

ARTICLES AND ESSAYS

A Conversation With Hugh Nibley

HUGH NIBLEY was interviewed in his office at the Brigham Young University Library on 15 October 1979, by Mary Bradford and Gary Gillum. They were joined midway in the conversation by Brother Nibley's long-time friend, Curtis Wright, who posed a few philosophical questions. A few days earlier, Brother Nibley had delivered his sesquicentennial address, "How Firm a Foundation," a speech which seems to sum up a lifetime of inquiry, reflection and faith. Dialogue is proud to publish this speech, with an introduction in the form of a brief conversation.

Dialogue: Do you see yourself as a "defender of the faith?"

Nibley: Perish, forbid! I'm not that at all. I'm just another sucker like you!

Dialogue: Many people have tried to follow you around and become your disciples.

Nibley: It doesn't work! No!

Dialogue: Are you saying that everybody needs to follow his or her own path?

Nibley: Oh, sure.

Dialogue: People tend to idolize you.

Nibley: Well, that's silly. Ah! That is the reward for keeping out of sight. All they have to do is see me, and boy, does that disillusion them in a hurry!

Dialogue: I understand you've learned to ride a bicycle backwards. Is that true?

Nibley: That's a new one. No. I don't ride a bicycle backwards. I have a son that does tricks like that.

Dialogue: You like to cook?

Nibley: No, I detest cooking.

Dialogue: I understand you lived entirely on milk and carrots once.

Nibley: No, it wasn't milk and carrots. It was oranges and cabbage.

Dialogue: Well, that will give you a lot of energy.

Nibley: Wait a minute! I did live on canned milk and carrots for quite a while. That's right.

Dialogue: It was when you were working on your dissertation. You decided to change your dissertation subject after you dropped your notes on the floor, so you locked yourself in your apartment for two weeks, eating carrots and milk.

Nibley: That's true, but it was more like four weeks.

Dialogue: And then you completed the entire process.

Nibley: See, these interviews are very bad. I've never yet read an interview that was correct. You just don't realize it's all wrong until there's one about you. Then you realize that almost nothing is right. That's where the myths and the gossip come from.

Dialogue: Well, there are quite a few myths about you. Have your children turned out to be scholars?

Nibley: Michael is a very good scholar, he's really bright. Martha is a prodigy. She was a National Merit finalist. She came home at the end of last semester with forty-four trophies.

Dialogue: Is she in college now?

Nibley: No, she's still at BY High.

Dialogue: Is she your youngest?

Nibley: No, she has a younger sister, Zina, who sometimes takes first when Martha takes second. That's happened once, and it broke their hearts. They were crying and crying, it was terrible. "What's the matter?" It was the big one, they were down at Baker's school, one of these big regional speech

things, you know. But Zina got first and Martha got second. It was quite a scene. Zina was all broken up because she thought Martha was done in. Martha was feeling bad because Zina wasn't happy about winning first prize.

Dialogue: Isn't that amazing?

Nibley: Yes, they were both in tears because they just got the first and second prizes, that was all, but not in the right order.

Dialogue: Is your wife, Phyllis, a musician?

Nibley: Yes, she's still in the orchestra. She still plays the cello. She's also the librarian for the orchestra—has to get all that music ordered from the East, copied, distributed, put on the stands, and then get it collected. The musicians like to take it home and practice. She has to get it back. It's only rented, you know.

Dialogue: One thing you're noted for is your sense of humor. It seems to us that humor is really basic. . .

Nibley: Certainly, that gives us some of the best defenses we have.

Dialogue: Do you feel that you were strictly brought up?

Nibley: No, not particularly.

Dialogue: What do you think accounts for your family's many accomplishments?

Nibley: Oh, my mother was hell on wheels. She pushed her kids.

Dialogue: I know your brother, Reid Nibley, the pianist. . .

Nibley: She pushed him too. Oh, how he hated practicing when he was a little boy!

Dialogue: You know many languages. What is the secret of being able to learn all those languages?

