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***Hugh Nibley Observed***

Hugh Nibley and Joseph Smith  
Richard Lyman Bushman

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# HUGH NIBLEY AND JOSEPH SMITH

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Richard Lyman Bushman

I am honored to inaugurate the Maxwell Institute lecture series on Hugh Nibley, surely the spiritual godfather, along with Elder Neal A. Maxwell, of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Nibley's mind was capacious enough to encompass nearly all of the institute's multifarious projects. He may have been the first to grasp the scope of the scholarship required to comprehend the Restoration. Before Nibley, our scholars, for the most part, concentrated on Latter-day Saint sources to support their work, with some reference to other texts. After Nibley that was no longer possible. He brought virtually the entire ancient world into our purview, and those who succeed him must now do the same. As well as anyone, Nibley appreciated the achievement of Joseph Smith. And yet as I will argue tonight, he approached the Prophet from a strangely oblique angle.

Like so many rising scholars of my generation, I had a Nibley moment. I had only the slightest personal acquaintance with him, and yet he came into my life at a critical time when my testimony was teetering in the balance. I had entered the mission field without conviction after my sophomore year of college, quite unsteady about my belief. When I told my mission president, J. Howard Maughan, that I lacked a testimony, he handed me a book and said: "See if you can find a better explanation than the one in the book itself." And so I began my first serious encounter with the Book of Mormon. I don't know exactly when *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* entered the picture. It was sometime during my first year. I do remember that by my second year I had written John Sorenson about some problem of evidence that concerned me and received a generous three- or four-page epistle in reply. John was my first

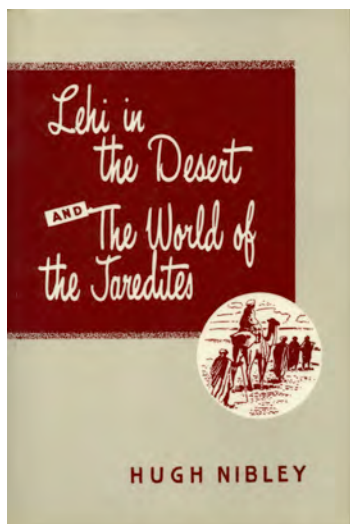


Figure 1. Nibley's rational defense for the Book of Mormon.<sup>45</sup>

introduction to the Latter-day Saint intellectual establishment, where at that time Nibley reigned supreme. I remember my fascination with the idea of Arabic poetry in the naming of hills and valleys for Laman and Lemuel, and the peculiar oasis on the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula that Nephi named Bountiful and that Nibley identified as a pocket of greenery unknown to anyone in the West in Joseph Smith's time. These little specks of evidence provided the kind of rational support I was looking for in my quest for conviction. Nibley opened

up a Middle Eastern antiquity I had not dreamed existed and securely located 1 Nephi in its desert culture.

The passage I remember most vividly was the famous Snite parable near the end of *Lehi in the Desert*. Here is Nibley at his sardonic and witty best:

A young man once long ago claimed he had found a large diamond in his field as he was ploughing. He put the stone on display to the public free of charge, and everyone took sides. A psychologist showed, by citing some famous case studies, that the young man was suffering from a well-known form of delusion. An historian showed that other men have also claimed to have found diamonds in fields and been deceived. A geologist proved that there were no diamonds in the area but only quartz: the young man had been fooled by a quartz. When asked to inspect the stone itself, the geologist declined with a weary, tolerant smile and a kindly shake of the head. An English professor showed that the young man in describing his stone used the very same language that others had used in describing uncut diamonds: he was, therefore, simply speaking the common language of his time. A sociologist showed that only three out of 177 florists' assistants in four major cities believed the stone was genuine. A clergyman wrote a book to

show that it was not the young man but someone else who had found the stone.

