

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



ROBERT A. REES lives in the Santa Cruz Mountains where he writes poetry, contemplates the glories of the giant redwoods, and studies Mormon culture. An earlier version of the paper, under a different title, was presented at the 2006 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (tape/CD/download SL06351).

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 miraculous events continue to happen in believers' lives, prove its doctrines true and sacred texts authentic, and so forth. As folklorist Donna Wycoff summarizes:

Contemporary legends—those generally anonymous, 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 ambiguities that underlie that concern.⁵

While some such myths and legends are rather benign, others have a negative and, in some instances, even destructive 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 subsequent 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 disasters, and other seemingly apocalyptic events have all led



JEANNETTE ATWOOD

LEGENDS REINFORCE THE PERCEIVED SPECIAL NATURE OF THE GROUP, AFFIRM THAT GOD AND THE ANGELS ARE PROTECTING ITS MEMBERS, CONFIRM THAT MIRACULOUS EVENTS CONTINUE TO HAPPEN IN BELIEVERS' LIVES, PROVE ITS DOCTRINES TRUE AND SACRED TEXTS AUTHENTIC.

bishop is claimed to have replied that this information came by way of “an internal memo sent to all bishops and stake presidents by . . . President Hinckley.”⁷

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 attacks 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

This story has several characteristics typical of a legend:

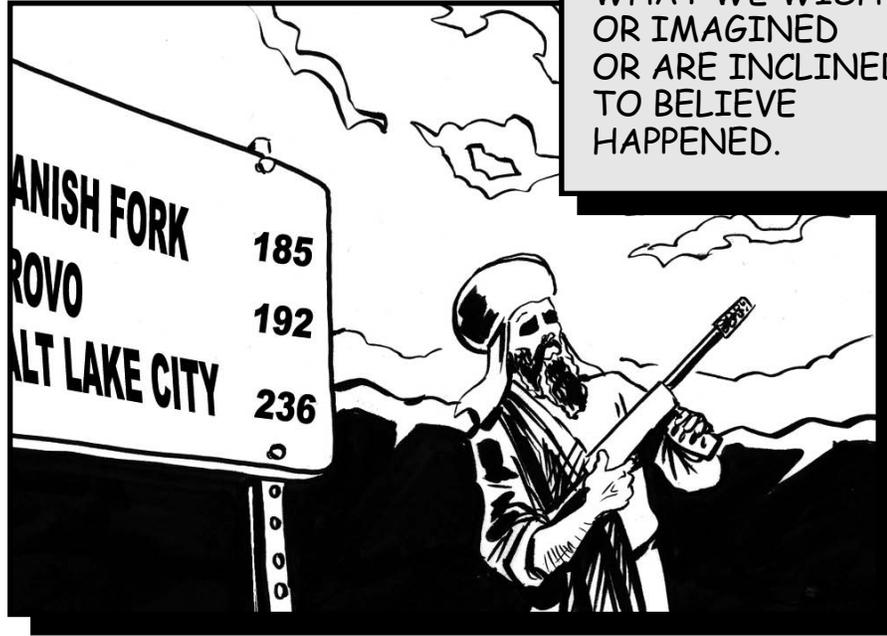
- It comes secondhand, from someone who heard about the event or who knew of someone who did.
- It includes specific (though not necessarily accurate) information and data—e.g., that forty-eight members of the Church worked in the Twin Towers.
- It has apparent authoritative support—e.g., an internal memo from President Hinckley.
- It includes information that while perhaps slightly incredible on one level is nevertheless plausible, especially if one considers the percentage of

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 se-

LIKE ALL STORY-TELLING, URBAN LEGENDS ARE ARRANGED AND ORDERED TO MAKE THEM MORE DRAMATIC. 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.



curity 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 taped 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.

