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Siding with Heretics: Evaluating Hugh Nibley Today

Taylor G. Petrey

HUGH NIBLEY'S TREATMENT OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY helped transform Mormon scholarship by turning to the primary sources themselves. Even when the content of his argument and his depiction of early Christianity may not hold up, his approach remains instructive. "Preservation, Restoration, Reformation" is a chapter draft that was not published, so many of its shortcomings and errors may be attributed to its unfinished state. My comments focus specifically on this work. First, I point out some of these shortcomings but conclude with a discussion of what remains most vital in Nibley's approach for scholars working today.

Nibley's narrative of early Christianity may be characterized as follows: There was a pure, original church guided by prophetic and apostolic authority. However, by the second century Christians were turning away from the main church to charismatic teachers who were using spiritual gifts and prophecy and were preaching about the end times. By the fourth century, the universal church found itself in even more serious opposition with rival Christian groups claiming lineage and authority from the pure original. Nibley identifies a few specific features of the pure church: unity, charismatic spiritual gifts, apostolic lineage, and correct eschatology. The essay then traces his view of the early Christian struggle to achieve, or in some cases, deny and suppress

these features. Nibley's framework here is sophisticated but reflects a traditional Mormon apologetic approach that I call a discourse of purity and parallels.¹ Drawing on models from Protestants in the nineteenth century like Adolf von Harnack, this discourse constructs a version of a pure original church and then seeks to authorize the church of today by showing how it is like its ancient counterpart.

There are numerous overstatements in this draft. Sometimes the quotations offered do not support Nibley's interpretation.² Nibley also frequently attributes motives or psychological states to ancient Christian subjects that are broadly claimed but weakly demonstrated.³ There are also numerous translation errors and creative glosses to the quotations

1. Taylor G. Petrey, "Purity and Parallels: Constructing the Apostasy Narrative of Early Christianity," in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford, 2014), 174–95.

2. For the late-fourth-century thinkers Hilary, Cyril, Basil, and Gregory, the "seeds of apostasy" and "falling away" refer to the continued success of Arianism in their day, not an admission that orthodoxy itself is corrupt. There is nothing in the description of Nepos's teachings that indicate he was calling for "continued apostolic authority," and he did not say that if Christ and the apostles were here we could ask them. Rather, Eusebius's source was saying that if Nepos were still alive we could speak with *him* directly. Additionally, Eusebius explains that the teachings of Judas were a response to the persecution of Christians at the time, not that they "stirred up" persecution against them. Novatus's *Katharoi* (the Pure) took the title not because of a claim to some original purity or truth, but because they alone had not cooperated with the Roman authorities at the time of persecution. When Epiphanius compares the church to the ship built from more than one kind of timber, he is trying to explain why both marriage and virginity can be accepted by the church—a claim some schismatics rejected—not making a general statement rejecting claims to exclusive truth.

3. For example, "Part of [the Montanists'] old-church practice was an insistence on purity and a consequent embarrassment at having to admit they were defective in it"; or "[the church] did not have [spiritual gifts]. Therefore, since it claimed to be the true church, it could only insist that the true church should not have them." Other assertions Nibley offers are hyperbole at best, such as: "The main church in its glory had simply failed to deliver, and everybody knew it." Nibley frequently tries to portray his subjects as being aware that the entire early Christian church was in a state of general apostasy. For example, "it was not only the crackpots who remembered that the church should have been something very different from what it had become—deep down, everybody knew it." This is more than an overstatement, and it makes a claim that scholars simply cannot prove.

that cannot be found in the original languages. Further, though the precise date of this writing is unknown, the overall characterization of many early Christians comes from a prior era of scholarship. Many of his evaluations of the New Prophecy (or Montanism), Gnostics, and others have since been significantly revised in modern scholarship.

When making comparisons, Nibley draws many explicit parallels to Mormonism in ancient Christian texts, including the search for prophecy, spiritual gifts, a literal eschatology, and the office of apostle. Sometimes Nibley tries to draw implicit parallels to Mormonism, such as in his claim that Montanists chose a site “amid the mountains of the West” where they “perform holy ordinances.” Western Asia Minor was still the “East” in the Roman Empire, and the translation of “holy ordinances” is incredibly loose. Sometimes, the parallels Nibley makes here do not tell us anything about the content of either the ancient Christian or the Mormon claims, leaving any comparison to Mormonism superficial.

Even with the few hints Nibley gives, the notion of a “pure” old church is difficult to define in this essay. Nibley leaves it a bit ambiguous here in terms of specific features. His implied list of ancient traits of purity emphasizes neither priesthood, nor specific ordinances, nor a list of specific teachings. Further, no single ancient Christian individual or group is held up as an example possessing this pure ideal, but the picture is painted from an amalgam of different authors, locations, and time periods. Origen’s claim that the church has always been diverse seems more accurate than the evidence Nibley offers to the contrary.

Looking beyond the specific shortcomings of interpretation or translation in this chapter, how does Nibley’s overall approach hold up today? Like any scholarship from a previous era, the paradigms that informed how scholars approach their topic are continually changing and being refined. In the interim period between Nibley’s writings on early Christianity and today, a number of important shifts took place in the field. Social scientific studies, ideological criticism, religious studies, and new historiographical approaches all impacted how scholars researched and wrote about early Christianity. These new methods arose not simply as fashionable trends deviating from some previously

stable core of scholarship, but rather as an abandonment of the kinds of normative, apologetic questions that had informed an earlier generation of scholars. Newer generations not only felt constrained by the questions of purity and parallels the previous century had provided, but they also felt as if those questions had largely proved to be dead ends.

Today, scholars are less interested in establishing the normative claims of the “real church,” as if such a thing could be objectively agreed upon, and are more interested in evaluating the rhetoric early Christians use about why their views were authoritative. Several developments contributed to a shift “from patristics to early Christian studies,” as Elizabeth Clark has put it, signaling the transition from a primarily theological framework to a more expansive toolkit that included social history, anthropology, women’s history, and attention to new topics such as the body, sexuality, race and ethnicity, empire, and material culture, to name a few.⁴ Scholars have replaced the question of orthodoxy itself with a sociological framework that is interested in examining how early Christians constructed their identity as orthodox, over and against constructed heresy. This approach pays attention to discourses and rhetorics of orthodoxy not as descriptions of the actual world but as practices and acts that form identity, shape differences, and define and police group boundaries.⁵

Nibley’s essay models some of these more contemporary concerns about orthodoxy and heresy, diversity in early Christianity, and the importance of what nonnormative Christianity may teach us about the ancient world, even when his approach to these topics does not anticipate current paradigms. Yet somehow his willingness to side occasionally with the ancient heretics reflected his own critical stance toward evaluating religious claims alongside his fierce commitment to discipleship.

4. Elizabeth A. Clark, “From Patristics to Early Christian Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (New York: Oxford, 2008), 7–41.

5. Karen L. King, “Which Early Christianity?” in *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 66–84.

What Nibley models for Mormon scholars today is a bold attempt to put Mormonism into conversation not only with ancient Christian sources but also with the best scholarship of the day. His legacy is not only in breaking new ground and setting the agenda for at least a generation of Mormon scholars of the ancient world, but in tackling tough issues and being willing to chart new territory.

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