

“A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND”: HUGH NIBLEY AS AN EGYPTOLOGIST

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Because Egyptology is a rarified discipline that normally takes years of training, people may wonder just how good Hugh Nibley was at Egyptology. The simple answer is that he was quite good. The complicated answer is that he had his strengths and weaknesses, as all Egyptologists do. Let me explain.

Egyptology covers five thousand years of human history along the longest river in the world and every facet of the civilizations that sprang up in that area, including places that were at one time under the hegemony of those areas. Back in 1996, one Egyptologist complained that “in 1947, it would have taken 11 months to read everything, at one item per day (excluding all book reviews). But in 1985, one would have had to read four items per day (be they books or papers), all 365 days of the year, to have read everything (again, excluding book reviews).”¹ It was (and is) simply impossible for an Egyptologist to be an expert on everything about Egypt. Therefore, they specialize.

Another problem is that Egyptologists are humans. No Egyptologist is good at everything. They have their strengths and their weaknesses. It is worth then knowing their strengths and their weaknesses. What I would like to look at are some of Hugh Nibley’s strengths and weaknesses as an Egyptologist.

Learning Egyptian²

Hugh Nibley had tried to study Egyptian when he was a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley in classics and history. The Egyptian expert there at the time was Henry Lutz, who was of the generation of orientalists who studied everything about



Figure 1. Some of the many books in the Nibley Ancient Studies Room donated by Hugh. He reported that when he arrived at BYU: “I found on the shelves just one Greek book (Homer) and one Latin book (Manilius), and I soon found out that nobody in Provo could read a line of either one.”⁷²

the ancient Near East and dabbled in all the languages. Lutz and Nibley were not on good terms when Nibley was a student because Lutz did not like Latter-day Saints. Nibley took most of his Near Eastern language courses in Hebrew and Arabic from William Popper. Nibley tried to teach himself from the then recent first edition of Alan Gardiner’s classic *Egyptian Grammar*.³ When teaching at Claremont, he lived next to the widow of James H. Breasted, the founder of American Egyptology, and had long talks with her.⁴ He used Egyptian in his dissertation and in the spin-off article, “Sparsiones,” which he published during World War II.⁵ He also used it in articles on the Book of Mormon,⁶ the origin of political institutions,⁷ the corrupting influence of rhetoric,⁸ and on Book of Mormon names.⁹

In 1946 when Nibley arrived at Brigham Young University, he reported that “I found on the shelves just one Greek book (Homer) and one Latin book (Manilius), and I soon found out that nobody in Provo could read a line of either one.”¹⁰ In time Nibley changed both the library and the general knowledge of the ancient world at BYU. The Ancient Studies Room in the library is now appropriately named after him.

In the 1950s Nibley was at the top of his game, controlling the sources in classics, history, patristics, and Arabic. One day in the stacks, he received a prompting: he should go back to Berkeley and study Egyptian. In practice this would include both the classical hieroglyphic stage and the later alphabetic stage of the language used by Christians called Coptic. Nibley thought, "The Coptic would be useful, but Egyptian?"¹¹ Nibley had kept up a punishing reading schedule that would make it difficult to fit another subject in, but about this time, his schedule cleared slightly:

For many years the regular reading of the Old Norse sagas was part of a self-inflicted curriculum to which I faithfully adhered. Then one day in the midst of a typical tale of family feuds and mayhem I suddenly admitted to myself a proposition I had known all along, but out of loyalty to my own cultural heritage had refused to acknowledge: "Let's face it," I said aloud, "these people are not interesting." From that day to this [1963] I have not read a word of Icelandic.¹²

Nibley applied for a sabbatical and spent the 1959–60 academic year in Berkeley teaching classical rhetoric as a consequence of writing a little essay he called "Victoriosa Loquacitas: The Rise of Rhetoric and the Decline of Everything Else," which had been published three years earlier.¹³ Although he was very skilled at rhetoric, he thoroughly detested the subject, for rhetoric—"the power or faculty or skill of persuading"¹⁴ (in modern times it encompasses the fields of law, advertising, public relations, and the media)—has a corrupting influence: "The worst people took to rhetoric like ducks to water. For rhetoric preached the gospel of success."¹⁵ To the rhetor, "everything must be accommodated to the common judgment and popular intelligence,"¹⁶ which made him "the slave of a thousand masters"¹⁷ and, like Hermodorus, who was banished for excelling at something ("If he must excel, let him go and excel over somebody else!"),¹⁸ real learning was banished as the rhetors turned "from the honest search for truth to the business of cultivating appearances."¹⁹ For Nibley, who eschewed the rhetorical approach, there was nothing to do but sweat at things the hard way, which meant actually trying to learn and master the Egyptian language.

He arrived resigned to study under Lutz only to find the day he arrived that Lutz had retired and was packing up his office.

