Truth is Stranger than Folklore: Hugh Nibley, the Man and the Legend

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SUNSTONE

Did Hugh Nibley really tether a goat to his front lawn so he wouldn’t have to mow it? Did Hugh and his friend scribble Book of Mormon passages in Egyptian in one of Utah’s red rock canyons? Would he walk home from work, forgetting he had driven that day? What truths lurk behind these and other stories?

TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FOLKLORE: HUGH NIBLEY—THE MAN AND THE LEGEND

By Boyd Petersen

Once, Satan appeared to Hugh Nibley, announcing that he and his forces were about to close down the temple in Manti, Utah, and that there was nothing Hugh could do about it. Hugh responded that indeed he would do something, and so, teaming up with the Three Nephites, he went to the doors of the Manti Temple and holding back the forces of evil, allowed the temple to operate undisturbed.

This story is obviously not true. While I’ve heard speculation that Hugh Nibley himself is one of the Three Nephites (how else could someone know so much?) and have been unable to determine that claim’s truthfulness, I know this story of Hugh’s thwarting Satan is false. It was transferred to the body of Hugh Nibley lore from an experience attributed to Apostle Marriner Merrill, first president of the Logan Temple (serving from 1884–1906). According to Apostle Rudger Clawson, Elder Merrill noticed a group of strangers arrive at the temple, some walking and some on horseback. One man came forward, and Apostle Merrill asked him who he was and what he wanted. The person replied that he was Satan and then demanded that Merrill shut down the temple for he did not like what was going on there. Merrill commanded him to leave. Satan reluctantly obeyed but promised that he and his followers would whisper into everyone’s ear “persuading them not to come to the temple.” Logan Temple attendance did fall off dramatically for a long time afterward. I suspect Clawson’s tale about the temple president’s encounter with Satan has entered the Nibley folklore cycle because of Hugh’s status as one of the Church’s preeminent explicators of temple rituals.

Hugh Nibley has achieved within the Mormon community the distinguished status of folk legend while still alive. Latter-day Saints, especially those who have attended BYU, love telling stories about Hugh. These narratives are shaped during the telling to accommodate the needs of the audience, and the fact that Hugh Nibley stories are told and the ways they are told really say more about our religious community than they do about the man himself.

Folklore is shaped, as Richard Dorson has argued, in two significant ways: “by variant tellings of a more or less verifiable incident, and by absorption of wandering tales that get attached to likely figures.” And although many of the stories surrounding Hugh Winder Nibley, like the story of his defending the temple from Satan and his minions, are patently false, I have discovered that the origins of the “borrowed” narratives are much slipperier than I had assumed. For, as his biographer, I’ve had the unique opportunity to compare the legendary Nibley with the documented one and have found it not always easy to disentangle the embroidery from the core biographical facts. Often, I have discovered factual, historical elements behind these borrowed tales—something I hadn’t expected. And this discovery has made me cautious about concluding a story is false simply because it is also told about another individual.

For example, one popular story is that while Hugh was serving a mission in Germany, his mission president instructed him to preach to the people that they must repent or be destroyed by fire. The story crescendos with a knowing nod to the fact that many German cities were destroyed by fire during World War II bombings.

This is a great story. However, it is a story immediately recognizable as fitting within a popular folktale motif about Mormon missionaries in general. In his classic study of mis-

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Hey, did you hear the one about how when Hugh was a missionary he preached to the German people that they must repent or be destroyed by fire, and then, when they didn’t, the same cities were destroyed during World War II bombings?

And, according to Hugh, on one occasion during his mission, he stopped at a butcher shop and spoke with the butcher’s wife. When he prophesied of fiery destruction to come, the woman got so angry that she chased Hugh away with a meat cleaver. In 1946, at the conclusion of the war, Hugh drove through this same town and came upon a door frame standing alone, the only portion of the house to survive the firebombs. He realized that it was the very butcher shop where the cleaver-wielding woman had chased him out.

