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Duane Boyce

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Title Do Liberal Economic Policies Approximate the Law of Consecration?

Author(s) Duane Boyce

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Abstract Review of *Approaching Zion* (1989), by Hugh Nibley.

DO LIBERAL ECONOMIC POLICIES APPROXIMATE THE LAW OF CONSECRATION?

Duane Boyce

Review of Hugh Nibley. *Approaching Zion*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989. xviii + 637 pp., with scripture and subject indexes. \$32.95.

Sharing is the very essence of the gospel plan. From King Benjamin's poignant reminder that we are all beggars, to the parable of the good Samaritan, to the Lord's repeated command that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves¹—the theme is more than recurring. It is constant and emphatic.

The theme reaches its apogee in the law of consecration, where the point is not merely to share but to create a condition of economic equality. Speaking specifically in the context of the law of consecration, the Lord proclaims that "in your temporal things you shall be equal" (Doctrine and Covenants 70:14). He explains that "it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another" (49:20), that "every man" is to be "equal according to his family" (51:3), and that equality in heavenly things requires equality in "earthly things also" (78:5–7).

No one has done more than Hugh Nibley to emphasize this essential feature of the kingdom of God. His cry regarding the law of consecration is loud, strong, and persistent. And it is a welcome voice indeed.²

1. Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Luke 10:27; James 2:8 (where it is called the "royal law"). See also 1 John 2:9–11; 4:20–21.

2. Much of Nibley's treatment of the topic is found in Hugh Nibley, *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989). In-text citations of page numbers refer to this book.

In reading Nibley one also cannot help wondering to what degree, if any, we should take the Lord's pronouncements regarding equality and the law of consecration as a guide to social policy outside the kingdom of God, in the world at large.

Nibley himself does not have much doubt about this. He is certain that the law of consecration is a reliable guide to wider social policy, and he is not reticent about saying so. In the course of one general discourse on the law of consecration, he describes the essence of the law as *sharing* and tells us that "the first rule is to 'remember in all things the poor and the needy, the sick and the afflicted' (D&C 52:40)." He then informs us that "this is frankly a redistribution of wealth" (p. 394). Nibley explicitly takes the phrase *redistribution of wealth* from political discourse, where those who oppose policies that are designed to equalize standards of living by high taxation of the wealthy (however *wealth* is defined) use the phrase pejoratively, while those who favor such social policies use it (when they do use it) approvingly. So in one passing comment Nibley chooses sides on the issue, and he does so explicitly in the name of the law of consecration. Signaling that he knows full well the social implications of the phrase, he says in another place that practicing the law of consecration looks "suspiciously" like "equalizing the wealth."³

In another example, also about wealth redistribution, Nibley discusses at length the law of consecration and along the way approvingly quotes this statement—with the same tax implications—from a U.S. senator: "Why does it always come that two hundred million people sacrifice and fifty-thousand at the top are never called upon to sacrifice?" (p. 444).

And in another place, on the general subject of sharing and its relationship to Zion and other "utopias," Nibley again raises the issue of redistribution of wealth. He quotes an economist saying: "Before the 1974–1975 mini-depression, all financial poverty could have been eliminated at a modest shift of \$10–15 billion to the poor from the rest of the community. 15 billion is less than 1.5% of the GNP, about

3. Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 560.

the size of one of the cheaper weapons systems.” Nibley then comments: “Our society has gone out of the way *not* to do what could be done to solve the problem. Why? A community which can at tolerable expense eliminate human distress but refrains from doing so either must believe that it benefits from unemployment or poverty, or that the poor and unemployed are bad people, or that other more important values will be impaired by attempts to help the lower orders—or all of these statements” (p. 515).⁴

So Nibley is not undecided about whether we should apply the law of consecration to wider social policy. He is certain that we should, and he is certain about how we should. In general, he sees the law of consecration as supporting policies that explicitly seek significantly greater economic equality than would occur through natural market forces and that therefore tax the wealthy disproportionately in order to achieve this result. In common parlance, the more an economic policy tends in this direction the more the term *liberal* is used to describe it. And since this type of economic policy sounds a lot like what happens under the law of consecration, Nibley seems to have reason on his side in viewing the law of consecration as valid support for such measures. Policies that approximate the Lord’s design have *prima facie* credibility and don’t require much in the way of additional argument.

