

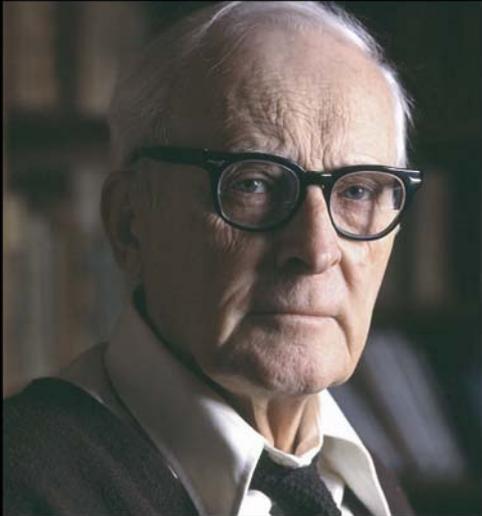
**Gary Gillum**  
Huge Windy Nebula  
The Unique Scholarship of Hugh Winder Nibly

House of Learning  
**407**  
(Season 4, Episode 7)

**OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT**

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Harold B Lee Library  
**HOUSE OF LEARNING LECTURE**



"HUGE WINDY NEBULA": The Unique Scholarship of  
**HUGH WINDER NIBLEY**

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**Gary Gillum**  
Religion, Ancient Studies, and Philosophy Librarian  
Hugh Nibley's Bibliographer  
Winner, Library Professionalism Award

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2:00 PM Library Auditorium Thursday, 12 January 2006

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"Prepare every needful thing... even... a house of learning." Doctrine and Covenants 88:119

## HUGE WINDY NEBULA

I'd first like to thank my library colleagues for the years of support they have given me in my journeys into Nibly scholarship as well as in many areas, other areas of my librarianship here. And I thank you very much. Now before I launch into the topic of this lecture, I want to avoid the inevitable question at the end about how I became involved with Hugh Nibly by relating it to you first. When I was investigating the church in 1969 after spending seven years to study for the ministry of the gospel, there were two things that I was reading at the time, The Book of Mormon and an article that someone had given me to read in the January 1969 improvement Era called quote "A new look at the Pearl of Great Price" unquote, by someone named Hugh Nibly. I have never heard of the Pearl of Great Price, or of Brother Nibly. But really surprised me as I read the article was that anyone could combine faith and scholarship in such a remarkable manner, especially after I had read so much Protestant theology.

After my baptism, I gradually read more articles by this interesting scholar. A few months after joining the church, I found myself at BYU and drawing on my undergraduate languages of German, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin was soon involved with the Ancient studies library and its premiere and most frequent user, Dr. Hugh Nibly. I became his personal librarian indexing his writings to that point, and eventually helping FARMS in editing three of the sixteen exstamped volumes. And then come, came the humbling epiphany as I reflected on my life not too long ago, that the Lord had transformed me away from family, culture, religion, career, and friends to quote "call me on a life-long mission." To work with Hugh Nibly and all the ramifications of doing so for the last thirty years. But the most wonderful thing about this Nibly connection was how his scholarship augmented my professional librarianship and personal life even while my library skills enhanced his research. Hence, my observations will be from a perspective a generalist, a librarian, and a friend who recognizes where Nibly has applied his considerable gifts.

Hugh Nibly closed his letters with a great variety of humorous salutations such as "goobers to all," or "your hand pecked grandson." However one wonders if he was doing more than merely jesting, when he closed his September 24, 1971 letter to his missionary sons, quote "As per ever Huge Windy Nebula." unquote. I will briefly explore his unique style of scholarship, under these three rubrics, huge, windy, and nebula, with three attributes under each section. From the outset, I wish to point out that these nine points overlap somewhat, and that these observations are also highly personal and idiosyncratic. A work in progress, meaning that I am willing and eager to entertain any ideas that any of you might have on this topic. And here are the nine points.

