

12-7-2011

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Fronk, Alexander, "Egypt and Mormonism: Oriental Traits of the Latter-Day Saints" (2011). *Arrington Student Writing Award Winners*. Paper 7.

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Egypt and Mormonism: Oriental Traits of the Latter-Day Saints

Introduction

In his lecture, Dr. Francaviglia presents a fascinating framework in which to understand American history and culture, as well as Mormons specifically. Orientalism was defined for the lecture as the assimilation or imitation of that which is oriental in religious or philosophical thought, or in art. Through various mediums, including architectural examples, quotes from Mormons and their detractors, and travel literature, Dr. Francaviglia demonstrates that not only Mormons were compared to Oriental peoples and assigned Oriental traits, but they also actively attributed such traits to themselves; they assumed an Oriental identity. By understanding how Mormons were Orientalized by others and themselves, he suggests that we can better understand the Mormon experience.

In brief, the following was addressed in the lecture: Orientalism defined, Orientalism in history, particularly American history, how Mormons were Orientalized by others, and Orientalized themselves and their surroundings (including the belief that Native Americans come from the Holy Land), and “real” and attributed connections or similarities between Mormons and various Eastern peoples, including ancient Egypt, Muslims, and ancient Israelites. A major theme running throughout was that the West’s ambivalent attitude toward the Orient enables Orientalism to serve at least three purposes: to differentiate, to venerate, or to denigrate. Detractors of the Mormons have compared them unfavorably to Oriental peoples and traits that were held in disregard, others Orientalized the Mormons to better understand and differentiate them from other groups, and Mormons created an identity for themselves that connected them and their surroundings to that which was revered and considered wise and sacred from the East.

A very interesting aspect of the Mormons’ Orientalizing behaviors is their affinity with Egypt, a subject that was touched on very lightly in the lecture. According to Dr. Francaviglia, Egypt is associated with both negative and positive characteristics, as is the Orient in general (e.g., servitude and oppression, as well as wisdom and accomplishment). In the official canon of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the golden plates from which the Book of Mormon was allegedly translated were inscribed with “reformed Egyptian” (see Mormon 9:32 and 1 Nephi 1:2 in the Book of Mormon), and the Book of Abraham is purportedly translated from an Egyptian papyrus (Smith, 1978, pp. 236, 248-251)¹. Dr. Francaviglia also briefly mentioned in the lecture that the name Deseret, taken from the Book of Mormon, supposedly denoting the honeybee, could be related to the Egyptian word Deshret. This is the desert land surrounding Egypt, the Red Land (David, 2002, pp. 12-13, 46, 49; Mercantante, 1978, p. 35). Lower Egypt, also called the Red Land, is symbolized by the honeybee (David, 2002, p. 49), and, as was explained in the lecture, the crown itself bears a stylized tongue of the bee.

The similarities and connections between Mormonism and Ancient Egypt extend beyond that which was covered in the lecture. Surprisingly, in many respects, there are a seemingly large number of overlapping characteristics between the two religions. There are far more dissimilarities than similarities; the theologies are fundamentally and substantially different, but those connections which can be demonstrated, whether they are directly linked or coincidental, attest to the Orientalized nature of the Mormons and their theology.

Osiris/Horus, the Pharaoh, and Christ

¹ I will be using American Psychological Association formatting guidelines for my references and citations; I hope this won’t be a problem.

Osiris

The Mormons' concept of Christ can be summarized as follows (this information can be found in the 2009 *Gospel Principles* manual of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, pages 13-16): Christ, or Jehovah, was chosen to be Savior for all God's children, to be sacrificed voluntarily to provide the means for redemption from sin. Lucifer or Satan (one of the spirit offspring of Heavenly Father and thus his brother) opposed the plan and sought the throne of God. There was a war and Lucifer and his followers were defeated and cast out. Later (pages 59 through 66 of the same manual), we find that Christ+ suffers and is killed to atone for the sins of man, but rises triumphant as a resurrected being of infinite power.

