

RELIGION AND SCIENCE IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH EGYPTOLOGY*

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ABSTRACT. *The late nineteenth century is generally considered to be the period of Egyptology's development into a scientific discipline. The names of Egyptologists of the last decades of the century, including William Flinders Petrie, are associated with scientific technique and objective interpretation as well as colonialist agendas. This article's thesis is that rapid developments in scientific technique were largely driven by spiritual objectives rather than any other ideologies. Egypt – after being derided and ignored during the mid-century – became of great significance to the British when spectacular finds suggested that Egyptology might offer conclusive evidence against Darwinism and the higher criticism while proving events of the Old Testament to be historically true. Other groups used ancient Egypt – professing Darwin, Spencer, and Huxley as inspirations – but the teleologies they invariably produced owe more to spiritualism than to scientific naturalism, blurring boundaries between science, the occult, and religion. In terms of popularity traditional Christian approaches to ancient Egypt eclipsed all rivals, every major practising Egyptologist of the 1880s employing them and publications receiving large, demonstrably enthusiastic, audiences. Support for biblical Egyptologists demonstrates that, in Egyptology, the fin de siècle enjoyed a little-noticed but widely supported revival of Old-Testament-based Christianity amidst a flowering of diverse beliefs.*

The last thirty years of the nineteenth century are generally considered to be the 'heroic age' of archaeology, and the period of its development from an antiquarian pursuit into a professional discipline.¹ These were the years in which the three age system of dating – which divided prehistory into the familiar eras of stone, bronze, and iron ages – came into general use and was refined by scholars

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* I would like to thank Peter Mandler, who has supervised the research of which this article is a product, and the AHRC who have funded it; Sarah Collins at the British Museum and Patricia Spencer at the Egypt Exploration Society for help at archives, as well as the trustees and committee of these organizations for their permission to use material in their collections; and, for their insightful and invaluable comments, the two anonymous readers provided by the *Historical Journal*.

¹ Scholarly general works on the history of archaeology are thinner on the ground than might be expected, and are largely brief and highly selective. They include several works by Glyn Daniel, such as *One hundred years of archaeology* (London, 1949), and *One hundred and fifty years of archaeology* (London, 1975), and more recently W. H. Stiebing, *Uncovering the past: a history of archaeology* (Oxford, 1993); for characterizations of this 'heroic period' see Daniel, *One hundred years of archaeology*, ch. 4, 'Archaeology come of age', pp. 122–51; and Stiebing, *Uncovering the past*, 'Archaeology's "heroic age"', pp. 55–78.

such as Sir John Lubbock; and when crossdating between Egyptian, Mycenaean and Assyrian histories finally dragged the millennium preceding the advent of classical civilization from the shadowy depths of prehistory. In the hands of individuals associated with this development, including Heinrich Schliemann, Wilhelm Dörpfeld, Sir William Flinders Petrie, and Augustus Pitt Rivers, archaeological technique developed with remarkable rapidity. In Britain by the end of the century the standard-bearer of this development was seen to be Egyptology. The Egypt Exploration Fund (EEF), Flinders Petrie, Sir E. A. T. Wallis Budge, and others, assured that Egyptology gathered a large popular appeal as well as making leaps and bounds in the direction of scientific technique. The name of Petrie in particular is considered to belong to a much more fully developed archaeology than the mid-century, biblically driven, excavations of Austen Henry Layard and Paul-Emile Botta.²

This article aims to dispel the myth of a rapid linear development in archaeology and Egyptology in particular in the last decades of the century. There is no question that technique developed or that motivations changed, but I aim to show that the development was not always towards self-professed 'scientific' objectivity as scholars have assumed: that the new techniques put to use in the Near East at this time were often developed to fulfil roles that today seem remarkably unscientific, relating primarily to spiritual issues. At the same time I wish to suggest how the case of Egyptology might be correlated with scholarship on theistic and metaphysical ideas in scientific contexts by writers such as Frank Turner, Bernard Lightman, Peter Bowler, and José Harris, showing – since Near Eastern archaeology remained fundamentally entwined with attitudes to the Bible in this period – that historical study of late nineteenth-century Egyptology has the potential to demonstrate the incredible diversity and ubiquity of late Victorian responses to the many challenges faced by traditional religion.³

To begin with it should be noted that the major ideological drive of the Egyptologists of this period was not either of those usually assigned to them by scholars: rather than being racists obsessed with proving white superiority and discrediting historical African achievements, or scientists chasing down scientific truth, they were – just like Layard and Botta – first and foremost Christians attempting to tie archaeological records into Old Testament history. Martin

² This kind of flattering appraisal of Egyptology and Petrie is offered in Daniel, *One hundred years of archaeology*, pp. 174–7; another enthusiastic example is to be found in Margaret Drower, *The splendour that was Egypt* (London, 1972), pp. 218–22, this final chapter being devoted wholly to praise of Petrie. Similar appraisals are offered by Drower in T. G. H. James, ed., *Excavating in Egypt: one hundred years of the Egypt Exploration Society* (London, 1982); Margaret Murray, *My first hundred years* (London, 1963); M. Drower, *Letters from the desert* (London, 2005); and Stiebing, *Uncovering the past*, p. 79.

³ Peter Bowler, *The non-Darwinian revolution* (Baltimore, 1988); and Frank Turner, *Between science and religion* (Yale, 1974), are classic approaches to this issue; for up to date surveys of reactions to perceived threats to religious belief see José Harris, *Private lives, public spirit: Britain, 1870–1914* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 169–77; and Tim Larsen, *Contested Christianity: the political and social contexts of Victorian theology* (Houston, 2004).

Bernal is a major culprit for the first of these misrepresentations of Egyptologists, claiming that

the last traces of the Hermetic, Platonic and Masonic respect for Egypt were being expelled from academia [in the late 1870s and 1880s], and a full-scale attack on the older Egyptology was launched a few years later ... One might think that having been stripped of civilization, religion and philosophy, the Egyptians might have been allowed the shred of metaphysics. However, the tidal wave of racism could not even tolerate this. I think it is fair to say that this essentially racist attitude of scepticism about, and scorn for, Egyptian achievements was predominant in Egyptology throughout the high tide of imperialism between 1880 and 1950.⁴

As this article will suggest, this statement – based on deeply flawed evidence – runs exactly counter to reality: the imperial agendas that would have encouraged a negative image of ancient Egypt were in fact pushed deep beneath the surface of Egyptology, being submerged under agendas relating to the Bible which inspired a remarkably positive image of Egyptian civilization. I want to argue that, ideologically speaking, approaches to ancient Egypt had little to do with the 1882 establishment of the Egyptian protectorate, though the protectorate did play a central role in arousing interest.⁵ Relating to the second misrepresentation, John Malcolm Russell has written that

by the 1870s the largely futile exercise of harmonizing the Classical-biblical chronology of Assyria with the new one provided by the Assyrian documents ceased to be a major concern for historians, subordinated in the late nineteenth century to other concerns – the nature of historical enquiry [and] the origin of linguistic groups.

Archaeologists naturally favour this idea with relation to archaeology as a whole.⁶ With Egyptology, however, it does not ring true. A significant change *had* taken place which sets the later period apart from the earlier, but this relates more to the way in which classical-biblical chronologies and new finds were harmonized than to any broader change of priorities.

⁴ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic roots of classical civilization* (2 vols., London, 1987), 1, p. 259. Edward Said and Donald Malcolm Russell, *Whose pharaoh's? Archaeology, museums and Egyptian national identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Los Angeles, 1992), are both generally fair in their treatment of the evidence, but still choose to assign the imperialist, racist, aspect of the period's Egyptology a more significant role than it perhaps deserves. Since this 'Orientalism' literature and the in-house histories of Egyptology are the only histories of the discipline available (including the UCL volumes *Encounters with ancient Egypt* published in 2002, which remarkably manage to compound the two genres) the only alternatives to Orientalism are predominantly laudatory surveys written for a non-specialist audience.

