

Fate and the Persecutors of Joseph Smith: Transmutations of An American Myth

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At the hands of an incensed mob, Joseph Smith was murdered, early summer, 1844. The instant he died The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was given cultural birth. No meeting of a required six members, no ecclesiastical approval from any council or governing body could have given the Mormon Church its operational base as did the death of Joseph Smith. Now the Mormons had a martyr.¹

The history surrounding this incident has received much attention from both Mormon and non-Mormon writers, but perhaps a more far-reaching and certainly more complex ramification of the martyrdom than mere documented historical details of the event can supply is a group of stories centering on those who participated in the murder. These tales, collected and published in a curious but popular volume entitled *The Fate of the Persecutors of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, by N. B. Lundwall, reflect a powerful current in the main stream of Mormon folk belief.² The stories, which in their particulars are peculiarly Mormon, are nonetheless part and parcel of a larger body of legend which has clear antecedents in American folk belief.

According to Lundwall, these stories, which he called "historical data,"³ show that those who persecuted the prophet met grotesque and untimely deaths. For example, in an interview with Lundwall, George C. King of Garland, Utah, reported the gruesome details of the suffering and death of one who had reputedly helped murder Joseph Smith. According to King:⁴

The statement of Seth Howe had a lasting impression on me as he related: 'My grandfather was one of the leaders of the mob which murdered Joe Smith.' I questioned him further as to what became of his grandfather afterwards. He related that following the assassination of Joseph Smith his grandfather never saw a well day, although he lived for several years afterwards. His condition grew progressively worse and physicians of the day who called to attend him were unable to diagnose it as any known affliction, but his suffering was so intense that he frequently expressed the desire to obtain poison to end it all. His family very carefully kept anything of that nature out of his reach and at his final demise he actually had rotted alive, finally dying in intense agony.

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While a prisoner in the jail at Liberty, Missouri, March 20, 1839, Joseph Smith wrote that God had assured him that, "Cursed are all those that shall lift up the heel against mine anointed...."⁵ Such curses are common in folk literature⁶ and, according to these popular stories, Joseph's curse, or his reporting of the curse, had flesh and blood implications.

According to J. C. Cox, one Jack Reed, an avowed participant in the murder of Joseph Smith, met a horrible fate. In a diary entry Cox recorded that Reed had taken ill, suffering from a strange ailment. According to an Indian friend, Reed's flesh was worm-riddled and was a sight no white woman could be allowed to see:

He was literally eaten alive by worms. His eye balls had fallen out, the flesh on his cheeks and neck had fallen off, and though he could breathe he could take nourishment only through an opening in his throat.

Pieces of flesh as large as two hands had reputedly fallen from different parts of his body.⁷

In the same entry Mrs. Cox asserted that Brigham Young had cursed the mob, saying that the participants would "utterly rot before they died."⁸

Ironically, some of the mobsters reportedly came to Utah, where they continued to suffer under the curse. About a pitiful old man living near Bedue Creek on the upper Weber River, Thomas Nichols wrote that:⁹

The lower part of one ear was gone, a part of the left side of his nose had rotted away, and there were other repulsive sores on his face. He showed me his hands. There was very little solid flesh on them. I expressed my sympathy for him and he said his feet were worse than his

hands. I asked him what had caused all this trouble and he replied: 'I don't know unless it was a curse God had placed on me.' He said some men had told him that was it, because he was with the men who killed Joe Smith, the Mormon prophet.

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On some of those involved in the murder the curse began working immediately. From the *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* we learn that an Iowan named Townsend had participated in the martyrdom. A shot from Joseph Smith's pistol wounded him in the arm; soon the arm began to rot and was finally amputated. However, the operation did not stop the strange rotting and eight or nine months after the operation Townsend died, "having literally rotted alive." Before dying, Townsend confessed he knew Joseph Smith was a prophet.¹⁰

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Such deaths were not meted exclusively to those who murdered Joseph Smith. Many men who either persecuted the Mormons in the East and Midwest or who tormented Mormon missionaries met similar fates. Some were killed in bizarre falls, gored by rams, buried alive¹¹ or horribly crippled. Others froze to death, died of drunkenness¹² or were shot.¹³

About some of those involved in the martyrdom, Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill note:¹⁴

A persistent Utah myth holds that some of the murderers of Joseph and Hyrum Smith met fittingly gruesome deaths--that Providence intervened to dispense the justice denied in the Carthage trial. But the five defendants who went to trial, including men who had been shown to be leaders in the murder plot and others associated with them, enjoyed notably successful careers.

They go on to explain that:¹⁵

The only principals involved in the Carthage trial who seem to have been stalked by tragedy in their later careers were the prosecutors, the sheriff, the judge and the governor.

