

## **AND A CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM: THE WISE CHILD FOLK MOTIF IN MORMON DISCOURSE**

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Prevalent in folktales throughout the world and in popular media in America, the “Wise Child” whose innocence sees through the deceptions, greed, envy, and ingratitude of his or her elders flourishes in Mormon official and lay discourse. Paradoxical in its inherent reversal of hierarchies in a religion often noted for its hierarchies, the wise child, rather than challenging adults and exposing adult foibles to mockery, is used to gently remind all members of their shortcomings and encourage greater adherence to church doctrines. Since the wise child in folk and popular culture is most often a trickster figure who points out foibles and follies in adults, how has it come to be used so often in Mormon discourse by those very adults and authority figures who are usually the butt of its jokes? This paper seeks to look at the significance of the wise child in Mormon official discourse, the transformation it has undergone there, and what that has to say about Mormon culture.

While the wise child is prevalent throughout Mormon discourse, this study is limited to the examples in the Spring and Fall sessions of General Conference. General Conference is a biannual meeting consisting of five two hour meetings over a Saturday and Sunday in April and October when Church Leaders present doctrinal and exhortive talks to church membership worldwide. This has been occurring since 1830 and each General Conference is identified by season or month and number ordinal number. My texts then come from the 182nd Spring and Fall or April and October General Conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

General Conference is a time when the church General Authorities address the church as a whole. The General Authorities is a term for the highest authorities of the Church. At the head is the President or Prophet of the Church and the First-Presidency which includes the Prophet, Thomas S. Monson and his two Counselors. Beneath them, but still regarded as “prophets, seers, and revelators,” are the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who are ranked in order of when they entered the Quorum. Next comes a Presidency of the Seventy, a group of 7 men who help direct the work of the First and Second Quorums of the Seventies, known as Seventies because of Christ appointing “other seventy” to preach the gospel in Luke 10:1. There is also a ruling Bishopric who take care of church humanitarian efforts, and the different auxiliary general presidencies of the Relief Society, the church’s women’s organization; the Young Women and Young Men, organizations for twelve to eighteen year old members; and Primary, organizations for the children of the church. All these presidencies, like local presidencies and the First Presidency, consist of 3 members: a President and First and Second Counselors.

General Conference is an important part of the year for active LDS church members and is often used in lessons and talks throughout the year by members

when they give talks in their local, weekly meetings. Further study on the wise child's use in local meetings will certainly reveal local variations, General Conference talks represent the Church's most public and widely recognized corpus of doctrine and knowledge beyond the "Standard Works." The standard works are the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, The Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. My citations for these scriptures follow the standard LDS conventions.

### **The Wise Child in Folklore**

The Wise Child, folk motif J120 in the Stith Thompson Motif Index, includes tales from many cultures describing how a child's actions produce knowledge or wisdom in adults. Often it is the child's naiveté that produces the knowledge, and often in the form of a rebuke, in their elders. For example, motif J121 tells of a certain son being reproved by his own son's imitation of him. After a man gives his aged father half a carpet to keep warm, his own son keeps the other half, telling him that he is keeping it for him when he's older. Sometimes the situation is reversed as when a father tells a son to only drag him to the threshold, but no farther, because that is as far as he dragged his father. The themes of old age, decrepitude, and a simple, naïve sense of justice are all features of these stories. The wisdom produced in these tales comes from both the child's interpretations of his father's actions and the father's subsequent revelation of the justice of his own actions. The child then, knowingly or not, is active in creating the story's moral (Thompson).

Motifs J122 and J125 follow this pattern. Motif J122 features the naïve remarks of children rebuking or uncovering the sins of their parents. In one a forgetful father wonders what he's forgotten and his naïve son suggests that he forgot to strike mother, as he was an abusive man. In another a seducer is stopped short by a child lamenting that his mother is open to just the crime he aims to commit. In motif J125, children uncover their parent's misdeeds such as an innkeeper's wife who has watered down the wine, or the child who innocently reveals that the father's secretary has been having an affair with his wife. While the targets of the knowledge often changes—though is always composed of adults—the revelation in these stories is also a dialogic act between the child and the adult (*ibid.*).

Motifs J123 and J124 don't rely on the child's innocence and naiveté to uncover wisdom, nor do they rely on the child's innocence. Here the children can be either a passive object lesson or the agent who actively produces the wisdom in the tale. A King who judges a lawsuit wisely after observing a child's game and seeing the principles of justice present in the game earns his wisdom on his own without significant participation from the children. Here they seem to act more as object lessons rather than being involved in the meaning-making of the tale. But there are also the cases of a clever prince overruling the seemingly just decision of the King with greater wisdom, and the J124 motif which encourages the learning of virtues from children who can exhibit patience when their food is stolen. Adults can learn patience when they see the children search quietly for their food rather than crying or getting distressed. In these cases, the child is actually regarded

as wise either through having a rare wisdom beyond his years as the prince exhibited, or an innate quality that is seen as desirable in the adult world (ibid.).

There seem to be two spectrums at work in creating the central action and conflict in these stories. One is a passive/active spectrum. Active children interact with adults in some way to create the moral of the story. Passive children's actions are only significant when the observing adult draws wisdom from the child in a way that might be available to any observer. The other main spectrum is between the naïve and knowing child. Again, the bulk of stories feature children who possess their wisdom naively. Their sense of justice is innate, or their fears real and guileless, and it is simply in voicing those pure, innocent, and honest values that creates wisdom in the adults around them. In this way they are valued as speakers of widely known but unacknowledged truths as in "The Emperor's New Clothes." The lone instance of the clever prince whose actions are indicative of wisdom in and of themselves without the interpretation or transfer of that wisdom to a corresponding adult is an exception that seems to prove that most of the wise children in folktales rely on being active but naïve.