⁵ Quantitative research on the press of this period reveals that – thanks partly to modern Egypt's prominence in the press and partly to its reenergized biblical role – ancient Egypt actually received more media attention during the 1880s and 1890s than in the 1920s, during the supposed 'press frenzy' following the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb. The 1880s and 1890s certainly saw much larger press interest than is evident during the much celebrated 'race to decipher the hieroglyphs' in the early part of the nineteenth century, when ancient Egypt hardly appears in the press at all. Of course, the reasons for this are complex, relating as much to the changing nature of the press as anything else, but the results are nonetheless suggestive.

⁶ John Malcolm Russell, *From Nineveh to New York* (London, 1985), p. 29.

Russell writes of the age of Layard, ‘finds were not valued as proof of the Bible, the Bible did not require proof’.⁷ But it seems that by the 1880s archaeologists did not consider this statement to be true: the activities of Petrie and the EEF in the 1880s and 1890s had at their heart a desire to disprove the assertions made by biblical critics and geological or evolutionary scientists that Old Testament chronologies did not contain historically feasible events. Indeed, at the heart of Egyptology’s mission was the development of a discipline capable of answering F. W. Farrar’s plea of 1864 that where the claims of materialist scientists were concerned, ‘Science can be refuted by Science only’.⁸ The excavations of Schliemann in the 1870s had apparently proved the reality of Homer’s Troy, suggesting that archaeology could be remarkably decisive in recreating ancient events; now the advances made by Schliemann could be turned to the cause of that great work of ancient literature that late Victorians saw as both the counterpart and superior of the Homeric poems: the Old Testament.⁹

I

In 1882 the novelist and travel-writer Amelia Edwards, and the British Museum official Reginald Stewart Poole established an organization – the Egypt Exploration Fund – to conduct the first British institutionalized excavations on ancient Egyptian sites: the most significant in a series of events that demonstrated a dramatic surge in interest in ancient Egypt in this period.¹⁰ In the tradition of George Grove and Austen Henry Layard who had established the Palestine Exploration Fund a generation earlier, Edwards appealed for support to the religious sensibilities of God-fearing Britons:

A society has been formed for the purpose of excavating the ancient sites of the Egyptian Delta, and the scheme has started with a reasonable prospect of success. The general

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁸ F. W. Farrar, ‘The attitude of the clergy towards science’, *Contemporary Review*, 9 (1868), pp. 600–20. The affinity of Egyptologists’ aims to those of Farrar is demonstrated by Farrar’s appearance alongside Egyptologists in several lecture series, including with Peter le Page Renouf in a lecture series at Zion College in 1889.

⁹ David Traill offers a warts-and-all assessment of Schliemann. While not fully doing justice to Schliemann’s importance in the history of archaeology, he amply demonstrates the way in which even fellow archaeologists might have been taken in by his extravagant claims: D. A. Traill, *Schliemann of Troy: treasure and deceit* (London, 1996); W. E. Gladstone, *Studies on Homer* (2 vols., London, 1858), II, pp. 3–8, offers an example of parallels drawn between Homer and the Old Testament.

¹⁰ This organization remains at the forefront of Egyptological research today, its name having been changed to Egypt Exploration Society in 1919. Edwards, as well as being the author of the best-selling *Barbara’s history and Hand in glove*, was well known for *A thousand miles up the Nile* (London, 1877), her account of the journey which inspired her interest in saving ancient Egyptian biblical monuments from the ravages of both tourism and Egyptian modernization. Poole was the keeper of the Coins and Medals Department of the British Museum, but was primarily an Egyptologist, less than happy with the position he held. For the events surrounding the founding of the EEF see James, ed., *Excavating in Egypt*, pp. 9–37. The surge in interest in ancient Egypt was magnified (and to some extent caused) by the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, but, as this article will attempt to show, it was debates over science and religion that defined its nature and assured widespread enthusiasm.

plan drawn out has received the approval of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishops of Bath and Wells, Durham and Lincoln, the chief Rabbi, Archdeacon Arason, Mr Robert Browning, the Earl of Caernarvon P. S. A., Canon Cook, the Dean of Manchester ... It is proposed to raise a fund for the purpose of conducting excavations in the Delta, which up to this time has been rarely visited by travellers, and where but one site (Zoan-Tanis) has been explored by archaeologists. Yet here must undoubtedly lie concealed the documents of a lost period of Bible history – documents which we may confidently hope will furnish the key to a whole series of perplexing problems. The position of the Land of Goshen is now ascertained. The site of its capital, Goshen, is indicated only by a lofty mound; but under this mound, if anywhere, are to be found the missing records of those four centuries of the Hebrew sojourn in Egypt which are passed over in a few verses of the Bible, so that the history of the Israelites during that age is almost blank.¹¹

Unlike Layard and Grove, however, Edwards did not accompany this appeal with promotional visits to the major scientific establishments of the day. Instead she ran a series of articles in the popular scientific journal, *Knowledge*, under the attention-grabbing title ‘Was Ramases II the pharaoh of the Exodus?’¹² This was a remarkable populist statement that was matched by a democratic attitude to subscriptions, which were set at the remarkably low level of £1, Poole urging that ‘friends should club together and send in a subscription of £1 under a single name, in order that no-one should lose the opportunity of reading the memoir’.¹³ The nature of this appeal – both popular and emphatically biblical – is the first sign that Edwards and Poole envisaged a missionary endeavour to counter – as one of their supporters put it – ideas that ‘have the minds of young men and women poisoned by what would to them strike at the cost of much of their faith in Christianity’; a missionary endeavour stated clearly by Edwards in her review for *The Academy* of Poole’s *Cities of Egypt* where she argues Egyptology to be

a cause of such supreme interest, biblically, historically, archaeologically that one marvels how it should need advocating at all. Remembering the enthusiasm excited by the discovery of the Chaldean deluge tablets, one asks with wonder how that enthusiasm is compatible with our indifference to the far more momentous discoveries which await the Egyptian explorer ... [It is] needful to wake the Bible-loving, church- and chapel-going English people from their long sloth, and to make them see that now, if ever, it is a serious

¹¹ This notice appeared in the *Times*, 30 Mar. 1882, p. 8; Poole to Naville, 28 Apr. 1882, London, Egypt Exploration Society archive (EES), box XIX, item c, pp. 2–3, contains information on the drafting of the memorandum and a list of the journals and newspapers in which it was published; Michael Musgrave, *George Grove, music, and Victorian culture* (Basingstoke, 2003), deals well (in passing) with the foundation of the Palestine Exploration Fund; John James Moscrop, *Measuring Jerusalem: the Palestine Exploration Fund and British interests in the Holy Land* (Leicester, 2000), offers a more complete survey.

¹² Amelia Edwards, ‘Was Ramases II the pharaoh of the Exodus?’, *Knowledge*, 2 (1882), pp. 108–9, 141–2, 192–3, 228–9, 244, 260–1, 291–3, 324–6, 357–8, 387, 450.

