



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 17 | Number 1

Article 6

1-1-2005

Leaving the Facts and the Faith

Kent P. Jackson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Jackson, Kent P. (2005) "Leaving the Facts and the Faith," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 17 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol17/iss1/6>

This Mormon Studies is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Leaving the Facts and the Faith

Author(s) Kent P. Jackson

Reference *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 107-21.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith* (2005), by Martha Beck.

LEAVING THE FACTS AND THE FAITH

Kent P. Jackson

Kent P. Jackson received a PhD in ancient Near Eastern studies from the University of Michigan. He is a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

*L*eaving the Saints is not an important book. But it has received a great deal of attention, and many copies of it have been sold. It is the memoir of Martha Nibley Beck, native of Provo, Utah, Harvard PhD, mother of three, best-selling author, national columnist, professional “life coach,” former Latter-day Saint, and daughter of Hugh Nibley. The latter two items are the most important for the book because they, more than anything else, are what the book is about. *Leaving the Saints* focuses on Beck’s experiences from the time she left Harvard for a new life in Provo to the time she left Provo for a new life in Arizona, roughly from 1988 to 1994. But it contains many detours to earlier times, beginning with Beck’s childhood, that set the stage for the life-changing events of those Provo years.

The literary framework of the book is an account of Beck meeting with her father in a Provo motel room, to which he had been taken under false pretext by Beck’s cousin and in which he was held against his will for some time while Beck confronted him face to face for sexually abusing her when she was a young child. Nibley was in his nineties at the time, and he had not seen his daughter for a decade since she first made the accusation. Beck’s reason for arranging the meeting was

Review of Martha Beck. *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith*. New York: Crown, 2005. ix + 306 pp. \$24.95.

to give her father the opportunity to come to grips with his dark past before he died. From that motel room, the book takes us through a series of flashbacks to various earlier episodes in Beck's life, each contributing to her spiritual journey toward the freedom she had always sought. By means of those episodes, readers are introduced to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Brigham Young University, Latter-day Saint culture, the Nibley family, and Hugh Nibley and his fame within the Latter-day Saint community—all in unflattering images that are at best caricatures and at worst outright misrepresentations. Readers are also introduced to Beck's husband and three children, various experiences in her education, and her life in Provo. More important still are the events through which she recovered the long-lost memory that her father had ritually raped her on multiple occasions from the time she was five until she was eight. Not coincidentally, it was the awakening of those memories that also awakened Beck to the understanding that the church and its teachings are not what they claim to be, its leaders are oppressive, its scriptures are frauds, and her father's academic work—like much of Mormonism—is a lie. Beck portrays her actions in the motel room as motivated by a desire to free both herself and her father from the effects of his crime against her. She wants him to confess so he can die in peace, and she finds reasons for his behavior that parallel the reasons for her own lifetime of pain, nightmares, and grief. Nibley, she decides, was sexually abused by his own mother and suffered his own post-traumatic stress as a result of his experiences in World War II. But more than anything else, it was Nibley's impossible life mission of defending Mormonism that drove him to madness and perversion.

Beck is a very engaging writer, and she skillfully tells her story in such a way that the reader is drawn into it and is eager to keep reading. My guess is that her target audience—those who like stories about people victimized by powerful men and powerful institutions—will find it to be not only a good read but also absolutely convincing. And I suspect that virtually all who will read the book will believe every word of it, unless they have some reason for doing otherwise. I have many such reasons.

It would be easy to call this book a work of fiction and be done with it, but the matter is not really that simple. Accusations of sexual

abuse of a child have to be taken very seriously. Three hypothetical possibilities exist regarding the molestation, each of which is frightening. First, Beck may be telling the truth, presenting us with the vision of a revered defender of the faith and long-time BYU icon being the rapist of his own daughter. Second, the sexual abuse never happened, but Beck, for whatever reasons, came to think that it did and sincerely believes that it did. That scenario is tragic for all involved, making Nibley the victim of someone's false memory and Beck the victim of bad counseling, bad psychological health, or other sad circumstances. The third option is that Beck made up the story of sexual abuse and knows that it is not true. That proposal is horrible, because it presents us with the thought that a person could have so much malice in her heart that she could knowingly fabricate a story with such tragic and far-reaching implications.

