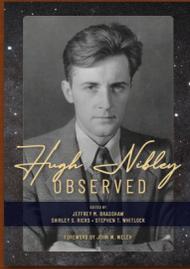


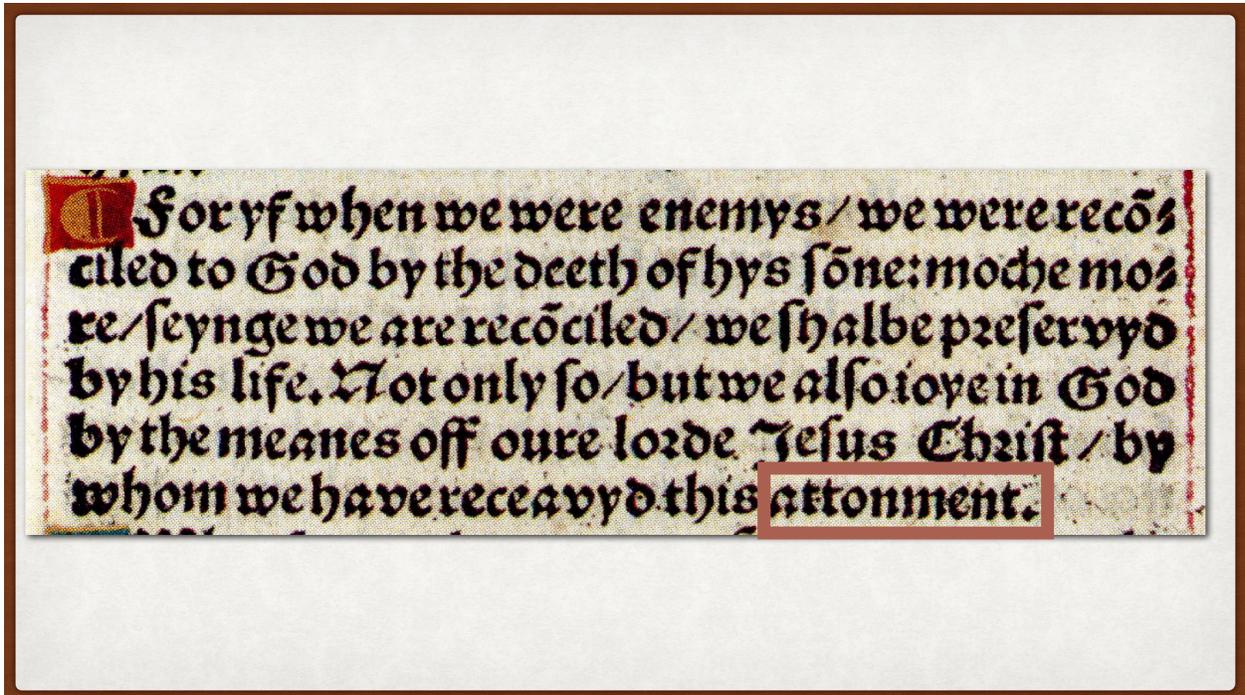
**Where Did the Idea That the Atonement is an “At-one-ment” Come From?**  
Insight: April 15, 2021

