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Interview
No. 325

HUGH NIBLEY

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Provo, Utah

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An Interview By

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Everett L. Cooley Oral History Project

Tape No. U-1200

Interview No. 1

April 19, 1990

Marriott Library

University of Utah

Salt Lake City, Utah

THIS IS APRIL 19, 1980. I AM IN THE CONTENT STUDIES CENTER
AT BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY HAROLD S. LEE LIBRARY WITH
JAMES NISLEY BEING INTERVIEWED AS PART OF THE ORAL HISTORY
PROJECT BEING CONDUCTED BY STAN LARSEN. [PAGE 11.]

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THIS IS APRIL 19, 1990. I AM IN THE ANCIENT STUDIES CENTER AT BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY HAROLD B. LEE LIBRARY WITH HUGH NIBLEY BEING INTERVIEWED AS PART OF THE COOLEY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT BEING CONDUCTED BY STAN LARSON. [TAPE #1.]

SL: What we would like you to do is to tell us a little bit about your earliest memories.

HN: Well, I'll give you the briefest history possible. I'm sure you don't want to find out about my earliest memories. I'll write about them if I have anything to write. It's not important, really. Let's skip all that.

SL: What about your academic training, then?

HN: Academic training was a mess. It really was. I paid little attention to the academic. It was a good excuse to spend time doing that sort of thing. I did what I was supposed to be doing academically and it was out of line with the rest of the academic studies. Really, you've caught me off guard this morning. I was thinking about something else, something much nicer than about myself.

SL: Well, some of the things about yourself and some of the things that you've done in your career.

HN: Well, now wait a minute. How long is this going to take? If you give me a set time, then I'll tell you everything, you see.

SL: Well, I'm limited to this one tape that I have

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and it's only an hour, so we can't go past that.

HN: Yes.

SL: That's the maximum. We can have anything up to that point.

HN: Yes, that's all right.

SL: Each side is a half hour.

HN: Well, I've told other people about those things. I don't need to repeat them, I don't think. They're on other tapes somewhere, as far as that goes. So, we'll talk about a different aspect of the thing. I always thought we were living at the last days. I was obsessed by that because I was raised by a grandmother who kept telling me that was the case and she was right too, absolutely right. So there we are, living in these here last days. I was always thinking of it very much.

SL: Well, have you ever recorded--I've heard about your patriarchal blessing, that was given. Has that been recorded?

HN: Yes. That has an interesting message. I recorded it and then I lost it. And I recorded it so many times. I had a new Corona typewriter and I had to use it so I kept making copies of it. Every time I'd make a copy I'd start writing the thing

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over again. So I wrote the thing about a dozen times, so from memory I know what it says.

Yes, as we know, as the Patriarch of the Church told us, he wouldn't even tell his patriarchal blessing to his wife. You don't tell your patriarchal blessing to anybody else. No, I'm not going to tell it to anybody, under any circumstances.

SL: Okay. I just heard some things about it, so someone has heard about it.

HN: Well, I've gave them some ideas about things like that, yes, all sorts of blessings, things like that.

SL: I think that as I heard a story about it, it was related to an after-death experience.

HN: Oh, that's something else.

SL: That's something else.

HN: Let's forget all about that.

SL: Let's forget that.

HN: You asked me, so let me tell you now, will you?

SL: Okay.

HN: Okay. This will be different. Because I was living in Oregon, see, and the lumber business is everything there. I can't go back to Oregon anymore, I've seen so much destruction there. I knew right from the

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beginning as a child because we'd see the woods going down, disappearing all the time. It was absolutely relentless, they wouldn't leave a single tree standing, they were so greedy, you know. You could see this going on all the time. So that would condition you to living, that things were going to be finished, you see, it's going to be another world when these things are over with. They didn't realize the evil they were doing, too.

SL: Never a thought at that time to replant, to do reforestation and things?

HN: Well, that reforestation is still a joke. I mean, it's just a joke. They plant trees in rows. The second growth has nothing like the quality of the virgin timber or anything like that. They knew that. But they still say, "Oh, yes, we replant everything." That doesn't mean a thing. That's just a bluff. No, we're going out. It's a valid action. We're going out in one way. I would bet a thousand to one that we're finished within a very few years now, I mean our whole society. So the gospel is going to be-- things are going to happen as they have been foretold. But it's very interesting, of course, everybody knows that. How would you imagine that

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the end was going to be? Of course, The Book of Mormon tells us what that's going to be--those confusions. The last two chapters of The Book of Mormon, the one tells us what it is all going to come to and the other tells us what we're supposed to do about it.

SL: Many of your studies and writings, of course, have been on The Book of Mormon.

HN: Yes, of course.

SL: Looking back at your career, what is the most important work that you've written, either article or book, or what do you feel the proudest about?

HN: The ones I'm the proudest about are those, the classical, the Greco-Roman studies. I've tried so hard to get the F.A.R.M.S. people to print them, instead of the garbage they've been getting out of mine. I don't like the stuff they've been printing.

SL: Don't they plan to reprint everything?

HN: Which is absurd, because there's bad stuff as well as good stuff. It makes me so angry. They should not reprint everything.

SL: But no one knows what's good and what's bad, except you, and you don't have the time.

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HN: Oh, no, no, no, no, no. This last book is so repetitious, it's perpetrating a fraud, a fraud on me, because they have taken stuff that I had given in some chapel or other at some time. I didn't know it was recorded, without asking me, without letting me see the manuscript, without letting me read the proof, they would reprint the thing. Along with that, the undergraduates would correct my style. And I'm supposed to be responsible for that? This can't go on, absolutely. I've got to tell them that very soon. Anyway, it's always been the same sort of story, always moving in the same direction, you can see it clearly. And, of course, with the ancient world it's always a state of perpetual decline and fall. It always is. Except for the amazing period in which the Greeks won all the prizes. And they show, you see, by doing that. Oh, the picture has changed so, nowadays. By doing that they showed that it must come from outside. They brought it with them, like Mozart, they brought the glorious stuff with them. Yes, when you consider that the Greeks in a very short period took all the prizes. That little group that met at Pericles place after the show,

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that included about every great man that ever lived. We've been living on their ideas every since. It's an astonishing thing.