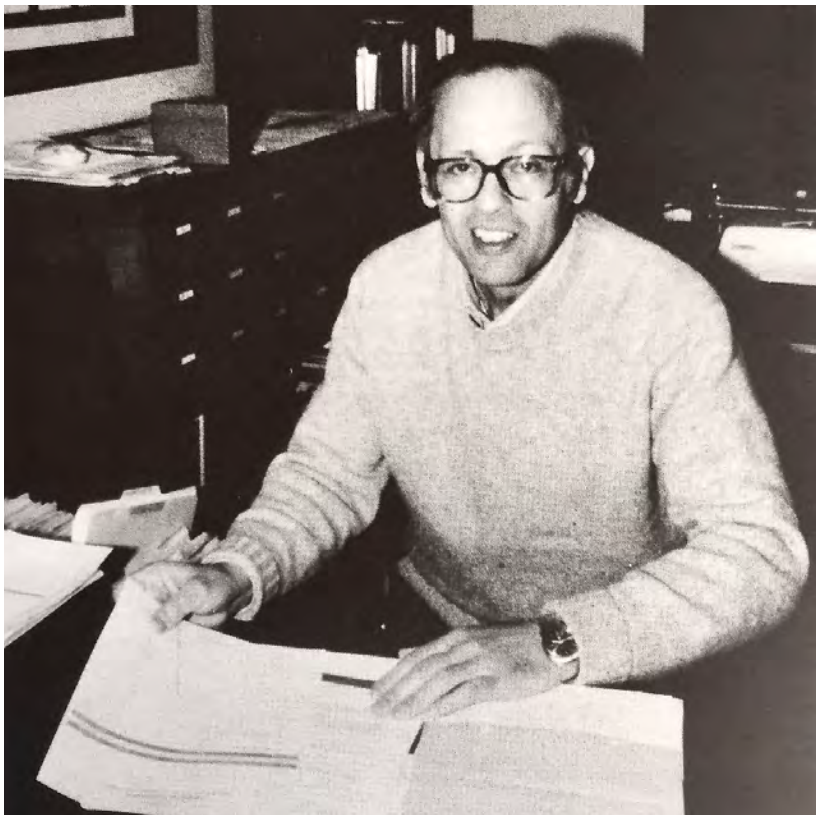


Figure 2. Professor Klaus Baer (1930–1987) in his office at the Oriental Institute in Chicago, 1987.⁷³

Moving into it was Klaus Baer (with a newly minted PhD from the University of Chicago), whom Nibley described as “a very able and eager young professor.”²⁰ Nibley became Baer’s first and, soon, only student in Egyptian and Coptic. Baer and Nibley were both fans of hiking in the wilderness and struck up a friendship that would last the rest of Baer’s life. Nibley described the process as being “badgered and bullied six hours a week by a fellow twenty years my junior, who was trying to knock the simple elements of Egyptian and Coptic into my head. It was all very elementary: my teacher would say after he had given a particularly brilliant demonstration that any Egyptian child of ten would probably laugh himself sick at our solemn and laborious attempts to reconstruct the language. He knew the whole thing was not on an advanced but a childish level.”²¹ Baer taught Nibley Egyptian, and Nibley gave Baer

teaching tips (which, for those who attended Nibley's classes, can only seem ironic). Nibley was a full professor when he started studying Egyptian. Baer was still "a young man recently out of graduate school"²² when the Joseph Smith Papyri were first published.

Nibley used the Coptic in his articles on early Christianity but wondered what good the Egyptian could possibly be. Nevertheless, he kept plugging away at learning the language. The Metropolitan Museum of Art always knew that in 1947 they had acquired papyri once owned by Joseph Smith. They made this fact known and even circulated photographs to some Egyptologists and other individuals. Baer recalled that he "saw photographs of them [the Joseph Smith Papyri] for the first time in 1963, I believe, and was asked at the time, on my honor not to tell anyone where they were and to keep the whole thing confidential."²³ Baer's memory may have been off a year, because he started asking Nibley questions about the papyri and the Book of Abraham in 1962.²⁴ Nibley answered with his usual candor: "I have always steered clear of the P.G.P. [Pearl of Great Price] which, as you can well imagine, has been a Happy Hunting-Ground for crack-pots."²⁵ Nibley then spent another seven single-spaced pages with references answering Baer's questions about the facsimiles, which Nibley described as "inexcusably long—it was also (necessarily) hasty and superficial."²⁶ He also answered another question from Baer: "It is commonly believed that the originals of the P.G.P. were destroyed in the Chicago fire, though recent evidence has been claimed that they escaped the fire & are still kicking around somewhere. As a collector's item they would fetch a lovely price."²⁷ In March of 1963, Nibley could report that he was "still plugging away at the Coffin Texts (*absit omen*),²⁸ and finding them more diverting and far more edifying than crosswords or Agatha Christie."²⁹ The next year he told Baer, "I have kept steadily plugging away at the Coffin Texts in the evenings (Lord knows why), and think I am getting pretty good at the Nag Hammadi stuff, which I find really significant."³⁰ A year later, he was again reporting to Baer, who by that time had moved from Berkeley to the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago:

I have kept up regular reading in Coptic and by now the Gnostic idiom has become fairly familiar—what it is all about is another question, but at least I have become largely independent

of the dictionary and the grammar. With Egyptian it is another matter of course; I plug away but never come out of the jungle. The formulaic nature of the Coffin Texts makes them fairly readable by now, but just the same I never know quite where I am. Fortunately our library makes it possible for one to follow things up, and like everybody else who dabbles in this intriguing field I am prone to have my own theories about everything. Which is all right, I suppose, as long as I keep them to myself.³¹

In 1966 Nibley used the Coptic sources extensively in an article that appeared in one of the premier journals on early Christianity.³² Nibley spent a sabbatical year in 1966–67 at the University of Chicago studying under Baer; Baer's teacher, John A. Wilson; and George R. Hughes.³³ One day, Nibley dropped by one of the professor's offices and saw something he was not meant to see—a photograph of the original of Facsimile 1, now known as Joseph Smith Papyrus I, lying on the desk.³⁴ Though Nibley did not know the location, extent, or exact contents of the papyri, he now knew for certain that they existed. He then began preparing in earnest: "Well, of course I had anticipated something like it, and saw that everything would pivot around the Book of the Dead. So I started reading same a year ago, getting through the Nesikhonsu version just when these Metropolitan [Museum of Art] scraps turned up—and that was a good thing since as you know it turned out to be just more of the same."³⁵ Nibley also anticipated the debate that would take place and thus read up on the 1912 attack on the Book of Abraham. He started writing articles about it and giving talks on the subject, one as early as March 14, 1967.³⁶

