

NO, DAN, THAT'S STILL NOT HISTORY

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Never has the field of Mormon history claimed more legitimacy in the scholarly community than it does today. Mormon Studies programs and courses in Mormon history are springing up on both sides of the Atlantic at prestigious universities, and the number of professional historians and graduate students pursuing Mormon topics in their research is at an all-time high. Membership in the Mormon History Association is growing steadily as well, and it is clear that the field is in the process of transforming from an obscure sideshow, driven by polemics and apologetics, to a mature, legitimate discipline worthy of the attention of the best minds in American religious history. As far as we have come over the course of the last twenty or thirty years, however, Dan Vogel's award-winning book *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* reminds us how tenuous the gains may be and how much further we have to go before the assumptions, questions, theses, and methods of an earlier, far less fruitful era are, themselves, more a part of history than current events.¹ One sees the influence

1. The Mormon History Association awarded Vogel its Turner-Bergera Best Biography award in May 2005. The John Whitmer Historical Association awarded him its Best Book award in September 2004.

Review of Dan Vogel. *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004. xxii + 715 pp., with index. \$39.95.

of Fawn Brodie in his book more than that of Jan Shipps or Richard Bushman, and in terms of historiography, his thesis and methods can only be viewed as a giant step backward in our study and understanding of early Mormonism.

The fundamental problem with the book is that Vogel refuses to evaluate Joseph Smith on his (Joseph's) own terms. The goal of biography is to make sense of an individual's life and thought as that individual experienced them; and for a biography to be successful, the biographer must lay aside his own assumptions and prejudices, sympathetically grant the subject his, and ignore as much as possible whatever gap might exist between the two. The subject's own recitals and explanations of his experiences should be the foundation upon which the biographer reconstructs the person's life and should carry far more weight with the historian trying to get inside his subject's head than any secondhand account or, worse yet, any theory of interpretation. These other sources have their place, but to favor them over the subject's personal statements—even though (or perhaps because) they agree with one's own biases—is to obscure rather than to understand the individual whose life and thought is under scrutiny. However long and involved the analysis may be, the result of such an approach is not a biography, but a simple and tedious recital of what other people—including the biographer—thought and think about the subject's life and experiences. The subject himself remains in the background, hopelessly mired in contradiction and interpretation, buried under the book and the volume of everybody else's observations and opinions.

Such is Vogel's Joseph Smith. Frankly admitting his "inclination . . . to interpret any claim of the paranormal . . . as delusion or fraud" (p. xii), Vogel refuses to accept Joseph's and his supporters' autobiographical statements—most of which grant, either explicitly or implicitly, such "paranormal" phenomena as angels, revelation, visions, and prophecy—at face value. Vogel's Joseph opens his mouth only to lie and deceive; and whatever he might be experiencing, or trying to do, or thinking about, one can rest assured that it's not what any record

generated by him or his sympathizers would have us believe. How, then, to get at the real story?

Easy—scour the records for any sources whose authors know, like Vogel, that Joseph was a liar from birth and see what they have to say about his life. In doing this, we need not completely throw away everything Joseph said or wrote—indeed, Vogel assures us, liars’ statements are full of meaning, and the social sciences are brimming with theories and mechanisms that allow the informed historian to read between the lines of an imposter’s record and find all sorts of insights into his character and motivations (p. xviii). Never mind the limitations of these other disciplines and their theories, as well as the very real problems attending the use of those secondhand and reminiscent accounts; the two balance and guide one another marvelously, and so long as one doesn’t fall into the trap of naively accepting what Joseph says as the truth, one is guaranteed success.

Thus armed and assured, Vogel charts and explains Joseph’s rise from obscure farm boy to founder of a significant church. His path to stardom begins in his childhood home—an unhappy place, Vogel tells us, that was wracked with discord, haunted by poverty, and headed by the alcoholic, incompetent, and superstitious Joseph Sr. Much of the discord was religious; Joseph Sr. was a staunch Universalist, while Lucy Mack and several children inclined to the Presbyterian approach to salvation. When he wasn’t promoting universal salvation, Father Smith was either out under the stars hunting for buried treasures—using the most up-to-date incantations, rods, and peep stones—or working his way through a variety of highly involved and significant dreams in bed; either way, Vogel leaves us with the impression that the family patriarch was, for the most part, up in the night. Older brother Alvin was able to keep the home functioning for a time, but his death in late 1823 plunged the family into further crisis.

