

Book Reviews

HUGH NIBLEY. *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled*. Edited by Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks. Vol. 10 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991. xi; 515 pp. Illus. Index. \$21.95.

Reviewed by David B. Honey, Assistant Professor of Asian and Near Eastern Languages, Brigham Young University, with an interest in Inner Asian languages and history.

This book may be the most important product of Hugh Nibley's enormous scholarly output. At the very least it should be considered the most useful, if not the most appreciated or cherished. As such it is unfortunate that this was not the first volume in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*. After all, the articles reprinted here do not culminate his lifetime of scholarship; rather, they initiated it.

The Ancient State is made up almost entirely of what we may term Hugh Nibley's secular studies. Among them are his first six professional publications in academic journals. They comprise Nibley's most sophisticated and successful work on the secular side of his life-long concern to contrast the ephemeral gauds and gewgaws of human artifice with the eternal glories of the Heavenly Kingdom. Subtitled *The Rulers and the Ruled*, the interrelated works in this singular volume develop three major themes: (1) the hierocentric nature of the ancient state and its remnants of rituals that distantly reflect an ultimate but now broken divine connection, (2) the nomadic provenance of the institutions and ideological underpinnings of the ancient state, and (3) the policies of rulership and techniques of political rhetoric that either represent desperate attempts to retap the divine source or to reject and replace it with man-made goods. These articles established Nibley's credentials in the world of scholarship and either forced or allowed his audience, whether critic or partisan, to take him seriously.

Reprinting these materials at the head of *The Collected Works* would have provided the entire set with an entrée to Nibley's investigative methodology, a window on the working principles that have guided the course of his research for five decades. But more importantly, virtually every entry included in the first nine volumes already published in the *Collected Works* either follows up or expands on the themes first introduced and discussed by Nibley in the secular settings treated by the works in *The Ancient State*. This volume therefore forms a thematic encapsulation of his entire oeuvre and contains concise epitomes of the principles that ground Nibley's vision of the cosmic order and mankind's vain attempts throughout history to duplicate it on earth. In short, what Nibley has tried to learn all his life and how he has learned it are most clearly presented with this volume, hence its importance.

Why, then, is *The Ancient State* only volume ten in the series? Apparently not for any lack of effort or enthusiasm. Indeed, in planning meetings in 1984 and 1985, in which the entire collection was mapped out, it was agreed that this book should be published as soon as possible. But the unblemished printed text as it appears now, with a minimum of readjusting and the addition of extensive illustrations by Michael Lyon, belies the great effort that went into checking each footnote for accuracy and completeness. Over a score of workers have labored since 1985 to track down and verify the sources that Nibley used to produce these pioneering pieces. They also worked to supplement bibliographic information. Their efforts, then, deserve more than the understated acknowledgment in the preface. Now that this book has finally appeared, it does celebrate an anniversary of a sort: 1992 marks fifty years since the date of Nibley's first published article.

Taking a lead from Joseph Scaliger, the master of ancient chronology as preserved in classical and oriental sources and also the subject of Nibley's very first article, let us review the publication dates of Nibley's strictly secular studies in chronological order: 1942, 1945, 1949, 1951, 1953, 1956, (1959), (1961), 1963, 1963, (1965), 1966, (1966), (1967), 1969, (1972).¹ (The dates in parentheses represent studies not reprinted in this volume.) We see that no more than four years passed during the thirty-year interval between 1942 and 1972 without a piece

being published in non-Mormon journals or on non-Mormon-related themes. This despite the fact that pioneering, seminal, and still crucial studies on a variety of religious topics for the home audience were continually produced. On average, every two or three years Nibley paid his dues to his profession and renewed his contact with the sources to keep both current and credible in his field. After thirty years, at age 62, Nibley may have felt that he had discharged his professional debt in full, because he then turned virtually all of his attention to his private calling of defending the faith, debunking the false, and dethroning the ephemeral fads and fashions in Mormon belief and society.² Neither wobbly tradition nor mercenary opportunism has ever stood much of a chance against either Nibley's erudite offensives or the devastating logic of his defenses.

