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Powers of Heaven and Hell: Mormon Missionary Narratives as Instruments of Socialization and Social Control

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Mormon missionaries are inveterate storytellers. Wherever two or more are gathered for whatever purpose, one can be quite sure the air will be thick with narratives. At testimony meetings at regional zone conferences; stretched out in sleeping bags on the church floor, awaiting the continuation of the conference the following day; gathered around the luncheon table; in new companionships created by the most recent transfer letter; doing the wash, shopping for groceries, and cleaning their apartments on preparation day (P-day); going from door-to-door to spread their gospel message; reunited in formal and informal reunions after they have completed their missions and returned home—in these and countless other settings, missionaries and former missionaries will regale each other with stories, stories of their own experiences and stories they have learned from others. In the process they will link themselves to one of the most cohesive and enduring social groups in the Mormon church, the missionary cadre. Recently two young men, strangers to each other but both doing research in the folklore archive I direct, discovered they had each served missions. Within a few minutes the stories began. Three hours later I locked the door and threw them out, still talking, strangers no longer but bondsmen now in a common cause.

The stories missionaries tell constitute only part of a much larger body of Mormon folklore that has developed over the years as Mormons have responded to the vicissitudes of their lives by capturing their experiences in a rich folk literature that can help social scientists and humanists alike better understand what it means to be Mor-

mon. Because the narratives making up this folk literature are communicated by the spoken word, most of them cannot be verified—that is, they cannot be proven either true or false. Even in those cases where it is possible to establish the bases of stories in actual events (and sometimes this can be done), the fact remains that as the stories are passed by word of mouth from person to person and from age to age, they are constantly changed by their tellers, constantly re-created to fit the needs of the moment, a fact that causes some individuals to question the value of the stories for scholarly research.

What is important to observe, however, is that the changes made in the stories—often unconsciously—do not occur randomly but are dictated by cultural determinants. Every social group, including Mormons and Mormon missionaries, will possess a body of shared beliefs and attitudes, a consensus *value center* (see Wilson, 1973:48–49), that will determine what storytellers retain, elaborate, or delete as they transmit their narratives through time and space. In other words, whatever the ultimate origins of the stories, they will be reshaped through the process of oral transmission to express the current attitudes and interests of narrators and their audiences and to meet their needs and influence their behavior. The very fact that the stories change to fit the cultural contours of a social group at a particular moment makes them excellent indicators of the social dynamics of that group. Further, since people govern their lives according to what they believe to be true rather than by what necessarily is true, the stories will function in significant ways in the lives of those group members who believe them and will, therefore, help researchers better understand the motivations moving these individuals to action.

The serious study of Mormon folklore began in the 1930s (bibliographies in Wilson, 1976b, 1976c; Terry, 1989), producing by mid-century two major works that brought Mormon folklore to the attention of national and international scholarship: Hector Lee's study of Mormon legendary eternal wanderers, *The Three Nephites: The Substance and Significance of the Legend in Folklore* (1949), and Austin E. Fife and Alta S. Fife's comprehensive *Saints of Sage and Saddle: Folklore among the Mormons* (1956). For many years these and other studies sought primarily to illuminate life in the agrarian world of the Mormon pioneer West. In recent years Mormon folklore research has gradually moved away from this emphasis. In my own work, for example, I have attempted to shift attention to the urban world of the present and to examine folklore not just as a key to the past but also as a living force in the lives of contemporary Mormons (see, e.g., Wilson, 1975, 1976a, 1988, 1989).

As part of this effort to focus on present concerns, some two decades ago my colleague, John B. Harris, and I began collecting oral narratives from recently returned missionaries at Brigham Young University. We now have well over thirty-five hundred narratives in our collection, covering the full range of missionary experiences (see Wilson 1981, 1983). Some of them are hilariously funny, others emotionally wrenching; some promote faith, others call it into question. All of them, however, provide vital insights into missionary life we might not get in other ways. Because missionaries, like members of other social groups, tell stories about those events that interest them most and because these stories are kept alive by word of mouth and die out as soon as their appeal diminishes—that is, when they no longer reflect the missionaries' contemporary *value center*—they serve as an excellent barometer of current missionary values and attitudes, anxieties and stresses, hopes and dreams.

