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10 QUESTIONS

A Whole Lot of Hugh Nibley

by [Chad Nielsen](#) • June 30, 2021 • [7 Comments](#)

Some years ago, I attended a course on the *Pearl of Great Price* at the Logan Institute that could have just as easily been entitled “Teachings of Hugh Nibley.” The teacher was well-versed in Nibley’s writings and frequently used them in discussing both the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham. And, frankly, it made the class quite interesting to attend because of the insights the teacher shared from his reading of Hugh Nibley’s works. In part because of the things that Nibley wrote, he has garnered attention as a widely-known figure of the 20th century in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In a recent interview with Jeff Bradshaw of the Interpreter Foundation, Kurt Manwaring discussed the new volume [Hugh Nibley Observed](#), which “contains more than 800 pages about the life of Latter-day Saint Scholar Hugh Nibley, including contributions from Dallin H. Oaks, Richard Bushman, and Truman G. Madsen.” In the discussion at Kurt Manwaring’s site, they went over a variety of topics, including who Hugh Nibley was, the impact of his work on various Latter-day Saints, and some discussion of what the Interpreter Foundation is currently working on. What follows here is a co-post, with a few excerpts and some discussion, but for the original post, follow the link [here](#).

Hugh Nibley was an influential professor at BYU and a noted apologist for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As stated in the interview, “Hugh W. Nibley (1910–2005) was arguably the most brilliant Latter-day Saint scholar of the 20th century, with wide-ranging interests in scripture, history, and social issues,” and “his erudition was recognized and admired by many of his non-Latter-day Saint colleagues.” Nibley was well-versed in linguistics and ancient studies and used those skills to provide intellectual support for the archaeological, linguistic, and historical claims of Joseph Smith and the Church. One example discussed in the interview was as follows:

His best-known discovery is that of a remarkable match between a name in the *Book of Moses* and in a *Dead Sea Scrolls* text discovered in 1948 called the *Book of Giants* (BG). In the *Book of Moses*, the name appears as Mahijah or Mahujah (Moses 6:40; 7:2) and in English translations of BG it is usually given as Mahaway or Mahawai. Nibley found not only that the ancient form of these names were likely to have matched well, but also that the roles of the corresponding characters were analogous.

Professor Matthew Black, a *Dead Sea Scrolls* expert and a collaborator on the first English translation of BG, published in 1976, was also impressed with the similarity of the BG and *Book of Moses* names. Like Nibley, he seems to have seen this finding as evidence that Joseph Smith's Enoch text was ancient—even though he didn't believe that Joseph Smith translated it through a process that relied on divine revelation. Instead, upon meeting Latter-day Saint graduate student Gordon C. Thomasson (who was familiar with Nibley's Enoch research), Black initially suggested that a copy of a text drawing on the some of the same Enoch traditions as BG must have made its way to Joseph Smith sometime before the translation of the *Book of Moses*.

Nibley said that during a previously unplanned visit Professor Black made to BYU soon afterward, Black reiterated his view that Joseph Smith must have relied on an ancient source in his translation. Thomasson relates this interesting story in more detail in his chapter of *Hugh Nibley Observed*. Other non-Latter-day Saint scholars have also remarked favorably on Nibley's discovery, and later research continues to support his hypothesis of a relationship between the names.

Nibley's apologetic efforts has helped to keep people in the Church with the various pieces of evidence he brought together. For example, Richard Lyman Bushman recalled that during his college years, his "testimony was teetering in the balance," but when he came into contact with Nibley's books *Lehi in the Desert* and the *World of the Jaredites*, he was fascinated by "the idea of Arabic poetry in the naming of hills and valleys for Laman and Lemuel, and the peculiar oasis on the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula that Nephi named Bountiful and that Nibley identified as a pocket of greenery unknown to anyone in the West in Joseph Smith's time." Ultimately, Bushman recalled, that: "These little specks of evidence provided the kind of rational support I was looking for in my quest for conviction." Because of similar impacts on other Latter-day Saints, efforts to compile Nibley's writings and works have led to *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, which includes 19 hefty volumes.

Hugh Nibley Observed, however, is more focused on biographical information about Nibley. As summarized by Jeff Bradshaw: “In this volume, readers will discover that the personal stories and perspectives behind the scholarship are sometimes even more captivating and inspiring than his brilliant and witty intellectual breakthroughs.” As shared in the interview, the backstory of this volume was as follows:

Some years ago (I can’t remember now how and when), I ran across a fascinating series of audio recordings of a BYU Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship-sponsored lecture series that was given in 2010, in commemoration of the anniversary of Hugh Nibley’s 100th birthday. Later I discovered, there were a few of these that had been posted on YouTube and a few others that had been published.

But the full set of audio recordings was nowhere to be found on the Web and few people I knew had ever heard of them. Over time, I kept having the nagging thought that these should be made more available.