AN EVEN MORE elaborate and more dramatic Mormon urban legend relating to 9/11 is also about Mormon soldiers fighting in Iraq. According to this legend, which circulated on the Internet and in high priest group meetings (a fertile ground for such stories!), including in my ward, members of the 1457th Utah National Guard's Engineer Combat Battalion are credited with almost single-handedly winning the initial campaign in the war in Iraq.

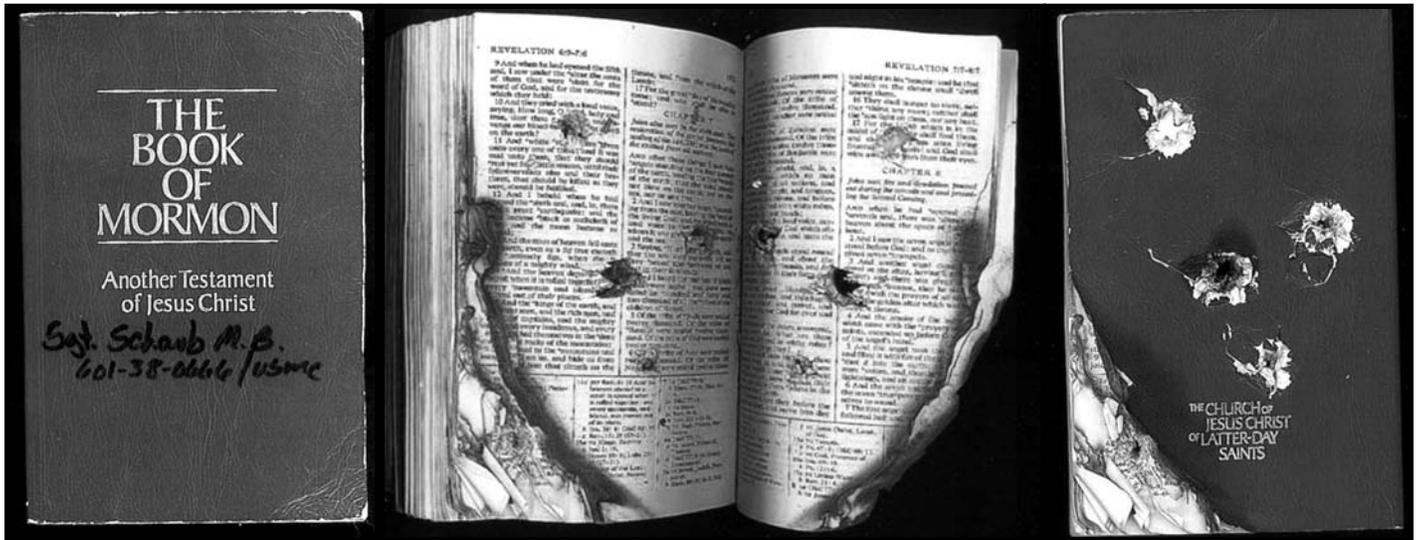
The story reports that these particular soldiers were required to go on such dangerous missions that “they were told to prepare messages and letters to their families and to plan their funerals, since the majority of them would not be coming back.”¹⁵ So certain was their demise that “the President [of 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



“EVIDENCE” FOR THE AUTHENTICITY OF SGT. SCHAUB’S STORY

These images accompanied the email account of the Sergeant’s miraculous protection from bullets and the book’s own preservation during a vehicle fire that occurred days later.

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,”¹⁶ 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”

- We *did not* “fight ahead of the main force”
- We were *not* considered “chaplains” by other soldiers
- We held church services in a *tent*, *not* in “Saddam’s Palace”
- We had few, if any, “visitors” at our Sunday church services
- *No* “General Officers” attended our church services
- We held *no* “prayer circles”
- “Pete,” the so-called technical services vendor for the Utah Guard, *exists only* in the mind of the author
- Senator Hatch *did not* complain to the Joint Chiefs asking them “if they were trying to kill his Utah Guardsmen”
- We are *not* responsible for the combat operations performed by any other units!
- We were *not* the “spearheads for the 3rd Marines or the 101st Airborne”
- We *did not* “teach the Army how to pray” because they already knew!