¹³ ‘Report of the first general meeting and balance sheet’, EES, box XXI, item 1; average Palestine Exploration Fund subscriptions are given at £5–10 by Moscrop, *Measuring Jerusalem*, p. 72. The memoir referred to in this quotation is the annual report on excavations issued by the EEF to each of its members, the first – and the one specifically referred to here – being Edouard Naville, *The store city of Pithom and the route of the Exodus* (London, 1883).

duty, and not a mere archaeological pastime, to contribute funds for the purpose of conducting excavations on a foreign soil.¹⁴

When the EEF's excavations began, in the hands of one of Europe's leading archaeologists, Edouard Naville, they were intended to find the route of the Exodus, and to fit biblical events that took place in Egypt into the chronology of pharaonic civilization.¹⁵ Success was claimed remarkably quickly, Poole publishing a celebratory article in *The Academy* on 7 April 1883 claiming the excavations to have provided 'final proof' that Ramases II was the pharaoh of the Exodus and that Tel el Muskhata – the site of his excavations – had been the first stopping point on the route of the Exodus.¹⁶ This was a major victory for the popularizing mission, since Ramases II – as well as being the most prominent pharaoh in terms of statuary – was one of the kings whose mummy had been discovered in 1881, and whose image the British would soon be able to look on with awe as the pharaoh who had mocked Moses and felt the wrath of God.¹⁷ The importance of this mummy, and the esteem in which the EEF were held for giving so concrete an artefact a role in the biblical narrative, are widely demonstrated in the writings of popular lecturers. The following example comes from *The pharaohs of the bondage and the Exodus*, by the Presbyterian minister Charles Robinson:

this mummy is as dead as stone, but 'being dead yet speaketh' as plainly as did Abel. What confirmations of Scripture are coming now close at hand! The declarations of the much maligned Moses, who wrote in the simplicity of candid narration as an exact historian, are confirmed at every point.¹⁸

During the period of the EEF's conception, the young Flinders Petrie was in Egypt, surveying the Great Pyramid, in which he had initially hoped to find support for the theory expounded to some acclaim by Charles Piazzi Smyth that God had caused it to be built as a repository of scientific and mystical knowledge to aid humanity in their intellectual development.¹⁹ Petrie was in Giza when he heard of Naville's appointment, and was incensed that a Swiss archaeologist

¹⁴ W. Williams to Peter le Page Renouf, 28 May 1889, London, British Museum, Department of the Ancient Near East (BM, ANE) Correspondence 1889/180; Amelia Edwards, 'The cities of Egypt', *Academy*, 22 (1882), p. 389.

¹⁵ An assessment of Naville (characterizing him as 'intensely religious') is given by Margaret Drower, 'The early years', in James, ed., *Excavating in Egypt*, p. 19. Naville's only biography is in Japanese.

¹⁶ R. S. Poole, 'The progress of discovery in Egypt', *Academy*, 23 (1883), pp. 246–7. Two months later, Poole published an even more laudatory article: R. S. Poole, *Times*, 2 June 1883, p. 14.

¹⁷ This mummy, along with many others from the Deir el Bahari cache, was unwrapped and photographed in 1886.

¹⁸ Charles S. Robinson, *The pharaohs of the bondage and the Exodus* (London, 1887), p. 28.

¹⁹ For a detailed exposition of this theory and Petrie's significant role in both expounding and exploding it see E. M. Reisenauer, 'The battle of the standards: Great Pyramid metrology and British identity, 1859–1890', *Historian*, 65 (2003), pp. 931–78; and S. Schaffer, 'Metrology, metrification and Victorian values', in B. Lightman, ed., *Victorian science in context* (Chicago, 1997), pp. 438–74.

should be employed to head the first institutionalized British excavations, when he himself could have conducted the digs as a purely British affair.²⁰ Before long, however, it became clear that the EEF's subscription hunt had been spectacularly successful, drawing enough funds to carry out a second excavation each year, and in October 1883 Petrie was appointed to the role of excavator. In line with the EEF's mandate, he began his work on Tanis – the biblical Zoan – city of Joseph, searching for some sherd or papyrus that would provide historical documentation of Joseph's regency, and hoping for such revelations along the way as 'the name of the father in law of Solomon and his dynastic place in Egyptian history'.²¹ Naville had already, in 1882, discovered an inscription nearby of the pharaoh Raian, whom he believed to be the king who elevated Joseph to the position of regent.²²

II

Besides Schliemann's indication of the incisiveness of archaeology, the trigger for the sudden quest for biblical verification beginning in the 1880s was the new view of prehistory proposed by evolutionary science and geology.²³ Thus the writings of Egyptologists in this period are suffused with attacks on both these disciplines, and the biblical criticism they informed.

These sciences claimed that man's intellectual capacity had undergone a constant development from primitive origins, and in the late nineteenth century, when the earth was thought to be many times younger than we now know it to be, the timescale for this process was drastically foreshortened.²⁴ The argument employed by the vast majority of those who took an interest in ancient Egypt during this period was that this civilization – the oldest to have left substantial documentation behind – could settle the issue of origins. To some, Egyptian civilization was seen to betray remnants of man's bestial state, revealing him coming down from the trees to begin the course of civilization.²⁵ To others,

²⁰ M. Drower, *Flinders Petrie: a life in archaeology* (London, 1985), p. 66.

²¹ Petrie's findings are published as William Flinders Petrie, *Tanis* (London, 1885). Biblical finds were not, in the end, forthcoming so the excavation report focuses largely on classical material; 'Egypt Exploration Fund Circular on Naville's achievements at Pithom', EES, box XVIII, item 40.

²² Amelia Edwards, 'M. Naville's visit to the ruins of Tanis', *Academy*, 22 (1882), p. 17.

²³ Schliemann was intended to be the excavator for the EEF, as is demonstrated by Poole to Naville, 28 Apr. 1882, EES, box XIX, item c, p. 8. As this document reports it was only when Gaston Maspero, the head of the French Antiquities Service in Egypt, objected 'in the strongest terms' to Schliemann's appointment on the grounds of Schliemann's 'love of publicity and a fracas in the papers' that alternatives were sought.

²⁴ Popular writing on Egypt contains occasional references to 4004 BC, suggesting that even in the 1890s a 6,000 year age of the earth had not been completely abandoned by some amateur Egyptologists. Egyptological writing occasionally still pays lip service to the idea of an age of the earth measured in thousands of years. For the contemporary debate, initiated by Kelvin, Darwin, and Lyell, see C. Smith and M. N. Wise, *Energy and empire* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 579–611.

²⁵ This description characterizes the approach of several supporters of evolution whose views are analysed in part IV of this article.

including the biblical Egyptologists, Egypt revealed man reeling in the wake of the biblical fall, within memory of a glorious, more enlightened stage of civilization.²⁶ The fact that predynastic artefacts only began to be appreciated for what they were in the late 1890s was of great significance here: before this it was widely noted that Egyptian civilization seemed to have come into existence as a fully formed complex culture, a major blow, it was felt, to evolution.

Part of the claim made by supporters of evolution and biblical criticism was that in the age of the Old Testament, when humanity was in a stage of evolution significantly less advanced than that of Victorian Britain, written language must have been relatively undeveloped, that the Pentateuch must therefore be an unreliable – even barbaric – document based on centuries of distorting oral tradition before its eventual materialization in written form. Egyptologists therefore went to Egypt not just to find records of biblical events, but in search of the highly developed written culture that they were certain must exist, and that would offer a serious setback to the claims of evolutionists and biblical critics.

Some Egyptologists even went so far as to resurrect the enlightenment idea – well-known from Newton's writings – that all of the world's civilizations sprang from a single source in a glorious imperial super-civilization that had known divine knowledge but in its decadence had been destroyed by the Noachic deluge. The British Museum Egyptologist Peter le Page Renouf for instance, supported this idea in his Hibbert Lectures of 1878, writing:

It is incontestably true that the sublimer portions of the Egyptian religion are not the comparatively late result of a process of development or elimination from the grosser. The sublime portions are demonstrably ancient; and the last stage of the Egyptian religion, that known to the Greek and Latin writers, heathen or Christian, was by far the grossest and the most corrupt.²⁷

Throughout the 1880s the public were rallied with a series of popular articles and books, noting the scientific achievements and philosophical wisdom of the ancient Egyptians and stressing the connection between ancient Egyptian culture and the Bible. Occasionally, articles would make explicit their popular agenda, claiming that Egyptology thoroughly discredited Darwinism: they did not, however, locate themselves in the natural sciences as most of Darwinism's many vocal opponents did, but made their attack on historical and ethical grounds, enunciating the threat that Darwin's 'pseudo-science' posed to Christian

²⁶ This also very closely parallels the beliefs of occultists including the Hermetic order of the Golden Dawn and many novelists such as H. Rider Haggard.

