

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.

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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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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-

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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).

fessed rationalist and naturalist, who rejects supernatural explanations (570 note 39). I believe that is how the historian should proceed. Historians, when acting as historians, should avoid supernatural explanations, such as those we hear in church meetings. When they do, they are stepping outside their role as historians to make theological affirmations. Historians *as historians* have no way of knowing whether God spoke to Joseph Smith in the grove or that Moroni, John the Baptist, Peter, James, or John defied natural law and appeared to Smith in the 1820s. Nor can a historian as historian demonstrate that an unlettered farm boy was able to gaze at a peep stone and translate Reformed Egyptian—a language which itself only exists as an act of faith.

You can't say "Joseph went to the Lord and God told him, 'Tell Emma to quit murmuring.'" All we can say is Joseph said God wants Emma to quit murmuring. I think if a historian steps outside the naturalistic approach, she needs to acknowledge it. Perhaps orthodox Mormon historians should preface certain remarks with statements like, "I'm a believing Mormon, and I think this revelation was from God and not Joseph using revelation to get his way with Emma."

The rational, naturalistic way is not the only road to truth. Human reason, too, is limited. But faith assertions are more unreliable than reason and empirical evidence. If you are a person of faith, a naturalistic biography of your spiritual model—Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, or whoever—is an important source for understanding your faith. Read the best naturalistic historical explanation you can find (like Vogel if you're Mormon) and then engage in personal dialogue between the naturalistic explanation and your faith story.

Historical "truth" is imperfect, as any historiographical study will suggest. But where the historical evidence seems particularly strong, we should revise our faith understanding at points where it is in conflict, or at least put a question mark by that item of our faith. Some recent activities of FARMS are a good example, as they have adjusted their explanation of the scope of population in the Americas descended from Lehi as a result of DNA evidence. They weren't willing to completely defy empirical evidence. John Charles Duffy's recent article in *Sunstone* is a masterpiece of research and interpretation regarding this matter.<sup>3</sup>

The traditional faith story of Mormonism is fraught with conflicts with historical evidence. Indeed, Mormonism is an anti-historical faith. The notion that there is a pure gospel—a plan of salvation or whatever—that existed with Adam, was restored by Jesus, and restored again by Joseph Smith, denies that the gospel is affected by history. I recall a plenary session on the LDS Church's missionary work in Africa held at the Sunstone Symposium in Salt Lake City a few years ago.

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3. John-Charles Duffy, "Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith: How Apologetics Is Reshaping Mormon Orthodoxy," *Sunstone*, Issue 132 (May 2004): 22–39, 42–55.

The advance advertising promised that this session would look at how the culture in Africa affects the gospel message proclaimed by the Church there. I went to the session with eager anticipation, but alas, not one word was uttered to suggest that African culture in any way helped shape the gospel message these missionaries had proclaimed there.

Two-thirds of Vogel's book is about the Book of Mormon. At first I thought that was too much. Richard Bushman's *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* covers the same years in Smith's life but only one of the six chapters is about the Book of Mormon. However, after finishing Vogel's book, I have concluded that he has made a valuable contribution by undertaking an extensive treatment of ways in which the contents of the Book of Mormon relate to Smith's life. I think the open-minded reader can hardly avoid coming away with the clear conclusion that the Book of Mormon is indeed Joseph's book and not an ancient document.

We create terrible misunderstandings of history when we treat the Book of Mormon as historical. For example, Fawn Brodie estimated that there were at least eight Indian fortification mounds within twelve miles of the Smith farm in Manchester (258). Vogel notes that the Book of Mormon gives us scant details about the temples and palaces, but "the Nephite fortifications are portrayed in great detail and in accord with what was generally understood about these sites." Clearly the historian will conclude that Smith, writing in 1829, was describing what he had seen. Vogel points out that B. H. Roberts, assuming the Book of Mormon was historical, said that whoever built the Ohio fortifications certainly "knew something of Moroni's system of fortification-building" (257). Roberts had it backwards.

Signature Books might want to consider publishing the Book of Mormon portion of this book as a separate volume. And I'd like to see Vogel write Volume 2, covering Smith's last twelve or thirteen years.

One problem with a religious system in which a prophet as prophet has revelations or gives general conference addresses which presumably speak for God is that difficult issues are thereby settled, often with an answer that is both simple and wrong. Poor Oliver Cowdery had a difference of opinion with Joseph Smith over whether John the Apostle tarried on earth after the apostolic age. So Joseph has a revelation on the matter. Are we surprised that, according to Joseph's revelation, Joseph was right? But possibly they were both wrong because the New Testament does not identify "the beloved apostle" as John. That's a later tradition.

Vogel has not written an anti-Mormon book. Contrary to the reviews published in FARMS, Vogel's book is moderate and balanced. He sometimes makes judgments that are consistent with the traditional Mormon faith story when he could have concluded otherwise, such as when he writes: "More likely, Anthon's initial assessment of the characters was more positive than he would later admit.