While Nibley was in Chicago, something happened from another quarter that changed things even more. As Aziz S. Atiya, both a Copt and a Coptic scholar at the University of Utah, prepared to attend the American Research Center in Egypt meetings in Baltimore, he decided that while he was on the East Coast, he would do some research at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan; he wrote ahead to make arrangements with the curator of the Department of Egyptian Art, Henry Fischer, "to go to New York afterwards and hope to steal a little of your time for lunch."³⁷ In writing back, Fischer told Atiya that he was "particularly glad that there will be an opportunity to see you while you are in New



Figure 3. Professor Aziz S. Atiya (1898–1988) and Hugh Nibley at the University of Utah with newly re-discovered original of Book of Abraham Facsimile 1.⁷⁴

York.”³⁸ Fischer showed Atiya the papyri once owned by Joseph Smith and asked him if he would be willing to act as a go-between with the Church to find out if the Church wanted the papyri back. “We knew,” Fischer said, “since he worked in Salt Lake City and was acquainted with leaders of the Mormon Church, that he might very tactfully find out how they felt about it. So we simply informed him about this in confidence, and I think he handled the matter very nicely.”³⁹ Atiya did so on his return to Utah. Then the museum began the nearly yearlong process of deaccessioning the papyri.⁴⁰

Fischer made periodic reports to Atiya on the progress. Thus on December 27, 1966, he wrote, “The proposal I have made to our Administrative Committee has been endorsed by them. It will be recommended to the Executive Committee of our Board of Trustees at the beginning of February, and the moment that I have their approval, I shall be in touch with you again.”⁴¹ February came with no progress: “I regret to say that my proposal has not yet been endorsed by the Board of Trustees. They considered the matter last night, but referred it to the President and Director-elect for further

deliberation. It seems likely that the documents will be transferred to your Mormon friends eventually, but that is all I am authorized to say.”⁴² Summer passed without a word, and Atiya complained: “It has taken me a great deal of time and effort to reach the Church Presidents personally, and I shall feel somewhat belittled if things do not work in the direction which we both had carefully planned.”⁴³

Although the plan was approved by mid-September, it was difficult to find a time when all the participants would be available to meet together. At the same time, anti-Latter-day Saints had also obtained photographs of the papyri and were trying to find out which museum housed them.⁴⁴ On November 27, 1967, the Metropolitan Museum of Art formally gave the papyri to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Fischer was miffed that the newspapers gave credit to Atiya for discovering papyri that were known, albeit not by many. He told Atiya: “Although I was already aware that your version of the ‘discovery’ of these documents had caused considerable confusion, it was startling to read that you had informed me of their existence. While I have taken pains to avoid any outright contradictions of what you said, I do not see why either I or the other members of my department—past and present—should be put in the position of being ignorant about facts we could not fail to have known.”⁴⁵ Fischer was an extremely meticulous scholar and made copious notes on every object in the museum’s Egyptian collection. He might not have known everything about each item in their vast Egyptian collections, but the idea that he did not know what the Department of Egyptian Art held is incredible.

What the museum thought they were giving the Church was just another set of scraps from the Book of the Dead since their acquisitions list registered that they had “papyrus fragments of hieratic Books of the Dead, once the property of the Mormon leader Joseph Smith.”⁴⁶ Fischer said, “We know for a certainty, however, that they are parts of several copies of the Book of the Dead. The texts probably vary in date, but most of them are pretty late in terms of ancient Egyptian history. . . . There are many, many copies of these texts. Of course, a very beautiful example would be of great interest to us, and we do normally have some fine examples on display. Let’s say that these fragments are reduplications in that

sense. Such reduplications are of interest to specialists in funerary texts but are not useful to us in terms of our exhibition.”⁴⁷ The museum had not bothered to read all the papyri. Nibley had the task of identifying the papyri for the Church and was the first to actually read the documents and recognize that Joseph Smith Papyri X and XI were not copies of the Book of the Dead but a different document, known then as the Book of Breathings. “Let’s face it,” Baer told a critic, “It was Nibley and not the Egyptologists who noticed that the sensen fragments were not from the Book of the Dead.”⁴⁸ Ironically, the museum rid themselves of one of only two copies in the United States of what is now called the Document of Breathings Made by Isis and what seems to be the earliest manuscript of this text in existence. Fischer’s comment is quite revealing about attitudes still widespread among Egyptologists about the Book of the Dead and Egyptian religious texts in general. If it is not beautiful, it is redundant.

The Church published the images of the papyri within two months after they received them,⁴⁹ which, at the time, was as fast as they could get issues with the talks from general conference out. Normally, materials in Church magazines took (and still take) much longer to get into print. Nibley, who had been an editor at the *Improvement Era* and had a long history of writing series of articles for the publication,⁵⁰ started a new series of articles on the Book of Abraham months before the papyri were given to the Church. Because Nibley did not know what the exact content of the papyri would be, he titled the series “A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price,” giving himself the latitude to cover whatever he might need to whenever the papyri actually appeared. His articles began to be published in January 1968. Notice of the existence of the papyri was published in February, and Nibley was finally able to discuss the papyri themselves in the eighth installment in September, several months into the publication of the series.

The series was broken into a number of parts, each of which had its own name, and the parts into article installments, each covering about eight pages of triple-columned small print. He started his series with the 1912 episode. The first sections—“Challenge and Response” (January–April 1968), “May We See Your Credentials?” (May–June 1968), “Empaneling the Panel” (July 1968), and “Second

String” (August 1968)—all deal with Reverend Spalding and his solicited Egyptologists, many of whom belonged to Spalding’s sect. “The antics of the *Gelehrten* [learned scholars] of 1912 prove most instructive—it is amazing what they got away with, and at the risk of being negative, I have devoted some articles to the subject.”⁵¹ Baer did not think Nibley’s articles were negative, although he thought that since they did not deal with the papyri directly, they were beside the point.⁵²

After Nibley had the papyri to work with, he discussed Facsimile 1, the only one of the facsimiles preserved in the papyri that had been given to the Church, and its similarities and differences with other lion-couch scenes in “Facsimile No. 1: A Unique Document” (September–December 1968). In 1912, the magisterial E. A. W. Budge had weighed in on the Book of Abraham—he claimed that it was simply stolen from apocryphal sources which, as it turned out, only Budge had access to. Nibley took a tip from that and dealt with about a dozen apocryphal sources on Abraham in “The Unknown Abraham” (January–July 1969). These apocryphal sources parallel the Book of Abraham, but few of them were available in Joseph Smith’s day, and even fewer of them were taken seriously.

