

REMINISCENCES OF NIBLEY

Stephen D. Ricks

My recollections of Hugh Nibley go back a generation. My father, Marc Ricks, and Nibley were both doctoral students at the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1930s, my father majoring in chemistry and Nibley in ancient history. Both attended church services at the Berkeley Ward in a lovely chapel with a venerable history located on the corner of Walnut and Vine in Berkeley. Dad said that he and Nibley were given a service assignment of cleaning up the grounds around the chapel. They worked together on the grounds until Brother Nibley became bored or distracted, at which point he walked to the chapel upstairs to play the organ, which he could do with real finesse. My dad referred to Nibley as an “information man” rather than a “people person”—but, with all due respect to my father’s point of view, permit me to observe that the Lord, in order to achieve his purposes, needs people from a whole range of backgrounds, even “information men” who are not particularly “people persons.”

A story is related that my dad’s friend Dilworth (Dil) Jensen — who was himself a graduate student at Berkeley—was looking out the window of his second-story apartment and, seeing Nibley walking along the sidewalk thoroughly engrossed in reading a book, invited Nibley to come in and eat dinner with him. Nibley looked at his watch distractedly, said, “It’s six o’clock, I must already have eaten, but thanks anyway,” then continued on his way to the university library (this was the same Dil Jensen who was once engaged to Fawn McKay, who as Fawn Brodie wrote *No Man Knows My History*¹).

A legend that circulated about Nibley is that as a graduate student in Berkeley, he began reading all the books at the top of the

stacks of the university library and continued from there to the bottom of the stacks. The real story, related by Nibley himself in his brief “Intellectual Autobiography,” is somewhat more modest but is still indicative of Nibley’s unquenchable compulsion to learn as well as of his breathtaking command of foreign languages: “I decided to put it all together in the stacks beginning at the southwest corner of the ninth level and working down to the northeast corner of the first level, book by book, stopping whenever something significant caught my eye. It took four years.”² While a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley in the mid-1970s, more than once I came upon a library book whose last borrower—checked out in the days when a library book could be borrowed simply by signing a card for it—was Hugh Nibley.³ Later, while on the faculty at BYU I requested through interlibrary loan a monograph dealing with Enoch, written in German by a Danish scholar, in a volume published by a European learned society. When I received it, I opened it up, thinking that this was surely something about the patriarchal figure Enoch that Nibley hadn’t even looked at yet, only to discover that it was filled with Nibley’s unmistakable marginal notes in pencil—I couldn’t win for losing!

As a boy of seven or eight I believe I saw Brother Nibley for the first time sitting on the stand at church during a sacrament meeting in our Berkeley Ward chapel. I honestly don’t remember what Brother Nibley said, but I do believe I remember seeing him, his wavy hair nearly white, sitting on the stand. Brother Nibley—who had brought his family with him—was on sabbatical at the University of California, Berkeley, studying ancient Egyptian and Coptic with Klaus Baer during the academic year 1959–60. Nibley wrote of his experience: “I was badgered and bullied six hours a week by a fellow twenty years my junior, who was trying to knock the elements of Egyptian and Coptic into my head.”⁴ Interestingly, while Nibley was in Berkeley he was offered a position at the University of California as full professor, but he declined the offer in order to return to Provo to continue teaching and writing at BYU.⁵

When I was thirteen, I was introduced to Nibley’s brilliantly illuminating, incandescent thought when I read *The World and the Prophets*.⁶ It set my mind ablaze. In it, Nibley simply and straightforwardly made the case for the loss of priesthood authority in the

ancient Christian Church and its absence in the successor denominations, Eastern Orthodox and Catholic. Inspired by Nibley's writing, I realized that I wanted to be able to defend the Church in that way, too, and it set me on a course that led me to a teaching career at BYU.

I actually met Brother Nibley in the spring of 1968 when my parents, who had come to Utah to attend general conference in Salt Lake City, brought me, still a junior in high school, with them and took me down to Provo to visit and stay with my uncle Eldin and aunt Irene Ricks, who were living there. We came to the door of Brother Nibley's long, narrow office in the original Joseph Smith Building on the campus of BYU and knocked on it. Brother Nibley came to the door, and my dad, with whom Brother Nibley had become acquainted from his days in Berkeley, greeted him. I asked Brother Nibley to recommend where I should continue my studies after BYU, and he told me I should go to Brandeis and study under Cyrus Gordon. I guess he recommended Cyrus Gordon because Professor Gordon had a strong opinion, based on extensive research and deep reflection, and wasn't afraid to express it. However, my own academic peregrinations took me in a different direction, back to Berkeley and from there to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but I appreciated what he said.

