



1-1-2015

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Becerra, Daniel (2015) "Beginning of What? A Reflection on Hugh Nibley's Legacy and LDS Scholarship on Late Antique Christianity," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity*: Vol. 7 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sba/vol7/iss1/6>

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Beginning of What? A Reflection on Hugh Nibley's Legacy and LDS Scholarship on Late Antique Christianity

Daniel Becerra

THE WORK OF HUGH NIBLEY (1910–2005) has set the contours of the discussions that characterize much of Latter-day Saint scholarship on ancient Christianity in the last several decades. In many ways, Nibley's "Preservation, Restoration, Reformation" is representative of his larger body of work on the early church, particularly as it pertains to Christianity after the first century CE. Nibley traces ancient Christian discourses regarding the need to revive, reform, and restore what was understood to be the purity of the apostolic church. His analysis reveals the impressive breadth of his knowledge of ancient languages and primary sources, lending an academic rigor to his work that was largely unseen in the "confessional histories" of his predecessors.¹ He jumps from East to West and back again, often giving voice to ancient authors not typically in conversation with one another. And true to form, Nibley

1. See Matthew Bowman, "James Talmage, B. H. Roberts, and Confessional History in a Secular Age," in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 77–89. See also B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History: A Text Book* (Salt Lake City: Cannon and Sons, 1893); and James Talmage, *The Great Apostasy: Considered in the Light of Scriptural and Secular History* (Portland: Northwestern States Mission, 1909).

exhibits a determined defense of the tenets of the LDS faith as he understood them.

Some ten years after his death, LDS scholars of ancient Christianity have an opportunity to reflect both on the work of Hugh Nibley and how we will continue to honor his legacy. I offer one such suggestion here in his own words: “As long as you are going to be doing something, why not be doing something that hasn’t been done before.”² In his early correspondence with Presidents McDonald and Wilkinson of BYU, Nibley recognized the field of early church history to be an “unexplored wonderland,” full of “important and voluminous,” “vital,” and “vast and neglected” textual resources.³ In a 1952 letter he pleaded, “Our business is to get into this stuff and it is high time we were doing something in this direction.”⁴ In the spirit of Nibley’s trail-blazing habitus, I pose the question, what might it look like to expand the parameters of the discussions that characterize LDS scholarship on ancient Christianity, or put another way, how might LDS scholars resist scholarly trends that limit the purview of early Christian studies as it pertains to Mormonism?⁵

In the past, LDS scholarship on the early church, and particularly on postapostolic Christianity, has generally assumed an ecclesiological posture, focusing primarily on institutionalized power structures, ritual, and the development of doctrine.⁶ Two of Nibley’s significant

2. Hugh Nibley, interview by Louis Midgley, “Hugh Nibley: The Faithful Scholar,” in *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others and the Temple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2008), 25–26.

3. Hugh Nibley to President Ernest L. Wilkinson, February 22, 1952, and June 15, 1953; Hugh Nibley to President Howard S. McDonald, April 28, 1946. Boyd Petersen Papers, MSS 7449, box 3, folder 8, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter Perry Special Collections).

4. Nibley to Wilkinson, February 22, 1952.

5. Ariel Bybee Laughton poses the latter question in “Apostasy’s Ancestors: Antiarian and Anti-Mormon Discourse in the Struggle for Christianity,” in *Standing Apart*, 225.

6. For several representative examples, see Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987); Hugh Nibley, “*Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966): 1–24; *Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2005); Noel Reynolds, ed., *Early Christians in*

contributions to this method of inquiry were to provide an academic infrastructure to Mormonism's great apostasy narrative as well as to contribute to larger scholarly debates regarding the history and historiography of early Christianity.⁷ Within this analytical paradigm, however, the ancient church is often framed as a foil for Mormonism, the assumption being that there exists a profound discontinuity between late antique Christianity and the modern Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁸ Consequently, one sees in this scholarly trend the implicit and pervasive supposition that the study of the ancient church has limited value apart from its potential to legitimize Mormonism as the true heir of the church of Christ and the apostles.⁹

One way to expand the scope of LDS scholarship on the early church would be to proceed from the assumption of a more fundamental continuity with the past.¹⁰ Terryl Givens has argued that Joseph Smith set a

Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2005). Particular attention in these works is paid to priesthood organization, temple ordinances, and what is understood to be the corruption of doctrine and practice in the postapostolic church.

