

THE  
INTERPRETER  
FOUNDATION

***Hugh Nibley Observed***

Hugh Nibley and the Church  
Robert L. Millet

The book from which this chapter is excerpted is available at:

FAIR: <http://fairlatterdaysaints.org/store/?s=hugh+nibley+observed>

Eborn Books: [https://ebornbooks.com/?s=hugh+nibley+observed&post\\_type=product&dgwt\\_wcas=1](https://ebornbooks.com/?s=hugh+nibley+observed&post_type=product&dgwt_wcas=1)

+Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Hugh-Nibley-Observed-Jeffrey-Bradshaw/dp/B091G27GPZ/>

***Recommended Citation***

Robert L. Millet, "Hugh Nibley and the Church" in Hugh Nibley Observed, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw Shirley S. Ricks, and Stephen T. Whitlock, eds., 117-140. (Orem, UT, and Salt Lake City: The Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2021), <https://interpreterfoundation.org/reprints/hugh-nibley-observed/HNO-09-Hugh-Nibley-and-the-Church.pdf>.

# HUGH NIBLEY AND THE CHURCH

---

**Robert L. Millet**

I am honored to be invited to contribute to this volume celebrating the remarkable life and work of Hugh W. Nibley. I believe Hugh was one of a kind, a man that comes along about once per dispensation. He was an individual with a distinctive mission on earth, one who no doubt brought with him many of the gifts that had long been developed in our first estate. And, of course, Hugh's intellectual preparation in this life, linked with his love for and devotion to Joseph Smith and the Restoration, prepared him for a task that in many ways would be unique to him. Before I dive into my topic, "Hugh Nibley and the Church," I want to make a few remarks about my personal engagement with Brother Nibley and his writings.

## **Personal Reflections**

In January of 1969 I had only been home from a mission a matter of days when I discovered my father's gospel library (it had always been there, but I don't think I noticed it before my mission). Dad had been a devoted member of what was then called the Latter-day Saint Book Club, and each month he would receive a card in the mail indicating what Latter-day Saint book would be sent to him automatically unless he indicated that he didn't care to receive it. Because Dad was a very busy man with both employment and Church responsibilities, I learned that it was not unusual for him to forget to return the card. Hence his library grew quite rapidly over the years.

One evening I sat down and scoured the library to see what kinds of books my father had collected and which ones I might read. He happened to be a huge fan of Sterling W. Sill, and so there

were several of Elder Sill's books. Dad had also written to President Joseph Fielding Smith about several doctrinal questions that arose during the years he served as bishop. President Smith always responded, often with a letter that began with "It never ceases to amaze me how ignorant our members can be" or "Now Bishop Millet, if you would study the gospel as you ought, you wouldn't need my help, especially regarding this particular question." I remember that the library contained the three-volume set of *Doctrines of Salvation*, the five-volume *Answers to Gospel Questions*, and *The Way to Perfection*.

As I recall, Hugh Nibley books that had made it onto Dad's shelves included *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites*, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, and *Since Cumorah*. Now don't get me wrong: my father had what I now appreciate was a fairly good grasp of the principles of the gospel, but to my knowledge he had never read a paragraph of Nibley's publications, except perhaps when they were used by the Church as Melchizedek Priesthood lesson manuals. I began to browse them. I remember especially spending time with *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, being occasionally stimulated by what I read, but sensing that for the time being I was not quite prepared to glean from his works more than a thought here and there.

I had actually encountered Nibley while serving in the Eastern States Mission. My last companion was someone who had been exposed to some of Nibley's work before his (my companion's) mission. It was also apparent that he had paid attention at Brigham Young University much more attentively than I had at Louisiana State University. In those closing months of our mission (we went home together), we were assigned to work in New York City, and our proselyting area included Greenwich Village, which was one of the gathering places for hippies, intellectuals, and lovers of art. While we had absolutely no success in baptizing any of those folks, we were able, strangely enough, to have many lengthy conversations with folks who resided in that area. They often asked philosophical questions about the teachings and practices of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and so my companion usually brought his copy of *The World and the Prophets* with him as we moved from apartment to apartment. He loaned it out on several occasions,

and a surprising number of the residents indicated that they had enjoyed reading it. Those experiences piqued my interest in Hugh Nibley.

I joined the Religious Education faculty at BYU in the fall of 1983. In the late 1980s my research assistant indicated to me that he had a great desire to take a class from Hugh Nibley, and I encouraged him to do so. He had not settled upon a major field of study, though he was considering a major in ancient history. He enrolled in Hugh's Pearl of

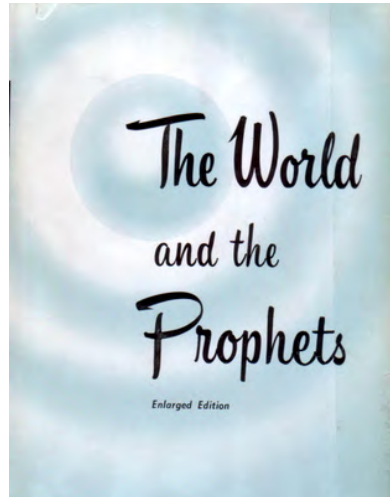


Figure 1. Nibley's volume provoked lengthy conversation.<sup>32</sup>

Great Price course and entered into a world like none other he had known before. He would come back from class with his head spinning, wondering what Nibley had spent so much time on had to do with the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>1</sup> As the weeks passed, my assistant's anxiety intensified, mainly because there were no quizzes, no exams during the semester, only a final exam, which he had learned would consist of only one question. He was enjoying the course very much and felt his mind expanding, but he wrestled with how best to prepare for the final. I remember the day my assistant returned from his final exam in his Pearl of Great Price class. I asked how it had gone, and he replied that he had no idea. I followed up: "What was the question?" He paused for about fifteen seconds and responded: "Discuss the apocalypse of bliss and the apocalypse of doom within the Pearl of Great Price." As I recall, he received a B in the course and chose to major in marketing. He also came away from the experience with an overwhelming respect for Hugh's scholarship.

