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**Abstract** Review of *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (2004),  
by Dan Vogel.

## JOSEPH SMITH AND “INTERPRETIVE BIOGRAPHY”

Larry E. Morris

Several years ago, when I researched the translation of the Book of Mormon for a prominent professor at Brigham Young University, he recommended that I get Dan Vogel’s *Early Mormon Documents*—I believe two volumes were available at the time.<sup>1</sup> I was one step ahead of him because I already owned those volumes and had made good use of them. But since the other volumes had not been published yet, I searched far and wide for such documents as statements by Joseph and Hiel Lewis (cousins of Emma Hale Smith). This meant digging through archives (where you naturally spend half your time waiting), fussing with microfilm, and sometimes relying on friends for second- or third-generation photocopies. What I ended up with, of course, was a stack of papers that I had to organize and index myself (all the while suspecting that even my list of documents was incomplete).

As I continued this research project—and started others—I was always tremendously relieved when a new volume of *Early Mormon Documents* rolled off the press. Yes, I had managed to find poor copies of *some* of the Lewis material, but Dan Vogel had found it all, had

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Thanks to Louis Midgley, Shirley Ricks, and my son Isaac for their help with this review.

1. See Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003).

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

given me readable transcriptions, and had also provided background information and biographical details on the Lewises.<sup>2</sup>

Not to say that Vogel was always my first choice. If I were dealing with a Joseph Smith document, for instance, I went to Dean Jessee.<sup>3</sup> For help with Lucy Mack Smith's history, I went to Lavina Fielding Anderson.<sup>4</sup> Still, as I have researched early Mormon history for the past ten years, the *Early Mormon Documents* collection has been by far my most useful resource. It is hard enough to locate the documents and transcribe them, but Vogel really went the extra mile by providing valuable footnotes throughout. Admittedly, transcription and factual errors can be found here and there in the volumes, but errors can be found in virtually any collection of such size and scope. Dan Vogel has made a significant and lasting contribution to Mormon studies, and he deserves to be thanked for his bibliographic work. I sincerely appreciate his prodigious research. I have also had a positive experience with him personally. We met at a Mormon History Association conference, and I found him cordial and respectful.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the extent of Vogel's research and his obvious interests, it came as no surprise that he produced *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, a massive, heavily annotated study of Joseph Smith's life up to 1831. It also came as no surprise that reactions to the book have varied widely. As I look at Vogel's work and the controversy surrounding it, however, I am persuaded that the discussion must center on an assumption Vogel announces in his introduction. "I am convinced," he writes, "that it is impossible to write a meaningful biography of [Joseph] Smith without addressing his claims" (p. viii). Vogel apparently believes that the biographer must not only decide (among other things) whether Joseph Smith was really a prophet of God and

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2. See *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:299–321.

3. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989); and Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002).

4. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001).

5. As I see it, some have been reluctant to acknowledge Vogel's contribution because he is a nonbeliever.

whether the Book of Mormon is really an ancient record but must also integrate his or her conclusions into the narrative. This is exactly what Vogel does. I believe, however, that this crucial assumption is fundamentally flawed and, in fact, is undercut by his previous work in *Early Mormon Documents*.

### Criticizing the Sources

In *Early Mormon Documents*, Vogel has published more than 450 documents—a truly astonishing number. This he has done in a straightforward manner, stressing that they are important for the information they contain about people and events. He correctly points out that “not all historical documents are created equal,” and he offers a solid discussion of the significance of “firsthand testimony from unbiased eyewitnesses,” “the time-lapse between an observation and its recollection,” and “the character or reliability of witnesses.”<sup>6</sup> He also groups the documents into distinct categories: official or authorized histories; diaries; memoirs and reminiscences; personal letters; journal and newspaper reports; and civil, business, and ecclesiastical records.<sup>7</sup>

Vogel’s attitude toward source criticism serves him well in *Early Mormon Documents*. Take his treatment of Oliver Cowdery. Although some critics of the church have quoted a document entitled “Defense in a Rehearsal of My Grounds for Separating Myself from the Latter Day Saints” in an attempt to discredit Oliver—as well as Joseph—Vogel excludes it from *Early Mormon Documents* because it is “now considered by most scholars to have been forged by R. B. Neal in 1906.”<sup>8</sup>

I was also impressed with Vogel’s discussion of Oliver Cowdery’s reported testimony of the Book of Mormon in a court of law during the decade (1838–48) that he was out of the church. Vogel has carefully researched this item, and he includes eleven different statements (none of which comes from a firsthand source), concluding that “the claim

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6. *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:xiv–xv.

