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One Eternal Round

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Hugh Nibley and Michael D. Rhodes. *One Eternal Round*.

The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, volume 19, Ancient History. Salt Lake City: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010.

Reviewed by Gary P. Gillum

On October 10, 2003, some eighteen months before Hugh Nibley passed away, I was accompanied by five of my students to Nibley's house so that we could assist two university archivists, Brad Westwood and John Murphy, in boxing up Nibley's considerable book collection for eventual placement in the Hugh Nibley Ancient Studies Room in the Harold B. Lee Library. While awaiting the arrival of the archivists, we surrounded Nibley's bed in the living room, joking and asking questions. One student asked about the completion of what everyone was calling Nibley's *magnum opus*. With a chuckle, Nibley responded, "Still round and round."

Hugh Nibley began serious research on *One Eternal Round* as early as 1988.¹ When Nibley's long-time colleague Michael D. Rhodes took over the project following Nibley's death in 2005, he was faced with thirty boxes of research notes and drafts, 450 computer files, and as many as twenty versions of one chapter.² Fortunately, Michael is familiar with most of Nibley's prodigious output, as well as the subjects listed in the preface, which are a reflection of Nibley's mind and interests and which are all within the scope of *One Eternal Round*:

Mathematics, Alexander the Great, the Egyptian pharaohs Sheshonq and Sesostris, medieval Jewish Kabbala, medieval Jewish and Islamic traditions

1. From an entry in my journal on June 8, 1988: "When I called Nibley to try to reschedule a session to talk to him about *Abraham in Egypt*, he grumbled about salvaging some messed-up footnotes for his book on facsimile no. 2."

2. Hugh Nibley's secretary at the time, Pat Ward, deserves a great deal of praise for keeping the files manageable and findable. It was also helpful to me to have Michael's draft in hand while I processed all of these notes and files for the University Archives at BYU, beginning in 2006. The thirty boxes Michael worked with (plus some additional materials found later) are now represented by 115 archival boxes (boxes 178–292), a very large percentage of the total 294 archival boxes of Nibley's total collection.

about Abraham, ancient Hermeticism, Greek myths and their relationship to Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths, early Jewish and Christian apocrypha, ancient Chinese jade disks, Indian mandalas, the Aztec calendar stone, shaman drums, ancient Egyptian mirrors, axial times, the great year-rites of ancient civilizations, Paleolithic cave drawings in France, the *Tabula Smaragdina*, Hopi Indian ceremonies, alchemy, and the relationship of myth, ritual, and history. (xiv)

Rhodes wrote transitions, additions, and clarifications to the book, but he successfully kept them to a minimum, wanting to keep “Hugh’s inimitable style” (xv) of hyperbole, humor, and satire, as well as his penchant for broad literary references. Also to his credit, Rhodes retained Nibley’s allusions to his personal life that are sprinkled throughout the work.

The seeds for *One Eternal Round* were planted in the summer of 1962 when Egyptologist Klaus Baer wrote a critical letter to Hugh Nibley about the Pearl of Great Price and its Egyptian connections.³ Leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints asked Nibley to pursue potential problems concerning the Pearl of Great Price and the Joseph Smith Papyri. They encouraged Nibley to research these subjects above others, including the work he was doing on Brigham Young and a list of projects J. Reuben Clark had encouraged him to pursue.⁴ Thereafter, except for some related and important forays into the Book of Mormon and temples, Nibley spent the majority of his research efforts on “the book that answers all the questions.” *Abraham in Egypt* (two editions) and *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (also in two editions) were a large share of those twenty-five years of research. By the late 1980s, Nibley felt that an important part of the Pearl of Great Price, Facsimile no. 2, had not received enough attention by secular Egyptologists or by members of the Church. The result is *One Eternal Round*, whose intended audience seems to be from all parts of these widely disparate groups of potential readers.

