

The Study of Mormon Folklore: An Uncertain Mirror for Truth

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IT IS AN HONOR FOR ME TO SPEAK HERE, partly because of the standard of excellence set by those who have preceded me at this podium, but primarily because of my respect for the man in whose name these lectures are held — Parley A. Christensen. I took four classes from Professor Christensen during my undergraduate years — Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and History of the English Language. I would hope that the literature that nurtured us both has instilled in me the same respect for the dignity of life and the same belief in the worth of all human beings that characterized his life. And I would hope also that the man who gave his collection of essays *All in a Teacher's Day* (1948) the subtitle, *Essays of a Mormon Professor*, would not be disappointed by his former pupil's choosing to speak in the Christensen Lecture Series on the folk literature of the Mormons.

When I began graduate work at Indiana University in 1962, I had no intention of studying Mormon folklore; indeed, my only experience with that subject had been mild shock when my English Romanticism professor, Orea Tanner, referred to stories of the Three Nephites as "folklore." I had come to IU to pursue a much more serious end — to learn as much as possible about Finnish folklore as a necessary prelude for my intended study of Finnish literature. But then I met Richard M. Dorson, head of the Indiana University Folklore Program and the dean of American folklore study. Relying on the works of Mormon folklorists — Thomas Cheney, Hector Lee, and Austin and Alta Fife — Dorson had written a chapter on Mormon folklore for his very popular text, *American Folklore* (1959); he lectured on Mormon folklore in his survey courses; and he made sure his students paid attention by asking questions on the subject in doctoral examinations.

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When I arrived in Bloomington, he was delighted to have a real Mormon in his program and soon set me the task of studying my own cultural heritage. During the fieldwork class I took from Dorson, I turned to Mormon faculty members and graduate students at the university and collected and annotated forty legends of the Three Nephites — I hope Professor Tanner would have been pleased. Professor Dorson was amazed to discover that Mormon folklore could be collected outside Utah, and I was hooked. A shortened version of this collection became my first publication in a professional journal (1969); and, though I have continued to study Finnish folklore and literature, I have from that time to the present devoted much of my energy to collecting and trying to understand the folk literature of the culture that produced me.

In the classes I have taught at Brigham Young University and Utah State University since completing my study at Indiana in 1967, I have required students to collect, interpret, and submit to the archives folklore they have encountered in their own lives. Though they have been free to collect whatever they wish, many, probably believing that following their professor's enthusiasms is the better part of valor, have turned their attention to their own Mormon traditions, with the result that the archives at both USU and BYU are brim full with Mormon materials. The slim file of Three Nephite narratives I collected at Indiana University now contains about one thousand separate stories; the missionary collection John B. Harris and I have brought together includes well over three thousand items; and these are only parts of the whole. The total Mormon collection contains thousands of separate items, mostly narratives — a data base large enough, I trust, to warrant my making some generalizations this evening and suggesting some directions for future research.

Before trying to draw a picture of the Mormon world that emerges from narratives in the folklore archives, I must make a few statements about the premises that underpin the work of most folklorists.

First, the people who possess a body of lore — that is, the folk — are not, as was once thought, unlettered, mainly agrarian people bound together by some kind of psychic unity that stretches relatively unchanged across cultural boundaries and from age to age. This concept of "the folk," which, unfortunately, some historians writing about Joseph Smith's magical practices still adhere to, is both outdated and misleading, and any research conclusions based on it should be accepted with great caution, if at all.

Who then are the folk? We all are. Each of us has a number of social identities — for example, I am a father, a college teacher, a Democrat, a westerner, and a Mormon. When I am with people who share my Mormon identity and in a social context that brings that identity to the fore, my other identities will be at least partially suppressed and I will think and act in traditionally prescribed ways, in ways similar to those in which other members of my group will think and act. As we relate to each other and to our Mormon world, we will attempt to manipulate the social environment to our advantage by generating, performing, and transmitting "lore," by communicating, that is, through traditional forms ranging from the stories of inspiration and courage

we recount about our pioneer ancestors, to the advice and comfort we give to a friend mourning the death of a loved one, to the jokes we tell about our bishops. Again, this is a process we all participate in. We are all the folk.

Second, narratives shared by members of a like-minded group serve as a mirror for culture, as a reflector of what members of the group consider most important. Thus the stories we Latter-day Saints tell provide valuable insights into our hopes, fears, dreams, and anxieties. This is so for the simple reason that folklore depends on the spoken word for its survival. Like all people, we tell stories about those things that interest us most or are most important to us. Each individual Latter-day Saint is in some ways different from all other Latter-day Saints, but if a story does not appeal to a sufficient number of us to keep it alive, if it does not somehow relate to what I have called our "value center" (1976, 45-46) — a consensus center of attitude and belief that ties us all together — it will either be altered by the tellers to make it conform to that value center or it will disappear. Those stories that continue to be told can serve, therefore, as a barometer of our principal concerns at any given time. If we want to understand Mormon hearts and minds, we should pay close heed to Mormon oral narratives.

