



Type: Magazine Article

What Frontier, What Camp Meeting?

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 62, No. 8 (August 1959)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 590–592, 610, 612, 614–615

Abstract: This article responds to the assertion that the Book of Mormon is a product of the religious and political milieu of the American frontier.

*Sixth of the series
"Mixed Voices"
on Book of Mormon
criticism*

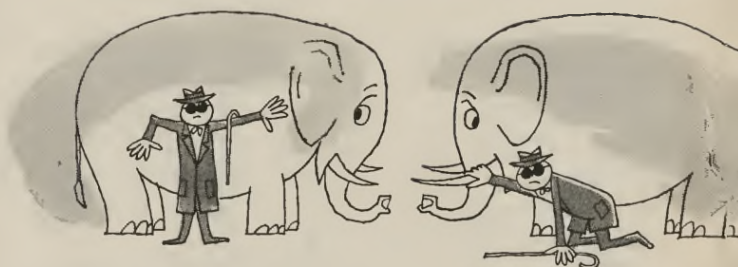
What Frontier, What Camp Meeting?

by Hugh Nibley
Contributing Editor

Nearly all present-day critics insist on an atmosphere of extreme religious hysteria, "a time of strange wild religious excitement," as essential to the production of the Book of Mormon.⁵¹ The heat and passion of the backwoods revival meeting provide the fiery crucible in which the book was forged.⁵² The frontier and the camp meeting between them set the stage for the Book of Mormon.

In spite of its respectable distant New England background, a recent and typical study reports, "Mormonism was unquestionably a product of the frontier, the strangest, most ambiguous, adventurous, and colorful of all the movements emanating from that turbulent region."⁵³ The latest investigators, however, have been seriously questioning this proposition. Mrs. Brodie has an easy time showing that western New York in Joseph Smith's time was not primitive frontier at all, but thoroughly settled and civilized. Yet after all that she remains true to the party line: the matter of the Book of Mormon "is drawn from the American frontier."⁵⁴ But others have now taken the magic out of that magic word and demythologized the myth of the frontier.

"Mormonism has usually been described as a frontier religion," writes Cross, and hastens to correct the error: "The church did not rise during the pioneering era of western New York. Its early recruits came

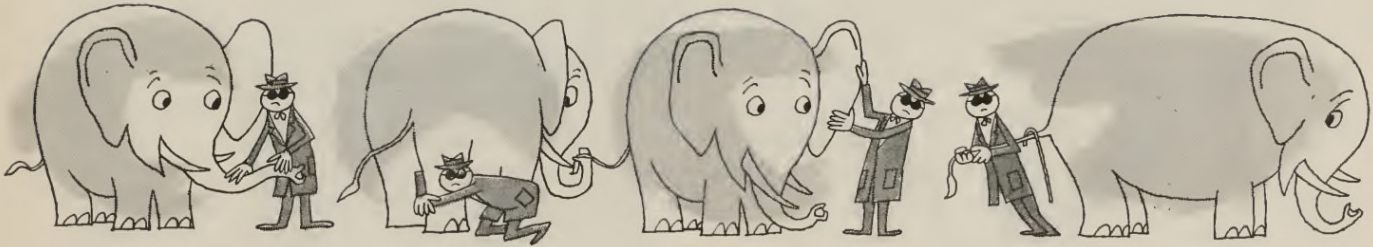


Why he's exactly like a wall

... more like a spear

from many sects, but invariably from the longest settled neighborhoods of the region. Joseph's peregrinations [in the early days] . . . were always eastward, not westward . . . the Church of the Saints was not a frontier phenomenon in origin." Even if you call Western New York the frontier, "its impact upon the region and period from which it sprung was extremely limited," Mormonism receiving its greatest strength from abroad.⁵⁵ Mr. Davis confirms this verdict: "But Upstate New York in the 1820's," he writes, "was not a frontier, . . . actually, the frontier was the place where Mormonism was nearly extinguished, while the final settlement came a thousand miles beyond the frontier."⁵⁶ The theory that Mormonism was a product of the frontier will not stand up to any examination.

