

## Birmingham Egyptology Journal

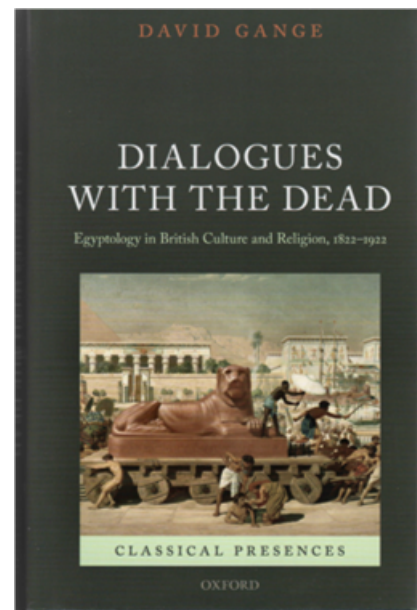
Review by Steven R. W. Gregory

D. Gange. *Dialogues with the Dead: Egyptology in British Culture and Religion 1822-1922*. Oxford University Press: Oxford. 2013. ISBN 9780199653102. £79.00. ix + 357 pages.

The reviewed title is one of the ‘Classical Presences’ series, published by the Oxford University Press, in which scholars aim to examine the ‘use, and abuse’ of past texts, images, and material culture in as much as such matter has been appropriated to authenticate the present [p. ii]. The perceived use of Egyptology in the support of recent thinking pertinent to various aspects of Western culture, in relation to features as wide ranging as the understanding of the nature of human origins and the plots of fictional literature, is outlined on the back cover.

Such practices are, I suspect, particularly as they are manifest in the sphere of popular entertainment, apparent to all involved in Egyptological discourse. It is difficult for the Egyptologist to avoid engagement at some level with the use, or perhaps misuse, of ancient Egyptian material in aspects of fictional narrative from, for example, the film and television series *Stargate* and the plots of Wilbur Smith – in such novels as *Warlock* and *River God*<sup>1</sup> – to the series of novels by Christian Jacques: a number of which might be identified with well-known ancient texts.<sup>2</sup> However, it becomes clear in the first pages of the introduction that the purpose of the reviewed work is not merely to inform a wider and perhaps more general audience of the manner in which the past is interpreted in such a way as to promote, embellish, or dramatise fictional narrative; it rather addresses a matter of deeper concern for those engaged in the study of ancient Egypt: the manner in which earlier scholars within the discipline itself have often distorted presentation of the studied culture in furtherance of their own beliefs. It is the revelation of both the extent and intent of such distortion, particularly as it relates to religious matters, which the more Egyptologically-minded reader may find informative.

It is clear to all, from the earliest engagement with Egyptological study, that present scholarly discourse is embedded with religious terminology, so much so that one might be tempted to believe that the ancient Egyptian culture in some way resembled, or at least shared some common ground with, the Christian Church. Much of the surviving monumental architecture is identified as having



<sup>1</sup> For the range of Smith’s titles with specific Egyptian themes see: <http://www.wilbursmithbooks.com/books/egyptian> (last accessed 28th March 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The range of novels by Jacques can be found at: <http://christianjacq.co.uk> (last accessed 28th March 2015).

had some religious function, and many officials of state are afforded sacerdotal titles. Such treatment of the studied culture is, as I have noted elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> somewhat at odds with the surviving evidence. This in itself suggests some degree of bias in earlier discussions of the material in question, a point given some consideration by Gange [pp. 1-3]. In his introductory remarks he refers to discoveries in the field of Egyptology which, early in the Nineteenth Century, had been expected by some scholars to undermine notions of historical truth in biblical accounts thereby helping to reveal the nature of the Bible ‘as the product of human authors who employed mythological means to impose order on the convoluted reality of the Hebrew “national past”’ [p. 3]. Nonetheless, by the end of that century, contrary to such expectations Egyptology had become a powerful tool in the promotion of Christian beliefs, so much so that ‘the family of the Archbishop of Canterbury named their cat Ra’ [p. 3] – the churchman himself having a statue of Horus on his desk [p. 184].

In this social climate some Egyptologists came to see their role as that of shoring up ‘public faith in the Bible’ [p. 5], and the Bible ‘provided the language and analogies through which Egyptologists communicated with their public’ [p. 9] – a trait which, in many respects, remains true to the present day. Perhaps the most significant point relating to the early developments which shaped Egyptology as a subject for study is that almost all scholars of the period, across the range of relevant disciplines, ‘were informed by a conviction of the profound truth of the biblical narrative’ [p. 25]. That such was the case is highlighted by the stated purpose of the Egypt Exploration Fund (now the Egypt Exploration Society) which, at its inception, was to reinforce the validity of the Christian Bible [p. 41].<sup>4</sup> Gange ends his introduction by assessing the role of historical scholarship within the rapidly changing societal structures which occurred in the wake of the industrial revolution, here with emphasis on the role of ancient Egyptian studies in discourse regarding the antiquity of the human race.

