

# The Paradox of Mormon Folklore

William A. Wilson

As I began work on this paper, I asked a number of friends what they would like to know about Mormon folklore. The responses were at such cross purposes the task ahead seemed hopeless. Finally, a colleague solved my problem by confessing that he knew next to nothing about the subject. "I would like to know," he said, "what Mormon folklore is and what you fellows do with it." Tonight I should like to answer these questions. I shall tell you what I, at least, consider Mormon folklore to be; I shall try to demonstrate what those of us who study it do with it; and I shall try to persuade you that what we do is worth doing, providing significant insight into our culture that we cannot always get in other ways.

In the 130 years since the word "folklore" was coined,<sup>1</sup> folklorists have been trying unsuccessfully to decide what the word means. I shall not solve the problem here. Yet if we are to do business with each other, we must come to some common understanding of terms. Briefly, I consider folklore to be the unofficial part of our culture. When a Sunday School teacher reads to his class from an approved lesson manual, he is giving them what the Correlation Committee at least would call official religion; but when he illustrates the lesson with an account of the Three Nephites which he

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<sup>1</sup>The term *folklore* was coined by William John Thoms in a letter to *The Athenaeum*, No. 982, 22 August 1846, pp. 862-63. Thoms, writing under the name Ambrose Merton, suggested that this "good Saxon compound" replace the term *popular antiquities* then in vogue. For definitions of folklore given by twenty-one twentieth-century scholars, see *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, ed. Maria Leach, 2 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1949), 1:398-403. For a recent appraisal of folklore study, see *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, ed. Richard Bauman, special issue of *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971).

learned from his mother, he is giving them unofficial religion. Folklore, then, is that part of our culture that is passed through time and space by the process of oral transmission (by hearing and repeating) rather than by institutionalized means of learning or by the mass media.

Not everything, of course, that we transmit orally is folklore. We distinguish folklore from other forms of verbal communication by clearly discernable structure. We are all familiar with the "Once upon a time" that signals the beginning of a fairy tale and the "And they lived happily ever after" that marks its end. The markers that set off other forms of folklore are often more subtle, but they are nevertheless there, and when we hear the initial signal, most of us know immediately that conversation is going to be interrupted by the telling of a tale. Further, not only is folklore in general set off from regular conversation by its structure, but the different forms of folklore (for example, ballad, folktale, legend) are also separated from each other by the distinctive ordering of their parts. Thus a Nephite story, reduced to its basic elements, is quite a different creature, structurally, from a story about J. Golden Kimball. It is because of this structural patterning, among other things, that we are justified in considering folklore to be literature. Another reason, as we shall see, is that through these narrative patterns we come to terms with some of our most significant Mormon experience.

To suggest that folklore is literature is to suggest that it is fiction; to suggest that it is fiction is to suggest also that it is not true, that it does not recount history accurately. This suggestion will not trouble many when we apply it to folksongs or to humorous anecdotes, which we really don't consider factual; but when we apply it to stories of the Three Nephites or to accounts of visits to or from the spirit world or to divine help in genealogical research, then eyebrows arch all over the place. And this brings me once again to my colleague's question: "If we have three oral accounts of something Joseph Smith did, does that mean it's folklore?"

The answer to that question depends on the antecedent of the pronoun *it*. If the pronoun refers to the actual event that started the stories, the answer is clearly no. The event is whatever the event was, and the folklorist will leave to the historian the task of deciphering it. But if the pronoun refers not to the event but to the account of it circulating orally, the answer is yes. The account is, or is on the way to becoming, folklore.



Folklore comes into being through a process we call communal re-creation. In general the materials of Mormon folklore come from three places: they are borrowed from others and then adapted to fit the contours of our culture; they sometimes originate, as Joseph Fielding Smith said, speaking of Nephite stories, from the vivid imaginations of some of our people;<sup>2</sup> and they develop from actual happenings. But whatever the source, the stories become folklore when they are taken over by the people and are reshaped as they are passed from person to person.

This communal re-creation occurs in two ways. First, the stories are reshaped to fit the structural patterns available to the narrators. My mother, a devout Mormon not easily given to criticism, complained the other day that all the talks of returned missionaries sounded the same. What she had perceived was that the return-home address is a traditional form into which the missionary must fit his personal experiences, altering them, or at least carefully selecting them, to fit the pattern. The process is similar to the one followed when a writer attempts to develop his personal experience into a short story. To be successful, he must alter the experience to make it fit the structural requirements of the form.

