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Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon

By John W. Welch

At first light on 6 June 1944, the first of many Allied landing craft began hitting the beaches of Normandy. At Utah Beach, 12 men dangling from one of the emerging jeeps cheered their driver on as they surged up from beneath the surface of the chilly English Channel waters. That driver, an army intelligence officer with a PhD in ancient history from the University of California at Berkeley, was none other than Hugh W. Nibley, age 34.

While preparing for the invasion, Hugh had visited several antiquarian bookstores in London—walking out with armloads of Arabic and Greek literary treasures. He had also, on the sly, slipped a copy of the Book of Mormon into one of the 55 pockets in his regimental intelligence corps fatigues.

“It was right there at Utah Beach,” Hugh vividly recalled, “as we were a couple of feet underwater, that

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it really hit me—how astonishing the Book of Mormon truly is. It had never occurred to me before, but all I could think of all that day was how wonderful this Book of Mormon was.”¹

Judged by any standard, the Book of Mormon is nothing ordinary. So it seems only right that possibly the most illustrious scholar yet to have investigated the Book of Mormon should have become fascinated with it in no ordinary way. After Utah Beach, Hugh Nibley was never again the same. Nor was Book of Mormon scholarship.

Hugh Nibley’s extensive contribution to Book of Mormon studies is a monument of dedication and ingenuity. It needs to be approached from several angles.

The most apparent is in terms of sheer volume. He was over 40 (older than the Prophet Joseph was when he was martyred at Carthage) when his first book, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites*, appeared in 1952. But he went on to add many significant articles and three other major works on the Book of Mormon to his list of publications—on numerous other subjects—which now numbers well over 150.

Lehi in the Desert broke new ground. Hugh’s broad range of knowledge about the ancient Near East, and especially his fluent Arabic, enabled him to reconstruct the cultural background of men like Lehi and Nephi and to read between the lines in the Book of Mormon to identify evidences of the world in which they lived. Few scholars had even thought of seeing such things.

Elder John A. Widtsoe acclaimed this book even before it was off the press: “This study has been done in such a manner as to make real and understandable these early peoples, and to make them living persons to those of this day, thousands of years removed. . . . The book could not have been written except with vast acquaintance with sources of historical learning. It has been written also under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. . . . For [many reasons] this book, which becomes a powerful witness of the Book of Mormon, becomes also doubly precious to the leaders of the latter-day faith.”²

The method of this book, as Hugh once explained it, is “simply to give the Book of Mormon the benefit of the doubt.” If the reader is at least willing to indulge the assumption that Lehi lived in Jerusalem around 600 BC, what he will find in the Book of Mormon itself will be remarkably consistent with what we know about that period of history from a secular standpoint.



The kinds of ancient Near Eastern facts and observations Brother Nibley included in *Lehi in the Desert* cover such points as language, literature, archaeology, history, culture, and politics. Here are a few samples:

“Egyptian literary writings regularly close with the formula *iw-f-pw* ‘thus it is,’ ‘and so it is.’ Nephi ends the main sections of his book with the phrase ‘And thus it is, Amen’ (1 Nephi 9:6; 14:30; 22:31)” (*Lehi in the Desert*, 17).

“[I] was once greatly puzzled over the complete absence of *Baal* names from the Book of Mormon. By what unfortunate oversight had the authors of that work failed to include a single name containing the element *Baal*, which thrives among the personal names of the Old Testament? . . . It happens that for some reason or other the Jews at the beginning of the sixth century BC would have nothing to do with *Baal* names. . . . ‘Out of some four hundred personal names among the Elephantine papyri, not one is compounded of *Baal*.’ . . . It is very significant indeed, but hardly more so than the uncanny acumen which the Book of Mormon displays on this point” (*Lehi in the Desert*, 33–34, including a quotation from the late J. Offord).

