MORMON TIMES
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For and about members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Orson Scott Card was born in Washington and grew up in California, Arizona and Utah. He served a mission for the LDS Church in Brazil in the early 1970s. He is the author of the novels “Ender's Game,” “Ender's Shadow” and “Speaker for the Dead,” which are widely read by adults and younger readers, and are increasingly used in schools.

Besides these and other science fiction novels, Card writes contemporary fantasy (“Magic Street,” “Enchantment,” “Lost Boys”), biblical novels (“Stone Tables,” “Rachel and Leah”), the American frontier fantasy series “The Tales of Alvin Maker” (beginning with “Seventh Son”), poetry (“An Open Book”) and many plays and scripts. Card currently lives in Greensboro, N.C., with his wife, Kristine Allen Card, and their youngest child, Zina Margaret.

We all face

Nibley explains gospel best

By Orson Scott Card

Thursday, Feb. 19, 2009

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During my weekly commute from Greensboro, N.C., to Buena Vista, Va., I listen to books on CD. As this semester began, I began to listen to "Time Vindicates the Prophets," a lecture series by Hugh Nibley, which the church broadcast from Temple Square in 1954.

The lectures eventually gave rise to the book "The World and the Prophets," which I read when I was in college and still remember very well -- it was pivotal in my Christian education.

But the lecture series had something the book couldn't duplicate: Hugh Nibley's voice, that headlong rush of language; his explanations of the terms he knows we won't know; his complete failure to explain terms that are just as difficult, because it doesn't cross his mind that we won't know them; his scraps of quotations in ancient languages just in case we want to know where he's getting the nuances of his new translation.

Then I got to Southern Virginia University and stood in front of my class on the Fiction of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. As I talked about the version of Christianity that Lewis believed in (post-Augustinian Neoplatonism, of course), I found myself quoting things I had just heard from Hugh Nibley.

And it dawned on me that Lewis and Nibley, between them, had formed most of my theoretical and practical Christian education.

Part I: Lewis

I was about 10 years old, and my parents had driven the whole tribe of us across Nevada so we could stay at my dad's parents' house and attend general conference.

I'm not sure if this is the trip where we stopped in Sparks, Nev., and my mom put a quarter into a slot machine in full view of all us kids, so we could see how the money just went down the drain.

Naturally, she got a jackpot and had to figure out what to do with a whole slew of silver dollars.

Maybe that was a different trip. The one I'm talking about was when my dad noticed I was reading through my grandparents' collection of Readers Digest Condensed Books (most memorable title: "Presenting Lily Mars").

My father handed me a slim volume from my grandfather's library. "Here, read this."

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It was "The Screwtape Letters," and it was the beginning of my long relationship with C.S. Lewis. I read "Screwtape" then and there, and talked about it with my dad. I read it again and again until I had every idea committed to memory.

This was in the same period of my life when I was reading whatever church books happened to be in the house: collected sermons by former presidents of the church, Parley P. Pratt's "Key to the Science of Theology," John A. Widtsoe's "Evidences and Reconciliations" and James E. Talmage's "Jesus the Christ."

C. S. Lewis was somehow different. He had put his religion lessons into the form of stories -- funny, ironic, sarcastic stories, yet with compassion and tragedy and redemption and joy. And even though he wasn't LDS, the kind of religion he was talking about still had everything to do with the way we Mormons try to live.

My reaction can be boiled down to sheer astonishment: This is possible!

Later, when I was in college, Lewis' work went through a kind of resurgence, and new editions of everything came out. I read it all -- not just the Christian apologetics, the "space trilogy" and "The Chronicles of Narnia," but also his narrative poem "Dymer," his critical study "The Allegory of Love" and his best novel, "Till We Have Faces."

I read his memoir, "Surprised by Joy," and I felt as if he had seen into my heart.

You can be a non-athlete who doesn't fit in at school, then end up a writer of good fiction and an unashamed Christian at the same time.

So I carried Lewis around in my heart, as a kind of beacon.

Part II: Nibley

With Nibley, it was once again my dad who introduced us. This time it was "Lehi in the Desert" and "The World of the Jaredites," bound in a single volume.

My father knew I was interested in the Book of Mormon; he also knew that I was frustrated with the amount of nonsense -- bad reasoning, shoddy scholarship, gross overreaching -- that pervaded the books then available that tried to "prove" the Book of Mormon through archaeology.

