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***Hugh Nibley Observed***

Introduction  
Jeffrey M. Bradshaw

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# INTRODUCTION

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Jeffrey M. Bradshaw



*Figure 1. Faces of Hugh Nibley ca. 1911, 1933, 2001, 2005.<sup>39</sup>*

One night at a reception, Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war in Abraham Lincoln’s administration, remarked to a friend that a certain man passing by was “a pretender, a humbug, and a fraud,” while also saying that he disliked the man’s face. “But the poor man isn’t responsible for his face,” retorted the friend. “A man of fifty is responsible for his face!” countered Stanton.<sup>1</sup>

Like the rest of us, Hugh Nibley made his own face. The photo at left radiates the innocence and purity of childhood. The next one, taken at age twenty-three, after Hugh had returned from his two-year mission to Germany and was preparing for an additional short-term mission over the summer in Portland, Oregon,<sup>2</sup> is handsome, idealistic, determined, intense—and, perhaps, reflects a hint of self-conceit. “Ambition was never my weakness,” he admitted to his son Alex, “it was vanity.”<sup>3</sup>

By the time the third photo was taken, Nibley had cast off, outwardly at least, his former well-coiffed, buttoned-up persona for an older, wiser, and perpetually amused demeanor. This photo represents the best known public face of the man who had become both a bulwark of Latter-day Saint apologetics and a folk hero to many who had never read him but had heard amusing stories about him. According to Alex, “the rumbled hat and baggy pants were his own

version of the monk's cassock, a sign not that he didn't care, but that he knew the danger of caring too much.<sup>24</sup> The last photo, taken shortly before Hugh's death at age ninety-four, is a visual reflection of his return to the fully cherubic self of his infancy,<sup>5</sup> when, near the end, he was virtually "sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."<sup>6</sup> "His ego," remembered Alex, "that vanity he fought so long finally died when frailty left him completely dependent on others for every function of life. And what was left? Pure love."<sup>7</sup>

### **My Personal Debt to Hugh Nibley**

Among other things, I love Hugh Nibley because of the part he plays in my appreciation of scripture. The scriptures are dear to me, especially the book of Genesis. As a young boy, I would read Genesis from my grandmother Singleton's large Bible over and over as I lay in bed at nights. These intimate stories of families from another time and place resonated with core elements of my own happy life. Of even greater importance, they confirmed to my soul that others besides myself experienced the depth of affection, trust, and loyalty that I felt toward my Heavenly Father. As I grew older my study was enriched through what I read from my grandfather Bradshaw's copy of *Lehi in the Desert*,<sup>8</sup> in the *Improvement Era*, and later within the pages of the *Ensign* and *New Era*. In these periodicals, I eagerly feasted on Nibley's frequent contributions.

During a pivotal year I spent at BYU before leaving for graduate school, my friend Michael B. James generously shared his vast collection of published and unpublished works by Hugh Nibley. Determined to make my personal index of Nibley's works as complete as possible, I corrected small errors and added unpublished items by hand to my xeroxed copy of the 1978 edition of Louis Midgley's bibliography.<sup>9</sup> I attended Nibley's classes and lectures whenever possible.

More than two decades later, through the unexpected blessing of a yearlong "sabbatical" in France, I was impressed that I should organize and publish thoughts about Genesis that I had previously kept to myself. Our move to a new time zone afforded extra early morning study time before the day's work-related email messages began to arrive from across the Atlantic. Jack Welch kindly offered encouragement to the project.

My original thought had been to focus on the poignant Jacob-Joseph story cycle, which had long attracted me. However, as I began the project in earnest, my thoughts were continually—and at first, I admit, reluctantly—led back to the Book of Moses, Joseph Smith's prophetic expansion of the first chapters of Genesis. My reluctance stemmed from a cognizance of my ignorance. Though the sobering demeanor of this marvelous book had become beautiful to me through long acquaintance, I felt I had neither the time nor expertise required to assimilate—let alone credibly contribute to—the mountain of prophetic writings and scholarship that had already addressed the many enigmas woven deeply into the fabric of this foundational work of scripture. To properly tackle the early chapters of Genesis would require addressing not only deep theological and doctrinal issues, but also scientific ones; not to mention the vast contributions of world religions in relevant texts, art, and music. In short, Genesis seemed a story far too old for a green author.<sup>10</sup>

Despite early misgivings, I was comforted by tangible reassurance and ongoing direction in the intimate dialogue of prayer. I also found friendly encouragement in the splendid scaffolding previously assembled by the patient labors of prior exegetes—Hugh Nibley in particular. Looking back, it is a wonder to me that a few months after our return from France, I had a reasonably complete draft of the commentary in hand, and had only the back matter still to finish.

