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PROPHETS AND THE  
STUDY OF ANTIQUITY  
IN EARLY AMERICA



# JOSEPH SMITH AND THE STUDY OF ANTIQUITY

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The path to antiquity in Joseph Smith's time lay through language. One did not approach the deep past through history, anthropology, or archaeology, but through philology and linguistics. The classicists were the antiquarians of their day. The academic study of antiquity began with the study of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Egyptian was not taught, but the classicists were the ones to keep up with Egyptian scholarship.

Joseph Smith's interest in ancient languages was tantamount to an interest in ancient history. He was fascinated by the deep past. He studied languages because they led him to antiquity. But he went at them in his own way. He did not follow the fashions of the day. The classical languages Latin and Greek were preeminent in both instruction and scholarship; Hebrew was required for understanding

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the Old Testament world; Egyptian was an exotic new study, an upstart. Although poorly educated, Joseph Smith engaged each one with varying degrees of interest. Strangely, the classical languages, the most intensely studied in the academy, interested him least. Instead he was drawn to Hebrew, important for its scriptural connections, and to the mysterious Egyptian.

### Latin and Greek

Caroline Winterer, whose book *The Culture of Classicism* surveys the golden age of Latin and Greek studies in America, offers the judgment that “next to Christianity, the central intellectual project in America before the late nineteenth century was classicism. . . . It is difficult for us to grasp how dazzled Americans were by the ancient Greeks and Romans, how enthusiastically they quarried the classical past for more than two and a half centuries.”<sup>1</sup> Supporting Winterer’s claim is the fact that nearly all of the 182 colleges in the United States before the Civil War required proficiency in the classical languages as a prerequisite to admission. The purpose of “grammar schools” was to teach Latin grammar in preparation for college. When Horace Mann applied for entrance to Brown University in 1816, he was required before admission “to read accurately, construe, and parse Tully and the Greek Testament and Virgil . . . to write true Latin in prose and [to know] the rules of Prosody.” Elsewhere it was Caesar, Sallust, Cicero’s orations against Catiline, Virgil’s *Bucolics*, *Georgics*, and Xenophon’s *Anabasis*—all required before matriculation.

For those who were admitted, classics dominated the curriculum. Ohio University emphasized the Greek New Testament, Xenophon, Herodotus, Homer, Greek tragedies and orations, Sallust, Livy, Cicero, Virgil, Tacitus, and Juvenal.<sup>2</sup> These requirements created a large market for classroom texts, which afforded scholars an opportunity to capitalize on their knowledge. When Martin Harris visited Charles Anthon in the spring of 1828, the Columbia classics professor was engaged in intensive negotiations with Edmund Henry

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Barker, an English classicist and entrepreneur, about publication of an English edition of John Lempriere's *Bibliotheca Classica, A Classical Dictionary*, which Anthon had published in the United States in 1825 after having made four thousand additions. Barker offered to split the profits of the English edition, "which may be considerable from the excellence of the matter, which you have added to the book."<sup>3</sup> Every few weeks in 1827 and 1828 Barker scribbled off another letter, urging Anthon to hurry up, egging him on with the promise of rich rewards.

And now, dear Sir, I rejoice to think that you & I, diligent, active, zealous scholars residing in two different parts of the world, can by a union like what I have recommended play into each other's hands & throw money into each other's lap, while we shall put forth good & useful books bringing honourable fame & making each edn. [edition] more valuable than its predecessor.<sup>4</sup>

As it turned out, Anthon made nothing on the venture. They sold only nine hundred copies of their three-thousand-volume press run, and all the money was used to pay the printer.<sup>5</sup> But neither of them gave up. Barker promised better results with a second edition, while at the same time urging Anthon to prepare a Latin dictionary as well as a collection of Native American oratory, a particular interest of Anthon's.<sup>6</sup> Barker assured Anthon the demand was there, as doubtless the Columbia professor knew from his own book sales.

