

A Hint of an Explanation

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The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment. By Hugh Nibley. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1975. xii + 305 pp. \$14.95.

This long-anticipated book by Hugh Nibley on the Joseph Smith Papyri continues his latest efforts to open our minds to the ancient world. Nibley has focused his wide-reaching scholarly interests on an exposition of an aspect of Egyptian religion and has made a valuable contribution to the few books available which give the amateur an exposure to the culture of forgotten peoples.

Nibley restricts his discussion primarily to two of the papyri, Numbers X and XI, which are remnants of an example of the genre of Egyptian funerary texts commonly called "books of breathing." P. JS XI is the document quoted in the so-called Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar (EAG) where it is presented as the source of part of the Book of Abraham. Much discussion has centered around this identification because it is attributed to Joseph Smith, but does not stand up under scrutiny by any trained translators. Nibley (Chapter 1) adds more arguments to his article in *BYU Studies*, in which he claimed that Joseph Smith was not responsible for the production of the Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar; rather it should be assigned to the speculative efforts of "the brethren in Kirtland," who sought to follow in Joseph's footsteps and reproduce his work. Whether his additional evidence will quiet the storm centering around the connection between the EAG, the Book of Abraham, and Joseph Smith remains to be seen. Since the various arguments produced are mainly to justify the proponent's previously confirmed convictions about the veracity of Joseph Smith's productions, it is doubtful.

Chapter 2 presents an elaborate interlinear translation of the two papyri, with line-by-line facsimile of the original hieratic text, hieroglyphic transcription, both right to left and then, for the convenience of the English reader, from left to right, followed by a phonetic transcription and word by word translation. To this are added notes to explain the options available to the translator. I am disturbed by the frequent proof-reading errors which mar an otherwise very worthwhile effort. For example, on the first page of the chapter, the labels of the columns are reversed. In the transliteration, there are several inconsistencies, such as the word for "on" being given as both *hr* and *hr*. Also various superscript numbers are scattered around without accompanying footnotes or explanation. However, this is the first time in recent memory that the literate Mormon has been presented with such an extensive exposure to the background of the translated word. This will contribute greatly to helping us see the tentativeness of any translation of an ancient text, and the number of decisions that must be made before a completed translation is produced.

The next chapter is a discussion of possible ways to understand the nature of a translation. The ultimate purpose of a translation is to provide a reader in one language with a similar intellectual experience had by a reader in another language. The production of a translation must take into consideration the different cultures