SL: Well, one of the things, since I'm from the University of Utah and the Marriott Library now, and this is part of the Everett Cooley Oral History Program, can you tell us a little more about, I guess, a decision in 1954 or '55 that you were going to move from BYU to the University of Utah?

HN: I never made such a decision.

SL: There wasn't anything being worked in that?

HN: No, that never occurred to me.

SL: Because the rumor--I think it was about '54 or '55--is what I heard.

HN: Well, when Wilkinson was here I was going to leave here. I had a very good offer from a branch of the University of Pennsylvania. Boy, they were really gung-ho.

SL: Actually, Sterling McMurrin is the one that mentioned that.

HN: Is that right?

SL: Yeah.

HN: Well, that's interesting. I would have forgotten about it then.

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SL: It wasn't important enough to remember?

HN: I would have forgotten about it then. I wasn't obsessed with it, I didn't have the idea, no, the truth is I didn't think I'd have a chance to get in up there, actually. I didn't think they'd ever take me or anything like that. No. I was going up there a good deal. I've seen a lot more of the people there, what's his name who was editing the legal quarterly up there. What was his name? Boy, this is no time to start thinking of names. Well, I consulted with him a lot and--you'd better turn your machine off until I can remember some names. [tape stopped] As a matter of fact, yes. I had more interesting contacts up there than I had down here. And also, the church offices, when I got out of the army I worked for a season in Forty-seven East South Temple.

SL: Oh, I didn't know that. That was right after the war then.

HN: Oh yes, yes, I worked there. Of course I was very friendly with Richard L. Evans and Brother [John A.] Widtsoe and Brother [Joseph F.] Merrill, well, most of them. We got along with famously--J. Rueben Clark. Well, some

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interesting things came out of that, interesting things, indeed, yes.

SL: It's not often that people have a chance to be so close to the Brethren--

HN: That's right--

SL: --nowadays, as it was back in--

HN: --for example, at that time Joseph Fielding [Smith] had an office on the second floor. When you came to the top of the steps there it was. Of course, there was no watchman downstairs or anything like that. His door was always wide open, and he was sitting at his desk. Anybody could go in and talk to him anytime of the day. Jesse Evans [Smith] was in the next room, you see, but he was there and his door was wide open. You could just go in and talk to him, and I did and we talked together. You couldn't dream of anything like that today. We've moved so far away from that. You see how things have gone. Of course, here I was very chummy with [Ernest] Wilkinson. Wilkinson wanted to enlist my services for various things, that was retrograde to my disposition, so we had very interesting contacts.

SL: But he wanted you to do things as a professor?

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HN: Well, I did write one speech for him.

SL: Oh, write for him to deliver?

HN: Oh, yes.

SL: Oh! (chuckle)

HN: Oh yes. And then I decided that a good subject for a speech to give at devotional would be on the subject of "Do Your Own Work." Never hand in anybody else's work as your own, because if you do that you'll be expelled from the university. It was a terrible crime. So here I was writing this for him. He got the point. He got the point.

SL: (chuckle) He never gave that speech, then, that you suggested?

HN: No, he never gave it to me. He didn't take the suggestion at all; he didn't take to it nicely. All I was trying to do was to tell him that what we were doing was dishonest.

SL: Well, unfortunately, that kind of thing still goes on with students.

HN: Oh, more than ever.

SL: Just a couple years ago I had a case like that where it was blatant plagiarism.

HN: Well, but look, every high official, including the general authorities have ghostwriters now.

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Everybody has a ghostwriter. They don't think that's immoral at all, but it is.

SL: Well, it seems worse in an academic setting. I suppose it could be justified for--

HN: Others are not supposed to take credit for work you do.

SL: Yes. Well, one of the other things that connects with the University of Utah is the debate in late 1955 between you and Sterling [McMurrin].

HN: Yes, Sterling.

SL: Do you remember anything about that particular one?

HN: Well, the nice thing about Sterling, he never lost his temper. He never did, no matter what. He was redheaded, he was Scotch, he was fiery, etc.; he'd always have to have the last word. etc., but he never lost his courtesy at all. I thought that was wonderful of Sterling.

SL: One of the things that I think he and others remember that were there--this was before my time, of course--but your categorization of academic work as a "game."

HN: Yeah, they didn't like that. They thought that was frivolous. This sort of thing you know, the great Adolf Erman, the father of modern

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Egyptology, and there was another Egyptologist, Dessier(?), who was very good, said, "You can't take him seriously because he actually enjoys doing it." Egyptology is hard, toil, work, it is drudgery. If it's anything else than that, then it's sort of betraying the profession, you see. That's the way they used to think about it. Scholars used to take their work so seriously.

SL: Serious and somber.

HN: It is not to be taken seriously. It is so hit and miss. Everything except, oh that marvelous conclusion where Rolag goes into all that discourse on charity, why he is obsessed with charity. The reason Paul uses that long operational definition of charity he is trying to get down to the basics. It is, well, the definition he gives is hermetic one and when he talks about faith, hope and charity--that is the New Testament. The Book of Mormon didn't get it from the New Testament, but it's very old, you see. But charity, then, you notice what the definition is. He says everything else is phony, everything else fails, everything else has a flaw in it, only charity doesn't. Charity is the real thing. It's the spontaneous, it must

be what represents your self and nothing else. There can be no ulterior motives, there can be no planning, there can be no manipulation, there can be no schemes, nothing like that. It's pure and spontaneous. It is the pure love of Christ, he says. In other words, it's the only thing in the universe that ain't phony, the essence of truth is charity here. That's why they call charity very interesting because love is very broad and with charity you have the idea of giving alms to the poor and things like that. Now in the definition he's trying to tell us what he means by charity and he quotes Paul's long definition etc. on what charity is. Charity is not envious, charity has no self-interest at all. Charity is total honesty. He says the only thing, if there are prophecies, other things shall fail, all else shall fail. Only charity abideth. It's a very interesting thing.

