

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 45 · 2021 · Pages 61 - 70

Honoring Hugh Nibley — Again

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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HONORING HUGH NIBLEY — AGAIN

Louis Midgley

Review of *Hugh Nibley Observed*, edited by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Shirley Ricks, and Stephen Whitlock (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2021). 820 pages. \$45.00 (hardback), \$35.00 (paperback).

Abstract: *Hugh Nibley Observed is the third assembly of essays honoring Nibley by his friends and admirers. It differs from the other two in many ways. It is packed with photographs, observations by his children about their father, and many other similar and related items that are often deeply personal reflections on Nibley as well as the influence he has had on Latter-day Saint intellectual life and also the faith of the Saints. Its contents are far more accessible than the strictly scholarly works written by the academic friends and colleagues of Nibley. There is some of that in this book, but it contains information and reflections on a host of different aspects of the first Latter-day Saint scholar who could and did provide a competent defense of the faith and the Saints. This book is very much about Nibley and not merely for him, as were the two previous efforts to honor him.*

I have an essay that I penned for *Hugh Nibley Observed* (pp. 609–30). Authors are *not* often invited to review their own books or those in which they have an essay. How, then, can I be reviewing this book?

The truth is that I requested to be allowed to write a review of this truly outstanding anthology about Hugh Nibley's life and academic ventures. Why? Like many others I have, for my entire adult life (I am now 90), been profoundly influenced by Hugh Nibley.¹ Hence I am also

1. Some evidence for my own fondness for Hugh Nibley's scholarship can be found in the following list of my own attempts to comment on his publications. In chronological order: (1) "Hugh Nibley: A Short Bibliographical Note," *Dialogue* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1967): 118–21; (2) "The Secular Relevance of the Gospel," *Dialogue* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 76–85; (3) "Hugh Nibley: A Portrait of a Leader," *Improvement Era*

now readied and even eager to opine about him. In addition, I believe that only someone who knew and admired Nibley — and who is also familiar with his scholarship — should venture opinions about the truly wonderful array of items assembled in *Hugh Nibley Observed*.

That being said, I will not comment on my own essay in the book, other than to indicate that “A Mighty Kauri Has Fallen: Hugh Winder Nibley (1910–2005)” is included in this truly remarkable anthology with only a few of what I see as necessary revisions. The essay was my response to the passing of a genuinely wise mentor whose influence has been lasting and who eventually became a colleague and, as far as it was possible, a dear friend.

And Now, Fifteen Years Later

Hugh Nibley Observed is an array of essays and various other items on the life and times of one who was a friend, father, and devout fellow Saint seeking sanctification. It has 211 often stunning illustrations, not counting the cover of the book. It is a way of knowing Nibley for the first time, and also for everyone to know him in various ways. Even those who knew him (or thought they did) will discover much they did not know about Nibley, including his quirks and obsessions. They will also discover something about the source and contents of his faith in God. This book adds much to our understanding of his own deepest longings and ardent faith.

Hugh Nibley Observed begins with some necessary introductory material, including comments on the “Conception and Organization of the Book” (pp. xv–xviii). Then, in his “Introduction,” Jeffrey Bradshaw calls attention to Nibley’s very strong aversion to being honored (pp. 5–9).

73, no. 5 (May 1970): 78–81; (4) (with Robert F. Smith) “Hugh Nibley Bibliography,” in *Tinkling Cymbals: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, ed. John W. Welch (privately printed, 1978), 225–47; (5) “Hugh Winder Nibley: Bibliography and Register,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 1, eds. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), xv–lxxxii; (6) “Hugh Nibley: The Faithful Scholar,” in *Eloquent Witness: Hugh Nibley: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 23–45. This is an edited version of my effort to interview Nibley at a BYU forum assembly held in the Marriott Center on 21 May 1974; (7) “Review of *One Eternal Round*, by Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes,” *FARMS Review* 22, no.1 (2010): 282–85; (8) (with Shirley Ricks) “Hugh Winder Nibley Bibliography and Register,” in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, vol. 1, eds. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990); revised and extended, 1 March 2010, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/resources/hugh-w-nibley-resources/>.

However, all those who have contributed to this book in any way have simply ignored Nibley's aversion and honor him anyway.

