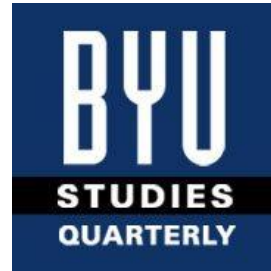




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## Seer Stones, Salamanders, and Early Mormon “Folk Magic” in the Light of Folklore Studies and Bible Scholarship

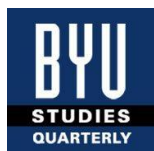
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**Abstract:** The 2015 publication of an Ensign article on, and especially photos of, one of Joseph Smith’s seer stones still owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints caused quite a sensation in the blogosphere. Mormon studies as a discipline has struggled to make sense of seer stones too. These responses are understandable, considering how often communities tend to presume little change in ritual practice over time and how identity groups tend to see others’ actually quite similar practices—separated by time or culture—as superstitious and our own as pious and commonsensical. This essay, by folklorist Eric Eliason, seeks to bring to bear the insights of both folklore scholarship and folklore-informed ancient Near Eastern scholarship on the issue of early Mormon seer stones in particular and American frontier folk magic in general.



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# Seer Stones, Salamanders, and Early Mormon “Folk Magic” in the Light of Folklore Studies and Bible Scholarship

*Eric A. Eliason*

The 2015 publication of an *Ensign* article<sup>1</sup> on, and especially photos of, one of Joseph Smith’s seer stones still owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints caused quite a sensation in the blogosphere. Many responses focused on the “weirdness” of the stone and its use, the ostensibly alien nature of this odd relic from the past, so out of place in modern religion, and posited it as a troubling problem in need of explanation.<sup>2</sup> Mormon studies as a discipline has struggled to make sense of seer stones too. These responses are understandable, considering how often communities tend to presume little change in ritual practice over time and how identity groups tend to see others’ actually quite similar practices—separated by time or culture—as superstitious and our own as pious and commonsensical. Patrick Mason reminds us, “When we

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1. See Richard E. Turley Jr., Robin S. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Joseph the Seer,” *Ensign* 45 (October 2015): 48–54.

2. Steve Fleming, “‘If Any of You Lack Wisdom’: Seer Stones and John Dee’s and Joseph Smith’s Religious Quests,” *Juvenile Instructor*, August 9, 2015, <http://juvenileinstructor.org/if-any-of-you-lack-wisdom-seer-stones-and-john-dees-and-joseph-smiths-religious-quests/>; Kevin Barney, “Coming to Terms with Folk Magic in Mormon History,” *By Common Consent*, August 9, 2015, <http://bycommonconsent.com/2015/08/09/coming-to-terms-with-folk-magic-in-mormon-history/>; Dan Peterson, “On Early Mormonism and the ‘Magic’ World View,” *Patheos*, August 11, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/danpeterson/2015/08/on-early-mormonism-and-the-magic-world-view.html>; jettboy, “The Stone in a Hat and the Miracle of Translation,” *Millennial Star*, August 15, 2015, <http://www.millennialstar.org/the-stone-in-a-hat-and-the-miracle-of-translation/>.

step out of [a] time machine [into the past], it is we, not the people whom we encounter, who are out of place. Disoriented though we may be, our first responsibility is to get to know them on their own terms.”<sup>3</sup>

Such considerations (and the topic of folk magic itself) are specialties of the field of folklore studies. Bible scholars have sought to make sense of seemingly magical practices in the ancient Near East using insights from folklore scholarship. Their example might be instructive for Mormon studies. This essay hopes to bring to bear the insights of both folklore scholarship and folklore-informed ancient Near Eastern scholarship on the issue of early Mormon seer stones in particular and American frontier folk magic in general. Folklore seems to be the field most relevant to addressing this issue. It is the discipline in which Mormons have figured more prominently as subject matter and practitioners than in any other field.<sup>4</sup> And as a social science rooted in ethnographic methods, folklore studies seeks to make the strange seem sensible.

However, to the broader academic world, the connection between Mormonism and folklore often has had little to do with what professional folklorists actually study. Oral narrative genres like Three Nephite, J. Golden Kimball, and personal revelation stories,<sup>5</sup> as well as contemporary courtship customs, Utah-era vernacular architectural types, and religious healing rites,<sup>6</sup> are not what most scholars outside of folklore

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3. Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2015), 90.

4. See, for example, Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould, eds., *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013); and Tom Mould and Eric A. Eliason, “The State of Mormon Folklore Studies,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 29–51.

5. William A. Wilson, “Freeways, Parking Lots, and Ice Cream Stands: The Three Nephites in Contemporary Society,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21, no. 3 (1988): 13–26; Eric A. Eliason, *The J. Golden Kimball Stories* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Tom Mould, *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011).

6. Kristi A. Young, “Now That I’ve Kissed the Ground You Walk On: A Look at Gender in Creative Date Invitations,” *Marriage and Families* (Winter 2005): 10–17; George H. Schoemaker, “Made in Heaven: Marriage Confirmation Narratives among Mormons,” *Northwest Folklore* 7, no. 2 (1989): 38–53; Thomas Carter, *Building Zion: Folk Architecture in the Mormon Settlements of Utah’s Sanpete Valley, 1849–1890* (PhD diss., Indiana University—Bloomington, 1984); Margaret K. Brady, *Mormon Healer, Folk Poet: Mary Susannah Fowler’s Life of*

imagine when they think of Mormonism and folklore together. Historians inside and outside Mormonism have long used “folk” as a synonym for “superstitious” or “bogus” relative to more respectable theological beliefs and accurate historical understandings; some still do.<sup>7</sup> “Folk” and “folklore,” carrying negative connotations with them, have been commonly used when examining the relationship between “frontier folk magic” or “the magic world view” and the origins of Mormonism.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, professional folklorists define folklore not by its respectability or truth value but by its means of transmission—face-to-face, intimate, and sometimes unofficial within small groups. As cultural art and knowledge pass on traditionally, folklore often encompasses the aspects of people’s lives they see as most valuable, sacred, and true. “Just because it is folklore does not mean it is not true” is the mantra I try to teach my students.<sup>9</sup> Especially in the realm of botany, spiritual encounters, medicine, and environmental stewardship, traditional ways have

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“*Unselfish Usefulness*” (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000); Jonathan Stapley and Kristine Wright, “‘They Shall Be Made Whole’: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (2008): 69–112.