Huge. With the publication last week of the second edition of Nibly's "The message of the Joseph Smith papyri: An Egyptian endowment," I was tempted to abbreviate this huge section. For this volume sixteen in the Nibly collected works is definitely huge by almost any standards. How fitting also that it appears during the library's wonderful Joseph Smith exhibit, next door to this auditorium. This tone represents most of the principles that I will be talking about. It was in fact Joseph Smith, quoted by Nibly and educating the saints who gave the ultimate guideline for latter-day scholarship. Quote "Thy mind O man, if thou wilt lead a soul to salvation, much stretch as high as the utmost heavens. And search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity." unquote. As Nibly's prophetic mentor, Joseph

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wanted to swim in deep waters, and then share his insights with the saints. Nibly could do no other, nothing otherwise. Number one, he was polymathic and broad ranging in his research pursuits. Nibly's insatiable curiosity embraced anything and everything in and out of time and space. His spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical curiosity and awareness are legendary and lead him to everything from camping alone in the same neighborhood as the bears and wolves around Crater Lake, to methodically perusing the spines of thousands of books in the Berkley library, pulling off the shelves only those titles which showed promise for research.

In the words of Zora Neal Hurston author of "Their eyes were watching God", quote "Research is formalized curiosity, it is poking and prying with a purpose." unquote. Despite his receiving a PhD from Berkley in the 1930's, Nibly was a tabular rosa or blank slate like that of Joseph Smith who had little formal education. Yet their self education has made both of them almost extraterrestrial scholars, because of their amateur big picture perspective and their combining of mortal and eternal principles. Most certainly Nibly gleaned much more from his autodidactic tendencies, than from his University degrees. He was careful and wise to point out however that "being self-taught is no disgrace, but being self-certified is another matter." unquote. His openness and humility in his research was occasionally criticized as naïve, vulnerable and gullible by other scholars. But he paid little attention to other scholars and their opinions, feeling that many of them were too afraid of being embarrassed if they were to step out on so many research limbs. His broad ranging explorations and observations also helped him to develop many of his writing styles, for he did not possess merely one. His wife, Phyllis, told me that he liked to read fiction occasionally to escape from the pressures of scholarship. As I processed his book collection, I've collected no less than fourteen Agatha Christy mysteries, gleaned from four different rooms from his house. A comment in Cristy's Caribbean Mystery, hints that he was conscious of his own writing. Quote, "Christy manages to keep up with the times, by getting older, superb." unquote. A further example, box eight from his northwest bedroom on the south wall was my favorite box. It included the following titles and informs of his, us of his eclectic interests. And collecting and studying habits. Frank Waters, "The book of the Hopi." Robert Merriam, "The battle of the bulge," the lost books of the bible and the forgotten books of eden, The Colorado plateau as a holy land and John Neihardt's "Black elks speaks."

I'm putting up a couple of slides here to show you the process of my going through these books. These boxes have been retrieved from the far reaches of the stacks of special collections brought to this processing room and then, and then I have decided which volumes go where. And, they will ultimately all end up here in the Hugh Nibly ancient studies room on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, in room 5431. This is where they will have their final resting place. This is as it looked up to two days ago. Eventually all of these shelves will be filled with his books.

It is these multidisciplinary discoveries which lead him to explore patternism, cross disciplinary insights, ambiguities and subtleties, and even the interconnectedness of all topics as proceeding from God. He was thus aware and alert to all ideas.

Two, all knowledge is an open cannon. There are no boundaries. Most of our latter-day prophets, from Joseph Smith to Gordon B. Hinckley have encouraged the saints to seek and embrace truth wherever they may find it. Nibly was an arch proponent of this principle and Jack Welch agrees quote "Any subject mentioned for Nibly is an open invitation to discuss matters of

