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Abstract *Review of Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 3* (1992), by Hugh W. Nibley.

Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 3. Transcripts of lectures presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University 1989–1990. Provo, UT: F.A.R.M.S., 1992. 360 pp. \$18.50.*

Reviewed by David Rolph Seely

Seventeen years ago, as an undergraduate at Brigham Young University, and somewhat on a lark, I slipped into one of Brother Nibley's religion classes in the old Joseph Smith Building. It was an hour quite unlike any other I had spent in my two years at the university, and somehow my life was never quite the same. Class started with a verse in the Pearl of Great Price, but soon we were listening to Egyptian sprinkled with Homer, Goethe, and Shakespeare, and an occasional timely quotation from the newspaper. Most often passages were quoted from memory in the original language, frequently unintelligibly mumbled, and only occasionally accompanied by an English translation. One minute we were talking about ancient Egypt, the next minute we were on the beach at Normandy, then with Joseph Smith, to ancient Rome, and maybe even to a secret cave witnessing a Hopi ritual. References were constantly made to ancient and modern writings, both canonical and noncanonical, and a host of scholarly authorities as if we were familiar with them. One could sense the importance and urgency of Brother Nibley's train of thought, but it was all but impossible to follow it very long without getting lost. We were alternately mesmerized by his genius, thrilled by his irreverence towards the "establishment," entertained by his irony, and sobered by his testimony, love, and commitment to the gospel. It was a class that engaged our spirits and our minds at the same time. I continued to attend his classes "just for fun" for the next two years until I had the courage to take it for credit, and then for the next two years "just for fun" again. In those days Nibley in print was largely accessible only through the xerox underground. Certain individuals had collections of the "really special stuff" that was available in photocopies so far removed from the originals as to be hardly readable. These were carefully passed around, copied, read, and filed. The most prized of these copies were the transcripts of his unpublished talks and lessons—daring, personal, and unsanitized by the editors of *Deseret Book*.

This volume is the third installment (of a projected four) of the transcripts of lectures presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University in 1989–1990. It consists of twenty-nine lectures, of approximately twelve pages each, covering Alma 45 through 3 Nephi 20. These lectures were videotaped live and then transcribed. They vividly capture the experience of Nibley classes as I remember them. Like many epic poems, which Brother Nibley loves so much, this volume appropriately begins *in medias res*. Lecture 57, Alma 45, entitled “Periodic Extinctions” begins with the statement “[a few minutes at the first were not recorded] Mrs. Carroll lived across the river from them, on the other side. I would take my bicycle and go along” (p. 1). This lecture is typical of all the lectures, with allusions to the Book of Mormon woven into the discussion of the disappearance of the wooden ships from the waterfront in Portland, Oregon, around 1940, the extinction of herring in large portions of the Baltic Sea, the extinction of prehistoric species in the periods having nothing to do with Adam or his posterity, Vergil, Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, fossil formations in Utah, catastrophism, Eduard Meyer, the Rosicrucians, Galileo, *Hamlet*, Milton, and finally *Henry V*. Who can resist such an adventure, and who would ever suppose such a discussion could come from Alma 45?

Transcripts have advantages and disadvantages over the live classroom. In contrast to the classroom experience the reader of these transcripts does not have to be frantic about taking proper notes. In addition, a reader has the advantage of being able to stop, back up, reread, look up a cross reference, ponder, or stop to catch one’s breath. A reader misses, of course, the electricity of the moment, the fellowship of the students, the teacher’s tone of voice, the look on his face, and the illustrative examples on the board.

Nibley, in his lectures, begins with the appointed passages in the Book of Mormon and enriches our perspective by his allusions to many cultures from virtually all historical periods in regard to the Book of Mormon teachings. In particular we are appreciative of his own personal insights. At the same time Nibley expresses to us his love of the Book of Mormon, his loyalty to Joseph Smith and the Restoration, and his commitment to its principles, he informs us how these teachings have intersected with his own life and consequently what he has learned from his own experiences.

This volume covers the war chapters in Alma 45–62, and Nibley uses his own experiences as an intelligence officer in World War II to illustrate his points from the Book of Mormon. Nibley students are aware of a myriad of short allusions and anecdotes from his war experiences sprinkled throughout his writings, but this volume contains the most extensive collection that I know of. These recollections are priceless to have in black and white. They help us to understand what has shaped Nibley's interpretation of the Book of Mormon and his attitude toward war. In addition, Nibley's reminiscences reinforce the message of the Book of Mormon about war and dramatically convey to a generation that has not experienced war first-hand a sense of the horror and futility of the business of killing. Throughout the lectures Nibley recounts many of his experiences on his mission, with the Hopis, at the prestigious graduate schools where he has studied and taught, and at Brigham Young University.

