Hugh Nibley: A Prodigy, an Enigma, and a Symbol

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To those who know him best, and least, Hugh W. Nibley is a prodigy, an enigma, and a symbol.

The origins he pursues as a historian are sometimes obscure. His own origins are clear. More dominant than recessive is his inheritance from one of the early Jewish converts to the Church, Alexander Neibaur: that brilliant gift for language and linguistics, that perfect ease with the subtleties and technicalities of word usage. The outcome is a man whose thinking vocabulary is five times that of Shakespeare, and in foreign language ten times that of most people. Superb tools! How he has used them is the story of his life.

He was tracting in the Swiss-German Mission at age seventeen. Then, as since, he was blithely unconcerned with what most people define as needs: food, clothing, shelter, recreation. At his mission end, it was discovered that checks from home, several hundred dollars, had accumulated in the office unclaimed. He was still wearing the same shirts, huddling in the same ramshackle apartment, and consuming more books than food as the instruments of his ministry.

The pattern of physical self-neglect continues, the price of fierce concentration. Even now, an emeritus professor and the father of eight children, most of them grown-up, his diet is not high on the hog nor his home high on the hill. "If you don't have a car, thank God and walk," he says. Like the late Dr. John A. Widtsoe, he has prayed (as did his grandmother before him) that he would have a bare sufficiency of the things of this world lest they distract him from his mission. Over the years he has had no secretary, no prestigious research grants, no staff (only temporary bouts), and a mere

Figure 1. Nibley doesn't trust "anyone too close to his skyscrapers of three-by-five cards massed in shoe boxes."[7]

handful of graduate assistants. He still pecks away at his own battered typewriter, not trusting anyone too close to his skyscrapers of three-by-five cards massed in shoe boxes. Rarely, if ever, has he taken an authentic vacation. During a recent spring semester, the doctor diagnosed total exhaustion and sent him to Florida. During that period, his wife, Phyllis, reports, for the first time since their marriage he once or twice came to bed at night without a book. A man of endearing eccentricities, he is not a misfit—he is instead a delight in any social setting. But in study he is, as he insists every genuine student must be, a loner cooped up in his rather bleak, rectangular office, which he chose because of its wide floor where he lays piles of categorized notes, leaving only a narrow path to and from his desk.

Some of the awe and even resentment of Nibley arises not from the fact that he penetrates into specialized esoterica but that he spills over into other fields with startling competence. Professor Arthur Henry King invited him casually to lecture on Oedipus and was stunned at his grasp and insisted that the lecture be published. Francis Wormuth, University of Utah political scientist, read Nibley's "Tenting, Toll and Taxing"[1] and responded, "There

are two geniuses in the western states—myself and Hugh Nibley." He is up-to-date on contemporary scientific developments but also equipped to explain in detail their analogues in the seventeenth (or any other) century. Of course, it is in part the calling of a historian to learn something old every day. But Nibley insists that a student is only a student when "interest reaches excitement." For him, excitement becomes all but obsession; he finds nothing in the world boring or dull except those who are themselves bored or dull. Attend his home nights and you will hear incredibly learned presentations. If you want to swap war stories, those of Athens, Persia, or Rome as those of Germany, he can provide vivid detail. Hike behind Timpanogos and you will hear him tick off the Latin names of all the flora and fauna and tell you how dikes are built. Break into an opera solo and he will hum the parts of the instruments, offer commentaries, and even take on something of a dramatic performance himself. Talk up the latest article on black holes, or parapsychology, or Gödel's proof, or Nigel Calder on the brain, or astrophysics. He will disappoint you in that he has already read it and impress you to go back to reread what you missed.

Students often lament Nibley's packed and even cramped style both in lecture and writing. Robert K. Thomas says of him, "He is always the classical satirist." It is so; if he ever really gave that flair its head, he could be a ruthless cynic. In fact, however, as *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* demonstrates, he has many styles. Early on he was immersed in British poetry, and such is his gift for powerful imagery that, even in sober articles, he slips into hyperbole. He has memorized half of the Greek poets, and when at a Biblical Society meeting Jesuit George MacRae heard him discourse without notes and then spontaneously quote thirty lines in the original, he put his hands over his face and said, "It is obscene for a man to know that much."