Reading Hugh Nibley gave me confidence that the early chapters of JST Genesis I had learned to love were something more than what is, in the eyes of many people nowadays, nothing more than a fanciful collection of worn-out fables—one more shard among the dusty discards of the almost bygone passage of Christianity in the world. The eloquent, erudite, and unwavering voice of Hugh Nibley as expressed through his writings confirmed, as did the scriptures themselves, that I was not alone in what I had come to know through sacred experience: that the Book of Moses includes priceless information about the teachings and ordinances of the temple, replete with indicators of antiquity that are best explained when the essential element of divine revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith is acknowledged.

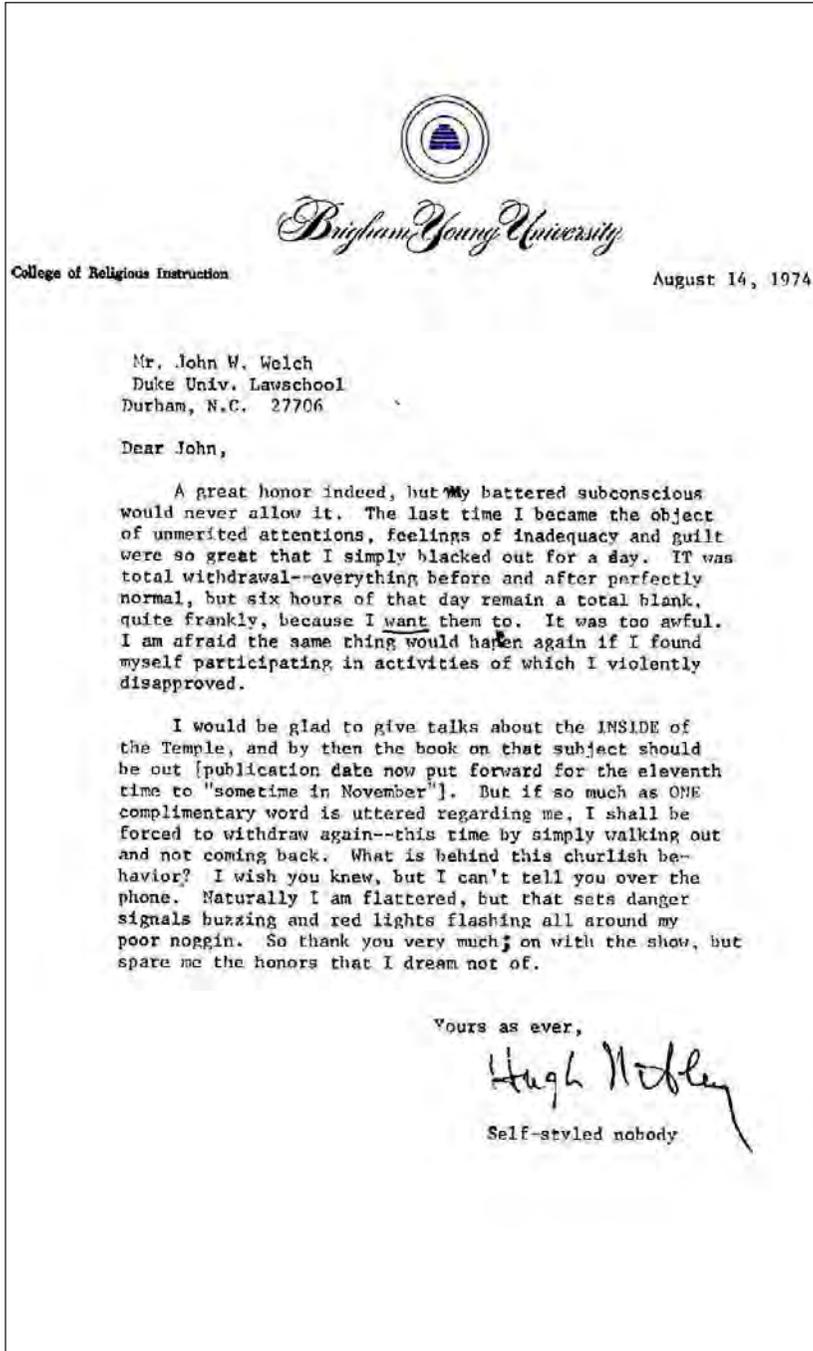


Figure 2. August 14, 1974, letter to John W. Welch in which Nibley refuses to participate in any event intended to honor him.<sup>40</sup>