The Book

If fans are hoping for one of Nibley’s more readable books, they will be disappointed. *One Eternal Round* is not a relatively easy read like *Temple and Cosmos* or *Approaching Zion*. Neither is the book a *magnum opus* in the sense of its size. Even though this latest publication is over seven hundred

3. For the complete story, see Boyd Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 313–15.

4. In 1955, President Clark’s to-do list for Nibley included a new translation of the Bible using ancient sources, a study of the true principles of many of the early Church fathers, and translating the Aztec Codices. Petersen, *Hugh Nibley*, 273.

pages long, *Tinkling Cymbals* and *Abraham in Egypt* are even longer. However, if readers are expecting a *magnum opus* in the sense that it is the most complete representation of Nibley's mind during the 1980s and 1990s, they will be satisfied—if not mentally overwhelmed—by his dense scholarship and thoroughness. *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* and *Abraham in Egypt* are virtual prerequisites for an elementary understanding of and appreciation for *One Eternal Round*. I am confident Nibley intended the book to be a comprehensive look at Facsimile no. 2, not an introductory “Hypocephalus 101” course.

However, for those of us whose unbounded curiosity outweighs our scholarly preparation, several study helps are included. Eighty-six black-and-white illustrations and eight color plates (meticulously provided by Michael P. Lyon) will reward hours of personal study, wonder, and speculation. Also, readers need not be multilingual, as English represents the chief language cited in this work. German sources are by far the second most cited, followed by smaller numbers of sources in dozens of obscure languages, like the Armenian version of “Pseudo-Callisthenes.”⁵

While reading *One Eternal Round*, I also read a biography of Albert Einstein. I personally find Hugh Nibley to be much like Albert Einstein in perspective, genius, love of nature, and the interconnectedness of all things. In fact, Nibley mentions how “the most sublime aspect of Amun is the way he brings all things together in one, just as science today looks for the Grand Unifying Theory” (239). Nibley was a great unifier of ancient religious history in the same way that Einstein was a unifier of physics.⁶

While footnotes abound, *One Eternal Round* lacks an alphabetical bibliography. Not only could I have used one to satisfy my own curiosity as a bibliophile but also because of “Nibliographic” questions from others that continue to come my way. If the bibliography was excluded in the interest of saving space, it would be a gracious token for the publisher to supply one on its website. Of course, problems and oversights of one sort or another are inevitable in almost all books. Michael Rhodes, sensitive to how important this book was to Nibley, adds a caveat, paraphrasing Mormon: “And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of *Mike*, wherefore condemn not the things of *Hugh Nibley*” (xvi). Knowing the history of this massive work

5. When I processed the Nibley papers for University Archives, I set about secondarily to discover the exact number of languages Nibley had used in his research, note cards, and vocabulary flash cards. The resulting number was an astounding thirty-one.

6. Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007). On the subject of interconnectedness, I doubt I'm the only one who sees hints of Einstein's theory in Doctrine and Covenants 88 and 93.

and the research that went into it, I find it difficult to criticize *One Eternal Round*, any shortcomings notwithstanding.

Michael Rhodes indicates that the reader will be able to distinguish between his writing and Nibley's. The writing was seamless enough that I found very little evidence of that. However, one major addition by Rhodes should be mentioned. On page 117, Michael Lyon supplies a drawing of what some archaeologists believe is the world's oldest temple (Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, considered 11,600 years old) and the source of human civilization. The illustration is from an article published three years *after* Hugh Nibley's passing.⁷ If Nibley had been alive, he surely would have referred to this article and added much commentary himself. This rare and welcome addition by Rhodes is but one example of how surprising discoveries continue to shed light on ancient history, and the history of the hypocephalus is another example of an artifact that continues to surprise.