One Nibley style is a horse laugh, as is his response to the *Myth Makers*, including that to Mrs. Brodie in *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*. There he savors her delicious prose style and regrets that she ignored nine-tenths of the relevant data. But his hints are stronger; what is really wrong with Brodie is not just her debunking tone but her uncritical presuppositions and her amateur psychologizing. That's where analysts outside The Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints have come down hard on her later efforts. A more systematic style appears in three books and over three decades—*Lehi in the Desert*, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, and *Since Cumorah*—in which Nibley has provided an Old World Middle East check on the Book of Mormon. Now John L. Sorenson has done the same for the Mesoamerican context of the book.[2] These efforts undercut what Richard L. Bushman calls the "sponge theory" of the Book of Mormon—that Joseph Smith simply absorbed what was "in the air" in his boyhood, then squeezed it and out came the Book of Mormon. Nibley cannot help smiling at this irresponsible "explanation." His style changes when he turns to the questions of parallels in ancient cultures, finding in Israel's Dead Sea Scrolls revealing traces of the people of the desert, in the Nag Hammadi literature evidence that some forms of Gnosticism may very well have been a graduate course in early Christianity, and in Syria the new discovery that Abraham was, after all, likely a historical character.

Students often ask how Nibley is viewed elsewhere. He has made a dent if not a breakthrough with preeminent men. In addition he has generated much heat and, for a mild man, it is surprising how gracefully he can take it. ("We need more anti-Mormon books. They keep us on our toes.") In some quarters he is impressive enough to be carefully ignored. Some of those who wish to champion him are themselves academic outcasts. Such men as anthropologist Cyrus Gordon of Brandeis, for example, take seriously a pre-Columbian origin of Mesoamerican peoples at their own peril but cannot say enough good about Nibley's work. On the other hand, America's highly honored Catholic exegete, Raymond E. Brown of Union Theological Seminary in New York City, has read Nibley's work and now says in learned company that the Book of Mormon is "authentic pseudepigrapha." Chicago's Egyptologist Klaus Baer refused to comment for or against Nibley's latest book on the Egyptians but shares Nibley's thesis that no able Egyptologist can confidently assert that Joseph Smith's reading of the Abraham facsimiles is fraudulent. ("Revelation is not a puppet affair for Mormons. If God wanted to bestow the mummies and scrolls upon Joseph Smith to prepare him for revelatory understanding of Abraham, why not? If his readings don't agree with the scholar's, a proper Mormon answer might be 'Do we have a right to tell God his business?'")

Hebraist and colleague Sidney B. Sperry wished Nibley had focused his talent on the Church Fathers, expanding into volumes what he only skirmishes with in articles—a documentary tracing of the decline and fall of the Christian Church. Classicist Jacob Geerlings remarked shortly before his death: "Hugh Nibley is simply encyclopedic. Though I do not agree with his views I hesitate to challenge him; he knows too much."

A persevering jibe at Nibley is that, for all his learning, he is a hop, skip, and jump scholar, who is too hard on reason, other disciplines, and the consensus of mainstream academia. Such writers take Nibley's jokes seriously and his serious work as a game. Sterling M. McMurrin, a historian of ideas, sees him as a kind of latter-day Tertullian putting faith ahead of critical intelligence and, like Karl Barth, as utterly opposed to the natural intelligence. To such generalizations Nibley, it must be admitted, is an unsatisfactory answerer. He will not sit still long enough to be classified. But he is no Barth. For all his plasticity and potshotting, he has the highest respect for scholarly endeavor, even that which is infected with vanity. But he has the heartiest and sometimes wittiest contempt for academic pretension. He is hard on abstract theology, harder on philosophy, and hardest of all on his own institution. More than once he has walked into a seminar or workshop and announced: "None of us has any business being here. We don't know enough." In this same spirit he says to students who suppose verbalizing is proof of insight, "If we really cared about this subject, we would be in the library studying the documents."

