

Egyptological Conversations on Race and Science

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In 1908, when James Henry Breasted published ancient copies of some Biblical texts, he hoped that one interested reader would be Booker T. Washington. Breasted wrote to Washington to bring the matter to his attention, providing him with a copy of the article and explaining its general content.¹ At that time, Washington was preoccupied with the aftermath of an injustice done to black soldiers stationed in Brownsville, Texas, and the subsequent refusal of Theodore Roosevelt, whom Washington had formerly advised, to undo the damage to the men's reputations, careers, and futures. Nonetheless, Washington replied to Breasted the following week, expressing his polite interest in the matter and noting that although he had not had the time to acquaint himself with the ancient history of Ethiopia, he noted that many West African traditions traced their cultural heritage to "a distant place in the direction of ancient Ethiopia."² Washington wondered if that "distant place" and the subject matter of Breasted's article could be one and the same. "Could it be possible that these civilizing influences had their sources in this ancient Ethiopian kingdom to which your article refers?"³ If Washington saw ancient "Ethiopia," that is, the southern Nile River Valley, also known as the Upper Nile, Nubia, and in contemporary political designation the Sudan, as the source of other African people's culture, Breasted would have concurred.

Breasted's article that he sent to Washington discussed the acquisition of some ancient papyri by a scholar in Cairo. The texts on the papyri were composed in an ancient language that was written in the Greek alphabet, but was largely undecipherable to scholars. The ancient papyri were Biblical in nature, the remains of two Christian books. One contained part of what was presumably an entire calendar year's worth of selections of the writings of Paul, and the other was a sermon, purportedly delivered by Jesus after his resurrection from the dead, concerning the past and future. The papyrus fragments were purchased in Cairo in 1906 by a German scholar, Dr. Karl Schmidt. Among the words written in the Greek script on the papyrus, Schmidt identified the name Herod and surmised that the letters that followed it, which he could identify neither as Greek nor as Coptic, were in fact the "Nubian" word (what we today refer to as Meroitic) for "king."

Breasted's discussion of the ancient intersections of Egyptian and Meroitic culture make it clear that he viewed such connections through the lens of the contemporary US politics, that is, the politics of racial identification based on skin color. Breasted wrote with excitement about the possibility of deciphering the

ancient Meroitic script, which he was (mistakenly) confident would occur thanks to the papyri that Schmidt had acquired. He referred to that language as “an African negro dialect” and concluded that it was related to the languages of groups in the central Sudanese region of Kurdufan. But then Breasted declared Nubians, the very people who inhabited the Upper Nile in ancient times, to be of mixed race, “far from being of exclusively negro blood,” despite his assessment of their spoken language.

Breasted believed that the decipherment of the ancient Meroitic language would reveal connections between the ancient scripts of the Nile River Valley’s lower area, Egypt, and its upper area, modern Sudan. In his mind though, the influence could have only gone one way: south. Breasted used imperialistic race-based language when he discussed any possible (though, he guessed, unlikely) influence of Meroitic on Egyptian, choosing the term “tinctured,” a word rooted in the sense of dying or coloring, to describe cultural influence from the south. “When, therefore, we are in a position to read the early Nubian inscriptions, we shall be able to compare the ancient Nubian with the Egyptian and thus to determine how far, if at all, the Egyptian language of the Pharaohs was tinctured by negro speech.”⁴ Breasted drew a color line between Meroitic language (“an African negro dialect”) and its people (“[not] exclusively negro”) versus Egyptian language and culture (clearly “non-negro” in his view). When he wrote of the “coloring” influence that the Meroitic language could have had on the ancient Egyptian language, he revealed his American race-based perspective, drawn from his contemporary world, and he projected that on to the world of the ancient cultures that he studied. To understand Breasted’s views on the ancient peoples of Egypt and the Sudan and the views he expressed in letters to Booker T. Washington, it is necessary to understand how Breasted viewed his work as the visionary behind the formation of a research institution focused exclusively on the ancient Near East: the Oriental Institute.

