What does the invention and dissemination of urban legends tell us about ourselves?

THE COST OF CREDULITY
MORMON URBAN LEGENDS
AND THE WAR ON TERROR

By Robert A. Rees

As does any cultural or religious group, Latter-day Saints tell and retell stories. Some of these stories follow a specific formula classified as urban legends. There are a number of contemporary Mormon legends that I believe qualify under this formula. Perhaps you have heard that:

• Steve Martin and Christina Aguilera are members of the Mormon Church.
• Microsoft's Paul Allen and Billy Graham's son Franklin, have both been defending the Church.
• God regularly preserves Mormon buildings from natural disaster.
• A little girl was saved by “birdies” (angels) who visited her from beyond the veil.
• LDS General Authorities are teaching that today’s Mormon youth were “generals in the war in heaven.”
• A boy with Down’s Syndrome had his faculties restored after receiving his patriarchal blessing.
• Scientists have found a Jaredite barge in Lake Michigan and a steel knife dating from 350 BCE buried in an ancient sequoia tree in California.
• In 1736, a Catholic priest prophesied of the Restoration.
• The apocalypse is certainly close at hand because missionaries are being called to China and others are being called home in order to be ready to serve in World War III.²

LDS general authorities have voiced their concern over the continuing currency of such legends. In a 1973 Ensign article, President Harold B. Lee wrote about members of the Church who spread rumor and gossip . . . which, when once started, gains momentum as each telling becomes more fanciful, until unwittingly those who wish to dwell on the sensational repeat them in firesides, in classes, in Relief Society gatherings and priesthood quorum classes without first verifying the source before becoming a party to causing speculation and discussions that steal time away from the things that would be profitable and beneficial and enlightening to their souls . . . It never ceases to amaze me how gullible some of our Church members are in broadcasting these sensational stories, or dreams, or visions, some alleged to have been given to Church leaders, past or present, supposedly from some person’s private diary, without first verifying the report with proper Church authorities.”³

More recently, and specifically concerned with the tendency of members to invoke General Authority authorship or sanction for the stories they tell, a 13 May 2004 letter to all Church leaders from the First Presidency states:

From time to time statements are circulated among members which are inaccurately attributed to the leaders of the Church. Many such statements distort current Church teachings and are often based on rumors and innuendos. They are never transmitted officially, but by word of mouth, e-mail, or other informal means.

We encourage members of the Church to never teach or pass on such statements without verifying that they are from approved Church sources . . . ⁴

In spite of such official statements, many myths and legends continue to proliferate among the Latter-day Saints. Like those of other groups (religious and otherwise), such legends rein-
force the perceived special nature of the group, affirm that God
and the angels are protecting its members, confirm that mirac-
ulous events continue to happen in believers’ lives, prove its
doctrines true and sacred texts authentic, and so forth. As folk-
lorist Donna Wycoff summarizes:

Contemporary legends—those generally anony-
mous, apocryphal, narratable, linguistic-based
rumor-stories that report on ostensibly true and
relatively current events—often circulate within a
community as part of an unconscious, creative,
collective response to some community concern,
even as they symbolically encode the social ambi-
guities that underlie that concern.5

While some such myths and legends are rather benign,
others have a negative and, in some instances, even de-
structive nature. In this article, I discuss a group of specific
Mormon legends relating to the so-called “War on Terror”
and comment on their meaning for the contemporary
Church.

THE STORIES WE TELL
To what degree do we “invent” rather than “report”
the events in our lives and those of “our people”?

LEGENDS TEND TO proliferate during times of
great crisis and, as generally proves true, the greater
the crisis or perceived threat, the more dramatic
and miraculous the legends are likely to become. The
September 2001 terrorist attack on the U.S. and subse-
quently attacks on other nations by radical Islamists, the
wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the turbulent conflict in the
Middle East, global warming and cataclysmic natural dis-
asters, and other seemingly apocalyptic events have all led
to a dramatic increase in fear and anxiety among the general
populace. Therefore, it is not surprising that there are a
number of such legends associated with these events nor that
some of these are distinctively Mormon.

