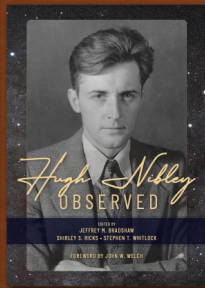


What Five Things Did Hugh Nibley Teach Us About the Temple?

Book of Moses Insight: May 13, 2021

WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT THE TEMPLE FROM HUGH NIBLEY?

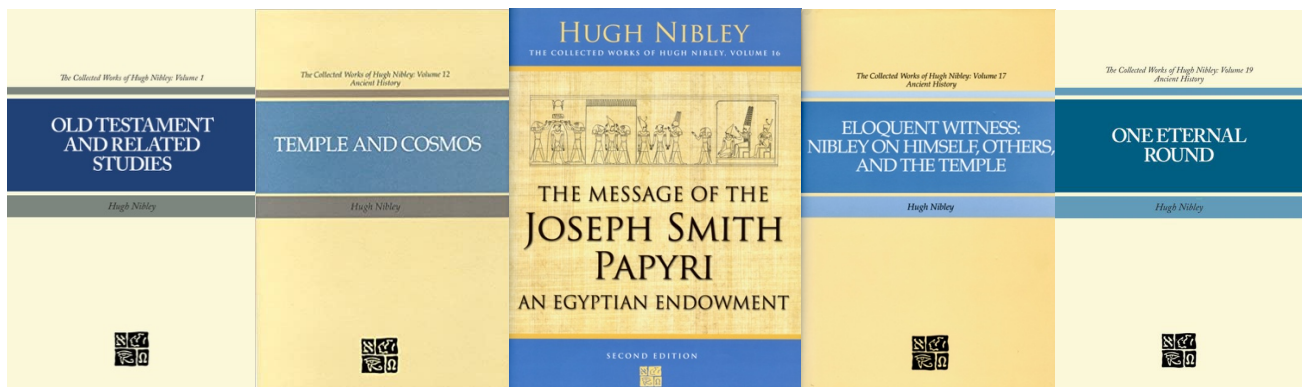


THINGS THAT MATTERED MOST TO HUGH NIBLEY

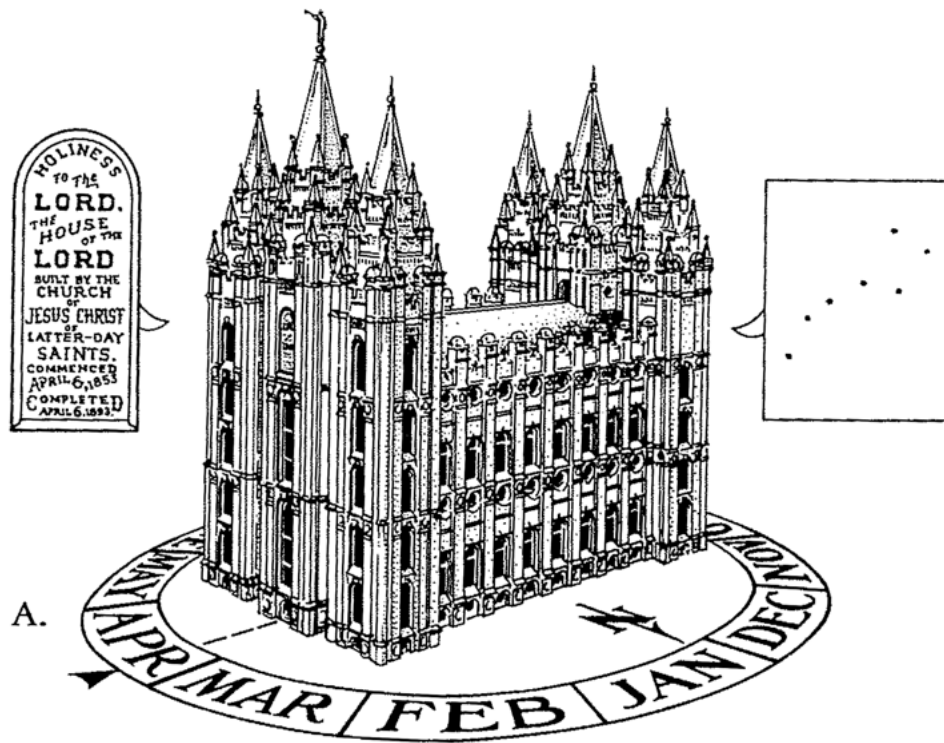
Elder Marion D. Hanks once joked that, “as president of the Salt Lake Temple he had been asked some questions so deep that only ‘Hugh Nibley and the Almighty might know how to answer them.’”¹ His remark, though made in a light-hearted vein, underscore the love and trust Church leaders and members have in his temple scholarship. What can we learn about the temple from Hugh Nibley? Let’s look at a few highlights.



