



6-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Eliason, Eric A. (2014) "Spirit Babies and Divine Embodiment: PBEs, First Vision Accounts, Bible Scholarship, and the Experience-Centered Approach to Mormon Folklore," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 53 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol53/iss2/5>

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Spirit Babies and Divine Embodiment

PBEs, First Vision Accounts, Bible Scholarship, and the Experience-Centered Approach to Mormon Folklore

Eric A. Eliason

To a devout insider, “Mormon folklore” might seem an oxymoron. To a skeptical outsider, it might seem a redundancy. Both reactions assume definitions of “Mormon” and “folklore” that differ from how academic folklorists use these terms. “Mormon” refers not only to official LDS doctrines; it includes all varieties of Mormon people and their experiences. “Folklore” does not mean merely the bogus, quaint, or pioneer-era vestigial aspects of Latter-day Saint life. Rather, folklore includes the living traditions, stories, and beliefs that are passed on in face-to-face situations outside of official channels. Examples include legends of folk heroes (the “cussing Apostle” J. Golden Kimball and frontier lawman Porter Rockwell), encounters with the angelic Three Nephites, Relief Society quilting bees, BYU coed jokes, creative dating traditions, and the homemade wall charts used to rotate family home evening assignments. Folklore also encompasses testimonies, conversion stories, and traditional healings by priesthood blessings.

Veracity is not what distinguishes folklore from other forms of cultural expression. Rather, it is the mode of transmission—informal vs. formal, intimate vs. remote, small group vs. mass media, personal vs. impersonal, and oral vs. written. Folklorists who study religion distinguish between the dogmas and practices that disseminate top-down through denominational authority structures and the customs, beliefs, and stories that bubble up from the pews. This institutional/vernacular cultural divide is often blurred—especially with Mormons, who have no clergy/laity distinction, who often align with the hierarchy’s teachings, and who commonly implement top-down directives with personalized folkways.

Rather than merely revealing oddities, folklore transmits Mormons' most cherished experiences. Folklore provides a window into *actual* beliefs and practices, rather than the ideal types sometimes proffered by normative proclaimers. Mormons—as subject matter and as scholars—may well figure more prominently in folklore than any other discipline.

A most distinctive variety of Mormon folklore is the stories parents tell of angelic yet-to-be-born children appearing to them. This essay presents some examples of this phenomenon and looks at how dramatically resonant they are with the leading theoretical approach in religious folklore studies. This “experience-centered approach” reveals a deep universal significance to these stories that may be of great interest to Latter-day Saints.

Rushing to the hospital in April 1947, Jenalyn Wing Woffinden fell unconscious from premature labor pains. The receiving physician doubted she would survive. But after waking she related the following:

I found myself in the Celestial Room of the Salt Lake Temple. As I walked across the back of the room . . . a man dressed in white robes . . . came up to me and introduced himself as Peter, a disciple of Jesus Christ. He told me I would have great difficulty rearing this child. . . .

Peter then introduced me to the child's spiritual mother who was dressed in white. . . . She told me of the difficulty she had had raising the child in the spiritual world and [said] the only way I would be able to successfully raise [him] would be with unbounded love.¹

Peter foretold many hardships for the boy and repeated his charge to love him unceasingly. As of 1965—when Brigham Young University student Russell Bice collected this story from Sister Woffinden's daughter for folklore professor Tom Cheney—the boy's sickly and rebellious nature was validating his mother's vision.

Though dramatic, this story is not doctrinally foundational like Joseph Smith's First Vision. Sister Woffinden is an ordinary Mormon. Her vision, though doubtless important to her family, remains largely unknown to other Mormons. What is remarkable about this story—besides the specific instruction encouraging unrestrained love in an era of ostensible emotional distance—is that it is not unique. Thousands of Mormon parents today tell similar stories.

1. Russell Bice, “A Child Called Peter,” individual collection assignment FA 02 1.1.1.5.1 (1964), William A. Wilson Folklore Archive, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

While Sister Woffinden had a sleeping NDE (near death experience) and while research by Craig Lundahl and Harold Widdison suggests people often experience prebirth visions and visitations along with an NDE, most LDS preborn-children narratives describe a wakeful encounter. In 2010, a young Arizona married couple began hearing noises in their house and sensed a watcher on their roof.