Finally an indigent jeweler named Snite pointed out that since the stone was still available for examination the answer to the question of whether it was a diamond or not had absolutely nothing to do with who found it, or whether the finder was honest or sane, or who believed him, or whether he would know a diamond from a brick, or whether diamonds had ever been found in fields, or whether people had ever been fooled by quartz or glass, but was to be answered simply and solely by putting the stone to certain well-known tests for diamonds. Experts on diamonds were called in. Some of them declared it genuine. The others made nervous jokes about it and declared that they could not very well jeopardize their dignity and reputations by appearing to take the thing too seriously. To hide the bad impression thus made, someone came out with the theory that the stone was really a synthetic diamond, very skilfully made, but a fake just the same. The objection to this is that the production of a good synthetic diamond 120 years ago would have been an even more remarkable feat than the finding of a real one.<sup>2</sup>

The passage reminds us of the watch in the field of Deist fame except that the argument takes a different form. The perfect mechanism of the watch points to something beyond itself. We want to know where it came from. Who could have contrived that intricate timepiece? There had to be a watchmaker, the logic requires us to conclude. Not so with the diamond discovered by the plough boy. Nibley structures the situation so that the diamond does not point beyond itself. His parable does not ask how the diamond got there. His only query is whether the diamond is authentic. The plough boy, a stand-in for Joseph Smith, we must assume, did not need supernatural powers. He just turned up the gem in a furrow. We don't have to ask how he found the diamond. The only question Snite asks is: How authentic is the diamond? In the story, the plough boy is an innocent bystander. We make the connection to divinity; Nibley does not fill in that logic for us. Once we know the diamond is real, we readily leap to Joseph Smith's inspiration, the existence of supernatural powers, and ultimately to faith in the Church today. We do all of that work. The point I am making is

that Nibley leaves all of it to us. He says virtually nothing about the Book of Mormon as sign, as Terryl Givens has put it.<sup>3</sup> He never uses the Book of Mormon as evidence of divinity working through a modern prophet. He is not interested in validating the plough boy who found the diamond, only in the diamond itself. I have focused on this one passage in Nibley's first apologetic work because I believe it foreshadows his treatment of Joseph Smith for the greater part of his life. In his early works especially, Nibley rarely mentions Joseph Smith.

Nibley makes a remarkable statement in the paragraph preceding the Snite passage:

We have never been very much interested in "proving" the Book of Mormon; for us its divine provenance has always been an article of faith, and its historical aspects by far the least important thing about it.

What can he possibly mean when he says he has never been much interested in "proving" the Book of Mormon? How can a man who dedicated his life to that endeavor say he is not much interested? He has to have been interested to focus his energies so zealously on that enterprise for decades. And then to say that the "historical aspects" were "by far the least important thing about it" compounds the amazement. What was he doing in all those books about the historical aspects if they were not important?

His belief in the book, Nibley tells us, arises in another realm, the realm of faith, not from the historical aspects, which he considers the most trivial of considerations. Apparently, he did not need that kind of proof for either Joseph or the Book of Mormon. The book's "divine provenance," Nibley says, comes from another realm—his faith. And so we have the anomaly: Nibley battling ferociously to demonstrate the historical validity of the Book of Mormon, and yet apparently subordinating historical inquiry to a little-mentioned realm of faith that hardly ever entered his public discourse. He seems to be fighting a ferocious rearguard action to protect the faith, which in the last analysis is what is most important to him.

It occurred to me that my own experience in talking about Joseph Smith to Latter-day Saint audiences might bear on Nibley's reticence. Often in the question period, someone will ask me to bear

my testimony. I am a little put off by this question. I often respond that I have been bearing my testimony in every word I have said. The whole story of the Prophet as I relate it is a testimony of the truth. But lying behind the question and my somewhat irritating response is a significant cultural issue. The questioner has been hearing one kind of discourse all night, a scholarly objective discourse, and is waiting for another kind of discourse, one more familiar and one required when speaking of the Prophet. She wants to hear “I know,” the language we use when speaking of Joseph Smith, a language of divine inspiration as opposed to cognitive examination. In asking the question, the audience is testing my loyalties. All right, you have proven yourself to be a scholar, they implicitly say. Now we want to know if you are one of us, the kind of us who knows about Joseph Smith spiritually. Will you deign to use our kind of speech and show yourself to be a brother as well as a scholar?