The Law of Consecration and Stewardship

But is this approximation all that it seems? To determine this, it’s helpful to try to flesh out the law of consecration itself. As far as I can discover, all of the following are central features of the law and of the expectation that people could actually live it. Together they describe the path to the kingdom of God.

1. First, people come unto Christ and are spiritually transformed (e.g., John 3:2–7; Mosiah 3:19; 5:7; Alma 5:14; 7:14; Moses 6:58–62). This spiritual renewal is the foundation of all other dimensions of gospel living (Romans 8:1–14; Galatians 5:22–23; 2 Nephi 31:13, 18–20; 32:2–6; Alma 13:28).

4. Nibley does not cite a reference for the economist he quotes.

2. People who are transformed in this way enter into covenants, including temporal covenants: they freely consecrate all that they have to Christ, through his appointed ministers (e.g., D&C 42:29–31; 72:15).

3. Through proper administrators, Christ then returns to these people their “portions, every man equal according to his family, according to his circumstances and his wants and needs” (D&C 51:3).

4. Each person then becomes a steward over that which has been returned to him (e.g., D&C 42:32; 104:11–13, 54–57).

5. All stewards then manage their stewardships personally, conducting affairs “in their own name” (e.g., D&C 42:54; 104:49).⁵

6. All stewards are accountable for the manner in which they manage their stewardships (e.g., D&C 42:32; 72:3–6, 16; 104:11–13).

7. Stewards freely consecrate back to the Lord, through his appointed ministers, all the surplus they produce—which is then kept in common in the Lord’s storehouse (e.g., D&C 42:33–34, 55; 70:7–8; 104:67–69).

8. If they are faithful and wise, all stewards in this system have an equal right to draw upon the Lord’s storehouse (e.g., D&C 82:17–19; 104:68–77).

9. Through this system of consecration and stewardship all are made equal (e.g., D&C 38:24–27; 49:20; 51:3; 70:14–16; 78:5–7; 82:17).

These principles form the foundation for the kingdom of God. Everyone is to be made equal through individual, sacred acts of complete freedom. And Christ is at the center of it all.

It’s evident that equality is the end state of the law of consecration. But it’s equally evident that the law includes a lot more than just this end state. And this means that if we want to take the law of consecration as our guide to wider social policy, we have more to consider than we might have thought.

5. Orson Pratt apparently saw such stewardship management as occurring within the general context of a free enterprise system. He said that under the law of consecration “there would still be buying and selling, trading and exchanging property with one another as well as with the world.” Orson Pratt, quoted in Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrines of the Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 238–39. This volume is still the most comprehensive historical and doctrinal source on the law of consecration and its place within the kingdom of God.

For example, consider again Nibley's view that social policy should include a simple and straightforward transfer of 1.5 percent of the GNP from the rest of the community to the poor. Perhaps it should. But now we have a further question to ask: Is it enough to assert this claim, in *the name* of the law of consecration, without also addressing *the features* of the law of consecration? I think the answer must be no. If we are going to rely on the law of consecration to support such a transfer of wealth (or to support any other social policy for that matter), we have to know more: How, for example, do principles of free covenant making, accountability, and stewardship figure into the process? Shouldn't they figure in? And if not, why not? And further: Where does transformation by Christ figure in? Where does consecration *to* Christ figure in? Must it figure in? And if not, why not? ⁶

A Reductionist View of the Law of Consecration

These are pertinent questions. Unfortunately, nowhere in Nibley's comments about social policy does he address them, and I think this highlights a pervasive tendency on his part. The tendency is to reduce the full law of consecration to a statement of its end state and to neglect the other principles of the law. With only this reductionist view to guide him, he then apparently assumes that any social policy with the same end state in mind (more or less) must be equal to, the same as, or a version of the law of consecration.