But the central problem in these stories of death by divine retribution is not a historical consideration, but rather a problem growing from the Mormon ethos, from the unconscious self-image¹⁶ the Utah Mormon subculture has fostered and nurtured. Although the incident around which these stories revolve, the actual murder of Joseph Smith, is historically true, the stories Lundwall compiled are probably not historically authentic.¹⁷ Some historians immediately respond to them by dismissing such "clap-trap" as the ravings of fanatics, which cannot be historically corroborated. However, as William A. Wilson has noted:¹⁸

What we must remember is that what actually happened is often less important than what we think happened. We [virtually all of us, since we all belong to many folk groups] are motivated not by actual fact, but by what we believe to be fact.

For example, one of the most widely shared folk beliefs among Utah Mormons concerns the coming of the Saints to the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847. Many Wasatch-front Mormons believe that Brigham Young and his company were led to the valley much the same way Moses and the children of Israel were led to the "Promised Land." This belief embodies what I have called the Mormon Migration Myth.¹⁹

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Although there is liberal historical evidence that the Mormons knew exactly where they were going long before they left Nauvoo, cajoling, educating, arguing and scoffing do little to convince the folk of their "sins against history." On the contrary, many Mormons are ever-ready and willing to bear testimony of the "fact" that the Saints were led purely by revelation. The point again is that in the folk mind the things the folk bear witness to are every bit as historical as the fact that a Georgia peanut farmer was elected President of the United States in 1976. The folk of the Mormon sub-culture make little distinction between folk history and empirical history; indeed, to them no distinction exists. Thus, whether Lundwall's claims are historically true or not, they are certainly true in the minds of the Mormon folk; since the tales are psychologically true, the question of their historical authenticity is not an important consideration here. Because the tales Lundwall printed exist in variants and are believed to be true by the tellers, they are legends. Whether or not they have a historical base, they are certainly "mythically" true.

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Though the folk versions of the fate of Joseph Smith's persecutors may not be empirically authentic, they are part of a larger body of myth by no means limited to Utah. Richard M. Dorson has reported a similar curse and its accompanied divine retribution in a small town on Lake Michigan's Green Bay. Two brothers, the McDonalds, after a drunken knife fight during which they killed one man, were pulled from jail by an insane mob, hung, dragged through the streets of town by their necks and finally incinerated in a house of prostitution. Thereafter their remains were hung from two jack pines. According to Dorson, "Few legends spawned in American history can match the story of the lynching of the McDonald boys at Menominee, Michigan, in 1881."²⁰ Folk belief has it that the mob who lynched the brothers was cursed by Father Menard, a Catholic priest. Says Dorson²¹

No trial was ever held, no arrests were even made, of the ringleaders. But it would not be correct to say that they never received justice. Sentence had been passed even before they reached the crossing sign with the dying men. Father Menard, whose church stood only a block away from the courthouse pleaded with the gang to desist, as they careened down Main Street. When the bloodied men laughed at his face, he denounced them with this curse: that all who rode the bodies would die with their boots on. So say the French and Irish Catholics. Men of other faiths feel that divine vengeance visited the curse on the lynchers.

Tradition says that all of the mob died with their boots on, some in very bizarre and unexpected ways.²² Interestingly, it was a belief founded in Christian zeal which spawned and passed on these tales in oral tradition in much the same way the stories about Joseph Smith's murderers passed among Mormons.

Thirteen years after Dorson collected this Michigan legend he heard another American variant. When attending a seminar on "American Folk tales" with Hector Lee at Chico State College during the summer of 1959, Dorson heard Lee relate a "Narrative of the Lynching of Lookout Bridge," which occurred in 1901 in Gouger's Neck, California. According to Dorson, the Gouger's Neck tale contained "the same skeletal themes" as the Menominee legend:²³

The town resentment against a family of halfbreed ruffians, their arrest, the storming of the jail, a fight and the lynching, the exoneration of the lynch party, and their macabre deaths. In the phrase of the elderly townspeople, 'Hell overtook 'em, every one of 'em.' One walked in front of a train, another developed a cancer of the throat, a third died from a rotting in the stomach as if he had been kicked there.

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Lee's legend from Gouger's Neck is similar in tone and consequence to stories circulated among Mormons about the deaths of the persecutors of Joseph Smith. Obviously, the death by rotting was also present in the Gouger's Neck tale.