I bridle when asked, not because I wish to distance myself from the audience. I am a brother, I would be quick to say. But testimony speech does not fit into scholarly speech. Bearing testimony at the end of one of these talks, I sense in my gut, would undermine the scholarly part of the talk, bringing into question my credibility as a scholar. Think of an attorney defending the Church’s interest in a court case involving the First Presidency. The lawyer takes great pains to present the evidence and interpret the law to the end of persuading the bench and the jury. Near the end of his involved presentation, he pauses and says, “I also want you all to know that I know that President Thomas S. Monson is a prophet of God by the power of the witness borne to me by the Holy Spirit. I know therefore that he is innocent of the charge brought against him.” What is wrong with such a statement? It may very well represent the attorney’s deepest convictions and commitments. Is it not proper to bear witness “at all times . . . and in all places” (Mosiah 18:9)?

Yes, but we know it would be unsuitable. By shifting the form of discourse from evidence and legal reasoning to testimony and felt inspiration, the attorney weakens his own case. He becomes a special pleader rather than a trustworthy judge of the evidence and the law. Everything he has said before is thrown into question. I cannot imagine Church attorneys changing their speech to testimony bearing, and I cannot imagine their client expecting them to do so.

I am suggesting that Hugh Nibley adopted a similar tactic when approaching Joseph Smith. He scrupulously remained in the mode of scholarly discourse—what could be proven out of the texts—rather than drawing out the religious consequences, such as the divinity of Joseph Smith’s calling and the necessary evidence of his supernatural powers. I don’t know that Nibley ever wavered from that discipline in his writings; those who know him more intimately may think of instances. But in his published work he was ever the scholar, asking his readers to grant him nothing more than an opportunity to lay out the evidence. I think he always wrote with a scholarly reader in mind. The fact that he argued in the court of scholarly opinion may have required him to stick with scholarly language so as not to undermine his case. He knew he would never persuade the scholars, though he may have hoped from time to time that Klaus Baer or some other of his scholarly friends would yield a point or two. But he never wanted to show weakness. He would always meet the critics on their own ground and slug it out. He would not abandon his lawyerly posture to become a simple testimony bearer. He would assert no more than he could prove. And perhaps most defensively, he would never expose his faith to their attacks. The unbelievers’ blows would never touch that vital spot underneath his armor.



Figure 2. Nibley rejects attempts to undermine the Book of Mormon by character attack.<sup>46</sup>

We must then content ourselves with Nibley’s laser-like focus on the Book of Mormon and not expect him to take the next logical step and bear testimony of Joseph. There were doubtless many reasons why Nibley refused to use the Book of Mormon to reach conclusions about either Joseph’s divine call or his character. In *Since Cumorah*, Nibley actually turns the reasoning around and objects to the practice of using Joseph to reach conclusions about the Book of Mormon. In characterizing the tactics of the critics, he says they reject the Book

of Mormon because its author/translator was untrustworthy. The critics' version of Joseph undermined the book rather than the book supporting Joseph.

Opponents of the Book of Mormon have always depended heavily on vigorous declamations against the character of Joseph Smith. The accepted procedure has been to argue that since Smith was a rascal the Book of Mormon must be a fraud.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, the critics spurned the Book of Mormon because it came from a disreputable source. Nibley objects to that tactic, less out of regard to Joseph's reputation, it would appear, than out of his desire to defend the Book of Mormon. He had recently defended the Prophet in his book *The Myth Makers*,<sup>5</sup> but he pointedly does not go into that argument here. "The whole discussion of Joseph Smith's character," he says, "has become academic," by which he seems to mean either moot or irrelevant. It is as if he wanted to clear away all the underbrush created by the anti-Latter-day Saint accounts of the Prophet as a man and make the Book of Mormon the issue. He believed that "the whole discussion [of the Book of Mormon] has shifted ground completely, though critics of the Book of Mormon are still desperately determined to keep it in the old grooves."<sup>6</sup> Nibley is dedicated to moving the debate to new ground—that is, to discussion of the historicity of the book in its own terms rather than in terms of the Prophet's character. He seems to imply that we should lay aside Joseph Smith, Moroni, and the nineteenth-century story and concentrate, as Snite recommended, on the diamond itself.

