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**Abstract** Review of *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple* (2008), by Hugh Nibley.

# THE NIBLEY LEGACY

Louis Midgley

Review of Hugh Nibley. *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*, CWHN 17, ed. Stephen D. Ricks. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2008. xvi + 536 pp., with index of passages and index of subjects. \$39.95.

Hugh Nibley is again testifying of a meaning and hope beyond the chatter and clutter of contemporary culture. How can this be? We now have available the seventeenth volume of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*. Even with this volume, the series is not yet completed; there is still more to come. It seems that, despite his detractors, Nibley will continue to testify.

## An Overview

*Eloquent Witness* consists of thirty-three essays assembled into six essentially thematic parts, including the following: two autobiographies (pp. 3–20);<sup>1</sup> six interviews (pp. 23–90); five book reviews (pp. 93–107), only one of which was at all negative (see pp. 106–7); two forewords to books, one which celebrates the Greek language and the other which urges the search for Zion (pp. 111–17); eleven essays of various sorts lumped under the label “personal” (pp. 121–268), and

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1. “Some Very Vital Statistics” (pp. 3–6) appears to me to be a kind of personal prelude to a series of essays entitled “The Way of the Church,” which was originally published in the *Improvement Era* beginning in January and ending in December 1955; republished in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, CWHN 4 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 209–322.

seven essays on temples (pp. 271–500). The essays in each part, with one exception, are placed in chronological order.<sup>2</sup> Twelve of the essays were written in the 1990s, including six on temples. All but one of the essays on temples has been previously published, the exception being a talk entitled “The Greatness of Egypt” (pp. 271–311), which was delivered in Provo in 1986 for the wonderful Ramses II exhibit. Though I consider myself a kind of Nibley aficionado, I seem to have both neglected and also not properly appreciated some of these. Having them assembled in one volume, I believe, allows one to savor some of Nibley’s passion for the endowment as well as his insights into the ubiquity of temple imagery spread here and there around the world and reaching back into antiquity.<sup>3</sup>

Eight of the essays included in *Eloquent Witness* appeared in rather obscure places such as the *Deseret News* (p. 80), *BYU Today* (p. 73), *Dialogue* (p. 51), *Century II: A BYU Student Journal* (p. 46), *Sunstone Review* (p. 83), *Sunstone* (p. 252), and the *Millennial Star* (p. 121). Nine of the essays in *Eloquent Witness* have not been previously published.<sup>4</sup>

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2. The lone exception is found in the middle of the essays placed under the label “Personal.” The first six are in chronological order (pp. 121–227), but then the next five also begin again in chronological order (pp. 228–68), partially as a function of grouping like items together.

3. Margaret Barker mentioned in a private conversation with me that her intense interest with the place of the temple in early Christian faith began when she read Nibley’s “Christian Envy of the Temple” in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* 50/2–3 (October 1959; January 1960): 97–123; 229–40; reprinted in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 391–434. For another work flowing from Nibley’s interest in temples, see William J. Hamblin and David Rolph Seely’s *Solomon’s Temple: Myth and History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), which illustrates efforts to mimic Solomon’s temple. See also the work of others—John Lundquist, for example—who have published on similar and related themes.

4. These include the following: (1) “Some Very Vital Statistics” (pp. 3–6); (2) “Hugh Nibley: The Faithful Scholar” (pp. 23–45); (3) “Nobody to Blame (125–41)”; (4) “The Faith of an Observer” (pp. 148–76); (5) “The Word of Wisdom: A Commentary on Doctrine and Covenants 89” (pp. 228–37); (6) “A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew” (pp. 238–51); (7) “Tribute to Krešimir Ćosić” (pp. 259–62); (8) “Graveside Service Address for Joel Eric Myers” (pp. 263–68); and (9) “The Greatness of Egypt” (pp. 271–311).

### Some Complaints

I introduce my all-too-brief foray into the wonders I have seen in *Eloquent Witness* with a comment on one of the six interviews with Nibley included in this volume (pp. 23–45). I was asked in 1974 to conduct a fully impromptu and *spontaneous* interview with him in a BYU forum assembly. This interview was not to be scripted. We practiced the interview several times prior to and even immediately before the event. These sessions were spontaneous and simply wonderful. Nibley was a gifted conversationalist in a small-group setting. But he feared not having either his note cards or a written speech to read, which he would then spice with many sly and witty asides. It was genuine spontaneity that we sought in a large setting. But in this instance there would be no script for him to embellish. He was quite uncomfortable in that setting. He seemed to resent my effort to drag him away from his carefully shielded persona. However, even without a script or notes, during the actual interview he was able to quote lines from Percy Shelley’s “To a Skylark” (p. 24), a poem by A. E. Housman (p. 25), lines from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (p. 26), *Macbeth* (p. 29), and *The Tempest* (p. 30)—all this without prior preparation. He also made one reference to his forthcoming volume entitled *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* (p. 36).