His earliest article, "New Light on Scaliger" (303–10),³ is thematically unrelated but entirely appropriate as a methodological gem illustrative of his skill as a philologist. By consulting an original edition of one of Scaliger's works to examine existing scholia and by scrutinizing a contemporary portrait of the great man, Nibley was able to supply hitherto unknown data on various aspects of Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609), one of Nibley's personal heroes (to judge from Nibley's method of study⁴). For example, Nibley determined the correct pronunciation of Scaliger's surname (hard g, after an Arabic reading), his education (not exclusively self-taught), and reputation. The penultimate point was noted by Rudolf Pfeiffer, who in his magisterial survey of the development of classical studies cited Nibley's article and appreciated the uniqueness of the source.⁵

Nibley's next professional contribution, "Sparsiones" (148–94), introduces Theme One, the hierocentric nature of the ancient state. It treats "the Roman practice . . . of bestowing public donatives by throwing things among the multitude to be scrambled for in scenes of wild disorder" (148). With evidence based on chapter four, "The Cult of Hospitality at Rome," of his 1938 dissertation,⁶ Nibley demonstrated that the provenance of this and related gift-giving ceremonies lay in the kingly rite of dispensing gifts as part of the New Year cult and that the ceremony was symbolic of both the largess of the giver and his blessed or divine nature. The restless Nibley curiosity was not content to detail the practice in its Roman guise but

ranged the whole of the ancient world in seeking to follow the complicated and often barely perceptible course of the thread that led to an entire nexus of related rituals preserved in other cultures and striving to approach its origins.⁷ This concern for origins dictated the methodology employed for this and most of his later works—the comparative approach—and impelled him to master as many relevant ancient languages as possible; no one has ever rightly accused Nibley of being narrow of vision or daunted in the face of temporarily inaccessible language sources.

Theme Two, a nomadic provenance for political institutions and ideology, commences with the first republished piece in the *Ancient State*, “The Arrow, the Hunter, and the State” (1–32). Appearing first in 1949,⁸ this piece actually expands on a short comment in “Sparsiones” and the extended footnote that supported it (162; 189, n. 152). The study examines the function of the marked arrow in enabling nomadic hunters to identify game, exploit the sedentary peasant populace who lacked such advanced weaponry, and through ritual extension, claim all that an arrow could over-fly. Its use in taking the census and in symbolizing the authority of the suzerain paralleled the use of the written word in recording and enforcing the imperial will.⁹ The marked arrow is thus seen as an important element in the formation of the earliest empires.¹⁰

With his next professional article, Nibley combined both Themes One and Two in highlighting another nomadic contribution to political organization, one that reflects a distant divine origin. In “The Hierocentric State” (99–147),¹¹ Nibley sets the nomadic custom of the *quriltai* or election *cum* elevation ceremony in the framework of world-wide royal new-year assemblies. After surveying the identifying elements in ancient cultures that reveal the existence of an underlying conception of universal kingship and the hierocentric role played by the king and his ritual hunts, progressions, and mobile palaces, Nibley traced the source of this concept and these rituals to Central Asiatic origins. Even Byzantine and European court ceremonies are seen as imitations of barbarian pageantry. Only recently has the same provenance (for ideology, not actual institutions), by way of the Aryans, been tentatively posited as a “working hypothesis” by a historian of the steppes, the late Joseph Fletcher.¹²

Nibley again uncovers the steppe origin of widespread religio-political practices in his 1966 offering “Tenting, Toll, and Taxing” (33–98).¹³ We see vast movements of nomadic hordes across the expanse of the steppes, with the tent as holy center and the royal progression on center stage. The interrelationship between political tolls and taxes on the one hand and religious rights of passage and ritual combats on the other is ingeniously and convincingly portrayed. All in all, Nibley’s work on the divine origin and organization of the state retains its relevance today in both broad outlines and most minor details, as borne out by an increasing amount of modern scholarship that unfortunately takes no notice of these pioneering studies.¹⁴ Of course, it is impossible to read all relevant works—Nibley himself missed an early treatment on arrow divination that covered much of the same ground, albeit in a much less deliberate, detailed, and documented manner.¹⁵ But by missing Nibley’s contributions, these recent works, in failing to see that the institutions, rites, or religious thought they treat form part of a world-wide complex that can be traced back to earliest times, regard them instead as isolated phenomena of their respective cultures, at most taking in other Asian analogues, and hence misconstrue their value as indigenous elements in those cultures.¹⁶