The first Mormon legend having to do with the terrorist at-
tacks and their aftermath emerged almost immediately after
9/11. Within days of the attacks on the World Trade Center
and the Pentagon and the failed attack on the White House,
stories began circulating that no Mormons were killed on that
day. According to one version, “Bishop Gonzales of the
Hollywood Ward”6 in the Los Angeles stake reported that al-
though forty-eight Mormons worked in the World Trade
Center, “not one member (in good standing) of the Mormon
Church died in the World Trade Center collapse on 9-11-
2001.” When questioned about the validity of the report, the
bishop is claimed to have replied that

This story has several characteristics typical of a legend:
• It comes secondhand, from someone who heard
about the event or who knew of someone who did.
• It includes specific (though not necessarily accu-
rate) information and data—e.g., that forty-eight
members of the Church worked in the Twin Towers.
• It has apparent authoritative support—e.g., an
internal memo from President Hinckley.
• It includes information that while perhaps slightly incredible on one level is nevertheless plau-
sible, especially if one considers the percentage of
Latter-day Saints in the general population of the Eastern seaboard.

On closer examination, we recognize elements that might undermine confidence in the veracity of the story, including the fact that it reports that only active Mormons were saved. When this story was posted on an Internet blog, one correspondent asked, “How many inactive members were killed?” to which another, obviously more skeptical blogger responded, “All of them, the bloody heathens...!!” Interestingly, according to Mormon scholar Mary Ellen Robertson, “There was an article in the Deseret News published 12 September 2001 indicating no New York church members or missionaries had perished in the tragedy. Later news reports indicated that in fact, a number of Mormons had been killed in these events.”

What does the invention and dissemination of such a legend tell us about ourselves? Legends that are based on real-life events and that correspond with a reasonable degree of verisimilitude to actual events may do no more than illustrate the human proclivity for exaggeration and hyperbole, especially when it comes to self-interest or self-promotion. That is, all of us engage in some degree of creative invention when telling stories about ourselves or our families, friends, and fellow believers. Like all storytelling, such narratives are arranged and ordered to make them more dramatic. We all want our lives to be more heroic than they are, our children to be smarter and more beautiful than other children, our churches to be sanctioned by the heavens, our lives to be more meaningful, our memories to be honored. And so we distort and invent, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, until with the passage of time, even we are no longer able to distinguish between what really happened and what we wish

or imagined or are inclined to believe happened.

Some stories, however—those that essentially are manufactured out of whole cloth—tend to be less benign. These are intentional fabrications, lies told in the service of convincing ourselves and others that we are the objects of special providence, that we are God’s chosen people who enjoy a state of grace superior to others. Like stories told by any group which feels it is chosen or highly favored of divinity, these legends reinforce elitist sentiments. The message is that although others may suffer and be killed by terrorists, God intervenes to save Latter-day Saints. A Catholic archbishop or Jewish rabbi might be killed in such an event, but not a tithe-paying, temple-worthy Latter-day Saint elder. The latter would be spared simply because he happened to hold the priesthood and belong to “the one and only true church.”

AN ALTERNATE LEGEND about 9/11 is the report that a large missionary zone conference was scheduled to take place in the World Trade Center on the day the terrorists struck but that none of the missionaries headed there was able to reach his or her destination. “Miraculously,” alarm clocks failed to go off, automobiles broke down, bus connections were missed, and so forth. Some have such a need to believe these stories that they don’t stop to consider the likelihood of a missionary conference being scheduled in the World Trade Center or, more significantly, to consider the character of a God who would not intervene to stop the terrorists from destroying so many innocent lives but would intervene in multiple minor ways to save several dozen Mormon missionaries. This is to believe in God as discriminate puppeteer.
THE MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR

ANOTHER LEGEND RELATING to terrorist attacks concerns the Mormon Tabernacle Choir being miraculously spared from the July 2005 terrorist bombings in London. According to this legend, the choir had planned a tour of Europe several years prior to its scheduled departure in the summer of 2005. Then, the December before, President Hinckley “instructed the choir to cancel their overseas tours, including a trip planned for London.”12 The “Choir was scheduled to perform on the day the bombs hit London.” Not only this, but they were scheduled to take a train from London to Scotland and would have been departing from King’s Cross Station, near where one of the bombs exploded. In various versions of this story, the account is told or confirmed by “someone who works in the Church Office Building,” by “the boss of my boss,” or by “several members of the Choir.”