As a teacher, he is, at least 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. His long paragraphs go by at approximately the speed of light. Students who learn the most learn to interrupt and to probe; it is like trying to count machine-gun shots while able at best to take notes on the tracers. Because the fine-tuning of his mind is to written materials, it is as if he is listening to them more than to his students; he is utterly oblivious to electronic trappings like a microphone or TV camera. Most of the time he talks as if everyone

Figure 2. "Most of the time he talks as if everyone present has just read everything he has."[8]

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. When he does not want to answer, he trails away into a closely related area and his listeners are not brave enough to request backtracking. Once a student asked him the question, "What is a symbol?" The answer slowly expanded to cosmic proportions, and Nibley stopped for breath an hour and twenty minutes later. It is not surprising that few professors have generated more stories about absentmindedness. He offers no defense but demonstrates that no mind is really absent; it is only present on other—and in his case more important—things. If you watch his lips move, during moments of partial seclusion or even in the middle of a slow-moving conversation, you can catch him reviewing any one of the dozen languages he wants to keep fresh. 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. He does have "an infinite capacity for taking pains." This means he has little truck with haste. He is slow to print, quick to revise and supplement (just ask his editors, who groan as they see "final" galleys torn to shreds), and perennial in his retreat from what cannot hold water. Much of his most significant work still lies on his shelves unpublished because it requires, by his standards, more work. More and more.

How, in book form, could we represent Nibley's writing? How could we select thirteen out of three hundred essays for the book we compiled?[3] We began with the premise that Nibley is a phenomenon. (He receives hundreds of letters a month from around

the world inquiring on more topics than can be found in the *Britannica*.) We envisioned the rising wave of college-age students and the wider-reaching waves of adult education. We selected essays that are not exactly popular but which, on the other hand, are not (except for the notes) unduly technical. Our criteria were loose: range of subject matter, diversity of style, controversiality. In some cases we consulted (and more than once overruled) Nibley's own appraisal as to relative significance. No strict logical connection holds the essays together. But they do fall into a sequential order: they begin with materials that relate to the premortal realm of existence and then move down through the dispensations. We also included important samplings of Nibley's hard-won as well as whimsical, sometimes startling, and always disquieting comments on education, society, and politics.

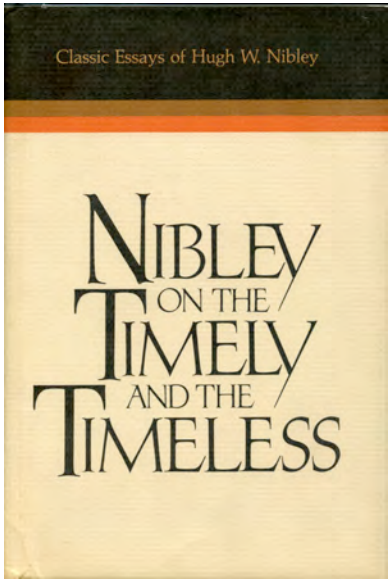

Figure 3. "How, in book form, could we represent his writing? How could we select thirteen out of three hundred essays?"[9]

Ill-wishing critics have suspected over the years that Nibley is wrenching his sources, hiding behind his footnotes, and reading into antique languages what no responsible scholar would ever read out. Unfortunately, few have the tools to do the checking. For purposes of this volume we have assigned ten linguists to go through every note for typographical accuracy. Some slips and discrepancies have been discovered and corrected (and others, no doubt, missed). But our greater effort has been to check fidelity in translation and relevance to the points Nibley presses in his text. Some stretchings beyond a minimal "given reading" have been noted. But in most cases Nibley clearly states where his readings are not in harmony with other scholars, and, on the other hand, where they would be defended by an increasing minority. It is the latter situation, for example, which explains his

ritualistic account of the Book of the Dead materials. But he well knows that his notes will stand or fall with the scrutiny of oncoming generations. "You don't need to check them," he has said more than once. "I must stand behind them." So, indeed, he must.