Nibley brought light and life to those who genuinely desired further light and knowledge. He also helped strengthen the faith of many Saints, which is what he seems to have believed was what he was *destined to do* during his own mortal probation. Some of the Latter-day Saints who knew him or who have been influenced by him are still eager to express appreciation and even their deep affection for his dedicated scholarship and for him personally. I must stress again that even though many Latter-day Saints have found in his addresses, teachings, lectures, essays, and books striking new insights, information, and understanding, Nibley resisted as well as he could efforts honor him.

I once asked Hugh in a large gathering in the Marriott Center² who he was trying to please. His answer was "my Father in Heaven."³ That has shown in his life and his work.

This current effort at honoring Nibley — this time posthumously — is the third effort to do this. Jeff Bradshaw describes this book as a *Festschrift*, which is a German word that combines *fest*, meaning "celebration," with *schrift*, meaning "writing." Thus a *Festschrift* is a collection of essays honoring a scholar (p. 5). *Hugh Nibley Observed* is evidence that many Latter-day Saints owe a huge debt to Hugh Nibley. Bradshaw begins by describing the preparation of essays in 1975 honoring Nibley entitled *Tinkling Symbols*, which was circulated privately (p. 7), and also a truly "powerful video" (p. xv) about Nibley's own faith entitled "The Faith of an Observer: Conversations with Hugh Nibley." Again, the problem was that Nibley did not want to be honored (p. 7).

The second and most ambitious collection of essays honoring Nibley is the 1400-page two-volume *By Study and Also By Faith*. This was begun in 1985 and was ready to be published the next year. But those at the Religious Studies Center would not send it to the printer. Jacob Neusner, the most widely published Jewish scholar at that time, had submitted two essays honoring Nibley and was demanding that it be published. Jack Welch eventually stepped in, and these two volumes were published by Deseret Book (and FARMS) in 1990.

2. For a transcript of this interview, see "Hugh Nibley: The Faithful Scholar," in *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 17 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 23–50. (This is an edited transcript of an interview with Nibley that I conducted at a BYU Forum Assembly in the Marriott Center on 21 May 1974.)

3. *Ibid.*, 25.

Nibley was entirely unaware that the two-volume *Festschrift* in his honor was in the works. It was my privilege to go with Shirley and Stephen Ricks to present him with a copy of the first volume. He really liked the title. He was also delighted with the essays by Aziz S. Atiya, James H. Charlesworth, Cyrus H. Gordon, Jacob Milgram, Jacob Neusner, and Raphael Patai. Then, suddenly Nibley realized these essays were in his honor. He said, “this is for me,” and for a moment was without words. He then noticed an essay by Bill Hamblin on “Aspects of Early Christian Initiation Ritual” and explained that he had been thinking about the temple. He proceeded to lecture the three of us about what we probably had not yet grasped about the endowment and other elements of the temple. He said he was initially but only momentarily annoyed when something had recently been changed in the endowment, but he also realized that he was aware of earlier changes, and hence he was confident it would need to be modified to better fit our own needs and also especially those of other cultures, even if such changes are shocking to the Saints and even to him.

Soon there was a public event at which Nibley was presented with the second volume of *By Study and Faith*. He had to listen to letters read and remarks from his friends. In his own brief response, he complained about having to endure honors he had not sought; his ironic wit was on full display, as was his own passion for mocking stuffed shirts. He commented on his regret in not bringing with him a handbook of clichés and indicated that he would have to improvise as well as he could.

The Variety of Contents

Hugh Nibley Observed is divided into four parts. Part 1, “Portraits,” consists of three items (pp. 25–54). Part 2, entitled “Nibley, the Scholar,” includes the “Nibley Centennial Lecture Series,” which consisted of essays on Nibley by thirteen distinguished scholars or by those who knew him intimately (pp. 57–386). These are followed by eight essays assessing “The Scholarship of Hugh Nibley” (pp. 387–544).

Part 3, “Nibley, The Man,” consists of eleven “Selected Tributes at the Passing of Hugh Nibley” (pp. 549–630), which include the remarks of his children (pp. 549–84). These are followed by five “Personal Stories, Perspectives, and Reminiscences” (pp. 631–772), the most important of which is Jane D. Brady’s striking “The BYU Folklore of Hugh W. Nibley” (631–96).