The wise child is a liminal figure that both divides and bridges the worlds of children and adults. A child is often seen as passive and naïve, as an object rather than a subject (de Schweinitz 126). As they grow more active, and more knowing, they come to enter more and more the adult world. As such, the best bridge between the two worlds are children who partake of both the childlike and the adult. These wise children exist somewhere between the wholly naïve and passive child of popular imagination and the active knowledge associated with adults and are indeed the most popular in folklore. This would suggest that the knowing, passive child would be the next most common, but there are no examples of passive, knowing children. This could be due to narratives preferring the more dynamic "active" child. Tales with passive wise children are more rare than the active because knowledge seems to presuppose or be indicated by activity. In other words, a child can act naively, but a knowing child will show it through his or her actions. Finally, the next most uncommon category seems to be knowing and active children as they partake too much of the adult world and/or no longer childlike. Thus they are no longer liminal, trickster figures who can instruct and delight.

It is important to note that these categories are etic constructions and don't always reflect the use of the wise child motif. The speaker and audience may not care whether child characters are active or passive, naïve or knowing, especially in the context of a didactic discourse such as General Conference. Within the General Conference talks I surveyed, the most common child was an active, naïve child, but there were also numerous examples of the knowing, passive child. The requirements of a good story or performance also influence how wise children are used in Mormon discourse. Active children are certainly more interesting than passive, while naïve and knowing children both have their narrative uses, and can both create interesting, artistically satisfying, story arcs and turnarounds.

Other scholars have noticed some of these contrasts at use in Mormon culture. Kristine Haglund Harris studied changes in the Children's Songbook and found "that early Primary songs presume that young people will play significant roles

in building the kingdom while later songs try to limit children's activity (think 'reverence') and suggest that children prepare themselves for future contributions" (qtd. in de Schweinitz 135). Harris found Mormon culture favoring passive children more recently, but the use of the wise child in General conference shows that LDS still prefers active children for use in official narratives.

Categorizing wise children in Mormon discourse with these traits was sometimes unclear. Active or passive traits, while seemingly obvious, were often unclear in context, and naïve and knowing were even less clear, and sometimes less relevant. Henry Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, spoke on the seeming difficulty in knowing or perceiving God in the world. In his address he relates the story of his three year old granddaughter visiting an open house of a temple, sacred structures to Latter-day Saints said to be a house of God. In one of the beautiful rooms, she asks her mother, "Mommy, where is Jesus?" Her mother responds that she wouldn't literally see Jesus in the temple, but could feel his presence. After considering this, the child, Eliza, responds with "Oh, Jesus is gone helping someone." Is this child naïve in taking literally the "house of the Lord" title Latter-day Saints use in talking about the temple, or is she knowing in her realization that this is a physical building where the physical presence of Jesus is expected to be found? Obviously the child's mother interprets it as naïveté while President Eyring goes on to comment, "No pavilion obscured Eliza's understanding...of reality" (Eyring, *Pavilion*), so President Eyring obviously sees Eliza as a knowing child, and yet the meaning of the story rests on Eliza being both a naïve AND a knowing child. It is faith that reconciles these two opposing forces. She is innocent and knowing in that her faith, or belief, in what she has been told is literal whereas her parent's understanding seems more figurative, and yet, with faith, it is the literal that is favored. So the older, wiser-in-the world parent has come to interpret doctrine as figurative instead of literal and thus is not as knowledgeable as her daughter in certain spiritual truths. She has something to learn from her daughter. By including this in his talk, President Eyring implies that all Latter-day Saints have something to learn from this young girl.

This dichotomy between worldly and spiritual things in Mormon thought is relevant to the wise child and one of the reasons that the Mormon variants differ so much from the folk variants. In *The Book of Mormon*, the prophet Jacob speaks of this dichotomy: "O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not" (2 Ne. 9: 28). Paul, in his epistle to the Corinthians, echoes the sentiment with "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness" (1 Cor. 3: 18-19). Paul's words seem like they would support the traditional folk use of the wise child, as a figure who reveals the foolishness of its elders through mockery and 'taking them in their craftiness,' as it says. The differences become more fully explained if we look at its use in its performance context of General Conference. I will discuss this later,

but first another example where the division between the naïve and knowing child seems less relevant in the context of the story.

Russell Osguthorpe, Sunday School General President, recounts a story of his son calling, wondering why Russell hasn't told them one of his articles was appearing in the Church's magazine, *The Ensign*. Russell responds with "I just wanted to see if you were reading the church magazine." His son says it was actually his daughter who brought it to his attention. "She got the *Ensign* from the mailbox, came into the house, and read it. Then she came up to our room and showed us your article." Russell concludes with "My granddaughter read the *Ensign* because she wanted to learn. She acted on her own by exercising her agency. The First Presidency recently approved new learning resources for youth that will support the *innate* desire of young people to learn, live, and share the gospel" (Osguthorpe, emphasis mine). It is obvious by his wording that Russell sees his granddaughter as an active child, but his wording also suggests she is a passive child. This desire to learn certainly exhibited itself in an active way, reading an entire magazine meant for adult members (young children and teenagers have church magazines aimed more at them), is certainly an active thing, but this desire Russell sees as innate, and thus is the source of knowledge coming from what she did, or the innate desire to do it? Depending on how one sees children, this granddaughter can be knowing or naïve. Either she knows that she is doing a good thing, or she is simply doing what she likes, and that thing happens to be an action Russell wants his adult listeners to imitate. It is obvious that this action in an adult member would be seen as active and Elder Osguthorpe is seeking to instill the knowledge of the value of that action, but it seems clear that for children, the assumptions are different. That this is not as volitional, that it is more innate and thus an expression of personality rather than an indication of one's use of free will. The message seems clear, that a desire to learn is a good thing that adults should learn but which seems to come naturally to children. Adults, the message is, be like your wise child. The cultural beliefs inherent in this dichotomy involve religious beliefs in the innate goodness of children and the cultural and religious beliefs that children are blank slates in need of instruction. Both of these ideas lead to assumptions in stories that divide how Mormons view adults and these wise children.