The one element of the narrative that was factual was that the battalion did not suffer any casualties during its tour of duty in Iraq. Montoya, the battalion chaplain, speaks of their “miraculous protection,” saying, “It was miraculous that we had no serious combat injuries or fatalities,” and he testifies that “we were protected and strengthened by the power of our Lord.” But he also reveals that the unit “arrived in Iraq after major [combat] operations had ceased.”

Although Chaplain Montoya says, “I am certain that the author(s) [of this legend] had no intention of deceiving anyone by sharing our story,” it is difficult not to conclude otherwise, especially given the story’s fabrication.

As folklore specialist Linda Dégh observes, “The core idea remains that untruth is told for truth and that the other components are used to set up and elaborate this assumption.”¹⁷ While one might be tempted to consider such a tale benign, it is dangerous to do so, mainly because it reinforces the sentiment that Mormons are so special they deserve divine protection and guidance not afforded others. In the language of the legend, “The Pentagon had ordered [an investigation into] every small thing about particular groups of soldiers, trying to figure out what was different about them—why they were so special.”

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.”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.”²¹ In a 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.”²²

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 “God’s in his heaven—/All’s right with the world”²³—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

SHOWING THE MORMON SOLDIERS IN IRAQ AS LARGER THAN LIFE 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.

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?



JEANNETTE ATWOOD

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,

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. ☹

NOTES

1. In her chapter, "Is There a Definition for the Legend?", folklore scholar Linda Dégh discusses the challenge of finding a consensus among folklorists about what, exactly, constitutes a contemporary legend: "For almost two centuries, scholars have attempted, with arduous dedication, to find a definition of the legend—to capture this 'elusive butterfly.'" See Linda Dégh, *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001), 23.

While no uniform definition exists, the following Wikipedia definition will serve our purposes here:

An urban legend is a kind of modern folklore consisting of stories often thought to be factual by those circulating them. The term is often used with a meaning similar to the expression "apocryphal story." Urban legends are not necessarily untrue, but they are often false, distorted, exaggerated, or sensationalized. Despite the name, urban legends do not necessarily take place in an urban setting. The name is designed to differentiate them from traditional folklore in preindustrial times.

Urban legends are sometimes repeated in news stories and, in recent years, distributed by email. People frequently say such tales happened to a "friend of a friend"—so often, in fact, that "friend of a friend", or "FOAF", has become a commonly used term for this sort of story.

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_legend (accessed 11 December 2006).

2. A list of such Mormon urban legends, including those mentioned in this list, can be found on the SHIELDS (Scholarly Historical and Information Exchange for Latter-day Saints) website, a section of which is devoted to debunking "LDS Hoaxes, Myths, and Faith Promoting Rumors." See <http://www.shields-research.org/Hoaxes/Hoaxes.htm> (accessed 11 December 2006). The rumor about missionaries being called to China has been around for quite a while, but an apparent recent resurgence in its spread has caused the Church to respond specifically to it. See "No Foundation to China Rumor," *Church News*, 23 December 2006, 13.

The legends about LDS buildings being miraculously preserved remind me of a report on CNN just after Hurricane Katrina in which the reporter, commenting on the devastation that engulfed New Orleans, showed a statue of the Virgin Mary that somehow had escaped being hit by a large tree that had destroyed a nearby church. Calling it "a miracle," the reporter didn't seem to wonder why God would preserve a statue but not the hundreds of citizens who perished in the destruction.

Regarding the claim that LDS youth were generals in the war in heaven, a note posted on the SHIELDS site states: "President Boyd K. Packer, acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve, has released the following concerning a statement he is said to have made:

We continue to receive reports of the distribution of a quote attributed to me which begins, 'The youth of the Church today were generals in the war in heaven,' and ends with the statement that when they return to heaven 'all in attendance will bow in your presence.' I did not make that statement. I do not believe that statement. The statement, on occasion, has been attributed to others of the First Presidency and the Twelve. None of the Brethren made that statement."