Desperate to save his family from disintegration and convinced that the only way to do it was to help his father assume his proper position as head of the house, young Joseph, in this moment of extremity, began receiving “visions” that both confirmed and yet gently corrected his father’s dreams and mistaken religious ideas. His father’s susceptibility

to treasure-hunting lore provided another avenue through which he could be reached and corrected, and the future prophet, having recently discovered his own natural ability to dupe people with a seer stone, was quick to take advantage of it. Enter the well-known story of the gold plates, hidden in a nearby hill and protected, like any good treasure, by a guardian spirit of sorts, and whose “translation” would yield further correctives for his father as well as provide young Joseph with a vehicle through which he might comment on the deteriorating social, religious, and political conditions of his day. When, in addition to his father, many others fell for his elaborate charade, Joseph conceived the idea of creating a church based on his ideas and methods, both of which God himself seemed to be endorsing. Vogel leaves the young prophet on his way to Kirtland, Ohio, supposedly “reflect[ing] on how far his seer stone had taken him” and suppressing whatever “doubts or second thoughts” he might have had about his actions (p. 557).

It is a remarkable thesis, if only for the departure it represents from Joseph’s own account of things. Just as remarkable is the methodology Vogel employs to make his case—a methodology as foreign to responsible historical scholarship as his thesis is revolutionary.² Since he and his publisher are marketing the book as academic history, however, and since many readers will no doubt read it as such, it may be instructive here to point out in some detail those areas where it departs from the discipline proper and where his assumptions and methods run afoul of professional protocol. The exercise would be less helpful were the prob-

2. Like law or medicine, history is a discipline complete with its own assumptions, methods, and limitations. Just as one must train in formal programs for several years to be a good lawyer or doctor, so one must train for several years in a formal setting to be a good historian. Such training, of course, is no guarantee that one will actually be very good in that field, but it remains, nevertheless, a *sine qua non* for those who would practice in these and other disciplines on a professional level. Lamentably, the field of Mormon history is saturated with those whose productivity far outstrips their ability and preparation. Even more regrettable, those who are least qualified frequently write on the most technical, sensitive, and difficult topics, with scandalous, highly publicized, and completely erroneous conclusions the inevitable result. Good universities sink millions of dollars into their graduate programs for a reason; and the sooner those in the field of Mormon history realize that no amount of passion, familiarity with the sources, or writing experience can make up for solid academic training in the discipline of history, the better off the field will be.

lems with his work limited to those we've already outlined in regard to biographical writing in and of itself; as it is, however, Vogel bobbles the ball the length and breadth of the methodological field, affording specialists and nonspecialists alike an unparalleled, press box-quality view of everything that good history is not.

Vogel needs to understand that it's not enough to simply acknowledge the standards of scholarship in an introduction; if one is going to retain any credibility with one's audience at all, one must actually stick to those standards in the body of the work. Vogel assures us, for example, that while he may "occasionally use qualifying verbs and adverbs to indicate where [his] analysis is speculative or conjectural, . . . [his] overall discussion and conclusions are firmly grounded in the primary source documents" (p. xvii). This nod to responsible scholarship notwithstanding, one doesn't get too far along in the book before one finds oneself gasping for breath in the face of a steady barrage of these "occasional" qualifiers. In the eight pages from 131 to 138, for example, the words "might," "probably," "may," "perhaps," and "seems" occur a total of 17 times—better than two per page, on average. Rarely does one find a run of more than two pages where such words aren't employed, and not infrequently one sees them in even greater abundance—pages 178 and 447, for example, contain nine such qualifiers apiece. They are central to every point and argument Vogel makes, whatever their overall rate of use may be, and one finds oneself involuntarily muttering under one's breath "yes, and *maybe, probably not*" at the end of most of them.

