# HUGH NIBLEY: SCHOLAR OF THE SPIRIT, MISSIONARY OF THE MIND

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The mythmakers and labelmakers in and out of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have always had a field day with Hugh Nibley, spreading exaggerated stories of his eccentric and polymathic attributes, his peculiar methods of scholarship, and his alleged irresponsible social behavior at the university. Unfortunately, these popular and all-too-common folktales fail to include all angles and flagrantly disregard the heritage, experience, environment, and intelligence that have made Hugh Nibley the man he is. How would your outlook be shaped if (1) your pioneer ancestry included Alexander Neibaur, the first Jewish convert to the Church and one who knew Joseph Smith personally; (2) your paternal grandfather, Charles W. Nibley, was Presiding Bishop of the Church; (3) your life experiences included seeing pristine forests greedily destroyed, fighting in a horrible World War, and reading literature in which anti-Mormon authors and uninformed hackmen tore your Church apart with a zeal barren of knowledge; (4) you lived in the midst of Latter-day Saints who witnessed to the truth of the fulness of the gospel but often failed to live it, preferring instead to follow the ways of the world; and (5) you were born with an intellect and spirit keen and discerning enough to spot self-serving and truthless scholarship from afar, even though such scholarship wore the outward garments of Ivy League respectability, higher degrees, and "union" membership? It seems only fair, then, to talk about Hugh Nibley in his own milieu, even as he himself talked about Lehi's contemporaries. But to do so effectively, his attributes must be broken down into seven broad categories, arbitrarily but cautiously selected to place him in true perspective: missionary of the mind, apologist, amateur, social critic, iconoclast, eschatologist, and spontaneous Saint.

## Missionary of the Mind

Few admirers of Hugh Nibley know of his "library career" at BYU. Hence, I use the more inclusive term "missionary of the mind," coined by one of the most scholarly librarians in American history, Dr. Jesse Shera of Case Western Reserve School of Library Science. From the outset of Nibley's long career at BYU, he unflaggingly pestered President Ernest Wilkinson and his colleagues for a realization of his prophetic dream that "the B.Y.U. should be the Information Center of the Church. The way to gain the respect of the world is not to concur meekly in its opinions . . . but to master its tools and sustain a powerful offensive."[1]

To give reality to his dreams, he did his homework. In the early 1950s Nibley spent sabbatical leave time at Harvard and Berkeley, interviewing "those who can impart the most information and wisdom on the subject of libraries and curriculum."[2] He corresponded not only with eminent scholars in his field, but with booksellers like Lucien Goldschmidt and William H. Allen Rare Books in Philadelphia, and he began to amass a collection at BYU of texts that would enable BYU religious scholars to "rewrite the whole of Church History."[3] Consequently, through the aid of President Wilkinson, Nibley was able to obtain for the BYU library the four hundred or so volumes of the *Patrologiae Latinae* (Latin Church fathers) and the *Patrologiae Graecae* (Greek Church fathers), which not only formed the beginnings of the Hugh Nibley Ancient Studies Room but began a healthy and consistent collection development pattern in Ancient Studies and in the general religion collection that has not slackened to this day, thanks to farseeing librarians like A. Dean Larsen and others. Such aggressive collecting, as well as the voluminous and popular writings of Hugh Nibley that reflect his use of the Ancient Studies Room, also made possible the Religious Studies Center, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), and the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (ISPART). The last of these institutions represents worldwide and far-reaching projects that Nibley could not have imagined in 1952.

In ancient religious matters BYU has thus become the information center for not only the Church but for the religious world in general. The Dead Sea Scrolls, Islamic Texts, Vatican Library microfilming, and Herculaneum project are only a few examples of the stone Hugh Nibley began rolling forth in the 1950s.

## Apologist

Unlike the proverbial scholar who is ever distrustful of the sources and hence neurotically avoids any possibility of writing anything that might be construed as erroneous, Nibley jumps in "where angels fear to tread." Fully aware that *any* source may be flawed, he is therefore not too proud to use any and all sources. He knows, like C. S. Lewis, that he is living in the middle of a play whose beginning or end he can only know through revelation, so he simply does the best he can in the short time allotted to him to occasionally take the risks of "amateur" scholarship. He does not care that a few of his conclusions may be proved wrong, yet he is fully conscious of his apologetic and eschatological role in helping Mormons and non-Mormons, scholars and farmers, attain a salvific "big picture" viewpoint not only of history but of life all around them.