Throughout, Nibley gives good insight and advice. At one point he compares the study of the Book of Mormon with a maxim of Joseph Justus Scaliger ("the greatest scholar who ever lived") about learning Arabic: "You reach with your finger, and it will grab your arm" (p. 11). He is at his best when he discusses values. He warns us that the saying "to be in the world but not of the world" is not scriptural (pp. 75, 86). He observes, "problem solving ability is a moral quality. It's the capacity to be strictly honest, which is very rare. Intelligence is examining your own inadequacy" (p. 107). One thought-provoking passage is his description of the difference between going through a village as a missionary compared with being a soldier, "I went through the same village with a carbine, dashing from door to door, and it was so much easier" (p. 122).

Often Nibley is an iconoclast. He forces us to see the foolishness of our own foibles and conventions. His description of Babylon is a ZCMI catalog (p. 71). The apostate Zoramites are model people, "smart and well dressed; they have dress standards" (p. 98). Delightful is the story of the patriarch's vision of the man who was about to be excommunicated because he smoked and swore. The patriarch saw the man sitting beside the Savior at the front of the congregation that wished to excommunicate him, because he had more importantly shared with and helped the poor (p. 215). Such stories are near heresy in the Church today. In opposition to "treasures in heaven" Nibley juxtaposes success and careers (p. 221)—the hallmarks of the present-day university. He takes a direct shot at PMA (positive

mental attitude), quoting Brother Marriot, who was known to say, "Tell us what's right with America." Nibley compares this attitude with a family doctor who compliments us on our eyesight, digestion, complexion, and teeth, and only as we leave the office mentions in passing that we have advanced cancer of the spleen (p. 276). His extended discussion of rhetoric (pp. 292–305) is also timely. He cites Lucian's description of a rhetorical education, including his example of Harmonides, a flute teacher, telling one of his students of the hard work required to become a good flute player. The student responds, "I don't want to be a good flute player; I just want to be a successful flute player." "Well," said Harmonides, "no trouble at all, then. You practice one hour a day and cultivate the right people" (p. 294).

Reading Nibley is a roller-coaster ride, and the reader must hold on tightly and maintain his or her wits. Nibley is a master of rhetoric and often uses hyperbole to make his point. Likewise, occasionally he quotes passages from contexts which do not support his point. Sometimes his notes and references are vague or inaccurate, and frequently he relies on scholarship that is dated. The experienced student has learned to use Nibley to open doors, not to close them, not to swallow everything he says whole, and to carefully check the references for him- or herself.¹

Many of his statements in this volume could and should be disputed. For example, Nibley argues that Asenath is a direct descendant from Egyptus (p. 27). This may well be, but how does one then explain the curse pronounced on Egyptus and her seed pertaining to priesthood (Abraham 1:21–27)? He claims Ishmael, who followed Lehi into the wilderness, was not a Jew "because a Jew isn't going to be called Ishmael" (p. 27). But there are five Ishmaels (besides the son of Isaac, Genesis 16) mentioned in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 41:11; 1 Chronicles 8:38; 2 Chronicles 19:11; 23:1; Ezra 10:22), and at least two of them are specifically identified as Judahites (Jeremiah 41:11; 2 Chronicles 19:11). In current literature Ishmael is regarded as a "popular name" in the seventh and sixth centuries in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, with nine attestations in the bullae

¹ See for example Kent P. Jackson, review of Hugh Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies*, in *BYU Studies* 28/4 (1988): 114–19; and Todd Compton, review of Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites; An Approach to the Book of Mormon; Since Cumorah*, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 114–18.

from the time of Jeremiah.² Nibley concludes Zoram was not an Israelite because he is called a "slave" of Laban and "a Jew can't be a slave of another Jew" (p. 28). Yet the Mosaic Law clearly allows for Hebrews to have Hebrew slaves for up to six years (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12; Jeremiah 34:14) or permanently (Exodus 21:6; Deuteronomy 15:16-17). In fact it was during the reign of Zedekiah that this institution was abused by Judahites (Jeremiah 34) keeping their Hebrew slaves beyond the six-year limit. Nibley's statement that "the Essene-Qumran theory, however widely accepted, is at odds with almost every shred of evidence" (p. 42) is overstated. There are a few scholars who argue either that Qumran was not inhabited by Essenes (Golb) or that the scrolls are not from the Essene community (Schiffman), but there is a great deal of evidence for the Essene-Qumran connection. The location of Qumran and the contents of the scrolls match very closely the descriptions of Pliny, Philo, and Josephus.³ In his discussion of the Day of Atonement, Nibley equates the *kippur* with the "veil of the tent" (p. 214). But in the Bible the word for the "veil of the tent" is *paroket* (Exodus 26:31); the noun from the root *k-p-r* is *kapporeth* and refers to the mercy seat at the top of the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:17). He suggests the *Sepher Yetzira* is "one of the two oldest writings in existence" as it is "usually attributed to Abraham" (p. 229). In fact the scholarly consensus is that this Kabbalistic text was written in the third to sixth century A.D. and that its attribution to Abraham is even later.⁴ Perhaps there are concepts in this text understood by Abraham, but there is no evidence he wrote it.

