

Freeways, Parking Lots, and Ice Cream Stands: The Three Nephites in Contemporary Society

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IN THE 1892-93 ISSUE OF *The Folk-Lorist*, a publication of the old Chicago Folk-Lore Society, the Reverend David Utter, from Salt Lake City, published a short piece entitled "Mormon Superstition." He recounted Mormon beliefs about Indians, summarized briefly the contents of the Book of Mormon, and then told how, according to this book, three of Christ's new-world disciples called Nephites had been allowed to remain on earth until the Savior returned again. "Many of the saints now living," wrote Reverend Utter,

tell that they have, at different times, seen one or more of these three immortal "Nephites." A daughter of Brigham Young, now a good Unitarian, has told me that her father told, with great and solemn pleasure, of an interview that he had with one of these remaining apostles in Liverpool, when he was there on a mission. The apostle met him at the chapel door, an old man with a long gray beard, made himself known, and spoke many encouraging and helpful words (Utter 1892-93, 76).

So far as I know, this was the first reference in a scholarly publication to what has become one of the best known supernatural-narrative cycles in the United States — the legend of the Three Nephites. And for over three decades it remained the only reference. Then in 1938, in a short article entitled "The Three Nephites in Popular Tradition," folklorist Wayland Hand once again introduced the Nephite legend to the scholarly community, recounting stories of a mysterious stranger who reportedly had prepared the way for Mormon missionaries in a southern town (Hand 1938, 123-29). Hand did not continue his study of the Nephite tradition, but three other folklorists, Austin and Alta Fife and Hector Lee, had also become interested in the legend and had begun collecting stories in earnest. In 1940 and 1942 Austin Fife pub-

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lished "The Three Nephites in Popular Tradition," a ground-breaking collection of fifty-two texts, and "Popular Legends of the Mormons," which contained a summary of the main features of the stories. In describing the Nephites, Fife gave a capsule summary of the legend that has served to the present day:

In localities of Utah, Idaho, and other states where the Mormon faith is prevalent, one frequently hears accounts of the miraculous appearance and disappearance of kindly, white-bearded old men who bring messages of the greatest spiritual importance, give blessings in exchange for hospitality, lead lost people to safety, and perform various other miraculous deeds. These old men are said by the people to be the "Three Nephites" (1940, 1).

In 1947, building on the work of the Fifes and basing his study on an expanded corpus of 150 legends and their variants, Hector Lee wrote a dissertation on the Three Nephites; in 1949 he published the work as *The Three Nephites: The Substance and Significance of the Legend in Folklore*. In 1956, the Fifes turned their attention to the Nephites once again, devoting a rich chapter to them in their monumental *Saints of Sage and Saddle: Folklore among the Mormons*.

As important as these works were, knowledge of the Three Nephites reached a national audience primarily through the efforts of Richard M. Dorson, dean of American folklorists and head of the prestigious folklore program at Indiana University. Drawing on the works of the Fifes and Lee, Dorson summarized the Nephite legend in his widely read *American Folklore*, published in 1959, and again in *Buying the Wind: Regional Folklore in the United States*, published in 1964.

Mormons, of course, at least those from the Mountainwest, have needed no such works to make them aware of the Three Nephites. They know of them directly, sometimes through their own experiences, which they have interpreted as Nephite encounters, more often by hearing Nephite stories repeated in their homes and churches and by telling them to others. I remember well one such storytelling event from my own life.

On a rainy night in early October 1960, a fellow high school teacher and his wife — Ray and Ann White — were driving me to Salt Lake City. As we dodged through the late-evening traffic, I listened fascinated as Ann told me that on these very roads in recent months an old hitchhiker had hailed rides with Mormon motorists, had warned them to store food for an impending disaster, and had then disappeared miraculously from the back seats of their cars. The hitchhiker was thought to be one of the Three Nephites. I believed the story, partly because of the mood in the car that night, but primarily because I had grown up with stories of Nephite visits and found this account compatible with my past experience.