If as the Lorax[4] of Mormondom he speaks for the trees, or juxtaposes the seeming opposites of temple versus university, priesthood versus academic degree, ordinances versus ceremony, or revelation versus scholarly methodologies, he maintains a certain stewardship of a scholar, spoken about by President Boyd K. Packer, whose ideal qualifications for historical scholarship find writing by the Spirit above facts, understanding, and scholarship.[5]

How might we characterize Nibley's style? First, his apologetic methods are tempered by a humble perspicacity that is defiled only occasionally by an impatience born of too frequent celestial clock-watching. In other words, as Nibley would put it, "We take either ourselves or the gospel seriously. Never both." To those who know him it is obvious that he follows Abraham Lincoln's dictum, "We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."[6] Or more pointedly and spiritually, in the words of C. S. Lewis, "The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object."[7]

Second, Nibley is the antithesis of rhetoric, although his style is far from barren. He seems to echo Albert Einstein, "If you are out to describe the truth, leave elegance to the tailor." Third, in describing truth, Nibley often humbly assumes that his audience and his readers know as much as he does, whether he is teaching a Gospel Doctrine class or writing about the Book of Breathings. Unlike books for general consumption that are written on the lowest-level style, Nibley's works force his readers to

ascend to the difficulty of his writing, even though his writing is never deliberately difficult. Consequently, his thoughts are written for the ordinary Joe as well as the scholar. It is also true that Nibley exhibits a certain detachment from his writings, for compared to the witness of the Spirit, his writings are all "junk and stuff." He will not be held responsible for anything he wrote yesterday. His mind is continually open to the new and the more truthful.

## Amateur

It is well known that Nibley sides with the amateurs, often totally eschewing the "professionals," whether in business, law, or his own disciplines. His "big picture" perspective clashes with the ultraspecialization so important to modern education. To Nibley, specialists are those who forget eternity in the pursuit of the moment, who ignore the universe while in love with the particle. Moreover, Nibley seems to feel, again like C. S. Lewis, that great scholars are now as little nourished by the past as the most ignorant, uninformed person who holds that "history is bunk." In addition, these scholars are the modern equivalent of the Greek Sophists, complete with the aura of sophistication, thereby making Nibley the symbol of unsophistication or even naïvete. However, if readers feel that he is unsophisticated by virtue of his much footnoting, they must remember not only that Nibley's 15,000-plus footnotes are actually sparse to a fault, but that unlike most scholars, he quotes with comparative ease from German, French, Latin, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Egyptian, and a dozen or so other ancient and modern languages.

Although Nibley has been excoriated by those who disagree with his methods, with his tendency to read between the lines, with his use of overlooked or rejected sources, with his risky comparisons between two cultures (the realm of the professional anthropologist), or with his penchant for being brilliant and multifaceted, there are others who ask if his critics can do better. Perhaps Nibley is an academic prophet after all, a true renaissance man in a day when "looking beyond the mark" by specialists is fashionable, and one who sees the end coming for the ultraspecialists or splitters in favor of the synthesizers and creators—the Newtons, Scaligers, and Bentleys after whom Nibley has unself-consciously tried to model himself.

## Social Critic

*Glitter is coined to meet the moment's rage;*
*The genuine lives on from age to age.*[8]

If there is any discipline in which Nibley is a true professional, it is social criticism. As *literatorum rex* (king of critics) and satirist, he knows no fetters or fences in time or space. Like the Roman epigrammatist Martial, Nibley sees himself surrounded by "fops, fortune-hunters and dinner-touters, dabblers and busybodies, orators and lawyers, schoolmasters, street hawkers, barbers, cobblers, jockeys, architects, auctioneers, debtors, bores, quidnuncs, doctors, plagiarists, hypocritical philosophers, poisoners, jugglers and acrobats,"[9] with a fortunate leavening of a few serious, truly educated, happy, honest, and genuine scripture readers, seekers after truth, and followers of pure religion. To the latter, society is still playing childhood games such as "Hey, Mommy" or "Hey, Jim, look what I can do!" or ignoring our own unique abilities in order to be like other people.