In my mind, the first of these options, that Hugh Nibley sexually abused his daughter, is to be ruled out, for reasons that I will explain below. Through much of the book, I was more or less convinced that the second option is true, that the sexual abuse did not happen but that Beck truly believes that it did. But now I am not sure.

I do not believe that Hugh Nibley molested his daughter, and I trust that objective thinkers will draw the same conclusion from the available evidence. At the outset, it must be admitted that sexual abuse of children does happen, even among Latter-day Saints. It is a horrible crime, and, regrettably, sometimes the honest accusations and appeals of victims are ignored or silenced. But I cannot believe the story. I find it significant that her seven siblings have gone on record to say unanimously that the abuse not only did not occur but that Beck's accusations of it are consistent with other destructive behavior throughout her life. On 22 February 2005, in anticipation of the publication of *Leaving the Saints*, her brothers and sisters issued a statement over all their signatures denouncing the claim as untrue.

Knowing our sister and the circumstances of our home, we agree that Martha Beck's portrayal of our family in "Leaving the Saints" is false. We are saddened by the book's countless errors, falsehoods, contradictions, and gross distortions. She

misrepresents our family history, the basic facts of our lives, our family culture. . . . She also omits critical facts including . . . the tortuous process—including self-hypnosis—by which she achieved her “recovered memories.”

Martha’s most egregious accusation—that our father molested her over several years and the family covered up the crime—is not true. While salacious accusations sell books, the reader should know that in this case it simply did not happen. . . .

Martha is a masterful storyteller, and throughout her writing career she has dramatically altered her beliefs and positions in order to focus on different audiences and market segments. Now, apparently to sell books, Martha has once again resorted to using storytelling in the place of research, discredited pop psychology for science, and fantasy instead of fact. In her book Martha calls for the highest standards of scholarship and social science professionalism, yet sadly her own writing is closer to tabloid journalism, failing to come anywhere close to the standards she claims to espouse.

. . . We love our sister and are very concerned for her at this time. We fear this is another instance of the self-destructive behavior that has haunted Martha throughout her life. No one in our family has any desire to choose sides between our father and our sister; however, intellectual honesty is a fundamental value of the Nibley family, and sadly we do not see that tradition reflected in “Leaving the Saints.”¹

One of Beck’s sisters added, “Her accusation that our family would in any way tolerate a crime as hideous as the sexual abuse of a child is probably just another sad attempt by Martha to claim the limelight and make herself the hero/victim in one of her fanciful stories.”² Another sister wrote, “We shared a bunk bed during the entire time Martha

1. “Nibley Family Response to Martha Beck’s ‘Leaving the Saints,’” which can be found at www.hughnibleydefense.com (accessed 18 May 2005). I should point out that I personally do not know any members of the Nibley family.

2. “Postscript” to “Nibley Family Response,” Christina Nibley Mincek, “an attorney who has studied and written on sexual violence.”

says she was being abused.” “We shared everything—clothes, friends, secrets. I don’t believe for a minute that during that whole time, she was being molested by our father. I’m shocked that her editors would release this book without checking even the most basic facts.”³

