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## Book Reviews

### The Extremes of Eclecticism

*Abraham in Egypt* by Hugh Nibley, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981, 288 pp., \$9.95.

Reviewed by Eric Jay Olson, scripture researcher, LDS Translation Division, Salt Lake City, Utah, Ph.D. candidate in Egyptology, University of Chicago, seventy; father of five children.

I approach a description of this latest book by Hugh Nibley with much hesitation. With Nibley, you buy a package that is as much image as content. He is either viewed as the exemplary scholar, able to establish historical facts in a single bound, or he is the ardent apologist, able to construct any defense of the faith out of thin air. The individual who says anything in favor of his work or against his work is immediately placed in one camp or the other. If you acknowledge Nibley as an authority, you are a believer; if you don't, then you are an enemy. There is no middle ground. A review of one of his books is usually read with attention only until the reader decides which side of the line the reviewer is on. I want to emphasize at the outset that my comments reflect my assessment of the book as a book, not my opinion about the historicity of Abraham and the Book of Abraham.

In *Abraham in Egypt*, Nibley has applied to an extreme the eclectic approach to history. The basis of that approach is the conviction that if you read everything that has ever been written, soon you will see how everything that has ever happened fits into a universal framework with a common origin and goal. In pursuit of this approach, Nibley collects information from all periods of Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Israelite, Canaanite, Greek, and Christian history. For example, in the first chapter of the book, he cites nineteen documents: the

Shabako Stone, Book of Jubilees, Metternich Stele, Lachish Letters, Book of the Dead, Ethiopian Book of Enoch (First Enoch), Apocalypse of Abraham, Testament of Abraham, Gospel of the Twelve Apostles, Pyramid Texts of Unis, Coffin texts, *The Iliad*, Justin Martyr's *Cohortatio ad Graecos*, Book of the Two Ways, a Text from the coffin of a daughter of Psammetichus II, Amduat, and Genesis.

Nibley defends this approach by observing that since we do not know when Abraham lived in terms of current chronological systems, one is justified in using data from any period to deduce the historical Abraham. However, after only a few pages, I was left behind in the jumps from Ptolemaic Egypt to the Old Kingdom and back, from Mesopotamia to Israel to Egypt to Greece to Rome and back. Abraham was obviously not only in Egypt. Within Israel we are treated to selections from Jewish apocalyptic documents whose extant versions are usually found only in a non-Ancient Near Eastern language such as Slavonic. We also have selections from rabbinic commentaries and Christian pseud-epigrapha. Out of this information whirlwind, we try to find the true Abraham who, at times, Nibley suggests, is equated with Onchsheshonqy, an Egyptian wisdom writer, whose earliest documents date from the Ptolemaic period and contrasted with Nimrod, who is equated with Pharaoh.

As a result of Nibley's method, a reader is not persuaded that Nibley's reconstruction is convincing. He is merely worn down until he ceases to raise objections and ask questions. The avalanche of citations and footnotes does not elucidate; it overwhelms. References should help to clarify and give documentation, but these bewilder and confuse. If by chance one tries to look up a reference for further information or to

check on accuracy, he often finds an error in the citation which makes the effort frustrating or he finds that the interpretation is based on conjecture. For example, a long quotation on page 5, which is actually taken from an earlier article by Nibley himself, deals with the tradition of keeping and preserving family records. It quotes from the Book of Jubilees saying, of Joseph: "He gave all his books and the books of his fathers to Levi his son that he might preserve them and renew them for his children until this day." A check of the original reveals that Joseph did not have a hitherto unknown son named Levi but that the words were really those of Jacob, not Joseph. Such an obvious mistake so early in the book makes one wary of trusting any of the quotations, unless each and every one of them is checked. And since there are so many citations from so many different literary traditions and scholarly specialties, one's next reaction is to find another book to read.

In science classes in secondary schools I suppose children are still taught that the only true scholarly method is the scientific method. It is the only method which reaches truly defensible conclusions. And the method dictates that a researcher should collect his data, construct his hypothesis, formulate an experiment to test his theory, conduct his experiment, analyze the results, and if necessary, modify his hypothesis. By this method, one arrives at the ultimate truths of reality. Since in historical reconstructions, a scholar is not able to construct an experiment which he can conduct to test his theories, at best his conclusions are only tentative. Therefore history is not a true science. Only later do the students learn that the first two steps in the scientific method are actually interrelated, if not in fact reversed. That is, data and hypotheses are interconnected. You must at least have some working theory before you know which facts to collect. So in reality there is more speculation in the scientific method than is at first admitted.

In historical reconstructions, the speculation is even more apparent since there

we do not have the option of formulating and conducting an experiment. We have only some recorded data from which we must try to construct a coherent scheme to explain how things happened and what forces were involved. The historian must beware of the temptation of selecting only those pieces which fit a preconceived picture.

Unfortunately Nibley cannot allow himself the freedom to exercise this care. Even though he calls his book *Abraham in Egypt*, he knows and so does the reader that he is really writing about the Book of Abraham. For example, he begins with a view of the "real" history of Egypt: "Matriarchal primacy in Egypt was traced by the Egyptians to a certain great lady who came to the Nile Valley immediately after the Flood and established herself and her son as rulers in the land. Since this is the same story that is told in the Book of Abraham 1:21-27, it is fortunate that the Egyptian sources are both abundant and specific." (p. 149) The first sentence is not given a footnote. One must ask which came first: the theory or the data? If the theory exists first, is it any surprise that the data selected support that theory?

Chapter 6 gives a variety of references to the role of women in the mythology of Ancient Egypt. As anyone remotely acquainted with Egyptian mythology knows, there are several prominent female deities. These personages have a variety of functions and roles associated with the institution of kingship. Unfortunately, while the Egyptian sources are abundant, they are not specific, at least not unambiguous. Hathor can be presented as the embodiment of kingship, without any necessity to posit the historical account of a king-making mother. Matriarchal primacy merely means that bloodlines are traced through the female, a practice which recognizes the difficulty of establishing paternity. The flood motif in Egyptian mythology does not presume a historical flood after the pattern of Genesis but the extrapolation of the annual inundation from which life and earth were re-born each year. There are, thus, simpler ex-