

*Fiction*

## THE PROPHET CLAUDE

*By Jack Harrell*

CLAUDE WINN WAS IN THE GARAGE CHANGING the oil on his motorcycle when he heard the message on the radio. Claude was a big man with a gray and black beard and a sun-browned baldpate on the top of his head. The hair he had left was long and tucked behind his ears, growing past his collar in the back. A retired appliance repairman, he lived in a two-bedroom ranch house along the Kansas River, two miles outside of Eudora. When the message came on the radio, he was kneeling before his motorcycle with words from the Book of Acts spinning lazily in his head. Staring at his reflection in the pan of dirty oil, his baggy eyes emerging from the pink-and-blue detergent film, he heard a voice say, "A message from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

Once when Claude had attended a small-business convention in Salt Lake City, he had awakened one morning with the thought of visiting the Mormon temple a few blocks away. But he'd dismissed the idea and attended his meetings instead. Years later he spoke to two missionaries who rode their bicycles in the rain. Standing outside the hardware store in Eudora, soaking wet in their suits, the missionaries had told him they had a living prophet. It sounded too good to be true. But now, kneeling before his motorcycle, he sensed his last chance to find out for himself. He looked up from the oil pan, seeing everything anew. Tools hung neatly above the workbench. A box of Christmas things sat on a high shelf. His wife's car, which hadn't been moved since her death, sat mutely beside him. Nothing there could hold him. Only his motorcycle seemed alive, a vehicle to a new reality. He put the pan of dirty oil on the workbench, knowing it wouldn't take long to lock up the house. In a matter of hours he could shut up his former life against the future.

He was ready to go by four o'clock the next day. He had gone to the post office and had the mail delivery stopped.



JACK HARRELL lives and teaches in Rexburg, Idaho. "The Prophet Claude" is half of a longer work, "A Prophet's Story," from his new book *A Sense of Order and Other Stories* (Signature Books).

He'd emptied the refrigerator and wheeled the garbage can to the street. He'd left a note for his son in Topeka, who had a key to the house. "I'm going to find your mother," it said. Maybe his son would understand. Claude's wife had been the daughter of the bookkeeper at the appliance store where he learned his trade back in 1960. When he got his own shop, she did the books. When she was tired at the end of a long day she would give him her hand and smile and close her eyes. He believed no woman in the world was more beautiful. They worked hard and got old, bought a motor home and made plans to fish in Alaska, to see the fall colors in Vermont, to run the Florida Keys. Then she died one afternoon while driving home from Lawrence with groceries in the car. Her heart stopped and she crashed into the only tree within a mile of the scene.

After that Claude became unmoored. He walked through the house and sometimes called to his wife, forgetting she wasn't just in the next room. He began talking to God, who wasn't there either. He stopped shaving, stopped cutting his hair. When it was light, he rode his motorcycle all over Kansas. He rode to Missouri and Arkansas, going nowhere. He rode and prayed, looking for signs. At night he stared at the TV, listening dumbly to its stories about the Loch Ness monster and the space aliens who built the great pyramids. He watched reality shows, gazing indifferently as the characters vied with one another. He watched politicians and preachers shout and wave their arms. He saw weapons of the future, he saw the factories where peanut butter was made, he saw microchips placed in the eyes of the blind. None of it made sense.

So he turned off the TV and got a Bible. Not knowing where to begin, he decided he may as well start at the beginning and read every word. It took him four days to read the whole Bible, day and night, hardly sleeping. But he still didn't understand, so he read it again. For weeks he prayed and read all night and prayed and rode his motorcycle all day. His hair got long, his beard got long. Someone told him he looked like a sixty-year-old Jesus. But none of his searching had made sense until now. He left the note to his son on the kitchen table, beneath the keys to the motor home. He left another note for his daughter, Tracy. "Take

Benson fishing,” it said. Benson was Tracy’s boyfriend from California. He wore suspenders and round wire-rimmed glasses and Claude had never liked him. That no longer mattered. Only one thing mattered. He was going to Salt Lake City to see a Mormon prophet.