The Hypocephalus

Facsimile no. 2 in the Pearl of Great Price is one of over a hundred specimens, found in nine museums worldwide, of an artifact known to Egyptologists as a *hypocephalus* (from the Greek, meaning "under the head").⁸ The disk was usually between four and seven inches in diameter and made from various significant materials, from wood to bronze to leather and, on one occasion, bread dough (188). The owners of hypocephali were either priests and priestesses of Amun-Re⁹ or those with whom they associated (239). Directions for creating a hypocephalus appear in chapter 162 of the Book of the Dead in Egypt's Twenty-first Dynasty (1070–940 BC). In Facsimile no. 2, eight scenes are presented in panels, which make the Joseph Smith hypocephalus almost identical with hypocephali in museums in both Vienna and London (195).

Rhodes provides a brief description of the purpose behind the hypocephalus in his introduction: "Its fundamental purpose was similar to all

7. Andrew Curry, "The World's First Temple?" *Smithsonian* 39, no. 8 (2008): 54–60. See also Charles C. Mann, "The Birth of Religion: The World's First Temple," in *National Geographic* (June 2011): 34ff. Several websites discuss the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, also reputed to be very ancient.

8. Museums: Cairo, British Museum, Paris, Turin, Berlin, Boston Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania, Hermitage, Zagreb, and Vienna (192, 195). Photocopies of most of these examples are found in the Hugh Nibley Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

9. Min-Amun-Re proclaimed that all the universe is full of life, sustained and rejuvenated in and by the One at the Center. See Abr. 3:12, 14, 18 and explanations to figures 5–8; and Moses 1:28.

Egyptian funerary documents—to ensure the resurrection and deification of the dead. It graphically portrays the whole creation of God in a circular or spherical form” (xix). Besides being a creation drama (137), the hypocephalus “represents the circle of the universe” (206).

The hypocephalus may be one of the most significant historical artifacts to be largely ignored by historians and even many Egyptologists.¹⁰ For that reason, *One Eternal Round* breaks new ground in Egyptology as well as for LDS readers. Perhaps this lacuna has come about because of the hidden nature of the hypocephalus; the Egyptians considered it too sacred for common consumption, and it was to be understood only by the initiated few. Egyptologists today increasingly concede that Egyptian religious symbols involved an esoteric tradition, a supposition that Nibley operated under for decades—and Joseph Smith long before that. Nibley, who has personally examined 103 of these hypocephali (233), observes that the disk is “first and last a didactic astronomical chart, which is how Joseph Smith treats it” (222).

The Chapters

Because there is far too much information to attempt a summary of each of the fifteen chapters, I will instead provide teasers and insights from some of the chapters. One wonders how Nibley was able to keep the multifarious details straight in his brain as he worked through each chapter, though many of his notecards were arranged as neatly as a library card catalog.¹¹

Chapter 1, “The Critics,” traces the contempt some early Egyptologists had for Egyptian thought. The most influential Egyptologists were disappointed to discover that “religion¹² was the whole world of the Egyptians” (13), and they attempted to dismiss its significance—along with Joseph Smith’s interpretation of Egyptian religious artifacts. Recently, with the coming of New School Egyptologists, the religion of the Egyptians has taken its place as an important system of human thought, seen as a forerunner to the Greek tradition (16). These new developments in Egyptology should remind scholars of the resilience of Joseph Smith’s work: “The ancient scriptures revealed through Joseph Smith . . . all begin in the Egyptian setting and share in many points of Egyptian theological speculation” (13). For

10. Nibley discusses this problem in chapter 1, “The Critics.”

11. Nibley kept 3x5 notecards throughout the house and in a steamer trunk. When I processed these cards for the Nibley Archives, I measured these stacks of cards to be thirty-six linear feet.

12. For more information, see Donald B. Redford, ed., *The Ancient Gods Speak: A Guide to Egyptian Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

example, in chapter 2, we learn that exaltation and infinite progression are two principles that Latter-day Saints share with Egyptian theology, as well as cosmism, the belief that the universe's matter is uncreated (43–44). In the same vein, chapter 3 discusses dispensations and axial times—periods past or future in which the council of the gods come together—whether in times of creation or refreshing or upheaval—to save mankind and bring them to theosis, or godhood (78).