We can understand Nibley's position better if we remember how badly treated Joseph Smith had been in non-Latter-day Saint accounts as Nibley was growing up. The best-known work on the Prophet had come from William Linn,<sup>7</sup> I. Woodbridge Riley, and George Bartholomew Arbaugh, who did nothing but deride Joseph Smith and his family. In 1903, Riley, who went on to become a distinguished historian of American philosophy, posed what he called "the Final Question" about Joseph Smith in his Yale dissertation on "the founder of Mormonism": "Was he demented or merely degenerate?" An advocate of the epileptic theory of revelation—the idea that revelations were the side effect



of a seizure—Riley left the final diagnosis of Smith’s dementia to the psychologists but concluded that his “psychic coordination had disappeared,” and his genetic inheritance had degraded his mind and his character. “Hereditry had passed down those abnormal tendencies which mark the degenerate.”<sup>8</sup> As late as 1932, a University of Chicago Press book by Arbaugh posed a similar question about Joseph Smith: “Was he only a fraud, or are we to regard him as a mixture of fraud, chance, and mental defectiveness?”<sup>9</sup>

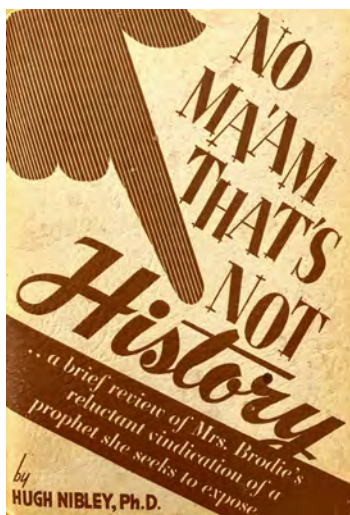


Figure 3. Nibley attacks Brodie’s scholarship rather than merely defending Joseph Smith.<sup>47</sup>

In these supposedly scholarly works, the Smiths were wounded, degraded people whose son lacked both intelligence and integrity. The degradation of the Smiths eliminated entirely any need to take Joseph’s work seriously. As Nibley said in his review of *No Man Knows My History*, “the thumping biographies” before Brodie’s had “announced that the man Joseph Smith was a complete scamp.”<sup>10</sup> The Book of Mormon, therefore, as the work of a feeble-minded charlatan, could be dismissed without serious attention.

Nibley wanted to change the intellectual agenda and make the Book of Mormon the issue, not the character of Joseph Smith. Although Nibley had attacked the detractors in *The Myth Makers*, he apparently came to the conclusion that vindication of the Prophet before authenticating his work was the wrong tactic. Let us leave Joseph Smith aside for the moment, he explicitly says, and look at what he produced. Deal with the text that came from his hand. Dismissing the discussion of Joseph Smith’s person as academic, Nibley chose to look at the indisputable fact that whatever his background and character, Joseph “did give a big book to the world.”<sup>11</sup>

You would think that his reply to Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History* would compel him to present a favorable portrait of

Joseph Smith to set over against Brodie's pious fraud. How could he treat a biography of Joseph Smith without making some biographical judgments of his own? Surely glimpses of Nibley's Joseph would be found there. Not so. Most of Nibley's response takes the form of attacks on Brodie's scholarship and reasoning, not a defense of Joseph Smith. (Incidentally, it launches a rather powerful attack on Brodie, in my opinion. In recent years, the pamphlet has been so criticized for its sarcasm that it was a pleasure for me to discover on rereading it how on the mark it was.)<sup>12</sup>