Third, storytellers themselves recount their narratives not to help scholars better understand what is important to them but rather to satisfy their own ends and meet their own needs. A Mormon missionary who tells his junior companion about another missionary who decided to test his priesthood power by ordaining a post to the priesthood and then was struck dead by a bolt of lightning does not tell that story to satisfy intellectual curiosity. The story does reflect the Mormon conviction that God will not be mocked and is useful, therefore, to the student of Mormon belief; but the missionary tells the story primarily to persuade his companion, and to remind himself, that if they don't want to be zapped by lightning they had better take serious things seriously. In other words, folklore has significant functions for both tellers and listeners.

Finally, every telling of a story is in some ways an exercise in behavior modification, an employment by the narrator of a rhetorical strategy designed to persuade the audience to accept a certain point of view or to follow a certain course of action — to convince one's fellows, for example, that ordaining posts to the priesthood is not a very healthy practice. Few storytellers would consider themselves artists, but they know that if they are to encourage the righteous or reform sinners they must make their stories artful — that is, they must imbue them with power. There are, of course, good and bad storytellers just as there are good and bad creative writers. The principal difference between successful oral and written storytelling lies not in the artistic merit of the works created but in the methods of composition. The writer achieves artistic power by carefully arranging words on the written page. The speaker of tales, in a dynamic process that cannot adequately be captured on the written page, achieves the same end by responding to an active audience. It is this interplay between teller and listeners which in the final analysis will give shape, meaning, and power to the story created. The art of folklore, therefore, lies not in the tale told, but in the *telling* of the tale. Some of the stories I will

turn to now, reduced to paper, may seem fairly pedestrian; but in actual performance many have had the power to move listeners to laughter or to tears.

If a dreadful holocaust were somehow to destroy all Mormon documents except those in the BYU Folklore Archives, what sort of picture of our contemporary Mormon world would a future generation of scholars, using only these surviving manuscripts, be able to draw? From the manuscripts, they would discover, first, that we have ennobled our pioneer past and made it a model for present action; second, that we see ourselves as actors in a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil; and, third, that in spite of the seriousness of this struggle, or perhaps because of it, we have developed the saving grace of easing tensions by laughing at ourselves and sometimes at the system we live under. In what follows, I offer a brief glimpse of each of these constituent parts of our Mormon world as revealed in folklore.

Every culture has its own creation myths — a body of narratives explaining how the social order came into being and providing models after which people in the present should pattern their behavior. People from all cultures tend generally to believe that the first way of doing things was the best way; therefore, when they struggle to solve contemporary problems, they seek answers in the primordial reality reflected in their origin narratives. Jews and Christians turn to the Bible, Communists to the words and deeds of Marx and Lenin, Americans to stories of their founding fathers, and Latter-day Saints to accounts of their pioneer ancestors.

From the outset, our Mormon forebears found themselves in sharp conflict with established American society. Their insistence that only they possessed the “correct” way to salvation, their tendency to establish political control in the areas they settled, their attempts to establish a theocratic state, and, later, their practice of polygamy engendered the hostility of their fellow citizens, who drove the beleaguered Latter-day Saints from New York to Ohio to Missouri and, finally, to Illinois, where in 1844 Joseph Smith paid a martyr’s price for his vision of the kingdom of God restored. Two years later Brigham Young led the Saints out of the United States in search of peace and refuge in the mountains and deserts of territorial Utah. There they struggled to overcome an unfriendly natural environment, colonized the Great Basin, sent out missionaries to gather in the elect, and set themselves single-mindedly to the task of “building up” a new Zion in preparation for the second coming of the Savior.

Out of this cauldron of struggle and conflict were forged many of the stories we still tell today, stories that inculcate in both tellers and listeners a great sense of appreciation for the sacrifices of these first Latter-day Saints and a determination to face present difficulties with equal courage.

Perhaps the most gripping cycle of stories has to do with the migration west in the years between 1846 and the coming of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Many who took part in this migration traveled in covered wagons; others, who could not afford wagons, pushed and pulled their meager supplies across thirteen hundred miles of prairies and mountains in homemade two-wheeled handcarts. The stories resulting from this experience tell of hardships

endured and of the spunk of the people who made the trip. In almost every instance, the stories remind us of the debt of gratitude we owe those who prepared the way for us, persuade us to hold fast to the church for which they paid such a dear price, and encourage us to face our own trials with similar fortitude. Consider the following story:

We were six in family when we started — father, my stepmother, two brothers, a sister sixteen years of age and myself. It seems strange that there were more men and boys died than there were women and girls. My two brothers died on the way, and my father died the day after we arrived in Salt Lake. The night my oldest brother died there were nineteen deaths in camp. In the morning we would find their starved and frozen bodies right beside us, not knowing when they died until daylight revealed the ghastly sight. I remember two women that died sitting by me. My mother was cooking some cakes of bread for one of them. When mother gave her one of them she tossed it into the fire and dropped over dead. I remember distinctly when the terrible storm came, and how dismayed the people were. My stepmother took my little brother and myself by the hand and helped us along the best she could while sister and father floundered along with the handcart. How we did struggle through that snow, tumbling over sage brush and crying with cold and hunger.