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universal significance." unquote. In order to do so, Nibly necessarily used a, this big picture or high altitude understanding and was not beholden to any one narrow, scholarly methodology. He defended his perspective with the following. Quote, "blindness to larger contexts is a constitutional defect of human thinking imposed by the painful necessity of being able to concentrate on only one thing at a time. We forget as we virtuously concentrate on that one thing that hundreds, that hundreds of other things are going on at the same time, and on every side of us. Things that are just as important as our object of study, and that they are all interconnected in ways that we cannot even guess. Sad to say, our picture of the world to the degree to which it has that neatness, precision, and finality so coveted by scholarship, is a false one." unquote. I found an example of this in an unpublished paper, "Plato's republic," which he wrote for a class at UCLA in the 1930's while still an undergraduate. He was writing about the dark ages where he saw a lot of faulty education. He called it quote, "A time of illusions, when all Europe would be moved and its life directly influenced by the birth of a child with the golden tooth. Or a saint become the guide and claim the fealty of men because he had, she had succeeded in roasting a batch of snow balls, or fetching sunlight into a monastery with the bucket." unquote. The dark ages exemplified a time when academic scholarship often had too many creeds and closed cannons. And we as latter-day saints know the danger of closed cannons. For just as the closed cannon of scripture is problematic, so also are closed cannons in academic systems. But, Nibly felt that these closed cannons exist even today. And are the same limitations which haunt mainstream Christianity and their closed cannon of scripture. Quote, "Hermeneutic blindness, androcentric presuppositions, as well as Eurocentric patriarchal, and dehistoricized assumptions of the past." unquote. Add to this the more common limitations of superstition, pride, prejudice, ignorance, traditions, and ego, and one wonders if anything at all can be known for certain. Nibly has even had to fight against the traditional attributes of scholarship since the enlightenment, which are the abstract in favor of the concrete, and the theoretical over common sense knowledge.

Perceiving these limitations has led to some additional salient thoughts from Nibly. Quote, "Now, the office and calling of scholarship and science is to investigate the unknown." unquote. And quote "All scholarship, like all science, is an ongoing open ended discussion in which all conclusions are tentative forever. The principle value and charm of the game, being the discovery of the totally unexpected." unquote. Finally, quote "Let us not seek to hold God to the learned opinions of the moment, when he speaks the language of eternity." unquote. Fortunately for us, Nibly ignored some of the errors, some unfortunate scholars have favored over the centuries that would call into question any of Nibly's works. These are neoplatonic hermedacism, syncretism, mysticism, and astrological speculation.

Three, studying original languages and cultures enhanced his research. We will never know exactly how many languages Brother Nibly was able to use for his research, for he probably had know idea himself. He merely used them as tools. But one of his army buddies at Camp Richy during World War II, George Bailey, put it this way in his book "Germans." Quote, "I knew a sergeant at Richy, Hugh Nibly, formally professor of ancient history at Pamona College who spoke sixteen languages tolerably well and who's nodding linguistic acquaintanceship included twice that number." unquote. As I work with Nibly's book collection in the achieves, I note that many of the notes he has made in these two thousand plus volumes are in modified Greg shorthand and at least one of his many foreign languages. But then his

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dabbling in 32 languages give or take a few is only an infinitesimal foray into the 6912 languages existing in 228 countries. Yet, according to Lewis Midgley, Nibly's bibliographer and a colleague of Nibly's for many years, Nibly was able to enjoy veil partings because quote "his comparisons over time between cultures, yielded new insights on old beliefs and scriptures." unquote. Having such facility with language made it easier to study the cultures behind these languages as well as to avoid faulty translations, although Nibly certainly wasn't perfect in all his own translations. If he were alive today he would most certainly run out to buy a text on the Bosnian language after learning that a certain hill in Bosnia, Herzegovina hides a real pyramid predating 600 AD, supposedly built by the Alearian peoples. Or, he would be excited by the new book to be published in April and which I reviewed for library journal last month in which the author, a pastor named Brian D. McClaren, declares at least six of our LDS principles as lost to the world for 2000 years. He is proclaiming these principles as the secret message of Jesus. It will no doubt ruffle the feathers of many mainstream Christians as they discover that McClaren's book is mostly what latter-day saints have been teaching for over 175 years. Nibly would have had field day reviewing this book. Most importantly however, Nibly came close to Joseph Smith's practice in language study. Associate vice president John S. Tanner quotes Terrell Givens as saying quote "Joseph consistently merged the gift of prophecy with the gritty work of language study." unquote. So did Nibly, if only as an unfrocked academic prophet. Nibly's use of languages is downright powerful as pointed out by one of my students in my Nibly class this semester already, when giving his reasons for taking my class, quote "I enjoy Nibly's wit, meticulous notes and source material, power over languages, and even his sarcastic snort." Unquote.

And this leads us to the next attribute, windy. At a three part lecture series called "the three shrines" which he gave at Yale University in 1963, Brother Nibly described the windy part of his scholarship, quote "the spirit bloweth, where it listeth. It does not wait upon human convenience. Nor do its manifestations comply with human expectations. Its operations are always surprising, they always catch men off guard." unquote. How does the spirit operate with Nibly scholarship? I will talk about three aspects of this windy portion his scholarship, learned behavior, attitude, and receptivity.