Equally groundless is the common claim that the element of supernatural intervention in the Book of Mormon was a response to the stimulus of the camp meeting. "There are no detailed descriptions of the revivals in Palmyra and Manchester between 1822 and 1827, when they were at their wildest," writes Mrs. Brodie.⁵⁷ If she had really wanted to find out what the revivals were like at the time and place indicated, Mrs. Brodie could have had a quite adequate description from the autobiography of Nancy Towle, the traveling revivalist who operated in upper New York State between the years 1818 and 1831. From her we learn that the pathological camp meetings that Smith is supposed to have attended are a myth of the critics.⁵⁸ The preaching routine of the time was standardized and stereotyped: if Smith ever got his religion "from the mouth of the wilderness preacher," it is passing strange that his own sermons



... obviously some sort of snake . . . no, round and tall like a tree . . . he is exactly like a huge fan . . . unmistakably like a rope

and writings do not remotely resemble theirs. Particularly repugnant to Miss Towle and her fellow evangelists is Smith's claim that "The gift has returned back again, as in former times, to illiterate fishermen." To which Miss Towle's reaction was: "Are you not ashamed, of such pretentions? You who are no more, than any ignorant ploughboy of our land! Oh! blush, at such abominations!"⁵⁹ So far were the revivalists from admitting any kind of inspiration. The idea of supernatural manifestations, which Joseph Smith is also supposed to have picked up from the revivals, was completely foreign to them. When she speaks of healing, Miss Nancy makes it perfectly clear that she means only the healing of the soul; when she rushes to the side of the sick and the dying, it is to exhort them to prepare to meet Jesus; when she speaks of death it is with genuine terror and despair;⁶⁰ she is constantly on guard against accepting for a moment as supernatural any of the many experiences and manifestations that she so often meets with in the course of her neurotic career.⁶¹ The revivalists had a definite technique and enthusiasm of their own, but it was of a totally different nature from that found among the Mormons, concerning which one observer noted ninety years ago:

"This enthusiasm is different in style and expression from the religious enthusiasm of many of the Christian sects. The excesses of revivals are not favored by the leaders for this practical Church. There is no frenzy in their prayers, and the worship in their Tabernacle is as decent as that of a Puritan Church. But under this quiet exterior, there is a spirit of fanatical devotion, deep and earnest. . . ."⁶²

Could one ask for plainer evidence that the Mormon

tradition is not that of the camp meeting and the frontier?

From Miss Towle we learn that the revival meetings of Joseph Smith's day were not held in fields, woods, and tents, but in regular churches and in good order.⁶³ It was only in the British Isles that Miss Towle herself preached in tents and in the open air; her message there was the same as in America, and met with the same response—there was nothing "frontier" about it.⁶⁴

Miss Towle has a good deal to say about the bitter revelries among the ministers, (" . . . rotten-hearted professors. . . . Oh! these men-appointed leaders, how despicable they often, to me, appear!") and so makes it clear that Joseph Smith was not exaggerating (as is often claimed) when he told of how meanly they treated him.⁶⁵ From Nancy Towle we can learn what the atmosphere of the revivals really was: Religious feeling ran high; rivalry was intense and sometimes bitter;⁶⁶ but the wild orgiastic rites of the camp meeting, of which we have heard so much, were totally foreign to her experience and to the world of the youthful Joseph Smith. Only twice in all her long experience did Miss Towle see anyone faint at a meeting—once in Cumberland and once in Nova Scotia—and the sight surprised and disturbed her: "Such a thing," she says, "never happens in the 'New England revivals.'"⁶⁷

As early as 1842 the *Methodist Quarterly Review* severely criticized an English writer for describing Mormonism as a frontier religion. The Mormon converts, the reviewer pointed out, came not from the frontier or even from America, but from that very "sound, enlightened, Protestant England" that the

British writer boasts about!⁶⁸ As to the Book of Mormon resembling American preaching, at revivals or anywhere else, nothing could be more absurd: "We now fear, that the reviewer [in England] knows just as little about what is said 'at meeting' as he does about the contents of the Book of Mormon, and this is almost nothing at all."⁶⁹

