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A Final Word

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In another part of this number of the *ERA* the reader will find a somewhat lengthy article by Dr. Robert C. Webb, reviewing certain points of a discussion, opened by the Rt. Rev. Bishop F. S. Spalding, on the very ancient piece of literature given to the world by Joseph Smith under the title, "The Book of Abraham."

A few months ago, Bishop F. S. Spalding published a little pamphlet on "Joseph Smith, Jr., as a Translator," the purpose of which was to prove by the testimony of scholars that the Prophet Joseph did not, and could not, give a correct translation of the text engraved on the Book of Mormon plates.

The Bishop, it is said, gave a liberal portion of his time and thought for some years to this literary production, fully expecting that when it should appear in print, it would signal the end of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The little pamphlet created some interest both among Church members and others, as evidenced by numerous replies, or criticisms, which have appeared in print. The reasons for this are apparent. The subject itself is fascinating, the author is prominent, and scientific importance was imparted to the argument by the use of the names of world-renowned Egyptologists and Assyriologists.

To the older Church members there was nothing new, or startling, in the proposition upon which the Bishop relied for success in his undertaking. They remembered that the illustrations which form part of the Book of Abraham, were criticized by a couple of travelers through Salt Lake City over fifty years ago, on the very ground the Bishop now takes, after they had submitted them to the scrutiny of a scientist of high repute, M. Theodule Deveria. But they also remembered that Elder George Reynolds in his "Book of Abraham," successfully met these critics. They felt sure that the result of the present discussion would not be different.

And this expectation has been fully justified. For the testimony of the scholars appealed to by the author of the pamphlet has been carefully weighed against truth and found wanting in some important particulars. To some of the younger members of the Church the pamphlet, when it first appeared, seemed to contain information injurious to the claim made for the Prophet Joseph as an inspired translator, but, when the alleged facts were exposed to the searchlight and the reasoning was submitted to the test of logic, the worthlessness of the criticism for purposes of honest inquiry and research became apparent.

To many, the attitude of Bishop Spalding, after having re-opened the discussion, has been disappointing. They supposed that, before he threw down the gauntlet, he was fully prepared to defend his position, that he was so well supplied with data that he could have met every effort to break down his argument successfully. They hoped for an exhaustive discussion, fair, impartial, scientific, one that would help the student to form an independent

opinion on the issue involved. But in the course pursued by him, they have found no help whatever. He has thought best to ignore many of the main points advanced by the other side. An abundance of facts has been placed before him, but there is no evidence that he has even noticed them. At the same time his pamphlet is being circulated, and the impression goes out with it that it is unanswered and unanswerable. In the language of "The Continent" of February 13, this year, a "great hoax has been proved on the 'Mormon' prophet." This, we say, is the impression which the Bishop permits to go forth, by ignoring the other side of the argument. Whether this is in accord with the profession of fairness claimed by the author at the outset, may be left to his own judgment.

As already stated, it was the fond hope of the author that his literary effort would turn Latter-day Saints away from the Church, and this expectation is openly admitted by some magazines which have noticed it. In the judgment of the Bishop and his friends, to turn somebody away from the faith as delivered by the prophets of this dispensation, is a highly meritorious work, whether they have anything to substitute for that faith or not; whether they land the victims in infidelity, or not, as long as they cause them to repudiate the principles of truth as understood by the unpopular "Mormons." But we have not heard of one single case of defection from the Church on account of this pamphlet. We have heard some young men express their gratitude that their attention was called to this work of the Prophet Joseph. Professor N. L. Nelson, in his open letter, published in the *Deseret News* of February 15, this year, voices that sentiment, when he says:

"The fog your critics spread did not hang long. Dr. Robert C. Webb's masterly explication of these plates restored to me more than your destructive criticisms took away. For up till the date of this discussion, I had given only the most casual attention to this part of Joseph Smith's work as translator, I therefore had no definite convictions thereto. Never having sought the testimony of the Spirit concerning them, I held these fragments from the lore of Egypt out in that boundless category of things yet to be investigated. But following Dr. Webb's careful paper, as best I could, by aid of dictionary and encyclopedia, I obtained gratifying glimpses into the mythology of Egypt and every bit of insight so obtained, was a new step in the direction of vindicating Joseph Smith." (IMPROVEMENT ERA, April, 1913, p. 604.)

This has been the effect in many instances. The Bishop has actually awakened an interest in this literary gem, the Book of Abraham.

Another effect of this discussion has been to draw out friends of the Latter-day Saints in defense of the Prophet Joseph and his work—friends who, but for such an occasion would have remained silent admirers, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea in the days of our Lord. The important fact has thereby been revealed that the great cause for which the Church stands has friends and defenders among the educated, thinking classes, of whom the Latter-day Saints know nothing until the emergency reveals them.