Nibley recognized that compared to previous biographers of Joseph Smith, Brodie gave the Prophet relatively kind treatment. In his opinion she did not write in anger, but although she went beyond the naked scorn of Riley and Linn, her portrait was in the end no more satisfying. "Brodie's Joseph Smith is a more plausible character than the consummate fiend of the earlier school in that his type is much more likely to be met with on the street any Tuesday afternoon."<sup>13</sup> But in the end Brodie's Joseph was even less plausible than his predecessors. "No blundering, dreaming, undisciplined, shallow and opportunistic fakir could have left behind what Joseph Smith did, both in men's hearts and on paper."<sup>14</sup> What Brodie failed to explain was what this dreamer produced. Being, on Brodie's account, a "completely undisciplined imagination,"<sup>15</sup> with an imagination that "spilled over like a spring freshet"<sup>16</sup> in a riot of intense color and luxuriant detail, having a wild, unbridled fancy that was not to be "canalized by any discipline,"<sup>17</sup> Joseph should have produced a phantasmagoria of incoherent mishmash, but did he?

Instead of an opium dream, we find an exceedingly sober document, that never flies off at tangents, never loses the thread of the narrative (which is often quite complicated), is totally lacking in oriental color, in which the sermons are confined to special sections, and which, strangest of all, never runs into contradictions. Joseph might get away with his "outrageous lying" in little matters, but what outrageous liar can carry the game to half the length of the Old Testament without giving himself away hundreds of times? Brodie doesn't say.<sup>18</sup>

In the face of this extraordinary achievement, Joseph Smith as a person was in Nibley's estimation irrelevant.

We know a butcher who looks just like the great Johann Sebastian Bach, and he walks and talks and eats and breathes—the very things that Bach did—only there is one slight difference: the butcher can't write music. Brodie's Joseph is a real enough character—all the details are there, except one: he can't do the things Joseph Smith did—the only things about Joseph Smith, incidentally, that really interest us.<sup>19</sup>

There I think you have the heart of the matter. “The only things about Joseph Smith” that “really interest us,” Nibley says, are the music. He could have walked and talked like any butcher without it making a particle of difference. His personality is beside the point. Joseph produced a masterpiece and nothing else about him need concern us. Why then say more about his character or even his divine call?

In Nibley's mind, vindication of the Book of Mormon was an end in itself, apart from its implications for Joseph Smith. In my opinion, John Welch has it right in the introduction to *Lehi in the Desert*, where he says of Nibley:

Ultimately, the importance of the Book of Mormon in his opinion is that it conveys a remarkably clear and compelling picture of the plan of salvation. It exposes in unequivocal terms the foibles of the human condition and the choices all people face for temporal and spiritual survival.<sup>20</sup>

Nibley believed the Book of Mormon was a diamond that could cut glass. It slashed through the falsities of modern materialism and humbled the mighty to the dust. The book and its message meant everything to him. The plough-boy prophet, much as Nibley may have loved him, was subordinated to his precious find in the field.

Tracking down references to Joseph Smith in the indexes of Nibley's collected works, I found the largest concentration in the reprint of a talk Nibley gave at the Sunstone Symposium in 1989 on “criticizing the Brethren.”<sup>21</sup> It is the only place I know of where Joseph comes to center stage, and we finally get a view of Nibley's thoughts about the man. He called in Joseph on this occasion to address an issue that frequently troubles intellectuals: how to deal with criticism of Church leaders. Nibley used Joseph Smith both as a model of an authority—the first among the Brethren—and also

as the target of criticism. Nibley tried to show how Joseph operated in each of these roles, leader and target, as an example for modern Church leaders and modern Church members. The point he wanted to make was that Joseph was constantly under attack from lesser men who did not value him, but his reaction was not to get upset. He rolled with the punches. Joseph was open, free, and searching, and he allowed all men the same privilege. He was inclined to leave evil to the Lord rather than cracking down.