Two years later, now a graduate student at Indiana University interested primarily in Finnish folklore and literature, I met Richard Dorson, who was delighted to have a real Mormon in his program and who introduced me to the scholarly study of my own tradition. Inspired by his enthusiasm, I turned to Mormon faculty members and graduate students at the university and in 1964

collected from them forty Nephite narratives for Dorson's fieldwork course — seven of them variants of the story I had heard that rainy night in Salt Lake a few years earlier (Wilson 1969, 3–35). Dorson was surprised and pleased to discover that Mormon folklore could be collected outside Utah. And I was hooked — from that day to the present, in one way or another, the Nephites and their stories have been my companions.

As I began collecting Nephite accounts, I expected my work merely to substantiate earlier findings of the Fifes and Lee. I was wrong. Both Austin Fife and Hector Lee had argued twenty years earlier that the number of Nephite accounts was at that time decreasing, and Lee especially believed the legend would not flourish in a more technological and rational age. But my collection showed that the legend was alive and growing, at least among my informants in Bloomington, Indiana. From twenty-one individuals, I easily collected my forty tales in a very short time — and could have collected more had the semester's end not been approaching.

Lee also had argued that while older Nephite stories were still being told, new accounts were not surfacing. According to Lee, the legend developed slowly from 1830–55, grew more rapidly from 1855–75, reached its peak from 1875–1900, waned slightly from 1900–25, and after 1925 dwindled to only a few scattered narratives (1949, 31). The stories he had collected were, Lee argued, cultural survivals from the pioneer past and therefore useful primarily as a means of understanding “pioneer concepts, attitudes, and impulses” (1949, 126).

I certainly did collect some fine pioneer narratives. The following is a good example:

This story is part of the family traditions on my mother's side of the family. It dates back, I believe, to the 1870s when my mother's grandparents lived in the central Utah area, more exactly in the region of Manti. My great-grandfather had a sawmill in the area and often would go up in the mountains to cut trees, and my great-grandmother would be left at home with the many children. Well, one time my great-grandfather was away, and great-grandmother was home watching the kids, and it happened that at the time the Manti Temple was to be dedicated. And my great-grandmother wanted very much to go, but she could find no one to watch the children because everyone in the area was going to the Manti Temple dedication. On the morning of the dedication she [was] still sure that she would not be able to go. She met an old man at the front gate, and he said, “Sister Swenson, I see that you'd like to go to the temple dedication. I'm just passing through; let me watch your kids and they'll be all right as long as you're gone. Don't worry.” My great-grandmother did not know the man, had never seen him before; but somehow she felt that he was a kindly old man and agreed. And she went to the temple dedication. When she came home from the temple dedication, she met the old man just coming out of the front gate, and he said, “Well, Sister Swenson, you have nothing to worry about,” and he walked down the street. And she watched him go, and it seemed that as he just about turned down the path out of sight he met two other old men. And it was felt in the family tradition that these were Three Nephites and one of them had stopped to help my great-grandmother with the children so she could go to the temple dedication.¹

¹ This and all other Nephite stories given here, as well as names of collectors and names and comments of informants, are located in the Brigham Young University Folklore Archive,

But I also collected stories far removed from a rural, pioneer setting. Consider the following account:

I heard this from the person it's said to have happened to, which might give it some more importance. The story was related by the owner of the A & W Root Beer stand on the corner of — I think it's State Street and the entrance to Brigham Young University campus in Provo, Utah. He said he was working in his stand one afternoon in the summer when an old man came walking up and asked if he could have something to eat. The man seemed rather poor, and so the owner gave him an ice cream cone and — perhaps something with it. I don't remember. After finishing this, the old man told the owner — he said something like this, "You'll always have all you need if you're generous with what you have and live righteously." The owner of the root beer stand turned to comment to one of his employees in the store, and when he looked back the old man had disappeared. And he said he immediately went outside to look for him, saying that he couldn't have got off in this short of time — it was just a few seconds — and looked all around in every direction up and down the street and couldn't find him. And in relating this story, then, he said that it wasn't possible for him to have walked out of sight in that short a period of time from the open space around the drive-in. And so he looked upon this as certainly a visit from a being somewhat supernatural, to say the least. And this seemed the highlight of . . . this fellow's talk in which he came [to stake priesthood meeting] and related this story and also, then, pointed out how he had been closing his stand on Sundays for a long time now and that it hadn't seemed to affect his income. . . . So this seemed to be fulfillment of the promise made that if he was generous and living righteously that he wouldn't be in need.

