

THE INFLUENCE OF HUGH NIBLEY: HIS PRESENCE IN THE UNIVERSITY

Robert K. Thomas

The verbal bookkeeping that is often useful in presenting complex people is hopelessly ineffective in giving a balanced account of Hugh Nibley.¹ To begin with, on which side of the ledger do we post his glorious absentmindedness? Dental appointments missed may be a liability, but a mind unfettered by circumstance is an asset most of us envy. What appear to be contradictions in others turn out to be complements in him: He is *sui generis* and therefore not subject to a normal audit.

If analysis of Hugh as a person is unfruitful, consideration of him as a presence is an overwhelming experience. In the first place, a presence may take on a mythic aura appropriately, and there is little doubt but that the friends and students who have been part of the penumbra that has surrounded his intense scholarly activity during the last quarter century have been stimulated beyond expectation and have never really lost the glow they first felt in attending him.

Yet he has never been a model to be followed, and he has not stopped long enough for disciples to line up in back of him. The enduring fact of his presence at BYU has been threat, comfort, goad, and—especially—conscience to his colleagues. The unembodied, internal conscience that whispers to each would-be scholar that his or her effort is imperfect may be lulled by rationalization—who has not cooled his or her intellectual ardor in the present by promises of massive exertion in the future?—but there is something so impelling about those note cards, rubber banded, boxed, or simply splayed on the lectern in front of Hugh Nibley, that makes the dull-est of us flush with scholarly resolve.



Figure 1. "No research is so difficult as that undertaken to investigate religious positions. . . . While acknowledging his religious beliefs, Hugh Nibley has avoided theological stances that go beyond the fundamental position of his church."²

Usual academic research is attended by some risks. One may choose to analyze and interpret areas that are so large or complex that early evidence of success is not possible, and one may know years of lonely, silent eloquence while research comes to fruition. Another may know the frustration of having his best efforts nullified by the work of those who bring to successful conclusion the experiments he is still engaged in.

But no research is so difficult as that undertaken to investigate religious positions. While no researcher begins without bias—whatever the object of his exploration—the temptation to emphasize evidence that supports one’s theological belief may be irresistible for the religious scholar. The deep emotional reinforcement that commitment to particular doctrines provides will usually seep through the chinks in the most objective prose. The problem is not that this occurs—as indicated above, anyone with a hypothesis experiences the same difficulty. The peculiar temptation of religious researchers is coming to believe that the theological tenets they accepted on faith are, after they have written about them, the result of their work. When this happens, what began, modestly, as investigation becomes justification, and discussion degenerates into contention. A position may be controversial without being contentious. The controversial scholar is not uncommon, but the contentious scholar is a contradiction in terms. There is presumption in contentious assertion that is simply incompatible with honest inquiry.

While acknowledging his religious beliefs, Hugh Nibley has avoided theological stances that go beyond the fundamental position of his church. He enjoys the give-and-take of doctrinal debate, and in his hands the familiar, personal letter becomes an unusually effective instrument by which to comment on opposing views. However brisk some of these letters have become—for Hugh can’t resist exploiting an obvious opening—his sense of proportion never fails him. He is always the classical satirist.

As often happens when one person exhibits the qualities that many would have, there has been a tendency on the part of some to equate presence with resource. Hugh has been expected to silence opposition with continuing, stunning discoveries and insights—even though the positions he is expected to support may be no more than the personal whim of those who attempt to use him as crutch, club, or mantle. A lesser man might have retreated into cynicism, or into the completely esoteric where the foolish could not follow, but Hugh has patiently corrected, carefully restated—and smiled when his simplest explanation has still been distorted.

An insistence on the significance of patterns keeps Nibley scholarship tentative when the key piece to a historical or scriptural puzzle seems to be found. Wry comments about his own fallibility

are never simply the graceful disclaimers of arrogance. His most persistent critics are not so skillful as Hugh himself in identifying and pricking the pretensions that could develop during the course of his work. The reach of his mind is such that the synthesis the Book of Mormon calls “a compound in one”—which is so difficult for most of us to pull together—is his natural mode. He follows implications that a less discriminating mind would lose in the limbo of fragmentary source and dubious translation that are the materials he must use. What Coleridge called the esemplastic process, the ability to project new entities that combine evidence in different and persuasive ways, distinguishes a Nibley reading and is the bane of those who prefer to echo traditional interpretations.

