

REVIEWS

The First Piece in the Puzzle

Emmanuel Abu Kissi, *Walking in the Sand: A History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Ghana* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2004), 384 pp.

Reviewed by Mark T. Decker, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Philosophy, University of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonie

When teaching argumentative writing, a wise instructor will often introduce her students to what is called the principle of charity, or the realization that problematic arguments were composed by intelligent people who faced rhetorical constraints that could not easily be ignored. Western Mormon intellectuals would be wise to keep the principle of charity in mind when approaching Emmanuel Abu Kissi's *Walking in the Sand: A History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Ghana*. This is not a scholarly book catering to people committed to critical inquiry. Instead, it is the work of a General Authority (Third Quorum of Seventy Area Authority) who sees the establishment and expansion of the LDS Church in his country as a miracle.

It would be easy to dismiss this book as oversimplified, feel-good propaganda. Yet Elder Kissi, who was instrumental in the growth he describes, is relating the authentic experiences of many observant Ghanaian Mormons. Thus, we can think of this book, with all its flaws, as a more or less accurate representation of an important element of the Mormon experience in Ghana. *Walking in the Sand* is best seen as the first piece of a puzzle that, as it is slowly assembled by other writers with other perspectives, will provide an ever fuller picture of the Mormon experience in West Africa.

Before we set aside the tools of crucial inquiry, however, we should note that Elder Kissi's project was guided by Matthew K. Heiss, an employee of the Archives of the Family and Church History Department. He edited the manuscript and created the footnotes. Heiss also brings his own agenda to the text, and this agenda problematizes Kissi's narrative. For example, Heiss notes that he did not want "to turn Elder Kissi's manuscript into the polished text of a Western scholar" (xviii–xix). This editorial decision makes the text both more and less accessible to lay LDS readers, probably the primary audience for Kissi's narrative.

While the prose is clear and accessible and while it preserves Kissi's gentle voice, the book's structure is problematic. Much of what comprises the text is a patchwork of items retrieved from the Church Archives and inserted into the nar-

rative verbatim. There are diary entries, transcriptions of talks, minutes of priesthood training meetings, reports to Salt Lake from mission presidents, newspaper articles, and transcriptions of interrogations by government officials. Some of these run for several pages.

Additionally, in attempting to provide a comprehensive recollection of all those who helped establish the Church in Ghana, some chapters give the reader a rapid-fire barrage of names which, though occasionally accompanied by pictures, are generally mentioned only once and in passing. This combination of archival pastiche and leadership catalog can, at times, make for cumbersome reading. On the other hand, it gives the book a familiar feel, a structural kinship with the thousands of locally produced histories of branches, wards, and stakes now sitting on shelves in living rooms and meetinghouse libraries. This generic familiarity may in turn, for lay readers, reinforce the truism about the international sameness of the institutional Church.

Indeed, providing evidence for the universality of the Mormon experience is very important to Heiss. In his preface, the editor expresses his desire that readers will “identify personally with the struggle, sacrifice, faith, and eventual triumph that is so much a part of Latter-day Saint life and history” (xix). And *Walking in the Sand*’s intended audience will enjoy the tale of rapid advancement in the face of adversity the narrative presents.

After all, the growth of the LDS Church in Ghana, especially from the perspective of a believer, is impressive. The first missionaries (arrived 1978) focused most of their efforts on making sure that the Church did not grow too quickly, as people who belonged to preexisting copycat congregations clamored for baptism. A period of government repression known to Ghanaian Saints as “The Freeze” occurred from early 1989 to late 1990. During this time, public meetings were outlawed, expatriate missionaries were sent home, and some Church assets were seized. Soon after this relatively mild (considered in the historical context of state-sponsored oppression of Mormonism and other religions) period of persecution ended, growth accelerated, stakes were created, and the Accra Temple was dedicated in January 2004. The Church, in other words, was fully established, or walking in the sand, as they say in Ghana, in a twenty-six-year period despite significant government interference. Indeed, it could be argued that it was in some ways easier to establish the Church in Ghana than in, say, America’s upper Midwest.