Joe was outside bringing in the groceries and our bishop drove by. He said to Joe, "I have a strange question to ask you." Joe responded, "I have a strange answer!" Our bishop proceeded to ask if we have ever seen a little girl at our home. Joe just got chills. The bishop explained how the young neighbor girl had been seeing "Angel girls" on our roof and outside of our home. The Bishop believed these spirits were our own children in spirit waiting to come to our home.²

In another instance, a couple agreed to stop talking about having more children, since this caused too much marital tension. Almost immediately, a blue-eyed little girl with blond pigtails began to visit the wife repeatedly, asking to be born. Wearied and deprived of sleep, the wife warily told her reluctant husband about these encounters. He replied, "So, she's been bothering you too has she?"³

Folklorists call personal narratives of supernatural encounters *memorates*. Memorates featuring spirit children not yet born are called prebirth experiences (PBEs). Relatively few people have had a PBE, but most Mormons know someone who has. Parents pass them on as etiological narratives of how their children came to be. They are often the most cherished spiritual experience in one's life. Notably, official Church publications rarely mention, and neither discourage nor encourage, PBEs. Yet this vibrant folk tradition is deeply enmeshed with official LDS doctrines such as people's prebirth spiritual life, spirits' human shape, entitlement to personal revelation, and parenting's centrality to our purpose on Earth. These are not abstract notions only for those few interested in theological esoterica. They are living concepts dramatically emergent in the lives of Latter-day Saints through PBEs.

PBEs suggest a possible correlation between LDS beliefs and scientific findings about the human mind. Folklorists have shown how traditional cultures can pass on sophisticated knowledge that science embraces only later. Ethnobotanists have developed hundreds of

2. Brook Weinberg, conversation with Eric Eliason, December 26, 2011.

3. Story related by Bert Wilson at a Fife Folklore Conference, May 1995.

modern medicines from traditional remedies around the world. Ethnohistorians have shown that preliterate societies' rigorous oral traditions can perpetuate genealogical information unrecorded by documents but corroborated by genetic testing. However, scholars have been less eager to plumb memorates for insights into psychological or spiritual matters. Folklorist David Hufford is one of the few working to develop ethno-psychology and ethnotheology as disciplines. He regards encounters with spirit children, deceased relatives, and human-shaped beings, both glorious and ominous, as akin to other kinds of firsthand empirical evidence. In his "experience-centered approach," memorates are not anomalies to be ignored or delusions to be cured. They are instead means to uncover the nature of common psychological and spiritual realities.

Bolstered by PBE researchers Elizabeth and Neil Carman, Harold A. Widdison, and Sarah Hinze, Hufford's quantitative data show that memorates like PBEs and sleep paralysis involving malevolent spirits seizing people in bed at night happen to about 20 percent of people. This rate does not correlate with psychiatric diagnoses or cultural, educational, or religious background, but seems to occur evenly across populations. Spirit-encounter memorates happen more frequently than the more academically respectable mystic or transcendent states of notable people in various religious traditions. In fact, rather than sensationalizing a mystic experience by presenting it as tangible, Hufford has found people more likely to obfuscate or "mystify" what were originally straightforward meetings with personlike beings.

According to Hufford, some cultural and religious traditions are better equipped to make sense of memorates. Baptists and atheists might not find understanding cobelievers to listen to their PBE, since neither worldview brooks a preearth life. Mental health professionals typically offer little help or deem them delusional. Many who have had a PBE understandably remain reticent.

Hufford suggests that psychiatry follow ethnobotany and ethnohistory in learning to draw on traditional data—especially if doing so can help patients. LDS apologists might enjoy the fact that Hufford, a Catholic, finds LDS theology the best suited to making sense of the full spectrum of spiritual visitations (PBEs as well as appearances of deceased loved ones and angelic and demonic persons) as they actually happen to people across cultures. Hence, Mormons tend to be less anxious about sharing them. However, PBE-relating traditions have also developed among Hindus and Buddhists, who understand them quite comfortably in terms of reincarnation. Also, despite Hufford's contention that robust,

cross-culturally similar experiences constitute evidence for a knowable external spiritual reality, his findings may merely demonstrate common powerful subjective psychological experiences. These two views are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Both could be true.

In either case, the experience-centered approach has potential implications for understanding foundational Mormon memorates—Joseph Smith’s First Vision and the angel Moroni’s appearance. The Prophet presented these as literal meetings, not mystic dreams or transcendent impressions. Terryl Givens contends the great uniqueness of Mormon theology is its nondivision of the spiritual from the material, its foundational episodes’ resistance to metaphoric interpretations, and its understanding of humans, angels, and gods as the same class of beings at different stages of progression. The experience-centered approach suggests that such understandings are not merely LDS notions but part of the world’s underlying reality—or at least the human mind part of it.

Some scholars have seen differences between the earliest First Vision accounts and ostensibly more concrete later ones as evidence that Joseph Smith elaborated a standard mystical experience for his day into one where he met glorified persons face to face. Experience-centered findings make it reasonable to suppose just the opposite—that he remembered humanlike beings from the first, but only revealed fuller details later as he felt more comfortable doing so. Scholarship by James B. Allen and John W. Welch closely counting motifs in Joseph Smith’s First Vision corroborates this idea. There is little evidence of a “development” or “elaboration” in a particular direction; rather, the pattern seems more suggestive of Neal Lambert and Richard Cracroft’s earlier claim of attention to audience shaping how the Prophet presented his story and what he chooses to divulge.