7. Laughton discusses this in "Apostasy's Ancestors," 220. For Nibley's engagement with non-LDS scholars on the subject of history and historiography, see Hans J. Hillerbrand, "The Passing of the Church: Two Comments on a Strange Theme," *Church History* 30/4 (1961): 481–82; and R. M. Grant, "The Passing of the Church: Comments on Two Comments on a Strange Theme," *Church History* 30/4 (1961): 482–83. For an overview of the larger debate regarding objectivity and subjectivity among church historians, see Henry W. Bowden, *Church History in an Age of Uncertainty: Historiographical Patterns in the United States, 1906–1990* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991). For a recent treatment of the evolution of the study of the early church, see Elizabeth Clark, "From Patristics to Early Christian Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7–41; and Karen King, "Which Early Christianity?," in *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 66–84.

8. Taylor Petrey, "Purity and Parallels: Constructing the Apostasy Narrative of Early Christianity," in *Standing Apart*, 174–82.

9. Laughton notes: "The question 'What in early Christianity may prove the LDS gospel to be true?' has hindered the development of a full and academically rigorous Mormon study of early Christianity." See "Apostasy's Ancestors," 224.

10. Terryl Givens, "We Have Only the Old Thing: Rethinking Mormon Restoration," in *Standing Apart*, 336. To his credit, Nibley understood Mormons, at least more

precedent for how contemporary Mormon scholars might engage with the ancients, in that Smith understood the process of restoration to consist of “salvaging, collecting, and assimilating” as well as “borrowings, reworkings, collaborations, incorporations, and modifications of what he found about him, with many false starts, second-guessings, and self-revisions.”¹¹ Givens continues, “Smith was explicit and unapologetic in assimilating the scattered truths and practices he found,” putting them all to “their proper use” within the context of Mormonism.¹² Where many saw otherness and difference, Smith often saw commensurability and potential. What then might informed, ethical engagement with and discerning appropriation of the wisdom of the past look like in the context of the LDS study of the late antique church?¹³

One complement to the ecclesiological current might be to adopt theoretical models of self-construction that view ancient Christianity as a mode of being, or program of self-cultivation, as opposed to merely an institution defined by its priesthood organization, rituals, and dogma.¹⁴

so than Roberts and Talmage, to “consistently find themselves in the company of the ancient saints.” See Nibley, “Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 139. However, what linked the modern LDS Church to the late antique church for Nibley were perceived similarities of the latter to a Mormonism understood almost exclusively in ecclesiological terms (e.g., rituals such as baptism for the dead and prayer circles). See note 13 below.

11. Givens, “We Have Only the Old Thing,” 338–39.

12. Givens, “We Have Only the Old Thing,” 339.

13. As Laughton notes, in recent decades Nibley has been criticized for his tendency “to read too far into sources, to make inferences not necessarily suggested by language or context, and to amalgamate information from numerous sources of dubious relation.” See “Apostasy’s Ancestors,” 223, as well as Kent P. Jackson, review of *Old Testament and Related Studies*, by Hugh Nibley, *BYU Studies* 28/4 (1988): 115–17; William J. Hamblin, “Time Vindicates Hugh Nibley,” *FARMS Review of Books* 2/1 (1990): 119–27; Douglas F. Salmon, “Parallelomania and the Study of Latter-day Saint Scripture: Confirmation, Coincidence, or the Collective Unconscious?,” *Dialogue* 33/2 (2000): 129, 131; Ronald V. Huggins, “Hugh Nibley’s Footnotes,” *Utah Lighthouse Messenger* 110 (May 2008): 9–21; Shirley S. Ricks, “A Sure Foundation,” *FARMS Review* 20/2 (2008): 253–91.

14. The theoretical framework proposed by Michel Foucault is probably the most influential for understanding ancient Christianity as a program of self-construction. See especially *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, vols. 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1985–86). Recently, Catherine

Mormonism at its heart is a *system of becoming* intended to facilitate the cultivation of Christlikeness in its adherents. The ascetic and hagiographic traditions of the late antique church, to name two examples, provide a virtually untapped resource for understanding the science and contours of self-construction, particularly as it pertains to moral formation. Perhaps more than any other Christian literary corpus at the time or since, these texts both explore what it means to negotiate the liminal space between human and divine nature, as well as to demarcate numerous technologies for cultivating a more Christlike subjectivity.¹⁵ Within this framework the ecclesiological elements of the early church might be understood as various mechanisms for the conversion of one's entire being to God.