The confidence with which Hugh presents a point of view is his compliment to an idea that deserves the most convincing context he can supply for it. No perceptive hearer mistakes this for the assurance with which the earnest amateur often chooses to speak. Failure to fit necessary patterns will check overstatement; other scholars will refute, refine, or extend, but that most fragile of human creations—a synthesizing concept—will get its chance to survive under optimal conditions.

The full influence of Hugh Nibley on other members of the faculty over the years is not easy to gauge. The affectionate respect with which his colleagues viewed him allowed the singular role he chose to play. We were always proud of him but not anxious to pull him away from “the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome” to the modesty that was Provo. Yet his was never a repudiating isolation; his single-mindedness was not achieved at the cost of rejecting the interests of his friends. Whatever one’s academic concern, it took on freshness and stature under the quickening impulse of a conversation with Hugh. Even the malaise of general faculty meetings was routed by his trenchant—and always sprightly—comment.

To fellow faculty members who feared lest humble resources and heavy teaching loads fatally compromise significant research at BYU, Hugh was answer and inspiration. His relentless demand for documents gave impetus to the building of collections that could approximate his expectations—and in so doing raised the aspirations of the entire library.



Figure 2. Robert K. Thomas, pictured in 1975, holds a diploma awarded in 1900.³

Few students can talk coherently about their first class from Brother Nibley. For some it was simply a rite of passage, the academic equivalent of a social-unit initiation. For many it was, at best, a brisk blur edged with random flashes of insight. For a few it was an intellectual implosion, from which they will never recover. For after one has stood in the presence of one's first true scholar, the world loses a bit of its apparent symmetry, reveals the forces that determined its form, and invites an infinite recasting. Never does one's agency seem so unlimited—yet the scholarly life is curiously impersonal, almost abstract. It isn't really possible to know the person who inspires our scholarly activity. One can hardly send a thank-you note to Prometheus. But one can acknowledge the electric force that is generated when a potentially good mind rubs against a great one.

Hugh has assumed the ultimate hazard of scholarly research—the popularization of technical material—without obvious discomposure, and he is equally serene under the critical review of his

peers. He has won, and kept, the confidence of General Authorities of the Church, and he holds the titles of husband and father with distinction. In the easy parlance of the day, he has “put it all together.” For as Thomas De Quincey observed: “A great scholar, in the highest sense of the term, is not one who depends simply on an infinite memory, but also on an infinite . . . power of combination; bringing together from the four winds, like the Angel of the Resurrection, what else were dust from dead men’s bones, into the unity of breathing life.”

Robert K. Thomas (1918–1998) was a professor of English at Brigham Young University as well as the founder of BYU’s honors program; he later became the academic vice president of BYU. Thomas studied at Reed College in Oregon and went on to receive an MA from the University of Oregon and a PhD in English from Columbia University. After joining the BYU faculty in 1951, Thomas convinced President Ernest L. Wilkinson and other administrators to establish the honors program, of which he became its first director. Thomas retired from BYU in 1983. His 1972 article “A Literary Analysis of the Book of Mormon” was the first significant published work to engage in literary analysis of the Book of Mormon instead of debating its origins.

Notes

1. This essay was originally published in John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also by Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 1:1–5, and is reprinted here with permission from the publisher.
2. Photo from a booklet produced by friends and family as part of a celebration of Nibley’s 75th birthday, March 27, 1985. See Bradshaw, “Introduction,” 8 (this volume); Welch, “Beyond Scholarship,” 246, (this volume); Gillum, “Hugh Winder Nibley,” 739 (this volume). Petersen Collection, box 1, folder 2. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP_-STW8093.jpeg.
3. Published in Michael De Groot, “BYU Grew from Humble, If Not Grim, Beginning.” *The Deseret News*, online edition, November 15, 2010, <https://www.deseret.com/2010/11/15/20153253/byu-grew-from-humble-if-not-grim-beginning#former-byu-vice-president-robert-k-thomas-pictured-in-1975-holds-a-school-diploma-awarded-in-1900>. Photo ID: 262160.jpg.

