

NIBLEY AND FOLKLORE

William A. Wilson

Prologue

Paul Hoskisson: Before we begin, I have to remind you that folklore is not always true.¹ There doesn't have to be any truth in it at all. My favorite is Brother Nibley not mowing his lawn in the springtime until the grass had fulfilled the measure of its creation. It's probably not true because he probably never ever mowed his lawn. Bert, we turn the time over to you now.

William A. Wilson: The difference between being retired and not being retired is that when you're retired, you're doing what you used to get paid for, and after you're retired, you no longer get paid for it. So, I'm pleased to look out at the audience to see quite a few people here in spite of the snowstorm. I told my wife earlier, if I didn't have to go to this, I wouldn't go when I looked at the snow coming down, but I'm glad to see you here.

I have a friend of mine who studies special relations between people, how we situate ourselves in relation to other people. I'd like to have him here sometime to analyze a Latter-day Saint audience, how we sit. Let me show you what I mean. Brother Hoskisson, come here.

Now, if I met you out there out in the quad, and you wanted to come and talk with me, where would you stop?

Hoskisson: Just about arm's length.

Wilson: All right. But what if I moved in like this, what would you do?



Figure 1. “For many of the things we do, our culture tells us what to do.”⁸

Hoskisson: I’d probably back away.

Wilson: Yeah, you probably would. Why did you decide that that was the right length?

Hoskisson: Custom?

Wilson: Yep. You didn’t make up your mind, your culture made it up for you. For many of the things we do, our culture tells us what to do. One of the things we do is to situate ourselves in an audience in relation to other people, according to what our culture tells us is proper.

Hugh Nibley vs. the Hugh Nibley of Folklore

I’m a little bit surprised to be here tonight because I probably know less about Hugh Nibley than anyone in this lecture series. I’ve had limited contact with him. I’ve always known about him. I’ve admired his work. I really liked his priesthood manual years ago,² and I had an office, when I was chair or head of the BYU Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, just down the hall from his. We passed each other now and then and would nod. But that was about the extent of our acquaintance.

One day, when I left the library, he was leaving, and we walked along and chatted for a moment. That was before they got rid of the Smith Family Living Center. He was bothered by the fact that



Figure 2. A Nibley family station wagon, ca. 1955.⁹

we kept tearing down BYU buildings that looked all right. He looked over at the Smith Family Living Center, and he said, “Gee, this building’s been here since 1950. Let’s get rid of it. Let’s tear it down.” He preferred to keep some of the older ones.

I observed him one time walking across campus at a pretty fast pace, and he had two to three students on each side of him as he walked. He was lecturing to them, and they were desperately trying to take notes of what he was saying. I thought, “That’s a pretty funny way to give a lecture.” But I’ve discovered some similarities between his behavior and mine. In one of the stories, he was supposed to have come down to the grocery store to shop for his wife, and he took the baby, whoever the baby was at that time. He pushed the baby around in a shopping cart and went through the checkstand. He took the groceries home, but when he arrived, he found that he had forgotten the baby.

My wife could tell you the story of when we were in graduate school in Indiana. There was a bypass road that went all the way around the university and the town and ended up at where we lived. We had been at a Church affair. We had a little Volkswagen at that time, and there’s that space behind the seat, which makes a good

place to put a bag. It's also a good place to put a baby who's crying, and the vibrations of the car will usually lull him or her to sleep.

I had to come home while Hannele was staying at the church. It was raining and it was cold, so I put the baby in that space behind the seat and started home. And then I had problems with the car. The car quit on me. So I got out and hitched a ride. After I got—I don't know how far away from where the car was, I remembered, "Oh, good heavens. I had a son in that car." And so, maybe I'm not too different from Hugh, and that son is . . . Where are you, son Eric? Sitting right back there. So, it wasn't too bad.

He didn't always remember his wife's name, according to the stories, and I've always remembered mine. But after importuning her for a long time to marry me, she finally agreed. And then shortly after that, I was walking one direction, and she was walking from the other; I passed by her and didn't see her, didn't say anything, and she was beginning then to wonder about whether she should have said yes to me or not.

I asked her about that later, and she said, "Well, I got used to you walking around in your thoughts and not paying any attention to what was going on around you." I don't think she looked at my leaving our baby son in the car with the same graciousness, but . . .

So, I have found several things that I've done that strike me as similar to some of the things Hugh Nibley is said to have done. But my job tonight is not to talk about Hugh Nibley himself but to talk about the folklore that circulates about Hugh Nibley, about the person who lives in that folklore. And I would like to caution you, as we do this—I'm not making judgments as I tell these stories. I'm going to talk as though these are all true, as though these are things that Hugh Nibley did. Some of them may be, some of them may not. But when I'm talking about these stories about Hugh Nibley tonight, I'm talking about the Hugh Nibley of the folklore, not *the* Hugh Nibley—this I have discovered through my careful personal research.

