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John W. Welch

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FOREWORD: A DOORKEEPER IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD

John W. Welch

The last person in the world who is interested in celebrating Hugh Nibley's seventy-fifth birthday is Hugh Nibley.¹ He has never asked for such a thing; he avoids recognition like the plague. In complete candor, he faithfully describes himself as follows: "I have always been furiously active in the Church, but I have also been a nonconformist and have never held any office of rank in anything. I have undertaken many assignments given me by the leaders, and much of the work has been anonymous: no rank, no recognition, no anything. While I have been commended for some things, they were never the things which I considered most important. That was entirely a little understanding between me and my Heavenly Father which I have thoroughly enjoyed; though no one else knows anything about it . . . I would rather be a doorkeeper in the House of the Lord than mingle with the top brass in the tents of the wicked."

Many similar words come to mind as others try to describe him. His life is a rare combination of faith and scholarship, of teaching and research, of orthodoxy and eccentricity, of rigor and homily, of spontaneity and tedium, of anonymity and legend, of an intimidating genius with a genuine humility. "Who is Nibley?" many visiting scholars have asked.

He is sincerely comfortable thinking of himself as a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord, echoing a poignant declaration in Psalm 84:10, "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness." Nibley loves the temple and the gatherings of the Saints and would rather be there than anywhere else. His scholarly and religious endeavors over the

past four decades have posted him at important portals through which Latter-day Saint generations will pass for years to come. His prolific writings have distilled the comings and goings of millennia of human traffic. With a watchman's panoramic vision, he sees the span of social and intellectual developments from Enoch and Abraham, to Peter and Paul, to Joseph and Brigham. He paces the halls of human knowledge, sometimes charting the territory with great detail, other times simply unlocking doors that lead down passageways others will be exploring for years to come.

Hugh Nibley was born March 27, 1910, in Portland, Oregon. He was perceptive and preceptive from the beginning. His experiences in the natural environment of pristine Oregon awakened in him an enduring sensitivity to mankind's stewardship over the earth. Memorizing much of Shakespeare led him inexorably to the study of Old English, then Latin, then Greek, then Arabic, and on and on. For Hugh Nibley, one profound thing has always led to another.

After serving in the Swiss-German Mission and carrying out a special assignment in Greece, he completed his AB in history at UCLA, graduating summa cum laude in 1934. Although he was born into wealth, the family fortune evaporated in the Great Depression, leaving Hugh to struggle for books and graduate-school tuition. He was a university fellow at the University of California at Berkeley (1936–1937), where he earned his doctorate in 1938, studying with such luminaries as the great Semitist William Popper. His dissertation, entitled "The Roman Games as the Survival of an Archaic Year-Cult," was composed in three weeks.

Following an appointment as lecturer in social philosophy at the Claremont Colleges in Pomona, California, and after several intense years of service as an army intelligence noncommissioned officer in World War II, he dedicated his promising academic career to the service of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the behest of John A. Widtsoe, Hugh Nibley joined the history faculty at Brigham Young University in 1946, leaving—as Robert Thomas has put it—the "glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome [for] the modesty that was Provo."²

He and his wife, Phyllis, became the goodly parents of eight fine children. Their home has been a haven. Its doors have always been open to numerous students and family friends. Their family

life has been filled with music, lively discussions about drama and literature, archaeological excursions, the arts and sciences.

He was promoted to the rank of professor of history and religion in 1953. His academic career has been punctuated with a visiting professorship at Berkeley (1959–1960), where he lectured on ancient rhetoric and studied Coptic; with a trip to Jordan in 1964, where he examined the Dead Sea Scrolls; and with advanced studies in Egyptian at the Oriental Institute in Chicago in 1966.

His publications over the past forty years cover a wide range of topics, including ancient history, politics, classics, education, science, Egyptology, early Israel, the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, Christian origins, the Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price, temples and temple worship, Church history, society, and the gospel. Though he considers it spiritually irrelevant, most of his nearly two hundred titles are classics.