To take one of literally scores of examples: Vogel suggests, in his assessment of young Joseph's home environment, that Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack conceived their first child out of wedlock, prior to their marriage (p. 573 n. 17). His evidence for this extraordinary claim? The fact that Joseph Sr., years later, said that "the Lord, in his just providence has taken from me, at an untimely birth, a son: this has been a matter of affliction" (p. 5). How, one asks, does Joseph Sr.'s grief over losing a child suggest that this child had been conceived out of wedlock? Vogel argues that Joseph Sr.'s "persistent 'affliction' over the infant's death seems to imply a sense of guilt or responsibility" and refers his

readers to Robert D. Anderson's *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* for an authoritative connection between this alleged sense of guilt and the child's conception out of wedlock (p. 5; more on psychoanalysis later).³ For further evidence, Vogel refers us to the Book of Mormon—young Joseph's vehicle for correcting his father's vices, remember—where the prophet Mormon recounts how wicked Nephites raped and abused female Lamanite prisoners in the wars leading up to the final battle at Cumorah. While "there may be a condemnation of the American treatment of Indians" in this story, Vogel intones, "there may also be an exaggerated criticism of how Joseph's father treated his mother, who may have been pregnant at the time of their marriage" (pp. 374–75). At this point we are several steps removed from the "primary source document" that got this whole thing started; we have stumbled over at least three "seems" or "mays" as we've picked our way through the rubble of the logic; and we are still scratching our heads trying to figure out how a father's grief over a dead infant implies, or even "seems to imply," a sense of "guilt or responsibility." Does a father have to be guilty of something before he can grieve over a lost child? Does that something have to be premarital sex? And is there any corroborating historical evidence, anywhere, that would support such a charge? However Vogel himself might answer these and other questions this particular argument begs, it is clear that one must read "firmly grounded in the primary source documents" to mean "buried knee-deep in conjecture" if one is to have any hope at all of following his lines of reasoning.

Vogel is especially adept at laying the documents aside when it comes to filling in the details of various seminal events in Joseph's history. Take, for example, his treatment of the events of the night of 21 September 1823. Dismissing Lucy's account on the grounds that she "probably minimized the intensity" of the Smith family's discussion about religion that evening (p. 43), Vogel takes it upon himself to

3. See Michael D. Jibson, review of *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon*, by Robert D. Anderson, *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1–2 (2002): 223–60; and Larry E. Morris's review of this book and others in *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 311–51.

tell us what *really* happened that night—indeed, what young Joseph was actually *thinking* over the course of that night and the following day, whatever he or his mother might later say. “Likely troubled,” Vogel informs us, “by his family’s religious conflicts” as he lay in bed that night, Joseph “may have prayed for deliverance—perhaps asking God to soften his parents’ hearts.” He may even “have asked that God would give him the words to convert his father,” although he “knew,” given his father’s “intellectualized approach to the Bible and Universalistic beliefs” that “words alone” would not be enough to bring him around. Aware that his father believed in his ability to see hidden treasure, however, Joseph hit upon the idea of the gold plates, hoping through them “to bring his father to repentance and give his family the religious harmony” that eluded them—“desperate thoughts,” Vogel admits dramatically, “but in Joseph’s mind, the situation would have called for decisive action” (pp. 43–44). “Knowing that he would be plunged deeper into deception and fantasy” if he tried to carry the ruse out, Joseph “hesitated” the following day before telling his father about buried plates; then, seeing it “as the only way” to save his family, he began taking the steps that would make his “midnight musings reality” (p. 45).

What more could a student of early Mormon history possibly want? Here, in a crisp three pages, is a detailed account of what Joseph Smith was thinking about, praying about, and hesitating about over 180 years ago during one of the most significant 24-hour periods in church history. And not just what he was thinking about, in general terms, but how and when, within this 24-hour period, his thoughts evolve! And Vogel gives us all this without a single source to guide his pen—indeed, in direct contravention of what the sources say! One might chalk up this ability to navigate so confidently and so deftly through Joseph’s mind to some type of clairvoyance on Vogel’s part—“clairvogelance,” we could call it—were it not that he himself protests so loudly against anything smacking of the “paranormal.”

None of this is to say that Vogel doesn’t use sources at all as he weaves his arguments, for he clearly does—a lot of them, in fact, as anyone familiar with his *Early Mormon Documents* series might

expect. And, to be fair, he seems to realize that not all sources are created equal—that, indeed, some are better than others and that one of the tasks of the historian is to discriminate between those that can be trusted and those that cannot. What he doesn't seem to understand, however, are the criteria by which sources are evaluated, and the simple fact that *all* sources—even those friendly to one's own biases—need to be scrutinized. These are important, if subtle, considerations in the writing of history, and to be unaware of them while trying to write an accurate and nuanced biography on as controversial a figure as Joseph Smith is both irresponsible and inexcusable.