What Is Folklore?

Now, I want to start with a definition, and the reason I need to do that is that most people have a different concept of what folklore is than folklorists do, and it's just good if we can at least get on

the same page as we begin. And so, I define folklore briefly as that part of our culture that we pass on through time and space—that is, from person to person and from place to place, by listening and repeating, or watching and imitating.

For example, if in your home when you were young, your father or mother told you stories about the pioneers that he or she had learned from grandparents, you make that part of your life; and then when you have your own children, you tell them that story. So, that story passes from generation to generation by the spoken word, and it's the spoken word that keeps it alive. Or if you learned to quilt sitting at your mother's knee, eventually you may have a daughter sitting at your knee and learning to quilt from you. And so, that practice is passed on again. Not through the written word, not through any other means than through, as I say, hearing and repeating, and watching and imitating, repeating again.

We generally talk, folklorists do, about three kinds of folklore:

- things we make with our hands,
- things we make with our actions, and
- things we make with our words.

The things that we make with our hands can be anything from that quilt to Native American moccasins, or it can be a rawhide braided bridle; some of you who are interested in horses have seen this intricate work. Anyway, there's a huge number of things that we make that we learn traditionally.

The things that we make with our actions or the games we play—such as the way we celebrate a family home evening in our own homes or the ways we celebrate birthdays or any other kind of traditional practices—these things we learn by doing them.

When my wife and I were in Finland not long ago, we stayed with a family that was a large family. Nine children, and it was a sort of a madhouse there. The father then said, "Well, it's time for evening prayer." And he said that, and every kid from whichever corner of the house he or she was in rushed to the living room and knelt down in the middle.

And I said to myself, "How in the world did he bring that about? I've had a hard enough time in my own life getting everybody to gather for a prayer." And then I learned that the last one who came

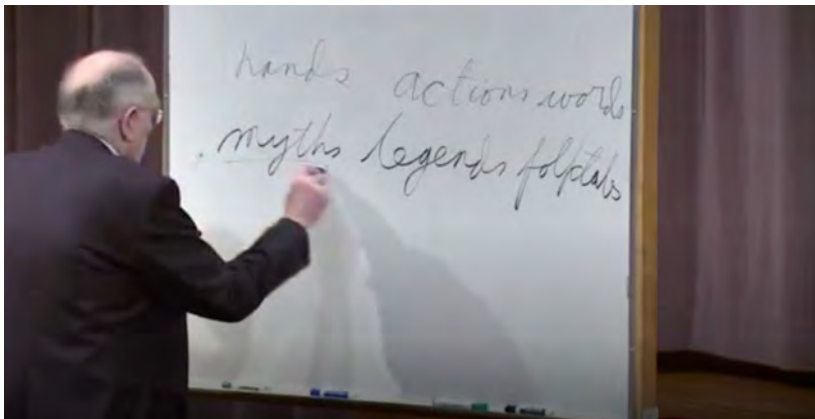


Figure 3. “The Nibley stories . . . belong in this middle category of legends.”¹⁰

was the one who got to give the prayer. So, that was the traditional practice in his home.

The things we make with words, of which there are a huge number, are the things that I’m interested in as a person who comes from literature: rhymes, proverbs, riddles, songs, and especially stories. Now, dividing things up into three, there are three kinds of stories that we tell. Maybe more, but these are the main ones: the myth, legends, and folktales. All are traditional narratives.

Myths are stories that are sacred. They’re told about a particular group of people—about the beginning of that group, who God is, what our relationship is to God or the gods, how to placate the god, and so on. Legends are set in the historical world, and they tell us about things that supposedly happened in our time, or at least in a time that’s not a different time, like the myth. The myth is often in a time before time. And the folktale includes tales—like “Cinderella” or “Beauty and the Beast”—any number of these stories that you used to tell your children or that you heard yourself.

The myth, then, comes closer in the literate society to being similar to scripture. If you’re wondering how you should live, what you should do, you turn to your myth and see what it tells you about the way things have happened in the past so you can repeat those things in the future. The legend comes closer to history, and the folktale comes closer to fiction, stories told just for the pleasure of telling. They may have morals, but nobody believes that in “Jack and the Beanstalk” Jack was really out climbing that beanstalk.

The Nibley stories, then, belong in this middle category of legends, history about Hugh Nibley and the things that he did in his life. They are generally believed to be true by the teller and sometimes by the listener. The stories range from absolutely true to absolutely false, and it's often difficult to know where to draw the line and decide what's true and what's not. What are we to do, then, with these stories if we can't be sure?

We should remember what Church historian Leonard Arrington said that has helped me a lot. He said, "Just because something didn't really happen doesn't mean that it's not true." You remember that—just because it didn't happen doesn't mean that it's not true. Let me illustrate this further.

