



1-1-2015

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Midgley, Louis (2015) "Situating Nibley on Early Christianity: A Bibliography Note," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*: Vol. 7 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sba/vol7/iss1/8>

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Situating Nibley on Early Christianity: A Bibliographical Note

Louis Midgley

“PRESERVATION, RESTORATION, REFORMATION” was the title Nibley gave to a section or chapter, published here in part, of an undated, and unpublished, very rough manuscript entitled “The End of What?” and written early in his academic career.¹ By drawing upon my earlier effort to assemble, preserve, and annotate Hugh Nibley’s vast array of published and unpublished essays and books,² I will describe and strive to situate this essay within the larger context of his intellectual concerns. “Preservation” could have been part of a lecture course on the history of Christian faith, or it could have been the notes for a book on the abrupt

1. The 517-page manuscript entitled “The End of What?” actually ends on page 446. The remainder of the manuscript (pp. 447–517) is an untitled verse-by-verse commentary on the Gospel of Matthew that was somehow attached to the larger work but that bears no thematic connection to it.

2. See Louis Midgley, “Hugh Winder Nibley: Bibliography and Register,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, 27 March 1990* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 1:xv–lxxxvii. Shirley S. Ricks, with very minor assistance from me, and necessarily without my sometimes lengthy annotations, has continued to update and refine this bibliography. See “Bibliography of Hugh Winder Nibley’s Works, Secondary Works about Him, and Reviews of His Works,” available at <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1071>.

end of the primitive church. This rough manuscript does not seem to have been, as I will demonstrate, his first effort to grapple with the topic.

Unlike previous Latter-day Saint efforts to deal with the notion that something radical and terminal, though not total, began to go wrong with the primitive church even as the apostles attempted to obey the commandment to take the gospel to all the world, which ended the original church soon after the death of the apostles, Nibley insisted on taking a fresh look at what he would eventually call the “way of the church.” The results of his inquiries were often dismissive of the received opinions. His conclusion was that the apostles, whom he saw not as leaders of local communities of saints but as stewards of the entire community of saints, were soon replaced by powerful and quarreling bishops. Nibley saw the apostles as traveling authorities who provided general supervision to the church; they were, he argued, open to divine special revelations for the entire community of saints. With the death of the apostles, there had been a cessation of crucial charismatic gifts, including the end of revelation. The Light had suddenly been turned off.

Nibley’s academic training in classics and ancient history, coupled with his remarkable mastery of the relevant ancient and modern languages, as well as his disposition to examine closely the relevant sources, led to an intense study of the New Testament, the church fathers, and hence to compare and contrast what he found with the competing opinions of later churchmen and historians, both ancient and modern, in an effort to recover as well as possible what had actually happened. He sought to figure what those who were involved directly in the events experienced and expected, as well as the accounts provided by those who were then faced with explaining the radical changes from the way of the original primitive church.

“The End of What?” thus provides a window into Nibley’s effort to set out an original, well-grounded account of what Latter-day Saints see as apostasy. He argues that the church came to an abrupt end, even though teachings and practices remained in ever-increasingly altered forms. He sought to demonstrate that there was an original primitive church, which was guided by divine special revelations and led

by apostolic authority. Then something went wrong. Hence the title “The End of What?” “Preservation, Restoration, Reformation” is thus an intriguing sample of a much larger endeavor in which he was engaged early in his career and that seems to have been, from time to time, a concern to the end of his scholarly life.³

The first indication that seems to have been preserved of Nibley’s interest in apostasy is a twenty-three page mimeographed class hand-out, which I date to about 1952, entitled “Questions on Authority and Passages for Discussion (The Atonement).” This is a compendium of passages from the New Testament, the church fathers, and also historians of Christian antiquity relevant to the question of apostasy. The issues raised in this handout were later addressed in detail by Nibley in courses, lectures, and in a series of publications.⁴

In addition to “The End of What?” Nibley fashioned still another much more polished manuscript related to understanding what happened to the primitive church, which was later discovered by John W. Welch in 1977. From this meticulously typed manuscript, in 1954 he read lectures to, one can safely guess, bemused and perhaps yawning students. The title of the course was “Apostles and Bishops in the Early Church” and was eventually published under a similar title.⁵ Both of these large