Beck’s brother-in-law, Boyd Petersen, thoroughly researched Nibley, his family background, his war-time experiences, his domestic life, and his professional career for an impressive biography of Nibley published in 2002.⁴ Petersen has written a response to *Leaving the Saints* that presents arguments against the book based on the firsthand observation of those closest to Beck. He presents a series of reasons why he and other family members disbelieve the story of the abuse after having given it what they feel was a fair and honest hearing. Petersen found no evidence that Nibley was abused by his mother or that he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. He points out errors in Beck’s presentation of circumstances relating to Nibley’s scholarship, including some of her most significant claims. He explains how Beck’s earlier memoir, *Expecting Adam*, not only contains much that is not truth but was originally written as a work of fiction. And he itemizes error after error in *Leaving the Saints* regarding events and circumstances that family members themselves witnessed. None of the family members believe that the abuse happened or even *could have* happened in the small, crowded Nibley home, where privacy and secrets were virtually impossible.⁵

I find these responses by Beck’s family members to be compelling. As painful as it must be for them to be thrust into the situation brought about by the book, their candid reaction to it should cause reasonable readers

3. “Postscript,” Zina Nibley Petersen, PhD. In response to Beck’s appearance on ABC Television’s “Good Morning America,” Beck’s siblings and mother stated: “We are united in our belief that the repeated abuse alleged in the book could not have taken place without any of us knowing. Furthermore, none of us would ever cover up such a serious crime” (“Family Responds to Martha Beck’s Appearance,” abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=586190, accessed 18 May 2005). Family members have made similar statements in subsequent media interviews—for example, in a KUER-FM interview, Salt Lake City, 30 March 2005.

4. Boyd J. Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2002).

5. See Petersen, “Response to ‘Leaving the Saints,’” found at www.fairlds.org/Reviews/Rvw200504.html (accessed 19 May 2005).

to have serious doubts about its veracity. It is one thing to have a different perception of events, but it is another to portray events in a manner that others who witnessed them view as clearly contrary to fact.⁶

For someone like myself who has no knowledge of the inner workings of the Nibley home, there is still ample cause to disbelieve the claims of *Leaving the Saints*. Like many others, I am reasonably familiar with the doctrines and activities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I also have a working knowledge of Brigham Young University and its recent history. Beck's portrayals of the church and BYU are so consistently erroneous that I have every reason not only to doubt everything else in the book but also to question the motives of the author. Beck's depictions of the church and BYU are so far removed from reality that it is clear that from the start she ruled out BYU faculty, other academics, and informed Latter-day Saints as potential readers. There was obviously no attempt made to establish credibility with those groups. Again, this book was written for those who like stories about people victimized by powerful men and powerful institutions. Yet those who really know what she has written about will have a very hard time believing anything in the book.

The misrepresentations about the church are too numerous even to mention. Those quoted here should give readers a taste of what *Leaving the Saints* is like:⁷

“Lineage matters in Mormonism. A lot. . . . To this day the social structure of the Latter-day Saint community is more aristocracy than democracy. Descendants of the early pioneers enjoy a subtly but distinctly higher status than new converts” (p. 31). “The one occupation

6. Petersen is frank to point out that not all the Nibley children share their father's belief in Mormonism and that some of them have issues with how their father—“obsessed with his research and writing, and constantly in demand to lecture, to write, and to travel—neglected them in their youth” (Petersen, “Response”). But that admission only adds to the credibility of their rejection of Beck's stories about him.

7. To readers who are not Latter-day Saints: I have chosen not to comment on these and most other statements from the book because Latter-day Saint readers, to whom this review is primarily addressed, will recognize them immediately as untrue, silly, and often laughable in their distortion and misrepresentation. Please rest assured that Beck's characterizations of the beliefs and history of the Latter-day Saints are not accurate, and all of the following statements could easily be annotated to show that they are false.