Granted, important differences between the historical event and the folklore version remain. There is no evidence, for instance, that Hugh actually cursed any city or house during his mission, nor did he invoke “the Lord to fight his battle for him.” Nevertheless, the truth behind the lore is not too far removed: Hugh had been instructed by an apostle to warn the people of the wrath to come; he did so in the language of the scriptures (probably more zealously than the average missionary); he had been, in fact, threatened by the butcher’s wife; and

The Marriage of Hugo

Apostles, notecards, the Provo love-mart, and a most delectable love in Phyllis

His same sort of blending of the factual and the mythic is easily seen in variants on the Hugh Nibley courtship story. The tale has many versions, but the truth is every bit as amazing as the folklore. Following his military service, Hugh got a job at the Improvement Era. There, he came to know Elder John A. Widtsoe, who encouraged him to teach at Brigham Young University. In May 1946, Hugh took the apostle’s advice and accepted a position as assistant professor of history and religion at BYU. Still, even as they encouraged him to come, Widtsoe and BYU administrators expressed some concern that Hugh was a thirty-six-year-old bachelor — a certified menace to society. Widtsoe, in particular, pressed Hugh to find a wife. Hugh described his encounter with Widtsoe as “the rising admonition of the brethren that I get me espoused.”

He had later discovered that her house had been destroyed by fire “from heaven” during the war. Rather than being a simple borrowing, as I first thought, the factual story has now been recast using the framework of the more common missionary folklore.

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On 25 May 1946, one of his first days on campus, Hugh walked into the housing office, and the almost-twenty-year-old receptionist, Phyllis Draper was the first woman he met there. On the basis of that encounter, Hugh decided to marry her. As Phyllis later told the story, he “kept coming into the office every few days to ask for 3x5 note cards. And he wouldn’t take very many, just a few, which would get him through the next couple of days, and then he’d come and ask for another one.”

In a letter written about 5 August, two weeks before he proposed, Hugh announced to his best friend his intentions to marry Phyllis:

Meantime all that the smartest pomades and the most lavish applications of Shinola can do to redeem the defects of nature [are] being thrown into the balance against the blandishments of youth, wealth and collegiate glamor to put the belated Hugo on a footing with some of the less dashing also-rans in the celebrated Provo love-mart. Wish me well, sweetheart, and when we meet again, who knows . . .?

Their first date was to a picnic Hugh’s cousin had invited him to. Thereafter, they took long walks, ate dinner together in the cafeteria, and had deep discussions. On 18 August, Hugh asked Phyllis, whom he later described to his mother as “delectable and ever-sensible,” to marry him. They were married four weeks later on 18 September 1946. About their whirlwind courtship, Hugh quips, “That’s why it’s called BYWoo, I guess.”

Most folk versions of Hugh Nibley’s courtship are fairly faithful to the truth—except for exaggerating the speed of the courtship—and emphasize that Hugh made his marriage a matter of obedience to apostolic instruction rather than following more conventional feelings of romance. Two of the variants, however, show direct borrowing from other sources, with the purpose of highlighting and accentuating the ideals of obedience to divine command.

In one, Hugh reportedly fasted for three days and then walked up Provo’s Rock Canyon where he patiently waited. Soon the woman whom the Lord intended for Hugh walked up the canyon. This narrative borrows heavily from Old Testament narratives in which a patriarch ascends a mountain to meet with God and obtain divine direction, and others in which a chosen prophet meets the woman who has been divinely selected for him, usually by a well. In a second version, “an angel came to him and told him to marry or he would cut off his head.” This story is an obvious borrowing from Joseph Smith’s report that he entered polygamy only after an angel with a drawn sword threatened him if he continued to delay. In short, these storytellers are taking the essential elements of the true Hugh Nibley courtship story—admittedly already unconventional—and combining them with elements from other sources, with the purpose of highlighting and accentuating the ideals of obedience to divine command.

In other Nibley tales, the facts remain quite similar to the folklore. One story relates how Hugh took his colleague and former Egyptian teacher Klaus Baer hiking in Utah’s red rock country. At one point, they stopped and into the sandstone carved Egyptian characters that read, “Plate #1—I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents . . .” Although this story sounds wildly apocryphal, Hugh himself confirms that the story is largely true in a letter of condolence to Baer’s widow soon after Klaus’s death:

Once as we hiked through the depths of Chimney Rock Canyon, he would stop from time to time to scratch into the red walls such Egyptian graffiti as are
found left by travellers and pilgrims at Egyptian tombs or shrines, e.g., “NN visited this place and he found it to be like heaven.”