Nibley returned to Facsimile 1 in “Facsimile No. 1, By the Figures” (July–October 1969). Here Nibley takes the reader on a trip with Dick and Jane through an imaginary museum where all the lion-couch scenes have been gathered together in one location. In “Setting the Stage—the World of Abraham” (October 1969–January 1970), Nibley returned to the apocryphal Abraham accounts to show how in them Abraham was offered up on an altar and argued that the conditions described match the historical Abraham’s time. Continuing the sacrifice theme, Nibley then inserted two thoughtful pieces on “The Sacrifice of Isaac” (March 1970) and “The Sacrifice of Sarah” (April 1970), showing how the various sacrifices of Abraham affected other members of the family. He ended the two-and-a-half-year series with a closing essay called “Conclusion: Taking Stock” (May 1970).

Nibley’s correspondence ballooned when the papyri were returned to the Church, as did the correspondence of everyone involved in the transfer of the papyri to the Church. Inquiries came from the curious general public, but mainly from Latter-day Saints

and anti-Latter-day Saints. Nibley had earlier enumerated the consequences when he discussed the four obvious ways in which those who accepted the gospel might meet the challenge of the learned world:

1. "We can ignore them. This is often a good idea, since the two greatest nuisances in the Church are (a) those who think they know enough to disprove the claims of Joseph Smith, and (b) those who think they know enough to prove them. Actually, nobody knows nearly enough to prove or disprove the gospel."⁵³ The Joseph Smith Papyri still attract hucksters who think they can use them to disprove the Church.
2. "We can run away from them. That is, we can claim to be scholars in the full and proper sense of the word and yet refuse to meet other scholars on their own ground."⁵⁴ Usually this takes the form of posing as an expert to Latter-day Saints for fame or gain without engaging the scholarly world outside the Church. "We respect our local Gelehrten (learned) for that knowledge and proficiency which they have demonstrated to the world, but when they go out of bounds and attack the Church with specious learning, they invite legitimate censure. They are like dentists who insist on performing delicate brain surgery because that is more interesting than filling teeth. Nice for them—but what about their patients?"⁵⁵
3. "We can agree with the world. This has always been the standard procedure with our Mormon intellectuals. What else can they do, since they cannot stand up to the opposition and cannot afford to run away? Nothing is more prevalent among the LDS schoolmen than the illusion that they can enroll themselves in the company of the experts and gain their respect and recognition simply by agreeing with whatever they say. Naturally our poorly equipped scholars tend to panic when anyone threatens to substitute serious discussion for professional camaraderie."⁵⁶
4. Finally, "we can meet the opposition on their own grounds, publishing in their journals (which are open to all) and presenting the clear evidence of the original sources. This is exactly what we have not been doing."⁵⁷ Ironically, Nibley had given up publishing in the academic journals by the time the papyri came out, so none of his Egyptological articles ever appeared in Egyptological venues. His reasoning was



Figure 4. Nibley in the Cairo Museum, probably January 1984.⁷⁵

as follows: “To be taken seriously one must publish, and I soon found out that publishing in journals is as easy and mechanical as getting grades: I sent out articles to a wide variety of prestigious journals, and they were all printed. So I lost interest. What those people were after is not what I was after. Above all, I could see no point to going through the years marshalling an ever-lengthening array of titles to stand at attention some day at the foot of an obituary.”⁵⁸ Still, publishing has its place: “‘Publish or perish’ is too mechanical and unimaginative a rule to apply everywhere, but it is not too much to insist on the rule, ‘Publish or shut up!’”⁵⁹ “We have fondly supposed through the years that we could mask our inadequacy behind the awesome façade of titles and degrees; our intellectuals rest their whole case on that very authoritarianism of rank and protocol which they have always affected to despise.”⁶⁰

Nibley followed the last of the options that he laid out. Even more than half a century later, Nibley’s observations are still on target and as relevant as ever.

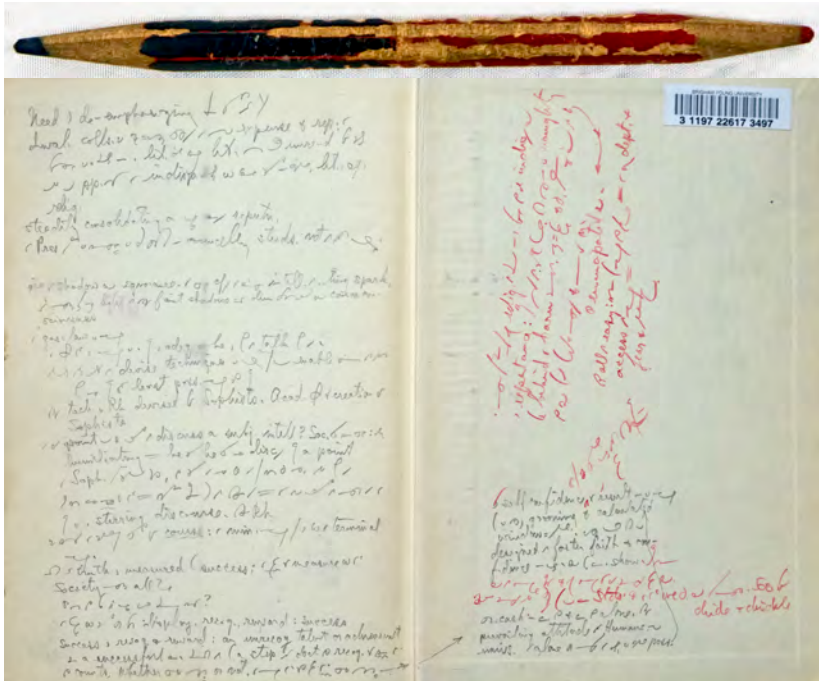


Figure 5. Nibley's pencil and shorthand scribbles in two different colors.⁷⁶

Strengths

When it came to strengths in Egyptology, Nibley had a number of them that were significant and formidable.

