjoined before receiving that revelation to indulge freely in vigorous speculation and exploration on their own: "... you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it is right. . . ." (D&C 9:8.)

One of the standard works is the Pearl of Great Price, in which the explanations of three Egyptian drawings are presented for our ac-

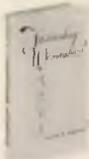
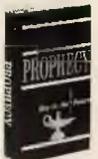
ceptance as inspired scriptures. The drawings themselves are introduced as supplementary aids to the ancient reader, and were not necessarily inspired. We know that the Prophet was in possession of other Egyptian documents as well, but the fact remains that only the three facsimiles were published as ancient records directly relating to an inspired interpretation. Whatever use Joseph Smith may have made of the other manuscripts, whatever he may have thought or said or written about them, is *not* scripture and is not binding on anyone; nor can it be used as a test of his inspiration, not only because he was as free to speculate and suggest as anyone else, but also because all these other writings, ancient and modern, have been pointedly omitted from the body of books passing as scripture.

Accordingly, in the following articles we are going to discuss *only* the facsimiles and the interpretation thereof, passing by in silence those writings which do not belong to the Book of Abraham, even though that book may have been the end product of a process in which they had a part. Like the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham must be judged on its own merits, and not on the way men choose to recreate and interpret the baffling and fragmentary episodes of its creation. While we can only encourage those scholars competent to deal with the Egyptian texts to play to their hearts' content with those fragments which give them a specialist's advantage over the rest of us, we ourselves must resolutely resist the allurements of that succulent diet of red herring which has long been the staple of those who would discredit the claims of the Prophet. Unable to get at him directly, they find grounds for complaint in all sorts of interesting if irrelevant things.



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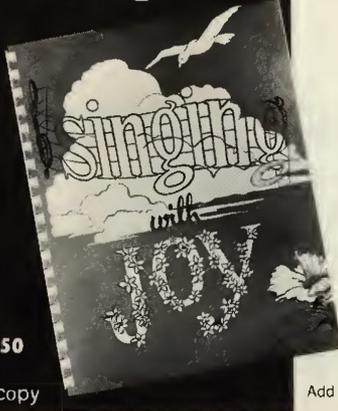
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Typical of this has been the reaction of some of our learned friends to the crushing discovery that among the papyri belonging to Joseph Smith was one document in Arabic. This was immediately pointed out to us as another proof of Smiths imbecility. True, he never included this Arabic writing among his Egyptian studies, never said it was Egyptian or offered to translate it, nor indeed have we any record of his ever mentioning it. Yet somehow the incongruity of an Arabic text among writings supposedly connected with Abraham is supposed to discredit Joseph Smith. In the same spirit snatches of the Book of the Dead, to say nothing of the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar, are now being treated exactly as if they were integral parts of the Mormon scriptures.

For those who wish to attack or defend the Pearl of Great Price, there is quite enough material contained in the facsimiles to keep things lively for sometime to come, without having to wrangle about hypothetical claims while the clear-cut claims of the facsimiles go unheeded. What are these clear-cut claims? One question embraces them all: *Were the originals of these three facsimiles ever used anciently to explain or illustrate historic events or teachings going back to Abraham?* If that can be answered in the affirmative the Book of Abraham is in the clear; if it can be answered in the negative—an emphatic negative—then it is discredited. Either solution depends upon an affirmative answer to an appalling preliminary question: *Do you know all there is to know about these three documents?* That admittedly is a poser, but none should know better than Egyptologists that where that challenge of omniscience cannot be met, almost anything can happen: He who knows not all things is

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ignorant of all things.

*That Fearful Symmetry:* The most obvious thing about the facsimiles is that they are pictures, but rather strange pictures. Not many people in frontier America had ever seen pictures like these at the time they turned up in Kirtland. Laymen like the writer still need expert instruction on how to view these quaint vignettes, and when Mr. Webb protested long ago that "the known habits of the ancient Egyptian artists have not been taken into consideration" by those who pronounced judgment, he was well within his rights. For it is only of recent years that the "grossly neglected" study of the canons of Egyptian composition has begun to receive the attention it deserves.<sup>1</sup> Early in the century Professor Budge could still claim in all seriousness that "it is possible that the Egyptians really believed in the existence of composite animals such as they depict in their funerary literature," the error of which proposition has been properly aired in our own day by Heinrich Schaefer.<sup>2</sup> It is not that simple.