Much to the chagrin of most of us, he continues to liken the scriptures to ourselves, often hitting hard, but never in a self-righteous, "I'm-better-than-you" attitude. The hard hits are often softened with a sense of humor, as in his famous spoof on archaeology, "Bird Island," the satirical introduction to Scaliger,[10] or his ribald humor in numerous other sources.

Even when criticizing or satirizing education, scholarship, and intellectualism, Nibley takes the gospel more seriously than himself. When throwing stones at science, scientists interpret him as waxing hyperbolic, but he is really being dead serious. Even in his own field of ancient studies, he would be critical of the childish wranglings of linguist Pettinato and archaeologist Mattiae, whose scholarship and discipline had the most sway in interpreting the Ebla Tablets at Tell Mardikh. He is unafraid of his own colleagues, speaking his mind clearly about the right of students to experience effective teaching from committed teachers. If he is a friend of students, he is an enemy of humanists, politicians (as opposed to true statesmen), military men, and even the Saints who "no longer speak of making the land blossom as the rose but of making a quick buck in rapid-turnover real estate."[11]

Like other enlightened scholars, he dislikes labels, mostly because he himself is conservative in one thing, liberal in another. But he is clearly conservative in his stand on rhetoric. He seconds Plato's definition of rhetoric as making "small things great and

great things small."[12] He constantly attempts to avoid this, except in a spoof, and insists, like Lucian, that "rhetoric had been left to the legal persons whose object is not truth but victory."[13] Further, Nibley agreed with the late BYU historian Russell B. Swensen, who used to counsel history students (only half in jest) that the eleventh commandment for historians is "Thou shalt not commit sociology."[14] Occasionally, however, he steps into the sociological quicksands to fill a void ignored by those whose business society is. In "How Firm a Foundation"[15] he unabashedly places his name on the line and thinks, like physicist-turned-pacifist Richard Garwin, that the MX, and other military hardware in general, has reached a lunatic stage that cries out for public scrutiny. The refreshing thing about Nibley is that he is not afraid to be that public or to be scrutinized himself. Instead, he continues to avoid the glitter and searches deeply and widely for the genuine—a search that will never cease.

## Iconoclast

Although everyone considers Nibley a nonconformist and a philosopher in the Platonic sense, few label him an iconoclast. But this is merely an oversight, for Nibley is truly an iconoclast in the tradition of Henry Louis Mencken, Erasmus, and others. Nibley pleads for the revision of social science, religion, and philosophy to stress connectedness, coherence, and wholeness, arguing against the fragmenting, reductive, and compartmentalizing forces of the prevailing orthodoxies.

Somehow knowing that the Lord Himself would approve, Nibley's iconoclasm even surfaced heavenward in a famous prayer he offered in commencement in 1960, which thoughts included: "We have met here today clothed in the black robes of a false priesthood" to receive degrees that are absolutely worthless.[16] Nibley implied in this prayer that the ancient traditions, the money wasted on robes, and the symbol of the apostasy and mammon were an intrusion into eschatological perspective. Moreover, he hinted that degrees are merely union cards, that grades and tests are not true signs of learning, and that all three had a way of belittling the self-educated and self-motivated autodidacts, the Joseph Smiths, Benjamin Franklins, Leonardo da Vincis, and Brigham Youngs the world has seen. In both phrases he pointed a finger at the university, with eloquent between-the-lines silence, indicating that the university has a much higher level to attain.

Education was not his only whipping post, however. Science, religion, and history have had their bellies dissected by the mental surgeon Hugh Nibley as well. Long before Helmut Koester wrote that "the terms 'apocryphal' and 'canonical' reflect a traditional usage which implies deep-seated prejudices and has had far-reaching consequences,"[17] Nibley pointed out the benefits of apocryphal writings to his BYU students, and strongly reminded them, in words similar to those by Elaine Pagels in her best-selling *The Gnostic Gospels*, that "It is the winners who write history—their way. No wonder, then, that the viewpoint of the successful majority has dominated all traditional accounts of the origin of Christianity."[18] But even after all of this, Nibley's truest and longest-standing iconoclastic fervor has pointed to eschatology, or the eschatological viewpoint.

