Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon

John W. Welch

At first light on June 6, 1944, the first of many allied landing craft began hitting the beaches of Normandy. At Utah Beach, twelve men dangling from one of the emerging jeeps cheered their driver on as they surged up from beneath the surface of the chilly English Channel waters. That driver, an army intelligence officer with a PhD in ancient history from the University of California at Berkeley, was none other than Hugh W. Nibley, age 34.

While preparing for the invasion, Hugh had visited several antiquarian bookstores in London—walking out with armloads of Arabic and Greek literary treasures. He had also, on the sly, slipped a copy of the Book of Mormon into one of the fifty-five pockets in his regimental intelligence corps fatigues.

"It was right there at Utah Beach," Hugh still vividly recalls, "as we were a couple of feet under water, that it really hit me—how astonishing the Book of Mormon truly is. It had never occurred to me before, but all I could think of all that day was how wonderful this Book of Mormon was."[1]

Figure 1. Hugh Nibley, 1945. "It really hit me—how astonishing the Book of Mormon truly is."[32]

Judged by any standard, the Book of Mormon is nothing ordinary. So it seems only right that possibly the most illustrious scholar yet to have investigated the Book of Mormon should have become fascinated with it in no ordinary way. Since Utah Beach, Hugh Nibley was never again the same. Nor was Book of Mormon scholarship.

Hugh Nibley's extensive contribution to Book of Mormon studies is a monument of dedication and ingenuity. It needs to be approached from several angles.

The most apparent is in terms of sheer volume. He was over forty (older than the Prophet Joseph was when he was martyred at Carthage) when his first book, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites*, appeared in 1952.[2] But since that time, he has added a dozen significant articles and two other major works on the Book of Mormon to his list of publications—on numerous other subjects—which now numbers over 150.[3] Although he recently celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday, he continues to add to that number yearly.

Lehi in the Desert broke new ground. Hugh's broad range of knowledge about the ancient Near East, and especially his fluent Arabic, enabled him to reconstruct the cultural background of men like Lehi and Nephi and to read between the lines in the Book of Mormon to identify evidences of the world in which they lived. Few scholars had even thought of seeing such things.

Elder John A. Widtsoe acclaimed this book even before it was off the press: "This study has been done in such a manner as to make real and understandable these early peoples, and to make them living persons to those of this day, thousands of years removed. . . . The book could not have been written except with vast acquaintance with sources of historical learning. It has been written also under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. . . . For this reason this book, which becomes a powerful witness of the Book of Mormon, becomes also doubly precious to the leaders of the latter-day faith."[4]

The method of this book, as Hugh once explained it, is "simply to give the Book of Mormon the benefit of the doubt." If the reader is at least willing to indulge the assumption that Lehi lived in Jerusalem around 600 BC, what he or she will find in the Book of Mormon itself will be remarkably consistent with what we know about that period of history from a secular standpoint.

The kinds of ancient Near Eastern facts and observations Brother Nibley included in *Lehi in the Desert* cover such points as language, literature, archaeology, history, culture, and politics. Here are a few samples:

> Egyptian literary writings regularly close with the formula *iw-f-pw* "thus it is," "and so it is." Nephi ends the main sections of his book with the phrase, "And thus it is, Amen" (see, for example, 1 Ne. 9:6; 1 Ne. 14:30; 1 Ne. 22:31).[5]

> [I] was once greatly puzzled over the complete absence of Baal names from the Book of Mormon. By what unfortunate oversight had the authors of that work failed to include a single name containing the element Baal, which thrives among the personal names of the Old Testament? . . . It happens that for some reason or other the Jews at the beginning of the sixth century B.C. would have nothing to do with Baal names. . . . "Out of some four hundred personal names among the Elephantine papyri, not one is compounded of Baal." . . . It is very significant indeed, but hardly more so than the uncanny acumen which the Book of Mormon displays on this point.[6]

> When [Lehi] dreams of a river, it is a true desert river, a clear stream a few yards wide with its source but a hundred paces away (1 Ne. 8:14) or else a raging muddy wash, a *sail* of "filthy water" that sweeps people away to their destruction (1 Ne. 8:32; 1 Ne 12:16; 1 Ne 15:27). In the year 960 A.D., according to Bar Hebraeus, a large band of pilgrims returning from Mekka "encamped in the bed of a brook in which water had not flowed for a long time. And during the night, whilst they were sleeping, a flood of water poured down upon them all, and it swept them and all their possessions out into the Great Sea, and they all perished." . . . One of the worst places for these gully-washing torrents of liquid mud is in "the scarred and bare mountains which run parallel to the west coast of Arabia." . . . This was the very region through which Lehi travelled on his great trek.[7]