Similar tales have been circulated in American tradition for centuries. Nathaniel Hawthorne in his tale, "The Gentle Boy," a story of Quaker persecutions by the Puritans, mentioned the activities of the Friends, noting that because of their religious zeal, which greatly annoyed the Puritans, "in the year 1659, the government of Massachusetts Bay indulged two members of the Quaker sect with the crown of Martyrdom."²⁴

Speaking of John Endicott, governor of Boston, and others who persecuted the Quakers, Hawthorne wrote that:²⁵

The Quakers, whose revengeful feelings were not less deep because they were inactive, remembered this man [Endicott] and his associates in after times. The historian of the sect ... recounts the judgments that overtook them, in old age or at the parting hour. He tells us that they died suddenly and violently and in madness; but nothing can exceed the bitter mockery with which he records the loathsome disease, and 'death by rottenness,' of the fierce and cruel governor.

The "death by rottenness" which Hawthorne mentions here is again similar to the supposed fates of many of the persecutors of Joseph Smith. Showing that he relied on history for such comments, Hawthorne mentioned "the historian of the sect" and seems at times to be quoting him directly.

The historian Hawthorne referred to was probably William Sewel, whose two-volume work, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress, of the Christian People Called Quakers*, was published in 1823. In his work Sewell specifically discussed the death of Endicott, attributing to him "a loathsome disease, inasmuch that he stunk alive, and so died with rottenness, his name being like to give a bad savour through ages to come."²⁶

The reason why people tell and believe such stories as those surrounding the Menominee murders, the Gouger's Neck lynching, the hanging of Quakers by Puritans and the murder of Joseph Smith may never be fully known. However, it is likely that most of these tales are told to reinforce cultural norms and beliefs through a process folklorists call communal re-creation. That is, tales, jokes, legends, folk songs and other forms may be borrowed from one culture by another, then reshaped to conform to the norms (be they historical, religious, national or otherwise) of the new group. Such re-creation has taken place on many levels among the Mormons.

One of the most widely collected and studied folk beliefs in the United States is a cluster of tales, familiar to most Latter-day Saints, told of the ministry of and visitations by The Three Nephites, those holy figures from the Book of Mormon who, like John of the New Testament, were allowed to dwell on the earth in the flesh until Christ's return. Stories of Nephite intervention in man's affairs, often to aid a Mormon in need, circulate widely in the Church. According to William A. Wilson, "the essential truth of the Nephite stories ... lies not in their actual truth or falsity but in the vision they give to those who believe them. . . ."²⁷

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The "vision" in Mormonism is that Latter-day Saints are God's chosen people and that he will do much to protect, succor, buoy up and sanctify his children.

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In the years immediately following the martyrdom, Mormons were consistently on the defensive.²⁸ It is then possible that the Saints adapted the instances and consequences of legend in oral tradition (like those told by the Quakers of God's retributions against the Puritans) to their own peculiar circumstances. As underdogs on the American frontier, the stories of the destruction of their enemies by a protecting God easily reinforced the belief that Mormons were the chosen; that the Creator would protect his children against the outrages of an unenlightened world, as he did Abraham, Moses, Job and even the Puritans; that in the hour of darkness the children could always look to the Father.

In those early days after the martyrdom, the tales told of the killers' deaths may have had a practical value foreign to the minds of modern Mormons. They created and reinforced group solidarity in the face of real as well as imagined dangers. But this does not explain the popularity of such stories among faithful moderns. Mormons of the twentieth century, as a subculture, are probably as conscious of the past (not necessarily the historical past) of their forebears, as any other folk group in the United States. They look with pride to the blood and tears of handcart companies, to privations, winter sufferings, persecutions by mobs and armies--because through all this the Saints have endured. Besides their obvious appeal to the macabre and the sensational, the dark stories of suffering and death meted out upon the killers of the

Prophet affirm to a new generation of Mormons that the past is real, that the consequences of the martyrdom had effects and repercussions that the world still feels and will feel "unto the third and fourth generation."

Even more important than the viability of the past to modern Mormons is its glorification. One can believe that the past was real without being enlightened; but if one can trace the benevolence of the Lord in his acts among ancestors, then the past transcends historical considerations. As stated earlier, these stories are told and believed to reinforce a cultural norm; thus, in the telling, the horrors accruing to the ungodly become positive reinforcements of a lifestyle introduced by the Prophet himself. And in the telling, reading and believing of *the legends*, the past forever remains the present.

Folklore is a vibrant force in the lives of most Mormons, a force that helps identify cultural roots while helping the people cope with present and future. And very likely an understanding of the Mormon ethos can best be attained through a study of Mormon folklore.²⁹ Mormons, like other American folk groups, have augmented and adapted legends from oral as well as written tradition to their own peculiar problems and circumstances. In this respect, the peculiarities of Latter-day Saints have been and will be shared by other American folk groups to explain, reinforce and defend cultural norms.