Barker and Anthon had in mind the market made up of the thousands of British and American schoolboys laboring away on Latin. When Winterer spoke of an intellectual project, however, she was thinking of something more than teachers and students. Under the influence of German scholarship, the study of the classics underwent a revolution in the early nineteenth century. Previously, students had stolidly developed a technical knowledge of Greek and Latin grammar; under German influence they turned to culture. The Germans

argued that the texts could not be understood in a historical vacuum. Mastery of vocabulary and grammar did not reveal all there was to know. Meaning could only be grasped in the context of the world in which the texts originated. One teacher of Greek in 1830 insisted that “a course of lectures should contain an account of the physical character, the scenery, the climate and the productions of Greece, with the early and later mythology, and the fabulous traditions of the heroic age. . . . Private life in all its forms, opinion in all their shades, the intellectual character and physical conformation of the people, should be fully illustrated.”<sup>7</sup> The study of Roman history became as important as the parsing of Latin sentences. The Germans insisted that students must go behind the text to the authors’ lives and times.

This new line of thought had many implications. It brought into question, for example, who wrote the Homeric epics. Pressing through a text to the life behind it led scholars to ask who the actual writers were. Were the epics all written by one man, a person named Homer, or were the texts a composite production, perhaps by a group of authors or bards?<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Germans historicized the texts, a method that soon affected biblical scholarship. Querying the authorship of classical texts led inexorably to questions about the books of the Bible. The German biblical scholar J. D. Michaelis (1717–1791) identified distinctive qualities in each of the New Testament books, undermining the basic assumption that the Bible was a unified, inspired whole. Once differences between the books were noted, differences within the books became apparent, and scholars were on their way to the documentary hypothesis, positing a variety of authors for Isaiah, Genesis, and all the others.<sup>9</sup>

The New Humanism, as this movement was called, filtered into the United States through a small, influential group of American scholars who studied in Germany and especially at Göttingen in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Edward Everett of later Gettysburg fame was appointed the Eliot professor of Greek at

Harvard in 1815 and immediately went to Europe for four years. He was joined by George Bancroft, George Ticknor, Joseph Green, and others who moved from place to place absorbing the latest in classical scholarship.<sup>10</sup> After learning all they could, they returned to teach in American universities, adding the new cultural outlook to the traditional focus on grammar and translation. This is what Winterer means by dubbing classicism the central intellectual project in nineteenth-century America next to Christianity. Not every American went all the way with the Germans. Some resisted the critique of Homeric authorship, fearing the books of the Bible would be next.<sup>11</sup> But with or without reservations, they admired and emulated the German scholars.

Classicism may have been a compelling endeavor for the learned, but did it have any impact on ordinary people? Was it of any importance to farm families in upstate New York? Did the classics leave a trace in the thinking of Brigham Young or Joseph Smith?

Classicism reached pretty far into ordinary lives. Palmyra, it must be remembered, was the Greek name of a rich trading city in Syria that came under Roman influence; Utica was an ally of Carthage in the Punic Wars; Syracuse was named for Siracusa, a city on the east coast of Sicily colonized by the Greeks; Troy was the object of Greek desire in the *Iliad*; and Rome was, of course, Rome. Classicism could be read in the facades of the neoclassical houses that successful New Yorkers built for themselves all over the state. Classical motifs appeared in furniture and painting. Classicism was everywhere.

Joseph had a near brush with one of the preeminent classics teachers of his generation. Although he did not study in Germany, Charles Anthon was an advocate of the new German scholarship. He published nearly fifty Latin and Greek textbooks, including readers designed to introduce students to Roman civilization. Although Anthon was criticized for sloppy scholarship, his huge corpus made him a prominent figure in the study of the classics and probably



Joseph Smith the Prophet. *Portrait by Dan Weggeland, courtesy of Church History Museum.*

explains why his name came up when Martin Harris was looking for a learned consultant on the transcript of Book of Mormon characters.<sup>12</sup> Knowing of Anthon would at least have made Joseph Smith



aware of classical studies. If he meant it when he said “I am determined to persue the study of languages until I shall become master of them,” he could not avoid Latin and Greek.<sup>13</sup>

And yet Joseph seems to have done little to promote classical studies among his uneducated followers. When he wanted to elevate their learning, he hired a Hebrew teacher, not a Latin instructor. His own language studies later in life focused on German, and he was deeply involved in Egyptian, but never Greek. It is particularly puzzling why Joseph Smith did not study Greek more than he did. Greek, after all, was the original language of many New Testament texts, and Joseph had tied his fascination with language to the scriptures, claiming, “My Soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original.”<sup>14</sup> If the reason for studying Hebrew was to get back to Old Testament prophets, why not study Greek to understand New Testament apostles? Oliver Cowdery did bring a Greek lexicon back to Kirtland along with the Hebrew books, but no one studied it in the School of the Prophets.<sup>15</sup> The skeptical visitor to Nauvoo in 1842, the Reverend Henry Caswall, claimed that Joseph Smith could not even distinguish Greek letters from Egyptian hieroglyphics.<sup>16</sup>

