Youth and Beauty: The Correspondence of Hugh Nibley

Boyd Petersen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Petersen, Boyd (1997) "Youth and Beauty: The Correspondence of Hugh Nibley," BYU Studies Quarterly: Vol. 37 : Iss. 2 , Article 2. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol37/iss2/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYU Studies Quarterly by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
When I ask what the temple teaches me, the answer is loud and clear: to control my actions. That is self-discipline, and that is what I promise to exercise with every covenant. The law of sacrifice could not have been entered upon by the gospels every day unless the same had been entered in the Sermon on the Mount against gossiping, and immodest dress. That chastity is nothing but self-control needs no argument. And the hardest hill, the law of consecration, can only be faced against sore temptation, and still confronts us with unresolved dilemmas. What I promise to do with every covenant is to order my life and specifically, as it is fully laid out in the
Youth and Beauty:
The Correspondence of Hugh Nibley

Personal letters written by Hugh Nibley during his youth show the fundamental consistency of his personality, style, beliefs, concerns, and penetrating perceptions throughout his lifetime.

Boyd Petersen

Sometime in the early part of 1910, Agnes Sloan Nibley attended the Salt Lake Temple. She was in the middle of a difficult pregnancy and most likely went to the temple seeking peace and comfort. While she was there, President John R. Winder, president of the temple and First Counselor to President Joseph F. Smith, approached her and asked to give her a blessing. In that blessing, President Winder spoke about the son Sister Nibley would soon deliver, stating that he would accomplish an important work. On March 27 of that year, President Winder died. According to the Nibley family story, with his parting words President Winder inquired whether Sister Nibley had yet given birth to her son. Significantly, the Nibleys' son was born that very day, and, in honor of President Winder, the baby boy was named Hugh Winder Nibley.¹

With such an extraordinary introduction, one would expect that Hugh Nibley would be a man of extraordinary gifts, and indeed he is. Moreover, as I have researched his correspondence over the past seven years, I have decided that one of the most extraordinary qualities about Hugh Nibley is the remarkable consistency of his life and words. His correspondence documents a consistency between the public and the private man—the beliefs, sentiments, and opinions Nibley has stated in his books and articles are echoed in his personal letters. Further, I have also discovered (contrary to what I expected) little change in his style, interests, or beliefs throughout his lifetime. The letters Nibley wrote in his youth are...
as erudite and witty as those written in his later years, while all the letters written throughout his life share a youthful tone and exuberance that reflect his passion for life and learning. The agelessness in his correspondence is so remarkable that I have almost come to suspect that Hugh Nibley really was not born at all but instead leapt fully formed from the head of some strangely dressed and multilingual Zeus, spouting obscure poetry and commenting on the phases of the moon.

**Biographical Introduction**

Most readers of his books know that Hugh Nibley grew up in Oregon and later southern California, where he attended Los Angeles High School. At age seventeen, he was called to the Swiss-German Mission. After returning from his mission, he attended UCLA, graduating summa cum laude in 1934. In 1938 he received his doctorate from Berkeley and then taught at Claremont, Scrips, and Pomona Colleges prior to his service in the army during World War II. He joined the army in September of 1942 and served in military intelligence in the European campaign. Following the war, he worked as an editor for the *Improvement Era*, where he became acquainted with Elder John A. Widtsoe. Elder Widtsoe urged Nibley to apply for a teaching position at Brigham Young University and wrote a letter recommending him to the president of the university, Howard S. McDonald. Elder Widtsoe described Hugh as "a book worm of the first order" who would "probably annoy his wife, when he marries, all his life, by coming home late at night—too late for dinner—and by sitting up all night with his books." At the bottom of the letter, he added, "I believe we must keep this man for our use."

Hugh took Elder Widtsoe's advice and accepted a position as assistant professor of history and religion at BYU. There he became a one-man campus, teaching language courses in Latin, Arabic, Greek, Russian, Hebrew, and Old Norse, as well as courses on early Christianity, ancient history, ancient Near Eastern religion, and, of course, the Book of Mormon.

Elder Widtsoe did have one concern about Hugh when recommending him to teach at BYU—his marital status. Hugh was a
Correspondence of Hugh Nibley

thirty-six-year-old bachelor. In a letter to his close friend Paul Springer, Nibley described Elder Widtsoe's prodding as "the rising admonition of the brethren that I get me espoused." Obedient to the end, Nibley told Elder Widtsoe that "I would marry the first girl I met at BYU." On one of his first days on campus, May 25, 1946, Hugh walked into the housing office, where the first young woman he met was Phyllis Draper, the receptionist. With that single encounter, Hugh decided that he was going to marry Phyllis, whom he later described to his mother as "delectable and ever-sensible." They courted until August 18, when he popped the question. The couple was married on September 18, 1946. About their whirlwind courtship, Nibley quips, "That's why it's called BYWoo, I guess." Hugh and Phyllis have reared eight children in a house full of books, music, and guests.