Because Nibley proceeds in this way, we find ourselves curious: Does spiritual transformation by Christ, then, make no difference? Does the initial act of freely consecrating to Christ make no

6. Though efforts of one variety or another were implemented for decades afterward, the Prophet Joseph Smith suspended the law of consecration as a formal church practice to care fully for the poor, if not to achieve total equality. First, through fast offerings, all members are to give liberally of their means to care for the poor; and second, out of concern for self-respect and the development of self-reliance, those who receive assistance are to work, as far as possible, in return for the help they receive. If we add these features to the law of consecration to identify a general gospel framework for helping the poor, we would also have to ask, regarding Nibley's proposal: Where does the principle of self-reliance figure into this policy? Must it figure in? And if not, why not?

difference? Does the principle of stewardship make no difference? Does the principle of accountability make no difference? Does the principle of faithful and wise management of resources make no difference? All of these (among others) are central features of the law of consecration, and yet they receive no attention in Nibley's attempts to apply that law to social policy.

I think this is a risky approach. Nowhere does Nibley actually argue, much less demonstrate, that the whole law effectively reduces to the equality ideal of its end state, and I fail to see how he could. To do so he would have to demonstrate that these other features of the law (principles 1–8) are more or less superfluous and that all that really matters is principle 9—the statement of equality itself. This would be difficult to demonstrate since principles 1–8 are revealed features of the law, after all. Moreover, the principles outlined in these revelations identify the Lord's chosen methods for achieving the equality that the law promises. To demonstrate that these methods are superfluous, and that *any* path to equality is functionally equivalent to the law of consecration, would require showing that these revelations from the Lord are superfluous. Put another way: it would require demonstrating that humanity's mere crafting of correct legislation is sufficient to bring about gospel ends—an outcome that, given all of the features of the law of consecration, would render the gospel itself superfluous. This would be quite an argument.

Nibley never produces such an argument, but he does in fact assume it. In every attempt to apply the law of consecration to matters of social policy that I have seen, Nibley applies the reductionist view of the law, rather than the full view, and this ineluctably influences the conclusions he draws. His reasoning appears straightforward: if a particular social policy tends in the direction of the equality ideal of the law of consecration, then that policy must be an approximation of the law of consecration itself, and therefore it must be a correct social policy. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

But if Nibley's convictions on taxation and the like are to be considered persuasive, not to mention convincing, they require far more argument than this. It *cannot* be sufficient merely to explain that the

end state sought by a particular piece of legislation approximates the end state sought by the law of consecration. That approach ignores eight-ninths of the divine law, and surely that large a fraction must have some bearing on how, if at all, the law of consecration ought to be applied to social policies in the world at large. Nibley never brings this much to bear on the question, however, and that renders his conclusions on such social policies unreliable at best.

I think it is fair to say that liberal economic policies (again, to use common parlance) generally claim to seek the same economic end state as the law of consecration, but that is a far cry from saying that such policies are some semblance of the law of consecration itself, which is what Nibley assumes. If Nibley's views on liberal economic policies are correct, it must be for independent reasons and not because he has shown that such policies approximate the law of consecration. This he hasn't shown, and whatever assertions or suggestions he makes to claim such an approximation can be disregarded.

Incomplete Analyses

I think it's useful to look at additional examples of economic commentary where, I believe, Nibley's exclusive focus on the equality ideal hinders his analysis. In each case, he makes comments or advances arguments that clearly call for more thought than he gives them. I don't think this would happen if he looked beyond the equality ideal and kept in mind a more robust conception of the law of consecration.

Proper philosophy in helping the poor

One example occurs in his general discussion—within the context of the law of consecration—on the proper philosophy for helping the poor. There are two schools of thought, he tells us: “There is the Good Samaritan or King Benjamin school, which does not ask whether a poor man is deserving or whether he has ‘brought [it] upon himself’ (Mosiah 4:17–18) but only considers his need. The other school is that which punches the computer to find out exactly who deserves what.” In the true system, Nibley tells us, “all distribution is on the basis of *need*; the question of who is deserving never arises” (p. 395).

Emphasizing this point, Nibley elsewhere refers to the phrase “deserving poor” as “convenient weasel-words.”⁷

But here Nibley is giving us a choice between false alternatives. In one case, he says, we help people based strictly on need, with no conditions placed on the help that is given; in the other case we help people based on one condition—namely, that they are not responsible for their destitution. Since this second alternative is obviously wrong, Nibley reasons, the first alternative is obviously right.

