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

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Part 6 (continued)

FACSIMILE NO. 1
A Unique Document

In the previous installment, Dr. Nibley presented considerable evidence to suggest that "Egyptian hieroglyphic is not a noise picture-writing, but a special code governed by strict rules, without a knowledge of which it cannot be read." Turning to a discussion of the three facsimiles of the Book of Abraham, Dr. Nibley says that these facsimiles are "strictly ritual," and that they are directly related to the theme of the Book of Abraham—"the transmission of priesthood and authority...."

Loise Klebs has argued that the only real rule of Egyptian art was to make everything as unmistakably clear and simple as possible. That, according to her, would explain Lange's famous "law of frontality," according to which everything is always drawn in its most readily recognizable position, so that on a single figure the eyes and shoulders are seen from the front—their most expansive and characteristic image—while the nose and feet are drawn in their most striking dimension—seen in profile. The main thing is to show each thing as it essentially is, and not as it happens to look at a particular moment from a particular angle: if you are drawing a square pool or tank in a garden, you always draw a square with a water-sign inside and trees around it, not because the pool always looks square, but because it always is square. A distant horse or ox and one close up are drawn the same size because they are the same size; that one of them is farther away is indicated by placing it higher up on the scene.

Such arbitrary devices, once understood, make for great simplicity and clarity of representation, and require us to view Egyptian pictures as a sort of mechanical drawing, with all the advantages and disadvantages of such. "This typification," writes a modern Egyptian, "is said to be both the strength and the weakness of the whole of Egyptian art." Its weakness, like that of all mechanical drawing, is its inability to grasp "the photographic, the perceptual, the candid, the real, the momentary, and the narrative," while its strength was (in Professor Wilson's words) its genius for conveying "the diagrammatic, the conceptual, the ideal, the static."12

Professor von Recklinghausen would have us compare a hunting scene by Rubens with one of Pharaoh's royal hunting reliefs: in the former all is color, movement, confusion, excitement—one catches the spirit of the moment and feels oneself in the midst of the melee, but one would be at a complete loss to report just what happened on the hunt. The Egyptian picture, on the other hand, shows men and animals in neat geometrical array, with an oversized pharaoh (the exact equivalent, says von Recklinghausen, of putting the king's name in giant capital letters), middle-sized officials, tiny servants, and little stylized lions: it is quite quaint, but with a little training anyone can tell at a glance exactly what took place on the hunt.
Prefacing his study of Facsimile No. 1, Dr. Nibley reviews the Egyptian style of art.

us what is going on. A man being doused with water does not need to have the water touch him at all when the position of the vase makes it perfectly clear that he could not possibly avoid getting wet. When mere position is enough to indicate a situation, why clutter up the scene by insisting on an absolute fidelity to detail that can never be attained anyway? "... a scene as represented by an Egyptian artist," writes W. S. Smith, "is to be looked at as a more or less diagrammatic rendering of the facts as he knew them to be. ... he seeks to portray a generalization of an action, not its transitory aspect. ..." Only the permanent and the universal interested him, and all else being mere passing impressions—a trick, a game, an illusion. In his effort to represent the ultimate, the essential, basic nature of whatever he is drawing," the Egyptian artist dispenses with all needless detail, "striving to give every body and every situation the character of a totality."

Idealized and generalized types of things are bound to be impersonal in nature, devoid of individual quirks and differences. In the marvelous royal portraits, even, "all the heads," according to C. C. Edgar, "are practically of the same type. It is not a portrait, but a rather characterless ideal countenance, which was no doubt used indifferently for successive kings as well as various deities." As impersonal as his subject, the Egyptian artist himself never seems to expect or seek public recognition: why should he? For one thing, he always worked in cooperation with other craftsmen on any masterpiece (one man drew, another carved, and another colored the same relief); and for another his work was designed from the beginning to be hidden in dark tombs and temples and not put on public display. But, most important, the Egyptian artist thought of himself as working in "the sphere of an eternal order, independent of time and place and human awareness," in which "the visual arts, mythology, and ritual were facets of one reality."

His reward was in the eternities, for his art "embraces the great structure of the cosmic order in the most literal sense of the word." Indeed, his drawing and carving are, as P. Derchain puts it, "simply a continuation of the original idea of hieroglyphic writing, an application of the rules of analogical thinking to which we owe all the cosmological systems and pre-Greek theological systems." Egyptian art and writing went forth together from the great cult centers of Memphis and Heliopolis as the means of conveying their inspired eschatological teachings.

