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FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES

Hugh W. Nibley

Nobody to Blame

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Summary:

In this letter to a BYU graduate student, Hugh Nibley advocates the program of the school of the prophets as a way to meet the challenges of academia. He explores four obvious ways of meeting the challenges of the learned world: ignoring them, running away from them, agreeing with them, or meeting the opposition on their own grounds.

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Provo, Utah
August 3, 1960

Dear Brother,

What one most misses in our Utah institutions is that air of intellectual candor, that free and searching discussion of the schoolmen, their ways and their foibles, which is the principal delight and, in the end, the main justification, of institutions of higher learning. Seen in proper perspective, the doings of the learned are high comedy, and we who profess publicly and for a fee are fair game for any criticism, as Justice Learned Hand has noted in a significant decision: "It is not true that all ridicule...or all disagreeable comment...is actionable; a man must not be too thin-skinned or a self-important prig...This rule, which allows for fair and free comment, applies to all professions and all persons who submit their work to the public. This includes teachers, ministers, educators, lawyers, doctors, architects." Elsewhere the Supreme Court has wisely decided that "fair and legitimate criticism is always permitted upon any work to which the attention of the public has been invited...If the public is to be aided in forming its judgment upon matters of public interest by a free interchange of opinion, it is essential that the honest criticism and comment, no matter how foolish or prejudiced, be privileged." The final clause is my franchise--why should we not feel free to speak on matters that concern us all? In an apocryphal but very ancient account, Peter in the course of a debate with Simon Magus, points out that people either take themselves or the Gospel very seriously--nobody ever takes both seriously. At our Utah universities we take ourselves very seriously, but the suppression of free and open discussion of things academic, while it provides needed security to those who have reason to shun honest scrutiny, can only contribute in the long run to mounting jealousy, suspicion, and tension. There is a point beyond which reticence ceases to be prudence and makes only for misunderstanding. The following letter, to a BYU graduate student in Religion, is meant to be only helpful and constructive. In the present state of things, to keep silent could only be harmful, and speaking out might do some good.

Sincerely,

Hugh Nibley

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Nobody to Blame

Provo, Utah
July 29, 1960

Dear Brother Burgon,

It is high time I was explaining my reluctance to assist people in getting Ph.D. degrees in Religion or anything else here at the BYU. The time is not ripe for that sort of thing, and I wonder if it ever will be. Why, for example, should I attempt to introduce you to the mysteries of Egyptian when within a few hundred miles of here is a man with only one or two students who knows a hundred times more about Egyptian than I ever will? It is expensive, unnecessary, and not really honest for us to pretend to duplicate the work of firmly established and far better equipped instructors and institutions. Should the Church have a university at all, then? Not, I believe, in the conventional sense. Let me explain.

In an article in the current Jewish Quarterly Review I refer to the fierce conflict that took place in the first five centuries after Christ between the "literalists" of the Church and the "allegorists", or, as they called each other, the "anthropomorphists" and the "spiritualizers." The latter were wholly under the sway of the University of Alexandria, and in the end they won a total victory. Ever since then the teachings of the Christian churches have been those of the old pagan universities; for when the Church lost revelation is had to turn to another source for guidance, and so threw itself into the arms of the established schools of learning. The schoolmen, as one of them expresses it, took over the office and function once belonging to the prophets, and once in power guarded their authority with jealous care, quickly and violently suppressing any suggestion of a recurrent inspiration.

