
LIGHTER MINDS

ON THE HISTORY AND USE OF "YOU BET" IN MORMON LIFE: A NEW APPRAISAL

By Franklin B. Roberts and William Sharp



For more than one hundred years, people have been repeating
"you bet," each time lowering their resistance to sin.

MUCH HAS BEEN written about the phrase "you bet," the ubiquitous response to "thank you." The first scientific investigations into its origin came from Snow College in Ephraim, Utah. In 1923, Harold Burns and Roger Abbott reported that the phrase originated with Lars Jorgensen, who joined The

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon) in his native Norway and migrated to Utah in 1854.¹ According to Burns and Abbott, "you bet" was a corruption of *jubut* (pronounced "you boot"), a Norwegian word in vogue in the Trondheim region of Norway from 1853-1855. *Jubut* was slang for

"I don't understand." Jorgensen knew no English when he migrated to Utah. He settled in Provo and worked as a deliveryman for a general store. In response to his customers' thanks, he would shake his head and respond, "*jubut*."

This theory immediately met with opposition. In 1924, Albert Smith and James Wesson blasted the idea, saying that "You bet" was obviously "an American phrase which was in use long before the 1854 date."² Smith and Wesson traced the usage to New York City's Bowery District where "you bet" was "a shortened form of 'you (had) better thank me,' a phrase used by drunkards in the Bowery District as early as 1827." Unfortunately, the authors failed to supply any sources or any links between the 1820s Bowery and Utah.

Either this explanation was accepted or else no one cared, because the subject was not broached again until 1936. Jimmy James, Sam Scrowinski, Hal Hall, and Gale Gibson, an unemployed law firm working on a government grant during the Depression, reopened the discussion with their scholarly and groundbreaking study, published in *American Linguistic Studies* and was later abridged and reprinted in *Readers' Digest*.³ James et al. spent two years scouring journals in the LDS Church Historical Archives and found the following entry in a journal dated Nauvoo, 13 May 1842: "I promist Br. Ebenezer that I would git him the fastest team of harses he ever done seen. He sid thank you and I sid you bet."⁴

George Thomas and David Sweets became suspicious that James et al. had only one questionable example of "you bet" to show for two years of work. When Thomas and Sweets found the journal in question, they discovered the following: "He sid thank you and I sid you bet your arse Ill git em fer you."⁵

With the excitement of World War II, the "you bet" controversy took a back seat. Then in 1946 BYU professor of religion Richard Thomson announced in a class that

during a vision last night, it was made known to me that "you bet" is the anglicization of "hubet," the pure Adamic word for "you're welcome." Either the word has survived relatively intact for many millennia, or else it was revealed to the true Saints in the nineteenth century as part of the restoration of all things. Personally, I support the latter view.⁶

This announcement led to the creation of the "Hubet Society of BYU" (HSBYU), which in

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DOUGLAS DICKSON (the real author), on the other hand, has never said "you bet." However, he has heard it one time too many. He has degrees from Princeton and Yale and lives in New Haven, Connecticut, where he serves in a branch presidency.

turn led to an attempt to create an Adamic 101 course. This entire movement was crushed when Jesse Wright, Provo Central Stake president, spoke at a BYU fireside on 1 December 1946. In an address entitled, "No Way, Man, Is That the Story," Wright called Professor Thomson, who lived in the stake, "insane," "an apostate and a heretic," and announced that "Adam told me that Richard Thomson is a damn liar. 'Hubet' never was a word in his language. He indicated that since there was no word for 'thank you,' why should there be a word for 'you're welcome'?"⁷ Professor Thomson soon disappeared from BYU.

Three years later, Burns and Abbott jumped again into the fray by republishing their 1923 paper, passing it off as original research.⁸ By this time they were both at Dixie College in St. George, Utah, and thought that no one would remember their 1923 paper. Unfortunately, Hal Andrews was researching the topic for a Ph.D. at Harvard University and immediately recognized the duplicity. The scandal rocked Dixie College, and Burns and Abbott were forced to resign. They moved to Manti and established a successful turkey ranch.⁹

The most bizarre episode in "you bet" history occurred in 1952. According to a leading newspaper,

The U.S. Army revealed today that Pvt. Christopher Dinwoodey, Provo, Utah, and Ltnt. York Kirkham, Adelaide, Australia, were taken into custody yesterday in Seoul and charged with espionage. . . . Raymond Card, Army Intelligence, overheard the following conversation between the two accused men in a Seoul market:

Dinwoodey: Are you El Diaz?

Kirkham: Is it that obvious?

Dinwoodey: I could tell. Scotty sent me.

Kirkham: Thanks for coming.

Dinwoodey: You bet.

