

# HUGH NIBLEY'S ARTICLES OF FAITH

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So, Hugh Nibley has two lawyers speaking at his funeral.<sup>1</sup> Good thing he appreciated irony! I have laughed and wept as I have written *this* final examination.

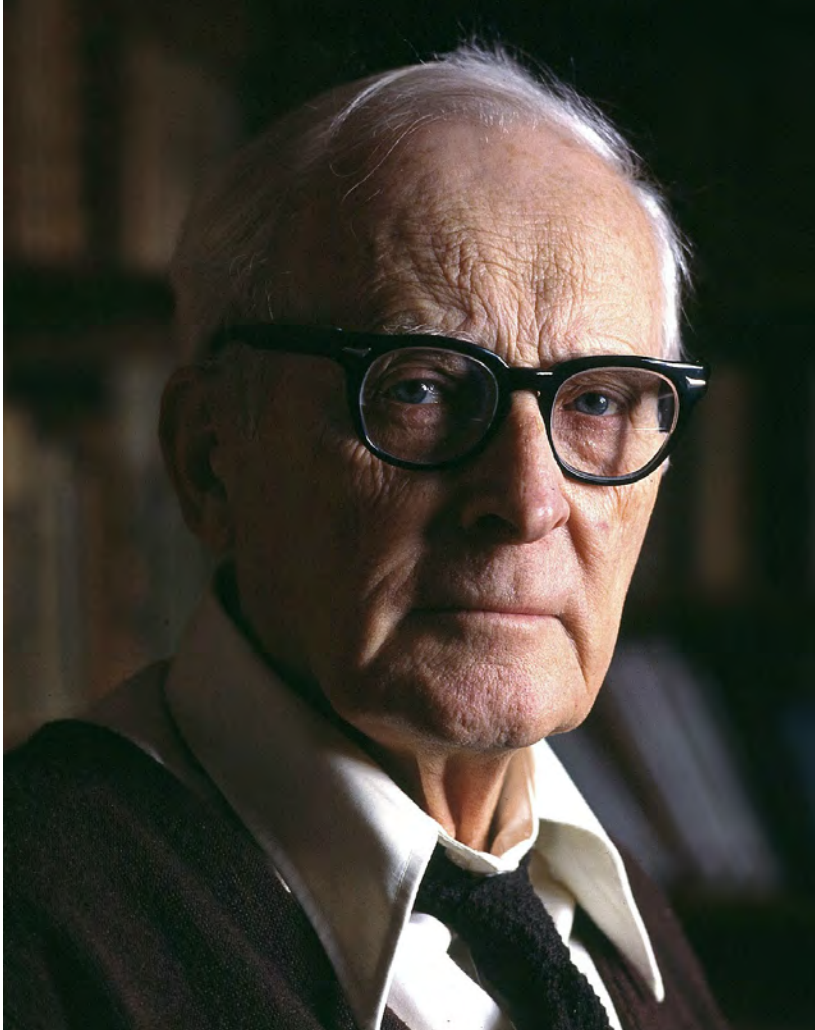
Speaking on behalf of all who have taken a Nibley class, attended a Nibley fireside, source checked a footnote, or have been changed by reading his gifted prose, I say, simply, thank you, Hugh, with special mention also to Phyllis.

If we were to “render all the thanks and praise that our whole souls have power to possess” (Mosiah 2:20), yet would our thanks be inadequate. He was a true friend, a model mentor, generous and inspirational in the extreme. He never did anything partway.

To paraphrase Brigham Young,<sup>2</sup> I feel like shouting hallelujah all the time when I think that I was so fortunate to ever know Hugh Nibley.

Robert K. Thomas once said, “Few students can talk coherently about their first class from Brother Nibley.”<sup>3</sup> That was the case for me when I entered his honors Book of Mormon class as a freshman forty years ago, or thirty-six years ago when I had my first three-hour, one-on-one session with him. And it is still the case today. Who can speak coherently of the life-changing experience of encountering Nibley’s expansive curiosity and grasp of everything from “before Adam”<sup>4</sup> to the continuous “breakthroughs” he always hoped to see?<sup>5</sup>

Lots of words are used to describe Hugh Nibley: brilliant, eclectic, iconoclast, critic, genius. But what was it, I got wondering, that held it all together for Hugh? What were Hugh Nibley’s “articles of faith”? In the middle of the night, two days after his passing, it suddenly dawned on me what his articles of faith were. And as my



*Figure 1. “What was it . . . that held it all together for Hugh?  
What were Hugh Nibley’s ‘articles of faith?’”<sup>59</sup>*

mind ran through the colorful titles of his many books and publications, through which most people will have access to him, the following thirteen-point insight fell into place:

First, Hugh believed in God, the Eternal Father, and in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost (see Articles of Faith 1:1). He rejected Augustine’s speculative creation of trinitarian theology, commenting wryly, “Here certainly is a place where revelation would [have been] helpful.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, Hugh believed that we will be accountable for our own sins and not for Adam's transgressions (see Articles of Faith 1:2). He saw to the depths of the plan of salvation and wrestled to the ground the "terrible questions"<sup>7</sup> of where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going. He reenthroned human agency through the ancient "doctrine of the two ways"<sup>8</sup> and the primordial dichotomy of good and evil.<sup>9</sup>

He zealously claimed the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of conscience (see Articles of Faith 1:11). He spoke out against intolerance or judging others. He wanted you "to understand men and women as they are, and not . . . as you are."<sup>10</sup> Tolerance, he wrote, is a crucial ingredient in "exemplary manhood."<sup>11</sup>

He also spoke keenly on political topics, realizing the necessity of being subject to kings, rulers, and magistrates (see Articles of Faith 1:12), yet hoping that people in power would not seek for glory or to get gain<sup>12</sup> and that we would have "leaders," not "managers."<sup>13</sup> He wrote of being "in the party but not of the party,"<sup>14</sup> on statecraft, ancient and modern,<sup>15</sup> on "the uses and abuses of patriotism,"<sup>16</sup> and much about the problems of war<sup>17</sup> and the ideals of peace.<sup>18</sup>

Hugh Nibley's first principle was clearly faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Articles of Faith 1:4). Hugh believed that, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all mankind shall be resurrected (see Articles of Faith 1:3). At Don Decker's funeral, Hugh declared: "A physical resurrection does exist. We believe in it. We will need it. We came here to get a body for a definite purpose. The body plays a definite role in the mind and the spirit."<sup>19</sup> Hugh testified that Jesus Christ "paid the ransom price, he redeemed us when we could not redeem ourselves."<sup>20</sup> It was, he said, "a suffering of which we cannot conceive, but which is perfectly believable."<sup>21</sup> We are saved by grace after all we can do, or as he unforgettably said, "Work we must, but the lunch is free."<sup>22</sup>

He spoke extensively of obedience to the ordinances of the gospel (see Articles of Faith 1:3). In "How Firm a Foundation,"<sup>23</sup> what made it so was the priesthood, ordinances performed by those in authority (see Articles of Faith 1:5), which extend the gospel beyond this "ignorant present."<sup>24</sup> The ordinances are everything behind his books *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*<sup>25</sup> and *Temple*

*and Cosmos*.<sup>26</sup> The ordinances have allowed him and will allow us to pass into the spirit world, out of the reach of the power of Satan.

Of the first principles of the gospel (see Articles of Faith 1:4), Hugh said, “We must keep our eye on the principles of the gospel that have been given us.”<sup>27</sup> Of repentance, he spoke of perpetual, voluntary repentance as the very definition of righteousness.<sup>28</sup> He exemplified humility and unpretentiousness.

He wrote passionately about the nature of spiritual gifts (see Articles of Faith 1:7) and exhorted us to “deny not the gifts of God.”<sup>29</sup> He clearly had the gift of tongues. From his own thin-veil experiences, he knew of and defended trenchantly the realities of the visions of Joseph Smith.<sup>30</sup> He rejoiced in the gift of prophecy.<sup>31</sup> He truly believed and unfolded all that God has revealed, from “Enoch the prophet”<sup>32</sup> and “Abraham in Egypt”<sup>33</sup> to the instructions revealed during Christ’s forty-day ministry.<sup>34</sup>

Eagerly he believed all that God does now reveal and shall yet reveal (see Articles of Faith 1:9). He drove a wedge between the sophic world and the prophets.<sup>35</sup> He wrote incisively against “criticizing the Brethren,”<sup>36</sup> ending that presentation with a story of Elder Spencer W. Kimball wiping off Hugh’s dusty shoes and with the testimony “I truly believe they are chosen servants of God.”<sup>37</sup>

Because Hugh had a command of primary sources, a major segment of his widely published work successfully compares the organization that existed in the primitive Church with features of the restored Church (see Articles of Faith 1:6), covering such subjects as Apostles and bishops,<sup>38</sup> prayer circles,<sup>39</sup> baptism for the dead in ancient times,<sup>40</sup> and when and why “the lights went out.”<sup>41</sup>

Without doubt, he believed the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly<sup>42</sup> (see Articles of Faith 1:8). Without correct translation we have only “zeal without knowledge.”<sup>43</sup> Nibley taught us to read the Greek New Testament with our Latter-day Saint eyes wide open. According to the King James Version, John 17:11, in the great high priestly prayer, simply reads, “Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me”; but to Hugh Nibley, who rightly sees this as a temple text, it is better translated instrumentally, “Holy Father, test them on the name with which you endowed me,”<sup>44</sup> a much different reading, for those who wish to enter into the presence of God.