SL: Now, you mentioned The Book of Mormon several times. Is there any discovery or discussion that you have done that stands out as the most important supporting The Book of Mormon in your career?

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HN: You don't have to support the Book of Mormon at all--it's absolutely gorgeous. The most important evidence for The Book of Mormon is its existence, actually. Because as soon as you come to it--you read every other historic epic or any great work you can think of, any great production of the mind, anything that has a sweep and scope of history and looks back at things, whether it's something like Tolkien or some of these family histories, or whether it's the Decline and Fall or all sorts of big histories, etc. or whether it's all of Shakespeare, as far as that goes. There's nothing like The Book of Mormon, nothing at all like it. It's an absolutely unique production. And it is carefully edited. It's the nearest thing to flawless you can get. You think you find mistakes in it all the time, but you don't. It's an absolutely amazing production. I mean the fact that it exists at all is unanswerable evidence as far as I'm concerned. But then you break it down into other things. Well, the characterizations, these marvelous characterizations. In a few lines you get a distinctive, very sharp and clearly drawn

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HN: character each time, without giving a paragraph describing what he was like. You know exactly the kind of person Nephi was.

SL: From very subtle hints in the text?

HN: Well, what they say about it, they give themselves away. You see Nephi is overconscientious and overachieving. He's always worried about himself, he's blaming himself, etc. He wants everybody to be perfect and he gets on everybody's nerves etc., a wonderful picture of this character here. And the dreamy Lehi, etc. The short patience of Laman and Lemuel and other interesting characters. Then when Alma gives the blessings to his four sons, each son is a sharply different character. He himself is very different and so you get every kind of character in there.

SL: Do you think there's any kind of a legitimate place for a more modern view of The Book of Mormon that places the value in these characterizations and the moral principles in the book, but lacking any historical--I'm not saying that you're suggesting that--but is it possible that someone could reject the historicity of The Book of Mormon and still--

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HN: Oh, they do that all the time, of course. I know General Authorities who do that, have done that--they're not living now--who have done that very thing.

SL: Who was a General Authority in the past?

HN: I won't say.

SL: You won't say?

HN: Because he's a very high General Authority.

SL: Has he passed away?

HN: Yes, he's passed away.

SL: Well, would it be safe to recommend his name to us?

HN: No, it would not be safe to recommend his name to you.

SL: But anyway, there are those that have had that view.

HN: He was convinced that the Book of Mormon was fiction, a work of pious fiction by Joseph Smith.

SL: Or non-historical.

HN: Possibly be. The astonishing thing is how little we know about anything. Who knows anything at all about what was happening in the western hemisphere two thousand years ago. Nobody knows less than archaeologists. I just got back from

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Egypt working with some of the boys over there. All they do is dig and guess. Their guesses are nothing else but wild guesses. Their knowledge is pathetic as far as that goes.

SL: Of course there's a lot less knowledge on the New World archeology.

HN: On the western hemisphere there's nothing. In Egypt we have a huge library of documents that supposedly can be read. I can read them about as well as anybody else by now.

SL: But we don't have that in the New World, with no translated texts.

HN: There are Aztec books that can't be very well deciphered and that's it. We have no written documents. We know that they made them, we know they made them, they did exist. Another answer to that would be they didn't have written documents. When I was at Claremont I shared on Tuesdays and Thursdays we'd give lessons at Scripps College. [Edgar J.] Goodspeed, the great New Testament man who retired from Chicago, came to Scripps College in retirement to teach there. We would teach in the Junior Humanities at Scripps on alternate days. He taught at that time, he says that the New Testament was not

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written down. They didn't write Hebrew at the time of the New Testament and nothing [in Hebrew] was written down really until the Fourth Century, and all that. Then he died and we find the Dead Sea Scrolls where everybody was writing, familiarly everybody was writing Hebrew at the time of Christ. It was the thing to do, you know.

SL: The discovery of a document can change all those theories.

HN: The absence of evidence isn't going to prove anything.

SL: Well, as far as the New World archeology, a recent problem that clarifies that is the story of Thomas ^{Stuart}~~Stewart~~ Ferguson who spent all those years.

HN: Oh, Tom was a crazy guy. Anybody who would say that the Hill Cumorah was Popocatepetl was crazy.

SL: Yes, that was his view in the 1940s.

HN: That was absurd and the reasons he gave for it-how anybody with any brain at all could do a thing like that.

SL: Well, there are those that place it down in Central America instead of in New York.

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HN: It doesn't have to be. He says how could you see an army from the top of the hill [?]. You could easily see an army from the top of the hill [?]. No, that whole thing was so absurd. The historical arguments are really something. And for one thing, they read The Book of Mormon so carelessly, the people that criticize The Book of Mormon don't even read it. The race problem, for example, is extremely complex in The Book of Mormon. It's not just everybody is a Nephite or Lamanite or anything like that. Moreover, it's clearly indicated from time to time they weren't the only people there. This is just a local history of a group like group of Qumran. You would guess, I suppose, from reading the Dead Sea Scrolls that the community of Qumran were the only people in Palestine. They weren't the only people in Palestine, but they don't talk about the other people there. So, no, we're wasting our time as far as that goes. No, the Book of Mormon--its impact is direct, it's tremendous and also very powerful. This hayfever has really got me today. My nose is stuffed up--can't sleep at night. My voice is gone. This is no time to give interviews.

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SL: Well, talking about things Egyptian, and of course, our connection with the University of Utah, Dr. [Aziz S.] Atiya, who passed away last year, spoke very highly of you. We've just this last month opened his collection. It had been in the safe for almost twenty years. There's a number of letters about the discovery of the Joseph Smith Egyptian letters and your connection with that. Do you feel like that was a significant, important find?

