

## REVIEWS

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### A Story-Telling Folk

Tom Mould, *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011) 464 pp. Cloth: \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-87421-817-6

*Reviewed by Blair Dee Hodges*

Mormons are a story-telling folk. The academic study of Mormon folklore began as a way to collect and analyze stories of pioneer heritage, faith-promoting experiences with the supernatural, end-times prophecies, and other narratives which illuminated Mormon beliefs and values. Twenty-three years ago, Mormon folklorist William A. Wilson described Mormon folklore as “an uncertain mirror for truth,” because even obscured stories tell us truths about those who pass them along. Wilson praised the early efforts of Mormon folklorists such as Austin A. Fife, whose 1956 book *Saints of Sage and Saddle: Folklore Among the Mormons* remains one of the best collections of Mormon folklore to date. Wilson himself has spent years collecting, archiving, and analyzing Mormon folklore and training a small army of students to carry on the legacy. But he felt that folklorists like Fife placed “exaggerated emphasis on the supernatural at the expense of any discussion of Mormon moral and spiritual values and of the motivating principles of sacrifice and service which I knew from experience were essential parts of being Mormon.” He admitted there was no shortage of supernatural tales, but by overemphasizing the supernatural at the expense of the mundane and service-oriented, researchers have created a distorted picture of the overall “value-center” of Mormonism. “The task for future Mormon folklore study,” Wilson admonished, “will be to enlarge the picture, and to bring the images reflected in it into sharper focus.”<sup>1</sup>

Tom Mould, associate professor of anthropology and folklore at Elon University in North Carolina, began his own study of Mormon folklore by investigating Mormonism’s “spectacular predictions” and “prophecies” about signs of Jesus’s Second Coming. One of Mould’s colleagues suggested he focus instead on Mormonism’s “deep tradition of personal revelation,” which he felt

would reveal more about “prophecy and prophetic narratives within the LDS Church” than visions of an impending apocalypse (ix, 7). After five years of fieldwork and archival research on the subject of personal revelation, Mould has emerged with a fascinating analysis, ably describing ways that the supernatural and mundane blend in contemporary Mormon lives. Stories of glossalia and angelic visitations are far less frequently shared by practicing Mormons today than are stories about personal revelation. Guidance from God delivered through the “still small voice” is perhaps the largest holdout of Mormon supernaturalism into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As Mould recognizes, the term “folklore” has “competing definitions in popular culture and in academia” (4). Before giving an overview of Mould’s book and describing his method and its relevance for Mormon studies and folklore studies more broadly, I’ll take a moment to clarify definitions.

### I. Folklore is not Falselore

In popular imagination “folklore” tends to conjure up ideas about outdated, discredited, or fantastic stories which might be fun, but which don’t offer much in terms of historical veracity. The Wikipedia entry on “Mormon folklore,” for example, focuses almost exclusively on urban legends (such as stories about the Three Nephites). Legends are a *type* of folklore, but certainly not the only type.

The term “folklore” has also been used to distinguish LDS “doctrine” from non-doctrinal speculation, usually of the embarrassing type. For example, during the PBS documentary *The Mormons*, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles dismissed as “folklore” the claim that black members of the church were denied the priesthood because they had been less valiant during a pre-mortal War in Heaven.<sup>2</sup> Holland’s statements draw attention to an important tension within the study of Mormon folklore: the boundary between the “folk,” or everyday Mormons, and the LDS hierarchy is somewhat permeable, as folklore often travels from the pews to the pulpit and back again.<sup>3</sup>

If folklore is not mere “falselore”—questionable teachings or spurious stories—what else does it include? Mould is careful to define the term and his governing assumptions:

[Folklore includes] those expressions of culture that reveal not only the artistry and aesthetics of communal traditions but the shared beliefs and values of a community. As such, folklore is not confined to a finite set of genres but rather describes an approach to the study of culture that recognizes the expressive nature of everyday life, including religious life (4).