> When Ishmael died on the journey, he "was buried in the place which was called Nahom" (1 Ne. 16:34). . . . The Arabic root NHM has the basic meaning of "to sigh or moan," and occurs nearly always in the third form, "to sigh or moan with another." . . . At this place, we are told, "the daughters of Ishmael

Figure 2. Altar at NHM, a uniquely named location in southern Arabia corresponding to the place where Ishmael was buried. Here Lehi's party took an eastward turn on the trail. The eastward trail then led them to Bountiful, corresponding today to an unusually fertile spot on the southern Omani coast.[33]

> did mourn exceedingly," and are reminded that among the desert Arabs mourning rites are a monopoly of the women.[8]

This excerpting of intriguing and stunning details and insights could go on at great length, but *Lehi in the Desert* is easily available. (It was in print for almost thirty years.) In spite of its age, and notwithstanding all of the subsequent research which this book itself has largely inspired, *Lehi in the Desert* should still be standard reading for anyone seriously interested in studying the Book of Mormon.

The durability of the legacy of this early pioneering research is probably proved no better than by the fact that Hugh Nibley himself has never stopped experiencing the thrill and romance of the desert imagery and Arabic intrigue which he found in the early chapters of the Book of Mormon. He still rates these discoveries as his most important contributions to Book of Mormon research.

He never wearies of telling how the Arab students, to whom he taught the Book of Mormon at Brigham Young University, reacted favorably to cultural elements contained in this book of scripture. Sometimes their reactions were not even to be anticipated. For

example, as the class one day read the account of Nephi's slaying of Laban, they became skeptical. It turned out that their interest was not in what had justified Nephi's slaying of Laban—an extraordinary act in the mind of most Westerners—but why he had waited and debated so long!

What kind of price tag can ever possibly be placed on the value of knowledge like this? To Brother Nibley in these early years, the real payoff for his research came in the form of the ammunition it provided against the critics of the Book of Mormon. His parting shots in *Lehi in the Desert* drive this point home: "There is no point at all to the question: Who wrote the Book of Mormon? It would have been quite as impossible for the most learned man alive in 1830 to have written the book as it was for Joseph Smith. And whoever would account for the Book of Mormon by any theory suggested so far—save one—must completely rule out the first forty pages."[9]

But it soon became obvious that this research was not simply destined to be involved in limited skirmishes. As his studies broadened, Nibley's results began coming from yet other directions.

In 1957, his second book, entitled *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, became the Melchizedek Priesthood course of study for the year. President David O. McKay knew it would be difficult for many good Saints to understand, but he also knew it would do them good to reach a little to comprehend this significant material. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith encouraged "all the brethren holding the Melchizedek Priesthood" to take "a deep interest in these lessons, which sustain the record of the Book of Mormon from [a] new and interesting approach."[10]

Nibley's approach here was basically the same as before, but the work now drew upon an even broader array of ancient contexts as settings for the Book of Mormon: Egyptian, Greek, Persian, and Hebrew. The details became more and more amazing.

For example, Lehi's life and times were analyzed not only in connection with the ways of the desert but also alongside his worldwide contemporaries, men whom Nibley calls "the titans of the early sixth century."[11] These included Solon, the great lawgiver-poet of Athens, Thales of Miletus, and other great religious founders such as Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tzu, and Zarathustra. This was

Figure 3. A possible location for Nephi's "Bountiful" along Omani coast, ca. 1990. Nibley used prints of such photos in his classes to illustrate details of geography.[34]

an axial period in history—one which "clearly and unmistakably" left its stamp upon the political, economic, and religious traditions of the whole world.[12] Lehi found himself right at home in this innovative crowd of great dreamers and doers.

Nibley showed that Lehi was a representative man in terms of his political and economic dealings. Lehi's probable experiences in world travel and commercial dealings with Egypt, and his possible connections with the Phoenician city of Sidon and the overland trade routes of the desert and the Fertile Crescent, are consistent with the fact that Lehi was a man of considerable means, a man intimately familiar with the Egyptian language as well as the ways of caravan travel.[13]

Nibley also explored broad patterns of ancient religious practices, showing how they relate with considerable insight to particular texts in the Book of Mormon. For example, the recurring "flight of the righteous into the wilderness" was a noteworthy practice. Lehi's flight from Jerusalem, and Alma's departure to the Waters of Mormon, are consistent with a repeated pattern of bands of people going out into the wilderness to live in righteousness. The same pattern is seen in the histories of the Jewish desert sectaries, the