## ESCHATOLOGIST

When we speak of eschatology, we are usually thinking of "last things": the Second Coming, the Millennium, or life after death. But when Nibley uses the term, he does so in connection with a certain perspective or viewpoint, exemplified most clearly by his parable called "The Eschatological Man."[19] If readers can understand and empathize with this parable, then they have made a giant leap toward knowing the mind of Hugh Nibley, a mind that is really not as inscrutable or enigmatic once you understand his perspective. A prophet like Spencer W. Kimball shares his perspective by remarking, "If you've seen what I've seen." A scholar like Nibley can only come close: "If you knew what I knew," or, "If you'd only read what I've read." But all of this is begging the question: exactly what is an eschatological viewpoint? And how does this viewpoint set Nibley apart from the majority of scholars?

If LDS social psychologists express dismay because too many Latter-day Saints love Harlequin novels, *Playboy* magazines, and soap operas, it is because such lackluster and worthless leisure indicate a failure to see the "big picture" perspective, or an all-embracing worldview. A cosmic or multidimensional perspective is like that of an extraterrestrial who sees everything in a different light and realizes how tentative each facet of life really is. Those who have visited the "other side," say Raymond Moody[20] and others who have had life-after-death experiences, stress the

importance of certain things in life: learning to love and serve other people and acquiring knowledge and wisdom.

Contrary to popular opinion, Nibley does not merely exhibit service. I have witnessed this man showing heart-felt compassion that I have seen few others exhibit, a case in point being the care shown to a mutual friend of ours, an elderly Jewish woman transplanted from New York to Orem, Utah. Nibley knows his scriptures too well to ignore love or his family. His impatience comes from his not wanting to spend time with those who come to him with "trivial questions" or unimportant tasks. This, I feel, is a service of real love to all of us who come in contact with him, for in our learning which questions to ask him, we often achieve an eschatological perspective. Nibley sees so much in each of us that he is saddened to be an accomplice in lower-level living.

It is no secret that Nibley is fond of the New Testament apocrypha, particularly of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. Should Nibley ever need to post a saying on his bedroom wall, it might be the following from the first chapter, third verse: "When you come to know yourselves, Then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living Father."[21] Nibley rightfully feels that life is tedious for most people because they refuse to seek the mysteries of godliness. To him, like Viktor Frankl, "Human existence is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualization."[22] Humans spend too much time in the shallow mud puddles instead of learning to swim in the deep oceans or in the swift currents, for it is in such challenges that they can immediately extend, perfect, and intensify their senses. The real world, to Nibley, is beautiful beyond comprehension, yet even in the best circumstances it is a filthy slum compared to what is beyond and ahead. And that is why Nibley is so critical of society and its lack of perspective, even down to dress, about which so many jokes have been made concerning Nibley himself. Like Aristotle, Nibley cares more for reality than for appearance; acquisition of wealth other than by barter is unnatural; he condemns as morally wrong the unlimited pursuit of wealth beyond what is needed for the purposes of life.

## Spontaneous Saint

It would be an injustice to Nibley himself if the most important hallmark of his character were to be ignored. Nibley's son-in-law Boyd Petersen includes many stories of his father-in-law's life

as a faithful Latter-day Saint in his biography.[23] Two additional stories exemplify his spontaneous service and were related to me by those who experienced the incidents firsthand. Dan Butler, whose father was Nibley's bishop in the Provo Manavu Ward at one time, told how his family went swimming one evening at the Richards Building on BYU campus. After the fun was over, they looked all over the building for little Dan, only to find him safely in the corner of the men's locker room with Hugh Nibley, who was giving Dan an astronomy lesson.