One advantage that Nibley had was the BYU library. Nibley said that when he started at BYU the library had exactly one book in Greek (Homer) and one in Latin (Manilius) and no one (else) in Provo who could read a line of either. That may have been a slight exaggeration, or at least a slight on his faculty colleagues, but Nibley worked hard to expand the library, both his own and BYU's. In 1951, thanks in part to Nibley's army buddy, the rare-book dealer Lucien Goldschmidt, "Brigham Young University acquired both the Greek and Latin *Patrologiae* and the Egyptian collection of the venerable Samuel A. B. Mercer, he who had spearheaded the attack on the Book of Abraham back in 1912."⁶¹ This gave BYU the best Egyptological library west of the Mississippi until 1988, when the University of California at Berkeley acquired Klaus Baer's. Nibley made better use of Mercer's library than Mercer himself had.

Both men wrote in the books, Nibley in pencil and Mercer in pen. Mercer used to write the date when he read an article in the periodical. Nibley just made marks in his inimitable shorthand. Nibley wrote notes about the subjects discussed in the text in the margins. Mercer wrote transliterations and translations in between the lines of the text, some of which are completely wrong. Nibley understood the texts better and read more extensively in the literature. One advantage of Mercer's collection was that it was fairly complete up through the mid-1950s. BYU did not do as well keeping the collection up to date and filling in some of the holes in the collection. While this gave Nibley a great grasp of the history of the discipline, which he exploited, it also sometimes forced him to rely on scholarship that was dated.

Another strength that Nibley had was his extensive and formidable knowledge of the ancient world. Nibley knew the ancient world through the classical authors and his knowledge of Greek and Latin literature was broad and deep. While his Egyptian readings tended to be in earlier time periods, that was true of almost all American Egyptologists at the time Nibley started working in Egyptology. His teacher, Klaus Baer, was an Old Kingdom specialist. Most American Egyptologists did not deal with anything after the New Kingdom. Only later would Janet Johnson and her students really start expanding American Egyptology into the later periods of Egyptian history, the period in which the Joseph Smith Papyri were dated. But Nibley at least knew the time period from his other studies of the ancient world.

Nibley had also had glimpses of the world before modernity. His earliest memories were of Oregon when it was still uncivilized and when sailing ships were still a means of transportation. He also spent time with the Hopi and appreciated their following the ancient cycles. He went to UCLA before it had a reputation.

Another strength that Nibley brought to his study of Egyptian was his phenomenal gift with languages. All that time that he had spent trying to become fluent in speaking German, French, Dutch, Arabic, Icelandic, and Russian, as well as developing proficiency in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Old Norse, meant that he knew a great deal about how languages actually work and how to translate them.

I remember one day about two years before he passed away, before he was confined to a hospital bed, he invited me over and took me for a tour of his personal library, which occupied what for most people would have been the garage. There was a first edition Stephanus, as well as treasures in Arabic that he had spent his life savings on the day before D-Day, and all kinds of books in various languages: Russian, Arabic, Egyptian, German, Greek, and Latin. He would pick one up, open to a random page, and read and translate at sight. By that time, I could check his work on most of them and he was spot on, if not elegant.

One other advantage that Nibley had is that he could write quickly and well. His gift with language and his quick wit were legendary. He was also both incisive and insightful in his analyses. In the period from 1968 to 1970, Nibley published forty-four articles,⁶² on average more than one a month. These were rarely opinion pieces but sustained and substantial pieces of scholarship, most of them on Egyptology. Most academics in the humanities even now are fortunate to publish an article a year. Most Egyptologists are expected to publish one research article a year. Back then, many BYU professors would go through their entire careers and not publish anything.

Weaknesses

One disadvantage that Nibley had was that he never really learned Demotic or Ptolemaic temple glyphs, two common scripts in which the Egyptian language was written in the time of the Joseph Smith Papyri. This is not to say that he had no knowledge of these scripts, but he does not seem to have been proficient in them. He was also working at a time before many of the texts and tools for studying them had been published. Nibley did the best he could with what he had, but there was a limit to his ability to deal with the material.

Ironically for someone who graduated in history, Nibley did not take a historical or developmental approach to ancient Egypt. Perhaps it was his initial attraction to sociology, but Nibley's approach to ancient Egypt was one of chronological flattening. He was looking for general patterns, and sometimes the evidence does not indicate a pattern unless one puts together all of the evidence for a phenomenon regardless of the time period from which the

evidence derives. The problem with that is that one cannot then see historical trends or peculiarities of a particular time period. Of course, Nibley is not the only Egyptologist with this particular problem; one can also see it in the works of Robert Ritner, particularly in his dissertation. Thus Nibley's commentary on the Joseph Smith Papyri focuses at least as much on the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts as it does on contemporary papyri or temple walls, although, to be fair, many of them were not yet published when he wrote.