A Research Institute

Breasted’s plan for the formation of the Oriental Institute, the research body at the University of Chicago that was funded by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., was firmly rooted in the understanding of scientific method of that time. Breasted’s

rhetoric was clearly influenced by his graduate training in Germany, with its tradition of *Wissenschaft* (knowledge production, broadly conceived). In January 1919, Breasted described his idea that the Oriental Institute would be a central organizing force, “a laboratory,” as necessary to his primary scholarly goal “as an astronomical observatory” is to the study of the universe.⁵ The goal of Breasted’s laboratory was to write a “history of the origin and development of civilization.”⁶

A month after writing up his January 1919 summary of his envisioned Oriental Institute, Breasted laid out his plan for the institute to Rockefeller. Using a politico-religious appeal, Breasted twice stressed that the time was ripe for a scholarly foray into the region because the area had been “delivered from Turkish misrule.”⁷ The moment was, he wrote, singular and unprecedented because of the ability to research the ancient records of the Near East “for the first time in history.”⁸ Rockefeller echoed that sentiment to Breasted in a letter sent three months later, writing that “material of untold value is now available,” but warning that “changing conditions may lead to [its] destruction.”⁹

Many years later, in 1926, Breasted wrote to Mrs. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, using the rhetoric of religious conquest and imperialism, perhaps in a (conscious or unconscious) attempt to appeal to the Rockefellers’ Christian beliefs. Breasted wrote of the “responsibility” to “study...shelter and [provide] protection” for the “priceless treasures of the Cairo Museum.”¹⁰ His missive was in reference to his discussions with Rockefeller about funding a new museum in the Egyptian capital. Breasted’s imperialistic appeal to Mrs. Rockefeller to stress the grand implications of his work (“...not really business, but the fate of a great civilization mission, sent out by a great American”) took a decidedly Christian turn when he referred to the plan to build the museum in Egypt as a “new Crusade to the Orient.”¹¹

The vantage point that Breasted repeatedly offered for an audience to understand, perhaps even appreciate, ancient Egyptian culture, was a Biblical one. In 1928, when Breasted wrote to Mrs. Rockefeller about a statute that he was trying to purchase on behalf of Mr. Rockefeller, Breasted described it as “one of the great kings of the Twelfth Dynasty, that is to say, roughly the age of Abraham, a generation or two after 2000 B.C.”¹² The unquestioned connection between Egyptian artifact and Biblical narrative was common among other Egyptologists of that era, such as Flinders Petrie of the University of London. For Petrie, fundraising for his fieldwork was often centered on generating the public’s interest in the possibility of finds that could shed light on Biblical sites.¹³

The founding of an institute to collect evidence from and to study the ancient Near East was in many ways a project that stood at the intersection of science and the humanities, as the German word *Wissenschaft* implies. That position at the crossroads of two ways of formulating and approaching questions can be seen in the documents that laid out the plan for the new institute. In the opinion of Ernest D. Burton, then president of the University of Chicago, the groundbreaking work in the physical sciences that was being done at the university should be matched by “research in reference to the whole history of man and of human society.”¹⁴ Among the several humanities projects at the university that aimed to achieve that goal, Burton wrote to Rockefeller in 1923 that the Oriental Institute was the project par excellence.

Breasted wanted the Oriental Institute to be the launching point for the telling of a grand history of the progress of humanity. His broad vision for that history, however, was countered by his narrow vision of what constituted both “progress” and “humanity.” In his 1919 description of the institute to Rockefeller, Breasted outlined his plan for just such a history that would trace “the story of man...his rise from Stone Age barbarism, through successive stages of advance, the emergence of civilization, the history of the earliest great civilized states, and the transmission to Europe of the civilization which we have inherited.”¹⁵ Here, Breasted performs an act of inclusion and exclusion. Civilization, in his view, equaled contemporary Western society, and it implied technological and societal advancement, positive progress, even enlightenment. Any culture group perceived or desired to have been an influence on contemporary Western society was a step in that transmission of civilization. Likewise, any culture group that might be excluded from Breasted’s purview was outside the so-described march of progress.

Breasted recounted the trajectory of human “civilization” using the science of his day: evolution. He was interested in questions like where humans came from and how they have “evolved.” Implicit in those types of questions is who is human. Ancient cultures outside of the Near East were not represented in Breasted’s Oriental Institute. In Breasted’s conception, “man” had reached the pinnacle of the march of civilization in Europe and America via the older cultures of the Near East. He claimed ancient Near Eastern history as the history of the West, and he questioned his own work neither on a theoretical level (e.g., his conception of civilization as based on tall burial places; the superiority of the Western culture of his day) nor on a practical level (e.g., what was the trajectory of humans who were

not a part of Western culture or who were not members of the dominant segments of Western culture?).