Let us illustrate through an example or two. At several points in the book, Vogel calls Lucy's reminiscent account into question. After citing her report of what Joseph said after his initial visit to the Hill Cumorah, Vogel tells us that Lucy "would supplement her memory with information she had obtained later" and urges his readers to be "cautious in reconstructing the original story, especially when citing portions that were influenced by Joseph's later emendations" (p. 47). Later, he chalks up Lucy's version of a dramatic fulfillment of one of Joseph's early prophecies to "retrospective falsification," a "not uncommon" tendency people have to "later ascribe more specificity to a prediction than was originally involved," creating a situation where "some extraordinary event is embellished in the retelling to emphasize favorable points and diminish unfavorable ones" (p. 62). And in a third instance (among many others), he calls into question Lucy's "unique, unconfirmed, and uncorroborated" story about feeling the breastplate through a thin muslin cloth and explains its presence by suggesting that Lucy's scribes, Martha and Howard Coray, "perhaps . . . mistook something Lucy said as hearsay for personal experience" (p. 100). All of these are, in fact, valid points to bring up when using Lucy's reminiscent, worked-over account, and Vogel is fully justified in raising them here—although he also would have done well to note that at least two studies have addressed the accuracy of Lucy's record and demonstrated that, while it is not infallible, it is for the most part remarkably accurate.⁴

4. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Reliability of the Early History of Lucy and Joseph Smith," *Dialogue* 4/2 (1969): 13–28; and Andrew H. Hedges, "Lucy Smith's His-

At the same time he is putting Lucy under the magnifying glass, however, Vogel is uncritically accepting sources far more removed from the events in both space and time than Lucy's ever was. Lorenzo Saunders, for example, who was interviewed in 1884—more than fifty years after the fact!—bulks large in Vogel's endnotes, yet never once does Vogel raise an eyebrow at anything he says. The same holds for interviews with a host of others, including S. F. Anderik (1887), William D. Purple (1877), Caroline Rockwell Smith (1885), Cornelius R. Stafford (1885), Isaac Butts (1885), Samantha Payne (1881), Sylvia Walker (1885), Benjamin Saunders (1884), William Smith (1883), William W. Blair (1879), Joseph and Hiel Lewis (1879), R. C. Doud (1873), Frederick G. Mather (1880), Christopher M. Stafford (1888), Gordon T. Smith (1883), one "Orson," a nephew to Lorenzo Saunders (1893), and many, many others, too tedious to name. Vogel even uses an 1899 statement from George W. Schwiech, *grandson* of David Whitmer, to reconstruct the nature of the three witnesses' experience! What kind of history is it that raises the specter of exaggeration and hearsay in Lucy's account, yet accepts wholesale the reports of an army of critics and their descendants collected a half century or more after the events? There they are, however, tripping and sporting across 700 pages of text and notes, apparently immune to the "retrospective falsification," embellishments, and hearsay that plagued the Smiths and therefore trumping anything that they might say.

In a similar vein, Vogel does not seem to realize the point at which a source unfavorable to his thesis has passed the standards of source criticism and beyond which any protestations about its validity and meaning become absurd. This tendency is best illustrated in his treatment of the testimony of the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Having satisfied himself that Joseph had the ability to induce "small groups of people . . . to experience the same imaginary phenomena" through hypnosis and that he had, in fact, done precisely that with the

tory and Abner Cole's Piracy of Extracts from the Book of Mormon," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: New York-Pennsylvania*, ed. Alexander L. Baugh and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 2002), 49–67.

Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon (p. 450), Vogel argues that the Eight Witnesses' experience had also been "visionary in nature," "despite the naturalistic language" of their testimony (p. 467). One of the most damning evidences for this, Vogel argues, is the fact than none of the eight contradicted dissenters in Kirtland were claiming as much (p. 467). "Hyrum Smith's response to the dissenters," Vogel argues as an example, "that 'he had but two hands and two eyes' and that 'he had seen the plates with his eyes and handled them with his hands,' . . . is not unlike the response of David Whitmer, who in 1886 told Nathan Tanner: 'I have been asked if we saw those things with our natural eyes. Of course they were our natural eyes. There is no doubt that our eyes were prepared for the sight, but they were our natural eyes nevertheless'" (pp. 672–73 n. 5). Since Hyrum, Vogel's logic runs, is reported (the source is secondhand) to have used language in Kirtland similar to that used by David almost fifty years later, and David's experience was visionary only (Vogel is satisfied on that point, in spite of David's suggestive language), then Hyrum "was not necessarily denying dissenter claims that he and the other witnesses had seen the plates in vision," in spite of the hands-on account he gives (p. 673 n. 5). The problem with this interplay of the sources and line of reasoning is that Hyrum was responding to gainsayers in 1838, not comparing notes with David Whitmer in 1886, and was as clear in his contradiction of the charges as the situation demanded of him—indeed, as he possibly could have been. Is it reasonable to expect Hyrum in Kirtland to know what words David was going to use fifty years hence to describe a separate experience, and therefore be able to choose words that will allow readers from an even later era to discriminate the nuances between the two? To think Hyrum was waffling on *his* position during the Kirtland apostasy because of *David's* choice of words a half century later in a completely different context is positively absurd and not an example of source criticism and incisive thinking most trained historians would want their names associated with.⁵

5. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (forthcoming).

As conversant as he is with what someone's nephew's daughter might have said about the Smiths fifty years after the fact, even Vogel frequently finds himself at a loss for a historical source that supports his notions of what kind of person Joseph Smith *really* was. Not to worry; our guide's historical acumen, it turns out, is exceeded only by his familiarity with applied psychoanalysis, and it is a rare discussion in the book that does not include laissez-faire retrospective psychoanalysis to one degree or another. Indeed, the whole overarching thesis of the book—that Joseph's "prophetic calling" is the result of his childhood experiences in a dysfunctional home and that his behavior disguised his motives—is highly psychoanalytic; and the sibling rivalries, alter-egos, interpretations of dreams, and other explanations that make up so much of the book are simply variations on the theme.

Vogel's uncritical acceptance and extensive application of psychoanalysis contrasts sharply with its limited use among twenty-first-century psychiatrists and psychologists. "Only a small proportion of psychiatrists today are graduates of psychoanalytic institutes," notes Dr. Rodrigo A. Muñoz, "and even they do not necessarily practice psychoanalysis with most of their patients."⁶ The reason is simple: psychoanalysis, for all its social and cultural influence, "is basically unscientific. . . . There is no way to prove or disprove the basic hypotheses of psychoanalysis."⁷ Good scientific theories not only *explain* observations, they also offer *testable* hypotheses—that is, by definition, hypotheses that can be *falsified*. Inviting and passing such tests, a theory then not only explains phenomena, it also goes a long way toward *demonstrating* that the theory is actually correct. Freudian theory *explains* all sorts of things, but, as it doesn't lend itself to falsification, it *demonstrates* nothing. One could, as an illustration, theorize that *War and Peace* would have been a far shorter book had Tolstoy been in the habit of shaving every morning, as shaving would have taught him how to trim his writing up a little. Great idea, but can it be proved? No, no more than one can prove psychoanalytic notions about

6. Rodrigo A. Muñoz, "Books, the Children of the Brain: 'Bush on the Couch,'" *Clinical Psychiatry News* 32 (October 2004): 68.

7. D. H. Barlow and V. M. Durand, *Abnormal Psychology: An Integrative Approach* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1999), 21, as cited in Robert F. Bornstein, "The Impending Death of Psychoanalysis," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 18/1 (2001): 6.

personality structure, defense mechanisms, the unconscious, and almost everything else. While psychoanalysis has its defenders, most scholars in the field today are finding less and less in Freudian theory to recommend it. E. Fuller Torrey, for example, places Freud's Oedipal theory "on precisely the same scientific plane as the theory regarding the Loch Ness monster," while John Kihlstrom writes that "when we stand on [Freud's] shoulders, we only discover that we're looking further in the wrong direction."⁸ "Independent studies have begun to converge toward a verdict," writes Frederick Crews. "There is literally nothing to be said, scientifically or therapeutically, to the advantage of the entire Freudian system or any of its component dogmas."⁹

The only setting, generally, in which psychoanalysis today has any professional validity at all is when a qualified psychoanalyst is able to "spend an untold number of hours in direct contact with a patient, listening to the patient's free association."¹⁰ This, of course, can't be done with a patient who is in a coffin rather than on a couch, and is, Muñoz writes, "the most obvious criticism of all psychobiographical works."¹¹ Given the shortcomings of psychoanalysis under even the best of circumstances, in short, Vogel's efforts to psychoanalyze Joseph Smith are worse than worthless; and if he has demonstrated anything, it is the extent to which Freud's legacy lives on in society today—a phenomenon amused specialists have been quick to note. "In science," David G. Myers writes, "Darwin's legacy lives, Freud's is dying. In the popular culture, Freud's legacy lives on."