Rechabites, and the Dead Sea community at Qumran. Even the followers of John the Baptist, the children of Israel in the Sinai, and the Latter-day pioneers fled into the wilderness and followed an identifiable pattern of life and beliefs. "At last enough of the hitherto hidden background of the Old and New Testament is beginning to emerge to enable students before long to examine the Book of Mormon against that larger background of which it speaks so often and by which alone it can be fairly tested."[14]

Particularly striking was Brother Nibley's detection and discussion of the vestiges of Old World ceremony and ritual in the Book of Mormon. The ancient Near Eastern year rite festival was an annual event at which the king called his people together, gave an accounting of his actions, placed the people again under obligation to abide by the law, prophesied, acclaimed all men equals, proclaimed them the children of God, and recorded their names in the registry of life. Such elements of the typical ancient year rite are readily discernible in several Book of Mormon assemblies, particularly that of King Benjamin in chapters 2 through 6 of the book of Mosiah.

"There can be no doubt at all," concludes Dr. Nibley,

> that in the Book of Mosiah we have a long and complete description of a typical national assembly in the antique pattern. The King who ordered the rites was steeped in the lore of the Old World king-cult, and as he takes up each aspect of the rites of the Great Assembly point by point he gives it a new slant, a genuinely religious interpretation, but with all due respect to established forms. . . .
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> The knowledge of the Year Drama and the Great Assembly has been brought forth piece by piece in the present generation. One by one the thirty-odd details . . . have been brought to light and . . . [are] now attested in every country of the ancient world. There is no better description of the event in any single ritual text than is found in the Book of Mosiah.[15]

Some of Brother Nibley's favorite finds, although coming from a later period and from Iran, were three tales which cast light upon Captain Moroni's actions in Alma 46. The first tells of a blacksmith named Kawe, who took his leather apron and placed it upon a pole as a symbol of liberation in the fight he led against Dahhak, "the

man of the Lie and king of madmen." Like Moroni's title of liberty raised against the unscrupulous Amalickiah, Kawe's banner in Isfahan became the national banner and a sacred emblem of the Persians for many centuries.[16]

The other two tales were collected in the tenth century AD by Muhammad ibn-Ibrahim ath-Tha'labi, a Muslim scholar who gathered legends about many ancient biblical figures. He preserved one account "not found anywhere else" about the coat of Joseph, telling how it was torn, how a remnant remained undecayed, and what that meant. This lore is preserved nowhere else—nowhere, that is, except in Alma 46:23–25, which also records the ancient tradition about a remnant of Joseph's coat which was preserved undecayed and explains its significance. "Such things in the Book of Mormon," states Nibley, "illustrate the widespread ramifications of Book of Mormon culture, and the recent declaration of [William F.] Albright and other scholars that the ancient Hebrews had cultural roots in every civilization of the Near East. This is an acid test that no forgery could pass; it not only opens a window on a world we dreamed not of, but it brings to our unsuspecting and uninitiated minds a first glimmering suspicion of the true scope and vastness of a book nobody knows."[17]

Powerful, jolting ideas like these become commonplace in the pages of *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*. Clearly, to generate all this from scratch was the task of no common man. Hugh Nibley was ideally suited and prepared to see these wide-ranging connections and implications. His training spanned the worlds of Greece, Rome, Arabia, and beyond. His keen sense of contrast bridged the worlds of the East and the West. And his eclectic and omnivorous consumption of knowledge was coupled with a nearly flawless recall of virtually anything he had ever learned. These tools of a scholar gave him the ability to see the Book of Mormon against a background so vast that no one before had ever even surveyed it.

Of his accumulation of knowledge, the story is true that in doing his doctoral research he pulled every potentially relevant book in the library off the shelf to see what bearing it might have on his work. Of his depth of knowledge, one scholar quipped recently in exasperation, "Hugh Nibley is simply encyclopedic. . . . I hesitate to challenge him; he knows too much."[18] Of his memory, I am

a witness: we were talking a few months ago and he began quoting Greek lyric poetry to me—line after line—lines he had studied forty-seven years ago.