Ageless Style

The young Hugh Nibley was certainly precocious. His intellect, wisdom, and self-deprecating humility are evident in the earliest correspondence I have found: a 1924 exchange between Hugh and his grandfather Charles W. Nibley, then Presiding Bishop of the Church. In a birthday letter written for Hugh's fourteenth birthday, Grandpa Nibley praises Hugh for his abilities and at the same time warns him to beware of vanity:

We all think you are gifted and talented above many of your fellows. The Lord has blessed you greatly. . . . Surely you are favored of the Lord. You must use your ability in His service in all humility and faithfulness. Do not ever allow yourself to get big-headed. Always be humble, always be prayerful. Do not forget to pray. . . .

I am going to keep my eye on you and see what you do, whether you are going to be a success or whether it is all make-believe.

Hugh's response to his grandfather's sober warning documents not only Hugh's imaginative wit, but also his characteristic tendency to draw parallels:

Few things turn out to resemble what they're cracked up to be. Cleopatra was irresistible in the moonlight, but when that Egyptian sun scorched that hideous map, Antony, no doubt, turned a little pale and asked to be excused.
The same will hold true in my case and, if you weren’t exersiz-
ing your, or your stenographers, imaginative ability in that birthday
letter, there is going to be an awful shock, not unlike the kind pro-
duced when the Lord Mayor of Dublin joins the Shriners . . .

As to getting “bigheaded”, it is in my case as that of a pin. It
does not have a big head because it is unnecessary and foolish.
Although there are some exceptions on the part of a pin, there is
none with persons.11

Responding to another of Grandpa Nibley’s adulatory letters,
written on the occasion of Hugh’s seventeenth birthday, Hugh writes
in the same vein about his accomplishments:

Why do you suppose one would think his efforts anything but
futile—who minces about in “The Beginners’ Greek Book,” “First
Steps in German” or “Anglo Saxon for grammar schools”? How can
one get the big head over “Easy lessons in Latin?” Not a day passes
but what I am completely silenced by some urchin who knows what
every urchin should know—and I don’t—a little Arithmetic.12

Hugh’s early letters are erudite, witty, and honest—hallmarks
of his later writing. But the content of those letters is also consist-
tent with his later themes.

On the Environment

The environmental movement certainly was not trendy in
the logging camps of the Pacific Northwest in 1925. Neverthe-
less, nothing better illustrates the fact that Hugh’s concerns and
interests have remained consistent than the letter he wrote to his
mother at age fifteen. Hugh was spending the summer working at
his grandfather’s Nibley-Stoddard Lumber Company along the
banks of the Feather River in Cromberg, California. Since it was a
family business, Hugh probably felt obligated to work there. In
his own “Intellectual Autobiography,” Hugh states that “to work
in mills or ranches in the summer, or to become seasonal
tramps”—something he also did as a young man—was “the thing
for schoolboys to do in those halcyon days.”13 However, he was
most certainly also enticed to work at the mill by his uncontrol-
lable sense of adventure and his passionate love for nature. This
was a fifteen-year-old’s chance to go to the woods! In this letter
responding to his mother’s plans to have him return home, Hugh
Correspondence of Hugh Nibley

writes of the ironic and heart-wrenching opportunity he had to be surrounded by nature while witnessing and participating in its destruction:

Dear Mother:

What's all this business of coming home? Let me live in Paradise while it lasts.

I climbed Jackson Peak Sunday, and when I looked around I saw not the great gray-green expanse of forest I had expected, but hundreds of miles of rocks and stubble broken here and there by well thinned plains of dry pines. This would have been most disappointing had it not been for the presence of one great patch of woods. What a heaven it was to look down onto the blue tops of those great cool firs and know that there in her last stronghold lives Nature with all her great family, for to this citadel have flocked all the hosts of the forest. Here in this cold, green temple, oozing and dripping with a licentious profusity of life, I felt as if I were a trillion years old. Nothing seemed strange or unusual. Badgers, coons, deer, skunks, porcupines, snakes and all only paid me a passing glance, and went on with their business...