HN: I'll say it was important. Certainly it was important, I should say so. And, of course, at the time all I could do--I had considerable training in Egyptian by 1967 when that was found, but I still wasn't competent--I had to stall for time, and all this sort of thing. That's what I was doing. People kept saying I was stalling for time, but I'm not stalling for time anymore.

SL: One of the letters, I guess it must have been one of the ones by you in his collection talked about a translation that you had done of the facsimile number one in early 1968. You said, Let's wait till the scholars back in Chicago get their translations and then we'll compare and

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see who's closest to the truth. You've never published that, I don't know whether that's still around.

HN: That interpretation, I hope not.

SL: Well, that would be in your papers that come to the library some day. Do you think that the finding of the actual papyrus has been instrumental in changing the view about the Book of Abraham?

HN: Oh yes. It's made all the difference in the world. It started things going. The only person who has offered to translate anything--remember all those characters, the eight to ten scholars that Spalding got together in 1912, and all the others that have criticized Joseph Smith--I'm talking about facsimile number two now, the round one--never offered to translate a single word. Why didn't they? The only person who ever did it was Mike Rhodes. He's in Colorado, he's teaching astronomy and math at the Air Force Academy.

SL: Now, he published in BYU Studies, didn't he?

HN: Yes, and he's going to come here now.

SL: Oh good.

HN: He's the best Egyptologist in the country, I

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think. He translated without much trouble--
[without] any trouble at all, as far as that
goes. Of course there are others, I'm writing a
book on the thing now, it's a richly documented
thing. Boy, I'm really going to town on it now,
if I can ever get this book out.

SL: Do you think that any of the Book of Joseph
material is in the new find or is that--

HN: No, I don't think so.

SL: Because there was some discussion at the time--

HN: Yes, I know. That could be, there could be some
stuff in it but that's round about, that's
indirect.

SL: That's indirect in what sense?

HN: That's another story. There are symbolic
interpretations there. Was this Joseph on the
throne? A representation, when it's a picture
like that, can stand for a number of people; it
could stand for Pharaoh, it could stand for a
substitute. In that book called Abraham in
Egypt, that second half is absolutely a mess.

SL: Of your book?

HN: Yes, but I found out that you can have these
free substitutions all over the place and they
did it all the time. Incidentally, that book,

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SL: when I was in Cairo, what's his name, Rabadam, who is the Minister of Antiquities for Egypt, you have to get your permission from him and his assistant, who's a good archeologist--they're translating that book into Arabic. They say it will be a bridge between our people.

SL: Oh, good.

HN: Yeah. Look, I've got to go fetch me a drink here. There's a cup there, I'm going to get some water because I'm so hoarse. [tape stopped]

SL: Tell us more about the book that you're working on right now.

HN: You never talk about a work in progress because it takes all the steam out of it. It is on the subject of facsimile number two. I've been on the darned thing for years now. It's extremely rich material.

SL: Will this be your magnum opus?

HN: No, but it might be. It should be, but it won't be. It could be, very well, because of the way it branches out into so many things. It brings so many threads together here. You would think that [inaudible] it doesn't seem to mean much, it's not very imposing to say the least, but my gosh, it's dynamite.

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SL: Now as far as the facsimile number two, the church historian's office had a copy-

HN: Made from an overlay, yes.

SL: --of an early handwritten copy. I guess that's at present at least the only non-original.

HN: Well, it's so close to the other one, the [Reuben] Hedlock engraving is no different. You can show that it was an overlay because all the figures are exactly right, facing, and so forth. That was before the thing became distorted. The one we have is distorted, but that's not important, you see.

SL: Are the gaps that are in the facsimile two at the historian's office--were those originally there when Joseph Smith had them, do you think?

HN: There was more. All of them were damaged progressively after the church got them. It wasn't in perfect condition, of course, but it was in better condition than we have it now. The gaps were, for example, that was a boat up in the upper right hand corner, you see. In all the others there's a boat there and it should be there with the same figures in it. So that was there but it's missing on the later ones, it's missing on the overlay, etc. Some of the rim is

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damaged, etc.

SL: So, at the point Joseph Smith got them there were some gaps in it but more happened during his--

HN: Oh yeah, the rim had obviously been damaged because by '42 they were rather careless with those things. I remember I was with Preston Nibley and he was assistant church historian at that time, you know.

SL: Lund?

HN: George Albert Smith. My uncle Preston was the Church historian. George Albert Smith and Colonel Young was going to bring in those original manuscripts from the cornerstone of the Nauvoo house. He was going to bring them to Salt Lake. He was in President Smith's office and I was allowed to be there. Who else was there?, well, somebody else. And anyway, Colonel Young brought them in in a shoe-box. Here were the original manuscripts and he brought them in a shoe-box. He dumped them out on the table and they all started pawing at them. The stuff was so brittle it immediately started coming apart. That's all they cared about it. I started screaming. And they said, "Oh, this is so faint

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we can hardly read it anyway." Oh, but we can use ultraviolet, infrared, and they can read that stuff. "Oh, can they?" But they were already breaking these things up into fragments right on the table there. First manuscripts of the book [of Mormon], and that's the way they also treated the Egyptian manuscripts. They just pawed through them.

SL: That's when the original manuscripts came to the Church?

HN: Yes.

SL: What year would that be, about?

HN: When this happened? Well, Preston was still in then, so I guess it would have been in the '50s. It would be quite early, yes. But here it was, they had these sacred manuscripts on this foolscap, this legal paper, and just turned the shoe-box upside down and dumped it all out on the table, this brittle, fragile stuff.

SL: It's certainly true that--

HN: They didn't have the remotest idea of the value of these things or what was in them or what could be done with them. You notice how sloppy they copied those things. For years and years it was reprinted, the top figure, you know, with

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the staff, the bottom of the staff was missing, you see, so they said it wasn't a staff, it was a bird upside down.