7. *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:xv–xvi.

8. *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:xiv.

[of Cowdery's testimony] rests on less than satisfactory grounds."<sup>9</sup> I agree entirely.

Again, Vogel proves himself to be a careful researcher when he discusses Barnes Frisbie's allegations that Joseph Smith's and Oliver Cowdery's fathers were involved in a money-digging fiasco known as the "Wood Scrape." Siding with Richard L. Anderson<sup>10</sup> rather than D. Michael Quinn,<sup>11</sup> Vogel agrees that Frisbie was "speculating beyond his data."<sup>12</sup>

Apparently continuing this emphasis, Vogel argues in *The Making of a Prophet* that his "discussion and conclusions are firmly grounded in the primary source documents"—just as they should be. He adds, however, that he "will consider the Book of Mormon and the texts of Smith's revelations as *primary sources* containing possible clues to his inner conflicts and state of mind" (pp. xvii, xviii, emphasis added). This assertion reveals that, as a biographer, Vogel has radically changed his methodology, for he has defined *primary sources* in a completely new way. First, he did not even include the Book of Mormon or the early revelations (such as Doctrine and Covenants sections 6, 7, 8, and 9) in his exhaustive list of more than 450 primary documents associated with early church history. Second, in *Early Mormon Documents* he took a *literal* approach to affidavits, interviews, letters, census records, road lists, receipts, and a host of other records, assuming that these documents both say what they mean and mean what they say (while properly acknowledging that that does not necessarily make them accurate). But now he has shifted to a *figurative* stance, where statements about Lehi or King Noah, for example, might mean something entirely different. What are we to make of all this?

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9. *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:468.

10. Richard L. Anderson, "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Seeking," *BYU Studies* 24/4 (1984): 521–24.

11. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, rev. and enlarged (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 34–36, 122–33.

12. *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:599.

## Vogel's View of the Historian's Task

Perhaps anticipating questions about his methodology, Vogel addresses this issue in the introduction to *The Making of a Prophet*.<sup>13</sup> “I believe,” he writes, “we must address what Jan Shippo, non-Mormon historian of the LDS experience, once termed the ‘prophet puzzle’ if we ever hope to understand Smith and the church he founded. . . . Shippo called for a more fully integrated view of Smith, one allowing for, even encouraging, the complex spectrum of human personality” (pp. vii–viii).<sup>14</sup>

Vogel also notes that “no biographer is completely free of bias. As is no doubt apparent, my inclination is to interpret any claim of the paranormal—precognition, clairvoyance, telekinesis, telepathy—as delusion or fraud. I do not claim that the supernatural does not exist, for it is impossible to prove a negative. I maintain only that the evidence upon which such claims rest is unconvincing to me” (p. xii).

Vogel eventually launches into a discussion of methodology:

Taking a cue from Robert F. Berkhofer's 1969 book, *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis*,<sup>15</sup> some writers have suggested that historians should not attempt to evaluate Smith's supernatural experiences but instead “try to understand [such] experiences in the way in which the actors themselves understood them.”<sup>16</sup> Reflecting this approach in his 1984 biography of Smith,

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13. Throughout the rest of this review, I frequently include the text of endnotes with quoted material, allowing the authors to more fully speak for themselves and also allowing readers to see which works are being quoted. The actual text of these quoted notes is enclosed by curly brackets, { }.

14. {Jan Shippo, “The Prophet Puzzle: Suggestions Leading toward a More Comprehensive Interpretation of Joseph Smith,” in *The Prophet Puzzle: Interpretive Essays on Joseph Smith*, ed. Bryan Waterman (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 44. As early as 1943, Dale Morgan recognized that Smith could not be explained in simple black or white terms and called for a more integrated view of his motives and personality (see John Philip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986], 44).}

15. {Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York: Free Press, 1969).}

16. {See, e.g., Thomas Alexander, “The Place of Joseph Smith in the Development of American Religion: A Historiographical Inquiry,” *Journal of Mormon History* 5 (1978):

Richard L. Bushman wrote: “My method has been to relate events as the participants themselves experienced them. . . . Insofar as the revelations were a reality to them, I have treated them as real in this narrative.”<sup>17</sup> While there is value to such a method, I am reluctant to dispense with critical tools and become a storyteller or narrator of the supernatural. I, too, want to understand Smith on his own terms, but I would like to be able to explain him.