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1. This idea seems reinforced in a statement made by Willard Richards and John Taylor, who were in jail at Carthage with the Smiths at the time of the murder. In a letter of instruction and information to the president of the British Mission dated July 9, 1844, they said about the murder, "It will call down the wrath and indignation of all nations upon the perpetrators of the horrid deed, and will prove the truth of the saying, 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church!'" Found in the Documentary History of the Church 7: 174-175.
 2. The copies of the book in the BYU Harold B. Lee Library are among the most used in the building. Dog-eared, liberally marked and well worn, the volumes themselves testify of their use.
 3. See N. B. Lundwall, *The Fate of the Persecutors of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: No Publisher Listed, 1952), frontispiece. Lundwall's collection is actually a body of raw folk narrative waiting for objective interpretation.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
 6. Folk motifs concerning such curses include M411.3, Dying Man's Curse; M411.4, Man pursued by hatred of the gods; M411.41, Curse by a god; M411.7, Curse by spirit; M411.8, Saint's (prophet's) curse; M411.18, Curse by priest. These motifs and their numbers are taken from Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), see volume 5.
 7. Lundwall, pp. 295-296.
 8. *Ibid.*, p. 296.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 298.
 10. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 4th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1950), pp. 424-425.
 11. Lundwall, p. 72.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 314.
 14. Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 217.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 219. For an interesting and insightful treatment of the martyrdom and Joseph Smith's status as hero from a folkloristic point of view, see Clifton Holt Jolley "The Martyrdom of Joseph Smith: an Archetypal Study," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44 (Fall 1976), 329-350.
 16. Alan Dundes has recently noted that, "Folklorists should study folklore, not for its own sake (though it is fascinating), but because folklore offers a unique picture of folk. In folklore, one finds a people's own unconscious picture of themselves. Folklore as an autobiographical ethnography permits the folklorist to see a people from the inside-out rather than from the outside-in." See *Analytic Essays in Folklore* (The Hague: Mouton and Company, 1975), p. xi.
 17. Because these legends are formulaized (the deaths are strikingly similar, as are the circumstances surrounding them), and exist in variants in oral tradition, they are very likely folk narratives. This point will be further substantiated as the article progresses. For definitions of folklore *per se* and discussions of its types and forms see Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore* (New York: Norton, 1968), and Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965).
 18. William A. Wilson, "Folklore and History: Fact Amid the Legends," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 41 (Winter 1973): 54.
 19. See my article entitled, "'This is the Place': Myth and Mormonism," *Western Folklore* 36 (July 1977): 246-252.
 20. Richard M. Dorson, *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers: Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 169.
 21. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.
 22. Dorson recorded the death of one lyncher as follows: "Bob Stephenson, who furnished the rope, died first, within a year after the lynching. A fire started in his lumber yard, among piles of four foot slabs, then used to fuel the lake boats. The space of a wagon road separated the two flaming piles each several hundred feet long. Stephenson wanted his men to go between the piles and tip them over to save the slabs. Neither they nor Randall, the fire chief, would enter the inferno." "By God, haven't you got guts enough?" asked Stephenson. "He walked in between the piles with a hose. Flame swept across his face. He opened his mouth and gasped for air. Stephenson was full of whiskey. He inhaled some flame and his alcoholic breath caught fire. He ignited, like a human blow-torch. 'Boys, I'm done for,' he sobbed." (pp. 174-175).
 23. Richard M. Dorson, "Debate over Trustworthiness of Oral Traditional History," *Folklore: Selected Essays* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp. 217-218. See Hector Lee, "The Shadows from Lookout Bridge" (a television script broadcast from Radio Station KPAY, Chico, California, 9 January 1960), bound with other scripts in the series under the title "Campfire Tales of Northern California" (1959), 41, n.o. 13.
 24. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Gentle Boy," *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Selected Tales and Sketches*, ed. Hyatt H. Waggoner (San Francisco: Rinehart Press, 1970), p. 69.
 25. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.
 26. William Sewel, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Benjamin and Thomas Kite, 1823), vol. 1, pp. 597-598.

27. Wilson, p. 55.
28. Such a defensive posture very probably led to the massacre at Mountain Meadows. See Chapter 2, "Defense of Zion," in Jannita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, for a discussion of the defensive attitudes of early Utah Mormons.
29. See William A. Wilson, "The Paradox of Mormon Folklore in *Essays on the American West, 1974-1975*, Charles Redd Monographs in Western History, no. 6, ed. Thomas G. Alexander (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), pp. 127-147, for a study of Mormon folklore in general. Wilson carefully makes the point that we can learn at least as much about Mormons by studying their folklore as by studying their history or their literature. The article was reprinted in *Brigham Young University Studies* 17 (Autumn 1976): 40-58.