This is the only unlogged tract within half a hundred miles of here—five hundred million feet of it—and owned, "the devil damn it black" (Shakespeare) by the Nibley-Stoddard Lumber Co. Soon it will be leveled to a desert—the streams will dry up and leave it to the sun, the sage brush, the snakes and the lizards.14

What Nibley saw at the logging camp profoundly affected his life. In the 1985 film documentary, The Faith of an Observer—Conversations with Hugh W. Nibley, Hugh recounts the story of his summer at the sawmill with the same disdain.15 And when he delivered the speech for 1971's ASBYU Last Lecture Series, Hugh spoke of another forest that was leveled by his grandfather:

After my mission I visited a glorious redwood grove near Santa Cruz, California. Only there was no grove there; the two-thousand-year-old trees were all gone: not one of them was left standing. My own grandfather had converted them all into cash... Grandfather took something priceless and irreplaceable and gave in return a few miles of railroad ties.16

What I find notable is that Hugh viewed his grandfather's legacy of wiping out acres of redwoods with the same contempt at the time it happened as he did years later. There has been no reinterpretation of the facts, no reevaluation of his grandfather's legacy since his teenage years.17 Hugh's belief in the sacredness of our
natural world has not changed in over seventy years. His letter of 1925 compares seamlessly with the following letter, written in 1986, which was read on his behalf at the Bureau of Land Management hearings on Utah wilderness designation:

I moved to Utah from California many years ago expressly because I had found the last authentic habitable wilderness in the temperate zone, i.e. in the entire world within reach of pleasant dwelling-places. The rest of the world has already become overrun or uninhabitable by nature. So what we have here and here alone is the RAREST commodity in the world, and its rarity can only increase with the passing of time. It is that ultimate blessing, a thing good and desirable in itself, not merely something that can be converted into cash. When it is gone not only the world but our own immediate environment, for which we are responsible, will be a bleaker and poorer one.18

**On Education**

Likewise, Hugh’s views on education have been consistent for many years. In early 1942, while teaching at Claremont College, Nibley writes: “Certainly I can never remain at ease in the stifling atmosphere of the American College, an institution which I hope with all my heart will go the way of the buffalo and the spittoon. It already survives only as a curio.”19 In a letter written during his army years, Hugh compares the state of the modern academy with the muddy conditions that existed at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, where he was stationed for military intelligence training:

Mud like manure has great possibilities, but of itself is simply loathsome. The same holds true of our educational system—a vast slughish sea of uniform primordial ooze out of which we fondly expect marvellous trees of knowledge to emerge, even though we have already waited 50 years for a single butter-cup to appear.20

Later, Hugh writes from the war front:

Scholarship is usual the clown of the professions—its practitioners are either dealing in things so abstruse as to place them beyond criticism (in which case they are almost bound to be phonies) or else they are chewing old familiar cuds—in which case they are wasting their time.21

Hugh does hint that he believes there are legitimate avenues for scholarship when he adds, “Nevertheless there is still a great
work to do in this direction.” It was not education, but the state of education in America that Hugh lamented. As he later wrote, “Scholarship in America is as dead as the dodo and has been for at least 30 years: go to their conventions if you don’t believe they are a bunch of ineffectual zombies; they are simply marking time waiting for nothing to happen.”22

It is tempting to see Nibley’s criticisms of educational systems as inconsistent with his life as a scholar. After all, Nibley has made his living working in the academy. However, he has never been against learning, just for humility and the gospel. He has long urged his students to carefully examine pat answers, to have constantly searching minds, and to read thoroughly and deeply; he has also encouraged them to remember that scholarship is “forever tentative.”23 He has shown little patience for those who let the pride of knowledge or the ambition for eminence get in the way of a sincere search for truth. What Nibley has said about Brigham Young University reveals much about his attitude toward scholarship in general:

I can see two totally different pictures of the BYU, each one a reality: From one direction I see high purpose, sobriety, good cheer, dedication and a measure of stability which in this unquiet world is by no means to be despised. Then by shifting my position but slightly I see a carnival of human vanity and folly to which only Gilbert & Sullivan could do justice, with solemn antics before high heaven that make the angels weep. Why take sides or contend? Both of the pictures are genuine.24

Hugh Nibley has not criticized education, but what passes for it. As he stated in his BYU commencement address, scholarship can be redeemed only when it is clothed in the robes of the gospel. Otherwise it is nothing more than a counterfeit.25

On Wealth

Likewise, Hugh’s views on wealth have remained remarkably consistent. I have heard Hugh recall his fifth birthday, when his favorite uncle gave him five shiny pennies. He remembers dropping those birthday pennies into the lake “solemnly, one by one, reflecting on each one, ‘there’s no loss there: what’s money?”26 As
a young teenager, Hugh wrote his Grandpa Nibley, thanking him for the birthday check of fourteen dollars, "P.S. While I'm at it, I might as well thank you for the check. I seldom write letters for less than fourteen dollars." Hugh Nibley has never been serious about money.