HUGH NIBLEY: SCHOLAR OF THE SPIRIT, MISSIONARY OF THE MIND

Gary P. Gillum

The mythmakers and label makers in and out of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have always had a field day with Hugh Nibley, spreading exaggerated stories of his eccentric and polymathic attributes, his peculiar methods of scholarship, and his alleged irresponsible social behavior at the university. Unfortunately, these popular and all-too-common folktales fail to include all angles and flagrantly disregard the heritage, experience, environment, and intelligence that have made Hugh Nibley the man he is.

How would your outlook be shaped if (1) your pioneer ancestry included Alexander Neibaur, the first Jewish convert to the Church and one who knew Joseph Smith personally; (2) your paternal grandfather, Charles W. Nibley, was Presiding Bishop of the Church; (3) your life experiences included seeing pristine forests greedily destroyed, fighting in a horrible world war, and reading literature in which anti-Latter-day Saint authors and uninformed hackmen tore your church apart with a zeal barren of knowledge; (4) you lived in the midst of Latter-day Saints who witnessed to the truth of the fulness of the gospel but often failed to live it, preferring instead to follow the ways of the world; and (5) you were born with an intellect and spirit keen and discerning enough to spot self-serving and truthless scholarship from afar, even though such scholarship wore the outward garments of Ivy League respectability, higher degrees, and “union” membership? It seems only fair, then, to talk about Hugh Nibley in his own milieu, even as he himself talked about Lehi’s contemporaries. But to do so effectively, his attributes must be broken down into seven broad categories, arbitrarily but cautiously selected to place him in true perspective: missionary of the mind, apologist, amateur, social critic, iconoclast, eschatologist, and spontaneous Saint.



Figure 1. “Nibley was able to obtain for the BYU library the four hundred or so volumes of the *Patrologiae Latinae* (Latin Church Fathers) and the *Patrologiae Graecae* (Greek Church Fathers).”³⁰

Missionary of the Mind

Few admirers of Hugh Nibley know of his “library career” at BYU. Hence, I use the more inclusive term “missionary of the mind,” coined by one of the most scholarly librarians in American history, Dr. Jesse Shera of Case Western Reserve School of Library Science. From the outset of Nibley’s long career at BYU, he unflinchingly pestered President Ernest Wilkinson and his colleagues for a realization of his prophetic dream that “the B.Y.U. should be the Information Center of the Church. The way to gain the respect of the world is not to concur meekly in its opinions . . . but to master its tools and sustain a powerful offensive.”²¹

To give reality to his dreams, he did his homework. In the early 1950s Nibley spent sabbatical leave time at Harvard and Berkeley, interviewing “those who can impart the most information and wisdom on the subject of libraries and curriculum.”²² He corresponded not only with eminent scholars in his field but with booksellers like Lucien Goldschmidt and William H. Allen in Philadelphia, and he began to amass a collection at BYU of texts that would enable BYU religious scholars to “rewrite the whole of Church History.”²³ Consequently, through the aid of President Wilkinson, Nibley was able to obtain for the BYU library the four hundred or so volumes of the *Patrologiae Latinae* (Latin Church Fathers) and the *Patrologiae Graecae* (Greek Church Fathers), which not only formed the beginnings of the Hugh Nibley Ancient Studies Room but began a healthy and consistent collection development pattern in Ancient Studies and in the general religion collection that has not slackened to this day, thanks to farseeing librarians like A. Dean Larsen and others. Such aggressive collecting, as well as the voluminous and popular writings of Hugh Nibley that reflect his use of the Ancient Studies Room, also made possible the Religious Studies Center, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), and the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (ISPART). The last of these institutions represents worldwide and far-reaching projects that Nibley could not have imagined in 1952.