7. William Hartley, “Mormons, Crickets, and Gulls: A New Look at an Old Story,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1970): 224–39. This trend seems particularly pronounced in referring to pre-1978 General Authority statements on race such as found in Margaret Blair Young and Darius Aidan Gray, “Mormons and Race,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 363–85.

8. See D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and The Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987); Stephen D. Ricks and Daniel C. Peterson, “The Mormon Magus: *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* by D. Michael Quinn,” *Sunstone* 12 (January 1988): 38–39; William J. Hamblin, “That Old Black Magic,” *FARMS Review of Books* 12, no. 2 (2000): 225–393. With essays by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald W. Walker, Marvin S. Hill, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, *BYU Studies* published a special issue on early Mormon folk magic in response to new documents produced by Mark Hofmann that highlighted this practice. The essays scrambled to make sense of Hofmann’s capture for murder, which happened as the essays were being written, and the implications of this for the reliability of his documents. *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (1984).

9. This definition accords with academic folklore textbooks from the 1970s and 1980s. But the field was little consulted at the time by historians. The two most widely used texts at the time were published in Utah or authored by a University of Utah professor: Elliott Oring, ed., *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1986); and Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

frequently been validated by scientific inquiry.<sup>10</sup> Early Mormon folkloric practices like seer-stone scrying or water divining tend not to seem as academically or religiously controversial to folklorists—especially those familiar with the academic study of biblical and religious folklore—as they might to others.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps this is why LDS folklorists have had relatively little to say about it. But in so doing, we may be in part responsible for letting less useful perceptions about “early Mormon folk magic” linger well into the twenty-first century. This essay seeks to provide a fuller context for understanding this phenomenon by addressing the historical, religious, biblical, and cultural issues involved.

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10. Most dramatic perhaps is ethnobotany’s vast contribution to modern pharmaceuticals from traditionally used medicinal plants. See, for example, Richard Evans Schultes and Siri von Reis, *Ethnobotany: Evolution of a Discipline* (Portland: Timber Press, 1995); and Paul E. Minnis, ed., *Ethnobotany: A Reader* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000). David Hufford’s experience-centered approach has led to discoveries in ethnopsychology showing that some supernatural narrative traditions make better sense of certain actual psychological phenomena than mainstream psychiatry has yet been able to do. See David Hufford, *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); Barbara Walker, ed., *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995); and Eric A. Eliason, “Spirit Babies and Divine Embodiment: PBEs, First Vision Accounts, Bible Scholarship, and the Experience-Centered Approach to Mormon Folklore,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2014): 21–28. Useful traditional knowledge about the natural environment has also been much attested: J. T. Inglis, ed., *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Concepts and Cases* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1993); Fikret Berkes, *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1999); and V. M. Toledo, “Ethnoecology: A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Indigenous Knowledge of Nature,” in *Ethnobiology and Biocultural Diversity*, ed. John R. Stepp and associates (Athens, Ga.: International Society of Ethnobiology, 2002).

11. Alan Dundes, *Holy Writ as Oral Lit: The Bible as Folklore* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999); Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996); Susan Niditch, *Ancient Israelite Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997); Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Susan Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible* (1993; repr., Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004); Richard Bauman, *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism of Speaking and Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers* (Tucson: Wheatmark, 2008); and Eliason, “Spirit Babies and Divine Embodiment,” 21–28.

## Seer Stones and Book of Mormon Translation

Seer stones are not a peripheral issue to Mormonism's founding. They are central to understanding how the Book of Mormon came to be. Traditional understandings of the Book of Mormon's translation—bolstered by decades of devotional art more focused on general devotional concepts than exact historical representations—had Joseph Smith peering directly at the golden plates, sometimes with the Urim and Thummim found with the plates and described by Joseph as stones set in a bow. Joseph claimed and his followers believe that not by natural means, but by the "gift and power of God," he dictated the book's contents. The general outline of this traditional understanding remains intact in orthodox Mormon circles. However, based largely on later accounts by family members and friends, Joseph is now understood to have done most of his translating away from the plates by looking at a seer stone or one of two stones from the Urim and Thummim in the bottom of his hat, which he used to block out external light, presumably so he could see better the divine light coming from letters appearing on his stone.<sup>12</sup> Scholars and Mormon history buffs have known of these accounts for a long time. We may be living in the moment where these understandings become common knowledge in the Church generally.

The historical record seems to suggest that this shift in understanding from a seer stone to the Urim and Thummim of popular Mormon history happened very early on, in Joseph Smith's own lifetime, close to the events described. Multiple documents written by a variety of contemporaries attest to Joseph Smith having both seer stones, which he found in a number of places, and a Urim and Thummim that he found with the golden plates. The oldest, most numerous, and most reliable extant sources point to Joseph translating with a seer stone in the hat. But how did this seer stone/Urim and Thummim confusion come about and how did it happen so early on? The answer is very much one of folk Mormon biblical reception and may not be confusion at all but a case

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12. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey and others (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 65–71; Turley, Jensen, and Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph the Seer," 51; Royal Skousen, "Translating and Printing the Book of Mormon," in *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness*, ed. John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006), 75–79.

of applying a biblical term to a similar early American folk religious practice.