SL: Yeah, upside down chicken or something.

HN: Yeah, that's right. Lund at the historian's office, Brother Lund took me aside and showed me, and turn it upside down. "See there, it looks like a turkey upside down." He said, "That's the Holy Ghost." See, they didn't care about the manuscript itself. It could be published in any form they wanted it. Most of those things don't mean anything to us, they weren't supposed to, they're very secret. The people that wrote them were very top secret and very personal. Only the person who drew the facsimile himself was allowed to see it. He drew it for himself as [inaudible]. They were drawn by priests who knew what they were doing.

SL: Um hum.

HN: But it was really something.

SL: But at least as far as the original manuscript of The Book of Mormon, that's now been encapsulated and preserved.

HN: Yes. They're paying attention to it now. They don't worry about it now. But I say, for over a

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century they were so indifferent to the condition of manuscripts that that's what happened to the papyri too. They would have been destroyed entirely if they'd been available any longer. They had to go out of circulation. There could be more hiding around, too. I'd certainly like to find the original of number two. Probably never will. Well, I don't know about that. I went on a wild goose chase looking for it once.

SL: But nothing turned up.

HN: Unfortunately, no. I think the guy was faking. We are so naive, we are so ignorant about those things, I just can't believe it. And indifferent we are to the doctrine. The thing is, the pictures that you get from The Book of Mormon itself, such great care was taken in editing and preserving and laying away and then copying, you see. These records, so we get them just right, the records themselves are sacred, the documents, the tangible documents and the like, and then we just kick it around without a thought.

SL: Well, do you [END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

SL: What about things like, you know, we've been

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talking about some of the documents that Joseph Smith had and that [he] translated and brought forth as scripture in The Book of Mormon and then also in the papyri for The Book of Abraham. What about the problem with the Kinderhook plates?

HN: Again, were they genuine or weren't they? What has that got to do with anything? Well, and then there's these--

SL: Well it appears--

HN: --these things found in Michigan, of course, the Soper and the things they have in the Church historian's office down in the basement for years, these slate plates. Soper was former Secretary of State and he collected these because they were dug up from under ancient trees in Michigan, etc. They have these amazing kinds of writings on them that look like a mixture of cuneiform and hieroglyphic of some sort. It's wild. Nobody has made anything of those; it's like the Kinderhook plates. A lot of things turn up and nobody knows what to make of them.

SL: Well, do you think the Kinderhook plates were authentic or were they made up as some kind of a

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trick that never panned out? They never published the fact a few years later--

HN: Yeah, I don't know. It was Soper and Savage and they had a lot of these slate plates and they found deep in the ground over a large area. Who would go to all that trouble and not succeed in fooling anybody. As far as that goes, was somebody trying to perpetrate a hoax? I don't know and I don't care. You judge a document by what it's telling you and that's all. All you have to do is read the Book of Mormon and especially the Book of Abraham. The greatest of them all is the Book of Moses. That is number one as far as I'm concerned.

SL: The Book of Moses is not based on a document.

HN: Direct revelation. That's right. The others are revelation, too. Joseph [Smith] he couldn't read Egyptian, of course he couldn't, he never said he could. Well, they wrote an alphabet and grammar; they tried to figure out if they couldn't get a key to Egyptian by using the translation that had come by revelation. It didn't work and they dropped it very quickly. So, no, you just read the document itself and it will tell you what really happened, is this the

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real thing? You can tell if it's the real thing or not.

SL: Well, in the case of the Book of Moses it's, like you say, a direct revelation based on Joseph Smith having the King James version.

HN: Of course, there's a literature you can check it against. This is the point, you see. You can check this thing against, I mean the whole situation it gives is, this is the archaic standard example of patterns, this is the archaic pattern that they all followed. The Book of Moses just follows it to the letter right down, it's a marvelous piece of work. Yeah, that came out the same time as the Book of Mormon-- totally different style with this Book of Enoch here. There are two great surviving out of the hundreds and hundreds of apocrypha that we have now, there are the two great ones that transcend all the others in importance today, as far as I'm concerned. The two that are really important are the Book of Abraham, the Testament of Abraham, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Abraham literature and the Books of Enoch. And those are the two that Joseph Smith gave us. The very two and do they match? This is the point. They match

like a glove. How would he know how to [inaudible] to Enoch, for example. Now the story of Mahuja and Meheja there, this is really something. You see we have four different areas there. There was first the Ethiopian and then the Old Slavonic and then there's the Greek and finally there's the Hebrew. They were discovered in that order. You know, each one gets older and older and finally the Aramaic which goes back to the Third century B.C. That's the oldest and that's the one that matches the Joseph Smith books including the story of the Mahuja and Meheja. When Enoch comes they detail someone to go out and ask him who he really was because they were scared to death etc. And Mahuja had to go and ask him, "Who are you?" "Well, I come from the land of my father [inaudible] to this day." And they go through this rigamarole, and that story is missing from all the Enoch stories except for the Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in 1950 which is in Aramaic, much older than the others. This is the one that Matthew Black, who did the English for the Oxford text. In the very week Matthew Black was to come here and he wrote and asked me, "Is

there something you'd like to ask about?" I said, "Yes, that story of Mahuja and Meheja asking the questions, etc." You don't find it anywhere else. And when he got here and met me he pointed to a letter he had in his pocket and he said, "Here's your letter, I still have that in mind." And we talked a lot after he was here but it never was mentioned, and didn't talk about.

SL: I wonder why.

HN: That last word was, "Someday we'll find out. Joseph Smith had some source we don't know anything about. We'll get it some day." He knew it was an authentic account, you see. He said, "Someday we'll find out where he got that." Someday, he might have one back there in 1830 but would he have had the Book of Enoch, for heaven's sake?

SL: And no knowledge of ancient languages, materials, texts to even work with.