“When [Lehi] dreams of a river, it is a true desert river, a clear stream a few yards wide with its source but a hundred paces away (1 Nephi 8:13–14) or else a raging muddy wash, a *sayl* of ‘filthy water’ that sweeps people away to their destruction (1 Nephi 8:32; 12:16; 15:27). In the year AD 960, according to Bar Hebraeus, a large band of pilgrims returning from Mekkah ‘encamped in the bed of a brook in which water had not flowed for a long time. And during the night, whilst they were sleeping, a flood of water poured down upon them all, and it swept them and all their possessions out into the Great Sea, and they all perished.’ . . . One of the worst places for these gully-washing torrents of liquid mud is

in ‘the scarred and bare mountains which run parallel to the west coast of Arabia.’ . . . This was the very region through which Lehi travelled on his great trek” (*Lehi in the Desert*, 45).

“When Ishmael died on the journey, he ‘was buried in the place which was called Nahom’ (1 Nephi 16:34). . . . The Arabic root NHM has the basic meaning of ‘to sigh or moan,’ and occurs nearly always in the third form, ‘to sigh or moan with another.’ . . . At this place, we are told, ‘the daughters of Ishmael did mourn exceedingly,’ and are reminded that among the desert Arabs mourning rites are a monopoly of the women” (*Lehi in the Desert*, 79).

This excerpting of intriguing and stunning details and insights could go on at great length, but *Lehi in the Desert* is easily available. In spite of its age, and notwithstanding all of the subsequent research that this book itself has largely inspired, *Lehi in the Desert* should still be standard reading for anyone seriously interested in studying the Book of Mormon.

The durability of the legacy of this early pioneering research is probably proved no better than by the fact that Hugh Nibley himself never stopped experiencing the thrill and romance of the desert imagery and Arabic intrigue that he found in the early chapters of the Book of Mormon. He rated these discover-



ies as his most important contributions to Book of Mormon research.

He never wearied of telling how the Arab students, to whom he taught the Book of Mormon at Brigham Young University, reacted favorably to cultural elements contained in this book of scripture. Sometimes their reactions were not even to be anticipated. For example, as the class one day read the account of Nephi's slaying of Laban, they became skeptical. It turned out that their interest was not in what had justified Nephi's slaying of Laban—an extraordinary act in the mind of most Westerners—but why he had waited and debated so long!

What kind of price tag can ever possibly be placed on the value of knowledge like this? To Brother Nibley in these early years, the real payoff for his research came in the form of the ammunition it provided against the critics of the Book of Mormon. His parting shots in *Lehi in the Desert* drive this point home: "There is no point at all to the question: Who wrote the Book of Mormon? It would have been quite as impossible for the most learned man alive in 1830 to have written the book as it was for Joseph Smith. And whoever would account for the Book of Mormon by any theory suggested so far—save one—must completely rule out the first forty pages" (123).

But it soon became obvious that this research was not simply destined to be involved in limited skirmishes. As his studies broadened, Nibley's results began coming from yet other directions.