While on his mission in Germany, Hugh wrote to his mother asking her not to send so much money. "If any more gets piled up, it will cause a sensation," he said, apparently alluding to high inflation rates in Germany a decade before the war. Hugh stated years later, "A German mark was worth nothing then: a billion marks for a dollar was what it was going for on the market. And naturally, when they'd send me fifty dollars a month what would I do with that? I could support the entire branch. I had no use for it, so I'd stick it in books and do everything else." Hugh's practice of using dollar bills as bookmarks was beneficial for his more financially strapped missionary companions. One of them reports that when any of the missionaries needed money, they would pilfer from Elder Nibley's books.

This view of wealth has also contributed to Hugh's "dress for success" style and his spartan eating habits, which evidently have not changed much either. One fellow missionary told me that, at one point, the mission president assigned him to "locate Elder Nibley and help him buy a new suit," while another fellow missionary reports that Hugh's mission diet consisted mostly of the wheat he stashed in his pockets and would chew while he was studying or tracting.

Hugh's belief about wealth is nowhere better summed up than in a letter he wrote to his mother during World War II, in which he states that "money is nothing but concealed wickedness." He repeats this same sentiment in a letter written in 1988:

We have been instructed to read the Book of Mormon with scrupulous care and close analysis. If we do that, we will discover that the acquisition of wealth often rewarded the zeal of the Saints but invariably led to pride, ambition and the increase of inequality among the Saints. It was the inequality that bothered the prophets. . . . As you know, Joseph Smith said "the heavens have often been sealed up because of covetousness in the Church." But the Church still went on—without angels or revelations, the channel being pretty well closed off. The degree of inspiration in the Church is not always
the same; the Book of Mormon is a barometer in which it goes up and down in astonishingly short periods. If you examine it, you will find that there is a definite correlation between wealth and revelation—a negative correlation. You will also find that at every period there are humble servants of Christ who go their way without trying to control anything but their own behavior; they are the ones who really benefit by the Gospel and enjoy it.34

With the publication of the essays in Approaching Zion, Hugh Nibley’s beliefs about the corrupting influence of wealth have had a broad and far-reaching impact on the Church. While the theme contained in that volume was new to many in the Church, Hugh Nibley has been consistently approaching Zion since he was a child.

As Social Critic

Another of Hugh’s gifts is his ability to size up the spiritual state of the Latter-day Saint community and to call us to repentance. We have been warned of our materialism in essays such as “What Is Zion? A Distant View” and “Work We Must, but the Lunch Is Free”,35 of our placing the image of management over the substance of leadership in “Brigham Young as a Leader” and “Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift”,36 and of our practice of putting partisan politics above the interests of God’s kingdom in “Beyond Politics”37 and “In the Party but Not of the Party.”38 As Eugene England has stated, Hugh Nibley “most perceptively describes our sins, most courageously and persistently calls us to repentance, and most accurately predicts our future if we will not repent.” England goes so far as to call Nibley “the finest lay (as opposed to officially called) prophet of the Latter-day Saint people.”39

But Nibley’s eye has not always focused solely on the Saints. His correspondence reveals that since he was a teenager Hugh has had a gift to discern societal ills and the urgency to call people to repentance. Two periods in Hugh’s life—his mission and his war service—offer illustrations of this gift of discernment.

While serving in the Swiss-German Mission, eighteen-year-old Hugh wrote to his Grandmother Sloan:

Nobody [in Germany] believes in a God. The strongest Catholics in Frankenthal are professed atheists. And the suddenness of the thing
is unbelievable. One feels a strange spirit like a cloud—a real thing,—that makes the people every week more testy and intolerant,—you feel the spirit closing in on the people; something mean & unpleasant seems to inhabit the average house. Not a spirit of uncertainty but of settled, determined indifference. I often wondered where the wickedness was that the Lord accuses the world of,—I suppose it is simply indifference, nobody seems to be really bad—but who has a right to be satisfied?...

