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William Rees Palmer, *Two Pahute Indian Legends: “Why the Grand Canyon Was Madea” and “The Three Days of Darkness”*

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Abstract *Review of Two Pahute Indian Legends: “Why the Grand Canyon Was Made” and “The Three Days of Darkness” (1987), by William Rees Palmer.*

Palmer, William Rees. *Two Pahute Indian Legends: "Why the Grand Canyon Was Made" and "The Three Days of Darkness."* With research, supplementary information, and editorial commentary by Thomas Keith Midgley. Cheney, WA: Lighthouse, 1987. 54 pp. \$5.80.

Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

This small book is even smaller than at first appears, since several pages are taken up with (often repetitive and rather wordy) moral exhortations and sketches of both author and editor. It bears the marks of its amateur production, and is marred by a fair number of grammatical and spelling peculiarities.

It is, nonetheless, an interesting little piece, which we can hope might induce someone with the requisite anthropological and other training to take a closer look at its subject matter. The first of the two legends recounted—both the author and his editor insist, incidentally, upon the spelling "Pahute" rather than the more common "Paiute" or "Piute"—is an etiological myth about "Why the Grand Canyon Was Made." It would seem that the canyon expresses the gulf between a young Indian couple whose love was destroyed by a devil-induced jealousy. Interesting, from a Mormon point of view, are some of the details of the creation of the earth as related in this story, as well as the picture of the Pahute godhead which it yields. Before human and animal life is placed upon the earth—"trees and fruits and flowers" are already present—the senior and supreme god Tobats is represented as holding council with the subordinate god, Shinob. Together, they form the first man out of earth and stone, and then pour vapor into him to bring him to life. However, Nung-Wa is still alone, and Shinob prevails upon Tobats to create for the man a companion, a beautiful maiden. Years later, when a sinful and promiscuous mankind is dispersed into many tribes, Tobats vows to destroy all human life—which he terms "the god-kind clan"—from off the face of the earth. However, Shinob intercedes for them, another response is chosen, and they are spared.

The second myth, "The Three Days of Darkness," has more obvious immediate relevance to the concerns of this Review. (The editor makes it clear later in the book that he believes the Grand Canyon to have been a sudden occurrence, connected with the earthquakes which, according to the Book of

Mormon, accompanied the crucifixion of Christ.) The myth purports to have taken place at Rush Lake, west of Parowan, Utah, and tells of the three days of thick darkness which fell over that area when Un-Nu-Pit, the devil, killed the younger god, Shinob. It was impossible even to kindle fire, and the people were near despair. Fortunately, the voice of Tobats pierced the darkness, and that god finally found a way to disperse the gloom. Later, in revenge, he slew Un-Nu-Pit and thereby brought Shinob back to life.

The editor expressly takes this event, as well as the previous story of the creation of the Grand Canyon, as literally historical. (He points, in this context, to the numerous cinder cones which dot southern Utah.) To do so, he implicitly rejects the uniformitarianism which is a cardinal principle of much modern science, and draws upon that catastrophism which is proposed instead by the Cooks in their *Science and Mormonism*.¹ (Some readers of this Review will doubtless also be familiar with Venice Priddis's *The Book and the Map*,² which takes a similar approach and to which appeal is made in the booklet under consideration here.) Geologists, LDS and non-LDS, would certainly have a sharp response to this move, yet the editor's supplemental pages on catastrophism in geology and Indian lore are thought-provoking, nonetheless. (He draws on the legends of the Klickitats of Oregon and Washington, who seem also to have an intercessor-god much like the Pahutes' Shinob.)

The limitations of this slender volume are obvious. We are entitled, for example, to wonder how closely the author followed his Indian informants, and how much contamination may have entered in from his own religious and historical concerns. This is especially true in the case of the second legend, "The Three Days of Darkness," where we do not even have the written version of the author/collector (who died in 1960), but rather the gathered and harmonized reminiscences of those who heard him recount it. We would also want to know just what the relationship of these stories might be to events which may have taken place in Mesoamerica³—or even, if we

¹ Melvin A. Cook and Melvin G. Cook, *Science and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1967).

² Venice Priddis, *The Book and the Map* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975).

³ John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985).

follow Priddis, in South America! These tales—in their present form, certainly—will not do as scientific proof, and must remain suggestive at the very best. Still, they are intriguing, and their potential implications are worth attempting to puzzle out.