Dr. O'Dea Bloweth Where He Listeth:—Dr. O'Dea should have considered some of these things before propounding his favorite thesis on the Book of Mormon: "The book is obviously an American work." How, "obviously?" Well, "American sentiments permeate the work." For example? "Taxation is oppressive, and lawyers are not to be trusted."⁷⁰ In what nations is that not true? Has Dr. O'Dea never heard of Moliere or Aristophanes or Rabelais? Again the "obligation of the clergymen to work" in Alma's church is right out of New England: but why not right out of Cluny, or the Qumran Community, or the *Didache*? Alma's going "from one body to another, preaching unto the people repentance and faith on the Lord" (Mos. 25:15), is for O'Dea "a scene strongly reminiscent of the camp meeting" though he admits elsewhere that camp meetings belong to the *post* Book of Mormon period.⁷¹ But Dr. O'Dea's job as a critic is not simply to report what Book of Mormon scenes and incidents suggest to his mind, but to prove when he suggests a source, that the matter concerned *could not possibly have come* from any other source. After all, the man who by some mysterious process can borrow the ideas of thirteenth century monks, Brahmin sages, French satirists, and Washingtonian reformers may at any given moment be stealing from *any* conceivable source, so that no critic can ever be sure of his ground. But Dr. O'Dea is: he finds that in the Book of Mormon "the closeness to violence was thoroughly American." But what could be more thoroughly Italian or Greek or Irish or Roman or Arabic or Hebrew, etc., than "closeness to violence?"⁷² Nancy Towle actually left England to get away from a "closeness to violence," in comparison of which America was a haven of calm.⁷²

In his too ready analysis Dr. O'Dea goes far enough to contradict himself soundly, for though the Book of Mormon according to him draws its "fundamental theme" from Calvinism and revivalism, it does so "without either the stress on human depravity of the

former or the excessive emotionalism of the latter." That is to say, what we find in the book is Calvinism and revivalism—but with their essential elements left out: "In contrast to the extremes of religious enthusiasm that were soon to follow upon the revivals . . . later in the decade, the intellectuality of the Book of Mormon and its appeal as a reasonable answer to the problems of existence and salvation are quite obvious." (P. 31.) So what the Book of Mormon offers is not a resemblance but a "quite obvious" *contrast* to the ways and teachings of those religious enthusiasts who are supposed to have inspired it! O'Dea even labors the indiscretion: "In fact, in catching and committing to print the hopes and exaltations of the revival meeting and in doing so without the distractions and emotional excesses . . . the Book of Mormon was admirably suited to become . . . the scriptures of an American Church." (P. 40.) Passing by the fact that the book was never meant to become *the* scriptures of any church, and that the great appeal of Mormonism and the Book of Mormon has in the past not been to Americans but to people of other lands, we must hasten to point out that "emo-

tional excesses" are no extraneous fixture of the revival meeting but the very substance of those "hopes and exaltations" without which it would not be a revival meeting. To say that the young fanatic Joseph Smith succeeded in separating revivalism from emotionalism *m a k e s* about as much sense as

to talk of separating Romanism from Rome or separating the front of a piece of paper from the back. Calvinism and revivalism "without either the stress on human depravity of the former or the excessive emotionalism of the latter" are simply *Hamlet* with *Hamlet* left out.

Though Riley assures us that "Joseph Smith knew as little about Arminius as Arminius did of him," and Davis insists that Mormonism is a revolt against Arminianism,⁷³ Dr. O'Dea finds "The doctrine of the book is wholeheartedly and completely Arminian." The proof? "Men, says the Book of Mormon, will be judged by God according to their works," which Arminius also taught.⁷⁴ But so did a thousand other Christian teachers, ancient, medieval, and modern, to say nothing of the scripture itself.

Again, we learn that the democratic creed of the Book of Mormon is purely American—except that it is not: "Yet this con- (Continued on page 610)

BIRTHDAY CAKE

by Christie Lund Coles

The flames climb high
Then sink;
Wax falls upon
The white, the pink;

The shadows move
Grotesque and tall
Against the curtain
And the wall;

Her breath comes fast;
Her blue eyes shine;
A moment here
I know her mine.

Yet, few the years
I shall make
The dainty small girl's
Birthday cake.

function. There is no "town." At priesthood meeting and Sunday School it is not uncommon to see the uniforms of the Navy, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard, Marines, and occasionally a member of the Geodetic Survey. All of these services have important missions to perform on "The Pearl of the Aleutians," or called by most, "The Rock."