Brother Nibley was a notoriously tough grader. I am embarrassed to admit it now, but as a student at BYU I was something of a grade grubber, so I didn't attend Brother Nibley's classes for academic credit but simply to hear him teach. Nibley's classroom teaching style left a great deal to be desired—he didn't look you in the face when he spoke; when he did speak, he either mumbled or spoke so quickly that he was often well-nigh impossible to understand; when he was at the chalkboard, he frequently spoke directly to the chalkboard rather than facing the listeners; he was polyglot in his quotations that he assumed the listener could already understand and didn't take time to translate them or unpack their meaning. But as a teacher in the broader sense—someone who expanded the student's mind and gave the student a new perspective on the world and the gospel—he was utterly unique. In time I did learn to understand his rapid-fire speech; my previous training in Latin and Greek and modern-language experience in German and

French made it possible to understand his foreign-language quotations; and I came to understand the ins and outs of his thinking and speaking so that, finally, what he said and how he said it ceased to be so puzzling.

I found out more about Brother Nibley, the person, in my conversations with him when he was walking around on campus, hustling either to his office or home. Before his mission Brother Nibley was set apart as a missionary by Elder Melvin J. Ballard, who admonished him to tell the people of Germany to repent or they would be destroyed by fire from heaven.⁷ Following this counsel, Brother Nibley related to me about going into a butcher shop in Pforzheim to repeat the warning to a “large Franconian woman,” who threatened him with a butcher knife. I asked Brother Nibley if he left immediately, but he said that he backed out slowly from the butcher shop to let the woman know that he wasn’t afraid of her, although he may have been a bit. When Nibley returned to Pforzheim, where he had had the confrontation with the woman at the butcher shop, but now as a master sergeant in a unit of the 101st Airborne Division that was a part of the Allied military force occupying Germany, he, with other noncommissioned officers, was able to race around in his jeep “like [a] lord of the earth.” Nibley drove to the very butcher shop where he had encountered the angry, knife-wielding woman, but it had been burned out.

Brother Nibley did not say it to boast, but in my conversations with him (he talked, I listened) it became clear that he believed that his life had been protected in providential ways during the war. Nibley’s unit in the 101st Airborne Division was assigned to hit Utah Beach on D-Day. One of the commanding officers of the 101st was also originally slated to land on Utah Beach, but because he had something that might be damaged if it were to come in from the English Channel, he decided to assign Nibley to land on Utah Beach while he himself would land in a glider on the Cotentin Peninsula to the west of the beach. Nibley then had to drive his jeep onto the beach, which he did in relative safety—there were very few German units defending Utah Beach that day. However, the glider carrying the commanding officer crashed, killing most of the passengers on board, including the commanding officer. Brother Nibley also mentioned his participation in Operation Market Garden. After he had

dug a foxhole around Nijmegen, in the Netherlands, a bomb rolled directly over Nibley's foxhole but didn't explode, causing General Maxwell Taylor, the commander of the 101st Airborne Division, no end of mirth when Nibley described his experience. Later in the fall Nibley's assignment would have taken him to Bastogne, Belgium, but because of his ability to speak German and French, he was sent instead to France to interrogate prisoners and civilians. The two soldiers who were sent to Bastogne to replace Nibley were killed when the city was surrounded and besieged by German forces during the Battle of the Bulge.

Following my return to Provo to teach at BYU and during the time that I was working on a number of volumes in the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley series, my wife, who was an editor at FARMS and the Maxwell Institute, and I often visited Brother Nibley at his home. We made our visits brief and to the point and didn't stay more than a few minutes—we had our lives and he had his—and he came to sense that we could be trusted not to overstay our welcome.

Tarrying a bit longer at Brother Nibley's home also resulted in the discovery of additional gems of assiduous research and reflection. While looking through some of Brother Nibley's papers in the Nibleys' garage, John W. (Jack) Welch came upon a sheaf of papers containing lecture notes for a course Brother Nibley gave on the office of apostle and bishop in the ancient Christian Church—a class, by the way, that was attended by Dallin H. Oaks, then a student at Brigham Young University, later president of BYU, afterward a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and now President of the Quorum of the Twelve and first counselor to President Russell M. Nelson. Where *The World and the Prophets* touched lightly upon the loss of apostolic authority in the ancient Church, Nibley goes into far greater detail in these lectures, which were later edited, annotated, and published in a slender volume entitled *Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity* in the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley series.⁸ In *Apostles and Bishops*, Nibley shows, with rich citations from the New Testament, the writings of the early Christian Fathers, and ecclesiastical historians, the transition of the Church from one with apostolic authority to one without, from a world-denying institution to one that was world-affirming, from one manifesting the gifts of the Spirit to one lacking those gifts.