Greek instruction and Greek textbooks were certainly available. Edward Everett’s American adaptation of a German Greek grammar went through fifty-five editions in a half century.<sup>17</sup> Leading lights like Everett also promoted Greek culture as pointing humans toward a higher existence. Everett was influenced by Johann Johachim Winckelmann, the eminent German historian of Greek drama. As Winterer explains, “Winckelmann helped to inaugurate in Germany a religion of beauty, in which Greek art moved the viewer into contact with what was universal and eternal.” It had the power of elevating human sensibilities: “Greece now emerged as the province of the spiritual and the ideal, the seat of art and learning, representing what was at once unique and universally true.”<sup>18</sup> Purveyors of Greek cultural values presented it as a remedy for the

crass materialism of young America, which conceivably would make it attractive to Joseph Smith, also a critic of the injustices in modern American society.<sup>19</sup>

Yet no seeming affinities were enough to capture his interest. Greek received little more attention than Latin in the School of the Prophets or in Joseph Smith's personal study. Two decades after Joseph Smith's death, Matthew Arnold, the noted professor of poetry at Oxford, identified Hellenism and Hebraism as the two pillars of modern Anglo-American culture. Both aimed at perfection and salvation. Hebraism pursued the goal by stressing right conduct and obedience, Hellenism by seeking the truth of things as they are and by spontaneity of imagination. Arnold turned away from Hebraism with its "suffocating fear of sin" while Joseph Smith took the opposite path.<sup>20</sup> He ignored Hellenism and embraced Hebraism more completely than any religious thinker of his generation.

## Hebrew

While he dabbled in many languages, Joseph devoted himself most ardently to Hebrew and Egyptian, the two ancient languages most closely linked to his work. The Book of Mormon, it said of itself, was written in a combination of Hebrew and Egyptian (see 1 Nephi 1:2). The combination resembled Coptic, which was Egyptian written in Greek.<sup>21</sup> In 1835–36 the two were linked again, at least chronologically. The Mormon purchase of the Chandler mummies and papyrus rolls thrust Egyptian into the forefront of Joseph's mind in the fall of 1835, and the next winter and spring, he and other elders studied Hebrew under the tutelage of Joshua Seixas who had offered Hebrew instruction in a nearby college. It has been argued that the two undertakings may have been interwoven, the study of Hebrew affecting the translation of the Egyptian Abraham scroll.<sup>22</sup> Whether this is true or not, it is certain that in a six-month period both Egyptian and Hebrew received close study in Kirtland.

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Why Joseph privileged these two languages above Latin and Greek remains a question. External events to be sure led him to Egyptian and Hebrew—the translations of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham—but Joseph went above and beyond the necessities of his work when he scheduled Hebrew classes and undertook a grammar and alphabet of Egyptian. Samuel Brown has argued in an imaginative essay that Joseph was interested in more than the translation of the two ancient scripts. He also pursued the pure language of Adam, the perfect original tongue. Traditionally Hebrew had been thought of as the *prima lingua*, the one language not confused at the Tower of Babel. If not the pure tongue itself, it was close enough that one might get back to the primeval truth by working through it.<sup>23</sup> The influential work of Theophilus Gale, *The Court of the Gentiles*, claimed that “the Hebrew language represents a perfect form of expression from which humanity fell because of its sins.”<sup>24</sup>

Something close to this held true for Egyptian hieroglyphs as well. In their emblematic form, that is as pictographs based on material objects, they were believed by some to approximate the original language. The deepest truths and mysteries of the world might be more clearly understood if voiced in these pure languages. Brown argues that Joseph hoped to recover the primal tongue in which truth could be stated unambiguously. Use of that elemental language would dissolve the misunderstandings and differences that divided modern believers and facilitate the realization of religious unity.<sup>25</sup>

It was not difficult to obtain instruction in Hebrew in Joseph’s time. Hebrew had always caught the interest of Bible translators such as Saint Jerome in the fourth century. In the medieval period, the study of Hebrew had suffered from Christian tensions with Jews, but it revived again in the Protestant Reformation with the renewed reliance on the Bible and the resulting translations into English. If ultimate trust was to be placed in the Bible, the original Hebrew manuscripts had to be understood correctly. Henry