### **The Wise Child in Mormon Scripture and Tradition**

Probably the most important example of the wise child culturally is Joseph Smith who, as a fourteen year old boy, had the wisdom to "ask of God" when he was confused about which religion to join. This act by a fourteen year old boy is often referenced and framed in a way that emphasizes both his youth and his wisdom—particularly as opposed to the religious leaders in his area at the time.

Other scriptural precedents include many prophets in the Book of Mormon. Nephi, the first writer in the Book of Mormon, is still a child of his father, a prophet in Jerusalem and begins the Book of Mormon with "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents (1 Ne. 1:1)." Later, when recounting his conversion, Nephi mentions that he was "exceedingly young" when he came to "believe all

the words which had been spoken by my father.” It is significant that he is able to convince his *younger* brother to also believe, but his *older* brothers, Laman and Lemuel, harden their hearts to his, and his father’s, words (1 Ne 2: 16-18). Alma, a later prophet in the Book of Mormon, is described as a wicked priest to a corrupt King when he hears the testimony of the prophet Abinadi. Alma, at the time, is described as “a young man” who “believed the words which Abinadi had spoken, for he knew concerning the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them [meaning the wicked King Noah and his priests] (Mosiah 17:2).” Alma believes and must flee the court of King Noah and the older, still wicked priests who seek to kill him and put Abinadi to death.

Later still, Captain Moroni, the Nephite leader in some of their most intense wars with the Lamanites is mentioned for being “only twenty and five years old when he was appointed chief captain over the armies of the Nephites (Alma 43: 17).” While 25 can hardly be said to be a child, his youth is certainly emphasized and in the succeeding chapters his wisdom is demonstrated as he prepares the Nephites for war against the Lamanites led by a rebel Nephite. He prepares his soldiers with various armor, and constructs ditches, walls and fortifications around their border cities ensuring those cities which had been weakest were now strongholds. The invading Lamanites are at first too scared to attack these heavily fortified cities. Finally using a combination of spies and prophecy, Moroni traps the main Lamanite army as they cross a river and completely defeats them (see Alma 43:17-44:24). When war returns a few years later, Moroni is again instrumental in securing peace from war and the stability of their main government.

While the war Moroni is engaged in is started by a Nephite dissenter, it is the sons of Lamanite converts that help turn the tide. These converts are called the people of Ammon and, after their conversion, make an oath to never “tak(e) up arms against their brethren (Alma 53: 11).” When the war against the Lamanites gets long, they consider breaking their vow for the greater good. They are “moved with compassion” at seeing “the danger, and the many afflictions and tribulations the Nephites bore for them... and were desirous to take up arms in the defence of their country (Alma 53: 13).” Their spiritual leaders urge them not to, and they send, instead, 2000 of their sons, “who had not entered into a covenant that they would not take their weapons of war to defend themselves against their enemies,” so they are mobilized instead, and join the war under the command of their spiritual leader, Helaman (Alma 53: 16-18). Are these good examples of the wise child? Their youth is certainly a vital part of their identity.

Rather than the wisdom, or cunning, exhibited by Captain Moroni, it is often their faith that is seen as praiseworthy and what continuously saves them. They are promised by their mothers, “that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them,” sure enough, in their first battle, “not one soul of them [had] fallen to the earth (Alma 56: 47, 56).” In a later battle, while casualties mount on both sides of the conflict, their faith in their mother’s words are confirmed again when “there was not one soul of them who did perish; yea, and neither was there one soul among them who had not received many wounds (Alma 57: 25).” While this may

not qualify as “wisdom,” according to the worldly/spiritual split mentioned earlier, the youth are indeed being set up as figures whose actions and faith adults can and should learn from.

The bible has its wise children too. Before Joseph becomes second only to Pharaoh in Egypt, he is the second youngest of 12 brothers, loved by his father, and envied and hated by his brothers. At 17, “the lad” tends sheep with his older brothers. He dreams dreams which indicate his parents and brothers will bow down to him. It may not be seen as wise to share those with said brothers, but in the end, the dreams come to pass, and Joseph is vindicated (see Gen. 37, 39-41).

Samuel is promised by his mother, Hannah, to serve the Lord, and so she gives him to the High Priest of the time, Eli. Eli, while a good man we are told, allows his sons to mismanage the sacrifices of Israel, and so, Eli’s house is condemned. Samuel, while still a child, is called of God in the night time. He finally responds “Speak; for thy servant heareth,” and is finally told the calamities that will befall Eli and his sons and is set to be the next prophet (1 Samuel 3). Young Samuel, is remarkable in receiving revelations from Lord at a time when “the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision (1 Samuel 3: 1).” Samuel however is innocent and good and honest. He even reveals God’s word of destruction towards the current Prophet, Eli, when asked to do so (1 Samuel 3: 19).

Samuel is instrumental in anointing David as the King of Israel after Saul sins and loses his mandate to rule God’s people. When Samuel sees David’s oldest brother, Eliab, he thinks he must be the future King of Israel, but the Lord counsels him to “look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as a man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart (1 Samuel 16: 7). This is even a “scripture mastery” scripture that is one of 25 in the Old Testament emphasized in Seminary, a daily spiritual study class many Mormon youth of High School age take. Seminary students will focus on and often memorize scripture mastery scriptures.

As for David’s wisdom, his encounter with Goliath is telling. While all the armies of Israel fear the mighty Philistine Goliath, David asks “for who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Samuel 17: 26) David, in opposition to his older brothers and King Saul who notes “thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth,” but David insists on his ability to defeat their champion and, without the traditional armor and weapons favored by the more experienced, he approaches Goliath with his staff, “five smooth stones,” and his sling (1 Samuel 17: 40). Goliath is insulted, David, undaunted, tells Goliath he’s about to die and that David comes in the “name of the Lord of hosts,” and that “this day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee...that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel (1 Samuel 45-46).” David does so, and is set up as a model of exemplary faith.