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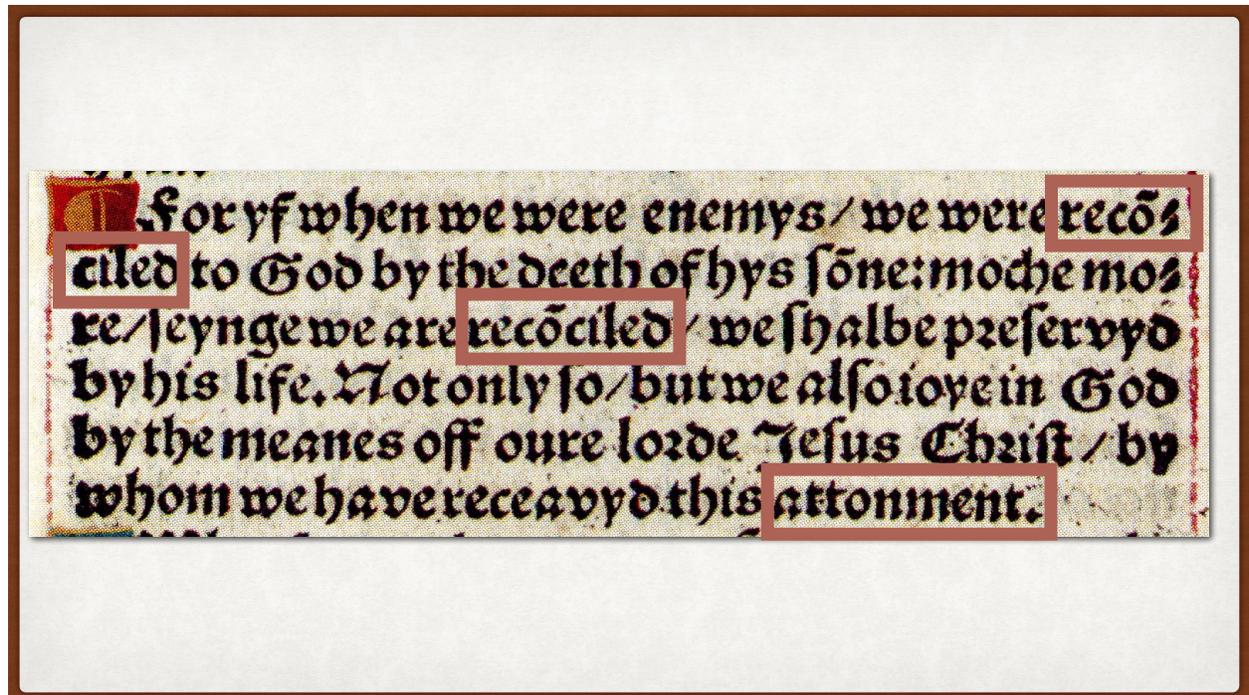


**THINGS THAT  
MATTERED MOST  
TO HUGH NIBLEY**

Most Latter-day Saints understand that the English word “atonement” literally means “at-one-ment.” But did you know that this insight came from a BYU scholar named Hugh Nibley?<sup>1</sup> And that he connected the idea directly to temple ritual in ancient Israel?<sup>2</sup>



Astonishingly, the word “attonment” appears only once in the New Testament, as seen here in William Tyndale’s translation of Romans 5:11.<sup>3</sup>



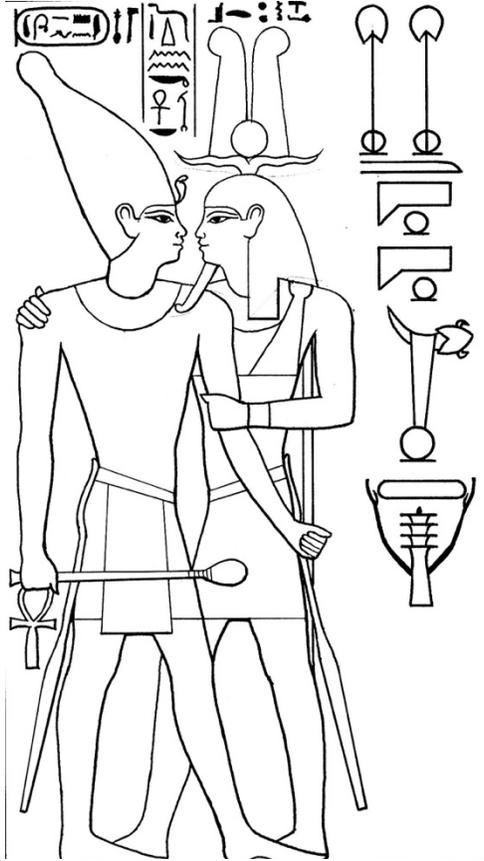
Everywhere else in the New Testament, including twice elsewhere in this verse, the same Greek word<sup>4</sup> is translated as “reconciliation” instead of “atonement.” According to Nibley, the term could also be translated as “redemption,” which “literally means to buy back, that is, to require something you owned previously.”<sup>5</sup> “So when the scriptures speak of atonement, it is always *re*-conciliation, *re*-demption, *re*-surrection, *re*-lease, ... and so on. All refer to a return to a former state,”<sup>6</sup> “a ... happier condition”<sup>7</sup> such as the one we enjoyed in the premortal life when we were not separated from God by sin.<sup>8</sup>



In Old Testament times, the purpose of the temple was to undo our separation from God. According to Doctrine and Covenants 84:23, Moses “sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God.” While “the word ‘atonement’ appears only once in the New Testament,” Nibley tells us that it occurs “127 times in the Old Testament,” and of those 127 times “all but 5 occur in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, where they explicitly describe the original temple rites on the *Day of Atonement*.”<sup>9</sup>



