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Hugh Nibley and Early Christianity

Looking Down a Dark Well: An Editorial Introduction

Carl Griffin

TEN YEARS AGO MORMONS MOURNED THE LOSS of the most important Mormon scholar of his generation, Hugh Winder Nibley (1910–2005). *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* is observing this decennary with a special section on Nibley as a scholar of early Christianity. We are publishing here for the first time “Preservation, Restoration, Reformation,” the final chapter of a long, unpublished typescript preserved in the Nibley papers that he titled “The End of What?”

The intended purpose of “The End of What?” can only be surmised, but its broad topic is early Christianity and apostasy. It is Nibley’s longest single treatment of this subject¹ and probably dates to the early 1950s. Just from the excerpt reproduced in “Preservation” we clearly

1. With the qualification that it seems to be comprised of two or more iterative discussions of the same subject matter (successive drafts?), which is itself an inviting research prospect for students of Nibley.

see its relationship to later published works, particularly “The Passing of the Church,”² as Louis Midgley discusses.

While Nibley’s manuscript bears all the hallmarks of the draft that it is—lack of references, messy overtyping, spotty handwritten changes—it is still a remarkably compelling piece of writing, with great energy and cadence. Nibley’s published work can at times feel dense and opaque, even encoded. “Preservation, Restoration, Reformation” shows a relative looseness and linearity—an enthusiastic gush of insight more than crafted, blunt-force argument. Or something more of a live performance than a studio production. And as Bert Fuller shows in his introduction to it, this preliminary work has real utility for both unpacking and augmenting our understanding of Nibley’s published work on early Christianity.

A generation ago, when Nibley wrote this, he was, very nearly, the only Mormon scholar engaged in the serious study of early and medieval Christianity. Today such Mormon historians number perhaps a score and are now beginning to reassess Nibley within the context of contemporary scholarship and modern Mormon inquiry. Certainly Nibley posed distinctively Mormon questions that still inform Mormon readings of Christian history.³ At the same time, as shown by Daniel Becerra and Taylor Petrey, each new generation must do as Nibley did and engage its own unique questions.

Nibley was necessarily in dialogue with the scholars of his day, and those even earlier—not with us who were to come. He worked within the basic context of fin-de-siècle ecclesiastical historiography. This historiographical divide between Nibley and us may pose the greatest challenge to contemporary appreciation for the original force and creativity

2. Hugh Nibley, “The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme,” *Church History* 30/2 (1961): 131–54; reprinted in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, CWHN 4 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 168–208.

3. See especially Ariel Bybee Laughton, “Apostasy’s Ancestors: Anti-Arian and Anti-Mormon Discourse in the Struggle for Christianity,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 218–41. Several essays in this important volume discuss both Nibley and the issues I just touch on here.

of his scholarship on early Christianity. Nibley showed high antipathy toward the church historians opposite him, and we might say, with good reason. Predominant still were creaky Protestant narratives of Roman Catholic corruption and decline, recently put into new academic trim by Protestant scholars like Adolf von Harnack, the leading pre-war historian of early Christianity. Catholic scholars of course responded sharply. Nibley articulated his own distinctively Mormon narrative that dismissed both sides alike, as well as those who had recently tried, too conveniently (he says), to claim nonpartisanship under the color of science. "Since the rules no longer favor us, we will abolish them! The modern scientific credo is thus no exception to the rule that an ulterior motive has marked the writing of church history from the very beginning."⁴ Nibley never claimed a scientific detachment for himself that he denied to others. And while he rebuked Protestant historians for not going far enough, his intellectual debt to them was undeniably great.

It takes nothing from Nibley, I think, to suggest he was our own Mormon Harnack, and not because he cites from Harnack frequently and approvingly (though critically). Within their respective communities, both scholars were at the vanguard of conversation about the relationship of Christian history to Christian truth. Both were gifted with second-to-none intellects. It has been rightly said of Harnack that his work showed "an erudition that would probably have been attributed to witchcraft in a more supernaturalistic age."⁵ Nibley's erudition was equally "obscene."⁶ One finds in both a similar historiographical method

4. Hugh Nibley, "The Way of the Church," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 213.

5. Jaroslav Pelikan, preface to *The Reality of Christianity: A Study of Adolph von Harnack as Historian and Theologian*, by G. Wayne Glick (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), xi.

6. Truman Madsen recounted this most famous Nibley anecdote: "He has memorized half the Greek poets, and when at a Biblical Society meeting Jesuit George MacRae heard him discourse without notes and then spontaneously quote thirty lines in the original, he put his hands over his face and said, 'It is obscene for a man to know that much.'" Truman G. Madsen, foreword to *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), xi.

and even a similar rhetorical style, Teutonic and bold.⁷ Karl Barth and others attacked Harnack for insisting on a continuity between history and revelation that, in their view, emptied Christian faith. Nibley used the same historical and rhetorical strategies, with a Restoration reframing, to empty competing Christian claims of authority. George Tyrrell complained, “The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a dark well.”⁸ Nibley saw at the bottom a different (Mormon) reflection, certainly, but how different was his well?

With its enmeshment in the sectarianism of another era, we recognize that “Preservation” is largely discontinuous with contemporary academic and Mormon historiography of early Christianity. Scholars today no longer see Christian history, even read theologically, as a dark well or any other such pessimistic construct. But more than just changing fashion, one might regard this as the proper fruit of such contrarian and brilliant scholarship as Nibley’s. Unlike more pedestrian fare, it generates new work that engages and supersedes it, driven by the provocative questions it raises. We continue to read Nibley because he continues to provoke us. Whatever the questions that result, may we emulate his thoroughness and fearlessness in engaging them!

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7. Compare, for example, Harnack’s *Monasticism* with “Preservation,” which cites it. See also the anthology of Martin Rumscheidt, ed., *Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at Its Height* (London: Collins, 1988). I would compare Nibley only to his more narrative and polemical works. Harnack’s publication output was heroic—numbering 1,658 items, by one count, even five years before his death—including many textual editions, philological studies, histories, handbooks, etc., that are not comparable to Nibley.

8. George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910), 44.