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Hugh W. Nibley

# Brigham Young as a Theologian

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## Summary:

With characteristic energy, Hugh Nibley describes the character of Brigham Young and discusses his teachings. The issues explored in this essay include the problem of evil and the power of the devil, temptation and necessary opposition, consequences of sin, and truth obtained by the light of Christ.

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## Brigham Young as a Theologian

Hugh Nibley  
9 June 1967

. . . negative idea in Brigham Young. He has nothing to be negative about. I mean, if the light and truth is burning in you, he says, if you have the candle of the Lord, if you have the wellspring of truth, you'll be exercised by what your neighbor is doing, whether he's going to hell or not. And so he says, the problem of evil, he treats it, is very interesting. He says the devil is very real, and he respects him. He says he's doing his job manfully. He says, "Don't accuse anybody of anything. The spirit of accusing is from the devil. Now why should I accuse anybody of anything? I would not think of accusing the devil." He says, "He has a mission to perform, and he's performing it manfully," is the way he puts it. "Therefore, why should I accuse him of anything? And to whom should I accuse him? To God? Well, God knows what's going on." I'm not telling him anything, you see. "Should I complain to one of my fellow men against him, so that my fellow man could go and correct him? If I can't correct him, how would I expect my fellow man to go around correcting him? Why should he? Why should anybody?" We are all in the hands of God. Remember, he keeps saying, leave the kingdom alone. That is, leave the mysteries alone, and so forth. So it is with the problem of evil. It's a very real thing, he says, and it is not to be deplored, it does not vitiate the good at all. It's a necessary part of the picture. Our Heavenly Father is subjecting us to sin, misery, pain, and death for the exquisite enjoyment of exaltation. God permits sin, or it wouldn't be here. All creatures are his work. They are for his glory, and for the benefit of the children of men, and all are put into the possession of man for his comfort, improvement, consolation, and for his health."

"Well, beauty and excellence. And every son and daughter have got to go through the ordeal that you and I have passed through. They must be tried, tempted, and buffeted, in order to act upon their agency before God and prove themselves worthy of exaltation." But he says, "You have to have these sufferings, but don't go looking for them. I intend to know the whole of it, both good and bad." Remember what we said yesterday, the dramas should depict the seedy and criminal side of life. That's important, he says. You don't want to get it firsthand, but we're here to find out about those things. And, he says, "Let your children read novels. I would rather have them read novels than read nothing," he said. We're here to find out. And here he says, "I intend to know the whole of it, both good and bad. Shall I practice evil? Oh no! Neither have I told you to practice it, but to learn by the light of truth every principle that exists in the world. Paul asks, shall we sin, that righteousness may abound? No, there's plenty of sin without our sinning. You'll find it soon enough" he says. "You don't have to go looking for it. We can have all the experience we need without sinning ourselves. Therefore, we will not sin, that good may come. We will not transgress the law of God that we may know the opposite. There is no necessity for such a course, for the world is full of transgression. And this people doesn't need to mingle with it. You'll get

the experience of it. It is best to get the experience as a spectator."

"We are obliged to have devils in our community," he says. "We couldn't build up the kingdom without them. We must have those among us who will steal our fencepoles, who will go and steal hay from the neighbor's haystack. It is essentially necessary to have such characters here. There are as bad men and women within the pales of this Church as there are upon this earth, and the gospel is being preached to them to prepare them to become devils. If they want to be, that's right, they are. This is the only place where you can really prepare to become a devil." He uses that argument, and of course, this could be easily twisted by outsiders, and it has been done.

"Whence comes evil? It comes when we make an evil of good. Speaking of the elements in the creation of God, their nature is as pure as the heavens, and we destroy it. I wish you to understand that sin is not an attribute in the nature of man," (He does not have the Calvinistic doctrine here.) "but is an inversion of the attributes God has placed in him."

"Of one thing I am sure--God never institutes war. God is not the author of confusion or war. They are the results of the acts of the children of men. Confusion and war necessarily come as the results of foolish acts and policies of men. But they do not come because God desires that they should come."

Here's an amusing one: "A man from Boston, on his way to the gold digging, stopped a few days ago in this city, and heard me preach. Soon afterwards I met him on the street, and he asked me if I knew where hell was. I told him I thought he was on the high road to that very place, and when he crossed over the Sierra Nevada," he means it quite literally here, "and when he crossed over the Sierra Nevada mountains to the gold diggings in California, if he discovered that he had not found hell, to come back and let me know." If you know what those California towns were in 1857, he's not exaggerating. It was a living hell.

"What causes us to mourn?" Notice there's nothing negative in this. "What causes us to mourn? Neither more nor less, to me, insofar as I convey the idea by language, than the earthly weakness that is in us." It is our own sins we suffer for. "We are prone to do evil deliberately because of the Fall, that's perfectly true. We are contaminated, and so forth. Every son and daughter of Adam that has come into this world has been subject to sin and prone to wander. They must have their times and seasons, and when the day has come in which all things are to be gathered in one, the Lord will gather those things."