VIII established the Regius Professorships of Greek and Hebrew at Oxford and Cambridge in 1540, and that tradition of instruction carried over to America. Jonathan Edwards studied and taught Hebrew at Yale and, as prospective president of Princeton, was asked to teach Hebrew again. Harvard established a chair of Hebrew and Oriental Languages in 1764 as did the University of Pennsylvania in 1782. At the time of the Revolution, all ten American colleges offered Hebrew instruction.<sup>26</sup>

Interest slackened at the end of the eighteenth century. Enrollment in Hebrew courses shrank because these classes were made optional at Harvard. But interest revived in the early nineteenth century. The brilliant young linguist Moses Stuart was appointed chair of sacred literature at Andover Theological Seminary in 1810. Feeling his preparation in Hebrew and Greek at Yale to have been inadequate, he plunged into a three-year crash course on Hebrew and then spent years in Germany studying with the masters. His publication of a detailed and lengthy Hebrew grammar established him as the leading American Hebrew scholar of his generation.<sup>27</sup> Study in Germany made Stuart suspect of New Humanist tendencies in biblical interpretation, which were much feared at Andover. The school had been established to counter the Unitarian takeover of the Harvard Divinity School, and the trustees wanted to keep the wolves from the fold. But they had nothing to fear from Stuart; his commitment to orthodoxy was firm. He aimed to extract the best from German scholarship on antiquity while opposing its radical tendencies.<sup>28</sup>

Among Stuart's informal students was Joshua Seixas (1802–74), the son of a distinguished Jewish family in New York City. His father, Gershom Mendes Seixas, was on the board of Columbia University from 1785 to 1815. Seixas had learned Hebrew as a boy and as a young man offered instruction to his own New York Jewish congregation Shearith Israel. After studying with Stuart, Seixas published an abbreviated version of his teacher's Hebrew grammar designed

for use in his classrooms, the *Manual Hebrew Grammar for the Use of Beginners*, which appeared first in 1833.<sup>29</sup>

Seixas's training qualified him for a post teaching Hebrew in an American university, but his Jewish identity stood in the way. Only Christians could be hired to teach the subject. Judah Monis, who taught Hebrew at Harvard from 1722 to 1760, converted to Christianity before accepting the post.<sup>30</sup> Seixas, too, may have converted to Christianity, assuming the name of James in place of Joshua, but the record is not clear. In any event, Seixas became a freelance who taught as an adjunct professor at Oberlin and at Western Reserve University in Cleveland. He also taught privately for the Latter-day Saints in Kirtland. The Mormons may have heard of Seixas from Lorenzo Snow who studied at Oberlin in 1835, the year Seixas was teaching there. His clients in both Boston and Kirtland preferred Hebrew instruction from a Jew, just as students today often prefer native speakers for learning modern languages.<sup>31</sup>

## Egyptian

Joseph Smith could not have turned to any American university for instruction in Egyptian because it was not the subject of any course. There was not a single Egyptologist anywhere in the United States in 1835 when the Mormons purchased the Chandler artifacts. Champollion did not crack the Egyptian code until 1822, and his grammar was not published until 1836. Throughout the eighteenth century, little information about Egypt filtered into the public mind. Collectors of curiosities might own a piece of an Egyptian arm or a small fragment of papyrus, but broad public interest was low. A group of mummies that happened to reach Philadelphia in 1800 was put away in a warehouse and never seen again.

Then over the next decade the world's attention turned to Egypt. The British Museum installed its first mummy around 1803. Nicholas Boylston, a Boston merchant, imported a mummy in 1818.

And a Cincinnati museum acquired a mummy head in 1822, along with papyri. Interest had risen in response to Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798. Bonaparte had invaded Egypt to cut off Britain's access to India but succeeded only temporarily. The British expelled him in 1801. Meanwhile, Bonaparte knew enough about Egypt to see it was worthy of study. According to contemporary historical theory, it was the cradle of civilization, as its immense monuments seemed to show. Along with his soldiers and administrators, Bonaparte sent 150 artists, engineers, mathematicians, botanists, chemists, physicists, naturalists, and geologists to record and analyze Egyptian civilization. Even after the British drove out the French, this band of scholars labored on. Between 1809 and 1829, they turned out nineteen volumes of dense description and drawings called *Description de l'Égypte*, which are recognized as marking the beginning of modern Egyptian studies. These fabulous volumes drew the world's attention to the Land of the Nile, and the Egypt business boomed.<sup>32</sup>