At that time I was serving as chair of the Department of Ancient Scripture, meaning that Hugh was a member of my department, which of course meant absolutely nothing, since he went his own way and did his own thing, which I more than encouraged. It would have been cruel and unkind to him, as well as unwise to students

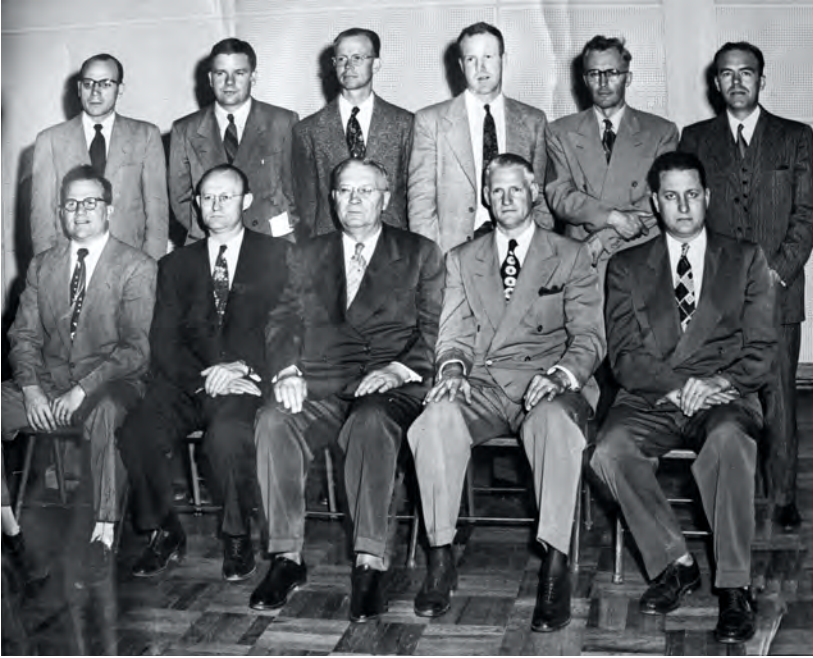


Figure 2. Nibley (second from right at back) with BYU colleagues, after 1950.<sup>33</sup>

or the larger membership of the Church, to treat him like every other member of the faculty. Hugh had a singular contribution to make, one no one else could make. Over the years I have been asked by Latter-day Saints all over the Church: “Who is the next Hugh Nibley? Who will take his place?” I have always answered with, “There will be no next Hugh Nibley because no one can take his place.” Why? For one reason, our educational institutions of higher learning do not train people to have a mind like Nibley. He was broad, expansive in his study, conversant with numerous cultures and cultural traditions. Doctoral students today are encouraged to study deep, not wide.

During those years as chair and even thereafter in the decade when I was dean of Religious Education, I would have students in my classes indicate, at the end of the semester, that they were contemplating enrolling in a Hugh Nibley course, usually Pearl of Great Price. They would inquire, “What do you think?” I would then follow up with a question of my own: “Exactly why do you want to take Brother Nibley for a course?” If they responded with, “I just want to have a Nibley experience,” I would say, “Yes, you

must do it!” If, on the other hand, the student responded to my question with, “I just want to know more about the doctrine within the Pearl of Great Price,” I would occasionally (depending on the student) pick up the class schedule and say, “Let’s see who else is teaching Pearl of Great Price this next semester.” Why? Because Hugh generally focused in class on what he was working on at the time. That might be Pearl of Great Price, or it may be Old Testament or Facsimile 2, or any number of other topics. My

unusual response to the student was more a compliment than a warning to beware of him. You see, my assessment is that Hugh Nibley regularly paid his students the ultimate compliment—he assumed they comprehended what he was lecturing on!

Without question, Hugh Nibley was the most influential Latter-day Saint apologist of the twentieth century. As an apologist, he was certainly a witness for the truth, and so above and beyond all that he stood for, he was a defender of the faith. It was known far and wide that Hugh was an unusually gifted intellectual, one who had paid a significant price both academically and spiritually to be able to engage the critics and naysayers with wit and wisdom and a solid witness.

Hugh knew worlds more than any normal human, and he was unshaken and untroubled by the attacks against the Church, whether toward Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, or the Church in general. He was very much aware of the “barking dogs” who delight in nipping “at the heels of the weary traveler,”<sup>22</sup> but he never so much as winced at their vulgar accusations. Hugh was unflappable, and so it was that many thousands of Latter-day Saints who encountered the crusade of the critics were assisted by him to go about their daily business relieved and reassured. Books with such titles as *No, Ma’am, That’s Not History*; *The Myth Makers*;

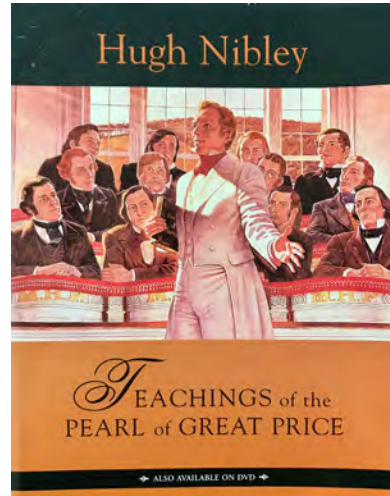


Figure 3. Nibley’s classes focused on what he was working on at the time.<sup>34</sup>



or *Sounding Brass* all represent his earnest effort to demonstrate the shallowness, inconsistency, misrepresentation, and vicious motives of the attackers.