Though we do not know what the connection was "between the units of the Egyptian system of linear measurement and the units of the canon of proportions," both were sacred and of cosmic and ritual significance. The perfect squares by which every human figure must be drawn are the artist's way of taking his bearing on the universe, like the guidelines used in astronomical charts. The basic rule of frontality, we are now told, "has its origin in the position of religious worship and is not, as so often supposed, a heritage of the archaic period."

The Long Tether: Once the set,
“It must also be borne in mind that not every object found in a tomb or with a mummy is necessarily a funerary object.”

prescribed, ritual nature of Egyptian art is understood, it is necessary to take the next step and show how the Egyptian artist was like every true artist an individualist after all, for whom the rules served as a guideline rather than a straitjacket. As Professor Wilson puts it, “a man could roam about at the end of a long tether, but the tether was always there.”27 Men with real artistic talents could and did constantly deviate from the set canons whenever they felt that the ideal type they sought was not adequately represented in the book of models. The run-of-the-mill craftsmen, on the other hand, were only too glad to have their official books of models to fall back on and thereby avoid the risks and pitfalls of creativity.28 These were “holy books,” by consulting which the artist gave his figures that flawless perfection which things designed to endure for eternity must have.29 “Everything was fixed in advance,” writes J. Capart; “the draftsman, formed by the training of the school, knew the canonical proportions of the figures by heart; he leaved through the book of models in order to extract each element he wished to employ in the scene he was about to draw.”30

Yet with their great artistic feeling the Egyptians were bound to be as offended by mere mechanical repetition as anyone else. “I was no mere copier of models,” boasts one artist, “but followed my own heart; no director had to give me instructions . . . for I understood every aspect of my art.” He was not free of the rules, but free because he had the rules by heart. On the other hand, we have the record of a self-taught scribe of the New Kingdom who developed his own canons of writing and drawing!31 A Middle Kingdom inscription praises the prince “who distinguishes the true artist and turns his back on mediocrity,”32 and already in the art of the Pyramid age there is a conscious avoidance of mere repetition, of perfect symmetry, of mechanical reproduction.33 In the use of color the artist of the Old Kingdom seems “sometimes actuated by a perverse and antic impulse” to play around, so that things are sometimes very oddly colored, and the three identical pots that make up a well-known ideogram may as well not be each of a different color.34

It is always important to remember that nearly all the objects and documents for our examination come from funerary settings, in which a rigid conventionality is to be expected; there is every indication that the secular everyday art of the Egyptians was much freer, more spontaneous and naturalistic.35 It must also be borne in mind that not every object found in a tomb or with a mummy is necessarily a funerary object, and we have yet to consider whether the facsimiles are really funerary or not.

In viewing any Egyptian composition, such as Facsimile 1, it is quite natural to pronounce it “typical,” since in a way every work of art that is recognizably Egyptian is by that token typical. But at the same time, since the Egyptian draftsman was free to deviate from the norm in special cases, we should not be surprised or distressed by deviation, but we should be interested. Even minor irregularities, von Recklinghausen ad-monishes us, are not to be regarded as mere slips, but as an “avis au lecteur,” intentionally put in to call our attention to some unusual aspect of the situation depicted.36

It should be clear by now that no conclusive evidence can be deduced from the fact that the facsimiles are typical on the one hand (though that has ever been the favorite target of the critics), or on the other hand that they contain irregularities. The mere existence of oddities in the drawings means little until we examine the nature of those oddities.

At first glance it is obvious that the draftsman who made Facsimile 1 has observed the canons, telling his story with strict observance of the conventions. That is what one would expect: the great market for the skill of scribe and artist in Egypt was the funeral business, and one of them boasts on a stela in the Louvre that he controls the full repertoire of a trained draftsman but is especially skilled in drawing scenes for the Book of the Dead—naturally, that was what paid.37 Anyone wishing to procure the services of an Egyptian artist-scribe would be almost sure to get one who was more familiar with Book of the Dead motifs than anything else, they being his normal source of income. And anything he drew would necessarily betray his background. But we have also seen that Egyptian scribes could use the old familiar school stereotypes when necessary to convey a message or tell a story that was quite different from those to which the well-known forms usually applied. That could happen and did; it was a risky business, we are told, and could get the artist into trouble artistically. As M. Baud explains it, the struggle between what the eye sees in an object and what the brain knows about it leads to a “fierce conflict” between the two for control of the hand,
which puts the artist in an embarrassing position.\textsuperscript{38} The eye sees the plate on the table as an oval, but the brain knows it is a circle—which shall it be?