Folklore can include older narratives, even sensational or legendary stories, generated by the “folk” which are passed on and reshaped. But it also includes the present stories Mormons tell, and Mould’s work focuses specifically on stories of personal revelation. As Wilson puts it: “Mormon folklore lies not at the periphery but at the center of LDS culture. It is not, as is sometimes thought, simply a survival from the past kept alive primarily by older, less educated, and agrarian Church members; rather, it is a vital, functioning force in the lives of all Latter-day Saints.”<sup>4</sup>

Numerous General Conference addresses, books, testimony meetings, missionary discussions, Sunday School lessons, and personal conversations among Mormons attest that personal revelation is a vital force in the lives of contemporary Mormons. Mould’s overriding goal in this book is to describe the ways Mormons understand personal revelation. More broadly he focuses on the “social dimension of personal revelation. . . . Experience and narrative are drawn together in a complex relationship guided by the abilities of the human mind to comprehend the divine; the communicative abilities to express the ambiguous, the visceral, and the spiritual; and the cultural norms and expectations for narrative, performance, and the construction of social identity” (381).

This is a fancy way of saying Mould explores Mormon beliefs and values by paying attention to the stories Mormons tell each other about what God tells them, and the contexts in which they tell these stories. Mould analyzes narratives from official Church publications (from the *Ensign* and *Preach My Gospel* all the way back to the *Juvenile Instructor*), diaries, and the extensive Mormon folklore archives at Brigham Young University and Utah State University.<sup>5</sup> More prominently, Mould includes transcripts of personal interviews he conducted, personal notes taken during sacrament meeting talks, and a host of other sources he personally gathered.

## II. Overview and Truth Claims

Chapter one will give outsiders an accurate picture of Mormonism's personal revelation in broad strokes—what it is, who expects it, when, and why. Chapter two discusses “performance norms,” or the informal rules about how and when members of the Church share stories (60). This chapter has important implications for the ways that context helps shape narratives—a story shared in a testimony meeting or in a missionary discussion will often differ from the way that same story is shared among close friends and family. Chapter three shifts to the “formal qualities” of personal revelation stories, as Mould develops a typology of prescriptive (solicited and unsolicited) and descriptive revelation. Here he delves into how cultural expectations can shape the ways Mormons actually experience revelation, as well as the ways Mormons relate such experiences to others (137). Chapter four lists the “building blocks of the narrative tradition,” which are common motifs that crop up in the stories shared in sacrament meetings and Sunday Schools (192). Chapter five focuses more broadly on the “echoes of culture” heard in the stories—the recurring themes the stories often revolve around, which include domestic life and church work (242). Mould discusses ways that region and era, age and gender impact the stories. He finds, for instance, that women are much more likely than men to relate stories of being prompted to protect children in the domestic sphere, whereas men are much more likely to receive revelation on the location of a new home or employment (261-288; see also 316, 353, 420), discoveries which follow typical gender role expectations. Chapter six is unique in terms of what typically receives attention in folklore studies. Rather than paying exclusive attention to oral contexts, Mould recognizes the need to discuss the relationship between written texts and oral story-telling (327). His rhetorical analysis of all twelve issues of the 2007 *Ensign* is fascinating (347, 349, 371).

Mould neither accepts Mormon folktales at face value nor does he dismiss the apparently fantastic (prescient warnings, divine instruction) as beyond the realm of possibility. Instead, he analyzes how culture shapes the stories people tell about revelation. But the question of whether such shaping makes the stories merely natural, purely cultural, or whether they can be considered to be revelation from God is also addressed (139, 149, 185,

196). Mould recognizes the trickiness of analyzing truth claims (321–23, 227, 383). But above all, he is trying to advance “a theory of interpretation that validates *both* personal experiences *and* shared cultural patterns” (324, emphasis in original). He wants to bracket the truth-claim issue, leaving the reader the space to form a conclusion:

Experience dictates the “data” one can draw upon to narrate, while personal choice guides which of those experiences one chooses to share. Both reflect the hand of God as well as of men and women. Revelatory experiences reflect God’s concerns for people’s well-being as well as people’s own concerns in what they choose to pray about. . . . Analyzing the themes in personal revelation narratives, therefore, can reveal both the intent of God in heaven and the concerns of people on Earth. For LDS members, the former is of greater interest. For the modest scope of this book, it is the latter that takes center stage (243).