The second incident juxtaposes the committed life of a Latter-day Saint with a solemn and important mission to bring the Joseph Smith Papyri from Salt Lake City to the Special Collections Library at Brigham Young University. Sterling J. Albrecht, Gifts Librarian in the late 1960s—and later director of the Harold B. Lee Library until 2002—relates the story:

> Hugh and I were invited to SLC to pick up the Papyri. We met with Elder Tanner [counselor to President David O. McKay] in his office. He told us that the First Presidency was sending the Papyri to BYU so that Hugh could study and interpret it. He also said that the Papyri was very valuable and if anything happened . . . [while we were driving] that Hugh and I should just keep going. As we were driving to Provo, we saw two ladies at the side of the road with the hood of their car up. I thought that we should stop but also remembered Elder Tanner's admonition that we had very valuable cargo, so I was going to drive on by. Hugh said, "Stop the car, they need help!" We stopped, locked the car and walked over to see if we could help the women. They said that the car would start but they couldn't get the hood down so that they could drive it. Hugh got up on the top of the car, hung his feet down over the windshield, and then pushed on the hood with both of his feet. He forced the hood down and the ladies were able to drive it.[24]

## Conclusion

Professor David Riesman of Harvard, while at Brigham Young University in 1963, stated that Nibley was the "Thomas Aquinas" of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and that his own erudition paled before Nibley's.[25] Whether he is an

Aquinas or not, I concur with Robert F. Smith in stating that "a general perusal of his articles and books . . . establishes him in my mind as one of those men of whom we see only four or five per century."[26] We hope that this little volume establishes that fact in even greater force.

Throughout his writings, Nibley implies that we all need to be doing the works of Abraham. Such works should give all of us a spiritual stance in which light is victorious over darkness, good over evil, the meaningful over the insignificant, and in which living is not acted out through a glass darkly simply because we have failed to clean the glass, but because in our searching we have not yet attained the clearest vision. Nibley is great because he has given us a "Saints' Guidebook" for reaching that light.

## NOTES

1. Hugh W. Nibley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, Provo, Utah, April 13, 1952, in the author's possession.

2. Hugh W. Nibley to Ernest L. Wilkinson, San Francisco, California, June 12, 1953, in the author's possession.

3. Nibley to Wilkinson, June 12, 1953.

4. Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971).

5. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (summer 1981): 259–78.

6. Abraham Lincoln, *Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862*, http://www.iapeace.org/PeaceNet.April%2014-03.htm.

7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 96–97.

8. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 71.

9. Walter C. A. Ker, translator, in introduction to Martial, *Epigrams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), xii.

10. Nibley, "New Light on Scaliger," in *The Ancient State*, in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1986–), 10:303–10; hereafter *CWHN*; Nibley, "Bird Island," *Dialogue* 34, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer): 61.

11. Nibley, as quoted in "Mormon Media Image," *The Sunstone Review* 1, no. 1 (July/August 1981): 34.

12. Plato, *Phaedrus* 267A, quoted by Nibley in "Victoriosa Loquacitas: The Rise of Rhetoric and the Decline of Everything Else," in *The Ancient State*, *CWHN*, 10:250.

13. H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, trans., introduction to *The Works of Lucian of Samosata* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1905), xi.

14. Russell B. Swensen, quoted in Arnold H. Green, "History and Fable, Heroism and Fanaticism: Nachman Ben Yehuda's *The Masada Myth*," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 3 (1996–97): 422, n.15.

15. Nibley, "How Firm a Foundation! What Makes It So," in *Approaching Zion*, *CWHN*, 9:149–77.

16. Nibley comments on this prayer in his BYU commencement speech on August 19, 1983, see "Leaders to Managers: The Fatal Shift," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, *CWHN*, 13:491. Unfortunately, no written transcription of the original prayer has been found, although a devotional prayer transcription is extant that makes no reference to a false priesthood.

17. Helmut Koester, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (January–April 1980): 105.

18. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 170.

19. Gary P. Gillum, comp., *Of All Things! Classic Quotations from Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 60–64.

20. Raymond Moody, *Life After Life* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1976).

21. "Gospel of Thomas," in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 118.

22. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), 175.

23. Boyd K. Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2002).

24. Sterling J. Albrecht, e-mail message to Gary P. Gillum, May 14, 2003. Although no written records were found to establish the date of this incident, it likely occurred during 1967 or 1968, shortly after the Church acquired the Papyri.

25. Robert F. Smith, Letter to the Editor, *Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 8.

26. Smith, Letter to the Editor, 8.