recommended for Mormon females: breeding well in captivity” (p. 45). “The more chicks per man-God, the better” (p. 75). “The celestial kingdom has a central zone called the kingdom of the firstborn, reserved for Mormons who live the ‘true and eternal principle of plural marriage’ (polygamy)” (p. 87). “A good Mormon girl doesn’t ever” engage in “*direct communication*” (p. 107). “Most Mormons see financial wealth as a sign of God’s favor” (p. 148). After the Egyptian papyri were acquired in 1835, the church’s claim was that “the Mormon Church now owned the original, physical manuscripts upon which the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah) had been written. Over the year, Joseph Smith managed to translate the sections he said were written by Moses and Abraham” (p. 154). “Mormons are discouraged from reading any materials about the Church that are not produced through official channels” (p. 176). “The imminent switch back to polygamy” (p. 177). “Infallible male leaders” (p. 178). “Men are to be pleased and protected, . . . and women are to do what they’re told. This includes excusing or ignoring sexual shenanigans on the part of the patriarch and siding with the male authority figure in any ‘he said, she said’ conflicts” (pp. 178–79). “My family specifically, along with Mormons generally, has a tradition of winking at sexual ‘abominations’ committed by men in the leadership structure, helping cover up any remaining gossip” (p. 180). “I suspected that even though the Mormon powers that be might not actually threaten my life, they would probably try to ruin it. Yes, these suspicions were outlandish. Yes, they were paranoid. And yes, they were completely accurate” (p. 182).

Through the voices of unnamed BYU professors, Beck tells us that the “Strengthening the Membership Committee” is “a squad of investigators who work for the Church. Very hush-hush. A lot of ex-CIA guys” (p. 189). “They gather information about most BYU professors. . . . Sometimes they stake out rebels’ houses and take down the license plate numbers of anyone who comes to visit them. Then *those* people are suspects. Next thing you know, they’re getting hauled in by their own bishops, maybe put on trial” (p. 189).

“Every now and then, Utah papers record murders with uniquely Mormon flavoring (death by temple-sanctioned methods, for example),

and the word that goes out on the Latter-day grapevine is *Danite*” (p. 190).

I could—and would—continue hanging out with my “dissident” friends. But I couldn’t do it without fear. I wasn’t sure exactly what there was to be afraid of. I was just consumed with a vague anxiety that some anonymous representative of the Mormon Church would soon do Something Bad to contain me and my treasonous stories.

Even years later, writing this, I can feel the twinges of that old terror. . . . I don’t think most people realize how much the Latter-day Saints’ history of quietly perpetrated violence still resonates throughout the community, what a powerful agent of social control it still is. . . .

. . . Fear stalked me as I rocked on my babies, stood behind me as I taught class, smiled its chilling smile at me every morning when I opened my eyes. I couldn’t stop it. (pp. 190–91)

Beck told a Provo hair stylist that she wanted her hair cut short. “The stylist checked my left hand for a wedding ring, then reported my request to the owner of the salon, who asked me to call my husband to ascertain that I had his permission to change my hairstyle” (p. 193). “Two university administrators told me they’d been ‘called in’ [for questioning by their bishops] after their home telephones started making strange clicking sounds and that the religious authorities who reprimanded them knew things they could only have gleaned from listening to the administrators’ private phone conversations” (p. 221). Beck and her husband also noticed “a strange, intermittent clicking sound” in their phone. When a repairman investigated, “he discovered that our phone line had been crossed with another line inside a phone junction box at the nearby Mormon chapel—something, the repairman said, that could not have happened accidentally. He separated the wires. The clicks went away. A few days later, they came back” (p. 233). “Many Latter-day Saints lived in mental and social prisons that perpetuated precisely the kind of insanity with which I’d grown up. It wasn’t slavery, but it was a powerful form of bondage:

the belief that God had ordained a pattern of secrets and silence, that religious authority always trumped one's individual sense of right and wrong, that the evidence of the senses must bow to the demands of orthodoxy, no matter how insane. It was a kind of institutionalized madness" (p. 239).

These and other such statements are so outlandish that they do not require rebuttal or even serious comment. Readers of this review will recognize them for what they are and will realize that if Beck can misrepresent the church with such ease, she can probably misrepresent other things as well.

Leaving the Saints also tells us much about Brigham Young University. But the problem for Beck regarding this topic is the same as that regarding her depictions of the church—namely, many of her claims can be tested empirically. Following are some statements from the book.