The suggestion that historians simply “relate events as the participants themselves experienced them” oversimplifies Berkhofer’s thesis and results in a methodological reductionism that assumes the historical record is both factual and accurate. Berkhofer knew well that the record of an event cannot be taken at face value because accounts are so often tainted by a recorder’s subjective beliefs. The historian’s task is to determine, as best he or she can, what really happened. Berkhofer was not dealing with reports of supernatural events but with more mundane human behavior. Even so, when Smith fails to mention foundational visions until years after the event and gives conflicting and anachronistic accounts of them, how certain can one be that he relates events as he experienced them at the time?

Even if we were to accept the idea that testimony regarding supernatural phenomena is reliable, we would still be under no obligation to uncritically embrace the witnesses’ interpretations of those experiences. What Berkhofer did in 1969 was to open the door to psychology and sociology, not to close the door on the humanistic sciences. Historians do well to narrate the Salem witch trials of 1692 “as the participants themselves experienced them”—complete with accounts of paranormal phenomena, demonic possession, etc.—but they

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17; Klaus Hansen, “Jan Shippo and the Mormon Tradition,” *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 136; and George D. Smith, editor’s introduction, *Faithful History: Essays on Writing Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), ix.}

17. {Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 3.}

are also right to make a case for mass hysteria, for example.<sup>18</sup> Simply put, a researcher is not limited in his or her analysis by the subjective view of the participant or even the work of past generations. Often, succeeding generations find additional sources and better tools with which to assess an event beyond what the participants themselves assumed.

Arguing that skeptics like me are victims of their own “naturalistic assumptions” diverts attention from the fact that there is simply no reliable proof for the existence of the supernatural. Naturalism is part of our everyday experience; supernaturalism is not.<sup>19</sup> The burden of proof rests with those making supernatural claims, and until such claims are proven “beyond a reasonable doubt,” one is justified in approaching such claims skeptically. (pp. xv–xvi, brackets and ellipses in original)

“In writing this biography,” Vogel adds on the next page, “I did not want to provide a simple chronological narrative of Smith’s early life. Rather, I intended to consider the psychological implications of Smith’s actions and beliefs and get as close to the man as possible. Thus, I have written an interpretive biography of an emotional and intellectual life” (p. xvii).

Vogel has touched on a number of key issues. The portions of his introduction reproduced above (and I have quoted him at length in an attempt to let him speak for himself) show what a multitude of controversial decisions are involved in the writing of history, particularly Mormon history. I would like to deal with several of these issues.

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18. {Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem* (New York: Braziller, 1969).}

19. {At heart, I am a rationalist and naturalist. I believe that the physical universe follows natural law, that it does not behave in supernatural or contradictory ways, that it functions without supernatural forces, and that it is unnecessary to go outside nature to explain what takes place within it. In an attempt to replace a rational conception of the universe with one that includes magic, miracles, etc., some writers appeal to quantum mechanics and the seemingly inexplicable behavior of subatomic particles. However, to my mind, such appeals are unconvincing. As a possible corrective, see Martin Gardner, “Parapsychology and Quantum Mechanics,” in Paul Kurtz, *A Skeptic’s Handbook of Parapsychology* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), 585–98.}

### An “Integrated View” of Joseph Smith

Referring to Jan Shippo’s oft-quoted essay “The Prophet Puzzle,”<sup>20</sup> Vogel, like Shippo, calls for a more fully integrated view of Joseph Smith. And what does Shippo mean by this? She says, for example, that the “Dogberry, Bennett, and Hurlbut and Howe reports of the way the people of Palmyra perceived the prophet are crucial to the development of a complete religious profile of Joseph Smith.”<sup>21</sup> She also maintains that a proper chronology of Joseph Smith’s life will include both his visions and his treasure-seeking activities and that our “perspective must be lengthened through a consideration of the prophet in the context of the social, political, economic, and theological milieu from which he came.”<sup>22</sup>

When Vogel says it is necessary to “address” the prophet puzzle to understand Joseph Smith, he apparently means that one must decide whether or not to believe Joseph’s claims. That is not exactly what Shippo says, however. Rather, when she wrote that essay, she was interested in accounting for what is found in the sources both friendly and hostile to Joseph Smith, arriving at “a picture of the prophet and an account of the foundations of the Mormon faith which will be convincing to both *tough* minds, which demand empirical facts, and *tender* minds, comfortable in the presence of leaps of faith.”<sup>23</sup> I understand Shippo’s point (although I would like to engage her in a conversation about what “empirical facts” are). Further, I believe the book that best offers an “integrated view” of Joseph Smith and is most convincing to both tough and tender minds is Richard Bushman’s *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*,<sup>24</sup> not *The Making of a Prophet*, which is likely to leave the tender-minded, as well as even some tough-minded, souls aghast.