My concern here, however, is not with the missionary worldview mirrored in these narratives but with the roles—the social functions—they play as they incorporate new missionaries into the system, guide their behavior during their missionary years, and continue to tie them to the system's behavioral values once they have completed their missions.

In a general way almost all the narratives are instruments of socialization, helping assimilate missionaries into the way of life they must adopt in the coming months. That is, one becomes a missionary by learning the canon of missionary stories and eventually by passing them on to others. Indeed, the ability to take an active role in this storytelling culture is one of the markers separating the seasoned missionary from the novice—the "greenie." The stories also function in many other and much more specific ways, usually depending on the genre of the stories told. One of the most dramatic narrative genres consists of stories that reveal how missionaries who disobey rules or engage in sacrilegious behavior will, like outsiders who fight against the church, subject themselves to terrifying and retributive powers.

Not all stories of misconduct, of course, result in frightening consequences. Consider the following narrative:

> Two missionaries were stationed in Zambia and were doing their normal missionary work. After a while, they decided to split and take off into the Congo. Their chapel was only forty miles from the Congo, and Leopoldville, where all the revolutionary excitement was going on, was not much further

> away. So they devised a plan—to make out their weekly reports to mission headquarters two weeks in advance and give them to their landlady, who in turn would send one in each week at an appointed time. By this means, the missionaries would have two free weeks to venture into the wilds of the Congo. All this would have gone well, except the stupid landlady sent the report for the second week in first and the report for the first week second. That spilled the tomatoes, and the mission president caught them. (Missionary Collection [hereafter MC] #585)

Most missionaries take great delight in this and similar stories, known in virtually every mission field, because the stories' trickster protagonists, like trickster figures everywhere, allow listeners to participate vicariously in actions they might like to commit themselves but generally do not—that is, the stories permit them to enjoy the pleasures of sin without suffering its consequences. In stories like these the prankster missionaries violate rules missionaries generally recognize as necessary but chafing (like not being allowed to travel more than a few kilometers from one's assigned city without permission of the mission president), rules that will not usually put the system at risk if violated and that one can repent of without suffering dire results.

Another, and much more serious, group of stories deals with rules of a different sort, those that if violated will not merely bring a reprimand but put missionaries' church membership or even their lives in jeopardy. Unlike the trickster tales, these are dark and somber stories, told to warn missionaries not to follow evil ways and to drive home what might happen to them should they do so. These stories also highlight those rules that if broken will both endanger individual missionaries and put the entire system at risk. A few of these stories, like the narrative below, have to do with sexual misconduct and are told primarily to illustrate why missionaries should never leave their companions. They are usually marked by a lack of supernatural intercession; the offending missionaries have simply been caught in their misdeeds or driven by conscience to confess the misdeeds to the mission president:

> 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 com-

> panion 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. (MC #2185)

The majority of these cautionary tales, however, deal not with sexual sin but with the grievous errors of challenging or defying the powers of heaven and hell, engaging in sacrilegious behavior, or tampering with forces beyond normal human control. In these accounts the wayward missionaries end up not only out of the church but often dead. Generally, the narratives recounting these events fall into two broad categories: first, those in which missionaries invite into their lives the destructive power of Satan; second, those in which they bring the wrath of God upon the heads of church enemies or, at times, even upon themselves.

In the first category, the missionaries foolishly seek a testimony of God by going through the back door, by first seeking a testimony of the devil. The following stories are typical:

> I heard from one of my companions about a particular individual that decided that he would gain his testimony by finding out about the adversary. And so he decided that he would pray to the devil and pray for a manifestation or a vision of some type. As he proceeded to pray, hour after hour, his companion had gone to bed and left him in the middle of the room on his knees, praying for a manifestation, or waiting to see the devil in person. And so, as the story goes, he finally reached the point where he woke, or he made enough noise so his companion woke and went to the window and saw a black figure on a black horse coming down the road towards their apartment. And they were up at least two stories, and this particular individual, as the story goes, jumped out of the window. (MC #52)

Another version of the same story ends a little differently: "He looks over to the bed where his companion has gone to bed, finally, and he's completely white and obviously dead from his appearance; and

there's a black figure on a white horse in the room, who is laughing. And then it just kind of fades away, until there's nothing. And the companion is dead" (MC #53).

