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Hugh Nibley and the Bible:
“Look! And I Looked”
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HUGH NIBLEY AND THE BIBLE: “LOOK! AND I LOOKED”

Ann N. Madsen

In his lecture in this series, Alex Nibley confided that he resigned from family home evening because of the strangers and foreigners who invaded the Nibley home on Monday evenings. Alex, as you recall, I was one of those people.

I think I first met Hugh Nibley when Truman had an office next door to him in the old Joseph Smith Building (JSB) starting in fall 1957. We would see each other occasionally, and I didn't know enough to take advantage of any chance meeting to ask a profound question. I was a young mother, busy with two, then shortly three children. We were out of breath, just out of graduate school, and settling into our first real house, a tract home, which seemed like a castle to me, with no furniture but the best hi-fi on the block.

Truman would come home for dinner and regale me with Nibley experiences almost nightly. Truman *knew* the treasure that was just through the wall from him. He would say something like, “Nibley knocked on my door today all excited and rushed me into his office, waving me away from a chair that didn't sit evenly on the floor so no one could keep him long from his projects. He'd thumb through one of his shoe boxes, pulling out a card here and one there, and then explain in crisp detail a connection he had just discovered. ‘Gleefully’ is the only way to describe him.” So I began to know Hugh Nibley secondhand. After a time it was easy to see that he was taking my newly PhD'd husband under his wing. He became a kind, generous mentor.

Fast forward to 1973, sixteen years later, children, now four of them, in high school and college. I was registered in Religion 606, taught by Hugh Nibley, as part of my graduate program in ancient

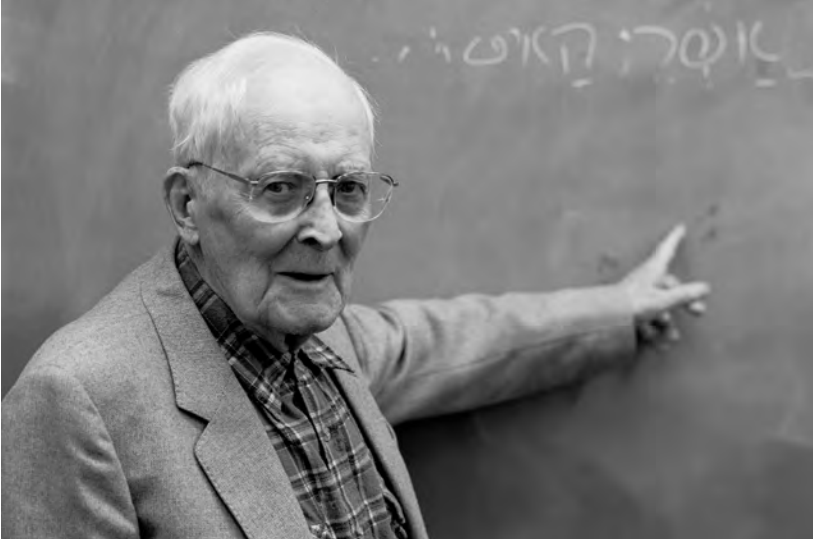


Figure 1. “Reading my class notes a few weeks ago, I could almost hear his voice and see him trotting back and forth telling us all about everything.”²³³

studies. My casual acquaintance was about to blossom into a full-blown teacher-student relationship. I knew enough to buy legal notebooks to take notes. Each page was divided with a wide margin so I could take class notes on one side and “Nibleyisms” on the other (no computers). This was one of two classes I took from him, holding out my cup under his Niagara Falls of knowledge, trying to catch all I could. I sat at his feet. I still do. Reading my class notes a few weeks ago, I could almost hear his voice and see him trotting back and forth telling us all about everything. I was quite excited to discover that after thirty-four years of my teaching in the new Joseph Smith Building, I finally understood those notes—most of them!

“Hugh W. Nibley and the Bible: ‘And the Spirit said unto me: Look! and I looked!’ (1 Nephi 11:8).” That title seems perfect to me. No one ever looked more earnestly than Hugh Winder Nibley . . . at *everything*. The scriptures were a major focus all his life. He read them. Discussing his encounter with the Bible is a formidable, no, let’s face it, an impossible task but well worth sampling.

Whoever decided to title his documentary *The Faith of an Observer* hit the nail squarely on the head. In that piece Hugh said,

We're wandering around as strangers looking for things to recognize, and whenever you see something which you know is good, true and beautiful, that's an act of recognition. And you recognize it as such not by analyzing it, but it comes to your memory; it hits you: "I've seen that, I know that's right," and so forth.¹

He looked. He observed. He pondered. He compared. *He recognized.* And when he recognized, he wrote, to share what he had seen and felt with us—to share his faith. I did not come close to reading all of his writings, teachings, and lectures on the Bible in preparing for tonight. But I looked at lots of it and kept bumping into some things over and over again, and as I looked over my class notes, some of the same themes emerged. These I chose to examine more deeply with you.