In frontier America, seer stones or “peep stones” were commonly used by lost object finders, people engaged in the widespread practice of lost treasure digging, and sometimes by people seeking to uncover the kind of truths we might call a private or police detective for today. It is unclear how much of this kind of activity Joseph Smith was involved in, except for water divining and treasure digging, which are widely attested. The “seer” in seer stone is a biblically literate early American culture’s reference to the biblical term *seer* explained in 1 Samuel 9:9 as an earlier term for a prophet—more specifically one who saw visions, dreams, or scenes in the mind’s eye, or even with the natural eyes. Moreover, God gives the seer insight into the meaning of his or her visions (2 Sam. 24:11; 2 Chr. 9:29; Jer. 1:11–18). All of this fits quite nicely with how Joseph Smith saw himself.

To Bible scholars, the Urim and Thummim is one of several items similar to the *ephod* and *lots* used to determine the will of God or seek information from him. (The Liahona in the Book of Mormon follows this pattern.) It seems that early Mormons began to use the terms *seer stone* and *Urim and Thummim* interchangeably, with the latter convention winning the day. But both terms emerge from biblical practices and understandings.

### **Poisoning the Well:**

#### **The Hofmann Episode and American Religious Historical Scholarship**

Joseph Smith and his associates’ involvement in practices such as dowsing for water with divining rods and searching for buried treasure with seer stones had long been known to historians, as was the common, but not uncontroversial, nature of such practices in Joseph Smith’s time.<sup>13</sup> In the 1980s, new research suggested a more in-depth and ongoing involvement with “magical” practices than was previously understood—as evidenced perhaps by occult volumes in the Palmyra library and by the Smith family’s possession of a Jupiter talisman, an astrological dagger, and magical parchments.

Apologists argued that propinquity, and even possession, do not automatically imply participation, but other scholars interpreted such

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13. Mark Ashurst-McGee, “A Pathway to Prophethood: Joseph Smith Junior as Rodsman, Village Seer, and Judeo-Christian Prophet” (master’s thesis, Utah State University, 2000).

evidence to mean that Mormonism's foundation lay more in the world of esotericism and the occult than in the prophetic biblical world the Prophet claimed.<sup>14</sup> This contention was bolstered by the emergence of the infamous "Salamander Letter" produced by document dealer Mark Hofmann and purportedly written by Joseph Smith associate Martin Harris to William W. Phelps describing the results of a treasure-hunting trip. This document provided a different account than the canonized version of the angel Moroni giving Joseph Smith the golden plates. "I take Joseph aside & he says it is true . . . the next morning the spirit transfigured himself from a white salamander in the bottom of the hole & struck me 3 times & held the treasure & would not let me have it . . . the spirit says I tricked you again."<sup>15</sup>

When newspaper cartoons depicted the salamander as a small newt-like amphibian, Mormons understandably found the letter unsettling. But if the salamander would have been understood as one of the quite distinct beings of the same name in European lore that, like angels, dwell unburnt amid elemental fire, the letter might have seemed a little less troubling. However, the Salamander Letter and several other newfound documents difficult to square with traditional historical understandings proved to be Hofmann forgeries. (In retrospect, perhaps the fact the letter had a salamander, or fire elemental—rather than the traditional gnomes, or earth elementals—guarding a buried treasure should have raised some eyebrows.) As Hofmann's promises to deliver buyers' documents outpaced his ability to create them, he began trying to murder people he feared would expose him. One of his package bombs killed a document collector, and another diversionary bomb intended for a collector's business partner instead killed the partner's wife. In a third explosion, the forger injured only himself and thereby drew enough suspicion for authorities to arrest him. In his plea-bargained testimony, he described himself as a practicing Mormon but longtime closet atheist who set out to profit personally by undermining traditional LDS historical understandings. Hofmann is internationally regarded by the

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14. The primary vector for the "folk magic roots of early Mormonism" trope entering American religious historians' consciousness has most likely been Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), which drew heavily from D. Michael Quinn. Butler also credited Mormon historians with fleshing out a forgotten nineteenth-century world that most Americans participated in, not just Mormons.

15. Quoted in Dean C. Jessee, "New Documents and Mormon Beginnings," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (1984): 403.



professionals he fooled as one of the most masterful forgers of all time. He is currently serving a life sentence in the Utah State Prison.<sup>16</sup> Thanks to him, many historical documents without a verifiable pre-1970s provenance are still suspect. Hofmann and sensationalistic reporting about him compounded the idea that folk magic is somehow scandalous, dangerous, and in some unsavory ways related to Mormon origins. The notion that the LDS Church tried to cover up its true history as discovered by Hofmann still widely persists in popular imagination despite Hofmann's exposure as a forger and the Church's invitations to the press as events unfolded to examine their newly acquired documents.

At the time, most scholars writing about early Mormon folk magic were historians of the American West or American religious history. The only folklorist to weigh in being William A. Wilson and only with two book reviews of historian D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*—the overreaching yet still seminal work on the topic.<sup>17</sup> Later, a new generation of scholars became more involved.<sup>18</sup> Samuel Brown, trained neither as a folklorist or a historian but as a physician who has intuited insights folklorists would appreciate, has done much to help demystify early Mormon “folk magic.”<sup>19</sup> Folklorist David Allred reminds scholars how folklorists helped de-exoticize the common magic/religion distinction by showing them to be functionally and structurally very similar concepts whose differences have more to do with culturally constructed notions emerging from relationships of group identity, prestige, and power than they do from any intrinsic qualities of magic or religion. For example, one contemporaneous critic of Joseph's involvement in scandalous superstitious doings, and

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16. Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989); Richard E. Turley Jr., *Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

17. William A. Wilson, Review of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* by D. Michael Quinn, *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (1987): 96–104; and Review of *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* by D. Michael Quinn, *Western Historical Quarterly* 20 (August 1989): 342–43.

18. David Allred, “Early Mormon ‘Magic’: Insights from Folklore and from Literature,” in Eliason and Mould, *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, 184–97; and Mould and Eliason, “The State of Mormon Folklore Studies.”

19. Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 69–87; and Samuel M. Brown, “The Reluctant Metaphysicians,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 115–31.

contributor to the first-ever anti-Mormon book,<sup>20</sup> was Doctor Philastus Hurlbut. Hurlbut’s given name, “Doctor,” had nothing to do with professional training. Rather, he got it from being a seventh son and was therefore thought to have special healing powers. When Hurlbut opposed Joseph Smith, the belief in seventh-son powers was apparently in a different category than seer stone–aided treasure digging—at least in Hurlbut’s parents’ minds when they named him. Today, however, many might see both practices as two of a kind. For Hurlbut, seer stones were evidence of fraud. David Whitmer, on the other hand, cites Joseph Smith’s abandonment of them as evidence of his loss of prophetic gifts and as a major reason for his disaffection from Mormonism.<sup>21</sup>

### Magic’s Definition and Persistence

Today’s notions of which practices seem magical and which don’t can confuse our understanding of the past more than clarify it. Nineteenth-century American aspirants to socially respectable circles might have denigrated glass-looking for lost objects and treasure digging as uneducated superstition. But the same people might have regarded the medicinal balancing of the four humors through blood-letting or timing crop planting by auspicious astrological signs listed in a farmer’s almanac as commonsensical and scientific. Joseph himself, as he moved from being a canny country boy to a cultured urbanite, reported giving up treasure seeking as youthful folly unworthy of his religious calling.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in court in 1830 it was testified and judicially accepted that Joseph Smith “had not looked in the glass for two years to find money, &c.”<sup>23</sup> Likewise, his mother, long sensitive to slights against her family’s poverty and supposed backwardness, revealed in her famous memoir familiarity with magic practices even as she sought to distance her family from them.<sup>24</sup> In this light, Joseph Smith’s claims to have left youthful follies

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20. E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, Ohio: By the author, 1834).

21. William D. Russell, “Understanding Multiple Mormonisms,” in Givens and Barlow, *Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, 82.

22. Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching,” *BYU Studies* 24, no. 4 (1984): 489–560.

23. Judge Joel K. Noble’s conclusion as reported in 1832 and quoted in Gordon A. Madsen, “Being Acquitted of a ‘Disorderly Person’ Charge in 1826,” in *Sustaining the Law: Joseph Smith’s Legal Encounters*, ed. Gordon A. Madsen, Jeffrey N. Walker, and John W. Welch (Provo: BYU Studies, 2014), 92.

24. Samuel M. Brown, “Reconsidering Lucy Mack Smith’s Folk Magic Confession,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 13, nos. 1/2 (2012): 4.

like treasure digging behind is not necessarily inconsistent with his speculated involvement with the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah or the purported possession of a Jupiter talisman at the time of his death.

The presumption that the difference between magic and proper belief is something intrinsic rather than relational to the definer is still very much alive. But on close analysis, complex definitions distinguishing “magical” from “modern” thinking rarely amount to more than “What *you* do is superstition, while what *I* do is science or true religion.” One of the biggest surprises rural students have in American university folklore courses, including at BYU, is discovering their suburban peers need to be taught what divining rods are and how to use them. Today, regardless of class, race, education, wealth, region, or religion, rural students tend to know of holding a forked stick gently in one’s hand to feel for the downward tug that points to underground water and a good spot for a well. Dowsing seems not only understandable, but essential, in rural areas where families are on their own to secure water, and where hired well drillers make no guarantees and charge by the foot. City kids are shocked that their country classmates could be such shameless occult dabblers in a modern age where you don’t have to think about where water comes from. You just turn on the tap and out it comes—like magic. My rural LDS students don’t understand why their suburban counterparts have so little respect for or belief in a common spiritual gift often displayed by their educated and reasonable bishops and stake presidents.

It is simply wrong to assume that divining practices are some long-abandoned exotic aspect of America’s frontier past rather than a continuing worldwide phenomenon, used not only by rural Americans, but by soldiers in Vietnam to find enemy tunnels, by oil and precious metal prospecting companies, and even by contemporary salvage professionals to recover, yes, lost treasure. But none of this means that there are not also bogus scams, such as the well-developed industry of luring American investors to fund “sure fire” efforts to recover caches of loot hidden by Japanese soldiers retreating from the Philippines at the end of World War II.<sup>25</sup> These always seem to need a little more financing and never seem to produce for investors.

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25. Numerous popular books detail how to go about doing this. See for example Aquila Chrysaetos, *General Yamashita’s Dream Book: How to Successfully Find Hidden Treasure in the Philippines* (London: New Generation Publishing, 2013); and Charles C. McDougald, *Asian Loot: Unearthing the Secrets of Marcos, Yamashita, and the Gold* (San Francisco: San Francisco Publishers, 1993).

Some twentieth-century Mormons persisted in using “seers” to find lost items and “water-witches” to decide where to dig wells. Others claimed that divine “manifestations” helped them locate precious things underground.<sup>26</sup> Former bishop John Hyrum Koyle was excommunicated in 1948 for repeated claims—against Church admonition—that he would save the Church from financial ruin with his “Dream Mine” near Spanish Fork, Utah.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, for Jesse Knight, manifestations led him to dig a mine that made him a wealthy man. Considering his find a gift from God, Knight scrupulously treated his workers well, kept his mine closed on Sundays, and really did help save the Church from near financial ruin brought about by its struggle with the federal government over polygamy.<sup>28</sup> While memories of Koyle’s audacious claims stir mostly in his local region of southern Utah County, Knight has a building named after him at BYU—though his method for discovering his donated wealth is mostly forgotten. The main difference between Koyle and Knight has little to do with how they decided where to dig, which was similar. Rather, the difference is that Knight’s mine actually produced gold (and silver and lead), while Koyle’s few remaining stockholders still await that day.<sup>29</sup>

Folklore studies can help dispel notions like the existence of one transcultural and transhistorical “magic world view” that *other* people have that is distinct from the supposed “nonmagic world view” of sophisticated moderns—moderns who are likely to wait an hour after eating to go swimming to prevent drowning from cramps or trust eyewitness testimony to identify criminals in police lineups despite the

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According to mainstream news accounts from another former World War II theater, a German and a Polish treasure seeker have recently found a legendary Nazi train, full of loot and hidden in a tunnel. They have secured an attorney and begun negotiations with the Polish government to be allowed to take possession of a portion of their finding. “Poland Radar Image ‘Almost Certainly Nazi Train,’” *BBC News*, August 28, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34090165>; Laura Smith-Spark, “Evidence Supports Claim of Nazi ‘Gold Train’ Discovery in Poland, Officials Say,” *CNN*, August 27, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/27/europe/poland-nazi-train-mystery/>. But this too may prove elusive in the end.