I was interested to find that the Joseph Smith in this essay was an expanded version of the plough boy that Snite defended. Nibley portrays Joseph as the simple innocent, assaulted by scornful, arrogant, and ultimately unknowing critics. Joseph Smith did not lay claim to high intellect or worldly might, Nibley reminds us. He simply reported what had happened to him. "He spoke only of what he had seen with his eyes, heard with his ears, and felt with his hands."<sup>22</sup> And yet, he stumped them all. Nibley let Brigham



*Figure 4. Nibley presents Joseph Smith as a simple innocent, assaulted by arrogant, unknowing critics.<sup>48</sup>*

Young drive home the point. "The whole Christian doctrine, as Brigham Young put it, 'simmered down . . . into a snuffbox, . . . but, when I found "Mormonism," I found that it was higher than I could reach, . . . deeper than I was capable of comprehending and calculated to expand the mind . . . from truth to truth, from light to light, . . . to become associated with the Gods and angels."<sup>23</sup> Nibley loved for the simple and plain to outfox the clever and wise. He spent his life showing how the plough boy surpassed them all.

He loved it too that the simple prophet was neither pompous nor self-aggrandizing about his powers. As he said, "this is a man who was not going to get a big head."<sup>24</sup> The epitome of humility and plain living himself, Nibley celebrated Joseph's openhandedness in granting his followers powers like his own. "The Prophet's

advantage over the world lay of course in revelation,” Nibley noted, “but in the Church, every follower has an equal right to revelation.” “Search the scriptures,” he quotes Joseph as saying, “and ask your Heavenly Father, in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, to manifest the truth unto you; . . . you will then know for yourselves and not for another. You will not then be dependent on man for the knowledge of God; nor will there be any room for speculation.”<sup>25</sup>

Reading along in Nibley’s talk, I realized that he was offering more than a comment on criticism of the Brethren. He was delineating the form of ideal social relationships within the Church—what kind of people we should be and how we should regard one another. He wanted a church of independent revelators who find the answers for themselves and who tolerate one another’s mistakes when they stumble. He refers to the famous Brother Brown incident, where an old man was brought to trial for teaching erratic doctrine and Joseph protected him: “I never thought it was right,” Joseph said, “to call up a man and try him because he erred in doctrine, it looks too much like methodism and not like Latter day Saintism.” Nibley’s gloss on the story was that “Joseph Smith said that Brother Brown’s teachings were absolutely ridiculous. He could not keep from laughing at his ideas. But Brother Brown had a right to them.”<sup>26</sup>

We get another taste of Nibley’s good society when he takes up the obvious question about what to do when evil appears. Can we just stand by? “What would Joseph Smith do about evil?” Nibley asks. Apparently not much. “He didn’t worry, because God was in charge.”<sup>27</sup> Then quoting Joseph: “Notwithstanding we are rolled in the mire of the flood for the time being, the next surge peradventure, as time rolls on, may bring to us the fountain as clear as crystal, and as pure as snow.”<sup>28</sup> Thus Nibley concludes, “With that perfect confidence, he never panicked, he never worried.” This is a Joseph who is very sure of himself, again the simple innocent resting in the assurance of his revelations.<sup>29</sup>

Not that Nibley’s Joseph was never impatient. Nibley himself lost patience with more plodding souls, especially if they seemed puffed up with their learning. Joseph had it even worse. “What a trial it must have been for one who had conversed with angels and with the prophets of old to find himself surrounded by a bunch of yahoos who considered themselves very important.”<sup>30</sup> And yet

Joseph bore with these brethren, and Nibley advises us to do the same. We must tolerate one another in our failings. At this point a little confusion enters the essay. For a time I could not tell if he was counseling the critics to be patient with the Brethren or for the Brethren to be patient with the critics. Were Church members to tolerate the Brethren, or were they to tolerate us? Finally I realize he was advising generosity for both parties. “If I esteem mankind to be in error,” he quotes Joseph as saying, “shall I bear them down? No. I will lift them up, and in their own way too, if I cannot persuade them my way is better; and I will not seek to compel any man to believe as I do, only by the force of reasoning.”<sup>31</sup> “Do not watch for iniquity in each other, if you do you will not get an endowment, for God will not bestow it on such.”<sup>32</sup> Nibley concludes, “This was a peculiarity of Joseph Smith—to love and esteem people deeply, but at the same time be perfectly aware of all their terrible faults.”<sup>33</sup>