"Men must also wear socks, on the premise that the hair on human ankles can be thought of as an extension of pubic hair" (pp. 77–78). A BYU faculty member said, "They'll never let us tell the truth" (p. 79). Beck writes concerning BYU faculty members' fears of their scholarship being repressed: "I suddenly remembered where I'd seen people act this way: in the People's Republic of China, where I'd gone to do research in 1984" (pp. 80–81). BYU professors live in fear of being "called in" by church leaders. "It's the way the Church jerks your chain—you know, reminds you that they can fire you anytime. It's been happening a lot around here lately" (p. 186). "It occurred to me that although the Mormon Church wouldn't endanger these professors' lives, it could definitely take away their living. Once academics have spent several years at BYU, most other universities won't touch them; rightly or wrongly, they're seen as religious loonies who prefer fundamentalist doctrine to academic process" (p. 81). Beck tells of a BYU clinical psychology professor who had a client who was the daughter of a man who was "financially important to the Church" (p. 184). A general authority called the professor and warned him to institutionalize his client and "put her back on the antipsychotics" so she would not be able to talk. The general authority threatened,

“There are plenty of psychologists who have lost their careers over less than this” (p. 185). When Beck counseled her friend to go public, he responded:

“But Martha, I’ve got five kids. If I don’t do as I’m told, BYU will fire me and say it’s for poor performance. I’ll never get another teaching job, and they’ll make sure I can’t start a decent private practice. What’s going to happen to my family?” . . .

“Allen, I really don’t think the Church is that powerful.”

He gave a humorless snort of laughter. “Oh, yeah. Tell that to all the non-Mormons who’ve been run out of business in this state.” (p. 185)

Beck tells of a classroom encounter with a male student: “‘You see, Sister Beck,’ he told me in an earnest voice, ‘I hold the priesthood, and that means I’ll *always* know better than you.’ Most of the class nodded sagely in agreement. . . . In the context of a Mormon worldview, his argument was flawless” (p. 222). To assure that everyone listens to campus devotionals, “the sound systems in the social science building (and all others, as far as I know) had been set with a central override switch so that it was impossible for faculty members to turn the sound in their offices off—or even *down*” (p. 222). “The General Authorities were destroying the careers of BYU’s best young professors, firing them for ‘shoddy scholarship’ when, in our view, their work was the only publishable material coming out of the university” (p. 232). “As tensions continued to mount, most BYU employees kept a tighter and tighter reign on their tongues. . . . Anything one said could be overheard and reported; it did not pay to trust. Even friends could turn state’s evidence, reporting on their colleagues’ heresy in order to save their own jobs” (p. 232).

Beck lists topics that BYU professors are to avoid altogether: evolution, Mormon history, American archaeology, and feminism (p. 81). Regarding these, the following comments may be helpful. All, or perhaps virtually all, BYU life science professors both believe in and teach evolution, and they do so without fear of the repercussions that

Beck wants her readers to believe would come from the university and the church. As for LDS history, BYU has a flourishing community of excellent historians who research and write openly about the church and its past. BYU has long had excellent research and teaching in the archaeology of Mesoamerica and the American Southwest, contrary to Beck's claim. And it is significant that shortly after Beck's brief stay as a part-time instructor, BYU hired a non-LDS scholar who is among the leading Mesoamerican archaeologists in the world. Feminism is taught and researched at BYU as well, and faculty members in several disciplines draw from and study its contributions. Beck's complaints against the university on these topics are very old news. Of course, the beliefs and values of Latter-day Saint scholars influence how they approach these and other topics, which aspects of their disciplines they choose to accept or reject, and how they present their findings. But those things are true of non-LDS scholars as well.