While I was at Berkeley I was asked to speak to a student group on the subject, "Is U.C. Anti-religious?" After considerable inquiry I was forced to admit that the Berkeley institution is if anything less anti-religious than the BYU, where religion is under more conscious and deliberate attack. But I do not for that reason hold my BYU colleagues culpable--they cannot help themselves. By its very nature the University is the rival of the Church; its historic mission has been to supply the guiding light which passed away with the loss of revelation, and it can make no concessions to its absolute authority without forfeiting that authority. In a series of articles in the Era (1959), I showed how almost all the opposition to the Restoration of the Gospel from the beginning came from the intellectuals; how else could they react to the return of revelation? After inspecting the great Prussian universities at the peak of their splendor, Orson Spencer reported to Brigham Young that "the universities are leading the people down into hell." This shocking statement is no more devastating than what Nietzsche wrote about the same universities a generation later, or what a number of German scholars have written about them in our own time: George Steiner blames the universities above all for "such a profound deadness of spirit, such an inescapable sense of triviality and dissimulation," as has possessed the modern German mind; the university, he says, has "drilled into the German people a terrible weakness for slogans and pompous cliches." Brother Spencer was right after all; and yet those very Prussian schools of which he spoke became the models of our American

institutions, and it is their proud, confident, befuddled teachings that still resound in the recesses of Orson Spencer Hall!

I have discussed the supplanting of the Gospel by the teaching of the schools (in ancient times, that is) in a number of studies, but to show what I mean one example close to home will suffice. On March 23, 1955, I engaged in a public discussion in Salt Lake with my friend Sterling McMurrin. I closed my rather feeble address with the words, "At this point (i.e., after we have discovered the depths of our own ignorance) we can begin the study of the Gospel; there is no further need for waiting around until 'History' can make up its mind." Immediately Sterling (for it was his turn to speak) arose and introduced his own discourse by saying, "Now we will hear the real Gospel." This brought a round of applause from the university crowd--did they realize what it meant? It was a frank declaration that the cerebations of the learned men and NOT the utterances of the prophets comprise the Gospel. This has been the credo of the Christian schoolmen since the days of Clement of Alexandria: the University, Christian, Moslem, Jewish or pagan, has its own religion, and the basic tenet of that religion is the denial of revelation: "We altogether avoid saying positively and confidently anything which contradicts manifest experiences and reasoning of philosophy or the other sciences..The truth of the Holy Writ cannot be contrary to the solid reasons and experiences of human knowledge."* This naive faith in the infallibility of our present knowledge would make many a modern physicist smile, and it has been shrewdly criticized by C. S. Lewis:

"Another thing I've noticed about reality is that, besides being difficult, it's odd: it isn't neat, it isn't what you expect... Reality, in fact, is always something you could not have guessed. That's one of the reasons I believe in Christianity. It's a religion you could not have guessed. If it offered us just the kind of universe we'd always expected, I'd feel we were making it up ... (It) has just that queer twist about it that real things have. So let's leave behind all these boys' philosophies--these oversimple answers. The problem isn't simple and the answer isn't going to be simple either...Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse...But don't let us come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us...I'm trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really silly thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the thing we mustn't say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said, would not be a great moral teacher. He'd be either a lunatic--on the level with the man who says he's a poached egg--or else he'd be the Devil of Hell."

How well these words apply in a lesser measure to Joseph Smith or any true prophet! What Lewis is here condemning is the very type of thinking that is being so diligently cultivated by our Mormon intellectuals, who must have their religion neat and rational, and who balk at anything in the Gospel that could not have sprung from their own minds. A good example of this is Brother Berrett's honest, persistent, and well-meant efforts to

*Pererius (16th Century).

convince our seminary and institute people that God simply CANNOT have foreknowledge of things, since that, according to an old and threadbare argument, would be incompatible with the free agency of man. That is the party-line of the university, the principle stated above by Pererius, that the mind of man always has priority over the Word of God. Now those who take this position do so not because they are religious renegades, but simply because it is the only safe position they can take. It is not that they are ashamed of the Gospel, but rather that they are abashed in the presence of the learned, intimidated by a situation with which they cannot cope. Again, let me explain.

There are four obvious ways of meeting the challenge of the learned world:

1. We can ignore them. This is often a good idea, since the two greatest nuisances in the Church are (a) those who think they know enough to disprove the claims of Joseph Smith, and (b) those who think they know enough to prove them. Actually, nobody knows nearly enough either to prove or disprove the Gospel--"Man cannot by searching find out God." If we ignore the learning of the world, then of course we will have no need for institutions of higher learning.