Nibley: Well, all you have to do is just live in the country, that's all. Nabokov segmented his life, the first part in Russia, then lived a while in Berlin, France, the United States, at least fifteen years in each country.

Dialogue: A woman called the other day to ask, "Can you tell me how many languages Brother Nibley knows?" She said, "I heard it was twenty-five, but I don't know."

Nibley: No, no!

Dialogue: How is your research on the Book of Abraham? We understand you're still working on it.

Nibley: Well, my book is up at Deseret. They've had it for a couple of months now. They're waiting until after Conference. Everything has had to wait for Conference. Did you ever see anything like it? Every other page of the newspapers was just plastered with book ads.

Dialogue: Is that right?

Nibley: Oh, you never saw the like! I mean, it was shocking, talk about the Big Push. There's nothing more venal on earth than a publisher. They get something for nothing; they take all their expenses and then divide it by the number of books they are going to get out, and that gives the cost of each book—total expenses divided by the number of books. Then they multiply that by eight, and that's the price of the book. Really, that's the normal procedure. They multiply their costs by eight, and that's what you get.

Dialogue: Now that you've finished your book on the Book of Abraham, what are you working on?

Nibley: I have a couple of projects now, but one is top secret!

Dialogue: Is it your magnum opus?

Nibley: No. . .

Dialogue: What do you think of the Orson Hyde Memorial in Israel?

Nibley: You know, we have never found the slightest trace of Jewish blood in the Orson Hyde line. He is in *no* way related to the Jews, and they emphasize that he is Jewish.

My great-grandfather, Alexander Niebaur, was a Jew, very much a Jew. The genealogists really went all out on Orson Hyde and couldn't find any connection with the Jews anywhere.

Dialogue: Well, we've never heard that before, that's fascinating. So it's just a myth?

Nibley: Well, I don't know. There must be something behind it. What is the blood of Israel, after all? We're all adopted into the covenant.

And he *was* the one who did go back there, and he *did* give the blessing, of course. If we are of Ephraim, who cares? It doesn't make any difference to us, as far as that goes.

Dialogue: Do you think it was a good thing for us to have that plaque in honor of the Jews, considering the Mideast situation?

Nibley: Yes. The scriptures talk about the prophecies and the Jews in the early days back there, and boy, they hit it right on the head. Some good things then. They had a very clear idea of exactly how it would be with the Jews and the people over here. The double action, the “one-two” business.

Dialogue: We want to ask about the Ebla Tablets. They sound exciting.

Nibley: They’re great! Dahoud was here from the Pontifical Institute. He is head of the Oriental Department. We had a long talk with him—it was very interesting.

Dialogue: Those were some of the earliest mentions of the creation?

Nibley: Not the creation, but mention of names like Abraham, first mention of David and Adam and Eve, the first mention we find of “Eve” occurring outside the Old Testament. And so it goes. It’s quite exciting. But they have just begun, now, and there are all sorts of differences about this thing.

Dialogue: So you’ll be working with Dahoud?

Nibley: No. In fact, I’m writing a letter here turning them down; they want me to work with them in the new encyclopedia. I’ve always been working on that from here. But I can’t get sidetracked on that.

Dialogue: Do you think that our country and maybe even the Church could be losing out for not doing as much research in parapsychology as they are in the Soviet Union, maybe trying to correlate it with the Gospel?

Nibley: Well, it’s true that American schools and institutes shut a lot of doors. They’re very dogmatic about certain things. Chicago is a good example of that. They will not credit the Egyptians with anything; because Egyptians lived back in primitive times, they can’t know as much as we do. And so it’s just so much mumbo jumbo, and with that attitude they won’t find anything at all. The Chicago School, with people like Breasted and Erman couldn’t stand the French because the French hadn’t used intuition when they were translating. And yet now, after a hundred years, the French translations are much better. But the Germans—Prussian arrogance, you know. They weren’t *wissenschaftliche*, they weren’t scientific about it. The two words they could not stand and would drive them wild were “Romantic” and “Fantasy.” If you didn’t use their method, you were guilty of *Romantik* or *Fantasia*.