Finally, Jesus is a prime example of the wise child when, at only 12 years old, he is left behind in Jerusalem after a Passover feast and is found, finally, “in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking

them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers (Luke 2: 46-47).” Jesus is a wise child who is wise beyond his years and astonishes those around him at his understanding of the scriptures and the law. Further, he is the source of many teachings that emphasize what people can learn from children. In Matthew 18: 2-4 “Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, “verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” In Matthew 19: 14, “Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” The emphasis on wise children in General Conference may reflect this precedent and desire to emulate Jesus Christ’s example, and align themselves with his teachings.

The wise child that Jesus speaks of, and that appears most frequently in scriptures, is strikingly different from the wise child of the folktales. These scriptural variants of the wise child share some similarities with the folk variants. The folk variants and the scriptural variants both emphasize rebuking elders, though those elders are less often parents. In the case of Nephi, it’s his older brothers, David rebukes King Saul, Joseph Smith rebukes the religious leaders of his area, and Jesus rebukes his mother. These rebukes are different in that the youths in these examples are both active, and knowledgeable although they retain a naiveté as well. They are able to be both knowledgeable and naïve by being naïve to worldly things, and knowledgeable about spiritual things. As such, they come across as less caustic than the folk examples in their efforts to instruct and exhort people on spiritual things.

### **The Child in Mormon and American Culture**

Scholars of American culture have identified two contrasting views of childhood: as a “tabula rasa” in need of “acculturation,” protection, or shelter, and the child as “specula naturae,” the mirrors of nature, or a type of noble savage. Gary Cross notes the connection between the Romantic era and the idea of the pure, innocent child. He quotes Wordsworth as saying children come “fresh from the hand of God.” Mormon speakers in General Conference are fond of Wordsworth and have quoted his *Ode: Intimations on Immortality* which includes “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:/ The soul that rises with us, our life’s Star, / Hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar: / Not in entire forgetfulness, / And not in utter nakedness, / But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home: / Heaven lives about us in our infancy!” This quote has been used in General Conference two or three times a decade over the past three decades, twice by President Monson in 2012 and 2007. It portrays the child not as a blank slate, but a noble, pure, innocent being close to heaven and divinity. The rise of Mormonism during the Romantic Movement supports this connection, as do numerous Mormon scriptures. Rebecca de Schweinitz also sees evidence of an Aristotelian view of children where “the child is important, not for herself or himself, but for his or her potential” (136-7).

Support for this idea in Mormon doctrine is surprisingly hard to find. If asked for scriptures that indicate children's innate goodness, many members might quote the prophet Mormon's condemnation of infant baptism. However, his reasons don't necessarily indicate it is because children are good, but because they are innocent and unaccountable for their actions. Mormon writes that "their little children need no repentance, neither baptism... But little children are alive in Christ... For the power of redemption cometh on all them that have no law" (Moroni 8: 11, 22). Other reasons include the injustice of a God that would condemn innocent children to hell for failure to do something they have no knowledge of or power to do. His reasons focus not on children's goodness, but their innocence or, the term I've been using, *naïveté*.

There is, however, some scriptural support for the idea that children are innately good. Christ encourages his disciples to "become as little children," and "humble himself as this little child" (Matt. 18: 3-4). Invoking the difference between the natural (or worldly) sphere and the spiritual, King Benjamin says that all men are enemies to God and in a fallen state "unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father" (Mosiah 3: 19).

Looked at as a syllogism, if saints should be good, and saints should be like children, children must be good. The difficulty of differentiating between good and innocent children is still present however because the examples here, and elsewhere in Latter-day Saint scripture, could still be read as seeing children not as acting righteously, but as being innately righteous. While much maligned by other Christian sects as 'trying to save ourselves through works,' Mormon theology does require knowledge to act righteously and places prime importance on agency or free will. While Mormon theology asserts that "salvation was and is and is to come... through the atoning blood of Christ (Mosiah 3: 18), Joseph Smith reveals that "It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance" (D&C 131: 6). The goal seems to be a fusion of the inherently good qualities of a child—especially those of submission to a heavenly father—fused with the understanding, knowledge, and decision-making ability of an adult.

The problem, finally, with the syllogism is a difference in expectations. Children are seen as inherently innocent, and so good or bad applies less to them—forget the conspicuous absence in any scriptures of the crying, willful children filling the pews each Sunday—while adults, with full agency, are expected to act good, knowing that those actions are good. The wise child in Mormon folklore helps clarify these expectations by presenting the naïve goodness of the child as an example to the knowing, but not always good, consideration of the adults.

The child as a blank slate is prevalent in American culture and, if not explicitly stated in Mormon theology, implicit in Mormon culture. The child of the blank slate needs acculturation, needs guidance, needs protection. Gary Cross would say the child needs "shaping." Mormon doctrine speaks of a "veil" that has caused people on earth to forget their premortal life where they knew and lived with God and Jesus Christ. The veil is there so that people can exercise faith, and so that

faith and obedience can be tested. The veil of the tabernacle Moses erected in the wilderness to “divide unto you between the holy place and the most holy,” is a symbolic representation of this separation between our world and God’s (see Ex 26: 33). Scriptures speak of a Book of Mormon prophet, the Brother of Jared, who was so righteous he “could not be kept from beholding within the veil (Ether 3: 19; 12: 19). Joseph Smith speaks of the veil being “taken from our minds” so that they can behold the Lord (D&C 110: 1), and later, explaining perhaps the physical workings of this veil, Joseph Smith records that “All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter” (D&C 131: 7-8). While generally the veil is a kind of tabula rasa, a blank slate that erases the memories of people’s premortal existence, it is also used, folklorically, to indicate that children are inherently good—not just innocent—but that they have an “innate connection to spiritual realms” (de Schweinitz 134). You can often hear speakers speak of good children and end with something like ‘the veil is very thin for children, who have recently come from God.’