But if we take the full law of consecration as our guide, we see that neither of the alternatives Nibley gives us is completely correct. It is true that how we come to be destitute is irrelevant: whether we deserve help is not a function of how we got where we are—whether we brought it upon ourselves or not. All are beggars. But it does seem relevant to consider what we *do* with the help we are given. For example: Do we feel accountable to make the most of the help we receive—our “stewardship”? (principle 6). Do we feel obligated to work, as far as possible, to produce a surplus on what we have received so that it can be consecrated back to the general good? (principle 7). And are we faithful and wise in managing what we receive? (principle 8). If these principles inform our view of how to help the poor, then it’s likely that there are proper factors to consider, beyond need alone, in doing so. This will be true especially in considering the type of help to give, how long to give certain amounts and types of help, and so forth. It’s just that nonresponsibility for destitution is *not* one of the factors to consider. Instead, all of the considerations have to do with the future, not with the past (Will we be accountable for what we receive? Can and will we work to produce our own “surplus”? Will we be faithful and wise in managing what we receive?). All of these seem to be relevant and important questions to consider if we want to take the law of consecration as our guide. Unfortunately, Nibley’s reductionist view of the law apparently prevents him from even conceiving these questions, and this forces him into a choice between the only two alternatives he can think of, neither of which is correct.⁸

7. Nibley, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 561.

8. In this same discussion Nibley quotes Joseph Smith to support his position: “When we consecrate our property to the Lord it is to administer to the wants of the

Societies “more committed to sharing”

Another example occurs in a passing comment Nibley makes in the course of a long discussion on the law of consecration. Lamenting various features of U.S. policy at the time, he remarks that “a frenzy of privatization now insists that the only public institution with a reason for existence is the military, to defend us against societies more committed to sharing” (p. 467). He says this at the height of the Cold War, so we must assume that Nibley has in mind the Soviet Union and other Communist regimes since these were the societies against whom the United States was defending itself at the time. And the difference, he tells us, between these regimes and the United States is that those societies were “more committed to sharing.”

It’s relevant in this context that recent estimates of the deaths due to twentieth-century Communist regimes range from 85 to 100 million. And these are not estimates reached by those with a distrust and/or hatred of Communism in the first place, but by French scholars—some of them Communists themselves—who ten years before their research “would have refused to believe what they now write.”⁹ One of these scholars calls Communism’s influence “the most colossal case of political carnage in history” and adds that “the shocking dimensions of Communist tragedy, however, are hardly news to any serious student of twentieth-century history.”¹⁰ So the carnage of

poor and needy . . . ; it is not for the purpose of the rich, those who have no *need*” (p. 395, Nibley’s emphasis). But this actually provides no support for Nibley’s claim. The statement obviously emphasizes a concern for the poor rather than for the rich, but it does not make the further point (which is Nibley’s position) that the poor then receive help without qualifications of any kind. The statement is made specifically in the context of the law of consecration, and as we have already seen, certain qualifications and understandings about conduct are *built into* that law. So from the standpoint of helping, the Prophet’s statement identifies what is clearly a necessary condition—it specifies that help is intended for the needy and not for the rich; but it does not say (which, again, is Nibley’s position) that need is a *sufficient* condition for receiving help—that all who are needy automatically qualify to receive whatever help without any further considerations or conditions of any kind. That is Nibley’s position, but it goes beyond what Joseph Smith says in this statement.

9. Martin Malia, “The Uses of Atrocity,” foreword to *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, by Stéphane Courtois et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1999), xx.

10. Malia, “Uses of Atrocity,” x.

Communist regimes has been colossal, and that carnage hasn't exactly been invisible. And Nibley tells us that the difference between such regimes and the United States is that those regimes have a greater commitment to "sharing."

Informed by a full view of the law of consecration rather than by the reductionist view that Nibley takes, we want to ask at least a few questions that don't seem to occur to Nibley. For example: If sharing is the central element of the law of consecration, and if Communist regimes' commitment is to such sharing, then exactly how many of the principles of the law of consecration did the Soviet Union, for one, actually incorporate and exemplify? How many of them do Communist regimes incorporate and exemplify today? And if we were to adopt Nibley's own tone we might ask: Where in the principles are we told that public executions of political dissidents by the thousands, and class genocide of its citizens by the millions, are part of the path toward the equality ideal? And finally: Is all this really best captured by the term *sharing*?