The main difference between the folktale and the fact is that Baer did not carve a Mormon text on the stone.

In other folktales, the relationship between truth and folklore is quite difficult to untangle. A story that baffles me is the tale about Hugh’s parachuting behind enemy lines during World War II:

During World War II at some point, Hugh Nibley was to parachute into Greece for some reason, you know, along with his [Military Intelligence] responsibilities or whatever. And as he was parachuting into Greece, he realized that there were people on the ground who could see him and could shoot at him and who were— at least, it appeared that they were— assuming that he was a bad guy instead of a good guy. He didn’t know how to indicate to them that he was a good guy instead of a bad guy since he didn’t speak any modern Greek. So what he did— at least this is the way the story goes— was that the only Greek he knew was ancient Greek and it was the Iliad or the Odyssey. And so, to convince them that he was a good guy, he started shouting out, as loud as he could in ancient Greek, either the Iliad or the Odyssey to convince them that he was a good guy and not a bad guy. And they subsequently did not shoot at him and he was able to land successfully and carry out his mission.

While this story is significantly false— Hugh never parachuted into Greece during World War II— one element is accurate. Hugh did visit Greece after his mission, between November 1929 and early 1930, and was delighted that because of his skill in classical Greek, he could communicate effectively with at least some Greeks. While not nearly as exciting as the folktale, this episode does seem to be the basis for the World War II story. However, I don’t know of a story involving another person from which the basic World War II setting and extensions might have been borrowed.

Even more difficult is separating fact from fiction in the many absent-minded professor stories told about Hugh. Richard Dorson has correctly pointed out that “every college and university in the land possesses some odd faculty member whose behavior makes legends.” Tales of such professors have been circulating for a long time. A story from ancient Greece tells of the presocratic philosopher Thales, who, as he was “gazing upwards while doing astronomy, fell into a well.” According to tradition, many made fun of him “since he was eager to know the things in the heavens but failed to notice what was in front of him and right next to his feet.” Well, Hugh Nibley has been appointed as the Thales of BYU. He is the quintessential absent-minded professor— knowing volumes of esoterica but not being able to remember the mundane, like where he parked the car.

It is quite easy to find Hugh Nibley stories that are told about absent-minded or eccentric professors at other universities. In his essay “The Folklore of Academe,” Barre Toelken relates a number of these tales, some of which have been attributed to Hugh Nibley. In one, the professor “concluded a mid-campus conversation with a student by asking, ‘Which way was I going when we stopped?’” and on being told, answered, “Oh, then I have eaten lunch.” In another, the professor writes notes on the board with one hand and erases them with the other. (In the Nibley version, he uses his shirt or suit sleeve to erase the board.)

That these stories so easily stick to the Hugh Nibley legend is a testament not only to Hugh’s absent-mindedness (which is absolutely true) but also to his amazing breadth of knowledge, which he sometimes assumes everyone shares. In one story, a student approaches Hugh after a lecture to ask a question. Hugh recommends a book to him and sends him off to the library. But the book is not in the library, so the student sends for it through inter-library loan. When the book arrives, the student discovers that it is in German and has not been translated. Back he goes to Hugh and tells him that he got the book “but I don’t understand it; it’s in German.” Hugh replies, “So what? It’s a small book.” In another tale, Hugh supposedly forgets what language to lecture in and without realizing it starts going off in a dead language.

Another absent-mindedness story describes a time Hugh took one of his children, a baby at the time, to the grocery store. He pushed the baby around the store, went through the check stand, and loaded the groceries into the car. When he got home with the groceries he realized he had left the baby at the store. Phyllis assures me that Hugh never left a baby at the store, but once when the whole family went shopping, they accidentally left one of their eight children— much older than a baby— and didn’t realize it until after they had returned home.

Many of the absent-minded professor stories have certainly been borrowed from the larger tradition of academic folklore. However, several contain a factual basis. Hugh has actually been caught wearing mismatched shoes or socks. And he has, in fact, walked home on numerous occasions when he had actually driven to the campus that day. Other stories are impossible to confirm but are plausibly consistent with Hugh’s personality.