At this point, Card arrested both men for being communist agents. El Diaz is the code name for a dangerous Soviet spy. Intelligence sources admit that they are still unsure who Scotty is, and so far the phrase "you bet" has them baffled. Card is convinced that a careful search through Chinese and Russian code books will reveal the meaning.¹⁰

This event was widely covered in all major newspapers and magazines.¹¹ Two weeks later, the Army admitted its mistake,

but by this time, "What is 'you bet'?" was on lips and front pages everywhere. As it turned out, Dinwoodey had really asked, "Are you LDS?" He had been sent by Scotty Anderton, leader of the local LDS servicemen's group, to deliver Church publications to Kirkham, leader of an Australian LDS group. The country was satisfied with the explanation, although "you bet" was still as mystifying as ever.

Church officials in the next three semi-annual general conferences went out of their way to denounce communism and to embrace pro-American policies with a newfound vigor, all in order to dispel any lingering doubts about a Mormon Church/Communist Party connection.¹² However, the Church offered no explanation for "you bet," a phrase which by this time had become widespread among the youth of the Church.

The following decade has been called "the lean years" by "you bet" aficionados.¹³ Mormon researchers were too embarrassed to publish, and non-Mormon researchers were not interested in discussing, "religious lingo."¹⁴

An important year in "you bet" studies was 1967. Two simultaneous articles published an ocean apart came to similar conclusions. In "The Secret Meaning of 'YOU BET',"¹⁵ and "You Bet und die Mormonen: das Geheimnis. . .,"¹⁶ both groups of authors noticed an uncanny coincidence: You Bet (YB) reversed becomes BY, for Brigham Young. (Efforts by Church Educational System computer experts to prove this to be an inspired form of chiasmus have come to naught.) And, significantly, the first three letters of Young spell "you." According to Hang et al. and Damm et al. the term "you bet" originated in Brigham Young's household when the phrase "Thank you, Brigham Young" was turned around to become "Thank you, you bet." Hang et al. laid the blame on Jane Miles Young, a vivacious and unsatisfied wife of the aging prophet. Damm et al. disagreed and pointed the finger at Charles Young (number 4, to distinguish him from three brothers also named Charles), a wiseacre son by Brigham's twenty-first wife. According to the Germans, Brigham Young, on seeing Charles enter the Beehive House, said, "Young man, it is useless to sell me a subscription to the *Deseret News*. I own the thing and always get a freebie." Charles was outraged and blurted out the immortal words, "Thank you, you bet," and the phrase stuck.

This view has been accepted for twenty years. However, the present authors beg to differ. First, the phrases "Thank you, Brig-

ham Young" and "Thank you, you bet" are both designed to be said by a single person. The modern usage of "Thank you"—"You bet" requires two people. Second, Jane Miles married Brigham in 1873, and Charles was born in 1870, yet an authentic use of "you bet" has been discovered in a St. George publication from 1872.¹⁷ In 1872, Jane Miles was not yet married, and Charles Young, who was always on the slow side, still could not speak. Third, and most important, our research at the American Express offices proves that on 17 November 1966, Hang et al. and Damm et al. all ate at the same Greenwich Village cafe. There they undoubtedly planned this "you bet" fraud, agreeing to support each other's papers while reaching only slightly different conclusions so as not to raise suspicions.¹⁸ For twenty years their plot worked, but no more. At last the truth is revealed.

THE present authors stumbled onto the "you bet" controversy quite by accident. In early 1987, we began polling residents of southern Idaho to determine the level of support for a proposed state lottery. We divided the citizens into many sub-groups (e.g., Mormons, non-Mormons, high income, low income, intelligent, non-intelligent, etc.). The lottery was opposed widely by every subgroup except for two: IV drug users and people who say "you bet." Whereas only 11 percent of the general Mormon sample favored the lottery, a full 54 percent of LDS occasional users of "you bet" and a whopping 86 percent of "you bet" addicts (defined as using the term more than twice a day) favored the lottery.¹⁹ Upon reinterviewing all those in the "you bet" categories, we discovered that through constant repetition, "you bet" acted as a subliminal message that entered the subconscious and destroyed brain cells. A person who says it often enough will begin to support gambling and lotteries. What starts out as a simple "you bet" soon progresses to a full-fledged addiction. Like all other such deviant devices, this is surely satanic in origin. Ominously, "you bet" played backwards sounds suspiciously like "taboo." This fact has been confirmed by Tipper Gore.

Encouraged by our findings in Idaho, we next turned our attention to southwest Wyoming. Sure enough, the establishment of horse racing (at Wyoming Downs in Evans-ton) was the direct result of the widespread use of "you bet" among the local inhabitants. Details of the Wyoming study will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Monologue: A Journal for Myopic Mormons*.

