4-1-2005

Hugh Nibley's Articles of Faith

John W. Welch

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

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol44/iss2/4

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.
So, Hugh Nibley has two lawyers speaking at his funeral. Good thing he appreciated irony! I have laughed and wept as I have written this final examination.

Speaking on behalf of all who have taken a Nibley class, attended a Nibley fireside, source-checked a footnote, or have been changed by reading his gifted prose, I say, simply, thank you, Hugh, with special mention also to Phyllis.

If we were to “render all the thanks and praise that our whole souls have power to possess” (Mosiah 2:20), yet would our thanks be inadequate. He was a true friend, a model mentor, generous and inspirational in the extreme. He never did anything part way.

To paraphrase Brigham Young, I feel like shouting hallelujah all the time when I think that I was so fortunate to ever know Hugh Nibley.

Robert K. Thomas once said, “Few students can talk coherently about their first class from Brother Nibley.” That was the case for me when I entered his honors Book of Mormon class as a freshman forty years ago, or thirty-six years ago when I had my first three-hour, one-on-one session with him. And it is still the case today. Who can speak coherently of the life-changing experience of encountering Nibley’s expansive curiosity and grasp of everything from “before Adam” to the continuous “breakthroughs” he always hoped to see?

Lots of words are used to describe Hugh Nibley: brilliant, eclectic, iconoclast, critic, genius. But what was it, I got wondering, that held it all together for Hugh? What were Hugh Nibley’s “articles of faith”? In the middle of the night, two days after his passing, it suddenly dawned on me what his articles of faith were. And as my mind ran through the colorful
titles of his many books and publications, through which most people will have access to him, the following thirteen-point insight fell into place:

First, Hugh believed in God, the Eternal Father, and in his Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost (A of F 1). He rejected Augustine’s speculative creation of trinitarian theology, commenting wryly, “Here certainly is a place where revelation would [have been] helpful.”

Second, Hugh believed that we will be accountable for our own sins and not for Adam’s transgressions (A of F 2). He saw to the depths of the plan of salvation and wrestled to the ground the “terrible questions” of where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going. He reen-throned human agency through the ancient “doctrine of the two ways” and the primordial dichotomy of good and evil.

He zealously claimed the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of conscience (A of F 11). He spoke out against intolerance or judging others. He wanted you “to understand men and women as they are, and not . . . as you are.” Tolerance, he wrote, is a crucial ingredient in “exemplary manhood.”

He also spoke keenly on political topics, realizing the necessity of being subject to kings, rulers, and magistrates (A of F 12), yet hoping that people in power would not seek for glory or to get gain, and that we would have “leaders,” not “managers.” He wrote of being “in the party but not of the party,” on statecraft, ancient and modern, on “the uses and abuses of patriotism,” and much about the problems of war and the ideals of peace.

Hugh Nibley’s first principle was clearly faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (A of F 4). Hugh believed that, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all mankind shall be resurrected (A of F 3). At Don Decker’s funeral, Hugh declared: “A physical resurrection does exist. We believe in it. We will need it. We came here to get a body for a definite purpose. The body plays a definite role in the mind and the spirit.” Hugh testified that Jesus Christ “paid the ransom price, he redeemed us when we could not redeem ourselves.” It was, he said, “a suffering of which we cannot conceive, but
which is perfectly believable.”

We are saved by grace after all we can do, or as he unforgettably said, “Work we must, but the lunch is free.”

He spoke extensively of obedience to the ordinances of the gospel (A of F 3). In “How Firm a Foundation,” what made it so was the priesthood, ordinances performed by those in authority (A of F 5), which extend the gospel beyond this “ignorant present.” The ordinances are everything behind his books The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri and Temple and Cosmos. The ordinances have allowed him and will allow us to pass into the spirit world, out of the reach of the power of Satan.

Of the first principles of the gospel (A of F 4), Hugh said, “We must keep our eye on the principles of the gospel that have been given us.” Of repentance, he spoke of perpetual, voluntary repentance as the very definition of righteousness.