HN: Remember the first one that was published was the Ethiopian and was published by the Bishop of Castle and Richard [inaudible]. That first came out and no copy of that reached this country and that didn't have that story or anything like

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that. But there are all sorts of checks and controls.

SL: Will this little episode with Matthew Black, and your conversation, will that be in your next book that's to be published?

HN: No, heaven's, no, this book isn't about that at all. This is about the documents themselves, the Egyptian documents here. No, I've never published that anywhere. He came out and he spent a whole week here. He was the president of the St. Andrew's Golf Club, which is the oldest golf club in the world. St. Andrew's Lakes, that's the original golfing in Scotland. And he was president of the club. And so we were up at Truman Madsen's and had a great night. And who should be there but Billy Casper. So all we talked about was golf, they could recall every stroke and every tournament that had ever been played. The one thing that Matthew liked most was golf. But he was the one who was taken up by the [inaudible]. Of course, he was enormously impressed. He said one thing that really stopped him cold was when Enoch says, "Dear Lord, thou hast given me a right to thy throne," because that's an amazing statement and he says that

does occur in all the Enoch texts and it's found nowhere else and it's an astounding, unorthodox statement. So he was really impressed by that, that's the thing he couldn't explain, how Joseph Smith should have known that Enoch said, "Thou hast given me a right to thy throne." There are lots of other things that he and the Lord have in common but the way it starts out, with Moses there, the drama of Moses--oh, I've talked about them, I've written about them in various books, I don't know what's in what book.

SL: Well, you've done so much, so many different articles and books.

HN: They must not give these speeches out. They were never meant for that sort of thing.

SL: Those that were just given extemporaneously.

HN: Yeah, that's not right without consulting me, and then they're corrected by these kids. That makes it worse.

SL: Surveying back on your academic career and your writings, either on the Book of Mormon or the Book of Abraham what's the most important historical connections that you have discussed or brought forth.

HN: Oh, it's the whole picture. It's the book

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itself. Like first, beginning with Lehi in the Desert. After I wrote that then for five or six years I had these large classes of Arab students because remember, President Harris was on this [inaudible] thing, he started as a matter of fact in the Near East. So we had all these Arab speaking students come over here and they had to take a religious class.

SL: So they came to your Book of Mormon class.

HN: Well, they had a special class for them. They didn't come to it, they were assigned to a special class just for the Book of Mormon. And Nephi was their boy, believe me. They just went for it hook, line, and sinker. They don't have an Ambassador in San Francisco at the Embassy there, but their representative came from here and he objected to the technique. He said they were having nervous breakdowns because they knew what it meant, you see, if you read Islam. But they were enormously impressed by that. One story I'll never forget, one of my very favorites is on the first day of class, well right at the beginning, sitting in the front row was little [inaudible], who became a doctor and was teaching in New Mexico. Then he got very

active with the PLO and he went for some years to Libya. He was in charge of a medical program there and then came back. 'By that time he was only seventeen years old. He was a little Arab guy from Syria. I visited his family later in a refugee camp near Jericho, a big camp there. Marvelous people, he was a terribly smart little guy. But he was sitting next to somebody, a Jordanese you see, and it was the story about Nephi cutting off Laban's head. As usual when I told that story you could see heads shaking, they didn't like that, they didn't approve of that cutting off his head, etc. They could see that was wrong. At the end of the class [inaudible] says, "Mr. Nibley, there's something very wrong here. When this Nephi finds Laban lying in the street and he's drunk, why did he wait so long to cut off his head?" That was the thing they couldn't figure out, not that he cut his head off but why he waited so long to cut off his head. It's so different from us. We always said, "Well, this is a fatal flaw, you shouldn't do anything as bad as that, that's immoral, but that wasn't the thing at all. Nephi himself thought it was wrong, he didn't want to

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do it, he got sick, he threw up but the Lord made him do it. Those things you have to do. But I had all these Arabs, etc. So that was the first thing, the fact that Joseph Smith takes them through the desert without stumbling. He sees them through quite a few [inaudible] almost forty pages through life in the wilderness, you see. The sizzling heat of the desert, so that's pretty good, he never stumbles, never falls and he gets him over here. Here, we can't check on it so well over here. But it follows through the very same sort of thing and then, of course, the Jaredite story, this is Asiatic way of life.

SL: Where you wrote The World of Jaredites.

HN: Yes, and "There were Jaredites" and this sort of thing because it is the epic milieu, the typical, perfect picture of an heroic age and heroic literature, the same one that produced that literature itself. But that only came out in the 1930s when the Chadwicks started going out. There was such a thing as heroic literature. Then everybody got on the bandwagon, especially Cramer of Pennsylvania. He not only recognized that what we had was not only a way of life it was the way of life. It represents

most of history that has been that sort of nonsense. And that's why such a large part of the Book of Mormon is taken up with it and why it's so long and why Moroni ends the Book of Mormon with that story of the Jaredites. It is only after, for the moment I thought I was finished, here's a few thoughts I'm going to add after that. [inaudible] Talk about a wind-up, what a tragic situation. You could call it the day after. He's the lone survivor type, there are others around to tell it, but he is the lone survivor and he's reflecting on the situation, and giving the word to us, it's all the signs you have to go through. And then the ninth chapter he gives us the worst possible case, how it ends up, it's utter confusion. All his life he'd never seen anything--well it's Mormon who says, "Since the day I could first behold the ways of man, I have seen nothing but violence and bloodshed all my life." Well, he wrote that when he was twenty-four years old. There are plenty of people that age today that could say the same thing in Afghanistan, Lebanon, or even Northern Ireland. They've seen violence and bloodshed all their lives. That's true. That's

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our world we're living in now. Notice how we lose our balance. Most of the time throughout my graduate study etc. was taken up with the Roman literature and the whole emphasis was on decline and fall. That's what interested me. I was going to write my thesis on the ancient mob. I saw mob activity all over the place. It was very important but the committee turned it down. They said, "No, we're living in civilized times, that sort of thing doesn't happen, it doesn't have any meaning for us any more. You should write about modern times."

