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Insights

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Hugh W. Nibley
1910–2005



Photos courtesy of the Nibley family.

Hugh Nibley Dies at 94

By John Gee

Hugh Winder Nibley (27 March 1910–24 February 2005) was a gifted writer, a prolific author, a first-class scholar, and, above all, a committed member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Hugh was educated at UCLA (AB summa cum laude) and Berkeley (PhD in history). He taught at Claremont Colleges before World War II. During the war, he enlisted in the army and served in military intelligence; he was involved in combat on D day and in Operation Market-Garden. He correctly predicted the Battle of the Bulge. After the war, he was employed at Brigham Young University. For well over a half century, until his doctor ordered him to stop researching in 2002, he was a permanent fixture in the BYU library.

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Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon

By John W. Welch

At first light on 6 June 1944, the first of many Allied landing craft began hitting the beaches of Normandy. At Utah Beach, 12 men dangling from one of the emerging jeeps cheered their driver on as they surged up from beneath the surface of the chilly English Channel waters. That driver, an army intelligence officer with a PhD in ancient history from the University of California at Berkeley, was none other than Hugh W. Nibley, age 34.

While preparing for the invasion, Hugh had visited several antiquarian bookstores in London—walking out with armloads of Arabic and Greek literary treasures. He had also, on the sly, slipped a copy of the Book of Mormon into one of the 55 pockets in his regimental intelligence corps fatigues.

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it really hit me—how astonishing the Book of Mormon truly is. It had never occurred to me before, but all I could think of all that day was how wonderful this Book of Mormon was.”¹

Judged by any standard, the Book of Mormon is nothing ordinary. So it seems only right that possibly the most illustrious scholar yet to have investigated the Book of Mormon should have become fascinated with it in no ordinary way. After Utah Beach, Hugh Nibley was never again the same. Nor was Book of Mormon scholarship.

Hugh Nibley's extensive contribution to Book of Mormon studies is a monument of dedication and ingenuity. It needs to be approached from several angles.

The most apparent is in terms of sheer volume. He was over 40 (older than the Prophet Joseph was when he was martyred at Carthage) when his first book, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites*, appeared in 1952. But he went on to add many significant articles and three other major works on the Book of Mormon to his list of publications—on numerous other subjects—which now numbers well over 150.

Lehi in the Desert broke new ground. Hugh's broad range of knowledge about the ancient Near East, and especially his fluent Arabic, enabled him to reconstruct the cultural background of men like Lehi and Nephi and to read between the lines in the Book of Mormon to identify evidences of the world in which they lived. Few scholars had even thought of seeing such things.

Elder John A. Widtsoe acclaimed this book even before it was off the press: “This study has been done in such a manner as to make real and understandable these early peoples, and to make them living persons to those of this day, thousands of years removed. . . . The book could not have been written except with vast acquaintance with sources of historical learning. It has been written also under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. . . . For [many reasons] this book, which becomes a powerful witness of the Book of Mormon, becomes also doubly precious to the leaders of the latter-day faith.”²

The method of this book, as Hugh once explained it, is “simply to give the Book of Mormon the benefit of the doubt.” If the reader is at least willing to indulge the assumption that Lehi lived in Jerusalem around 600 BC, what he will find in the Book of Mormon itself will be remarkably consistent with what we know about that period of history from a secular standpoint.



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The kinds of ancient Near Eastern facts and observations Brother Nibley included in *Lehi in the Desert* cover such points as language, literature, archaeology, history, culture, and politics. Here are a few samples:

“Egyptian literary writings regularly close with the formula *iw-f-pw* ‘thus it is,’ ‘and so it is.’ Nephi ends the main sections of his book with the phrase ‘And thus it is, Amen’ (1 Nephi 9:6; 14:30; 22:31)” (*Lehi in the Desert*, 17).

“[I] was once greatly puzzled over the complete absence of *Baal* names from the Book of Mormon. By what unfortunate oversight had the authors of that work failed to include a single name containing the element *Baal*, which thrives among the personal names of the Old Testament? . . . It happens that for some reason or other the Jews at the beginning of the sixth century BC would have nothing to do with *Baal* names. . . . ‘Out of some four hundred personal names among the Elephantine papyri, not one is compounded of *Baal*.’ . . . It is very significant indeed, but hardly more so than the uncanny acumen which the Book of Mormon displays on this point” (*Lehi in the Desert*, 33–34, including a quotation from the late J. Offord).

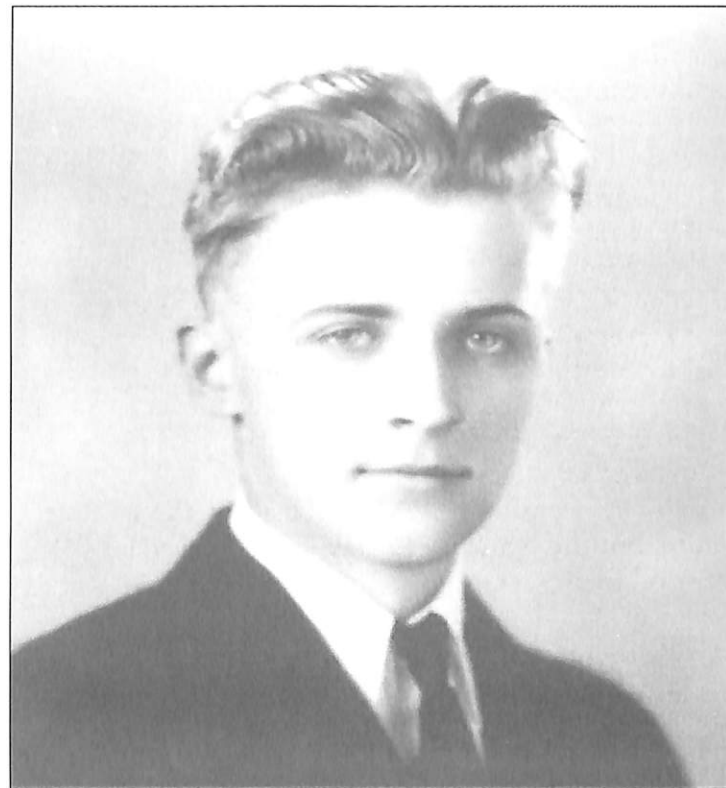
“When [Lehi] dreams of a river, it is a true desert river, a clear stream a few yards wide with its source but a hundred paces away (1 Nephi 8:13–14) or else a raging muddy wash, a *sayl* of ‘filthy water’ that sweeps people away to their destruction (1 Nephi 8:32; 12:16; 15:27). In the year AD 960, according to Bar Hebraeus, a large band of pilgrims returning from Mekkah ‘encamped in the bed of a brook in which water had not flowed for a long time. And during the night, whilst they were sleeping, a flood of water poured down upon them all, and it swept them and all their possessions out into the Great Sea, and they all perished.’ . . . One of the worst places for these gully-washing torrents of liquid mud is

in ‘the scarred and bare mountains which run parallel to the west coast of Arabia.’ . . . This was the very region through which Lehi travelled on his great trek” (*Lehi in the Desert*, 45).