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20. Shippo, “Prophet Puzzle,” 25–47.

21. Shippo, “Prophet Puzzle,” 36.

22. Shippo, “Prophet Puzzle,” 28.

23. Shippo, “Prophet Puzzle,” 28–29, emphasis in original.

24. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

## That “Noble Dream”

When Vogel says the “historian’s task is to determine, as best he or she can, what really happened,” he seems to be saying that historians should be objective, or that the history they write should be objective. And what does *that* mean? As Peter Novick points out, the notion of “historical objectivity” is “not a single idea, but rather a sprawling collection of assumptions, attitudes, aspirations, and antipathies,” including

a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are “found,” not “made.” Though successive generations of historians might, as their perspectives shifted, attribute different significance to events in the past, the meaning of those events was unchanging.

The objective historian’s role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge; it must never degenerate into that of advocate or, even worse, propagandist. The historian’s conclusions are expected to display the standard judicial qualities of balance and evenhandedness.<sup>25</sup>

This idea of objectivity—with strong roots, at least for Americans, in the writings of the German historian Leopold von Ranke—has had

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25. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1–2. Reviewer Ann Wilson calls *That Noble Dream* an “elegantly written, wide-ranging study” in which “Peter Novick explores the ways that American historians have constructed, modified, defended, and challenged the idea of objectivity since the establishment of professional historical practice over one hundred years ago.” Review of *That Noble Dream* at [userwww.sfsu.edu/~epf/2002/wilson\\_novick.html](http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~epf/2002/wilson_novick.html) (accessed 15 March 2006). For a discussion of Novick’s book in the context of Mormon history, see Louis Midgley, “The Myth of Objectivity: Some Lessons for Latter-day Saints,” *Sunstone* 14/4 (1990): 54–56.

enormous influence in the writing of history. “When Ranke in the 1830s,” writes E. H. Carr, a prominent historian of the mid-twentieth century, “in legitimate protest against moralizing history, remarked that the task of the historian was ‘simply to show how it really was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen* [war]),’ this not very profound aphorism had an astonishing success.”<sup>26</sup> Such statements, for instance, as “let the facts speak for themselves” or “follow the evidence where it leads” are simply different ways of saying that historians ought to be objective.

Take a well-known statement by B. H. Roberts on the writing of Mormon history:

It is always a difficult task to hold the scales of justice at even balance when weighing the deeds of men. It becomes doubly more so when dealing with men engaged in a movement that one believes had its origin with God, and that its leaders on occasion act under the inspiration of God. Under such conditions to so state events as to be historically exact, and yet, on the other hand, so treat the course of events as not to destroy faith in these men, nor in their work, becomes a task of supreme delicacy; and one that tries the soul and the skill of the historian. The only way such a task can be accomplished, in the judgment of the writer, is to *frankly state events as they occurred*, in full consideration of all related circumstances, allowing the line of condemnation or of justification to fall where it may; being confident that in the sum of things justice will follow truth; and God will be glorified in his work, no matter what may befall individuals, or groups of individuals.<sup>27</sup>

More recently (in the same essay quoted earlier), Shipps wrote: “The entire project must be approached with an open mind, a generous spirit, and a determination to *follow the evidence* that appeals to reason

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26. E. H. Carr, *What Is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures Delivered in the University of Cambridge, January–March 1961* (Houndmills, Engl.: Macmillan, 1961), 3.

27. *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 1:vi–vii, emphasis added.

from whatever source it comes, wherever it leads.”<sup>28</sup> Taking the negative side, Quinn said that one of the “seven deadly sins” of traditional Mormon history is hesitating “to *follow the evidence* to ‘revisionist’ interpretations that [run] counter to ‘traditional’ assumptions.”<sup>29</sup>

This notion of “stating events as they occurred” or “following the evidence where it leads” has strong appeal. It seems the proper way to do history. I believe it is particularly influential because it resonates with ideas found in other areas of life. One of the definitions of the adjective *objective* is “expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or *interpretations*.”<sup>30</sup> Being objective certainly seems both sound and possible. Students, for example, want their instructors to be objective when grading papers. Our culture has also come to place a high value on “objectivity” in both the media and the courtroom. We expect reporters to set aside their own feelings, get at the truth, and “tell it like it is” (well illustrated by former CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite’s “and that’s the way it is” at the close of his evening news broadcasts). Likewise, judges are expected to be “impartial” or “unbiased.”