As anyone can soon discover for himself, Egyptian hieroglyphic is not a naive picture-writing, but a special code governed by strict rules, without a knowledge of which it cannot be read. Not only must certain conventions, which some describe as rules of grammar, be observed in writing and reading it, but all the little pictures that convey the ideas and sounds must be executed according to strict canons of proportion that remained unchanged for thousands of years. From at least the 3rd Dynasty on, such strict controls "are canonical for the whole of Egyptian art . . . from the representation of human beings in relief and sculpture to the forms of pottery."<sup>3</sup> The general impression is that everything follows established rules "from age to

age . . . without the slightest deviation."<sup>4</sup> Because of this system or convention the carvings and paintings on the walls of temples and tombs, no matter how vivid and how familiar they may seem to us, are, H. von Recklinghausen reminds us, "by no means self-explanatory. . . . one had to be taught their meaning in order to understand them, exactly as one must be taught the alphabet in order to read a written text."<sup>5</sup> This puts writing and drawing in the same class, and it has often been noted that it is impossible to draw a line between the Egyptian scribe and the graphic artist: ". . . was not drawing as much a part of the training of a scribe as writing itself?" asks D. Meeks. If Egyptian writing is a kind of graphic art, "Egyptian graphic art is also a kind of writing," says von Recklinghausen, so that "an Egyptian picture must accordingly be not viewed but read."<sup>6</sup>

Even Professor Sethe, who took it for granted that "pictographs are the prelude [*Vorstufe*] to writing throughout the entire world" (a proposition by no means confirmed by the evidence), assures us that though the Egyptians were the only people in the world who retained the primitive form of writing throughout, the oldest known Egyptian pictographs are already "firmly established conventional conceptual symbols," whose meaning is not to be divined by looking at them as pictures.<sup>6</sup> It is a contrived system from the beginning, so that "an Egyptian drawing . . . is not a picture in the present-day sense of the word." "Every figure," writes Siegfried Schott, "signifies more than its appearance would suggest, and can only be understood when its deeper meaning is recognized." Schott regards the ingenious method of conveying information by related techniques of writing and drawing in code as

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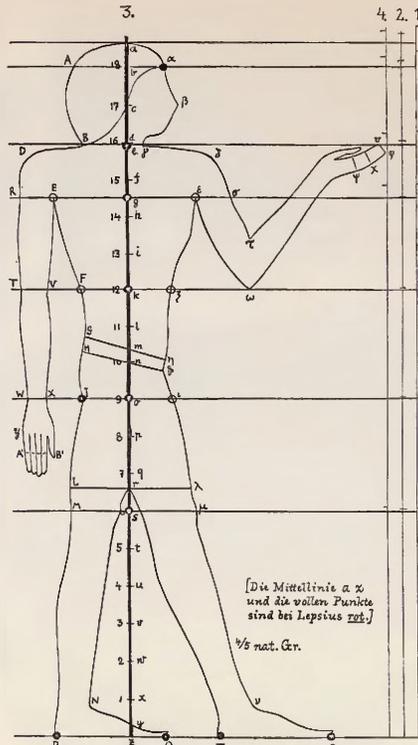
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The most famous example of an Egyptian canonical drawing is this figure with guidelines from the tomb of Ma-nefer at Sakkarah. (From R. Lepsius, Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopen [Leipzig, 1897], Vol. 1, p. 234.)

one of the sudden and phenomenal developments that marked the almost explosive emergence of a full-blown Egyptian culture on the scene.<sup>7</sup> According to de Rochemonteix, we must look upon the figures on the walls of temples and tombs as "gigantic ideograms" whose form and meaning were developed along with and as part of the concept of hieroglyphic writing.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Schaefer went so far as to insist that one cannot understand Egyptian art without understanding the Egyptian language.

By the 5th Dynasty at the latest, "the many traditional rules had come to be fused," observed Eduard Meyer, "into an inviolable canon of proportions, that had to be learned in the school and schematically applied to every drawing."<sup>9</sup> Such a conclusion was

justified by the readily discernible uniformities of Egyptian composition, as well as the testimony of Diodorus (Vol. 1, No. 98, pp. 5-9), though "the Egyptians themselves," as P. Lacau informs us today, "have told us nothing concerning their belief in the efficacy of drawing. It is up to us to understand how their system of decoration . . . could express their ideas as well or even better than a written inscription."<sup>10</sup> Professor Mercer was wrong when he wrote that Egyptian pictures are easier to understand than inscriptions—they only look that way. Many students of Egyptian art have tried to work out the rules by which it was constructed, but there is still little agreement among them. Peculiarities long attributed to the primitive or infantile mentality of the Egyptians, lacking the sophistication to see things as they are, are now generally recognized as the expression of a shrewd and calculated system of communication.

