

Chapter 24

“Joy Lies in Another Direction”: Hugh Nibley’s Call to Leave Babylon and Build Zion

On 27 March 1915, to celebrate his fifth birthday, Hugh went with his family to the boathouse of his Uncle Louie on the Willamette River. “That was the biggest treat in the world, going down to the boathouse on the river,” remembers Hugh.² There he received a birthday present that most five-year-olds at that time would have surely considered a fine gift: five shiny new pennies. But Hugh was not like most five-year-olds. In a private moment of contemplation, Hugh took his birthday pennies to the water’s edge and dropped them into the river “solemnly one by one, reflecting on each one, ‘There’s no loss there: what’s money?’”³ “That’s how I spent my fifth birthday,” Hugh later recalled, “Philosophyzing.”⁴

Hugh Nibley’s attitude about money has changed little over the years. He has had little use for it; and as a young man when he saw its effects on his parents, he came to regard money as a corrupting influence. Yet it wasn’t until rather late in his life that Hugh forcefully addressed the theme in his writings. And despite his negative feelings about materialism, he has usually taken a position of hope and optimism for the future. Whether anticipating the subject of his last public discourse as he did in his contribution to the 1971 Last Lecture Series, or contemplating break-

²Hugh Nibley, “Faith of an Observer,” 26-27. Lou West, known by the courtesy title of “Uncle Louie,” was the brother of Hugh’s uncle by marriage, Richard Ballantyne West, husband of Ruth Sloan. I read an early version of this chapter at the Sunstone Symposium, 15 July 1999, in Salt Lake City.

³Hugh Nibley, interviewed by Boyd Petersen, 9 June 1996.

⁴Hugh Nibley, “Faith of an Observer,” 27.