But the problem is, of course, that the façade of objectivity starts to crumble when you look at it closely. Students may want their papers graded “objectively,” but what does that really mean? The things that are most objective—most easily agreed upon by “impartial” observers—are also the kinds of things likely to be least meaningful to the student, such as the basic rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. (But get copyeditors together, and even this so-called objectivity will evaporate.) As soon as the instructor comments on the more important aspects of a paper, such as its coherence or credibility, he or she has seemingly stepped into a much more “subjective” realm, relying less on rules that can be explicitly spelled out. Does the student really want objectivity? (If so, designing all tests and papers so they can be graded by a computer might be the answer. Better yet, use both computer instruction and

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28. Shipps, “Prophet Puzzle,” 28, emphasis added.

29. D. Michael Quinn, ed., *The New Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), viii, emphasis added.

30. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., emphasis added.

computer grading and eliminate human elements altogether. Then find a way to eliminate software programmers, etc.)

Similarly, “objective” hardly describes what takes place in either the newsroom or the courtroom. Television stations and newspapers are first of all owned by groups or individuals who ultimately decide what is broadcast or printed. Could a reporter ever be completely objective when doing a story concerning the personal life of the owner or publisher? Second, ratings and sales obviously play a key role in what stories are presented and how they are presented. Third, those involved in an incident later reported in the news often see the coverage not as objective but rather as slanted and incomplete. As for the courtroom, the notion that facts or conditions can be dealt with in that setting without interpretation is laughable. Interpreting is exactly what a judge is supposed to do (such as deciding what can and cannot be introduced as evidence). Lawyers fully expect the judge to be “biased” by the interpretations of previous judges, or case law, and those judges in turn were influenced by earlier judges, making the process anything but objective.

“Objective history” runs into the same kind of problems. From the minute I start “doing” history, I face one decision after another and naturally make those decisions based on previous experience, aptitudes, personal preferences, and so on (in other words, what might be called *subjective* factors). If I decide to write a book on the early U.S. fur trade, I have already chosen a book rather than an article, the U.S. rather than Canada, the fur trade rather than the liquor trade, and early rather than late. I have also begun to formulate some kind of story, or plot, in my mind. I continue with an amazing array of personal decisions—deciding whether to do research at the Missouri Historical Society, the National Archives, or both (and so on). Next I frame certain questions rather than others, focus on certain individuals rather than others, use certain sources rather than others, and quote certain documents (and certain sections of those documents) rather than others, all the while refining and reshaping my plot. If being objective means dealing with historical facts or conditions without personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations, then I am not

being objective. Quite the opposite—I am making personal interpretations at every step along the way. (It is not even clear what *objective* would mean at this point.)

That is not all. Notions like “stating events as they occurred,” “following the evidence,” or “letting the facts speak for themselves”—which no doubt sounded fair and noble at first glance—are suddenly sounding hollow. In the case of a violent conflict between Blackfoot Indians and trappers in Montana in 1810, for example, what in the world is the event “as it occurred”? Blackfoot oral tradition may see the event one way while witnesses Thomas James (a young, hired trapper) and Pierre Menard (a seasoned fur-company partner) see it a second and third way. I must somehow construct my own version, using my words, my interpretations, and my plot. (And even if only one account of a given event is available in the primary documents, I will be asking about the date of composition, the reliability of the recorder, and any other number of questions, and modifying my story in the process.) As for “evidence” or even “facts,” these do not come prepackaged and labeled for me—I am the one who decides what the facts are and which ones are significant enough to count as evidence.