Hugh Nibley discovered a connection between the word “atonement” and the Israelite Tabernacle, a large tent that served as a portable temple. When people imagine what went on there, they usually think about animal sacrifice. But Nibley realized that the *purpose* of sacrifice was to prepare people to “*meet*” the Lord within the sacred tent. That’s why the Lord called the Tabernacle a “Tent of *Meeting*.”<sup>10</sup> As the Lord says in Exodus, “I will *meet* you at the ‘door of the tent of the testimony ... , on which occasion I shall make myself known to you that I might *converse* with you.”<sup>11</sup> In the rites performed by the high priest on the *Day* of Atonement, he returns to the Holy of Holies, which represents spirit “world upon which he was created”<sup>12</sup> in the beginning. Having been purified from all sin through the Redeemer, the separation of spiritual and temporal death is overcome. He can once again enter the presence of God and converse with Him face to face.



According to Nibley, the basic word for “atonement” in the languages of the ancient Near East<sup>13</sup> is related to the action of becoming one symbolically in temple ritual. He concludes that the symbolism of at-*one*-ment is:<sup>14</sup>

certainly related to the Egyptian *hpt*, the common ritual embrace written with the ideogram of embracing arms.



Nowhere is this imagery more clear than in the Book of Mormon, where the word “atonement” appears 39 times.<sup>15</sup> Nephi’s poetic account of his spiritual rescue draws parallels between the Lord’s welcoming embrace within the Tabernacle tent of meeting and desert custom of welcoming endangered wanderers into the safety of the family tent. Wrote Nibley:<sup>16</sup>

It was the custom for one fleeing for his life in the desert to seek protection in the tent of a great sheik, crying out, “*Ana dakhiluka*,” meaning “I am thy suppliant,” whereupon the host would place the hem of his robe over the guest’s shoulder and declare him under his protection. In one instance in the Book of Mormon we see Nephi fleeing from an evil enemy that is pursuing him. In great danger, he prays the Lord to give him an open road in the low way, to block his pursuers, and to make them stumble. He comes to the Lord as a suppliant: “O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness! O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies!” (2 Nephi 4:33.) In reply, according to the ancient custom, the Master would then place the hem of his robe protectively over the kneeling man’s shoulder (*kafata*). This puts him under the Lord’s protection from all enemies. They embrace in a close hug, as Arab chiefs still do; the Lord makes a place for him (see Alma 5:24) and invites him to sit down beside him—they are at-one.



Nibley concludes with this observation about the Book of Mormon:<sup>17</sup>

It has often been claimed that the Book of Mormon cannot contain the “fulness of the gospel,” since it does not mention the temple ordinances. As a matter of fact, they are alluded to *everywhere* in the book if we know where to look for them, and the dozen or so discourses on the Atonement in the Book of Mormon are replete with temple imagery.

From all the Semitic variations of *kafar* (atonement), for example, we concluded that the literal meaning of the term is a close and intimate embrace, which took place at the *kapporet* or the front cover or flap of the tabernacle or tent. The Book of Mormon instances are quite clear:

“Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you.” ([Alma 5:33](#).)

“Behold, the Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love.” ([2 Ne. 1:15](#).)