One of the most revealing episodes in *Leaving the Saints* is Beck's story about her research in the BYU library. Seeking sources on Sonia Johnson, a critic of the church who attracted national attention in the late 1970s, Beck went to the library at BYU. She writes:

Not a single reference to [Sonia Johnson] showed up on the library's retrieval system. Puzzled, I checked the references I'd gotten from books, the ones that quoted specific articles in major newspapers. I found the correct papers, dates, and page numbers, then scrutinized the microfilm screens with the care of an art restorer examining a painting. And what I found, while insignificant in the scheme of things, troubled me just a bit.

The articles were simply missing.

All of them.

Someone in the BYU library had spent an enormous amount of time and effort to excise every single reference to Sonia Johnson that had ever appeared in print. Whatever splash she'd made in the non-Mormon world, in the microcosm that was the Lord's University, it was as though nothing about Johnson . . . had ever existed at all. (p. 83)

No one who knows anything about BYU, or about universities in general, or about university libraries, will believe any part of this fanciful story. Imagine what it would take to bring about this cover-up. An army of people with microscopes and surgical knives would have to go through each roll of microfilm to find every reference to Sonia Johnson and then cut them all out by hand. Within BYU's microfilm collection are the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the local Utah newspapers, and others. All of the microfilms of each of those newspapers had to be physically edited by hand to remove every reference to Sonia Johnson. But even if such an information purge had been possible, how could it have been kept secret all these years? Why did no one else notice it until Beck published her book in 2005? How did all those articles get back in place today? Perhaps even more important, why would BYU even want to do such a thing? What purpose could it possibly serve?

Beck tells the story of her chance meeting in a grocery store with a man in a tweed jacket who worked as a source checker for her father's publisher. He confronts her with the claim that her father is a liar: "His footnotes. He makes them all up." "All of them?" she asks. The man in tweed states, "I'd say, conservatively, 90 percent of them." "Sometimes what he said was exactly the opposite of what the author meant. Sometimes a quotation he'd footnote just wasn't there." Nibley "could see anything on any page that needed to be there." When Beck asked the man why he continued to play along, he said:

"I needed the job. I wanted to finish school. I'd already been working toward a PhD for four years. If I'd gotten kicked out with bad references, no other school would take me."

"You think BYU would have blackballed you?"

"Not just BYU. The Church. And no, I don't *think* so, I *know* so. I'd have been lucky to get a job sweeping floors. . . . The Church gets pretty much anything it wants, and it wants your father protected."

. . . "In this state, you don't just go around spouting stuff that may be a problem for the Church. Like, some of the other fact-checkers on my team got a little mouthy after we finished

the project. They're not doing well. Can't get jobs. Incredible pressure from their families. Hints about excommunication.”
(pp. 165–67)

The man in the tweed jacket gave Beck the phone numbers of other source checkers, and from them she heard “unanimous confirmation” that many of Nibley’s footnotes were “fictional” (p. 169).

There are serious and insurmountable problems with this story. First, Nibley’s books still exist, and thus the notes are available to be examined by anyone who wants to take the time. And those who checked his references for the publication of his collected works are known people who are credited by name in the books. Beck’s claims regarding the notes can therefore be tested. Boyd Petersen’s review includes statements from some of the footnote checkers, and they deny the claim of falsified references.⁸ In 1989 I published a review of one of Nibley’s books in which I pointed out what I felt were major problems in his scholarship, particularly in the book I was reviewing.⁹ It may be the most critical review of Nibley ever written by a believing Latter-day Saint, and it may even be the source for some of the ideas and language coming out of the mouth of Beck’s man in tweed. Among my critiques was that Nibley often generalized excessively, saw “things in the sources that simply don’t seem to be there,” let his “predetermined conclusions set the agenda for the evidence,” and misinterpreted authors he cited.¹⁰ Others, including some of Nibley’s greatest admirers, have found the same problems in his scholarship. But the academic transgressions committed by Nibley (hardly unique to him) were the products of carelessness and wishful thinking, not of fraud and deception. Nibley’s greatest skill as a scholar was his ability to see the big picture, not his ability to finesse the fine details. Nowhere in my own examination of his research and writing did I

8. One reference checker told me: “We never found anything that Nibley made up or intentionally misquoted. I would characterize his use of sources as sloppy but certainly not dishonest” (Terrence L. Szink, personal communication, 8 April 2005).