**H**E PUT ON his leather riding chaps, tucked his graying hair behind his ears, and put on his helmet. He pressed the start button on his Honda Goldwing 1800 and rode the twelve miles from his home to the junction of Interstate 70. From there he headed west toward Salt Lake City, an eighteen-hour ride. The interstate lay before him like a concrete ribbon for hundreds of miles, and he imagined his past peeling away in layers as he rode. Crossing the flatlands of Kansas and eastern Colorado, he felt his childhood disappear. Next came the arrogance and godlessness of his young manhood. As he passed through Denver and into the Rocky Mountains, he felt the early years of his marriage sloughing off—when his children were small and feeding his family was the only thing that mattered. Soon he was riding the shoulder-less freeway through narrow canyon passes crowded by eighteen-wheelers and carloads of summer tourists. The north side of the freeway was walled by rocky cliffs that rose hundreds of feet into the sky, while the south side dropped down into the Colorado River. It was

through this stretch that he lost the latter years of his working life, when he believed he was building a legacy. Every dozen miles or so, the old mining towns appeared, built up against the mountains like the ancient sandstone cities of the Hopi. Driving those last miles into Utah, he lost the only thing he had left to hold onto, the lonely miles he’d ridden since his wife’s death.

Except for food and fuel, he stopped once, sleeping for a few hours behind a rest stop outside of Denver. In his sleep he dreamed of the Mormon Temple floating above the Great Salt Lake in a pink, translucent glow, held in the air by hosts of wingless angels in white robes. Once he arrived in Utah, riding up through Price and Helper, Spanish Fork and Provo, he was completely empty. What was left inside him hummed with the roar of the motorcycle’s engine. As he rounded the Point of the Mountain and entered the Salt Lake Valley, a sign looming at the side of the freeway said This is the Place Monument, and he knew this was the place. Cruising the eight-lanes of I-15 into Salt Lake City, the freeway decorated with leftover images of the 2002 Olympics, Claude felt euphoric. He could see the temple in the center of the valley. “Go to the temple, to the center” the hum within him said.

The city had changed since he’d been there last. It was no longer the dusty Western cowboy town he remembered from



years before, his memory of it muddled with hoary images of John Wayne movies. State Street was a wide, direct shot through the valley floor, toward the capitol building, lined with the new government buildings, steel-and-glass high-rises, and expensive specialty shops. The traffic was heavy and pedestrians stepped on and off a new light-rail system. Near the city center were leather-clad, body-pierced punks; richly-dressed, urbane women; harried businessmen wearing cufflinks and shiny leather shoes. The whole city seemed a hub of worldliness, momentarily distracting Claude from the hum that had driven him a thousand miles. But then he saw the temple, walled in like a shrine. At the corner of Main and South Temple, traffic slowed to a crawl. Shoppers and tourists walked alongside the ten-foot concrete Temple Square walls; hundreds more milled around on the wide, curved sidewalks weaving among the fountains and pools in the plaza facing the temple. A great statue of Brigham Young stood at the gates of the plaza, his stern face set, his hand and arm gesturing to the ground.

Claude turned his big motorcycle onto South Temple where the traffic was halted. At a pedestrian stoplight in the middle of the block, a horse and carriage with a driver in a top hat waited to give carriage rides to tourists. But Claude's eyes were drawn to another sight: a lanky, wild-eyed man in a dark three-piece suit standing on the sidewalk outside the

gates of Temple Square. The man was shouting at the passing cars and sweating visibly in the dry summer heat. He had deeply tanned skin and a massive wave of white hair on his head. He held up a cardboard sign written in florescent orange that read ZION IS FLED! Claude knew the man was either a devil or a prophet, that this ground was a land of devils and prophets.

Claude turned north on West Temple and parked his motorcycle on the street. Coming around the corner on the sidewalk outside the wall that separated the city from the sacred inner grounds, he was sore from his ride through the night and still had on his big

riding boots and leather chaps over his Levi's. His denim shirt was rolled up at the sleeves. His beard was parted in the middle from the long ride, his long hair sprouting wildly from his head.