“When Ishmael died on the journey, he ‘was buried in the place which was called Nahom’ (1 Nephi 16:34). . . . The Arabic root NHM has the basic meaning of ‘to sigh or moan,’ and occurs nearly always in the third form, ‘to sigh or moan with another.’ . . . At this place, we are told, ‘the daughters of Ishmael did mourn exceedingly,’ and are reminded that among the desert Arabs mourning rites are a monopoly of the women” (*Lehi in the Desert*, 79).

This excerpting of intriguing and stunning details and insights could go on at great length, but *Lehi in the Desert* is easily available. In spite of its age, and notwithstanding all of the subsequent research that this book itself has largely inspired, *Lehi in the Desert* should still be standard reading for anyone seriously interested in studying the Book of Mormon.

The durability of the legacy of this early pioneering research is probably proved no better than by the fact that Hugh Nibley himself never stopped experiencing the thrill and romance of the desert imagery and Arabic intrigue that he found in the early chapters of the Book of Mormon. He rated these discover-



ies as his most important contributions to Book of Mormon research.

He never wearied of telling how the Arab students, to whom he taught the Book of Mormon at Brigham Young University, reacted favorably to cultural elements contained in this book of scripture. Sometimes their reactions were not even to be anticipated. For example, as the class one day read the account of Nephi’s slaying of Laban, they became skeptical. It turned out that their interest was not in what had justified Nephi’s slaying of Laban—an extraordinary act in the mind of most Westerners—but why he had waited and debated so long!

What kind of price tag can ever possibly be placed on the value of knowledge like this? To Brother Nibley in these early years, the real payoff for his research came in the form of the ammunition it provided against the critics of the Book of Mormon. His parting shots in *Lehi in the Desert* drive this point home: “There is no point at all to the question: Who wrote the Book of Mormon? It would have been quite as impossible for the most learned man alive in 1830 to have written the book as it was for Joseph Smith. And whoever would account for the Book of Mormon by any theory suggested so far—save one—must completely rule out the first forty pages” (123).

But it soon became obvious that this research was not simply destined to be involved in limited skirmishes. As his studies broadened, Nibley’s results began coming from yet other directions.

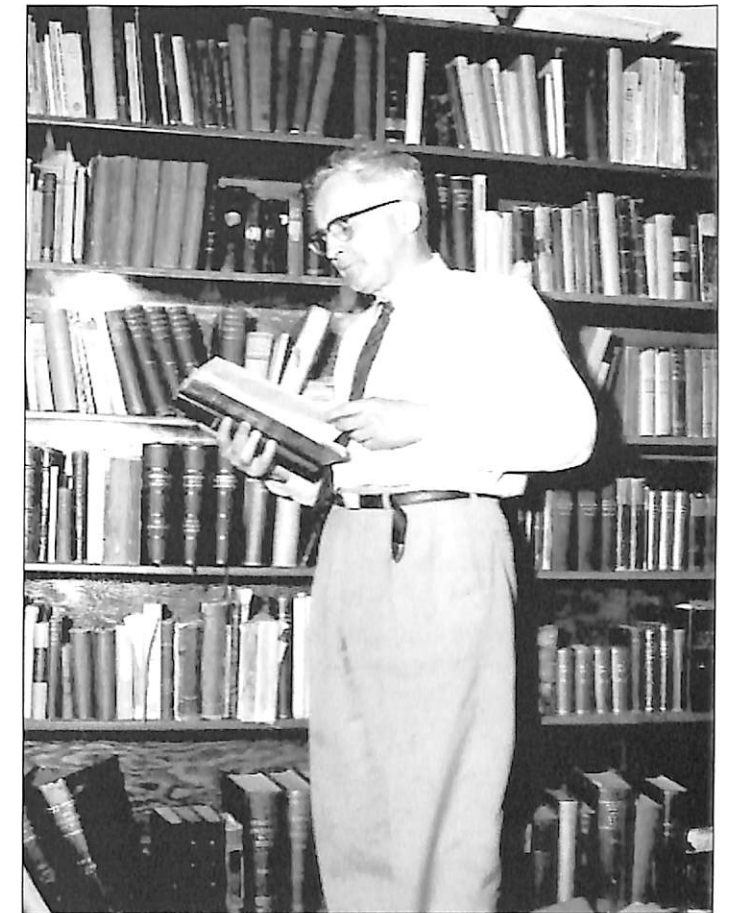
In 1957, his second book, entitled *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, became the Melchizedek Priesthood course of study for the year. President David O. McKay knew it would be difficult for many good Saints to understand, but he also knew it would do them good to reach a little to comprehend this significant material. Elder Joseph Fielding Smith encouraged “all the brethren holding the Melchizedek Priesthood” to take “a deep interest in these lessons, which sustain the record of the Book of Mormon from [a] new and interesting approach.”³

Nibley’s approach here was basically the same as before, but the work now drew upon an even broader array of ancient contexts as settings for the Book of Mormon: Egyptian, Greek, Persian, and Hebrew. The details became more and more amazing.

For example, Lehi’s life and times were analyzed not only in connection with the ways of the desert, but also alongside his worldwide contemporaries, men whom Nibley called “the titans of the early sixth cen-

ture” (*Approach*, 49). These included Solon, the great lawgiver-poet of Athens, Thales of Miletus, and other great religious founders such as Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tzu, and Zarathustra. This was an axial period in history—one that “clearly and unmistakably” left its stamp upon the political, economic, and religious traditions of the whole world (*Approach*, 53). Lehi found himself right at home in this innovative crowd of great dreamers and doers.

Nibley showed that Lehi was a representative man in terms of his political and economic dealings. Lehi’s probable experiences in world travel and commercial



dealings with Egypt, and his possible connections with the Phoenician city of Sidon and the overland trade routes of the desert and the Fertile Crescent, are consistent with the fact that Lehi was a man of considerable means, a man intimately familiar with the Egyptian language as well as with the ways of caravan travel (see *Approach*, 46–83).

Nibley also explored broad patterns of ancient religious practices, showing how they relate with considerable insight to particular texts in the Book



of Mormon. For example, the recurring “flight of the righteous into the wilderness” was a noteworthy practice. Lehi’s flight from Jerusalem, like Alma’s departure to the Waters of Mormon, is consistent with a repeated pattern of bands of people going out into the wilderness to live in righteousness. The same pattern is seen in the histories of the Jewish desert sectaries, the Rechabites, and the Dead Sea community at Qumran. Even the followers of John the Baptist, the children of Israel in the Sinai, and the Latter-day Saint pioneers fled into the wilderness and followed an identifiable pattern of life and beliefs. “At last enough of the hitherto hidden background of the Old and New Testament is beginning to emerge to enable students before long to examine the Book of Mormon against that larger background of which it speaks so often and by which alone it can be fairly tested” (*Approach*, 182).