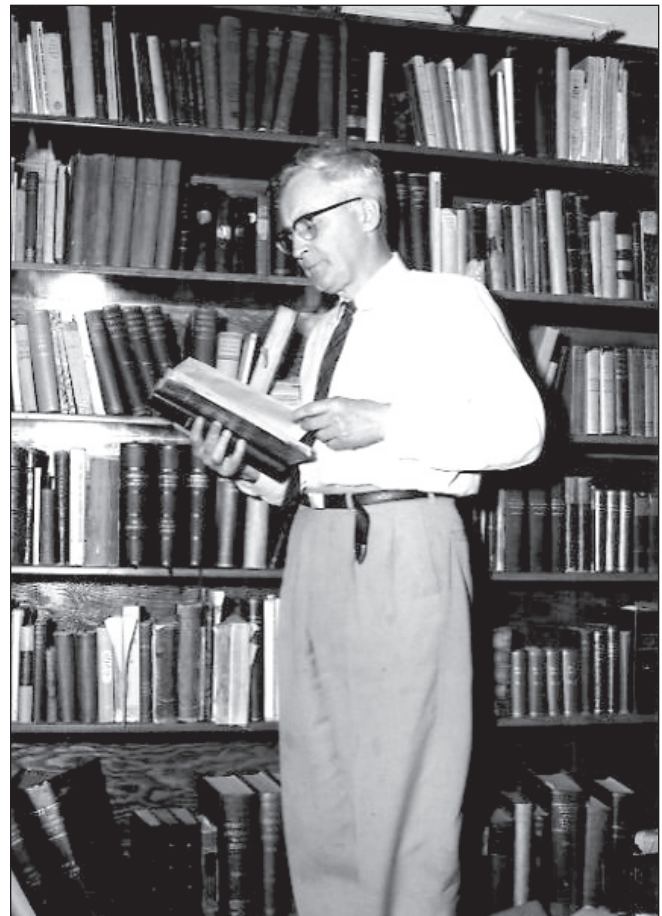
In 1957, his second book, entitled *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, became the Melchizedek Priesthood course of study for the year. President David O. McKay knew it would be difficult for many good Saints to understand, but he also knew it would do them good to reach a little to comprehend this significant material. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith encouraged "all the brethren holding the Melchizedek Priesthood" to take "a deep interest in these lessons, which sustain the record of the Book of Mormon from [a] new and interesting approach."³

Nibley's approach here was basically the same as before, but the work now drew upon an even broader array of ancient contexts as settings for the Book of Mormon: Egyptian, Greek, Persian, and Hebrew. The details became more and more amazing.

For example, Lehi's life and times were analyzed not only in connection with the ways of the desert, but also alongside his worldwide contemporaries, men whom Nibley called "the titans of the early sixth cen-

tury" (*Approach*, 49). These included Solon, the great lawgiver-poet of Athens, Thales of Miletus, and other great religious founders such as Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tzu, and Zarathustra. This was an axial period in history—one that "clearly and unmistakably" left its stamp upon the political, economic, and religious traditions of the whole world (*Approach*, 53). Lehi found himself right at home in this innovative crowd of great dreamers and doers.

Nibley showed that Lehi was a representative man in terms of his political and economic dealings. Lehi's probable experiences in world travel and commercial



dealings with Egypt, and his possible connections with the Phoenician city of Sidon and the overland trade routes of the desert and the Fertile Crescent, are consistent with the fact that Lehi was a man of considerable means, a man intimately familiar with the Egyptian language as well as with the ways of caravan travel (see *Approach*, 46–83).

Nibley also explored broad patterns of ancient religious practices, showing how they relate with considerable insight to particular texts in the Book



of Mormon. For example, the recurring “flight of the righteous into the wilderness” was a noteworthy practice. Lehi’s flight from Jerusalem, like Alma’s departure to the Waters of Mormon, is consistent with a repeated pattern of bands of people going out into the wilderness to live in righteousness. The same pattern is seen in the histories of the Jewish desert sectaries, the Rechabites, and the Dead Sea community at Qumran. Even the followers of John the Baptist, the children of Israel in the Sinai, and the Latter-day Saint pioneers fled into the wilderness and followed an identifiable pattern of life and beliefs. “At last enough of the hitherto hidden background of the Old and New Testament is beginning to emerge to enable students before long to examine the Book of Mormon against that larger background of which it speaks so often and by which alone it can be fairly tested” (*Approach*, 182).

Particularly striking was Brother Nibley’s detection and discussion of the vestiges of Old World ceremony and ritual in the Book of Mormon. The ancient Near Eastern year-rite festival was an annual event at which the king called his people together, gave an accounting of his actions, placed the people again under obligation to abide by the law, prophesied, acclaimed all men equals, proclaimed them the children of God, and recorded their names in the registry

of life. Such elements of the typical ancient year-rite are readily discernible in several Book of Mormon assemblies, particularly that of King Benjamin in chapters 2 through 6 of the book of Mosiah.

