The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley Volume 1, Old Testament and Related Studies

Hugh Nibley

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Hugh Nibley is the best-known and most highly revered of Latter-day Saint scholars. For over forty years he has enthralled his readers and listeners with his encyclopedic knowledge, his wit, and his untiring research in defense of Latter-day Saint beliefs. It is not saying too much to suggest that he has become a legendary figure in Latter-day Saint academic circles. He has developed a remarkable following among his readers and former students, several of
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whom now continue his work in academic professions of their own. This book, published by Deseret Book and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, inaugurates an ambitious multivolume project to gather and publish "all of Hugh Nibley's published books and articles, as well as many other previously unpublished papers and transcribed talks" (vi). The Collected Works series represents a major effort to honor him for his many accomplishments.

Nibley has had his detractors as well. Because of his unhesitating willingness to speak out in defense of Latter-day Saint positions, he often finds himself a target for the Church's critics. Since his 1946 publication of No Ma'am, That's Not History, he has been seen by many as the Church's chief apologist. Even today, some feel that if they can neutralize the arguments of Hugh Nibley, they have effectively refuted the beliefs of the Church. Nibley himself would undoubtedly agree that such a stance both overestimates his arguments and underestimates the strength of the Church's teachings. In his role as a defender of the faith, Nibley has served extremely well and deserves our highest admiration and praise. Those of us who share his conviction that the restored gospel is true would do well to emulate his lifelong dedication to defending and sustaining it. My own serious misgivings about his methodology do not detract from my admiration for his life of scholarship consecrated to the highest cause.

In the present volume, eleven items are collected which are related in some way to the Old Testament. They were presented originally either in print or from the speaker's platform between 1956 and 1980. Only three of the eleven (chaps. 1, 4, and 6) had not been published previously. Echoing the feelings of Nibley's followers throughout the Church, editor John W. Welch suggests in his Foreword that most of Nibley's lifetime total of nearly two hundred titles are classics (ix). If that is in fact the case, then this volume has been severely shortchanged; nothing in it can be called a classic. It is, in fact, a disappointing collection.

There are several areas about which I have concerns regarding the material in this book:

1. In most of the articles Nibley shows a tendency to gather sources from a variety of cultures all over the ancient world, lump them all together, and then pick and choose the bits and pieces he wants. By selectively including what suits his presuppositions and ignoring what does not, he is able to manufacture an ancient system of religion that is remarkably similar in many ways to our own—precisely what he sets out to demonstrate in the first place.
There are serious problems involved in this kind of methodology. The various religious communities from whose documents Nibley draws his material had mutually exclusive beliefs in many areas. By removing their ideas from their own context (thus rendering them invalid) and joining them with ideas from other communities—similarly removed from their own context—Nibley creates an artificial synthesis that never in reality existed. The result would be unacceptable and no doubt unrecognizable to any of the original groups. Generalization is the key ingredient. Such phrases as “the ancient world is now all one” (13), “ancient civilization was . . .” (43), and “according to the ancients” (131) presuppose a common worldview for all the disparate cultures of the ancient world. But this idea is as unhelpful as “according to modern man” would be to postulate a common ideology for Ottoman bureaucrats, Bolshevik revolutionaries, Nazi fascists, Afghan peasant women, and Manhattan Yuppies. In spite of influences such as Hellenism, the Roman Empire, and Christianity, the ancient world was as diverse as our own, if not more so—a fact that is generally ignored in this book. Nibley’s chapter “Treasures in the Heavens” is one of the most sophisticated in the book, but in it the most puzzling examples of this methodological pitfall can be found. It speaks of the “treasure’ texts,” a term which is not defined but which, judging from the sources cited, must include documents from the Old and New Testament pseudepigrapha, the Essenes, the Mandaeans, the Gnostics, the Manichaens, the Early Christian Fathers, the ancient Egyptians, and the classical Greek poets. If we define an artificial collection like this—which spans hundreds of years, thousands of miles, and widely diverse societies and religions—as all being the same (they were “all teaching very much the same thing,” [126]), we can bring forth proof that “the ancients” believed anything we want them to believe.

This kind of method seems to work from the conclusions to the evidence—instead of the other way around. And too often it necessitates giving the sources an interpretation for which little support can be found elsewhere. I found myself time and time again disagreeing with this book’s esoteric interpretations of Qumran passages. In several places Nibley sees things in the sources that simply don’t seem to be there (for example, most of the preexistence references in the Dead Sea Scrolls, cited in chap. 7). This is what inevitably happens when scholars let their predetermined conclusions set the agenda for the evidence. The work in this book is better informed and more sophisticated than the Dead-Sea-Scrolls-prove-the-gospel-is-true firesides and tapes that have been
popular around the Church, but the methodology is not much different.

2. In this book Nibley often uses his secondary sources the same way he uses his primary sources—taking phrases out of context to establish points with which those whom he quotes would likely not agree. I asked myself frequently what some authors would think if they knew that someone were using their words the way Nibley does (the same question I asked myself concerning his ancient sources as well).