### Repeated Honors for a Man Who Disdained Recognition

It is the rare scholar whose qualities and reputation are honored by a *Festschrift*,<sup>13</sup> a collection of essays from one's colleagues affirming and building on the work of their respected peer. However, it is almost unheard of for scholars to honor the same individual with multiple *Festschriften*, including the present *Festschrift*-like volume, appearing more than fifteen years after Nibley's passing.

The typical *Festschrift* is accompanied by a formal event attended by family and friends. During the event, effusive verbal accolades for the embarrassed honoree are ceremoniously heaped upon the already bounteous but usually more restrained prose contained in the published volume.

To unlucky friends who were called upon to organize events in honor of Hugh Nibley, huge obstacles presented themselves, the most daunting being that Nibley was absolutely allergic to the spotlight (see figure 2). In his mind, such events were "activities of which [he] violently disapproved."<sup>14</sup>

And when the organizer prevailed in scheduling an event against Nibley's vehement opposition, there were additional, thorny problems to solve. Such problems arose when programs opened with a customary introduction of Hugh to the assembled crowd. Indeed, a lengthy, formal discussion among faculty members was once scheduled by John W. Welch, Louis Midgley, and Sterling Van Wagenen on the question of "How does one introduce Hugh Nibley?"<sup>15</sup> In his discussion notes, Welch noted the many contradictory adjectives used to describe him:<sup>16</sup>

- Furiously active in the Church or a nonconformist?
- No recognition or iconic hero?
- Serious scholar or buffoon clowning around?
- Mentor or individualist?
- Teacher or researcher?
- Reconfirming or unsettling?
- Challenging or reassuring?
- Conservative or liberal?
- Privileged or paupered?
- Author or speaker?
- Academically rigorous or only interested in homiletics?
- Spontaneous or tedious?

