

Eric A. Eliason. *The J. Golden Kimball Stories*.

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Reviewed by Elliott Oring

In *The J. Golden Kimball Stories*, Eric A. Eliason offers an “as-complete-as-possible” collection of the oral narratives surrounding the figure of J. Golden Kimball (vii). He presents some 180 texts, drawn mainly from conversations with informants and from folklore archives. The texts are presented in eleven chapters. The first eight chapters are organized according to story theme: chapter 1 (ten texts) deals with J. Golden Kimball’s attempts to manipulate or trick his interlocutors; chapter 2 (thirty texts) with his responses to hostile Gentiles and self-satisfied Mormons; chapter 3 (twenty-six texts) with his pointed comments on Mormonism and its leaders; chapter 4 (nine texts) with his adherence to the Mormon health code; chapter 5 (twenty-two texts) with his views on the practice of swearing; chapter 6 (twenty-eight texts) with his preaching and counseling; chapter 7 (eleven texts) with his rebukes both to Mormon congregations and to Gentiles; and chapter 8 (five texts) with both self-imposed and Brethren-imposed efforts to repent. There is a certain amount of overlap in this arrangement, and readers may have difficulty locating particular stories when they look for them.

Because Eliason is presenting stories found in folk tradition, he wishes to illustrate some of the textual variations that mark orally transmitted narratives. Eleven narratives included in the volume are presented as variants of other texts and follow the texts they most resemble. Yet “Tithing” (58), which appears to be a variant of “Giving Your All” (56); “Patriarchal Blessing” (98), which appears to be a variant of “Parentage” (65); and “Vocabulary” (85), which is a variant of “Vocabulary Words” (83), are presented—and I am not sure why—as unrelated texts. The anecdotes included in the last three chapters of the book are meant to show how oral tradition works. The narratives in chapter 9 (ten texts) are meant to exemplify the distinction between the first-person accounts of people who actually spoke with J. Golden Kimball and the orally circulating anecdotes.

Chapter 10 (sixteen texts) is meant to show how the types of stories attributed to J. Golden Kimball attach themselves to other Church leaders. Chapter 11 (twelve texts) is meant to demonstrate how the stories can feed back into oral circulation from official Church sources.

A number of the anecdotes about J. Golden are attached to different figures in other cultural traditions. Eliason identifies several J. Golden stories that are closely related to jokes about other preachers, politicians, and local characters. Yet certain stories may be just analogues: texts that are similar not by virtue of diffusion and borrowing but by virtue of their confrontation of common problems and themes. For example, the first text below is from Eliason. The second text I found in a book of Jewish jokes published in 1941. Are they variants or analogues?

In his last years, he [J. Golden] met a friend in the street who said to him, “How are you, Golden? How are you getting along?” “Well, to tell the truth, I’m not doing so good. Getting old and tired. You know, Seth, I’ve been preaching this gospel nigh onto sixty years now, and I think it’s time for me to get over to the other side to find out how much of what I’ve been saying is true.” (70)

A pious Jew was on his deathbed, and his children surrounded him ready to listen to his parting words. Speaking slowly and heavily he said: “Listen, my children! You know how zealous I have been in behalf of my faith. I have sacrificed everything and deprived myself of worldly pleasures for the sole purpose of gaining a share in the world to come. Now I have reached my end, and I am ready to face my Maker. If I discover the whole thing is only a joke, wouldn’t I laugh?”¹

I reckon that I have seen or heard about 20 percent of the texts in the first eight chapters of the book somewhere before. It would require some dedicated research to discover all the parallels and analogues to the J. Golden texts, but it is not clear that such an exercise would be worth the effort. The fact is that even migratory anecdotes are borrowed selectively and are shaped into a cohesive repertoire. This shaping is what gives the J. Golden Kimball narratives—whatever their original sources—their distinctive character.

In his effort to present a complete picture of the anecdotal tradition, Eliason leaves out some material that appeared in Thomas E. Cheney’s *The Golden Legacy: A Folk History of J. Golden Kimball* published by Brigham Young University Press in 1973. Cheney’s book was a mixture of J. Golden Kimball sermons, newspaper accounts, and snippets of biography, as well as anecdotes told about him. Consequently, the book is characterized as a folk history rather than as the documentation of a folk narrative tradition. If Eliason does not include a particular anecdote from Cheney’s work (for example, “Heir-Conditioned”) in his book, I presume

it is because Eliason found no evidence either among his informants or in the folklore archives for its oral circulation.

In addition to offering a representative collection of anecdotes, Eliason wishes to characterize the anecdotes' significance for the people who tell and appreciate them. Consequently, he sets the stories in their historical and cultural contexts. The fifty-three-page introduction discusses J. Golden Kimball's biography, the relationship between folklore and history, stories in the context of their telling, the evolution (or devolution) of Mormon swearing, social changes in the Mormon community, a statistical profile of the repertoire, and concepts of the hero in folk tradition. Thirty-nine pages of endnotes provide not only the sources of the texts but also detailed cultural information that makes the texts understandable to the non-Mormon reader. The cultural commentary varies from the most basic kind of information to esoteric aspects of Mormon behavior and practice. The latter is illustrated by the following story:

A visiting general authority commented that we had a remarkable record in our stake of 100 percent home teaching for ten out of twelve months for the past three years!