3. Nibley’s endeavors were, of course, apologetic—that is, a setting out of historical accounts supporting, enriching, and defending the faith of Latter-day Saints. This is not a flaw in his scholarship. In a real sense everyone is obliged to defend their opinions. Hence every intellectual endeavor is necessarily a defense of some position by those who advance their opinion. Every author, as well as everyone with an interpretation or explanation, whether they recognize the fact or not, is thus an apologist. So the question is always how well one sets out and defends one’s position. These previously published essays have been made available in the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (CWHN)*, which consists of nineteen volumes.

4. Nibley collected quotations on topics related to changing scholarly and sectarian understandings of the scriptures, the history of Christianity and so forth, and circulated them in various forms. See, for example, a twelve-page collection entitled *New Discoveries concerning the Bible and Church History* (Provo, UT: BYU Extension Publications, 1963).

5. See Hugh Nibley, *Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity*, ed. John F. Hall and John W. Welch, CWHN 15 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005). Hall and Welch provide an excellent editor’s preface (pp. vii–xi) and also an editor’s

manuscripts seem to have been part of Nibley's abiding interest in the question of apostasy in the early church, or, more directly, what led to and resulted from the sudden end of the primitive church of Jesus Christ.

Nibley dealt with these and similar issues in a series of thirty-one essays entitled *Time Vindicates the Prophets* that he read over KSL from March 7 through October 17, 1954. These were immediately published in separate leaflets by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and then published in the book entitled *The World and the Prophets*.⁶ An indication of the contents of this collection is illustrated by the first essay, entitled "How Will It Be When None More Saith, 'I Saw'?"⁷

Nibley also set out his understanding of the end of the church in a series that appeared in the *Improvement Era* between January and December 1955, entitled "The Way of the Church."⁸ This series, which consisted of three parts, was abandoned without explanation. Although for a time he turned to writing about other matters for his Latter-day Saint audience, he had not lost interest in the question of what had happened to the church with the death of the apostles, which he argued came to an end with the end of genuine divine special revelations, resulting in, among other things, a closed canon of scripture, ecumenical councils, and a host of other radical changes. In 1961, the arguments he had set out in "The Way of the Church" were refined and assembled in an essay entitled "The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an

postscript (pp. 239–45), which supplement my thoughts here. Unfortunately this publication is out of print, and only the table of contents is currently available on the Maxwell Institute webpage.

6. *The World and the Prophets* was originally published by Deseret Book in 1954 and republished in an enlarged edition, also by Deseret Book, in 1962. It was published as volume 3 of the CWHN in 1987—Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987).

7. Hugh Nibley, "How Will It Be When None More Saith, 'I Saw'?" in *The World and the Prophets*, CWHN 3:1–8.

8. See Hugh Nibley, "The Way of the Church," *Improvement Era*, January–December 1955, reprinted in Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, CWHN 4 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 209–322.

Unpopular Theme.”⁹ This remarkable essay was directed to a non-LDS audience.

“The Passing of the Church” immediately drew some presumably hoped-for critical attention. The arguments for the fading of the church led to a protest by Hans J. Hillerbrand, who insisted, among other things, that if Nibley’s arguments were accepted, it would preclude teaching what is traditionally known as “church history.”¹⁰ If there was a genuine “passing of the church,” as Nibley argued, even though various elements of Christian faith and devotion still remain, it would be impossible to teach church history. Instead, one could only study the history of what happened after its passing. Hillerbrand seems to have feared that historians would end up having to teach the history of controversies and apostasies, which is what general histories of Christianity actually end up doing.

The editors of *Church History* called upon the distinguished Robert M. Grant¹¹ to respond to the incensed Hillerbrand.¹² Grant argued that historians would have to deal with Nibley’s arguments and evidence, and an appeal to a Protestant understanding of what constitutes the church would be futile. Only a Catholic understanding of the church

9. See Hugh Nibley, “The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme,” *Church History* 30/2 (1961): 131–54. This essay was subsequently reprinted, with two other closely related essays concerning the early church, as “The Passing of the Primitive Church (Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme),” in *When the Lights Went Out* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 1–32 (reprinted by FARMS in 2001); as “The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme,” in *BYU Studies* 16/1 (1975): 139–64; and as “The Passing of the Primitive Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, CWHN 4:168–208.