“There can be no doubt at all,” concluded Dr. Nibley, “that in the Book of Mosiah we have a long and complete description of a typical national assembly in the antique pattern. The king who ordered the rites was steeped in the lore of the Old World king-cult, and as he takes up each aspect of the rites of the Great Assembly point by point he gives it a new slant, a genuinely religious interpretation, but with all due respect to established forms. . . .

“The knowledge of the year-drama and the Great Assembly has been brought forth piece by piece in the present generation. One by one the thirty-odd details . . . have been brought to light and . . . [are] now attested in virtually every country of the ancient world. There is no better description of the event in any single ritual text than is found in the Book of Mosiah” (*Approach*, 308–9).

Some of Brother Nibley’s favorite finds, although coming from a later period and from Iran, were three tales that cast light upon Captain Moroni’s actions in Alma 46. The first tells of a blacksmith named Kawe, who took his leather apron and placed it upon a pole as a symbol of liberation in the fight he led against Dahhak, “the man of the Lie and king of madmen.” Like Moroni’s title of liberty raised against the unscrupulous Amalickiah, Kawe’s banner in Isfahan became the national banner and a sacred emblem of the Persians for many centuries (see *Approach*, 216–18).

The other two tales were collected in the 10th century AD by Muḥammad ibn-Ibrāhīm al-Thaḥlabī, a Muslim scholar who gathered legends about many ancient biblical figures. He preserved one account “not found anywhere else,” about the coat of Joseph, telling how it was torn, how a remnant remained undecayed, and what that meant. This lore is preserved nowhere else—nowhere, that is, except in Alma 46:23–25, which also records the ancient tradition about a remnant of Joseph’s coat that was preserved undecayed, and explains its significance. “Such things in the Book of Mormon,” stated Nibley, “illustrate the widespread ramifications of Book of Mormon culture, and the recent declaration of [William F.] Albright and other scholars that the ancient Hebrews had cultural roots in every civilization of the Near East. This is an acid test that no forgery could pass; it not only opens a window on a world we dreamed not of, but it brings to

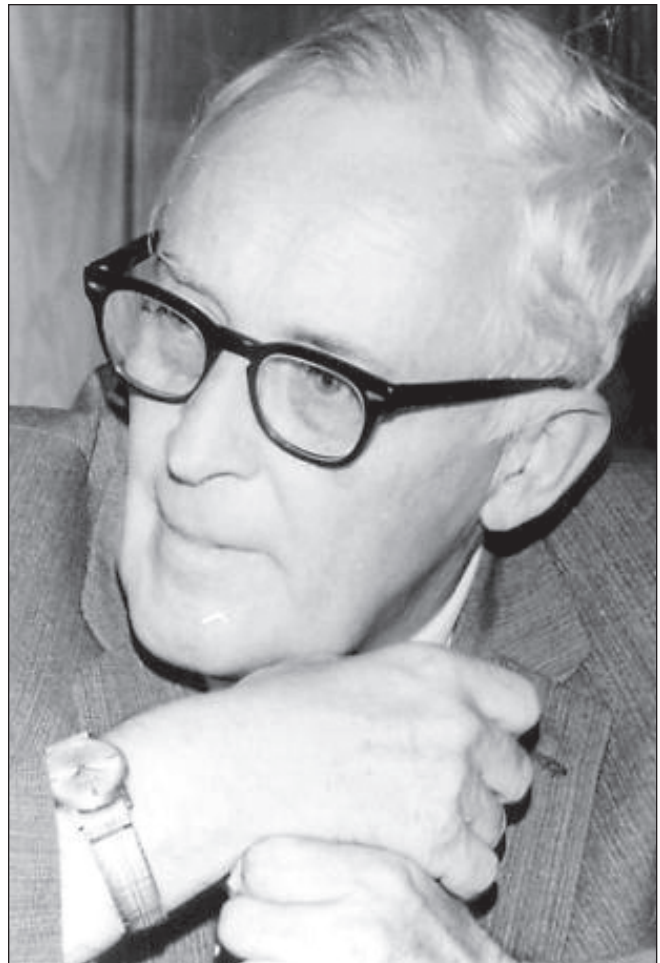
our unsuspecting and uninitiated minds a first glimmering suspicion of the true scope and vastness of a book nobody knows” (see *Approach*, 218–21).