Dialogue: That’s strange. The Germans have such a long history of romanticism in their literature and history.

Nibley: Well, that's true. But again, they have such a long tradition of humanism and liberalism, too . . . Such extremes!

Dialogue: Is that why the Gospel isn't being preached very successfully in Germany right now?

Nibley: Yes, that's true. They were all romantics, extreme romantics. After all, Hitler was as superstitious, as star-bound as anyone.

Dialogue: Do you see great scientists as having a sense of mystery?

Nibley: They always did, but they tell us, according to all the surveys today, there aren't very many great scientists left. It was a toss-up with the Nobel, as far as that goes, you see. It's just some very tiny segment. That's why I think Weinberg probably deserved it because he took a broader view of things.

I thought that the survey the *Saturday Review* made, two years ago was interesting. They interviewed physicists, asking them, first of all, who are the giants in your field? And the answer was, "Well, if you had come around ten years ago, we could have told you: Niels Bohr, Einstein," and so forth. "But we don't have any giants." It's interesting; they went to every other field, into literature and into music. There are no giants; it's an age of pygmies, an exhausted age. Technology may have crippled us.

Dialogue: Of all the people who may have brought truth into the world in this century, who do you think has brought the most? (Besides church leaders, that is.)

Nibley: In this century? That's an interesting question. I wouldn't say Rex Stout. He's been a great revelator. (laughs) His stuff puts you in the picture and makes you feel the spirit . . . In this century you're expected to say Einstein. Who besides Einstein?

Dialogue: What about Bucky Fuller?

Nibley: I think he hasn't brought new knowledge into the world, but he has pointed it out.

Dialogue: Synthesized?

Nibley: He has called attention to certain things, and that's very important; we've been looking in the other direction. I have a feeling this century's getting along now, and that's quite a span. I'd forgotten about that. I don't know, I'll have to think about that. There must be somebody who's given us something really big. I wish Nabokov hadn't gone overboard for sex. What a master of language! Nobody can touch him in it. He had the secret of it,

inimitable, that just carried you along. And yet he would get on this “organic sexuality” that was so horrible. . . . It was incest and all sorts of things. And yet, he wrote other books with no mention of it whatever—some of his best things.

Perhaps Mark Twain.

Dialogue: Yes, Mark Twain was quite a giant in his own right.

Nibley: He made an American contribution. Someone like James Joyce has a lot to offer. He was great. Poets . . . Nobody keeps track of the poets anymore.

Dialogue: They don’t seem to be coming from one central tradition.

Nibley: No, any of them could be a poet just by writing any prose piece and dividing up the lines. Two words, three words, that’s it, you can just take any letters and make them into a poem.

Dialogue: Stream of consciousness. And emphasis on speech pattern.

Nibley: Yes, well now, that isn’t creating much.

Dialogue: Do you find that most students are spending all their time studying what they already know?

Nibley: Well, that’s been characteristic of BYU all along. I mean, the students actually resent being told what they don’t know. They will come to me at the beginning of class and say, “You’re not going to tell us anything we don’t already know.” They actually do that.

Dialogue: I notice sort of a “supermarket attitude:” “We’re paying for our education, so we will take only what we want to take.”

Nibley: “You pays your money and you takes you choice.” That’s true enough. (laughter)

Dialogue: That’s basically what you said in “Zeal Without Knowledge.” We notice that in literary studies: Just studying the same thing over and over again, instead of going out and creating something new and then coming back and looking at it.

Nibley: After announcing that the Gospel embraces all truth. We accept truth from all sources, we accept all truth, the Gospel includes all truth.

Dialogue: Do you think some students are passing on the torch, though?

Nibley: Oh, there are some good ones coming along now. I don't know enough about it, because I'm not in it anymore, but there should be some very good students. Now let me see, oh, yes, there are. I can think of half a dozen—at least half a dozen in Egyptian and classics. They are very active in classics. We have some good students in classics, far more than ever before. Everybody else is in business and law now. That's the thing. Nothing else counts. It's just managers managing other managers.