Up ahead the man with the cardboard sign was shouting at the cars, standing near the gates of Temple Square like some hound of hell. The preacher stood next to a three-wheeled bicycle that had a basket full of pamphlets and books. Propped against the bicycle was a tattered piece of plywood crowded with florescent orange letters. GO YE OUT FROM AMONG THEM! it said. In the midst of his shouting, the man took up a bundle of pamphlets, and waved them above his head. "Out prophet is fallen," he railed at the passing cars. "The Church has become Babylon! Behold, the Corporation of the First Presidency has invested in the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company!"

Claude stood and watched the man, sounding the hum of the spirit that had driven him.

"I know from whence I speak," the man cried to the on-lookers. "I was once an elder among you." The preacher moved erratically between the street and the sidewalk, amidst shouts and honking horns, shoving his literature at the rolled-up windows of passing cars.

Standing a few feet away, Claude called out: "Are you a prophet?"

The man turned on Claude, seeing him for the first time. "No," he shouted. "I am no prophet. Only God's voice is holy!"

"I came to see a prophet," Claude said.

The man looked up at Claude's face with shifting eyes. "The burden of the Lord which Isaiah did see," the man said, "was hot coals on his tongue and an ache in his belly." Up close, the preacher's brown face was almost gray, his eyes the eyes of a madman. "The children of Israel passed through on dry ground," he cried, "and the chariots of Pharaoh were drowned in the sea!"

Looking over the man's shoulder, Claude watched a Salt Lake City police car creep between the congested lanes of traffic, sounding a single blast of its siren. Two officers emerged from the car in crisp black uniforms, their silver badges shining in the sunlight. The preacher took hold of Claude, lifting himself to Claude's ear. "The judgment of this generation is upon them," he said in a bitter whisper, but Claude sloughed off the man's grip. One of the officers took

**They worked hard and got old, bought a motor home and made plans to fish in Alaska, to see the fall colors in Vermont, to run the Florida Keys. Then she died one afternoon while driving home from Lawrence with groceries in the car. Her heart stopped and she crashed into the only tree within a mile of the scene.**

Crossing the flatlands of Kansas and eastern Colorado, he felt his childhood disappear. Next came the arrogance and godlessness of his young manhood. As he passed through Denver and into the Rocky Mountains, he felt the early years of his marriage sloughing off.

the man by the back of his neck and said, “Come on, Billy. Let’s go.”

“I’m not on church property,” the preacher protested. “This is a public sidewalk.”

“You’re creating a disturbance,” the officer said. “Let’s call it a day for now.”

The preacher squirmed in the policemen’s grasp as they carried him to the squad car. “Behold, the inhabitants of Zion are terrible!” he shouted. “Who can stand them?” But Claude wasn’t listening. He was already headed toward the gates of Temple Square, his beard parted, searching for the true and living prophet.

STEPPING INSIDE TEMPLE Square, Claude felt the hum of the Holy Spirit quivering within him like a gyroscope. The first thing he saw was the flowers, like a beautiful Edenic garden. There were flowers of every color in low-walled planters along the sidewalks, small blossoming trees, and perfectly manicured tracts of green grass. Claude took a deep breath, knowing he was on holy ground, the worldliness of the city behind him. The beautiful gray-and-white Assembly Hall, the famous rounded Tabernacle, and the temple itself with its gothic spires and mournful rounded windows—they stood tall among the trees like ornaments in a crown. He thought he should have cleaned his dirty boots. But then a young woman appeared before him, a beautiful angel like Eve in the garden. She wore a navy blue jumper over a white shirt. She had long blonde hair and a full, pleasant face, her teeth straight and white. “Hi,” she said. “Is this your first visit to Temple Square?”

Claude’s spirit burned like a fire. “You have a prophet,” he asked.

“Yes,” the young woman said, “you mean like the Gallery of Prophets? Sister Hope is just starting a tour.” She directed Claude toward a squat, squarish building. “If we hurry we can just make it,” she said. Claude struggled to keep up in his leather chaps, his legs stiff from the long ride. “So where are you from?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Kansas,” Claude said. The Spirit was a spinning centripetal force, humming delicately, and Claude was afraid he might lose his balance.

“That’s great,” the young woman said. “I know a sister missionary serving in Kansas.”

Claude didn’t think he would ever be going back to Kansas.