Like most legends, this one contains elements of truth: the Choir’s European trip was cancelled, but it was “because of worldwide security issues, not because of some future subway bombing in London.” As reported at SHIELDS.com, The Church’s Public Affairs Dept. and . . . the Publicist of the Tabernacle choir, Michael von Rosen [reported that] the trip planning was not far enough along to determine which subway the Choir might use. . . . [Besides, since] the Choir normally travels on private buses, not public transportation, it is unlikely that it would have even used the subway. The choir publicist also confirmed . . . that the choir would not have arrived in London until ten days after the bombings.

As with other such myths and legends, there is a didactic purpose to this story: “Listen to the Prophet even if his instruction does not seem to make sense. He is truly a prophet of God and still guides and leads the members of the Church through dangerous times and can lead us to safety.” Or, as the narrator of one version of this legend puts it, “They don’t call this Hinckley guy a prophet for nothing!!”

The people who pass on such stories don’t seem to ask such questions as: “If President Hinckley had received an impression or revelation concerning danger to the choir, why wouldn’t he have conveyed that information to the British government so that the lives of all those in harm’s way would have been spared?” But, of course, that would take away the essential purpose of the story, which is to confirm that Latter-day Saints enjoy special protection of the heavens.

OSAMA IN UTAH

REFLECTIVE OF A high level of anxiety about terrorism are numerous rumors that Osama Bin Laden has been hiding in various parts of the American West, including Utah. Apparently, a familiar desert landscape and hospitable place in which to continue his polygamous marriages (to say nothing of being one of the least likely locations in the world where people would be looking for him) brought him to the Great Basin. According to the Salt Lake Tribune, “Federal agents in Salt Lake City say they have recently fielded dozens of reports that the accused terrorist mastermind has been spotted on the freeway, in the mall, or enjoying a Big Mac and fries at McDonald’s.” FBI Special Agent Kevin Eaton is quoted as saying, “It is pretty surprising how many people really believe he is here.”13

MILITARY MIRACLES

OTHER POPULAR LEGENDS are centered in Iraq. Two elaborate ones have circulated quite heavily in LDS circles. The first was sent to me by a friend who prefaced the message with “Incredible story . . . a guy in our office knows the soldier.” The
story had an additional prefatory validation: “I thought you might appreciate this story. In this instance, I actually know Michael and his wife.” The story is titled, “LDS Military Miracle”:

Thought you’d find this timely . . . . it came from a friend of ours . . . . Tonight my visiting teachers, the Lovelands, came by. They brought some photos that their grandson, Sgt. Schaub, sent them. I asked their permission to share it with my friends. Sgt. Schaub, who is in Iraq, had a set of scriptures tapped together to make a quad. He had been reading his patriarchal blessing the night before and tucked it into the pages of his scriptures and the next morning, picked them up and tucked them into his shirt and his bulletproof vest. Sgt. Schaub led a troop out that morning and was rounding a corner when he was met by an Iraqi with a rifle. The Iraqi fired four bullets into his chest then ran out of bullets. Sgt. Schaub stood there waiting to fall to the ground dying, but instead, grabbed his pistol and shot the Iraqi dead. It was discovered that the Iraqi’s bullets penetrated the bulletproof vest and went through the scriptures and stopped at the pages just before the patriarchal blessing. Days later, their military vehicle was hit by artillery and literally melted to the ground. The next day, Sgt. Schaub found the scriptures that were laying on the dashboard and only the outside of the pages had been burned. Amazing! I have attached the files which are virus free. . . . I made them myself.

Attached to the email were photos of a Book of Mormon with bullet holes in it and some burned pages.