The middle chapters of the book distinguish between myth, ritual, and history, especially as they connect with Egyptian annual year-rites.¹³ “The purpose of the year-rite was to bring all things together in one clear revelation setting forth man’s condition” (113). Egyptian religion embraced the big picture: the meaning of life, the divine sphere, the godly cosmos of wholeness and unity. And this striving for broad meaning—to both Egyptians and to Joseph Smith—was not used ultimately to create myth but to recreate reality. To the Egyptians, observes Mircea Eliade, “reality is a function of the imitation of a celestial archetype” (106). And the Egyptians took this grand celestial archetype very seriously: evidence of the creation drama, which is related to the year-rite, has been found in every tomb, temple, or Coffin Text in Egypt (112). Nibley asserts that the coronation of Mosiah in the Book of Mormon is one of those year-rites, which harks directly to the “big picture” depicted in the hypocephalus (113).¹⁴

Chapters 7 and 8 explain how to read and interpret the hypocephalus. “The upper part of the hypocephalus brings together sun, moon, and stars in their various relationships” (285), as well as showing “a progression both in time and space” (289). The main purpose of the hypocephalus was to achieve an unbroken contact between spirit and body until the moment of resurrection (330). Understanding how both the Egyptians and the Prophet Joseph used representation will go a long way toward grasping Smith’s interpretations, as well as settling the question of myth versus reality. The man on the throne in figure 7 does not depict God, but is a *representation*. Likewise, what is being handed over is not the Holy Ghost but “‘the *sign* of the Holy Ghost’—a sign does not describe, it only points to something” (304).

13. See also Hugh Nibley, “Roman Games as a Survival of an Archaic Year Cult” (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1938).

14. Nibley mentions the Hopi people of the village of Hotevilla, which is believed to be the center of the world where the complete cycle of the year must be celebrated to keep the human race in contact with heaven (116). According to a Shoshone acquaintance of mine, Robert Mendez, there are four centers of the world which are the keepers of sacred writings, including the Hopi. The others are in the Swiss Alps, the Kikuyu tribe of Africa, and the Tibetans. See Lance M. Richardson, “They Saw Our Day” (Brigham City, Utah: Brigham Distributing, 2006).

The Egyptians and likewise Joseph Smith used representation to explain a deeper reality. This device, of course, has a long history, whether it be the creation story in Genesis or the parables of Jesus.

Chapter 9 reviews ascension dramas, ancient apocryphal texts that describe the ascension into heaven and cosmic tour of a patriarch, prophet, apostle, or other religious figure, with his subsequent return to earth to reveal what he has seen. “The Book of Abraham is a classic example of just such a text” (346). As such, these ascension dramas have more than a superficial attachment to hypocephali, and Nibley appropriately compares them with the following ascension dramas: *The Testament of Abraham*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *The Testament of Isaac*, the books of Enoch, *The Ascension of Moses*, the Book of Ezekiel, *Second Baruch*, the Book of Ezra, the Book of Revelation, *The Apocalypse of Paul*, *The Narrative of Zosimus*, *The Apocalypse of Elijah*, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and *Joseph and Asenath*. While reviewing these cosmic texts, the author challenges his readers in a passage that can only be called vintage Nibley:

One beauty of the hypocephalus is the broadening of our mean provincial existence. We ignore the fall of the sparrow, but strangely, God does not; we “suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by [us], and notice them not” (Mormon 8:39). We are not even interested in our own world except where it concerns our immediate success and comfort; we refuse even to consider the doctrines the Prophet Joseph has given us about the lives of other creatures in their respective sphere and element. It is the singular value of the Pearl of Great Price that it recognizes the reality of races, peoples, civilizations, and great empires, which everyone knows have existed through the ages but to which modern Christianity grants no access to salvation—to the Christian world it is as if they had never existed, though they represent at least ninety percent of the world’s population. (394)