Particularly striking was Brother Nibley’s detection and discussion of the vestiges of Old World ceremony and ritual in the Book of Mormon. The ancient Near Eastern year-rite festival was an annual event at which the king called his people together, gave an accounting of his actions, placed the people again under obligation to abide by the law, prophesied, acclaimed all men equals, proclaimed them the children of God, and recorded their names in the registry

of life. Such elements of the typical ancient year-rite are readily discernible in several Book of Mormon assemblies, particularly that of King Benjamin in chapters 2 through 6 of the book of Mosiah.

“There can be no doubt at all,” concluded Dr. Nibley, “that in the Book of Mosiah we have a long and complete description of a typical national assembly in the antique pattern. The king who ordered the rites was steeped in the lore of the Old World king-cult, and as he takes up each aspect of the rites of the Great Assembly point by point he gives it a new slant, a genuinely religious interpretation, but with all due respect to established forms. . . .

“The knowledge of the year-drama and the Great Assembly has been brought forth piece by piece in the present generation. One by one the thirty-odd details . . . have been brought to light and . . . [are] now attested in virtually every country of the ancient world. There is no better description of the event in any single ritual text than is found in the Book of Mosiah” (*Approach*, 308–9).

Some of Brother Nibley’s favorite finds, although coming from a later period and from Iran, were three tales that cast light upon Captain Moroni’s actions in Alma 46. The first tells of a blacksmith named Kawe, who took his leather apron and placed it upon a pole as a symbol of liberation in the fight he led against Dahhak, “the man of the Lie and king of madmen.” Like Moroni’s title of liberty raised against the unscrupulous Amalickiah, Kawe’s banner in Isfahan became the national banner and a sacred emblem of the Persians for many centuries (see *Approach*, 216–18).

The other two tales were collected in the 10th century AD by Muḥammad ibn-Ibrāhīm al-Tha‘labī, a Muslim scholar who gathered legends about many ancient biblical figures. He preserved one account “not found anywhere else,” about the coat of Joseph, telling how it was torn, how a remnant remained undecayed, and what that meant. This lore is preserved nowhere else—nowhere, that is, except in Alma 46:23–25, which also records the ancient tradition about a remnant of Joseph’s coat that was preserved undecayed, and explains its significance. “Such things in the Book of Mormon,” stated Nibley, “illustrate the widespread ramifications of Book of Mormon culture, and the recent declaration of [William F.] Albright and other scholars that the ancient Hebrews had cultural roots in every civilization of the Near East. This is an acid test that no forgery could pass; it not only opens a window on a world we dreamed not of, but it brings to

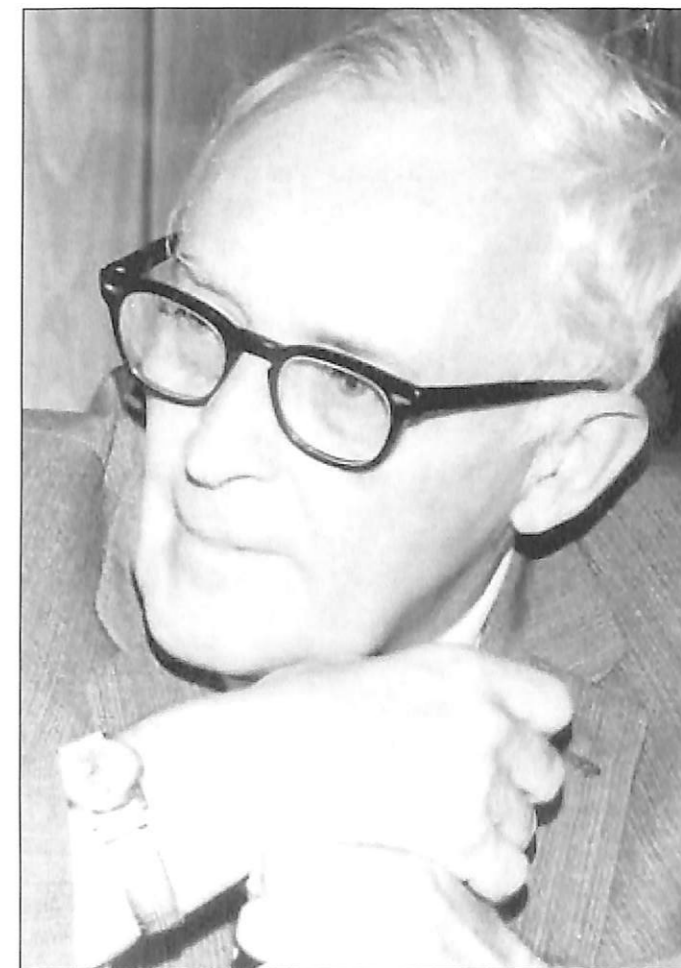
our unsuspecting and uninitiated minds a first glimmering suspicion of the true scope and vastness of a book nobody knows” (see *Approach*, 218–21).

Powerful, jolting ideas like these become commonplace in the pages of *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*. Clearly, to generate all this from scratch was the task of no common man. Hugh Nibley was ideally suited and prepared to see these wide-ranging connections and implications. His training spanned the worlds of Greece, Rome, Arabia, and beyond. His keen sense of contrast bridged the worlds of the East and the West. And his eclectic and omnivorous consumption of knowledge was coupled with a nearly flawless recall of virtually anything he had ever learned. These tools of a scholar gave him the ability to see the Book of Mormon against a background so vast that no one before had ever even surveyed it.

Of his accumulation of knowledge, the story is true that in doing his doctoral research he pulled every potentially relevant book in the Berkeley library off the shelf to see what bearing it might have on his work. Of his depth of knowledge, one scholar quipped in exasperation, “Hugh Nibley is simply encyclopedic. . . . I hesitate to challenge him; he knows too much.”⁴ Of his memory, I am a witness: once we were talking and he began quoting Greek lyric poetry to me—line after line—lines he had studied 47 years ago.