Even the canonized First Vision account shows signs of reticence. Without later interpretive glosses, a reader might not catch that “personages” refers to God the Father and Jesus Christ. But the echo in the Sacred Grove of the voice that spoke “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” at Jesus’s baptism (Matt. 3:17) and at the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:5) suggests as much.

Some claim a fabulist Joseph Smith inflated his story from seeing one angel, to just Jesus, to both God the Father and Jesus. But if Joseph was inconsistent about the numbers and identities of beings he encountered, he places himself squarely in Old Testament prophetic company. Abraham and Lot’s hospitality toward two or three travelers whom the Bible variously calls “the Lord,” “men,” and “angels” (Gen. 18:1, 2; 19:1); Jacob wrestling with what is traditionally glossed as an angel but what the

text actually calls “a man” or “God face to face” (Gen. 32:24, 30); Joshua meeting “a man,” the captain of God’s angelic army or the Lord himself, before the battle of Jericho (Josh. 5:13–15; 6:1–2); and the annunciation of Samson’s birth by what his parents are unsure is a man, an angel, or perhaps the Lord himself (Judg. 13:2–23) are all examples. Resonant with both experience-centered folklore and Mormon theology, Bible authors present ambiguity about visitor identity in memorates, because men, angels, and gods come in similar form.

James Kugel, an Orthodox Jew and Harvard professor of Hebrew literature, explains that the Bible’s earliest authors saw humans, angels, and “the God of Old” as all having physical bodies that allowed them to walk and talk together. Only later did Bible authors abandon clearly anthropomorphic gods for Ezekiel’s fantastic animal symbolism and the incomparable seemingly formless God of Isaiah’s prophecies. For generations, Bible readers have understood early memorate accounts through later authors’ and interpreters’ metaphorizing eyes. In line with Kugel, Catholic theologian and New Testament scholar Stephen H. Webb claims that it is misguided later-theology, not the scriptural accounts themselves, that has shorn the resurrected Christ of his bodily physicality. LDS nonscholars like Joseph Smith, who believed the Bible world was being restored, and experience-centered folklorists, who have found such memorates as a norm, might say “amen” to Kugel’s and Webb’s proposed face-to-face encounters and continuity of form among heavenly beings and earthly persons.

But seeing PBEs as emergent from ancient psychic universals only helps explain their form. It does little to explain the particular contexts in which they might occur. Feminist folklorist Margaret Brady suggests PBEs provide wives a revelatory “trump card” forcing foot-dragging husbands to father children. According to Brady, motherhood is women’s primary means of validation in LDS patriarchal culture. However, actual LDS households are typically much more egalitarian, even matriarchal, and very few recorded PBEs suggest gender power struggles. When they do, PBEs tend to bring unity, as in the blonde-pigtail-girl story.

PBEs could also be a response to tensions Mormons feel between Church teachings and modern lifestyles. In the past, Church leaders encouraged large families and discouraged birth control. Such admonitions abated in the 1980s and virtually disappeared in the mid-1990s. But pronatalism remains strong, and Mormons still tend to have more children on average than other Americans. With worldly voices calling

children a burden, quality better than quantity, and “breeders” threats to the environment, prophetic calls not to limit family size stand in stark contrast. In the struggle to know which path to follow, PBEs can provide clear resolutions to difficult dilemmas. However, even granting these interpretations, just because PBEs can serve certain functions does not mean these functions cause the experiences.

Positive valuation of “faith-promoting rumors” such as PBEs coexists with caution toward them. Sharing such stories may make one seem kooky, even to other Mormons. Merciless Internet debunkings can reveal one as a dupe, but being too skeptical of a friend’s personal experience can brand one insensitive to spiritual things. Perhaps in a community open to visions, miracles, and prophecies, it is especially important to guard against fakery. But Salt Lake City has no office like the Vatican’s that investigates miracles and pronounces them genuine or fraudulent; Mormons are generally on their own in such matters. Many Mormons avoid giving too much credence to such tales the further away they get from firsthand experience. And some firsthand experiences are accompanied by an impression not to share them except in sacred moments.

It is little wonder then that some American Mormons tend to avoid investing too much in such tales one way or another, unless the PBE in question happened to them or someone very close. However, Mormons in the expanding worldwide Church may find themselves in cultures much more friendly to sharing the supernatural than the secularized, disenchanted Western world. And experience-centered theory suggests that this is nothing to worry about as weird, but something to embrace as real.

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