Looking at General Conference talks, Mormons would seem to agree. While the wise child folk motif is the subject of this paper, the protected child who needs shaping and the watchful care of parents is just as, if not more, prevalent in official discourse. “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22: 6), is more than just a proverb in Mormon families. After giving Moses the law, God commands that these things be taught to their children on multiple occasions (see Deut. 4: 10; 6: 7; and 11: 19-21). Ephesians, in the New Testament encourages us to “bring up [children] in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6: 4), The Book of Mormon includes numerous examples of children being taught (like the aforementioned Stripling Warriors), Nephi and Enos both reflect on words they were taught by their fathers (see 1 Ne 1: 1 and Enos 1: 1), and Lehi preaches to and corrects his children many times (see 1 Ne 2: 8-9, 1 Ne 8: 37), King Benjamin exhorts his people to “teach [their children] to walk in the ways of truth and soberness” (Mosiah 4: 15), and the Doctrine and Covenants include the injunction to “bring up your children in light” (D&C 93: 40), and a warning for parents who do not teach their children (D&C 68: 25).<sup>1</sup> In any general conference or sacrament meeting, members hear counsel about the importance of and how to raise their children. Beyond that, there are two magazines especially for youth, *The Friend* for pre-teen youth, and *The New-Era* for teens. Beyond that, the first presidency—the highest authority in the church comprising the President and his two councilors—has a message at the beginning of each issue of *The Ensign*, a magazine for adult members of the church. The message is meant to be shared in month family visits by pairs of male members known as Home Teachers. These messages now include special teaching ideas and examples for “Youth” and “Children.” Obviously the training and teaching of youth and children is a high priority for the church, and the members that comprise it. All of which indicate a strong belief in and support of the child as a blank slate, the child in need of acculturation and guidance to become proper adults.

## Methodology

While the current LDS Prophet, President Thomas Monson, is well known for his use of stories and anecdotes that would include the wise child, I have instead chosen to focus on the use of the Wise Child folk motif in the last two general conferences of the church when church leaders speak to members all over the world. Although the topics and discussions are often familiar, the messages in these biennial meetings represent the most current word of the Lord available to church members. I have looked at each talk in these conferences and noted each use of the Wise Child.

The wise child in the folk motif stories were classified based on someone learning something based on the actions of a child, and the person who learned was usually an adult. Based on these broad similarities, the criteria for which stories I included as an example of the wise child included two main components. First, the story had to be about a child and secondly the child, knowingly or not, had to be the source of the knowledge the adult gained. Thus a story about a child who dies and the family who learns to cope with and overcome trials would not necessarily count as a wise child because the learning comes more from the child's death, an event, rather than the child herself. There were other border cases.

For example, David F. Evans spoke of a young man who was not a member of the church but had many friends who were and came to many ward activities as a youth. After high school, he became roommates with an LDS friend who had not gone on a mission due to certain issues he was working through. They spoke about it and soon the boy was meeting with the LDS friend's bishop and was baptized. The purpose of the story was to show how conversion can often be a slow process, but many will eventually enter the church through the efforts of friends and church members. The teaching that occurs is from boy to boy rather than child to adult, but later, when the speaker talks of what he learned from this example, and makes the point to share that with church members listening to General Conference, it becomes a more obvious example of the wise child, as the actions of a young man are presented as exemplary, and thus something all can and should learn from. Even within the narrative when Evans remarks "What an invitation!" after the LDS boy invites his friend to come meet with his bishop, we see that he is being set as an example, and someone to learn from, a wise child (Evans).

Some cases were not clear-cut. While parts of Joseph Smith's story includes moments of the wise child, only references dealing specifically with him as a wise child were included. Jesus is an even more complicated example because his "Son-ness" is emphasized much more often than the wisdom and learning he had to offer when he was a child. I have not included any references of Jesus as a child of God, but have included any references made to his mortal childhood. This dual quality of Jesus as Father and Son, parent and child, will be discussed later in my interpretation of the wise child motif. Finally, I have included wise children used in talks aimed at youth or children as well as children as old as missionaries if the youth or "child-ness" of the missionaries was given as a defining feature. If it

was important enough to stress, then it seemed fair to include it as an example of the wise child.

In looking at the last two general conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there were a total of sixty-seven talks, thirty-two of which used the wise child motif with forty-nine unique instances. So if a story of a wise child started at the beginning of a talk and was references towards the end, it still only counted once. However, if one speaker gave numerous stories about different children who taught or whom the audience could learn from, each instance was counted. So this year, the wise child figured in nearly half of all talks given by general authorities at General Conference. The unique instances shows that it can be used numerous times—five was the most—in a given talk and that depending on topic and speaker, it can feature quite prominently in a talk. When a primary president or a Young Men president speaks, or when the topic is what parents can learn from their children, the speaker often uses numerous examples.

### **General Conference: The Authoritative/Exhortative Frame**

At General Conference, leaders of the LDS church present talks of varying length to church members around the world and, implicitly or explicitly, to non-members. The purpose of general conference talks is to present doctrine and exhortations to live by gospel principles. Conference talks, like many talks in weekly church meetings, include exhortations, scripture quoting, personal experience, the experiences of others, and usually end with a declaration of testimony, or conviction of truth. Current events, references to magazine articles, or pop-culture references happen, but are less common. Like sacrament meeting talks, General Conference addresses are monologic, and are the most public speech act in LDS culture.

