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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD

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Nibley Reprint Explores Evidences of Apostasy

Three of Hugh Nibley's important essays on the fate of the primitive Christian church and its institutions and beliefs are brought together in a reprinting of the 1970 book *When the Lights Went Out: Three Studies on the Ancient Apostasy*. The issues that Nibley explores with penetrating insight—traditional Christianity's studied silence regarding evidence for the apostasy, Christ's 40-day postmortal ministry, and the centrality of the temple—are as relevant today as they ever were.

In "The Passing of the Primitive Church," Nibley argues that Christ's original church did not remain on earth and was not expected to. He develops this thesis in 40 separate arguments. For example, the apostles did not leave behind written instructions on how the fledgling church should be guided in their absence. "It is hard to conceive of such a colossal oversight if the founders had actually envisaged a long future for the church," Nibley writes. He observes further that "as 'the great lights went out' the most devoted Christians engaged in a wistful 'Operation Salvage' to rescue what might still be saved of 'those things which came by the living voices that yet remained.' What more eloquent commentary on the passing of the church?"

"The Forty-Day Mission of Christ" deals with the historical relevance of Acts 1:3, which states that after Christ's resurrection, he was "seen of [the apostles] forty days, and [spoke] of the things pertaining to

the kingdom of God." Embarrassed at not knowing what Christ taught during that interval, "churchmen since Clement and Origen have employed all the arts of rhetoric and logic to evade [the] crass literalism [of Acts 1:3]," Nibley writes. He goes on to argue that the teaching of the 40 days has not come down to us because, being "the last and highest revelation" given to the apostles, it was top secret. The serious student should not dismiss the 40-day literature found in the

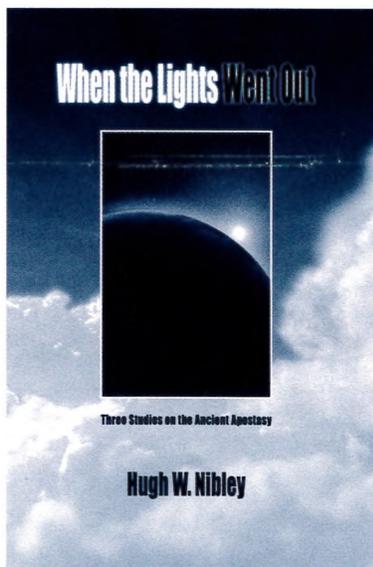
early apocrypha, he says, because "these writings take a position of conscious resistance to the rising tide of skepticism regarding the reality of the resurrection." They also fully explain the absence of a 40-day literature as resulting from apostolic secrecy and general church apostasy.

Nibley discusses the implications of the loss of the temple during the fall of Jerusalem in the final essay, "Christian Envy of the Temple." He explains why the loss of the temple was a crippling blow to the church and why the church fathers were reluctant to talk about it and why Christian scholars ignore

or denounce it out of envy and insecurity.

"The moral of our tale is that the Christian world has been perennially haunted by the ghost of the temple—a ghost in which it does not believe," Nibley observes. "The temple has cast a shadow over the claims and the confidence of the Christian church from early times, a shadow which is by no means diminishing in our own day."

To order a copy of this telling book, use the enclosed order form or visit the catalog section of the FARMS Web site. 





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Fig. 1. Aztec artist's depiction of a youthful miscreant being scourged with what are described as "burning firebrands."

Scourging with Faggots

The means by which the Book of Mormon prophet Abinadi was put to death by order of wicked King Noah is described in Mosiah 17:3: "And it came to pass that they took him and bound him, and scourged his skin with faggots, yea, even unto death."

The antiquated terms *scourge* and *faggot* may be unfamiliar to many modern readers. In Joseph Smith's day the verb *scourge* meant "to whip severely" or "to

punish with severity," and the noun *fagot* denoted a bundle of sticks used for firewood.¹

Punishment by scourging was known in the ancient Near East of Lehi's day. A wooden rod was the usual instrument of punishment in ancient Egypt² and remains so in some modern Arab countries. The Romans used whips as well as wooden rods to scourge malefactors.

The scourging of Abinadi recalls the Old World practice,

with the exception that the Old World sticks are not said to have been firewood. There is, however, a direct parallel between Abinadi's scourging and a form of punishment common in the much later Aztec culture of Mexico. *Codex Mendoza*, a richly illustrated ethnographic record of Aztec daily life that was produced in Mexico City around 1541, contains a painting that depicts two men beating a youth with firebrands (see fig. 1).

The caption for the painting is *tlequahuital*, which means "firebrand." The translated anno-

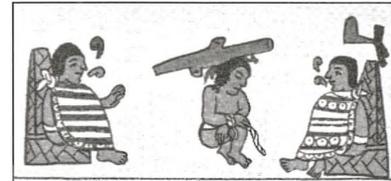
tation next to the painting reads in part, “The two *telpuchtlato*, who are masters who govern youths, punished a youth who had been living with a woman by beating him with burning firebrands.”³ Referring to this same painting, the editors of a modern edition of the codex note, “Cudgels almost identical to these . . . appear in three illustrations of the *Florentine Codex*. They are used to punish an adulterer, a careless musician, and a merchant who had misused a woman.”⁴ Many such infractions resulted in the death penalty.