In some of these accounts mission leaders are called to exorcise the force of evil, but even their priesthood authority will not always save the errant missionary:

> It 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 there in their apartment. His companion, after missing him, searched all over and couldn't find him. He 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 closet 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. (MC #489)

Sometimes, as in the following story, missionaries seek help from Satan in less direct ways:

> There were a couple of missionaries, and one of them had a broken leg. Well, one P-day they went to a place where a famous preacher, or somebody like that, was giving a lecture, and I guess he was healing people. Well, the missionaries were watching all of this and didn't know what to think. The missionary with the broken leg decided to go up and see if he could be healed. So he went down, and the guy healed his leg. The two missionaries didn't know what to think of it, so they went home, and the missionary with the broken leg didn't want to do any missionary work because his faith had been shattered. So his companion called the mission president, and the mission president told them to come into the office. So they went to the mission president's office and told him what had happened. When the mission president heard this, he stood up and cast out the evil spirit, and the missionary fell down because his leg was once more broken. (MC #2302)

In the many versions of this story, the missionaries usually attend a faith-healing meeting in violation of rules prohibiting them from

doing so. The narrative is particularly interesting, not simply because it encourages missionaries to obey mission rules and to avoid the forces of Satan but also because it associates those forces with other, usually fundamentalist, churches. For some missionaries, therefore, the narrative serves the additional function of strengthening their resolve to win converts from churches whose leaders they associate with the adversary.

The majority of the stories in which missionaries subject themselves to the power of Satan, however, focus not on other churches but on the missionaries' own violations of important rules. For example, a Brazilian missionary refused to sleep in his sacred temple undergarments because of hot weather. "When his companion woke in the morning, he found the errant elder pressed into the wall so hard that he could hardly pull him off. The elder was obviously dead from being mashed into the wall" (MC #878). According to another account, a photograph taken of a missionary swimming, in violation of mission rules, shows an evil-looking form hovering near him (MC #270). In still other stories missionaries are either killed or tormented for experimenting with spiritualism (MC #133), playing the ouija board (MC #284), leaving their companions (MC #2186), or sometimes simply not working hard enough (MC #209).

Logically, these narratives make little sense. One would expect the devil generously to reward those errant missionaries who turn to him in prayer or violate the rules he would have them break, but instead he kills or sorely injures them. Logic notwithstanding, the stories provide stark reminders that missionaries who stray too far from appropriate behavior put their lives and their salvation at risk.

The second category of stories having to do with supernatural warnings focuses not on the buffetings of Satan but on the punishments of God, directed sometimes at enemies of the church and at other times at those missionaries themselves who fail to take their callings seriously. Those stories that tell of the Lord's punishing outsiders who fight against the church encourage missionaries to live righteously to be worthy of divine protection or assistance. Consider, for example, the following very popular narrative:

> [This] guy was on a mission in one of the wilder type towns like New York. 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 they started to start the car, and it wouldn't start, and they tried to start the

> car [again], and it wouldn't start. Meanwhile, the guys with the chains and the knives are starting to get closer and closer to the car, so they get really scared. And the one guy says, "Well, let's have a prayer." So they said a 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 why the car wouldn't start. And they got out and they opened the hood, and there's no battery. (MC #774)

Other stories in the missionary canon reveal how the power of God not only protects the missionaries but also can bring terrible consequences to those who mock or attempt to thwart missionary work:

> Two missionaries were walking down the street when they spotted a man coming towards them, and as good missionaries they approached the man about the church. As they began to talk about the Book of Mormon with this man it became evident that he had had contact with Mormons and the Book of Mormon before and that that contact hadn't been too favorable. The man began treating the two missionaries rather poorly, and in the process he grabbed the Book of Mormon from the elders and threw it on the ground and started to stomp on it. When this man began to stomp on the Book of Mormon the senior companion got really upset to see the Book of Mormon treated that way. He told the man that he would never let anyone treat the Book of Mormon that way in his presence. He called the man to repentance, and when the man showed no signs of repenting, the missionary dusted his feet off to the man and left. In less than a week it was reported that the man died in a fire that occurred in his home. (MC #1096; see Mark 6:11 concerning the curse of dusting off one's feet)