### The Power of the Savior's Atonement

As wide-ranging and expansive as Nibley's interests were, he had a special feeling for the Atonement of Jesus Christ and for its centrality in all we do and say as Saints. "There are certain things of which we never tire," Brother Nibley once commented, "with which we never become bored. Those are the things of eternity. Yet strangely enough it is these which we easily dismiss and neglect as if they were highly expendable."<sup>3</sup>

I believe that because the Atonement of Jesus Christ was uppermost in his mind and heart, was at the core of his being, he was able to see all other things in their proper perspective. "To be redeemed is to be atoned," he once explained. "From this it should be clear what kind of *oneness* is meant by the Atonement—it is being received in a close embrace of the prodigal son, expressing not only forgiveness but oneness of heart and mind that amounts to identity, like a literal family identity as John sets it forth so vividly in chapters 14 through 17 of his Gospel."<sup>4</sup>

If anyone understood why the gospel of Jesus Christ was good news or glad tidings (see Doctrine and Covenants 76:40–42), Hugh did. In fact, he seemed to have little patience with those of us who lose track of that good news because of other, much less important news. He was persuaded that because of what Jesus did for us we have every reason to live in an attitude of joy and thanksgiving. "We are commanded to be joyful for [Christ] has borne our sorrows (see Isaiah 53:4)," he said. "He was 'a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53:3) *so that we need not be*. Our own sins and limitations are the things that make us sad. He had no sins and limitations; *he was not sad for his sake, but wholly for ours*. Only one could suffer for others who did not deserve to suffer for himself.

"If we remain gloomy," he continued, "after what he did for us, it is because we do not accept what he did for us. If we suffer, we deserve to suffer because there is no need for it if we only believe in him."<sup>5</sup>

Hugh's depth, linked with his single-mindedness, often made it possible for him to simplify deep matters. For example, how does one become right with God? How do we draw closer to the Father and the Son? Note the simplicity of what follows: "Who is righteous? Anyone who is repenting. No matter how bad he has been, if he is repenting, he is a righteous man. There is hope for him. And no matter how good he has been all his life, if he is not repenting, he is a wicked man. The difference is which way you are facing. The man on the top of the stairs facing down is much worse off than the man on the bottom step who is facing up. *The direction we are facing, that is repentance; and that is what determines whether we are good or bad.*"<sup>6</sup>



Figure 4. "If we remain gloomy, . . . it is because we do not accept what he did for us."<sup>5</sup>

To confirm that we are all in this together, that no one of us has arrived, Nibley emphasized: "The gospel of repentance is a constant reminder that *the most righteous are still being tested and may yet fall*, and that *the most wicked are not beyond redemption and may still be saved*. And that is what God wants. . . . There are poles for all to see, but in this life no one has reached and few have ever approached either pole, and no one has any idea at what point between his neighbor stands. Only God knows that."<sup>7</sup>

Those words brought to mind something I read several years ago from an Episcopalian scholar, Barbara Brown Taylor. She reminded her readers that in the biblical languages the word *sin* implies iniquity, wrongful intent, breaking the commandments, and rebellion. Professor Taylor pointed out that sin implies—and this is the point—"missing the mark," as we would if we were shooting arrows at a bull's eye. A righteous man or woman, she goes on to say, is one "whose aim is true." Thus, righteousness is not some static goal to be attained in some distant day but rather a kind of "target practice. Whether my arrow finds its mark or falls



a hundred feet away, the daily practice of [righteousness] is how I improve my aim. I will continue to sin, no doubt about it, but that is not my aim. My true aim is to live as God wants me to live.”<sup>8</sup>

Nibley’s definition of a righteous man or woman—one who is repenting—also recalls the language of President Russell M. Nelson about the need for every one of us to be engaged in “daily repentance.” “Nothing is more liberating, more ennobling, or more crucial to our individual progression than is a regular, daily focus on repentance,” President Nelson declared. “Repentance is not an event; it is a process. It is the key to happiness and peace of mind. When coupled with faith, repentance opens our access to the power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

“Whether you are diligently moving along the covenant path, have slipped or stepped from the covenant path, or can’t even see the path from where you are now, I plead with you to repent. Experience the strengthening power of daily repentance—of doing and being a little better each day. When we choose to repent, we choose to change! We allow the Savior to transform us into the best version of ourselves. We choose to grow spiritually and receive joy—the joy of redemption in Him. When we choose to repent, we choose to become more like Jesus Christ!”<sup>9</sup>

Professor Hugh Nibley was eager to confess the hand of the Almighty in all things (see Doctrine and Covenants 59:21), to acknowledge God’s goodness and grace and wonders, to receive thankfully the Lord’s gifts and tender mercies. Nibley quoted the Book of Mormon: “Deny not the gifts of God” (Moroni 10:8). “Everything you have is a gift—everything,” he taught. “You have earned nothing. There is no concern for prosperity and survival where the gospel is concerned. Everything we could possibly need for survival is given us at the outset as a free gift.” He then reminds us of the centuries-long debate over whether we are saved by the grace of God or good works and Christlike service. “If everything is given to us, do we have to work? Of course. The gifts do not excuse us from work, they leave us free to do the real work. . . . In return for giving us everything,” he continues, “God asks only two things: first, to recognize his gifts for what they are, and not to take credit to ourselves and say, ‘This is mine.’ . . . None of us has so much as earned our own keep, as he says. ‘I say, if ye should serve him with your whole souls yet ye would be

unprofitable servants' (Mosiah 2:21)—that is, consuming more than we produce. Nobody can pay his own way here.