Individuals fortunate enough to own mummies found that this extraordinary commodity would draw crowds willing to pay twenty-five cents each to view such a rarity. In 1823 a pair of merchants presented a Thebes mummy, later found to be a stonecutter named Padihershef, to the Medical College in Boston for the purpose of public display and fund-raising for the hospital. The donors assumed the mummy would "excite some curiosity of the public," as indeed it did.<sup>33</sup> A Boston newspaper estimated that within two days five or six hundred people had viewed the mummy. After interest in Boston flagged, the hospital trustees leased the mummy to Doggett and Co. to tour the nation. In 1824 Padihershef went to nearly a dozen American cities and netted over a thousand dollars. In Baltimore, the Peale Museum rented the mummy for six weeks for \$650 and brought in \$1,842.<sup>34</sup>

The returns declined after a year, however, as the competition rose. Ambitious entrepreneurs plundered Egypt's tombs to recover

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artifacts they knew had a market in the United States. After touring mummies had exhausted the immediate interest, they were procured by museums like Peale's for ongoing display. There they continued to enlighten the public and stimulate speculation such as the conjecture that Padihershef was Pharaoh's daughter or perhaps Moses himself.<sup>35</sup> Before the Civil War, exhibits and museums were the most common way for the general public to learn about Egypt.

Michael Chandler, an Irish immigrant, went into the mummy business around 1833. By his time, mummies were being transported all over the country as a curiosity for locals to talk about. The mummies were a glimpse into another world, a break with the tedium of small town life. They were of a piece with the lecture system that was burgeoning in these years led by such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson or, at the low end, touring exhibits of a dwarf or hippopotamus. Later on, circuses were to serve the same purpose. Chandler's exhibit was notable for the number of mummies it presented, possibly as many as eleven at one point, though the number decreased as he proceeded.

In Kirtland, his collection made a huge splash. Joseph probably found more meaning in Egyptian matters than the average viewer of his generation. He believed the papyri put him in touch with the ancient patriarchs Abraham and Joseph. The Kirtland Saints paid \$2,400 for Chandler's collection of four mummies and various papyrus rolls, a high price in the mummy market but not out of sight. The market value of a mummy by 1833 was estimated at about \$450.<sup>36</sup>

As with the plates of the Book of Mormon, Joseph wanted the scrolls translated. In this he could expect little help from American universities. There were no Egyptian experts anywhere. For centuries, European intellectuals had speculated about Egyptian without making progress in translating the language. On the whole they were more interested in Egyptian as a mystery language than as a scientific study. The great seventeenth-century German polymath Athanasius

Kircher (1602–80) had speculated extensively on the hidden meanings of Egyptian, and the students of Kabbala such as Pico della Mirandola had seen possible clues in Egyptian hieroglyphs to the manipulation of magical powers. But Egyptian stood for mystery more than for historical knowledge. Egypt was the home of the esoteric.<sup>37</sup>

This may have contributed to the fascination of Egyptian for the brilliant young scholar Jean Francis Champollion, who began lecturing on Egyptian at Grenoble in 1816 and announced in 1822 that he had translated the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone. The stone which had been discovered in 1799 by a French officer was written in three parts: hieroglyphic Egyptian, demotic Egyptian, and Greek. Originally inscribed in the second century BCE, the top band of hieroglyphs was broken and incomplete but it carried the same information as the middle band of demotic Egyptian and the lowest band of Greek, making translation a possibility.<sup>38</sup>

One of Champollion's achievements was to overthrow common assumptions about the nature of Egyptian. Until his time, hieroglyphs were considered to be symbols. For centuries it had been believed that each of the little pictures stood for some material thing which symbolized something else. As William Stukeley, secretary to the Society of Antiquaries, put it in 1762: "The characters cut on Egyptian monuments, are purely symbolical. They are nothing [more] than hymns & invocations to the deity. . . . A feather so often appearing, signifies sublime. An eye is providence. . . . A boat, the orderly conduct of providence in the government of the world. A pomegranate imports fecundity from the multitude of its seeds."<sup>39</sup> Thus it was that "this nation of philosophers and religious visionaries codified their profoundest insights into the symbols on their obelisks and temples."<sup>40</sup>