It was inevitable that with this warehouse of knowledge—coupled with shoeboxes full of notes written on three-by-five scraps of colored paper—Hugh Nibley would continue to produce a steady stream of additional papers about the Book of Mormon. In 1967, the third of his major volumes on the Book of Mormon appeared. *Since Cumorah* is a mixed assortment of studies developing themes which were present with Nibley from the beginning: (1) his disdain for the so-called scientists or scholars whose dogmatism or authoritarianism preclude them from taking the Book of Mormon seriously; (2) his view of the Book of Mormon as an accurate reflection of the religious worlds which produced the books of the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Apocrypha; (3) his quest for words, phrases, poetry, or narratives which particularly elucidate our understanding of the words of the Nephite prophets; (4) his rejection of charges that things mentioned in the Book of Mormon are anachronistic; (5) his urgent belief that the book speaks to our day and that we will be condemned to repeat the true-to-life errors of the Nephites if we do not take the message of this sacred record seriously and repent.[19]

Many of the specific topics treated in *Since Cumorah* either already were or soon became the subject of individual articles. His treatment of the Liahona in the light of the Arabic use of arrows or pointers to cast lots and make decisions was preceded by his article "The Liahona's Cousins."[20] His comparison of early Christian accounts about the forty-day ministry of Jesus among the Apostles after the Resurrection and the account in 3 Nephi of his ministry to the people of Nephi was later expanded into a much more detailed listing of parallels in his study "Christ among the Ruins."[21] His thoughts about "good people and bad people" grew into his more recent reflections on "Freemen and King-Men in the Book of Mormon," in which he articulates a creed that epitomizes the life Hugh Nibley himself has lived. In his typically candid analysis, Nibley sees the freemen of the Book of Mormon as being "not militant; they made war with heavy reluctance; they were noncompetitive, and friendly, appealing to the power of the word

above that of the sword. . . . In their personal lives they placed no great value on the accumulation of wealth and abhorred displays of status and prestige, e.g., in the wearing of fashionable and expensive clothes. Eschewing ambition, they were not desirous or envious of power and authority; they recognized that they were 'despised' by the more success-oriented king-men."[22]

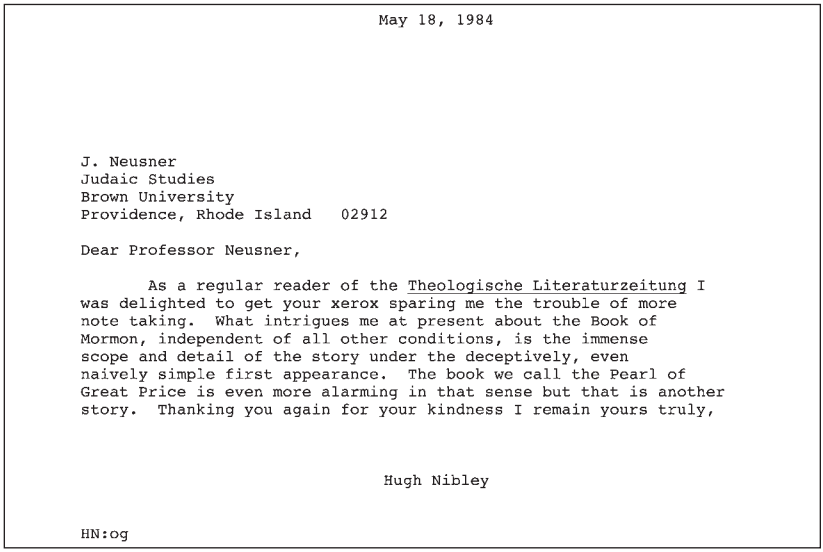
In several other articles, Brother Nibley likewise continued his quest for greater refinement and further elaboration of particular points. As Hugh describes this process, "The Book of Mormon is particularly amenable to comparative study—there are thousands of very extensive comparisons. With numerous comparisons there is a need for better information—always— . . . and we have hardly scratched the surface. Learning is cumulative. All we have to show for our existence is our awareness. Faith can bring things back into remembrance—it is the Holy Ghost which brings things to mind. . . . I like a more lavish picture."

"Of course," he recognizes, "what we are dealing with are just possibilities. Parallels are just that. But after so many extensive ones, that's what hits you hard, the case becomes quite compelling."

What, then, can one say to summarize the contribution of Hugh Nibley to Book of Mormon scholarship? Here are ten things which stand out to me:

1. He has made us look more carefully at the Book of Mormon. "We need to make the Book of Mormon an object of serious study. Superficiality is quite offensive to the Lord. We have not paid enough attention to the Book of Mormon."
2. He has shown us that the Book of Mormon stands up well under close scrutiny. By looking carefully at the Book of Mormon, by reading between the lines, by examining each significant word or phrase in this book closely, we repeatedly find that there is always more there than meets the eye.
3. He has taught us to be surprised at what this marvelous book contains. Time after time he remarks how perfectly obvious something should have been to him long before it was—it was there right under our noses and nobody saw it. "Some subjects I studied for years without it occurring to me for a moment that they had any bearing whatsoever on the Book of Mormon."