Hugh himself is not certain about some of these stories. According to one tale about his mission, a small congregation in Germany took up a collection to buy a new coat for one of the elders. Believing that, since the elder needed a new coat, he probably could also use a new pair of shoes, Hugh chipped in generously, only to discover later that he was the needy missionary. This story seems probable. Hugh’s first concern in dress has always been practicality, not fashion. He buys most of his clothes at thrift stores and has frequently worn jogging shoes with standard J.C. Penney (circa 1945) suits. However, when I asked Hugh about this particular story, he couldn’t say whether it happened or not. “It could be true,” he admitted. “It was a long time ago, and that sort of thing happened.”

Perhaps Hugh has ulterior motives behind his dress. One story relates how one of his colleagues was walking across
Hugh is also known for his numerous witty statements and outrageous comments, many of which have ended up in the folktales about him. For instance, Hugh reportedly once debated another BYU faculty member who, in an effort to butter him up, stated, “We at BYU lean on every word you say,” to which Hugh allegedly retorted, “If you do, you’re a damn fool.” Hugh is also said to have told a class, “Why, I’d rather have a live cobra in my living room than a television.”

Legends about Hugh Nibley’s eccentric behavior even spill over onto his own front yard in two folktales about his lawn. According to both stories, Hugh didn’t mow his lawn for a long time, and its disheveled appearance began to irritate his neighbors. One account claims that rather than just keep it long, Hugh poured gasoline over his lawn and sets it afire. Both tales are false but based on an authentic Hugh Nibley characteristic: Hugh doesn’t think of keeping up his yard as a virtue. In one letter he wrote, “I have not the slightest intention of keeping up the yard in the conventional sense: it looks good to me and I am the guy it is supposed to please.”

Hugh’s respect for the environment is also a factor in his apparently eccentric behavior; he dislikes the idea of trimming or cutting down any living thing. His early years in the lush green forests of Oregon while witnessing their destruction at the hands of his own grandfather helped etch this attitude into his psyche. Thus, the tale about Hugh’s pouring gasoline on his lawn is both untrue and inconsistent, not recognizing his great respect for nature.

Another story relates how Hugh was studying in his office late one evening when a broken pipe in the nearby rest room caused a minor flood. Upon being warned, Hugh gathered the books and note cards arranged in tidy stacks around the floor, returned to his chair, put his feet on his desk and continued reading. Again, I have no idea whether or not this story is true, but it is consistent with Hugh’s obsession with learning. Before his retirement, he routinely took a book to most faculty meetings and still takes one to family functions. Furthermore, his ability to concentrate during the most chaotic disruptions is legendary and not overstated.

One story almost too frightening to be true is that Hugh would prop a book up on the steering wheel when he would drive the half-hour commute between his home in Glendale, California, and UCLA. This story is true, confirmed by two of his brothers, Sloan and Reid.

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**HILE LOOKING AT the truth behind the Nibley folklore can be fun, all folklore ultimately tells us more about the community in which it is told than about the subject of that lore. As William Wilson states:***

The bulk of Mormon folklore functions to persuade church members that [their] beliefs are valid and that individuals must devote themselves valiantly to the cause—indeed, may suffer dire consequences if they fail to do so. In brief, this folklore falls into two broad categories: lore that shows how God protects the church in its battle with the world, and lore, remarkably like that of the early Puritans, that shows how God brings about conformity to church teachings by intervening directly in the lives of church members.

Much of the folklore told about Hugh Nibley certainly falls into these categories. It validates the faith and promotes conformity. Some Nibley folklore functions like the broader folklore told about academics in general. It helps us to justify the fact that although we aren’t quite as brilliant as the professors are, we do have a competency in various life skills that they lack.

Still, the fact that we tell stories about Hugh Nibley reflects our esteem for the man. Our culture needs someone who can stand as a combination of pure intellect and pure spirituality (“pure” meaning untainted by commercial exploitation, academic politics, groupie-ism, or trying to build a following), and Hugh not only fills that role but actually is that person.
It's not a mask. It's not a collusion between a performer and his public. He really is a person of mythic stature for Mormon folk.

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