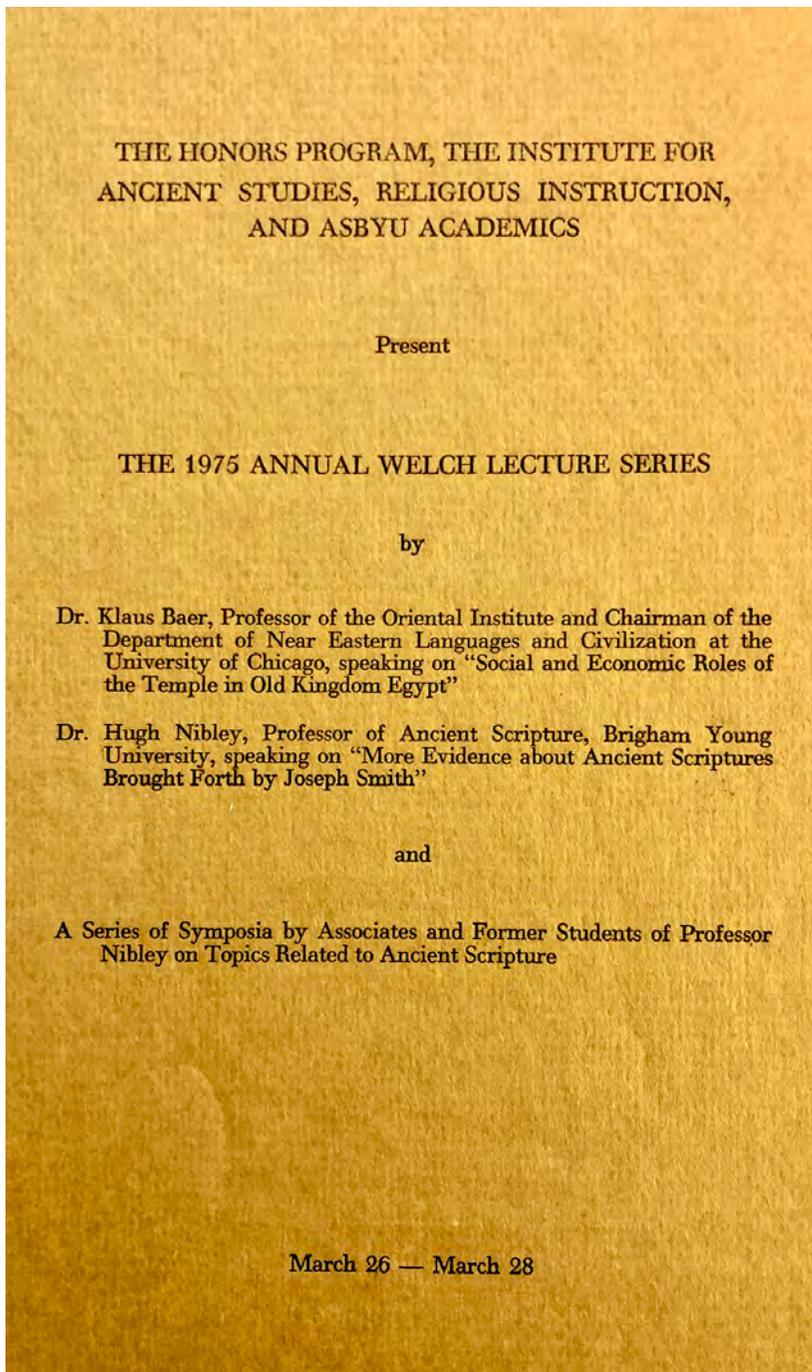


Figure 3. Cover page for the printed program of the 1975 Nibley celebration.<sup>41</sup>

- Aloof or compassionate?
- Panoramic or mired in details?
- Lasting contribution or merely stalling for time?
- Absolutely confident or forever tentative?
- Eccentric or mainstream? . . .
- A doorkeeper in the House of the Lord or the Head Curator of the Temple Treasury?

Writing elsewhere, Robert K. Thomas gives what would be an apt observation about Welch's list: "What appear to be contradictions in others turns out to be complements in him: He is *sui generis*<sup>17</sup> and therefore not subject to a normal audit."<sup>18</sup>

Despite all these hardships, no fewer than six major celebratory gatherings were planned and carried out in Nibley's honor during his lifetime:

1. **March 26–28, 1975.** The annual Welch lecture series—founded by John S. and Urita Welch (the parents of John W. Welch), funded by the Welch family, and based in the honors program—ran throughout the 1970s, bringing an outstanding non-Latter-day Saint scholar each year to BYU. In 1975, the lecture series featured a celebration in honor of Hugh Nibley's official retirement from the university at age sixty-five.<sup>19</sup> Jack invited Dr. Klaus Baer, a well-known professor of Egyptology at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago and Nibley's former teacher, to give these lectures on ancient Egypt. These were to be followed by a lecture by Hugh. A call for papers for symposia to be held on the same dates also went out to others at BYU. Symposia papers were presented by C. Terry Warner, Arthur Henry King, Richard Haglund, Gordon C. Thomasson, Robert K. Thomas, Stephen E. Robinson, John W. Welch, Michael D. Rhodes, Paul Y. Hoskisson, John M. Lundquist, and D. Michael Quinn. In connection with this event, John W. Welch prepared a Festschrift entitled *Tinkling Cymbals*.<sup>20</sup> Sadly, due to worries about its potential for profitability, publishers were reluctant to bring the volume to press. In 1978, a version of the collection appeared, containing most of the symposia papers plus some others.<sup>21</sup>
2. **1978.** While the 1975 celebration of Nibley's sixty-fifth birthday took place about a year after he suffered a worrisome stroke, a set of papers authored by Nibley and gathered

in his honor was published when he just about died of a heart attack.<sup>22</sup> The book was compiled at the instigation of Truman G. Madsen, who wanted to inaugurate a monograph series for the newly created Religious Studies Center with a series of essays on wide-ranging subjects by Nibley.<sup>23</sup> Originally, the book was to be named *The Nibley Legacy*, but when Nibley heard the title, he hated it. When told it would cost eleven hundred dollars to change the title at that late stage, he insisted that the amount be taken out of his royalties. Gasping, Madsen asked, “Hugh do you care that much about a title?” and he said, characteristically, “No, I care that little about royalties!”<sup>24</sup> The book’s title was changed to *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*.<sup>25</sup>