Dialogue: Managing people or managing money?

Nibley: Both. And management produces nothing.

Dialogue: What about the sciences?

Nibley: Well, there's always the science of management.

Dialogue: With all that you've been able to accomplish in your lifetime, is there any way that you can teach members of the church to be self-motivated, to educate themselves?

Nibley: Well, it has always happened: Students are exposed to education; a surprisingly large percent, I think, will be affected, if they are exposed to good taste in music or art. The kids don't forget. It will catch on.

Dialogue: So you hope that we will be able to get past the attitude that we are here to get what we already have.

Nibley: Yes.

Dialogue: Some BYU physicists and others are trying to relate the second law of thermodynamics to the atonement. They are trying to learn how the atonement might have reversed the process of entropy. Will you comment on that?

Nibley: It's clearly stated in the Book of Mormon. I've known about that for years. Where it says in the Book of Mormon that the normal process of nature is to die, to crumble, and to rot, we return to dust, never to rise again. Now, that's the law of nature. That's how everything breaks down. Talk about mysterious forces! We don't know what it is, but the testimony of our senses makes it clear that it works. It's interesting that there are physicists interested in that.

Dialogue: Do you think it's the atonement itself that causes syntropy?

Nibley: Well, "atonement" means syntropy—bringing back to its former state, restoring to its former state. You see, when something breaks down, it

becomes disorganized and fractured. "At one" means unified again—returned to its unity, returned to its former integrity and structure. It sounds like a Latin word or Greek, but it isn't—it's pure old English, nothing else. Atonement is not one of the technical terms, not even like resurrection. It is an old English word. It's like "bless"—it comes from no other language but English—"woman" comes from no other language but English. "Lord," the word "Lord"—no trace of it in any other language. Isn't that funny?"

Dialogue: It's Anglo-Saxon, the simpler term . . .

Nibley: Anglo-Saxon is related to all the other languages around. And yet these particular words emerge only in English.

Dialogue: Do you think that the gift of the Holy Ghost, or the Priesthood power itself has any parallels in science, or do you think it will have in the future as we do more research?

Nibley: Yes, that's the whole thing. Notice who got the Nobel Prize—Weinberg, and he's the farthest out of all. He's the one who's broken down the quark. He's going to get us the ultimate particle, as far as that goes. And the particle will account for everything, and we've gotten nowhere, but that's exactly where the atomists began. It's relative.

Well, it doesn't make any difference what the particle is because it resides in a ultimate little particle, and they haven't found that. Then there were different variations of atomism, the shapes and forms of atoms, that account for it, but the point is that this particle, by its structure, will explain everything in the universe, and that's exactly what we're working for today. We'll finally get the ultimate particle, says Weinberg, and then we'll know everything. It's like saying, "Nature does this, nature does that," or "Evolution does this, evolution does that." They're just words. He says it happens because it happens. You haven't explained anything. Well, nature did it, evolution did it; that explains it.

Dialogue: We thought evolution was a dead issue on campus, but apparently it's not.

Nibley: Oh, heavens, no. As far as that goes, it never will be, because as long as you don't have to define anything, you can fill a gap. That's what Karl Popper says, it's just a circular definition. It's the process of natural selection, survival of the fittest. How do you know it's the fittest? Because it survives. If the only test of fitness is survival, how do you know that it was the fittest that survived? Because it survived. You've gone nowhere—Karl Popper's very good on that. He really *rips* the tautologies.

Curtis Wright enters.

H. Curtis Wright: I have two questions, if you want to comment on them.

Nibley: Oh, sure.

Wright: One deals with the relations between naturalism and supernaturalism, the other with the relationship between the basic realities the Saints believe in and their ways of expressing those realities theologically (in rational terms) and ritually (in dramatic terms). By “naturalism,” of course, I am not referring to the philosophical tradition known as “materialism” before Karl Marx.