Science and Humanities

In keeping with the German ideal of *Wissenschaft*, Breasted's view of history was strongly influenced by scientific theory, and it laid firmly within the realm of the humanities. As noted above, before the Oriental Institute was a reality, Breasted described its importance to his field in scientific terms: as an astronomical observatory is to the study of the universe.¹⁶ A 1923 report that detailed the Oriental Institute's accomplished work and future needs positioned the Institute as a "missing link" between palaeontology, anthropology, and ethnology (which analyzed, respectively, "lower animal life," "primitive man," and the "races of man") and history and sociology (which devoted themselves to the analysis of "later civilized society").¹⁷ Between these areas of study, the only organization (according to the document) dedicated to the "origins of civilization and early history of civilized societies (down through Hebrew history)" was the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.¹⁸ The document refers to the Oriental Institute as a means for doing "for man" what Louis Agassiz did "for lower animals," that is, establish a "laboratory and museum" for systematic analysis of the subject matter.¹⁹

In June 1925, Breasted wrote to Abraham Flexner, future founder of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and at the time that Breasted wrote to him, member of the Rockefeller Foundation's General Education Board. Breasted expressed his pleasure at "your interest in humanistic research."²⁰ The document that laid out Breasted's vision for the research center, which Rockefeller had requested of him in October 1925, was entitled "A New Area of Humanistic Research and a Plan for Beginning Its Investigation."²¹ April of the following year saw Flexner sending to fellow board member, W. W. Brierley, his memorandum to be discussed at the May board meeting on the importance of archaeology, specifically Breasted's work through the Oriental Institute, from the standpoint of humanistic research.

Between 1926 and 1928, Breasted vacillated between describing the Oriental Institute's mission in terms of humanities and science. In December 1926, Rockefeller received from the Oriental Institute a "Memorandum on Scientific

Research in the Ancient Orient.”²² A year later, Breasted completed “A Brief on Scientific Education in the Study of Early Man, Popularly Called Archaeology,” in which he described a “huge gap” that separated “physical man emerging in the gray dawn of the human career” and “the rise of civilization in Europe.”²³ “The Orientalists” are the only ones able to span that gap and thus to reveal to living humans how humans got from there to here, by revealing the “fundamentals upon which modern life is based.”²⁴

In May 1928, Breasted wrote to George Vincent, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, mentioning that because the Board had typically supported work in the natural sciences, Breasted wanted to point out “the very close relationship, and sometimes indeed, complete identity, as between our Oriental Institute research projects and natural science.”²⁵ Financial support of the Oriental Institute was not, Breasted assured him, “by any means exclusively humanistic support, but to no small extent is support of natural science.”²⁶

In July of 1928, Breasted wrote a lengthy summary of the research work of the scholars at the Oriental Institute. In the report, which was entitled “A Laboratory for the Investigation of Early Man,” Breasted again turned to scientific language to describe the Oriental Institute.²⁷ In outlining the work of the Prehistoric Survey, Breasted made a clear distinction—as he had in his article that he sent to Booker T. Washington—between the Africa of his ancient Near East and the Africa of Booker T. Washington. Because of the Survey’s work in the Faiyum oasis in Egypt, Breasted wrote, “In a preliminary way we can therefore now place North African man (not Negro) in geological history.”²⁸

In October 1928, Breasted sent a summary of the Oriental Institute’s work to the president of the General Education Board, at his request. Entitled, “Some Notes on the Oriental Institute as a Laboratory for the Investigation of Early Man and for the Training of Specialists to Undertake Such Investigations,” the memo written by Breasted described the work of the Oriental Institute using the same bridge metaphor as he did in the 1923 report, described earlier. The Oriental Institute, in Breasted’s view, spanned disciplines such as palaeontology and history or straddled a focus “exclusively [on] men’s physical evolution” and the “recent history of European man...[that] begins with civilization as already a given factor.”²⁹ The importance of the Oriental Institute’s work in deciphering and understanding the ancient records remained imperative, in Breasted’s view, because the Near East was the place “where the civilization which we of the West

have inherited arose.”³⁰ Drawing on metaphors inspired by the Industrial Age, Breasted wrote that the Oriental Institute would provide the “scientific training” for the practitioners of this bridge discipline, the necessity of which was paramount, Breasted wrote, lest the world plunge into a state where “exclusively material forces operate.” The work of the Oriental Institute would bring “spiritual values into an otherwise mechanistic universe.”³¹