THE BOOK OF ABRAHAM

The Book of Abraham is one of the most interesting and important literary productions in existence. It is older, by several centuries, than the sacred records of the Hebrews. It supplies some important particulars regarding the

history of Abraham, showing why he was commanded to emigrate from the land and home of his ancestors. It gives important information concerning the structure of the universe. It teaches the pre-existence of intelligences and the rebellion against God before the creation of the earth. Such are the great truths with which it deals.

It shows, further, that Abraham had an important mission to perform in Egypt. Having obtained the Holy Priesthood, and having been given the sacred instrument known as Urim and Thummim, he was properly equipped for that mission, and the Lord, therefore, told him: "Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee. As it was with Noah so shall it be with thee, that through thy ministry my name shall be known in the earth for ever, for I am thy God." (Book of Abraham, Pearl of Great Price, pages 52-53.)

It is well known that a wonderful civilization flourished in the Nile valley in the very earliest dawn of history. This is one of the great riddles of science. Whence came that civilization? Who planted the seed from which it grew? Who taught the Egyptians their marvelous architecture? Who instilled into their minds their religious conceptions? Who wrote their ethical code? Who was the great prophet through whose preaching the Egyptians attained a position of leadership among the nations of the world, which was held for thousands of years? In the Book of Abraham these questions are, at least partly, answered. It shows us that the "Father of the Faithful" went to Egypt and proclaimed the true religion, as revealed to him, and when this is known it is as easy to account for the great advancement of the ancient Egyptians, as it is to explain the origin and development of the modern culture which flourishes under the aegis of the Christian religion. Whenever, and wherever, truth sets man free to think and to act, intellectual development is the result.

In view of what is here set forth, the importance of the Book of Abraham can hardly be over-estimated.

HOW IT WAS DISCOVERED

The story of the discovery and translation of this priceless record is told in the History of the Church. From the beginning to the end the hand of Providence is plainly discernible in the circumstances under which it was brought to light.

In the year 1831, a French traveler, M. Antonio Sebolo, found several mummies near Thebes, Egypt. He retained eleven of these and started for Paris. On the voyage he took sick, and after a few days of illness he died at Trieste, Austria. The bodies were eventually forwarded to his nephew, Mr. M. H. Chandler, in New York, who obtained possession of them in the year 1833, whereupon he decided to tour the country for the purpose of exhibiting them. In due time he arrived in Kirtland. This was in 1835. He had previously opened the cases and found two rolls of papyrus and a few smaller pieces containing writing.

As the Prophet Joseph Smith had acquired a reputation for ability to translate ancient languages, Mr. Chandler, naturally, asked his opinion concerning those records. The Prophet interpreted some of the characters, and Mr.

Chandler at once recognized the agreement between his interpretation and that of scientists whose opinion had been solicited. Being satisfied that the records were genuine, some of the Saints in Kirtland purchased them and the mummies.

The Prophet Joseph now began to study the text carefully, assisted by Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps. As the work proceeded, he became convinced that one of the rolls of papyrus contained a copy of a book written by Abraham, and the other, one written by Joseph, the son of Jacob. He now redoubled his efforts to understand them. He had very little, if any, access to scientific helps at this time, but he, nevertheless, applied himself to the stupendous task before him, as often as a multitude of other duties would permit, and in seven years his translation of the Book of Abraham was ready for the press. Three smaller pieces of manuscript containing pictures were published and partly explained in connection with the Book of Abraham—one of them being known as a hypocephalus. The Book of Joseph was not given to the public.

The mummies and the manuscripts after the Prophet's death, found their way to a museum in Chicago, where it is believed they were destroyed in the big fire which devastated the city in October, 1871.

Such is the story of these wonderful records. The hand of Providence, as already stated, is clearly seen in their preservation until the part known as the Book of Abraham and the accompanying illustrations were given to the world through the Prophet Joseph.

AGE OF THE BOOK

The Prophet Joseph states that the letters on the papyri were written in black, and some in red, ink, and that they were of the kind found upon the coffins of mummies. Interspersed among the hieroglyphics were letters resembling the ancient Hebrew. (Millennial Star, Vol. 15, page 519, quoted by George Reynolds, Book of Abraham, page 3.)

This is exceedingly interesting information, for it may furnish a clue to the approximate date of the original composition. Critics judge the age of a Ms. from the form of letters, division of words, or lines, material on which they are written, and so forth. Now, Dr. E. A. W. Budge ("Book of the Dead") tells us that the first specimens of Egyptian literature are found upon the walls of the chambers and passages inside pyramids of the fifth and sixth dynasties, and that the characters are hieroglyphics. If the characters of the Book of Abraham had resembled these first specimens, the Prophet Joseph would have said so, and the conclusion would have been that the record belonged to this earliest period.