It was inevitable that with this warehouse of knowledge—coupled with shoeboxes full of notes written on three-by-five-inch scraps of colored paper—Hugh Nibley would continue to produce a steady stream of additional papers about the Book of Mormon. In 1967, the third of his major volumes on the Book of Mormon appeared. *Since Cumorah* is a mixed assortment of studies developing themes that were present with Nibley from the beginning: (1) his disdain for the so-called scientists or scholars whose dogmatism or authoritarianism preclude them from taking the Book of Mormon seriously; (2) his view of the Book of Mormon as an accurate reflection of the religious worlds that produced the books of the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Apocrypha; (3) his quest for words, phrases, poetry, or narratives that particularly elucidate our understanding of the words of the Nephite prophets; (4) his rejection of charges that things mentioned in the Book of Mormon are anachronistic; (5) his urgent belief that the book speaks to our day and that we will be condemned to repeat the true-to-life errors of the Nephites if we do not take the message of this sacred record seriously and repent.⁵

Many of the specific topics treated in *Since Cumorah* either already were or soon became the subject of individual articles. His treatment of the Liahona in the light of the Arabic use of arrows or pointers to cast lots and make decisions was preceded by his *Improvement Era* article “The Liahona’s Cousins.”⁶ His comparison of early-Christian accounts about the 40-day ministry of Jesus among the apostles after the resurrection and the account in 3 Nephi of his ministry to the people of Nephi was later expanded into a much more detailed listing of parallels in his study “Christ among the Ruins.”⁷ His thoughts about “good people and bad people” (see *Since Cumorah*, 337–97) grew into his later reflections on “Freemen and Kingmen in the Book of Mormon,” in which he articulated a creed that epitomized the life he lived. In his typically candid analysis, Nibley saw the freemen of the Book of Mormon as being “not militant; . . . they made war with heavy reluctance. . . . They were non-competitive, and friendly, appealing to the power of the word above that of the sword. . . . In their personal





lives they placed no great value on the accumulation of wealth and abhorred displays of status and prestige, for example, in the wearing of fashionable and expensive clothes. Eschewing ambition, they were not desirous or envious of power and authority; they recognized that they were ‘despised’ by the more success-oriented king-men” (*Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 371).

In several other articles, Brother Nibley likewise continued his quest for greater refinement and further elaboration of particular points. As Hugh described this process: “The Book of Mormon is particularly amenable to comparative study—there are thousands of very extensive comparisons. With numerous comparisons there is a need for better information—always— . . . and we have hardly scratched the surface. Learning is cumulative. All we have to show for our existence is our awareness. Faith can bring things back into remembrance—it is the Holy Ghost which brings things to mind. . . . I like a more lavish picture.”

“Of course,” he recognized, “what we are dealing with are just possibilities. Parallels are just that. But after so many extensive ones, that’s what hits you hard; the case becomes quite compelling.”

What, then, can one say to summarize the contribution of Hugh Nibley to Book of Mormon scholarship? Here are 10 things that stand out to me:

1. He has made us look more carefully at the Book of Mormon. “We need to make the Book of Mormon an object of serious study. Superficiality is quite offensive to the Lord. We have not paid enough attention to the Book of Mormon.”

2. He has shown us that the Book of Mormon stands up well under close scrutiny. By looking carefully at the Book of Mormon, by reading between the lines, by examining each significant word or phrase in this book closely, we repeatedly find that there is always more there than meets the eye.

3. He has taught us to be surprised at what this marvelous book contains. Time after time he remarks how perfectly obvious something should have been to him long before it was—it was there right under our noses and nobody saw it. “Some subjects I studied for years without it occurring to me for a moment that they had any bearing whatsoever on the Book of Mormon.”

4. He has proved that the Book of Mormon is comfortably at home in the world of the ancient Near East, reflecting details that were not known and in many cases not knowable at the time the book was translated in 1829. As a book containing eternal truths, it is also, of course, at home in other generations. But anyone seeking to explain the book away must deal in all of the evidence, not just selections out of context.

5. He has opened further doors. Although he has not walked down every hallway, he has gone along opening doors that others will have to walk through for many years to come. Most of his hints have an uncanny way of proving to be vital clues. For example, the work he began in analyzing the philological roots of nonbiblical Book of Mormon names has been pursued by others. Points he made about Arabic oath-taking in relation to the oath given by Nephi to Zoram in 1 Nephi 4:31–35 have become the basis of several solid studies. A passing reference to the use of tents in his discussion of the year-rite festival in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* has become the spark for a thorough treatment of the impressive correlations between the ceremony of King Benjamin and the typical ancient Israelite Feast of Tabernacles.

6. He has challenged us. “The Book of Mormon,” he says, “is a debatable subject. . . . If we do not accept the challenge, we will lose by default.”

7. He never lost sight of the spiritual significance of the book. “Above all it is a witness to God’s concern for all his children, and to the intimate proximity of Jesus Christ to all who will receive him.”⁸ Despite Hugh’s knowledge, he knew that any scientific method is, by nature, limited. He knew that no ultimate proof of the Book of Mormon will be given. “The evidence that will prove or disprove the Book of Mormon does not exist” (*Since Cumorah*, xiv). In his mind, scholarship simply sets the stage for the ultimate question. Once a person comes to the explicit realization that neither he nor she nor anyone else can explain *how* all this got in the Book of Mormon (and there may be arguments for, and contentions or predispositions against—but so many amazing details simply *cannot* be explained away by human fiat), then the person is at last at the point where he *must* turn to God in order to find out if these things are indeed true. “All that Mormon and Moroni ask of the reader,” Nibley said, “is, don’t fight it, don’t block it, give it a chance!”⁹

8. He has spoken candidly about the book’s relevance to our day. “I intend to take Moroni as my guide to the present world situations” (*Of All Things*, 148). “In my youth I thought the Book of Mormon was much too preoccupied with extreme situations, situations that had little bearing on the real world of everyday life and ordinary human affairs. What on earth could the total extermination of nations have to do with life in the enlightened modern world? Today no comment on that is necessary” (*Of All Things*, 148). “In the Book of Mormon, the very questions that now oppress the liberal and fundamentalist alike, to the imminent overthrow of their fondest beliefs, are fully

and clearly treated. No other book gives such a perfect and exhaustive explanation of the eschatological problem. . . . Here you will find anticipated and answered every logical objection that the intelligence or vanity of men even in this sophisticated age has been able to devise against the preaching of the word. And here one may find a description of our own age so vivid and so accurate that none can fail to recognize it” (*Of All Things*, 149).