He wrote passionately about the nature of spiritual gifts (A of F 7), and exhorted us to “deny not the gifts of God.” He clearly had the gift of tongues. From his own thin-veil experiences, he knew of and defended trenchantly the realities of the visions of Joseph Smith. He rejoiced in the gift of prophecy.

He truly believed and unfolded all that God has revealed, from “Enoch the prophet” and “Abraham in Egypt” to the instructions revealed during Christ’s forty-day ministry.

Eagerly he believed all that God does now reveal, and shall yet reveal (A of F 9). He drove a wedge between the sophic world and the prophets. He wrote incisively against “criticizing the Brethren,” ending that presentation with a story of Elder Spencer W. Kimball wiping off Hugh’s dusty shoes, and with the testimony, “I truly believe they are chosen servants of God.”

Because Hugh had a command of primary sources, a major segment of his widely published work successfully compares the organization that existed in the Primitive Church with features of the Restored Church (A of F 6), covering such subjects as Apostles and bishops, prayer circles, baptism for the dead in ancient times, and when and why “the lights went out.”

Without doubt, he believed the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly (A of F 8). Without correct translation we have only “zeal without knowledge.” Nibley taught us to read the Greek New Testament with our LDS eyes wide open. According to the King James Version, John 17:11, in the great high priestly prayer, simply reads, “Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me”; but to Hugh Nibley, who rightly sees this as a temple text, it is better translated instrumentally, “Holy Father, test them on the name with which you
endowed me,” a much different reading, for those who wish to enter into
the presence of God.

It goes without saying that he believed the Book of Mormon to be the
word of God. We could multiply dozens of titles, from Lehi in the Desert
to his last retrospective “Forty Years After.” He has consistently taught
us to look at this book more carefully, that it holds up under the closest
scrutiny as an ancient testament of Jesus Christ, with deep spiritual rele-
vance today and at the judgment bar of God.

No theme was stronger for Hugh Nibley than our “approaching Zion,”
which is the thrust of the tenth Article of Faith. When invited to speak in
a Last Lecture Series at BYU in 1971, without hesitation he took Article of
Faith 10 as his ultimate topic in the lecture he challengingly entitled “Our
Glory or Our Condemnation.” He wrote often about the millennial goals
of a consecrated Zion, if only from “a distant view.” He saw Zion as
needing to be perfectly pure in a perfectly pure environment, to be holy
enough to receive the coming Lord himself, “for the Lord hath chosen
Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation” (Ps. 132:13).

In the tenth Article of Faith is located Nibley’s concern about the
renewal of the earth to its paradisiacal glory, of “man’s dominion,” our
“stewardship of the air” and the obligations that accompany all “prom-
ised lands.”

In “Goods of First and Second Intent,” he spoke of seeking after
things that are ends in themselves, things that are honest, true, chaste,
benevolent, virtuous, and so forth (A of F 13). Throughout his life he was
occupied with this quest, in an effort to educate the Saints, from college
students down to the most humble amateurs. On the phrase “in doing
good to all men,” this is precisely what his speech “How to Get Rich” is
all about. And how do we get rich? By giving it all away, in doing good
to all men. And, for Nibley, these were not just words.

Thus, several new conclusions dawned on me as I suddenly appreci-
ated more fully than ever before Hugh Nibley’s brilliance as the quintes-
sential gospel-scholar. As eccentric as he was in some ways, Hugh Nibley
swam in the main streams of Mormonism. It is hard to find the title of a
single Nibley book or article that does not pertain directly to one of the
Articles of Faith.

In extraordinary ways, he addressed ordinary topics:
His subtexts were none other than the primary truths of the Articles
of Faith, all thirteen of them.
His framework was completely congruent with Joseph Smith’s.
He did not ride any particular pet hobby horses, but sought to circum-
scribe all truth into “one eternal round.”
He preached the gospel, in its fullness, and with an eye single to the glory of God.

Nibley was loved and trusted precisely because he put first principles first.

At his sixty-fifth birthday celebration, it was said, “A great scholar . . . is not one who depends simply on an infinite memory, but also on an infinite . . . power of combination; bringing together from the four winds, like the Angel of the Resurrection, what else were dust from dead men’s bones, into the unity of breathing life.”