This story recalls legends that have circulated among Latter-day Saints in the recent past, about missionaries protected from harm by their temple garments or about copies of the Book of Mormon that miraculously survive after the owner’s home burns down. Those similarities invite skepticism about this new story, despite the photographic “evidence” that accompanies it through cyberspace. As one of my more skeptical friends wrote: “Moral of the story: on patrol, never pack less than a fully loaded quad.” There are, in fact, reasons to believe that this story has been at the very least embellished if not completely fabricated.14 It is ironic that the person passing on this story speaks of the files being “virus free” since there is no protection against the kind of spiritual virus such legends spread. Again, those inclined to believe such legends don’t seem to wonder about the caprice of a God who would cause a piece of paper to stop a bullet but not stop bullets and bombs from killing tens of thousands of his children.

The story reports that these particular soldiers were required to go on such dangerous missions that “they were told to prepare messages and letters to their families and to plan their funerals, since the majority of them would not be coming back.”15 So certain was their demise that “the President [of the United States] wrote a letter of apology to them.” The fabricator of this story can’t help but slip a little conservative politics into the narrative. We are told that this engineering unit had to go to Iraq “because the eleven regular army combat engineer units were too badly depleted during the Clinton Administration to be combat-ready.”

In this legend, Mormon soldiers are credited with capturing Saddam Hussein, pulling down Hussein’s statue, capturing the first Iraqi prisoners of war, and winning a number of strategic battles—all without losing a single soldier. They were on some of the most dangerous missions, missions in which other soldiers were killed but they were not: “More than once, Jack [the supposed son of the narrator] came out alive, unscathed from a destroyed Humvee . . . . When a squad took casualties, the ones walking away from it always included the combat engineers [from Utah] they had with them.” The soldiers were so inspired in battle that they seemed to have special insight as to where to lead other soldiers. Mormon soldiers, many of whom were returned missionaries, seemed to have special channels through which they received revelations, performed miracles in combat, and inspired others. “Only the true Spirit would lead men to say such great things.” Mormon soldiers didn’t just supply specific intelligence to fight particular battles, they were also a key source of general intelligence: “Much of the intelligence for the war comes out of Draper [Utah]. The translation and analysis comes out of the linguistics group there.”

According to the legend, extraordinary exploits of Mormon soldiers prompted a full-scale investigation into them, without even their knowledge. . . . Now regular army spooks were following them around everywhere they went and reporting every small thing they did, and asking other soldiers about them. The general story coming back was that they were essentially extremely religious guys who had close friends [i.e., fellow returned missionaries] everywhere and all of them were afraid of nothing. They must have some kind of unexplained charmed life. There was no logic at all in the way they came back unharmed over and over again.

Beyond their remarkable performance on the battlefield, these soldiers had a profound influence on the religious scene in Iraq. They held worship services and “special prayer circles” that became so popular that “standing-room-only meetings were held every hour on the hour, from 7:00 AM to 9:00 PM.” So many Latter-day Saint and other soldiers attended these Mormon services that the only place large enough to hold the services was “Saddam’s huge residence,” which the Mormon soldiers “cleaned out” for this very purpose. But even that was not large enough because before long, one could see “the desert covered with men in prayer circles, arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders.” Soon this became one Great
Awakening throughout the valley of the Euphrates: “As time went on, the prayer circles were held after lights out in the tents all over Iraq.” Before long, strains of “I Am a Child of God” could be heard throughout Iraq!

Hearing of the accomplishments of these Mormon soldiers, “many times... a senior officer... would break down in tears and ask, ‘What kind of people are we commanding anyway?’” So remarkable were the accomplishments of this battalion that, according to the legend, the Pentagon ordered an investigation. Their heroic exploits were so astonishing that “five senior generals” visited with a group of General Authorities to commend the Church for producing such extraordinary young men.

Called “Our Modern Day Stripling Warriors,” this legend is replete with the language of special providence and miraculous deliverance:

- “Never before in American military history has any assault engineer unit gone into war and not suffered heavy casualties—until now.”
- “It was not a coincidence that a Utah boy found Saddam. It was also Utah Guardsmen who threw a rope around Saddam’s statue and pulled it down, with the world watching.”
- The soldiers are called “Miracle men”; others regard their accomplishments with “amazement”; the narrative reports on “unexplainable things happening—at least unexplainable in ordinary terms.”