²⁷ Peter le Page Renouf, *Lectures on the origin and growth of religion as illustrated by the religion of ancient Egypt* (London, 1897), p. 90. Renouf's name crops up several times in this article in connection with conservative beliefs. This threatens to give an unfair representation of a remarkable scholar, described by Lord Acton as 'the most learned Englishman I know'. Renouf's prodigious scholarship is given a fitting representation in K. J. Cathcart, *The letters of Peter le Page Renouf* (4 vols., Dublin, 2003).

morality.²⁸ Nor did Egyptologists confine themselves to their area of expertise when attempting to discredit the theories that questioned Old Testament history. Renouf, for instance, contributed ideas to an article in *The Rock* written by the physician and amateur Egyptologist J. M. Winn, claiming to strike ‘at the very root of Darwinism’, but acknowledging the futility of the exercise since ‘arguments are lost on the infatuated believers in Darwinism’; the article concluded:

the philosopher of Laputas’ notion of extracting sunbeams from a cucumber was not a whit more impossible than Darwin’s origin of the species ... We might smile at all these doctrines did they not tend to subvert the fundamental principles on which all our morality and polity are based. The subtle sophistries of the Huxley, Tyndall, Darwin and Herbert Spencer school have done more mischief than the outspoken blasphemies of Hyde Park stump orators.²⁹

Like many other popular lecturers Robinson also made a contribution to this subject, arguing that because of the work of the EEF, ‘there will be an uneasy surrender of the dangerous features of modern theories of evolution on the part of its radical advocates, and men are in all likelihood coming closer to the fact about God’s making the world’.³⁰

The previously unfashionable claims of ancient Greek writers to have received their wisdom from Egypt were suddenly treated with great credulity, and rumours abounded of such scientific wonders as the ancient Egyptian cutting of stone with diamond-edged saws.³¹ Ancient Egypt was held up as a civilization of intense virtue, an example to the modern world as much as a parallel to Victorian achievements. Thus Poole attacked those who considered the Egyptians to be melancholy and vulgar in their funerary architecture, arguing that

The consequence thus given to the tomb by an active and joyous people is at first perplexing. We must think of them as the only nation of the times before later Judaism and Christianity who had a vital belief in the future state ... The Egyptian tomb was due to no mere convention; faith raised its mighty mass above the rock or cut its hidden halls beneath. Those who accuse this great nation of a vain ostentation in these costly sepulchres, cannot conceive the delight of lavishing gold and silver without return in the

²⁸ An extensive literature exists on the status of Darwin’s theory and its mechanisms in the late nineteenth century; Bowler, *The non-Darwinian revolution*; Turner, *Between science and religion*, and a special edition of the journal *Ostria*, ‘Science in theistic contexts: cognitive dimensions’, *Ostria*, 16 (2003), being especially noteworthy. These works demonstrate that Darwinism was far from being universally accepted in this period, and that natural selection was often considered to be a dead end, not even being central to many intellectuals’ understandings of Darwin. This should not be read to imply, however, that Darwinism and natural selection were not of cultural significance, or that they did not cause a great deal of trepidation among the church-going public; indeed, by 1884 they were a pervasive enough fear for the duke of Argyll to refer to ‘natural selection’ exerting a ‘Reign of Terror’ on British intellectual life. Argyll, ‘Organic evolution’, *Nature*, 34 (1884), p. 335.

²⁹ Winn to Renouf, BM, ANE Correspondence 1887/235.

³⁰ Robinson, *The pharaohs of the bondage and the Exodus*, p. 43.

³¹ For an example of emphasis on the classical debt to Egypt see E. A. T. Wallis Budge, *The dwellers on the Nile* (London, 1891), p. 188. For the idea of diamond edged saws see William Flinders Petrie, *The pyramids and temples of Gizeh* (London, 1883), p. 173.

consecration of a noble idea. The Egyptians raised monuments that have defied time, to show to all who should come after them that they believed in the immortality of the soul.³²

The Greeks had made profound religious vigour a virtue of the Egyptians, the author of the Hermetic sayings of Asclepius (in vogue as hermetic spiritualism crept into fashion in the 1890s) echoing the sentiments of Plato when referring to Egypt as ‘the only land that by the strength of its religion brought the Gods down to earth, model of holiness and piety’, and late Victorian Egyptologists, painfully aware of the challenges facing contemporary religion, held up this aspect of ancient Egyptian culture as an ideal for Victorian Britain to aspire to, emphasizing faith, steadfastness, and tolerance.³³ Thus the Egyptologist Alfred Wiedemann wrote that

The attempt has often been made to hit off a national characteristic in some apt epithet; the Romans have been denominated ‘brave’, the Israelites ‘religious’, the Assyrians ‘cruel’. In like manner the Egyptians might be called ‘conservative’ in the first and strictest sense of the term ... Progress was made and new views were attained to, either as the outcome of reflection or in consequence of foreign influence; but, although the Egyptians could not hold aloof from change, their acceptance of it involved no casting off of old and cherished ideas, which were retained and allowed to subsist on equal footing with the new modes of thought.³⁴

Archibald Henry Sayce, eminent Professor of Assyriology at Queen’s College Oxford, also praised this resilience, recalling Edward Freeman’s famous interpretation of the aftermath of the Norman conquest – that ‘in a few generations we led captive our conquerors’ – when he writes of successive invasions of Egypt, that ‘the higher culture of the conquered people overcame the conquerors’.³⁵ This statement appears even more remarkable when it is considered both that one of the conquering cultures Sayce considers to have been overcome by Egyptian ‘higher’ culture is that of Alexander the Great and the Ptolemies, and that Egyptologists like Sayce are generally considered to have been actively involved in propagating a new, highly imperialistic, ‘conquering culture’.³⁶ Poole, like Buckle, emphasized the potential of the desert to focus philosophical

³² R. S. Poole, *The cities of Egypt* (London, 1881), pp. 27–8; this passage also hints at another of the motivating factors behind late Victorian evangelical approaches to Egypt for which there is not space here: that of Egypt’s association with death. Developing Victorian interactions with the idea of death are explored in Patricia Jalland, *Death and the Victorian family* (Oxford, 1996), in a way that is enlightening of many statements made by Egyptologists.

³³ Asclepius testimony 25.

³⁴ Alfred Wiedemann, *Religion of the ancient Egyptians* (London, 1897), p. 1.

³⁵ E. A. Freeman, *History of the Norman conquest* (5 vols., Oxford, 1870–6), 1, p. 2; A. H. Sayce, *The Egypt of the Hebrews and Herodotus* (London, 1895), p. 14.

³⁶ In fact, one of the ideas that Sayce’s contrary pen was happiest to contradict was the assumption he saw as central to the higher criticism, that the East could not have had a vibrant literary civilization preceding that of the West. ‘That there was a literary age in the East long before there was a literary age in the West never entered the mind of the critic; or if it did, it was dismissed with contempt. Anything, therefore, which seemed to imply the existence of such a literary age, or which appealed to it

thought; in Egypt ‘more than even in the midst of the ocean, man seems conscious of the divine presence’.³⁷

All of this, however, provided a thin smokescreen over the fact that throughout the EEF’s first decade, Egypt had yielded little of the unequivocal biblical evidence that Egyptologists had been certain they would find. No real record of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt came to light, though several individuals writing to the British Museum claimed to be in possession of the only ancient Egyptian depiction of Joseph (other letters reveal that Egyptologists even began to suspect that an industry forging increasingly popular Egyptian-biblical reliquary had been set up in Birmingham).³⁸ Nor did literary evidence arise to shake the critics out of their complacent belief in Egyptian barbarity.