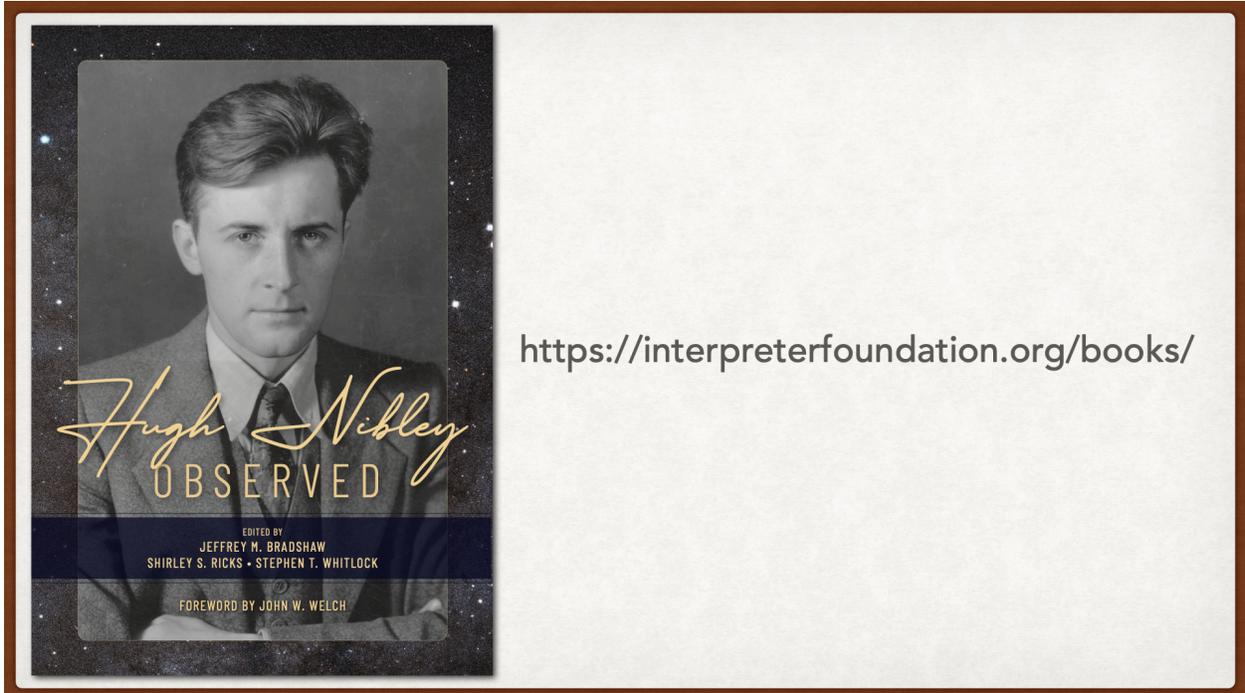
To be redeemed is to be atoned. From this it should be clear what kind of *oneness* is meant by the Atonement—it is being received by the Lord in a close embrace of the returning prodigal son, expressing not only forgiveness but oneness of heart and mind that amounts to identity, like a literal family identity.



No wonder, as Robert Millet expressed it in the book *Hugh Nibley Observed*:<sup>18</sup>

If anyone understood why the gospel of Jesus Christ was good news or glad tidings (see Doctrine and Covenants 76:40–42), Hugh [Nibley] did. In fact, he seemed to have little patience with those of us who lose track of that good news because of other, much less important news. He was persuaded that because of what Jesus did for us we have every reason to live in an attitude of joy and thanksgiving. “We are commanded to be joyful for [Christ] has borne our sorrows (see Isaiah 53:4),” he said. “He was ‘a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief’ (Isaiah 53:3) *so that we need not be*. Our own sins and limitations are the things that make us sad. He had no sins and limitations; *he was not sad for his sake, but wholly for ours*. Only one could suffer for others who did not deserve to suffer for himself.

“If we remain gloomy,” he continued, “after what he did for us, it is because we do not accept what he did for us. If we suffer, we deserve to suffer because there is no need for it if we only believe in him.”



High Nibley’s deep interest in the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ led him to many discoveries of importance to Latter-day Saints. The book “Hugh Nibley Observed” tells the story of the man and his work. For more information, visit [interpreterfoundation.org/books/](https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/).

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Although Hugh Nibley was not the first to mention the idea, he was arguably the one who was responsible for its eventual widespread promulgation among Church members after it appeared in part 1 of a four-part series in the *Ensign* (H. W. Nibley, Atonement, Part 1. Cf. H. W. Nibley, Atonement, p. 556). See Aaron R., When Did Atonement?.
- <sup>2</sup> H. W. Nibley, Atonement, pp. 556–563.
- <sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of Tyndale's translation of this term, see J. M. Bradshaw, *God's Image 1*, pp. 466, 642–644.
- <sup>4</sup> I.e., *katallagein*.
- <sup>5</sup> H. W. Nibley, Atonement, p. 556.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 558, emphasis added.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 556.
- <sup>8</sup> Thus, the frequent teaching in scripture that the Atonement of Jesus Christ was “prepared from before the foundation of the world” (\*\*refs).
- <sup>9</sup> H. W. Nibley, Atonement, p. 566.
- <sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of this subject, see M. L. Bowen, “Where I Will Meet You”.
- <sup>11</sup> H. W. Nibley, Atonement, p. 560, citing LXX Exodus 29:42.
- <sup>12</sup> Moses 1:8.
- <sup>13</sup> H. W. Nibley, Atonement, Part 1.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> H. W. Nibley, Atonement, p. 567.
- <sup>16</sup> H. W. Nibley, Atonement, Part 1. Cf. H. W. Nibley, Atonement, p. 559.
- <sup>17</sup> H. W. Nibley, Atonement, Part 1. Cf. H. W. Nibley, Atonement, p. 567–568.
- <sup>18</sup> R. L. Millet, *Hugh Nibley and the Church*, p. 122.