

By-Paths of Bible Knowledge

I

CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE

A HISTORY OF THE LONDON OBELISK

WITH AN

EXPOSITION OF THE HIEROGLYPHICS

BY THE

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AUTHORIZED LECTURER TO THE PALESTINE EXPLORATION FUND.

"The Land of Egypt is before thee."—*Gen.* xlvii. 6.

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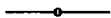
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[The illustrations of the obelisk at Constantinople, and of Cleopatra's Needle on the Embankment, are taken, by the kind permission of Sir Erasmus Wilson, from his work, "The Egypt of the Past."]

INTRODUCTION.

THE London Obelisk, as the monument standing on the Thames Embankment is now called, is by far the largest quarried stone in England ; and the mysterious-looking characters covering its four faces were carved by workmen who were contemporaries of Moses and the Israelites during the time of the Egyptian Bondage. It was set up before the great temple of the sun at Heliopolis about 1450 B.C., by Thothmes III., who also caused to be carved the central columns of hieroglyphs on its four sides. The eight lateral columns were carved by Rameses II. two centuries afterwards. These two monarchs were the two mightiest of the kings of ancient Egypt.

In 1877 the author passed through the land of Egypt, and became much interested during the progress of the journey in the study of the hieroglyphs covering tombs, temples, and obelisks. He was assisted in the pursuit of Egyptology by examining the excellent collections of Egyptian antiquities in the Boolak Museum at Cairo, the Louvre at Paris, and the British Museum. He feels much indebted to Dr. Samuel Birch, the leading English Egyptologist, for his kind assistance in rendering some obscure passages on the Obelisk.

This little volume contains a *verbatim* translation into English, and an exposition, of the hieroglyphic inscriptions cut by Thothmes III. on the Obelisk, and an exposition of those inscribed by Rameses II. Dr. Samuel Birch, the late W. R. Cooper, and other Egyptologists, have translated the inscription in general terms, but no attempt was made by these learned men to show the value of each hieroglyph; so that the student could no more hope to gain from these general translations a knowledge of Egyptology, than he could hope to gain a knowledge of the Greek language by reading the English New Testament.

In the march of civilisation, Egypt took the lead of all the nations of the earth. The Nile Valley is a vast museum of Egyptian antiquities, and in this sunny vale search must be made for the germs of classical art.

The London Obelisk is interesting to the architect as a specimen of the masonry of a people accounted as the great builders of the Ancient World. It is interesting to the antiquary as setting forth the workmanship of artists who lived in the dim twilight of antiquity. It is interesting to the Christian because this same venerable monument was known to Moses and the Children of Israel during their sojourn in the land of Goshen.

The inscription is not of great h'istorical value, but the hieroglyphs are valuable in setting forth the earliest stages of written language, while their expressive symbolism enables us to interpret the moral and religious thoughts of men who lived in the infancy of the world.

Egypt is a country of surpassing interest to the Biblical student. From the early days of patriarchal history down to the discovery in 1883 of the site of Pithom, a city founded by Rameses II., Egyptian and Israelitish and Christian history have touched at many points. Abraham visited the Nile Valley; Joseph, the slave, became lord of the whole country; God's people suffered there from cruel bondage, but the Lord so delivered them that "Egypt was glad at their departing;" the rulers of Egypt once and again ravaged Palestine, and laid Jerusalem under tribute. When, in the fulness of time, our Saviour appeared to redeem the world by the sacrifice of Himself, He was carried as a little child into Egypt, and there many of His earliest and most vivid impressions were received. Thus, from the time of Abraham, the father of the faithful, to the advent of Jesus, the Lord and Saviour of all, Egypt is associated with the history of human redemption.

And although the Obelisk which forms the subject of this volume tells us in its inscriptions nothing about Abraham, Joseph, or Moses, yet it serves among other important ends one of great interest. It seems to bring us into very direct relationship with these men who lived so many generations ago. The eyes of Moses must have rested many times upon this ancient monument, old even when first he looked upon it, and read its story of past greatness; the toiling, suffering Israelites looked upon it, and we seem to come into a closer fellowship with them as we realize this fact.

The recent wonderful discovery of mummies and Egyptian antiquities, of which an account is given in this volume, and the excavations now being carried on at Pithom and Zoan, are exciting much fresh interest in Egyptian research.