4. He has proved that the Book of Mormon is comfortably at home in the world of the ancient Near East, reflecting details that were not known and in many cases not knowable at the time the book was translated in 1829. As a book containing eternal truths, it is also, of course, at home in other generations. But anyone seeking to explain the book away must deal in all of the evidence, not just selections out of context.
5. He has opened further doors. Although he has not walked down every hallway, he has gone along opening doors which others will have to walk through for many years to come. Most of his hints have an uncanny way of proving to be vital clues. For example, the work he began in analyzing the philological roots of nonbiblical Book of Mormon names is being pursued by others.[23] Points he made about Arabic oath-taking in relation to the oath given by Nephi to Zoram in 1 Nephi 4:31–35 have become the basis of solid studies.[24] A passing reference to the use of tents in his discussion of the year rite festival in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (p. 300) has become the spark for a thorough treatment of the impressive correlations between the ceremony of King Benjamin and the typical ancient Israelite Feast of Tabernacles.[25]
6. He has challenged us. "The Book of Mormon," he says, "is a debatable subject. . . . If we do not accept the challenge we will lose by default."
7. He has never lost sight of the spiritual significance of the book. "Above all it is a witness to God's concern for all his children, and to the intimate proximity of Jesus Christ to all who will receive him."[26] Despite Hugh's knowledge, he knows that any scientific method is, by nature, limited. He knows that no ultimate proof of the Book of Mormon will be given. "The evidence that will prove or disprove the Book of Mormon does not exist."[27] In his mind, scholarship simply sets the stage for the ultimate question. Once a person comes to the explicit realization that neither he nor she nor anyone else can explain *how* all this got in the Book of Mormon (and there may be arguments for, and contentions or predispositions against—but so many amazing details simply *cannot* be explained away by human fiat), then the person is at last at the point where he or she *must* turn to God in order to find out if these things are indeed true. "All that Mormon



May 18, 1984

J. Neusner
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Dear Professor Neusner,

As a regular reader of the Theologische Literaturzeitung I was delighted to get your xerox sparing me the trouble of more note taking. What intrigues me at present about the Book of Mormon, independent of all other conditions, is the immense scope and detail of the story under the deceptively, even naively simple first appearance. The book we call the Pearl of Great Price is even more alarming in that sense but that is another story. Thanking you again for your kindness I remain yours truly,

Hugh Nibley

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Figure 4. In conversations with prominent academics, Nibley did not shy away from discussing his views on the remarkable nature of the Book of Mormon.[35]

and Moroni ask of the reader," Nibley says, "is, don't fight it, don't block it, give it a chance!"[28]

8. He has spoken candidly about the book's relevance to our day. "I intend to take Moroni as my guide to the present world situations."[29] "In my youth I thought the Book of Mormon was much too preoccupied with extreme situations, situations that had little bearing on the real world of everyday life and ordinary human affairs. What on earth could the total extermination of nations have to do with life in the enlightened modern world? Today no comment on that is necessary."[30] "In the Book of Mormon, the very questions which now oppress the liberal and fundamentalist alike, to the imminent overthrow of their fondest beliefs, are fully and clearly treated. No other book gives such a perfect and exhaustive explanation of the eschatological problem. . . . Here you will find anticipated and answered every logical objection that the intelligence and vanity of men even in this sophisticated age has been able to devise against the preaching of the word. And here one may find a description of our own age so vivid and so accurate that none can fail to recognize it."[31]

9. He has put the book into an eternal, urgent perspective. "The Book of Mormon should take priority. We have not paid enough attention to the Book of Mormon. This is very urgent!" While earlier generations should not be overly criticized, since many of the documents and discoveries elucidating the Book of Mormon have only recently come to light, there is now indeed an enormous amount of work crying out for us to do. A sense of pressing need to see that this work is done is one indelible stamp left on many by the legacy and influence of Hugh Nibley.
10. In all of this, he has changed us. Since Hugh Nibley, we as a people are not the same. We are warned but reassured; and we are fed, but still must plow.

Surely there are many ways and numerous reasons to read the Book of Mormon. Some days I read it for the doctrines of Christ, some days as a source of practical wisdom, and some days to contemplate the personalities of the prophets whose messages fill its pages. But other days, I read it for Hugh Nibley and the way he has taught me to read it—as a living testament of an ancient covenant people who knew the Lord and tried to follow his guidance centuries ago here on the American continent.