As Richard Bauman says, in most communicative acts, an interpretive frame sets up how things are to be interpreted (292). While I have defended various aspects of the wise child in Mormon discourse on narrative grounds, General Conference frames the speech acts as authoritative and exhortative. General Conference is set apart as a very special verbal event in Mormon life. It happens only twice a year and overrides the usual schedule of weekly meetings. Rather than meeting in their regular church buildings on Sunday during the regularly scheduled three hour block of meetings, Latter-day Saints across the world watch online or via satellite the Conference Center in Salt Lake City. In supplanting regular worship services, General Conference is marked as more important and of more authority than regular worship services. Further, it places Salt Lake and the leadership who reside there as the loci of the LDS world. Not only is it authoritative, but possesses the most authority. Similar to any classroom or auditorium, the leaders of the church sit around and behind the raised lectern from which speakers address their live audience of 21,000 and their televised audience of millions. The General Authorities are raised, literally, above the crowd to address the entire church membership.

This most authoritative and exhortative frame may be one reason why General Authorities employ children to communicate their messages. Tom Mould notes that

the cultural norm for humility in Mormon culture. By making the child the source of wisdom, even church leaders, those highest in the hierarchy, are able to achieve a level of humility by learning things from the humblest among us, children. We see this in fact, in the many examples of experiences that involve children in the third world in abject poverty. In terms of humility there is the added implication that even the “greatest” in the Kingdom have something to learn from the lowest. A message echoed in the New Testament. In one instance, Christ tells his apostles “Whosoever shall receive this child in my name receiveth me:...for he that is least among you all, the same shall be great” (Luke 9: 48).

Boyd K. Packer’s talk in the April session of General Conference is a good example of this humility before children and even impoverished children. The title of Packer’s talk “And a Little Child Shall Lead Them,” references the wise child. Accordingly, he cites many examples of children he learned something from. He begins his talk with the story of seeing an orphan beggar in Japan freezing, dressed in rags, covered in scabies, and holding a rusty tin can and a spoon. He’d knocked on the door of his train. Elder Packer tried to open the door to give him some money but the train pulled out. Elder Packer ends the story by commenting “I will never forget that starving little boy left standing in the cold, holding up an empty tin can. Nor can I forget how helpless I felt as the train slowly pulled away and left him standing on the platform.” Elder Packer is not explicit in what he has learned or what he intends his audience to learn at this point, but the idea that children can help us understand and know the purpose of life becomes more clear as he continues. In Cusco, Peru, another “starving street orphan” enters the meeting house and tries to make for the Sacrament bread. A stern look from a woman causes him to leave, but he returns and, when Elder Packer opens his arms for him, comes to sit on his lap. Again, he offers little explanation beyond sharing it with then Prophet President Kimball, who notes “That experience has far greater meaning than you have yet come to know.” Next Elder Packer tells of a boy in Salt Lake running around in the winter with no coat. He concludes that story with the moral “At night, when I pull the covers over me, I offer a prayer for those who have no warm bed to go to.” He has learned, or hopes to teach something about compassion (Packer).

The wise children Elder Packer tells about in these stories are largely passive. What the children do is less important than who they are, poor, destitute, and children. Elder Packer’s next example includes a girl in Japan at the close of WWII. She goes about “busily gathering yellow sycamore leaves in a bouquet,” seemingly “unaware of the devastation that surrounded her.” Elder Packer is impressed by her ability to find “the one beauty left in her world,” and adds that thinking of her increases his faith, concluding “embodied in the child was hope.” The child is naïve in the wisdom she produces, which is produced in both active and passive ways. Her actions of gathering the leaves are the catalyst for Elder Packer’s revelation, but his interpreted focuses on an innate quality in the child (ibid).

Later in his talk, Elder Packer notes, “one of the great discoveries of parenthood is that we learn far more about what really matters from our children than we ever did from our parents. The role reversal here is obvious, but done very differently than it would be in American culture or even many folk tales. In American culture,

there is more conflict and thus more victory for the child and more humiliation for the parent when roles are reversed. The wise child in folktales is also often a trickster figure who will turn the tables on their foolish, stingy, or conniving parents. Here the second most senior member in the church, and a father and grandfather himself, cites this role reversal. There is no trace of the trickster, or humiliation for anyone involved, but is presented more as a simple fact of life. Parents are not necessarily diminished by it, and yet, children do rise to the role of teacher in the reversal (*ibid*).

This role reversal is well known in scriptures. Jesus rebukes his disciples for keeping a child from him and uses the opportunity to teach them that “of such is the kingdom of God,” and “whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein” (Mark 10: 14-15). The Book of Mormon also has much to say on the matter. Mosiah 3: 19 reads that “The natural man is an enemy of God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a little child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.” Here sainthood, is equated with becoming like a child. And the child indicated is not the *tabula rasa* but, but the noble savage in direct contrast with the “natural man” who is the carnal aspect of people who prioritize their physical desires. The naturally innocent and pure child must be worked towards once someone has become an adult and their natural desires grow stronger. There seems to be a pre-puberty purity and post-purity tendency towards physical appetite and “the natural man.” As far as the wise child goes, this corresponds to the passive child in the folktypes whose wisdom is outside its own knowledge. The child may have things to teach, but those things are merely attributes of who the child is, and thus the child can teach simply by being a child, good, pure, obedient, etc.

Some speakers we expect to use the wise child. Primary, Young Women, and Young Men General Presidency members might all be expected to use children as examples of good action because their intended audience are children. Ann M. Dibb, 2nd Counselor in the General Young Women Presidency begins her talk with the example of a fifteen year old girl she saw standing in a line, wearing a shirt that said, “I’m a Mormon, are you?” Sister Dibb was impressed with her confidence in her identity. She was a passive but knowing child. Later she mentions a girl who joined the church because she finally found one that taught modesty and standards. Sister Dibb presents this young woman as having an innate knowledge of the importance of standards and modesty, she had a spiritual knowledge that general members, and other young women, can learn from. She even mentions Jesus as God’s son in the garden of Gethsemane being obedient and submissive to his father (Dibb).