Stepping through the doors of the Visitor’s Center, the

young woman said, “Sister Hope, here’s one more.” Claude took in the building’s space, the high ceiling, the museum-like displays. A group of fifteen or twenty people was gathered around Sister Hope, a young woman with shoulder-length, curly brown hair and wearing a white blouse and black skirt. The group consisted of three or four families of various ages and sizes—parents, children, grandparents. “Hello,” Sister Hope said to Claude. “Please join us. We’re about to tour the Gallery of Prophets.”

Claude felt the gyroscope tilt forward as he walked with the group toward the prophets, each one portrayed in a life-sized diorama running along the back of the curved, high wall of the building. “Adam was the first prophet,” Sister Hope said. “Prophets are men on earth who speak with God.” The next display showed the prophet Noah standing with a long beard in a long robe, preaching to the people, his arms outstretched to the sky. Behind him was a partially constructed ark; before him men and women laughed and pointed in derision. Sister Hope explained the story of Noah and his ark, saying that Noah preached for a hundred years to people who didn’t listen to him. “Prophets give a voice of warning,” she concluded.

Looking at the next display, Moses parting the Red Sea, Claude knew his own life was being parted. Everything before this day was on one side of the divide, everything after that was on the other side. Sister Hope showed them the Old Testament prophets who testified of the need for obedience, men like Isaiah, Daniel, and Malachi. She explained that the New Testament had prophets, too, men like John the Baptist, the Apostle Peter, John the Revelator, men who preached mercy and redemption. Claude moved with the group, listening carefully to Sister Hope and lingering to read every word on every plaque. It was like a story he’d always known





and had only forgotten for a moment.

When Sister Hope showed them the ancient American prophets with names like Nephi, Abinadi, and Mormon, Claude laughed out loud for joy, causing Sister Hope to clear her throat, displeased. As the group passed through a display featuring paintings of the modern-day prophets, from Joseph Smith to the present, Sister Hope said the Holy Ghost was a still small voice that quietly testified of truth. She explained things that the modern prophets had revealed, truths poured out on the earth as thick and sweet as cream, and Claude could barely contain himself. He wanted to leap into the air. "God is in the shape of a man!" he wanted to shout. "Baptism is offered to the dead! The priesthood is restored!"

This new knowledge moved through Claude like electricity, as real as the gyroscope sensation within him. Reaching out, he touched the shoulder of a woman standing beside him, a pear-shaped woman in a pea-green dress. He whispered in her ear, saying it was all true. The woman smiled pleasantly as she inched away from Claude. A few moments later she was speaking to Sister Hope, looking suspiciously back at Claude and gesturing as she spoke.

Then Sister Hope brought the group to a spiral, crimson-carpeted walkway that ascended to the *Christus*, a great white marble statue of Christ. She stood at the bottom of the walkway, inviting them to ascend to the statue, asking them to take a moment at the red velvet ropes to meditate on the loving kindness of the Savior. Moved by her request, Claude walked softly behind the group, his eyes fixed on the great statue of Christ enrobed in a cloth that came over his shoulders and covered his left breast. Christ's arms and feet were bare, revealing wounds. His beard was parted, his long hair falling in curls upon his shoulders. Above and behind him, a rich blue field like outer space was adorned with glowing stars.

When Claude reached the red velvet rope, he knelt among the group in his leather riding chaps, causing the mothers to draw their children closer. Claude tucked his long hair behind his ears and then lifted his arms to the *Christus*. Shutting his eyes, he saw a vision of the spear being thrust into Jesus' side, flooding the Savior's body with water and blood. Claude began to weep aloud, unaware that the other members of the group were backing away, turning to descend the crimson walkway. When Claude's cries turned

to shouts of praise that echoed through the building, Sister Hope moved to a nearby information desk where a gray-haired sister picked up a phone and began to whisper distressfully into the receiver.