So I must again issue forth to a few hours of intense persuading, decoying, tempting—well[[l]] nigh bullying. We are supposed to invite & recommend but nearly all the people are past that stage. I am becoming quite artful.\textsuperscript{40}

In calling people to repentance, Hugh has consistently employed the same combination of faith and learning. While on his mission, he writes of his discussions with the German clergy:

Our manipulations are getting under the Holymen's already too-well-filled skins. All these fellows seem to think we know 20 times as much as we do, thanks to my playing around with those primitive English manuscripts, all Catholic writings of course, on which their learning and authority has never been before called into question. (Incidental[l]y, I have stowed away in my trunk, for some dim future day, a number of priceless texts, dirt cheap, but obtained with difficulty) Then too, in this land of the free, no two Bibles read at all alike, the interpreters pull most of their crude stuff on some of our best passages; so I have actually been able to turn Greek to account. Though I don't know the stuff I call the pastor's bluff and silence the new churches at times.\textsuperscript{41}

Nibley also saw the antics of that same clergy and reports this anecdote:

A charming and innocent sight here the other day: Before a festival in the church the little boys who "fling the golden censer wide," that is the caddies in red who bear the smoke-pots before the altar, were outside in front of the church awaiting their cue. A crowd of imps (their "lay" friends) assembled to examine the curious stinking things & soon the altar servers, forgetting their celestial offices, converted holy instruments into war clubs, and swinging them wildly, like true brothers of Brunhilde, staged a small battle in the market place. Oh the horror of the good Father when he saw them!—Stop the fight—he? Rather, like the avenging angel did he baptize the little ones with maledictions. The voice out of the whirlwind became the "still small" when he opened up with a salvo of umlauts & gutturals. That was inspiring.\textsuperscript{42}
Hugh Nibley as a toddler. From Hugh's early childhood, members of the Nibley family were aware of his great promise, ca. September 1911, Portland [?], Oregon.
A dapper young Hugh poses for his portrait. 1917 or 1918, Medford [?], Oregon.
Passport photograph. Taken in preparation for Hugh's mission, 1927. The signature along the side of the photograph is Hugh's.
Hugh and his brother Sloan. Sloan served in a neighboring German mission at the same time Hugh (on right) was serving in the Swiss-German Mission. This photograph was taken in Leipzig in front the Battle of Leipzig Monument, ca. 1929.
Official military photograph. Taken while Hugh was attending the weather training school at Godman Field, Fort Knox, Kentucky, 1943.
Taking a moment to read. On a street in Heidelberg, Germany, after the Allied invasion, 1945. During the war, Hugh devoted his spare moments to reading the Book of Mormon and had become profoundly aware of the power of its message.
Correspondence of Hugh Nibley

With urgency and zeal, Hugh warned the German people of the scriptural promise that terrible consequences would follow if they did not repent. Immediately following World War II, he was able to visit some of the areas of his mission and saw the literal fulfillment of this prophecy:

Having visited all the scenes of my missionary labors by jeep, and beheld the painfully literal justifications of the warning word to these foolish people 17 years ago, I speak with confidence of calamities to come. Everything has turned out exactly as I had imagined, so there is no reason to suppose that it won’t continue to do so.13

Hugh saw this destruction not as the result of a vengeful God so much as the direct consequence of human immorality:

It is only after men have neatly reversed all values, calling black white and vice virtue, that nature follows suit. Nature does not want to be thrown off balance—seventy times seven she will patiently refuse to turn topsy turvy, and then finally one day she reacts to that steady, willful perversity and makes some adjustments of her own. The 4th Century BC and the 6th AD are terrible examples. In the times of total confusion which lies ahead let us not forget how clearly our own behavior has foreshadowed the horrible commotion of the earth and the elements. I speak in a prophetic vein, because the signs of an impending readjustment in the face of the whole earth are fairly clear.44

After having witnessed the crimes against humanity that Nazi Germany had committed, Hugh sums up the state of their culture:

Other people have their vices as opposed to their virtues, but the Germans’ vices are their virtues & vice versa; by an act of that Will they are forever talking about, they turn good qualities into vicious ones or clothe any crime that suits them in moral garments. They remain, after all, still the most dangerous people in the world—unwilling to distinguish good from bad.45

The one good thing coming from the war, Hugh argues, is a proper distrust of outward appearances:

The Nazis have done us the service of showing how complete the depravity can go on year after year enjoying an unchallenged authority, wearing the robes of every office with dignity and ease, professing none but noble motives and going thru all the motions of high governance. After their masterful performance the world may rightly distrust every appearance—flags, hymns, parades and solemn oaths have been forever discredited by German wickedness.46
Despite his abhorrence for the immorality and atrocities of wartime Germany, Hugh did not see World War II as a "good guys versus bad guys" conflict. The spiritual state of America also alarmed him considerably. In a letter written after the Normandy invasion, Hugh is evidently responding to some jeremiads from his mother about the political climate in the United States:

> Obviously few people are making an effort to win the blessings which the B.M. [Book of Mormon] promises to the promised land; the catch is that the alternative is not an easy decline or gentle corruption but a whacking curse that knocks all the pegs out at once as soon as everything is good and ready.⁴⁷

A very short while later, Hugh writes, "The people of the world for the most part . . . have built up a strong willful indifference to everything: they believe nothing, they hope nothing, they have endured what they had to and hope to be able to get out of enduring anything more."⁴⁸

Hugh has stated that throughout his life he has felt like an observer: "I never thought of myself as a participant, but always on the sidelines, always looking on, and always finding myself in a position where I could get a rather good look."⁴⁹ It is clear that this position has allowed him to gain a clear vision of what ails our world and a sincere desire to help us heal.

**On the Book of Mormon**

Perhaps nothing in Hugh Nibley's life has been more constant than his testimony of the Book of Mormon. In many letters, he writes of being overwhelmed by the book's authentic portrait of ancient Middle Eastern culture and language, the book's witnesses to the prophetic mantle of Joseph Smith, and the book's prophetic accuracy. This witness really came to the fore during World War II. Hugh has said elsewhere how the potency of the Book of Mormon hit him fully while driving the first Jeep onto Utah Beach during the D day invasion of Normandy.⁵₀ That he was preoccupied with the power of the Book of Mormon at that time is confirmed in his correspondence, where, in a letter written as preparations for D day were underway, Hugh writes:

> Of course there is little time to relax in the Airborne at a time like this, but when I can snatch a moment or two off it is devoted to a
Correspondence of Hugh Nibley

single engrossing item: at this late date I have discovered the Book of Mormon, and live in a state of perpetual excitement—that marvelous production throws everything done in our age completely into the shadow.51

Much later, after he had written An Approach to the Book of Mormon and Lehi in the Desert, he would say to his friend Paul Springer:

I have been sort of overseeing the translating of the B. of M. [Book of Mormon] into Greek (it is now finished), while at the same time working on my Moslems52 and consorting with the Hasidic Jews, meantime faithfully plodding through the Coffin Texts and preparing an article on the new Christian Coptic texts for a very serious journal.53 Doing all this at once has addled the old brains more than ever, but forced me to recognize the common pattern behind things. I say recognize, not invent, because other people are beginning to recognize it too. This whole apocryphal world is brought together in the B. of M., a veritable handbook of motifs and traditions. As a work of fiction, as a mere intellectual tour-de-force, nothing can touch it—but along with that it is full of old Jewish lore that very few Jews have ever heard of, handles the desert situation in a way that delights my Meccans, and gives a picture of primitive Christianity that is right out of the Dead Sea Scrolls & the Nag Hamadi texts.54

These Middle Eastern parallels testified to Hugh that Joseph Smith was divinely called as a prophet:

What a theme for a kid of 23 to attempt—it makes all the honors papers I have ever read look painfully jejeune and unbeholden: I have never met or heard of anyone in college or out who could turn out a piece of work of such boldness, sweep, variety, precision, complexity, confidence, simplicity, etc. Put it beside any work in our literature for sheer number of ideas, situations, propositions & insights . . . it makes me mad the way they act as if this was nothing at all and then turn out a million pages of pompous froth about a literature that has hardly given the world a dozen interesting ideas or characters in 200 years. Open the B. of M. [Book of Mormon] every ten or twenty pages and see what it is talking about—a bedazzening variety of stuff; open any other big work—James Joyce or the 1001 Nights—and you will find largely variations on a theme, a round of safely familiar matter given largely stereotyped treatment. Shakespeare has that kind of variety, but Shakespeare does not have to be telling the truth, does not have to combine his things in a single package, and can take thirty years to tell his story; also he is free to borrow at will without apologies to anyone. When you start listing the problems J. S. [Joseph Smith] had to face just to get his book down on paper you will see that writing about a biblical people does NOT automatically take care of everything—in fact it raises more questions than it
solves. You ask why I am going on like this? Because Christina [Hugh's eldest daughter] is making such a damnable racket with the vacuum cleaner around my feet, cleaning up our rumpus-room-salon-library-ante-room-dining-music-conservatory-nursery-playschool-parlor for company, that I can't think as is fiercely apparent.\textsuperscript{55}

It was, however, not the literary achievement of the Book of Mormon that most impressed Hugh—it was its prophetic accuracy: "I cannot imagine a more powerful, prophetic document or one more obviously going into fulfillment at the present time. If you look at the big picture, the Book of Mormon is as up-to-date as tomorrow's newspaper."\textsuperscript{56}