There is a nasty, self-serving rumor going around that he had a kind of psychotic episode during this interview, and that this was somehow the result of his having been ordered by the Brethren to defend what he knew to be the indefensible Book of Abraham.<sup>5</sup> This is utter rubbish.

Both prior to and during that interview, as well as in the meetings leading up to it, he did not give the slightest indication of being a bit lugubrious about the Book of Abraham, but just the opposite. He regaled me (and others) about its wonders. Whatever the medical difficulty that he experienced during the interview, which I immediately sensed, he was fine when I visited him the next morning. He was sorry for having made what he considered a fool out of himself. And he was

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5. See Martha Beck’s *Leaving the Saints* (New York: Crown, 2005), 21, 148–49.

still not pleased at not being able to script his remarks. But he immediately lectured me on the wonders in the Book of Abraham.

There is also a tall tale being circulated that has become a favorite of one sectarian anti-Mormon zealot. His argument is that Nibley both roundly distorted the sources he cited and faked his footnotes.<sup>6</sup> This is also rubbish. Does one who can quote during an interview passages from three Shakespeare plays need to fabricate materials? I did the source and quotation checking on two of his more complicated essays, and I was eventually able to track everything down. The many problems I had finding the sources he cited, I discovered, were the result of my own ignorance. And whatever tiny mistakes I found were either transpositions of page numbers or the obvious result of his having relied on his shorthand notes. This is not, of course, to say that I would put exactly the same spin on all the passages he cited or quoted. But my mastery of the languages and literature he consulted and cited is at best rudimentary. Of course, Nibley got some things wrong. And, of course, subsequent LDS scholarship has not always supported some of his hunches. That is to be expected. It happens to everyone who ventures away from routine, safe paths. It is time that critics cease attacking the man and deal, instead, with relevant substantive issues. When some of Nibley's critics have tried to do this, they have floundered at times because they lack his command of the relevant languages and cannot match the scope of his learning.

### Stranger Than Fiction

Two of the items not previously published are tributes delivered at funerals, one of which was for Krešimir Čosić (pp. 259–62). For those

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6. See Ronald V. Huggins, "Hugh Nibley's Footnotes," *Salt Lake City Messenger* 110 (May 2008): 9–22. Huggins teaches at the Salt Lake Theological Seminary. He is a strident and sectarian anti-Mormon. His tactic is to describe Nibley as "the quintessential LDS apologist" and then attack the soundness of some of his essays. The idea seems to be that, if Nibley can be discounted, then Mormonism falls flat, since he is the very best we have to offer in defense of the faith. Huggins relies heavily on the fictional figure Martha Beck described as "The Man in Tweed." She imagines she met this fictional figure in "the frozen-foods isle at the grocery store" and this eminent but otherwise unidentified Mr. Tweedy revealed that her "father is a liar." See *Leaving the Saints*, 164–67, for this bunk.

who do not know, Nibley was instrumental in turning Ćosić into a dedicated Latter-day Saint. Ćosić was born in 1948 in Zagreb, Croatia. He came to BYU in 1970, where he managed to charm the fanatics like me who follow basketball. He succeeded in doing this far more than anyone else whom I have seen play the game. The word *played* is exactly the right word to describe what Ćosić did. Basketball for him was a mere amusing game that one could and should enjoy to the fullest, which he did. This illustrious Croatian basketball player, when he arrived at BYU, had already led Yugoslavia in 1968 to a silver medal in the Olympics. Later in 1976 he won still another silver and then in 1980 a gold medal. But the crucial fact about Ćosić was his unlikely encounter with Nibley.

If one had invented a Ćosić and a Hugh and Phyllis Nibley and placed them together in a work of fiction, the plot would never have sold—such a combination of personalities would have appeared far too bizarre even for a work of fiction. But the fact is that the Nibleys were the occasion for the radical transformation of a fellow fully familiar with the sybaritic ways of the world. The Holy Spirit was able to transform Ćosić into a humble, devoted, passionate Latter-day Saint. Ćosić passed away in 1995 of cancer at age 46 while serving his native Croatia as deputy ambassador to the United States. Nibley’s remarks about his dear friend provide a tiny glimpse into the otherwise shielded core of the souls of this pair of friends. I mention this because readers should be aware of the texture and variety of items included for the first time in this volume.