In ancient religious matters BYU has thus become the information center for not only the Church but for the religious world in general. The Dead Sea Scrolls, Islamic texts, Vatican Library micro-filming, and Herculaneum project are only a few examples of the stone Hugh Nibley began rolling forth in the 1950s.

Apologist

Unlike the proverbial scholar who is ever distrustful of the sources and hence neurotically avoids any possibility of writing anything that might be construed as erroneous, Nibley jumps in “where angels fear to tread.” Fully aware that any source may be flawed, he is therefore not too proud to use any and all sources. He knows, like C. S. Lewis, that he is living in the middle of a play whose beginning or end he can only know through revelation,⁴ so he simply does the best he can in the short time allotted to him to occasionally take the risks of “amateur” scholarship. He does not care that a few of his conclusions may be proved wrong, yet he is fully conscious of his apologetic and eschatological role in helping members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and of other faiths, scholars, and farmers attain a salvific “big picture” viewpoint not only of history but of life all around them.

If as the Lorax⁵ of the Latter-day Saint community he speaks for the trees, or juxtaposes the seeming opposites of temple versus university, priesthood versus academic degree, ordinances versus ceremony, or revelation versus scholarly methodologies, he maintains a certain stewardship of a scholar, spoken about by President Boyd K. Packer, whose ideal qualifications for historical scholarship find writing by the Spirit above facts, understanding, and scholarship.⁶

How might we characterize Nibley’s style? First, his apologetic methods are tempered by a humble perspicacity that is defiled only occasionally by an impatience born of too frequent celestial clock-watching. In other words, as Nibley would put it, “We take either ourselves or the gospel seriously. Never both.” To those who know him it is obvious that he follows Abraham Lincoln’s dictum “We must disenthral ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”⁷ Or more pointedly and spiritually, in the words of C. S. Lewis, “The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object.”⁸

Second, Nibley is the antithesis of rhetoric, although his style is far from barren. He seems to echo a quote attributed to Ludwig Boltzmann: “If you are out to describe the truth, leave elegance to the tailor.”⁹ Third, in describing truth, Nibley often humbly assumes that his audience and his readers know as much as he does, whether he is teaching a Gospel Doctrine class or writing about the

Book of Breathings. Unlike books for general consumption that are written in the lowest-level style, Nibley's works force his readers to ascend to the difficulty of his writing, even though his writing is never deliberately difficult. Consequently, his thoughts are written for the ordinary Joe as well as the scholar. It is also true that Nibley exhibits a certain detachment from his writings, for compared to the witness of the Spirit, his writings are all "junk and stuff." He will not be held responsible for anything he wrote yesterday. His mind is continually open to the new and the more truthful.

Amateur

It is well known that Nibley sides with the amateurs, often totally eschewing the "professionals," whether in business, law, or his own disciplines. His "big picture" perspective clashes with the ultraspecialization so important to modern education. To Nibley, specialists are those who forget eternity in the pursuit of the moment, who ignore the universe while in love with the particle. Moreover, Nibley seems to feel, again like C. S. Lewis, that great scholars are now as little nourished by the past as the most ignorant, uninformed person who holds that "history is bunk." In addition, these scholars are the modern equivalent of the Greek Sophists, complete with the aura of sophistication, thereby making Nibley the symbol of unsophistication or even naivete. However, if readers feel that he is unsophisticated by virtue of his much footnoting, they must remember not only that Nibley's 15,000-plus footnotes are actually sparse to a fault, but that unlike most scholars, he quotes with comparative ease from German, French, Latin, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Egyptian, and a dozen or so other ancient and modern languages.

Although Nibley has been excoriated by those who disagree with his methods, with his tendency to read between the lines, with his use of overlooked or rejected sources, with his risky comparisons between two cultures (the realm of the professional anthropologist), or with his penchant for being brilliant and multifaceted, there are others who ask if his critics can do better. Perhaps Nibley is an academic prophet after all, a true Renaissance man in a day when "looking beyond the mark" by specialists is fashionable, and one who sees the end coming for the ultraspecialists or splitters in favor of the synthesizers and creators—the Newtons,

Scaligers, and Bentleys after whom Nibley has unself-consciously tried to model himself.