**On Faith in the Gospel**

It is the faith of Hugh Nibley—his ability to believe deeply what he knows to be true and to seek answers to his questions with confidence that answers will be forthcoming—that is the hallmark of Hugh Nibley's life and work. I am moved by the fact that a man so erudite can and does see God's hand even in small things:

Against all expectations my magnificent estate is yielding tons of fruit. While conscientious farmers with much pruning and spraying have lost all their pears this year, nothing I can do will discourage our little tree from showering down its blessing with almost obscene abundance. That is what comes of paying tithing, my boy.\textsuperscript{57}

And I am prodded to take the priesthood with greater seriousness when I read:

The Sunday after I got back Christina came down with a case of total pneumonia—all indications were the worst and the doctor was preparing for everything: then it was time to exert the power of the priesthood and within a few hours the little nipper was healthier than she has ever been. The alleviation was instantaneous (she was fighting for breath) and the cure complete between midnight and early morning. I have never known this power to fail—it is not a case of asking for a favor from the Lord with a chance that something may happen or not: if the power has actually been put at our disposal there is no question of whether it will work or not. Leave us not speak of miracles, since we are interested in having the Lord's help, and not in eye-wash.\textsuperscript{58}

As much as any other quality, faith characterizes Hugh Nibley's life and work.
Conclusion

The correspondence of Hugh Nibley reveals a surprisingly consistent individual: the content and style of his writing is ageless—it all reflects a combination of the wisdom and knowledge of age, as well as the joy and exuberance of youth. It also documents that there is no significant difference between the public and private man. Consistent, too, has been Nibley's choice to ignore the rhetorical admonition to tailor one's writings to a particular audience. He is fond of telling how, when he was working on the Melchizedek Priesthood manual, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, he refused to comply with Elder Richard L. Evans's advice to "always think of yourself as addressing the tiredest farmer in Koosharem."³⁵⁹ Hugh has disregarded such advice from the start. One of my favorite examples is a classic three-page letter Hugh wrote in 1935 to his younger sister on her ninth birthday. In that letter, he writes of Burke's artistic ideal, speaks of ancient Teutonic thought, and quotes from Shakespeare's sonnets. Obviously, all this is well over the head of the average—or even above-average—nine-year old. Hugh's sister Barbara assured me that she did not understand this letter until she was older and was grateful that her mother had saved it for her because it then meant much more to her than a letter she would have understood at age nine. Those who read his work have benefited from Hugh's decision to ignore the counsel to speak down to his audience. By having to reach for what Nibley gives, a reader achieves new levels of understanding.

And what of Hugh Nibley's life? Has it been consistent with his words? I have known him for over fourteen years, and in that time I have observed a man whose actions have been surprisingly consistent with his words. Hugh is committed to preserving our environment—consistently supporting political candidates who take strong stands to preserve the land and speaking out against pollution and in favor of wilderness. I have witnessed his constant curiosity and hunger for knowledge and his genuine acceptance of individuals without advanced degrees or credentials. I have been astonished by his complete lack of materialism, but equally astonished by his generosity. And I have seen his deep commitment to the gospel—worrying as much about doing his home teaching as he does about writing his next book.
Furthermore, the life of Hugh Nibley, like his correspondence, reflects seasoned wisdom expressed with a youthful joy. To this day, Nibley has a vitality of mind and body that most of us feel lacking by middle age. Yet his is a natural vitality; he has never been one to run from age. In the letter to nine-year-old Barbara, Hugh wrote: "Youth and beauty are invariably associated because they have an identical function—they alone free the possessor from all obligation of doing or knowing anything." Clearly, Hugh Nibley has practiced what he preached—he has maintained balance between youth and age, never assuming youth to be an excuse for ignorance nor allowing age to dampen his joy for life and learning. If, as Brigham Young once said, consistency is "one of the fairest jewels in the life of a Saint," Hugh Nibley is a rich man indeed.

Boyd Petersen is adjunct faculty in the English and Humanities Departments at Utah Valley State College.