Misunderstanding labor and idleness, rich and poor

In one place Nibley discusses the divine imperative that "he that is idle shall not eat the bread nor wear the garments of the laborer" (D&C 42:42). In beginning his discussion, Nibley actually overlooks this scriptural passage and accuses the Latter-day Saints of fabricating the sentiment themselves—"a favorite maxim of their own invention," he calls it (p. 241). He then reports the view of an Institute director—and, he says, of Latter-day Saints in general—that the sentiment means that "the idle *poor* should not eat the bread of the laboring *rich*." And, speaking of the Saints, he exclaims of this interpretation: "And what an ingenious argument they make of it!" (p. 241). He seeks to demonstrate the error of this interpretation by pointing out, to the amazement of the Institute director, that the ancient teaching on this score "has always meant that the idle rich shall not eat the bread of the laboring poor" (p. 241).

At first glance this observation seems to turn the tables. But it is actually less discriminating than it appears. For if, as Nibley reports (but does not demonstrate), Latter-day Saints have made the mistake of

equating the poor with idleness and the rich with labor, Nibley's assertion does nothing more than repeat the error in reverse: equating the poor with labor and the rich with idleness. But obviously neither view is accurate. The poor can be either idle *or* industrious, and so can the rich. And whatever the ancient teaching might have been on the subject, modern revelation makes this very point: "Wo unto you poor men, whose hearts are not broken, whose spirits are not contrite, and whose bellies are not satisfied, and whose hands are not stayed from laying hold upon other men's goods, whose eyes are full of greediness, and who will not labor with your own hands!" (D&C 56:17). Here the Lord rebukes these poor for being both greedy *and* idle—and both at the same time. So this is not, as Nibley has it, a condition restricted to the rich. Indeed, in another place Nibley quotes Brigham Young emphasizing the same point: "Again, it is known to all that a great many of the poor are as bad as those who have property. . . . They are just as covetous and craving in their feelings as are the rich who hoard up their means and keep it from the honest poor. . . . There are many who live in this city without labor . . . and you have neighbors near you who steal your wood."¹¹ Clearly, because these are mutually independent or orthogonal concepts, insight into the relationship between labor/idleness and rich/poor requires more analysis than Nibley gives it.

Saints' opposition to sharing

Further thought is also called for when Nibley remarks that Latter-day Saints "are perhaps the most rigidly opposed to the principles of sharing of any people in the world" and that "nowhere in the nation are tramps more evilly treated than in Utah" (pp. 470, 479). He may be right on both counts, of course, but unfortunately he gives us insufficient evidence to be able to judge. He supports the first statement by listing a number of newspaper headlines, but these are unconvincing, to say the least. After all, newspaper headlines are the most superficial dimension of a distinctly superficial medium. We don't go to very many newspapers for thoughtful *analysis*. Do typical

11. As quoted in Hugh Nibley, *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, ed. Don E. Norton and Shirley S. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 200.

newspaper articles reveal subtle insights and distinctions in economics, for example? Do they exhibit sharp arguments and equally sharp counterarguments, penetrating examples and counterexamples? Do they compellingly present the philosophical underpinnings of rival political positions? And if they do, do their headlines even approach capturing all of this? Well, no. So it's hard to say just what weight to give to newspaper headlines, especially when they are the only evidence one offers. In addition, Nibley uses the economic-related headlines in a way that simply assumes his reductionist view of the law of consecration and of how it ought to be translated into social policy. But since Nibley doesn't demonstrate, even remotely, that his view of the relationship between the law of consecration and social policy is correct, the headlines on this score are irrelevant; indeed, they would still be irrelevant even if, *per impossibile*, they actually turned out to be comprehensive, accurate, and philosophically discriminating.

Nibley's support for the second claim is thinner still: his own conversations with "many" transients. If we are to give serious consideration to what Nibley presents as a serious claim, we need to know: How many is "many"? Of all the tramps in Utah (over how many years?), what percentage of them did Nibley talk to? What was his sample size? Had they all been in every state of the Union so that they could confidently assert what Nibley says they assert? How long had they been in Utah? Where had they been in the state? Is the southern part different from the northern part? What time of year were they in Utah? Did they all use the same words to describe their experience, or did Nibley have to summarize their sentiments? Was there 100 percent agreement on the sentiment, or is Nibley reporting a 90 percent answer? Or a 50 percent answer? And so on. This listing of questions illustrates the difficulty with all anecdotal evidence: there is so little information contained in the report that it is completely unreliable for reaching any conclusions.