In this light, hieroglyphics invited speculation. What could those tiny pictures mean? Stukeley believed "the just understanding of them was lost." Only the ancient Egyptian priests knew their



meaning.<sup>41</sup> But that did not stop inquirers such as Kircher from proposing deeper meanings. Visiting Rome in 1760, the Anglo-American painter Benjamin West said the most interesting object in the city was an Egyptian obelisk. “The hieroglyphs appeared to resemble so exactly the figures in the Wampum belts of the Indians that it occurred to him, if ever the mysteries of Egypt were to be interpreted, it might be by the aborigines of America.”<sup>42</sup>

Before he could make headway with the Rosetta Stone, Champollion had to overcome this speculative reading of Egyptian. His great breakthrough was to discover that many parts of the hieroglyphs did not represent things but sounds. Egyptian, in other words, was, like modern alphabets, partly phonetic. Originally writing was pictographic. A sign pictured an object. Over time the pictures came to represent sounds, as, say, a picture of a bee followed by a leaf could be read in English as “belief.” Eventually the pictorial value of the sign was erased completely, leaving only a mark that represented a sound. For example, “Aleph” in a Semitic language was the name for an ox. The pictured head of the ox gradually transmuted into an “A,” and the mark referred only to the sound with no reference to the ox or anything material. Champollion discovered that Egyptian was made up of phonetic symbols mixed with pictures or ideograms that represented ideas. The changes increased the precision of the language, but gone were the deeper metaphysical associations imagined by earlier scholars. In their place, particular sounds were attached to each sign yielding a word.<sup>43</sup>

News of Champollion’s triumph was conveyed to the American reading public through the scholars most closely in touch with antiquity, the classicists. Charles Anthon introduced scores of Egyptian entries into his revision of J. Lempriere’s *Classical Dictionary*. Edward Everett wrote about the bas-relief zodiac in the temple of Denderah in the 1823 issue of *The North American Review* and gave a more extensive account of Egyptian in an article on hieroglyphics

in 1831. Thrilled by Champollion's discovery, Everett dismissed the older symbolic interpretation entirely. The work of the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, Everett said, was "utterly baseless" and "laboriously absurd." He scorned the tendency to find biblical religion interwoven into Egyptian such as the claim that a psalm of David was buried in the zodiac of Denderah.<sup>44</sup>

But not everyone yielded entirely to Champollion's phonetic explanation of the hieroglyphs. The old symbolic interpretation lingered on. The Transcendentalists, and more particularly the Swedenborgian Sampson Reed, played up the parts of the writing that promised to yield metaphysical fruit. Reed picked up on Champollion's recognition of a certain class of signs called "anaglyphs" that were not true hieroglyphs but were symbolic pictures. These, Reed wished to believe, still carried the deeper mysteries of Egyptian wisdom that could be interpreted by the adept. Among these he included himself because of his understanding of the Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondences, which was the belief that material facts of nature corresponded to higher truths of the spirit. "Nature is the symbol of spirit," Emerson wrote in his seminal essay, "Nature"; "the World is emblematic." "The Poet," Emerson wrote, "shall use Nature as his hieroglyphic."<sup>45</sup> Reed and the Transcendentalists saw the interpretation of hieroglyphs as of a piece with the interpretation of nature. The surface meaning of both had to be transcended to discover the spiritual truths they secreted within themselves.

If we follow Samuel Brown's analysis, Joseph Smith and William W. Phelps stood with Emerson and Reed in the symbolic school of Egyptian interpretation. In the "Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar," prepared in conjunction with the Smith's translation of the Book of Abraham, each hieroglyph was matched to an English interpretation many lines long. One character, according to the emblematicists, contained multiple meanings, and it was not surprising that it took a paragraph to explore them.<sup>46</sup> Emerson and Reed would

have understood what the two Mormons were attempting, although they would have been appalled at the meanings they assigned. Long-form definitions of hieroglyphs made sense to the symbolists. Joseph actually followed the same approach in his use of Hebrew words to lead the Saints into deeper theological truths. *Elohim*, the plural name for God, became in his hands a theology; and *bara*, the Hebrew word for organize, became a theory of creation.