“What is the second thing he requires? That we should not withhold from others his gifts to us—as if we had a special right to them. As long as we turn our minds to the things of this world, which means just that, and think that we can manage things pretty well for ourselves, we are doomed—not only to frustration but to destruction.

“‘There is no free lunch,’ says Korihor. ‘It is all free lunch,’ says King Benjamin. . . . If lunch is the aim and purpose of life, then Korihor is right. . . . But since I accept the gospel, that’s out of the question. Either we believe that the lunch has been taken care of, or we are in for a long, horrible contest, both internal and external, as to who is going to get the most.

“The Lord won’t let you starve. Satan puts that fear into us, which is the opposite of faith. I can honestly say that everything that I have asked for with an honest heart, I have received.”<sup>10</sup>

### Singleness of Purpose

For Nibley, one of the great tests of life—if not *the* great test—is whether we will seek the kingdom of God first, foremost, and finally. For one thing, Hugh seemed to be absolutely oblivious to and notoriously unconcerned with what the learned and the prominent people of the world thought of him or his work. President Joseph F. Smith once warned of three great dangers that threaten the Church from within: false educational ideas, sexual immorality, and the flattery of prominent men.<sup>11</sup> The very fact that Brother Nibley spent the bulk of his time and energy in writing to and fortifying the faith of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a statement in itself. He could very well have made a different decision—to immerse himself completely in the worlds of ancient history, ancient languages, biblical studies, or Christian history, to name only a few. And anyone who knew him well could acknowledge that he would no doubt have made significant contributions and been among the elite within the marketplace of ideas, the world of the academy.

Hugh Nibley didn’t, however, choose that path. Rather, he determined early on that he would devote himself to responding to



*Figure 5. Nibley could have made significant contributions elsewhere, but “determined . . . that he would devote himself to responding to critics of the Church.”<sup>36</sup>*

critics of the Church, including assuring and reassuring the Saints that the restored gospel was rigorous enough, intellectually consistent enough, and spiritually powerful enough to withstand any and all attacks. In short, the Latter-day Saints had every reason to believe in and feel confident with the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Church he organized under the direction of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Saints of the Most High could feel secure with their history, their doctrine, and the apostolic and prophetic direction of the “true and living church” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30).

When one’s heart has been weaned off the desire for applause or acclaim, when all that really matters is that the work of the Lord go forward, when there is no longer any concern regarding who is noticed or who receives the credit for what was accomplished, then one’s soul is prepared to cry out like the early brethren of this dispensation, “The kingdom of God or nothing!” Joseph Smith improved upon the King James translation of the Savior’s words in the Sermon on the Mount: “Wherefore, seek not the things of this world, but seek ye first to build up the kingdom of God, and to establish his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 6:38).

When asked once whom he was trying to impress, Hugh Nibley answered: “I am trying to impress my Heavenly Father. And it is not easy, I have discovered. I am much too old to try to impress anybody else. I am not going anywhere. Promoted to what, for heaven’s sake—dog catcher? No, the only person you try to impress is your Heavenly Father, and it is awfully hard because he can’t be fooled—not for a minute. I have always felt driven this way. The gospel is so wonderful. There is so much to find out. It opens the doors to so many things. It is sort of an obsession, a sort of personal thing.”<sup>12</sup>



Figure 6. “I am much too old to try to impress anybody else.”<sup>37</sup>

I knew Brother Nibley well enough to know how deeply he loved the Lord, loved the restored gospel, loved the Church, and demonstrated a loyalty to them all. For him there was no pecking order. He was thoroughly unaffected, purposely unconcerned about any kind of position in the Church, and demonstrated dramatically that one need not hold high position or occupy prominent office in the Church to have a lasting impact, to fortify the faith of the Saints, and thus to build the kingdom of God. It may well be that his single-mindedness about what mattered most is at the base of why he proved to be so effective at building and fortifying faith.

Hugh once observed: “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.”<sup>13</sup>

### The Allure of Prosperity

Linked with the necessity of having an eye single to the glory of God was the repeated warning that Nibley sounded about seeking after riches when our heart is not right with God (see Jacob 2:17–19). “Almost all the young people I know today,” he remarked on one occasion,

want to believe that we do not have to make such a drastic choice as between trusting in God entirely and working for money in the bank. Again may I remind you, the choice was deliberately designed to be a hard and searching one. But surely, I hear all the time, there must be a compromise, a common ground between them. The favorite text to support this is “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). This is commonly interpreted as meaning that I should first go on a mission or get a testimony, thus seeking the kingdom of God, and then I will be free to seek the other things. First wisdom, then riches. But you *never* cease seeking wisdom, and you are forbidden to seek riches. This is a classic case of a text out of context. There is no thought here of *seeking* the other things—if you need them they will be added: When are you supposed to stop seeking the kingdom of heaven?<sup>14</sup>

One of my personal favorite “Nibleyisms” is also a rather haunting one: “Why should we labor this unpleasant point [the potential peril of seeking after riches]? Because the Book of Mormon labors it, for our special benefit. *Wealth is a jealous master who will not be served half-heartedly and will suffer no rival—not even God.* . . . In return for unquestioning obedience wealth promises security, power, position, and honors, in fact anything in this world. . . . Along with this, of course, everyone dresses in the height of fashion, the main point being that the proper clothes are expensive—the expression ‘costly apparel’ occurs 14 times in the Book of Mormon. *The more important wealth is, the less important it is how one gets it.*”<sup>15</sup>

One final warning from Nibley on this sensitive matter: “Wealth is a pleasant and heady narcotic that gives the addict an exhilarating sense of power accompanied by a growing deadening of feeling for anything of real value. It seals up the heavens and closes the mind to revelation; it takes possession of the heart and darkens the spirit;

it works by deception, bewitching the nations (Revelation 18:23); it becomes an obsession. . . . [I]t paralyzes the mind's perception of higher things."<sup>16</sup>

### **Zion's Battle with Babylon**

"*Zion* is a code word denoting a very real thing," Hugh explained.