This little volume will have served its end if it interests the reader in the historical associations of the monument, which he can visit, if he cares to do so, and by its aid read for himself what it has to tell us of the men and deeds of a long-distant past.

It also seeks to stimulate wider interest and research into all that the monuments of Egypt can tell us in confirmation of the historical parts of the Bible, and of the history of that wondrous country which is prominent in the forefront of both Old and New Testaments, from the day when "Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there," until the day when Joseph "arose and took the young Child and His mother by night, and departed into Egypt: and was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called My Son."



CLEOPATRA'S NEEDLE.



CHAPTER I.

THE RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS.

STANDING some time ago on the top of the great pyramid, the present writer gazed with wonder at the wide prospect around. Above Cairo the Nile Valley is hemmed in on both sides by limestone ridges, which form barriers between the fertile fields and the barren wastes on either side ; and on the limestone ridge by the edge of the great western desert stand the pyramids of Egypt. Looking forth from the summit of the pyramid of Cheops eastwards, the Nile Valley was spread out like a panorama. The distant horizon was bounded by the Mokattam hills, and near to them rose the lofty minarets and mosques of Grand Cairo.

The green valley presented a pleasing picture of richness and industry. Palms, vines, and sycamores beautified the fertile fields ; sowers, reapers, builders, hewers of wood and drawers of water plied their busy labours, while long lines of camels, donkeys, and oxen moved to and fro, laden with the rich products of the country. The hum

of labour, the lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, the song of women, and the merry laughter of children, spoke of peace and plenty.

Looking towards the west how changed was the scene ! The eye rested only on the barren sands of the vast desert, the great land of a silence unbroken by the sound of man or beast. Neither animal nor vegetable life exists there, and the solitude of desolation reigns for ever supreme ; so that while the bountiful fields speak of activity and life, the boundless waste is a fitting emblem of rest and death.

It is manifest that this striking contrast exercised a strong influence upon the minds of the ancient Egyptians. To the edge of the silent desert they carried their dead for burial, and on the rocky platform that forms the margin of the sandy waste they reared those vast tombs known as the pyramids. The very configuration of Egypt preached a never-ending sermon, which intensified the moral feelings of the people, and tended to make the ancient Egyptians a religious nation.

The ancient Egyptians were a very religious people. The fundamental doctrine of their religion was the unity of deity, but this unity was never represented by any outward figure. The attributes of this being were personified and represented under positive forms. To all those not initiated into the mysteries of religion, the outward figures came to be regarded as distinct gods ; and thus, in process of time, the doctrine of divine unity developed into a system of idolatry. Each spiritual

attribute in course of time was represented by some natural object, and in this way nature worship became a marked characteristic of their mythology.

The sun, the most glorious object of the universe, became the central object of worship, and occupies a conspicuous position in their religious system. The various aspects of the sun as it pursued its course across the sky became so many solar deities. Horus was the youthful sun seen in the eastern horizon. He is usually represented as holding in one hand the stylus or iron pen, and in the other, either a notched stick or a tablet. In the hall of judgment, Thoth was said to stand by the dreadful balance where souls were weighed against truth. Thoth, with his iron pen, records on his tablet the result of the weighing in the case of each soul, and whether or not, when weighed in the balance, it is found wanting. According to mythology, Thoth was the child of Kneph, the ram-headed god of Thebes.

Ra or Phra was the mid-day sun ; Osiris the declining sun ; Tum or Atum the setting sun ; and Amun the sun after it had sunk below the horizon. Ptah, a god of the first order, worshipped with great magnificence at Memphis, represented the vivifying power of the sun's rays : hence Ptah is spoken of as the creative principle, and creator of all living things. Gom, Moui, and Khons, were the sons of the sun-god, and carried messages to mankind. In these we notice the rays personified. Pasht, literally a lioness, the goddess with the lioness head, was the female personification of the sun's rays.

The moon also as well as the sun was worshipped, and lunar deities received divine adoration as well as solar deities.