For Breasted, ancient Egypt was firmly in the purview not just of Christianity, but also of white people. He showed that view in a visually striking way on a map published in the second edition (1935) of his textbook *Ancient Times*. In that book, Breasted twice depicts the homelands of the “three races,” as was commonly conceived at that time. The first chapter of the book features a map showing the retreat of ice after the last Ice Age and the subsequent movement of people.³² The map superimposes the so-called scientific grouping of people into three major races onto the Eastern hemisphere, giving geographical authority to the racializing claims. Europe and North Africa are emblazoned with the words “Great White Race,” while a smaller font informs the reader that the “Black Race” was situated south of the Sahara Desert and the “Mongoloid or Yellow Race” inhabited the area west of the Ural Mountains. In Breasted’s estimation, only one of the three deserved to be labeled “Great,” while the other two were left with no extra modifiers beyond a generalized hue of the skin.³³ In a footnote, he explained the apparent contradiction in locating a part of his “White Race” in Africa: “In North Africa these people were dark-skinned, but nevertheless physically they belong to the Great White Race.”³⁴ The second, more schematic, illustration in the textbook laid out the same idea but in an abstract form, deriving authority from geometry (with the quarter circle that encompasses the zone in question) and cartography (where the sixtieth degree East and the twentieth degree North demarcate borders between the “Mongoloid or Yellow” and “Black” races and his “Great White Race.”)³⁵

In his writing for an English-speaking public, Breasted makes his readers complicit in his whiteness. He does not imagine an audience of a different skin color. In the first edition of *Ancient Times*, Breasted begins his section on “Egypt and Its Earliest Inhabitants” with a view from a “comfortable railway car” in Egypt, where the tourist sees “brown-skinned men of slender build, with dark hair” irrigating fields.³⁶ Besides the obvious giveaway that the reader is not a “brown-skinned” person, since the men working in the fields are presented as such a point

of interest, there is another indication that Breasted is writing for a privileged white audience. At the time that his book was published, in 1916, there were many parts of the United States where “brown-skinned” people would be relegated to substandard railway cars, not the “comfortable” car in which Breasted places his imaginary tourist, himself, and the reader, as they companionably chug southward out of Alexandria.

Despite Breasted’s lack of imagination regarding his readership’s diversity, he did exhibit some creative racial gerrymandering with regard to the ancient Egyptians. Being “dark-skinned” did not exclude Breasted’s Egyptians from membership in his so-called Great White Race. Breasted’s conception of “white’...was less a construct of skin color and more a construct of *achievement* and *control*” because “a variety of skin colors or physical features” could be encompassed under his “Great White Race” umbrella.³⁷ This is the precisely the point when Breasted’s trajectory of history becomes muddled. If ancient Egypt was a “great civilization,” based on its impressive monuments, and Europe and the West were home of the “great white races” that led the way in civilization in Breasted’s day, then how could he reconcile the fact that “brown-skinned” modern Egyptians were the inheritors of that ancient greatness, while his so-called “great white races” had stone weapons and tools as relics of their ancient past? To address that conundrum, Breasted simply drew a historical line from Egypt to the Levant of the Bible to Europe and the West of the present.

In Breasted’s view, a culture as grand and “advanced” as ancient Egypt must surely have lain on the same trajectory as his own. Darkness of skin tone did not disqualify Egyptians from membership in the Great White Race because more pressing for Breasted than the dark skin of the Egyptians was the Egyptian influence that he perceived on a historical trajectory that would culminate in his contemporary Western culture. Breasted simply hijacked others’ history for the West. Darkness of skin tone mattered for him only in the face of the twin factors of a “not-great” history that would have laid outside of the white West’s so-called march of progress. With regard to the Meroitic papyri about which he wrote to Booker T. Washington, Breasted could not conceive of linguistic or cultural influence moving from the Meroitic people north to Egypt because such a movement of cultural influence would signal a “greatness” of the “Black Race” and would not have fit with Breasted’s historical model that positioned a white West at the pinnacle of “civilization.”

Conclusion

Breasted viewed his work as *Wissenschaft*, encompassing both science and the humanities, but his racially exclusionary views assigned Egypt to a dominant white race. His perception of ancient Egyptian culture is inspired by his faith in American know-how, a (male, white) Western sense of imperialism, and a disdain for non-Western groups.³⁸ Breasted's desire to save Egyptian monumental records (the decoration inscribed and painted in formal contexts, such as tombs and temples) was linked to the association between ancient Egypt and the Bible. Like his colleague at Harvard, Egyptologist George Reisner, Breasted saw ancient Egypt more connected with Semitic groups of the ancient Near East and less connected with groups further south or west in Africa. In Breasted's view, the Meroitic people, not the Egyptians, were related to the race to which Booker T. Washington belonged. Breasted laid out that distinction for Washington in his letter when he described the discovery of the papyri and his own work on ancient monuments in the Sudan as "a matter concerning the early history of your race."³⁹ To his credit, Breasted's statement to Washington was quite remarkable for his day in that Breasted recognized that people of African descent in America had a history, something that many at that time denied completely. Nonetheless, he demarcated the history of ancient Egypt as something outside of the "history of [Washington's] race."