When we camped they had to scrape a place to camp on, and not much wood to make a fire with. The food rations became scarce — there were four ounces daily for an adult and two for a child, and sometimes a little piece of meat. Oh! I'll never forget it, never!

When we arrived in Salt Lake we were taken to the assembly room and the people were asked to take as many of us into their homes as they could take care of. My father and mother were taken to one place and my sister and I each to another. I did not see my father again — he died the next day. . . . I did not stand on my feet until the sixth of March. I lost the first joints of six of my toes. My step-mother then carried me twelve blocks to [a] man's home who had been a friend of father's. Mother would carry me as far as she could, then she would put me down in the snow. Then we would cry a while and go on again. (Ricks 1924)

The important thing, of course, is not the crying for a while, however necessary that may be, but the going on again — a lesson generations of Mormon young people raised on stories like this have had drilled into their heads as they have been encouraged to press on and on in whatever tasks they may be given in building up the kingdom. This particular narrative was recorded in 1924 from a woman who had crossed the plains in 1856. Most of the material in the folklore archive, like the following story, is many hands removed from the actual events described:

The McCareys were among the several thousand Mormons who lost all their worldly possessions in the tragic mid-winter exodus from their beloved homes in Nauvoo. With little food and scant protection from the elements, they suffered greatly from hunger and disease at Winter Quarters and during their long migration to Salt Lake City. Yet on reaching the Platte River crossing, they were still in sufficiently good condition to kneel together and thank the Lord for getting them through the worst part of the journey.

During the river crossing cholera broke out among the members of the company. The terrible disease raged throughout the camp. Dozens died. It was necessary for James McCarey to assist in digging graves for the victims. James was a willing worker and finished three graves that October morning, even though he began to feel a little ill as he started the third. A short time after the last grave was completed, James was

dead from the effects of cholera. His young daughters Victoria and Mary helped their mother wrap him in an old blanket, place him in the grave, and cover him with the dirt he had spaded up two hours earlier.¹

The teller of this story, the great-great-grandson of one of the little girls who helped bury her father, will not easily turn from the faith his ancestor died for.

Once safely across the plains and established in their Great Basin communities, the Mormon settlers continued to experience hardships and convert them into stories as they endured severe winters, dry summers, failed crops, swarms of crickets, attacks by unfriendly Indians, and arrests and jailings by federal officers for practicing polygamy. Some faltered and lost the faith that had brought them there, but many were sustained in their struggle to conquer the western wilderness by a belief, a belief clearly evident in the stories, that they were engaged in a cause that could not fail. Individuals might fail, but the new Zion would not.

As the pioneer era passed, the world in which Mormon stories circulated changed markedly. But the telling of stories continued unabated. The reason for this is that the generating force behind Mormon storytelling was not the persecutions of the Church nor the hardships of frontier life but rather the theological beliefs of the people. The external world may have changed, but these beliefs remained, and continue to remain, constant. Most of us still hold fast to the visions of Joseph Smith, we still believe that only through the restored gospel can the world be saved, and we still believe we have a sacred obligation to take our message to the world. Thus in a changed physical world but inspired by the same deeply held convictions, stories continue to play a significant role in Mormon life.

In many ways, the roles of these stories in our New Zion are similar to those played by accounts of remarkable providences in the Bible Commonwealth American Puritans once established in their new land. 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. They said:

The things to be esteemed *memorable* are specially *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*, *inchantments*, and all extraordinary things wherein the existence and agency of the *invisible world* is more sensibly demonstrated. (Mather 1853, 2:362)

This passage seems not unlike instructions on how to keep a Book of Remembrance. Puritans and Mormons alike have told stories to illustrate the hand of God or the influence of Satan in all things, to bring vividly alive the dramatic conflict in which the powers of good and evil struggle for mastery of our souls.

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

Perhaps our most frightening stories, as I can testify after collecting a lot of them, are those in which Satan or his evil spirits attempt to take control of our bodies to thwart the work of the Lord — to hinder a missionary from going tracting, for example, or a convert from joining the Church, or a bishop from carrying out his duties. In most of these stories the evil spirit is exorcised by prayer or by the power of the priesthood. But in some instances the spirit cannot be exorcised because the possessed individual courts disaster by seeking out the Devil: “A girl from Torrence, California,” for example, “was playing with a [ouija] board. She asked by whom the board was controlled. The reply came back, ‘The Devil.’ An undescrivable force picked her up and slammed her against the wall. The jolt of the slam damaged her spine. She is now paralyzed from the waist down.”

In another story, known widely in the mission fields, a young elder actually prays to the Devil:

[A story] had been going around the mission field about an elder who decided that he would test the powers of Satan. So he decided that he would pray to him. He left his companion and went into the closet that was in their apartment. His companion, after missing him, noticed that the closet door was open only about an inch, and so he walked over to the closet and tried to open up the door and couldn't get it open. And he called the mission president, and the mission president came over with his assistants, and together all of them pried at the door. And finally when they got it open, the elder was kneeling in prayer, but he was up off the ground about two feet, suspended in air. And so they immediately administered to him, and he fell on the floor, dead.