A good synopsis of his academic interests can be gleaned by scanning a few of these titles, which include *No, Ma'am, That's Not History* (1946); "The Arrow, the Hunter and the State" (1949); *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (1952); *The World and the Prophets* (1954); *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (1957); "Christian Envy of the Temple" (1959–1960); "How to Write an Anti-Mormon Book" (1962); "The Expanding Gospel" (1965); *Since Cumorah* (1967); "Brigham Young on the Environment" (1972); "What Is Zion?" (1973); "Beyond Politics" (1974); *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (1975); "The Early Christian Prayer Circle" (1978); "Patriarchy and Matriarchy" (1980); *Abraham in Egypt* (1981); and "Work We Must, but the Lunch Is Free" (1982). All the while, he has carried on voluminous correspondence, magnified his distinctive calling in life as Church teacher and speaker, and has been a major contributor to Church magazines over the years—often on short notice and under considerable pressure from publication deadlines.

His works are characterized by several unmistakable traits. He harbors an urgent sense of placing immediate priority on eternal values. He knows that the door is about to close, that time is running out, that money is not worth it, that the extreme situations involving total extermination of nations in the Book of Mormon are relevant for our day—and for him all these realizations trivialize many



Figure 1. Headstone for Hugh Winder Nibley,
a "Doorkeeper in the House of the Lord."²⁴

pedantic projects and issues. He is relentless in his examination of documents and in providing abundant documentation. His curiosity is inexhaustible. He still feeds his memory a steady diet of vocabulary cards. Discoveries constantly amaze him. His writings often draw parallels or offer new characterizations that others have failed to perceive. His interests are usually ahead of their time. He incisively exposes the shortcomings of scientific absolutism and the fundamental flaws of gospel detractors and zealots. His works are typically bold and daring, challenging but reassuring, resourceful and creative, innovative if not revolutionary, sensitive and insightful.

Still, he does not take himself at all seriously. Repenting and giving thanks are the things he thinks he does best. He sees his learning as forever tentative, incomplete, and accumulating. Once discovered, his innovative insights are so painfully obvious that it is hard for him to see why he had not noticed them before. He willingly describes himself as a buffoon, and from time to time as a frustrated fiction writer, waiting for the real scholarship to begin.

As a university community and as a people, we owe an immeasurable debt to Hugh Nibley for his unique contributions to our lives. His work has changed us all. "Few students can talk

coherently about their first class from Hugh Nibley,”³ observed his former academic vice president. For many, it has been viewed as a necessary “rite of passage,” while for others it was an electrifying baptism in the waters of ideas and ideals. Hugh Nibley’s manner of speech—tempered hyperbole—instills an extraordinary sense of vitality. His unfailing encouragement to students to satisfy their own curiosity—not his—is the kind of faith that has moved many inert cerebral mountains.

In a word, Hugh Nibley is no ordinary doorman. But then, as far as that goes, he doesn’t stand by ordinary doorways either.

John W. Welch retired as the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at Brigham Young University in 2020. For 27 years he was editor in chief of BYU Studies, the premier Latter-day Saint scholarly journal. He founded the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies in California in 1979. From 1988 to 1991, he served as one of the editors for Macmillan’s Encyclopedia of Mormonism. As the general editor of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley for 25 years, Welch directed the publication of the 19 volumes in the series. Welch is among the most prominent pupils of Hugh Nibley, having made several important discoveries and advances regarding biblical studies, Latter-day Saint scholarship, history, culture, and thought. His publications cover a wide range of topics, including Roman and Jewish laws in the trial of Jesus, the use of biblical laws in colonial America, chiasmus in antiquity, and commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount and King Benjamin’s speech.

Notes

1. This essay, originally prepared for Nibley’s seventy-fifth birthday, was previously published in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 1:6–10, and is reprinted here with permission. The portrait of Hugh Nibley by Rebecca F. Everett on the page preceding this essay is reproduced courtesy of the artist, who retains all rights for the use of the image.
2. Thomas, “Influence of Hugh Nibley,” 404 (this volume).
3. Thomas, “Influence of Hugh Nibley,” 405 (this volume).
4. Courtesy of David Nibley. Photo ID: HN-Interment-026-ECS-InMemory-HughWinderNibley-FamilyPhotographsMar2005.jpeg.