The wrath of God is kindled against people like those in the stories above, outsiders who threaten missionaries or mock and persecute the church, but it is brought to full flame against those missionaries who do not hold sacred things sacred or engage in sacrilegious behavior. Stories that detail the dire consequences suffered by church members participating in sacrilegious acts have long been part of Mormon folklore. For example, on May 31, 1889, a citizen of Provo, Utah, recorded in his journal:

> A sad affair is reported as having occurred in Provo a few days since. Jonathan Harris, who is wild and addicted to the use of liquor, went into a saloon and after getting a glass of whiskey, mockingly consecrated it, as is customary in the consecration of oil in the Church. No sooner had he finished this sacrilegious act than he was struck with paralysis and fell helpless on the floor. His Gentile companions were horrified at his act, and its result, and carried him home where he has since laid in a very precarious condition. A horrible warning to scoffers! (MC #1704)

Equally horrible warnings to scoffers occur in missionary narratives, as the following stories testify:

> [Two elders] had read in a magazine where the pioneers had blessed their oxen that were sick on the way to Salt Lake Valley, and the oxen were cured because of the power of the priesthood. So they thought they would confer the priesthood on a fencepost, just for fun. Upon doing so, lightning wiped them out. (MC #1281)

> Two missionaries were messing around, and they decided to confer the priesthood on a dog which they saw on the street. Before they could complete the ordinance, a bolt of lightning came and struck the dog and the two elders, and it zapped them. (MC #1044)

Other stories tell of events that begin more innocently but still end disastrously when missionaries move beyond proper behavior and attempt to manipulate God to their own advantage:

> This is a story about two South American missionaries. As the story goes, the two missionaries were in a place where the people didn't like them very well at all, and they decided they'd get rid of them quick and had some kind of poison food that they fed them—I don't remember what it was; 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, you know, and told them what happened and said, "Truly you must be men of God," you know. And they got a lot of converts from it. They went to another town and decided that when the people were hard-hearted again, 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." (MC #3460)

"Thou shalt not tempt the Lord, thy God." Therein lies the key to all the narratives discussed here. Missionaries must not tempt the Lord, their God, by breaking those rules on which their own success, as well as the success of the missionary system, depends. They must not tempt their Lord and put their lives and salvation at risk by flirting with Satan or in any way mocking or misusing God's divine and sacred power. These are the messages sounding clearly through all the narratives, messages drilled into the heads of missionaries from the first day they enter the Missionary Training Center. They are also the messages missionaries bring home from the field and by which they govern their lives in the church, as they seek through a lifetime of church activity to follow rules, respect authority, fear Satan, and honor God. I recently sat in a church meeting in which the topic of discussion was "treating the sacred with respect." In an attempt to stress the seriousness of the subject, one fellow, many years removed from his own mission, told the story of a missionary struck dead for ordaining a post to the priesthood. Lessons learned from stories of his missionary past were still clearly governing his life.

In conclusion, it would be misleading to assume that narratives like those recounted here are the whole of missionary storytelling. They are, as already noted, only part of a much larger whole, but they are a very important part nonetheless. It would be still more misleading to assume that missionaries make a practice of praying to the devil, ordaining posts to the priesthood, or cursing those who oppose them or that mission presidents go around driving evil spirits out of disobedient missionaries. These narratives do not relate facts. They are stories, fictions, based perhaps on some distant reality but reconstructed again and again in each new telling and in response to each new situation, playing in the process important cultural roles usually denied to sober history as they integrate new missionaries into the missionary world, with its private and esoteric knowledge; teach them the rules on which both their individual success and the success of the missionary program will depend; and, finally, inculcate in them attitudes toward the sacred that will guide their conduct throughout their lives.

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