

HUGH NIBLEY AND ME

Don Norton

I was a semi-literate Idaho farm boy, something of a loner, when, in my mid-teens, I discovered Hugh Nibley's late-1940s articles in *The Improvement Era*. Nibley had answers to questions I had about the Restoration in general and especially the Book of Mormon, a volume which I had only sampled and which was then very little talked about in the Church. I became an avid reader of Nibley's articles in Church periodicals.

Later, my sophomore year at BYU, 1953-54, I enrolled in all three quarters of Nibley's classes on the history of early Christianity. His weekly broadcasts in 1954 over KSL Radio were an additional treat. When in 1958 those broadcasts were being prepared for publication, titled *The World and the Prophets*, I asked Hugh how his re-editing of the articles was coming along. He replied, "They're more true now than when I wrote them." Little further editing needed. And he had added a couple of chapters to the volume.

But he always held reservations about editors, who all too often felt compelled to spend time making edits he did not agree with (well, editors are paid by the hour). I assured him that my edits of his writing would be minimal since he knew as much about linguistic "correctness" and "good style" as I, now a budding professional editor, did. I believe I did tweak him on his insistence that the use of *whose* as a non-human pronoun referent was an "error," in place of his observance of the traditional rule that called for "of which": "the river *whose* (rather than *of which its*) source was not far off." Yet I think I allowed some of his "*of whiches*" to remain. They reflect the era of his training as an informed and articulate writer. He commanded a variety of "voices," from scholarly to informal, even casual, an unusual talent among scholars.



Figure 1. Don and Georgia Norton, David and Jo Ann Seely at a “wake” held by some friends of Hugh Nibley after his passing, March 26, 2005.¹

When I finished editing and writing the foreword to his volume *Approaching Zion* (one of his most popular, albeit controversial, volumes), I phoned Hugh and asked him what he wanted to title the volume. He muttered a few possibilities, then concluded, “Well, it ought to be titled *Zion*, but we’re not there as Saints yet. So let’s title it *Approaching Zion*.”

One story captures Hugh’s sense of humor as well as his humility. When I joined the BYU faculty in 1967, I had just finished reading all of Brigham Young’s discourses in the *Journal of Discourses*; and I learned that Hugh had just finished reading everything he could locate on what Brigham had written or said.

On the phone, I told him, “Hugh, you once said you felt like a mental midget to the side of Brigham Young.” (Brigham Young used to boast of eight days of formal education.)

“I said that?” he asked.

“Yes, you did. I heard you say it in a class you taught.”

“Well, I said it because it’s true.”

“Can Shirley Ricks and I include it in the foreword?”

“Yes, but only if you put it in **boldface**.”

It occurs in **boldface** on page x of the foreword to volume 13 of his Collected Works: *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*.

He had also omitted one of Brigham’s most plain and probing words of counsel on how to deal with the earth’s sufficiencies: Just

keep your dish right side up. Don't you try to fill it, or you will lose your soul. Let the Lord fill it, *if* He chooses to. (paraphrasing).

Nibley's unusual modesty, even humility (a trait rare among trained scholars), surfaced often. "Who'd ever believe that all this *stuff* [one of his favorite words] would ever be published?" he queried at a pizza party such as we used to celebrate when a new volume of his Collected Works came out.

I intercepted him one day on his way down to the Richards Building for a swim. "What's new?" I asked him.

"You know," he replied, "an undergraduate girl in one of my classes just brought to my attention something that's critical to understanding the Book of Mormon—something I'd overlooked!"

I know of only one story in which he openly challenged, in a rare fit of pique, a group of closed-minded academic "experts": "I read *your* journals. Do you read *mine*?" He had a habit of sampling recent articles in the leading journals of several disciplines other than his own.

Nibley resisted trends toward the secularization of scholarly work, as well as the habit of many scholars to cultivate personal followings. His first remark on entering a classroom one day was "Someone in the class has asked what is going to be on the final exam. Egads! The exam will test what *you* know, not what *I* know." His final exams usually consisted of one, maybe two, essay questions that drew on what the students themselves felt they had learned from their own notes on class lectures and suggested readings.

I was assigned one semester to teach the writing portion (two credits) of a five-credit course on ancient history taught in the honors program by two full professors of history. Mid-semester, a very bright female student approached me on a Thursday: "I don't see any connection between what the history teachers are teaching and the gospel."

I recommended that she purchase in the bookstore Nibley's volume *The Ancient State* (volume 10 of his Collected Works).

The following Monday morning, I found the student stretched out limp on a chair on the front row of the classroom: "I bought the book, read it, and now I see that *everything* in the ancient world relates to the gospel."

The student went on to earn a doctorate in Arabic and teach at a major American university.

Nibley used to refer students to what he considered his most important scholarly insight, laid out in some 170 pages also in the volume *The Ancient State*, on the contrast between *mantic* (revelatory, from “beyond this world”) vs. *sophic* (the rational, “the resources of the human mind”). It’s a must read, if one is to appreciate Nibley and his extensive writings.

Over the years of Nibley’s scholarly activity, there formed groups of BYU faculty and students, and even some Utah Valley residents, who attended his popular lectures and, as time permitted, sat in on some of his regular classes. Nibley seemed a bit wary of some students who came to his classes with a tape recorder, though he politely tolerated such recordings. I believe a few of his “publications” owe to edited transcriptions of these recordings.

As is well known, Nibley took extensive notes on 3” x 5” cards, and he had a garage full of them. He typically lectured from a handful of them, and he also used them as he composed books and articles. I somehow once came into possession of a stack of those cards, on a topic on which he had not published. Knowing well his writing style, I actually wrote them into an article, which later appeared in one of his books. I don’t remember the subject or the article, and I don’t think Hugh or his readers were ever aware that he himself had not composed it.

Why such interest in what he had to say? His insights into current and past history were simply illuminating, thanks to his perspective of the interplay of the universal forces of good and evil in which the drama of human behavior has played in the history of humankind.

Nibley knew a lot, both mantic and sophic. As Truman Madsen said (in the video *The Faith of an Observer*): “Nobody knows what Nibley knows.” Nibley’s nineteen collected volumes contain a refreshing reminder of what there is to know about humans and their behavior, both good and bad, through their historical records, as well as the scriptures and the counsel of the living prophets themselves, about what should be our own, individual, most pressing concerns. At the end of many of his lectures, he often offered very simple counsel to his audiences and readers: “Get a testimony. Find

out from the Lord your calling in life. Confess your weaknesses before the Lord, and don't forget to repent daily.”

Don Norton taught in the BYU English Department for almost forty years before retiring in 2004. In his last few years at the university, he was in the Department of Linguistics and English Language. Usage, grammar, and history of the English language are his academic specialties, and he taught a variety of writing courses. Since retiring, his main passion has been personal history, with a focus on oral history. Norton served as editor or coeditor for five volumes of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley.

Notes

1. Courtesy of Shirley S. Ricks. Photo ID: ShirleySRicks-20060326 Don and Georgia Norton David and Jo Ann Seely Nibley wake.jpeg.