“We have, in recent years,” writes Yale University history professor John Lewis Gaddis, “embraced postmodernist insights about the relative character of all historical judgments—the inseparability of the observer from that which is being observed—although some of us feel we’ve known this all along.”<sup>31</sup> Keith Jenkins, lecturer at the Chichester Institute of Higher Education in England, goes even further when he says that

no matter how verifiable, how widely acceptable or checkable, history remains inevitably a personal construct, a manifestation of the historian’s perspective as a “narrator.” Unlike direct memory (itself suspect) history relies on someone else’s eyes and voice; we see through an interpreter who stands between past events and our readings of them. Of course, as Lowenthal

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31. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9–10.

says, written history “in practice” cuts down the historian’s logical freedom to write anything by allowing the reader access to his/her sources, but the historian’s viewpoint and predilections still shape the choice of historical materials, and our own personal constructs determine what we make of them. . . .

So far I have argued that history is a shifting discourse constructed by historians and that from the existence of the past no one reading is entailed; change the gaze, shift the perspective and new readings appear. Yet although historians know all this, most seem to studiously ignore it and strive for objectivity and truth nevertheless.<sup>32</sup>

### Telling a Story the Best You Can

So how does this discussion of objectivity relate to Vogel? First, I believe it shows that his statement that the “historian’s task is to determine, as best he or she can, what really happened” is ill-conceived (even though it sounds perfectly good). The past is gone forever, and whether we have access to “what really happened”—or whether such a phrase actually even means anything—is questionable.

Second, history involves interpretation from start to finish. When a figure in the past creates a so-called primary document by recording an experience, he or she, in the act of recording it, has already interpreted the experience (not to mention the interpretation that took place when he or she experienced the event itself). The historian again interprets when deciding whether or not to use a document (and, if so,

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32. Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991), 12, 13–14. As if to illustrate Jenkins’s point, Robert Remini, whom one must assume is well aware of postmodernist trends, introduces his biography of Joseph Smith as follows: “As a historian I have tried to be as objective as possible in narrating [Joseph Smith’s] life and work.” Remini, *Joseph Smith* (New York: Viking, 2002), x. Writing twenty years ago, Thomas G. Alexander, a vocal proponent of “New Mormon History,” claimed that he knew “of no historicist who believes that objectivity is anything more than a sympathetic attempt to understand objects outside his or her own mind, including the ideas of others.” Alexander, “Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian’s Perspective,” *Dialogue* 19/3 (1986): 38–39. I believe, however, that some “historicists” mean something more than that by objectivity. I would also ask if these objects “outside our own minds” are static and somehow capable of being understood without personal interpretation.

how much). And the reader interprets when reading the narrative (by imagining the scene in a certain way, emphasizing certain details and deemphasizing others, and so on).

What then, is the historian's task? Gaddis offers this fascinating anecdote about the process of writing history:

Some years ago I asked the great global historian William H. McNeill to explain his method of writing history to a group of social, physical, and biological scientists attending a conference I'd organized. He at first resisted doing this, claiming that he had no particular method. When pressed, though, he described it as follows:

I get curious about a problem and start reading up on it. What I read causes me to redefine the problem. Redefining the problem causes me to shift the direction of what I'm reading. That in turn further reshapes the problem, which further redirects the reading. I go back and forth like this until it feels right, then I write it up and ship it off to the publisher.

McNeill's presentation elicited expressions of disappointment, even derision, from the economists, sociologists, and political scientists present. "That's not a method," several of them exclaimed. "It's not parsimonious, it doesn't distinguish between independent and dependent variables, it hopelessly confuses induction and deduction." But then there came a deep voice from the back of the room. "Yes, it is," it growled. "That's exactly how we do physics!"<sup>33</sup>

As Gaddis himself points out, however, such sentiments do not leave us anchorless:

Consider the meteorologist Lewis Richardson's famous question: how long is the coastline of Britain? The answer is that there is no answer—it depends. Are you measuring in miles,

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33. Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 48.

meters, or microns? The result will differ in each instance, and not just as a consequence of converting from one unit of measurement to another. For the further down you go in the scale of measurement, the more irregularities of coastline you'll pick up, so that the length will expand or contract in relation to the manner in which you're measuring it. . . .

At the same time, though . . . we'd be most unwise to conclude from this, as a postmodernist might, that Britain is not actually there.<sup>34</sup>

Gaddis's last point can hardly be overemphasized. Some postmodernists head in the direction of claiming Britain is not there. Although Jenkins, for example, makes good points about history being a personal construct, he goes quite a bit further than that, ironically describing relativism in absolute terms. "Today," he writes, "we know of *no* foundations for Platonic absolutes. . . . Truth is a self-referencing figure of speech, *incapable* of accessing the phenomenal world. . . . I think people in the past were very different to us in the meanings they gave to their world, and that *any* reading on to them of a constancy of human nature type, of whatever kind, is *without foundation*."<sup>35</sup>

As I see it, the danger is that we can slip into nihilism: "the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated."<sup>36</sup> I agree with Gaddis, however, that Britain is still there, even if we recognize that our descriptions are indeed dependent upon both interpretation and explanation.