According to Hector Lee, only five of the stories he had collected occurred after 1925 (1949, 31). But of the twenty-seven individual stories I collected in Bloomington (the other thirteen texts were variant accounts of one or more of these), eight of them, like the A & W story, related events that had occurred in the recent past. This was an important discovery. If what was true of these Bloomington Mormons should prove true of Mormons in general, the Nephite stories could serve not just as a window to the pioneer past, but also as a means of understanding contemporary Mormons coming to terms with the circumstances of modern living.

When I came to BYU and developed a course in folklore in 1969, I began to test this hypothesis. As part of their course work, students in my classes must always submit folklore they have collected themselves to the BYU Folklore Archives. While I have never required students to collect Nephite stories, many of them have. As a result, a steady stream of Nephite narratives has come into the archive each year, producing, at last count, a rich store of some 850 texts, ample evidence, I would think, that the legend is still around.

Dating the events these stories recount is no easy task, because new wine often gets put into old bottles. That is, while the structure of a particular story remains the same, the setting is often changed from pioneer to modern times. For example, one very popular pioneer narrative goes as follows:

There was a missionary thousands of miles away from his home. He was starving to death. He didn't have anything to eat, so he knelt down to pray. When he finished, a

Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602. In all instances where names of individuals appear in the stories, I have changed them to pseudonyms.

man came to him with a piece of bread covered with a towel. He ate the bread and kept the towel. Months later, when he returned home, he brought the towel to his wife. When she saw it she asked him where he had found her towel. He then related the story to her. She told him that the same day he was starving to death a man came to her door and asked her for some bread. The only bread she had was a piece that she was baking, and because it was fresh, she covered it with that towel. They thought that the man who asked her for bread was one of the Three Nephites.

A modern version of the story goes like this:

A stranger called at the home of Mrs. John Harris of Roosevelt, Utah, and asked for a meat sandwich. Mrs. Harris's husband was stationed in Korea for the U.S. Army, and a few days later, this stranger presented Mr. Harris in Korea with an identical sandwich to that which his wife had given to the stranger.

It is possible, of course, that these two stories are of independent origin, but it is much more likely that the latter is a modern adaptation of the former. And so it is with many other stories. A horse-drawn wagon tips over and pins a man under a load of wood; a stranger appears from nowhere, rescues the driver, and then disappears. In a modern version of the story the wagon simply becomes a truck.

In spite of the difficulty in dating the stories, careful textual comparisons will show that at least half the Nephite accounts in our collection describe events that occurred after 1925 — and a considerable number of them after 1960. More important, well over half the events described in the stories are believed by their tellers to have occurred in modern times. The stories speak to us, then, both of the past, or at least of our interest in the past, and of the present. They are not, as Lee suggested, simply survivals from an earlier non-rational, nonscientific way of thinking but are very much a part of our contemporary world. And while they are delightful stories whose own existence is their best excuse for being, they also provide us valuable information about ourselves. They do this for the simple reason that, like people everywhere, we tell stories about those things that interest us most or are most important to us. Further, because the stories are oral, depending on the spoken word to keep them alive, when a given event ceases to interest us, stories we tell about that event will disappear. Thus by looking carefully at the Nephite accounts and at the dominant themes contained in them, we should be able to discover those issues of central importance at any one time to the Church and especially to individual Church members.

A few of these issues have grown out of concern over world political situations. For example, in the 1950s, during the tense years of the Cold War and the Korean War, the story I have already mentioned of a Nephite warning of imminent disaster and encouraging individuals to follow Church counsel by storing a supply of food, spread rapidly through the Mormon West and became the best known Nephite account of all time (Wilson 1975, 79–97). The following is a typical example:

A lady got up [in a testimony meeting] and was quite excited and upset about this. She said that this experience had happened to — I don't remember the relation, a

friend of a friend or something. And they had been on their way to the temple and had stopped to pick up a man who was hitchhiking, and they'd talked to him about various things. And suddenly he asked them if they had their two-year supply of food, and they said no. And he said, "Well, you better get it because the end is coming, and it's coming soon." And then the conversation turned to other things. And they turned around, and he was gone, just vanished.