Although the Aztec practice of beating transgressors with firewood followed more than 1,000 years after the death of Abinadi, it provides an interesting parallel to the method of Abinadi’s execution. 

Notes

1. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. “scourge” and “fagot.” Webster employed the variant spelling *fagot*.
2. See T. Eric Peet, *The Great Tomb Robberies of the Twentieth Egyptian Dynasty* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), plates v, vii, xxv, xxxvii.
3. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, eds. and trans., *The Essential Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 4:131.
4. *Ibid.*, 2:180. The *Florentine Codex* is the most complete version of Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún’s *General History of the Things of New Spain*, a 16th-century record of Aztec culture written in Náhuatl (the language of the Aztecs) with parallel Spanish text.

By Brant Gardner



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Fig. 2. In Aztec society a common form of punishment was to beat malefactors with sticks or cudgels. Illustrations from the *Florentine Codex*, from top: punishment of an immoral merchant, judgment and execution of an adulterer, and a noblewoman who corrects and punishes.

Scholar Oversees Projects on Eastern Christian Texts

Two major projects—the Eastern Christian Manuscripts project and the Eastern Christian Texts series—of the BYU Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts are progressing under the direction of Kristian Heal, one of the newer scholars at the Institute. Heal, who is pursuing a Ph.D. in Syriac Studies from the University of Birmingham, joined the Institute in April 2000 after completing his master’s degree at the University of Oxford. His skill and experience are making an important contribution to the work of the Institute.

As an academic overseer of the Eastern Christian Manuscripts project, Heal assesses the

value of digitizing various manuscripts from around the world. The primary focus of this project currently is to publish digitized images and electronic transcriptions of 28 Syriac manuscripts from the Vatican Apostolic Library. These manuscripts, which contain over 11,000 pages of text, are among the oldest known Syriac manuscripts (some date to the 6th century A.D.) and were written by some of the most influential authors in the Syriac tradition, including Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), the most important poet-theologian of the Syriac tradition; Jacob of Sarugh (d. 521); Isaac of Ninevah; John Dalyatha; and Philoxenus of Mabbug. Other manuscripts currently being digitized and prepared for publication include Slavonic manuscripts from the Pontifical Oriental Institute in

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Eastern Texts continued from page 3

Rome, Christian Arabic manuscripts from Notre Dame University in Lebanon, and the carbonized scrolls from the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum.

Heal also acts as the series editor for the Eastern Christian Texts series. This series was established to facilitate scholarly access to eastern Christian literature, which has been preserved in Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Georgian, and Syriac. The first volume of the series, *The Reformation of Morals*, by Yahya ibn 'Adi (893–974) will be published later this year. It will be followed by two to three additional volumes every year, such as *Selected Poems and Hymns on Nisibis* by St. Ephrem the Syrian and *The Mystical Discourses of John Saba*. Each volume will contain a reliable edition of the primary text, side by side with an annotated English translation. Heal works closely with an international board of advisors to see that each volume is accurate. The Eastern Christian Texts series will also include volumes of scholarly introductions to each of the major Eastern Christian writers.

Regarding his work on these projects, Heal said, "Through its publications and digitizing efforts in Eastern Christian Texts, BYU is making a major contribution to our understanding and appreciation of an important branch of Christianity. This work will be of considerable benefit to both the academic community and, more generally, to those Christians who are interested in knowing more about this rich tradition." 

IN THE NEWS

The July 2001 edition of *National Geographic* includes a foldout map on underwater archaeology. Of the eight "exploiters and explorers" discussed on one side of the foldout (ranging from Francisco Pizarro, who pillaged Inca gold in the 16th century, to Robert Ballard, who located the *Titanic* and *Bismarck*), one is a Latter-day Saint scholar, George F. Bass, who invented the techniques used in underwater archaeology. The brief caption to his image reads: "His career began on dry ground, but he later founded the field of nautical archaeology, developed new underwater technologies, and excavated Bronze Age shipwrecks. 'Archaeology is archaeology, wherever it's done,' says Bass. 'A historic site on the seabed is just as important as one on land.'" 

The Newsletter of the Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies (FARMS) at Brigham Young University



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The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) encourages and supports research about the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ and other ancient scriptures.

FARMS is part of the Brigham Young University Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. Its main research interests include ancient history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to the scriptures. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of the scriptures, solid research and academic perspectives alone can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about the scriptures.

FARMS works to make interim and final reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer reviewed to ensure scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these publications are used to support further research and publications on the scriptures. As a service to teachers and students of the scriptures, research results are distributed in both scholarly and popular formats.

It is hoped that this information will help all interested people to "come unto Christ" (Jacob 1:7) and to understand and take more seriously these ancient witnesses of the atonement of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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