26. Wallace Stegner, *Mormon Country* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1942), 154, 200–201.

27. Kevin Cantera, “A Currency of Faith: Taking Stock in Utah County’s Dream Mine,” in *Between Pulpit and Pew: The Supernatural World in Mormon History and Folklore*, ed. W. Paul Reeve and Michael Scott Van Wagenen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 125–58.

28. Stegner, *Mormon Country*, 199–208.

29. Cantera, “Currency of Faith,” 125–58.

thorough scientific debunking of each of these contemporary practices.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, when historians talk about early Mormon folkways, their analysis is often clouded by understanding “folklore” to mean “incorrect notions that uninformed people believe” and “folk magic” to mean “superstition or paganism.” Such definitions prevent readers from seeing value in, or making proper sense of, traditional practices Joseph Smith may have participated in.

But how did nineteenth-century folk divinatory practices come to be seen as disturbing and not merely curious? Many American Mormons alive today can remember, or were raised by parents who can remember, the national fascination with the occult in the 1970s and the “Satanic Panic” of the 1980s through the mid-1990s.<sup>31</sup> These events likely shape contemporary Mormons’ view about anything even remotely resembling divinatory practice. For example, Ouija boards were widely viewed as a harmless parlor game for most of the twentieth century, but their implication by some pastors as a vector for demonic possession recast them entirely in the public mind.<sup>32</sup> The 1973 movie *The Exorcist* about a Catholic priest who struggles to cast a devil out of a young girl was a massive cultural phenomenon that, according to Stephen Taysom, even influenced how Latter-day Saints understood their own tradition’s practices.<sup>33</sup>

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30. “Medical Position Statement—MPS 18, Eating before Swimming,” Leuven, Belgium: International Life Saving Federation, 2014; Robert N. Singer and Robert E. Neeves, “Effect of Food Consumption on 200-Yard Freestyle Swim Performance,” *Research Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1968): 355–60; “Is It OK to Swim Right after Eating?” *Mayo Clinic Healthy Lifestyle: Infant and Toddler Health*, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/infant-and-toddler-health/in-depth/childrens-health/art-20044936?pg=2>; Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Henry F. Fradella, “Why Judges Should Admit Expert Testimony on the Unreliability of Eyewitness Testimony,” *Federal Courts Law Review* 2 (2007): 2–18; Saul M. Kassin, Phoebe C. Ellsworth, and Vicki L. Smith, “The ‘General Acceptance’ of Psychological Research on Eyewitness Testimony: A Survey of the Experts,” *American Psychologist* 44, no. 8 (August 1989): 1089–98.

31. See Jeffrey S. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993); Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker, *Satan’s Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

32. Eric A. Eliason, “Ouija,” in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Jan Harold Brunvand (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 534.

33. Stephen C. Taysom, “‘Satan Mourns Naked upon the Earth’: Locating Mormon Possession and Exorcism Rituals in the American Religious Landscape, 1830–1977,” unpublished manuscript in author’s possession.

Later in the 1980s, a wave of criminal prosecutions swept across the country targeting day care workers, teachers, and neighbors with accusations of satanic ritual abuse, with lurid descriptions of outlandish cultic ceremonies that inverted or otherwise desecrated Christian (often Catholic) rites involving ritual and magical objects. The main accusers were patients of psychologists who touted—now thoroughly discredited—recovered memory therapy.<sup>34</sup> But while it lasted, this modern version of the Salem witch hysteria ruined hundreds of lives. Scores of people went to prison based on no evidence other than the nonsensical and contradictory testimony of coached children.<sup>35</sup> One notable set of cases happened in Lehi, Utah, and satanic ritual abuse cases in Utah often claimed participation in secret, multigenerational satanic versions of LDS temple ceremonies.<sup>36</sup>

It is unclear if the American public fully understands that there never were any secret satanic cults ritually abusing people and that those who claimed to remember such abuse were lying, delusional, or experiencing a now much better understood psychological phenomenon of falsely created, not recovered, memory.<sup>37</sup> Some reporters, notably, Geraldo Rivera, have since publically apologized for their role in stirring up the

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34. Toward the end of the scare, as scholarly evidence began to pile up against recovered memory therapy, Elder Richard G. Scott gave a conference talk warning against “improper therapeutic approaches,” “leading questions,” and “excessive probing into every minute detail of past experiences.” These may “unwittingly trigger thoughts that are more imagination or fantasy than reality. They could lead to condemnation of another for acts that were not committed. While likely few in numbers, I know of cases where such therapy has caused great injustice to the innocent from unwittingly stimulated accusations that were later proven false. Memory, particular adult memory of childhood experience, is fallible. Remember, false accusation is also a sin.” Richard G. Scott, “Healing the Tragic Scars of Abuse,” *Ensign* 22, no. 5 (1992): 31–33.

35. See Richard Beck, *We Believe the Children: A Moral Panic in the 1980s* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015).

36. For an overview of LDS and anti-Mormon responses throughout the scare and more detail on the Lehi case, see Massimo Introvigne, “A Rumor of Devils: Allegations of Satanic Child Abuse and Mormonism, 1985–1994,” Center for Studies on New Religions, [http://www.cesnur.org/2001/archive/mi\\_mormons.htm](http://www.cesnur.org/2001/archive/mi_mormons.htm).