Disappointment would be short lived however: in the 1890s Petrie and the EEF would raise the debate over Egypt to fever pitch and seem to have made good on promises to their subscribers, when at a small, unprepossessing, site in Middle Egypt, they excavated a site rich in sophisticated diplomatic documents and naturalistic artwork, into which they could read vibrant political and philosophical innovations in the sixteenth century BC. This site was Tel el Amarna, the city of the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten.³⁹

III

By 1893 Sayce was using the Tel el Amarna finds as a justification to turn his attention from Assyria towards Egypt, heralding them as concluding an

for confirmation, was at once ruled out of court.’ A. H. Sayce, *The higher criticism and the verdict of the monuments* (London, 1893), p. 14.

³⁷ Poole, *The cities of Egypt*, p. 14. Despite emphasizing the virtues of desolation, Buckle was typical of the mid-nineteenth century in being remarkably dismissive of the ancient Egyptians, claiming that they achieved ‘little of any moment’, H. T. Buckle, *The history of civilization in England* (2 vols., London, 1857–61), 1, p. 47. Calvinist Wales, in contrast, demonstrated an intense interest in ancient Egypt in the mid-century, the Rev. John Parry’s *Gwyddoniadur Cymraeg*, for instance, displaying a rich, if eccentric, appreciation of biblical Egypt.

³⁸ This phenomenon forms part of an intriguing protestant trend for reliquary, to which even the EEF contributed, Edwards making the impracticable request that 1,000 of the enormous bricks built without straw from Pithom (thought to be those that Pharaoh demands of the Israelites in Exodus 5:18: ‘go now, and work; for no straw shall be given to you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks’) be sent to Britain as gifts for EEF subscribers. The cost of actually carrying out this demand would have run into many thousands of pounds, Edwards being unaware of the enormous size and weight of the bricks. The character of this trend and the kind of assumptions many people made about the biblical nature of even the most mundane Egyptian items are illustrated in a letter sent by a James Smith to the British Museum on 27 Apr. 1889. Smith writes: ‘Dear Sir, some years ago a friend of mine sent me a small scrap of mummy cloth said to have been unwound from the body of “Pharaoh’s Daughter” (probably the one that found Moses in the Nile) when being placed in the British Museum. I have shown it in good faith to my friends as such but as some doubts have arisen in my mind as to its authenticity ... I have taken the liberty of writing to you to see if you can put me right.’ BM, ANE Correspondence 1889/184.

³⁹ Reception of the culture initiated by Akhenaten – which will be explored below – is one of the few aspects of nineteenth-century Egyptology blessed with insightful secondary literature. See for instance Dominic Montserrat, *Akhenaten: history, religion, and ancient Egypt* (London, 1998), ch. 1.

“‘archaeological revolt’ against the fantasies of subjective criticism’ that had begun in the 1870s, and claiming that since this time ‘a new era [had begun] in the study of antiquity’.⁴⁰ With an exquisite sense of irony Sayce took great pleasure in using this new evidence to turn upon the biblical critics the very arguments that they had used against those (such as himself) who had insisted on treating the Pentateuch as an unimpeachable historical record:

The critic had closed his eyes to a most important source of evidence, that of archaeology, and had preferred the conclusions he had arrived at from a narrower circle of facts to those which the wider circle opened out by oriental discovery have forced him to adopt. It was the old story, it is disagreeable to unlearn our knowledge, and to resign or modify the beliefs for which we have fought and laboured because of the new evidence which has come to light ... We adopt the anti-scientific attitude of those who condemned Galileo, because our old beliefs have become convictions and we do not want them to be disturbed. There are popes in the ‘higher criticism’ as well as in theology. The scepticism of historical criticism could hardly go any further.⁴¹

The idea was taken up by several clergymen who made use of the Amarna finds, including the Rev. Andrew Archibald who wrote of Egyptologists as prophets fulfilling a divine appointment, arguing that:

God had a purpose in hiding [Egypt’s confirmation of the Bible] beneath the accumulation of ages. When in our day infidelity has become rampant, when the Old Testament has with great confidence been pronounced a mass of fables, the very stones have risen from the ground to verify in baked brick and tablet and rock and cylinder what of the sacred records had been fiercely assailed by a sceptical criticism.⁴²

For a generation of Egyptologists brought up in the 1890s and 1900s Tel el Amarna was a triumph to be enthused over again and again. The religious revolution carried out by Akhenaten replaced for a short time the familiar Egyptian polytheism with monotheistic belief, providing the only known example of non-Jewish monotheism in the ancient world, and in the eyes of Petrie and other Akhenaten aficionados confirming the belief that Egyptian civilization maintained some memory of an antediluvian civilization that was initially harmonious, godly, and glorious. Akhenaten’s reign – in reality pretty brutal – was therefore glorified as a brief period of Christian virtue in its most Victorian, bourgeois, form, Petrie writing:

No other king ever dedicated himself to an ethical idea as Akhenaten did ... he lives in truth. The attainment and spread of truth was the object of his life ... he is determined not to suppress anything, but openly kisses the queen as they ride in a chariot, and he dances her on his knee with the babies as he sits on his throne. His domestic affection is the truth, and as the truth he proclaims it. Here is a revolution in ideas! No king of Egypt, nor of any other part of the world, has ever carried out his honesty of expression so openly.

⁴⁰ A. H. Sayce, *The higher criticism and the verdict of the monuments* (London, 1893), p. xiv.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6. ⁴² Andrew W. Archibald, *The Bible verified* (New York, 1893), p. 217.

His domestic life was his ideal of the truth of life, and as part of his living in truth he proclaims it as the true life to his subjects.⁴³

The Victorianesque society that Petrie conjured around Akhenaten was elevated above every other ancient society, even classical Greece, for its art and science as well as religion. Petrie, for instance, claims that the murals of birds, reeds, and mammals that make up the floor of Akhenaten's palace 'are unparalleled even in classical frescoes. Not until modern times can such studies from nature be found.'⁴⁴ Similar claims were made for the heady cocktail of science and philosophy that he read into Akhenaten's religion:

If this were a new religion invented to satisfy our modern scientific conceptions, we could not find a flaw in the correctness of this view of the energy of the solar system ... a position which we cannot logically improve upon at the present day.⁴⁵

Akhenaten's first English-language biographer, James Henry Breasted, similarly considered Akhenaten 'a God intoxicated man', and in 1952, the German Egyptologist Rudolf Anthes revealed just how influential and resilient this view had been, echoing the characteristically late nineteenth-century language of both science victoriously dispelling myth and tenuous biblical formulation:

Thirty years ago, perhaps all of us saw [Amarna religion] under the influence of J. H. Breasted. It was the highest and purest flowering of insight into the divine in Egypt. Akhenaten had freed himself from the mumbo-jumbo of traditional religion. He had found a direct path from the human to the divine. He rejected myths, symbols, and everything polytheistic. Since he was not accorded a revelation of God, he saw Him in the sun; but light, life and truth guided him ... and on an unprecedented level of insight he anticipated basic concepts of the Gospel according to John. To us, Akhenaten seemed to have been the prophet of a religion for which the time was not yet ripe.⁴⁶

By 1908, as pressure to display scientific credentials increased, Arthur Weigall even offered Akhenaten as evidence for the evolutionary process, arguing that his reign 'stands as the earliest landmark in the higher development of the human brain'.⁴⁷ This development is still seen, however, as inspired by the Christian God, Akhenaten being born into a world where 'superstition was everywhere to be seen' and 'as soon as he came to the throne [beginning] to direct men's eyes to the worship of the true God ... he himself wrote religious hymns, amongst which is the undoubted original of our 104th Psalm'.⁴⁸

Most importantly of all, however, Egyptologists were now able to state with confidence the elevated origins of civilization. Akhenaten seemed to prove

⁴³ William Flinders Petrie, *Tel el Amarna* (London, 1893), p. 41.

⁴⁴ Idem, *History of Egypt* (3 vols., London, 1894), III, p. 214.

⁴⁵ Idem, 'The excavations at Tel el Amarna', *Academy*, 91 (1892), p. 356.