It goes without saying that he believed the Book of Mormon to be the word of God. We could multiply dozens of titles, from *Lehi in the Desert*<sup>45</sup> to his last retrospective “Forty Years After.”<sup>46</sup> He has consistently taught us to look at this book more carefully, that it holds up under the closest scrutiny as an ancient testament of Jesus Christ, with deep spiritual relevance today and at the judgment bar of God.

No theme was stronger for Hugh Nibley than our “approaching Zion,” which is the thrust of the tenth article of faith. When invited to speak in a Last Lecture Series at BYU in 1971, without hesitation he took Articles of Faith 1:10 as his ultimate topic in the lecture he challengingly entitled “Our Glory or Our Condemnation.”<sup>47</sup> He wrote often about the millennial goals of a consecrated Zion,<sup>48</sup> if only from “a distant view.”<sup>49</sup> He saw Zion as needing to be perfectly pure in a perfectly pure environment, to be holy enough to receive the coming Lord himself, “for the Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation” (Psalm 132:13).

In the tenth article of faith is located Nibley’s concern about the renewal of the earth to its paradisiacal glory, of “man’s dominion,”<sup>50</sup> our “stewardship of the air,”<sup>51</sup> and the obligations that accompany all “promised lands.”<sup>52</sup>

In “Goods of First and Second Intent,”<sup>53</sup> he spoke of seeking after things that are ends in themselves, things that are honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and so forth (Articles of Faith 1:13). Throughout his life he was occupied with this quest, in an effort to educate the Saints,<sup>54</sup> from college students down to the most humble amateurs.<sup>55</sup> On the phrase “in doing good to all men,” this is precisely what his speech “How to Get Rich”<sup>56</sup> is all about. And how do we get rich? By giving it all away, in doing good to all men. And, for Nibley, these were not just words.

Thus, several new conclusions dawned on me as I suddenly appreciated more fully than ever before Hugh Nibley’s brilliance as the quintessential gospel scholar. As eccentric as he was in some ways, Hugh Nibley swam in the mainstreams of the Latter-day Saint faith. It is hard to find the title of a single Nibley book or article that does not pertain directly to one of the Articles of Faith.

In extraordinary ways, he addressed ordinary topics:

- His subtexts were none other than the primary truths of the Articles of Faith, all thirteen of them.
- His framework was completely congruent with Joseph Smith's.
- He did not ride any particular pet hobby horses but sought to circumscribe all truth into "one eternal round."<sup>57</sup>
- He preached the gospel, in its fullness, and with an eye single to the glory of God.

Nibley was loved and trusted precisely because he put first principles first.

At his sixty-fifth birthday celebration, it was said, "A great scholar . . . is *not* one who depends simply on an infinite memory, but also on an infinite . . . power of combination; bringing together from the four winds, like the Angel of the Resurrection, what else were dust from dead men's bones, into the unity of breathing life."<sup>58</sup>

We will be everlastingly grateful to Hugh Nibley for bringing it all together, for taking dusty books and forgotten scrolls and breathing into and out of their words the eternal truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. For all this, and much, much more, thank you, Hugh.

In his memory, let us live our religion. We have a work to do to prepare for that exalted sphere where Hugh now moves, and talks, and expounds with endless joy. I testify that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, that we shall have life and have it abundantly.

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## Notes

1. This speech was delivered at Hugh Nibley's funeral on March 2, 2005. Originally published as John W. Welch, "Hugh Nibley's Articles of Faith," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2005): 103–9.
2. Brigham Young used similar language in reference to Joseph Smith. See Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 458, originally published in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:51.
3. Thomas, "Influence of Hugh Nibley," 405 (this volume).
4. Hugh Nibley, "Before Adam," in *Old Testament and Related Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986), 49.
5. Hugh Nibley, "Breakthroughs I Would Like to See," in *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 378.
6. Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 95.
7. Hugh Nibley, "The Terrible Questions," in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 336–78.
8. Hugh Nibley, "The Ancient Law of Liberty," in *World and the Prophets*, 182–90. The doctrine of the "two ways" is discussed frequently, for example, in *Approaching Zion*, 18–19, 30–31, 41, 126, 434, 448, and in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 204.
9. On the premortal world and its conditions, see Nibley, "Treasures in the Heavens," in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 171–214.
10. Hugh Nibley, *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 150, quoting Brigham Young.
11. Nibley, "Exemplary Manhood," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 518–19. See also "Patriarchy and Matriarchy," in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 87–114.
12. See, for example, Nibley, "The Way of the Wicked," in *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 378–98.
13. Nibley, "Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 491.
14. Nibley, "In the Party but Not of the Party," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 105.
15. Hugh Nibley, *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991); *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 138.
16. Nibley, "The Uses and Abuses of Patriotism," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 247.