The “Index of Passages” (pp. 773–78) makes it easy to discover where the scriptures and other sources are cited. I am pleased that the

vast number of notes are at the end of each essay. It would have been impossible to have them at the end of the large book. The “Index” (779–99) is truly remarkable and especially on Nibley’s publications and every name found in this volume.

Where to Begin?

With the variety of contents just recounted, I have felt obligated to actually read the entire book I am now strongly promoting. I must admit that I struggled to find language fit to describe the excellence of *Hugh Nibley Observed*. I began with confidence that I really knew my friend. I must admit that in my reading of the book, I have learned much that was new to me. I also want to suggest how one might approach this book.

After one has given due attention to the “Introduction” (pp. 1–14) and then read, or read again, Nibley’s own “An Intellectual Autobiography: Some High and Low Points” (pp. 37–54), I suggest reading Daniel C. Peterson’s “Nibley as an Apologist” (141–74), where one will learn, or learn again, that building — and also *defending* — the Kingdom of God is a solemn covenant the faithful make. This was a covenant that dominated Nibley’s entire life. In Dan’s essay he recounts the story of a young Hugh Nibley in turmoil about divine things and then what led to his experiencing a stunning *life-after-life event*, or what is now most often referred to as a *near-death experience* (pp. 164–66). This experience settled for Hugh certain questions and equipped him with a desire to defend the faith and the Saints.⁴

I also urge special attention to what Jack Welch has written about Nibley (25–30; 585–94), then the remarks about him by Richard Bushman, who focuses his attention at how Nibley sees Joseph Smith and those who have followed him (pp. 99–116). I also recommend Robert Millet’s essay (pp. 117–40).

If you cannot tell, it is difficult not to reproduce the entire Table of Contents of this remarkable book when recommending what one should read.

4. Hugh and his wife, Phyllis, once came to visit the Midgleys. Just a few moments after they arrived, Phyllis said something to my wife, and Hugh told her that “we don’t talk about that!” Both my wife and I said, “Oh yes we do!” Phyllis then strongly urged Hugh to tell the entire story, which he did. What we heard that afternoon in my living room explained in detail why Hugh Nibley was as dedicated as he obviously was to the Saints, his faith, and his academic ventures.

A Conversation with Neusner

Jacob Neusner (1932–2016) published essays in earlier *Festschrifts* to Nibley.⁵ He was by far the most widely published Jewish scholar, having written or published over 900 books. Neusner was interested in and knew much of the crucial facts about the Restored Gospel.⁶ Once, when he was at BYU giving lectures, a group of us met with him. I remember Neusner sitting directly opposite me, with Hugh Nibley on his right. Truman Madsen was on my right and Kent Brown on my left. There were also others sitting at that table in a comfortable room in the Wilkinson Center.

The conversation began with Neusner asking Nibley what he was currently working on, to which he replied that he was at work on the Enoch materials. The two checked to see that they were talking about the same Enoch literature. They were, and Neusner said that this literature was “junk.” Nibley then indicated that in June 1830 Joseph Smith gave us a new version of the Enoch materials that was embedded in a new version of the literature on Moses.⁷

Neusner demanded to know what was in this new Enoch text. He looked directly at me, and I must admit I was delighted when Madsen explained what was in this “new Enoch material” found in the Book of Moses. Nibley added one or two additional items to the conversation. In response, Neusner said he would now have to invent a mysterious rabbi from the East whom no one had ever heard about and who somehow turned up in Kirtland, Ohio, with information about Enoch that only he knew, and who then disappeared.

Neusner then said that we “seemed like bright learned fellows but that Nibley stood far above all of us.” The exchange between Nibley and Neusner led Neusner to say to Nibley that he just had to be Jewish. Someone — I think it was Madsen — explained that Nibley was a descendant of Alexander Neibaur, the first Jewish convert to The Church of Jesus Christ and also one who knew Joseph Smith. Neibaur

5. See Jacob Neusner, “The Case of Leviticus Rabbah,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 1, 332–88; Jacob Neusner, “Why No New Judaism in the Twentieth Century?” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 2, eds. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 552–84.