2. We can run away from them. That is, we can claim to be scholars in the full and proper sense of the word, and yet refuse to meet other scholars on their own ground, confining our learned antics to audiences of "our own people." We at the BYU want the world to accept our academic pretensions, even though we do not begin to come up to its academic standards. We claim special status and immunity as a Church School, and yet ask full faith and credit in the world for a brand of education which we will not allow the world to criticize. All this is a form of running away from our scholastic responsibilities. When books and articles against the Church and its teachings have come out in the past, no matter how patently false and unfair they have been, none of the Church's army of professional scholars has shown any inclination to rush to the defense of the faith, though even a mercenary should show some measure of loyalty to his employer. Why is this so? Those who keep silence when the Church is attacked are neither vicious nor depraved, but they are afraid--they are playing safe in a ticklish situation. For having given out that they are scholars, they must, to save face with the Gentiles and the Saints, steer clear of any situation in which their limitations would be brought to light.

3. We can agree with the world. This has always been standard procedure with our Mormon intellectuals. What else can they do, since they cannot stand up to the opposition and cannot afford to run away? Nothing is more prevalent among the LDS schoolmen than the illusion that they can enroll themselves in the company of the experts and gain their respect and recognition simply by agreeing with whatever they say. Naturally our poorly equipped scholars tend to panic when anyone threatens to substitute serious discussion for professional camaraderie. They have assailed me hysterically for daring to criticize Mrs. Brodie or speak of the Book of Mormon in polite company. And yet I cannot feel to chide them for their timidity--mere prudence admonishes them against rocking the boat in waters where they cannot swim. But the point is that they claim to be expert swimmers and volunteer themselves as lifeguards for us all. And so their specious learning has been a source of weakness to the Church. Specious learning? Consider our next point.

4. We can meet the opposition on their own grounds, publishing in their journals (which are open to all) and presenting the clear evidence of the original sources. This is exactly what we have not been doing. We have fondly supposed through the years that we could mask our inadequacy behind the awesome facade of titles and degrees; our intellectuals rest their whole case on that very authoritarianism of rank and protocol which they have always affected to despise. Here, as you know, our most serious weakness has ever been in the field of languages--precisely the field in which the School of the Prophets and the Nauvoo University were particularly strong. All knowledge of the past--historical, philosophical, literary, religious, etc. -- comes to us through written texts which (as I showed at length in a number of Era articles in 1955) cannot be critically examined or understood in translation. The indispensable key to the past is language, and in our Utah schools we have always affected a unique and intense interest in the ancient world. We have tried to open the lock without the key: only in Utah can you take advanced courses in the fine points of Greek literature from a man who does not know a word of Greek but who, in the name of scholarship, has driven hundreds of young people from the Church (I have run into them everywhere); only here can you attend public lectures on the Dead Sea Scrolls by savants who cannot read a line of them; only here can you study Classical and Near Eastern civilization and thought under experts to whom a line of Horace or the Talmud might as well be Chinese; only here can you listen to discourses on the philology of the Tower of Babel by authorities who know no language but English, and so on and so on--it is unbelievable. I well remember the amazement and delight with which I perused the BYU catalogue as I waited for my first interview with President MacDonald. Never had I beheld such a sumptuous offering in Classical Antiquity; there were advanced courses in Greek and Roman literature, philosophy, religion, archaeology, language and what-not. "You must have a splendid Classical library," I observed to President MacDonald, who, in his curt blunt way replied, "The Brigham Young University has no library!" "Come again?" quoth I in astonishment, and he repeated the brutal phrase. At once I rushed to the stacks and discovered that he was right--I found on the shelves just one Greek book (Homer) and one Latin book (Manilius), and I soon found out that nobody in Provo could read a line of either one. Yet we were offering the youth of the Church an unparalleled selection of courses, along with higher degrees, in Classical Studies. Today we are stronger both in library and in staff, but the grotesque disproportion between our claims and our performance is as great as ever--for now we offer the Ph.D.