Consider, for example, the stories of the Three Nephites. The basic structure of these stories seems to be this: someone has a problem; a stranger appears; the stranger solves the problem; the stranger miraculously disappears. A story may have more to it than this, but it must have these features. Any account that is taken into the Nephite cycle will be adjusted (probably unconsciously) to fit the pattern. The remarkable disappearance is particularly interesting. I see no compelling reasons why the Nephites must disappear. In Book of Mormon times they were thrown into prison, into dens of wild beasts, and into furnaces, and in none of these instances did they solve their problems by disappearing. But in the modern stories, they vanish from the back seats of speeding cars; they vaporize before one's eyes; or they walk away and someone later tracing their footsteps in the snow finds that they abruptly end. The Nephites disappear, I believe, because the story requires it. The disappearance is the climax toward which the narrative builds, overshadowing in many instances the kindly deeds the Nephites came to perform in the first place.

The second way in which communal re-creation occurs is that the

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph Fielding Smith to Hector Lee, 15 December 1941, as cited in Lee, "The Three Nephites: The Substance and Significance of the Legend in Folklore" (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1947), p. 217.

stories are reshaped (again probably unconsciously) to reflect the attitudes, values, and concerns of the people telling the stories. In 1962 a student in an anthropology class at BYU collected the following item from one of her teachers:

Brother James Rencher was a very devout man, who, in all of his spare time, read and re-read the Book of Mormon. However, no matter how many times he pored over the book, there remained ten questions concerning it which he could not answer. Every year during the fall, the Renchers moved down into town to escape the harsh winter. One day in October, 1898, Brother Rencher was moving some furniture and provisions down the mountain, when it began to snow. All of a sudden, a strange man appeared several yards in front of him, and asked for a ride. The stranger climbed into the wagon, and immediately began talking about the Book of Mormon. During the next few minutes he answered all of Brother Rencher's questions about the book. Then he jumped out of the wagon and started to walk away. Being concerned that the stranger would freeze in the cold snow, Brother Rencher went after him. He traced the man's footprints to the top of the mountain; there they suddenly disappeared.<sup>3</sup>

I have several accounts of this story quite similar to this one, except that in some not even the General Authorities could answer Rencher's questions and in some Rencher was from Pine Valley while in others he was from Heber City or from Idaho. In two versions of the story published by Austin Fife in 1940, Rencher picked up an old hitchhiker who explained political and religious matters "to his satisfaction just perfectly."<sup>4</sup> These accounts suggest that the story once had a double theme—politics and religion. A story collected just last year emphasizes the politics:

Brother Rencher was closing up a campground and left to go home. After he had been driving in the mountains for a way, he came across a man who seemed to appear from nowhere. They were out in an area where there was no one living and very few people passed that way. Brother Rencher in order to start conversation asked the man what he thought of the political parties. The man who turned out to be one of the three Nephites answered: "They are both as corrupt as hell."

What we see here then is that different people, or groups of people, perceive the important "message" of an item differently, and that

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<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all items of Mormon folklore discussed in this paper, as well as comments of informants, are located in the Brigham Young University Folklore Archives, c/o English Department.

<sup>4</sup>Austin E. Fife, "The Legend of the Three Nephites among the Mormons," *Journal of American Folklore* 53 (1940):27-29.



as they continue to tell the story they drop or add details to strengthen what they consider to be important in the story.<sup>5</sup>

Another example of the shifting shape of folklore lies closer to home. Most of us will remember the turbulent period in late 1969 and early 1970 when BYU athletic teams and the marching Cougarettes met violent demonstrations in neighboring schools, when a spate of stories was circulating about bus loads of Black Panthers making their way to the state to blow up Mountain Dell Reservoir and to invade Temple Square, and when some people feared to travel beyond the state's boundaries because they had heard gory stories of people with Utah license plates being stopped and beaten up by blacks. Emotions were intensified by the revival and rapid circulation of the apocryphal Horse Shoe Prophecy attributed to John Taylor. (This prophecy was first written down in 1951 by Edward Lunt, who said that in 1903 or 1904 he had learned it from his mother, who said that she had received it from President Taylor in 1885.)<sup>6</sup> In Lunt's account, President Taylor supposedly saw a day of great trouble and warfare striking the Saints, with "blood running down the gutters of Salt Lake City as though it were water." As versions of the prophecy began to multiply during the violence of 1969 and 1970, a new motif was added to it—the notion that the blood would run in the gutters because of racial warfare. For example, an employee of Seminaries and Institutes stated

that it was common knowledge among teachers in the Church educational system that a confrontation with Black Panthers was going to take place in the streets of Salt Lake City and that this would be a fulfillment of the prophecy that Blacks would wreak havoc in the streets of Zion. He said that this prophecy was given to President Taylor. It was common knowledge from reliable sources [he said] that Blacks and hippies were arming themselves in the canyons east of the city and that the FBI had uncovered plans by revolutionaries to hit Salt Lake City with a violence campaign.

Another individual, a stockbroker who claimed he did not believe the part about Negroes, stated:

John Taylor is supposed to have said that the Negroes will march

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<sup>5</sup>The same individual will often tell the same story quite differently, depending on his reasons for telling it and upon his audience. For example, I have two versions of the James Rencher story told by the same informant, one with the political theme and one without it. In the first instance, the informant focuses on politics because he wants to persuade the students in his religion class that the General Authorities have the right to speak out on political issues.