In other versions of this story, the praying elder is slammed against the wall, instant death the result; in another story, the missionary is found in bed, burned from one end to the other; in still another the shell of a body remains, but the insides have been cooked out. Logically, these stories make little sense; one would expect the Devil generously to reward those errant individuals who turn to him in prayer, but instead he kills them. Logic notwithstanding, the narratives serve as forceful warnings that one does not provoke the powers of Hell with impunity.

In a number of stories, Satan seeks to destroy Church members not by possessing their bodies but by enticing them to sin. These cautionary tales, and their number is legion, show what happens when one surrenders to the alluring powers of evil. One example will have to do:

A missionary had been on his mission for twenty-three months and had served a very honorable mission, been an assistant to the mission president and held every leadership position in his mission. He had been successful in baptizing many people into the church. But one night he and his companion were cooking dinner and when they got ready to eat they discovered they were out of milk. This one elder told his companion he would be right back; he was going to run to the store on the corner and get some milk. Both of them thought that since the store was only a block away there would be no problem. But on the way, somehow a neighbor woman enticed the elder into her house. He then committed an immoral act with this woman, was excommunicated, and was sent home dishonorably from the mission field.

Narratives like this are similar to those war stories in which the protagonist is killed on his last bombing raid or on his last patrol just before his scheduled return home. Both sets of stories emphasize that one is never safe (from an enemy's bullet or from the sexual enticement of the world) and that one must therefore be constantly on guard to the very end.

Almost as frightening as stories of the Devil's terrible actions are those in which a vengeful God wreaks havoc on the enemies of Zion. In their book *Carthage Conspiracy*, Dallin Oaks and Marvin Hill write: "A persistent Utah myth holds that some of the murderers of Joseph and Hyrum Smith met fittingly gruesome deaths — that Providence intervened to dispense the justice denied in the Carthage trial. But the five defendants who went to trial, including men who had been shown to be leaders in the murder plot and others associated with them, enjoyed notably successful careers" (1975, 217). The myth Oaks and Hill refer to is that perpetuated principally by N. B. Lundwall's oft-reprinted *The Fate of the Persecutors of Joseph Smith* (1952); the popularity of this book suggests, unfortunately, that Latter-day Saints are as capable as anyone of taking uncharitable and unChristian pleasure from the discomfort of those who oppose them.

But perhaps the issue is more complicated than that. One of the best ways to prove the validity of a cause is to prove that God is on one's side. Thus Mormon tradition is replete with accounts of God fighting Zion's battles. Consider, for example, the following story:

There was a preacher in Yakima, [Washington], who hated Mormons and the Mormon Church. Because of his constant efforts, the man became well known for his feelings. One Sunday he delivered an unusually fiery speech against the Mormon Church in which he denounced Joseph Smith as a liar and the Book of Mormon as a fraud. In his closing remarks he stated that if everything he said wasn't true the Lord should strike him dead. After the services, he walked out of the church and fell dead upon the lawn.

A spate of stories tells how the Lord pours out his wrath on those who oppose or abuse missionaries. In these accounts, the elders, following biblical example, shake dust from their feet and thereby curse the people who have treated them ill. The Lord responds to the missionaries' actions in a dreadful manner. In Norway a city treats missionaries harshly; they shake dust from their feet, and the city is destroyed by German shelling during the war; after the war the repentant townspeople invite the missionaries back. Throughout the world, other cities that have mistreated missionaries suffer similar fates. Towns are destroyed in Chile by floods, in Costa Rica by a volcano, in Japan by a tidal wave, in Taiwan and Sweden by fire. In South Africa a town's mining industry fails, in Colorado a town's land becomes infertile, and in Germany a town's fishing industry folds.

Individuals who have persecuted missionaries may also feel God's wrath. An anti-Mormon minister loses his job, or breaks his arm, or dies of throat cancer. A woman refuses to give thirsty missionaries water and her well goes dry. A man angrily throws the Book of Mormon into the fire only to have his

own house burn down. In one story, widely known, two elders leave their temple garments at a laundry, and when the proprietor holds them up for ridicule, both he and the laundry burn, the fire so hot in some instances that it melts the bricks. In all these stories the implication is clear: the Church must be true because God protects it and its emissaries from harm.

If the wrath of God is kindled by outsiders who attack the Church, as these stories would suggest, it is still more easily aroused by Church members who fail to do their duty or who engage in blasphemous acts. A large number of stories, in which Cotton Mather would certainly find evidence of the "judgments on the wicked," teach us to do right by showing what will happen if we don't. 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. 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. And, as I have already noted, a missionary who attempted to ordain a fence post or, depending on the version, a Coke bottle, a broomstick, a fire hydrant, or a dog was struck dead. All these stories attempt to inculcate in the listeners the moral appended by the narrator to the following account:

This is a story about two South American missionaries — I don't remember who told it to me. As the story goes, the two missionaries were in a place where the people didn't like them very well at all. And . . . [these people] decided that they'd get rid of 'em quick and had some kind of poison food that they fed them. I don't remember what it was, but I think it was some kind of poison meat. And the missionaries blessed it and ate it and didn't die from it. And all the people were very impressed, ya know, and told 'em what happened and said, "Truly, you must be men of God," ya know; and they got a lot of converts from it. They went to another town and decided that they would try the same thing. And so they said, "See now we can eat poison meat, and we won't die." And they ate it, and they died. And the moral that I got from it, from the person who told me, was that "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."