¹ James Henry Breasted to Booker T. Washington, April 29, 1909. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

² Booker T. Washington to James Henry Breasted, May 6, 1909. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

³ Booker T. Washington to James Henry Breasted, May 6, 1909. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

⁴ Breasted p. 384–385.

⁵ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Series 2 (FA335), Box 41, Folder 365.

⁶ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Series 2 (FA335), Box 41, Folder 365.

⁷ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 112, Folder 812; Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 111, Folder 808.

⁸ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 112, Folder 812.

⁹ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 111, Folder 808.

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- ¹⁰ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, AA (FA336), Box 2, Folder 23.
- ¹¹ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, AA (FA336), Box 2, Folder 23.
- ¹² Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, AA (FA336), Box 2, Folder 23.
- ¹³ Drower, Margaret S. *Flinders Petrie: A Life in Archaeology*. 2nd ed. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, p. 58, 65, 127, 221.
- ¹⁴ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 112, Folder 812.
- ¹⁵ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 112, Folder 812.
- ¹⁶ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Series 2 (FA335), Box 41, Folder 365.
- ¹⁷ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 112, Folder 814.
- ¹⁸ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 112, Folder 814.
- ¹⁹ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 112, Folder 814.
- ²⁰ General Education Board, General Education Board record group, Series 1, 1.4, Box 659, Folder 6851.
- ²¹ Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Box 112, Folder 814; General Education Board (FA058), General Education Board record group, Series 1, 1.4, Box 659, Folder 6855.
- ²² General Education Board (FA058), General Education Board record group, Series 1, 1.4, Box 659, Folder 6851.
- ²³ General Education Board (FA058) General Education Board record group, Series 1, 1.4, Box 659, Folder 6855.
- ²⁴ General Education Board (FA058), General Education Board record group, Series 1, 1.4, Box 659, Folder 6855.
- ²⁵ Rockefeller Foundation records, projects, RG 1.1 (FA386), Series 216, Subseries 216.R, Box 17, Folder 236.
- ²⁶ Rockefeller Foundation records, projects, RG 1.1 (FA386), Series 216, Subseries 216.R, Box 17, Folder 236.
- ²⁷ General Education Board (FA058), General Education Board record group, Series 1, 1.4, Box 659, Folder 6855.
- ²⁸ General Education Board (FA058), General Education Board record group, Series 1, 1.4, Box 659, Folder 6855, p. 6.
- ²⁹ International Education Board records (FA062), Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 18, Folder 269, p. 1; General Education Board (FA058), General Education Board record group, Series 1, 1.4, Box 659, Folder 6855.
- ³⁰ International Education Board records (FA062), Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 18, Folder 269, p. 2.
- ³¹ International Education Board records (FA062), Series 1, Subseries 1, Box 18, Folder 269, p. 5.
- ³² Breasted, James Henry. *Ancient Times, A History of the Early World*. 2nd rev. ed. Boston: Ginn and Company, (1916) 1935, p. 13.
- ³³ Ambridge similarly notes that Breasted was trying “to create a scientifically definable concept of ‘civilization’—one that did, admittedly, marginalize any group of people whose cultural values did not conform to his criteria;” Ambridge, Lindsay. “Imperialism and Racial Geography in James Henry Breasted’s *Ancient Times, a History of the Early World*.” *JEH* 5 (2012):12–33, p. 29.
- ³⁴ Breasted, James Henry. *Ancient Times, A History of the Early World*. 2nd rev. ed. Boston: Ginn and Company, (1916) 1935, p. 12.
- ³⁵ Breasted, James Henry. *Ancient Times, A History of the Early World*. 2nd rev. ed. Boston: Ginn and Company, (1916) 1935, p. 130.

³⁶ Breasted, James Henry. *Ancient Times, A History of the Early World*. Boston: Ginn and Company, 1916, p. 35–36.

³⁷ Ambridge, Lindsay. “Imperialism and Racial Geography in James Henry Breasted’s *Ancient Times, a History of the Early World*.” *JEH* 5 (2012):12–33, p. 29.

³⁸ On Breasted and imperialism, see Ambridge.

³⁹ James Henry Breasted to Booker T. Washington, April 29, 1909. Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.