There is a bit of blood involved in the dissection here, but Mould wields his scalpel with care using three strategies. First, he consciously distinguishes “temporal” from “spiritual” revelation. The latter bear directly on the truth-claims of LDS doctrinal propositions (a revelation that “the Book of Mormon is true,” for example) while the former deal with all other “facets of life, including daily, ongoing decisions.” If this seems like an easy out for Mould, he argues that “in the folk narrative tradition of personal revelation . . . temporal revelations dominate” (40). Mould still spends a few pages describing conversion narratives and testimonies, but the bulk of the book focuses on the “temporal” (see also 40–5, 244, 328, 383). The index entries listed under “themes in personal revelation narratives” reveal his scope: children, church work, conversion and baptism, danger, death, finding a home, genealogy, guidance finding scripture, guidance speaking, healing, helping others, marriage, missionary work, preparation, spirit children, temple work, travel (447).

For the second strategy, Mould focuses his assessment of personal revelation narratives on the values they communicate, rather than attempting history-focused debunkery. He recognizes that “folklore can distort [values] through accentuation and omission,” but folklore theory finds such distortions relevant in themselves (5). One quick example of how this plays out: Mould

relates the oft-told story of Wilford Woodruff, who was prompted to move the wagon his family was sleeping in during the night. Had he not immediately obeyed, his family would have been destroyed by a fallen tree. Woodruff's account contains elements found in more recent "prompting" stories, including the fact that obedience saved the day. In later iterations of this story, however, a new motif common to other more recent "prompting" stories emerges. Woodruff is depicted as initially hesitant to follow the prompting, waiting until he is prompted multiple times before obeying. Absent from the initial tellings, Mould discovers this new motif is retroactively added by tellers who fill in gaps with their memories and expectations (197–201). Such analysis could help resurrect countless late reminiscences of early Mormon life and leaders from obscurity, as folklore studies works hand-in-hand with historical studies in what one folklorist historian has envisioned as an "age of cooperation" between the two fields.<sup>6</sup>

Third, Mould approaches narratives from an "emic," or insider, perspective (4). He promotes an "experience-centered approach that honors, rather than dismisses, the belief systems under study," and as a non-Mormon, Mould does a remarkable job (6). He is finely attuned to Mormon concepts, repeatedly helping the outsider by providing descriptions of LDS jargon and culture from "greenies," to "the Y," to "pass-along cards," with very few minor flubs. He says D&C 124 was received in 1841 "in the specific context of having to abandon Nauvoo" rather than Missouri (408); conflates the word "atonement" with "repentance and forgiveness" (217); refers to Joseph F. Smith as Joseph Fielding Smith (301), and once refers to "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" as "the Proclamation on Marriage" (261). These nit-picky errors only serve to show how often Mould is right on the emic money; they're the only glaring errors I noticed in the whole book, and they're negligible.

### III. Mould for Insiders and Outsiders

Due to this emic approach, Mould's analysis can actually help members of the church better assess the stories they've heard, the stories they tell, and even the ways they experience personal revelation. Mormons will likely be irritated by some of the more fantastical stories, like the MTC trainer who tells about a missionary

who takes a shotgun blast to the chest, only to rise up and convert the would-be murderer who later becomes a stake president “or something like that” (214). They are just as likely to find inspiration, as when the “white-haired sister by the name of Needum” appears in the nick of time to administer a healing blessing to a dying baby, telling the family she’s “been set apart in the temple to bless the sick with her prayers” (217–8). Ultimately, neither faith-promotion nor demotion is Mould’s aim.

He notes one of the biggest benefits of writing as an outsider is the “silent train” phenomenon, whereby insiders might overlook aspects of the culture which are “so normalized that they are ignored” (404). Mould frequently makes the sort of fruitful analysis I’ve come to expect from careful outsiders. One striking example is his likening of family stories to Mormon ritual: “Family stories draw relatives closer together, binding them in story just as sacred temple rites such as sealings and baptisms of the dead bind them in eternity” (330; this idea seems to be implicitly articulated by a church member on 336). Mormons will likely feel at home with the stories he relates, even the cringe-worthy ones (he knows many of us may clench our teeth as little Primary children recite parrot-monies, p. 234).