Social Critic

*Glitter is coined to meet the moment's rage;
The genuine lives on from age to age.*¹⁰

If there is any discipline in which Nibley is a true professional, it is social criticism. As *literatorum rex* (king of critics) and satirist, he knows no fetters or fences in time or space. Like the Roman epigrammatist Martial, Nibley sees himself surrounded by “fops, fortune-hunters and dinner-touters, dabblers and busy-bodies, orators and lawyers, schoolmasters, street hawkers, barbers, cobblers, jockeys, architects, auctioneers, debtors, bores, quidnuncs, doctors, plagiarists, hypocritical philosophers, poisoners, jugglers and acrobats,”¹¹ with a fortunate leavening of a few serious, truly educated, happy, honest, and genuine scripture readers, seekers after truth, and followers of pure religion. To the latter, society is still playing childhood games such as “Hey, Mommy” or “Hey, Jim, look what I can do!” or ignoring our own unique abilities in order to be like other people.

Much to the chagrin of most of us, he continues to liken the scriptures to ourselves, often hitting hard, but never in a self-righteous, “I’m-better-than-you” attitude. The hard hits are often softened with a sense of humor, as in his famous spoof on archaeology, “Bird Island,”¹² the satirical introduction to Scaliger,¹³ or his ribald humor in numerous other sources.

Even when criticizing or satirizing education, scholarship, and intellectualism, Nibley takes the gospel more seriously than himself. When he’s throwing stones at science, scientists interpret him as waxing hyperbolic, but he is really being dead serious. Even in his own field of ancient studies, he would be critical of the childish wranglings of linguist Pettinato and archaeologist Mattiae, whose scholarship and discipline had the most sway in interpreting the Ebla tablets at Tell Mardikh. He is unafraid of his own colleagues, speaking his mind clearly about the right of students to experience effective teaching from committed teachers. If he is a friend of students, he is an enemy of humanists, politicians (as opposed to true statesmen and women), military people, and even the Saints who

“no longer speak of making the land blossom as the rose but of making a quick buck in rapid-turnover real estate.”¹⁴

Like other enlightened scholars, he dislikes labels, mostly because he himself is conservative in one thing, liberal in another. But he is clearly conservative in his stand on rhetoric. He seconds Plato’s definition of rhetoric as making “small things great and great things small.”¹⁵ He constantly attempts to avoid this, except in a spoof, and insists, like Lucian, that “rhetoric had been left to the legal persons whose object is not truth but victory.”¹⁶ Further, Nibley agreed with the late BYU historian Russell B. Swensen, who used to counsel history students (only half in jest) that

the eleventh commandment for historians is “Thou shalt not commit sociology.”¹⁷ Occasionally, however, he steps into the sociological quicksands to fill a void ignored by those whose business society is. In “How Firm a Foundation”¹⁸ he unabashedly places his name on the line and thinks, like physicist-turned-pacifist Richard Garwin, that the MX, and other military hardware in general, has reached a lunatic stage that cries out for public scrutiny. The refreshing thing about Nibley is that he is not afraid to be that public or to be scrutinized himself. Instead, he continues to avoid the glitter and searches deeply and widely for the genuine—a search that will never cease.



Figure 2. Gary Gillum at his home in Catalina, Arizona, 2015.³¹

Iconoclast

Although everyone considers Nibley a nonconformist and a philosopher in the Platonic sense, few label him an iconoclast. But this is merely an oversight, for Nibley is truly an iconoclast

in the tradition of Henry Louis Mencken, Erasmus, and others. Nibley pleads for the revision of social science, religion, and philosophy to stress connectedness, coherence, and wholeness, arguing against the fragmenting, reductive, and compartmentalizing forces of the prevailing orthodoxies.