The fond illusion that there is an area of mental activity to be designated as advanced study or higher learning is costing us dearly at the BYU. There is no such thing as advanced study. During the past year I studied very hard at Berkeley. Was it advanced study? I was badgered and bullied six hours a week by a fellow twenty years my junior, who was trying to knock the simple elements of Egyptian and Coptic into my head. It was all very elementary: my teacher would say after he had given a particularly brilliant demonstration that any Egyptian child of ten would probably laugh himself sick at our solemn and laborious attempts to reconstruct the language. He knew the whole thing was not on an advanced but a childish level. Anything I don't happen to know is elementary to me--all learning is elementary. Failure to realize this simple fact has made a fiasco of our graduate work. I have had freshmen and sophomore students who have made phenomenal progress in Greek and Arabic, but it is almost impossible to find a

graduate student who will submit to the humiliation of doing simple daily assignments; having imbibed the heady illusion of "advanced studies", they cannot bring themselves to do the childish exercises without which no one ever learned a language. The faculty are most to blame for this: I have sat in many a master's examination in which neither the candidate nor any member of the committee could read a word of the writings they were so learnedly discussing. My last official act being going to Berkeley was to sit in on such an examination, where the candidate had based his thesis on the critical interpretation of a Greek poet whose writings neither he nor any of the committee could read; I asked the young man what he intended to do for his life's work, and he replied that he wanted to devote himself to the study of Ancient History. I suggested that in such a case it would be a good idea for him to learn Greek and Latin, and he agreed. Thereupon a member of the examining committee warmly interposed with the observation that though he himself was "not without some intellectual attainment," he felt it quite wrong to insist that any student must learn this or that language. Which of us was right? The student soon went East on a fine scholarship--and promptly came to grief, because he had not had that basic training which his BYU professors had prevented him from getting. I have seen this happen many, many times.

I mention the high cost of poor preparation because of your avowed intention of getting a bread-and-butter degree as quickly as possible and then getting down to real work. Nearly all our serious graduate students have had the same idea, dear brother--but it never works. Like the elder Maeser you are "painting for bread too soon." You admit that if you had the money you would go elsewhere and get a real degree. They all do. But do you see where that puts us? We are using your financial pressures to force you into buying an inferior product. You speak for others when you protest that you are wasting your time taking required courses that never go very deep and keep you from learning the things you should. Such courses exist in all graduate schools--for the sake of the teachers, not the students. The idea is that a large number of courses and a large staff teaching them make a good college. But forty sparrows do not make an eagle, forty house-cats do not make a lion, and forty survey courses do not make a scholar. Moreover, if you bring together forty men each of whom knows a little Latin or math, the result is not the equivalent of consulting just one person with a good knowledge of those subjects. At present our graduate program has nothing to offer but survey courses. Beware of them.

You want to settle for a "service degree," and indeed if you got a degree here it would have to be such a one. But such a gimmick is a snare and a delusion; it is a hybrid thing that satisfied nobody and does much harm. In the 1920's the University of Chicago offered such a blessing to ministers who did not intend to become scholars but wanted the dignity of the doctorate to help them in their careers. A throng of eager seekers from Utah got the degree and have kept things stirred up ever since, correcting the views of the Church in history and doctrine in the name of scholarship, though to my knowledge not one of them has ever produced a piece of work acceptable to the learned world to which they claim to belong--some of them didn't even write dissertations. The trouble with a service degree is that nobody will admit he has one.

But if you try to pass as a scholar on the strength of a degree (to say nothing of a moth-eaten degree like mine!) you will soon find yourself in trouble, making concession like mad because you can't deliver the goods. And to vindicate your undignified retreat you will have to do what the rest

of them do--you will convince yourself and others that the course you are forced to take is actually the only right and true course for anybody to take; and when others propose to meet the world on its own grounds you will promptly sound the alarm and attack them as fanatics and trouble-makers. And so your whole career will become one long face-saving operation--at the expense of the Church.