Thoth, the reputed inventor of hieroglyphs and the recorder of human actions, was a human deity, and represented both the light moon and the dark moon. He is also called Har and Haremakhu—the Harmachis of Greek writers—and is the personification of the vigorous young sun, the conqueror of night, who each



THOTH.

morning rose triumphant from the realms of darkness. He was the son of Isis and Osiris, and is the avenger of his father. Horus appears piercing with his spear the monster Seth or Typho, the malignant principle of darkness who had swallowed up the setting sun. The parable of the sun rising was designed to teach the great religious

lesson of the final triumph of spiritual light over darkness, and the ultimate victory of life over death. Horus is represented at the coronation of kings, and, together with Seth, places the double crown upon the royal head, saying: "Put this cap upon your head, like your father Amen-Ra." Princes are distinguished by a lock of hair hanging from the side of the head, which lock is emblematic of a son. This lock was worn in imitation of Horus, who, from his strong filial affection, was a model son for princes, and a pattern of royal virtue. The sphinx is thought to be a type of Horus, and the obelisks also seem to have been dedicated, for the most part, to the rising sun.

There were also sky divinities, and these were all feminine. Nu was the blue mid-day sky, while Neit was the dark sky of night. Hathor or Athor, the "Queen of Love," the Egyptian Venus, represented the evening sky.

There were other deities and objects of worship not so easily classified. Hapi was the personification of the river Nile. Anubis, the jackal-headed deity, was the friend and guardian of the souls of good men. Thmei or Ma, the goddess of truth, introduced departed souls into the hall of judgment.

Amenti, the great western desert, in course of time was applied to the unknown world beyond the desert. Through the wilderness of Amenti departed spirits had to pass on their way to the judgment hall. In this desert were four evil spirits, enemies of the human soul,

who endeavoured to delude the journeying spirits by drawing them aside from the way that led to the abode of the gods. On many papyri, and on the walls of tombs, scenes of the final judgment are frequently depicted. Horus is seen conducting the departed spirits to the regions of Amenti ; a monstrous dog, resembling Cerberus of classic fable, is guardian of the judgment hall. Near to the gates stand the dreadful scales of justice. On one side of the scales stands Thoth, the recorder of human actions, with a tablet in his hand, ready to make a record of the sentence passed on each soul. Anubis is the director of the weights ; in one scale he places the heart of the deceased, and in the other a figure of the goddess of truth. If on being weighed the heart is found wanting, then Osiris, the judge of the dead, lowers his sceptre in token of condemnation, and pronounces judgment against the soul, condemned to return to earth under the form of a pig. Whereupon the soul is placed in a boat and conveyed through Amenti under charge of two monkeys. If the deeds done in the flesh entitle the soul to enter the mansions of the blest, then Horus, taking the tablet from Thoth, introduces the good spirit into the presence of Osiris, who, with crook and flagellum in his hands, and attended by his sister Isis, with overspreading wings, sits on a throne rising from the midst of the waters. The approved soul is then admitted to the mansions of the blest.

To this belief in a future life, the custom among the

Egyptians of embalming the dead was due. Each man as he died hoped to be among those who, after living for three thousand years with Osiris, would return to earth and re-enter their old bodies. So they took steps to ensure the preservation of the body against the ravages of time, and entombed them in massive sarcophagi and in splendid sepulchres. So well did they ensure this end that when, a few months ago, human eyes looked upon the face of Thothmes III., more than three thousand years after his body had been embalmed, it was only the sudden crumbling away of the form on exposure to the air, that recalled to the remembrance of the onlookers the many ages that had passed since men last saw that face.

It is with the worship of the sun that the obelisk now on the Embankment is associated, as it stood for many ages before one of the great temples at Heliopolis, the Biblical On.

Impressive as this ancient Egyptian religious life was, it cannot be compared for a moment, judged even on the earthly standard of its moral power, to the monotheism and the religious life afterwards revealed to the Hebrews, when emancipated from Egyptian bondage. The religion first made known through God's intercourse with the Patriarchs, continued by Moses and the Prophets, and culminating in the incarnation and death of Christ the Lord, lacks much of the outward splendour and magnificence of the Egyptian religion, but satisfies infinitely better the hearts of weary sinful men.

The Egyptian worship and religious life testify to a constant degradation in the popular idea of the gods and in the moral life of their worshippers. The worship and religious life of which the God of the Hebrews is the centre, tends ever more and more to lead men in that "path of the just, which is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."* Now in Christ Jesus those that once "were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ."† "The times of ignorance" are now past, and God "commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as He hath appointed a day in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained."‡

* Prov. iv. 18.

† Eph. ii. 13.

‡ Acts xvii. 30, 31.