The narrative suggests that all of this was according to divine plan: Why were these Mormon soldiers sent to Iraq? The answer is found in the response of one of the soldiers to his father,

You see, Dad, it wasn’t just that the president sent us there, at least not the national kind. The Lord sent us to Iraq to start something for Him. Not since the days of Abraham has there been any significant Melchizedek Priesthood presence in Babylon. We talked about it a lot among ourselves. We all knew that the Lord was doing something special and decided we would keep our mouths shut and get on with it.

It is a powerful, faith-promoting story. Unfortunately, almost none of it is true. Jan Harold Brunvand describes urban legends as “true stories that are too good to be true... [They] are also too neatly plotted to be believed,” as this one certainly is. The Army was so embarrassed over this story that it produced three separate responses to quell and quash it, by James A. Montoya, battalion chaplain; Maj. Lorraine Januzelli, spokesperson for the Utah National Guard; and Lieutenant Colonel Jefferson S. Burton, commander of the 1457th Engineer Combat Battalion. Major Januzelli stated, “Our service was not particularly unique... . Sadly, the lies and sanctimony expressed in the fictional email cheapens the dedicated service of honest service members everywhere.”

Colonel Burton countered the legend in detail, saying, “I will refute the lies told in this fabrication point by point:

- We were not “sacrifice troops”
- The President did not send us letters of apology as asserted
- Sgt. Jack does not exist anywhere but in the mind of the author
- The 1457th did not “engage the enemy from Kuwait to Baghdad”
- We did fight as a unit and were not “divided up among other units”
- We did not serve with the “3rd Marines, 7th Marines, Rangers, Special Forces, or 101st Airborne”
- We did not engage in “hand-to-hand combat with the enemy”
- We did not “find Saddam Hussein” (That was the 4th Infantry Division)
- We did not “rescue the first prisoners”
WHY THESE LEGENDS ARE DANGEROUS
Dark sides to our desire to be “special”

More than a century ago, William Graham Sumner coined the term ethnocentrism to describe the human phenomenon which David Berreby terms “sovereign human kind”—the “view of things according to Sumner] in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled in reference to it.” In his newly published book, Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind, Berreby explores the way the human mind establishes a hierarchy of human kinds: “Human beings . . . have an immense mental apparatus for mapping the world of human kinds.”

Berreby cites various studies to show our proclivity to select positive and deselect negative characteristics of our group or tribe:

- It is not hard to see . . . how moral feeling sparks up when we hear about actions by people we feel are our kind, even if those actions have no effect on us personally. If someone is a member of the same human kind as you are, then his behavior is in a sense yours as well.

Thus, showing the Mormon soldiers in Iraq as larger than life or, as the legend puts it, “superior soldiers” (one pictures them like Arnold Freiberg’s heroic, muscular Sons of Helaman or Captain Moroni), in some ways may make us feel that we too are extraordinary, that we too could walk into the lion’s den of war, do mighty things, and, by the special grace of God, walk out unscathed. Like the soldiers in this legend, we could fight our nation’s wars and at the same time teach others how to come unto the Lord, all while being protected under the banner of heaven.

In an October 2005 Wall Street Journal article titled “Brains Strive to See the Good, Leading to God,” Sharon Begley reports on how our brains “interpret unexpected and even unwanted outcomes as being for the best.” Begley cites the work of Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard University professor, who states, “People don’t know how good they are at finding something desirable in almost any outcome. So when there is a good outcome, they’re surprised, and they conclude that someone else has engineered their fate.”

Gilbert posits that we are wired so that the brain “tends to search for and hold onto the most rewarding view of events, much as it does of objects.” In July 2006 Washington Post article titled “How the Brain Helps Partisans Admit No Gray,” Shankar Vedantam states, “Psychological experiments in recent years have shown that people are not evenhanded when they process information, even though they believe they are.”