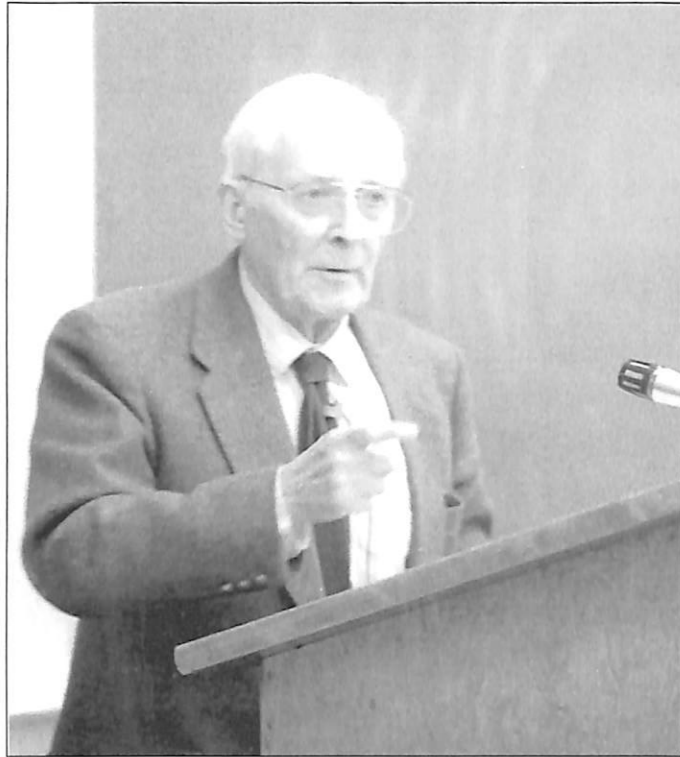
9. He has put the book into an eternal, urgent perspective. “The Book of Mormon should take priority. We have not paid enough attention to the Book of Mormon. This is very urgent!” While earlier generations should not be overly criticized, since many of the documents and discoveries elucidating the Book of Mormon have only recently come to light, there is now indeed an enormous amount of work crying out for us to do. A sense of pressing need to see that this work is done is one indelible stamp left on many by the legacy and influence of Hugh Nibley.

10. In all of this, he has changed us. Since Hugh Nibley, we as a people are not the same. We are warned but reassured; and we are fed, but still must plow.

Surely there are many ways and numerous reasons to read the Book of Mormon. Some days I read it for the doctrines of Christ, some days as a source of practical wisdom, and some days to contemplate the personalities of the prophets whose messages fill its pages. But other days, I read it for Hugh Nibley and the way he has taught me to read it—as a living testament of an ancient covenant people who knew the Lord and tried to follow his guidance centuries ago here on the American continent. 📖

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, statements from Hugh Nibley quoted in this article were gathered from oral interviews with him by John W. Welch and Susan Roylance in 1984.
2. Foreword to the 1952 edition of *Lehi in the Desert*; reprinted in Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert: The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, ed. John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), ix–x. Subsequent references to *Lehi in the Desert* are to the 1988 edition.
3. Preface to *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988).
4. Truman G. Madsen, foreword to *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), xii.
5. See *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988). The chapters in this book, like those in *Lehi in the Desert*, first appeared in serial form in the *Improvement Era*. Subsequent references to *Since Cumorah* are to the 1988 edition.
6. *Improvement Era*, February 1961, 87–89, 104, 106; reprinted in *Since Cumorah*, 251–63.
7. One early version appeared in *Ensign*, July 1983, 14–19. The expanded version entitled “Christ among the Ruins” appears in Nibley’s *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 407–34.
8. “The Mormon View of the Book of Mormon,” in *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 262.
9. *Of All Things! Classic Quotations from Hugh Nibley*, comp. Gary P. Gillum, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1993), 158.



Temples Everywhere

By Hugh W. Nibley

Those of us who saw the recent television documentary *American Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith* may have noticed an interesting defect in the script, namely, that it was Hamlet with Hamlet left out. It was as if one were to produce the life of Shakespeare with charming views of Stratford-upon-Avon, country school, the poaching story, marriage to Anne Hathaway, showbiz in London, and respectable retirement without bothering to mention that our leading character gave the world the greatest treasury of dramatic art in existence. Or a life of Bach with his niggardly brother-guardian, his early poverty, his odd jobs with local organs and choirs, his acceptance in the courts of the Holy Roman Empire, his nineteen children, and his loving nature without a word about the greatest volume of music ever produced by a mortal.

So it is with Joseph Smith. No one has the slightest inkling of the mass and charge of his legacy to us. I sometimes think how it would be if I had to hand in a term paper, the subject of which was the “Thousand-

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Year History of a Nation,” in detail, fiction if you will, or anything else, but one semester to do it in. Panic as the day approaches—what on earth can I write? What shall I say? Anything you want to, but it had better be good. The newspapers had been heckling and guffawing, and everybody was waiting for Joe to fall on his face. Surprise, surprise! He brought out the book, five hundred pages of factual information, on time, and invited critics to do their worst. And of course everyone, including ourselves, has avoided the big question: How did he do it? Local mobs chased him down country roads and broke into his house at night. But nobody was able to explain where he got the book.

In the same sense, does anyone alive have the vaguest clue as to what Joseph really gave us in the temple? That was the greatest of all. The Book of Abraham tells us a lot about it, but who reads the Book of Abraham? In a letter dated 26 February 1996, the director of Berlin’s Egyptian Museum, in answer to a Latter-day Saint student, responded, “The interpretations printed in the three Facsimiles have nothing to do with Egyptian beliefs: they are pure fantasy.” In the next sentence, however, the director obligingly refers his correspondent to Professor Eric Hornung, specifically to his book on the Valley of the Kings,¹ which he recommends as giving “the real explanations of the Egyptian drawings.” This is welcome advice since Professor Hornung may well be called the supernova of the so-called New School of Egyptology.

Obedient to the good director, we turn at once to Hornung’s guidebook, which refers us to the works of yet another giant: “Egyptian historiography reached its high-water mark with Eduard Meyer.”² With all haste, we repair to the books of Meyer, who bids all students of ancient religion to seek wisdom in the works of giant number four: “Mormonism is one of the most instructive phenomena in the whole area of religious history: And it is most remarkable . . . that students of religion who have sought enlightenment in the most remote, inaccessible, and all but incomprehensible religions of the past have kept themselves strictly aloof from Mormonism and disdained the rich instruction it has to offer.”³ Having viewed the whole field, Professor Meyer can assure us that it is the case of Joseph Smith that sheds light upon all the others and helps us to reach an understanding of the fundamental problems.⁴ And here is my point: Though the great Eduard Meyer was impressed enough to come to Utah in 1904 and carry on his investigations here, he never bothered to read the Book of Mormon, declar-

ing that only a Mormon could have the patience to get through it. For him the Pearl of Great Price does not exist; and yet it was his special field—for that very reason he could not lower himself to take it seriously. Joseph Smith’s resurrection of the temple should have electrified him, but in those days it was fashionable for Egyptologists to hold all religion, and especially that of the crazy, irrational Egyptians, in contempt.

It is another picture today. The New School of Egyptology has focused and held its full attention on the religion of Egypt; almost every leading scholar has written a work on the Egyptian concept of the hereafter, which requires deep searching into the temple and funerary literature—recognized as essentially the same. Whoever would have thought it?