Listening in one sitting to all these stories — to accounts of evil spirits and of the judgments of God on the unrighteous both within and outside the Church — can be a pretty grim experience. Fortunately, the bulk of Mormon folklore falls under what Cotton Mather would have called, "Mercies to the godly." Stories that fall under this heading testify to the validity of the gospel in a positive way by showing the rewards that come, or will come, to those who live righteously. A number of these stories simply recount the advice, comfort, and protection individuals receive for individual problems. But many of them cluster around and mirror major emphases in the Church — missionary service, genealogical research, and temple work.

The following four stories stress these themes. The first one illustrates the protection worthy missionaries may receive in dangerous situations; the second story ties missionary labors into the important task of binding the hearts of the fathers to their children; the third story demonstrates the kind of help those

intent on turning the hearts of parents and children toward each other may receive in their genealogical research; and the fourth account, one of the most wide-spread narratives in recent years, shows how those who save the spiritual lives of the dead may, in turn, expect physical protection in their own lives:

[A missionary was assigned to New York City.] And they had a lot of gangs and stuff, and they were in a bad part of town. And they were in teaching a family, and when they came out there was a gang waiting to beat up these missionaries. And the missionaries got really scared and ran to the car and got in it . . . , and it wouldn't start. Meanwhile, the guys with the chains and the knives were starting to get closer and closer to the car. So they got real scared, and the one says, "Well, let's have a prayer." So they said the prayer and turned on the ignition, and sure enough, the car started up and they took off. And they got about five or ten miles away or so — anyway they decided to find out why the car wouldn't start, and they got out, and they opened the hood, and there's no battery. That's the story this girl told in my Book of Mormon class.

One family . . . said they would never be baptized but that they would listen to what the missionaries had to say. The elder had faith that if he lived right the family would accept the gospel, so he set their baptism date for two weeks away. After the family had been given the sixth and final discussion, they were still not willing to be baptized. The missionaries asked them if they could have a word of prayer and return tomorrow. When the prayer was finished and they looked up, the man was crying. While they were praying he didn't want to close his eyes, for behind the missionary he saw his [deceased] father. He asked them. "What does this mean?" The missionary explained to him about work for the dead — baptism and other ordinances. The man and his family were baptized.

[A group was sitting together talking after a session in the Los Angeles temple. One woman said] that she'd gone as far in her genealogy as she could and she couldn't do anything else; she'd just reached a dead end. So while the group was sitting there and they were talking about genealogy and such, . . . a little old lady with gray hair came up. She was carrying a briefcase, and she sat down in the group, and everybody thought everyone else knew her. You know, she'd just joined the group, and so then all of a sudden, a few minutes later they noticed . . . she was gone. But she'd left her briefcase. So they picked it up and tried to talk to the temple workers and see if anyone had seen her or knew where she went — tried to find her, and they couldn't. So they decided, "Well, maybe if we open the briefcase, then it'll have her name or something in it, and we can locate her that way." So when they unlatched the briefcase, undid the fasteners or whatever, it just flew open, you know, because it was so filled with papers and things, and the pressure was pretty great. And it turned out that the information that was on the papers was this lady's genealogy who'd remarked to the group that she'd gone as far as she could go.

A dear LDS lady left her small family in Phoenix to go to the temple in Mesa. While she was in the middle of a session, she got a strong feeling that she should go home — that something was terribly wrong. The feeling wouldn't go away, so she told the temple president and asked him what she should do. He said, "Have no fear. You are doing the right thing by being here. All is well at home." So she continued the session. She hurried home when she was through and found her six-year-old daughter in bed. She asked her daughter if something was wrong. She told her mother that she had left the house while the babysitter was busy with the other children and had gone out by the canal near their house. While she was playing, she slipped on some grass and fell in. She couldn't swim, and the canal is deep. Many people drown this way. But a lady all dressed in white came along just then and got her just before she would have drowned. The lady set her on the bank and made sure she was okay. The little

girl asked the lady who she was because she knew that the lady didn't live near by. So, the lady told her what her name was. The lady who saved the little girl was the lady whom the mother had done work for in the temple that day.

In all these stories there is what I would call an "if/then" structure. If the Lord really saved the missionaries from the gang, if the investigator's father really appeared to him, if the frustrated genealogist's family data were really given to her in a remarkable way, and if the daughter of the woman who had attended the temple was really saved by the woman for whom saving gospel ordinances had just been completed — if all these events really happened, then missionary work, genealogical research, and temple work must be true principles; and if they are true principles, then we should more diligently seek after them; and if we seek after them, then the Lord will bless us, protecting us from harm and guiding us to success as good finally conquers evil.