During the years this story was circulating, another narrative also gained wide currency. In this account the normally peace-loving Nephites, sometimes followed by a phantom army, entered the Arab-Israeli conflict on the side of the Israelis:

There was this war between the Arabs and the Jews, and the Jews were outnumbered 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 out waving the white flag and everything, surrendering to these Jews. And the Jews walk out, and there's ten of them. And the Arabs say, "Where's the rest of your men?" And the Jews say, "What do you mean the rest of our men. This is the total company." 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 in white robes and flowing white beards appear to the Arab generals and warn them to surrender or face annihilation. The story, which originally entered Mormon tradition via the religious press,² has been applied to most major Arab-Israeli conflicts — 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. It has not been collected much in recent years; but considering current geo-political tensions, it may reappear, assuring Mormons that the Lord is still in charge of events in the Middle East.

Most Nephite accounts are much less dramatic than these and relate not to national or international events, but to the personal problems of individual Mormons. These stories can be grouped into three broad categories.

The first of these has to do with genealogy and temple work. Since salvation depends on family members attending the temple to seal themselves first to each other and then to their deceased ancestors whose names they have discovered through genealogical research, it is understandable that the Nephite canon is replete with accounts of the old men appearing to Church members and encouraging them to do their duty. In the genealogy stories, the Nephite,

² The story was first published in September 1950 by Arthur U. Michelson in a Los Angeles newspaper called *The Jewish Hope* and was picked up and passed into Mormon tradition by Joseph Fielding Smith in *The Signs of the Times: A Series of Discussions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1952), pp. 227–33, and by LeGrande Richards in *Israel! Do You Know* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1954), pp. 229–33, and in "The Word of Our God Will Stand," *Improvement Era* 57 (June 1954): 404–6. For a possible source of this story, see Dov Joseph, *The Faithful City: Siege of Jerusalem, 1948* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p. 73.

as in the following narrative, usually appears to a faithful individual who has worked long and hard uncovering ancestral lines but has come upon a seemingly impassable barrier:

[My girlfriend's] grandmother was having considerable difficulty in finding some names on a certain genealogical line. She had done research and, not finding the information, had prayed about the problem. She was in her kitchen one evening, and her husband was in the living room reading the paper. They were alone in the house. Suddenly, they heard the typewriter sounding in the other room. At first, they thought each other was typing, but then they remembered where each other was located in the home. They went in to the room where the typewriter was, with the unfinished pedigree chart still in it. They found that the much sought after names were typed in—in the correct spaces. They firmly believe that it was an act of the Three Nephites.

In other stories a Nephite simply delivers a list of missing names or a newspaper containing crucial information, guides a researcher to a book in the library, or tells one good sister to go to the basement and look in an old trunk located there. In these stories, as in most Nephite accounts, the Nephite delivers his message and then miraculously disappears, thus adding credibility to the message. Such stories persuade struggling genealogists that if they will persist in their work and remain faithful they too may receive the help they need to reach their goals.

In the temple stories, a Nephite, often appearing as a hitchhiker, warns married people who have not been sealed to each other in the temple to have this ordinance performed, or he encourages others who have already been to the temple to visit there as often as possible because “the time is short.” Again he almost always disappears, sometimes leaving no tracks in the snow or along the dusty road where he asks to be let out of the car.