"Our religion is a practical and progressive one. It will not prepare a thief, a liar, a sorcerer, a whoremonger, an adulterer, a murderer, or a false swearer in one day so that he can enter into the Celestial Kingdom of God." You have to take some time, he said. But it is to prepare you, even the worst. We cannot save ourselves from the consequences of our evil choice, because we are here. But that's why we have the Redeemer. He has redeemed the earth; he has redeemed mankind and every

living thing that moves upon it. This gospel will save the whole human family; the blood of Jesus will atone for our sins, if we accept the terms he has laid down. But we must accept those terms, or else it will avail nothing in our behalf. If a person could not see as he did, while in the flesh, hear as he heard, understand as he understands, and become precisely as he was, according to their several capacities and callings, they can never dwell with him and his Father. What, then, is the earth in its present condition? Nothing but a place in which you may learn the first lessons toward exaltation, that is, obedience to the gospel of the Son of God.

And so this brings us to the subject of ordinances, and look how the time has run over. So we've had to ramble around here on Brigham Young and his theology, and it hasn't been too theological, because he does develop some very interesting ideas here; but the whole thing, you see, being based on revelation, it's non-speculative. He's not developing the ideas. He's talked about the experiences he's had, and that's when he's interesting, and he's talking about things that he knows are so through the power of revelation, and he puts the gospel on that foot. But he's always our same old Brigham, never imposing, "here I am, this is what I've found out, you can take it or leave it." And that's all he ever asks, the only leadership he ever imposes.

Question: Was he a very cheerful man?

Oh, he was very cheerful! I mean, he danced almost every night. He was a great one for joking about everything, like Joseph Smith. He called Joseph Smith "the merry Prophet." The interviews with him-- Remember Mark Twain's interview, Mark Twain was very young when they were passing through California at that time, and Mark Twain was always trying to get in on the conversation, make bright remarks, and so forth. Brigham Young didn't even notice him during the interview, and when it was over he laid his hands on his head benevolently and he said, "Fine child, boy or girl?" That was all he said to Mark Twain! Mark Twain was just a kid, he was only about 20 then, and he was trying to be very smart. Brigham just didn't notice him. "Fine child, boy or girl?!" Oh, he saw the humor in things. He made some wonderful jokes.

I think one item here, one topic, some of the jokes he used to tell, because he told some very good ones. Most of his humor was in the vigorous language he used, and in the ironic expressions. There's a lot of wit in that, you know, the way he turns these expressions. Almost anywhere you open, even at random, you can get something, well, when he's talking about revelation here, the evil that is in us, well, about evil spirits. Or, telling this person going to California, well, you come back and tell me if you haven't found hell in the mining towns, and believe me, they were hell--nothing but murders, and violence, and drunkenness and immorality of the grossest sort. It was a hell on earth, it would be hard to imagine anything worse. He meant it seriously as well, but this, for example, he says here: "Thank God the devil has not forsaken us yet. Will he not sustain his own kingdom? When you have seen all the powers of evil, when combined against a community, you may know that it is Christ's kingdom."

Well, here's when he's talking about temple building, for example. He's talking about ordinances, and he says about the temple here, "We never began to build a temple without the bells of hell beginning to ring. I want to hear them ring again."

Question: How are you related to him?

I'm not related to him at all--well, through marriage, everybody's related to him one way or another. There's always somebody in the family that relates up to Brigham Young. But again, he thought nothing about that, particularly.

Oh, he had some very funny things to say about that, too. In this section on leadership, there's one where he talks about snobbery in the Church, and there was a lot of it among his wives, and so forth. And he can be quite humorous, and he used to put on a terrific act in the tabernacle, you know. He'd show how they would walk with the new Grecian bend, and with the bustle, and with the affectations of the women at tea, and he had them all rolling on the floor, and the outsiders would be shocked. Is this the way for a reverent man. . . ? And he said, I don't care whether you reverence me or not. As long as you do your duty, it's none of my business. He was a marvelous one.

Well, the time is up, so we should bear our testimony. If you're stuck here this long, you've got to hear that, because I have a testimony of the gospel which I wish to bear. Again, as Brigham Young says, because I say it's true doesn't make it true, does it? But I know it is, and I would recommend you to pursue a way of finding out. And there are ways in which you can come to a knowledge of the truth. When is a thing proven? When you personally think it's so, and that's all you can do. And that's true, of course, in science or anything else. When enough experience, and enough impressions, enough thought and so forth, build up in your own mind so that a thing is proven to you, that's the proof. But heavens, I've seen, you can get someone like, from Königswald and Leaky, for example, talking about bones, the same bones, equally eminent paleontologists, the one says, can't you see the evidence? And the other one says, yes, I do see the evidence, and I can't see why you don't see the point. You can't force another person to believe. The one man's experience convinced him that this was so, the other man's convinced him that a totally different thing was so. No two of us, you see, have the same experience, have the same background, have the same evidence, or anything else. All we can do is reach the point where, ahah! that is it, you see. Then you have your testimony, and all you can do is bear your testimony and point to the evidence. That's all you can do. But you can't impose your testimony on another. And you can't make the other person see the evidence as you do. Things that just thrill me through and through in the Book of Mormon leave another person completely cold. And, the other way around, too. So we can't use evidence, and we can't say, I know this is true, therefore you'd better know it is true. But I know it is true, and I pray our Heavenly Father that we may all come to a knowledge of the truth, each in his own way, as Brigham Young would have us do it. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.