⁴⁶ Rudolf Anthes, 'Die Maat des Echnaton von Amarna', *Supplement to the Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 14 (Baltimore, 1952), p. 154.

⁴⁷ 1908 EES bulletin, 'The significance of the excavations at Tel el Amarna', EES, box XVIII, item 71.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

that ancient Egypt held memories, however vague, of a sophisticated and godly antediluvian civilization, belief in the existence of which Renouf had unfashionably raised from obscurity in 1878. John Ward demonstrated the new impulse given to Renouf's belief by stating in 1902 that:

The original faith of the old Egyptians was pure and simple ... some have called it the best faith ever invented by man ... But in later times the Egyptian religion deteriorated and the worship of one deity gradually degenerated into a species of polytheism. Each of the various attributes of the Great Being, represented by allegorical figures, seem at last to have been regarded as representing separate personages worthy of worship, and so a polytheistic belief gradually arose.⁴⁹

IV

Though the biblical Egyptologists represent the predominant attitude to Egypt in this period and drew by far the greatest public support, they were never unopposed.⁵⁰ They had the advantage of possessing a virtual monopoly on British excavations in Egypt, but their discoveries were also put to use for very different purposes: purposes which demonstrate just how significant a crux Egypt had come to be in British considerations of the course of human history. The EEF's opponents challenged biblical Egyptologists directly, and succeeded in rousing their ire, establishing a fiery debate between Egyptologists, their critics, and the public.

Opposition to biblical Egyptologists was led by two well-known public figures: the astronomer Richard Proctor, editor of the popular science journal *Knowledge* (which had published much biblical Egyptology before Proctor tightened his editorial control and began to use it as an outlet of his own, antithetical, views on Egyptology); and the poet Gerald Massey, a favourite of Ruskin and Tennyson, who was reputedly the inspiration for George Eliot's character Felix Holt the radical.⁵¹ This opposition was remarkably learned: Massey's six large volumes

⁴⁹ John Ward, *The sacred beetle: a popular treatise on Egyptian scarabs in art and history* (London, 1902), p. 6.

⁵⁰ The conclusion that biblical Egyptologists represent the predominant attitude to ancient Egypt is reached on the basis of a large accumulation of evidence. First, works of biblical Egyptology outnumber works opposing them on an enormous scale, since the former can be counted in thousands the latter in tens, and few works which do not take one side or other in this debate exist at all between 1880 and the mid-1890s other than the most technical publications of Egyptologists such as E. A. T. Wallis Budge; secondly, as Massey admits in the introduction to *Ancient Egypt the light of the world*, the biblical works sell on a much larger scale, some quickly selling up to 30,000 copies, Massey bemoans the inability of those writing with evolutionary principles in mind to sell more than 4,000; thirdly the large number of letters written to Egyptologists and the press (even those few hostile journals) are almost all in support of biblical Egyptology, often attacking non-biblical Egyptologists.

⁵¹ Proctor's journal, *Knowledge*, between 1881 and 1886 contained a hugely disproportionate number of articles on ancient Egypt. At first he allowed a rich debate on Egyptology, printing, for instance, Amelia Edwards's 'Was Ramases II the pharaoh of the Exodus?' as well as the theories of pyramid metrologists influenced by Charles Piazzi Smyth. By 1883, however, he had closed the pages of *Knowledge* to all articles on ancient Egypt except those that supported his own outspoken views, perhaps because of the extent to which biblical Egyptologists received the most favourable response even in his

on ancient Egypt were packed with anthropological and archaeological detail, resembling in their density of evidence Sir James Fraser's *The golden bough*.⁵² They wielded the names of eminent scientists as symbols of their scientific credentials and guarantees of their desire for objectivity in the search for scientific truth. Massey for instance prefaced his second Ancient Egyptian work, *The natural genesis*, with the claim that this book:

completes the author's contribution to the new order of thought that has been inaugurated in our own era by the writings of Darwin and Wallace, Spencer and Huxley, Morgan and McLennan, Tylor and Lubbock. It was written by an evolutionist for Evolutionists, and is intended to trace the Natural Origins and teach the doctrine of development ... the battle for evolution has here been continued amongst the difficult defiles and mountain fastness of the enemy.⁵³

These promises of scientific objectivity, as Massey's combative tone might suggest, were not fulfilled: in fact Proctor and Massey had more in common with the contemporary Egyptian novels of Rider Haggard and Marie Corelli, suffused with supernatural meanderings and conspiracy theories, than with any scientific naturalism. They did not offer a 'scientific' critique of the EEF's nature, never questioning such anachronisms as attempts to retrace the route of the Exodus on a landscape drastically changed over the last three millennia.⁵⁴ Instead they challenged biblical Egyptology by using Egyptian mythology and Egyptological discoveries (sometimes genuine, sometimes spurious) to attack the very fundamentals of Christian belief.

Both Massey and Proctor argued that hieroglyphic material was a hugely important new source for the history of religion, and that its existence necessitated a rereading of Christian history, much of which was claimed to be 'pre-extant as Egyptian mythology'.⁵⁵ The figure of Jesus, Massey argues, is merely a conflation

own pages. For Proctor's initial democratic aspirations and gradual adoption of a more hard-line stance on other issues, see B. Lightman, 'Knowledge confronts nature: Richard Proctor and popular science periodicals', in L. Henson, ed., *Culture and science in the nineteenth century media* (Ashgate, 2004), pp. 199–210. The Egyptological element of *Knowledge* disappeared immediately in 1887 when Proctor gave up editorship and the journal began to focus solely on the natural sciences which had, in fact, been stated as its sole purpose from the beginning. Frank Turner states in relation to the Congregationalist R. W. Dale that 'theirs was a world that refused to draw boundaries between the secular and the religious', and the case of Proctor demonstrates just as much as that of the EEF that research into ancient Egypt demonstrated this facet of mid- and late Victorian religion to an enormous degree.

⁵² Gerald Massey, *The book of the beginnings* (2 vols., London, 1883); idem, *The natural genesis* (2 vols., London, 1885); and idem, *Ancient Egypt the light of the world* (2 vols., London, 1889).

⁵³ Massey, *The natural genesis*, II, p. vii.

⁵⁴ This idea became a point of criticism in the work of the Egyptologist T. E. Peet in the 1920s, T. E. Peet, *Egypt and the Old Testament* (Liverpool, 1922). By 1900, however, criticisms were already being made that Egypt had little to offer the archaeologist seeking evidence of biblical events; see for instance J. F. McCurdy, 'Oriental research and the Bible', in Herman Hilprecht, *Recent research in Bible lands: its progress and results* (Philadelphia, 1900), p. 8.

⁵⁵ Gerald Massey, 'The historical Jesus and the mythical Christ', in *Gerald Massey lectures* (New York, 1996), p. 1.

of the historical Egyptian Joshua ben Pandira, with the ancient myths on which Egyptian religion had been founded. Pandira, who had lived over a century before the supposed date of the incarnation, was – according to Massey – the only Jesus known to the Jews of the first and second centuries, and had only become deified when the early Christians, under the influence of the spread of Mithraism and the worship of Isis in the Roman Empire, read the Egyptian mythology, with its tales of virgin birth, resurrection, adoration of infants, and three Magi.⁵⁶ ‘These scenes, which were mythical in Egypt’, Massey claimed, ‘have been copied or reproduced as historical in the Canonical Gospels, where they stand like four corner-stones to the Historic Structure, and prove that the foundations are mythical’.⁵⁷ Chapter 12 of Massey’s final Egyptian work, *Ancient Egypt the light of the world*, is thus an in-depth exploration of the development of this mythology, entitled ‘The Jesus legend traced in Egypt for 10,000 years’, and Massey’s personal motto had by 1886 become the words of Robert Taylor, imprisoned for blasphemy in Oakham Gaol: ‘bind it about thy neck, write it upon the tablet of thy heart: “Everything of Christianity is of Egyptian origin.”’⁵⁸