<sup>6</sup>Brigham Young University, Harold B. Lee Library, Special Collections, Manuscript Collection, M884.

to the west and that they will tear down the gates to the temple, ravage the women therein, and destroy and desecrate the temple. Then the Mormon boys will pick up their deer rifles and destroy the Negroes, and that's when the blood will run down the street.

On 30 March 1970, the First Presidency, concerned by the growing emotionalism, released a statement in which they denounced the Horse Shoe Prophecy and urged members to school their feelings.<sup>7</sup> In their statement, the First Presidency quoted a memorandum from the Church Historian's office which pointed out that of the five copies of the prophecy on file in that office no two were identical in wording and that the statement about Negroes was in one of the copies but not in the others, "particularly" not in the version signed by Lunt. What the First Presidency actually did was conduct a small-scale folklore study. They discovered, as we have discovered with the James Rencher stories, that as stories are passed from person to person they are "adjusted" to reflect the concerns and to fit the predispositions of the people.

What I am saying, then, is that while folklore may be factually false, it is psychologically true. Students of Mormon culture turn to it not to discover the ledger-book truths of history but to fathom the truths of the human heart and mind. The truths that we find may not always please us, but if we really want to understand ourselves I know of no better place to turn than to folklore.

I say this with some hesitation because I am well aware that Mormon literature, *belles lettres*, gives us good insight into the Mormon ethos. But I am convinced that Mormon folklore gives us a still clearer view. My reason for believing this is simple: the works of Mormon *belles lettres* are the creative products of individuals; the works of Mormon folk literature are the creative products of the people, constantly being reshaped, as we have seen above, to mirror contemporary values, anxieties, and social practices. The Mormon poet or short-story writer, however much he draws on his Mormon background and however much he discusses his works in process with his Mormon friends, still gives us his own *individual* interpretation of our culture, an interpretation, I might add, that is elitist in approach. On the other hand, an item of Mormon folklore, to have become folklore, must have moved from the individual expression of its originator to the communal expression of those who preserve it, losing, through the process of communal re-creation

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<sup>7</sup>The First Presidency first addressed the issue in a letter (30 March 1970) mailed to stake presidents, mission presidents, and bishops. The letter was reprinted in the *Church News*, 4 April 1970.



described above, the marks of individual invention and assuming in time a form that reflects the consensus of the group.

In a recent BYU address, N. Scott Momaday made this point far more eloquently than I when, speaking of a Kiowa Indian tale, he said: "As many times as that story has been told it was always but one generation removed from extinction."<sup>8</sup> As soon as any story, Kiowa or not, ceases to appeal to its hearers, then, it dies or it is changed to reflect a new reality. No two tellers, of course, will ever relate the same story the same way; but if that story is to live, they cannot, in the telling of it, depart too far from the value center of the audience whose approval they seek.

I have been dealing thus far with the revelatory nature of Mormon folklore and have ignored its functional role. That is, I have been discussing what folk stories mean to the student of Mormon culture, but I have said nothing yet about what they mean to the people who tell them and listen to them, nothing about the force of folklore in the lives of human beings. In the remainder of this paper, I should like to discuss the influence of Mormon folklore on Church members, as it functions to reinforce Church dogma and practice, to sanction approved forms of behavior, and to give people a sense of stability in an unstable world.

In 1694 the Puritan divines, Increase and Cotton Mather and the Fellows of Harvard College, instructed the New England clergy to record the remarkable providences that would show the hand of God in their lives. "The things to be esteemed *memorable*," they said, "are especially *all unusual accidents*, in the heaven, or earth, or water: all wonderful *deliverances* of the distressed: Mercies to the godly; *judgments* on the wicked; and more glorious fulfillment of either the *promises* or the *threatenings* in the Scriptures of truth; with *apparitions*, *possessions*, *incantments*, and all extraordinary things wherein the existence and agency of the *invisible world* is more sensibly demonstrated."<sup>9</sup> This passage seems not unlike instructions on how to keep a Book of Remembrance. And indeed we Mormons, like the Puritans, seem eager to seek evidence of the invisible world, not simply because we like sensational stories but because, as Richard Cracroft and Neal Lambert point out, "the Mormon world is a God-made, man-centered world" and because "each

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<sup>8</sup>N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words," Brigham Young University Forum Address, 14 January 1975.

<sup>9</sup>Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Or, the Ecclesiastical History of New England* [1702], 2 vols. (Hartford, Conn.: S. Andrus & Son, 1853), 2:362.

Latter-day Saint in his personal life is challenged to bring forth evidence that supports this belief.”<sup>10</sup> But in the stories we tell, we are seeking not just evidence that God lives but also that his programs are inspired and that he expects us to follow them. Stories about genealogical research and temple work illustrate this point well.