8. E. Fuller Torrey, *Freudian Fraud: The Malignant Effect of Freud's Theory on American Thought and Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 221; John F. Kihlstrom, "Freud as Giant Pioneer on Whose Shoulders We Should Stand" (Social Psychology list-serv posting, 11 November 1997), quoted in David G. Myers, *Psychology*, 7th ed. (Holland, MI: Worth Publishers, 2004), 587.

9. Frederick Crews, "The Verdict on Freud," *Psychological Science* 7/2 (1996): 63.

10. Kyle R. Walker and Douglas E. Craig, review of *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon*, by Robert D. Anderson, and *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr., and the Dissociated Mind*, by William D. Morain, *Journal of Mormon History* 30/1 (2004): 255. See Richard N. Williams's review of Morain, *FARMS Review of Books* 12/1 (2000): 435–43.

11. Muñoz, "Books, the Children of the Brain," 68.

Some ideas that many people assume to be true—that childhood experiences mold personality, that dreams have meaning, that many behaviors have disguised motives—are part of that legacy. His early twentieth-century concepts penetrate our twenty-first-century language. . . . “Freud’s premises may have undergone a steady decline in currency within academia for many years, but Hollywood, the talk shows, many therapists, and the general public still love them.”¹²

Vogel brings all these elements of his peculiar methodology—the conjecture, the mind reading, the laissez-faire source criticism, and psychoanalysis—to bear on his examination of the Book of Mormon itself. Accepting as a given that the book is a product of Joseph’s fertile and somewhat devious mind only, Vogel dances back and forth between using it to explain Joseph and using Joseph to explain it—an approach apparently suggested to his mind by Fawn Brodie’s contention that the Book of Mormon, “like any first novel, . . . can be read to a limited degree as autobiography.”¹³ “This is especially true,” Vogel assures his readers, “since Smith’s method of dictation did not allow for rewriting. It was a more-or-less stream-of-consciousness composition,” in which Joseph’s “beliefs, hopes, fears, struggles, transformations, thoughts, dreams, and future plans” have been “woven” into the narrative (p. xix). As such, the Book of Mormon substitutes for the “untold number of hours” Vogel the psychoanalyst is unable to spend listening to Joseph freely associate and becomes perhaps *the* primary source document—of infinitely more value than Joseph’s later, sanitized autobiographical statements—for understanding Joseph Smith and his rise to stardom. Vogel, at least, treats it as such, and devotes well over one half of his book to its analysis.

12. Myers, *Psychology*, 586. The first sentence of this quotation is a summary of Bornstein, “The Impending Death of Psychoanalysis,” 3–20. The final sentence is from Martin E. P. Seligman, *What You Can Change and What You Can’t: The Complete Guide to Successful Self-Improvement* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 228.

13. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 413.

In his determination to read the Book of Mormon as an autobiography of Joseph Smith, Vogel is completely ignoring scores of sophisticated studies, presented over the course of several thousand pages in books and journal articles, that strongly suggest the book's ancient Near Eastern and ancient American connections. The studies make it clear that grammatically, symbolically, thematically, and in many other ways, the Book of Mormon is best understood as an ancient text, written a good many years before Joseph Smith was on the scene. As such, one might as well look to Homer's *Odyssey* for insights into Joseph's thinking and family dynamics as to the Book of Mormon. Forty years ago, prior to serious scholarship on the Book of Mormon's ancient connections, Vogel could have rejected the book's internal claims and responsibly—as far as academia goes—have gotten away with his thesis; today, however, given all that serious and qualified scholars have done and demonstrated in this direction over the last several decades, Vogel would have to thoroughly dismantle the ancient origin thesis and demonstrate the need for a counterthesis before he could justifiably proffer so tenuous a methodology as psychoanalytically based psychobiography. The few jabs Vogel takes at Hugh Nibley (mostly regarding a few of the latter's suggestions about the Jaredites) and other "apologists" are a far cry from the informed, technical criticism this immense body of research calls for and without which any competing explanation is not only woefully premature but doomed to failure as well. As well might a modern astrophysicist attempt to construct a model of the universe without taking into account quantum mechanics, relativity, or the studies of Stephen Hawking and Albert Einstein; the geocentric model he would construct would, to be sure, account for and explain a host of casual and superficial observations, and yet would be, in the end, completely wrong. One can't simply ignore or brush aside what an Einstein or a Nibley have persuasively demonstrated; and one's own explanation of things, whatever it may be, has to either incorporate or convincingly dismantle everything they and other observers have found. Passing off chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, for example, as simply a well-known form of "rhetorical repetition" in early America (p. 605 n. 48) doesn't cut it and goes much