The gyroscope lifted Claude to his feet, carrying him out to the brilliant sunlight where the flowers burst like flames along the sidewalk's edges. The trees blossomed like burning bushes testifying. In every direction he saw the children of God milling about sleepily, seeing or not seeing God's power in and through all things. When he saw a Polynesian missionary with a small, leather-bound book, he asked, "Is that the book that speaks from the dust?" She nodded, absently handing him the book. Claude leafed through the hundreds of pages that were as thin as onion skins. Standing on a low wall that enclosed a narrow garden of flowers, he lifted one arm to the vaulting blue sky and began to read in a loud voice, "Alma said unto him, believest thou there is a God?" The crowds of people stopped at the sight of this great preacher in leather and denim, his beard dried and curly in the arid Utah heat. "Will ye deny again that there is a God," Claude read, "and also deny the Christ?" Laughing, Claude shouted the words to the gathering crowd: "I have all things as a testimony that these things are true."

Standing on the low wall, Claude didn't see Sister Hope.

## In every direction he saw the children of God milling about sleepily, seeing or not seeing God's power in and through all things.

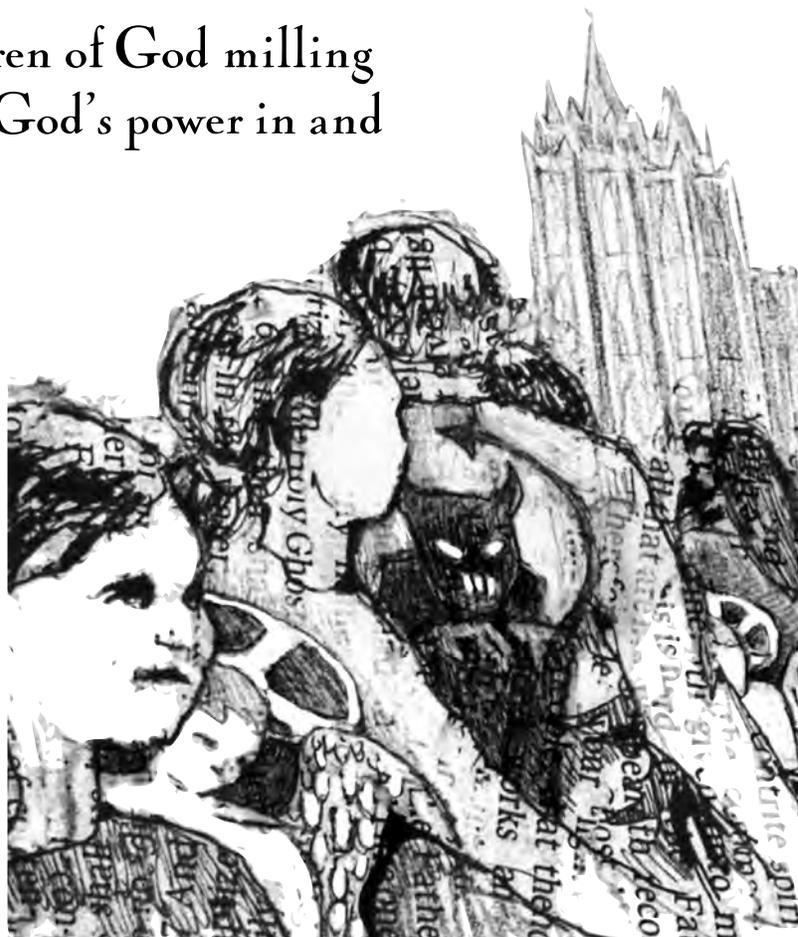
He didn't see the two men in dark suits with tiny wires descending into their collars. As the two men emerged from the crowd, Claude bent his knees and lifted his arms before the faces of the people. With the exulting flowers and trees as witnesses, with the holy temple just a few yards away, he let out a wordless, joyful shout that mingled with his laughter and tears. One of the men spoke into his lapel as the two of them carefully approached Claude, taking his arms from the sky and holding them at his side, the book of scripture falling to the flowerbed. "This is private property," one of the men said. "We're going to have to remove you."

A moment later, laughing, crying, stupidly tugging against the grasp of the men as they carried him away, Claude testified to the crowd: "I've seen the *Christus*," he proclaimed, "and I have all things as a testimony." Outside the gates of Temple Square, the same two Salt Lake City police officers emerged from their cruiser and put Claude in handcuffs. Claude called out to the people standing next to the horse and carriage, the people crossing the busy street, the people along the walls of Temple Square. "A voice speaks from the dust," Claude shouted. "The Mormon

book speaks from the dust," he cried as the officers put him in the squad car.