Having highlighted the manner in which groups or individuals, practitioners within the field of Egyptological study, have interpreted material from the ancient past to the advancement of their own ideological or philosophical perspectives, the author’s stated aim is to discover why Egyptologists acted in the observed manner, an aim which itself implies that this book will be of benefit to present students of ancient Egypt, at all levels, in assessing the credibility of the subject’s historiography. And, in the following chapters, placing scholarly literature in the societal contexts of the period, Gange indeed disentangles the complexities of theological and scientific discourse during his period of interest with some intellectual dexterity.

Chapter 1 presents a summary of the reception of ancient Egypt in the decades following reports of the translation of hieroglyphs by Champollion and Young in 1822 – claims received with little enthusiasm, or even belief, for some years. At this time, when many of those engaged in Egyptological discourse were themselves theologians and/or politicians, Egypt’s ancient history was used mainly in support of religious orthodoxy. Preachers of the fire and brimstone persuasion focussed public attention upon the apparent desolation of Egypt’s ancient monuments as an example of the apocalyptic retribution to be wrought by divine wrath upon a decadent society. The message, it seems, was that just as the god of the Bible had triumphed over Egypt so he would treat any who strayed from the ideals of Christianity. For the most part, it appears that it was not so much a question as to whether evidence from ancient Egypt did or did not support biblical traditions, but as to which school of religious thought could best use Egyptological sources to advantage in promoting their particular interpretation of the Bible. Such themes were echoed in artistic and literary works and also reflected in popular fiction and entertainments throughout Britain [p. 63]. However, there were those who adopted a more secular approach, and this chapter gives some attention to the work of John Gardner Wilkinson whose contribution to Egyptological discourse in the first half of the Nineteenth Century was notable both for his use of tomb art as a source of

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<sup>3</sup> S. R. W. Gregory, *Herihor in art and iconography: kingship and the gods in the ritual landscape of Late New Kingdom Thebes*, 100-136 (Golden House Publications: London, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> See also, for example, T. W. Davis, *Shifting sands: the rise and fall of Biblical archaeology* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004).

information regarding the daily life of the ancient Egyptians and for his minimal discussion of religion – whether Egyptian, Muslim, or Christian – in which respect he appeared to remain remarkably neutral [p. 88].

Broadly speaking, Chapter 2 relates to the third quarter of the Nineteenth Century when additional aspects of theological debate arose from Darwinism and notions of ‘scientific naturalism’ [p. 126]. An early thread demonstrates the continuing religiosity of Egyptology at this point in recounting the quandary of Ruskin [p. 121], a respected figure of the Victorian age, in his attempts to reconcile spiritual matters with evidence from the ancient world. His Egyptological skills were somewhat limited, his pronouncements on the subject often contradictory, yet nonetheless, with ‘disproportionate authority’, he urged his audience to ‘favour the biblical and classical associations of Egypt ... rather than its histories or chronologies’ [p. 122]. Attention is also given to such notable founding figures in the Egyptological discipline as Amelia Edwards, Édouard Naville, and Flinders Petrie, whose activities at this time were also committed to the support of religious orthodoxy [p. 127].

A further, perhaps equally dubious aspect of Egyptology, is also considered: that of pyramid metrology. This phenomenon, which became most prevalent in the 1870s [p. 133], is introduced with reference to the works of Charles Piazzi Smyth and his notions relating to the divine standards of measurement encoded within the dimensions of ‘the Great Pyramid’ – notions once again given some biblical gloss [pp. 131-2]. The chapter closes with consideration of the effects of Schliemann’s work on Hissarlik Troy – which came to be viewed by both Assyriologists and Egyptologists as ‘a turning point towards the empowerment of their disciplines’ [p. 150] – the support for which, by a British audience, was influential in the future funding of archaeological exploration in Egypt.

Chapter 3 describes ancient historical influences at the *fin de siècle* when those influences were perhaps not so immediate in political circles as had previously been the case, but were perhaps stronger in other areas of society: in music, art, and architecture. In this period some figures from ancient Egypt – the examples of Ramesses II and Akhenaten are given [p. 153] – gained something akin to celebrity status, while Egyptology itself continued to maintain close links with biblical study to the extent that some commentators felt that a knowledge of ancient Egypt was essential to the complete understanding of Christianity [p. 155]. The notion that this period saw Egyptology move away from the traditions of biblical archaeology – notions often expressed in more recent Egyptological historiographies – are challenged. Gange, with focus on the early activities of the Egypt Exploration Fund and its excavators, Naville and Petrie, argues that ‘after 1880 Egyptology became a powerful component in a broad fight-back of popular religion against perceived “irreligious” tendencies in British intellectual life’ [p. 163].