We are all familiar with the plethora of stories genealogy workers tell to encourage others to keep up the pursuit of their dead ancestors. For example, two LDS men driving to a conference pick up a man (later thought to be a Nephite) who urges them to do their genealogy work and then disappears from the back seat of the car. On another occasion, a lady who has trouble tracing her genealogical line prays for help. While she is out of the room where her typewriter is located, she hears its keys clicking. Investigating, she finds the missing information typed in the proper places on her pedigree chart. And so the stories go: A stranger appears to a man in the temple and warns him to get busy on his genealogy because the time is short. A Nephite brings to the temple genealogical sheets that a couple had left home on the table. A man is instructed by a stranger to visit a graveyard, where he finds his missing family names. A man is instructed to go to a pawnshop, where he finds his genealogical data in a Bible. In exchange for a meal, a Nephite gives a lady a book containing information which she needs to extend her family genealogy. And a woman finds the missing names she has been searching for in a newspaper left mysteriously in her car. All of these stories make two main points: first, genealogical research must be important because the Lord helps people complete it; and, second, if one keeps struggling faithfully ahead, not getting discouraged, he will eventually succeed.

If genealogical research is important, so, of course, is temple work, both for oneself and for one's ancestors. And once again circulating oral narratives stress the importance of this work. For example, couples who have not been sealed in the temple are visited by mysterious strangers (usually Nephites) who warn them to make haste in getting their work done. Couples who have been to the temple pick up old men along the highways who urge them to attend the temple often because time is short, warn them that otherwise they will not be ready when the Savior comes, and then disappear. Stories are legion about temple workers missing one of the names on a list and then having this mistake made known in

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<sup>10</sup>Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), p. 3.



a miraculous way. But the most widely circulated story today is probably the following:

A lady in Salt Lake City, Utah, was desirous of going to the temple but was afraid to leave her children at home alone. She hadn't been able to locate a suitable baby-sitter but finally she did. She went to the temple a little apprehensive and about halfway through the session she felt so uneasy that she got up to leave. As she got to the back of the room, a temple worker stopped her to find out what the matter was. She, the lady, said she felt like she was urgently needed at home. The temple worker promised her that if she would return to her seat and finish the session everything would be fine. So she did. After the session was over she hurried home, and sure enough, there were fire engines and police cars all around her house. As she was running to her house, a neighbor lady stopped her and explained that her daughter had fallen into the ditch and couldn't be found. As the lady came to the house, there was her daughter soaking wet and crying. Her mother grabbed her and hugged her. After, the little girl gave her mother a note and explained that the lady who'd pulled her out of the ditch had given it to her. There on the note was the name of the lady for whom this woman had gone through the temple that day.

In some versions of this story it is the new baby-sitter herself who pulls the child from the water. In these instances the sitter then disappears and the mother later recalls that the person whose work she had done in the temple that day had the same name as the baby-sitter.<sup>11</sup> In one version the mother, and her husband, though faithful in other duties, have not been attending the temple and finally decide to go only after their bishop makes a personal request. In another version the couple actually call home, learn that their child is missing, but, after praying and getting a feeling that all will be well, remain and complete the session. But whatever form the story takes, it serves always, as one informant said, "as a testimony to the truthfulness of temple work."

These stories, then, not only mirror our concern with genealogical research and temple work, they also reinforce our belief that these pursuits are of God and thus persuade us to participate more eagerly in them.

In one of the most common stories of the Three Nephites, one of the old men visits a home, asks for nourishment, is given it, and then blesses the home with health and prosperity. But in one instance

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<sup>11</sup>For a brief discussion of this version of the story, see Jan Harold Brunvand, "Modern Legends of Mormondom, or, Supernaturalism is Alive and Well in Salt Lake City," in *American Folk Legend: A Symposium*, ed. Wayland D. Hand (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1971), p. 200.

the lady of the house hasn't "time to bother" with her visitor; as a result she loses some of her children to the flu. In another, a lady who turns a beggar away has her lawn overrun with Bermuda grass. Stories like these are what Cotton Mather called "judgments on the wicked." They teach us to do right by showing us what happens to us when we don't. Many of them have to do with blasphemy and graphically demonstrate, in the words of one informant, that "the Lord will not be mocked." For example, in 1962 two priests from California decided to baptize a goat; they were struck dumb and haven't talked yet. In Idaho, the wayward son of a stake president consecrated a glass of beer; he passed out immediately, fell into a coma, and died a few days later. Two boys were in a chapel on Saturday without permission; they put bread on the sacrament trays and were running up and down the aisles; one of them looked down and discovered the bread had turned black. In 1860 Brigham Young dedicated "Salem pond," a new irrigation project, and promised that no one would die in the pond if the people refrained from swimming on Sunday; the eight people who have since drowned there were all swimming on Sunday. In southern Utah, a young man refused a mission call; about a month later he died in an automobile crash. In Springville not long ago three boys took a ouija board to the cemetery on Halloween night and asked it when they would die; within three years, in accordance with the ouija board's answer, all three were dead, one from suicide and the other two from accidents.