Otherwise, it is doubtful that Harris would have requested a written statement" (115). Vogel doesn't accept critical judgments of Joseph Smith when there is cause for skepticism. He does not credit the 1830 allegation by a "Methodist gentleman" who told Isaac Hale that Joseph Smith was engaged in extra-marital activities (528). He doesn't accept the allegation that Smith said "the book of plates could not be opened under penalty of death by any other person but [Smith's] first-born son and that the young lad would translate the plates at the age of three" (111). If Joseph did say it and the child had lived, you can imagine the bewildered look on the child's face when his father said, "Okay, son, here's the seer stone. Now translate."

On the other hand, Vogel doesn't avoid embarrassing episodes when the evidence is clear—the arrests, accusations of adultery, and so forth. It is always tempting for the orthodox historian to leave these things out. Bushman sometimes left out material that I'm sure he was aware of and which seemed to me important for a "fair and balanced" treatment of the prophet.

We Mormons have often foolishly said that either the First Vision happened just as Smith said it did, or he was a liar and a fraud. The moderate Vogel offers a middle ground which I think believing Mormons are foolish to reject as without merit: He believes that Smith had a profound religious experience which included seeing Jesus in a heavenly vision and, over time, remembered it as a literal experience (242). Interestingly, Charles Grandison Finney, the greatest revivalist of the era, who also operated in the state of New York, reported a grove experience similar to that of Joseph Smith.

The Joseph Smith movement began as a protest against elites who claimed superiority over ordinary people in religion and other areas of life. Vogel notes that Smith was vulnerable to revelatory competitors like Oliver Cowdery and Hiram Page. Smith's limitation of revelation to himself was the first great compromise in the evolution of the movement from radical populism in its infancy to where it is today—the ultimate bastion of American conservatism.

It was unfortunate that the time in which this radical populist movement was emerging was the worst period in American history from the perspective of women's rights. It seems that women were freer in the colonial period than they were in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately the patriarchal worldview that was so strongly entrenched in early nineteenth-century American culture became canonized in the utterances of Joseph Smith. God speaking to a prophet with new scripture resulting was a radical idea. But it became a very conservative force, making it more difficult for Mormon women to break the shackles that bound them.

Revelation coming through ecclesiastical officers makes for conservative policies. I was struck by several references Vogel makes to Seneca Falls, New York, which happened to be the place where in 1848 the first women's rights conven-

tion was held. It is too bad that Emma and the other Mormon women were long gone from the area by 1848. While it is unlikely the Mormon women would have embraced the women's rights movement in New York, Susan B. Anthony and others did make alliances with Mormon women in Utah a generation later. And the populist theme of early Mormonism was consistent with the women's rights agenda.

The Book of Mormon knew nothing of women's rights, however. As Vogel notes, there are only three women in the entire Book of Mormon who are even named (225). Sariah's death goes unreported in the narrative (131), and nothing is said concerning the order of birth of Nephi's sisters, while it is quite clear regarding the first four brothers and reasonably clear on the last two.

When Vogel mentions an Anabaptist Society in Tunbridge, Vermont, that Joseph Sr. "may have joined," he says the Anabaptists "historically defended a belief in polygamy" (178). That is an inaccurate characterization of Anabaptists. They were the left wing of the sixteenth-century Reformation, and pacifism was a central tenet. The polygamist Anabaptists of Muenster, Germany, were an aberration. Their resort to violence and polygamy was a denial of Anabaptism's central tenets. Like so many marginalized groups in history, the dominant groups—here the Catholics, Reformed, and Lutherans—characterized Anabaptism on the basis of an extreme segment totally out of character with the genius of the main movement. I'm confident the Anabaptist group in Tunbridge was in harmony with the mainline Anabaptist groups that survived—the Mennonites, Hutterites, and the Amish. Muenster was a very short-lived community.

In 1965 Charles A. Davies was retiring after seven years as the RLDS Church Historian. He was our last Church Historian without a graduate degree in history. He had been shocked by the stuff he was finding in the headquarters archives about polygamy, the method of translation of the Book of Mormon, and other matters relating to our founding prophet. He often shared his findings with a handful of young scholars at headquarters, sometimes referred to as "the Young Turks." A few days before he retired, these Young Turks took Charlie out to lunch. They asked him, "Charlie, how would you characterize Joseph Smith?" Charlie thought for a minute and then said, "He was game!"

When asked if there are men on the moon, the Prophet described their height, their clothing, and so forth. Bring him an ancient document and the attitude was, "Heck, yes, I can translate it." When a rabbi is delayed several days in arriving in Kirtland to teach Hebrew to the saints, Joseph could step right in until the rabbi arrived.

Charlie was right. Joseph Smith was game. And the man we see in Dan Vogel's book fits that description.