Before leaving on his mission in 1927, Hugh Nibley received his temple blessings in the Salt Lake Temple. Speaking of his endowment, he remembered: “I was very serious about it. ... And the words of the initiatory [part of the endowment] — I thought those were the most magnificent words I have ever heard spoken.”² Admitting that his first visit to the temple had left him “in something of a daze,” his return to the temple after his mission was an overwhelming experience: “At that time I knew it was the real thing. Oh, boy, did I!”³

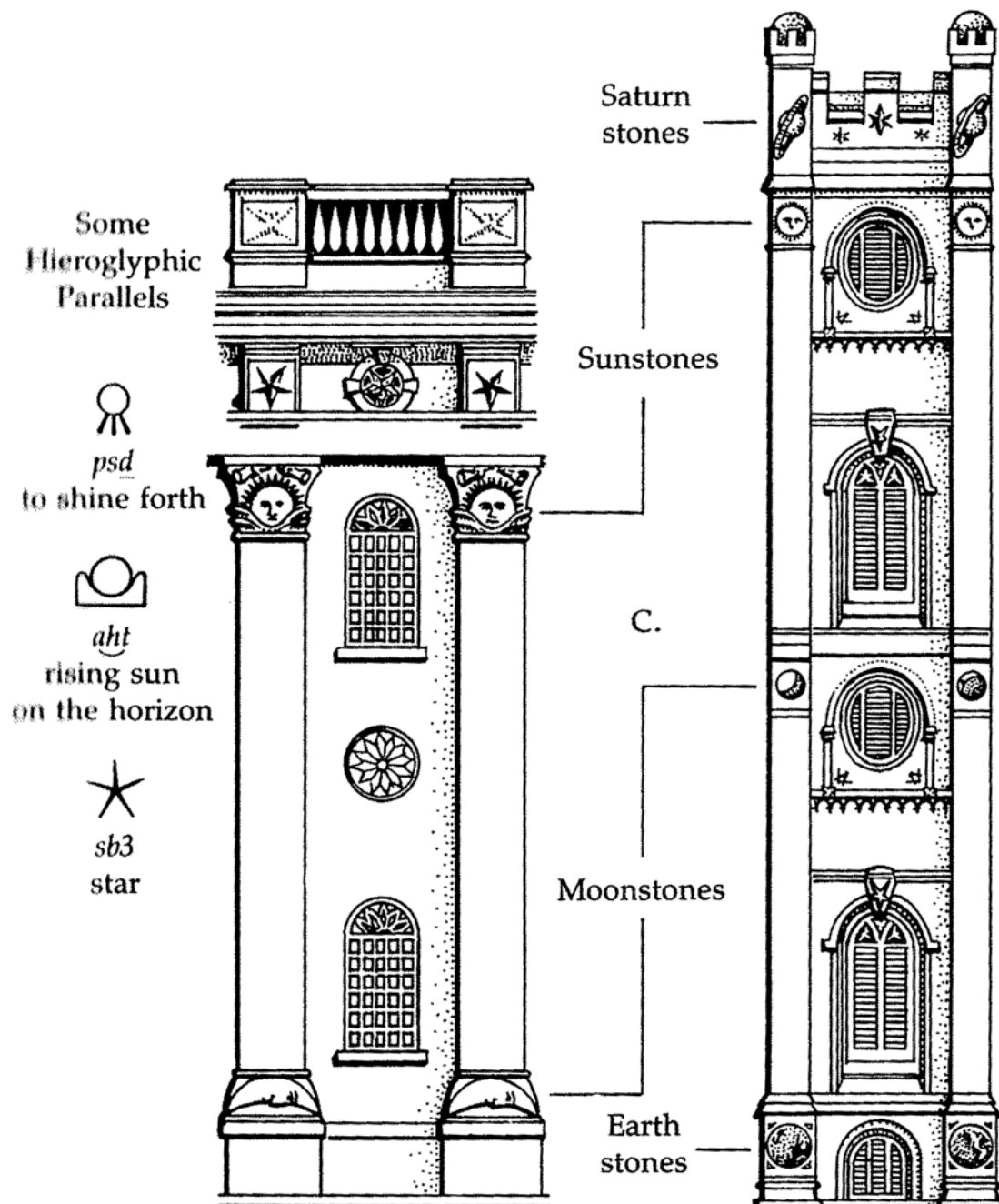


Nibley remained a devoted participant and student of the temple throughout his life. His writings drew on his extensive knowledge of the ancient world and illuminated many aspects of restored temple ordinances. Nearly everything he wrote about from the mid-1970s onward had something to do with the temple.