The second major category is missionary work. With over 30,000 young people serving as full-time missionaries in all parts of the world and with the Church's constant emphasis on proselytizing activity, it is again understandable that the Nephites would choose to become involved. On numerous occasions they reportedly have visited a community to prepare it for the message soon to be brought by the missionaries. And from all over the world come accounts of Nephites escorting missionaries through a vicious slum, protecting them from angry crowds, participating with them in street meetings, instructing them in proper proselytizing methods, cheering them when discouraged, and, in time of need, providing them with adequate food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. In recent times, our automobile culture generates many stories. For example:

Two missionaries in the Canadian Mission were driving home from a discussion meeting one day and there was quite a bad storm going. They were clear out in the middle of nowhere when their car broke down, and they were unable to repair it. They decided that they would just freeze to death if they stayed there, so they got out of the car and started walking down the road. After a couple of hours they were pretty badly frozen anyway and could tell they weren't going to be able to go much farther. Just then they heard a car coming behind them. It stopped and the man opened the door, and they got into the back seat. They were so cold they just laid

down on the floor, and didn't even look at the man. Finally they came to a service station, and the man stopped the car at the side of the road to let them out. They got out and stumbled over to the station, but they still hadn't really gotten a look at the man in the car. When they got up to the station, the attendant looked surprised and asked where they had come from. They said from the car that had just stopped out in front. He said, "There hasn't been any car come along here for a couple of hours." They went out to the road and looked, and there weren't even any tire tracks.

To struggling young missionaries such stories provide inspiration and motivation for their difficult work, and to their anxious parents back home they give assurance that the Lord and his servants will protect their daughters and sons while they are away.

The third category of stories really subsumes the others. In these narratives, the Nephites come to solve the personal and sometimes desperate needs of individuals — to save them from physical or spiritual danger. Most of the pioneer stories Mormons still relate will, like the following, fall into this category:

My aunt who lived in Rock Point, Summit County, Utah, was left a widow with a large family. She just wondered how she was ever going to manage, and one day an elderly man came to her home and asked for bread. She said, "Oh, I wonder what I'm going to do! I just have this big family and all." But anyway she gave him a meal and brought him in and fixed him up, and when he left he said, "Sister, you'll be blessed|. You'll never see the bottom of your flour bin." And she looked for him when he went out the door, and she couldn't find him anywhere. And she always felt that this visit was from one of the Nephites. She had looked and looked and not any of the other neighbors had ever seen him. And she said as long as she lived she never did see the bottom of her flour bin.

The majority of the stories relating contemporary events also fall into this category. These stories reveal that contemporary Mormon society is not remarkably different from that of the past. The concerns of our pioneer fathers and mothers are still our concerns today — though worked out in modern contexts. Hector Lee argued that as the need for security from the hazards of pioneer living faded, the Nephite stories diminished (1946, 35, 122). This need has not faded; it has merely changed, generating new stories all the while. For example, in pioneer society, where doctors were scarce and medical techniques primitive, the Nephites came often to aid the Saints in times of illness. They frequently administered to the sick through the laying on of hands, or they employed such popular home remedies as tobacco boiled in lard for the caked breast of a nursing mother, grated nutmeg mixed in oil for a child with croup, and an extract from an indigenous herb for a cholera victim.

The Nephite visiting ailing Mormons today will still lay hands on people's heads and bless them, but also frequently relies on the techniques of modern medicine. Today the Nephite pulls a bishop's son from a lake after a canoeing accident and revives him through artificial respiration; he rescues a Church official from a fiery automobile accident and treats his wound "in a very professional manner"; and in one instance he actually enters the hospital, operates on a woman the doctors had been unable to treat, and removes a "black-covered growth" from her stomach.

Life on the frontier was dangerous, and the Nephites had their hands full rescuing cattlemen and children from blizzards, guiding wagon trains to water holes, saving them from Indian raids, finding lost oxen, bringing food to isolated and starving homesteaders, pulling wagon drivers from under their overturned conveyances, and harvesting crops for ailing farmers. Today it is the Native Americans who need Nephite protection from the whites; sleek automobiles zip us rapidly over paved roads from one water hole to the next; and government welfare agencies succor the poor and needy. Still, modern life is not without its perils, and the Nephites continue to find ample work. Occasionally they stop to fix a widow's furnace, guide a nurse through a storm to the hospital, help a young man pass an officers' candidate test, or rescue a temple worker locked in the temple after it closed. But for the most part, they are kept busy on the highways. For example:

A family consisting of parents and three children were on their way to stake conference. They lived on a desert, and it was a hot, dusty ride of two hundred miles to the tabernacle. On the way home the car broke down on a lonely road, which was even more deserted because it was Sunday. The children were hot and hungry, and the poor father could not find the trouble. Just then, two men in white came walking down the road and offered to help. Telling the man to get in his car and start the motor, they lifted the hood. To the family's surprise the car started, and after kissing his wife and hugging his children for joy, he went out to thank the men. They had disappeared.