Number four, by study and also by faith a learned behavior. Nibly often spoke of how important it was to exercise our scholarship with both the mind and the spirit or study and faith. If Nibly is indeed an academic prophet, he would necessarily have to advocate and speak innovatively for a cause. For those of us here who have listened to Nibly extensively, even when he was not espousing a cause or a discussing a topic few people could understand, the audience would at least catch his enthusiasm. Now the word enthusiasm comes from two Greek New Testament words, en and theo, meaning near god. I believe his enthusiasm was maintained for the most part because of his consistent life of faith in public and private, his frequent temple attendance and his unwavering teaching that there are two things that we latter-day saints should do exceedingly well during this life, repent and forgive. As I pointed out in a symposium talk I delivered in 1985, repentance also means rethinking, changing our mind or heart to be more in tune with the Lords. This is from another two Greek words metanoia, meaning changing of mind. Often when I am reading something of Nibly's, I perceive that he is thinking with his heart and feeling with his mind.

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The importance of learning by study and faith is common knowledge in our university setting. Indeed it is part of BYU's mission statement. Even our, university motto, the glory of God is intelligence leads us to the exciting promise that quote, "If your eye is single to my glory, your whole body will be filled with light." Unquote. Doctrine and Covenants, section 88, verse 67.

Number five, the mantic or sophic perspective an inborn or converted attitude. Nibly gives us a very basic definition of these two terms in his three shrines talk at Yale. Both ideas were very important at the time of Socrates, and in Greek society. Quote "Mantics, simply means prophetic or inspired, oracular, coming from the other world and not from the resources of the human mind. The mantic expects the other world as part of our whole experience, without which any true understanding of this life is out of the question. Sophic on the other hand is the tradition which boasted its cool, critical, objective, naturalistic, and scientific attitude" unquote. A mantic or prophetic perspective is that which unhesitatingly accepts supernatural occurrences and feeling, and feelings as true reality. A sophic or philosophic perspective on the other hand is a humanistic reliance on the powers of mankind alone. As a theology student it was very easy for me to get caught up in this sophic realm of religion with its naturalism, reductionism, higher criticism, ecclesiocentrism and near idolatry of both scriptures and theology. As I look back it was an atmosphere similar to Joseph Smith's where quote "They worshipped me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." unquote.

Genetic and environmental backgrounds usually determine whether a person has a mantic or a sophic perspective towards reality. We need only think of the differences between Nephi and Laman. But these predispositions can be changed by conversion. A process, we latter-day saints are all encouraged to participate in, whether we are born in the church or not. Most universities are sophic, but Brigham Young University is one of the few where there is a combination of the sophic and the mantic, where a testimony is fully acceptable for spiritual matters, while scientific proof is mandatory for mental and physical disciplines. But the mantic perspective is usually inclusive of the sophic, whereas the opposite seldom occurs. In other words an inspired and mantic LDS scientist or someone like Albert Einstien can use the spirit to assist him in scientific research, while the sophic scientist feels that he has no recourse but his own mine. A sophic person is not necessarily an atheist. He can be religious without calling upon the powers of heaven. Now although our world is decidedly sophic and secular, there are hints that civilization is becoming more mantic. Three recently published books in the last six months show this. Mark Patrick Hederman's "Walk about: Life is holy spirit," Margaret Barker's "An extraordinary gathering of angels," and Methi Cadovill's "The world as Sacrament: The sacramentality of creation," all give witness to this movement outside Mormonism.

One of my favorite passages in McLaren's "The secret message of Jesus," applies to everyone and when it comes to mantic or sophic world views or perspectives. Quote, "A world view is a way of seeing. It is not just what we see, but how we see everything else. It is the lens, through which we see. A lens of assumptions, beliefs, images, metaphors, values, and ideas that we inherit and construct from our family, our teachers, our peers, our community, and our culture. As we go through life, many of us find it next to impossible even to want to question our inherited world view while others do exactly that. We rethink, we imagine other ways of seeing things, and we sometimes experience radical conversions out of one world view and into

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another." unquote. Paul, Alma, Moses, Abraham, Joseph Smith and others experienced these radical conversions, or turnings to another world view.