Occasionally Joseph Smith appeared to flaunt his knowledge of languages to impress his audiences with a pretended erudition. At least, he approved the flamboyant translations Phelps wrote into political documents over his name.<sup>47</sup> To a degree, these linguistic flourishes revealed Joseph's social insecurity. He knew he lacked education and polish and tried to compensate. But social aspiration did not govern his choice of languages for intensive study. Had he been motivated primarily by a desire to be respected socially, he would have begun with Latin and Greek. Because classicism was the central intellectual project of his time, he would have sought literacy in that arena first. But he chose instead to focus on Hebrew and Egyptian, serious but exotic languages. In concentrating here, he seems to have been driven by a quest for spiritual knowledge. The classics, and especially Greek, led to a higher beauty and heightened refinement, but not to religious mystery and elemental truth. Hebrew and Egyptian offered the spiritual wisdom Joseph hungered for. In selecting these two for particular attention, he revealed the deeper tendencies of his mind and spirit.

## Notes

1. Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1.
2. Carl J. Richard, *The Golden Age of the Classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the Antebellum United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5–6.

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3. Edmund Henry Barker, Thetford, England, to Charles Anthon, New York, July 9, 1827, Edmund Henry Barker Letters, 1827–1831, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library, New York City.
4. Edmund Henry Barker, Thetford, England, to Charles Anthon, New York, July 13, 1827, Barker Letters.
5. Edmund Henry Barker, Thetford, England, to Charles Anthon, New York, April 19, 1829, Barker Letters.
6. Edmund Henry Barker, Thetford, England, to Charles Anthon, New York, July 9, September 29, October 29, 1827, Barker Letters.
7. Richard, *Golden Age*, 15, 17.
8. The giant in the field was Friederich August Wolf, who sought to establish the authorship, meaning, and authenticity of familiar classics. Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 51.
9. Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 51, 89–90.
10. Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 52.
11. Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 89–91.
12. Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 57; Stanley B. Kimball, “The Anthon Transcript: People, Primary Sources, and Problems,” *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1970): 325–52.
13. Joseph Smith, journal, February 17, 1836, in Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2008), 186 (hereafter *JSP*, J1).
14. Joseph Smith, journal, February 17, 1836, in *JSP*, J1:186.
15. Joseph Smith, journal, November 20, 1835, in *JSP*, J1:107.
16. Samuel Brown, “The Translator and the Ghostwriter: Joseph Smith and William Phelps,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 39; Henry Caswall, *The City of the Mormons; or, Three Days at Nauvoo, in 1842* (London: J. G. & F. Rivington, 1842), 5, 19–21, 24, 28–29, 34–37, 43. Joseph also included the Greek and Latin words for “good” in his list of terms for

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- interpreting the word “Mormon”; see Joseph Smith, “To the Editor of the Times and Seasons,” *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1843, 194.
17. Richard, *Golden Age*, 10.
  18. Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 54, 62.
  19. Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 82–83.
  20. Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 113.
  21. John A. Wilson, *Signs & Wonders upon Pharaoh: A History of American Egyptology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 17–18.
  22. Michael Walton, “Professor Seixas, the Hebrew Bible, and the Book of Abraham,” *Sunstone* 6, no. 2 (March–April 1981): 41–43.
  23. Shalom Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue: Hebrew & the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 2, 23–24. The venerable Bede called Hebrew the *prima lingua*; see Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue*, 26.
  24. Theophilus Gale, *Court of the Gentiles* (London, n.p., 1672), in Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue*, 81.
  25. Samuel Brown, “Joseph (Smith) in Egypt: Babel, Hieroglyphs, and the Pure Language of Eden,” *Church History* 78, no. 1 (March 2009): 26–65.
  26. Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue*, 23–25, 29, 74–75; Robert H. Pfeiffer, “The Teaching of Hebrew in Colonial America,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series 45, no. 4 (April 1955): 370–71.
  27. Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue*, 144–46, 181; Pfeiffer, “Teaching of Hebrew,” 370.
  28. Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue*, 133.
  29. Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue*, 177–78, 182.
  30. Pfeiffer, “Teaching of Hebrew,” 369.
  31. Goldman, *God’s Sacred Tongue*, 176, 189–90.
  32. See John D. Ray, *Wonders of the World: Rosetta Stone and the Rebirth of Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).
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  35. Wolfe, *Mummies*, 26–28, 30, 32–33, 36.

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37. Ray, *Wonders*, 18.
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39. Quoted in Wilson, *Signs & Wonders*, 11.
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