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Critics couldn't touch Nibley's faith

By Michael De Groot

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PROVO, Utah -- Hugh Nibley, one of the greatest defenders of Joseph Smith's work, didn't worry about vindicating the Prophet's character, said Richard L. Bushman at a lecture at BYU on Jan. 14.

Instead, Nibley concentrated on shifting the debate to what Joseph had produced: the Book of Mormon.

Bushman, the Howard W. Hunter Professor of Mormon Studies at Claremont Graduate University (Calif.), was the inaugural speaker of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute's weekly lecture series honoring the centennial of the late professor Hugh W. Nibley's birth. Bushman looked at how Nibley "approached the Prophet from a strangely oblique angle."



Richard L. Bushman lectures on Joseph Smith and Hugh Nibley's research at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute series. Photo: Michael De Groot

Bushman explained that Joseph's character had been under heavy attack while Nibley was growing up. For example, historian I. Woodbridge Riley suggested the big question about Joseph Smith was: "Was he demented or merely degenerate?"

"The degradation of the Smiths eliminated entirely any need to take Joseph's work seriously," Bushman said.

Nibley took these types of arguments against Joseph Smith and turned them around.

"Nibley wanted to change the intellectual agenda," Bushman said, "He apparently came to the conclusion that vindication

of the Prophet before authenticating his work was the wrong tactic."

To illustrate this approach, Bushman quoted from Nibley's famous analogy of a jeweler named Snite. Snite is the sensible hero in a story where a ploughboy (read Joseph

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Smith) finds a diamond (read Book of Mormon) while working in his field.



Bushman talks with an audience member following his lecture at BYU on Joseph Smith and Hugh Nibley. Photo: Michael De Groot.

Critics descend upon the boy -- claiming he was deluded, that others have claimed to find diamonds, that it had to be merely quartz, that surveys showed nobody believed him or that somebody else had to have found the diamond. Snite (read Nibley?) declares that "since the stone was still available for examination" the object could be proven by well-known tests for diamonds.

The only question is whether the diamond is authentic. But the character of the ploughboy is not the issue. "We make the connection to divinity," Bushman said. "Nibley does not fill in the 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."

Nibley didn't bear his testimony in this. For him, the scholarly work wasn't proof. "His belief in the (Book of Mormon), Nibley tells us, arises in another realm, the realm of faith," Bushman said. "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."

Bushman understands this anomaly and runs into it when he speaks to Mormon audiences about the history of Joseph Smith. Often someone will ask him to bear his testimony. "I am a little put off by this question," Bushman said. "The whole story of the Prophet, as I relate it, is a testimony of the truth."

But Bushman said behind the request for a testimony performance is the real question: "All right, you have proven yourself to be a scholar ... now we want to know if you are one of us ... use our kind of speech and show yourself to be a brother as well as a scholar."

To Bushman, however, it would be like having an attorney who is representing the LDS Church in court suddenly bear his testimony of President Monson to prove his point. It would have the opposite effect. Even though the testimony may be the lawyer's deepest conviction, it is presented in the wrong venue and is connected to the wrong type of presentation.

Bushman said that Nibley remained in "the mode of scholarly discourse" when talking about Joseph Smith. He did not connect the final dots from his scholarly conclusions about the Book of Mormon to the divinity of Joseph Smith's calling.

"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," Bushman said. "He would never expose his faith to their attacks. The unbelievers' blows would never touch the vital spot underneath his armor."

This lecture was part of a 13-part series titled "The Work of Hugh W. Nibley On the 100th Anniversary of His Birth." The lectures take place every Thursday at 7 p.m. in

the Harold B. Lee Library auditorium at BYU. The next lecture, "Nibley and the Church," will be by Robert Millet on Jan. 21.

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