Nibley: I know what you mean by naturalism.

Wright: I mean the belief that the natural order contains everything that is.

Nibley: Yes.

Wright: I refer to the belief that the natural order has no environment, that there is nothing outside of it to relate or be related to it, versus the belief that in addition to the natural order, there is a transcendent reality, another world order, distinct and separate from the natural order. These beliefs I take to be irreconcilable, because you can't believe at the same time (a) that the natural order is all there is, and (b) that there is something other than the natural order.

My first question, therefore, is this: What is the impact on human history of the naturalistic and supernatural outlooks?

Nibley: Well, it completely dominates the world. You have nothing else today except the Gospel. That's why, when the Church first came out, Joseph Smith couldn't lose—he simply couldn't lose. The naturalists had everything going for them, and he had nothing going for him. And yet he couldn't lose because he had a scenario. He didn't really believe that spirit was spirit—“spirit” is their word for “essence,” you see, and that's not physical substance. So, every time they would collide like this, nothing would come of it.

Wright: I've been deeply interested in your study of sophic and mantic because it seems to explore these matters. The issue of this forced union, it seems to me, is a conflict of spiritualities in which two fundamental contradictories are permanently opposed to each other. The Greeks and Romans, who go for the naturalistic answers to everything, are very spiritual people. But their spirituality is naturalistic because it pertains solely to the natural order; it never transcends the temporal system of nature because they have little or no feeling for eternity in the supernatural sense.

Nibley: That's right. That accounts for all the difference between the Greeks and the Egyptians. The Greeks got all their answers from the Egyptians but didn't bring in the other world. And that's the whole difference. Egyptian philosophy was actually way ahead of the Greeks, but nobody will recognize

that. No, the Greeks just keep on beating their breasts and going around and around in a circle because you can never get out of the naturalistic syndrome.

Wright: That creates the closed system of science.

Nibley: Yes—it's a closed system.

Wright: And we're thoroughly confused by all this. That's my perception of it, anyway. The result of mixing these eastern and western outlooks is a conflict of spiritualities in which we can't decide whether we ought to be Greeks or Hebrews. We're very ambivalent about this.

Nibley: Well, the Hebrews themselves were often naturalistic.

Wright: Yes, and *some* of the Greeks, at least, were supernaturalists. These distinctions are basic enough to be found among all peoples. There are, I would guess, no purely naturalistic or supernatural cultures.

I have thought about this a lot, and sometimes I think the problem is too big for me. But here's the way I handle it—and I would value your comments on this. I believe that the Saints ought to be two-game athletes. We ought to resist the strong, relentless pressure of monism, which, I take it, is simply the passionate desire of the Greeks to resolve everything at the highest abstract level. They wanted to create a single superscience for explaining everything—as you know—a knowledge system so comprehensive and so airtight that, beginning with any particular in the system, you could induce one basic premise from which all the rest of the system could be deduced.

Nibley: The one particle. If you can only discover the one final particle!

Wright: The Saints should be capable of playing two games instead of one. In order to do it, though, they must distinguish between two sets of rules. They can't play a temporal game by eternal rules, or an eternal game by temporal rules.

Nibley: Yes, because that distinction is always made. There is the temporal existence, and there is a spiritual aspect to it. The temporal, that describes it perfectly. The natural world is temporally limited, and its actual size is limited by its spiritual logics. They are unchangeable. That is a set beyond which we cannot go; we are bound by time, the temporal.

Wright: This way of conceiving it has brought me a little comfort. I don't know if it's wholly right or not, but I do believe that I can play basketball as well as football. What I can't play is footbasket: I can't play football according to the rules of basketball or vice versa. That's chaotic. On the other hand, the monists will say that I can't be a good football player if I dissipate half of my energies playing basketball. They can't admit the existence, to say nothing of

the validity, of the eternal game without abdicating as naturalists. But I take comfort in believing that I can play both games. How do you feel about that?