So there's much we don't know about Nibley's claims. The problem is there's much he apparently doesn't know either. Regarding the assertion about sharing, it's unlikely that Nibley has factored in the tithing on gross income that Latter-day Saints regularly contribute,

or the monthly fast offerings they also regularly contribute, or their contributions to humanitarian projects administered by the church, or (now) their contributions to the Perpetual Education Fund, or the donations they make to send their children (and others' children) on missions, or the temple donations (still being made at the time Nibley wrote), or the "Pennies by the Inch" donations, or the "Friends of Scouting" donations, or the compassionate service donations of food and household items, or, finally, the welfare assignments members regularly fulfill at bishops' storehouses, other church food production plants, the Humanitarian Center, and Deseret Industries.

We don't know the difference that calculating all these factors would make in the overall comparison between Latter-day Saints' sharing and others' sharing, of course, but neither does Nibley, even though he is the one making the claim.

Censoring the Lord

A final example does not concern social policies in particular, but it does show the extent to which Nibley's focus on the equality ideal colors his thinking in general. The example is Nibley's criticism of church members for censoring "the words of the Lord himself." This is something they did, he says, in ignoring the account of Joseph Smith's first vision that was discovered in 1969; it didn't receive the attention and arouse the excitement that, according to Nibley, such a discovery should have received and aroused among the Saints. Nibley concludes that members ignored the discovery because they were "unflattered" by what the Lord said in the account—namely, that no one is righteous, "no not one." This lack of righteousness, Nibley contends, consists in the inequality that exists in the world and among the Latter-day Saints. According to Nibley, the Saints felt accused by the Lord for this failing and decided to ignore the discovery altogether, thus effectively censoring the Lord himself (p. 481).

But it strains reason to think Latter-day Saints in general would feel unflattered and offended in this way. For one thing, the charge of unrighteousness was not leveled against the Latter-day Saints; it was leveled against the whole world, in 1820, before there *were* any Latter-day Saints. In light of this, what is the likelihood that members would take

the matter personally and feel offended by it? Second, there are already plenty of places in the scriptures where the Lord directly chastises the world and the Saints. Why should one more example be thought particularly offensive and unflattering? Third, and most revealingly, the Lord himself doesn't say in the account that the unrighteousness of the world consists in economic inequality. *Nibley* says this, but most members are likely to see inequality as a subset of a still larger category of conditions and conduct that would be classified as "unrighteous." Why does *Nibley* think that others draw the same one-to-one correlation that he draws between unrighteousness and inequality—and thus conclude that that's why members would feel guilty and chafe at the Lord's statement? He provides no evidence for the view, and given its implausibility, I don't see how he could provide it.¹²

In each of these cases, I think *Nibley's* concentration on the equality ideal of the law of consecration, to the exclusion of all other factors, clouds his analysis. In the first example it prevents him from seeing past two alternatives for helping the poor, neither of which is correct. In the second, this reductionist conception leads to a sympathetic construal of Communist regimes that could hardly be more inaccurate. In the third, it leads to a simplistic and mistaken identification of the poor with labor and the rich with idleness. In the fourth, it leads to unfounded accusations of the Saints' attitudes toward sharing. And in the fifth, it leads to even more unfounded accusations of the Saints' attitudes, not only toward sharing but also toward a historical discovery regarding the first vision—an event that had nothing at all to

12. In contrast, I think there are actually three plausible reasons why *Nibley* didn't observe a flurry of member activity around this discovery. First, since members already embrace the first vision, nothing new about it is likely to be considered momentous. What the discovery contained was about what one would have expected and therefore didn't create anything beyond a normal interest. Second, because most members are neither historians nor scholars of some other stripe, they have no academic interest in the matter. Again, the content of the new discovery was not startling or doctrinally groundbreaking; as a result, it was simply not central to members' daily affairs, at least not in the way that it would be to a scholar's daily affairs. Finally, many members don't subscribe to church periodicals in the first place, and most who do certainly don't read them in the way that scholars study professional journals. Many could have simply overlooked the discovery, or at least failed to appreciate its significance from a historical point of view.

do with economic issues, but which, given his philosophical commitments, Nibley still can't help seeing in economic terms.