37. See Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketchum, *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memory and Allegations of Sexual Abuse* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996); C. J. Brainerd and V. F. Reyna, *The Science of False Memory*, Oxford Psychology Series, no. 38 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

frenzy.<sup>38</sup> The news media has not been as thorough in reporting the collapse of the scare as it was zealous in promoting it.

People tend to remember sensational accusations more than they remember that they were false. So today, when an average American hears the word *occult* or considers the use of objects guided by unseen forces, the first thing they think of is likely *not* the kind of enlightening, esoteric ancient knowledge Joseph Smith sought to recover, but rather more recent events casting these concepts in an entirely different and negative light.

### **To Recognize and Root Out, or Gather and Embrace? What Does the Bible Say?**

When confronted with practices unfamiliar to us, we often assume they are illicit and use terms like *magic* or *superstition* to refer to them. In Mormon studies, if a scholar points out possible but unfamiliar influences in our intellectual history, the reaction is often defensive denial. Scholars without experience in Mormon studies or folklore, who venture into the Mormon magic question, can seem to engage in imaginative selective reinterpretation of Mormon intellectual history. John L. Brooke's Bancroft Prize-winning *Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* is an example. To critics, Brooke's book takes seeming similarity, rather than clear causal connection, as evidence that LDS doctrinal concepts had their origins in seventeenth-century European alchemic and hermetic practices by way of the radical reformation's clandestine undercurrent in colonial New England. Brooke seemingly magnifies beyond recognition the significance of what may be at best a thin trickle of influence, while overlooking much clearer and closer probable inspirations for LDS concepts, such as the Campbell-Stone movement. Like Mormons, these Christian primitivists, with whom Sidney Rigdon's flock affiliated before his conversion, rejected creeds; insisted their churches be named after Jesus Christ and not a movement (Methodist), form of church governance (Episcopal, Presbyterian), practice (Baptist), or person other than Jesus (Lutheran); and saw themselves as neither protestant nor Catholic, believing they were instead a "restoration" of early Christianity—a term they often used along with "age of accountability" (usually after eight years old), baptism

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38. B. A. Robinson, "Geraldo Rivera: Satanic Ritual Abuse and Recovered Memories," *ReligiousTolerance.org*, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/geraldo.htm>.

by immersion as a "saving ordinance" (unlike Evangelicals, who consider the LDS/Restorationist view akin to works and hence a denial of salvation by grace alone), and "first four principles of the gospel" being faith, repentance, baptism, the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. These concepts began to be discussed in this way in Mormonism after significant numbers of Campbell-Stone restorationists joined.<sup>39</sup> Initial LDS responses to Brooke also saw him shortshrifting the deeper connections Mormons point to in the biblical Near East and early Christianity.

But recent work by Samuel Brown persuasively argues that Brooke's thesis may be more solid than first thought and should be less controversial to the faithful.<sup>40</sup> Like early Mormons, the hermetic traditions Brooke identifies as influences on Joseph Smith also referenced ancient biblical antecedents. Furthermore, Brooke rightly points out that those identifying folk magic as evidence of Mormon credulity overlook past scientific heroes like Isaac Newton, who delved deeply into magical alchemy. Newton wrote over a million words on the subject and understood his magical work as one and the same as what later readers have teased out as his scientific pursuits.<sup>41</sup> Time has been kind to Brooke in some LDS scholarly circles. Many who were initially suspicious of the book, myself included, gladly attended a 2015 Mormon History

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39. Some of these ideas are so central to Campbell-Stone Restorationism that they are listed prominently on the "Restoration Movement" Wikipedia page dedicated to them, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restoration\\_Movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restoration_Movement). Other similarities I learned in long discussions with pastors affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, and the Churches of Christ. (When you can only name your church after Christ it makes it difficult to distinguish similarly named successor churches.) We found each other in U.S. Army chaplain training, where each morning Protestants were told to go into one room for a devotional, Catholics into another room. Sometimes we went to these services. Other times we chatted in the hall between the rooms, sometimes joined by the similarly non-Protestant/Catholic rabbi. For a treatment of the distinctive nature of LDS Restorationism through the lens of a scholar in the Campbell-Stone tradition who taught at Pepperdine, the Church of Christ's "BYU," see Richard T. Hughes, "Early Mormonism and the Eclipse of Religious Pluralism," in *Mormons and Mormonism: An Introduction to an American World Religion*, ed. Eric A. Eliason (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 23–46.

40. Brown, "Reconsidering Lucy Mack Smith's Folk Magic Confession," 1–12.

41. Allred, "Early Mormon 'Magic,'" 191.



Association panel organized in honor of the twentieth anniversary of his book's publication, reported in the *Journal of Mormon History*.<sup>42</sup>

Evangelical anti-Mormons also seem bedeviled by magic—seeing folk magic as evidence of Joseph Smith's non-Christian paganism.<sup>43</sup> However, celebrating Jesus's birth with decorative greenery drawn from pre-Christian Germanic practices, in late December, in a continuation of Roman festivities in honor of Saturn—a complex god associated with agriculture, hard partying, and gift giving<sup>44</sup>—is apparently okay, as is celebrating Jesus's resurrection by painting eggs and fetishizing newborn animals after the manner of worship once presumably directed toward Eostre/Eástre—a Germanic goddess of the dawn who gave Easter its name, according to the Venerable Bede and those early and most famous folklorists, the brothers Grimm.<sup>45</sup> To be fair, speculative reconstructions of the Eástre/Easter connection have fallen somewhat out of favor, and a vigorous movement exists among some Evangelicals that takes their own tradition to task for countenancing supposed pagan survivals and intrusions in modern Christian practice with titles such as *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?*; *Christianity: The Origins of a Pagan Religion*; and *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices*.<sup>46</sup> It is also widely understood by historians that many

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42. "Reassessing Refiner's Fire: A Twentieth-Anniversary Retrospective," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 4 (2015): 177–237.