Finding himself faced with a new and unusual situation, the ordinary Egyptian artist would naturally try to play it safe and stick to his book of models as closely as possible, "confining his innovations," as Spiegel explains it, "to details, such as the position of an arm or leg, or an attempt at a complicated crossing of arms or legs, etc."\textsuperscript{39} Or, as von Becklinghausen puts it, the Egyptian sacrifices common sense to indicate exceptional situations, and this often leads to "nasty contradictions (boeeser Zweispalt)."\textsuperscript{40}

Isn't this very much the situation in Facsimile 1, where the artist does very well until he must indicated the struggle on the altar, when he leaves the victim's legs, the couch, and the priest hopelessly out of line without making any effort to correct them—which could easily have been done in view of the vacant spaces left in the critical area? That he is having trouble with the legs is further indicated by another significant anomaly. "The greatest feature of Egyptian drawing," wrote Petrie, "is the beauty of line. There was no tentative touching and smudging. Each line was drawn in one sweep...there was never a quiver or hesitation. The artist must have had the precise form in imagination on the surface before him, and followed with his hand what his mind already saw in place."\textsuperscript{41} Now when the composer of Facsimile 1 is dealing with familiar and conventional objects, such as the couch and the bird, that is, when he has "the precise form in imagination," his line is simple and sure; but when he gets to the figure on the couch, and especially the legs, he loses confidence: here we do find "tentative touching and smudging"—the lines are heavy and overdrawn again and again, almost scrubbed into the paper. Plainly the artist is not here tossing off the well-known scenes that he could do with his eyes closed.

Solving a Problem: In Facsimile 1 the first problem that faced the artist-scribe, according to our text (Abr. 1:15), was to represent a man who was both "fastened upon an altar" and praying. He solved his problem with strict obedience to the canons of his art in the only way it could be solved. The man is supine, to indicate his incapacity and helplessness; his body does not touch the altar—its position alone is enough to show that he is on it; nor are the binding ropes shown, for the supine position tells us, according to the Egyptian formula, that he is helpless. So far everything is expressed diagrammatically, not realistically. But even though the man is flat on his back, he is taking the correct and conventional attitude of prayer or supplication. We now see why it is important to make clear that Abraham in this scene has both hands before him, for that not only makes this particular lion-couch scene unique, but it also gives the whole drama its meaning. M. Korostovtsev has recently pointed out that the Egyptians placed peculiar emphasis on hand positions to convey ideas, and in Luise Klebs' catalogue of "Formal Gestures of the Egyptians," the "Gesture of Praying"—right foot forward, hands raised before the face—has the honor of being number one.\textsuperscript{42}

From the point of view of graphic art, this is indeed an incongruous combination—a man bound and helpless but at the same time waving his arms and legs around—but actually it seems to be a rather sensible employment of the canons of a particular art.

Facsimile 1 Is Not a Picture: A most serious oversight by the critics of Joseph Smith's explanations of the facsimiles has been failure to read with care what is said in those explanations. As a rule one glance at the facsimiles has been enough to assure any scholar that they are familiar Egyptian stuff, and a second glance has made clear that the Prophet's interpretations have no resemblance to those of modern Egyptologists. It has never occurred to any of the experts to ask whether there might after all be something instructive or significant in the explanations. Had they taken the pains to do so, they could have discovered right at the outset that Joseph Smith does not describe the facsimiles as pictures of anything: they are symbolic diagrams describing not so much unique historical occurrences as ritual events. Let us explain this more closely.

If we follow the official explanations, some of the most important elements in Facsimile 1, such as "the angel of the Lord," "Abraham in Egypt," "the pillars of heaven," etc., do not have even the remotest resemblance to what they are supposed to represent; they are strictly symbolic and cannot possibly be thought of as pictures until their meaning has been explained. Moreover, we are explicitly told that figures in the facsimiles are "designed to represent" such and such a thing, not to depict it as it appears, for what it is is apparent only to the initiated: "... as understood by the Egyptians." It is an arbitrary interpretation that is given to these things, e.g. the hatched lines in Facsimile 1, Fig. 12, "signifying expance, or the firmament. ..." One does not draw a picture of "expance"—one can only "signify" it by symbols, whose meaning can only be understood in the context of a particular time and culture: "... but in this case, in relation to this subject, the Egyptians meant to signify [what we Semites would call] Shaumau, to be high. ..."
...the Book of Abraham is a which is

The whole thing is culturally conditioned, Abraham is trying to explain the figures to non-Egyptians and tell them that they cannot be understood unless they are viewed through trained Egyptian eyes. There are various levels of symbolic representations, since every symbol necessarily has some point of visual contact with the thing it is supposed to represent, and some of the figures in the facsimiles are accordingly nearer to true pictures than others: “And that you may have a knowledge of this altar, I will refer you to the representation . . .”—here we expect something like a picture, and get one. Likewise, “That you may have an understanding of these gods, I have given you the fashion of them in figures . . .” (Abr. 1:12, 14) refers us to the familiar images by which these particular gods were identified to their worshippers.