Fifty years later, some of Nibley's work has not held up well. What is surprising is that any of it has. Nibley is often viewed as a product of his time, and in some ways he was. He never shook off the patternism he absorbed so thoroughly in graduate school, but he was largely not swayed or enamored with the fads that flooded the fields of his day. His grasp of the sweep of history and knowledge of the history of scholarship in his disciplines inoculated him against buying too much into some of them. To hear someone enthralled with gender theory criticize Nibley for being a product of his time is so ironic it is laughable. In Egyptology he was actually ahead of his time. He was recognizing and talking about initiation in ancient Egypt before Edward Wente and Jan Assmann made it accepted.

In some cases, the discipline has moved beyond where it was in Nibley's day. One cannot minimize the importance of the thousands of texts that have been published in the last half century. While Nibley answered the questions as well as he or anyone else at the time could, we have information bearing on those questions that he did not have. The questions that Nibley asked, however, are still relevant, even if we answer some of them a bit differently now. He was asking the right questions, and not everyone has, at the time or since.

Some Personal Vignettes

My father had taken a few classes from Nibley. My uncle lived for a time in his ward. My older brother took classes from Nibley and was even in his ward for a time. I first took a class from Nibley before my mission. It was an amazing experience. In a class on the Pearl of Great Price, we were in the second week in the second term

before we even got to Moses 1:1 and spent an entire class period on the first verse. At the end of the semester I realized that the first class and the last class of the semester were outlines of the entire semester. Nibley had the ability to see the big picture and how the details fit into it.

A few years after my initial experience with Nibley, I had other opportunities for contact, especially when Stephen Ricks hired me to check Nibley's footnotes for the *Collected Works*, but there was always a distance. Nibley was my grandfather's age. Although I probably got to know him as well as anyone of my generation outside his family, we were never friends. It was always a teacher and student relationship.

One of the things I remember was that Nibley did not like to be bothered. He was especially impatient with those who wanted him to do their homework for them. He was constantly bombarded with requests of others to approve their theories or address their pet topic of interest. Most of these went straight into the trash can because Nibley wanted to focus on contributions that he could make, things that only he was in the position to do. But he could be very kind and helpful if you asked him questions like, *Where can I go to find something on this subject?*

As a teacher, Nibley did a couple of things that were and are unusual. One was how he graded on attendance. Nibley would just go through the roll until he hit a student's name that was present to say the opening prayer. If you prayed, you were counted as having been present for the semester. Otherwise the student's grade in the class was based on the answer to a one-question essay final. Nibley was very good at coming up with thought-provoking questions that allowed the students to display their ability to think and display their knowledge while at the same time giving them plenty of rope with which to hang themselves: "Why is the Book of Mormon a message of hope?" "Compare yourself to an individual in the Pearl of Great Price (and do not be too personal)."

I remember one Book of Mormon class where the final question was "Why should we study the Book of Mormon?" That gave the students plenty of room to explain why they thought the Book of Mormon was worth studying. The answer that most of them gave was that we should study the Book of Mormon because President

Ezra Taft Benson said so. They received Cs because they showed that they could not think for themselves and could not think of reasons of their own why they should study the Book of Mormon. After grades came out, Nibley would always have a line of students waiting outside his door wanting to argue that they really did not deserve the grade they got. I do not know if any of them ever got Nibley to change his mind. He finally quit teaching when a university administrator changed the students' grades without his permission.

Nibley's classes could be notoriously difficult as they assumed that the student already had a broad and thorough general education before taking the class. Otherwise one had to hope that the student could latch onto one of the many potential references to be sucked into the all-encompassing vortex of Nibley's thought. His knowledge was encyclopedic and was dispensed during class like a fire hose. I remember one student commenting to another that he had not come for two weeks and could not see that he had missed anything. Looking through my notes, I disagreed.

One of the reasons he did not deal with class discussion is that the students tended not to know enough to make intelligent comments, and often did not realize it. I ended up on the wrong end of a class discussion one time. It was the second or third week of the semester, and the class I had immediately after Nibley's was Arabic, which I just started, and we had barely finished learning the alphabet. Nibley must have seen me looking at my Arabic text before class. Out of nowhere in the middle of the lecture he asked: "Brother Gee, you know Arabic. What is the Arabic word for *across from*?" I did not know that Nibley even knew my name, much less that I was taking Arabic. It might be optimistic to think that at that point I might have known twenty words in Arabic. I fumbled badly because I did not know the answer, but I have never forgotten *'inda* since.

A couple of years and many personal encounters later, I ran into Nibley one spring afternoon walking on campus. He was on his way to his office outside the Ancient Studies Room in the library. Nibley said to me: "I have just been asked to nominate a student for a scholarship or fellowship, or something like that. And I nominated you, because you are the only one I know." I was flattered,

but later that evening I was brought back down to earth. My roommate came in that evening and said that afternoon, apparently just after our conversation, Nibley had poked his head into the Ancient Studies Room and asked my roommate, who happened to be studying there, "What's Brother Gee's first name?" For him it was a very strange conversation, and he had been trying to figure out what that was all about.

One summer, just after I had finished my comprehensive exams for my doctorate, I spent an otherwise disastrous summer at BYU teaching a couple of religion classes. But Michael Rhodes was preparing for his PhD exams, and he and Nibley and I met a couple of times a week and read Egyptian texts. Having just finished my own exams, I was up on the grammar. I noticed something about Nibley's abilities translating Egyptian. Nibley was not up on the grammar, but he had such a knowledge of the ancient world and such a mastery of English that he could come up with the correct translation even if he could not tell you grammatically how he had arrived at it. This was in contrast to some of my professors who could cite chapter and verse on grammar but often produced translations into stilted jargon that, if nothing else, ensured that their prospective audience would never make the mistake of thinking that either the original or the translation was actually English. Two of my former professors have stated in print that "I am not confident that, at the present state of knowledge, one can write English and translate from Akkadian at the same time."⁶³ This is also true of Egyptian.⁶⁴ It was not true of Nibley.