Just what did he look at?

1. He looked at the big picture, a giant puzzle with thousands of pieces.

It was not just a worldview but a cosmic landscape. After seeing the sweep of it all he often invested his time in examining some of the smallest details, if you can call the well-known, round "hypocephalus" of Facsimile 2 a small detail. He wouldn't have called it small in any sense, as his thick book on it is scheduled to come out on his hundredth birthday, with the clever title *One Eternal Round*.² He has more to say, to teach us.

Do you all know what a hypocephalus is? It is a round disk, covered, about 7½ inches in diameter. Some are larger and some smaller, according to my informant, Michael Rhodes. You can turn to page 36 in the Book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price to see one. But you would need Hugh Nibley to explain it. As, of course, he has done and will do. One description of how a hypocephalus was used by the ancient Egyptians states that it was a round head cushion covered with writing, placed under the head of the mummified person to assist him in remembering what to say and do in relation to questions he would face after death.³ Things he would need to know to be resurrected and go to live with the gods. But enough about the small details he chose to prize.



Figure 2. Egyptian hypocephalus, a circular depiction of the cosmos.³⁴

2. How did he organize his looking?

What was his research strategy? What a gold mine I found right under my nose—at least his plan in 1951. This method likely evolved over the next decades, but what fun to see how he was thinking in 1951. My friend and home teacher recounted for me a meeting he attended in March 1951, in which Hugh Nibley spoke to the University Archaeological Society. In the words of my friend's journal,

I made sure I showed up for that meeting, and it turned out to be most memorable. Nibley talked rapidly, describing how he went about doing his research. The process involved several steps.⁴

3. He looked for patterns.

The Bible presented Hugh Nibley with a very ancient, very big picture. It traced the life of a family who came to be called, collectively, the children of Israel. He saw a pattern here. In my class notes I wrote:

Patternism [Was this word his invention?—[we're] all tested the same, each generation has same tests. Some more wicked. Moroni 10: All dispensations have a "last days."

Hugh observed Israel rejecting God in an undulating pattern, a recognizable cycle, over and over again, but in the same moment he would point out to us that even though this persisted, God deigned to give these wandering people power *to become* his sons and daughters, his peculiar, holy people set apart from the world.

Observing these patterns prompted questions, some of them difficult to answer but needing answers nevertheless. What does this patience with rebellious children teach us about God? About forgiveness? About us? About his "hand stretched out still" of which Isaiah repeatedly speaks? About the transforming, enabling power of the Atonement?

Remember the tender moment in *Faith of an Observer* when Hugh says, "The angels envy [people] their ability both to forgive and to repent."⁵ That's what it all comes down to, two things are our final test, can we forgive and can we repent?

He described it as progressive repentance, forevermore and a progressive revelation of our own ignorance. Our family memorized his insightful take on rationalization: "You can always find someone wickeder than yourself. It may give you a good feeling but it will block the way to your own repentance."⁶

So these are the answers Hugh gave to a couple of the questions. Repent, forgive. Simple. Profound.

4. He looked at temples.

The Bible describes temples and their rituals from beginning to end and beyond, often in the minutest detail, cubits and all, including clothing and vestments and a golden crown etched with "Holiness to the Lord." Hugh looked hard at biblical temples and rituals and found counterparts all over the world and all across history. If you

ever heard him speak or read his words, you had to have come across a phrase something like this: “The temple is a scale model of the universe.”⁷ I didn’t count how many times that was in my notes, and once he added, “Cosmic idea = everything has an appointed time and place.”

Temple = scale model of Zion

Temple= scale model of Cosmos

One profound observation explains what we might now call “the bottom line”:

It becomes pointless to draw the line between this world and the beyond. Indeed, the contemplation of the unbroken continuity of life “from eternity to eternity” is the very purpose and function of the temple.⁸

For him it all began with Adam and Eve and an altar built by Adam, who knew not why but was obedient to the command. (After typing that sentence it occurred to me that I was not being accurate, since Hugh also wrote a piece called “Before Adam,”⁹ but I think his biblical look at temples would start with Adam’s altar.) He said:

My story begins with Adam and Eve, the archetypal man and woman, in whom each of us is represented. [I think “my” here may have a double meaning; the story he was telling and his own personal history.] From the most ancient times their thrilling confrontation has been dramatized in rites and ceremonies throughout the world, as part of a great creation-drama rehearsed at the new year to celebrate the establishment of divine authority on earth in the person of the king and his companion.¹⁰

I was interested to note that “Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” from which this quotation came, was a speech first delivered on February 1, 1980, at the BYU Women’s Conference, which would explain his close look at Eve and her role in the following assessment. You will understand why at least we women love this:

So who was more important? Eve is the first on the scene, not Adam, who woke up only long enough to turn over to

fall asleep again; and then when he really woke up he saw the woman standing there, ahead of him, waiting for him.¹¹

He goes on to discuss in detail the interaction between Adam and Eve and the choice to opt for “ever greater light.”