Number six: Revelation and inspiration, the receptivity of the spirit. Some of the greatest adventures while living the gospel are the incredible and even ordinary surprises that the spirit often places before us. Joseph Smith said that quote, "It is the spirit of revelation when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you. It will give you sudden strokes of ideas." unquote. Nibly claims that he had daily spiritual surprises, although many were too spiritual and private for him to share with anyone. They were between himself and Heavenly Father. He felt that own faulty wills and materialistic dreams pale in comparison. Nibly felt that many members of the church wish they avail themselves of revelation. But they either don't recognize the subtle whisperings of the spirit or are plain unreceptive to them. And for many of us who minutely plan our days either on paper or electronically, we fail to leave time for the spirit. The secular world labels these experiences as serendipitous or synchronous coincidences. A profusion of them in Nibly's writings appear as insights, which when the reader confronts them asks himself where did Nibly come up with such an insight.

An example of this occurred to me one day 3 years ago when I was looking for a female counterpart to Hugh Nibly's diversity in scholarship. I came to work and read the daily biography on my tear off calendar. On this particular day it happened to be Hildegard Von Bingen, a German nun who lived between 1098 and 1179. I had never heard of her, but now I was keenly interested. I searched the library catalog, found two biographies about her and began a friendship with the long departed sister, who was not only influential in catholic ecclesiastical circles, but was visionary, author, theologian, religious superior, and musician composer. In fact, you can currently buy CD, 5 CDs of her music. Alive at a time before the printing presses, it was amazing that so much of her work has survived. Alive, but now she enriches the world with her thoughts. Many of which Nibly would have resonated with completely. She also seemed fearless around her male superiors, possessing a kind of prophetic authority. In any case, the serendipitous experience taught me something important about coincidence.

David Klinghoffer in "The discovery of God" characterizes what Nibly experienced in his daily adventures. Quote, "God operates in the worlds through events that seem to come by chance. His interventions in our lives are concealed by the appearance of randomness." Quote. And Mark Patrick Hederman in his new book "Walk about," offers a different twist to this same phenomenon. Quote, "Coincidence is one of the ways in which the spirit makes his presence felt without importuning or interfering with free will." unquote. And unless we recognize the operations of the spirit, how could anything be more nebulous. So we turn to nebula. Very early in his life, Nibly had an abiding interest in astronomy. To the extent that he shaved off his own eyebrows and darkened the nearest street lamps so he would have better vision into the night skies. And in fact one of his earliest writings was a poem he called "Two stars," describing Vega and Altairs as he metaphorically outlined two world views. According to the encyclopedia, a nebula is an interstellar cloud of dust, gas, and plasma. And when thinking of creation and creativity, what could be a better scenario.

At Nibly's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday party, academic vice president Robert K. Thomas, described a great scholar as "not one who depends simply on an infinite memory, but also on an infinite

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power of combination. Bringing together from the four winds, they are cosmic as well as earthly, like the angel of the resurrection. What else were dust from dead man's bones into the unity of breathing life." unquote. Jack Welsch follows Brother Thomas with the following, quote "we will be everlastingly grateful to Hugh Nibly for bringing it all together, for taking dusty books and forgotten scrolls and breathing into and out of their word eternal truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ."

Number seven: thinking out of the box and beyond. Nibly often ignored traditional history and academic assumptions. To him, any discussion worth its salt needed to be open minded. Quote, "In the ancient study of ancient things." excuse me, "In the study of ancient things, it is the fantastic and in congress that opens the door to discovery. Never forget that. In scholarship as in science, every paradox and anomaly opens the door and is really a broad hint that new knowledge is awaiting us, if we will only go after it." unquote. An example of this is that he hated theology. On the catholic news service, dated December 5, 2005 Vatican city reporter Cindy wooden states that quote "Theology is an academic discipline, and must follow the rules for scientific inquiry." unquote. Although I am sure that Roman Catholics would say except with their own theology, and we would say basically the same thing. So is theology really about the word of God as the original words, Greek words would indicate, or the word of man about God which would actually be anthropology. But that has been preempted by the discipline. It was headlines like these that provided the beginnings of many of Nibly's writings. And unheard of, unorthodox, alternative approach to something very ordinary. He had a perennial problem with BYU students who would say "I've never heard of that before," as if learning new ideas wasn't as included as education.