### With an Edge

One thing, among several, that has made Nibley’s essays attractive to me is that he was, more than anyone else I have ever known, fully at home in the English language. He often took advantage of his gift with words to fashion striking phrases. Early in his career his essays had an edge; he was impish if not sarcastic, but later he mellowed and that disposition seemed to melt away. A close look at some of the essays in *Eloquent Witness* illustrates this change.

He was also the master of what might be called the “open letter”—that is, what appears on the surface to be a personal communication

was actually intended to be widely circulated. And the followers of Nibley passed these things around and fully enjoyed them. Two of these appear in *Eloquent Witness*. The first is a 1960 letter entitled “Nobody to Blame” (pp. 125–41). In this letter, Nibley claims that what he liked to call “the BYU” is hostile to genuine faith in God. In his early days at BYU, religion understood as faith in God was under conscious and deliberate attack. “But I do not for that reason,” Nibley opined, “hold my BYU colleagues culpable—*they cannot help themselves*” (p. 127). He offered his reasons for holding this opinion. He described the university as a rival of the church, since its very purpose is to “supply the guiding light which passed away with the loss of revelation” (p. 127). Could this happen in so-called religion classes? What followed is both amusing and insightful, if now quite dated, since some real changes have taken place. But one can still benefit from his remarks about our dedicated weakness for slogans and clichés that are drilled into students by those who, perhaps without knowing it, supplant faith in God with a specious type of learning that rests on the assumption that everything must be explained in strictly naturalistic terms.

This “type of thinking,” according to Nibley, “is being so diligently cultivated by our Mormon intellectuals, who must have their religion neat and rational, and who balk at anything in the gospel that could not have sprung from their own minds” (p. 130). He then outlined “four obvious ways of meeting the challenge[s] of the learned world”: “We can ignore them,” which is sometimes a good idea, or “we can run away from them” by addressing only our own people as we sell what amounts to feel-good mock wisdom for applause and even real money. Or “we can agree with the world. This has always been the standard procedure with our Mormon intellectuals” (p. 131)—that is, those I call cultural Mormons. The fourth way is to “meet the opposition on their own grounds, publishing in their journals” (p. 132).

Nibley also observes that “the two greatest nuisances in the church are (a) those who think they know enough to disprove the claims of Joseph Smith, and (b) those who think they know enough to prove them” (pp. 130–31). In the 1960s, as several items in this collection demonstrate, he was very pessimistic about the prospects for higher



education in the church, fearing that the Saints would not tolerate a serious defense of the faith and the Saints. Why? The reason is that “when anyone threatens to substitute serious discussion for professional camaraderie,” they are “assailed . . . hysterically,” which was his own experience when he defended the faith (p. 132).

But have we not made progress? Well, yes and no. “There are,” Nibley notes, “some very good articles in *Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, and other publications, including Church magazines. But the general feeling in perusing many of those publications is that of walking on a treadmill: The scenery never changes. There are always legitimate boasts and grievances” (p. 179). He grants that, for example, the “faults of one’s leaders can be annoying” (p. 179). But then he explained that such things should never ever keep one from strict obedience to God’s commandments, or fidelity to the faith, which does not require faultless leaders or answers to every question.<sup>7</sup>

The other “open letter” included in this collection was addressed to “Dear Sterling” McMurrin (pp. 142–47), who back then was the leading light among cultural Mormons. Nibley concludes this stunning letter with the following candid comment: “I am stuck,” he says, “with the gospel. I know perfectly well that it is true; there may be things about the Church that I find perfectly appalling—but that has nothing to do with it. *I know the gospel is true*” (pp. 146–47). Everyone with any sense knew exactly where Nibley stood on fundamental issues. This freed him to act as a staunch defender of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, as well as an apologist for the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also as a kind of gadfly pestering both lazy Saints and cultural Mormons alike.

### Tranquilized with the Trivial

Nibley held in great disdain the triviality and turmoil of wanton consumerism. Some of this contempt seeps through in various caustic

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7. Nibley loved the *FARMS Review*. There the scenery does change. The last time I visited with him, he complained that we were treating him as if he were dead, since he had not received the latest issue of the *Review*. At that very moment the postman was at the door to deliver Nibley’s copy of the *Review*. He could enjoy signs that his apologetic endeavors would continue in the future, something he once doubted.

remarks here and there in his essays. Take the following as an example: “I began this talk” on temples, he pointed out,

with Shakespeare and Bach, and I agree with Spengler that they represent the high point of our civilization. Now I invite you to go home from this melancholy meeting and beguile three hours or so before the tube, so that you may experience one full hour of commercials. This is the final triumph and total corruption of rhetoric—rude, brief, and wrenching interruptions, as garish and distracting as possible, as your attention is jerked from one sales pitch to another, and we sit there and allow this corrupt practice to inflict the deadly epidemic of the past on our civilization. At this point the only escape I can think of is the temple. I testify to its sanctity and power to purify our thoughts and lives. (pp. 499–500)