If there is general agreement among most high school students that "history is bunk" and boring bunk at that, a little maturity and some exposure to Nibley may reverse the verdict. He observes that no culture in the world is more superficial than that of America, where change, adaptation, and fad are as fleeting as popcorn. He thinks both Protestant and Catholic culture (less so among Jewish) are likewise massively undernourished in terms of the classical insights and perspectives of the ancients. He is not talking simply of wisdom nor even of moral lessons. He is talking in the larger pattern of what is today called "apocalyptic." Far from living too much in the past, he sees the past as the clearest "clue" to the future; but only if one defines past and future in a way that reaches, at both ends, to God. Latter-day Saints themselves, history-minded as few others, are slow to recognize that "the Restoration of all things" included restorations of key books for every major dispensation; a book of Adam, a book of Enoch, a book of Noah, a book of Abraham, a book of Melchizedek, a book of Elijah, a book of the intertestamental period, three books on the dispensation of Christ, and vast apocalyptic visions of the consummation of world history.

Nibley has given flesh, in all this, to a "patternist" or "diffusionist" theory of history. The premise is at work in almost everything he has written since his Berkeley days. On the negative side he refuses to accept the conventional dogma of social Darwinism—that society has emerged from simpler, cruder, more primitive forms. He never tired of pointing this out on a recent tour of Athens and visits to its museums, to Sounion, Corinth, and then again in Egypt at the tombs of Theban royalty, and in Luxor and Karnak, and again at the ruins of Qumran at the Dead Sea: full-blown cultural and spiritual splendor can be found in some of these early stages of civilization. Neither the evolutionary nor the revolutionary conception of religion will do. On the positive side he sees strands of eternal meaning in pockets as rare and neglected as the Hopi Indian year rites. Critics say he has broken some of his own rules on

"parallels" and that the similarities that seem to appear in, say, the Book of Mormon matrix and the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Coptic materials are only superficial. He himself admits that some of these materials may turn out to be "poor stuff." But in them are echoes, echoes of something at the core of the authentic influence of Christ. And these echoes, as scholars increasingly acknowledge, require reevaluation of all that has heretofore been called Christianity. Nibley's thesis is that those reevaluations, as often as not, point in the direction of Latter-day Saint doctrine.

If one studies Nibley's writing output not chronologically but thematically, one can see a pattern, both in the foreground and in the background. It is the temple. His mastery of Arabic, Greek, Hebrew (and a little Aramaic), Latin, German, French, and Spanish, and more recently of Coptic and Egyptian, has given him access to world liturgy. In historic and comparative terms he has done for the Western world what Mircea Eliade has done phenomenologically for the ceremonial life. He is incurably literalistic, never capitulating to the notion that religious expression is quasi-real without a tie in terra firma, yet, simultaneously, perhaps more than any one of his colleagues, alert to the rich nuances of symbolic significance, especially as these are manifest in ordinances. He has offered specialized courses in world liturgy for three decades and enlisted the aid of some bright and newly competent graduate students. He wrote "What Is a Temple?"[4] for the dedication of the London England Temple and says now, with a wave of the hand, "a lot has been learned since then." The Church's fourfold canon (the standard works) and books of remembrance of our own century help one understand what the temple is all about. It is Christ. Nibley has done his homework on both counts. But what he has published to the world is really something else—and may be one of his lasting contributions: authentic records, to which there was no access in the nineteenth century, show that jewels and nuggets as well as twists and distortions and inversions of temple ceremonies have reached into almost every society. He has shown that Joseph Smith's full-bodied presentation of ordinances, with the temple at their climactic apex, could not have been simply a nineteenth-century aberration nor warmed-over Masonry. By and large, and point for point, what takes place in Latter-day Saint temples is closer

to presently describable ancient practice than to any modern ritual. Of course, the hard question remains: Where did the ancients get them? Nibley has more than enough evidence gathered that it is not implausible to postulate a common source. But the question, Nibley's leading question, and which puts the burden of proof on the naysayers, is, Where did Joseph Smith get them?[5]

