

Chapter 20

“The Book That Answers All the Questions”: Hugh Nibley and the Pearl of Great Price

During the summer of 1962, Klaus Baer, then professor of Egyptian at Berkeley, wrote to Hugh asking about Egyptian connections to the Pearl of Great Price. No doubt he had received inquiries from Mormons searching for information about the Book of Abraham. Even during Hugh’s 1959-60 sabbatical when he had studied Egyptian and Coptic with Baer, they had not discussed the Pearl of Great Price. “I have always steered clear of the Pearl of Great Price which, as you can well imagine, has been a Happy Hunting-Ground for crack-pots,” Hugh wrote to Baer. “However, I would not be human if I were not guilty of speculating at times.”² Hugh then launched into a seven-page, single-spaced technical discussion of the three facsimiles which accompany the text of the Book of Abraham. A few weeks later, Hugh wrote, exhilarated, to his friend Paul Springer that he and Baer “have been corresponding at some length about the Pearl of Great Price—he brought it up; I wouldn’t dare.”³ While Hugh’s letter to Baer was lengthy, it was the first of many exchanges that would follow between the two men.

Indeed, Hugh did not publish on the Pearl of Great Price until the discovery of the Joseph Smith Papyri in 1967.⁴ It is clear, however, that he had a keen interest in the book and had indeed engaged in much speculation. In fact, it was the relationship

²Hugh Nibley, Letter to Klaus Baer, 2 August 1962, Klaus Baer Collection, Archives of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago. I have not yet discovered the letter from Baer that prompted Hugh’s response, but it is clear in Hugh’s letter that Baer had initiated the discussion.

³Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, 20 August 1962.

⁴While Hugh’s first publication about the Pearl of Great Price did not come out until after the papyri were discovered, he gave at least one lecture, “On the Pearl of Great Price,” earlier. On 13 May 1965, Hugh dis-