Though the Egyptian notions of Osiris/Horus the Elder and his son Horus are markedly different from the Mormon concept of Christ, the similarities are striking. After it caught hold, the cult of Osiris was widespread and popular for all classes of Egyptians (David, 2002, p.158; Sauneron, 1957/2000, p. 173). Unfortunately, there is only one full account of the Osiris myth still extant, that of Plutarch (David, 2002, p. 156; Mercantante, 1978, pp. 112-115), though bits are found in various pieces, and references to the myth are found in many places, such as the Pyramid Texts (Meeks & Favard-Meeks, 1996, pp. 27-28). In all these accounts, there are some general trends that are of interest. Osiris had taken the solar deity Re's throne. His brother, Set, wishing to reign instead, slays Osiris. Osiris becomes a relatively everlasting, undying king in the Duat, and though seemingly defeated, becomes in a sense the greatest of the gods, a great and living god (Meeks & Favard-Meeks, 1996, p. 31). His son, Horus, posthumously conceived, continues the battle and drives out Set in a series of contentions.

Though there are marked differences (for example, there is no equivalent to Isis, a vital character in the Osiris myth, connected with the Mormon belief in Christ), there are some interesting shared themes: one brother trying to usurp his brother's power, the shameful death of one by another (the executioners of Christ are generally considered influenced by Satan), and the triumphant rise of the dead brother to glory and power. The comparison becomes even more interesting when we realize that Christ or Jehovah is often given the title "Lord of Hosts" ("Lord of Armies") in Mormon canon (for example, Doctrine & Covenants 64:24) and the Elder Horus (equivalent to Osiris in the Pyramid Texts) is given the title of "leader of the troops" of the sky-goddess (Meeks & Favard-Meeks, 1996, p. 40). Of even greater interest is that every one that wished to have the same good fortune in the afterlife as Osiris had to be literally called by his name (David, 2002, 158-159); in the papyrus of Ani as translated by Budge, one can hardly turn a page without running into the phrase "the Osiris Ani" (1895/1960). Compare this to Mosiah 6:8-9 in the Book of Mormon, where we find the exhortation to "take upon you the name of Christ," for, apparently, at the judgment, the righteous man shall be "called by the name of Christ." This belief in the power of the name of Christ is also evident in the sacrament ritual, in which devout believers covenant weekly to "take upon them" the name of Christ. Though they are fundamentally different (for one thing, Christ is undefeatable; his death was his own choice, while Osiris was a very unwilling participant) the parallels are fascinating.

Pharaoh

The pharaoh, in a way alien to our society, was both political sovereign and ecclesiastical head. In the theocracy that was ancient Egypt, he was considered a mediator between the gods and man (Meeks & Favard-Meeks, 1996, p. 122). The divine son of mortal woman (the previous pharaoh's wife) and a god (Meeks & Favard-Meeks, 1996, p. 21), he was considered the priest for the entire land. All those that functioned as priests were merely representatives of him (David, 2002, p. 198; Shafer, 1997, p. 22-23). All temple rituals were done in the name of the pharaoh.

Christ in Mormon theology is unique in parentage: he is the only individual born by mortal woman sired by God, as opposed to the long line of pharaohs in Egyptian religion, all or most of which were supposedly of divine parentage. He is also a mediator, the “great Mediator” (2 Nephi 2:28), interceding on his people’s behalf with God. Also, Christ is considered the head of the priesthood of God (Doctrine and Covenants 76:57, 107:1-4), which is delegated to men on earth to represent him. Emphasizing the representative nature of the priesthood as well as the intercessory power of Christ, all ordinances are done “in the name of Jesus Christ.” The parallels do not end there: there is also deeply held belief that Christ will “reign personally on the earth” according the tenth article of faith penned by Joseph Smith (Smith, 1842/1978). Even a cursory glance at early Mormon history will reveal that the relationship of secular and ecclesiastical authority is more Egyptian in its unity than the contemporary model of separation. As a being of half-mortal, half-divine parentage, as an intermediary between his people and the divine, as the head of a delegated priesthood that is performed in his name, and as a secular/ecclesiastical leader, the figure of the pharaoh is remarkably similar to that of the Mormon concept of Christ.