Both Massey and Proctor added a further ‘scientific’ significance to ancient Egypt by claiming that it demonstrated the first major leap in the evolution of religion, a scheme of development in which Victorian Britain had the potential to be the next arena of development if those who clung to outmoded beliefs could be persuaded from their error. Identifying the achievement of ancient Egypt as being the development of a religion that did not merely worship celestial bodies, Proctor wrote:

As fossil-minded folk in our day proclaim that science is setting on one side the Almighty in the name of universal evolution, so would the ignorant of those old sun-worshipping days have lamented that their gods were being set aside in the name of uniform motion. We have only to consider the horror with which the Copernican theory and afterwards the theory of gravitation were received, to perceive what a shock there must have been here for the worshippers of the sun and moon in the idea that those bodies, have each of them, their appointed paths.⁵⁹

Proctor followed a system, heavily influenced by Spencer, in which a new creed of ‘the Unknowable, or the religion of science’ could replace the unreasoned superstition he saw in contemporary Christianity with a belief founded on scientific knowledge:

civilized man cannot gain in intellect and develop while he worships an unreasoning deity of ill-developed moral character (the invention of less advanced races) as the

⁵⁶ Proctor made similar claims: ‘Osiris, the Egyptian saviour was regarded as a virgin-born god. But he was also the father of Horus, more justly regarded as the Egyptian saviour, and Horus was born to the virgin Isis, whose symbol (as later that of the Virgin Mary in Catholic Churches) was the crescent moon.’ Richard A. Proctor, ‘The unknowable or the religion of science’, *Knowledge*, 9 (1886), p. 298.

⁵⁷ Massey, ‘The historical Jesus and the mythical Christ’, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Robert Taylor, *Diegesis* (London, 1830), used as a frontispiece to Massey, *The natural genesis*, 1, p. ii.

⁵⁹ Proctor, ‘The unknowable or the religion of science’, p. 201.

Supreme Being; in the recognition that all anthropomorphic attributes must be rejected from our consciousness of deity, lies our sure hope for the advancement of humanity to all of which humanity is capable.⁶⁰

As these statements suggest, Proctor and Massey were not merely mounting a mean-spirited attack on religion, and they were certainly not promoting scientific naturalism. Symbiotic with their discrediting of Christianity is the desecularization of science, the elevation of science as the means by which man could best understand his *spiritual* role in the universe. Just as much as the EEF, Massey and Proctor represent the way in which late nineteenth-century approaches to Egypt were almost always spiritually charged: at the centre of their endeavour was an attempt to infuse evolution with spiritual ideas, in short, to re-enchant the evolutionary world.⁶¹

However religiously conceived Massey's and Proctor's writings were, they still caused biblical Egyptologists great concern. The British Museum – ever the first appeal for those seeking advice on ancient Egypt – received a number of letters from members of the public seeking confirmation that Proctor's and Massey's interpretations of Egyptian civilization were incorrect, and that some of their more dramatic archaeological examples were frauds (as indeed some of them were). Some of these letters reveal that it was clergymen who were recommending that parishioners approach British Museum experts. One example from 1889 reveals that a Martin Simpson was attempting to find 'scientific vindication ... of the miracles ascribed to Christ in the New Testament', but having read in Massey a suggestion that they were in fact the magical acts of an Egyptian mystic, 'a statement that all of them almost had been found set forth in some papyri ... the date of which could not have been many centuries older than Christ's time usually computed' and therefore falsely attributed to Christ, Simpson had written to the dean of Canterbury seeking repudiation of this statement, the dean suggesting that the keeper of the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum should be approached as 'the highest authority on the subject'.⁶² Simpson's correspondence is then concluded with an exposition of the dangers to 'the minds of young men and women' of such irresponsible attacks.⁶³

The British Museum's response to such approaches was, however, compromised by one of the most remarkable features of the debate between biblical Egyptologists and their spiritualist opponents, this being that the philologist and Egyptologist who headed the British Museum department incorporating ancient Egypt was until 1885 Dr Samuel Birch – the enormously respected founder of the Society for Biblical Archaeology – who was surprisingly more

⁶⁰ Proctor, 'The unknowable or the religion of science', *Knowledge*, 2, p. 37.

⁶¹ The theosophical society also sought to attach a spiritualist element to the theory of evolution, as is noted in Alex Owen, *The place of enchantment: British occultism and the culture of the modern* (Chicago, 2004), p. 34; the introduction to Helena Blavatsky, *Isis unveiled: a master-key to the mysteries of ancient and modern science and theology* (New York, 1877), also reveals this trend with specific relation to Egypt.

⁶² Martin Simpson to Renouf, 28 May 1889, BM, ANE Correspondence 1889/180; Martin Simpson to Renouf, 8 June 1889, BM, ANE Correspondence 1889/181. ⁶³ *Ibid.*

inclined to side with Massey than with biblical Egyptologists. Birch was a staunch opponent of the EEF, his opposition based, according to histories of Egyptology, on his belief that Poole and Edwards might compete with his established society.⁶⁴ There is evidence, however, suggesting that Birch's opposition had a deeper basis in belief than this implies, and that he may not have been as inclined towards traditional Christian belief as has been assumed.

Birch, for instance, was described by his British Museum colleagues in terms that imply discreet-agnosticism; according to his successor, Sir E. A. T. Wallis Budge, among the 'godless good'.⁶⁵ At the same time, his organization – the Society for Biblical Archaeology – was not so biblically focused as might be expected, being a generally objective forum for research into the languages of the Near East, arguably only using 'biblical' as a convenient term to cover the whole of the region on which they worked. From the organization's origins in 1870 they subverted the implications of their name, ran counter to the religiously inspired archaeological mainstream, and produced detailed, largely philological, studies, mainly Assyrian but sometimes Egyptian.⁶⁶ Despite his continuing friendship with Edwards and Poole, Birch's opposition to the EEF's 'sentimental archaeology' (a term of abuse coined by Birch in 1882) was so unremitting that Poole came up with the eccentric phrase 'a portcullis to block a pyramid' to describe its obstinacy.⁶⁷

This is the background to letters in the British Museum which demonstrate that Birch gave Massey a great deal of help in the writing of his Egyptian works: proof reading drafts sent to him by the controversial poet, correcting him on Egyptological points, and generally making sure that biblical Egyptologists would not be able to write off Massey's efforts as unworthy of their attention.⁶⁸

Nor, when Massey's volumes came to their attention, did they try to ignore him. One American Egyptological enthusiast, William Emmette Coleman (a US Army quarter master) made opposition to Massey the central theme of his intellectual life, publishing article after article attacking the 'unjust criticisms and malevolent attacks of a semi lunatic'.⁶⁹ His correspondence with

⁶⁴ This interpretation is suggested in T. G. H. James, *Howard Carter: the path to Tutankhamun* (London, 1992), p. 17.

⁶⁵ E. A. T. Wallis Budge, *By Nile and Tigris* (London, 1920), p. 49.

⁶⁶ Even when this society featured the writing of Sayce and other biblical Egyptologists, it made certain to only publish their most toned down, factual work: work which reads very differently from their writings published elsewhere. ⁶⁷ Poole to Naville 28 Apr. 1882, EES, box XIX, item c.

⁶⁸ A large body of correspondence between the two, spanning some five years, exists, but does not make this argument completely watertight. It is possible, despite the polity of his letters, that Birch did consider Massey to be unworthy of his attention, no comment on Massey except the positive ones directed to the poet himself being found in Birch's correspondence with others. Even if this is true, though, Birch was taking a major risk with his reputation by allowing Massey's work to carry the unquestioned authority of his name.