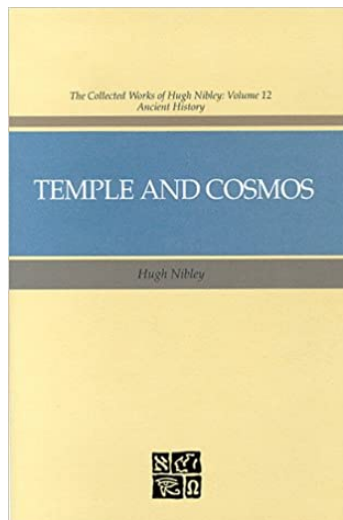


Courses of time represented in the horizontal planes of the Salt Lake Temple.

First, Nibley famously said that the temple “is a scale model of the universe, ... for the purpose of taking our bearings on the universe and in the eternities.”⁴ What did he mean by that? Well, for one thing we can see a magnificent example in the Salt Lake Temple. With respect taking our bearings, Nibley referred to Truman Angell’s statement that the moral of the Big Dipper on the western façade was that “the lost may find themselves by the Priesthood.”⁵ As to time and eternity, Nibley noted that on the horizontal planes of the temple the foundation stones are laid clockwise corresponding to the succession of hours in a day, the fifty earthstones show our world rotating through the seven days of the week, and the moonstones show the courses of the year.⁶

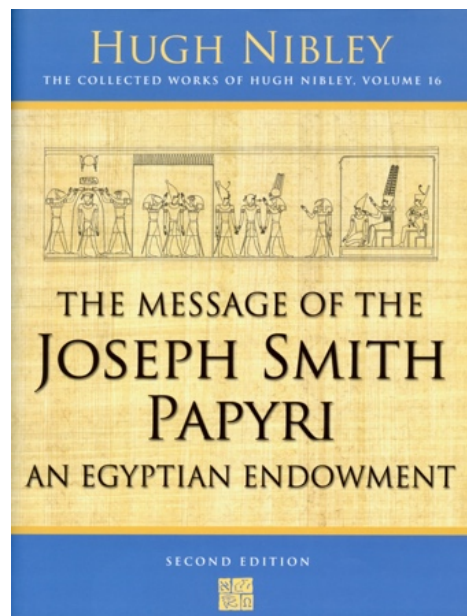


On the vertical planes, we see we ascend heavenward from the earth to the moon, sun, and Saturn as the scattered stars shine out to typify the glory of the heavens.



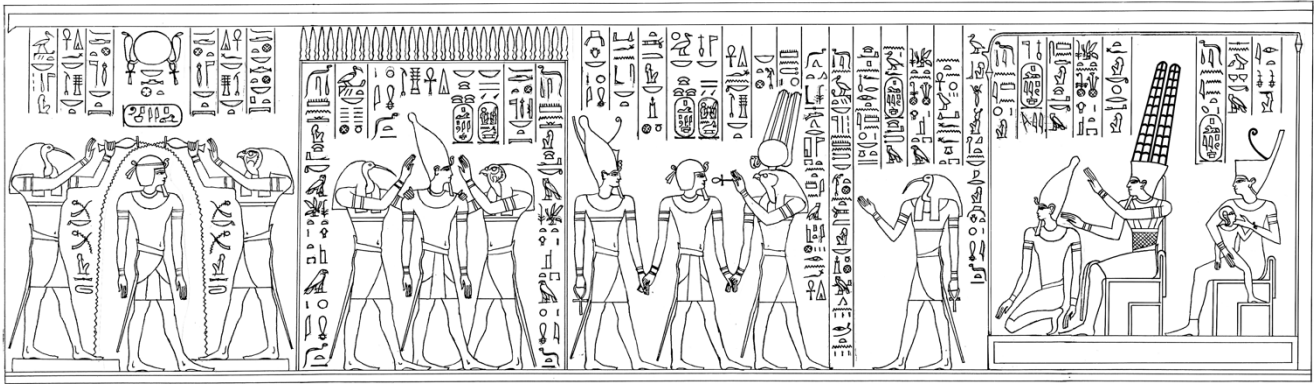
*Temple and Cosmos.*⁷

Second, Nibley taught that modern temples have ancient roots, with tattered fragments of authentic temple worship scattered throughout the world. He traced ancient likenesses of modern temples, ordinances, initiatory, endowments, prayer circles, sealings and their covenants, especially the law of consecration, which was to him “the consummation of the laws of obedience and sacrifice [and] the threshold of the celestial kingdom, the last and hardest requirement made of men in this life”⁸ and “can only be faced against sore temptation.”⁹



*Second edition of The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment.*¹⁰

Nibley took a special interest in the temple rites of ancient Egypt, and, according to Egyptologist John Gee, “was ahead of his time” in recognizing that the Book of Breathings was an initiation text, and that so-called Egyptian funerary texts were not merely intended for the dead but were also “used by the living. This point has ... become mainstream” in Egyptian scholarship.¹¹



According to Nibley:¹²

This sequence from a temple at Karnak shows how the royal initiation culminated in ritual embraces. In each scene the words of instruction are written over the heads of the speakers. First comes the washing or baptism, then (in another room) the bestowal of crown and throne; then the candidate is conducted by ministers of “life, health, strength, and joy” to Thoth the [Master of Ceremonies], who introduces him at the last shrine, where he receives the paternal embrace that confirms his “appearing in glory on the throne of his father Re.” Finally, the maternal embrace of Innt, who says, “I nurse thee with my milk.” Thus, the rites end in the intimate embrace of the primordial family.