Latter-day Saint Values at the Heart of Nibley Stories

Each of us belongs to a lot of different social groups. We talk about folklore with talk about the folk, who are the people who possess it, and about the lore, what it is that they pass along and keep alive. The folk, we're all folk—all belong to different social groups. In those social groups that we live in, we participate in the traditional culture of that group. If you're a member of an occupational group, you tell stories about the occupation; and if you're a student of some university, you tell stories about the university; and if they're teachers, they are telling stories about you, and on and on we could go. If you belong to an ethnic group, you tell stories about members of your ethnic group, or about the world you live in. If you're in a regional group, you tell stories about the region you live in. The stories, as I say, are the lore, and depending on the group that you belong to, you can have a wide variety of traditional stories or you can have a few, but they are always tied to the social group to which you belong.

Now, each member of a social group is different from all other members. I'm sometimes asked by people who know I'm a Latter-day Saint, and who are not Latter-day Saints themselves, "What's the typical Mormon like?" And my answer to that is, "I don't know. I've never met a typical Mormon." And what do I mean? I mean that each of us is different from every other person in the world, including every other member who belongs to our social group.

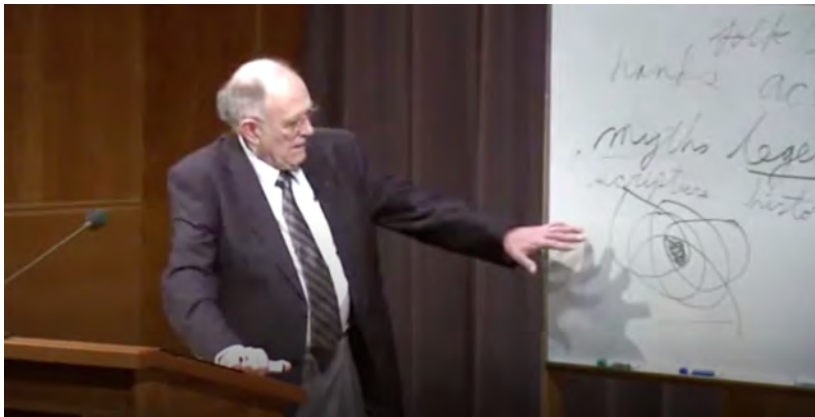


Figure 4. A Hugh Nibley story “starts someplace, goes through the value center, and it comes out the other side a different story.”¹¹

Think of it like this. This circle should represent one individual, this circle could represent another one, this one could represent another one, another one from here, another one, etc. Each one of those circles is a different person, but they overlap in the middle. Here’s what I call a value center, and we could sit here and talk for a while of what’s the value and center of being a Latter-day Saint: what do you have to believe and do to be a Latter-day Saint? I don’t want to do that. But if the center doesn’t hold, the group doesn’t continue—it doesn’t exist. So, you’ve got to have that space in the center where all these people, this one’s a Democrat, this is a Republican, this is a highly educated person, this one is a local farmer, and so on, but they have to overlap at the middle. It’s this middle that is the generating force for the folklore.

I would say, no matter what its origin, as a Hugh Nibley story passes through this value center, the story starts someplace, goes through the value center, and it comes out the other side a different story. It will pick up elements of the center that will perhaps tell us more about ourselves than about Nibley, since after all, we are the ones who make changes in the stories, either consciously or unconsciously. We are the ones who decide what to remember, what to embellish, what to forget. And I would like to argue then, going back to Paul’s introduction, that what many of us know about Hugh Nibley, we know from folklore, from the stories that circulate about him.

There are some Nibleyophiles who know every detail of his life, but most of us know things about him from the stories that we have heard and learned from others and told ourselves. And I would also argue that all of these stories are true.

Different Ways That a Story Can Be True

I go back to Leonard Arrington: in what ways are they true? There are many ways a story can be true.

First of all, a story will on occasion keep alive a memory of events as they actually occurred. And I think that in most of the Hugh Nibley stories, they start out from something that was true, and then they get changed as they move through time and space. So it can be accurate, historically accurate.

Second, it will always provide a faithful record of what the storytellers believe happened, and that's perhaps most important because we are moved to action not by what really happened but by what we believe happened.

And then third, a story will mirror the culture of the people who believe it, reflecting their hopes, their existence, their anxieties, their fears, their attitudes and beliefs. We have those three things: a story will give us a picture of things that actually happened, of things that people believe happened, and of the culture in which those people function.

Example: Stories That Circulate about Nibley's Marriage

Now let's put this to a test by looking at some versions of the story that circulate about Hugh Nibley's marriage. How many of you have heard a story about it? . . . I'd say at least half of you raised your hands. And so, I want to try to illustrate what I've been talking about by looking at some of these stories. I'll take the first one, from the *Daily Herald*.³ This appeared in the *Herald* a little while ago, and all of you know that the *Herald* would never print anything that wasn't true . . .