During the eleventh and twelfth dynasties, Dr. Budge says, the texts on the walls were transferred to coffins and sarcophagi, and the forms of the letters were somewhat modified, and became "cursive hieroglyphics." The prophet says the characters he translated resembled these, and the Book, therefore, we may conclude, belongs to this second period. But this was the golden age of Egyptian literature. And it follows so closely upon the epoch-making visit of Abraham to Egypt, as to suggest that the development may have been due to the influence he exerted while there.

There is, of course, no absolute certainty about the chronology of those

early ages, but the author of the article on Egypt in the New International Encyclopedia says: "The Twelfth (Theban?) Dynasty seems, from recent discoveries, to have begun about B. C. 2000. This period of about 2000 years * * * was considered by the later Egyptians as the golden age, especially of literature, the poetical style of which formed the model for all succeeding periods."

* The story of Abraham, according to recent chronologists, begins in the year 2333 B. C. Others place the date of his birth from 300 to 400 years nearer our era. But on any calculation it is clear that the golden age of the twelfth dynasty followed the visit of Abraham, almost immediately. The form of the letters on the papyri, and the chronological calculations of recent years, taken together, furnish very strong corroborative evidence of the truth of the claim made for the book, as to authorship.

CORROBORATIVE EVIDENCE

The evidence is strengthened by the probability that Abraham left some record of his life; that Moses had access to some such records, and that Joshua had documentary evidence for his statement to the children of Israel, that their ancestors served "other gods" before their emigration from the land beyond the Euphrates. The author of the Book of Judith no doubt had authority for the statement that the family of Abraham were compelled to leave the country because they refused to take part in the idolatrous worship of the people among whom they lived. (Judith 5:6-8.) Paul may have seen some authentic record besides Genesis for his statement: "The God of Glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, and said unto him, 'Get thee out of thy country,'" etc., and Josephus may have had a copy of this very Book of Abraham before him when he stated that Abraham taught astronomy to the Egyptians.

This is not mere guesswork, for in a list of Hebrew writings, forming an appendix to the catalogue of Nicephorus, about 800 A. D., copied from much earlier sources, is mentioned a work bearing the title, "The Book of Abraham," and Origen, the celebrated church father, is supposed to have quoted from this book. (Bible Encyclopedia, edited by Dr. Samuel Fallows, Vol. 1, page 28.)

If, then, Abraham left records to which as late writers as Origen, who, by the way, was an Egyptian, born at Alexandria, had access, there is nothing improbable in the statement that a copy of these records, entire or in part, was discovered in our day in an Egyptian tomb.

Egypt has of late years proved a veritable treasure house of literature of the class to which the Book of Abraham may be said to belong. A few years ago a manuscript was found containing "Sayings of Jesus," evidently a copy of some very ancient document, and some years previously a German resident at Cairo obtained a tattered papyrus which, on examination, was found to be the "Acts of Paul, the Apostle." This manuscript was secured for the University Library at Heidelberg. It was written in an unknown Coptic dialect, and the difficulties of translation were numerous. This book is said to throw new light upon some important questions of the New Testament times. It tells of the return of Paul to Rome, and his martyrdom there, implying his release from the first captivity and a missionary journey of which the Acts

says nothing. It contains a couple of letters, one from the Saints at Corinth to Paul, and the other his answer. It describes Paul as follows:

“And Onesiphorus saw Paul approaching, a man short in stature, bald-headed, crook-kneed, of a fresh complexion, with eyebrows that joined, and a rather hooked nose, full of grace; for sometimes he appeared as a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel.”

If a German resident at Cairo did find such an important document, the existence of which was known only through references made to it by ancient writers, such as Tertullian, Jerome, and Chrysostom, there is nothing incredible in the story of the discovery of the Book of Abraham through the instrumentality of a French traveler, M. Sebolo.

THE HAND OF PROVIDENCE

We have said that the Prophet Joseph obtained this record providentially. Why, it may be asked, should Providence direct the journey of those papyri and cause them to fall into the hands of the humble prophet of this dispensation? Was it, then, his calling to translate hieroglyphics?

In reply to these questions it should be said that the mission of the Prophet Joseph was to proclaim the gospel message to the world, and to establish the Church of the Redeemer, preparatory to his second advent, but part of that mission was to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and to link together the past and the present into one grand and all-comprehensive dispensation. There can be no such union, until the present shall understand the past, and realize that it is merely building upon the foundations laid by the fathers. Hence the Prophet Joseph was given the key to the historical and religious treasure house of the past of the American continent; hence he was given to understand, in the Book of Abraham, that the marvelous civilization of the ancient Egyptians had its origin in divine revelation.