10. See Hans J. Hillerbrand, “The Passing of the Church: Two Comments on a Strange Theme,” *Church History* 30/3 (1961): 481–82. (Nibley did not respond to Hillerbrand, but others did.)

11. See Robert M. Grant, “The Passing of the Church: Comments on Two Comments on a Strange Theme,” *Church History* 30/3 (1961): 482–83, for this reply to Hillerbrand.

12. For an insightful response to this issue, see William A. Clebsch, “History and Salvation: An Essay in Distinctions,” in *The Study of Religion in Colleges and Universities*, ed. Paul Ramsey and John F. Wilson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 40–72, at 67.

can make sense of whether it faded away or not. And Nibley's being a Latter-day Saint is not a reason for rejecting his arguments and ignoring his evidences. According to Grant, if what continues was not the original church, it makes no sense to turn to the magisterial Reformers for their understanding of what constitutes the church. The issue must be dealt with by engaging Nibley's arguments. If the church did not persist, then one can only tell the story of various competing factions, or competing interpretations of the Bible, or theological squabbles, or the history of religion. Grant rejected attempts to avoid the issues raised by Nibley by reducing, among other things, church history to the "history of interpretation," shifting to "history of Christian religion."¹³

Responding to this issue, William Clebsch argued that more than merely writing about versions of Christianities is at stake. If one were to grant that the church faded away, then "Christian faith itself will not long outlive its major premise: God's real presence in human history—past, present, and future." "Indeed, the church historian must assume the survival of his object of investigation." But the assumption of continuity cannot be settled because the "hard data indicate as much discontinuity as continuity in the church."¹⁴

The tendency has been, as Nibley expected, for scholars to avoid the crucial issue of the survival of the church by turning instead to writing about history of "religion," an ambiguous and amorphous term, and more recently to secular religious studies. The publication of "Preservation, Restoration, Reformation" thus raises again the issues Nibley sought to address: how ought the Saints and others understand apostasy both in the original covenant community of saints and hence also in the present?

13. See Clebsch, "History and Salvation."

14. Clebsch, "History and Salvation," 70.

Appendix: Chronological Bibliography of Hugh Nibley's Works on Early Christianity

"Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times." A series of articles in the *Improvement Era*.

"Part 1." *IE*, December 1948, 786–88, 836–38.

"Part 2." *IE*, January 1949, 24–26, 60.

"Part 3." *IE*, February 1949, 90–91, 109–10, 112.

"Part 4." *IE*, March 1949, 146–48, 180–83.

"The Dilemma: Part 5—Conclusion." *IE*, April 1949, 212–14.

"The Unsolved Loyalty Problem: Our Western Heritage." *Western Political Quarterly* 6/4 (1953): 631–57.

Time Vindicates the Prophets. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1954. 30 pamphlets, weekly radio addresses from 7 March to 17 October.

The World and the Prophets. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954. 250 pp.

1. "How Will It Be When None More Saith 'I Saw'?"
2. "A Prophet's Reward"
3. "Prophets and Preachers"
4. "Prophets and Scholars"
5. "Prophets and Philosophers"
6. "Prophets and Creeds"
7. "The Prophets and the Search for God"
8. "Prophets and Gnostics"
9. "The Schools and the Prophets"
10. "St. Augustine and the Great Transition"
11. "A Substitute for Revelation"
12. "Prophets and Mystics"
13. "Rhetoric and Revelation"
14. "Prophets and Reformers"
15. "The Prophets and the Open Mind"
16. "Prophets and Miracles"
17. "Prophets and Ritual"

18. "Easter and the Prophets"
19. "Two Ways to Remember the Dead"
20. "Prophets and Martyrs"
21. "The Ancient Law of Liberty"
22. "Prophets and Crisis"
23. "The Prophets and the Scriptures"
24. "The Book of Mormon as a Witness"
25. "Prophecy and Tradition"
26. "The Prophets and the Plan of Life"
27. "A Prophetic Event"
28. "Prophecy and Office"
29. "What Makes a True Church"
30. "Prophets and Glad Tidings"

"The Way of the Church—1"

"Controlling the Past (A Consideration of Methods)." *IE*, January 1955, 20–22, 44–45.