9. Kent P. Jackson, review of *Old Testament and Related Studies*, by Hugh Nibley, *BYU Studies* 28/4 (1988): 114–19.

10. Jackson, review of *Old Testament and Related Studies*, 116–17.

find any hint of his making up sources for fictional references. I do not believe it happened. And as for the fear of losing one's job at BYU and suffering reprisals from the church, I should note that my review was published in BYU's official academic journal, *BYU Studies*, and none of the consequences foretold by the man in the tweed jacket happened to me.¹¹ For those reasons, I doubt that the man in tweed ever really existed, except in Beck's *Leaving the Saints*.

With the stories of the Sonia Johnson research and the footnote checker in tweed, Beck seems to be signaling to informed readers that she does not care that we know she is not telling the truth. Some of the stories regarding members of her family seem intended to signal the same thing to them. In fact, I suspect that aside from Beck and her family, virtually all the characters in the book are fictional—literary devices created by Beck to assist her in telling the story. Her use of pseudonyms for almost everyone she mentions makes this possible. Even so, *Leaving the Saints*, marketed as a work of nonfiction, will still be a best seller, and her targeted audience will likely believe it all.

Leaving the Saints is so full of misrepresentations about the church and BYU, and so full of things that seem imaginary, that I find it hard to believe the core elements of the story, including the story of the child sexual abuse. I sincerely hope that the author truly believes she was sexually abused by her father because that is the least troubling of the hypothetical possibilities. But if she truly believes it, why then did she go out of her way to destroy any chance of credibility by including so many tall tales—assertions and stories that are demonstrably untrue and that she undoubtedly knows are untrue?

When I first wrote this review, I ended it here with these words: "*Leaving the Saints* is not an important book, nor is it a must-read for anyone. It will have its day, and it will continue for a while to draw attention to itself and to its author. But like so many other works of this sort, it will soon be forgotten." All of that is true, but in the mean-

11. I was promoted on schedule to full professor at Brigham Young University two years later. The only negative consequence to come from the review is that several anti-Mormon Web sites have posted it, or provided links to it, imagining that to find fault with Hugh Nibley is to destroy the foundation of the church. Some few Latter-day Saints who sent me angry letters apparently believe the same thing.

time, there is more to be said. *Leaving the Saints* hurts real people. It tells untruths about the Church of Jesus Christ and its teachings. It insults me and other believers who love our religion and find in it the answers to life's hardest questions. It deceives thousands of honest readers who find the author convincing and do not know better. It has forced Hugh Nibley's widow and children into a spotlight they never chose for themselves, violating their privacy and misrepresenting their lives. It demeans in a profound way my wife, my three daughters, and all other believing Latter-day Saint women, depicting them as weak and stupid. And it hurts real victims of real sexual abuse. It will also undoubtedly taint by association future discussions of critical issues relating to women in the church. I do not know if Random House (parent company of Crown) knew the true nature of *Leaving the Saints* when agreeing to publish it. But either way, this book hurts the company's credibility with me. I feel sorry for the author's clients and readers, who look to her for help. And I feel genuinely sorry for Martha Beck. I know from personal experiences and from the experiences of others that life can be very hard, and I am deeply sympathetic to whatever struggles and challenges she may have faced. But regardless of what they are, and regardless of what it is that drives or torments her, writing this book—an act of unkindness that overflows with words that are not true—was not the answer.¹²

12. After writing this review, I read the following thoughtful and recommendable reviews written by others: Tania Rands Lyon, "An Exhausted Memoir of Reading *Leaving the Saints*," *Sunstone*, March 2005, 62–67; and Allen L. Wyatt, "Loss and Sadness among the Saints," at www.fairlds.org (accessed 25 April 2005).