The first daring step had to be taken, and if in her enthusiasm she let herself be tricked by the persuasive talk of a kindly “brother,” it was no fault of hers. Still it was an act of disobedience for which someone had to pay, and she accepted the responsibility. And *had* she been so foolish? It is she who perceives and points out to Adam that they have done the right thing after all. Sorrow, yes, but she is willing to pass through it for the sake of knowledge—knowledge of good and evil that will provide the test and the victory for working out their salvation as God intends.¹²

His explanation is clearly stated, calling on other obvious sources where this vital drama is played out.

Moving on to Moses and the tabernacle in the wilderness, in Hebrew, “the tent of meeting,” a much more accurate idea, which allowed a portable temple to house rituals and a place where the Lord could *meet* his prophet-leader and “tent” in the midst of his fickle children, Israel, welcoming their sincere sacrifices but rejecting their “meaningless offerings” that came from habit but hardly from the heart—echoes of Cain and Abel. Another pattern. Another question: What did Satan have to do with all this? Brother Nibley explains:

Satan’s concern with Moses was not to turn him against religion but to enlist his devotions. In Moses 1, a most marvelous piece of epic and dramatic literature, Satan confronts Moses, and Moses doesn’t yield. But Aaron does—he falls for Satan’s golden calf.¹³

It all seems to be about enticing and the opposition necessary for man to choose. In Moses’s words, having experienced both God and Satan, “Behold, I can judge between thee and God” (Moses 1:15). “I can judge!” What powerful words!

In the spirit of *Approaching Zion*,¹⁴ let’s rush by Solomon’s grand, ornamented structure, double the size of the movable “tent



Figure 3. As Jesus walked the path to Gethsemane by a full moon, “the shadow that fell across his path would have been Herod’s gigantic white temple.”³⁵

of meeting” but with the same rituals and priesthood. Oh, but there was more, much more. That temple destroyed around 586 BC and rebuilt in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, around 515 BC, was a more modest structure but still a place to carry out the law of Moses, which as we all know was based on a system of sacrifice, an eternal type in the biggest picture, for the Redeemer of us all.

In that same spirit, we will glance at Herod’s massive building projects, whose large and spacious building projects included enlarging and beautifying that same Jerusalem temple on the hill across from the Mount of Olives, which was barely finished after decades and destroyed only a few years later by the Romans for the last time in circa AD 77.

One of my most memorable experiences in Jerusalem was walking by the light of a full moon one night tracing Jesus’s path across the Kidron Valley to Gethsemane. As we walked beneath the Dome of the Rock, I suddenly realized that when Jesus walked this way on that fateful night before his arrest, there was the same full moon, but the shadow that fell across his path would have been Herod’s gigantic white temple. He would have been walking in the shadow of the temple, the one he called “his house” only days before as he cast out those who defiled it.

The destruction of that temple in AD 77 was not the end of Hugh Nibley’s ardent research into ritual and temples. As was his wont, he looked outside the box.

He found temples aplenty in Egypt and in the ancient documents he studied. Ezekiel predicted a future temple. The scribes who penned the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) saw a future temple with an authentic priesthood. All these temples and more deserved Hugh's attention. And so he looked, hoping to find something he recognized. And he did.

How did Hugh Nibley respond to our modern temples? He went inside. In the days long ago when the religion faculty held regular temple nights, he would come to teach us inside the temple, all of us dressed in white, able to speak of things there that we could not discuss elsewhere. Try imagining yourself in the temple, all in white, listening to Hugh Nibley with his white hair, white clothing, and face full of light as he spoke in his wonderful, animated way. He might have said something like this, which was published in "What Is a Temple?," so you needn't worry that I'm speaking out of turn: "Here all time and space come together; the barriers vanish between this world and the next; between past, present and future. What is bound here is bound beyond, and only here can the gates be opened to release the dead who are awaiting the saving ordinances. Here the whole human family meets in a common enterprise. . . . All time becomes one and the worlds join hands in this work of love, which is no mere mechanical bookkeeping."¹⁵

When Krešimir Ćosić brought dozens of names of his Croatian ancestors for their temple blessings, Hugh Nibley was always there with Phyllis. So was I. So was Truman. He always went inside with his eyes wide open, looking, just like the angel had invited Nephi to do.