Hugh Nibley's book did none of the things that had made me so unhappy with the others. Instead, he studied the text of the Book of Mormon closely, and treated it, not as something to be proven, but as something that was true.

The Book of Mormon, Nibley showed me, is not trying to prove its own genuineness, it's trying to get people to repent of their sins and accept the Atonement of Christ. But the culture is there -- it simply isn't explained or pointed out, because that wasn't the writers' purpose.

My favorite part was "The World of the Jaredites." Nibley took me into a culture very different from my own, and showed how the Book of Ether, which is so drastically abridged, still contains cultural patterns that Joseph Smith could not have known about, and which were alien even to Moroni as he abridged it.

Yet there they were, clearly present in the text. So from then on, each time I read the Book of Mormon, I tried to adhere to Nibley's high standard, to see what was, not said, but implied about the people and the culture.

As with Lewis, during my college years I came to read more of Nibley's writings. Nibley wasn't a fiction writer, but he had the kind of humor and verve and wit that typified Lewis' nonfiction writing. It was a joy to spend time in his company, reading what he had to say.

He taught me, as Lewis did, that worldly intellectuals are only able to claim superiority to believers by using the dumbest examples of Christian thinking, and comparing it to the best of science; but the best of Christian (and, more particularly, Mormon) thinking takes all the findings of science and history into account, and finds no contradiction.

Nibley wrote or spoke about every aspect of the gospel, so that if you work your way through his books -- reissued by FARMS and available through the BYU Bookstore online -- www.byubookstore.com -- you get an extraordinarily complete course of study in Mormon religion.

It comes from a rigorous scholar, who never lowers the bar to account for faith. Indeed, it was Nibley who taught me that religion must meet the same standard as science: It has to work in the real world. You have to be able to replicate the results.

What Nibley had in common with Lewis, besides their roots in the philological tradition, their extraordinary talent for language and their commitment to the revealed religion of Christ, was their brilliance as writers.

For me, reading either of them was like sitting down with a scintillating conversationalist. They didn't just provide information, they involved me in the conversation, so that even though they weren't present, I found myself adding to what they said, finding my own examples, going beyond, when I could, and always going within.

As I talked to the excellent students who had taken my course because they loved the works of Lewis and Tolkien, two of the most morally profound writers in the English language, I discovered that hardly any of them had ever heard of Hugh Nibley; nor had they read anything he wrote.

Wouldn't that be a tragic irony if the greatest scholar, explainer and defender of Mormon doctrine in contrast to the philosophies of the world should be forgotten by his own people?

It's not because the books are not available -- though perhaps the sheer mass of the FARMS edition of Nibley's collected works is intimidating.

It's not because we no longer need a Hugh Nibley -- I believe we need him now more than ever.

Perhaps it's because Nibley was so -- unofficial. Sometimes authorized, always radically orthodox, completely faithful -- but unofficial and very, very personal.

Like Lewis, he doesn't speak with the voice of the official church. But that is precisely Hugh Nibley's strength. His life's work says, "You don't have to be a prophet to understand the revealed gospel."

His life's work says, "Look what I found here in the words of the prophets, and how it fits in with -- or repudiates -- what history and philosophy and other religions claim."

I had a mission president once who made us read "How I Raised Myself from "Failure to Success in Selling" and "The Greatest Salesman in the World." I read those books in an afternoon, out of obedience alone.

But it was Hugh Nibley, more than any other person, who actually taught me, not the gospel itself, but how to study the gospel and hold myself to the most rigorous standards as I did.

You can go into any bookstore and get almost any of the works of C.S. Lewis -- and I recommend that you do so!

But our Christianity, the revealed religion, both ancient and modern, is nowhere better explained and applied than in the writings of Hugh Nibley.

The triumph of Hugh Nibley is that, unlike most theologians, he does not domesticate the prophets, he does not reinterpret their words to fit into some preconceived system. Instead, he takes them as they are, and fits us into the world God revealed to us through them.

A wonderful place to meet Hugh Nibley is listening to "Time Vindicates the Prophets," available at the BYU Bookstore.

Orson Scott Card is a writer of nonfiction and fiction, from LDS works to popular fiction. "In the Village" appears Thursdays in the Deseret News. Leave feedback for Card online.

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