John W. Welch retired as the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at Brigham Young University in 2020. For twenty-seven years he was editor in chief of BYU Studies*, the premier Latter-day Saint scholarly journal. He founded the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies in California in 1979. From 1988 to 1991, he served as one of the editors for Macmillan's* Encyclopedia of Mormonism. *As the general editor of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley for twenty-five years, Welch directed the publication of the nineteen volumes in the series. Welch is among the most prominent pupils of Hugh Nibley, having made several important discoveries and advances regarding biblical studies, Latter-day Saint scholarship, history, culture, and thought. His publications cover a wide range of topics, including Roman and Jewish laws in the trial of Jesus, the use of biblical laws in colonial America, chiasmus in antiquity, and commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount and King Benjamin's speech.*

Notes

1. This essay first appeared in *Ensign*, April 1985. The citations to the works of Hugh Nibley have been updated to the most current edition. Unless otherwise indicated, statements quoted in this article from Hugh Nibley were gathered from oral interviews with Brother Nibley by John W. Welch and Susan Roylance.
2. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952.
3. Most of Hugh Nibley's papers, both published and unpublished, along with a complete annotated bibliography, a complete scriptural index, and a subject index of his works could originally be ordered from the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), P.O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, UT 84602, USA. That nonprofit organization established a Hugh Nibley archive. It also sponsored Book of Mormon research and distributes a wide variety of reprints and new reports on Book of Mormon research. Another early collection of articles written by Hugh Nibley is *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978). A second edition was published by the Religious Studies Center in 2004. See https://rsc.byu.edu/book/nibley-timely-timeless. The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley were published by FARMS (volumes 1–16, 1986–2005), and with the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, its successor organization within BYU (volumes 17–19, 2008–2010), all through Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City. These volumes are still in print and are readily available. Many of the early editions of the writings of Hugh Nibley about the Book of Mormon are also freely available online at https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/. His Book of Mormon books and articles are centered mainly in volumes 5–8 of the CWHN, but materials relevant to the Book of Mormon are also found in most of these nineteen volumes. For more on the CWHN, see Welch, "Beyond Scholarship," 245–66 (this volume); S. S. Ricks, "Editing Hugh Nibley," 451–496 (this volume).
4. See the foreword to *Lehi in the Desert*, v–vi; Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), ix–x. Page numbers that follow refer to the 1988 edition.
5. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 17.
6. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 33–34.
7. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 45.
8. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 79.
9. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 123.

10. See preface to *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1957). The second edition, published by Deseret Book in 1964, is currently in print. A third edition was published in 1988 as volume 6 of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley. Page numbers that follow refer to the 1988 edition.
11. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 49.
12. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 53.
13. See Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 46–83.
14. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 181–82.
15. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, chapter 23, especially 308–9.
16. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 217.
17. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 218–21. The editors make the following observations about new research that has appeared since the time of Nibley's original finding:

> In an occasional paper in 2003, Brian M. Hauglid has suggested another way to render part of Nibley's translation of this early Arabic account. Hauglid, "Garment of Joseph: An Update," in *Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies Occasional Papers*, vol. 4 (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2003), 25-29. https://www.academia.edu/647209/Garment_of_Joseph_An_Update_Occasional_Papers_FARMS_no_4_2003_25_29). Relative to the garment of Joseph (the coat of many colors or pieces), Nibley had rendered this Arabic text as saying that "it never *decayed* [*mubtalan]* or in any way *deteriorated* [*saquim*]" Instead, Hauglid's alternative translation would read those two italicized words as saying that the coat "does not fall upon the *afflicted* [*mubtalan*] nor upon the *sick* [*saquim*]" without healing them. In all other respects, Hauglid agrees that "Nibley's translation is reasonable and correct as it stands" (Hauglid, "Garment of Joseph," 26).
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> Stories of a garment brought from Paradise have been preserved in both Islamic and Jewish tradition, as Nibley himself has discussed elsewhere; see, e.g., Hugh Nibley, "Sacred vestments," in *Temple and Cosmos* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 128–32. Jewish tradition traces this garment through the patriarchs back to Adam. The smell of the garment is understood by some to be the fragrance of the Garden of Eden, which is also understood as the "aroma of the fragrant incense which would one day be offered in the temple." Meir Zlotowitz and Nosson Scherman, eds., *Bereishis/Genesis*, 2nd ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 1136n27.
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> Whereas Nibley's translation is not quite right in a literal sense, an understanding of the Arabic allows for Nibley's positive interpretation. The Arabic may be understood in a very positive sense as that garment "woven in Paradise, and it had the smell of Paradise. When it only touched an afflicted or ailing man, that man would be restored to health." Abu al-Thaʿlabi, "Lives of the Prophets," trans. William M. Brinner (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 228. The negative *la . . . la . . .* and adversative *illa*, translated literally as "not . . . not . . . unless" may be understood in a positive sense as "only." Thus Hauglid is right, and Nibley's positive understanding of the text's meaning is also right as well.
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> With this additional background, the content of this Arabic account as a whole, as well as its harmonization with Alma 46:24-27, can be understood. From this text, there can be no question that some ancients believed that Joseph's garment "had belonged to Abraham" (Joseph's great-grandfather) and had "already had a long history," even though that point is not stated anywhere in the Bible. In order to have had such a long history, the garment obviously had not decayed. So, whether the word that Nibley translated as "decayed" should have been translated as "afflicted" or not, his key point is still valid—namely that, according to tradition, the garment had, in fact miraculously, not