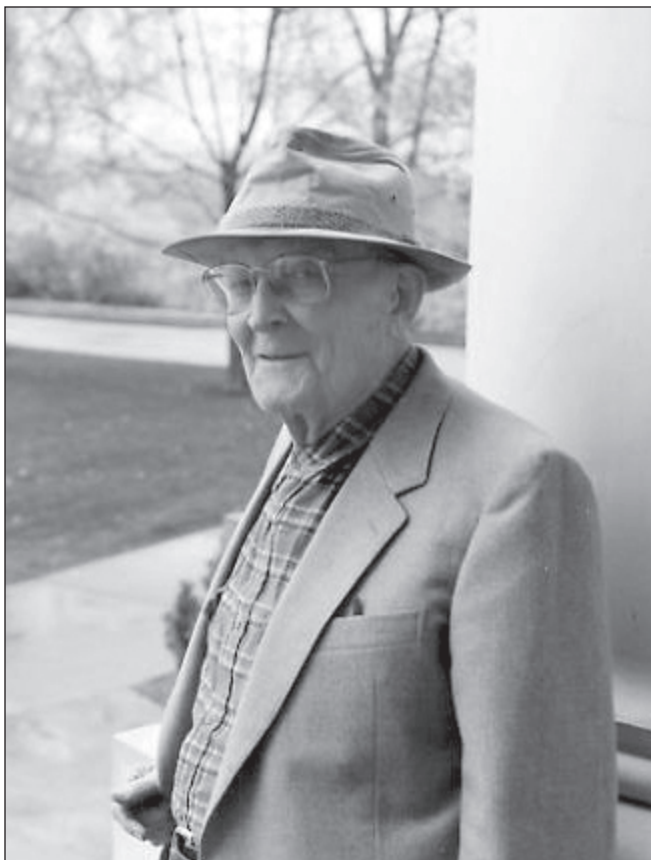
Powerful, jolting ideas like these become commonplace in the pages of *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*. Clearly, to generate all this from scratch was the task of no common man. Hugh Nibley was ideally suited and prepared to see these wide-ranging connections and implications. His training spanned the worlds of Greece, Rome, Arabia, and beyond. His keen sense of contrast bridged the worlds of the East and the West. And his eclectic and omnivorous consumption of knowledge was coupled with a nearly flawless recall of virtually anything he had ever learned. These tools of a scholar gave him the ability to see the Book of Mormon against a background so vast that no one before had ever even surveyed it.

Of his accumulation of knowledge, the story is true that in doing his doctoral research he pulled every potentially relevant book in the Berkeley library off the shelf to see what bearing it might have on his work. Of his depth of knowledge, one scholar quipped in exasperation, “Hugh Nibley is simply encyclopedic. . . . I hesitate to challenge him; he knows too much.”⁴ Of his memory, I am a witness: once we were talking and he began quoting Greek lyric poetry to me—line after line—lines he had studied 47 years ago.

It was inevitable that with this warehouse of knowledge—coupled with shoeboxes full of notes written on three-by-five-inch scraps of colored paper—Hugh Nibley would continue to produce a steady stream of additional papers about the Book of Mormon. In 1967, the third of his major volumes on the Book of Mormon appeared. *Since Cumorah* is a mixed assortment of studies developing themes that were present with Nibley from the beginning: (1) his disdain for the so-called scientists or scholars whose dogmatism or authoritarianism preclude them from taking the Book of Mormon seriously; (2) his view of the Book of Mormon as an accurate reflection of the religious worlds that produced the books of the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Apocrypha; (3) his quest for words, phrases, poetry, or narratives that particularly elucidate our understanding of the words of the Nephite prophets; (4) his rejection of charges that things mentioned in the Book of Mormon are anachronistic; (5) his urgent belief that the book speaks to our day and that we will be condemned to repeat the true-to-life errors of the Nephites if we do not take the message of this sacred record seriously and repent.⁵