Desensitizing us to suffering others. One of the effects of such a process is that it may lead Mormons either to dismiss or to diminish the tragedy and suffering of others. If God saves Mormons but not others in such situations, then he must not save others either because they are not special and deserving or for some reason known only to him. If God manipulates world events and intervenes in such specific ways in the lives of the Saints, then Mormons can be assured that “Gods in his heaven—/All’s right with the world”—at least for us! Conveniently, we don’t have to wonder about the tens of thousands of innocent Iraqi citizens killed in the war, many by our own bombs and bullets, perhaps arguing that somehow, because they are Muslims, they get what they deserve or are unfortunate if necessary collateral damage in the war on terror.

With so much evidence as we are confronted with in such places as Iraq, Darfur, and Palestine (and, more recently, Lebanon), and throughout the developing world where tens of thousands of children suffer and die daily for want of food and...
medicine or because of violence, how can we not at least be troubled by the idea that God would save particular Latter-day Saint soldiers, singers, or missionaries and not these children? Or, even if we somehow can be so categorical in our thinking, how can we reconcile God’s intervention in the lives of Latter-day Saints who work in the World Trade Center or the Pentagon when he apparently does not provide material sustenance for the thousands of Latter-day Saint families who suffer from severe malnutrition, inadequate health care, or acts of violence in Africa, Ecuador, and elsewhere?24

Implied judgment for those not spared.

Another destructive result of such stories is that they cause deep anguish for the families of military personnel who were not preserved from the ravages of war.25 What must the parents, spouses, and children of a soldier killed in Iraq or Afghanistan conclude about the death of their loved one? That either he or they were not worthy of God’s special providence? That God is capricious in his grace? That if only their loved one had joined the 1457th Engineer Combat Battalion instead of another unit, or carried all of the standard works into battle, he would have been spared? Why wasn’t their loved one worthy enough to be classified as “a modern-day Stripling Warrior”?

Wouldn’t it have been better if . . . ? A lack of critical thinking also enables some Latter-day Saints to believe that God sent Mormon soldiers to fight in Iraq so the priesthood would be in that part of the world once more, as if God could not find an easier, less violent way of accomplishing this task. The suggestion also is that only the power of the priesthood could bring down a person of such evil as Saddam Hussein (which causes one to wonder why this power was not used to bring down such despots as Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot). No one seems to ask the question: if the priesthood could capture the evil emperor of Iraq, why wasn’t it powerful enough to bring him down earlier—before he killed so many people or before we started a war that has resulted in the deaths of tens if not hundreds of thousands of Iraqi citizens?

The war in Iraq and Israel’s actions in the Middle East are God’s will. One of the most destructive results of such a legend is that it tends to increase Mormons’ support of the war in Iraq—or, at the very least, to muzzle any criticisms they might entertain about the moral justification for the war. If God is using the war to convert others to Mormonism and to restore the priesthood to Babylon, then the war must be justified. Undoubtedly, such sentiments also help explain the overwhelming support of Utah Latter-day Saints for the Bush administration. If the President has led us into what he appears to believe is a God-sanctioned war, a war that has allowed the Melchizedek priesthood to be reestablished in the ancient land of Abraham; if Mormon soldiers, many of whom are returned missionaries, are indeed God’s modern-day Stripling Warriors who not only defeat the proponents of the false religion of Islam and the architects of evil but who also show thousands of American soldiers the true order of prayer and worship, then how can this be other than the inspired decision of a Christian president who feels led by God?

Further, if God privileges the Latter-day Saints as his
modern chosen people, then Latter-day Saints are likely to be unquestioning in their support of God’s other chosen people, the Jews, no matter how many innocent civilians they kill in Lebanon or in Gaza in their attempts to retain their habitation in the Promised Land. Thus, the Israelis’ fight against Hamas and Hezbollah in the increasingly apocalyptic endgame currently raging in the Middle East becomes the Latter-day Saints’ battle as well. Moral complexity is simply ignored or obscured. This is the dark side of the idea of chosen people or peoples.