SL: So what was the choice?

HN: We don't have complete social collapse any more.
ha! ha! ha! This was back in the '30s, you see.

SL: What did they decide should be the topic of your dissertation?

HN: Oh, they didn't decide. I decided on that then. I just changed to something else. I ritualized the mob--is what I did. The factions at the Roman games cheered for this side and that side, ended up rioting and burning down the town. They did that again and again. It's decline and fall and collapse. It was very interesting in the '20s and '30s, along with the great

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depression, etc. there was a great deal of writing about the cause for the fall of Rome. Of course, the best thing Rome did was fall, but it didn't get itself out of the way. But see, the Roman satirists--J. Y. Duffy gave the Salem lectures one year. I took his class in Roman satire which was very enlightening, because we don't have great satires in our day. As Hugo starts out, "How can you write anything but satire in days like this?" We feel the same way here. We're hypersensitive, we can't take it.

SL: Can't take the criticism.

HN: The self criticism. We criticize somebody else. No, we're never going to repent. The Book of Mormon makes such a good thing about that. We never repent because we have a nice substitute for repentance, that's the witch-hunt, you see. You know, periodically we have a purge, a time of contrition. How we get rid of our guilt feelings is to have a witch-hunt and get rid of the bad guys. It's the Salem witchcraft. It's abolitionist, no solution but a bloody solution. It's prohibition. It is McCarthyism. Then it became the Eighteenth Amendment--I already said prohibition. We have to get the bad guys,

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somebody to fight in that way. Then it became pornography and now it's child abuse. You see, we have all these witch-hunts, we go wild about it and then we've purged our soul because we got rid of the wicked. That's the thing the Book of Mormon keeps telling us again and again and again. That's it's yourself, you are the enemy and you can never account for anybody else's behavior. And the Nephites are told, the Lord says, I want these Lamanites breathing down your neck, I want them to be a danger to you, to stir you up to remembrance. You'll never solve your problem by fighting the communists, that'll never do it because it's yourself you have to correct. I've kept it for that purpose. So we're told on more than one occasion that the Nephites are going to be destroyed and the Lamanites are going to survive, even though they're the bad guys, as far as that goes.

SL: Yes, that's a recurrent theme.

HN: Yes, it is a recurrent theme. We don't get the point because we have the bad guys always over there and it becomes an obsession with us. And, most people have that simplistic explanation about the Book of Mormon. It was the good

Nephites and the bad Lamanites, and that was that. It wasn't that at all, you can't make that distinction. They were not only free to mingle and inter-marry at all times--at all times Nephites mingled with the Lamanites and the other way around. There were far more--the Lamanites consisted of three tribes and the Nephites consisted of four tribes. The different tribes intermingled very freely and actually the Mulekites, which were a mixed batch, were far more numerous than the rest of them combined, as far as that goes. Zarahemla wasn't a Nephite city at all.

HN: Do you think that there will come a time where the archeological evidence in the New World will provide support for the Book of Mormon story?

HN: Well, it does already, as far as that goes.

SL: Well, only in a general way. I mean translating inscriptions and supporting people and places and things like that.

HN: Yes, you have to have an inscription with names in it and things like that. Well, that remains to be seen, of course. We know that as in the old world, the records are found not here a scrap and there a scrap, but in libraries. When

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you find a library, is what you find. You don't find just one record here and there. Ninety-nine percent of our historical records from the old world comes from libraries, large collection of thousands of tablets or thousands of papyri.

SL: So when it comes it comes as an avalanche.

HN: People will discover a library somewhere. That's the only way we'll bump into that. But we're told that they kept libraries. They make that thing very clear, make a big thing about it. All these plates together, the Hill Shim. Where the Hill Shim up in the north is, I don't know. That's another thing, you casually mentioned this Hill Shim a number of times. It's always a little farther north to get to Hill Shim. Shim means north, the north hill, or north mountain. And they wrote things like that. These incidental things pop up once in a while but the way the world is going now we'll have to interpret--well, this last book, this one called The Poacher's Arm(?). I hadn't read it and I've just been reading it the last few days. I'm rather shocked by all the repetitions in it. In fact they have taken tapes I never had expected anyone to use. Some of the things aren't so bad

though, that one called "May we still weep for Zion," where we go through the history of the church, right from the beginning to show that people paid no attention whatsoever to the law of consecration. Our leaders told them again and again and again, each time they would have to get kicked out, they failed to do it, they'd get kicked out again, and then they'd repent and settle down. Then they'd fail to do it and this keeps going on and on.

SL: That's a hard principle to life, isn't it?

HN: Yes, it is a hard principle to live, but from our point of view these things are relative, you see. Living the way we do is unthinkable, absolutely. But living the way some people have, the way we live would be unfaithful. I mean our excesses and our wastes. We're not like the rest of the world, for that matter. We're living high on the hog, so excessive, so extreme, and so silly. It can hardly be imagined it's so utterly wasteful. [inaudible] This is the time of extermination. Notice, this is another thing, we're getting into new phases of study now where extermination becomes a reality. Like your Jaredites and your Nephites, they were

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exterminators. Well, those things don't happen anymore?, yes, they do, and they have happened. Again, here's the Book of Mormon--nobody was worried at deforestation in Utah--when they went to the land northward, all the land, vast areas where people deforested it. And there's another case about the cement. It wasn't just cement they used for building, it was poured concrete, just the kind we use. This is a big thing that's come up.

SL: It's interesting how the comparisons can be made.

HN: Well, the idea of extermination, which no one had ever thought of before. Now they had a nature center, not only were the trees [inaudible], they worshiped trees. They spared every tree that was planted. They weren't allowed to touch trees. This is a place in the 1820s and the wood tree was the enemy, as far as that goes. Whoever thought that deforestation would be a major tragedy, a major calamity to civilization. Well that's just a casual thing that was thrown in there to explain certain things.