Zion is any community in which the celestial order prevails. Zion is "the pure in heart" (Doctrine and Covenants 97:21), but Zion is also a real city or any number of real cities. It is a constant; it is unchanging. There are Zions among all the worlds [see Moses 7:31], and there are Zions that come and go. Zion is a constant in time and place—it belongs to the order of the eternities. We're not making Zion here, but we're preparing the ground to receive it. . . . We must be prepared to receive this glory; we don't produce it ourselves. We must be ready, so that we won't die of shock when we get it. . . .

Zion comes and goes. When the world cannot support Zion, Zion is not destroyed but taken back home. . . .

We can't discuss Zion very long without running into Babylon, because Babylon is, in all things, the counterpart of Zion. It is described just as fully, clearly, and vividly in the scriptures as Zion is and usually in direct relationship to it. . . . Just as surely as Zion is to be established, Babylon is to be destroyed. . . . Babylon is not to be converted, she's to be destroyed. . . .

Babylon then, like Zion, is a type. If Zion is wherever the celestial order prevails, Babylon is the culmination of the worldly power wherever it happens.<sup>17</sup>

Now note the manner in which Nibley offers pertinent but rather painful warnings: "What makes Zion?" Nibley inquired.

God has given us the perfect definition: Zion is the pure in heart—the pure in heart, not merely the pure in appearance. It is not a society or religion of forms and observances, of pious gestures and precious mannerisms: it is strictly a condition of the heart. . . .

Ancient writers assure us repeatedly that the temple is the earthly type of Zion, a holy place removed from contact with the outer world, set apart for ordinances from which the world is excluded; while it is in the world, the temple presents a



forbidding front of high gates, formidable walls, narrow doors, and frowning battlements, dramatizing the total withdrawal of Zion from the world and its defensive position over against it. Zion itself, of course, is absolutely impregnable and unassailable, since the world has no access to it. Should the world get too close, Zion withdraws.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 7. “Hugh was able to scold the Saints in a way that I could never imagine myself . . . doing.”<sup>38</sup>

Hugh was able to scold the Saints in a way that I could never imagine myself or any of my colleagues doing. He could say things that, if I were to speak them, I would anticipate an unfriendly phone call within a short time from 47 East South Temple Street in Salt Lake City. How could Hugh do what he did? How could he get away with what he said? My personal opinion is that he was so committed to the restored gospel, so devoted to the Lord’s Church, and so respected, appreciated, and beloved by the leaders of the Church that they trusted him implicitly, had no fear that he

would apostatize or lead others to question the restored gospel or oppose the Church. As we sing in reference to our living prophet, they had “proved him in days that are past.”<sup>19</sup>

### The Prophets and the Witness of the Spirit

For nearly thirty years I have been involved in interfaith relations, seeking to build bridges of understanding and friendship with persons of other faiths, usually Christian faiths. As I have had occasion many times to speak and respond to questions from those of other faiths, one matter seems to have come up in practically every exchange. It has usually been a challenge to the Latter-day Saint claim to be a Christian church. I must admit that during the early years of my interfaith involvement, I perceived this kind of a

challenge as an insult and, frankly, rather ridiculous. As the years have gone by, however, I have come to see things differently.

Today I am not very bothered if it is a pastor, priest, or theological scholar who states categorically that we are not Christian. Almost always, the more learned of the Christian criticizers are making that statement on the basis of theology, more specifically our nonacceptance of the post-New Testament councils and creeds. I am, however, very concerned when the man on the street or the woman in the pew hears the expression “Latter-day Saints are not Christian.” Why? What does that statement mean to the man on the street or the woman in the pew? Does it mean to them that we do not accept the miraculous nature of the Savior’s birth? Or that we do not accept his teachings? Or that we do not accept as actual and real the miracles he performed? Or, more troublesome, that we do not believe in his atoning sacrifice or his resurrection from the dead? Obviously if they were to conclude any of those ideas, they would clearly misunderstand who we are and what we profess.

Of all of Nibley’s books, one of my favorites is one of his earliest, *The World and the Prophets*, a compilation of radio addresses delivered on KSL between March 7 and October 17, 1954.<sup>20</sup> The series was entitled “Time Vindicates the Prophets.” In the end, Nibley taught, after we have read and studied, after all our searching for supporting evidence for the truth—a reason for the hope within us (see 1 Peter 3:15)—our ears must be attuned to the words of latter-day prophets and our hearts open to the witness of the Spirit.

First of all, it is worth considering how Hugh reacted to those who proclaimed that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are not Christian.