Latter-day Saint Apostle John A. Widtsoe told Nibley that he could begin teaching at BYU in only a few months, but he would need to be married. Hugh Nibley said, "That's fine, as long as you arrange that the first girl I meet at BYU will be my wife." And remember that it's Apostle Widtsoe who has to arrange this.

Chris Deaver, who supplied this story, said, *After arriving at BYU, Nibley went to the housing office to ask about living arrangements and spoke to the secretary, one Phyllis Draper. A few months later, at age 36, he married her.* Is that story accurate?

Partly. About half-accurate, I suppose I would say. Let's look at some of the other stories that fall into this group. *After Nibley got home from the war, he went to work as an editor for church publications. He was in his late 30s, and the General Authority told him that he should go to BYU and get married, that it was time for him to get married. So he was hired to teach at BYU. He came down to Provo and resolved to himself that he would marry the first girl he saw when he was there. At that time, the mail room in the JSB was the ticket booth, and so he came to the JSB and came up to the ticket booth to ask for some information and saw Phyllis Draper.*

The story goes something like this: *He invited her to get acquainted with him for the remainder of the day. And all night long, they walked in the mountains and foothills, getting acquainted. He asked her to marry him.* What about that? How close is that to the real story?

Hugh Nibley was reading about marriage one day and, due to all the pressure on him at that time to get married, he decided to do it. So, he fasted three days and went to Rock Canyon to wait. Soon, a girl came there, too, and he asked her out and later married her.

Hugh Nibley was working in a church office when he was sent to BYU. He was also told to get married. He said he'd marry the first girl he saw. He went to the housing office in the Joseph Smith Building without seeing a soul. When he got there, he was attended by a secretary whom he took to a faculty party that night and also got engaged at the same time.

How about that one? How close is that one to the real story?

At age 35, Hugh Nibley had been encouraged for years by various General Authorities to marry, but his ambitious scholarly work hardly left time for dating. Being a deeply spiritual man and not wanting to waste his time on girl-watching, he knelt down one day in the closed stacks of the old Grant Library. Some of you remember those stacks, if you're old enough. And he fervently laid out his faith, asking the Lord to please arrange that the next woman who came through the door would be a suitable wife for him.

Of course, Nibley knew that not many people had access to this closed-stacks library, but one wonders if his faith wavered slightly to see that the next woman who entered was his best student, considerably his junior. And so, his courtship began, hardly breaking the stride of his scholarly endeavors.

Another one: Hugh Nibley went into the housing office, which was then located in the basement of the Joseph Smith Building. He was looking for a wife, I guess. He went in there and he asked the first girl that he met, who was working behind the counter, for a date. I guess she agreed to go out with him. They stayed out all night.

I don't know. If I'd heard that story at the time, and I was there, I'd tell him, "You need to go talk to your bishop. You meet this girl you've never seen before and you stay out all night? That doesn't sound too good." But I don't know what happened while they were out, but they were engaged when they came in in the morning. The girl had been just substituting for the regular girl who worked at the counter.

The story that I was told by a teacher when I was an undergraduate was that he was called into the commissioner's office, and the commissioner said, "Now, Hugh, how old are you?" And he was in his 30s, and the commissioner said, "Well, you know, we've got to be examples for the young people, and there's going to be a problem if you don't get married soon. We won't be able to keep you here at BYU." And they kept raising the temperature on him, and finally, in desperation he went up to Rock Canyon and sat on a rock overlooking the canyon. He had been fasting, and he began to pray and ask the Lord to help him find a wife.



Figure 5. Phyllis Draper.¹²

And then, he was just sitting there when his wife walked up the canyon. How did he know it was his wife? She was just taking a walk. He figured she must be the one. So, he went down and introduced himself, and later they got married.

He also had an angel appear to him who told him to marry, or the angel would cut off his head. That story probably may remind you of the angel who appeared to Joseph Smith, who didn't want to begin polygamy, and threatened him that he had better start it or else he would be in trouble.

One final story here: One day Hugh Nibley walked into an office on campus and saw a girl typing. She didn't speak to him or notice him, but as soon as he saw her, he was inspired by the Spirit and knew that this was the girl that he should marry. He was already engaged to someone else at that time. He broke off his engagement, married the girl who was typing, and they lived happily ever after.

Now, what's the true story? Anyone want to correct all of these versions?

I certainly don't. I do know a few things. I know that he was told by Elder Widtsoe that he ought to get married and that he put the responsibility on Elder Widtsoe's shoulders: "You arrange for me to marry, and I'll do it." That was probably more a Hugh Nibley witticism than an actual fact.

I do know that he went, I think it was to the housing office, and he met this young girl who helped him out. He was trying to arrange his housing. In the corner, he saw a musical instrument leaning against the wall, and he saw that and asked her if it was hers. And she said yes, it was. She played in the university symphony, and he had heard the symphony recently and was impressed by how good they were, and so he was interested in her.