The Temple

The temples of the Egyptians are usually divided into different types, “mortuary” and “divine” being the principle types, though this can lead to mistaken oversimplification of the temple functions (Shaffer, 1997, pp. 2-3). Mortuary temples were generally dedicated to ensuring the well-being of a deceased pharaoh, while the divine temples were dedicated to the worship of a god. The temples were sacred places where the world of the living, the dead, and the gods met (Shaffer, 1997, p. 8). At least in the Ptolemaic period, temple ritual included secret rites of induction and initiation which included presentation, purification rites/ceremonial washing (e.g. an anointing of the hands) and eventually being led to stand before the god of the temple (Sauneron, 1957/2000, pp. 47-50), as well being dressed in a new garment of linen. White sandals were also a part of temple raiment (Sauneron, 1957/2000, p.25). The temple was composed of three areas of increasing sacredness (Shaffer, 1997, pp.5-6). The open courtyard came first and was open to the general populace. Next came an inner, enclosed area of increasing sacredness through which the pharaoh or his representatives, the priests, could pass after purification, following a path that represented the journey of the sun through the Duat and the creation of order from chaos that brought the world into being. The most sacred room, into which only the pharaoh or his representatives could go, contained the god. According to the Egyptians, it was not just a figure; the statue was the god, and when you stood in its presence, you stood in the presence of the god (Shaffer, 1997, pp.5-6).

The holy room where the god dwelt was the scene of a daily ritual involving the pharaoh or his special representative. This ritual involved (but was not limited to) the unveiling of the face of the god, prostrating oneself in awe, purification, dressing and washing the god, anointing the idol with oils, ceremonial feeding, and the eventual exit, the pharaoh sweeping away all his footprints (Shaffer, 1997, pp. 22-23).

A thorough comparison of the Mormon concept of temple with that of the Egyptians is not possible, the rituals of both being sacredly secret². Suffice to say, the temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also act as a link between the world of the living, the dead, and the divine, serving as a combination of mortuary and divine temple. Here, too, rites are performed to ensure the well-being of deceased individuals, white clothing is worn, and the temple is considered the house of God, filled with his presence. Purification is a key component

² An entire book has been written on the subject: Hugh Nibley’s *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*. I cannot remember much of it, being an ignorant high school student when I read it. It has been eight years since I have seen a copy; it seems to be fairly rare.

(e.g., baptisms for the dead). One must be initiated to enter the most holy areas, and there are areas of increasing holiness (anyone can enter the grounds, worthy youth can enter the baptistery and cafeteria, and certain other areas are restricted to those who have been deemed mature and worthy enough to enter).

Souls

Premortal Life

According to E. A. Wallis Budge, in the papyrus of Ani (a New Kingdom Book of the Dead for a scribe by that name), we read the following: “I am Shu of divine company. My soul is God, my soul is eternity” (1960, p. 68³). Budge explains that, by identifying himself with Shu, Ani “makes the period of his existence coeval with that of Temu-Ra and his company, i.e. he existed before Osiris and the other gods of his company” (1960, p. 68).

This is of especial interest to a Mormon, the belief in a premortal existence being a crucial part of Mormon doctrine (cf. Abraham 3:22-23). It seems to be fairly unique to Mormons among Christians, although by no means limited to them (for example, Aeneas viewing future leaders of Rome in Elysium; Crabb & Small, 1951, p. 196).

The Body

Beliefs about the soul do not cease to meet there. Again according to Budge, there is also corruptible body, what he calls the khat (*ḥ3wt*). The word seems to imply something that will decay (Budge, 1960, Pallis, 2011); the sign of a pustule at the end certainly suggests corruptibility. This is not unique to Egyptians or Mormons; the body’s ability to stop moving and begin rotting is fairly apparent. However, among the Egyptians, it was believed that this body gave rise to the *s*□□ (Budge, 1960), a body of considerably greater permanence, a concept borne out by the sign of the seal on a necklace with which it is often spelled. This is also the case with Mormons (Young, 1954, p.373). However, a key difference is that Mormons believe that the body can rise again even after rotting away, whereas the Egyptians took great pains to preserve it for this and other purposes.