Of course, it would not be a good society for Nibley without scholarship. Although it had little to do with his topic, he could not resist a side comment about Joseph and learning. “Joseph Smith . . . was an impassioned scholar; he hungered for learning; he revelled in it when he had a chance; and he never tired of showing and explaining the papyri to his visitors. His own curiosity was typically the most lively of all.”<sup>34</sup> “Joseph threw himself with passion into the study of ancient Hebrew writings,” Nibley says of the Prophet, “and he made great progress through the year 1835, especially in Hebrew. It would be easy to underestimate his progress. By the end of the year, I’m sure he certainly would have qualified for graduate study in Hebrew. He knew much more about it than we give him credit for.”<sup>35</sup> Then a startling speculation from Nibley: “Joseph, had he lived, might have been

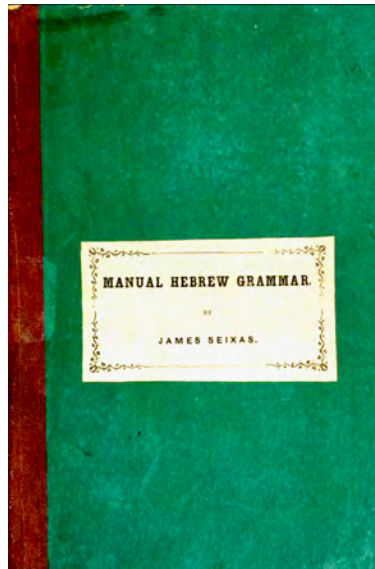


Figure 5. Nibley avers that “Joseph threw himself with passion into the study of ancient Hebrew writings.”<sup>49</sup>



a specialist.” He might have become a Hebrew scholar. For proof Nibley quotes Joseph saying: “My Soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original and I am determined to p[u]rsue the study of languages untill I shall become master of them if I am permitted to live long enough.”<sup>36</sup> Just as well that never happened, Nibley happily concludes. “Had Joseph and the Brethren followed the line of study that fascinated him, we would be up to our ears today in hairsplitting discussions and recondite speculation.”<sup>37</sup> Can you imagine the miseries of an entire society made up of scholars?

Adept at learning like few others, Nibley was scornful of scholarly pomposity. He reminds us that “Joseph Smith had good advice for scholars.” On the occasion of a dispute in the School of the Prophets, he wrote: “I discovered in this debate, . . . to[o] much zeal for mastery, to[o] much of that enthusiasm that characterizes a lawyer at the bar who is determined to defend his cause right or wrong. I . . . advise[d them] that they might improve their minds and cultivate their powers of intellect in a proper manner.”<sup>38</sup> Nibley brings Joseph’s judgment right home. “The critics,” he says to his audience, “are really just showing off, which is what we do in sessions like this [the Sunstone Symposium].”<sup>39</sup>

Nibley has Joseph dealing with his followers’ foibles as Nibley himself did. “Joseph Smith retained his sanity by dealing with this type of situation in high good humor.” I am sure Nibley was thrilled to read Joseph saying: “Beware of self-righteousness and be limited in the estimate of your own virtues. . . . You must enlarge your souls towards each other. . . . We must bear with each other’s failings, as an indulgent parent bears with the foibles of his children.”<sup>40</sup> You see, Nibley concludes, we’re at school. “We must be allowed to make mistakes.”<sup>41</sup>

“Overriding all else,” Nibley sums up, “is that grand feeling of love which makes life a joy, and everything I read about Joseph Smith reflects that promise.” Joseph told the Church, “Let me be resurrected with the Saints, whether to heaven or hell.”<sup>42</sup> Then the classic: “Friendship is the grand fundamental principle of Mormonism, to revolutionize and civilize the world, [to] pour forth love. . . . I do not dwell upon your faults. You shall not [dwell] upon mine. . . . [If] Presbyterians [have] any truth, embrace that.