Many of the specific topics treated in *Since Cumorah* either already were or soon became the subject of individual articles. His treatment of the Liahona in the light of the Arabic use of arrows or pointers to cast lots and make decisions was preceded by his *Improvement Era* article “The Liahona’s Cousins.”⁶ His comparison of early-Christian accounts about the 40-day ministry of Jesus among the apostles after the resurrection and the account in 3 Nephi of his ministry to the people of Nephi was later expanded into a much more detailed listing of parallels in his study “Christ among the Ruins.”⁷ His thoughts about “good people and bad people” (see *Since Cumorah*, 337–97) grew into his later reflections on “Freemen and Kingmen in the Book of Mormon,” in which he articulated a creed that epitomized the life he lived. In his typically candid analysis, Nibley saw the freemen of the Book of Mormon as being “not militant; . . . they made war with heavy reluctance. . . . They were non-competitive, and friendly, appealing to the power of the word above that of the sword. . . . In their personal





lives they placed no great value on the accumulation of wealth and abhorred displays of status and prestige, for example, in the wearing of fashionable and expensive clothes. Eschewing ambition, they were not desirous or envious of power and authority; they recognized that they were ‘despised’ by the more success-oriented king-men” (*Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 371).

In several other articles, Brother Nibley likewise continued his quest for greater refinement and further elaboration of particular points. As Hugh described this process: “The Book of Mormon is particularly amenable to comparative study—there are thousands of very extensive comparisons. With numerous comparisons there is a need for better information—always— . . . and we have hardly scratched the surface. Learning is cumulative. All we have to show for our existence is our awareness. Faith can bring things back into remembrance—it is the Holy Ghost which brings things to mind. . . . I like a more lavish picture.”

“Of course,” he recognized, “what we are dealing with are just possibilities. Parallels are just that. But after so many extensive ones, that’s what hits you hard; the case becomes quite compelling.”

What, then, can one say to summarize the contribution of Hugh Nibley to Book of Mormon scholarship? Here are 10 things that stand out to me:

1. He has made us look more carefully at the Book of Mormon. “We need to make the Book of Mormon an object of serious study. Superficiality is quite offensive to the Lord. We have not paid enough attention to the Book of Mormon.”

2. He has shown us that the Book of Mormon stands up well under close scrutiny. By looking carefully at the Book of Mormon, by reading between the lines, by examining each significant word or phrase in this book closely, we repeatedly find that there is always more there than meets the eye.

3. He has taught us to be surprised at what this marvelous book contains. Time after time he remarks how perfectly obvious something should have been to him long before it was—it was there right under our noses and nobody saw it. “Some subjects I studied for years without it occurring to me for a moment that they had any bearing whatsoever on the Book of Mormon.”

4. He has proved that the Book of Mormon is comfortably at home in the world of the ancient Near East, reflecting details that were not known and in many cases not knowable at the time the book was translated in 1829. As a book containing eternal truths, it is also, of course, at home in other generations. But anyone seeking to explain the book away must deal in all of the evidence, not just selections out of context.

5. He has opened further doors. Although he has not walked down every hallway, he has gone along opening doors that others will have to walk through for many years to come. Most of his hints have an uncanny way of proving to be vital clues. For example, the work he began in analyzing the philological roots of nonbiblical Book of Mormon names has been pursued by others. Points he made about Arabic oath-taking in relation to the oath given by Nephi to Zoram in 1 Nephi 4:31–35 have become the basis of several solid studies. A passing reference to the use of tents in his discussion of the year-rite festival in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* has become the spark for a thorough treatment of the impressive correlations between the ceremony of King Benjamin and the typical ancient Israelite Feast of Tabernacles.

6. He has challenged us. “The Book of Mormon,” he says, “is a debatable subject. . . . If we do not accept the challenge, we will lose by default.”