We will be everlastingly grateful to Hugh Nibley for bringing it all together, for taking dusty books and forgotten scrolls, and breathing into and out of their words the eternal truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. For all this, and much, much more, thank you, Hugh.

In his memory, let us live our religion. We have a work to do to prepare for that exalted sphere where Hugh now moves, and talks, and expounds with endless joy. I testify that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, that we shall have life, and have it abundantly.

Hugh W. Nibley was a frequent contributor of valuable articles to BYU Studies. The full text of over a dozen of his titles can be found on the web at byustudies.byu.edu.

John W. Welch is the Editor-in-Chief of BYU Studies, the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at Brigham Young University, and founder of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). This speech was delivered at Hugh Nibley’s funeral on March 2, 2005.


12. "In the Party but Not of the Party," in Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, 105.


29. See chapters throughout World and the Prophets.

34. “Criticizing the Brethren,” in Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, 407.
35. Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, 444.
38. “Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times,” in Mormonism and Early Christianity, 100.
41. “Zeal without Knowledge,” in Approaching Zion, 63.
45. “Our Glory or Our Condemnation,” in Approaching Zion, 1.
48. “Man’s Dominion, or Subduing the Earth,” in Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, 3.
49. “Stewardship of the Air,” in Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, 55.
50. “Promised Lands,” in Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, 76.
51. “Goods of First and Second Intent,” in Approaching Zion, 524.
52. “Educating the Saints,” in Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints, 306.
55. See “One Eternal Round: The Hermetic Version,” in Temple and Cosmos, 379–433, and also the forthcoming volume in the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley that will be similarly titled.
56. Thomas, “Influence of Hugh Nibley,” 5, citing Thomas DeQuincey, emphasis added.
One of my priorities as document editor for *BYU Studies* is publishing documents by and about lesser-known Latter-day Saints, especially women. Only documents judged to have lasting historical significance are featured in *BYU Studies*, so the challenge is to discover rich, unpublished sources that allow readers to hear otherwise silent historical voices. Sally Bradford Parker’s letter to her brother-in-law John Kempton on August 26, 1838, fills the role perfectly. I learned about the letter from Brenda McConkie, a relative of Sally Parker, who showed me a transcript of it while we were on a tour of LDS history sites in Ohio. Steve Sorenson at the LDS Church Archives brought Sally Parker’s letters to Janiece Johnson’s attention. Her research and writing on early LDS women made her the right choice to work with these letters and to write an introduction for the one featured here.

Sally’s letter is published with the permission of the Delaware County Historical Society, where the original reposes safely in the Doris Whittier Pierce File in Delaware, Ohio, near Columbus. Pierce donated this and other family letters to the Historical Society, where family historian W. Edward Kempton painstakingly transcribed them. Kempton’s transcription and genealogical research underpin this edition of Sally’s letter. The letter is also available through the LDS Family History Library.

This document is more challenging to present than most of those *BYU Studies* has featured. As Kempton wrote to Brenda McConkie on October 15, 1997, Sally is a “powerful and moving writer,” but her literacy, like Joseph Smith’s, was limited. Her lack of capitalization, punctuation, standardized spelling and appropriate verb tenses is not much poorer than that of some undergraduates, but it makes deciphering her vocabulary and syntax difficult. Document editors today believe that the anthropology of a document—its humanness—is historically significant. We want to mediate only minimally between the author and the reader, the way a museum curator might present an artifact. But we also seek to provide access to the meanings of the document captured in the words. How does one capture the power and beauty of Sally’s prose in modern language without damaging it and marring her in the process?

We decided to bring readers into the document editing process by featuring the text twice. The original transcription leaves usage, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation as Sally rendered it. Editorial insertions in brackets [like this] are minimal. Inserts <like this> show words Sally inserted. Strikeouts like this show words Sally struck out. The edited transcription strives to maintain the integrity of Sally’s intent while increasing readability. Her verbs remain but tenses have been changed and punctuation, capitalization, and spelling have been standardized.

—Steven C. Harper, BYU Studies