Heroic though it may be, this struggle between good and evil can wear us down a bit — especially those of us painfully aware of our own imperfections in a society that demands perfection. Some crack under the pressure, but most of us make it through, primarily because of our convictions, but partly because we, unlike the Puritans, have learned to laugh at ourselves and at the system that controls us. Consider, for example, the poor bishop who must urge his people on to a standard of conduct he seems not capable of reaching himself:

There was a Mormon bishop in a small Utah town who, like all Mormon bishops, worked so hard at his calling that he never had time for his own activities. One Sunday, when the pressure had gotten unbearable, he decided to skip meeting and go golfing. This he did and had quite an enjoyable time. Upon returning home, however, he found his town had vanished. A bit bewildered, he went to his house where he found a note tacked to his door. It read: "Sorry we missed you. — Enoch."

Or consider another bishop who must commit himself to an ideal world while pragmatically learning to deal with the real world:

A bishop who was conducting a church building fund in his ward preached a sermon from the pulpit one time about being blessed for contributing to the building fund. After his sermon, a member came up to him and said, "Bishop, that was a damned fine sermon." The bishop replied, "Brother, you had better watch the swearing." The member continued, "Yes sir, Bishop, that was such a damned fine sermon that I gave an extra \$650 for the building fund." The bishop paused, then said, "Yes, brother, it takes a hell of a lot of money to build a church."

Or consider the long-suffering Relief Society president:

A Catholic priest, a rabbi, and a Mormon bishop were bragging about how much their various congregations believe them. So they decided to test a member of each faith to see which one would believe a strange thing. They went to a Jew's home. "Hello, Mrs. Goldstein: I'm a holy cow," said the rabbi. "Oh, come on," said Mrs. Goldstein, "you're a lot of strange things, but I know you're not a holy cow." So they went to a parishioners home, and the priest said, "Hello, Mrs. Florentin; I'm a holy cow." "Oh, father," she said, "I know you're not a holy cow, but come on inside anyway." So they went to a Relief Society president's house with whom the bishop had had many meetings. He knocked on the door. As soon as she saw who it was, she exclaimed, "Holy cow, is that you again?"

Or consider, finally, the poor stake president in the following story:

At a stake conference in Idaho once the stake president was sitting up on the stand, and somebody else was talking. The stake president noticed three people standing up in the back because they didn't have a seat. He proceeded to attract the attention of one of the deacons to have him go get three chairs. He was motioning, signaling "three" with his fingers, moving his lips wide and slow, mouthing the words "three chairs." But the deacon still hesitated. The stake president kept it up, getting more insistent all the time and finally said, "Come on, get up." So the deacon finally dragged himself up [in front of the congregation] and said: "Rah, rah, rah, stake president!"

If there is any central figure in Mormon folk humor it is not J. Golden Kimball — who today belongs more to popular culture than to folk culture — or any of the revered, and sometimes frightening, General Authorities. The central figure is the beleaguered bishop, his counterpart, the Relief Society president, and occasionally a high councilor or stake president — in other words, people not too different from you and me. If we have not already become the very leaders the jokes poke fun at, we are likely to do so if we mind our manners. These leaders are bedeviled by the same problems that plague us. Hence there is a more affectionate feeling toward the objects of Mormon humor than there is in the anticlerical jokes of many other groups. As we laugh at the jokes, we are perhaps laughing more at the circumstance of being Mormon than at the imperfect bishop or stake president. We are laughing, that is, at ourselves—and through that laughter finding the means to deal with stresses that might otherwise be our undoing.

This, then, is the Mormon world scholars of a future age would discover if they were to turn to the materials in the folklore archive and to publications based on those materials. In this world, people take great pride in their pioneer heritage and seek in the heroic deeds of their founding fathers and mothers models of conduct for the present day; they see themselves engaged in a struggle between good and evil and attempt to encourage proper behavior by recounting faith-promoting stories, or remarkable providences, of the tragedies that will strike the wicked and of the rewards that await the righteous. And when the burdens of their religion sometimes weigh too heavily upon them, they seek to ease the pressures by laughing at both themselves and at the system in order to face the new day with equanimity.

But is this an accurate picture? To answer this question we must consider carefully the nature of folklore inquiry. As I said at the outset, folklore is an unflinching mirror of what is most important in a society. The problem is that what the nonspecialist sees in that mirror will be what the scholar chooses to collect and study. In defining legends, Richard M. Dorson once wrote: "There would be little point . . . in remembering the countless ordinary occurrences of daily life, so the legend . . . is distinguished [from regular discourse] by describing an extraordinary event. In some way the incident at its core contains noteworthy, remarkable, astonishing or otherwise memorable aspects" (1962, 18). But in far too many studies, what is considered memorable has been determined not by the people who tell the stories, but by those who collect

and study them. Thus while folklore remains a true mirror for culture, the cultural reality reflected in a published work depends very often upon the predisposition and presuppositions of the scholars holding the mirror. (And that, of course, is true also for historical and sociological studies of Mormon culture.)