In other stories the Nephites repair a broken truck axle, tow a stranded automobile to safety, guide motorists lost in blizzards or in the deserts of Death Valley, keep a long-haul truck driver awake, and pull people from a flaming pileup on the Los Angeles freeway.

As they have done for the past 100 years, the Nephites still come to comfort mourners, clarify gospel teachings, and encourage devotion to duty; but the spiritual advice they now give speaks to the children of a modern age. For example, a Nephite appears to a woman who has lost her husband and daughter in an airplane crash and tells her that her loved ones have been called on a special mission to the spirit world. In Portland, Oregon, a woman takes a break in the department store where she works and forgets to check out at the time clock; a Nephite meets her at the foot of the stairs and reminds her of her negligence. In Los Angeles, one of the old men appears to the head of the police force vice squad and urges him to give up his wild ways. And in San Diego, a Nephite warns a young parking-lot attendant about to be seduced by a woman customer "not to ruin his entire life for a few minutes of pleasure."

In the new stories, then, the scene changes from country to city, but many of the old problems and concerns continue. They are simply changed in form. They are worked out not in pioneer or village cottages with a country road winding pleasantly by, but in urban dwellings, at parking lots and ice cream stands, with the freeway sounding noisily in the background.

What do the Nephite stories tell us about central issues in the Church? Nothing too startling. They show us that the main concerns of the Church are also the main concerns of individual Church members — living lives that

will make them worthy to enter the temple, sealing themselves to their family members, both living and dead, and taking the gospel message to the world. But the stories do more than simply mirror dominant beliefs and principles. They also testify to the validity of Church programs and inspire members to follow them. As anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown has pointed out, folklore expresses and cultivates in the minds of individuals those "sentiments" upon which the continuity and existence of a society depend (1922, 376–405). The Nephite stories thus reflect and reinforce Church programs and, by endowing them with mystical values, place them beyond criticism or questioning.

They also provide the believer with a sense of security in an unsure world. Just as the early Utah settler living in a hostile physical environment felt safe listening to an account of a Nephite rescuing a rancher from a blizzard, so, too, contemporary Mormons faced with urban congestion, riots, and increasing international tensions are comforted when they hear that Nephites might protect them on crowded highways, guard their children in the mission field, and make sure the right side carries the day in the Middle East.

Perhaps most important, the stories give evidence of a personal, loving and caring God, who sends his servants to succor the weary, protect the helpless, and encourage the wayward to mend their ways.

When physically describing the Nephites, the stories are remarkably inconsistent. The old men have white beards, gray beards, black beards, red beards, neat beards, scraggly beards, no beards at all. And they appear in everything from shabby khaki pants to tuxedos. But despite this variation in dress and appearance, one thing remains constant throughout the Nephite canon: the Nephites come in love and compassion. The following statements from a variety of different stories capture in part the feelings of the narrators toward the Nephite visitor: "[He brought] a very serene, peaceful, and quiet feeling"; "he seemed to bring a good feeling"; "a strange feeling came over the woman as she examined the caller—she noticed a sweet spirit radiate from his eyes"; "he vibrated with kindness and love"; "after he left I had such a peaceful feeling fill my soul and heart"; "[his] personality was overwhelming"; "he seemed to bring peace into the room upon entering"; "in the presence of this man he felt a warmth and friendship that was immediate"; "[he] was extremely kind."