Other speakers mention wise children similar in some ways to the wise children of the folktales who are naively wise. Quentin R. Cook, a member of the 12 apostles, mentions a young man who realizes that society recognizes many things Latter-day Saints see as wrong, but not when it comes to pornography. This

boy is set up as being wiser than much of American society, and Cook follows this up by citing himself the boy's exhortation that primary is not too early to start warning and protecting children from society (Cook). Here we have a wise child being used by a General Authority to evoke the sheltered or protected child in need of educating by parents and leaders. Truly a dizzying interplay of authority and subservience.

Rebecca de Schweinitz notes the sentimental use of children in Mormon culture and argues that LDS culture "(however unconsciously)...link(s) emotional responses to religious beliefs [] to reinforce adult agendas" (135). And certainly that is true. Children, especially the impoverished ones used by Boyd K. Packer, can produce powerful emotional responses, and in the hands of authority figures will not criticize the very people using the trope. Further explanation for this interplay comes from the earlier discussion of humility in Mormon culture, but it is important to note that the wise child is not just a way to borrow humility, but can also be seen as a democratic expression of heavenly virtues. Cook's talk is a good example. Beyond quoting this unnamed 15 year old boy, Cook also quotes C. S. Lewis—a highly respected and often quoted Christian author—past presidents of the Church, Joseph Smith, George Albert Smith, Ezra Taft Benson, and Gordon B. Hinkley; scriptures from The Book of Mormon and both Old and New Testaments; English poet William Wordsworth; New York Times columnist Ross Douthat; Wall Street Journal columnist Peggy Noonan; and even Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The inclusion of children into the cannon of both spiritual and worldly greats presents an incredibly democratic cosmology. In the Book of Mormon, Alma speaks of this democratic ideal when he says "and we see that [God's] arm is extended to all people who will repent and believe on his name" (Alma 19:36). I will discuss further evidence and implications of this worldview in the conclusions.

Craig Christensen shares the story of going through a temple open house—before a temple is dedicated, anyone is allowed to go through and view much of the interior. His 6 year old son accompanies him and remarks "what is happening? What am I feeling?" Elder Christensen's talk credits his son for the wisdom he exhibited in noting not the fine and beautiful art and architecture which he and others were appreciating, but the spirit of the place, the spiritual importance of it, that was more important (Christensen).

Henry B. Eyring shares a similar story about his granddaughter who "illustrated the power of innocence and humility to connect us with God." She went to the temple open house and asked, "Mommy, where is Jesus?" As the "house of the Lord" she had expected to see Jesus. Her Mother explained that she wouldn't be able to "see" Jesus in the temple, but could feel his influence in her heart. Considering this, she decided, "Jesus is gone helping someone." While her naiveté seems evident, Elder Eyring praises her for not having things obscure or obstructing her view of reality, that God is close, and can be felt by anyone. He adds that she had a good understanding of Jesus's corporeal body, that he can only be in one place at a time, and that what Jesus was most often doing, was performing miracles. He adds that "the spirit could reveal to her childlike mind and heart the comfort all of us need and want" (Eyring). The point is that the

adults listening to Elder Eyring's talk should be as childlike in their faith of gospel truths.

D. Todd Christofferson tells the story about a 14 year old boy in India who works two jobs, goes to school, and studies into the night to help support his family and prepare for a brighter future. Elder Christofferson praises the boy's "diligence and courage," and continues, "he is doing the very best he can with his limited resources and opportunities, and he is a blessing to his family." The boy is wise and very active, an example of work and activity Elder Christofferson wants church members to emulate regardless of their circumstances. The boy's hard work is central to Elder Christofferson's talk which repeats numerous times "Brethren, we have work to do" (Christofferson). Clearly, this child is the example priesthood holders should follow.

## Conclusions

Terryl Givens in *People of Paradox* reveals one reason why the wise child may be a popular motif in Mormon discourse. Givens identifies four fundamental paradoxes in Mormon thought, the first two relate to the wise child: authority and radical freedom and searching and certainty. The hierarchical structure of the church and the equating of priesthood power and authority with God's authority has been examined and criticized by many writers and scholars who see the unquestioning obedience that often results. On the other hand the lay clergy and the emphasis on personal revelation support a radical individuality and disruption of those hierarchies. If any worthy member can hold a leadership position in the church, then there is something of a meritocracy in the power structure of the church albeit a meritocracy based on spiritual rather than worldly values. This mixing of clergy and member, officials and officiated, does establish a hierarchy, but a fluid one, where members can find themselves on either side. A member may be a bishop for a while, and called to the Family History Center afterwards. The wise child reveals a similar flattening between youth and adults, the knowing and the naïve, as categories are mixed or fluid.

The second paradox relevant to the wise child relates to the wisdom of the child. Givens notes that Joseph Smith's experience in physically meeting God the Father and Jesus the Son, having actual angelic hands placed on his head to confer the power of the priesthood, and translating 50 lb. golden plates imbued him and Mormonism with a predilection for certain knowledge. Contemporary evidence of this can be seen in the monthly testimony meetings in any ward or branch in the church where members are encouraged to proclaim before their fellow congregants the things they know to be true. The emphasis is more on knowledge than simply belief. General Conference also emphasizes certainty as members hear testimonies from "special witnesses of Christ." On the other hand, Joseph Smith also taught that knowledge and progression were a ceaseless struggle that took not only entire lives but were something to work on "a great while after you have passed through the veil (qtd. in Givens 30)."