Chapters 10 and 11 examine ancient Hermetic teachings and practices that were eventually rejected by Christianity but were resurrected by Joseph Smith. Nibley examines the Hermetic *Tabula Smaragdina* and “the similarities it shares with various objects described in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Chinese, Jewish, Early Christian, gnostic, and Arabic sources. These include shining stones, jade disks, the tablets of destiny, the Urim and Thummim, and especially the hypocephalus” (462). Like the philosopher’s stone, these jewels of discernment and tablets of destiny were instruments on which the ancients “said all their knowledge rested” (425). Nibley then provides five examples of Hermetic teachings that were rejected by conventional Christianity and Judaism but that are found in early Christianity. “The doctors of the fourth and fifth centuries . . . succeeded in condemning the doctrines of

(1) literalism, (2) cosmism, (3) plurality of worlds, (4) premortal existence of man, and (5) the creation as organization of matter” (484). Nibley clearly points out the relationship between these teachings and Facsimile no. 2.

Towards the end of his life, Nibley bemoaned how he had not learned much about mathematics—but that he would make up for it in the next life. However, Michael Rhodes points out that Nibley’s “discovery of the mathematical relationships depicted on Facsimile 2 such as the golden section or phi proportion, the $1-2-\sqrt{5}$ triangle, the Pythagorean 3-4-5 triangle, the Fibonacci series, the phi spiral, the pentagram and the hexagram (star of David), and their relationship with the biological and mineral worlds are remarkable and insightful, providing whole new areas of research for future scholars” (xxi–xxii).¹⁵ How fitting that the final chapter of Nibley’s last book was a foray into realms previously unexplored. And how fitting to end on that which endures beyond this crumbling sphere: “The day dawns when the nautilus is no more. The rainbow passes, the flower fades, the mountain crumbles, the star grows cold. But the beauty in mathematics—the divine proportion, the golden rectangle, *spira mirabilis*—endures forevermore.” For Nibley, this sacred geometry places on the hypocephalus “the stamp of eternity” (631–32).

Conclusion

Throughout Nibley’s long career, his critics have seen him as a patternist that has gone too far, conveniently seeing what fits and discarding what doesn’t. With *One Eternal Round*, it becomes more difficult to maintain this disparaging assessment of Nibley’s work. Nibley and Rhodes point out that they “are not picking convenient parallels at random,” but that the subjects treated in *One Eternal Round* are central and were of “immense importance” (73) to the Egyptians. Joseph Smith’s explanation of Facsimile 2 is at the core of what they sought after: an understanding of the nature of life, the afterlife, and the cosmos, all of which would lead them to resurrection and godhood. Nibley’s book provides significant evidence of Joseph Smith’s authenticity by presenting for the first time many facts, symbols, and artifacts that he could not have known about in his day.

Michael Rhodes is to be commended for faithfully observing Nibley’s intentions in *One Eternal Round*. In the final words of his introduction,

15. Nibley also looks at the music of the spheres and the Tree of Life in their connection to the hypocephalus. An updated discussion of the Tree of Life is found in a new publication by John W. Welch and Donald W. Parry, eds., *The Tree of Life: From Eden to Eternity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2011).

Rhodes writes the following: “*One Eternal Round*, Hugh Nibley’s final publication, the culmination of a life dedicated to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to discovering truth wherever it could be found, is a monument to his scholarship, his remarkable ability to see relationships in diverse areas of study and to synthesize them into a comprehensible whole, and his humble willingness to consecrate his work to the glory of the Lord and the furtherance of his kingdom here on earth. I consider it one of the greatest blessings of my life to have known him and to have associated and worked with him” (xxii). I fully empathize with Rhodes and wholeheartedly give my “Amen.”

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