3. Several of the articles lack sufficient documentation and some lack it altogether. This is to be expected in a collection that includes popular articles and transcripts of speeches. The editors clearly deserve our praise for trying to bring Nibley’s footnotes up to professional standards. But given the complexity of the material, it was not always possible. The first article, for example, is riddled with undocumented quotations. Some of Nibley’s most puzzling assertions remain undocumented—or unconvincingly documented—even in those articles that are footnoted heavily. The two most extensively referenced articles, “Treasures in the Heavens” and “Qumran and the Companions of the Cave,” display the opposite problem. The seemingly endless footnotes in those articles suffer from dreary overkill, and yet too often I was disappointed by searching in vain in them for proof for the claims made in the text.

4. Nibley’s wit has made him one of the most sought-after speakers in the Church. But I am dismayed to find in this collection several passages in which his satire tends toward sarcasm and name-calling, which have no place in serious scholarship. A frequent vehicle for this is the straw-man approach. Nibley frequently misrepresents his opponents’ views (through overstatement, oversimplification, or removal from context) to the point that they are ludicrous, after which he has ample cause to criticize them. This may make amusing satire, but it is not scholarship. Nibley has made a fine career of responding to those who have either willfully or unknowingly misrepresented Joseph Smith and the gospel. Thus I am troubled that this book would contain the same kind of distortion. If it is unfair when directed against us, is it somehow an acceptable method when directed at our critics?

Among those satirized in this book are “the learned” (8), archaeologists (chap. 2), “the clergy” (38–39), “professional scholars” (39), “secular scholars” (39), “the doctors” (217–18), “the schoolmen” (217), and “the doctors, ministers, and commentators” (221). We read that recent document discoveries “have proven so upsetting” (8), “startling” (241), “disturbing” (241), and
“maddening” (241) to people of this sort, and that “there was a lot of political and other pressure to keep them from coming out” (125). These are frequent, but inaccurate and grossly unfair, leit-motifs in this book. “The clergy,” according to Nibley (I have no idea who this means here), exhibited “marked coolness” to the Dead Sea Scrolls (39). Why would they be “warm” to them, or “cold,” or anything else? The Dead Sea Scrolls are irrelevant to what clergy do; most don’t know or care that they exist.

5. My final area of concern is more properly directed at the editors than at Hugh Nibley. What is the point of publishing some of this material? There clearly is merit in republishing significant material that has been unavailable to readers for many years. But few thinkers in the history of the world have been so good that everything they ever wrote or spoke should be memorialized in this way. Several of the chapters in this book, particularly 9 and 10, are so weak that the editors would have been doing Nibley a much greater honor if they had left them out. What is the point of resurrecting such material, which is now completely out-of-date and was not even quality work when first published three decades ago? In doing so they have not done Nibley a service, nor have they served his readers.

Hugh Nibley’s contributions to Latter-day Saint scholarship have been to a large degree the product of his willingness to take a refreshing, imaginative view of things and express it in refreshing, imaginative ways. This book, despite some of the methodology used in it, contains a share of what Nibley does best. I found his discussion of the Creation and the Creation accounts (64, 69–74) to be very insightful—and enjoyable reading as well. I was most intrigued with his brief note on humans and animals on other planets (146), in which he proposes that on distant worlds different varieties of animals are found, but humans (presumably because we are God’s children) are the same everywhere. Nibley’s thoughts on “the silliest doctrine of all,” cultural evolution (80–81), are well-stated. His keen perspective on human nature is expressed in thought-provoking terms: “To be first is Satan’s first principle” (95); “You can always find somebody who is worse than you are to make you feel virtuous” (217); and “To be highly successful in this life is hardly the ultimate stamp of virtue” (233). “Scholarship,” he tells us, “is also an age-old, open-ended discussion in which the important thing is not to be right at a given moment but to be able to enter seriously into the discussion” (28). And all of us who engage in academic pursuits should beware of “the gas law of learning”: “Any amount of information no matter how small will fill any intellectual void no matter how large” (4).
Nibley never rests from defending the Book of Mormon, which he calls “God’s challenge to the world” (16). Particularly timely, in light of recent notions concerning its origin, is his comment: “Unlike the Bible, it cannot be partly true, for the Book of Mormon itself closes the door on such a proposition” (17).

As usual, Nibley is at his best when he is being a social critic. Small pockets of social criticism appear in various places in the book, but the largest concentration is found in his chapter “Great Are the Words of Isaiah.” Note the thought-provoking comments on “successful people” and Zoramites (221–22). Nibley lists among his (and to a lesser degree, Isaiah’s) areas of concern for potential danger: competitive society (227), the courts (228), real estate development, bribery, trade (229), and power (232).

Finally, my favorite part of the book is the brief but all-too-instructive story of the dog cave on 253–54. One learns a lot from this real-life episode. And, incidentally, one should also gain from it a healthy skepticism for much of what has been passed down to us from the ancient world—including those documents and traditions that Nibley holds in such high regard.

Hugh Nibley’s iconoclastic and imaginative way of looking at things has opened a whole world of excitement and challenge to those of us who have read his words and heard him speak. Far fewer in the Church today would be interested in scriptural research and ancient things in general if Hugh Nibley had not come along. For this we can all be sincerely thankful to him and for him. He has served for over four decades as a faithful apologist (in the most positive sense of the word) for the Church. Because of this, criticism directed at his work is more often than not actually aimed at the Church and its scriptures instead. Such is not the case with this review. The task at hand has been to evaluate one book only, not an entire career. Unfortunately, this book is not a collection of Nibley’s best material. It will likely turn out to be the weakest in the Collected Works series.