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# The Case Against the Alleged Psychotic Joe Smith or One Hallucinating Jose, Imaginary or Real? by David R. Larsen\*

The Prophet Joel in the Bible declared that there would come a time when young men would see visions. Paul noted that in the latter days men would receive "strong delusion(s)." It appears that in those times, as today, there were many people who strongly believed that they had received visions from God; a few others had proclaimed themselves to be gods. People exhibiting these symptoms of withdrawal from reality, characterized in part by delusions, hallucinations and other disorganization of thought processes, we label as "psychotic."

One of the most renowned visionary cases of the last 200 years has been that of Joseph Smith, Jr., 1805-1844. He precipitated a movement which has taken his name and peculiar history to the four corners of the earth. However, a cursory examination of his story tends to reveal psychotic behavior, typified by apparent symptoms of paranoid type schizophrenia. His life was marked by turmoil, confusion and by a lack of decision-making ability which caused considerable anxiety, as reflected in the following quote:

*My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. (JS-H 1:9)*

This state of disorientation finally led to visions wherein he claimed to have both seen and heard God and angels telling of a special mission for him to perform, complete with don'ts, warnings and admonitions to strictly observe. Later he said a special power was given him by three biblical apostles, which enabled him to perform his special calling. He showed what may be called symptoms of "delusion of reference," (he said that he was told his name would be "both good and evil spoken of among all people,") and delusions of persecution, influence and grandeur as in the following excerpt:

*... how very strange it was that an obscure boy, of a little over fourteen years of age, and one too, who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor, should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling. (JS-H 1:23)*

In telling his own story, Joe Smith seems to have made a pretty good case for himself, that is, for his being committed as one hallucinating Jose. They say, "the truth or falsity of a story lies mainly in the details." So now that we have had a cursory review, let's examine some of the details.

Joseph Smith, Jr. claimed to be a prophet of God. Many people, however, may claim to be prophets of God these days, some with purported visions or delusions to support their claims, but what are the differences between a person who is psychotic and a true prophet of God? Are there any

differences, and which did Joe Smith have more of the symptoms of?

With regards to excitement, turmoil and confusion, the psychotic's is typically said to be caused by a mental filter failure in perception. Because of his mental/perception problem information enters his consciousness in fragments or great floods characterized by disorganization of thought and emotion with impaired reasoning ability. This is what creates his turmoil, confusion and intense anxiety.

The prophets also from time to time did get excited and anxious, but it was usually in response to the turmoil and confusion which existed in their sick societies outside, rather than as a result of their own faulty perception or thinking processes.

In comparison then, which was Joe Smith's mental excitement and confusion most similar to? Was it of internal or external origin? Well, there does seem to have been a great deal of religious excitement and controversy in his area at the time, and this external disharmony does seem to be the "great and incessant cry and tumult" to which he was referring. But would a true prophet have been indecisive and confused? No, but then he didn't claim to be a prophet at that time either. Nevertheless, let's still not rule out all internal mental factors.

How about Jose's hallucinations? Anyone would have to admit they were a bit unusual. Of course, true prophets had visions, too. In the book of Numbers 12:6 God is recorded as saying "... If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream." That is good Biblical support for a lot of psychotic reports. But how, if in any way, were the visions of prophets different from those of any run of the ward Jose hallucinator?

The hallucinations of the psychotic are typically bizarre, illogical and incomprehensible, as are their delusions. They are also generally quite threatening, or in response to imagined threats directed at the individual. The visions of a true prophet on the other hand are usually founded on or in accord with previous revelations to earlier prophets, and are based on facts of existing conditions or prophecies of the future which come to pass (their percentage of fulfillment is much higher than the 52% accepted for most modern seers). What they hear or see is very clear, specific and most generally concerned with other people rather than personal threats. Their recounts or warnings, again, are usually clear, concise, coherent and detailed, marked by internal integrity and in response to real problems.

In analyzing some of the recorded visions of Joseph Smith, Jr., we find them to be bizarre indeed. He said he saw bright lights, glorious beings, not just one but two Gods. Later he saw many other angels. He was said to have had in his possession a book of gold and ancient spectacles. He also saw other heavenly places and events in the future,

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which he later reported and prophesied about. They seem to be bizarre enough, but how illogical and incomprehensible were they? Which pattern do they fit?