² Nahman Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986); John M. Berridge and Ernst Axel Knauf, "Ishmael," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* III: 512-13, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992). Tigay identifies 13 occurrences of the name Ishmael in the corpus of Israelite inscriptions. See Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, Harvard Semitic Studies 31 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 85.

³ For references and discussion of this issue see James C. Vanderkam, "The People of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Essenes or Sadducees," Chapter 4 in *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls*, edited by Hershel Shanks (New York: Random House, 1992), 50-62.

⁴ Gershom Scholem, "Sefer Yezireh," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 16:786.

In a similar vein, Nibley describes the world situation today: "The chances of coming to peaceful and friendly agreements based on love, brotherhood, charity, and all that sort of thing get fainter and fainter all the time, don't they? So that's the age you happy people are living in. I'm glad I'm clearing out" (p. 95). While the world situation is not stable and many find reasons for pessimism, it has improved in many areas in the seventeen years since I started attending his classes. It is unlikely, as Nibley claims, that Bar Kokhba could have succeeded in his revolt against the Romans if he had been more gentle, like Moroni (p. 187), or that "spoiled, rich, young men like to be drafted" (p. 189). True, Bar Kokhba was not gentle, but he was vastly outmatched by the Romans, and most of the "spoiled, rich, young men" I knew during the Vietnam War ended up with college deferments or in the National Guard. Nibley makes the astonishing statement: "I'm told from many reliable sources that the pioneers rejoiced continually. They were happy all the time. In their worst sufferings they said, we just celebrated—we just thought it was a picnic" (p. 213). He obviously hasn't read some of the pioneer journals from my family! There was much suffering, deprivation, heartbreak, and discouragement among the pioneers.

These examples are instructive. Nibley has never claimed for himself the kind of infallibility that some have attributed to him. He has always maintained that scholarship is a high-spirited and open conversation. For example, in regards to his work on the Abraham facsimiles, he once said, "I refuse to be held responsible for anything I wrote more than three years ago. For heaven's sake, I hope we are moving forward here! After all, the implication [is] that one mistake and it is all over with. How flattering to think in forty years I have not made one slip and I am still in business! I would say about four-fifths of everything I have put down has changed. Of course!"⁵ I have always assumed Nibley would be delighted for us to read his work critically, and statements such as the above should be taken as invitations to join the fray.

For the most part the unnamed secretaries and editors are to be commended for their transcriptions. Brother Nibley is not always easy to follow. The lectures are rendered in passable prose, and the long quotations from Shakespeare and others are

⁵ Hugh Nibley, "The Facsimiles of the Book of Abraham: A Response," *Sunstone* 4:5/6 (December 1979): 49.

carefully rendered in poetic lines. There are a couple of practices that cause confusion. Brackets are used for various insertions, and it is not always clear if they represent Brother Nibley's comments or the editors'. Meticulous references are given for Brother Nibley's allusions to his own printed work in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, but ironically these are the easiest of Nibley's many allusions for a reader to track down. For the most part Nibley's references to his favorite authors and their works, such as Eduard Meyer, Francis Yates, Lambert, de Santillana, Friedrich Blass, Thālabi, Commager, Clausewitz, Frazer, Heilbroner, etc., are not referenced at all. The experienced Nibley reader is familiar with most of the above and their works, but for the novice it would be worth the extra work to add these important references, thus greatly facilitating further study.

A few problems remain with these transcriptions that could have been avoided through more careful proofreading. For example, at one point, at the bottom of page 125, the end of the sentence or paragraph is missing completely. Occasionally a name or title is missed or left blank (pp. 201, 208). Would it be possible to have Nibley fill in some of these blanks before the lectures go to press? Questions from the class are almost always unintelligible on the tape and thus ellipsed from the transcription, which make Nibley's answers hard to understand. For the most part ancient names and foreign words are rendered correctly. But there are a few clinkers: the word "prophesy" should be "prophecy" (p. 18); "Matthew 25" should be "24" (p. 40); Greek *chitona poikila* should be *chiton poikilos* (p. 62); there is confusion over Joab, who is dead during the reign of Solomon (p. 64); "breast works" should probably be "breastworks" (p. 159); "til" should be "till" (p. 207); the "stern gang" (p. 235) should probably be the "Stern gang"; "ludlul" and "gilgamesh" should be capitalized (p. 253); the Copper Scroll is not 13Q15 but rather 3Q15 (p. 274); "eretology" should be "aretalogy" (p. 324); and "Thycidides" should be "Thucydides" (p. 355).

These transcripts are important additions to the Nibley archive. They capture and preserve the charm and spontaneity of a Nibley class. There is much autobiographical material here only alluded to in other printed sources. Many important connections are made between the Book of Mormon and other ancient and modern texts which can be profitably pursued in the future. Most importantly these lessons contain one man's lifelong experience with the teachings of the Book of Mormon, and

his thoughtful witness of its truthfulness, integrity, and relevance for our own lives.