⁶⁹ It is noticeable that despite the publication of Massey's first two books in 1883 and 1885, none of this opposition was raised against him until later in the decade, after the death of Birch in 1885. Thus much of the material that was attacked had not been submitted to Birch's scrutiny and Birch was not

Sayce and Renouf reveals a general outrage among Egyptologists and a hive of activity directed towards finding evidence to expose Massey's claims as fraudulent. In 1888, Coleman published 'Opinions of eminent Egyptologists regarding Mr Massey's alleged Egypto-Christian parallels', which received immediate praise from Sayce for its 'thorough demolition of Mr. Massey's crudities ... errors ... exposed impartially and mercilessly'.⁷⁰ Renouf too wrote to Coleman:

You are right in your opinion of Mr Massey. Some people think him dishonest; and that he is quite conscious of the ridiculous blunders which he publishes. I do not think so after having examined his large book. It is a work which I should have thought could only have been written in Bedlam. No lunatic could possibly write more wild rubbish, without the least consciousness of the incredible ignorance displayed throughout. The man is AT ONCE an ignoramus of the worst, kind, viz., not in the least being aware of his ignorance, and he has the pretension of explaining things which cannot be understood (except by trusting other persons) without a considerable knowledge of different languages, which he does not possess.⁷¹

Unfortunately for Renouf, Coleman made the mistake of publishing this response, thinking that Massey would not guess its author, underestimating the poet's powers of deduction.⁷² This set off an intense argument, beginning with Massey's 'A retort' in which Massey answered Renouf by drawing a parallel between Bedlam and Bethlehem (Bedlam had originally been known as Bethlehem), claiming that it was the worshippers of 'the ancient Bedlam' who should be incarcerated in the modern one.⁷³ This document concludes with an attack on biblical archaeology in general, making frequent reference to 'the enemy', defined as 'Egyptologists and Assyriologists who are bibliolators first and scholars afterwards', claiming that in their output 'bibliolatry puts out the eye of scholarship or causes confirmed strabismus'.⁷⁴

These debates between biblical Egyptologists and their opponents offer the most dramatic evidence of the extent to which Near Eastern archaeology in the 1880s and 1890s was still defined by its practitioners' attitudes to the Bible. The status of the Bible remained a highly contentious issue that dominated many debates about the identity of the world before classical civilization: polarizing scholarship, making objective debate of certain issues almost impossible, and causing discussion of ancient Egypt to flare up into the kind of incautious posturing that erupted between Massey and Renouf in the above debate.

available to defend it. Coleman's own motivations are difficult to situate – he roused biblical Egyptologists against Massey, but his own beliefs were far from orthodox.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Gerald Massey, 'A retort', in *Gerald Massey's lectures*, p. 249. ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 248–9.

⁷² On reading Coleman's article, Massey wrote to Renouf asking for a categorical denial that he had written the letter. Renouf was unable to offer this. His drafts of a suitably evasive reply can be found on the reverse of the letter from Massey: Massey to Renouf, undated, BM, ANE Correspondence 1887/141. ⁷³ Massey, 'A retort', p. 250. ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

V

Biblical Egyptologists, Proctor, and Massey do not represent all of the uses of ancient Egyptian archaeology in this period. The Egyptian novels of H. Rider Haggard, for instance, are quite remarkable repositories of second-hand archaeological information – quite different from *King Solomon's mines* or *She* – intended to convey a detailed, genuine, picture of ancient Egyptian civilization to his audience, where narrative is frequently subsumed beneath a welter of dense archaeological information and exposition of the spiritual truths Haggard considered these facts to prove.⁷⁵ But all of the approaches to Egypt in this period have in common the belief that pharaonic civilization is central to an understanding of the course of history. In all of these approaches ancient Egypt is key in identifying a teleology to which Victorian Britain is also subject, whether as part of the same decline from glorious beginnings, or ascent from a primitive state. In all of them the quest for material origins is closely connected to a spiritual quest, Egypt being considered uniquely capable of revealing spiritual truth. Because of this, approaches to Egypt were always defined by religious belief, demonstrating that in this period few of the celebrated archaeologists who worked in Egypt, or scientists who turned their attention to it, did so in order to discover how society had developed, but like Schliemann at Hissarlik, approached ancient history in order to prove an existing, strongly held belief, which did not usually overtly relate to colonialist ideas.⁷⁶

The predominant belief that was to be proved is of additional interest since it runs counter to conventional understandings of Victorian reactions to the much problematized ‘crisis of faith’. Some apologists did conform to the well-worn idea of writing divine agency out of Old Testament accounts of miracles, so as to make them conform to modern scientific knowledge: the physicist Sir Thomas Lauder Brunton, for instance, demonstrated that even among professional scientists the Egyptological interweaving of scientific and theological issues did not seem peculiar in the 1880s, writing a long account of biblical Egypt, involving ‘scientific’ explanations of several miracles, of which the following is a striking example:

Among the plagues was one that used to puzzle me not a little, the plague of ‘darkness which might be felt’. Why, I thought, did the people all remain in their dwellings? Why could they not take lanterns with them and move out? But a day I once spent in Port Said showed me what was probably the reason. On waking in the morning it seemed to me that everything had been turned into pea-soup. Above, around, and on every side, was

⁷⁵ Novels such as these were another feature of the sudden emergence of a popular fascination with ancient Egypt towards the end of the nineteenth century. By the mid-1890s many more works of fiction set in ancient Egypt were being produced each year than had been written in the whole of the first half of the century put together, most emphasizing the civilization’s biblical connections and spiritual power.

⁷⁶ Hissarlik is the site in the Troad at which Schliemann made the discoveries he connected to the Iliad.

a thick yellow mist, darkening the air like a London fog, but differing from it in this respect, that it was darkness perceptible; a darkness that might be felt, and painfully felt too, for it was caused by a storm of sand, driven by the wind and every particle stinging the skin like a needle. It was the khamasin, and while it was blowing, those who were wise all stayed indoors.⁷⁷

Even Naville occasionally succumbed to what has become a stereotyped, but largely unstudied, practice of the late nineteenth century.⁷⁸ Among the evidence for his favoured Exodus route, for instance, he cited observation of a point on the Red Sea where ‘the phenomenon which took place on such a large scale when the Israelites went through must have been well-known ... At this point the sea was liable to be driven back under the influence of the East wind, to leave a dry way.’⁷⁹

But in the cases of most Egyptologists, and the public who flocked to read of their discoveries, attitudes to ancient Egypt demonstrate the kind of commitment to biblical teleologies that Peter Bowler identifies among many physicists and biologists in the *fin de siècle*. In the case of Egyptologists this commitment went a step further than it did among most scientists, however, becoming a retreat into the most traditional forms of religion, aggressively refusing to entertain any question as to the Bible’s historical reliability and using it, word for word, as a guide for excavations. Far from denigrating ancient Egypt as Bernal suggests, most Egyptologists reacted to it with awed respect, considering it to be the civilization in which Moses – according to St Paul – had learnt his wisdom, providing evidence that Christian ethics were God-given: as old as civilization itself.⁸⁰ Egyptian archaeology, rather than being ‘the handmaiden of history’, remained the handmaiden of theology for several decades past the point at which religious belief has been considered to have ceased to be definitive of archaeological practice, demonstrating just how traditional a large proportion of the Victorian reading public remained, and just how fundamental the need to prove biblical history still was to many intellectuals.

⁷⁷ Sir T. Lauder Brunton, *The Bible and science* (London, 1881), pp. 27–8. The biblical account of this plague is found in Exodus 10:21.

⁷⁸ This view was already a stereotype in 1892, demonstrated in George Gissing, *Born in exile* (London, 1892), p. 118, the central character arguing ‘Bishops, Priests and Deacons ... [insist] that one must be “broad”’; there are clamours for treatises which pretend to reconcile revelation and science. It is quite pathetic to watch the enthusiasm with which they hail any man who distinguishes himself by this kind of apologetic skill, this pious jugglery.’ ⁷⁹ Naville, *The store city of Pithom*, pp. 25–6.

⁸⁰ Acts 7:22 ‘And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.’