Somehow knowing that the Lord himself would approve, Nibley even let his iconoclasm surface heavenward in a famous prayer he offered in commencement in 1960, which thoughts included: “We have met here today clothed in the black robes of a false priesthood” to receive degrees that are absolutely worthless.¹⁹ Nibley implied in this prayer that the ancient traditions, the money wasted on robes, and the symbol of the Apostasy and mammon were an intrusion into eschatological perspective. Moreover, he hinted that degrees are merely union cards, that grades and tests are not true signs of learning, and that all three had a way of belittling the self-educated and self-motivated autodidacts, the Joseph Smiths, Benjamin Franklins, Leonardo da Vincis, and Brigham Youngs the world has seen. In both phrases he pointed a finger at the university, with eloquent between-the-lines silence, indicating that the university has a much higher level to attain.

Education was not his only whipping post, however. Science, religion, and history have had their bellies dissected by the mental surgeon Hugh Nibley as well. Long before Helmut Koester wrote that “the terms ‘apocryphal’ and ‘canonical’ reflect a traditional usage which implies deep-seated prejudices and has had far-reaching consequences,”²⁰ Nibley pointed out the benefits of apocryphal writings to his BYU students and strongly reminded them, in words similar to those by Elaine Pagels in her best-selling *The Gnostic Gospels*, that “it is the winners who write history—their way. No wonder, then, that the viewpoint of the successful majority has dominated all traditional accounts of the origin of Christianity.”²¹ But even after all of this, Nibley’s truest and longest-standing iconoclastic fervor has pointed to eschatology, or the eschatological viewpoint.

Eschatologist

When we speak of eschatology, we are usually thinking of “last things”: the Second Coming, the Millennium, or life after death.

But when Nibley uses the term, he does so in connection with a certain perspective or viewpoint, exemplified most clearly by his parable called “The Eschatological Man.”²² If readers can understand and empathize with this parable, then they have made a giant leap toward knowing the mind of Hugh Nibley, a mind that is really not as inscrutable or enigmatic once you understand his perspective. A prophet like Spencer W. Kimball shares his perspective by remarking, “If you’ve seen what I’ve seen.” A scholar like Nibley can only come close: “If you knew what I knew,” or “If you’d only read what I’ve read.” But all of this is begging the question: exactly what is an eschatological viewpoint? And how does this viewpoint set Nibley apart from the majority of scholars?

If Latter-day Saint social psychologists express dismay because too many Latter-day Saints love Harlequin novels, *Playboy* magazines, and soap operas, it is because such lackluster and worthless leisure indicate a failure to see the “big picture” perspective, or an all-embracing worldview. A cosmic or multidimensional perspective is like that of an extraterrestrial who sees everything in a different light and realizes how tentative each facet of life really is. Those who have visited the “other side,” says Raymond Moody,²³ and others who have had life-after-death experiences, stress the importance of certain things in life: learning to love and serve other people and acquiring knowledge and wisdom.

Contrary to popular opinion, Nibley does not merely exhibit service. I have witnessed this man showing heartfelt compassion that I have seen few others exhibit, a case in point being the care shown to a mutual friend of ours, an elderly Jewish woman transplanted from New York to Orem, Utah. Nibley knows his scriptures too well to ignore love or his family. His impatience comes from his not wanting to spend time with those who come to him with “trivial questions” or unimportant tasks. This, I feel, is a service of real love to all of us who come in contact with him, for in our learning which questions to ask him, we often achieve an eschatological perspective. Nibley sees so much in each of us that he is saddened to be an accomplice in lower-level living.

It is no secret that Nibley is fond of the New Testament apocrypha, particularly of the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*. Should Nibley ever need to post a saying on his bedroom wall, it might be



Figure 3. Nibley had a “solemn and important mission to bring the Joseph Smith Papyri from Salt Lake City to the Special Collections Library at Brigham Young University.”³²

the following from the first chapter, third verse: “When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father.”²⁴ Nibley rightfully feels that life is tedious for most people because they refuse to seek the mysteries of godliness. To him, like Viktor Frankl, “Human existence is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualization.”²⁵ Humans spend too much time in the shallow mud puddles instead of learning to swim in the deep oceans or in the swift currents, for it is in such challenges that they can immediately

extend, perfect, and intensify their senses. The real world, to Nibley, is beautiful beyond comprehension, yet even in the best circumstances it is a filthy slum compared to what is beyond and ahead. And that is why Nibley is so critical of society and its lack of perspective, even down to dress, about which so many jokes have been made concerning Nibley himself. Like Aristotle, Nibley cares more for reality than for appearance; acquisition of wealth other than by barter is unnatural; he condemns as morally wrong the unlimited pursuit of wealth beyond what is needed for the purposes of life.