43. This is not a minor issue for critics of Mormonism. It has been a central thrust of their arguments since the early years of the Restoration. See J. Spencer Fluhman, "A Peculiar People": *Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Scott F. Hershey, *Mormonism: Unscriptural, Pagan, and Immoral* (1900; repr., Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2010); "There Is Nothing More Pagan: Mormon Teaching," *Chick Publications*, January/February 1985, <http://www.chick.com/bc/1985/mormonism.asp>; "Mormonism Is More Pagan Than Christian," *YouTube*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z32N1GRW\\_Qw&safe=active](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z32N1GRW_Qw&safe=active).

44. See Christian Räscher, *Pagan Christmas: The Plants, Spirits, and Rituals at the Origins of Yuletide* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2006), 154–56.

45. Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 3d ed. (Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung, 1854), 267–68. Bede, in *Temporum Ratione* (probably in the early 700s), mentions that April was called Eosturmonath among the Anglo-Saxons after a goddess of theirs named Eostre. See <http://www.manygods.org.uk/articles/essays/Eostre.shtml>. Thanks to Roger Terry for pointing out the Bede reference.

46. Bruce K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Philippe Walter, *Christianity: The Origins of a Pagan*

esoteric ideas and practices of America’s founders and presidents would not pass the scrutiny of Christian depaganizers—perhaps most notably freemasonry, which also has a relationship to Mormonism’s founding, hopefully made somewhat more sensible by my arguments here.<sup>47</sup>

Such seeming inconsistencies of opprobrium show up in the Bible as well. The same Bible that proclaims “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Ex. 22:18) and seems to condemn Saul’s necromantic visit to the witch of Endor, portrays favorably, or at least without criticism, Jacob’s using sympathetic magic in showing pregnant sheep bark-stripped rods to make them bear more of the striped or speckled lambs Laban had agreed to give him; Joseph of Egypt owning a silver divining cup; prophets and apostles using physical objects to discover the will of God, such as casting lots to determine a guilty party or choose a new apostle; and consulting the bejeweled ephod or Urim and Thummim priestly adornments to determine a course of action or the mind of God.<sup>48</sup> Such practices seem little different in essence than Joseph Smith using a divining rod or a seer stone. Is it any wonder that Bible-literate early Mormons came to call Joseph Smith’s devices for finding lost objects or translating ancient records a Urim and Thummim or even *the* Urim and Thummim?<sup>49</sup>

Such practices characterize Jesus’s ministry as well. It took place in the religious milieu of several other non-Christian religions from which it emerged, including Judaism and what Morton Smith has called “native, Palestinian, Semitic paganism.”<sup>50</sup> Bible scholars generally understand that Jesus’s contemporaries interpreted his miracles as magical

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*Religion* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2006); Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Ventura, Calif.: BarnaBooks, 2008).

47. Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America: White House Séances, Ouija Circles, Masons, and the Secret Mystic History of Our Nation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010); Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Freemasonry and the Origins of Modern Temple Ordinances,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 15 (2015): 159–237, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/freemasonry-and-the-origins-of-modern-temple-ordinances/>.

48. See 1 Sam. 28:5–19; Gen. 30:25–43; Gen. 44:1–5; Jonah 1:7–8; Acts 1:24–26; Ex. 28:4, 29:5, 39:2; Lev. 8:7; Judg. 8:26–27, 17:5; 1 Sam. 21:9; 2 Sam 6:14; Hosea 3:4; Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Deut. 33:8; 1 Sam. 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Neh. 7:65.

49. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Book of Mormon Translation,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng>.

50. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (Newburyport, Mass.: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2014), 68.

and that the Gospels depict Christ's actions as akin to magical practice. For example, Christ's removal to the wilderness for forty days parallels shamanistic training. Smith argues that the words Christ used to raise Jairus's daughter, "Talitha cumi,"<sup>51</sup> were similar to a magical formula of the day. Jesus's spitting in dirt to make a paste for anointing a blind man's eyes and then telling him to ritually wash in an enchanted pool would be recognizable to virtually any traditional healer or magician of any time or place. A claim of inappropriate miracle working may stand behind the charge against Jesus in John 18:30.<sup>52</sup>

Roman Catholicism—which has had two thousand years to construct a highly developed discourse concerning problematic aspects of Christian history—uses the term *Interpretatio Christiana* to refer to the ways in which Christian beliefs, practices, worship sites, and calendar events have supplanted, co-opted, adapted, adopted, changed, copied, reinterpreted, continued, suppressed, and reused pagan antecedents. Though they have tracked the issue and considered carefully how to handle it, Catholics tend to be less surprised and panicky about this topic than Protestants, some of whom seem to rediscover the issue every few generations and call again for banning Christmas and Halloween as our Puritan forefathers did and Jehovah's Witnesses still do.

While some contemporary Evangelicals may be myopic in their criticisms of Joseph Smith, they are correct to see the Bible as a key to understanding Joseph Smith's "magical" practices. According to Bible scholar Shawna Dolansky, a magic-versus-religion distinction "is not represented in . . . ancient Near Eastern literatures," and ancient Hebrews did not make a distinction between licit and illicit magico-religious practices based on form or content.<sup>53</sup> In the cultural context of ancient Israel, the prohibitions found in Deuteronomy 18 and Leviticus 19–20 do not categorically condemn magic. "Magic as a category . . . was not illegal," says Dolansky. "The mediation of divine power . . . in the hands of priests and prophets [was] perfectly legal."<sup>54</sup> According to Bible

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51. Mark 5:41; Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 95; John 9:6–7.

52. John W. Welch, "The Legal Cause of Action against Jesus in John 18:29–30," in *Celebrating Easter: The 2006 BYU Easter Conference*, ed. Thomas A. Wayment and Keith J. Wilson (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2007), 157–76.

53. Shawna Dolansky, *Now You See It, Now You Don't: Biblical Perspectives on the Relationship between Magic and Religion* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 20–27, 54.