He borrowed all these three-by-five cards from the young girl. If you know anything about Hugh Nibley, you know that he had boxes of three-by-five cards. In fact, there is a story about when *he was working on his dissertation and had those with him; somebody came from one direction and he came from the other in the library. They crashed, and the cards spilled all over the library floor. He looked at them and said, "Oh, well. I didn't like that subject very much, anyway," and started off on another dissertation topic.*

But he did go into the housing office to find a place to live in, and he borrowed some three-by-five cards from the young girl who had impressed him because she played the musical instrument, and he kept coming back to borrow more cards. Instead of just getting a whole bunch one day, he would use these up, and then he would come back and he'd get some more and then come back again. And finally, one day, he said to her that he had been invited to a party at the university, and he didn't know any girls, so would she go with him? That's a good way to make your first date, by the way.

She said yes, and they went, and then their romance started. They took long walks, and they did go up in the canyon. I don't think they stayed all night. But it was three months from the time he walked into that office until they got married. So, if you look at this story, each of these stories, as you see, is drastically different from each of the others. And so, my question is, what is the essential truth? Or what is the essential truth revealed in all of these? And what is that truth picked up from this value center that would be true of all of us in similar circumstances?

Well, I wish we had time for group discussion. I would let you answer that question and see what you come up with. I think that central to that story is obedience. He was obedient to Elder Widtsoe. He wanted to do what he said and get married, because that's what the Apostle of the Lord had asked him to do. He relied on the Lord for help. And then finally, he didn't give up. So, I think if you could say from what's true of all of these stories, that would be true of every one I read to you, but each one is drastically different from every other one. And I go back to Leonard Arrington, then: "Just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it's not true. You just have to decide what way the story is true."

How Did the Hugh Nibley Legend Start?

Let me back up just a minute and talk about Hugh Nibley as a legend. How does this legend come into being?

Let's say that this is Hugh Nibley, or any individual that we would like it to be, and during his lifetime, he performs in an eccentric or heroic manner, as did Hugh Nibley. The real Hugh Nibley is a fascinating person, and the way he acts and reacts calls attention to himself, and people then begin telling stories. I'll draw



Figure 6. “People . . . pull into this circle [the stories] that appeal to the value center.”¹³

the circle around Hugh Nibley, and so they start telling stories about him.

Now, these lines represent all kinds of things that happened in Hugh Nibley’s life. People don’t tell all of those. They pull into this circle those that appeal to the value center, those that they like, those that illustrate the point which they think is important. And then over time, they tell and retell these. They exaggerate them. They drop details that don’t fit the image, the type, because Nibley develops then into a type as we move along. They drop details that don’t fit and add to it and then embellish them.

There’s a story from Truman Madsen, who said, “There is a Mormon legend that Nibley was not always convinced that the Book of Mormon was true. In fact, he went at it with heavy critical tools, in effect trying to show it up. He told us once, and I’m afraid that I embellish it . . .” And so, here is Truman Madsen admitting that he has probably embellished this story. Why? To make it fit the type better, to make it become a typical Hugh Nibley story.

“He told us once, and I’m afraid that I embellish it, that at the landing of the Allied Forces at Normandy”—and he was in on that invasion and went in with the first wave—“he was on a craft. They used to call them LSTs. It’s a large barge and the whole end drops down, and you can drive off into the water. He was in charge of

driving a Jeep off. The Jeeps had snorkel exhaust so you could drive them in the water. The water was deeper than they thought; it was essentially going to be driving underwater. In that setting, he said something like this to himself: 'It is ridiculous that the Book of Mormon should mention elephants. Oh, but it only mentions them in the book of Ether, which is 2,000 years before Christ. Great Scott. Maybe the Book of Mormon is true, after all.'

Now, fancy that, imagine that. If you've seen some of the movies about D-Day, imagine what's going on all around him, and here's Hugh Nibley, driving a Jeep with his exhaust pipe up above the water for the snorkel tip. Is he worried about getting killed? Is he worried about making it? No. He starts thinking about the Book of Mormon and comes to the conclusion it must be true because it only mentions elephants in the book of Ether.

Is there anybody in this room who would act in that manner? I can't imagine that.

Well, in time then, stories outside the cycle get added to it as well. In every campus across the United States, there are a lot of stories about eccentric professors, and some of these start coming in and get added to the stories told about Hugh Nibley. All the stories about him walking home and leaving his car at school are probably part of that. But I can believe that, too, because I did that. In wintertime, I'd been in my office late. I walked home and looked for the car, and it wasn't there. Then I had to walk back to BYU and get the car and drive home. So, I can believe a lot of those things.

But Hugh was supposed to have talked so fast that when he lectured, he wrote on the board with one hand and then erased it with the other hand. Have some of you heard that story? Yeah, some of you had. That's good.