7. He never lost sight of the spiritual significance of the book. “Above all it is a witness to God’s concern for all his children, and to the intimate proximity of Jesus Christ to all who will receive him.”⁸ Despite Hugh’s knowledge, he knew that any scientific method is, by nature, limited. He knew that no ultimate proof of the Book of Mormon will be given. “The evidence that will prove or disprove the Book of Mormon does not exist” (*Since Cumorah*, xiv). In his mind, scholarship simply sets the stage for the ultimate question. Once a person comes to the explicit realization that neither he nor she nor anyone else can explain *how* all this got in the Book of Mormon (and there may be arguments for, and contentions or predispositions against—but so many amazing details simply *cannot* be explained away by human fiat), then the person is at last at the point where he *must* turn to God in order to find out if these things are indeed true. “All that Mormon and Moroni ask of the reader,” Nibley said, “is, don’t fight it, don’t block it, give it a chance!”⁹

8. He has spoken candidly about the book’s relevance to our day. “I intend to take Moroni as my guide to the present world situations” (*Of All Things*, 148). “In my youth I thought the Book of Mormon was much too preoccupied with extreme situations, situations that had little bearing on the real world of everyday life and ordinary human affairs. What on earth could the total extermination of nations have to do with life in the enlightened modern world? Today no comment on that is necessary” (*Of All Things*, 148). “In the Book of Mormon, the very questions that now oppress the liberal and fundamentalist alike, to the imminent overthrow of their fondest beliefs, are fully

and clearly treated. No other book gives such a perfect and exhaustive explanation of the eschatological problem. . . . Here you will find anticipated and answered every logical objection that the intelligence or vanity of men even in this sophisticated age has been able to devise against the preaching of the word. And here one may find a description of our own age so vivid and so accurate that none can fail to recognize it” (*Of All Things*, 149).

9. He has put the book into an eternal, urgent perspective. “The Book of Mormon should take priority. We have not paid enough attention to the Book of Mormon. This is very urgent!” While earlier generations should not be overly criticized, since many of the documents and discoveries elucidating the Book of Mormon have only recently come to light, there is now indeed an enormous amount of work crying out for us to do. A sense of pressing need to see that this work is done is one indelible stamp left on many by the legacy and influence of Hugh Nibley.

10. In all of this, he has changed us. Since Hugh Nibley, we as a people are not the same. We are warned but reassured; and we are fed, but still must plow.

Surely there are many ways and numerous reasons to read the Book of Mormon. Some days I read it for the doctrines of Christ, some days as a source of practical wisdom, and some days to contemplate the personalities of the prophets whose messages fill its pages. But other days, I read it for Hugh Nibley and the way he has taught me to read it—as a living testament of an ancient covenant people who knew the Lord and tried to follow his guidance centuries ago here on the American continent. ❏

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, statements from Hugh Nibley quoted in this article were gathered from oral interviews with him by John W. Welch and Susan Roylance in 1984.
2. Foreword to the 1952 edition of *Lehi in the Desert*; reprinted in Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*; *The World of the Jaredites*; *There Were Jaredites*, ed. John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), ix–x. Subsequent references to *Lehi in the Desert* are to the 1988 edition.
3. Preface to *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988).
4. Truman G. Madsen, foreword to *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), xii.
5. See *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988). The chapters in this book, like those in *Lehi in the Desert*, first appeared in serial form in the *Improvement Era*. Subsequent references to *Since Cumorah* are to the 1988 edition.
6. *Improvement Era*, February 1961, 87–89, 104, 106; reprinted in *Since Cumorah*, 251–63.
7. One early version appeared in *Ensign*, July 1983, 14–19. The expanded version entitled “Christ among the Ruins” appears in Nibley’s *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 407–34.
8. “The Mormon View of the Book of Mormon,” in *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 262.
9. *Of All Things! Classic Quotations from Hugh Nibley*, comp. Gary P. Gillum, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1993), 158.