In no place do these stories flourish as abundantly as they do in the mission field. They are told over and over again to impress on the missionaries the sacredness of their callings and to demonstrate that the power of the priesthood is not to be tampered with. According to one story, a photograph taken of an elder in swimming, against mission rules, showed an evil-looking form hovering over his head. A story from Brazil tells of a missionary who refused to sleep in his garments at night because of the hot, humid weather: "When his companion woke in the morning he found the errant elder pressed into the wall so hard that he could hardly pull him off. The elder was obviously dead from being thus mashed into the wall." One of the most widely known stories, recounted in practically every mission, tells of elders who, as in the following account, are struck dead for testing their priesthood power by attempting to ordain a post or a Coke bottle or an animal: "Two missionaries were messing around, and they decided to confer the



Priesthood on a dog which they saw on the street. Before they could complete the ordinance, a bolt of lightning came and struck the dog and the two elders, and it *zapped* them."

One of the most frightening cycles of stories is that which tells of missionaries who seek a testimony by going through the back door—that is, by seeking first a testimony of the devil. The following story is typical:

I heard from one of my companions about a particular individual that decided that he would gain his testimony by finding out about the adversary. And so he decided that he would pray to the devil and pray for a manifestation or a vision of some type. . . . As he proceeded to pray, hour after hour, his companion had gone to bed and left him in the middle of the room on his knees, praying for a manifestation, or waiting to see the devil in person. And so, as the story goes, he finally reached the point where he woke, or he made enough noise so his companion woke and went to the window and saw a black figure on a black horse coming down the road towards their apartment. And they were up at least two stories, and this particular individual, as the story goes, jumped out of the window.

Another version of the same story ends a little differently:

He [the companion] looks over to the bed where his companion has gone to bed finally, and he's completely white and obviously dead from his appearance, and there's a black figure on a white horse in the room, who is laughing. And then it just kind of fades away, until there's nothing. And the companion's dead.

In many versions, the nonpraying companion summons the mission president for help. Usually when they enter the room by breaking down the door they find the praying elder suspended in the air, his hair sometimes as white as an old man's. In one account, when they opened the door, the suspended elder's body is slammed against the wall, instant death the result. In another they find the bed pinned to the ceiling with the missionary dead between bed and ceiling. In still another the elder is in bed, burned from one end to the other.

These stories do not make pleasant reading, nor telling. Anyone who doubts their evocative power need only sit in his office late at night, as I have done, listening to them on tape. I think I can say with some assurance that a group of missionaries sitting up telling the stories would not lightly dishonor their priesthood for some time to come. From them, unpleasant though they may be, we find a good example of how folklore controls behavior, moulding it, in this instance through tales of horror, to fit the accepted norms of the group.

Most Mormon folklore is not so dark and gloomy as these devil stories. Much of it, indeed, suggests that God is in his heaven and that all is right with the world—or, at least, that all will be right with the world. Committed to a Messianic view of life, most of us are convinced that if we will only endure to the end we will win in the end. Yet, as turmoil and unrest swirl around us, it is difficult at times not to feel, with Matthew Arnold, that

... we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.<sup>12</sup>

But our folklore persuades us otherwise. It teaches us that there is, after all, order in the universe and that if things get too much out of hand, God will step in and set them right.

Consider, for example, the following story:

There was war between the Arabs and the Jews and the Jews were out-numbered by hundreds, thousands. They had one cannon and they had like about ten men, and the Arabs had stuff from Russia, artillery and all sorts of stuff. And the Jews were banging on cans and moving the cannon over here and they'd shoot it and then they'd move it back and shoot it so the Arabs would think they had lots of men. And they were only fooled for a little while.

And then when the Jews had just about run out of all their ammo and they were ready to surrender, then the Arabs, they all threw down their weapons and came walking and waving the white flag and everything, surrendering to these Jews. And the Jews walk out and there's ten of them. And the Arab guy who was spokesman for the group said: "Where are those thousands of troops that were just across the hill with the man in white leading them? This man was dressed in white and he was leading all these thousands of men and he had a long beard."

In some accounts *three* men with white flowing beards appear to the Arab generals and warn them to surrender or to face annihilation. The story, one of the most popular Nephite accounts to develop in recent years,<sup>13</sup> has been attached to all the Arab-Israeli wars: the 1948 War, the 1956 War, the 1967 War, and the recent war

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<sup>12</sup>Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold, 1840-1867* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 402.