**I**N A WAL-MART parking lot on the west side of the valley, the police car screeched to a halt. One of the officers got out and threw Claude's door open. "Get out," he said. "Come on, we've got another call." The officer took off Claude's handcuffs. "We're going easy on you today, preacher," he said, slapping Claude between the shoulder blades. The policeman got back in the car and the officers sped off, leaving Claude spinning in a sea of cars in every direction, stores all around, four-lanes of hyperactive traffic feeding into and out of the parking lot. For a moment, the worldliness of the city closed in on him, but then he felt something else, too, the Spirit driving him forward, the gyroscope within. "Testify," the Spirit said, and Claude walked toward the crowds of people at the Wal-Mart entrance.

Stepping inside the store, not knowing what he would say or do, he went to an unoccupied check stand, climbed up onto it, and raised his hands above his head, just as he'd done a few minutes before on Temple Square—like Noah in the diorama. He stood there a moment, silent, unnoticed. "Testify," the Spirit said in a voice like courage. "People," Claude shouted, drawing the crowd's attention, "there is a book," he said. "The book speaks from the dust. God speaks



through every particle of dust.”

The checkers stopped their work, the shoppers fell strangely silent. Claude looked out at all of them, taking in their beautiful faces, the faces of God’s children. In the silence, he whispered to them. “I’ve seen the book,” he said, “in the hands of an angel near God’s temple.”

The silence lasted only a moment. Claude heard a roar like ten thousand motorcycles on ten thousand highways. He saw the flashes of fire like a dream of endless rows of brake lights on the highway at night. All the people before him were looking around, searching anxiously. A woman with platinum-colored hair wearing yellow jeans cried out, “What’s going on?”

“It’s motorcycles,” someone said, “lots of motorcycles.”

But Claude knew it wasn’t motorcycles. He knew it was the Spirit, coming like the roar of mighty winds. He saw tongues of fire lick the air. In the gathering crowd, some people murmured while others spoke truths they’d always known but had never given words to before.

“In the last days,” Claude said, “God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.”

Some recognized the scripture from Acts, on the Day of Pentecost. “On my servants,” he said, “and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

“What’s going on?” a woman in a postal uniform said.

“They’re drunk,” a hairy man in a black muscle shirt responded. He looked around at the people murmuring and

testifying, then at the prophet Claude on the check stand. “All of you are drunk.”

Above the buzz of the crowd, above the roar of the Spirit, Claude spoke in a loud voice: “I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath.”

A security guard was moving toward Claude, a black woman in dark pants and a white shirt. As she bumped through the crowd, she jostled two Mormon missionaries in their suits and nametags. One of the missionaries was grinning. He had a digital camcorder trained on Claude. The other missionary, who’d been eating from a bag of peanuts, stood in shock, a sudden look of recognition on his face.

“The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood,” Claude shouted.

Then the woman in the postal uniform spoke: “Before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.”

“You’re all drunk,” the man in the muscle shirt said.

The security guard took hold of Claude, pulling him down from the check stand, and led him toward the door.

The missionary stuffed the bag of peanuts in his pocket and followed, his companion trailing after, the camera still rolling. The woman in the postal worker’s uniform followed them, as did a few from among the crowd.

Passing through door, still in the grasp of the security guard, the prophet Claude turned to those who followed him. He spoke in a loud voice, testifying: “Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord,” he shouted, “shall be saved.”



## IN MEMORY

The dark unwrapped itself,  
 as around the hawk that brush-painted the sky  
 when the trees were shaggy with dusk.  
 It cycled down;  
 its prey leapt from the grass to greet it,  
 a wild rabbit about as long as a girl’s arm  
 that became a flash of life;  
 and you covered your eyes,

as when you carried flowers in a vase  
 and, turning, saw the light displaced  
 by memory, and the beloved face  
 and self there and the words,  
 the exquisite gestures  
 all fell to the floor,  
 the dark crashing in  
 and the flowers and wet leaves splashed everywhere.

—BECKY KENNEDY