5. I would like to give Truman a moment here.

Truman knew Hugh well. Oh, he would have done such a spectacular job of this. Truman used to say, "No one knows what he knows." I can attest to that in all of the ambiguity our language provides. No one knows what *he knows*. We have no idea the extent of his data bank. *No one knows* what he knows. We don't have nearly the data bank to draw on that he does. And, perhaps, most significantly, no one knows what he knows—in other words, the depths of his spiritual nature and experiences are not known to us. We don't have the same lens to see through a glass brightly. (That

sounds like something Truman might say.) He routinely brushed so close to the sacred, it was really the center of his study. Some may have thought he said too much. I would question that. He always said too little; there was always more to “recognize”—to understand. But we lacked the tools. He brushed ever so close, using terms and metaphors that would paint vivid pictures for us, trying to bring us along to where he was. For instance:

We know now that there are three worlds: the telestial, in which we live; the celestial, to which we aspire; and in between them another world, called the terrestrial. . . . According to the ancients, this world is represented by the temple, the in-between world where the rites of passage take place.¹⁶

Interesting. It was all one big picture to him, and the temple personified and was the center of it. “No one knows what he knows.” Indeed. There may be more in that little sentence, but that will suffice.

6. Let’s discuss his footnotes for a moment.

It would be interesting to average out the number in his many articles and books. Nineteen is the fewest I remember seeing, and 128 is not uncommon. My sampling was only that. I’ve heard people say that that many footnotes can’t all be real; that he must have fabricated some to impress. But I stumbled onto an eyewitness account from someone I trust completely.¹⁷

When our son, Barney, was in law school, he was a research assistant for Jack Welch and was assigned to check the footnotes for Hugh’s fairly short essay “Treasures in the Heavens,”¹⁸ to be published in the first volume of the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Old Testament and Related Studies*. When he began his task, he noticed the essay took up fewer pages than the footnotes. “The final published version of the essay is 17 pages, while the footnotes fill 26 pages.” The job looked daunting. He began chasing the books referenced all around the library. They were not conveniently located on adjacent shelves in one area but scattered all over the library. He was impressed by the breadth of the research, no stone left unturned. No computerized card catalog. Soon, he recognized that there were almost as many languages as there were books, and while he could

handle a few, he often had to seek out Brother Nibley to get him to translate what he had found. He was impressed at how gracious and kind he always was. It was not long until Barney realized he had his own tool to shortcut the looking. Thumbing through the pages looking for a page number, he would find the page and, in the margins, penciled notations in a hand that he soon recognized as Hugh Nibley's. Talk about researching "treasures." When he told me that, I immediately thought that perhaps someone should do a thesis collecting footnote references with their accompanying Nibley notes. Wow! Imagine my surprise when I called to consult with Gary Gillum, only to find that he was serving a mission and that the fine young man who was hired to try to fill his shoes, Ryan Combs, was in the midst of just such a project. They were using Twitter and Facebook technology. In a personal communication, Ryan described it thus:

We hope to scan the copies of books Hugh Nibley owned (and donated to the library) or borrowed from the library and wrote in. [We'll start with books in the public domain and try to add others based on legal copyright.] Once we have them scanned we'll invite professors and students familiar with Nibley's work to contribute to this database, which will be a kind of combination of a Wiki and Flickr. People will be able to "tag" sections of the page and type what they think Nibley wrote, someone else can disagree and give their opinion. Another "tag" we'll do is of the text itself; if it's a book Nibley cited in his own writings, we'll tag that section of the book and link it to the appropriate publication on the Maxwell Institute website. The tags will be searchable and be a good way for people to research on the shoulders of a giant.

Their challenge will be the languages, but then a group of eight to ten linguists should be able to do it. But what a pity Hugh is no longer in that Ancient Studies office on the fourth floor to consult as Barney had the pleasure of doing. Technology is great but not the same as knocking on an office door and finding Hugh Nibley willing to confer with you. So what was the verdict of my careful, soon-to-be lawyer son? Hugh Nibley did exhaustive research, and the 128 footnotes he checked were absolutely accurate.



Figure 4. Nibley points out an interesting feature of an Egyptian temple.³⁶

7. He looked at languages and learned them.

We needn't number the languages in those little shoeboxes or in his head. The fact is, he kept brushing up on all of them most of the time. In Bible scholarship we begin with Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Old and New Testaments, but he ran far ahead of that, learning as he ran. Thirteen-plus languages learned seems to be the consensus, but some report he could read well in twenty-four. He always had a question to ask. What, indeed, is reformed Egyptian? Has anyone ever answered that satisfactorily? One would have to begin with Egyptian. So he mastered Egyptian.