Lacking an Egyptian thesis on the subject, the basic issues are still being debated: What were the proper proportions? How were they related to the Egyptian standard measurements of length? Do repeated pictures signify repeated action (H. Balcz)? Why the strong predilection for profiles? Why do the Egyptians always favor the right profile (Erman's Law)? Was the law of frontality (J. Lange's Law) inviolable (Schaefer) or could it be broken when necessary (H. Senk)? Did the Egyptians have a true perspective (L. Klebs) or not (H. Schaefer)? Why is the leg opposite the viewer always thrust forward? Were the canons of a religious nature (Maspero)? Why does the Egyptian always view things either from the front or the side, never from other angles



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(Schaefer)? Why did the Egyptians in inscriptions and drawings not use the guidelines offered by the joints between buildingstones and bricks as other ancient people did (Senk)? Why with a strong feeling for perspective did the Egyptians never develop any rules for perspective (Klebs)? Why would Egyptian artists sometimes add the usual grid work of guidelines to a composition *after* the drawing was completed? Why did the Egyptians continue to ignore true perspective after the Greeks in Egypt had amply demonstrated its use? Can the peculiarities of Egyptian art be explained on psychological grounds (Schaefer) or not (F. Matz)? Have we a right to say that the Egyptians were observing rules when we cannot agree on what those rules were and the Egyptians do not mention them (von Recklinghausen)? Did the Egyptians deliberately avoid drawing true to life (W. van Os)? Did their canons scorn real appearances (J. Spiegel)? Was the geometric style basic or incidental (Spiegel)? Is *the* sovereign law of Egyptian composition Schaefer's *Geradansichtigvorstelligkeit* (Senk. The word is too good to miss!)? Did the Egyptians regularly employ instruments to preserve the accuracy of the canons (R. Hanke)? Does symmetry of composition indicate regularity of motion (Balcz)? Why was the height of a man 13 units in the Old Kingdom, 19 units in the 18th Dynasty, and 22½ units in the 26th Dynasty (F. Petrie)? Are these units (the grid squares) measured by the extended five-fingered hand, the fist, or four fingers (E. Iversen)? Why after experimenting with naturalistic positions in the Old Kingdom did the artists abandon and never return to them (H. Madsen)? Is the direction in which figures face originally determined by the direction of hieroglyphic writing (Schaefer)? Is

it determined by the medium—the pen favoring L to R, the chisel R to L (Recklinghausen)? Are the standards of length all based on the human body (Iversen)? Did the Egyptians fear figures that looked directly out of the picture at one (Schaefer)? ○

(To be continued)

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The position of the Church was stated officially by Elder James E. Talmage in 1903 before a senatorial investigation committee in Washington, D.C.:

"Mr. Worthington. What are the accepted standard works of the church which bind all its members? Mr. Talmage: The standard works are four in number—the Bible, King James version or translation; the Book of Mormon; the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. . . . Mr. Worthington. Now . . . let me ask you about this work which you are the author—the Articles of Faith. You say you were authorized by the high church officials to prepare such work. . . . Is that work, or anything in it, binding upon any member of your church? Mr. Talmage. Oh, in no sense. . . . Mr. Worthington. Is there any publishing house authorized to publish works and send them out, which works bind the church as an organization? Mr. Talmage. No such publishing house could be named. . . . the only supervision exercised by the church . . . is in regard to reissuing standard works—three of the standard works. *Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the U. S. Senate in the Matter of the Right Hon. Reed Smoot*, (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1905), Vol. 3, pp. 24-26.

<sup>1a</sup>So H. De Morant, in *Chroniques d'Egypte*, Vol. 10 (1934), p. 207; see esp. A. M. Bakir, in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 53 (1967), pp. 159f.

<sup>2</sup>E. A. W. Budge, *Gods of the Egyptians* (1904), Vol. 1, p. 61; H. Schaefer, *Von aegyptischer Kunst* (4th ed., Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup>A. Scharff, in *Aegypten u. Vorderasien* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1950), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup>So M. de Rochemonteix, in *Receuil des Travaux*, Vol. 6 (1885), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup>H. von Recklinghausen, in *Aegypt. Ztschr.*, Vol. 63 (1928), pp. 34f.

<sup>6</sup>K. Sethe, *Vom Bild zum Buchstaben* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1964), pp. 17ff., 26ff.

<sup>7</sup>S. Schott, *Hieroglyphen* (Wiesbaden: F. Steinen, 1950-54), pp. 51ff.

<sup>8</sup>In *Receuil des Travaux*, Vol. 6, pp. 23, 29.

<sup>9</sup>*Gesch. des Altertums*, Vol. 1, pp. 2, 198.

<sup>10</sup>P. Lacau, in *Revue d'Egyptologie*, Vol. 19 (1967), p. 50.

## Time Study

By Betty G. Spencer

*My husband, with his day's work done,  
Said, "You should organize.  
Be more effective in your work;  
Make plans, dear; visualize!"*

*I've tried to follow his advice.  
I schedule. (He insists.)  
And I could be efficient, too—  
If I could find my lists!*