Now it is important to understand that the issues I am discussing and which are making so much trouble here at the "Y" are not religious issues at all; they are purely academic. The grim problems which are brought to my office by a steady stream of students could be solved, I believe, without any reference whatever to religion. If only our Mormon professors were required to come up to the standards of really good universities, not in religion but in the subjects they teach, they would soon be too busy to carry on their ideological campaigns; if they could turn their energies into productive channels and meet the hard and exacting requirements of the scholarly community to which they pay such ardent lip-service, they would not have to work off their frustrations on helpless students. Perhaps I am being too naive, but the fact is that most of the troubles here stem from the fact that our faculty are allowed to parade as scholars without being scholars. "Publish or perish," is too mechanical and unimaginative a rule to apply everywhere, but it is not too much to insist on the rule, "Publish or shut up!" It is not the religious views of our professors that drive so many young people from the Church--few are fooled or impressed by the religious contributions of our English or Philosophy Departments, for example--It is the claim to a higher and deeper learning, a knowledge of things that others do not know, that is the weapon; it is the power to impress and beguile others by appealing to a learning that the "layman" does not possess that puts him at the mercy of the professors.

For the past year I have been trying to learn and teach something called Classical Rhetoric. Rhetoric was "the art of the Sophists," and the ancient, medieval and modern universities have all been under their spell. Plato warned against these people and prophesied that they would (as they soon did) gain complete control of education; in his dialogues he has Socrates draw from the great Sophists their admission that what they really seek is not knowledge but the prestige and influence that go with it, and that the aim of their art is only to get enough learning to make an impression on the public and thereby get "power and gain." It can be clearly shown that higher education, especially in the humanities, has faithfully followed the Sophist line ever since Isocrates.

From the beginning the Sophists devoted most of their energies to attacking religion. The professional humanist simply cannot leave religion alone, for in the end he has nothing else to talk about. The philosophers can always get an audience by promising an attack on the Church, but whoever listens to them or reads their stuff when they talk about anything else? They don't dare apostatize, because if they did the public would lose all interest in them. To attack religion is the one safe course for the ambitious intellectual. A professional savant is expected to say something significant--it is not enough for him simply to repeat what others are saying. And so he strikes out in bold new directions by attacking prevailing religious beliefs. Of course in doing so he falls back on platitudes and truisms and arguments as old as the race (you will find them all in the Book of Mormon), but since he is in the minority, this marks him as Great Thinker, and above all saves him from being called to account; for if he is too closely

questioned or criticized, he can always play the Martyred Liberal. I am not making this all up, Brother B., what I am describing is the normal behavior of the ancient Sophists. Even in those societies in which genuine religious belief had been effectively stamped out, and at those schools where no one for generations had dreamed of being anything but a liberal and a sceptic, and in those communities where no one dared breathe a word against the doctors, they still depicted themselves as crusading heroes of the mind. So let us not be too hard on our local profs, who expend their powers in attacks on the Church--they are simply following the established ways of their profession.

What, then, should you and I do? Return, I say, to the program of the School of the Prophets and the University of Nauvoo, which was the acquisition of basic knowledge (especially languages) for the avowed purpose of aiding the spreading of the Gospel. At once an agonized cry goes up from the faculty: "How can you be so narrow, so biased, so prejudiced as to begin your researches by assuming that you already have the truth! While in Berkeley I got a letter from a BYU professor who gave me to know that because I believe the Book of Mormon I am not really qualified to teach history, and who ended his harangue with the observation that while I claim to know the truth, the gentlemen of the History Department, like true scholars, claim only to be searching for it. A noble sentiment, truly, but a phony one--are they really searching? For one thing, they don't believe for a moment that the truth of the Gospel can be found, and have only loud cries of rage and contempt for any who say they have found it--they are as sure that it doesn't exist as we are that it does; which is to say, our dedicated searchers for truth are dead sure that they have the answer already! As if to prove that they have no intention of pursuing serious investigations, these people have conspicuously neglected to prepare themselves for any but the most localized research; they are like a man setting out to explore a wonderful cavern without bothering to equip himself with either lights or ropes. We respect our local Gelehrten for that knowledge and proficiency which they have demonstrated to the world, but when they go out of bounds and attack the Church with specious learning they invite legitimate censure. They are like dentists who insist on performing delicate brain surgery, because that is more interesting than filling teeth. Nice for them--but what about their patients?