Afterlife

Journey

There are many similarities between Egyptian and Mormon views of the afterlife, but for lack of space I will content myself with a very brief treatment of both views. The Egyptians believed the road to Osiris was a dangerous and tortuous one. Among other things, there were many sentinels that the Osiris of an individual must pass, gods that guarded the way (Budge, 1895/1960, p.37). To get past them, one had to know their names⁴ and a significant part of the Book of the Dead was aimed at making sure that the soul was enabled to get past (Budge, 1895/1960, pp. 402-418; this is the actual transcript and translation from the papyrus of Ani and several others in which names and instructions are revealed). Compare this to certain statements of Mormon prophet Brigham

³ I hunted in his translation for the spot where he got this quote, but could not find it. However, I was able to squeeze out enough of a translation from the hieroglyphics provided with my meager knowledge of ancient Egyptian and the aid of *How to Read Egyptian Hieroglyphics* (Collier & Manley, 1998) to believe that the translation is correct, wherever he got the quote from; *ink šw* means ‘I am Shu,’ at any rate.

⁴ These were not the only names the dead had to remember; their own name, or *rn*, was vital; there was an entire spell devoted to its safekeeping (Budge, 1895/1960, pp.436-437).

Young (1954, p. 395-396) stating that it is necessary to gain “every word, sign and token” in order to “enter fully into the joy of your Lord,” and of the necessity of passing “all the sentinels leading into the celestial kingdom and into the presence of God.

Judgment and reward

Besides getting past all the potentially unfriendly gods and dangerous monsters, the dead must be judged in the well-known Weighing of the Heart ceremony (Budge, 1895/1960, pp. 371-375; David, 2002, p.158). The dead needed to testify of his innocence in the Negative Confession (Budge, 1985/1960, 576-584; David, 2002, pp.158, 245, 262). If judged righteous, he was declared *m3w*-*rw* (Collier & Manley, 1998, p. 13; David, 2002, p.158), usually translated as “justified,” but literally meaning “true of voice,” his or her words are true or in line with *ma’at*, and he or she is therefore as innocent as professed.

Once the Osiris of a person passes all obstacles, he or she becomes one of the gods, accepted by them as one of their own, inherits a throne, is dressed in white linen and sandals, partakes of the tree of life, and becomes as everlasting as anything can be in Egyptian theology (Budge, 1985/1960, pp. 66-67, 85-92, 362-363, 541-544). It is a very physical heaven (including never-failing beer and bread), a continuation of this life, but more perfect.

The concept of Judgment Day is so pervasive in Mormon thought that a comprehensive list of references would be difficult. Alma 5:15-25 is fairly representative, however, and we learn that it involves being brought before God to be judged of all deeds done in mortality, and that the heart is also measured for personal righteousness. We find in verse twenty-four that the righteous will associate with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose garments are “pure and white.” Interestingly, these three are described as being “not angels but are gods” in Doctrine and Covenants 132:37, a section which promises in verses nineteen and twenty that those that keep certain covenants will have the ability to arise in the first or second resurrection, be declared clean of innocent blood (a vital part of the Negative Confession), and pass by all the angels and gods to become everlasting gods themselves. It would seem that the concept of Mormon heaven is more similar to that of the Egyptians than to any contemporary Christians.

Conclusion

There is much more that could be said about each of these items, and there are many more comparisons and connections that could be made (e.g., key-words, plurality of gods in the creation, creation of order from a chaotic primeval ocean, the role of words and intelligence in the beginning, organization of the cosmos) but space is limited for this essay. Hopefully the main purpose of this essay has been demonstrated: Mormons, through their theology, have assimilated many beliefs and characteristics that are Egyptian in nature, thus strengthening again Dr. Francaviglia’s premise that Mormons have been Orientalized, in this case subscribing to some decidedly Oriental, specifically Egyptian, beliefs. If the evidence presented is not convincing of actual similarities, then it at any rate still demonstrates Dr. Francaviglia’s assertion that Mormons have been and are assigned Oriental characteristics. It would seem that the lens of Orientalism is indeed valuable for understanding the Mormon experience.

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