further toward demonstrating an ignorance of chiasmus's complexities than it does toward illuminating Book of Mormon origins.

While there is little to be gained in examining the particulars of a thesis whose fundamental assumption is at odds with the weight of evidence, some few of the claims Vogel makes while developing his thesis do call for brief comment. First, Joseph's early treasure-hunting activities loom large in his thesis, as they were an important avenue, Vogel contends, through which young Joseph could reach his wrong-headed father (pp. 35–52). In painting Joseph as a treasure hunter, Vogel uses the statements collected in E. D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* and other early anti-Mormon works that are familiar to any serious student of Mormon history. Like so many authors before him, however, Vogel fails to see how weak and vague these charges are—indeed, to realize that in the vast majority of treasure-hunting expeditions Joseph is accused of having headed up, he is not—according to the person relating the story—even present! In most cases, those with the shovels, or those sacrificing the sheep, report that someone *told* them that Joseph *said* there was a treasure buried in a particular spot and could be obtained through whatever machinations; only rarely (twice, by our count) is Joseph actually identified as being an on-the-scenes participant, and one of those was simply when he used the seer stone to find a tie pin Martin Harris had dropped on the ground a few moments before (pp. 42–43). A careful reading of Vogel's argument shows that Joseph's involvement was only alleged or implied in the great majority of the expeditions that are exhibited as evidence of his treasure-hunting activities, which in turn suggests that his involvement in such activities was probably less than many historians today—even those who are faithful members of the church—have come to believe.

Vogel contends throughout the book that Joseph Sr. was an avowed Universalist. His conclusion is based on his interpretation of several of the elder Smith's dreams and on the "Book of Mormon's preoccupation with establishing Jesus' divine status and its sustained defense of the Atonement" (p. 578 n. 9). Remove the ad hoc dream interpretation from the picture, and Vogel's argument for Joseph Sr.'s Universalism, stated more fully, is that Joseph Sr. *must* have been a Universalist because the

Book of Mormon, which was written to correct him, focuses so much on the divinity and atonement of the Savior. Having established that “fact,” Vogel then spends much of the rest of the book arguing that the Book of Mormon says so much about the divinity and atonement of the Savior *because* (you guessed it) Joseph Sr. was a Universalist. Add to the tautology Joseph Sr.’s “flirt[ing] with Methodism” (p. 3), his struggles with “Puritan insecurities” (p. 29), and his “leanings” toward Anabaptist ideas about baptism by immersion (p. 305), and one begins to wonder what kind of Universalism Joseph Sr. represented—certainly not any brand known in early America. And then, after all this, Vogel disingenuously argues that Doctrine and Covenants 19 reveals that young Joseph himself actually “privately believed in Universalism” (p. 490), even though he’d just spent two years of his life writing an anti-Universalist book! One does far less violence to rational thinking and finds far more consistency in the sources if one simply accepts Lucy’s contention that the pre-Mormon Joseph Sr. was his own man when it came to religion and of very much the same opinion as Lucy herself (pp. 7–8). With Joseph Sr.’s Universalism out of the way, needless to say, the alleged “religious discord” that reportedly wracked the Smith home evaporates as well.