“For a long time,” Hugh noted, “the world refused to look upon Mormons as Christians. Indeed, most people still think of them as . . . unique and isolated from all other creatures. There is some justice in this viewpoint *if one defines a Christian as one who subscribes to the creeds of Christendom, but the dictionary gives no such definition: for it [the dictionary], a Christian is simply one who believes in Christ, with nothing said about adherence to formulae describing his nature devised three hundred years after his death.* The Latter-day Saints do *not* accept the ecumenical creeds

because they were not given by the power of revelation but worked out by committees of experts.” Nicaea “may be described without exaggeration as a philosopher’s field day.”<sup>21</sup> Or, as Hugh put it on another occasion when he commented on the importance of “lived religion”: “How can [critics of the Church] presume to criticize a religion in which they do not believe? Is that not akin to the folly of criticizing a painting which one has not seen or music which one has not heard? The insider and the outsider do not experience the same thing at all.”<sup>22</sup>

Nibley himself was the consummate example of one who came to know the truth, both by study and also by faith (see Doctrine and Covenants 88:118). On the one hand, he was persuaded that there is a dear price to be paid in research, study, mental stretching, the rational quest to find evidence and support for one’s conclusions. Austin Farrer, a valued associate of C. S. Lewis, taught: “*Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.*”<sup>23</sup>

In counseling those who are seeking the truth on matters of faith, particularly those who refuse to accept any spiritual verity without empirical proof or tangible, physical evidence, Nibley testified: “Until the final returns are in, no one is in a position to make final pronouncements, and as long as science continues to progress, the final returns will remain at the other end of a future of wonders and surprises. . . . What we do claim is that *the words of the prophets cannot be held to the tentative and defective tests that men have devised for them.* Science, philosophy, and common sense all have a right to their day in court. But the last word does not lie with them. Every time men in their wisdom have come forth with the last word, other words have promptly followed. *The last word is a testimony of the gospel that comes only by direct revelation.* Our Father in heaven speaks it, and if it were in perfect agreement with the science of today, it would surely be out of line with the science of tomorrow. *Let us not, therefore, seek to hold God to the learned opinions of the moment when he speaks the language of eternity.*”<sup>24</sup>

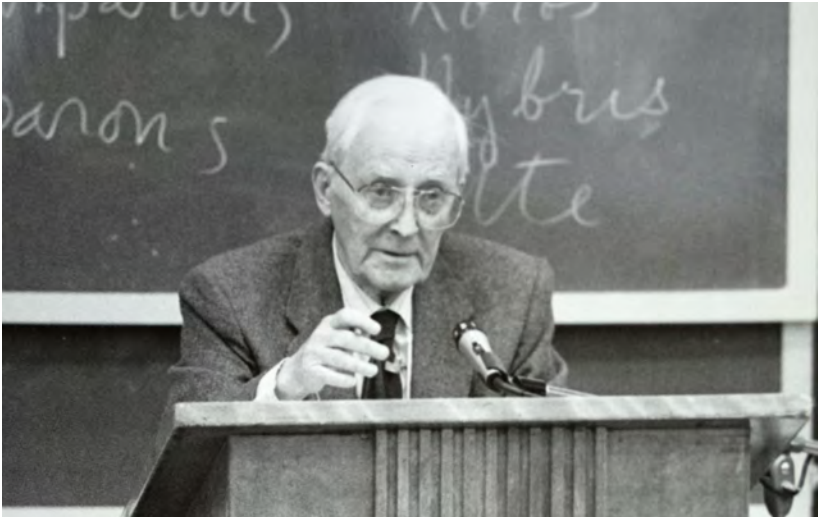


Figure 8. *“The last word is a testimony of the gospel that comes only by direct revelation.”*<sup>29</sup>

Hugh’s encouragement for the children of God to open themselves to the quiet but dynamic influence of the Holy Spirit echoes what our prophet-leaders have delivered to us. Elder Neal A. Maxwell, one who had unbounded respect for the mind and heart of Hugh Nibley, wrote: “It is the author’s opinion that all the scriptures, including the Book of Mormon, will remain in the realm of faith. Science will not be able to prove or disprove holy writ. However, enough plausible evidence will come forth to prevent scoffers from having a field day, but not enough to remove the requirement of faith. Believers must be patient during such unfolding.”<sup>25</sup>

Likewise, President Russell M. Nelson spoke prophetically of future evidences of the truthfulness of the restored gospel that will be provided for the Saints: “Our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, will perform some of His mightiest works between now and when He comes again. We will see miraculous indications that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, preside over this Church in majesty and glory.” The prophet then charged the members of the Church soberly to cultivate their spiritual convictions: “But in coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>26</sup>

I wrote earlier of the love and respect the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had and still have for Hugh Nibley. Hugh reciprocated that love toward them. In describing an experience Hugh had with a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he explained: "I spent a week with Apostle Spencer W. Kimball visiting his home state in Arizona. We were gone ten days. We went by train in those early days. We came back to the old Los Angeles station, and in that part of Los Angeles there were a lot of bookstores, which I knew very well. I bought . . . a very valuable set of ten volumes. I barely made it back to the train by running across a lot. I jumped on the train, plunked down beside Brother Kimball, who was already on the train, and staggered into the drawing room, my arms full of the complete set, which I greatly valued.

"As we sat talking about the books," Hugh continued, "Brother Kimball casually took an immaculate linen handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket, and, stooping over, vigorously dusted off my shoes and trousers. It was the most natural thing in the world, and we both took it completely for granted. After all, my shoes were dusty in the race for the train, and Brother Kimball had always told missionaries to keep themselves clean and proper. It was no great thing. . . . Neither of us said a thing about it, but ever since, that has conditioned my attitude toward the Brethren. I truly believe they are chosen servants of God."<sup>27</sup>

### **What His Life and Work Can Teach Us**

In looking back at the life and voluminous published work, in contemplating his remarkable contributions to Brigham Young University, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the larger kingdom of God, I draw the following conclusions, principles that his life proclaims (I have purposely not ordered these items):

- The restored gospel is worthy of a lifetime of study.
- If one will come to the study of the restored gospel with an open heart and mind and maintain the spirit of curiosity to the time of death, he or she may find deeper and grander profundities as the years pass.
- The Latter-day Saint position in the religious world is far stronger than many suppose.