About a year after Brother Nibley's death I gave a lecture, "Apostles and Bishops: The Problem of Religious Authority in Early Christianity," at a conference on "Religious Authority in Christianity." Following Nibley's lead and relying heavily on his sources in *The World and the Prophets* and *Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity*, I argued from primary and authoritative materials for the apostasy in ancient Christianity. Following my lecture at the conference, one of the participants, himself from the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, got up and said that either he or a colleague of his could have given the same lecture as I had given. Immediately thereafter, one of the other presenters at the conference, who was originally from the Pentecostal tradition but was now a Baptist, got up and said that either he too or a colleague of his could have given the same lecture as I had. I thanked them for their kind words. I didn't think of it at the time, but have reflected on it since that, while I, as a Latter-day Saint, could have argued for an apostasy from the Church as founded by Jesus Christ—something that my colleagues could have done as well—as a Latter-day Saint I alone among the representatives of the various denominations of Christianity could claim that apostolic authority had been restored to the earth by the laying on of hands by heavenly messengers—in this instance, Peter, James, and John.

Despite Brother Nibley's relative good health and strong constitution, toward the end of his life, when he was in his early nineties, he was confined to a hospital bed set up in the middle of the front room of the Nibleys' home. At times his mind was sharp and lucid—he was his regular self—while at others his mind drifted and he struggled to find words to express himself. I didn't visit him much at this time, probably once or twice, and although his mind drifted, and he fought to express a thought, a certain sweetness and gentleness pervaded him, as though his spirit was being prepared to move on to heavenly realms. After his passing, his funeral was held in the old Provo Tabernacle (now the Provo City Center Temple) and was attended by several General Authorities. There were lighter moments, when daughter Zina talked about her father wanting to put the "fun back in funeral"⁹ and daughter Christina spoke of her father's introducing her and the other Nibley children to the pleasures of eating ice cream immediately after bringing

them home from the hospital.¹⁰ Elders Holland and Oaks, both of whom were in attendance, spoke of their own interactions with Brother Nibley and praised his great contributions to the university and the Church.¹¹

Brother Nibley's contributions to making the gospel understandable were immense. He wrote extensively and persuasively on a whole range of subjects—ancient Christian history, early Latter-day Saint Church history, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, and the temple. He also wrote personal essays of social criticism. Although he is no longer read widely by the young people of the Church, those who do write what young Latter-day Saints read have themselves doubtless read, and been influenced by, Brother Nibley's writings. Whatever I write for a Latter-day Saint readership has been influenced by my reading of Hugh Nibley. If I can see further, that is because I am standing on the shoulders of a giant—Hugh Nibley—even if this giant was scarcely more than 5'6" tall.



Figure 1. Stephen Ricks and Louis Midgley at a "wake" held for Hugh.¹²

Stephen D. Ricks is a professor of Hebrew and cognate learning at Brigham Young University and an author and coauthor of numerous books and articles defending The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its teachings. He received his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley and Graduate Theological Union. From 1988 to 1991, Ricks was the president of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, and from 1991 to 1997 he served as the chairman of the FARMS board of directors. He was the founding editor of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies, serving in that position from 1992 to 1997. From 1992 to 1996, Ricks was also the associate dean of General Education and Honors at BYU. Ricks is a coauthor of the forthcoming Names in the Book of Mormon: A Dictionary of Book of Mormon Names and Foreign Terms. He has written several studies on the temple in the ancient world. Ricks also coauthored Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord? with

Legrand L. Baker. He edited Warfare in the Book of Mormon with William J. Hamblin and translated Klaus Vondung's The Apocalypse in Germany into English.

Notes

1. Hugh W. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History: A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie's Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946); reprinted in 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), 1–45.
2. Nibley, "Intellectual Autobiography," 42 (this volume).
3. The book that I came upon and checked out was in the *Fontes Historiae Religionum* (Sources in the History of Religions) series edited by the distinguished—and prolific—German theologian and historian of religions, Carl Clemen.
4. Hugh Nibley, "Nobody to Blame," in *Approaching Zion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 133–34.
5. Boyd Jay Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 291–92.
6. Hugh W. Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954); reprinted as Hugh Nibley *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1987).
7. See Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 87.
8. Hugh Nibley, *Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005).
9. Petersen, "A Brighter Light," 549 (this volume).
10. See Mincek, "Remembering My Father," 573 (this volume).
11. See Oaks, "Funeral Service," 595–602 (this volume).
12. Courtesy of Shirley S. Ricks. Photo taken March 26, 2005. Photo ID: ShirleySRicks-20050326 Shirley Stephen Ricks Lou Midgley Nibley wake.jpeg.