My favorite memory of witnessing that expertise was walking with him down the broad hallway into a burial tomb in the Valley of the Kings near Luxor, Egypt. (An aside: I remember clearly Truman's amazement when he found that Hugh had never visited Egypt in person and his immediately making arrangements to correct that. Happily, we were able to walk beside him on that first jaunt—and I use the word advisedly because he was like a child opening an unexpected but perfect gift.) I had been to Egypt three or four times before and walked into its obvious ancient history—what a visual aid for antiquity! This time, Hugh rushed along, translating the walls as he went, finger tracing the hieroglyphics where he could reach and pointing where he could not, unlocking

as he sped along the meanings of the afterlife according to these ancient people's understanding. I hope someone was recording. You can catch some of this in *The Faith of an Observer*. Not our trip but a later one. The running commentary with us included corrections as he went. He would translate and then correct himself—"No, no," he would say, "that would be better said this way." That was Hugh Nibley. When he found he was in error, he readily shifted to what he felt was a better fit, more truthful. You get nowhere in scholarship without maintaining a foundation of truth to return to again and again after the theorizing. As he examined those tomb walls, there would be connections with our doctrine of the afterlife, and he would point out any overlap he encountered.

My little experience with Hebrew in teaching Isaiah and Old Testament courses helps me see how very much a language opens a window, letting in much more light. One Hebrew word, like *Elohim* or *derech*, can change the entire meaning of a verse. The examples in Psalm 8:4–5 and Isaiah 55:8 are simple but striking. The KJV reads,

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels [*Elohim* NIV "Heavenly beings"], and hast crowned him with glory [*kavod*, or, in some contexts, "body"] and honour.

Imagine, Hugh had the ability to look through the lenses of thirteen-plus languages. How broad was his horizon? How able was he to find connections others may miss or never even know exist?

8. He looked at sources beyond the Bible to help recognize what was being taught us in holy writ.

He was willing to search the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, which we traditionally look to as context for our modern Bible, and which Joseph Smith inquired about as he was working in the Old Testament.

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you concerning the Apocrypha—There are many things contained therein that are true, and it is mostly translated correctly;

There are many things contained therein that are not true, which are interpolations by the hands of men.

Verily, I say unto you, that it is not needful that the Apocrypha should be translated.

Therefore, whoso readeth it, let him understand, for the Spirit manifesteth truth;

And whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom;

And whoso receiveth not by the Spirit, cannot be benefited. Therefore it is not needful that it should be translated. Amen. (Doctrine and Covenants 91:1–6)

Can you imagine reading the Book of Mormon knowing that “many things . . . are true” and “many things . . . are not true”? Hugh wisely noted, “There are things in the Bible that are historical and things that are not. The guide to follow is the Book of Mormon.”¹⁹

Doctrine and Covenants 91:5 could have been written with Hugh Nibley in mind: “Whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom.” He does quote Doctrine and Covenants 91 occasionally in his writings. He differentiated between canon and noncanon but was not afraid to examine ancient myths and traditions, “walking around [in them like a garden of flowers] looking for things to recognize.”²⁰ And recognize he did. He collected his own Pseudepigrapha from everywhere. He explains:

But such study as has been done shows us that the old myths are by no means pure fiction, any more than they are all history.²¹

Myths arise as attempts to explain ritual doings, whose meaning has been forgotten.²²

So when the ancient myths from all over the world show us the same situations and the same adventures . . . recurring again and again, we may look upon this endless repetition not as discrediting the historicity of those events but as confirming it.²³

There is no telling what wonders may be brought to light simply by bringing together new combinations and associations of documents already in our possession. . . . It already appears that the ancient myths, wherever they turn up, have a tendency to fit together into the same picture, supporting and confirming

each other due to the solid ground on which they stand—the reality of ritual. . . . This leads us to conclude that there is a serious historical reality behind the myths as a whole.²⁴

This open attitude gave me confidence as I researched my thesis on Melchizedek. I was excited to examine the *Genesis Apocryphon* from the DSS Cave 1 for bits of tradition that corresponded with the truths I had already discovered in Alma 13, which added considerably to my knowledge of Melchizedek. I also consulted the Nag Hammadi *Melchizedek* document,²⁵ which had not yet been published and was kindly supplied me by the scholar who had barely translated it.

Nibley teaches us that the key to benefiting from searching tradition and myths is starting from a solid base of truth. But ranging far afield and looking is the very essence of the search of a true observer. The question always is, “What matches? What corresponds? What is ‘out in left field?’” He went far afield from the Apocrypha and the “canonized” or body of known and accepted Pseudepigrapha, finding his own documents—Ebla, DSS, Nag Hammadi—and unlocking them as they appeared on the scene with the key of language and myth-gathering but always avoiding “left field.” He had a game plan and he stuck to it. Is that a mixed metaphor? He watched Krešo play basketball but was so involved he finally couldn’t go to games.