- While cynicism and skepticism occasionally appear to be fashionable, there is always a place, indeed a vital need, for a defender of the faith.
- Being a defender of the faith is not all joy and delight. There is a dissident element in our society that finds morbid delight in exposing the apologist as a pious fraud. Such efforts may come, painfully, even from former friends or loved ones.
- Not everyone in the Church needs to be a mirror image of every other person.
- Eccentricity need not signal aberrance within the faith.
- A lasting contribution to the kingdom comes only after one has paid a significant price by both study and faith.
- Some are clearly foreordained to render marvelous service, to prove a blessing to hundreds of thousands, and yet not hold high position in the Church.
- If one assumes the best—namely, that Joseph Smith and the Restoration are a divine work—then God will find ways to shower down light and understanding to reinforce and buttress that faith and hope.
- Breadth, depth, and perspective result in an elevated understanding that defies such shallow and inane categories as “liberal” and “conservative.”
- One can actually reach the point in this life where he or she is no longer drawn or driven by the allurements of fame and notoriety and wealth.
- It is not necessary to loosen one’s hold on redemptive theology (especially the doctrine of the Fall, the Atonement of Christ, and spiritual rebirth as taught in the Book of Mormon) as that person becomes more knowledgeable.
- We need not be ashamed of teaching of the glorious principle of grace and would do well to live in a constant state of gratitude.
- Incessant study and broad preparation, when engaged in with an eye single to the glory of God, lead to the celebration of a simple faith.
- Loyalty to the Lord’s anointed servants need not be surrendered as one’s academic reputation grows.
- In the long run, it matters precious little what one’s academic peers may think of a disciple’s devotion.
- The study of holy words results in an elevated perspective, which in turn produces a reverence for life.



- The final word comes not by study and research but through revelation.
- The true and living Church is all about change, and a serious student ought to be pleased and gratified that his or her former position is in need of alteration. We simply ought to see certain things today differently than we did thirty years ago.
- If we cannot explain a deep or profound concept in a simple manner, as we might to a child, then we may not really understand it.
- True knowledge never closes the door to more knowledge; it welcomes it.
- A truly consecrated life, a life dedicated to building up the kingdom of God and establishing God's righteousness (see Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 6:38), gradually results in the formation of a Christlike character and a quiet but dynamic discipleship.

### Conclusion

Hugh Winder Nibley was fascinated by the restored gospel, drawn to and repeatedly enticed by the teachings of holy scripture and the words of the prophets. He once remarked that “the greatest appeal of the gospel in every age has been that it is frankly wonderful”—truly “one long shout of hallelujah.”<sup>28</sup>

Like many others, I am persuaded that Hugh Nibley was a man chosen and raised up by God to perform a significant labor. He was, from very early on in his career, a consummate apologist, a witness, a defender of the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Restoration. He assured the Saints that they had every reason to have confidence in a gospel and a divine plan that was as wide as eternity and as deep as the ocean. He taught the Latter-day Saints to search the scriptures with an assurance of the historicity and antiquity of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham.

He dared to challenge the naysayers, to expose the mythmakers, and to encourage those who were undergoing faith crises. Thousands upon thousands have been touched, strengthened, and brought back into Church activity as a result of his willingness to share what he had learned. He did it because of his love of learning, his passion for truths that transform. He did it to reassure those in the midst of

a faith crisis that there was no need to yield to doubt, to harbor it, and certainly not to parade it. It was his desire to assist those who heard him or read his work to acquire a witness of the truth that is as stimulating to the mind as it is reinforcing and soothing to the heart. He did it because he himself was steeped in testimony. He once observed with tongue in cheek: “Well, I have a testimony: I may be ignorant, but I am not lost.”<sup>29</sup>

In discussing apocryphal documents that had been discovered, Hugh asked:

Question: Won't these documents prove that the gospel is true? Answer: No, you'll never prove the gospel [in that manner]. You'll never prove the Book of Mormon or the Bible or anything else. Remember, people have been working on the Bible for hundreds of years, and do people believe it? When is a thing proven in science or anywhere else? When you have had enough experience, enough observation, enough thinking, enough testing, enough personal impressions to impress *you* that it's so. That might not convince another scientist at all. Equally eminent men may have the same evidence in front of them, and when is it proven to one? When he believes it's so. *When is the gospel proven to you or anyone else? At the point at which you are personally convinced. . . . That's why we have to have the Holy Ghost and have to listen to the promptings of the Spirit.* Otherwise, we're not going to agree on anything. . . . You can't force your testimony onto somebody else—it's nontransferable.<sup>30</sup>

We can learn much about people at their funeral, by listening carefully to what is said about them by those who knew them best and loved them most. It was my privilege to attend Hugh Nibley's funeral. On the stand were members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and a number of these leaders paid appropriate tribute to Hugh and the legacy he left behind. For me, however, the most powerful tribute paid to Brother Nibley was by one of his children who said essentially, “My father was the purest man I have ever known.”<sup>31</sup> That's the Hugh Nibley I knew, the peculiar personality whose whole soul was dedicated to furthering the work that Joseph Smith set in motion and strengthening the faith and devotion of Latter-day Saints. And he did those things consummately well.