When I first started working on checking the footnotes for the second edition of *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*,⁶⁵ Nibley asked what I was doing. When I told him, he replied: "Don't bother with that, write your own." I might be in a position to do that now, but at the time it could only have been worse.

Replacing Nibley

I would like to address the issue of why there have been no replacements for Hugh Nibley. It was long joked that because Nibley did so many things in so many fields that Nibley would have to be replaced by a committee. This strikes close to one of the reasons there have been no replacements for Nibley: specialization. One of the things

that made Nibley unique is that he worked in so many different fields, and these neither were nor are easy fields. Working in different fields gives the scholar who does so certain advantages: It is easier to see how different methods used in one field are adaptable to problems in other fields. It can also be easier to recognize fads sweeping one field for what they are. Those who push for specialization want “faculty who are advanced specialists and authorities in their fields.” They do not realize that “while leading researchers and publishers are normally very smart people they . . . are not often oriented toward wrestling with big-picture intellectual questions,”⁶⁶ such as Nibley wrestled with. That requires a broader base than specialists deal with.

Another reason that we have not seen another Hugh Nibley is that, in the words of one academic written about the time that Nibley retired, “courage is neither a virtue among academicians nor is it a way to continue at what certainly beats working for a living.”⁶⁷ By the end of graduate school, most graduates “are intellectual cowards.”⁶⁸ Nibley, who had to gather the military intelligence about D-Day, brief the men he knew were sitting ducks, and then participate in the operation, was not a coward and thus was willing to state the truth. This, however, is not true of many who are in academia. Ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth, most academics are blown about by every wind of doctrine, cowardly following the crowd. Nibley was willing to buck the trends and see through the academic facades and call them out plainly and persuasively. In academia cowardice is rewarded and courage is punished.

Exploring Nibley

If one wishes to start to explore the writings of Hugh Nibley, I recommend starting with either *The World and the Prophets*⁶⁹ or *Approaching Zion*.⁷⁰ In *The World and the Prophets*, Nibley explains how the early Christian church worked, how it apostatized, and why we need prophets today. In *Approaching Zion*, he addresses the issue of taking the gospel seriously. In the short essay “Nobody to Blame,”⁷¹ he discusses the perennial issues of how the gospel relates to higher education. More than half a century later, his analysis still holds, and his writing is as trenchant, pointed, and memorable



Figure 6. False door of Neferseshemkhu.⁷⁷

as anything he ever wrote. It should be required reading for any Latter-day Saint going into graduate school.

The False Door

One metaphor from the study of ancient Egypt that Nibley evoked explains much of the difference between Nibley's approach to Egyptology and most Egyptologists then and now. One of the standard features of an Old Kingdom tomb is the so-called false door. It is depicted as a doorway, open, with a rolled-up mat carved in stone at the top. In a carved window above the door is a window into which the viewer can see the deceased happily seated at a banquet table. The ancient Egyptian depicted this as a doorway to another world where the souls of the deceased enjoyed their life and

mingled with the gods and with others who had passed on. The modern empiricist says that the doorway is false; what is behind the false door are the rock walls of a silent tomb. Nibley, like the ancient Egyptians, was certain that there was something beyond this mortal present, the possibility of reunion with loved ones in the presence of God. That is a chasm that separates the modern Egyptologists from the ancient Egyptians and from Nibley. He did not believe there was something beyond; he knew it.

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Notes

1. Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Curse of Publication and the Blight of Novelty," in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Egyptologists*, ed. C. J. Eyre (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 625.
2. Adapted from John Gee, "Editor's Introduction: Hugh Nibley and the Joseph Smith Papyri," in Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Abraham* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2010), xv-xxx.
3. See Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).
4. See Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 139-40.
5. See Hugh Nibley, "Sparsiones," in *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 148-94. The article originally appeared in *Classical Journal* 40, no. 9 (June 1945): 515-43.

6. See Hugh W. Nibley, "The Book of Mormon as a Mirror of the East," *Improvement Era*, April 1948, 115–20, 122–25; essentially reprinted as "Men of the East," in Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 25–42.
7. See Hugh Nibley, "The Arrow, the Hunter, and the State," in *Ancient State*, 1–32. The article originally appeared in *Western Political Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1949): 328–44.
8. See Hugh W. Nibley, "Victoriosa Loquacitas: The Rise of Rhetoric and the Decline of Everything Else," in *Ancient State*, 269–70. The article originally appeared in *Western Speech* 20, no. 2 (1956): 56–82.
9. See Hugh Nibley, "Egypt Revisited," in *Lehi in the Desert*, 308–49.
10. Hugh Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," in *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2008), 133.
11. Nibley, "An Intellectual Autobiography," in *Eloquent Witness*, 17.
12. Hugh Nibley, "Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic," in *Ancient State*, 312.
13. See Nibley, "Victoriosa Loquacitas," 243–86.
14. See Nibley, "Victoriosa Loquacitas," 244.
15. Nibley, "Victoriosa Loquacitas," 253.
16. Nibley, "Victoriosa Loquacitas," 260, citing Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.36.
17. Nibley, "Victoriosa Loquacitas," 259, citing Philo, *On Joseph* 13–14.64–68.
18. Nibley recounts the story in "Victoriosa Loquacitas," 260.
19. Nibley, "Victoriosa Loquacitas," 246.
20. Nibley, "Intellectual Autobiography," 48 (this volume).
21. Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," 133–34.
22. Nibley, "Conclusion: Taking Stock," in *An Approach to the Book of Abraham*, 571.
23. Klaus Baer, letter to Jerald Tanner, August 13, 1968, quoted in Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 316.
24. See Klaus Baer, letter to Hugh Nibley, July 6, 1962. The original to this letter is in Hugh W. Nibley Papers, MSS 2721, boxes 40–41, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. All citations of the correspondence between Baer and Nibley come from this collection unless published, in which case the published source is also given.
25. Hugh Nibley, letter to Klaus Baer, August 2, 1962.
26. Hugh Nibley, letter to Klaus Baer, August 17, 1962. At least three drafts of this letter survive.
27. Nibley to Baer, August 17, 1962.
28. Literally, "may omen be absent," i.e., "May there be no ill omen in it."
29. Hugh Nibley, letter to Klaus Baer, March 28, 1963.