54. Dolansky, *Now You See It*, 99.

scholars, Moses turning his staff into a snake was not the same as Pharaoh's magicians doing so, since Moses was a prophet of God and Jannes and Jambres were not. From a biblical perspective, determining whether Joseph Smith's treasure seeking, seer-stone gazing, blessing of "magic" handkerchiefs, alleged Kabbalistic dabbling, and so forth were proper should not be based on whether moderns see them as weird or formally similar to pagan practices, but on whether or not Joseph Smith was an authorized prophet of God. Presumably, since Joseph Smith claimed to be God's instrument for restoring biblical priesthood authority, he would have welcomed this basis for determination.

In both Christendom and Mormondom, the seeming disappearance of "folk magic," either by abandonment or normalization into official practice, is partly the result of Max Weber's routinization of charisma process and partly the result of developing methods of exercising divine authority. What today might be regarded as mixing folk and official practices was seen in the past as an unproblematic unified whole. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mormonism, Latter-day Saints, including women known to have individual healing gifts, were as likely to be sought out for the laying on of hands and the administering of traditional remedies as were the chain-of-command priesthood authority.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes the person sought out would be one of the itinerant, ordained, but relatively uncorrelated patriarchs who for a donation would pronounce blessings of lineage, healing, or prophecy.<sup>56</sup> Going to a physician would have been even less likely considering territorial-period Mormons' almost Christian Science-like aversion to professional medicine—a well-founded aversion considering medical science only began to do more good than harm at about the same time Mormon attitudes began to change in favor of professional medicine.<sup>57</sup> The now long-forgotten ordinance of rebaptism served not only to signal recommitment to the faith but also as a cleansing remedy for illness, as recorded in temple records until the 1920s as "baptisms for health."<sup>58</sup> The

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55. Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (2011): 64–75; Claire Noall, "Superstitions, Customs, and Prescriptions of Mormon Midwives," *California Folklore Quarterly* 3 (April 1944): 103–4.

56. Irene M. Bates, "Patriarchal Blessings and the Routinization of Charisma," *Dialogue* 26, no. 3 (1993): 1–29.

57. See Lester E. Bush Jr., *Health and Medicine among the Latter-day Saints: Science, Sense, and Scripture* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

58. Stapley and Wright, "'They Shall Be Made Whole,'" 69–112.

consecrated olive oil today dabbed on one's crown for priesthood blessings was then perhaps peppermint oil, fish oil, or bear tallow poured liberally, or mixed into ointments and poultices for topical application to wounds, or was drunk straight from the bottle for stomach and bowel ailments.<sup>59</sup> For contemporary Mormons who believe in both medicine and priesthood blessings but tend to keep them conceptually separate, time can divide as effectively as religion or culture—making ancestral practices seem as unusual as those of exotic foreigners.

### The Future of Magic?

In considering disconcerting differences we find in the past, it might be worthwhile to try to imagine what common, even indisputable, beliefs or practice today will seem ridiculous, dangerous, superstitious, or even morally impossible one hundred years from now. What ideas will complete the journey of all ideas that, according to the old saw, “are born as heresy, bloom as orthodoxy, then die as superstition”? Our tendency to presume that what we do now is obvious and eternal seriously hampers any useful speculation along these lines, as does the tendency to assume inspired change in Church practice will follow one's own political and moral intuitions. Almost anything we come up with could seem as silly as the claim that, in the future, we will be aghast that we quaintly ate organic foods rather than “jelly donuts,” whose health benefits we now know to be unquestionable, as an incredulous far-future denizen noted a long time ago in Woody Allen's Rip Van Winkle–esque 1973 science-fiction comedy *Sleeper*. As Patrick Mason suggests, we are guests in the past and should not assume ill of our hosts if we do not, at first, understand them. The future is even more inscrutable than the past. Perhaps it is wise to always remember that our present will be an odd-seeming past for people in the future, with perhaps nothing more odd about us than our speculations about the future.

With this in mind, there is no reason to regard magic-seeming practices—even if fully embraced by Joseph Smith for his whole life as foundational to his teachings—as counterevidence to his prophetic

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59. Jonathan A. Stapley, “Pouring in Oil’: The Development of the Modern Mormon Healing Ritual,” in *By Our Rites of Worship: Latter-day Saint Views on Ritual in Scripture and Practice*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 283–316, especially 310; see also Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, “The Forms and the Power: The Development of Mormon Ritual Healing to 1847,” *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 3 (2009): 44–51.

claims. They might have been authorized; they might not have been magic, since “magic” is a uselessly vague and deictic term; they may end up validated by science; they may only be the victims of ever-changing boundary-maintenance labeling; they might have been just like what biblical prophets did; they might not have been pagan, only no longer very familiar. In light of Joseph Smith’s statement that “one [of] the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism <is> to receive thruth [truth] let it come from where it may,”<sup>60</sup> the idea that the restoration of all truth might draw from folk magic traditions should be no more shocking than the fact that many Protestant hymns have found their way into LDS hymnbooks. Likewise, a photo of a small brown rock should cause no more shock and consternation than the voluminous displays of yuletide greenery that have come to characterize the First Presidency’s Christmas broadcast.

With the biblical precedent that form, content, seeming similarities to paganism, and subjective feelings of weirdness are not legitimate reasons to call out practices as inappropriate for God-fearing people, and with the understanding that still today, as in Bible times, the Lord’s anointed determine what is and is not licit, perhaps Mormons can safely put up mistletoe, hide Easter eggs, and even witch wells (but maybe not scry with seer stones?), regardless of their ostensible pagan and previous “folk magic” uses. That some Saints continue to be troubled by such issues perhaps reveals more about modern attitudes toward earlier and unfamiliar practices—and the work Mormon folklorists have yet to do de-exoticizing them—than it does any real problems with Mormon origins.

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60. Joseph Smith, Journal, July 9, 1843, in *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, vol. 3 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2015), 55.