My colleagues in Berkeley gave me a bad time about this, and it was your letter to Prof. Baer that started it all. For Baer promptly got hold of a BYU catalogue and the cat was out of the bag. I was assailed by questions from him and others--ironically, the same questions I had raised vainly through the years: What on earth is meant by "Biblical and Semitic languages?" Don't you know that all Semitic languages are Biblical, and that there are at least a hundred other Biblical languages? How can Egyptian be taught by "Staff" when there are only four or five qualified teachers of Egyptian in all America? How can Church History and Biblical Languages be lumped together as a required minor when they deal with totally different materials? What are these fantastic courses in archaeology? You know that even a teaching assistant may not instruct in a field of archaeology in which he has not both excavated and published. Classical and Biblical archaeology are highly specialized subjects--what is this nonsense about "General Classical and Biblical, etc. archaeology? Here are a hundred other highly specialized fields--we know all the men working in those fields, for they are few in number and keep in constant contact with each other: how does it happen that none of your men are among them? We understand that you have a duty

to your own people, but before you can instruct them you are under a moral obligation to prove to them and to us that you can meet our standards. If you expect us to respect your degrees why don't you establish communication with us? Instead of offering all these high-sounding courses as a demonstration of competence, why don't you first demonstrate your competence the hard way, so that you can honestly offer the courses? These and endless other questions all point up our great weakness--trying to begin at the top: the BYU began I am told, as "the world's greatest university."

Thus our fame is spreading and we are in intimate danger of acquiring a reputation as an asylum for quacks. While the BYU was an obscure college in the sticks nobody cared particularly what wild claims we made. But now we are breaking into the big leagues and demanding attention and respect. This is a far riskier business than many people seem to think, for once a university gets a reputation, good or bad, nothing on earth can change it--the reputation will stick for centuries, no matter how the school may change for better or worse. I have noted ample indication that the world resents our ambition and wants to see us fail. Since we are on the spot academically, we ignore the strictest academic standards (and how we ignore them!) at our peril. Even the most skillful public relations will only backfire in the end.

So, my advice to you is not to get a quick degree. In time you will find out that the hard way is the only easy way. After our Division of Religion has given the world a few hundred books and articles in the proper places, we might start to think of offering higher degrees. But, I ask myself, is it worth all the trouble? It is not. My own conviction is that the Lord does not intend the BYU to become a great university in the conventional sense. The constitution of the Church as set forth in the Doctrine and Covenants gives no place to a university. And why should it? A university is a substitute for the Church; its doctorate is a substitute for the priesthood; its discussions and techniques a substitute for revelation; its robes and rituals a substitute for lost ordinances. It is a second-best, but it is sworn to defend its priority against all comers and insist that it alone has the true Gospel. No wonder there are tensions! The university has dictated doctrine and policy to every church that has sponsored it, and the churches of the world have listened to its voices only for a lack of a better guide. The true Church needs no such crutch to lean on. Our young people are desperately in need of knowledge that neither the "life adjustment" experiments of the educationists nor the posturings of our self-certified experts can supply. You have been looking for some of that knowledge and found your access to it constantly blocked. For the present I can only advise you either to go where you can find it, or start looking for something else. But whatever you do, don't try to build something out of nothing by the manipulation of credits and courses. We all need to be learning constantly, but "Higher Learning" is the illusion of those that are lost.