6. See Jacob Neusner, “Conversation in Nauvoo about the Corporeality of God,” *BYU Studies* 36, no. 1 (1996): 7–30.

7. It is found in chapters 6 and 7 of the Book of Moses. What Nibley wrote is most conveniently reproduced in *Enoch the Prophet, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol 2, ed. Stephen Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986).

was born in Koblenz and educated at the University of Berlin. He was fluent in seven languages. Madsen also said that some of us, which included me, had tried to discover a Jewish ancestry.

Some Other Encounters and Lessons

In the mid-to-late 1960s, Charles Malik spoke at BYU multiple times.⁸ The first time he visited and spoke was, if I recall correctly, in either 1962 or 1963. Hugh Nibley was in attendance at the address, as were several faculty from the Department of Political Science. Immediately after the address there was a luncheon for our distinguished guest. Ray Hillam, a colleague from the Department of Political Science, and I waited outside the room where the luncheon took place, since we were going to drive Malik to Salt Lake City, where he would have an audience with Henry D. Moyle, then a member of the First Presidency. Ray Hillam was eager to talk with Malik about international relations. Since I had written my PhD dissertation on Paul Tillich, then a very famous German/American theologian, and Malik knew him well, I was hoping to also talk about Tillich. It turned out that neither of us got to ask Malik a single thing about ether topic.

When Malik came out of the luncheon, Nibley darted out of his nearby office and handed a Book of Mormon to Malik. He said something to Malik in Arabic, the official language of Lebanon, and then went back into his office. As we walked a few yards to the vehicle in which we were going to take Malik to Salt Lake City to visit with President Moyle, he wanted to know why that fellow had said to him in perfect Arabic that “the best kept secret at Brigham Young University was the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.” Hillam and I did our best to explain to Malik the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith as well as the restoration of the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When we were met at Church Headquarters and were taken to President Moyle’s office, Malik refused to be given a tour of the Church’s welfare facilities that had been arranged for him. Instead, he insisted that President Moyle continue the conversation that had begun on our way from Provo. After he heard about the fellow speaking to Malik in Arabic, President Moyle asked me if it was Hugh Nibley, and I nodded.

President Moyle had to cancel appointments so he could struggle along with the two of us to introduce the Restored Gospel to Malik, who insisted that we focus on the Book of Mormon. This conversation went on for nearly

8. Charles Malik (1906–1987) was a very distinguished Lebanese philosopher and diplomat who had served as President of the United Nations General Assembly.

two hours, when Hillam and I were sent on our way. President Moyle, I believe, went with Malik to the airport to continue the “missionary” lesson.

That experience taught me, or forced me, or shamed me to henceforth be much, much better prepared to give the reasons for the faith that is in me to those with whom I come in contact, whatever their standing in this often disconsolate world.

The last time I was able to visit with Hugh Nibley, his wife Phyllis phoned me early one afternoon and asked that I come to their home. Hugh had heard that my wife and I had visited Normandy, and he wanted to talk to me about what we had experienced. I arrived to find him on a hospital bed in their living room. He was eager to talk but had a struggle to do so. He began with a question about someone he thought had lived in or was from New Zealand. I had never heard of this person. He also wanted to know why I had not told him about those *matakite* (seers) who prepared some Maori for our missionaries and their message.⁹ I tried to explain that I was never eager to lecture him on anything.

Then he wanted to know if I had visited Utah Beach, where he had landed, and whether I had visited the wonderful Airborne Museum at Sainte-Mère-Église and seen the gliders and hundreds of other items used in that huge undertaking. I had. He also wanted to know if I had visited Omaha Beach, where a thousand soldiers had been killed before two heroic events suddenly turned what looked like a sure defeat into a bloody victory. This led him to moan about the utter evil and necessity of war. Then he asked me if I had visited Bayeux and seen the famous tapestry that provides important information about the Norman invasion of England in 1066. Again, I had.

Suddenly Nibley complained that “we” at the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) were treating him, as he put it, as if he were already dead, since he had not received the latest issue of the *FARMS Review*. At that very moment the doorbell rang; it was the postman with the most recent issue. This pleased him greatly, though he would not be able to read it. Phyllis, though, would read every word to him, including the footnotes.