According to this note, "President Packer has sent a letter to mission presidents requesting their help in clarifying this matter among missionaries and members, and has had posted on some Internet sites carrying the statement a notice that he did not make this declaration."

The legends about mission calls remind me of the urban legend circulating fifty years ago when I was a young missionary in the Northern States. Several missionaries reported that a missionary they had known, before being sent into the mission field, had been taken up to a promontory overlooking Salt Lake City by a General Authority who said something like the following, "Elder, take a good look at this valley because when you return from your mission it will be covered with tents." As a group of us sat around one night repeating and embellishing such stories, speculating about the return of the Lost Tribes, one of my more sardonic companions said, "I don't know what you guys are getting so excited about, it's just going to be a national Boy Scout jamboree!"

3. Harold B. Lee, *Ensign*, January 1973, 105.

4. As quoted on the SHIELDS site, <http://www.shields-research.org>. This statement came shortly after a summary of lighthearted remarks made in Kuna, Idaho, 21 March 2004 by Elder L. Tom Perry concerning the various personalities of the members of the Quorum of the Twelve began circulating on the Internet. For a copy of what circulated and more on the story, see *SUNSTONE*, May 2004, 76–77 and *SUNSTONE*, July 2004, 54–55.

5. Donna Wycoff, "Why a Legend? Contemporary Legends as Community Ritual," *Contemporary Legend* 3 (1993): 2; as cited in Dégh, *Legend and Belief*:

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.religion.mormon/msg/74e24cf4d7a357e5?as_umsgid=f6058cf6.0210250954.ccb998c@posting.google.com (accessed 11 December 2006). A long string of responses, most 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.

11. See "Missionaries miraculously spared in World Trade Center attack," http://www.shields-research.org/Hoaxes/LDSWorld_Internet_Hoaxes_and_Mormon_Urban_Legends.htm#wtc (accessed 21 August 2006).

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

13. See "Osama bin Laden has been sighted in Utah" at www.Snopes.com/rumors/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." An additional bit of information came from a third correspondent: "Apparently the photos were not photo-shopped. . . . he actually shot the book."

15. This and all quotations in this section are from the story, "Modern Day Stripling Warriors," and the commentary at http://www.shields-research.org/Hoaxes/Modern_Day_Stripling_Warriors.htm (accessed 25 July 2006).

16. Jan Harold Brunvand, *Too Good to be True: The Colossal Book of Urban Legends* (New York: Norton, 1999), 19.

17. Dégh, *Legend and Belief*, 46.

18. David Berreby, *Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 211.

19. *Ibid.*, 214.

20. *Ibid.* 194.

21. Sharon Begley, "Brains Strive to See the Good, Leading to God," *Wall Street Journal*, 28 October 2005. Available at <http://www.mindpowernews.com/BrainStrives.htm> (accessed 4 August 2005).

22. Shankar Vedantam, "How the Brain Helps Partisans Admit No Gray," *Washington Post*, 31 July 2006, A02.

23. Robert Browning, "Pippa's Song." Available at <http://www.bartleby.com/101/718.html> (accessed 22 August 2006). The distinction between particular/special 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/UMHISTORY/Wesley/sermons/serm-067.stm> (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/Voltaire0265/OnToleration/HTMLs/0029_Pt05_Lisbon.html#

toc_lf029.head.086 (accessed 22 August 2006), is a direct counter to the optimism of Browning and others.

24. See Dr. Bradley Walker's articles "Spreading Zion Southward, Part I: Improving Efficiency and Equity in the Allocation of Church Welfare Resources" and "Sharing our Loaves and Fishes," in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 91–109, and *Dialogue* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 33–47.

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/494b392f0edb1bcf74e24cf4d7a357e5 (accessed 11 December 2006). The post cited above was written by "Garydw" 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 gunfight, 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 Iraqi 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 Iraq 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/Hoaxes/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