What about genuine miracles? One other casualty of such stories is that they undermine those instances where there seems to be a legitimate miracle or a convincing justification for divine intervention.26 That is, if we tell and pass on fraudulent stories and people later come to discover that they are false, their faith is invariably compromised. This reminds me of our experience with our youngest daughter when she discovered that the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, and Santa Claus were not real. She asked, “What about Jesus?” In the article cited above about Daniel Gilbert’s work on the brain, Sharon Begley writes, “Prof. Gilbert once asked a religious colleague how he felt about helping to discover that people can misattribute the products of their own minds to acts of God. The reply: ’I feel fine. God doesn’t want us to confuse our miracles with his.’”27

GENUINE CHRISTIANITY
The true call to “chosenness”

IRONICALLY, AND TRAGICALLY, these supposedly faith-affirming legends actually serve to undermine the very foundations of the Christian gospel. The miracle of Christ’s mission; including his atonement, is that it was so universal, so completely democratic: “As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). The great moral challenge and burden of the gospel is articulated in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew. There Christ challenges our tribalism in a way that leaves us no room for escape or excuse, no retreat into callousness or indifference, no self-satisfaction in being his chosen people. If, as the Book of Mormon contends, “all are alike unto God,” then he values Palestinians as he does Israelis, inhabitants of Darfur as those of Detroit, Sunnis as Latter-day Saints, our neighbors as ourselves. Such legends as those discussed above counter Christ’s central message of our universal brother- and sisterhood.

If there is such a thing as chosenness, then surely it must mean not a privileged place in Christ’s kingdom, not special providence to save us from the violence and vicissitudes of this spook alley we call life, not a greater measure of grace than others enjoy, but rather a heightened call to service and sacrifice, an enlarged stewardship to participate with Christ in bearing the burdens of the world, an increased compassion for our suffering brothers and sisters, a greater willingness to try with him to descend the harrowing journey beneath all things, and, ultimately, to consider ourselves, as he does, the least among our fellow beings.
Dialectics of a Folklore Genre, 45

6. This name seems to be accurate. At the time, there was a Bishop Gonzales in the Hollywood Ward.

7. This attribution was reported at: http://groups.google.com/group/alt.reliigion.mormon/msg/7e42c94d7a357f578_umsgid=6b059c07e42c94d7a357f578c0e98c7ca@posting.google.com (accessed 11 December 2000). A long string of responses, mostly skeptical, follow the post.

8. Ibid.

9. Mary Ellen Robertson, “Still Circling the Wagons: Violence and Mormon Self-image,” paper delivered at a Utah Valley State College conference on Religion and Violence held 18–19 October 2001 in Orem, Utah. This paper was later published with the same title in SUNSTONE, April 2002, 64–66. The article Robertson is referring to is Deseret News, 12 September 2001, “LDS Church members in N.Y. are safe.” B4. The story contains an interview with Elder Craig Zwick, then area president of the Church’s North America Northeast Area, who said “he is aware of more than 20 members who work every day in and around the trade center that didn’t come in to work yesterday, which is pretty amazing.”

10. Elbert Eugene Peck provides an excellent reflection on this phenomenon in his wise and judicious editorial, “Casting Out the Spell,” in SUNSTONE, September 2001, 12–15. This is the SUNSTONE issue dedicated to exploring the many facets of Elder Paul H. Dunn’s fabrications about his baseball and war experiences and the aftermath.


12. This and all quotations in this section are from the story, “Mormon Tabernacle Choir Kept Safe from London Subway Bombing,” and comments found at http://www.shields-research.org/Boxies/Tabernacle_Choir_01.html (accessed 28 July 2006).

13. See “Osama bin Laden has been sighted in Utah” at www.snopes.com/tu- mors/utah.htm (accessed 2 July 2006).

14. According to SHIELDS, “This item is passing around on the Internet about a Sgt. Schaub that was saved when bullets penetrated his bullet-proof vest, at close range, and was stopped by his scriptures. We have verified that much of this story is true, but cannot pass on all issues at this time. The family is unhappy that this story is passing around on the Internet and we encourage everyone to stop sending it around. As we obtain further data, it will be posted here.” My attempts to ascertain the veracity of the story have convinced me that the entire story was fabricated. One person who originally testified that the story was true, wrote, “I know the man who you are talking about. He and his wife divorced about a year ago. He had a real problem telling the truth.” (Confidential email sent to Robert Rees, 21 August 2006). Another respondent reported, “The whole thing ended up being a lie. The guy fabricated the story.”