The Adak LDS Group is attached to the West Anchorage Branch, but visits to the "home" branch are rare, since it is some 1500 miles distant, and the only way is by expensive commercial aircraft, or "space-available" ships. With fairly limited facilities, the group has had to function almost when and where it could. For quite some time, priesthood meeting and Sunday School were held in a small TV room of the Armed Forces TV Service. It was disconcerting, especially to the youngsters, to try to hold religious services in such an atmosphere. The group changed from morning to afternoon hours and was able to meet in the small auditorium of a religious education building annexed to the base chapel. This was an improvement for the ten to twenty members who came out. Now, the group has moved into the base chapel where a more sacred atmosphere can be maintained. The size of the attendance is dictated by work schedules, transportation, and the weather.

With constantly rotating personnel, it is difficult to hold together the few officers of the group, or even to plan ahead from one Sunday to the next. Brother O. C. Ford is group leader. He, his wife Zelma, and sons Barry and Leslie have been on Adak almost three years. Both Fords are government employees of the Navy. Assistant group leader and Sunday School teacher is L. M. (Bob) Whittaker, an Air Force 1/Lt., and Navy-man Vaughn Failner is assistant group leader. Uray Funk, another civilian employee, was replaced as priesthood teacher by Don Bowers, of the Naval communications station. A Navy tug cook, Alex Briskie from American Samoa was group secretary until his rotation, and that position is now filled by Marine Master Sergeant Stanley Titcombe. Teaching the youngsters has been assigned to Sister Jo Whittaker, Sister Ford, and Sister D. E. Seyboldt. Many of these officers are active in many other activities.

Brother Ford is president of the Adak chapter of P-TA, and Brother Whittaker is publicity chairman of P-TA and the Boy Scouts. Since the departure of Brother Dale Brown many months ago, the group has been without an accompanist. A record player and organ accompaniment records are used.

In addition to priesthood meeting and Sunday School, the group meets each Sunday evening at one of three homes for fireside. These are government quarters, since there are no "private" homes on the island. A regular lesson is presented, except the last Sunday of each month which is given to a social-type gathering. Among the few members and investigators the "Mormon movement" can be traced to all corners of the world. Needless to say, a great deal of spare time is used in telling and showing pictures of faraway places, reminiscing, and yearning. Considering the twice weekly mail and a once-a-month boat with packages, this remote outpost hears a lot about "home" and warmer climes.

But even here, thousands of miles from home, the power of the gospel was illustrated not long ago. The chance meeting of two priesthood members brought to light a distant relationship. For many years, one had supposed his father to be dead and could find nothing on his paternal genealogy. Not only did the meeting prove the father to be alive, but also revealed the missing genealogy line, and the work was completed.

When the westward movement of the Mormons began over a hundred years ago, few then could visualize the magnitude of the gospel and just how far west it would go. But, here on Adak, just as in other places of the world, the Church continues to be an ever-present influence and inspiration in the lives of the small LDS Group. As long as the elements will permit, the Adak Latter-day Saints will continue to worship, and join in fellowship that will make the stay on "The Rock" a little less lonesome and an experience that will long be remembered.

What Frontier, What Camp Meeting?

(Continued) fession of faith, so characteristic of the milieu, did not pass without qualification. . . . Whether it was the problems of de-

veloping his 92 B. C. plot or his reflection upon his experience with his contemporaries that gave him pause, Joseph appended a profound warning." (P. 35.) That is, it *should* have been "characteristic of the milieu," according to Dr. O'Dea's calculations, yet it was not, because that rascal Joseph Smith insisted on forcing it into another milieu—that of 92 B. C. We challenge Dr. O'Dea to name a century between the first and the twentieth A.D. in which the "content" of which he speaks was not only present but also conspicuous in the Christian world: the Reformation was only one of many expressions it has taken through the centuries. Again, it is impossible to take any position regarding baptism that has not been taken by one religious group or another in the past; so while the Book of Mormon concept of baptism conforms to none of the familiar Christian patterns, it may be broken down arbitrarily into fragments that may be held to suggest aspects of baptism as practised by somebody or other, and so claim to have discovered the source of the Book of Mormon ideas on the subject, as Dr. O'Dea does.⁷⁵