"Controlling the Past." *IE*, February 1955, 86–87, 104, 106–7.

"Controlling the Past: Part 3." *IE*, March 1955, 152–54, 166, 168.

"Controlling the Past: Part 4." *IE*, April 1955, 230–32, 258, 260–61.

"Controlling the Past: Part 5." *IE*, May 1955, 306–8, 364–66.

"Controlling the Past: Part 6." *IE*, June 1955, 384–86, 455–56.

"The Way of the Church—2"

"Two Views of Church History." *IE*, July 1955, 502–4, 538.

"Two Views of Church History: Part 2." *IE*, August 1955, 570–71, 599–600, 602–6.

"Two Views of Church History: Part 3." *IE*, September 1955, 650–53.

"Two Views of Church History: Part 4." *IE*, October 1955, 708–10.

"The Way of the Church—3"

"The Apocalyptic Background, 1: The Eschatological Dilemma." *IE*, November 1955, 817, 829–31.

"The Apocalyptic Background, 2: The Eschatological Dilemma." *IE*, December 1955, 902–3, 968.

- “The Idea of the Temple in History.” *Millennial Star* 120 (August 1958): 228–37, 247–49.
- “Christian Envy of the Temple.” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 50/2 (October 1959): 97–123.
- “Christian Envy of the Temple [part 2].” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 50/3 (January 1960): 229–40.
- “The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme.” *Church History* 30/2 (June 1961): 131–54.
- The World and the Prophets*. 2nd enl. ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1962. 281 pp. Chapters same as 1954 version plus:
31. “The Doctors’ Dilemma”
 32. “The Return of the Prophets?”
- “Three Shrines: Mantic, Sophic, and Sophistic (The Confrontation of Greek and Christian Religiosity).” Three Deseret Lectures given on 1, 2, and 3 May 1963, Sterling Library Lecture Hall, Yale University.
- New Discoveries concerning the Bible and Church History*. Provo, UT: BYU Extension Publications, 1963.
- The Early Christian Church in Light of Some Newly Discovered Papyri from Egypt*. Provo, UT: BYU Extension Publications, 1964.
- “Early Accounts of Jesus’ Childhood.” *Instructor*, January 1965, 35–37.
- “The Expanding Gospel.” *BYU Studies* 7/1 (1965): 3–27.
- “Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20/1 (1966): 1–24.
- “Jerusalem: In Christianity.” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 9:1568–75. New York: Macmillan, 1972.
- “Treasures in the Heavens: Some Early Christian Insights into the Organizing of Worlds.” *Dialogue* 8/3–4 (1974): 76–98.
- “The Passing of the Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme.” *BYU Studies* 16/1 (1975): 139–64.

“The Early Christian Prayer Circle.” *BYU Studies* 19/1 (1978): 41–78.

The World and the Prophets. CWHN 3. Edited by John W. Welch, Gary P. Gillum, and Don E. Norton. 3rd ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987. xii + 333 pp. Chapters same as 1962 version.

Mormonism and Early Christianity. CWHN 4. Edited by Todd M. Compton and Stephen D. Ricks. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987. xiii + 446 pp.

“Early Accounts of Jesus’ Childhood”

“*Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum*: The Forty-day Mission of Christ—The Forgotten Heritage”

“The Early Christian Prayer Circle”

“Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times”

“The Passing of the Primitive Church”

“The Way of the Church”

“Jerusalem in Early Christianity”

“What Is a Temple?”

“Christian Envy of the Temple”

Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity. CWHN 15. Edited by John F. Hall and John W. Welch. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005. xxv + 254 pp.

“The Office of Bishop in the Early Christian Church as a Whole”

“The Office of Bishop in the Church in Rome”

Louis Midgley, now an emeritus professor, taught the history of political philosophy at Brigham Young University.