My friend Steve Whitlock and I started to conceive of a book that would contain these lectures as a nucleus. We decided to include other chapters from Nibley’s friends and family. Shirley S. Ricks, a skilled and dedicated editor who was heavily involved in the original *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* series, agreed to join the project and made substantial and invaluable contributions. With the backing of *The Interpreter Foundation*, significant help and overall suggestions from Jack Welch (the prime mover behind *FARMS* and *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, who also wrote the foreword and three other chapters), and the partnership of *Book of Mormon Central* and *FAIR* the project began to accelerate. We were thrilled that members of the family agreed to contribute materials (the book includes over 200 photos—many never before published), including moving talks given at Hugh Nibley’s memorial service at the Provo Tabernacle in 2005. With permission, eloquent remarks at that service given by Jack Welch and President Dallin H. Oaks were also included.

For more information about and excerpts from this volume, follow the link to Kurt Manwaring’s site [here](#). There is also some information about a variety of initiatives that the *Interpreter Foundation* will be making available in the near future and some (such as the *Complete Nibley Bibliography*) that will grow over time. It’s a lengthy post, but if you’re interested in Hugh Nibley, it’s worthwhile.

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I fell in love almost simultaneously, as a junior in high school, with historical linguistics and Hugh Nibley. It was March 3, 2010

[Hugh Nibley's Secret Identity](#)

I think that I have discovered Hugh Nibley's secret identity. It should come as no surprise, of course, that November 1, 2005

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7 comments for "A Whole Lot of Hugh Nibley"

Terry H says:

[July 1, 2021 at 8:19 am](#)

We also had Jeff and Christina Nibley on the Interpreter Radio broadcast on April 11 for about an hour. Here's a link:

<https://interpreterfoundation.org/interpreter-radio-show-april-11-2021/>

JR says:

[July 1, 2021 at 11:48 am](#)

Thanks for this.

And now for my small contribution to "Hugh Nibley Observed":

As an undergraduate organ student I became the substitute organist in

the old Manavu Ward of which my organ professor and Hugh Nibley were members. (The regular organist had hurt his wrist, I think, and couldn't play for some time — several weeks or a couple months, I don't remember.) From the organ console I kept an eye on Brother Nibley when I didn't need to be watching the chorister. Brother Nibley gave every speaker his full and intense attention for 1 or 2 minutes after which he either continued to do so or read a book. (Later I followed his example for a time.)

Brother Nibley was our Elder's Quorum instructor. It seemed most of us often had no idea what he was talking about, but we did notice that when it was time to quit, he quit — mid-sentence or whatever. It seemed to us that he picked up in the same place the next week. (I have never been able to follow that example.)

Just my observations — and appreciation.

Jonathan Green says:

July 1, 2021 at 12:49 pm

A few people will complain that Nibley's scholarship is outdated. I think he'd be deeply disappointed if it wasn't outdated by now, given how long ago he was writing. Nibley is like his rough contemporary Joseph Campbell — you don't read *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* because it's the last word on the topic, but because of its lasting influence and big-picture view. With Nibley, what's been so influential and is still worth emulating is the way he looks at the ancient world with absolute confidence in the restored gospel and his ability to make them mesh with each other.

Travis says:

July 1, 2021 at 4:26 pm

I am grateful to Nibley for broadening the scope of LDS thought.

Reading Nibley as a teenager was like excavating with Indiana Jones. Nibley made scripture and spiritual discovery romantic.

Nibley linked the old world and new world with alchemy and atonement, giving us a universal platform to speak about sacred space, liturgy, and the purpose of temples.

Nibley was never afraid to call-out the corrupt merchants and Pharisees roundabout the Church.

No LDS scholar today could be so brave.

John Charity Spring says:

July 2, 2021 at 9:26 am

Thank you. Hugh Nibley was a true genius who was not afraid to tell it like it is.

Kevin Christensen says:

July 2, 2021 at 2:40 pm

When I was on my mission in England in 1974, a member in the little Kendall branch loaned me a copy of the 1957 Priesthood manual, An Approach to the Book of Mormon. That was mind expanding, and lit hunger in me for more such mind expanding thinking. Back home, I searched through a stack of old Improvement Eras and Ensigns in the basement, running across the Enoch series, and the 29 part series on Abraham, as well as Richard L. Anderson's series on the witnesses, and following those leads led to much else in used books stores and bound periodicals in libraries, and then, the rise of FARMS, the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Boyd Peterson's biography, Alex Nibley's Faith of an Observer, and Sgt. Nibley, Phd, and the recent and wonderful publication of Hugh Nibley Observed, I never did see or meet Nibley in person. The closest I came was to attend the hilarious and warm Sunstone Roast

given by his family and friends. I sat in a chair in a table next to where the Nibley family sat, but as it happened, he had gotten dehydrated and could not personally attend. So I never met him, but I have taken in all the light I could gather, which in turn, led to further points of light.

***rogerdhansen* says:**

July 3, 2021 at 12:05 pm

I didn't know Hugh Nibley. I remember that on my mission I read his "Lehi in the Desert" on my mission and was impressed.

But more than his scholarship, I came to appreciate his ideas about consumerism and affluenza. I also found his discourse on the difference between managers and leaders to be instructive.

Comments are closed.