NOTES

1Hugh W. Nibley, interview by author, tape recording, Provo, Utah, June 9, 1996.
3John A. Widtsoe to Howard S. McDonald, March 14, 1946, Howard S. McDonald Presidential Papers, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as BYU Archives).
4Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, [ca. August 5, 1946], in possession of Hugh Nibley. All of the correspondence cited in this article is in possession of Hugh Nibley or the author unless otherwise noted. The letters reproduced here retain the original spelling, punctuation, and underlining.
7Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, postmarked August 23, 1946.
8Nibley, personal journal, August 18, 1946; Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, August 19, 1946.
9Maynes, "Nibleys," 7. The cycle of folklore that has been built up around the Nibley courtship story is immense. For example, see Jane D. Brady, "The
Correspondence of Hugh Nibley

Brigham Young University Folklore of Hugh Winder Nibley: Gifted Scholar, Eccentric Professor and Latter-day Saint Spiritual Guide" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1996), 30–32.

16Charles W. Nibley to Hugh Nibley, March 25, 1924, Family Correspondence, Charles W. Nibley Collection, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

17Hugh Nibley to Charles W. Nibley, 1924, Family Correspondence, C. Nibley Collection, LDS Church Archives.

18Hugh Nibley to Charles W. Nibley, April 13, 1927.


20The Faith of an Observer—Conversations with Hugh W. Nibley, 63 min., Brigham Young University Productions in association with FARMS, 1985, videocassette.


22Hugh Nibley's vision of the sacredness of the earth contrasts with that of his grandfather. In one of the few comments I have discovered where sugar beet businessman Charles W. Nibley discusses the beauty of nature, he reveals his main motive. In a letter to Hugh's father, Alex Nibley, Charles W. Nibley follows a lyrical description of the beauties of spring in Utah with the comment, "There will be a world of money come from the ground this season. After all, the good old farm land is the best and richest gold mine in all the world." Charles W. Nibley to Alexander Nibley, September 12, 1925, C. Nibley Papers, BYU Archives.

Hugh, even in his youth, has viewed the beauty of the earth as valuable in and of itself, while his grandfather saw it, despite its beauty, as a commodity. In the video The Faith of an Observer—Conversations with Hugh W. Nibley, Hugh stated that Charles W. Nibley could see "only the feet of timber in a forest and that's all it [was] to him." And because he could not fully appreciate nature, Hugh argued, Charles W. Nibley was prevented from having "a fullness of joy" on this earth. The Faith of an Observer—Conversations with Hugh W. Nibley, transcript of videocassette, 1985, FARMS, 9.


24Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, postmarked February 14, 1942.

25Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, April 13, 1943.

26Hugh to Agnes Sloan Nibley, n.d. This letter was written after the invasion of Normandy and while Hugh was still in Europe, so it dates to either late 1944 or early 1945.


28Hugh W. Nibley, The World and the Prophets, vol. 3 of The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1987), 275. Nibley further expresses his view of learning: "Until the final returns are in, no one is in a position to make final pronouncements, as long as science continues to progress, the final returns will remain at the other end of the future of


26Hugh Nibley, interview by author, Provo, Utah, June 9, 1996.

27Hugh Nibley to Charles W. Nibley, [ca. 1924], Family Correspondence, C. Nibley Collection, LDS Church Archives.

28Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 1928, C. Nibley Papers, BYU Archives.

29Hugh Nibley, interview by author, Provo, Utah, June 16, 1996.


31Quayle Cannon, as quoted in Donald Q. Cannon to author, February 27, 1990.


33Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, February 5, 1945.

34Hugh Nibley to Brent Lewis, February 24, 1988.


38Hugh W. Nibley, "In the Party but Not of the Party," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 105–37.


40Hugh Nibley to Margaret Violet Reid Sloan, May 31, 1928, in possession of Barbara Nibley Richards; underlining in original.

41Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, [ca. 1928], C. Nibley Papers, BYU Archives.

42Nibley to Margaret Sloan, May 31, 1928.

43Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, [ca. summer 1946].

44Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, November 5, 1944.

45Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, [ca. 1945]; underlining in original.

46Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, August 24, 1944.

47Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, August 24, 1944. I have not yet found the letter from his mother to which Hugh responds in this letter, so it is unclear what events in America prompt Hugh's remarks.
Correspondence of Hugh Nibley

49Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, September 12, 1944.
49The Faith of an Observer—Conversations with Hugh W. Nibley, transcript, 2.
51Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, April 8, 1944.
52Nibley was then teaching a special course on the Book of Mormon to visiting Moslem students.
53Nibley gave a lecture, “The Early Christian Church in Light of Some Newly Discovered Papyri from Egypt” on March 3, 1964, at a BYU tri-stake fireside (Provo, Utah: BYU Extension Publications, 1964), which probably reflected the work he was doing at this time.
58Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, August 1952.
59Hugh W. Nibley, “Mediocre Meditations on the Media,” in Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, 394.
60Hugh Nibley to Barbara Nibley, April 8, 1935, in possession of Barbara Nibley Richards.