Let us, then, grant Kissi’s and Heiss’s point that there was a typically Mormon experience in Ghana that many Ghanaian Saints genuinely experienced, one that other Mormons would see as uplifting. But because the narrative insists on recounting the putatively typical Mormon nature of the Church’s establishment in Ghana, readers do not get a very full picture of the context in which that establishment took place. This context will need to be filled in by other scholars

and other projects, but *Walking in the Sand*'s omissions could provide interesting starting points for future investigation.

For example, Kissi's brief discussion of the fifteen years between the establishment of congregations that styled themselves as Mormon and the arrival of missionaries sent by Salt Lake does not clearly describe what unofficial Mormon services and congregations were like. Furthermore, Kissi provides only basic biographical information about the colorful founders of these copycat congregations. Of particular interest to many LDS scholars may be Sister Rebecca Mould, who was "known throughout the area as a 'Mormon Prophetess'" (30 note 12). It would be fascinating to learn what a West African Mormon prophetess taught, felt, and experienced.

More importantly, there is little in this book to give readers any grounding in Ghana's turbulent political history, something that is necessary to fully understand the Freeze and other difficulties with the Ghanaian government. Heiss compounds this lack of political context with the annoying habit of relying on obscure internet sources buried in telegraphic footnotes to provide political background. For example, the cursory information on Jerry John Rawlings, president of Ghana during most of the time period covered by this book, comes primarily from <rulers.org>.

Additionally, Kissi apparently had no access to Ghanaian government documents and thus cannot provide a fully developed discussion of the motives of the Ghanaian government during the Freeze. According to Kissi, Rawlings undermined the Church by means of "apparently innocuous" articles in Ghanaian papers that represented "practically the official point of view" (170). Despite dismissing these articles as little more than government propaganda, Kissi reproduces them in full, and they actually do deal with topics that the government would understandably be concerned with. For example, an editorial published in the *Weekly Spectator* immediately after the imposition of the Freeze argues that the "BIBLE' OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS STATES THAT BLACKS ARE CURSED AND WILL NOT GO TO HEAVEN? (185; capitalization in original). An editorial in the *People's Daily Graphic* darkly implies that the "CIA have in the past hidden behind some of these religious bodies to carry out acts of subversion against Third World countries" (172).

Without defending the Freeze, one could see why the leaders of an African nation would be skeptical of a church that, until very recently, had denied a leadership role to men of African descent. Furthermore, it would be easy to see why a left-leaning, Third World government would be skeptical of an apparently wealthy American church that had established itself so rapidly. It could also reasonably be concerned about possible connections to American intelligence efforts. But until we have access to government documents, we will never really know how much these concerns influenced the Freeze.

But we should not expect too much from Kissi, who is not a professional historian and who is understandably primarily concerned with charting the growth of the officially recognized Church in Ghana. Instead, those of us who are genuinely interested in the international growth of the LDS Church should respectfully listen to his story, and then, perhaps, bring our own efforts to completing this fascinating puzzle.

“He was ‘Game’”

Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), xxii + 715 pp.

Reviewed by William D. Russell, Professor of American History and Government, Graceland University, Lamoni, Iowa

Dan Vogel has written an extensive volume on the controversial Mormon prophet Joseph Smith, focusing on his creation of the Book of Mormon as “the making of a prophet.”¹ Vogel has done impressive research, not only in the documents directly relating to Joseph Smith and his family, but also in the Old and New Testaments, the history of Christian thought, and American history in the Jacksonian era.

The characters in the Book of Mormon are one dimensional—either good guys or bad guys. (And “guys” they were.) Similarly, the pre-Fawn Brodie biographies of Joseph Smith were also one-dimensional. The Prophet was either a saint if the author was Mormon or a rogue if he was not. But Vogel sees Smith as both a sincere religious leader and a deceiver (xi, viii, xiv-xv; see also xii). He is both sympathetic to Smith and critical of him. While no historian can be totally objective, Vogel’s biases are not as visible as those of Brodie, on the one hand, or, on the other, orthodox biographies by Richard Bushman and Donna Hill.²

Bushman consciously avoided what he called the “environmental” approach, in which a biographer sees his or her subject as merely a reflection of the forces that were at work in the subject’s family and society. Vogel is a self-con-

1. Some of my comments are based on my panel presentation at the Sunstone Symposium, August 14, 2004, Salt Lake City.

2. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2d ed. rev. (1945; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971); Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1977).