Bright lights are occasionally seen by psychotics, but also accompanied biblical visions (Ezek. 1:28; Acts 9:3). I lack sufficient data on psychotics to compare the frequency of glorious beings in white having been seen, but in cases when hallucinations have involved communication with God, there has usually been just one God involved, as most Christians and Jews are monotheistic. Such was usually the case in biblical accounts of visions of God.

But Joe Smith, atypical of either group, says he saw "two personages in the form of men," with one referring to the other as his son, and it was the son not the Father who addressed Joseph. Although this story seems impossible to many theologians, and is likely unduplicated in mental case history, yet its details are not without parallel and support in biblical record. (See: Matthew 17:2,5; John 8:17-18; Acts 7:55-56; 1 Tim. 2:5).

Though unusual, the theophany story of Joseph Smith seems to be coherent, and in at least some accord with previous revelations to true prophets in the Bible. Yet, his story is not completely comprehensible as he noted that the persons who addressed him were of such a brightness and glory as to defy all description. Nevertheless, this narration, as well as later ones involving angels, apostles and prophets of old, appear coherent and in accord with previous Biblical revelations.

Although Smith's visions seem somewhat in accord with previous prophetic visions, that still doesn't make him a prophet devoid of delusions. Were the true biblical prophets devoid of delusions? Many definitely appeared to the people of their day not to have been.

Noah said God had spoken to him. He further was warned of an impending disaster which would wipe out the rest of the human race unless they followed his divine plan to save them—it does sound a bit psychotic. They thought he was crazy, until the presumed delusion turned out to be a deluge.

Then, of course, Moses may have seemed to think himself pretty important, too, challenging the Pharaoh of Egypt, but then he did put on an impressive show of power, before walking off with the entire labor force of Egypt.

Many of the prophets seemed to feel they were persecuted, but then many were. However, these symptoms along with alienation usually came later in their lives, having been precipitated by visions and revelations; but in the clinical psychotic the pattern is usually reversed with withdrawal coming first and hallucinations later. The overall picture is really quite opposite.

Finally, lets look again at Joe Smith's seeming delusions. He had definite feelings of being talked about and persecuted, even plotted against. However, the fact that he was mobbed, beaten, tarred and feathered, had a tooth chipped in a battle to force poison down him, spent over one year in jails awaiting trials, without convictions, was chased out of Missouri after other of his followers had been massacred under Governor Boggs' "Extermination Order," and was often under warrant for arrest, perhaps had something to do with his feelings of being persecuted. Then, too, the fact that he was ultimately mobbed and

murdered while in jail awaiting trial, also gives some support for his feelings of apprehension.

But, what evidence is there that he didn't bring this bizarre persecution on himself, by his crazy or obnoxious behavior? Perhaps the fact that in 52 court trials by law, he was never convicted and sentenced for a single crime, gives some cause for wonderment. We might even wonder as to the motives and even the mental health of his prosecutors. It seems more likely that they, rather than he, were suffering from some type of delusions. (2 Thess. 2:11-12)

What other factors then, caused this bitter persecution against him? One was the fact that he irritated other ministers by "draw(ing) away many of the best and brightest people of the churches," as Mrs. Palmer a non-LDS neighbor later stated. Another non-LDS neighbor, Thomas H. Taylor, pointed out a second cause for persecution against the "Mormons" and Joe Smith in particular:

The only trouble was they (Mormons) were ahead of the people; and the people, as in every such case, turned out to abuse them . . . Smith was always ready to exchange views with the best men they had. . . . Someway he knew more than they did, and it made them mad.

A third, and principle reason for their being driven out of Missouri, was because Smith and the "Mormons" were anti-slavery and the Missourians who were pro-slavery feared the growing "Mormon" population might sway the vote. So for these reasons and others, the plotting and persecution did indeed become more real than imaginary, though it must have seemed a nightmare for the Saints.

Well again we've barely skimmed the surface of Joseph Smith's personality, but in reviewing the symptoms of psychotic disorders we find, instead of characteristic withdrawal from reality and interpersonal relationships, a very gregarious Joseph, leading his loyal friends by the thousands, headlong through the vicissitudes of life. It seems that the more revelations he received the more sociable he became. He was a family man, had at least two wives, but was never divorced. He was always concerned with the conditions of his fellowmen and held several public offices, but although he was physically very strong and forceful he led his people not by fear, but by love, example and superior understanding.