Nibley: It's perfectly true that in this world there is the temporal and the spiritual, and yet there is no distinction between them. There is no system that is not spiritual, and there is none that is not material. The spirit itself is composed of matter. We fuse the two in the gospel; only there can it be done. You can accept the temporal and the spiritual as co-existing. When a person dies, you see, he is forced to face another existence. We don't like to accept this, though. We want to shut ourselves in.

Wright: If you're a supernaturalist, you can do it; but you can't do it as a naturalist.

Nibley: Oh, no! Not as a naturalist. You can never say: "Well, we include the other world in our studies of this world." You can't do that. There's no way you can do that in the laboratory.

Wright: As long as it's possible for me to play both games, I will, and I will play to the best of my ability.

Nibley: And you can! The gospel will let you do it. It's the *school* that won't let you do it.

Wright: If I were pushed to the wall and forced to choose between the natural and supernatural spiritualities, I would stay with the eternal system. But short of that, I am able to play either game as best I can.

Nibley: We use the word "spiritual" around here so much, but we never define it, of course.

Wright: I know, and that only deepens the conflict of spiritualities in which we are engulfed. The *homo animalis* is, after all, a spiritual man, the perfect equivalent of Paul's *psychikos anthropos*. The natural man is not the man of flesh, but the man whose spirituality is naturalistic. Compared to profligates, of course, he is the noblest of men; but a whole dimension of his soul is missing in comparison with the *pneumatikos anthropos*, whose spirituality is revealed from outside the natural order.

That brings us to my second question. In any system of worship, it seems to me, you have to have some basic realities to believe in. And then, I think, you will have to express those realities somehow, or at least attempt to communicate them. Historically, this takes one of two forms: Men have either tried to explain the realities they believe in theologically in rational categories, or to present them dramatically in ritual performances. In addition, I suppose, you would also have an ethic, but I'm not interested here in the "way of life" business. I'm more interested in the relationship of the

doctrinal realities believed in by the Saints both to their theological explanations of those realities in rational terms and to their ritualized presentations of the same things in dramatic terms.

You have known me for a long time. I have a pronounced theological tendency but I think you know that I sense some dangers in that. Sometimes, when I want to push explanations as far as I can go, I feel ashamed of myself. I back off, I think, because I don't want to distort the realities I believe in by forcing rational explanations upon them. I also wonder about the relationship of theological explanations to what goes on in the temple where you see ritualized presentations of those realities in dramatic form. What, then, is the relationship of doctrine to theology and ritual?

Nibley: Well, ordinances are more than just symbols—they go beyond that. They can be as simple as a drawing of something that actually is. They always have a double nature: they are or mean something that is real. You see that as soon as you try, in music and art, to give religious experience a third dimension. The gospel actually *has* that third dimension, of course. But the whole purpose of music and art, and literature too, is to produce the *illusion* of a third dimension, to produce the illusion that there is depth in the picture. That's what art does. The painters were scandalized, I read, when they suddenly produced perspective. On a two-dimensional canvas you can produce a third dimension. It's like looking up into the heights of St. Peter's: you can see the angels floating on the clouds, and you get the illusion of ascending up to heaven. But that's the point: it's all an illusion, a trick of art, you see; and it will always backfire if you try to do that with the gospel, which is the real thing. That's why I think we're wasting our time, mostly, to try heightening religious experience by using such devices in the Church. Once you know the real thing, everything else is an anticlimax. The ward choir can never achieve the same effects as a choir of angels, and yet these things go together.

I was truly amazed when I went to the Kirtland temple. Look at the work that went into it! It looks like nothing much on the outside but not so on the inside: the workmanship, the design, the way the whole thing is conceived, the scope of it all, the size, the proportions—simply astounding! There is something legitimate there. I can see that the Lord, and not just an angel, has deigned to appear there, knowing how the poor people have worked their heads off for these very same things. And it is really so. They are actually working in a third dimension there: It's more than just dream and illusion. It's totally unlike these ugly gothic, neogothic churches all over the place, these massive pretentious buildings, but of course, they are not genuine. They are imitation gothic. They try to take you back to the Age of Faith, to the Middle Ages, and all that tripe.