These, kind, compassionate, caring disciples of the Savior come, then, not so much as divine messengers or fearful visitors from the other side, but as brothers and friends, engaged with the people to whom they appear in the same eternal drama and determined to help their brothers and sisters along the way. This gives the Nephite stories a homespun quality and a warmth and immediacy seldom found in other supernatural legend cycles—a warmth and immediacy captured wonderfully in the following story:

Millie and George were a middle-aged couple who had gone a little to the wayside. When first married, they hadn't thought of ever having a cup of coffee or a shot of whiskey. But now, who's to say they were wrong to just calm their nerves by the coffee or whiskey. In their younger years, they never missed a Church meeting or calling. Now, it was harder to get up and wipe the sleep out of their eyes. It was much easier to stay in bed and let Priesthood [meeting] and Sunday school go on

without them. When it came time for Sacrament meeting, Millie was too busy fixing dinner and George, he was too tired from lying around all day. This routine went on for quite a few years. One day as Millie and George were riding down a lonely Arizona road, they saw two men who were hitchhiking. Usually, they would never think of picking up hitchhikers, but something told them to pull over and pick up the two men. The men were dressed nicely and looked as if they hadn't walked even a mile. When asked where they were going, they said that they were going anywhere Millie and George were going. Then they began to talk of things which were very extraordinary and unusual. They told Millie and George that they were living in the last days when the Savior of the world was to come again. They told of the great destruction that would come to the wicked if they did not repent. They told them of the wonderful day when Jesus Christ would again come and never leave his brothers and sisters. They talked on about all that was to come for the world and all its inhabitants. Finally, they told Millie and George that if they didn't repent, they were going to be two sad people. If they kept on as they were, they would be very unhappy and discontented when they didn't obtain the degree of glory they wanted. It was those little things that were bringing them to destruction. Millie and George just sat there wide-eyed and listening to each word spoken by these two strange men. They couldn't bring themselves to turn around and look at the two men because they knew within what they said was true. Millie finally got up enough courage to turn around to ask the men how they knew so much about her and her husband's personal lives. When she turned around, the two men were gone, and they didn't leave even a hint that they had been sitting in that back seat. This experience shook George and Millie greatly. From then on, they gave up their habits and shortcomings. Millie and George, to this day believe those two men who brought them to the truth were two of the Three Nephites.

What does the future hold for the Nephite legend? Will the old stories continue to be told, and will we still hear about new ones? Or in our supposedly more sophisticated age, will the stories eventually disappear?

To answer these questions, we must ask still others: Will Mormons continue to hold fast to the visions of Joseph Smith? Will they continue to believe that God personally leads the Church, rewarding the faithful and punishing sinners? Will Church members continue to seek evidence of God's participation in their daily affairs, and will they continue to tell others about this participation? So long as answers to these questions remain affirmative, the Nephite stories will probably remain. Or if they do disappear, they will be replaced by similar stories that meet similar needs in the lives of those who tell and believe them.

What we must remember is that the Nephite accounts are really only a small part of a much larger body of Mormon supernatural lore that shows no signs of diminishing — a lore generated by belief in a personal God who actively intervenes in people's lives. And this lore speaks to the same central issues as those reflected in the Nephite narratives — genealogy work, temple work, missionary work, personal worthiness, and divine help in solving personal problems. In fact, the Nephite stories are so similar in subject matter to the rest of Mormon lore that stories often slip easily from one genre to another. For example, in one of the most popular non-Nephite stories of recent times, a young mother attending a temple to perform vicarious ordinances for the

dead suddenly felt that something was wrong at home but was promised by a temple official that if she would complete the session everything would be fine.

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 a 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 [deceased] lady for whom that woman had gone through the temple that day.

Another story collected just last year has an identical beginning to the one just cited, but the ending takes a different direction:

They went home, and they really got concerned when they saw a police car and a fire truck outside their house. They ran up to the house and asked the baby sitter what was wrong, and she said their little girl was missing, and they thought she might have fallen into the irrigation ditch because they found her ball in the ditch. So they went searching for her, and about fifteen minutes later she just showed up at the door, and they asked her where she had been, and she said she fell in the ditch, and a man all dressed in white helped her out. I think he was one of the Three Nephites.

That the Nephite tradition was still strong enough to pull this story into the cycle suggests that the stories will be with us for some time to come.