How was Joseph's earlier life? One of his early neighbors, Orlando Saunders said, "they were the best family in the neighborhood." Incidentally, all of Joseph's family believed and followed him.

How was Joseph's emotional appropriateness? He appeared to be appropriately joyful as well as sad at times, as we all are; but if he was excessive in affect it would have been most obvious in his sense of humor.

Did he show any mental disorganization or lack of insight? I guess most all of us show a bit of that once in a while, but his revelations, rather than adding to the problems, gave him inner guidelines and amazing insight. The Saints, now 150 years later, still have the same basic organization and teachings as in Joseph's day, yet they are perhaps in some ways the most progressive denomination

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We've noted that Joseph Smith was quite dissimilar to the clinical model psychotic, but what evidence exists that he was a true, honest to God, prophet? First, we might examine his prophecies. Although some are yet to be fulfilled, many have already come to pass. For example, in 1832 he made a prophecy on wars wherein he foretold the coming of the Civil War, and even where it would begin. He spoke of the world wars, and the more recent black "rebellion," as well as future wars, present earthquakes, future famine and plagues. He, of course, also foretold the expansion of the church, it's setting in the Rockies and even foresaw and mapped out Salt Lake City, with its extra wide streets. He also foresaw his own death. To his friends it was just another day in court, hopefully to be vindicated once and for all, but Joseph said, after hugging his children and kissing his wife good-bye for the last time, "I go like a lamb to the slaughter. . . I shall not return alive."

In Exodus 34:29-30 it says that on occasion after speaking with the LORD, Moses' face "shone." This was also reported by entire congregations to have happened on occasion to Joseph, a pretty tough trick to duplicate.

As with the Bible, many of Joseph's writings and teachings recorded as scripture have since been backed up by recent discoveries. The Book of Mormon, an ancient American History book translated from the gold plates, has since been supported by a variety of findings in archeology, biology, history, geology and psychology.

While many biblical apostles and prophets often had to stand alone in their experiences, such was not always the case. Rather, the law was that "by the mouth of two or three witnesses shall all things be established." (Deut. 19:15; II Cor. 13:1) Joseph was not the only one in his day to see the LORD; at least 12 other special witnesses shared in the experience. At least one other person also saw, felt and heard ancient apostles and prophets. The most prominent of these special witnesses was Oliver Cowdery, a local school teacher who later left the church, or the church left him, but he never denied his previous testimony and later returned to the church. His last words confirmed what he had seen and heard. The gold plates were seen and felt by eleven others, and the Angel Moroni showed them to three of the most prominent and reputable men in the area, with the voice of the LORD declaring their contents. None of these men ever denied it, even though it caused them considerable hardship. Now perhaps Moroni was having nihilistic delusions, but no one could ever locate him again to check him out.

Prophets also have special power to perform miracles and healings. Joseph displayed much of the same, healing many, even raising men from their death beds. That he made it to 38 and accomplished what he did in that time with only 3 years of formal schooling, is in itself a miracle explicable only by the assessment that he was indeed a true prophet called by God.

Of course, one may continue to believe that Joseph Smith, Jr. was indeed psychotic despite the lack of foundation in reality; but, then if they maintained this belief despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, wouldn't they be manifesting some symptoms of delusions themselves?

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on earth, at least the fastest growing in America. The church continues to attract "many of the best and brightest people," or produce them. One insight very pertinent to psychology, may help reveal the cause. While most religions, and later social scientists, were teaching the innate depravity of man, Joseph Smith was teaching the more liberating doctrine of the initial innocence of man, the clean slate theory and the divine potential in man. Most psychologists don't yet teach much about the divine potential in man, but few still maintain the innate depravity line.

Did Joseph live a painfully limited life, as do most psychotics? It's more likely that Joseph lived a fuller life in his short 38 years than most men live in 80, past prophets included. Three examples might suffice. Before he died he had translated, or recorded, over 800 pages of new scripture, two-thirds as much as the entire Bible combined. Millions of copies of these scriptures have been sold, and still provide, with the Bible, the basic doctrine for millions of Mormons. Secondly, he organized a church based on the revelations he received, which by the time he died already had the fastest rate of growth of any religious movement in either America or Europe. Finally, following the Missouri persecution he directed the purchase of an area of swamp land on the banks of the Mississippi, and in 5 years engineered the development of Nauvoo, reported by outsiders as being the largest and most advanced city on the Western frontier.