*Robert L. Millet is professor emeritus of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University. He received his bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology from BYU and thereafter worked as a marriage and family counselor with Latter-day Saint Social Services (now Family Services). After completing his PhD in religious studies from Florida State University in 1983, he joined the BYU Religious Education faculty, where he worked until his retirement in 2014. During his 31 years at BYU, he taught courses in the New Testament, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price, and Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. He has served as chair of the Department of Ancient Scripture, dean of Religious Education, and Richard L. Evans Professor of Religious Understanding. He is the author or editor of more than eighty books and two hundred articles, book chapters, and reviews dealing mostly with the doctrine and history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its relationship with other faiths. For more than thirty years, Professor Millet has been engaged in interfaith relations and been a part of formal academic dialogues with Evangelical Christians, the Church of the Nazarene, and the Community of Christ (formerly the RLDS Church). He and his wife, Shauna, are the parents of six children and reside in Orem, Utah.*

### Notes

1. Truman G. Madsen described Nibley the teacher as follows: "As a teacher, he is, at the outset, terrifying. He does not lecture; he explodes. He brings source materials in the original to class, translates them on the spot, and lapses into spasms of free association as he sees linguistic connections. He teaches whatever he is working on that day, allowing students to look over his shoulder. . . . Most of the time he talks as if everyone present has just read everything he has. This is less a Germanic or Olympian detachment than a temperamental unwillingness to put anyone down. He exhibits patience with questions which show no one was listening a minute ago. . . . It is not surprising that few professors have generated more stories about absentmindedness. . . . He is usually talking before and after the bell rings for any given class period, and the lecture only begins and ends with your being in earshot" (Madsen, "Prodigy," 391–2 [this volume]).
2. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Caravan Moves On," *Ensign*, November 1984.
3. Hugh Nibley, "Goods of First and Second Intent," in *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 529.

4. Nibley, "The Meaning of the Atonement," in *Approaching Zion*, 567–68.
5. Hugh Nibley, "Prophets and Glad Tidings," in *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 259.
6. Nibley, "Funeral Address," in *Approaching Zion*, 301–2; emphasis added.
7. Hugh Nibley, "The Prophetic Book of Mormon," in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 461–62.
8. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2000), 48–49, 101.
9. Russell M. Nelson, "We Can Do Better and Be Better," *Ensign*, May 2019, 67.
10. Nibley, "Gifts," in *Approaching Zion*, 91, 101, 109, 111, 116.
11. See Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 313.
12. "Hugh Nibley: The Faithful Scholar," in Hugh Nibley, *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2008), 25–26.
13. Hugh Nibley, "The Best Possible Test," in *Temple and Cosmos* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 535, 537.
14. Nibley, "Deny Not the Gifts of God," in *Approaching Zion*, 130–31; see also p. 233.
15. Hugh Nibley, "Good People and Bad People," in *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 356–57; emphasis added.
16. Nibley, "What Is Zion? A Distant View," in *Approaching Zion*, 39–40.
17. Nibley, "Our Glory or Our Condemnation," in *Approaching Zion*, 4, 5, 6, 14, 16.
18. Nibley, "What Is Zion? A Distant View," in *Approaching Zion*, 26, 27–28; emphasis added.
19. William Fowler, "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet," *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 19.
20. Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987).
21. Nibley, "Prophets and Creeds," in *The World and the Prophets*, 44.
22. Hugh Nibley, "Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic," in *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 311.
23. Austin Farrer, "The Christian Apologist," in *Light on C.S. Lewis*, ed. Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 26; emphasis added.
24. Nibley, "The Prophets and the Open Mind," in *The World and the Prophets*, 134; emphasis added.

25. Neal A. Maxwell, *Plain and Precious Things* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 4; see also Maxwell, “*But for a Small Moment*”: *Light from Liberty Jail, Inspired Contributions from the Prophet in Prison* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 35.
26. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018, 96.
27. Hugh Nibley, “Criticizing the Brethren,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 444.
28. “Nibley the Scholar,” interview of Hugh Nibley by Louis Midgley, Forum Assembly, Brigham Young University, May 21, 1974; in *Of All Things: Classic Quotations from Hugh Nibley*, ed. Gary P. Gillum, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 5.
29. Nibley, “Do Religion and History Conflict?,” in *Temple and Cosmos*, 449.
30. Nibley, “Apocryphal Writings and Teachings of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Temple and Cosmos*, 323–25; emphasis added.
31. Compare A. Nibley, “Remarks,” 559 (this volume).
32. Goodreads. [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/399217.The\\_World\\_and\\_the\\_Prophets](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/399217.The_World_and_the_Prophets). Photo ID: 3018431.jpeg.
33. Nibley Collection, box 290, folder 2. Photo ID: HBLL-HughN-\_STW8414-ECBox290Folder2-.jpeg. Some of those in the photo have been identified by Robert Millet. These include: a. sitting, left to right: B. West Belnap (dean); Roy W. Doxey (dean), ; Sidney B. Sperry (dean); William E. Berrett, administrator of Seminaries and Institutes, unknown; standing: unknown, unknown, Ellis T. Rasmussen (one of the deans of Religious Education), unknown, Hugh Nibley, unknown.
34. Photograph by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw. Photo ID: IMG\_0045.jpeg.
35. Courtesy of David Nibley. Photo ID: DavidN-mugging2-EC.jpeg.
36. Photo taken in 1990 (see Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* [Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002], 118). Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 4. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-\_STW8729-EC-Box10Folder4.jpeg.
37. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 1. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-\_STW8575-EC-Box10Folder1.jpeg.
38. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 4. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-\_STW8600-ECR-Box10Folder4.jpeg.
39. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 4 Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-\_STW8744-ECR-Box10Folder4.jpeg.