9. He looked at Enoch and Abraham.

He taught us:

Zion is a code word denoting a very real thing, *Zion* is any community in which the celestial order prevails.²⁶

The prophets through the Old Testament designate this world by the code name of *Babylon*. It was Babylon where Abraham dwelt.²⁷

He looked long at Abraham. He never stopped looking, and he wrote much to “fill us in” on this remarkable patriarch. Among other things he said:



Figure 5. Abraham “threw himself down on his face, and then it is that the Lord promised him Isaac as a reward for what he had done.”³⁷

Abraham remains throughout eternity preeminently the friend of man; the kind father, husband, and host; the earnest and self-effacing advocate; the rescue worker; the zealous missionary; and finally the devoted worker for the dead.²⁸

Can we really speak of Hugh Nibley and the Bible without more about Enoch and Abraham, especially Abraham? As surely as Abraham was the friend of God, so surely was Hugh Nibley the friend of Abraham. He opened Abraham to us in ways never before attempted or even conceived, collecting that untapped treasure of myth and tradition to paint a larger, more complete picture. But we could safely save Abraham for the upcoming lecture by Michael Rhodes. Perhaps just a sample here.

Among my favorite moments with Hugh Nibley was the time he told us the same story about Abraham that he tells at the end of *Faith of an Observer*. I remember his eyes filling with tears at both tellings. I am so grateful for the images of Hugh in Egypt, sitting at sunset with the heat swirling around him, a wise, white-haired, aging patriarch himself, telling a tender tale of the great patriarch

Abraham. A story from “outside the box.” I repeat it here from that source.

We must do the works of Abraham. And then we are told specifically in the Doctrine and Covenants, that that means sacrificing, if necessary, your own life. Abraham was willing to do that. . . . Unless you are willing to give everything, you cannot claim eternal life. It’s not to be cheaply bought. These are the great blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. . . . There’s a story told in the *Midrash*. It begins with Abraham sitting in the door of his tent in the plain of Mamre in the heat of the day. But this was a hot day. [Like the one where Hugh is telling the story—beautiful film making!] . . . You can see the kind of country it was, and is. . . . The heat and the dust and the sand . . . that’s utter desolation. And he was worried, of course, because he says some poor stranger might be lost out there. Someone might have lost his way and be perishing because you’re not going to last an hour in this. So he sent his faithful servant Eleazer out to look everywhere. He sent him out in all directions, and he came back, “No, I can’t find anyone anywhere.” Abraham was still worried. He said, “There might be someone out there.” *You have these feelings* . . . so he went out himself, though he was very sick at the time. He was sick and ailing, and old, and he went out into that hell. And he looked and searched but he found no one. And at the end of the day, he came back exhausted toward his tent. As he approached the tent the three strangers were standing there. It was the Lord and the two with him, because the Lord goes with his two counselors, so to speak. He threw himself down on his face, and then it is that the Lord promised him Isaac as a reward for what he had done: this supreme offering. It’s a very moving story. . . . Abraham [had] said, “I think I can find someone.” Well, he found something. He found the answer to the thing he’d prayed for all his life: his son Isaac. It’s a beautiful story. . . . This Abraham who towers like a colossus is Everyman, as every man should be.²⁹

How much did *you* know about Abraham before Hugh Nibley?

He looked at Enoch! A word about Enoch, a word from Hugh, that is, from his 1975–77 series in the *Ensign*. I had just completed my graduate work in ancient studies, which had included my classes from Hugh Nibley. What an introduction to this series. I ate

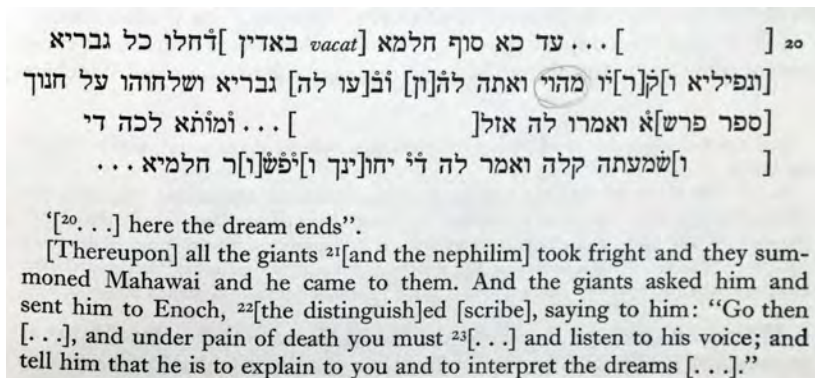


Figure 6. In this passage from Milik and Black's translation of the Book of Giants, Mahawai is sent to ask Enoch questions, just as Mahijah, the only named character in the Book of Moses Enoch account besides the prophet himself, questions Enoch. Notice how Nibley circled the Aramaic name in pencil.³⁸

it up. It was like a delicious dessert, and I was ready for it, steeped in what I had already learned from this great teacher. It was like a continuation of the courses he taught. I remember how excited I was to learn about all the books of Enoch and the detail of Mahijah. But let Hugh tell the tale:

What always impressed me as the oddest detail of the Joseph Smith account of Enoch was the appearance out of the blue of the name of the only nonbiblical individual named in the whole book—Mahijah. (Moses 6:40.) Mahijah is the one who asks Enoch searching questions, and in answer is told about the place Mahujah, where Enoch began this particular phase of his mission. (Moses 7:2.) It was therefore with a distinct shock of recognition that, after having looked through all but the last of the Aramaic Enoch fragments without finding anything particularly new, and coming to those very last little fragments, I found the name Mahujah leaping out of the pages again and again. Could this be our Mahujah or Mahijah? As a matter of fact it could be either, not only because the semi-vowels *w* and *y* are written very much alike in the Aramaic script and are sometimes confused by scribes, but also because the name as written in 4QEn, MHWY, is the same as the MHWY-EL who appears in Genesis 4:18 as the grandfather of Enoch, transliterated in the King James Bible as *Mehuja-el*, which name also appears in the Greek Septuagint as *Mai-el*

and in the Latin Vulgate as *Mavia-el*, showing that Mahujah and Mahijah were the same name.³⁰

So, you think language helps? Here he uses English, Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and Hebrew.

He continues:

So what? A coincidence—a giant or a Watcher called Mahujah or Mahijah. But far more than a coincidence when taken in its context. The only thing the Mahijah in the Book of Moses is remarkable for is his putting of bold direct questions to Enoch, thus giving the patriarch an opening for calling upon the people to repent, referring them to the book of remembrance, and telling them of the plan of salvation. And this is exactly the role, and the only role, that the Aramaic Mahujah plays in the story. *The name is found in none of the other Enoch texts and neither is the story*: it is peculiar to the version Joseph Smith gave us and the oldest known Enoch manuscripts. The following translation is from Milik and Black, lest the writer be charged with forcing the text.³¹

How playful he was. He ignored critics—this is not to say he didn't sometimes pen answers to them, but they never deterred him. He went blissfully on his way, being about his own business, or more precisely, his Father's business. We could all take a page from his book.

Spending this time with him again these past few weeks has been a delight, just as every encounter always was. I come away again truly humbled, realizing how little I know and what treasures there are to learn. The potential of one day having our capacities expanded to know *all* things seems more of a real possibility because of him. I think the soaring words of Doctrine and Covenants 76:5–10 fit.

For thus saith the Lord—I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end.

Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory.

And to them will I reveal all mysteries, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old, and for ages to come, will I make known unto them the good pleasure of my will concerning all things pertaining to my kingdom.

Yea, even the wonders of eternity shall they know, and things to come will I show them, even the things of many generations.

And their wisdom shall be great, and their understanding reach to heaven; and before them the wisdom of the wise shall perish, and the understanding of the prudent shall come to naught.

For by my Spirit will I enlighten them, and by my power will I make known unto them the secrets of my will—yea, even those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor yet entered into the heart of man.

I want to say thank you, Hugh.

After all is said and done about Hugh Nibley and the Bible, it is his faith we need to emulate, the faith of this extraordinary observer. It was from his heart that he chose to range abroad after obtaining all the tools he might need in his search. No one knows what he knows now. Joseph Smith once said, “Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that was ever written on the subject.”³²

No one ever entered the spirit world, “heaven,” more curious and prepared to satiate his or her curiosity than Hugh Winder Nibley. It is a wonderful thing to think of him, no more a stranger, looking wherever the angels direct, pondering and recognizing *everything!*

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Notes

1. See p. 150 in Hugh Nibley, “The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley,” in *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 148–76. <http://www.bhporter.com/Hugh%20Nibley/The%20Faith%20of%20an%20Observer%20Conversations%20with%20hugh%20Nibley.pdf>. For the film itself, see Sterling Van Wagenen (producer), Brian Capener (writer, director, and photographer), and Alex Nibley (writer), *The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2004), DVD and YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYPVZvRXpIY>.
2. Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes, *One Eternal Round* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2010).
3. See Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005), 28–29.
4. Victor Purdy, personal recollection.
5. Nibley, “Faith of an Observer,” 162.
6. Compare Hugh Nibley, “Great Are the Words of Isaiah,” in *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986), 217:

You can always find somebody who is worse than you are to make you feel virtuous. It’s a cheap shot: those awful terrorists, perverts, communists—“they” are the ones who need to repent! Yes, indeed they do, and for them repentance will be a full-time job, exactly as it is for all the rest of us.

7. See, e.g., Hugh Nibley “The Meaning of the Temple,” in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 15.
8. Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 15.
9. Hugh Nibley, “Before Adam,” in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 49–85.
10. Hugh Nibley, “Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 87.
11. Nibley, “Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” 92.
12. Nibley, “Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” 92; emphasis added.
13. Hugh Nibley, “Three Degrees of Righteousness,” in *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 323.
14. Nibley, *Approaching Zion*.
15. Hugh Nibley, “What Is a Temple?,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 368.