Parallels to Taste:—The grab-bag method exemplified by Dr. O'Dea makes it possible for the experts, each feeling his own part of the elephant, to propound with perfect confidence diametrically conflicting explanations of the Book of Mormon. Thus some scholars tell us that the Book of Mormon could only have been written by "a man of learning," that "the real author . . . was well acquainted with the classics,"⁷⁶ while others insist that "only an ignorant man could have produced it."⁷⁷

Today certain professors find that "the intellectuality of the Book of Mormon and its appeal as a reasonable answer to the problems of existence and salvation are quite obvious,"⁷⁸ and assure us that the book "satisfied the inbred desire of Yorkers to achieve an orderly, intellectual formulation of their beliefs."⁷⁹ Can this be the same book which Dr. Davis is calling "the gibberish of a crazy boy?"⁸⁰

For Professor Meinhold the Book of Mormon contains no history, but a wonderful *philosophy* of history. For Professor Arbaugh it is the other way round: "Mormon scriptures contain items of purported history, but,

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significantly, no philosophy of history."⁸¹

Investigators as different as Gibbs, Brodie, and Eduard Meyer have commented on the remarkable consistency of the Book of Mormon, which for Mr. Bernard DeVoto was nothing but a "yeasty fermentation, formless, aimless, and inconceivably absurd."⁸² Years later, to be sure, DeVoto admitted he was lying, but the solid majority of scholars are still with him.⁸³

Critics have detected fraud in the Book of Mormon on the one hand in their discovery that it "determines none of the great questions pending the world at large, but only minor difficulties that would have been likely to reach a western village,"⁸⁴ and on the other hand in the equally astute discovery that it simply reflects the great issues about which "men in different parts of the country were thinking. . . ."⁸⁵ Again, which is it to be, great issues or small, that damn the Book of Mormon?

While one school of investigators sees in the Book of Mormon an "altogether remarkable production of an over-imaginative mind . . ." the work of "an audacious and original mind . . . marvellously fecund imagination," etc.,⁸⁶ others can detect only "a perfect destitution of inventive power in its writer." "Not a spark of imagination or invention enlivens the weary sameness of the annalist."⁸⁷

A learned English divine in 1886 felt to reject the Book of Mormon *in spite of* "all its air of sincerity and truth; for all the striking and often beautiful passages that it contains."⁸⁸ Yet how many critics detect those qualities in the work? The usual reaction is: "In nothing does the line, style, invention, conception, content and purpose reveal the hand of a master, let alone of Divine inspiration."⁸⁹

FOOTNOTES

⁸¹Quote is from J. D. Kingsbury, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁸²The Book of Mormon itself is "interspersed with the catch-words of the Methodist camp meeting exhorter," according to Hastings' *Encyclopedia* XI, 86. For a particularly gaudy description see Leon Lemonnier, *Les Mormons* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 17; and George Townshend, *The Conversion of Mormonism* (Hartford: Church Missions Publishing Co., 1911) pp. 13f.

⁸³E. S. Bates, *American Faith* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1940), p. 341. I. W. Riley, *Founder of Mormonism* (1902), p.

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85, goes even further: ". . . the contents of the Book of Mormon can be traced to . . . ideas which Joseph picked up in the Indian country where he lived." Not merely frontier-Indian country!

⁵⁴Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows my History*, (New York: A. Knopf, 1946) pp. 9-10.

⁵⁵W. R. Cross, *Burned-Over District*, pp. 146-8, 138-140.

⁵⁶D. B. Davis, *New England Quarterly*, 26: 151.

⁵⁷Brodie, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁵⁸Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated* (Charleston: J. L. Burges, 1832). It is plain that Mrs. Brodie read only the part dealing with Towle's visit to Kirtland in 1831, which she distorts in her usual fashion, reporting, e.g., that Miss Towle "blundered" into Kirtland (Brodie, p. 103), while Miss Towle's own account is that she had long planned and carefully arranged her visit to that place.

⁵⁹N. Towle, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 198, 157.

⁶¹For example, *ibid.*, pp. 124-5. The worst thing she can call people is "superstitious," *ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶²J. Remy, *op. cit.*, I, ciii.

⁶³She commiserates a fellow-evangelist for being forced by unusual circumstances to preach in the open air at the risk of her health, *ibid.*, p. 54, cf. p. 82.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 33, 53.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 170, 185, 171, 212, 21, 17.