Third, Nibley taught that the temple is a “house of learning.”¹³ He wrote, “If I went to the temple five times and nothing happened. I would stop going. But I’ve gone hundreds of times, and the high hopes of new knowledge with which I go up the hill every week are never disappointed.”¹⁴ According to Boyd Petersen:¹⁵

On another occasion, [Nibley] commented: “Last Saturday I left the temple loaded with instructions, specific instructions.” And then he revealed his secret for gaining knowledge from temple work: “I found it all laid out for me, because I was looking for it. That is always the case when you are going to the temple.”¹⁶ This is [a] comforting factor: Hugh gets out of his temple trips what he puts into them. When he attends the temple, he actively seeks knowledge and insight rather than just hoping for it. And he rejoices in whatever insight or knowledge he gains.



Brian Kershisnik: Holy Woman.

Fourth, Nibley observed that we have much to learn from Adam and Eve that is applicable our own time and culture:¹⁷

“In the Eden story [Eve] holds her own as a lone woman in the midst of an all-male cast of no less than seven supermen and angels,” wrote Hugh.¹⁸ He viewed Eve as more progressive than Adam — “she takes the initiative, pursuing the search for ever greater light and knowledge while Adam cautiously holds back.”¹⁹ ... He has specifically addressed the inequality that many see in the temple covenants:²⁰

[Adam and Eve] supervise each other. Adam is given no arbitrary power; Eve is to heed him only insofar as he obeys the Father — and who decides that? She must keep check on him as much as he does on her. It is, if you will, a system of checks and balances in which each party is as distinct and independent in its sphere as are the departments of government under the Constitution — and just as dependent on each other.



Hugh and Phyllis outside the Salt Lake Temple, May 1984.²¹

Fifth, Nibley attended the temple frequently. Every Saturday morning, so long as his health permitted, he would walk the few miles uphill from his home to the Provo temple and back. Paying tribute to his fellow Saints who engage in temple service, he wrote:²²

Five days a week between three and four o'clock in the morning, hundreds of elderly people along the Wasatch Front bestir themselves to go up and begin their long hours of work in the temple, where they are ready to greet the firstcomers at 5:30 a.m. At that time, long before daylight, the place is packed, you can't get in, so I virtuously wait until later, much later, in the day. Whatever they may be up to, here is a band of mortals who are actually engaged in doing something which has not their own comfort, convenience, or profit as its object. Here at last is a phenomenon that commands respect in our day and could safely be put forth among the few valid arguments we have to induce the Deity to spare the human race: thousands of men and women putting themselves out for no ulterior motive. There is a touch of true nobility here. What draws them to the temple? There is no music, pageantry, or socializing to beguile the time; none of us begins to grasp the full significance of what is going on, yet nobody seems bored. Why is that? ... *The temple, as the very name proclaims, is a place where one takes one's bearings on the universe.*

Yours truly,
Hugh Nibley

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Endnotes

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- 1 B. J. Petersen, Nibley, p. 351.
- 2 Ibid., p. 352.
- 3 Ibid., p. 352.
- 4 H. W. Nibley, Meaning of Temple, p. 15. See Ann M. Madsen in J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, p. 202.
- 5 H. W. Nibley, Meaning of Temple, p. 17.
- 6 Ibid., p. 16.
- 7 H. W. Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos*.
- 8 H. W. Nibley, *Foundation*, p. 168.
- 9 H. W. Nibley, *Sacred*, p. 34.
- 10 H. W. Nibley, *Message* (2005).
- 11 John Gee, Introduction to the Second Edition, *ibid.*, pp. xxii–xxiii.
- 12 Ibid., p. 445. Cf. H. W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, 16, p. 201.
- 13 Doctrine and Covenants 88:119; 109:8, 14.
- 14 Hugh Nibley in J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, p. 51.
- 15 B. J. Petersen, Nibley, p. 357.
- 16 H. W. Nibley, *But What Kind*, p. 261.
- 17 B. J. Petersen, Nibley, p. 360.
- 18 H. W. Nibley, *Patriarchy*, p. 90.

19 Ibid., p. 92.

20 Ibid., p. 92.

21 J. M. Bradshaw *et al.*, *Hugh Nibley Observed*, p. 50.

22 Ibid., pp. 50–51.