The remaining works in this volume treat Theme Three: political policies and refined rhetoric are second-best replacements of divine originals. These essays are all about decline: decline from loyalty to deserving individual leaders to a diffused, abstract, civic loyalty easily manipulated for the wrong reasons and further decline from that public loyalty to private selfishness devoid of responsibility, treated in “The Unsolved Loyalty Problem: Our Western Heritage” (195–242);¹⁷ decline in true wisdom to slickly sold sophistry, in “Victoriosa Loquacitas: The Rise of Rhetoric and the Decline of Everything Else” (243–86);¹⁸ and decline from education for learning and self-cultivation to education for monetary and social success, in “How to Have a Quiet Campus, Antique Style” (287–302).¹⁹ When first published, these essays must have seemed immediately and uncomfortably relevant even though they addressed contemporary problems from the indirect and therefore usually less threatening perspective of the past. These three essays, then, complement Nibley’s many contributions

to current issues made from the perspective of a deeply concerned participant who, strikingly enough, practices what he preaches.

Two concluding efforts are “Three Shrines: Sophic, Mantic, and Sophistic” (311–79), a series of lectures delivered at Yale University May 1–3, 1963, and “Paths That Stray: Some Notes on Sophic and Mantic” (380–479), compiled as aides to research, also around 1963. They both form a natural bridge between this volume and his more overtly religious works,²⁰ because they take the theme of the opposition between honorable applied learning and cheap rhetorical huckstering, adroitly summing up the conclusions along these lines already reached in this volume and elsewhere and contrasting them both to revealed knowledge.

In conclusion, this volume consists of a set of interlocking essays, each indebted to the former and launching the next, that exemplify Nibley’s scholarship at its best. These essays undergird virtually all of Nibley’s works. Time and time again his writings have revisited the central themes of the temple, the human condition, and the ways of the world in contrast to the ways of God. As is well stated in the foreword to this volume, “Despite the book’s title, these essays are in fact often highly pertinent to our own time. Astute readers will recognize in these essays many now-familiar themes of Nibley’s trenchant social commentaries. The foibles of our age are nothing new, repeating what has been done in other eras” (ix). No wonder Nibley personally considers this volume the most important for understanding his lifetime scholarly contributions.

These essays further illustrate the practical use Nibley has always made of his scholarly gifts in serving society by laying the lessons of the past at the feet of the present while treating these three fundamental Nibley themes. The conclusions we may draw from this work are many but can again be grouped under three major points. First, nomadic institutions, in their very mobility, are symbolic of fallen humankind’s wandering in the wilderness in search of the divine center, and to the extent that ancient states drew their political models from nomadic exemplars, all political institutions and their underlying ideologies are but temporary stop-gap measures at social organization and improvement to be discarded as soon as the gospel can fully flourish. Second, political polarization, whether East against West, *Pax Romana* against the barbarian

periphery, or party against party, is thus another reflection of the original dichotomy between the sacred Kingdom of God and the secular kingdoms of this world, that, unhappily, quickly degenerated into a vain competition between the unrighteous “they” group and the equally unrighteous “we” group, whatever their transient membership categories. Finally, rhetoric is itself seen as an unsuccessful attempt at reclaiming the inspiration and wisdom that was lost due to the degeneration of the crucial qualities of personal virtue and responsibility. It is at this personal level that we may begin to make the political process work.

These messages are not only timely messages from timeless scholarship. They are the key to understanding—and applying—all that Nibley has been trying to tell us through the years. No student who appreciates the uniqueness of Nibley, therefore, can be without this book. It teaches us, the ruled, just whom we should choose for our rulers, and that we should go beyond the tents of the ancient and modern states to what they dimly and vainly reflect: the temple of the Kingdom of God.

NOTES

¹ See Louis Midgley, “Hugh Winder Nibley: Bibliography and Register,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley*, eds. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 1:xv–lxxxvii, for a complete listing with annotations of Nibley’s works.

² One piece published in 1983 (but based in part on a conference paper read in 1941) does return to a secular setting and was published outside of Deseret: “Acclamation (Never Cry Mob),” in *Toward a Humanistic Science of Politics: Essays in Honor of Francis Dunham Wormuth*, ed. Dalmas H. Nelson and Richard L. Sklar (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1983), 11–22. Also partaking of the themes of this volume but not included is the essay “Beyond Politics,” *BYU Studies* 15 (Autumn 1974): 3–28; the mainly Mormon sources it draws on would have made it the odd piece out in this volume devoted to secular studies.