3. **1985.** For many years, several people (Louis Midgley, Robert F. Smith, Gary P. Gillum, and John W. Welch) had been contemplating a biographical documentary about Hugh. Jack approached Nibley’s son Alex, who in turn recruited Sterling Van Wagenen and Brian Capener to the team.<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, Hugh was initially dead set against the project, as he reported to his friend Paul Springer: “Here I was, sinking into the grateful obscurity of a somewhat benign old age, and this thing breaks loose. I must put a stop to whatever Charles [Alex] is up to. I did not settle in and for the suffocating obscurity of Provo to attract public notice.”<sup>27</sup> Eventually, under pressure, Nibley caved in, and “filming began in earnest in late 1982.” Again, the celebratory events coincided with serious health concerns when Hugh underwent quadruple bypass surgery from Russell M. Nelson on April 10, 1984. On March 27, 1985, with Hugh turning seventy-five, friends, associates, and family gathered for a premiere of the film *The Faith of an Observer*.<sup>28</sup>
4. **1990.** In 1984 a proposal by John M. Lundquist to publish a Festschrift in Nibley’s honor was approved by the BYU Religious Studies Center.<sup>29</sup> The original target date for the receipt of manuscripts was a year later, but because of various delays, the two-volume work, consisting of nearly 1,400 pages, was not published until 1990. By that time, responsibility for publication had been transferred to the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and Deseret Book Company. With Stephen D. Ricks as coeditor, the volumes were published in the year of Nibley’s eightieth birthday under the title of *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays*

*in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*.<sup>30</sup> The format and dust jacket of the two-volume set was deliberately designed to match the volumes in the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (CWHN) series, whose publication by that time was well underway.<sup>31</sup>

5. **September 15–November 17, 2009.** In 2009 John W. Welch initiated plans for a posthumous celebration to be held in anticipation of the centennial of Hugh Nibley’s hundredth birthday in 2010.<sup>32</sup> His proposal included a fall BYU faculty seminar; a celebration for the publication of Nibley’s long-awaited nineteenth and concluding volume in the CWHN series that was completed posthumously by Michael D. Rhodes, entitled *One Eternal Round*;<sup>33</sup> a family party on Hugh’s birthday (March 27, 2010); a public conference to be held sometime in 2010, drawing especially on the discussions of the faculty seminar; and a special session at the November 2010 conference of the Society for Biblical Literature on “Hugh Nibley and the Bible.” The discussions at the faculty seminar were enthusiastic and well attended. On October 13, Ralph Hancock and Neal Kramer led a discussion of Nibley’s important 1974 *BYU Studies Quarterly* article entitled “Beyond Politics” that was reprinted in Madsen’s 1978 volume.<sup>34</sup> Sadly, Hugh refused to allow the article to be included in CWHN due to a “tiny mistake in a classical allusion,”<sup>35</sup> which was finally corrected in a 2011 reprint.<sup>36</sup> An entire website on the forty-day literature was privately funded and developed to make all the ancient sources relevant to Stephen Ricks’s faculty seminar discussion on that topic freely available.<sup>37</sup>
6. **January 14–April 8, 2010.** In fulfillment of the 2009 proposal for a series of public lectures to be held in 2010 in honor of Hugh Nibley’s one hundredth birthday, the BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship sponsored presentations to be given on various aspects of Nibley’s scholarship. Each of these thirteen lectures, plus twice as many additional contributions, are contained in the present volume.

Though we should all be relieved that Hugh is not now in a position to complain about the tributes given him in the present volume, his family and friends greatly miss his wisdom, his testimony, and his good cheer. The prospect of meeting him again brightens our sure hope in the Resurrection!<sup>38</sup>

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## Notes

1. Lucius Eugene Chittenden, *Recollections of President Lincoln and His Administration* (New York City: Harper Brothers, 1891), 184, <https://archive.org/details/recollectionsof1464chit>. As a subsequent confirmation of Stanton’s assessment, Chittenden reports: “A few months later the official in question was found guilty by a court-martial of peculation [i.e., embezzlement] and fraud in the management of his bureau, and dishonorably expelled from the service.” Though Chittenden did not name the individual in question, Lincoln scholar Vernon Burton concurred with my surmise that it was probably Frederick W. Hurtt (Orville Vernon Burton, email message to Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, February 3, 2012). Unfortunately, neither reference librarians at the National Archives (Holly Reed) nor at the Library of Congress (Jonathan Eaker) were able to find a photograph of Hurtt in a search of their own collections or within additional biographical directories and images databases. So the exact appearance of the “face” in question may remain forever unknown.