Spontaneous Saint

It would be an injustice to Nibley himself if the most important hallmark of his character were to be ignored. Nibley's son-in-law Boyd Petersen includes many stories of his father-in-law's life as a faithful Latter-day Saint in his biography.²⁶ Two additional stories exemplify his spontaneous service and were related to me by those who experienced the incidents firsthand. Dan Butler, whose father was Nibley's bishop in the Provo Manavu Ward at one time, told how his family went swimming one evening at the Richards Building on BYU campus. After the fun was over, they looked all over the building for little Dan, only to find him safely in the corner of the men's locker room with Hugh Nibley, who was giving Dan an astronomy lesson.

The second incident juxtaposes the committed life of a Latter-day Saint with a solemn and important mission to bring the Joseph Smith Papyri from Salt Lake City to the Special Collections Library at Brigham Young University. Sterling J. Albrecht, gifts librarian in the late 1960s—and later director of the Harold B. Lee Library until 2002—relates the story:

Hugh and I were invited to SLC to pick up the Papyri. We met with Elder Tanner [counselor to President David O. McKay] in his office. He told us that the First Presidency was sending the Papyri to BYU so that Hugh could study and interpret it. He also said that the Papyri was very valuable and if anything happened . . . [while we were driving] that Hugh and I should just keep going. As we were driving to Provo, we saw two ladies at the side of the road with the hood of their car up. I thought that we should stop but also remembered Elder Tanner's

admonition that we had very valuable cargo, so I was going to drive on by. Hugh said, “Stop the car, they need help!” We stopped, locked the car and walked over to see if we could help the women. They said that the car would start but they couldn’t get the hood down so that they could drive it. Hugh got up on the top of the car, hung his feet down over the windshield, and then pushed on the hood with both of his feet. He forced the hood down and the ladies were able to drive it.²⁷

Conclusion

Professor David Riesman of Harvard, while at Brigham Young University in 1963, stated that Nibley was the “Thomas Aquinas” of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and that his own erudition paled before Nibley’s.²⁸ Whether he is an Aquinas or not, I concur with Robert F. Smith in stating that “a general perusal of his articles and books . . . establishes him in my mind as one of those men of whom we see only four or five per century.”²⁹ We hope that the present volume establishes that fact in even greater force.

Throughout his writings, Nibley implies that we all need to be doing the works of Abraham. Such works should give all of us a spiritual stance in which light is victorious over darkness, good over evil, the meaningful over the insignificant, and in which living is not acted out through a glass darkly simply because we have failed to clean the glass, but because in our searching we have not yet attained the clearest vision. Nibley is great because he has given us a “Saints’ Guidebook” for reaching that light.

Gary P. Gillum is a librarian emeritus of Brigham Young University. He has compiled bibliographies of works in Mormon studies and as the foreign languages bibliographer; he became the librarian of religion, philosophy, and ancient studies in 1980. Gillum was Nibley’s “personal librarian” during much of Nibley’s time at BYU. Because of his familiarity with Nibley’s sources, Gillum helped in editing three volumes of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, as well as indexing, reviewing, and archiving his works. He also compiled Of All Things! Classic Quotations from Hugh Nibley and taught an honors class on Nibley at BYU for five years. Gillum has written reviews for Library Journal, BYU Studies, and Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought,

in addition to serving on the editorial boards for BYU Studies and Dialogue. He has been a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, American Theological Library Association, and the Mormon History Association. He and his wife Signe share seventeen children and eighty-one grandchildren.