<sup>13</sup>This story seems to have entered the Nephite tradition from printed sources. A somewhat different version from the one given here was cited by Joseph Fielding Smith in *The Signs of the Times* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1952), pp. 227-29. Two years later LeGrand Richards printed the same story in *Israel! Do You Know?* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), pp. 229-33. Both President Smith and Elder Richards cited as their source an article in *The Jewish Hope* by Arthur U. Michelson. Neither of them argued that the men in the story were Nephites but merely suggested that they might have been.



that brought about the oil crisis. It persuades those who believe it that God's plans for the Jews will not be thwarted and that he will not allow the wrong side to win in the Middle East.

On a less grand, but no less significant, scale, we hear stories which convince us that the missionary system will succeed in taking the gospel to the world. For example, a recent story tells of a missionary in the Language Training Mission who had gotten up one hot night to take a shower:

He took his shower and returned or began to return to his room. Halfway down the hall he stopped because he heard a noise and wheeled around. Upon doing so he saw before each door an armed guard. Each one was a full six feet six inches tall, and regally dressed as one might expect a Nephite army to be dressed. One sees many such pictures of Moroni. Each one was standing at attention, and the ones at the end of the hall behind him were changing guard, therefore the noise.

From the mission fields come numerous accounts of these guardian warriors being put to good service. Missionaries are saved from storms, rescued from violent mobs, and pulled from flaming wrecks on the freeway. In one instance, two lady missionaries, who run out of gasoline in the middle of a New Mexico desert, fortuitously discover a service station, fill up, and proceed on their journey; on their next trip over the same road they learn that no station has ever existed at the place where they filled their car with gas. After being badly treated on one street in Taiwan, the missionaries shake dust from their feet and the entire street burns down. In South America the elders dust their feet and a town is destroyed by wind. Two elders leave their garments at a laundry, and when the proprietor holds them up for ridicule, both he and the laundry burn, the fire so hot, in one instance, that it melts the bricks.

With the monstrous Texas murders fresh in our minds and with other stories of opposition to the missionary program familiar to us all, we take comfort in stories that testify that the missionary system, and with it the gospel, will prevail and that our righteous sons and daughters will be protected from harm. The stories thus provide their listeners a sense of security and equilibrium in an unsure world.

In discussing the contribution of myth and ritual to the stability of a society, the anthropologist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown has argued that members of society share a "system of sentiments" (about right and wrong and about the order of the universe) and that it is the continuance of these collective sentiments that makes the survival

of society possible. The function of folklore, he says, is, through "regular and adequate expression," to keep these sentiments alive in the minds of the people.<sup>14</sup> All the examples I have given above fit Radcliffe-Brown's formula rather neatly. They reinforce our belief in Church dogma and practice; they persuade us to follow accepted standards of behavior by showing what will happen to us if we do and, particularly, what will happen to us if we don't; and they give rest to our souls by showing that there is order and purpose in the universe. But in all the examples I have given, I have left out one very important person—J. Golden Kimball.

How do we deal with J. Golden Kimball? More important, how do we deal with the fact that thirty-seven years after his death Mormons still tell more anecdotes about him than about any other figure in Church history? At first brush, the stories told about him certainly seem not to fit Radcliffe-Brown's model. They often make fun of Church practice. They do not give one a particularly strong feeling for the cosmic order of things. And they inspire correct behavior only in the sense that those who tell the stories fear they may be struck dead for doing so.

To answer this question about the J. Golden Kimball stories, let us look briefly at a missionary tale. By far the best known and most popular story my colleague John B. Harris and I have collected in our study of missionary lore tells of a pair of enterprising elders who, deciding to take an unauthorized trip, make their weekly activity reports out three months in advance, leave them with their landlady with instructions to send one in each week to the mission office, and then leave on an unearned vacation. A few weeks before their return, the landlady mixes up the reports, sends one in out of sequence, and they are caught. The place of the unauthorized trip (New York, The Riviera, Cairo, Moscow, the Easter Islands, the bush country of Australia) varies greatly; otherwise, the details of the story, known in virtually every mission, are the same. One could argue that, since the wayward elders are always caught, the story serves as a warning to obey mission rules. Perhaps it does. But most missionaries enjoy the story because they find it amusing. One returned missionary who had served as assistant to the mission president, told me: "You would always like to do something like that yourself, and you kinda admire someone who has the guts to do it." In other words the hero in this story does for the missionary what

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<sup>14</sup>A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "The Interpretation of Andamanese Customs and Beliefs: Myths and Legends," in *The Andaman Islanders* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1922), pp. 376-405.



he is not allowed to do himself—travel five kilometers beyond the boundaries of his assigned city.

Folklorists have long been intrigued by the problem we face here: Why do characters in traditional narratives commit acts that the tellers of the tales cannot, or would not, commit themselves? The answer seems to be, as the comment of my returned-missionary friend suggests, that folklore as a mirror for culture reveals not only outward behavior but also inner desires, not only what we can do but also what we might like to do if society did not decree otherwise.