I mention this story because Nibley saw in FARMS an effort to keep alive his own passion for a deeper and better understanding of the contents

9. For the most recent treatment of this, see Robert Joseph, “The Lord Will Not Forget Them: Maori Seers and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand,” in *Remembrance and Return: Essays in Honor of Louis C. Midgley*, eds. Ted Vaggalis and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2019), 323–70.

of our scriptures, and also the defense of the Restoration from both sectarian and secular criticisms, as unsavory as doing this sometimes turns out to be.

Closing Thoughts

When Hugh Nibley began in 1948¹⁰ to argue that the Book of Mormon was an authentic ancient history,¹¹ there was no Mormon History Association; it came later, in 1965.¹² Long before there was such a thing, Nibley was busy setting out reasons why the Book of Mormon is and must be read as an authentic ancient history, not as merely a product of Joseph Smith's environment and imagination.

When Nibley began to publish, there were no Latter-day Saint historians prepared to respond when Fawn Brodie published her deeply flawed book on Joseph Smith.¹³ Nibley stepped up and did some counterpunching until others came along and were competent, capable, and willing to flesh out the details of the Restoration and subsequent history of the Church of Jesus Christ, which is an ongoing undertaking. Nibley was willing to let others work on that kind of history.

Speaking of history, there are those who are still wrongly enthralled by some version of the myth of objectivity — that is, that only those who are neutral, dispassionate, indifferent, balanced, disinterested, or detached can possibly manage to produce an “objective” account of Latter-day Saint history or of those important to the faith of Latter-day Saints like Hugh Nibley. He had no illusions about objective history or historians; neither should the Saints or those who write about the past.

In 1957 Hugh Nibley responded to those who “have noted with disapproval” that he defends the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. His response was that “no fruitful work of science or scholarship was ever written that did not attempt to prove one thing and in so doing disprove another.”¹⁴ Then there were those who wrongly insisted that

10. See Hugh Nibley, “The Book of Mormon as a Mirror of the East,” *Improvement Era* 51, no. 4 (April 1948): 202–204, 349–51. This was soon followed by two long series of essays in 1950 and 1952, which were soon published as books, both on the ancient setting of the Book of Mormon.

11. One must keep in mind that Nibley's *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* was first published in 1957.

12. The official publication of the Mormon History Association, the *Journal of Mormon History*, began publication in 1974.

13. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945).

14. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon: Course of Study for the Melchizedek Priesthood Quorums of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

to defend even their own faith was not what “objective historians” should ever do. This dogma came crashing down when Peter Novick exposed and demolished the myth of objective history and objective historians.¹⁵

In 1979 Jack Welch launched the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), whose name was changed in 2006 to the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. Among other things, one purpose for FARMS was to situate the Book of Mormon in the ancient world and not in Joseph Smith’s immediate environment. Hugh Nibley became an enthusiastic contributor and then later consumer of the literary products of this necessary, ongoing endeavor.¹⁶

Hugh Nibley was a mentor, a colleague, and a friend. His legacy is immense, and all those who seek to understand and defend the gospel owe him a debt of gratitude. I believe that *Hugh Nibley Observed* provides much-needed information about Nibley’s life and times. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in the man or his legacy.

Louis Midgley (PhD, Brown University) is an emeritus professor of political science at Brigham Young University, where he taught the history of political philosophy, which includes efforts of Christian churchmen and theologians to identify, explain, understand, and cope with the evils in this world. Dr. Midgley has therefore had an abiding interest in both dogmatic and systematic theology, and the alternatives to both. His doctoral dissertation was on the religious socialist political ideology of Paul Tillich, a once famous German American Protestant theologian, most famous for his systematic theology which is a radical elaboration of classical theism. Dr. Midgley’s encounter with the writings of Leo Strauss, an influential Jewish philosopher/intellectual historian drew his attention to the radical challenge posed by what is often called modernity to both the wisdom of Jerusalem, which is grounded on divine revelation, and also the contrasting, competing wisdom of Athens, which was fashioned by unaided human reason. Dr. Midgley has an interest in the ways in which communities of faith have responded to the challenges posed by modernity to faith in God grounded on divine special revelation.

(Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1957), 11.

15. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

16. As an example, see the recent publication of Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, Maxwell Institute Study Edition* (Provo, UT: UT: Neal A Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University / Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), as well as the publications of the Interpreter Foundation and Book of Mormon Central.