30. Hugh Nibley, letter to Klaus Baer, June 1, 1964.
31. Hugh Nibley, letter to Klaus Baer, September 28, 1965.
32. See Hugh Nibley, "Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 10–44. The article originally appeared in *Vigiliae Christianae* 20, no. 1 (1966): 1–24.
33. See Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 307. For Nibley studying under Hughes, see Hugh Nibley, personal communication.
34. See Hugh Nibley, personal communication.
35. Hugh Nibley, letter to Klaus Baer, February 12, 1968.
36. Louis C. Midgley, comp., "Hugh Winder Nibley: Bibliography and Register," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990), 1:xlvi.
37. Aziz S. Atiya, letter to Henry G. Fischer, October 18, 1966, Aziz Atiya Collection, ACCN 480, box 40, folder 8, Manuscripts Division, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. All citations of the Atiya correspondence come from this collection.
38. Henry G. Fischer, letter to Aziz S. Atiya, November 2, 1966, Aziz Atiya Collection, box 40, folder 8.
39. Norman Tolk et al., "An Interview with Dr. Fischer," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 4 (1967): 58.
40. For which, see Thomas Hoving, *Making the Mummies Dance: Inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 291–92.
41. Henry G. Fischer, letter to Aziz S. Atiya, December 27, 1966, Aziz Atiya Collection, box 40, folder 8.
42. Henry G. Fischer, letter to Aziz S. Atiya, Aziz Atiya Collection, February 15, 1968, box 40, folder 8.
43. Aziz S. Atiya, letter to Henry G. Fischer, August 10, 1968, Aziz Atiya Collection, box 40, folder 8.
44. See Wesley P. Walters, letter to Aziz S. Atiya, November 23, 1967, Aziz Atiya Collection, box 40, folder 12.
45. Henry G. Fischer to Aziz S. Atiya, January 2, 1968, Aziz Atiya Collection, box 40, folder 1.
46. "Review of the Year 1947," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 7, no. 1 (1948): 17.
47. Tolk, Travers, Smith, and Graves, "An Interview with Dr. Fischer," 58.
48. Klaus Baer to Jerald Tanner, August 8, 1968, as quoted in Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 318.
49. See Doyle L. Green, "New Light on Joseph Smith's Egyptian Papyri," *Improvement Era*, February 1968, 40–40-I. The fact that they had to add extra pages shows that the issue was already typeset.

50. "Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times," "Lehi in the Desert," "The World of the Jaredites," "The Stick of Judah and the Stick of Joseph," "New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study," "The Way of the Church," "There Were Jaredites," "'Mixed Voices': A Study in Book of Mormon Criticism," "Censoring the Joseph Smith Story," and "Since Cumorah" had all appeared as series in the *Improvement Era*.
51. Nibley, letter to Baer, February 12, 1968.
52. See Klaus Baer, letter to Hugh Nibley, August 10, 1968. Baer wrote his letter just before the papyri began to make their appearance in Nibley's articles.
53. Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," 130–31.
54. Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," 131.
55. Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," 139.
56. Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," 131–32.
57. Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," 132.
58. Nibley, "Intellectual Autobiography," 15–16.
59. Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," 136.
60. Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," 132.
61. Nibley, "Intellectual Autobiography," 15.
62. See Midgley, "Bibliography and Register," 1:xliv–xlix.
63. Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1993), 1:xxvii. Cited with approval by Wolfgang Heimpel, *Letters to the King of Mari* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 169.
64. Cf. Erik Hornung, *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter* (Zürich: Artemis, 1990), 17: "Wenn der Leser an veilen Stellen das Gefühl haben sollte, nichts zu verstehen, so teilt er dieses Gefühl sehr oft mit dem Übersetzer."
65. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005).
66. Christian Smith and John C. Cavadini, *Building Catholic Higher Education: Unofficial Reflections from the University of Notre Dame* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 79.
67. Professor X, *This Beats Working for a Living: The Dark Secrets of a College Professor* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1973), 12.
68. Professor X, *This Beats Working for a Living*, 130.
69. Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987).
70. Hugh Nibley, *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989).
71. Hugh Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," in *Approaching Zion*, 125–41.
72. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock made in the BYU HBLL Nibley Ancient Studies Room, 1 February 2021. Photo ID: HBLL-ASR_STW9069-ECS.jpg.

73. From the frontispiece of David P. Silverman, ed. *For His Ka: Essays Offered In Memory of Klaus Baer*, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 55 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1994). <https://oi.uchicago.edu/sites/oi.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/shared/docs/saoc55.pdf>. Photo ID: Klaus Baer-M4909-02.jpeg.
74. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 4. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-STW8775-EC-Box10Folder4.jpeg.
75. Petersen Collection, box 10, folder 1. Photo ID: HBLL-BoydP-STW8588-EC-Box10Folder1.jpeg.
76. Photograph by Stephen T. Whitlock made in the BYU HBLL Nibley Ancient Studies Room, February 1, 2021. Pencil is from Nibley Collection, Box 285. The book shown was certainly not part of the Mercer collection. Rather, it was a copy of the third edition of George C. Divry's "Greek Made Easy (New York: D. C. Divry, Inc., 1953) that was gifted to the library by the Nibley family and catalogued on March 31, 2006. Photo ID: HBLL-HughN_STW8955-EC-Box285.jpeg; HBLL-ASR_STW9103-EC2.jpg.
77. Egyptian, 4th Dynasty. Object reference: 1282. British Museum, with permission. Photo ID: Gee chapter-False Door-00031227_005.jpg.