Speaking to this issue, Roger Abrahams has argued that hero stories project cultural values in two ways: "as a guide for future action in real life and as an expression of dream-life, of wish-fulfillment." Of this second kind of projection, he says:

In many groups there is a trickster hero who expends much of his energy in anti-social or anti-authoritarian activity. Even when this results in benefits to the group, his actions cannot be interpreted as providing a model for future conduct. He is a projection of desires generally thwarted by society. His celebrated deeds function as an approved steam-valve for the group; he is allowed to perform in this basically childish way so that the group may vicariously live his adventures without actually acting on his impulses. To encourage such action would be to place the existence of the group in jeopardy.<sup>15</sup>

Applied to the J. Golden Kimball cycle, Abrahams' dictum means that the stories provide us the pleasure of sin without the need of suffering its consequences. More seriously, they contribute to the social cohesion Radcliffe-Brown talks about by making it easier for us to live with societal pressures that inhibit our natural inclinations and might otherwise be the undoing of both ourselves and our society.

In this connection, we should remember that the J. Golden Kimball stories are, in the final analysis, no longer about J. Golden Kimball at all. They are about us. We are the ones who keep them alive by continual retelling and by continual reshaping. We should be concerned, I believe, not so much with trying to characterize Kimball but rather with trying to understand ourselves—trying to understand why we have created the kind of character who lives in the legend, and trying to discover what need the telling of the stories fills in our own lives.

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<sup>15</sup>Roger D. Abrahams, "Some Varieties of Heroes in America," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 3 (1966):341-42.

I believe it is a need to assert one's own personality and to resist, or at least to deflate, those who exercise authority over us. One of my friends, for instance, says he takes delight in the J. Golden Kimball stories because he believes reverence for people is absurd and because J. Golden is always putting down the revered. Those who would like to censor the stories because of their colorful language have really missed their best argument. If the stories are dangerous, they are so not because of their language but because of their expressed disrespect for authority. In joke after joke, J. Golden is juxtaposed alongside a higher, more sour and dour authority. In almost every instance he lets the air out of this authority and gets away with it. For example, "J. Golden was talking with one of the Quorum members one time and the 'brother' said to him: 'Brother Kimball, I don't see how you can swear so much. Why I'd rather commit adultery than swear so much.' J. Golden answered: 'Wouldn't we all brother? Wouldn't we all?'" Another story states: "This happened in St. George. J. Golden was down there with an Apostle for stake conference. J. Golden fell asleep while the Apostle was talking and fell off his chair right at the feet of the Apostle. The Apostle looked rather strongly at Brother Kimball, who responded: 'Well, you shouldn't be so damn boring.'" Most of us know the story of how President Grant insisted on writing J. Golden's conference address because he had lost confidence in the crusty old man's ability to speak without swearing. J. Golden took the talk as he walked toward the podium, stared at President Grant's handwriting, then screeched over the microphone: "Good hell, Hebe, I can't read a damn word of this." There is humor, of course, in the swearing and in the thwarting of President Grant's plan, but the real laughter is evoked by the word "Hebe." Prophet, seer, and revelator—yes. But never Hebe. Therein lies the sacrilege.

Though the J. Golden Kimball accounts are the best known, they are by no means the only stories that put down authority figures. A large number of "Mormon Bishop" jokes also serve this end. The following story, which has also been told for years about Protestant ministers, Catholic priests, and Jewish rabbis, is typical:

This bishop lost his bicycle and suspected that it was stolen, so he talked with his counselors about it and asked them to help him find out who stole it. The bishop decided to give a little talk in church about the ten commandments, and when he came to the commandment about "Thou shalt not steal," he would slow down and pause so that his counselors could see who squirmed and find out who it was that stole his bicycle. Well, the bishop got up in



church and started preaching about the ten commandments, but when he came to the commandment about stealing he didn't even slow down. He just rattled right on and didn't even pause at all. Afterwards his counselors asked him why he didn't slow down so they could see who squirmed when he talked about stealing. The bishop said, "Well, when I came to the commandment 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' I remembered where I left my bicycle."<sup>16</sup>

(It is interesting to note that not only is the bishop in this joke made to look ridiculous; he is made so by violation of the very law that bishops are usually most diligent to enforce among their charges.) Even among our children the tendency to rebel against authority by using folklore is sometimes evident. Fed a diet of saccharine-sweet songs by solicitous Primary and Sunday School teachers, youngsters often respond with parodies like the following:

I have five little fingers on one little hand;  
I have six little fingers on my other hand.  
During all the long hours till daylight is through,  
I have one little finger with nothing to do.

Some of the jokes project not just a resistance to authority but also a concern with certain Church practices. For example:

One day Saint Peter was repairing the Gates of Heaven and a Catholic priest who had just died came to get in.