Dialogue: What do you think of our modern Mormon churches?

Nibley: They represent bottom-line economy. The architect gets his five percent by grinding them out on the drawing board. There's not much imagination shown in them, but once he gets a plan that works, we apply it, with

slight variations, to hundreds of churches, regardless of the country or the climate. They all follow the same cinder-block pattern, and the architect makes his killing.

Wright: Okay. Let's talk about theology for a minute. They are admittedly some dangers here: even Luther said once, "Oh God, deliver me from the theologians." For all that, however, an angel from God does speak *qua* theologian in the 5th chapter of Moses. Adam had been instructed to sacrifice the firstlings of his flock as an offering unto the Lord, without knowing the rationale for what he was to do. Adam did as instructed, but after many days, when the angel asked him why he did what he had done, Adam could only answer: "I don't know why; I only know that I was asked to do it." The angel then gives a certain amount of theological explanation: "This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father," and so on.

Nibley: Sure. These things have to be explained.

Wright: We need explanation, then?

Nibley: Yes. But not through speculation. The angel didn't get his information by speculation.

Wright: Precisely. But in the western tradition the penchant for rational explanation is very strong, so strong, I think, that we constantly run the risk of valuing our ability to explain things more than the things we are trying to explain.

Nibley: Yes, that could happen. It's all too easy to fall into that trap.

Wright: Well, that's essentially what I was interested in. I think, though, that much difficulty would be avoided if we could only keep from confusing the temporal and eternal spiritualities and the two sets of rules which go with them. But we are so prone to get them all mixed up.

I reject in principle the academic criticism of prophets. There is something wrong with the football player who criticizes the play of basketball on the basis of the only rules he knows, especially if he believes into the bargain that football is the only game in existence. I can't bring myself to criticize a prophet for any utterance, no matter how foolish or profound, on the basis of academic rules. I don't always agree with everything the prophets say, but they are free to say anything they like without opposition from me.

Nibley: Well, there's so much in church history on that particular subject. But we have gotten into a concept of authority which is a million miles away from it. This authority business is a dodge. The idea is that every man must answer for himself, must decide for himself. Every president of the Church has repeatedly emphasized that. But it's so much easier to let someone else make up our minds. Let the prophets do our righteous deeds for us; if they

tell us what's what, that lets us off the hook. Brigham Young has a wonderful quotation on this: "There are some Latter-day Saints who say 'If it is all right with the brethren, it is all right with me.'" But that, he says, is not enough. We must decide what is virtuous and what is not because we can't ride into the kingdom on someone else's coattails.

Dialogue: We are interested in your matriarchal studies. I understand you're going to lecture at the law school on matriarchies.

Nibley: Oh, yes. I have quite a section on that in this book on Abraham. Of course, the Egyptians have the matriarchal tradition. The line passed through the females.

Dialogue: There is quite an interest now in feminist studies, of course.

Nibley: Yes, there is!

Dialogue: About the prehistory of goddesses and the notion that the patriarchy is more recent.

Nibley: The matriarchy is just as old as the patriarchal order.

Dialogue: Do you see that as being any comfort to women?

Nibley: Yes, it should be.

Dialogue: I understand you've taken quite an interest in politics recently, especially environmental issues.

Nibley: No, none whatever. That comes out in my speech. (How Firm a Foundation!) I call it the "Gentile Dilemma", the Devil's dilemma, you see. You give people two choices when they're not two at all. It's a neat trick. Which will it be? Cigars or cigarettes? The answer is, of course, neither one interests us."

Dialogue: What do you think about some of the independent journals, like *Dialogue*? Do you think they serve a useful purpose?

Nibley: I think so. I think they should keep up. You don't want too many of them, of course. That would be trouble.

Dialogue: We do have at least four now.

Nibley: But then the idea is pluralism, anyway. If you say, let's not have any new ones at all, that wouldn't be good, but you can have too many.