The ancient world was filled with temples. Two centuries of worldwide comparative studies has come up with the conclusion that there existed throughout the world from the most ancient times a body of religious beliefs and practices centered around the temple. Everyone recognizes the sameness of the dominant theme and allows for local variations. But it is generally agreed that throughout the world people have held certain general concepts which for some strange reason have been very much the same; the objectives and the rites to achieve them are strangely alike from prehistoric times down to Christianity, virtually unchanged. The temple rites and funeral rites all had the same common intent, namely, to see the worshipper safely through from this world to the next and to guarantee an acceptable eternity hereafter.

To make such a transition the temple is necessary, it being defined as the place of contact (“interface,” says Hornung) between worlds above and below the earth; more recently emphasis has been put on its function as relating to the cosmos. This was the only solution to the one great problem that has ever haunted the human race: the problem of facing death.

Resurrection and eternal life are the *sine qua non* of that piece of mind which is the whole gift of religion. The neo-Freudians have finally recognized “the rediscovery of modern psychology: that death is man’s peculiar and greatest anxiety,” outranking even sex.⁵ In his prize-winning book, Ernest Becker finds that “historic religions addressed themselves to this same problem of how to bear the end of life. Religions like Hinduism and Buddhism performed the ingenious trick of pretending not to want to be reborn.”⁶ Not so our Egyptians. Siegfried Morenz has pointed out the complete contrast between eternity of the Egyp-

tian individual and the Indians’ transmigration, the one determined to be himself forever and the other resigned to becoming anything you please—a drop of water in an ocean of being.⁷

If modern scholars are depressed by the mortuary atmosphere of Egyptian culture, our modern world has an even more demoralizing message: the absolute scientific certainty that man “goes back into the ground a few feet in order to blindly and dumbly rot and disappear forever,” taking with him his vast unrealized potential.⁸ No wonder “the full apprehension of man’s condition would drive him insane.”⁹ Mircea Eliade concludes his book *Cosmos and History* with a warning that unless we find “a new formula for man’s collaboration with the creation” to give tragedies a meaning, we must be “prey to a continual terror.”¹⁰ The temple provides the formula.

Since death cannot be denied, what hope is there for the hereafter? The Egyptian answer, as everybody recognizes today, was to start all over again and have a new life. That meant a new creation. How was that to be effected? There is one glowing example which no one can overlook—the sun. And the Egyptians, like other ancient people, made the most of it. Stick close to the sun was the idea, and do what he does. Get yourself a place in his boat, as a crewmember, attendant (*shms-Re*), or member of the family. To prolong your own life, you must get in on the action—you must be present at the only time and place that the sun, completing one cycle and reaching its lowest point at the solstice, without a split-second hesitation, reverses its direction and begins its upward climb.

This means that everybody in the world had to come together at a special place—the exact center of the cosmos, since it was the point of convergence for the pilgrims’ roads from every point on the horizon. And for the beginning of a new life cycle, you must start with the creation all over again. The creation drama is a standard feature of temple worship. Everywhere, as far as we can trace the records and the ruins, there have been great gatherings of the race—the *panegyris*, or “everybody in a circle,” in every part of the world. Many have recognized the phenomenon, but no one can explain when or how it began. Eduard Meyer thinks it started with animals in their periodic meetings to disport and reproduce. Megalithic circles marking the great ceremonial assemblages are found by the thousands and go back to the Stone Age.

I had the good fortune to be stationed near Avebury in Hertfordshire at the end of World War II and

had ample time to examine the vast establishment. That was before it was discovered by the tourists. The stone circle, 1400 feet in diameter, was rivaled by the great artificial mound “Silbury Hill,” 150 feet high, the highest artificial mound in Europe, to beckon the pilgrim from afar. It took thirty-five million baskets of earth to complete—by a community, it is calculated, of only five hundred souls.¹¹ The mountain dominated the flat surrounding plain, littered with the bones of countless ceremonial feasts. From the air (I had to pass over it slowly in regular and frequent glider flights) one could behold traces of prehistoric roads, marked by standing stones, leading from all directions. That is the general layout of countless megalithic ceremonial centers, over ten thousand of which are known and, according to Aubrey Burl, the principal authority, is “strangely parallel in North America where the collapsed trading networks of the Hopewell Indians in Ohio were succeeded by the Temple Mound societies.”¹² According to him, the British “circles were separated from Cahokia by three thousand years and four thousand miles of Atlantic Ocean,” and Cahokia culture goes back to Teotihuacan.¹³ He could neither explain the anomaly nor deny the astonishing resemblance.

Strangely, I was prepared for this surprise (at that time little attention was paid to Avebury), for eight years earlier in Berkeley I had produced a laborious comparative study, a thesis examining eyewitness accounts of some fifteen such holy centers scattered widely in the Old World. Within a year of returning from the army, I went straight to Provo, where Brother Virgil Bushman, a great missionary to the Hopi and Navajo, urged me to come with him and see the culture of the Old World in Arizona. I have described our arrival in Hotevilla in the piece called “Promised Lands.”

I was stunned by what I saw as we came through a low arch at dawn out onto the spectacle of a splendid drama in progress. Here, on a high, bleak rock, surrounded by nothing but what we would call total desolation in all directions, was a full-scale drama in progress in the grand manner of the Ancients. . . . Everything was being carried out with meticulous care; all the costumes were fresh and new; . . . nothing artificial—all the dyes, woven stuff, and properties taken from nature.

What an immense effort and dedication this represented! And for what? These were the only people in the world that still took the trouble to do what the human race had been doing for many

millennia—celebrating the great life-cycle of the year, the creation, the dispensations. I told Brother Bushman that there should be fifty-two dancers, and that is exactly what there were, . . . the sacred number of the Asiatics and the Aztecs, but it was also the set number of dancers in the archaic Greek chorus. [We remember that there were fifty-two rods stored in the ark of the covenant, each *shevet* or staff representing a family in Israel.]¹⁴

Hotevilla is an exciting new study and wild surmise; I refer you to the recent volume by Thomas Mails entitled *Hotevilla: Hopi Shrine of the Covenant, Microcosm of the World*.¹⁵ Through the years I have taken some beautiful reproductions of Egyptian papyri to show to the children and elders in Hotevilla; they have been greatly impressed by the resemblances to their own rituals. The dancers always have the headband and two feathers, stripes on the face, copper bands around the arms, an evergreen wreath around the neck, bandolier over the shoulder, and especially an apron of fox or wolf skin with the tail dangling conspicuously behind, the wand or rattle, the ornament at the knee, and buskins on the feet. And when I have taken professors from Israel to visit the Hopis, they were simply bowled over by the parallels.