Well, this comes from an article by Barre Toelken, who teaches at Utah State University, who wrote an essay called "The Folklore of Academe,"⁴ and he's been studying college folklore from all over the country. He says, "There is a professor on campus who writes equations on the board so fast that a graduate assistant must follow and erase the board behind him. Since the assistant erases faster than anyone can take notes, most of the material is irretrievably lost. Another professor writes on the board with his right hand and erases as he goes with his left hand." And he's not thinking of Hugh

Nibley when he writes this. This is just a story that's told all over. "Anyone who cannot take immediate notes or memorize quickly is lost."

So, part of that cycle picks up these stories, and it gets added to these, and you can't tell which ones are based in reality and which aren't. And once again, I would still say they're all true. I think that Stephen Robinson from the religion department describes this process about as well as I've seen it. "Nibley embodies for us certain values."⁵ There's the value center. "And any story that is designed to illustrate those virtues gravitates to Nibley. Any evaluation that would go the opposite direction is immediately routed out by that emotional part of us that wants him to be the font of academic and intellectual virtue." So here he is, and you're dropping some stories while adding and elaborating on others.

That is the mechanism, and he's passed over into the mythic, so that I'm sure the stories about him will continue to grow and get better and better because of the emotional need it satisfies for the community at BYU, trying to make an uneasy marriage between the things of the Spirit and the things of the world. As we learn of the Spirit and learn of the world, he becomes our hero. He becomes our champion.

More Examples of Hugh Nibley Stories

So, in the time that's left here, I want to just give you some examples of the stories that circulate about Hugh. I've already given you some, but let's just look at these, which are the stories through which we have created the man we know as Hugh Nibley.

Boyd Petersen, who wrote a book on Hugh, has in his introductory chapter the following story: *During World War II, at some point, Hugh Nibley was to parachute into Greece for some reason. You know, along with his military intelligence responsibilities or whatever. And he was parachuting into Greece. He realized that there were people on the ground who could see him and could shoot at him, and who were at least, or appeared to indicate to him, that they were assuming that he was a bad guy instead of a good guy. He didn't know how to indicate to them that he was a good guy instead of a bad guy since he didn't speak any modern Greek.*⁶

Of course, Hugh could speak many, many languages. So, *what he did*—at least this is the way the story goes—*was to start shouting out as loud as he could in ancient Greek either the Iliad or the Odyssey to convince them that he was a good guy and not a bad guy. And they subsequently did not shoot at him, and he was able to land successfully and carry out his mission.*⁷

So, it's story after story about his remarkable ability to learn languages. I can't really believe—well, I can believe because I've seen it—that anyone has the capacity to learn not just one but . . . I myself have studied Finnish, my wife's language, which I know reasonably well. I've studied German, and I've studied Russian, and I've studied Estonian. Most of those I've forgotten by now, but to think of the broad range of languages that Hugh knew, going back from the present day clear back into the ancient days. How many people do you know who can read Sanskrit? Well, Hugh Nibley could.

And so, it's only reasonable that a large cycle of stories focuses on this. *While Dr. Nibley was visiting in one of the Scandinavian countries, he was doing some sort of business with a person from there who did not speak English. Dr. Nibley did not speak the Scandinavian language either, so they were working with an interpreter. After only one day of this, Dr. Nibley became frustrated with the awkwardness of the situation. He obtained a book on the language and studied it that evening. The next day, he and the Scandinavian conversed in the Scandinavian language and dismissed the interpreter.*

Talk about the gift of tongues. Now, Dr. Nibley did not speak the language fluently, but he was able at least to converse and to be understood and to understand.

Here is another story about language. *Hugh Nibley was teaching a class at Brigham Young University. On one occasion, two of his students could not keep up their note taking with his lecture. After class, they went up to ask to him and ask if they could borrow his notes from which he had lectured to fill in their notes. He agreed and gave them his notes.* How does that story end? How many of you can say what happened?

These two students were surprised when they looked at the notes because they were in a totally different language from English. They saw no English in his notes. He must have translated as he lectured,

and he did not lecture slowly. That story, or a version of it, circulates in many redactions.

A student of Dr. Nibley was assigned to write a paper on a relatively obscure subject. The student located a few significant books from the library with what he could find to begin his research. In one of the key books, he discovered writing in the margins. Knowing that Hugh Nibley was known for writing in books, the student took a closer look and determined that, indeed, he had stumbled on the musings of his professor. The student began to rejoice, for he believed that all he would have to do is copy the notes in the margins, and he would obviously get an A because he would reflect Dr. Nibley's own sentiments.

Gleefully, the student began to copy the notes. Well into the book, the text turned into Egyptian. Startled, he thumbed further and found that the notes later shifted to Coptic. Unable to read either, the student was foiled in his deceptive scheme.