There were refugee journals in France and Berlin, and so forth, in Paris and Berlin. They would come out by the hundreds, and they would just wither as fast as they could come out. Every refugee camp had its own.

Dialogue: You wonder if there is that much material worth publishing.

Nibley: Yes, that's true again. I think that's what produced much of Dadaism and impressionism and various wild things you have read about.

Dialogue: There's space to be filled, and they fill it.

Nibley: Like John Cage, my old bosom companion.

Dialogue: You knew him?

Nibley: Oh, we were the closest friends in high school; we were buddies all through high school. He was quite a character. But he knows he's spoofing. It paid off beautifully. Did you hear about that?

Unlike Picasso who produces something and puts something in front of you, just anything went with John Cage. He would take a class out and watch the traffic go by, and that was the music lesson for the day. Really, that was it! He said that's just as good as Bach or Grieg. It's not structured, it's open. Imagine! (laughs)

Dialogue: With the millenium coming so close, what do you think is the value of fiction and science fiction for members of the Church? Do you think it increases our perspective?

Nibley: It has sort of faded out now, because science has left it behind, and especially in the horror department. There is nothing in science fiction more dreadful than the MX.

Dialogue: It was on the news as one of the biggest public works projects in the history of the world.

Nibley: And it's never supposed to work; because they'd have to send over a dozen or two hydrogen warheads to wipe it out. They can't zero in on it. They can zero in on the area, but nuclear warheads cover an awful lot of territory.

Dialogue: St. George would be wiped out.

Nibley: Oh, definitely.

Dialogue: Have you read any of Orson Scott Card's science fiction?

Nibley: Orson Scott Card is a very imaginative writer.

Dialogue: Inventive.

Nibley: A gifted young man. I don't know if there is still a market for science fiction. I thought it was sort of played out, because after all that we've said about it . . .

Dialogue: Well, it seems to be getting quite religious in tone.

Nibley: Yes. It's not science fiction anymore. This is what Bradbury's was. It's not science fiction. They've changed it to fantasy, and there's nothing very scientific about it.

Dialogue: It's philosophical. . .

Nibley: Mystic. . .

Dialogue: Mystic, yes. New language. . .

Nibley: They went into a psychological angle, with Piaget and people like that. The first were the gadgetry, with H.G. Wells, the wonderful world of tomorrow, and the wonderful world of tomorrow turned out to be a nightmare.

Dialogue: There is a lot of medical stuff, too: Diseases, new creatures appearing.

Nibley: Yes, the biological. But the emphasis is horror nowadays. Science did not have the perfect world to offer—it is still just beyond our reach. H.G. Wells was going to give us and science was going to give us so many wonderful things we couldn't imagine. And he then tried to describe them and turned out a crashing bore.

Dialogue: Do you have any advice for *Dialogue*, for people like us who are trying to be an independent voice and yet at the same time faithful to the Church?

Nibley: Keep things stirred up—gimmicks to put before the public eye. (laughter)

Dialogue: To keep their interest.

Nibley: Do you inveigle General Authorities from time to time to write for you?

Dialogue: We haven't had much luck with that.

What do you see as the greatest problem in the Church?

Nibley: The fact that we don't live up to our covenants.

Dialogue: We don't really live the Law of Consecration?

Nibley: No, we don't. We have no intention of doing it. There has never been much safety in it. That's what the Doctrine and Covenants says.

It keeps hitting you all the time. You have to dodge and apologize and shift to the next verse, and look the other way . . .

It shouts at you all the way through, and we sidestep it so neatly, "covetous and feigned words."

If I am actually accepting the Law of Consecration, that rules everything else out. It is beyond discussion anymore. I'm stuck with it now. I have no choice. I do consecrate, here and now, all the Lord has given me, all I have now, as well as what I'm going to get in the future, all my present possessions.

Dialogue: Wonderful!

Nibley: You'd be surprised at what is in that speech.

"How Firm A Foundation!" follows