In each of these cases, I believe Nibley's analysis would be more comprehensive and accurate if he looked beyond the equality ideal of the law of consecration and considered that law in its fullness.¹³

Conservative Economic Policies?

Though Nibley's attempt to correlate the law of consecration with liberal economic policies doesn't work, it hardly follows that an attempt to do the same with opposite-tending, conservative economic policies would fare any better. The opposite of an error is often just another error. If conservative policies are a better approximation of the law of consecration, it will require a separate argument to show it, and I have not attempted that here. I am content merely to note that Nibley's assumption of the similarity between the law of consecration and liberal economic policies is a mistake. That is a useful reminder for anyone who wants to try something similar, even if in the opposite direction. After all, no philosophy outside the kingdom of God can really be identical to the kingdom itself. The gap between the two will always be large and, in the last analysis, unbridgeable.

This doesn't mean that the law of consecration (that is, the full law) shouldn't still guide our thinking about national economic policies; it just means that we must ask what approximation of that law is the best—the wisest—application, given the world we live in. This is a world, after all, where Christ is not the center, where administrators represent one level or another of government rather than Christ,

13. It's interesting that Nibley did not intend *Approaching Zion*—a primary location of his thinking about the law of consecration and social issues—to be published in the first place. Because it was a collection of talks rather than a more scholarly presentation on the topic, he was actually not fond of it when it appeared. See Shirley S. Ricks, "A Sure Foundation," *FARMS Review* 20/2 (2008): 272. I believe Nibley's misgivings were justified. If he had approached the topic in his more systematic style—with the customary attention to completeness and to tight argumentation—I believe he would have ended up with a comprehensive conception of the law of consecration and that this would inevitably have modified, if not completely averted, some of his claims, including those we have looked at here.

where administrators are elected or appointed rather than called through divine inspiration, where the source of revenue is legislated taxation rather than free consecration, where relatively few (including those in positions of authority) have been transformed by Christ, and so forth. With all of these differences, and more, it's not possible to create any tight approximation between what the world can achieve and what the full law of consecration contemplates.

Still, while no tight approximation is possible, I believe, with Nibley (indeed, I learned it from Nibley), that the law of consecration still must be the single most profound influence on our thinking about economic matters. As I said, I think we are obligated to pursue the wisest approximation of that law, given the world we live in. But what we can't do is arbitrarily omit some elements of that divine law and then use what is left over as the sole basis for forming our judgments. That will undoubtedly lead to error.

Zeal with Knowledge

To conclude: When Nibley applies the law of consecration to matters of social policy, he sees an approximation between that divine law and economic measures that in common usage are termed "liberal." The approximation he sees stems from the view of the law of consecration that he starts with—a view that reduces the whole law to the equality ideal of its end state and that overlooks its other revealed features. Unfortunately, this omits too much of the law for us to be able to apply it with confidence, as Nibley tries to do. The approximation he sees turns out to be superficial; it provides no support for his views on economic matters and actually leads him into other errors of analysis as well.

Though important to acknowledge and learn from, this is still only one aspect of Nibley's writings on the law of consecration, and it comes nowhere close to nullifying the many virtues that are found in his discussions on the topic, both in *Approaching Zion* and elsewhere. More than anyone else, Nibley has elevated the law of consecration in the Saints' consciousness (including mine) and has taught us to look to that divine model for our guidance in thinking about economic

policies in the world at large. His abundant zeal for the equality ideal of the law of consecration is admirable, and there is no question that that law embodies precisely the economic state that Nibley envisions. I also think that his zeal is a necessary corrective to the contrasting zeal that some have for anything *but* an equality of economic station in life. For these reasons alone, though there are many others, Nibley's writings on the law of consecration are admirable and important.

I only suggest that our knowledge match Nibley's zeal. And framing and keeping in mind a more complete conception of the law of consecration would, I think, go a long way toward supplying it.

