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Title Out of the Dust: Ancient Semitic in Egyptian Pyramids?

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Abstract An announcement made in Jerusalem—claiming that parts of the text found in the pyramid of Wenis were ancient Semitic and not Egyptian—could have implications applicable to the Latter-day Saints. If the claim proves to be true, these spells would be one of the oldest attestations of any Semitic language. Egyptologists have tended to reject the possibility of influence from non-Egyptians, but the existence of these Semitic lines would force them to reconsider that possibility. The reverse would also have to be considered, supporting the Book of Mormon’s suggestion that the Hebrews adopted Egyptian script to write Hebrew. However, the assertion has only been made and has yet to be proven.



OUT OF THE DUST

Ancient Semitic in Egyptian Pyramids?

Paul Y. Hoskisson and
Michael D. Rhodes

An announcement was made recently in Jerusalem claiming that parts of several spells from the text found in the pyramid of Wenis (last king of the 5th Dynasty, who reigned from 2375 to 2345 BC,¹ and the oldest pyramid in which texts are found) were not Egyptian as first assumed, but were rather ancient Semitic (the language group to which Arabic, Babylonian, and Hebrew belong). The claim was almost immediately challenged. Though it will take some time before the academic dust kicked up by scholarly jousting settles, Latter-day Saints may be interested in the implications, should the lines in question turn out to be ancient Semitic.

If the lines prove to be Semitic, they would be one of the oldest—if not the oldest—attestations of any Semitic language. East Semitic (represented by Old Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian) makes its first appearance (personal

names aside) in the Old Akkadian period, i.e., about 2300 BC. Northwest Semitic (represented by Ugaritic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Phoenician, etc.) is not attested until 1400 BC at the earliest. Hebrew itself does not appear on the scene until about 950 BC. Southwest Semitic (represented by Arabic, Epigraphic South Arabic, Ethiopic, etc.) does not appear until the middle Iron Age, perhaps as early as 700 BC. If this pyramid text has ancient Semitic writing, that would push the earliest attestation of Semitic text back about 100 years. For this reason alone, the claim that a pyramid text contains Semitic language will generate substantial interest among scholars.

The implications for Latter-day Saints, however, go beyond any interest in ancient Semitic inscriptions. But first a minor digression will be helpful. It seems to be the nature of most scholars in most disciplines to believe that their field of study is unique and therefore not subject to outside influences. Thus, for years, Classicists rejected the notion outright that there could have been any influence on Greek thought, ideas, or culture from outside of Greece. It

has only been in the last twenty years or so that Classicists with the stature of Walter Burkert have been able to convince other Classicists that the ancient Near East did exercise a great deal of influence on the development of Greece, from religion to literature to artifact.

Egyptologists have also tended to reject the possibility of any influence on Egypt from outside the Nile Valley. Egyptian documents speak rather disparagingly of non-Egyptians. Yet the Egyptian language is classified as belonging to the Hamito-Semitic language family, making it distantly related to Semitic languages. In addition, several of the dynasties of Egypt were admittedly of non-Egyptian origin. Nevertheless, most Egyptologists would never admit more than a passing influence on Egypt from non-Egyptians, at least before the end of the Bronze Age in 1200 BC. For them, like the die-hard Classicists, nearly all influence flowed out of Egypt, not into Egypt from other regions. The thought of finding ancient Semitic lines embedded in one of the oldest and most Egyptian of all things Egyptian would be

greeted with disdainful skepticism by many Egyptologists. Yet, objective Egyptologists will look at the assertion seriously enough to evaluate the claim and provide corroboration or well-reasoned refutation.

Naturally, the merits of the assertion will be discussed in academic circles for years, if not decades, to come. In the meantime, however, while the scholarly discussion rages on, there are several points of interest for Latter-day Saints that can be explored without waiting for the academic fallout to settle and the skies to clear.

It has long been the belief of Latter-day Saints who accept the Book of Abraham as authentic that non-Egyptians did have substantial influence on Egypt long before the beginning of the Iron Age, i.e., 1200 BC. After all, we believe that Abraham sat briefly on the throne of Egypt and that he tutored Egyptians on astronomy. Some Latter-day Saints would even go so far as to suggest that Abraham taught

them much concerning the gospel and its ordinances. Such ideas would seem preposterous to most Egyptologists. Yet if the claim that ancient Semitic lines are found among the Pyramid texts proves true, then Latter-day Saint claims would no longer seem so far-fetched.

Although most Egyptologists believe that Egypt had considerable influence on the land of Canaan, in past years not many scholars of Northwest Semitic (Hebrew, Aramaic, Ugaritic, etc.) would admit Egyptian influence except in the realm of politics. For example, a few years ago any suggestion that Hebrews might have adopted Egyptian script to write Hebrew, as the Book of Mormon suggests, would have been greeted with loud guffaws, and indeed was. All that has changed. Today few scholars of Semitic languages would deny that Egypt and the Egyptian language had considerable influence on Hebrew. Enough examples of Hebrew written with Egyptian script have been found so that

no one would dismiss out of hand the claims of the Book of Mormon. If this claim of finding ancient Semitic written with the Egyptian script among the pyramid texts proves tenable, then the practice of writing a Semitic language using Egyptian script would be pushed back about 2000 years and would no longer be confined to the Iron Age and later.

But before Latter-day Saints allow their scholarly salivation to begin, we need to emphasize again that only an assertion has been made. And even though nothing has yet been published, already the dust has been kicked up and the fur is flying through hyperspace. It is one of those academic skirmishes that Latter-day Saints will watch with vested interest for some time to come. And when the storm has passed and the skies have somewhat cleared, a new report will appear in these pages. 

Report on a Reconnaissance Survey of the Northwestern Province,” 64; John A. Tvednes has pointed to rivers in the general region that are noted by classical historians such as Strabo and Agatharchides who evidently never saw any of these streams (“More on the River Laman,” FARMS Update No. 176 in *Insights*, vol. 25 [2005]: 2–3).

54. “Survey of the Northwestern Province,” 64.

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1. These dates are taken from Ian Shaw, *Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and are generally accepted by most Egyptologists, although there is an uncertainty of as much as ± 100 years for dates at the beginning of the Old Kingdom (2613 BC according to Shaw). The chronology of the rest of the Ancient Near East is also uncertain with at least four competing versions, High, Middle, Low, and Ultra-low with a difference of 152 years between the highest and the lowest. For example, Hammurabi’s reign in these 4 systems is: 1848–1806, 1792–1750, 1728–1686, and 1696–1654 BC.

[With Real Intent]
An Unexpected Gift
Larry EchoHawk

1. Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream” (speech, Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC, August 28, 1963).
2. Personal reminiscence of author. For a more detailed description of the 1946 dream, see Dell Van Orden, “Emotional Farewell in Mexico,” *Church News*, February 19, 1977, 3.