17. Dégh, Legend and Belief, 46.


19. Ibid., 214.

20. Ibid. 194.


23. Robert Browning, “Pippa’s Song.” Available at http://www.bartleby.com/101/718.html (accessed 22 August 2006). The distinction between particular/speciﬁc and general providence has existed at least since the early Greeks. It was debated during the Protestant Reformation (see, for example, John Wesley’s “On Divine Providence” [Sermon 67] available at http://gbgm-umc.org/MHHIS- TORY/Wesley/sermons/serr-067.htm (accessed 22 August 2006), and became particularly vigorous during the Enlightenment. Voltaire believed in both kinds of providence until he saw the devastation of the earthquake in Lisbon. His “Poem on the Lisbon Disaster: Or an Examination of the Axiom, ‘All is Well’” (http://oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/Voltaire1026/OnToleration/HTMLs/0029_P56_05_Lisbon.html#toc_01029 head 086) (accessed 22 August 2006), is a direct counter to the optimism of Browning and others.


25. In relation to the urban legend about how wonderful it was that Mormons were spared in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, one blogger wrote, “A friend of mine did not take it that way when an LDS member told her this story. Her son, who is Baptist, died in the WTC attack.” See the thread at: http://groups.google.com/group/alt.religion.mormon/browse_thread/thread/494b392f06b1ecf74c4c64c9d7a357f578 (accessed 11 December 2006). The post cited above was written by “Garydu” on 29 October 2002.

26. Such legends also open Mormons to ridicule for being so gullible, as the following story posted on the Internet demonstrates (punctuation and spelling corrected here):

Has anyone heard this urban legend? A Mormon soldier in Iraq was shot dead in a gunfight. After the gunsight, a little Afghan boy noticed something sticking out of his uniform. It was the Book of Mormon. The little boy picked it up out of curiosity and took it home and his family read it. After the family finished reading it, the Holy Ghost bore witness to them and they all wanted to get baptized. Unfortunately, they didn’t know how to contact the missionaries. They traveled thousands of miles to the nearest town with Mormon missionaries. After several days and some help from the locals, they were able to track down the missionaries. Fortunately one of the missionaries knew the Iraqi language and was able to communicate with them. The family told the story of finding the Book of Mormon, reading it every night as a family, and praying together. They all received witness from the Holy Ghost that it was true and wanted to be baptized. The missionaries scheduled a date and then the Iraq speaking missionary spoke up. “I am confused,” he said in Iraqi, “Do any of you speak English?” They all shook their heads indicated that they didn’t. “Then how did you read this?” the missionary asked. “It is an English Book of Mormon.” At first the missionaries thought it was a hoax, but the family members were all able to recite stories from the Book of Mormon accurately. There was no doubt they had read the book without knowing how to read English. The only explanation was that God gave this family the gift of tongues. The story gets more interesting. The family was baptized by the brother of the Mormon killed in Iraq. They discovered this later. The Iraqi family now believes his brother died so they could find the gospel. Does this sound familiar? If not, it’s because I made it up. LOL. How does it sound? Do you think TBMs [True Believing Mormons] will buy it? I am going to mass email it to a bunch of TBMs and see if it spreads. See http://www.shields-research.org/Boxies/Mormon_soldier_killed_in_Iraq.htm (accessed 3 November 2006).

27. Begley, “Brains Strive to See the Good.”

MY SON VISITS

I misplace Wisconsin on the map but you come home to me like a Midwestern bleep, a burned out shopping center. You don’t leave the state but somehow you’re traveling somewhere. I park your lack of enthusiasm in jaded youth. I play bumping cars in the parking lot and skid into our green arrogance. You are rude to me like a spoiled gourd. There are insects in your deranged pulp. I don’t know how to walk away from your disillusion because I am umbilically caught in our genetic career.

—DAVID LAWRENCE