What about the academic application? He isn’t always as careful to make his jargon understandable to Mormons, who perhaps aren’t his main target audience. Sometimes-pedantic analysis can prompt chuckles: “Dreams and promptings are part of the same revelatory phenomenon. A thrice-repeated revelatory dream is equal to a thrice-repeated prompt” (203). Seeing the process of revelation depicted on Mould’s charts and graphs may seem clinical, but they are useful tools for visual depiction. Some of the charts could even transfer quite easily to Sunday School. His footnotes and appendices and chapter-concluding analyses peppered with folklorist insider-speak all signal that the book is intended for a wider folklore studies audience. He makes important contributions to his field using Mormons as the subject through which broader principles are explored, as when he situates the common appearance of the number three in Mormon narratives with broader Western culture (202–203). In contrast to prior Mormon-themed folklore studies, Mould focuses on the *concept* of personal revelation rather than particular *categories* of lore, like the

Three Nephites or J. Golden Kimball stories. Theme, rather than story type, drives the book (25).

Mould recognizes his book is limited by the relative homogeneity of his sources (9). For lack of space and resources, Mould wasn't able to fully explore variations in "other regions and other countries." He points to a "nascent body of scholarship" trying to pay due attention to these wider contexts and issues a call for more attention to "social, cultural, and religious contexts around the world [in order to] provide a more accurate picture of Mormonism as a global religion" (386). The closest he comes to such analysis are his discussions on the importance of dreams in Latin American Mormon contexts (50). Added to this broader scope would be narratives from other groups including Mormon fundamentalists or the Community of Christ. Still, this is a wonderful first step toward exciting projects to come.

### Conclusion

Perhaps the key contribution Mould offers to Mormons themselves is his making of folklore studies immediately relevant to the stories Mormons are still creating rather than focusing only on stories passed down from the nineteenth century. For outsiders and academic folklorists in particular, Mormonism offers Mould a perfect scenario for analyzing the genesis of oral folklore and the transition from the oral to the printed page, as folklore becomes solidified in ink and shaped through the expectations of the recorders (373–75). Finally, all readers can benefit by reflecting on memory itself: from our perception, to our understanding, to our telling and re-telling, to our memory banks, each stage distorts and clarifies the truth about our history, and thus, the truth about our present (192).

*Blair Hodges's interview with Tom Mould is available at <http://www.fairblog.org/2012/01/24/fair-conversations-episode-14-tom-mould-on-folklore-and-personal-revelation/>*

### Notes

1. From William A. Wilson, "The Study of Mormon Folklore: An Uncertain Mirror for Truth," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22 (1989): 95–110.
2. Such folklore, Holland added, "must never be perpetuated." See



excerpts of the transcript at <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/inter-views/holland.html> (accessed April 7, 2012).

3. This distinction is briefly described in *Between Pulpit and Pew: The Supernatural World in Mormon History and Folklore*, edited by W. Paul Reeve and Michael Scott Van Wagenen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011).

4. William A. Wilson, "Folklore," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:518–20, or <http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Folklore> (accessed April 7, 2012).

5. These archival collections are described in William A. Wilson, "Mormon Folklore." *Mormon Americana: A Guide to Sources and Collections in the U. S.* (Provo: BYU Studies, 1995), 437–54.

6. Peter Burke's historiographical survey of history and folklore studies outlines an early "age of harmony" (ca. 1846–1920s), an "age of suspicion" (apx. 1920s–1970s), and an "age of rapprochement" (ca. 1970s to 2000s). See Burke, "History and Folklore: A Historiographical Survey," *Folklore* vol. 115, no. 2 (Aug. 2004): 133–39. In addition to Reeve's edited collection, Brant A. Gardner fruitfully uses folklore theory to analyze the statements of witnesses to Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon translation. See *The Gift and the Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

## Faith and Doubt in the First-Person Singular

Therese Doucet. *A Lost Argument: A Latter-Day Novel*. Washington, DC: Strange Violin Editions, 2011. 254 pp. \$14.00. ISBN: 978-0-9837484-1-0

*Why I Stay: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Mormons*, edited by Robert Ress. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011. 199 pp. \$24.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-213-1

Thomas Riskas. *Deconstructing Mormonism: An Analysis and Assessment of the Mormon Faith*. Cranford, N.J.: American Atheist Press, 2011. 480 pp. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-57884-007-6

*Reviewed by Rosalynde Welch*

In 1979, Mary Bradford published in these pages an important personal essay on personal essays. Titled "I, Eye, Aye," the piece