Some may argue that the stories will continue for still another reason — because they are true. If the Book of Mormon is really the word of God, the following Book of Mormon description of the Three Nephites ought to be sufficient explanation for the continuance of the stories: “And they are as the angels of God, and . . . can show themselves unto whatsoever man it seemeth them good. Therefore, great and marvelous works shall be wrought by them, before the great and coming day [of judgment]” (1 Nephi 28:30–31).

I have no quarrel with this argument. As a folklorist interested in human behavior, I am, to be sure, more concerned with the influence of the stories on the lives of those who believe and tell them than I am with the validity of the stories themselves; and as a literary scholar, intrigued by the struggle for human souls revealed in the Nephite drama, I am more concerned with the artistic tensions developed by the actors in that drama than I am with the historical accuracy of the narratives. But as a Latter-day Saint who believes in the Book of Mormon, I also believe that the Three Nephites may do what the Book of Mormon says they can do. Having read hundreds of Nephite accounts and having compared them with each other, with Mormon folklore in general, and with supernatural legends outside Mormon tradition, I can discount many of the narratives. But I can't discount them all. And I am romantic enough to hope that a story like the following, collected from the young lady who was about to marry the young man in the story, really happened:

Carol's fiancé, Brent, was called to the Mexico-North Mission. Since Carol had not previously been . . . [through the temple ceremonies], she couldn't go through the temple with Brent to see him . . . [receive his ordinances]. So she stayed outside on the temple grounds of the Mesa, Arizona, Temple. To make her wait a little less

tiring and more enjoyable, she took along some embroidery. As she was standing outside the entrance, a short, very old man dressed in white coveralls and carrying a hoe came up to her and said, "You must be very proud of that young man in there," nodding towards the temple. Because she had not seen him standing around when Brent was there, she was very surprised by his remark. He said he was the gardener for the temple grounds and asked if she would like to walk along with him since she had about three hours to wait. She said yes, mostly out of curiosity, she supposed. But as the time went on, he showed her all the flowers on the grounds and explained the lives of some and legends behind others. It seemed his entire life was those flowers. He continued speaking to her, and showed her many things in nature, and she grew to love him in the short time she had known him. He began talking about Brent then. He said she was a lucky girl to have such a man as her future husband. And he went on to explain the importance of marriage. He told her that when Brent came out of the temple, she would see him as she never had before. He then looked at his watch and said, "I suppose your young man will be coming out soon, so we will walk back." As they got back to the waiting room, he thanked her for spending the time with him and asked her to please remember what he had told her that day. Then he left, just as Brent appeared at the desk. Carol looked at him, and she said he had a glow around his entire face. She kissed him and told him to hurry because there was someone she wanted him to meet. They rushed out to catch the gardener, and he wasn't anywhere to be found. Carol looked everywhere they had been and finally she found a very tall man dressed in dirty blue coveralls. She excused herself and asked if he had seen the gardener, and he answered her and said that he was the only temple gardener there had been for the last three years and that he had seen no one there all day.

I see no reason to doubt that the young lady who told this story really had spent the afternoon talking with a stranger. Whether this stranger was simply a kindly old man who had helped a young lady pass the time while she waited for her missionary to go through the temple or whether he was one of the Three Nephites sent to help her understand the significance of the occasion, I leave for each individual to decide.

Stories of the Three Nephites, then, like the stories of Millie and George or of Carol and Brent, are still very much a part of contemporary Mormon society. In our unguarded moments, in a testimony meeting, in a Sunday school class, in intimate conversations with small groups of friends, in the family circle — when critical perceptions are tuned low and the spiritual vibrations are strong — in these moments the Nephite stories circulate among us. And they tell us much of ourselves and of our church. They mirror our attitudes, values, and principal concerns; they reinforce Church teachings and persuade us to follow them; they tell us of a personal God concerned with our individual problems; and they provide us with pride in the past, with confidence in the future, and with the means of meeting the crises of modern living with equanimity. So long as the stories continue to meet these ends, they will remain a vital part of Mormon folk tradition, and they will continue to enlarge our understanding of Mormon culture.

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