Eight: Seeking balance and understanding the law of opposition. This particular attribute caused me the most difficulty in coming up with the title. Perhaps a quote from Nibly himself will better explain my attempt. Quote, "Things that appear unlikely, impossible, or paradoxical from one point of view often make perfectly good sense from another." unquote. He explored this creative intention in scholarship by utilizing the spirit to help an earthly learning and mind in exploring celestial matters. In his personal life, Nibly was conservative in religion, but liberal in politics, although he saw beyond politics towards the building up of Zion. Our current academic vice president, John Tanner, asks the question, quote "Are we breaking into Babylon, or building Zion's walls. We sometimes assume that secular subjects are to be learned exclusively by study while religious subjects are to be apprehended solely by revelation. The prophet Joseph Smith did not draw sharp distinctions between how we are to learn sacred and secular truth." unquote. In more secular matters, Nibly often saw both sides of an issue more clearly than most of us would have dreamed. Often his conclusions would be a compromise between two opposites, but more often he would just leave it at that.

An example would be the perspectives on opposites on BYU. Quote "I can see two totally different pictures of the BYU, each one a reality. For one direction I see high purpose, sobriety, good cheer, dedication, and a measure of stability which in this unquiet world is by no means to be despised. Then by shifting my position but slightly, I see a carnival of human vanity and folly, to which only Gilbert and Sullivan could do justice. With solemn antics before high heaven that make the angels weep. Why take sides or contend, both of the pictures are genuine. In a paper he wrote for the graduate school in 1965, he offers his own unique version of the

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balance needed in scholarship. Quote, "Every study should be one: authentic, two: original, and three: significant. Without all three of these characteristics, no study should be published. With all three any study is certain to find publication without difficulty.

Nine: Eschatological scholarship as discipleship and consecration. Eschatology deals with last things. Nibly provides us with a very compelling definition. Quote, "The eschatological view point is that which sees and judges everything in terms of a great eternal plan. Whether we like it or not, we belong to the eternities. We can not escape the universe." unquote. Then from one of my favorite personal quotes, the late Elder Neal A. Maxwell tells us how each one of us can achieve Nibly's grand vision. Quote, "For a disciple of Jesus Christ, academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration. Hence, one who seeks to be a disciple scholar will take both scholarship and discipleship seriously and likewise gospel covenants. For the disciple scholar, the first and second great commandments frame and prioritize life. How else could one worship God with all of ones heart, might, mind, his italics, and strength?" unquote. Add to Elder Maxwell's injunction, Nibly's insistence that we need to do the works of Abraham, and only then can we fulfill of this University the inspired vision President Spencer W. Kimball add in his second century address of 1975. Quote, "This university shares with other universities the hope and the labor involved in rolling back the frontiers of knowledge. But we also know, that through divine revelation, there are yet many great and important things to be given to mankind which will have an intellectual and spiritual impact, far beyond what mere men can imagine. There must be an excitement and an expectation about the very nature and future of knowledge that underwrites the uniqueness of BYU." unquote.

Now my conclusion. There are many fine scholars, and have been many fine scholars at Brigham Young University. Hugh Nibly is only one example of what needs to happen here at BYU on a grander scale. What made Nibly's scholarship unique was the combination of all nine attributes, which I have discussed above. When the church asked him to research the Joseph Smith papyri, Nibly did not have any idea what he was up against. Nor the conclusions he would ultimately make about the papyri. But he made the consecrated effort to do so. And in his own words, quote "The bringing forth of the papyrus fragments in 1967 was a reminder to the saints that they are still expected to do their homework, and may claim no special revelation or convenient handout as long as they ignore the vast treasure house of materials that God has placed within their reach." unquote. This new book, "The message of the Joseph Smith papyri" and the earlier 1975 edition are eloquent witnesses to his consecrated efforts and the use of his considerable talents. We also can't forget how far reaching his influence continues to be. Including the added perspective he gave to my own life making it possible to have my own huge windy nebula. I thank my wife Signa. My children and my grandchildren for the support they have given me over the years during my rewarding journeys into Nibly scholarship. And thanks to all of you for coming here today.