Another one. Dr. Nibley had given an assignment to his New Testament class to write a research paper on the conditions existing in Jerusalem at the time of Christ. Well, Mrs. Turnbull's friend was having problems finding any material, so she went to see Dr. Nibley. Dr. Nibley said to come over to his house that night and he would find some material. The friend went over and she was amazed at the piles of books that were everywhere. Dr. Nibley started going through the piles and finally found her about 10 books he thought would be useful to her. The friend went home only to find that the books were all written in different languages.

Well, these stories go on and on. I don't need to read any more of those. But what comes through in these stories is the reflection of Hugh Nibley's intellect, his raw intellect and memory that shine through all the stories, and it's that that takes us back into that value center. It's that which is part of what we admire about Nibley.

Just a couple of examples here. *Three people were given the task of each memorizing one-third of the D-Day plan invasion. And you can imagine how elaborate that plan would have been. While the written plans were to be destroyed, because of his remarkable intellect Nibley was chosen to be one of the three. So, Hugh Nibley supposedly knew one-third of the plans. He would have been a good man to capture by the Germans, I guess.*

But also when he was on a military mission, he managed to get hold of a wad of documents that were very important to the Allied Forces, but he came to a check station. He knew he couldn't get through that check station with the documents. So, he—I've forgotten now what he did, if he ate the material he had or what—destroyed them, and then he came back immediately to the base he had come from and reproduced everything. He had memorized everything that was in those documents.

And then, other people admire him from other universities. Dr. Nibley got his doctorate at Berkeley. When it came time for his doctorate orals, the professors who were going to test him were discussing him. One of the professors asked the other what kind of questions he was going to ask the Nibley kid during his orals. The professor replied, "I'm not going to ask him anything. I don't want to make a fool of myself."

Well, they said he had to be tricked into taking his doctorate at Berkeley. The professors knew he was working on it, but none of them wanted to be on his committee for fear of being shown up. One day, a friend invited him to dinner along with the committee, and in a general conversation, he answered all of their questions. So, he got through his PhD exam at that dinner engagement, and they never had to hold it.

One of the things that comes through the stories is a remarkable ability to concentrate and to remember things. As each day goes by, I regret more and more the loss of my ability to remember things. I remember with great clarity what I did when I was twelve, but I can't remember what I did yesterday. I was talking to a friend of mine, Neal Lambert, and he said that he and his wife, Anne, had had a long discussion—they were both trying to remember what they had done that morning. And it took quite a while before they could remember. And so, when you find a Hugh Nibley that can remember all of these things . . .

When Hugh Nibley was a graduate student at Berkeley, he found that his classes didn't offer him the intellectual challenge he desired; he ended up never attending class. Instead, he would go to the university library every day and choose a section of the library that he was interested in. Then he would read all of a section. Hugh Nibley would go to class on the days he had tests, and of course he



Figure 7. "He walked in wearing his old fishing hat and threw it . . . on the table in front of the room."¹⁴

passed every test because he knew so much from all of his readings.

I wish that Wilfred Griggs had made it back here, and we could challenge him on this one. *The Department of Religion took Nibley to his first major conference after he was hired. They put him on a plane and told him that he was the first speaker at the conference. He was to be talking to some of the noteworthies in the scholarly world in the United States. After he arrived at the conference, he was outside getting a drink. When he was introduced, he walked in wearing his old fishing hat and threw it and his*

manuscript on the table in front of the room. The members of the audience had been filling their pipes and stopped in midair in horror at seeing such unscholarly action. Nibley started giving his talk, and as he went along, he would get a new idea and carry forth on it for a while, and then go back to his original talk.

He would quote large, huge manuscripts from memory, including portions of the Iliad in perfect Greek verse, and then translate it. The chairman of the Harvard Divinity School was sitting next to Wilfred Griggs, and he leaned over and told Brother Griggs, "I don't like him. People who know that much make me nervous."

Later on in the conference, whenever a question came up, everyone looked to Nibley for an answer and did not question his answer because he quoted from sources they had never even heard of—how could you argue with him, then?—let alone read. He would say, "After you have read such-and-such, you will understand this."

That's one of the problems with evaluating his scholarship—it is because not too many people can follow all of his sources.

Just a couple more stories, and I think I'm going to quit. "He had another kind of concentration, and that was . . ." Well, another



Figure 8. "One of the things that comes through the stories is a remarkable ability to concentrate and to remember things."¹⁵

story first, and then I'll mention this. Dr. Nibley late in the evening sat in his office reading, when a student who had been cleaning up the building came running down the hall into Dr. Nibley's office. Evidently, a pipe had broken in the bathroom plumbing and was quickly causing a minor flood in that area. Upon being warned by the student, Dr. Nibley walked about his office, picking up the books that lay scattered on the floor. Completing this, he returned to his chair and the book he had been reading and merely placed his feet on his desk as the water began to cover his office floor.

This story was . . . After library hours one day, a janitor was in the basement of the library and noticed a leak in the pipe. Nibley was on the fourth floor and was the only other person in the library, so the janitor asked him if he could hold the flashlight while he repaired the leak. So they went downstairs together, and the janitor began to repair the leak. Well, pretty soon, he noticed that it was getting darker and darker until, finally, there was no light at all.