"It'll be a few minutes before you can enter," Saint Peter said. "The gates are broken. You can go over there and have a cup of coffee while you wait."

The priest calmly began drinking his coffee and Saint Peter returned to his work. Not long after, a Protestant minister who had just died approached Saint Peter to enter heaven.

"You'll have to wait while I fix these gates," Saint Peter said. "Just go over there and have some coffee."

The minister joined the priest. Soon a Mormon bishop who had just died came up to Saint Peter and wanted to get into heaven.

Saint Peter said, "You'll have to go to hell; I don't have time to make hot chocolate."

A joke which made the rounds a few months ago tells that

President Kimball sent out messages for all members of the Church to meet on Temple Square for an important message. The Tabernacle, the Assembly Hall, and the Salt Palace were full, and people

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<sup>16</sup>Many stories like this one are Mormon not by birth but by adoption. They come originally from the large body of anticlerical stories known throughout the world. The central character, in the above instance a Mormon bishop, is a rabbi, a priest, or a minister, depending upon the religious affiliation of the people telling the jokes. The popularity of such stories throughout the Judeo-Christian world suggests that religious subjects everywhere have enjoyed deflating those who exercise authority over them.

were all over. President Kimball got up and said: "Saints, I've got some good news and some bad news. First the good news. We have just received a telegram from Western Union; the Millennium is here. Christ arrives in two days. Now for the bad news. We're all supposed to meet at the Vatican."<sup>17</sup>

Some Mormons are offended by this story because we haven't the necessary psychic distance to tell jokes about a living head of the Church the way we can tell them, for instance, about Brigham Young. But the story itself is relatively innocent, spoofing the belief that only Mormons will make it to heaven. Other jokes are more serious. For example, an anecdote collected recently but first heard by the informant in the 1930s tells that when Heber J. Grant was President of the Church and Rudger Clawson, who was a year younger than Brother Grant, was President of the Quorum of the Twelve, Brother Clawson was trying "with all his strength" to "outlive Heber." At a later date, the same story was attached to David O. McKay and Joseph Fielding Smith, who also were close in age and were Presidents of the Church and the Quorum of the Twelve respectively:

Before President McKay died, Jessie Evans Smith used to get her husband out of bed each morning and say: "All right, Joseph, it's time for our exercises. Ready. One, two, three. Outlive David O.; outlive David O."

I am quite sure that neither of these anecdotes has any basis in actual fact, but they both have a basis in the psychological fact discussed earlier—that is, both reflect a real concern of some Mormons that ascendancy to the Presidency seems to result from longevity rather than from revelation and that we are forever destined to be led by men long past their prime. I personally cannot hear the anecdotes with pleasure—I have been taught too long and too well to honor the prophet. But they exist, and if we wish really to understand varying Mormon attitudes, they cannot be ignored.

The stories we have been considering here suggest that however willingly we live under our authoritarian system we do not always do so easily. If the jokes trouble us, we should remember the point made by Abrahams: jokes like these do not provide models for con-

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<sup>17</sup>This is a widely-traveled story, told by Catholics, Mormons, and Reorganized Mormons alike. The pope in the Catholic version and the church president in the RLDS version both advise their people that the gathering place is to be Salt Lake City. Occasionally Mormons tell of the pope sending his followers to Salt Lake City, the geographical setting varying according to whether the teller is making fun of his own religion or someone else's.



duct; they provide instead a means of easing the pressures developed by the system we live under (and no matter what system we live under there will be pressures). We should also remember that the people who tell these jokes are not out to overthrow the system. They are simply finding release from their frustrations through laughter. Next Sunday will find most of them in church faithfully attending their duties. The fact that they are there may indeed be a result of their saving sense of humor. These stories, then, like the stories of divine intervention in the affairs of man, contribute to the stability of both the Church and its members. And herein lies the paradox of Mormon folklore: On the one hand, it persuades members to accept and support Church dogma and practice; on the other hand, it provides them with the means of coming to terms with the tensions such support at times imposes upon them.

In conclusion, and in answer again to the introductory questions, Mormon folklore is Mormon literature, folk literature. The materials of this literature are not some sort of fossilized artifacts surviving from an earlier period and valuable only to the curio-collecting antiquarian. They are instead a body of living traditions constantly renewed and constantly re-created as Mormons react to the circumstances of their contemporary environment. This material is valuable to the student of Mormon culture because it gives him keen insight into the Mormon mind and a better understanding of Mormon behavior. It is valuable to the people themselves because it reaffirms their conviction in the truthfulness of the gospel; it inspires them to conform to accepted patterns of behavior; it persuades them that God is on their side and in times of trouble will come to their aid; and, finally, when the burdens of their religion at times weigh too heavily upon them, it provides them with the means to ease the pressure by laughing at both themselves and the system and thus to face the new day with equanimity.