decayed. Nibley's rendition, "that it never decayed or in any way deteriorated," is thus at least implicitly, if not explicitly, present in the Arabic account.

Moreover, consistent with the idea that the coat of Joseph had a very long history going back to Eden was the additional belief reflected in the Arabic account that this garment had power to heal and preserve people or to make them whole or well. In Genesis, Joseph's torn coat had been given to his father Jacob as a false sign that Joseph had died (Genesis 44:28), and indeed before he died Jacob would see and be preserved by Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 47:7). So, in several senses, that special coat (or even a remnant of it) was thought to have saving and signifying power, which is the main use that al-Thaclabi makes of this tradition about Joseph's coat.

With this in mind, consider the four points that Captain Moroni makes. First, he wants his soldiers to remember that they, as a people, are "a remnant of the seed of Jacob" (Alma 46:23). Second, he wants his men to know that just as Joseph's coat, long ago, "was rent by his brethren into many pieces," so the "garments [of his men] shall be rent by our brethren, and [his men] shall be cast into prison, or be sold, or be slain" (46:23). And third, the fact that a remnant of Joseph's coat had been "preserved and had not decayed" was a sign in Moroni's mind that part of Joseph's seed (namely the Nephites) would also in some way be preserved. But fourth, Moroni warned his men that even that part of Joseph's seed will only be preserved if those people (his men) stand fast in the faith (Alma 46:27).

Moroni's exhortation is, of course, different from al-Thaᶜlabi's scenario, but these two texts are not inconsistent with each other. Both depend on the idea that Joseph's coat was durable and had been preserved for a long time, and both saw in the remnant of Joseph's coat a sign or symbolic value regarding healing or preservation. These were the parallels that attracted Nibley's attention.

Nibley, of course, wished to accentuate the similarities between the account of al-Thaᶜlabi and the words of Captain Moroni in Alma 46:23, and perhaps for that reason Nibley used Moroni's particular word "decayed" in translating the Arabic term *saqim* into English, although he did not use Moroni's wording that the coat "was preserved," but instead he used the words there that it had "not in any way deteriorated." Note that, according to Lane, the one can be *saqim* with respect to one's speech or language or discourse, with respect to one's heart (in a non-biological, non-medical sense), and also with regard to one's understanding. So its meaning not just a matter of literal disease.

With respect to the other key term *mubtalan*, Hauglid's idea that its meaning as a participle is "limited to 'afflicted' or 'tried'" (Hauglid, "Garment of Joseph," 26) is overly restrictive. For example, Dozy gives the definition *lépreux* (leprous), which is much more specific than "afflicted" or "tried" and which definitely suggests "decay." R. Dozy, *Supplément aux Dictionnaires Arabes* (Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1968), s.v., *mubtalan*. And E. W. Lane's great lexicon strongly emphasizes in the basic root of this word meanings of "decay," or "being threadbare," or "worn-out," or becoming "old and withered," for the fundamental Form I of the verb; and explicitly—though, it must be said, not altogether clearly—Lane connects the meaning of the relevant Form VIII verb to that of the Form I verb. E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 1:255-256.

Thus, while one may agree that the literal translation of Hauglid and Brinner is a good possible fit to the specific context in question here, it fails to capture the full semantic range of these two key verbs and thus it masks the hint of wordplay in the fitting apotropaic imagery where a touch of a sickly, decaying body with a decay-resistant ancient garment ironically becomes a means of healing. If our detection of the multivalent character of this expression is correct, being consistent also with the typically allusive nature of Arabic as a language, then Nibley's translation is not only shown to be plausible, but, in addition, it makes explicit a beautiful instance of nuanced wordplay in the original.