Nibley's literary legacy will survive him. So will his zest for life, even in its most grim and agonizing hours (we watched him dance with joy at King Tut's tomb as he saw firsthand and in color what he had previously seen only in photographic reproductions). And for those who find the idea of eternal ordinances and covenants and ceremonies foreign to authentic religious life, his personal embodiment of his writings will always beckon to deeper second thoughts. Some months after he had completed his volume on the Egyptian ritual, he emerged elated from the Provo Utah Temple one afternoon, saying, "I have learned more today in one session of the temple than ever I knew before." When pressed, he offered that kindly smile which, loosely translated, means, "These are things I would rather not talk about." (He can mumble in more languages and say more in his asides than any man alive.) He did, however, provide in his own terms a clue "that the idea of beauty in divine creation came fresh." He saw, again but as if for the first time, what he had seen in the rain forests of Oregon—"the kind of world God intended this to be." At this level there is nothing of the pedant about him, but all the uncomplicated wonderment of a child. William James somewhere observes that one may define a Bach quartet as "the moving of horsehair over catgut," or he may be transformed by the music. Something of the temple's transformation, its power, impact, and revelatory lift, can be seen exuding from Nibley's pores.

In his study of the nature of genius, Ernest Jones says "an essential prerequisite" is "a particular skepticism." The genius must be original. He or she "must have refused to acquiesce in certain previously accepted conclusions. This argues a kind of an imperviousness to the opinions of others, notably of authorities."[6] One must know the authorities well in order to know where to disagree. In history, Nibley knows them cold. But he also has the requisite imperviousness, even to some of his own opinions. "Things are never settled," he keeps saying, and "my conclusions are momentary."

Figure 4. "Hugh Nibley could have had disciples lined up four abreast from here to the library. He has, instead, sent them on to the only One who deserves disciples."[10]

Constantly he sees problems and perplexities that others do not and is incessant in pursuing them. Who else, for example, would have thought of tracing the role of the notched arrow in the formation of the State? On the other hand, in religious realms where others see huge problems he sees no problems at all. The one refusal to acquiesce accounts for his colossal erudition; the other for his breathtaking assurances of faith.

To students of all kinds, that combination, that balance, is sometimes confusing but always exciting. ("There may be things about the Church that I find perfectly appalling. But I know the gospel is true.") To his critics it is maddening. And to his disciples? Well, Hugh Nibley could have had disciples lined up four abreast from here to the library. He has, instead, sent them on to the only One who deserves disciples.

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for twenty years; was a guest professor at Northeastern University in Boston, University of Haifa in Israel, and Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley; and lectured at over one hundred universities in the United States and over fifty universities around the world. He was a prolific author, a recognized authority on Joseph Smith, and a popular lecturer. His publications include Eternal Man*;* Christ and the Inner Life*;* Four Essays on Love*;* The Highest in Us*;* The Radiant Life*;* Five Classics*;* Joseph Smith, the Prophet*;* Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story*;* The Presidents of the Church*;* The Temple: Where Heaven Meets Earth*; and* Sacramental Reflections.

Notes

1. Hugh W. Nibley, "Tenting, Toll, and Taxing," in *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 33–98.
2. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1985).
3. Hugh W. Nibley, *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Bookcraft, 1978). The selections were made by a committee: poet Arthur Henry King, philosopher C. Terry Warner, classicist Douglas Phillips, political scientist Louis W. Midgley, and S. Kent Brown of ancient studies. Several of Professor Nibley's former students were also consulted.
4. Hugh Nibley, "What Is a Temple?," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Compton and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 355–90.
5. "I am prepared to admit," a well-known scholar confessed to Wilfred Griggs after scanning Nibley's footnotes on "What Is a Temple?" "that Joseph Smith knew things about the ancient world that no one in the nineteenth century could know." That pretty well sums it up.
6. Ernest Jones, "Nature of Genius," *Scientific Monthly* 84, no. 2 (February 1957): 80.
7. From Marilyn Arnold, "'Words, Words, Words': Hugh Nibley on the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 4–21. https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol19/iss2/3, 8. Photo ID: Screen Shot 2021-01-23 at 10.27.38 AM.jpeg.
8. *BYU Today,* May 1990, 37. With permission. Photo ID: Nibley in class.jpg.
9. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock of a personal copy of the book. Photo ID: STW007-E.jpg.

10. From 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. Photo ID: TGM-Screen Shot 2021-01-30 at 5.31.29 PM-EC.jpg.