SL: Well, one of the things that has been a

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difficulty for me in Third Nephi is the account of the Sermon on the Mount in the Book of Mormon, where in comparison with the King James version, the Book of Mormon, unlike a genuine translation, copies mistakes in the King James.

HN: I don't think it does. What mistakes does it copy? Say The Lord's Prayer.

SL: Well, for example, the end of the Lord's Prayer, the doxology, is not in the earliest--

HN: Ah. It is in the earliest, that's the point. It is the earliest. It has to be in the earliest. Every Jewish prayer ended that way. This has been a very study by Joachim Jeramias, who has lived in Palestine all his life. He's the foremost scholar on that subject there. He showed me that the original Lord's Prayer ended that way.

SL: Well, there were no manuscripts to that effect. It ought to have had some response at the end, so he assumed that the people would do this, but the actual manuscripts don't support that.

HN: Yes, they do, that's the point. They do. The oldest ones do.

SL: No.

HN: Where you have the Jewish prayers like this it would

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have to end that way. But, you can't go by the manuscripts, as far as that goes. The manuscripts have the Lord speaking in Greek. He wasn't speaking in Greek to them all, you see. We don't know what he originally said.

SL: So that's been conjecture--

HN: How did it ever get into the King James if none of the manuscripts had it?

SL: Well, it did come in--

HN: Through ancient manuscripts.

SL: Through later ancient manuscripts.

HN: But you can't say that a fifth century manuscript-- that is the best manuscript. You can't say that a fifth century manuscript is always wrong and a fourth century manuscript is always right or even to be preferred. You can't say--they have these leaps, etc. You can't trace the various--they tried to trace back the devious way by which manuscripts get through, you see. But this might not have occurred till the tenth century manuscript and still be the original authentic form. But it should have been, according to Jewish standards, it should have been the ending there, and it is there in ancient manuscript. Earlier ones may have lacked it because they come through another line.

It is the one thing that A. E. Housman emphasized more strongly than anything else in the editing of manuscripts. He said, the greatest folly of all is this idea that there's a best manuscript at one period or time or school or group of manuscripts is to be preferred to another. That's never so. The best manuscript, he says, can be way off at a point where the worst manuscript can be right on target.

SL: That's certainly true.

HN: But you cannot dogmatize about that.

SL: I think people are not saying so much that there is a best manuscript to follow, that we have to look eclectically at the various evidence and then try to decide.

HN: In New Testament scholarship there's been a recent study by what's his name in Sweden. In the last fifty years in New Testament scholarship, he says, we haven't advanced one millimeter. And it's true. Wilford [Griggs] does a lot--have you seen his new book? It's a good one. It was just published--Early Egyptian Christianity. He's been doing a lot, of course, in the New Testament manuscripts, and he's particularly strong in that particular thing. But today's scholarship is worse than ever--they

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are as dogmatic, they are as snobbish, they're as foolish as they can be. You cannot pin these things down and say, "Because the Doxology wasn't there"--you don't know whether it was there or not. You can't prove a negative, for one thing, if the thing isn't mentioned, if there's no mention of various things. Well, some of the criticisms of the Book of Mormon, one person says the Book of Mormon mentions milk. Well, this is having to do with--we're talking about those old, old arguments about the Book of Mormon. We're certainly wasting our time, aren't we?

SL: Certainly you have to be--

HN: No, you do not. You cannot prove a thing from ancient times. You weren't there, I wasn't there, and if we were, we couldn't prove it, anyway. No, we can't be dogmatic about these things.

SL: That's right, we mustn't be dogmatic, but the evidence--

HN: You can't say evidence--

SL: The evidence of the manuscripts shows a development in, for example, if we talk specifically about the Doxology, but in fact it

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SL: didn't just suddenly appear, it grew and developed in different forms and then finally crystallized in the well-known form that we see in the King James version, but that's a clear case of development.

HN: Only if you arrange the manuscripts yourself to do that. That's what they do. You can't date them except by typology. Then you put their types exactly in the order you want to put them, then you get the clear development. That's the way it happens. I remember, oh, what was his name, [F.B. Schick], he was the first editor of the [Western] Political Quarterly. We got into that thing once, because some German scholar had said that very same thing. Because you arrange the manuscripts to suit your tastes, as far as that goes. You date them according to what's in them and then having dated them, you say, ah, look, this is what's in them. You can't do that; you're giving an arbitrary nature to it.

SL: Well, the dating, of course, has to be based on the paleography, the handwriting style, according to what we know from dated documents of the same period.

HN: That's right.

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SL: We can't just do it circularly.

You can go on longer if you want, but let me summarize by saying this: here you are, let's hope you live many, many more years. I understand you just turned eighty and here I have my whole life to look forward to, I hope. My own view--and I don't know if you would consider it so radical that I would cast into hell--but my own view is that the value of the Book of Mormon is paramount and exciting, the moral principles in it excite me, even now, all the time. But I have decided that the way the evidence is right now--the way the evidence is that we can see--that historically I see it as a non-historical product, but a very exciting and influential in both my life and the life of the Mormon people. Now, is that a view that I can live with for the rest of my life? I feel comfortable with that.

HN: If it fits you. If it fits you. Give me a clear lucid account of what happened in the fifth century, start at the beginning and cover the whole Near East and cover most of Europe, because some very good things are there. You can even take it up to England, if you want. Now, tell me about the fifth century, and when you have given me an exhaustive account of the fifth

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century and all the records therefrom, I say, "Well, you may know what you're talking about." But unless you can do that, I don't pay any attention to you at all, because I've known too many scholars--and we're all phonies. This is the point, I think. [inaudible] as far as that goes.

SL: Well, because things are going to change as more evidence comes, more information comes, your ideas change. That's why I say, I need to keep an open mind about this.

HN: You haven't even begun.

SL: My own study has been very focused. I'm looking at New Testament manuscripts and making comparisons with the Book of Mormon.

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]