This paradox between certain knowledge in the form of testimonies and ceaseless striving for ever greater knowledge and righteousness extends the

spectrum between naiveté and knowledge out to eternity. When using such a measure, even the most elder apostles and prophets giving talks in General Conference can be viewed as little more than wise children themselves. Wilford Woodruff recorded some words of the Joseph Smith on this subject. At the conclusion of a conference Joseph Smith stated “Brethren, I have been very much edified and instructed in your testimonies here tonight, but I want to say to you before the Lord, that you know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother’s lap. You don’t comprehend it” (Woodruff). This was the prophet speaking to the whole priesthood of the church at the time. While his comment was specific to knowing the destinies of the church, the comparison of even the highest in the church hierarchy to “a babe upon its mother’s lap,” is an aspect of the doctrine of eternal progression. Anyone in mortality can be seen as a child, but hopefully a wise one. Seen in this light, the wise child is not necessarily a trickster figure of role-reversals in Mormon culture and can be used with gentle humor since members share its naiveté and searching for truth.

Mormon teaching treats all people on earth as sons and daughters of God and thus spiritual siblings, but also focuses on the importance of the family consisting of a husband and wife, raising and teaching children. In a church where common addresses involve “brother” and “sister,” what is the role of the child in LDS religious discourse? For a religion that has been criticized for being patriarchal, and a Gerontocracy, what view of childhood emerges from looking at the official statements and faith-promoting stories given out by the church?

The democratic nature of Mormon cosmology is even more profound. Not only are all people brothers and sisters, and not only are all beings on an eternal path of progression, but all have the most grand potential. Church President Lorenzo Snow is often quoted as saying, “As man now is, God once was; as God is now man may be” (Snow). Joseph Smith also stated that “God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!” (“God”). Latter-day Saints believe that this potential is open to all men, women, and *children* on earth. The prevalent use of the wise child—and possibly even the short shrift given to rowdy children in official discourse—is a consequence of this democratic and egalitarian cosmology.

There is a flip side to this egalitarian view. Elder Packer’s talk, mentioned previously, notes that “the ultimate end of all activity in the Church is to see a husband and his wife and their children happy at home, protected by the principles and laws of the gospel, sealed safely in the covenants of the everlasting priesthood (Packer).” Although husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, are often reminded of the need to protect their children, here they are in need of protection as much as their children. This is not unique. If the sheltered or protected child is prevalent in American and Mormon discourse, the protected parent and adult, is just as, if not more prevalent in Mormon discourse. Scriptures are full of warnings for all people to continually beware temptation’s lure. Doctrine and Covenants 20: 33 reads “Therefore let the church take heed and pray always, lest they fall into temptation;” the same basic sentiment is repeated in D&C 31: 12. D&C 75: 11 and 88: 126 talk about praying always that people “faint not.” Matthew 26: 11 and Mark

14: 38 both exhort to “watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.” The lord’s prayer includes the plea to “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” again indicating the ever-present nature of temptation and risk of falling to it. The Book of Mormon Prophet, Nephi when he is older, laments “the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me” (2 Nephi 4: 18). Alma 34: 39 states “Yea, and I also exhort you, my brethren, that ye be watchful unto prayer continually, that ye may not be led away by the temptations of the devil, that he may not overpower you, that ye may not become his subjects at the last day; for behold, he rewardeth you no good thing.” Clearly the danger of sin is prevalent, and the solution watchfulness, prayer, and, as Elder Packer States, the protection that righteous living offers. All people are like the protected child, in need of shelter and protection.

These connections between children and adults go further. Other conference addresses note that most things done in the church are begun when we are children. President Monson, in April 2012 conference, notes that “in one capacity or another, in one setting or another, I have been attending priesthood meetings for the past 72 years—since I was ordained a deacon at the age of 12” (Monson). Often, the comparison is made between the newest and most senior members of the Priesthood having access to the same or similar power, that it is all based on righteousness rather than age or experience. A great way to teach this basic belief is to use children as examples of power to prove that very point. It deemphasizes age, seniority, experience, other hierarchical structures for one that is more merit-based which, in this religious setting, means merits of morality, goodness, righteousness.

Julie B. Beck, then president of the LDS women’s organization, The Relief Society, shared a similar message. She notes that “every year hundreds of thousands of women and young women become part of this ever-expanding “circle of sisters” [meaning the Relief Society]” and “wherever a sister lives and wherever she serves, she retains her membership and association in Relief Society.” At eighteen women go from being in the “Young Women” organization of the church to the “Relief Society” (Beck). This change comes at the cusp of adulthood and lasts the rest of their lives.

Further essential rituals and practices of church membership are begun when children are young and continue into adulthood. Just as President Monson noted that he’d attended, and thus entered and continued in, Priesthood since he was 12. According to the “Articles of Faith” penned by Joseph Smith, the first principles of the gospel are “first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost” (1:4). These principles are prerequisites for the ordinances of baptism and confirmation which commonly happen when children turn eight. Thereafter, as noted in 2 Nephi, Chapter 31, the main thing is to “endure to the end.” There are certainly other ordinances and rituals which only adults participate in, but the most basic and essential are done when members are children and simply continue on through adulthood and, as mentioned earlier, into eternity.

The wise child is not a real child but a narrative device. As a narrative device, the wise child is based on cultural concepts of childhood and how children

differ from adults. The wise child of folklore, the trickster figure who ridicules and confounds adults, has been transformed in LDS culture into a common trope on par with almost any other source of wisdom. This transformation indicates Mormonism's egalitarian ideals and cosmology as well as its unique views of children as agents and adults as young in an eternal perspective. In short, the wise child in Mormon discourse has been transformed from a trickster figure to a standard authority figure because Mormons already see themselves as liminal figures between a spiritual infancy and exalted adulthood. In such a worldview, the child as trickster loses its fangs and settles in as another member of the community.

## NOTE

1. D&C is the abbreviation of Doctrine & Covenants, one of the standard scriptures of the LDS Church.

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