In 1948 Austin Fife wrote in the *Journal of American Folklore*:

The roots of the theology of divine intercession are so deeply implanted in the Mormon folk mentality that forces for the cultural absorption of Mormonia into the current of intellectual life have, at best, made only superficial penetration. The integrity of the philosopher and the objectivity of the man of science are in Utah as a thin crust over a pie of spiritualism and propitiatory ritual still hot from the oven. Humanists and scientists of Mormonia are compelled either to bury their ideals in speechless serenity or to resort to a fantastic set of mental calisthenics in order to appear to accommodate their beliefs to the spiritualistic impulse of their environment. Failing this, they must depart Zion to take refuge among the Gentiles, for the time has not yet come when they may aspire to become prophets in their own land. (1948, 30)

Now I would argue that this statement is not overburdened with scholarly detachment and that the sentiments expressed there would have to shape the images reflected in Fife's Mormon folklore study — that is, in his mirror for Mormon culture. When he and his wife Alta published *Saints of Sage and Saddle: Folklore among the Mormons* (1956) eight years later, much of the anger evident in this statement had disappeared, but enough of it remained to color at least the tone of the writing through which some of the data were presented in the book.

But I am concerned here not so much with the Fifes, whose enduring contributions to Mormon and American folklore studies are incontrovertible, as with my own work, with the research and writing I have conducted in Mormon folklore for the past twenty years. Once again, does the picture I have drawn give an accurate view of Mormons? Two months ago I might have answered, "Yes." After all, the picture does capture principal concerns in the Church — the reality of Satan, the need for constant vigilance in adhering to gospel principles, the importance of missionary work to save the living and of genealogical research and temple work to save the dead. But, in spite of all this, I must now answer the question, "Only in part."

During the Christmas break, my wife, Hannele, and my son and I visited Hannele's mother in Finland. The night before I returned I had my own remarkable experience, which I recorded in a letter to a friend:

Hannele's mother has excellent home teachers. One of them keeps her driveway clear of snow, and the other takes her and an even older blind sister to church each Sunday. The day before I left Finland this good blind sister, Sister Vassenius, was having problems with her back and asked her home teachers to give her a blessing. One of them couldn't make it, so the other asked me to join him. We went into her darkened old home, where she still lives alone, in spite of her blindness and eighty-eight years. He anointed, and I blessed. I heard no voices, saw no visions, witnessed no miracle — except the miracle of heart touching heart. When I finished, she stood up, put her arms around me, and thanked me for blessing her with peace. And I realized, perhaps better than I have for a long time, that what I had just experienced was the essence

of the gospel. The gospel's not to be found in intellectual discussions about God's omniscience, nor in scholarly debates over the nature of Joseph's first vision or over whether or not he used a divining rod. It's to be found in the homes and hearts of the Sister Vasseniuses throughout the church, where people take seriously the Savior's injunction, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden," and as a result find rest to their souls. I wish the missionaries who brought Sister Vassenius into the church long years ago could have been there to witness this fruit of their labors, to see the gospel they had preached bring light to blind eyes and joy to a tired heart.

As I sat on the plane the next day thinking of this experience, I recalled another good Finnish member whose husband had been a chain-smoking alcoholic who in a drunken stupor had thrown up all over the rug the first time the missionaries visited but who gradually turned his life completely around and embraced all the virtues he had once scorned. His wife told me, "Before the missionaries came, my life was hell on earth; now it's heaven." "If experiences like these are at the heart of what it means to be Mormon," I wondered — at the heart of that value center I talked about — "why aren't they a part of Mormon folklore." And then I realized that, of course, they are — they have just not been collected and studied. I have probably told the story of the alcoholic's conversion a hundred times; and I have heard a hundred stories like it. Yet rarely have I attempted to collect that kind of material.

During my first year in graduate school at Indiana University, I reviewed the Fifes' *Saints of Sage and Saddle* in Professor Dorson's seminar on theory and technique. In the main, I praised the book — and it deserves praise; but I also criticized what struck me as the work's exaggerated emphasis on the supernatural at the expense of any discussion of Mormon moral and spiritual values and of the motivating principles of sacrifice and service which I knew from experience were essential parts of being Mormon. I wrote:

The missionary returning from the field will probably tell of a healing or two he has witnessed and of a miraculous conversion he has had a part in, but primarily he will talk about the change of character he has observed in the lives of those who have accepted the gospel. He will tell many stories about people who have abandoned their own interests to devote themselves to the service of others. These stories are just as much a part of Mormon oral tradition as are tales of the supernatural, and no survey of Mormon folklore is complete without them. (1963, 5)

When I wrote those lines, I feared that Professor Dorson would attack me for being a narrow Mormon apologist. Instead he wrote on my paper: "Splendid appraisal and statement of unnoticed Mormon traditions." As I continued Mormon folklore research in the coming years, I should have followed my own instincts; I should have followed Professor Dorson's counsel and turned my attention to these unnoticed traditions. When I left Indiana, I did break new ground in my studies of Mormon folk history (1973 and 1979), of the contemporary era (1976), of Mormon humor (1985), and, with John Harris, of missionary lore (1981 and 1983b); but in my work with Mormon traditions in general I let myself be too easily influenced by what folklorists generally have considered to be memorable in religious folklore — that is, with dramatic tales

of the supernatural — rather than with the quiet lives of committed service that I knew really lay at the heart of the Mormon experience.