Notes

1. Hugh W. Nibley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, Provo, Utah, April 13, 1952, in the author's possession.
2. Hugh W. Nibley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, San Francisco, California, June 12, 1953, in the author's possession.
3. Nibley to Wilkinson, June 12, 1953.
4. Hugh Nibley, "Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic," in *The Ancient State* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 369–71. Compare C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt, A Harvest Book, 1964), 79; Lewis, "The World's Last Night," in *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley. (London, England: HarperCollins, 2000), 49; Lewis, "Historicismism" in *Essay Collection* (London, England: HarperCollins, 2000), 630–31. See also Boyd K. Packer, "The Play and the Plan" (CES fireside broadcast for young adults, Kirkland Washington Stake Center, May 7, 1995), in *In Wisdom and in Order* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 182–97. <https://emp.byui.edu/SATTERFIELDDB/PDF/The%20Play%20and%20the%20PlanPresident%20Boyd%20K.pdf>.
5. See Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971).
6. See Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 259–78.
7. Abraham Lincoln, "Annual Message to Congress," December 1, 1862, <http://www.iapeace.org/PeaceNet.April%2014-03.htm>.
8. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 96–97.
9. The source for this quote is Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, trans. Robert W. Lawson (New York City: Henry Holt, 1920), vi. <https://ia902604.us.archive.org/33/items/relativityspeci00lawsgoog/relativityspeci00lawsgoog.pdf>, where it reads a little differently: "I adhered scrupulously to the precept of that brilliant theoretical physicist [Ludwig] Boltzmann, according to whom matters of elegance ought to be left to the tailor and to the cobbler." The quote is often misattributed to Einstein himself.
10. Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 71.

11. Walter C. A. Ker, trans., in introduction to Martial, *Epigrams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), xii.
12. Nibley, "Bird Island," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 1-2: 61
13. See Hugh Nibley, "New Light on Scaliger," in *The Ancient State*, 303-10.
14. Hugh Nibley, as quoted in "Mormon Media Image," *Sunstone Review* 1, no. 1 (July/August 1981): 34.
15. Plato, Phaedrus 267A, quoted by Nibley in "Victoriosa Loquacitas: The Rise of Rhetoric and the Decline of Everything Else," in *Ancient State*, 250.
16. H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, trans., introduction to *The Works of Lucian of Samosata* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905), xi.
17. Russell B. Swensen, quoted in Arnold H. Green, "History and Fable, Heroism and Fanaticism: Nachman Ben-Yehuda's *The Masada Myth*," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 3 (1996-97): 422n15.
18. See Hugh Nibley, "How Firm a Foundation! What Makes It So," in *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 149-77.
19. Nibley comments on this prayer in his BYU commencement speech on August 19, 1983; see "Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 491. Unfortunately, no written transcription of the original prayer has been found, although a devotional prayer transcription is extant that makes no reference to a false priesthood.
20. Helmut Koester, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (January-April 1980): 105.
21. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 170.
22. See Gary P. Gillum, comp., *Of All Things! Classic Quotations from Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 60-64.
23. Raymond Moody, *Life after Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1976).
24. "Gospel of Thomas," in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 118.
25. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 175.
26. Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002).
27. Sterling J. Albrecht, email message to Gary P. Gillum, May 14, 2003. Although no written records were found to establish the date of this incident, it likely occurred during 1967 or 1968, shortly after the Church acquired the papyri.
28. Robert F. Smith, letter to the editor, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 1 (1969): 8.

29. Smith, letter to the editor, 8.
30. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock of the Patrologiae in the BYU Library Nibley Ancient Studies Room, February 1, 2021. Photo ID: HBLL-ASR_STW9068-EC.jpg.
31. Courtesy of Shirley S. Ricks, February 27, 2015. Photo ID: 2015-02-27 Gary Gillum in his home in Catalina, AZ.jpeg.
32. Photo ca. 1970. Nibley Collection, box 289, folder 10. Photo ID: HBLL-HughN-_STW8265-ECR-Box289Folder10.jpeg.