The recognition of a prehistoric order of things, religious and political, picked up speed with the founding of the East India Company in 1773; eager young Englishmen discovering the East and the primacy of Sanskrit broke into the open field with “inquiry. . . into all the languages to reduce them to one common center, from which they spread like rays of the Sun.”¹⁶ The progress of the science is marked by the writings of the great Max Müller, who moved from philology to his monumental *Rig-Veda-Sanhita* (1849–1873),¹⁷ to a broader *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion* (1879),¹⁸ and finally to his wide-ranging studies on the science of mythology.¹⁹

And so the next step: “If the heathens already possessed . . . an abundant stock of religious *myths*, then song and story could not fail to . . . interweave themselves with the *rites and customs*.”²⁰ Throughout the world students started studying the various major events and making lists of their main features. When these lists were compared, they displayed a surprising degree of conformity, especially in the five main events. Eliade strings together the sacred place (the celestial prototype), the act of creation (the sacred marriage), the confrontation with evil, the victory of the king, and the coronation. To these he adds the

atonement sacrifice (cleansing the people of their sins) and memories of paradise, festivities wistfully but happily recalling the golden age.²¹

As we summed up the picture many years ago, “At hundreds of holy shrines, each believed to mark the exact center of the universe and represented as the point at which the four quarters of the earth converged—‘the navel of the earth’—one might have seen assembled at the New Year—the moment of creation, the beginning and ending of time—vast concourses of people, each thought to represent the entire human race in the presence of all its ancestors and gods.”²² The whole trend can be summed up in an astonishing statement of Eliade: “In extremely diverse cultural contexts we always find the same cosmological pattern and the same ritual scenario,” and as “man progressively occupies increasingly vast areas of the planet, . . . all he seems to do is to repeat indefinitely the same archetypal gesture.”²³

The great object of Egyptian ritual was “the creation, maintenance, and continuation of life beyond death, in the cosmos as well as on earth. . . . After creation . . . the vital forces of all creatures has to be preserved for eternity, this being accomplished by continuous renewal or rejuvenation.”²⁴ It is a case of “periodically recharging the sun,” as Hornung puts it.²⁵ This requires the aid of all living things.²⁶

Mankind must cooperate in “the rites and ordinances that express the unity of the universe [and] must be repeated to keep up [man’s] awareness of them,” without which the whole structure would vanish.²⁷ “Everything meaningful is brought together into a single meaningful whole.”²⁸ It was both with *Natalia* and the resurrection when everyone went wild with the good news that death had been overcome and the hero had risen victorious over death.²⁹

Not the least significant note on the primacy of the temple is the source and origin of civilization. The spin-offs that the great year-rite generated throughout the world were quite inevitable. The bringing together of vast numbers of farmers from widely scattered regions, bringing their local produce to be exchanged for acceptable temple tokens (see 1 Samuel 1:3), required facilities for exchange, “banks” or benches of the money changers in the court of the temple. The exchange of goods and services gave rise to great markets and market centers all over the world. It was the one time and place at which servants could be hired out “for a year and a day.” Contracts had to be made and signed between parties who would not see each other for another year. Legal prob-

lems arose, and courts to take care of them, with agents representing the king himself.

For the long dangerous journey, hostels and hospitals had to be provided. The local youth inevitably engaged in demonstrating the village pride and prowess; boxing and wrestling (the Icelandic *glíma*), songs, dances, dramatic recitations, and plays by traveling troupes still have a ritual significance. At the shrine itself one could receive oracles, healings, dreams, counsel.

Homer has given us the whole picture in his hymn to Apollo. When the gods looked down from their happy halls of Olympus and saw the poor struggling human race, who had been their companions in a golden age, helpless to cope with their condition and, worst of all, without any cure for death or old age, Leto, the ambitious mother of Apollo, saw a chance for undying fame and wealth by having her son go down and establish a circuit of temples, marking the course of the sun through the year, where the people could gather at the New Year all dressed in white, bringing their rich gifts and feasting and dancing and having a wonderful time while celebrating the creation of the world and their ancient companionship with the gods.

Most of all, the temple was the home of the arts and sciences. Vivid portraits of ancestors and sacred images and idols developed a great plastic art. The temple itself was the sacred edifice that required sophisticated geometry according to strict rules and holy dimensions.³⁰ So also did the reapportioning of private and state- and temple-owned fields and forests, resurveyed at the end of each year. The all-important timing of rites and festivals required close observation of the heavens, and the temple as in Egypt was the site of a great observatory. Divination by the study of the liver and other parts of animals and birds, connected with sacrifice, advanced the medical art.

The library was the pride of the temple with the records of the past, including complete genealogies (see Abraham 1:28) and the description of the universe. It was the “House of Life” where all knowledge was deposited forever. Thoth, the librarian, is addressed as “Lord of the Divine Words, Keeper of the Secret Knowledge . . . who established speech and writing, causing the Temples to flourish.”³¹ He is assisted by the “Lady of Writing,” Sšjt, whose name shows her to be the Secret-ary (the name means “secret woman”) par excellence.³² Of special interest to Latter-day Saints is the great concern with the records and work for the dead. Here is one of many “Instructions for Sealing the Order (request) of a Man Concerning His Family.” Text: “I come before you

exalted ones (male and female)! The Great One in concurrence with the Council has approved (ordered) the sealing of a certificate (order) concerning this my family. Thoth has said to me, the order has been sealed, giving you his voice. This order has accordingly been validated (*nfr.w*). This correct writing for the Lady of Appearances is to the effect that my family is given to me.”³³

The lady is Seshat, who from prehistoric times has been in charge of all the records. The next item is also Coffin Text 143:

N is Re who comes forth in the *Hnhnw*-ship, a glorified spirit in passage. This N has taken his seat in the West beside the Great God. He has opened the mouth of the earth . . . the gates of Geb. He has assembled dependents of this N before him, along with his proper family. . . . This N has written down a multitude of persons, male and female. N goes among those upon the shore, and hears those within their shrines (tombs). This N unites the dependents. With the coming of this family of N to him, a multitude has surrounded this N. This N has written down those spirits which still remain hidden in places of the West. They give the *ba* to N to give glory to this N . . . causing the caves to open to N with those who are in them in the Nun. This N (legal language) releases their bonds that they may walk in the light. . . . This N issues the command for breath and strength which is stronger than the Gates of Hell (*skr*) to live after death even as Re does every day. If his dependents are not united with him in the Amentit, then he will come down to the lake of the land that devours and flames shall come forth against those who are in the Nun.³⁴

This is designated “for uniting the family of N to him in the other world.” The long Coffin Text 146 is “To Gather the Family in the Next World.” If they are not gathered he shall lose them: “His staff shall be removed from his hand.” This is the language of Israel, for example, the staff, *shevet*, departing from Jacob. If he fails to gather them in the beyond, there will be no great family reunions on earth with the usual parties and feasting. This is an authentic piece of “recognition literature,” like the Clementine *Recognitions* and the moving family stories of the classical New Comedy down to present-day productions of the *Comedy of Errors*. When N arrives in the other world, the family is working in the field. “Now NN’s sister, the woman who is in charge of the great field has said: ‘See, you have come joyful and happy-hearted!’ So said she to NN. ‘Give answer! Has

there been granted to you a valid decree for this family of yours?’ NN has gone down happy and rejoicing, for his family has been given to him. The great ones of NN’s family have gone down joyfully, and their hearts are full at meeting NN. They have left their plows (*h^cb.w*) and their utensils (tools, pots—*hⁿk.w*), on the ground. Conclusion: Assembling the family, father, mother, friends, associates, children, women, concubines, servants, workers, anything belonging to a man for him in the realm of the dead.”³⁵