But when we are told that Fig. 1 in Facsimile 2 is “signifying the first creation,” we are dealing with the purest symbols; and when we learn that Fig. 3 “is made to represent God sitting upon his throne,” we can be sure that the artist did not for a moment suppose that God on his throne really looked like that, ibis-head and all. If we doubt it, we are told that Fig. 7, a totally different image, also “represents God sitting on his throne,” so that these two cannot possibly be thought of as pictures of anything. Fig. 4 “answers to” whatever is conveyed in another culture by the word “Raukeeyang,” yet at the same time it is “also a numerical figure, in Egyptian signifying one thousand,” a clear demonstration of the principle that these figures are not supposed to be pictures of anything but may represent whatever the Egyptians choose to see in them.

To modern eyes it has seemed naive and even comical for Joseph Smith to have Abraham tell a vivid and exciting story and illustrate it with doll-like and lifeless little caricatures of people, making no attempt at aesthetic or emotional appeal. But that was the Egyptian way, as it is the way of Indian glyphs and of ancient oriental art in general. The tableau on the walls of Egyptian temples, as de Rochemontex noted long ago, “are not real people: one has the impression of having before his eyes symbolic abstractions rather than human beings.” Economy is the watchword: “almost always in his drawing [the Egyptian] seeks to portray a generalization of an action. . . . the narrative element is conspicuously absent.” There is no need to worry about bad craftsmanship as long as a drawing is adequate to convey its message. Dr. Mercer contemptuously observed that there was nothing whatever about Fig. 2 of Facsimile 1 or Fig. 3 of Facsimile 2 to remind him of Abraham. If there had been, the drawings would not have been authentic; a real portrait of Abraham or the priest would be as far from Abraham’s way of doing things as would be a portrait of the angel. The meager, stiff, lifeless figures apparently do not disturb Joseph Smith, who goes right ahead and gives us Abraham’s explanation of the things as purely symbolic quantities.

It Is All Ritual: What made it possible and easy to tell Abraham’s story in formal and conventional designs is the fact that the scenes presented and the episodes re-
discourse on divine authority, also the theme of the three facsimiles.''

Thus in Facsimile 1 we are introduced first to "the Angel of the Lord," then to "Abraham fastened upon an altar" to be offered up "as a sacrifice" to gods to whose idols we are introduced. Abraham is not simply being executed; he is the central figure of an extremely important ritual in which "the idolatrous god of Pharaoh" figures conspicuously, and the competing powers of heaven and hell come into conflict both in their superhuman and their appointed representatives.

Turning to the text of the Book of Abraham, we find the patriarch's whole concern to be with rites and ordinances: the blessings of the fathers, the sacrifice of children to idols, the complicated holding of priestly offices in the mixed cults of Egypt and Asia, local customs of sacrifice: "Now at this time it was the custom . . .," strange gods, strange rites, strange names. After an introduction devoted to briefing the reader on the ritual practices of the heathen, Abraham in verse 12 gets down to cases: He, too, was expected to play the game and provide a victim for the rites. He describes the altar, as if that were very important, and then tells how he was delivered from the knife, receiving at the same time the promise of priesthood for himself. (See Abr. 1:18.) Then he goes into a long explanation of Pharaoh's rival priesthood.

All this shall be duly considered in time, but the thing to note here is that the Book of Abraham, far from being merely a divinely inspired or edifying history, is a discourse on divine authority, which also is the theme of the three facsimiles. The explanations to the three plates makes it perfectly clear that they are meant as diagrammatic or formulaic aids to an understanding of the subject of priesthood on earth. Awareness of this may help substantially in understanding the details of the papyri, to which we now turn our attention.

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES


2W. M. F. Petrie, Life of the Egyptians (London: British School of Archaeology, 1940), p. 5.


18For the chart, see H. Müller, in Mitt. d. Inst., No. 7 (1937), p. 91.


20Wilson, op. cit., p. 247.