The stake president responded, "And if it weren't for Halloween and New Year's Eve we'd have made 100 percent every month!" (121)

This story is marvelous because there may be no amount of reading in Mormon history, theology, or sociology likely to make this joke comprehensible to an outsider. It is one of those jokes interwoven with the practices and circumstances of everyday Mormon life. Most active Mormons will understand the joke, but non-Mormons will have to read Eliason's explanation in the endnote.

I would offer a few comments on Eliason's conceptualizations of the corpus of J. Golden stories. In discussing the relation between the figure of J. Golden Kimball and the hero of traditional myth and legend, Eliason correctly observes that the latter was usually a man of *deeds*. In the jokes and anecdotes, J. Golden is a man of *words*. The stories always turn on something J. Golden says, not something he does. Consequently, Eliason labels J. Golden a "performer-hero" (33). The concept of performance holds a particular place in contemporary folklore studies that is too complicated to describe in a brief review. I would suggest, however, that the man of words is the norm in the joke genre. Contemporary jokes almost invariably end with something said rather than something done. I am not convinced that the notion of "performer-hero" adds to the understanding of the J. Golden cycle. Wry comments are not a peculiarity of J. Golden Kimball; they are made by a wide range of historical and fictional joke characters.

Eliason also characterizes J. Golden as a Mormon “trickster” (39) and compares him with tricksters in other traditions. Certainly J. Golden is similar to figures in African American, Jewish American, and Swedish American lore to which the term “trickster” has been applied. But the term is too easily conflated with tricksters in world mythological tradition, and these mythological figures seem distinct from J. Golden. Eliason states that “tricksters articulate a culture’s deepest beliefs about appropriate moral behavior by violating them spectacularly” (41). J. Golden Kimball, however, does not violate the deepest beliefs of the LDS Church. As Eliason notes, he transgresses only in matters of swearing and the consumption of coffee—proscriptions begun as matters of guidance that were elevated to stricter rules over time. In essential matters of faith and practice, J. Golden Kimball is rock solid. So J. Golden is a trickster, but only in a weak sense of the term. He shares little with the tricksters of mythological tradition.

Eliason employs the concept of a safety valve to explain the significance of the stories in the Mormon community—they release the “tension that results from social, religious, cultural, and biological demands and constraints” (35). The safety valve has often been invoked in the analysis of humor, but I am not sure that it is a necessary or even a desirable explanatory mechanism. I think it preferable to approach jokes in cognitive rather than emotional terms and regard them as commentaries rather than catharses. Jokes often crystallize around contradictions, conflicts, and stresses in a society. The anecdotes about J. Golden Kimball’s swearing and coffee drinking seem less a release of and relief from pent-up desire than a commentary on the Mormon culture of niceness, obedience, and conformity (37–38). While J. Golden’s honesty and directness have been repeatedly stressed, the fundamental honesty of his swearing has been downplayed. Swearing registers the emotional dimensions of a message. (That is why it invariably calls upon the vocabularies of bodily functions and sacred landscapes—the words are precharged with emotion.) J. Golden is always bluntly honest, and his swearing is not merely a failing but a part and parcel of his honesty. In the inhibition of irritation and anger and in the suppression of swearing, it can be argued that Mormons have suppressed something honest and direct about themselves. J. Golden’s fondness for coffee might be viewed similarly. In the great scheme of things, it is a minor failing. His faith, his work, his sincerity, his charity, his humility, and his tolerance decidedly outweigh it. How do humans fulfill the divine plan? The necessary answer to this question is “imperfectly.” The J. Golden anecdotes can serve as a commentary on such imperfection. As such, they give hope. As Eliason states, Latter-Day Saints “laugh at their failures and

foibles, not to justify them but to gain courage and strength to move on and overcome" (51). The jokes look a lot more like philosophy than catharsis.

If *The J. Golden Kimball Stories* has a flaw, it is that it tries to appeal to two audiences: scholars of oral tradition on the one hand and those "in search of a good laugh" on the other (xv). Consequently, the anecdotes in the collection are not numbered for easy reference, and the annotations and sources are relegated to the endnotes. For the scholar, this is an inconvenience. Nevertheless, Eliason's volume is the first collection of J. Golden Kimball stories compiled and edited according to contemporary folkloristic standards. There is a concern to document the genuine oral tradition; there is an effort to situate the tradition in the context of Mormon history and culture. Therefore, *The J. Golden Kimball Stories* is the volume that scholars will consult and cite when they write about Mormon folklore or religious humor.

Elliott Oring (eoring@calstatela.edu) is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at California State University, Los Angeles. His book *Engaging Humor* was published by the University of Illinois Press in 2003.

1. S. Felix Mendelsohn, ed., *Let Laughter Ring* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1952), 68.