³ Originally published in *Classical Journal* 37 (February 1942): 291–95.

⁴ See Nibley’s depiction of his undergraduate study habits as “Scaliger’s Method or the Method of the Renaissance Scholars,” in “Nibliography,” *Century Two: A BYU Student Journal* 1 (October 1976): 54–55.

⁵ Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From 1300 to 1850* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 114, n. 1. The greatness of Scaliger, and thereby the splash this article must have made when the neophyte Nibley contributed

something new on this much-studied man, can be best appreciated by reading Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *History of Classical Scholarship*, trans. Alan Harris, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982). Scholars ranging from Politian to Otto Jahn are constantly compared, either implicitly or explicitly, with Scaliger and his erudition and methods.

⁶ Hugh Nibley, "The Roman Games as a Survival of an Archaic Year-Cult" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1938).

⁷ This formed the basis for Nibley's work on Old-World ritual in King Benjamin's speech. See *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 6:295–310.

⁸ It was Nibley's third professionally published article, first appearing in *Western Political Quarterly* 2 (September 1949): 328–44.

⁹ Nibley would in due course see connections here with Ezekiel's sticks and the Liahona's spindles. See materials in two other volumes in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, namely *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* 8:1–48 and *Since Cumorah* 7:255–60.

¹⁰ The present consensus on state formation is that it took place first in the ancient agricultural societies of Mesopotamia. Thus, while not a currently viable theory on state formation, if ever intended as such—the use of the terms *state* and *empire* is, I suspect more general than technical—Nibley's views on the use of the arrow to enable nomadic hunters to overpower farmers and then to impose their will on them over long distances is reasonable in terms of positing an actual mechanism first for conquest and social control and then for organization for exploitation in empires of conquest, Nibley's "great empires." This scenario is supported by John H. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). A recent anthropological work posits the reverse of Nibley's theory and claims instead that sedentary states expanded by exploiting nomadic populaces; see Pierre Briant, *État et pasteurs au Moyen-Orient ancien* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). This view has, however, been shot down in the reviews. For the most accurate marksmanship, see Henri-Paul Francfort, in *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* 73 (1984): 369–84, who incidentally grants to the nomads the primary role in the formation of empires, if not states.

¹¹ Originally published in *Western Political Quarterly* 4 (June 1951): 226–53.

¹² Joseph Fletcher, "The Mongols: Ecological and Social Perspectives," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 46 (June 1980): 30.

¹³ Originally published in *Western Political Quarterly* 19 (December 1966): 599–630.

¹⁴ The following are just a few works from the Asian sphere that underscore the importance of the hierocentric view. The main contribution is Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarter: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971). Rolf Stein, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), reprints in English translation three seminal monographs on prehistoric dwellings, historical palaces, magical mountains, grotto heavens, trees and other numinous

nodes, miniature gardens, and other microcosmic models that reflect macrocosmic reality in Asian thought. For individual motifs, see further Paul Pelliot, "Dry (Lone) Tree," in *Notes on Marco Polo*, 3 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1959–73), 2:627–37; and Michael Sullivan, "The Magic Mountain," *Asian Review* 51, no. 188 (1955): 300–10. For hunting preserves as symbols of universal suzerainty over both animal and spirit worlds, see Edward H. Schafer, "Hunting Parks and Animal Enclosures in Ancient China," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 11, no. 3 (1968): 318–43.

¹⁵ A. W. Buckland, "Rhabdomancy and Belomancy, or Divination by the Rod and by the Arrow," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 4 (April 1876): 436–50.

¹⁶ For instance, only William Boltz, "Philological Footnotes to the Han New Year Rites," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99 (July–September 1979): 423–38, attempts to set the Chinese practice within the Middle Eastern complex as outlined in Theodore H. Gaster's *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East* (1950; reprint. New York: W.W. Norton, 1977). (Gaster's book could have itself benefited from Nibley's work, which it ignores.)

¹⁷ Originally published in *Western Political Quarterly* 6 (December 1953): 631–57.

¹⁸ Originally published in *Western Speech* 20 (Spring 1956): 57–82.

¹⁹ Originally published in *BYU Studies* 9 (Summer 1969): 440–52.

²⁰ See, for example, *Approaching Zion*, vol. 9 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989).