17. In *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, see “Renounce War, or a Substitute for Victory,” 267–69; “If There Must Needs Be Offense,” 270–77; and “Warfare and the Book of Mormon,” 278–300.
18. In *Approaching Zion*, see “Our Glory or Our Condemnation,” 13; and “The Utopians,” 487–523.
19. Nibley, “Funeral Address,” in *Approaching Zion*, 304.
20. Nibley, “Deny Not the Gifts of God,” in *Approaching Zion*, 137.
21. Nibley, “The Meaning of the Atonement,” in *Approaching Zion*, 598.
22. Nibley, “Work We Must, but the Lunch Is Free,” in *Approaching Zion*, 202.
23. See Nibley, “How Firm a Foundation! What Makes It So,” in *Approaching Zion*, 149.
24. See Nibley, “The Expanding Gospel,” in *Temple and Cosmos*, 177–211.
25. See Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book).
26. In Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*, see especially “The Meaning of the Temple,” 1–41; “Return to the Temple,” 42–90; “Sacred Vestments,” 91–138; and “The Circle and the Square,” 139–73.
27. Nibley, “Three Degrees of Righteousness,” in *Approaching Zion*, 336.
28. See Nibley, *Approaching Zion*, 301–2, 387, 415, 586–87.
29. Nibley, “Deny Not the Gifts of God,” 118.
30. See Hugh Nibley, *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass: The Art of Telling Tales about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991).
31. See chapters throughout Nibley, *World and the Prophets*.
32. Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986).
33. Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000).
34. Hugh Nibley, “Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum: The Forty-Day Mission of Christ—the Forgotten Heritage,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987), 10.
35. See Nibley, “Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic,” in *Ancient State*, 311–79; Nibley, *World and the Prophets*, 17–79.
36. Nibley, “Criticizing the Brethren,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 407.
37. Nibley, *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 444.
38. See Hugh Nibley, *Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005).
39. See Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 45.
40. See Nibley, “Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 100.
41. Nibley, “The Passing of the Primitive Church,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 168.



42. See several of the chapters in Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies*—for example, “Historicity of the Bible,” 1–20; “Myths and the Scriptures,” 37–48; and “Great Are the Words of Isaiah,” 215–38.
43. Nibley, “Zeal without Knowledge,” in *Approaching Zion*, 63.
44. Nibley, “Meaning of the Atonement,” 606.
45. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988); *Approach to the Book of Mormon; Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988); and *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989). Nibley saw several aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls as evidence of the truthfulness of the Bible and the Book of Mormon; see articles in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, including “Unrolling the Scrolls—Some Forgotten Witnesses,” 115–70; “More Voices from the Dust,” 239–44; and “Qumran and the Companions of the Cave: The Haunted Wilderness,” 253–84.
46. See Nibley, “The Book of Mormon: Forty Years After,” in *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 533.
47. See Nibley, “Our Glory or Our Condemnation,” 1.
48. See Nibley, “Law of Consecration,” in *Approaching Zion*, 422.
49. Nibley, “What Is Zion? A Distant View,” in *Approaching Zion*, 25–59.
50. Nibley, “Man’s Dominion, or Subduing the Earth,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 3.
51. Nibley, “Stewardship of the Air,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 55.
52. Nibley, “Promised Lands,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 76.
53. See Nibley, “Goods of First and Second Intent,” in *Approaching Zion*, 524.
54. See Nibley, “Educating the Saints,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 306.
55. See Nibley, “The Day of the Amateur,” in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 301.
56. See Nibley, “How to Get Rich,” in *Approaching Zion*, 178.
57. See Nibley, “One Eternal Round: The Hermetic Version,” in *Temple and Cosmos*, 379–433; and also Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).
58. Thomas, “Influence of Hugh Nibley,” 405 (this volume), citing Thomas De Quincey; emphasis added.
59. Photo by Mark A. Philbrick, BYU Photo. Published on the front cover of *BYU Today*, February 1984. With Permission. Photo ID: Hugh\_Nibley.jpeg.