He looked up to see what the problem was, but it was only that Nibley had become so absorbed in the book he was reading that he had forgotten all about the janitor and the leaking pipe.

Another kind of concentration that is true of these stories is the focus on things that are really important. We're all aware of the

stories of Hugh Nibley with his mismatched stockings, his rumpled suit. Somebody mentioned that grass of his lawn. *What they did was to get a goat to put out there and eat the grass*, according to one account. Another account is that *he just got some gasoline and spread it around and set fire to the grass, and that was one way of getting rid of the grass and satisfying his neighbors*.

A couple points I want to emphasize here at the end. If you look at these stories very carefully, and we smile at these things and laugh at the funny things that have happened in his life, his absentmindedness, his slouchy dress, at all kinds of things that occur in the stories, but what I value most in the stories is that Hugh Nibley in them forgets the superficial things of the world and focuses on what is eternally important. And if you want to talk about that value center, that's what comes out again and again.

It didn't make any difference whether his lawn was too long or not, or whether his socks matched each other. In one story *his car quit, and he got out to hitch a ride and got picked up by the police and arrested as a vagrant because the police wouldn't believe that he was a college professor dressed the way he was*. But behind all of these stories—and this is what I think is probably true of the stories and probably true of Hugh Nibley, where the Nibley of the stories and the Nibley of reality come together—is that he never forgot what was important. He never sought the success of the world. He was an iconoclast. He hated conformity, but he did not hate conformity to the gospel and to the defense of the gospel through reasoned and careful argument. And I think that in that, the Hugh Nibley of the stories and the Hugh Nibley of reality come together, and he becomes the man that we could all, with good reason, emulate.

William Albert "Bert" Wilson (1933–2016) received his PhD in folklore from Indiana University, where he studied folklore and nationalism in Finland, a topic he continued to pursue throughout his career. He was an expert on American folk art and is also known as the "father of Mormon folklore." He founded folklore archives at both Utah State University (1978–85) and Brigham Young University. He and his students collected jokes, legends, stories, songs, and other information to add to the archives. Wilson chaired the English Department at BYU from 1985 to 1991 and received the Karl G.

Maeser Distinguished Scholar award in 1990. Wilson also served as the director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies. In 2003 the Brigham Young University Folklore Archives were renamed in his honor as the William A. Wilson Folklore Archives. He was a fellow of the American Folklore Society and the Utah Historical Society.

Notes

1. Some of the stories about Nibley related in this chapter are found in Brady, "BYU Folklore," 631–696 (this volume). Additional stories are found in her masters thesis, from which this chapter was excerpted. See Jane D. Brady, "The Brigham Young University Folklore of Hugh Winder Nibley: Gifted Scholar, Eccentric Professor, and Latter-day Saint Spiritual Guide" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1996). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5547&context=etd>. For the full collection, readers should consult the William A. Wilson Folklore Archives, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, <https://lib.byu.edu/collections/wilson-folklore-archive/forms/>. See also Boyd Petersen's insightful introduction to his *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), xxiii–xxxi.
2. Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham: Course of Study for the Melchizedek Priesthood Quorums of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1957).
3. Cody Clark, "Authors Offer 'Fearless' Assistance to LDS Singles," *Daily Herald*, February 6, 2010, https://www.heraldextra.com/lifestyles/faith-and-values/authors-offer-fearless-assistance-to-lds-singles/article_d24cf29c-6d6e-5689-bea1-a75941d41564.html.
4. Barre Toelken, "The Folklore of Academe," in *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, ed. Jan Harold Brunvand, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 502–28.
5. The original source reads "virtues," not "values." See Brady, "BYU Folklore," 681 (this volume).
6. Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, xxvii.
7. Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, xxvii.
8. From Bert Wilson, "Folklore and Nibley (The Work of Hugh W. Nibley Lecture Series)," BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ta8pXBkVWH0>. Photo ID: Screen Shot 2021-01-21 at 6.30.00 AM.jpeg.
9. Nibley Collection, box 289, folder 23. Photo ID: HBLL-HughN-STW8310-EC-Box289Folder23.jpeg.

10. Wilson, "Folklore and Nibley." Photo ID: Screen Shot 2021-01-21 at 6.30.55 AM.jpeg.
11. Wilson, "Folklore and Nibley." Photo ID: Screen Shot 2021-01-21 at 6.32.18 AM.jpeg.
12. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 4. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-_STW8689-EC-Box10Folder4.jpeg.
13. Wilson, "Folklore and Nibley." Photo ID: Screen Shot 2021-01-21 at 6.33.59 AM.jpeg.
14. Photo copyright Brent C. Orton. Used with permission. Photo ID: Hugh04.tiff.
15. Photo taken in 1990 (see 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.