This anecdote is almost always attributed, erroneously, to Abraham Lincoln himself; see, e.g., Mack R. Douglas, *How to Make a Habit of Succeeding* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1966), p. 30, and dozens

of other publications. The wording of these later versions of the story usually parallels a 1917 article in the *American Magazine* (Henry C. Walker, “Building Up Personality,” *American Magazine* 83, June 1917, 132, <http://books.google.com/books?id=UsVZAAAAYAAJ>), which, without attribution, summarized Chittenden’s firsthand reminiscence. Unlike the later derivatives, Walker’s version of the story accurately gives the subject as being “a member of Lincoln’s cabinet” rather than Lincoln himself, but, among other things, changes the punchline to read: “Any man over forty is responsible for his face.”

2. See Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 104, 109–10.
3. A. Nibley, “Remarks,” 557 (this volume).
4. A. Nibley, “Remarks,” 557 (this volume).
5. Of course, the return of old age to infancy is not a *full* return except, sometimes, at the very end. By the end of life a good man or woman’s nature has been refined, and the fruits of that refining process enable joys even deeper and more pure than those of childhood because they are coupled with knowledge, experience, and the divine powers that result in sanctification. If that were not so, what would be the point of mortal life?

This truth was recently sharpened in a conversation I read recently between an insightful editor and a seasoned disciple of Christ. While the manuscript under review had spoken of how various elements of the Atonement of Christ enable “our progression toward divine nature,” the editor had suggested: “Perhaps ‘divinity’ would be better here, since we often talk about how we [are born] with a divine nature.” The author replied: “It’s my understanding that our ‘nature’ at birth is ‘innocent’ (see Doctrine and Covenants 93:38; Moses 6:54) but with a divine heritage. Then our hope and purpose is to become perfected, as God is. See Moroni 10:32–33. Let’s say ‘progression toward acquiring a *perfected* divine nature’” (December 21, 2020).

6. William Shakespeare, “As You Like It,” in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 382, 2.7.166.
7. A. Nibley, “Remarks,” 559 (this volume).
8. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952).
9. Louis C. Midgley, “Bibliography of the Writings of Hugh W. Nibley,” in Hugh W. Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978). For later editions of the bibliography, see The Interpreter Foundation Hugh Nibley Bibliography page, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/bibliographies/nibley/>.

10. See William Shakespeare, “Venus and Adonis,” in *Riverside Shakespeare*, p. 1714, 806.
11. See Sara Israelsen-Hartley, “Mormon Author Hugh Nibley Honored with BYU Lecture Series,” *Deseret News*, January 28, 2010, <https://www.deseret.com/2010/1/28/20367238/mormon-author-hugh-nibley-honored-with-byu-lecture-series#author-hugh-nibley-is-the-topic-of-discussion-for-a-lecture-series-that-will-coincide-with-the-100th-year-of-nibleys-birth>. Video versions of four of the lectures (C. Wilfred Griggs, Alex Nibley, William A. Wilson, and Eric D. Huntsman) are currently available on the BYU Maxwell Institute channel on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/user/themaxwellinstitute>).
12. See David Johnson, “The Woman behind the Man: A Look into the Life of Hugh Nibley’s Widow,” *Daily Universe*, April 7, 2006, <https://universe.byu.edu/2006/04/07/the-woman-behind-the-man-a-look-into-the-life-of-hugh-nibleys-widow/>.
13. German, from *Fest* “celebration” + *Schrift* “writing” (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “Festschrift,” <http://www.bartleby.com/61/>).
14. John W. Welch, ed., “Nibley 65th 1975” (unpublished collection of notes and documents relating to the planning of the 1975 Welch lectures in honor of Hugh Nibley’s sixty-fifth birthday, 2021), pdf, p. 18, with permission.
15. Hugh Nibley Centennial Faculty Seminar, fall 2009 (schedule as of September 14, 2009), in John W. Welch, ed., “Nibley Celebration 2009 JWW Emails and Working Papers” (unpublished manuscript, 2021), pdf, p. 16, with permission.
16. Hugh Nibley Centennial Faculty Seminar, fall 2009 (schedule as of September 14, 2009), in John W. Welch, ed., “Nibley Celebration 2009 JWW Emails and Working Papers” (unpublished manuscript, 2021), pdf, p. 16, with permission.
17. Unique, one of a kind. Latin, literally “of its own kind.”
18. Thomas, “Influence of Hugh Nibley,” 401 (this volume).
19. See Welch, “Nibley’s 65th 1975”; Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 347n48.
20. In the preface by Welch in the 1978 edition, he explains the title as follows:

In 1958 Hugh W. Nibley published and captured in that title some bold imagery. Our ambitions here—and we hasten to say so—are notably less imposing than those of the brass which Professor Nibley polished off, as well as being far less resounding than the profound efforts of the Professor himself. What remains is *Tinkling Cymbals* (coincidentally, we might add, these were instruments used in ancient festivals). (John W. Welch, ed., *Tinkling Cymbals: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley* [Provo, UT: privately circulated typescript, 1978], 1)

Of course, both Nibley's and Welch's book titles mentioned above are drawn from 1 Corinthians 13:1:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

Thus, as Paul Nibley points out, the irony in the titles must also be taken into account to grasp their full significance (Paul S. Nibley, email message to Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, January 14, 2021). In reality,

the implication is that sounding brass is useless noise, not bold imagery. Hugh was making fun of people who sound off with lies and false accusations. He and I talked about this when the book first came out. He had thought of calling it, "Analyzing Ann Eliza and Her Lies," but thought that was too flippant and settled on the scripture reference that contained the same irony.

21. See Welch, *Tinkling Cymbals*. Digital copy graciously provided by Welch. Three of the essays appeared in *BYU Studies*, and several appeared, with many additional essays, in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990).
22. See John W. Welch, email message to Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, December 21, 2020.
23. See Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 348.
24. See Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 348, for the full story. See also Nibley, "Faith of an Observer," 154–55.
25. See Hugh W. Nibley and Truman G. Madsen, eds., *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978).
26. I draw from the account in Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 374–79.
27. Hugh W. Nibley, letter to Paul Springer, January 3, 1983, quoted in Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 375.
28. Nibley, "Faith of an Observer."
29. For a summary of the publication history, see Lundquist's foreword in Lundquist and Ricks, *By Study*, 1:x–xii.
30. See Lundquist and Ricks, *By Study*.
31. For a history of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, see Welch, "Beyond Scholarship," 245–66 (this volume); Ricks, "Editing Hugh Nibley," 451–96.
32. See Welch, "Nibley Celebration 2009."
33. See Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2010).
34. See Hugh W. Nibley, "Beyond Politics," in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, 279–305, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1841&context=msr>.

35. Louis C. Midgley and Shirley S. Ricks, "Out of Obscurity: The Story of Nibley's 'Beyond Politics,'" *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 23, no. 1 (2011): 132, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1840&context=msr>.
36. See Hugh Nibley, "Beyond Politics," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 23, no. 1 (2011): 133–51, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1841&context=msr>.
37. This website is currently being refurbished.
38. See Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 5:361–62.
39. A. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 4. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-STW8626.JPG. B. Photo courtesy of Alex Nibley. Photo ID: 42 HN portrait-EC.jpeg. See Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), p. 104. C. Photo copyright Brent C. Orton, probably taken 14 April 2001. Used with permission. Photo ID: Hugh03.tiff. D. Photo by Stuart Johnson, from Carrie A. Moore, "Revered LDS Scholar Hugh Nibley Dies at 94," *Deseret News*, February 26, 2005, <https://www.deseret.com/2005/2/26/19879192/revered-lds-scholar-hugh-nibley-dies-at-94>. Photo ID: Nibley photos-Deseret News-700457859.jpeg. Used with permission from the Deseret News and thanks to Karrie Lasater.
40. Welch, "Nibley's 65th 1975," 18. Photo ID: Nibley's refusal of honors-p.18-Nibley 65th 1975.mod.jpeg.
41. Photograph of the program kindly provided to the author by John W. Welch. Photo ID: IMG\_5906.jpeg.