16. Hugh Nibley, "The Meaning of the Temple," in Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, 27–28.
17. For an extended discussion of Nibley's footnotes, see Shirley S. Ricks, "Editing Hugh Nibley," 451–496 (this volume).
18. Hugh Nibley, "Treasures in the Heavens," in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 171–214.
19. Nibley, "Historicity of the Bible," in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 19.
20. Nibley, "Faith of an Observer," 150.
21. Nibley, "Myths and the Scriptures," in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 41.
22. Nibley, "Myths and the Scriptures," 42.
23. Nibley, "Myths and the Scriptures," 43–44; emphasis added.
24. Nibley, "Myths and the Scriptures," 47.
25. Soren Giversen and Birger A. Pearson, "Melchizedek (IX, 1)," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1977), 438–44.
26. Hugh Nibley, "Our Glory or Our Condemnation," in *Approaching Zion*, 4.
27. Nibley, "Three Degrees of Righteousness," 323–24.
28. Hugh Nibley, "The New Abraham," in *An Approach to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2009), 447.
29. Nibley, "Faith of an Observer," 175–76. For a collection of rabbinic sources that underlie Nibley's telling of the story, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve. In God's Image and Likeness 1* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 339, 439–41. <https://archive.org/download/140123IGIL12014ReadingS>.
30. Hugh Nibley, "A Strange Thing in the Land," in *Enoch the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986), 277–78. For an account of discussions of Enoch scholar Matthew Black with Hugh Nibley and Gordon Thomasson on resemblances between Mahijah/Mahujah in the Book of Moses and Mahaway/Mahawai in the Dead Sea Scrolls *Book of Giants*, see Thomasson, "Matthew Black and Mircea Eliade," 423–27 (this volume).

For a detailed report of new findings that build on Nibley's pioneering research on these similar names, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Matthew L. Bowen, and Ryan Dahle, "Where Did the Names 'Mahaway' and 'Mahujah' Come From?: A Response to Colby Townsend's 'Returning to the Sources,'" *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 40 (2020): 181–242. <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/where-did-the-names-mahaway-and-mahujah-come-from-a-response-to-colby-townsend-s-returning-to-the-sources-part-2-of-2/>.

For more on the Book of Moses story of Enoch, including up-to-date research on its relationship to ancient sources, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Enoch and the Gathering of Zion: The Witness of Ancient Texts for Modern Scripture* (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central; Tooele, UT: Eborn Books, forthcoming 2021).

For an in-depth survey of current scholarship outlining evidence on sources for the Book of Moses in antiquity, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David Rolph Seely, John W. Welch, and Scott Gordon, eds. *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses* (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central; Redding, CA: FAIR; Tooele, UT: Eborn Books, forthcoming 2021).

31. Nibley, "Strange Thing in the Land," 278; emphasis added.
32. Joseph Smith Jr., *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 419. From *History of the Church*, 6:50–51; paragraph divisions altered; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on October 9, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards and *Times and Seasons*, September 15, 1843, p. 331; this issue of the *Times and Seasons* was published late.
33. Photo copyright Brent C. Orton. Used with permission. Photo ID: Hugh01.tiff.
34. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock. *Hypocephalus of Hor* (2005), British Museum 35875 (formerly 8445c). Photo ID: 06A-Hypocephalus, British Museum 35875, 8445c-HC-BM-8445c.jpg. According to Hugh Nibley, "the Joseph Smith hypocephalus [Book of Abraham, Facsimile 2] is almost identical with the *Ws.t-wr.t* hypocephalus in the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna [Wien 253 a/2, published in Nibley, *One Eternal Round*, Appendix 4, 636] and the one belonging to Hr [Horus] in the British Museum." (Nibley and Rhodes, *One Eternal Round*, 194–95.)
35. J. James Tissot, 1836-1902: *Reconstruction of Jerusalem and the Temple of Herod Seen from the East*, ca. 1886-1894. Painting Mania. https://www.paintingmania.com/reconstruction-temple-herod-southeast-corner-237_42354.html. Photo ID: 05-5. Tissot-00.159.7herods_temple-trim.jpg.
36. Nibley Collection, box 292, folder 25. Photo ID: HBLL-HughN_STW8513-EC-Box292Folder25.jpeg.
37. J. James Tissot, 1836-1902: *Abraham and the Three Angels*, ca. 1886-1894. Wikimedia Commons. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tissot_Abraham_and_the_Three_Angels.jpg. Photo ID: vayera-9.jpg.

38. Photo by Stephen T. Whitlock taken on February 1, 2021 of page 305 from Józef Tadeusz Milik and Matthew Black, eds., *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments from Qumran Cave 4* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1976). <https://archive.org/details/MILIKEnochInAramaicQumranCave4>. The book is in the BYU HBLN Nibley Ancient Studies Room. Photo ID: HBLN-ASR_STW9072-EC.jpg.