⁶⁶She tells how "the very bigoted Methodists" of Geneva, New York, near Palmyra, refused her their chapel, p. 152. Though she tried hard to get herself persecuted, "that honor," she reports, "was denied me." *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 62-63, cf. 17, 23, 28, 41, 54, 94, etc. Only the Mormons had that honor, p. 146.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 165, n. 1; 164f, 165, n. 1.

⁶⁸*The Methodist Quarterly Review* (ed. Geo. Peck, D.D.), XXV (1843) Vol. 3, p. 126, cf. 128.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 126, cf. pp. 123f.

⁷⁰T. O'Dea, *The Mormons*, p. 32.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 28. On page 31 we read that "the extremes of religious enthusiasm . . . follow upon the revivals . . . later in the decade. . . ." Yet these extremes are supposed to have produced the Book of Mormon.

⁷²*Ibid.*, p. 102; only in Britain did Miss Towle have fears for her life, *op. cit.*, p. 59; she vividly describes the poverty, violence, and insecurity of English lower society. Recently Chief Justice Jackson observed that the American public differs most sharply from the European in its abhorrence of violence; mob action is the rule in European political history, the exception in America.

⁷³Riley, *op. cit.*, p. 135; Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-5, 158.

⁷⁴O'Dea, *op. cit.*, p. 28, cf. p. 27: ". . . its [the Book of Mormon's] fundamental theme combines the concomitance of righteousness and prosperity of the later Calvinists with the call to repentance and humility of revivalistic Christianity." If Dr. O'Dea troubled to read such odd items as the Bible, the Greek Poets, or the Fathers of the Church he would discover that these teachings are by no means a monopoly of Calvinists and revivalists.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 35-36, accusing the Book of Mormon of "ambiguity on the question of baptism" because it does not conform to one pattern but suggests Baptist, Arminian, Catholic, and Episcopalian ideas.

⁷⁰E. D. Howe, *Mormonism* (1840), p. 21.

⁷¹Van Pelt, in *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* VIII, 13.

⁷²O'Dea, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁷³Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

⁷⁴Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁷⁵P. Meinhold, in *Saeculum V* (1954), p. 86. G. Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism*, p. 5.

⁷⁶Ed. Meyer, *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormoren.*, p. 78; Meinhold, *op. cit.*, p. 67. B. De Voto, in *The American Mercury*, Jan. 1930, p. 5.

⁷⁷De Voto, in *The Improvement Era*, 49 (Mar. 1946), p. 154. See Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America II*, 351-3. D. B. Davis' article of 1953, *op. cit.*, is a faithful echo of the earlier De Voto.

⁷⁸J. Hyde, *Mormonism*, p. 281; J. B. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages*, p. 203.

⁷⁹H. M. Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), p. 81.

⁸⁰M. A. Sbresny, *Mormonism: As It Is Today* (London: A. H. Stockwell, no date), p. 25; cf. Beardsley, *op. cit.*, p. 4; J. F. Gibbs, *Lights & Shadows of Mormonism* (Salt Lake Tribune Publishing Co., 1909), p. 57; F. Brodie, *op. cit.*, pp. 42, 48.

⁸¹D. P. Kidder, *Mormonism* (1842), p. 255.

⁸²G. Wotherspoon, *Mormonism* (London, 1886), p. 16.

⁸³M.H:A. Van Der Valk, *De Profeet der Mormonen Joseph Smith, Jr.* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1921), pp. 106-7.



Where Unto Shall I Liken It?

(Continued) sistence to develop it, there will be few more rewarding activities.

The following may be helpful to a teacher in learning to teach on the concept level of his students:

1. Teachers should become acquainted with the vocabulary level of their students. Teachers often do not realize the distance between their vocabulary level and that of their students. It might be helpful to examine their schoolbooks and to find out what magazines and other printed matter they read. Listen carefully when they speak and notice the terms they use *consistently*. This should give a pretty good indication of their vocabulary concept level.

2. Lesson outlines are generally written with no particular locality or community pattern in mind. If the teacher does not adapt the abstract part of the lesson somewhat to farm vernacular, the vernacular of a particular geographical area or urban locale, and so on, the students may actually not be able to picture the

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