

Fragment Found in Salt Lake City

Written by Administrator

Sunday, 02 May 2010 19:43 - Last Updated Monday, 17 May 2010 11:59

Edited by Kerry A. Shirts

Hugh Nibley, *BYU Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (1968) pp. 191-194

This fragment has been preserved in the Church Historian's Office through the years among Joseph Smith's papers, including the so-called Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar. There is ample evidence that all the papyri though very fragile were in excellent condition when Joseph Smith worked with them the clumsy patching, gluing, and sketching came later. This fragment, which has been badly fitted together like some of the others, belongs to the same roll as the other hieratic papyri, as is apparent from recurring elements of the owner's name, that appears a number of times in full in the other fragments as

Which may be "translated" as something like "The Osiris Daughter of Min, true of word (or justified, deceased, triumphant, etc., i.e., tested and found true and faithful), declared blessed (as a dead person, the word being written merely by a stroke, since the proper hieroglyph was considered magically dangerous), belonging to Khons (or in the company of Khons, the moon-god), justified." Or, simply as a name, something like Taimin Mutninesikhonsu. One of the most famous manuscripts of the Book of the Dead is that of another lady, Nesikhonsu, belonging to the XX1st Dynasty (1090-945 B.C.), which bears some interesting points of resemblance to this one.

Why must every syllable of the lady's name invite a lecture? This question calls for at least a mention of some of the reasons why the problems posed by the Pearl of Great Price have never been settled and probably will not be for a long time to come.

There are three kinds of document presented here--hieroglyphic writing, hieratic texts, and symbolic pictures. Joseph Smith in the Pearl of Great Price dealt only with the third type, though he studied and commented on the other two in private. There need be no direct connection between the three, since Egyptian ritual texts and accompanying drawings often have nothing to do with each other (H. Grapow, A. Resch, S. Bjerke). The most extensive of the present texts are the hieratic fragments, readily recognizable as bits from the Book of the Dead.

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At present the Book of the Dead is being diligently studied by many scholars seeking to discover for the first time what it is all about. Long monographs weave laborious guesses around a few shaky pegs, while each scholar moves the pegs about to suit his predilection. The authors of these studies, including some of the most reputable Egyptologists of the day, are agreed that the Book of the Dead, like the Coffin Texts and Pyramid Texts which lie behind it, is no mere conglomeration of magic spells, as was formerly thought, but a structure of real significance, the true message of which still awaits discovery (W. Czermak). The whole Egyptian religion is being reevaluated today. It is a religion not of mythology but of revelation, "liberal" and "additive" (R. Anthes); it is not magical but anti-magical in orientation (E. Drioton); its rites and doctrines reflect "a profound intelligence" (S. Morenz); its earliest and purest doctrine is sound and logical (Anthes); its astronomy is "remarkably sane and attractive" (R. E. Briggs). It was formerly thought that there was no Egyptian religion proper but only a jumble of more or less primitive cults and superstitions (G. Maspero); today this verdict is reversed--the same basic themes run through the Egyptian religious texts from beginning to end (H. Kees); and teachings known to us only from late texts such as those in Joseph Smith's possession in their essence go back to very ancient times (H. Junker, L. Speleers). If we do not have the "Urtext" of Egyptian religion, we find everywhere the marks of a common "Grundtext" (Czermak).

We are not in any way, however, committed to the religion of the Egyptians. The Egyptians themselves were always keenly aware that a very important ingredient was missing from their religious traditions (E. Meyer, I.E. S. Edwards). This awareness is nowhere more strikingly set forth than in the Pearl of Great Price itself (Book of Abraham 1:26-27). In his comments on the papyri, Joseph Smith hails them as a welcome confirmation of his own ideas, but never as the source of those ideas. Even when "the principles of astronomy as understood by Father Abraham and the ancients, unfolded to our understandings," it was by direct revelation and not by reading the text (DHC 2:286). Indeed all the teachings of the Pearl of Great Price apart from those accompanying the Facsimiles, are already set forth in the Book of Mormon (for example, Alma 11; 12; 13). The question, then, is whether these present fragments of Egyptian writing give support to Smith's ideas, as he claims they do. We think they do.

Of recent years Egyptologists have been slowly but steadily overcoming a deep-seated reluctance to recognize that the Bible echoes the teachings of the Egyptians (A. Erman was one of the first and most reluctant to yield); though through the years the connections between Egypt and Israel have been glaringly obvious, Egyptologists have resolutely refused to see them (R. Weill). But after demonstrating undoubted ties between the Wisdom Literature of the Egyptians and that of the Hebrews(H. Gunkel, F. J. Chabas), researchers discovered even wider literary connections (Gunkel, A. Wiede-mann), until in our own day they are openly proclaiming definite kinship between the prehistoric "Memphite theology" and the teachings of the Old and especially of the New Testament (C. Preaux, H. Jacobson, L. V. Zabkar). S. Morenz now insists that a knowledge of Egyptian religion is essential to an understanding of early Christianity, and Anthes declares that as far as he can see the Christian and the ancient

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Egyptian concepts of the Trinity are very close indeed. Along with this goes a growing recognition that the ties between Egypt and the rest of the ancient world, especially Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia and Greece, are not only very real but very far-reaching, the religion of Egypt having widespread influence throughout the ancient East (A. Moret, S. Herrmann, E. Brunner-Traut).

What has held things up so long has been the nature and difficulty of communications with the ancient Egyptians. Except for "a tiny minority of texts," Egyptian literature is very poorly understood today (G. Posener); we have only a few shreds and tatters of Egyptian history (A. Gardiner). The Egyptian way of playing with words and symbols raises formidable obstacles to understanding (P. Munro, J. Yoyotte), cryptograms and other tricks of writing being commoner than one would suppose (Grapow, Drioton). The most the Egyptologist can hope for is to be "merely a purveyor" of words, avoiding wherever possible every temptation to go into possible deeper meanings of a text (Gardiner). Yet in our time scholars are becoming ever more willing to recognize the possibility of deeper meanings: some of them are even searching for cosmic and hidden meanings in the dimensions of Egyptian buildings in a way that would have horrified good Egyptologists a few years ago (A. Badawy, Ph. Derchain). Even more baffling than the language used by the Egyptians is their deliberate reticence on matters of religion. Thus while they never tire of talking about the affair of Horus and Seth, not a single text ever tells us what happened--for that we must still go to the Greeks (Grapow, T. Hopfner).

Egyptology is a science of surprises (Maspero), and it would be most unwise for anyone to presume at this time to speak the final word regarding the resemblances between some of Joseph Smith's ideas and some of those expressed in the papyri.