

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

of the respective readers. Translators can either strive to produce one-to-one correspondence between words in a sentence or they can attempt to reproduce a similar meaning which communicates with the reader's experience. For example the German sentence, "Der Apfel faellt nicht weit vom Baume ab," can be translated either "The apple falls not far away from the tree," or "He's a chip off the old block." The problem is really insurmountable when we attempt a similar enterprise between cultures as fundamentally different as Egyptian and American. The differences are so radical that we can only suspect them in most cases. Nibley has helped place our discussion in perspective by drawing attention to this problem. A translation of a Book of Breathings as presented in Chapter 2 is still foreign to most modern readers. His claim that it presents an "Egyptian Endowment" hints at another translation.

The remainder of the body of the book gives the fruits of Nibley's efforts to find meaning in the Egyptian symbols that will be understandable to one of our culture. This is Nibley at his most characteristic, drawing on his wide exposure to the primary and secondary literature of the ancient world. He has made extensive use of the so-called Books of the Underworld, a corpus of Egyptian literary productions which elaborate on the activities of the denizens of the underworld. This material has recently been tapped by Egyptologists like Erich Hornung as a valuable source for insights into how the Egyptian understood the nature of his gods and the way he related to them. Nibley has brought together much material that will give all a detailed exposure to the Egyptian world. Scattered throughout this section are numerous drawings and illustrations taken from original Egyptian material (although the source is not always given) which give an exposure to Egyptian religious scenes. Their connection to the text, however, is often loose—possibly an attempt to illustrate the Egyptian style, as Nibley claims (p. 3), in which figures used often have only a remote connection with the text.

A further attempt to expose us to the Egyptian world of religious concepts and its remnants is provided in the Appendix, where Nibley has shown six documents that follow the pattern that he has adduced from the Book of Breathings.

Nibley avoids providing a summary and conclusion to the material he has presented. His purpose was "not to prove a case but to state one," providing the reader "with information to help him make up his own mind." And it is with great control that the reviewer has resisted the temptation to improve on Nibley's resolve. For always behind any such summing up lies the necessity to refer to the ceremonies of the Mormon temples, to which part of the readers of this journal will not have been initiated. Suffice it to say that there are obvious parallels apparent to those exposed to both and Nibley has made a valuable contribution by providing us with the material which will allow some of us at least to draw our own conclusions.

Life Under the Principle

EDWARD GEARY

Family Kingdom. By Samuel Woolley Taylor. Revised Edition. Salt Lake City: Western Epics, 1974. xi + 323 pp., \$7.95.

Family Kingdom was written primarily for a non-Mormon audience, written, as the