Vogel scrapes away at some very old themes in his analysis of the Book of Mormon, including such time-honored charges as the book’s anti-Masonic flavor and its anachronistic use of steel. Had he done his homework, he would have found recent research addressing both these questions—as well as many other standard arguments against the book’s validity. Paul Mouritsen, for example, has effectively demonstrated the significant differences between the anti-Masonic rhetoric of the early nineteenth century and the Book of Mormon’s warnings against secret combinations, while Wm. Revell Phillips has shown how commonplace simple steel was in the Near East at the time of Lehi—something archaeologists have known for years.¹⁴ Similarly, in accepting the argument that DNA analysis argues against the Book of

14. Paul Mouritsen, “Secret Combinations and Flaxen Cords: Anti-Masonic Rhetoric and the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 64–77; Nathan Oman, “‘Secret Combinations’: A Legal Analysis,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 49–73; and Wm. Revell Phillips, “Metals of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 36–43.

Mormon, Vogel makes it clear that he hasn't understood the very real limitations of population genetics—limitations that Michael Whiting and others have pointed out in great detail.¹⁵

Vogel also sees evidence in the Book of Mormon that Joseph was highly concerned about the election of Andrew Jackson, both for that president's "Masonic affiliation" and for "his party's secular approach to governing" (p. 199). Such a thesis fails entirely, however, to account for Joseph's decidedly pro-Jackson statements later in his life—unless, of course, we interpret them to mean that Joseph the secret Universalist was also a closet Jacksonian.¹⁶ In a similar vein, Vogel points out how so much of the Book of Mormon language is taken from the New Testament—ideas like a "suffering Messiah" or a "belief in resurrection" (pp. 182–83). In identifying these as anachronisms, however, Vogel is assuming that these ideas, and the language used to convey them, are original with New Testament writers. Such an assumption, however, is completely unwarranted. The ancient Near East and Mediterranean world was a very bookish place, and Paul and other New Testament writers were well-versed in the literature. They borrowed continually from earlier authors, just as authors today borrow almost unconsciously from Shakespeare or the Bible itself; Paul's well-known homily that "evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Corinthians 15:33), as just one example, is a direct quotation from the late fourth-century BC Greek author Menander.¹⁷ Were Vogel to invest a little time (twelve or fifteen years would be a good start) in learning a few ancient languages and in familiarizing himself with the literature of the ancient world, he would find that Paul and his companions actually had very little to say that was original. The idea of a suffering, dying, resurrecting god, for example, which Vogel sees originating in New Testament times, is

15. See the four-article series "The Book of Mormon at the Bar of DNA 'Evidence,'" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 4–51; and the five articles in *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 35–197. In this number, see Ryan Parr, "Missing the Boat to Ancient America . . . Just Plain Missing the Boat," pages 83–106.

16. Joseph characterizes Jackson's presidency as "the *acme* of American glory, liberty, and prosperity"; see "Joseph Smith's Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States," in *History of the Church*, 6:203.

17. Henry L. Crosby and John N. Schaeffer, *An Introduction to Greek* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1928), 48.

actually one of the oldest and most widespread motifs in the ancient Near East. Book of Mormon authors were heir to this vast body of religious literature every bit as much as biblical authors were and incorporated its themes and motifs into their writings as much as their biblical counterparts did—the result being the similarities between the Bible and Book of Mormon that Vogel is so quick to jot down to inelegant and transparent borrowing on Joseph’s part, but which more likely reflect both books’ common source in the ancient world. Nibley, again, has done more than anyone in identifying these sources common to both books, and the field continues to be a fruitful one.

And so it goes. Page after weary page, Vogel hammers away at Joseph Smith, yet in the end he reveals only his own lack of qualifications for so monumental a task as a writing a biography of such a figure. Our review has necessarily been incomplete; virtually every page cries for comment and correction, and a comprehensive review of all of Vogel’s claims would require a volume rivaling his own in size. What we have tried to do here is point out the very real problems with his assumptions and methods and illustrate them through a few examples. We could have used scores of other arguments he makes to illustrate our points just as easily, and if we’ve neglected to treat his handling of the timing of the first vision, his arguments surrounding the loss of the 116 pages, Joseph’s “modalist” ideas regarding the Godhead, or any one of a host of the book’s other microthemes, it is only for lack of time and space and not because they don’t lend themselves to precisely the same criticisms as those we’ve chosen to address explicitly. More talk show and tabloid journalism than scholarship, the book fails miserably both as history in general and biography in particular and will serve the instructor casting about for an illustration of how *not* to write sophisticated history far better than it will the individual seeking insight into the Prophet Joseph Smith. The former, indeed, will find it an unimaginably rich resource; the latter will come away with nothing.