Baptist, Methodist, &c. Get all the good in the world. Come out a pure Mormon.”<sup>43</sup>

At the very end of the essay, Nibley described his own relationship to the Brethren in a story about Spencer W. Kimball. Nibley traveled with Elder Kimball to a stake conference in Arizona one weekend as an emissary of BYU. During a train stop in Los Angeles, Nibley characteristically visited a bookshop near the station and purchased what he described as a ten-volume set of “a very rare collection, of Alfonsus De Lingorio, the seventeenth-century Redemptorist writer on probabilism.” Rushing back to catch the train, lugging his ten volumes, Nibley had to cross an empty lot. When he settled into his seat, Elder Kimball noticed that Nibley’s shoes and trousers were covered with dust. What happened next left an impression on the scholar.



*Figure 6. Nibley described the kindness shown him by Elder Spencer W. Kimball.<sup>50</sup>*

Brother Kimball casually took an immaculate linen handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket, and, stooping over, vigorously dusted off my shoes and trousers. It was the most natural thing in the world, and we both took it completely for granted. After all, my shoes were dusty in the race for the train, and Brother Kimball had always told missionaries to keep themselves clean and proper. It was no great thing—*pas d’histoire*. Neither of us said a thing about it, but ever since, that has conditioned my attitude toward the Brethren.<sup>44</sup>

Nibley told no comparable tales of Joseph dusting shoes, but one senses that he saw in the Prophet’s tolerance of the wayward the same kindness he discovered in Elder Kimball. Nibley’s own richly furnished mind yielded to the superior worth of such saintly men.



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### Notes

1. Originally published as Richard Lyman Bushman, "Hugh Nibley and Joseph Smith," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 4-13, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol19/iss1/3>; reprinted with permission.
2. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 121-22, 114.
3. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62-88.
4. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 8.
5. See Hugh Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History: A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie's Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose*, incorporated into *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1991), 103-406.
6. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 8-9.
7. See William A. Linn, *Story of the Mormons: From the Date of Their Origin to 1901* (New York: Macmillan, 1902).
8. I. Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism: A Psychological Study of Joseph Smith Jr.* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903), xix, 328.
9. George B. Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism: Its Character and Changing Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932), 227.
10. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*, 4.
11. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 338.
12. See Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*.
13. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*, 4-5.
14. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*, 5.

15. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*, 15.
16. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*, 15.
17. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*, 15.
18. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*, 16.
19. Nibley, *No, Ma'am, That's Not History*, 35.
20. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, xii.
21. Hugh Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 407–48.
22. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 409.
23. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 410.
24. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 429.
25. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 412.
26. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 413–14.
27. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 428.
28. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 428.
29. See Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 428.
30. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 430.
31. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 432.
32. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 433.
33. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 434.
34. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 438.
35. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 438.
36. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 439.
37. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 439.
38. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 438.
39. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 438.
40. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 440–41.
41. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 441.
42. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 441.
43. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 441.
44. Nibley, "Criticizing the Brethren," 444.
45. Photo by Stephen T. Whitlock of a personal copy of the book. Photo ID: STW011-E.jpeg.
46. Photo by Stephen T. Whitlock of a personal copy of the book. Photo ID: STW012-E.jpeg.
47. Photo by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw of a personal copy of the book. Photo ID: IMG\_9985-EC.jpeg.
48. Portrait ca. 1842. Wikimedia Commons. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph\\_Smith,\\_Jr.\\_portrait\\_owned\\_by\\_Joseph\\_Smith\\_III.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joseph_Smith,_Jr._portrait_owned_by_Joseph_Smith_III.jpg). Photo ID: Joseph\_Smith,\_Jr.\_portrait\_owned\_by\_Joseph\_Smith\_III.jpeg.
49. Archive.org. Joshua Seixas, *A Manual of Hebrew Grammar for the Use of Beginners*, a book used for Hebrew study in Kirtland, Ohio, by members

- of the School of the Prophets. <https://archive.org/details/manualhebrewgram03seix>. Photo ID: Screen Shot 2021-02-09 at 8.41.37 AM.jpeg.
50. From Bushman, "Hugh Nibley and Joseph Smith," 12. Photo ID: Screen Shot 2021-01-21 at 7.56.28 AM.jpeg