As the temporal focus begins to move towards the early years of the Twentieth Century the activities of Petrie and the EEF remain central to the material discussed in Chapter 4. With Petrie’s work in both Egypt and Palestine denoting some shift from biblical archaeology – Petrie concentrating rather on theories of race, particularly in his interpretation of burial remains in the Naqada region of Egypt – Egyptological research begins to align with European archaeology, where racial theory had been a driving force for several decades. Space is also given to the debate between those who would preserve ancient monuments and those, in particular the EEF, who would plunder them to ‘satisfy British cultural longings’ [p. 245]. Also considered is the new interest in Graeco-Roman Egypt which gave rise to the expression in art and literature of the ‘symbolic repertoire used to express the clash of religious and intellectual systems’ of the period [p. 250]. This notwithstanding, intellectual developments did allow some disentanglement of ancient Egypt from matters of mainstream religion, thereby allowing the discipline of Egyptology some, albeit limited, freedom from such associations. The early years of the Twentieth Century were perhaps more notable for the significance of Egyptology in spiritualist and occult practices.

From the turn of the century to the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb Egyptology took on a new form as a further shift in British attitude towards the subject becomes apparent, as outlined in the early part of Chapter 5. Here, a new emphasis encouraged the adoption of more observational

and less fanciful techniques with the introduction of authoritative guidance in matters of archaeological methodology – although the ‘flood of biblically inspired’ publications was yet to be staunched [p. 273], as was the ‘wholesale plunder of artefacts’ [p. 274]. These changes are discussed in the context of the prevailing political vicissitudes within Egypt itself, and a further shift in social concerns in Britain from purely religious matters to those of race and origin [p. 277]. The author again uses Petrie as a central figure in his discussion who, while still engaged in ‘biblical works’ in the first decade of the new century, was becoming somewhat more secular in his methods and teaching, as well as becoming immersed in the eugenics movement [p. 281] and using his interpretation of the ancient past in the reinforcement of such ideologies [pp. 296-9]. The final pages of the book are devoted to the debate between scholars variously supporting ideas of diffusionism and evolutionism as explanations of human development: one further area of conflict, again with biblical undertones [p. 315], in which Egyptological studies became a weapon used by protagonists on both sides of the argument.

It is not possible here to do justice to the depth of Gange’s research. In brief, little is said of ancient Egypt itself, but much about Egyptology and Egyptologists. The book describes a period during which the study of various aspects of ancient Egypt appeared to permeate many, some perhaps now unexpected, areas of British culture: from art and literature, in its many and varied forms, to a variety of political ideologies and religious doctrines. As such the book gives considerable insight into the origins of Egyptianizing tendencies in many spheres of endeavour, themes which often endure to this day. And the influence of Egyptology was apparent at many levels within the social hierarchy, from parliamentary debate to lessons in Sunday school, at a time when the real and imagined were intertwined in a manner now perhaps unthinkable, one might hope. Here, perhaps one reference more than any other elucidates Egyptology in the early Twentieth Century: the claim of Margaret Murray, instrumental in the establishment of the ‘first examinable university course in Egyptology’, who ‘insisted that “all good archaeologists are expected to have had at least one occult experience”’ [p. 266]. Murray is also said to have been ‘driven by distaste for the church and desire to undermine its historical claims’, yet nonetheless was seemingly compelled to present Egyptian archaeological work in biblical terms [p. 268]. Such apparent scholarly dilemma appears in various guises throughout the book.

More often the motivations of savants, as presented in the reviewed work, appear suspect. In many cases they were not, it seems, looking to further understanding of the ancient Egyptians, rather for aspects of ancient Egypt which could be used to bolster prevailing ideologies and doctrines. And in this respect Gange presents a detailed, informative, yet cautionary tale. I suspect that everyone trained in Egyptology has at some point been apprised as to the bias likely inherent in texts both ancient and modern; yet the depth of such bias, as demonstrated by Gange’s investigations, may still be surprising. It prompts some consideration as to the reliability of the historiographical background often guiding present Egyptological study, a background in which some scholars abandoned academic rigour to the advancement of personally held beliefs and/or self-aggrandizement. One may wonder when such practices ceased; it would perhaps be naive to think that they have in every case.

Perhaps the political or religious fervour of the period discussed is somewhat lessened in more recent times, yet other motivations for bias exist, not least personal or group pecuniary interests. Whether such concerns are real or imagined, the possibility urges scholars to adopt caution in considering secondary source material; herein lies the value in Gange’s book. It is not a light-hearted romp through the vagaries of early Egyptological practices; it is a considered study – well referenced, and augmented by helpful footnotes, bibliography, and index – which, in my opinion, belongs on the reading list of all who would present their interpretation of past cultures and ideas that it may serve as a constant reminder of the need for integrity: to investigate with the sole purpose of furthering present understanding of the studied culture regardless of pressure, from whatever source, to do otherwise.