Due to the destructive nature of these two words, the only way to prevent the further degeneration of our children is to ban the use of "you bet." The authors propose that we preach against it at church, teach against it at school, speak against it at home, and act against it in the government. Satan introduced the seemingly innocent phrase more than a hundred years ago, knowing that the day of lotteries and horse betting would surely come. For more than one hundred years, people have been repeating "you bet," each time lowering their resistance to sin. Now we know, and now we can stop it. ☞

NOTES

1. Harold F. Burns and Roger R. Abbott, "You Bet's Proud Norwegian Heritage," *Snow Studies* XI (1923): 19-26.
2. Albert Smith and James Q. Wesson, "You Can Bet Your Sweet Bowery: No More Norwegian Nonsense," *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 131 (1924): 38-39.
3. Jimmy James, Sam Scrowinski, Hal Hall, and Gale Gibson, "You Bet' in Nauvoo," *American Linguistic Studies* (Spring, 1939): 4-6. Also *Readers' Digest* (December 1936): 82.
4. John Larson journal, original spelling and punctuation
5. George Thomas and David R. Sweets, "You Bet Your Arse—A Startling Find," *Journal for Applied Theories* XIII (1939): 61-64.
6. *Daily Universe*, 23 October 1946, 1.
7. *Provo Herald*, 2 December 1946, 1.
8. Harold F. Burns and Roger R. Abbott, "You Bet's Proud Norwegian Heritage," *Dixie Divulsions* 3 (1949): 7-14.
9. After all the furor had died down, Andrews's committee finally read his dissertation proposal which he had submitted two years earlier. The committee unanimously voted to reject the proposal and to expel Andrews. By this time Andrews had become famous, and the public was outraged at Harvard's reaction. Following a telephone call from President Truman, the committee voted to award Andrews a Ph.D. for his unwritten dissertation with the provision that Andrews cross the Charles River and never come back. Andrews agreed and immediately returned home to Logan, Utah, where he began teaching linguistics and animal husbandry at Utah State University.
- Andrews wrote a screenplay in 1950 based on his story, but every studio turned him down claiming that the story was still too controversial. Apparently, Burns-Abbott Turkey Co. was Hollywood's single largest turkey supplier.
10. *Little Rock (Arkansas) Gazette*, 23 February 1952: 1, 3.
11. See *Time*, 28 February 1952: 7-10. "The Russians and the Chinese—You Bet Those Commies Know Who Scotty Is."
12. See *Conference Reports*, April 1952, October 1952, and April 1953.
13. Harold T. Burns, letter to his son, 2 September 1966.
14. H. L. Steiner and T. Lipton, "A Subject Worth Ignoring—American Religious Lingo," *Religious Studies* III (1961): 76-89.
15. Dewitt Hang, Dewayne Gurney, and Dewally Colson, "The Secret Meaning of 'You Bet,'" *Stanford Study of Western, but not quite West Coast, Americana* 47 (1967): 187-246.
16. Karl Heinrich Damm, Heinrich Fritz Schmidt, und Fritz Karl Helmholtz, "You Bet und die Mormonen: das Geheimnis entschleiert, oder wie wir intellektuelle Übermenschen entdeckten, was andere, minder begabte Geschichtswissenschaftler in ihren halbherzigen Studien des Mormonismus übersehen haben: Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Soziologie der Mormonen, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können." *Zeitung für Zeitgeist* (Mai 1967): 39-168.
17. *Dixie Rag* IV, 6 (28 May 1872): 3.
18. Careful study of the receipts proved that not only did they have the same waiter, but all six men ordered the same lunch and left only a 5 percent tip. Rumor has it that all six checked into a nearby hotel room later in the afternoon to finish the devious plans.
19. See "Lottery Support is Low Among the Righteous," *Sugar City (Idaho) Sentinel*, 17 March 1987, 3.



A TRIP TO THE SEA

I

Once more it has burned over the blue sea,
 over the black-hulled seine boats working
 far out beyond the tolling buoys; burned higher,
 over the trim, green-shingled house-

tops, the indolent white yachts and steeples
 of Gloucester and Rockport; burned westward
 over the abandoned quarry, the sea-blackened
 granite bluffs; and once more

the beautiful young of those houses came down
 beneath it to the narrow sands where the surf
 discards its million imperfect whelks and cockles—
 so many chipped coins coughed

up out of death's plenty; and there they
 gathered in thin shirts and blouses to feel
 it burn over their bodies and be warmed
 in the yellow nectar of its light.

II

We came down through shallow-
 rooted shadbush and leafless
 greenbrier still grasping
 the shriveled black berries
 of another season and stood
 coatless in the chilling wind
 where the bramble ends and bare
 rocks tumble down to the sea.
 Our shadows fell long across
 the broken slope, grew, as we
 watched, longer, and suddenly
 we knew the stones beneath us
 to be turning, turning us
 slowly from the sun. I thought
 of the lovers and the children
 of that morning, of the fathers
 far out at sea, and I thought
 of the stones, knowing millennia
 of wind would diminish them,
 and the sea would one day
 swallow their shadows;
 but, turning, they seemed so
 solidly rooted in time that we
 whose brief images flickered
 like the memory of a love
 or a fear across their faces
 would never see their changes.
 At our backs the sun burned,
 and the gulls crossed it, hung
 trembling on the wind, turned,
 crossed again, their bodies
 on crooked wings falling and falling
 into the circle of flames.

—PHILIP WHITE