Nibley was simply appalled at the way people tend to “tranquilize [themselves] ‘in the trivial’” (p. 193). When they are the least bit prosperous, people forget that they will eventually die and none of their vaunted worldly success will matter. But to distract themselves from this fact, they busy themselves with toys and fun and engage in emulation and rivalry. Death is, Nibley argued, the hidden but also the great fact of life that ends our brief appearance on this little stage before the great drama is over. He thought that

Joseph Smith had already stated the problem as clearly as anyone ever has and done what no one else has done in giving us a solution. “What is the object of our coming into existence, then dying and falling away, to be here no more? . . . [This] is the subject *we ought to study more than any other*. We ought to study it day and night. . . . If we have any claim on our Heavenly Father for anything, it is for knowledge on *this important subject*.” (p. 193)

### Focusing on Crucial Issues

When asked back in 1983 whether he was inclined to study in detail the textual record of the restoration, Nibley explained that “a lot of other

people are doing that, making documents available now, for which I am,” he assured us, “extremely grateful” (p. 90). He noted that

the woods are crawling with people who can do research on the early Church. I won't spend time on that. But what excites me is when Joseph [Smith] starts to give us books of Abraham and Enoch and Adam and apocryphal writings and reconstructions of the New Testament and inspired translations of the Bible. Then you can go back to old sources and see if that is comparative, see if he has a leg to stand on. Once you start comparing, there is no end, but it gives you such marvelous control over Joseph Smith and his critics. (p. 90)

Nibley was, of course, pleased to see others collect and publish and mine the textual materials housed in archives that open to us a better understanding of Joseph and his immediate environment.

But he was focused on what Joseph Smith—without benefit of more than the mere rudiments of education, and without either leisure or a library—was somehow able to produce, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, though he seems not to have known how he was able to do it. Nibley asked:

Do you have the remotest inkling of an idea . . . how much sheer mental effort it would take the smartest person to produce a book of Enoch, or Abraham, or Nephi, or Ether, or Helaman, or the first section of the Doctrine and Covenants? To lay it all out in order with the vast sweep and scope of the Book of Moses, bridging great gaps in the human record? The Pearl of Great Price putting the whole into a cosmic setting in the manner of the ancients? The Book of Mormon with its ever-changing scenes of desert wanderers, luxury and danger in Jerusalem, migrations, wars, politics, ecology, trade and commerce, law and lawyers, paramilitary terrorists, youth gangs, strategy and tactics, natural disasters, organized crime, corrupt courts and politicians, dangerous opportunists, secret organizations, vain intellectuals, devout sectaries in the wilderness, prophets as near-death witnesses of the afterlife, great missionaries,

dynastic feuds, and more, and with all this the doctrines of salvation set forth more fully than anywhere else, and in a setting not of Joseph Smith's rural America? (pp. 194–95)

Nibley from a very early age was interested in the possibility that Joseph Smith had in some strange and wonderful way been able to tap into ancient streams of wisdom.

### Apologia

There is little or nothing in this latest collection of Nibley's collected works that is a direct response to critics of the faith and the Saints; it is not in that sense apologetic. And yet virtually every essay in this collection sets out his often subtle, complex, and compelling reasons for faith in God; *Eloquent Witness* is thus apologetic in the larger sense of that word.

Nibley is known for his efforts to address genuinely foundational issues. In several essays in this volume he focuses on what he has elsewhere called the "terrible questions,"<sup>8</sup> the most decisive of which is whether there is anything at all beyond death and the grave. Is it possible to move past an enervating *dubium*—when we really probe the mysteries of this world—about everything concerning us and our place in it? Put another way, is there a genuine meaning to our being here on what Nibley constantly referred to as this strange little stage where we engage in the routines we acquire by emulating others equally lost in what is, despite its beauties and momentary distractions, a dreary place? And if so, what exactly is it? In several of the essays in *Eloquent Witness* one can find Nibley's thoughts on these issues. Even though he passed away in 2005, he is thus still providing his *apologia* for the substance and core of his faith in Jesus Christ and also for his profound awe in the presence of the mystery of divine things that he found both then and there in the past as well as here and now in this otherwise disconsolate world. Nibley was always ready to provide a *defense* for the hope that was in him.

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8. See, for example, his essay entitled "The Terrible Questions," in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond the Ignorant Present*, CWHN 12 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 336–78.