As with us, one went to the temple for an “endowment,” that is, to be given all the equipment, information, and certification he would need to make the passage from this world to the next. And to our surprise, this is the main theme of all temple and funeral literature. As Richard Lepsius put it in the first edition of the Book of the Dead, “The text applies only to the deceased and the things he will meet with on the long journey after his earthly death. There is described to him where he is going, what he does, what he hears and sees,” or the prayers and addresses which he must give to whatever gods he meets.³⁶

The surprise is that the best account of the endowment is found in Joseph Smith Papyrus XI, the Book of Breathings. The key to the endowment is the eternal progression of the pilgrim from one state of blessedness to another.

As you approach the camp surrounding the temple, you signify your intent with a reassuring *sign*, a *signum*, visible from a distance, calling attention to yourself as Adam does in his prayer and demonstrating your peaceful intent. Upon reaching the gate, you present your *token*, a tangible object (compare *touch*, *digit*, *dactyl*, or a solid handclasp). All these serve as a *tessera hospitalis*, admitting one to a closed group or a party, or a club, guild meeting, etc. It is presented to the doorkeeper, a herald trained in such matters: “The Holy One of Israel is the Keeper of the Gate, and he employs no servant there!” Most important, “he cannot be deceived.”³⁷ The token recognized, you pronounce your name to the doorkeeper in a low voice, a whisper, for it is a special name agreed on between you and your host and should not be picked up and used by anyone else. There is a famous Egyptian story about how Isis tried to get her true name from Re so that she could give it to her son along with the priesthood. So we have names, signs, and penalties introducing us to the ancient rites of hospitality in the mysteries.³⁸

But to be at the temple one must first get there. Essential to every endowment is the journey or

pilgrimage to reach the place. Moreover, once one has arrived the traveling continues, for the passage through the temple from room to room, level to level, and ordinance to ordinance is a true rite of passage.

Throughout the world the candidate begins on his arrival by removing his dusty clothes, and is bathed, anointed, and dressed in white robes and slippers. Then he receives a new name and proceeds from chamber to chamber of the temple. After passing through the veil to depart, he never returns again but proceeds on his way to the next temple for a higher endowment.

What happened to all the temples? The reply to that question is well documented—they were privatized. Free from taxation, but also free to engage in trade as charitable foundations, including accumulating land by grants from the king and nobility along with the serfs to cultivate them, the religious societies became immensely rich, like the Cistercians in the time of Henry VIII. The priesthood of Thebes grabbed everything and finally aspired to take over the rule of the country. And so we have the owners for security converting their shrines to castles.

I spent my mission up and down the Rhine plain in Germany. It was medieval country and Catholic, and I tracted every house in scores of villages and got a pretty good idea of how things worked. All up and down the length of the great river at almost regular intervals were magnificent cathedrals. *Cathedral* means a seat or preaching stand, the center of power of a bishop. And next to the cathedral was the palace of the prince-bishop himself. The dual role of the takeover is represented by Longfellow’s notoriously wicked “Bishop of Bingen in his Mouse-Tower on the Rhine” (“The Children’s Hour”). It was the new order of the fortified palace that ruled the land. These great structures were under a curse as oppressors of the peasants and doomed to fall. Golden Mycenae, sacred Thebes, Troy itself, Camelot, Hersepolis, the Jomsborg, Aasgard, the House of Usher, San Simeon—all claimed the powers of the temple over subjects. Under the castle was the realm of Pluto, or the caves where the dragons slept guarding the heaps of disastrous Rhine gold, and deeper still the toiling dwarves, the once-free inhabitants of the land slaving to bring forth more gold—the cursed gold of the Nibelungen.

The commercialized temples, “the cloud-capped palaces,” stand out in bold contrast to the true solemn temples of Cologne, Speyer, Bruchsal, Freiburg, Worms—I labored in all of them as a missionary. But how did these sacral centers accomplish their end? It

was by a frontal attack, sheer assertion, an overpowering display and demonstration of might and glory from the awesome horns of the Tibetan lamasery to the booming organs of the Byzantine court—an overpoweringly contrived theatrical production of heaven.³⁹

When the emperor entered, Constantine says, and a beam of sunlight hit his garment stiff with jewels, you felt you were in the presence of an angel of God. This mind-boggling theater was taken over by the West and combined the intoxication of the senses with a compelling force of mass action. No one can resist being swept along by such a cheering section. “What society as a whole believes,” wrote St. Augustine, “that we also believe and without an inkling of doubt, even though we admit that we cannot know that it is true.”⁴⁰

From the sixth century BC on, the art of rhetoric became the substance of education. Quintillion defines it as the *vis persuadendi*, or the art of persuasion; it was also called *suaviloquentia*, or the “soft sell.” The Greek sophist and rhetorician Gorgias, one of the founders, worked out the technique which enables the student to speak offhand on any subject for any length of time and to sell anything to anybody. The new art caused an immense sensation, not unlike the computer today, and never lost its control over the public. Plato said it made great things small and small things great by the manipulating of words—a vicious device but a very useful one. “People of every class became inflamed with the desire to achieve the new success,” wrote Irvin Rhode. Augustine felt it was the ultimate weapon for conversion and made it the cornerstone of Christian education even while he confessed, “I taught the art of rhetoric . . . and, myself the victim of cupidity, trafficked in loquacity.”⁴¹

The problem of rhetoric was to make an irresistible impression immediately on large numbers of people. To do that you had to pour it on. *Copia*, “abundance, excess,” is Cicero’s favorite word. So this became the obsession of the Western Church—boundless profusion and endless size. St. Peters and Santa Sophia are meant to be overpowering. When size had to be limited, the Baroque poured it on with massive profusions of glittering gold. Justinian boasted that he had surpassed Solomon’s temple. People were out to gather glory to themselves.

I began this talk with Shakespeare and Bach, and I agree with Spengler that they represent the high point of our civilization. Now I invite you to go home from this melancholy meeting and beguile three hours or so before the tube, so that you may experience one full hour of commercials. This is the final triumph and total

corruption of rhetoric—rude, brief, and wrenching interruptions, as garish and distracting as possible, as your attention is jerked from one sales pitch to another, and we sit there and allow this corrupt practice to

inflict the deadly epidemic of the past on our civilization. At this point the only escape I can think of is the temple. I testify to its sanctity and power to purify our thoughts and lives. ❏

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