Mormon supernatural stories do indeed exist in rich abundance (sometimes too rich for my taste). And they do play the roles I have described. But they are only part of a larger, more important, whole. The picture I have drawn here is not inaccurate; it is simply incomplete or, perhaps better, not quite in focus. It is, therefore, an uncertain mirror for truth. Fortunately, scholarship is usually a self-correcting process. The task for future Mormon folklore study will be to enlarge the picture, and to bring the images reflected in it into sharper focus.

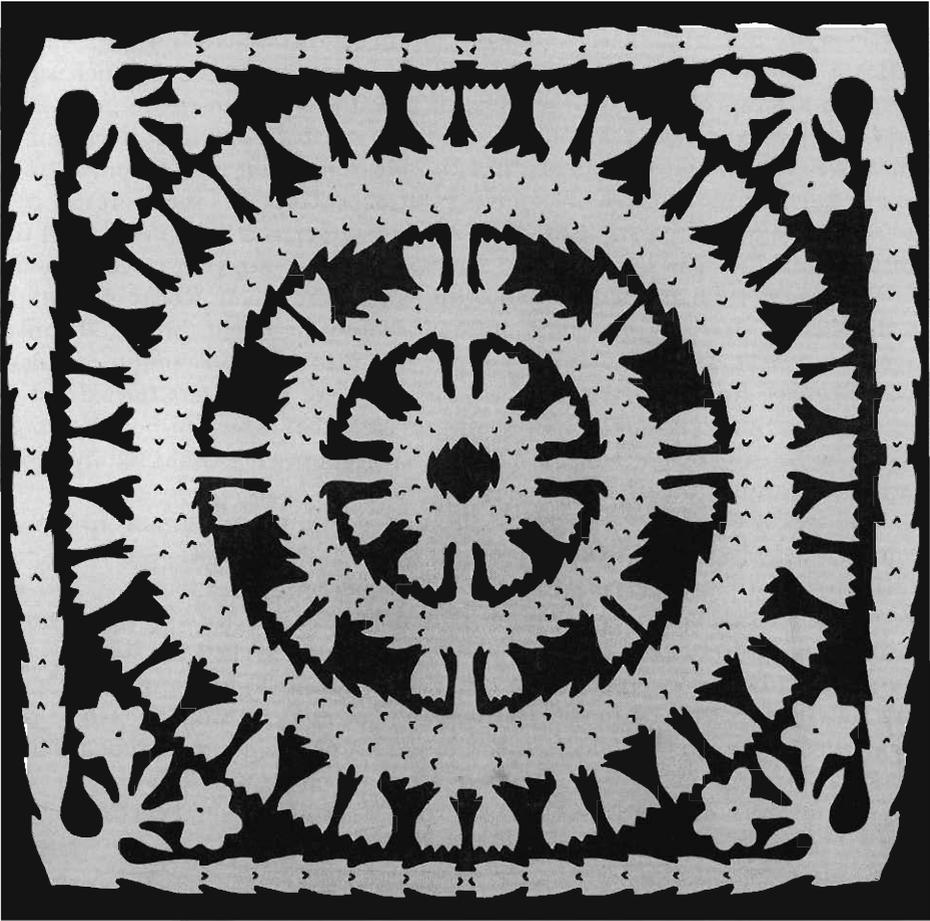
Let me end on a personal note. I attended Indiana University under a National Defense Education Act Fellowship that paid more than I had been earning as a full-time faculty member at BYU and made possible my completing a second major in Uralic-Altaic Studies and picking up an additional minor in anthropology. At the time I made a private vow to pay back to the American public in service the debt I owed them for making my education possible. I have genuinely tried to do that through my teaching, through my involvement in public folklore programs, and especially through my research and writing. By studying closely one group of human beings — the Latter-day Saints — I have hoped to discover the universal truths manifested in specific ethnographic facts and thereby to increase awareness of and sympathy for the human condition in general.

During this past semester, after suffering strength-sapping bouts of ill health and carrying a heavy administrative assignment, I found myself thinking, "You've published some twenty articles on Mormon folklore now. Maybe it's time to bring the best of these together in a book and then to stand by at last and, as Robert Frost might say, watch the woods fill up with snow. Then came my trip to Finland. Rejuvenated now by three weeks away from the office, with my earlier commitment always in memory, and with new research designs for making the study of Mormon folklore a more certain mirror for truth swirling through my mind, I guess I'll have to let the woods go for a while, or let them fill up with snow without my being there to watch. I still have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.

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Tahitian tifaifai, flower design, Henriette Munanui (Salt Lake City, Utah), 83"X93", cotton, 1977; (Utah) State Art Collection.