Additionally, one sees in the growing field of Mormon theological studies sparse efforts to engage with the voices of the fathers and mothers of the ancient church in any sustained manner.¹⁶ Discussions of theological anthropology in the writings of Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius,

Chin has proposed alternate theoretical approaches that highlight the communal and collaborative nature of the (trans)formation process. See "Who Is the Ascetic Exegete? Angels, Enchantments, and Transformative Food in Origen's Homilies on Joshua," in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 203–18; and "Cassian, Cognition, and the Common Life," in *Ascetic Culture: Essays in Honor of Philip Rousseau*, ed. Blake Leyerle and Robin D. Young (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2013), 147–66.

15. In a 2001 address Elder David A. Bednar opined that the cultivation of Christlikeness is a topic that Mormons "do not study or teach frequently enough. I believe we do not understand it adequately." See "The Atonement and the Journey of Mortality" (devotional, Brigham Young University, October 23, 2001). See also Taylor Petrey, "Practicing Divinity" *Dialogue* 42/2 (2009): 179–82.

16. One exception would be Terryl Givens, who frequently engages with the fathers of the church in his work, although most often as a way of contextualizing Mormon theology as opposed to informing it. See *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Grant Underwood also periodically engages with the fathers in a similar fashion. See "Justification, Theosis, and Grace in Early Christian, Lutheran, and Mormon Discourse," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* (2009): 206–23. For a concise history of the practice of theology in the LDS tradition, see Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 6–22.

Gregory of Nyssa, and others allow scholars to overhear conversations regarding identity, unity, and diversity in the ancient church. How might such late antique notions as human creation in the “image and likeness of God,” for example, contribute to an understanding of ourselves and the principles that should govern our interactions as relational beings? Especially at a time when Mormonism has never been more culturally and politically diverse, such literature may function as a conversation partner as Mormons seek to negotiate the boundaries of personhood, or the “authentic self,” in the context of the latter-day body of Christ.¹⁷

At the heart of this ancient-modern dialectic would be the principle that theology is an “exploratory rather than explanatory discipline,”¹⁸ both acknowledging the theological terrain already tread and looking forward to additional insights that come from thinking *with*, in contrast to merely *about*, the ancients.¹⁹ The supposition of continuity with the past need not restrict productive engagement with the late antique church to instances of perceived parallels; rather, sympathetic understanding of difference can be equally profitable for approaching Mormonism with new eyes and new questions. Such an approach to ancient Christianity will demand of LDS scholars epistemic humility and methodological sensitivity to the historical situatedness of the texts engaged as well as to the cultural assumptions that inform modern conceptual frameworks. Continued historiographical reflection and pursuits of historical-critical acuity, such as can be seen in the recently published volume *Standing*

17. The rhetoric of “authenticity” is often deployed in modern LDS circles to elucidate the tension that can arise between one’s self-identification—typically with respect to gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, “orthodoxy,” or political affiliation—and a particular understanding of Mormonism. For two representative examples, see “Kate Kelly: If Staying in LDS Church Doesn’t ‘Spark Joy,’ It’s OK to Leave,” published on July 17, 2015, at <http://www.sltrib.com/opinion/2738628-155/kate-kelly-if-staying-in-lds>; and “Being Authentic within Mormonism” episodes 249–50 on the Mormon Matters Podcast, published on September 23, 2014, at <http://mormonmatters.org/2014/09/23/249-250-being-authentic-within-mormonism/>.

18. Frances Young, *God’s Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2.

19. Michael D. K. Ing, “Future Prospects in the Comparison of Religion,” *Dialogue* 44/3 (2011): 112.

Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy, will in many instances widen the theological gap between Mormons and our ancient predecessors; however, at the same time, they will also serve to inform analytical approaches that preserve the integrity of discrete but potentially commensurable ways of life.²⁰

Joseph Smith taught that it is “the first and fundamental principle” of Mormonism to be free “to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another.”²¹ As LDS scholars continue to seek to demarcate some of the methodological contours of this endeavor, may we recognize the vast and neglected writings of the late antique church as a means of enriching and expanding theologically constructive projects in the present, and in so doing, continue the tradition of preserving, restoring, and reforming all that is good and profitable.

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20. Several works are helpful for understanding the theoretical considerations involved in the comparison and appropriation of discrete systems of life. See Elizabeth Cochran, “Bricolage and the Purity of Traditions: Engaging the Stoics for Contemporary Christian Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40 (2012): 720–29; Ing, “Future Prospects in the Comparison of Religion,” 107–14; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); David D. Peck, “Covenantal Pluralism in Mormonism and Islam: Alternatives to the Binary Logic of Islam,” in *Standing Apart*, 280–308; Petrey, “Purity and Parallels,” 183–88; Jonathan Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 19–35; C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); “The Art of Retrieval: Stoicism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40 (2012): 705–19; Jeffery Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Young, *God’s Presence*, 1–6.

21. *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 420.