In sum, Hauglid has made a helpful observation, but so has Nibley. Taking the underlying Arabic account as a whole, one can still legitimately find there parallels with

parts of Moroni's exhortation. Therefore, any claims that Tha'labi's passage has completely lost its applicability to Alma 46:24, or that it cannot be allowed as a parallel to the idea that Joseph's garment never decayed, would be premature. –Eds.

18. As quoted in Truman G. Madsen's foreword to *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, vii.
19. See *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967). The chapters in this book, like those in *Lehi in the Desert*, first appeared as a serial in the *Improvement Era*. Page numbers that follow refer to the 1988 edition: Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988).
20. See Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 251–63. See also *Improvement Era*, February 1961, 87.
21. See Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 174–81. See also *Ensign*, July 1983, 14.
22. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 337–407. See "Freemen and King-Men in the Book of Mormon," in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 328–79.
23. See Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Ancient Near Eastern Background to the Language of the Book of Mormon," CES Symposium, Brigham Young University, 1982; Joann Carlton Hackett and John W. Welch, "Possible Linguistic Roots of Book of Mormon Proper Names" (FARMS Preliminary Report, 1981); John A. Tvedtnes, "A Phonemic Analysis of Nephite and Jaredite Proper Names," *SEHA Newsletter*, 141 (1977), also available in FARMS Reprint Series. For recent detailed analyses of each proper name in the Book of Mormon, see the onomasticon at https://onoma.lib.byu.edu/, as well as a number of recent publications by Matthew Bowen and Stephen Ricks and various KnoWhys and postings on https://bookofmormoncentral.org/.
24. See Roy Johnson, "The Use of Oaths in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon" (FARMS Preliminary Report, 1982); Mark Morrisse, "Simile Curses in the Ancient Near East, Old Testament and Book of Mormon" (FARMS Preliminary Report, 1982).
25. See John A. Tvedtnes, "A Nephite Feast of Tabernacles" (FARMS Preliminary Report, 1978); John A. Tvedtnes, "King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 2:197–237. For example, at the Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites lived in tents or booths, and according to the Mishnah they listened to the king deliver a message similar to Benjamin's in many respects, down to the fact that it was delivered while the king stood on a wooden platform or tower.
26. Hugh Nibley, "The Book of Mormon: A Minimal Statement," in *Concilium: Theology in the Age of Renewal XXV* (New York: Paulist Press, 1968); reprinted in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*, 151.
27. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, xiv.

28. As quoted in Gary P. Gillum, comp., *Of All Things! A Nibley Quote Book* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1981), 93; Gary P. Gillum, comp. and ed., *Of All Things! Classic Quotations from Hugh Nibley*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 158. Page numbers that follow refer to the 1993 edition.
29. Gillum, *Of All Things*, 148.
30. Gillum, *Of All Things*, 148.
31. Gillum, *Of All Things*, 149.
32. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 4. See Boyd Jay Petersen. *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 204. Photo ID: HBLL-HughN-_STW8472.jpeg.
33. Photo from Book of Mormon Central KnoWhy #19: Who called Ishmael's burial place Nahom? https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/who-called-ishmaels-burial-place-nahom. Photo ID: nahom.jpg.
34. Nibley Collection, box 290, folder 24. Photo ID: HBLL-HughN-_STW8470-ECR-Box290Folder24.jpeg.
35. Retyped representation of the original letter. See Petersen Collection, box 3, folder 4. Photo ID: 840518-Nibley letter to Jacob Neusner-trim.png. In a letter to Boyd Jay Petersen written on February 10, 1997, Jacob Neusner shared his impressions of Nibley:

> He struck me as a first-rate intellect. I did not think he invested his excellent ability in the right questions, which are religious, not historical; but I myself at that very moment was completing the move from history to history of religion.
>
> Where we differed, and probably still would differ, is on the authority of historical study. I think it is very difficult on the basis of literary evidence to falsify or to verify and validate the allegations as to fact of historical writings, or writings that are framed in the past tense. The historical Moses has no bearing upon the Judaism that I practice, because what we know about Moses flourishes in a different realm from what we know about George Washington. To Nibley validating the historicity, in positivist terms, of the Book of Mormon formed a powerful and urgent requirement of learning. I can understand that concern within the context of the faith, but I think more urgent questions have to do with the religious world that the holy book brings into being, as it did and does: all of the facts concern the future. My position begins with faith, and his means to end there. That was my sense of matters. Nibley addressed a world defined by a rigid historicism, with truth-claims of the faith subjected to tests of historicity, and he responded to that world. To me, the issues of faith find other definitions than historical ones, whether the Torah or Judaism or the Bible and Book of Mormon of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Petersen Collection, box 1, folder 3).