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34. Gaddis, *Landscape of History*, 27–28, 123.

35. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, 29, 29–30, 46, emphasis added.

36. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at [www.iep.utm.edu/n/nihilism.htm](http://www.iep.utm.edu/n/nihilism.htm) (accessed 25 April 2006). I believe that many of the so-called postmodern arguments are quite enlightening. But one must ask: Do deconstructions apply to the postmodern arguments themselves? If so, what is the meaning of such arguments? Some of these authors, for example, seem to be experts at deconstructing language itself and showing how relative meaning is. But if that is so, why are they publishing books? One can easily get caught in the endless cycle of deconstructing a text, only to deconstruct the deconstruction, ad infinitum, so that nothing ever means anything, kind of like the person who asks what a word means, then asks what the definition means, and then what the definition of the definition means.

So what stops history from slipping into what Jenkins calls “hapless relativism,” where one asks, “if [history] seems just interpretation and nobody really knows, then why bother doing it? If it is all relative what is the point?”<sup>37</sup> I believe my colleague Louis Midgley offered an excellent answer to this question when he suggested to me that historians must tell a story the best they can using the available texts. I like this simple explanation, and I think both parts of it—the story and the texts—offer grounding for evaluating histories. Yes, each historian tells a different story, but the lack of a single, absolute story (even as an ideal) hardly means that one story is as good as another (any more than the lack of an absolute map means that any map will do or that there is no coastline at all). So how does the reader evaluate historical accounts? By looking at how the author tells the story and how he or she uses the texts, or primary documents.

Philosophers, literary theorists, and historiographers have struggled over the nature of history and debated whether it is an art, a science, or something else.<sup>38</sup> One aspect of this discussion I find quite intriguing deals with the correlation between fiction and history. “Against the positivist conception of the historical fact,” writes Paul Ricoeur, “more recent epistemology emphasizes the ‘imaginative reconstruction’ which characterizes the work of the historian.”<sup>39</sup> “Fiction’s persuasive force,” adds Nancy F. Partner,

its “sense of reality,” results from an author’s ability to offer the reader a suggestive array of fictional elements that satisfy the requirements of possible reality in the shared world of

37. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, 25.

38. To really get a handle on the question “What is history?” it seems one would have to read philosophers like Heidegger, Husserl, Gadamer, and Habermas; literary theorists like Ricoeur, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard; and historiographers like Carr, Collingwood, Elton, White, Jenkins, and Novick. If that is true, I do not think many people have a handle on the question, although Alan Goff might be one of them; see Goff’s “Uncritical Theory and Thin Description: The Resistance to History,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7/1 (1995): 170–207; and Goff, “Dan Vogel’s Family Romance and the Book of Mormon as Smith Family Allegory,” *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 321–400.

39. Paul Ricoeur, “The Narrative Function,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 289, cited in Goff, “Uncritical Theory,” 184.

writer and reader. The historian, using techniques that differ only a little from those of the novelist, has to persuade the reader not only of the *possible* reality of his array of verbal elements, but that those on display in the text are “guaranteed” by their relation (reference, logical inference) to things outside the text, and thus the result is a real mimesis.<sup>40</sup>

The distinction between “fiction” and “nonfiction” has traditionally implied some kind of wide gulf between the two. I suspect that “objective historians” emphasized this distinction and tried hard to separate themselves from novelists and align themselves at least with the so-called “science” of social scientists. But historians and writers of fiction have something crucial in common because they both use *narratives*, while science does not seem to do so.<sup>41</sup> The historian and the novelist both employ plots and fashion stories. The Greek *mimesis*, normally translated as “imitation,” can also be rendered as “make-believe.” As soon as he or she moves from analyzing sources to casting a narrative, the historian has begun to make up a story, to create his or her own plot, just as one would if fashioning fiction. In much the same way, the writer of a memoir has made up a story. Ricoeur is right when he says that “the references of empirical narrative and fictional narrative *cross upon* . . . historicity or the historical condition of man.”<sup>42</sup>

I believe the links between history and fiction are so fundamental that we should abandon the outdated fiction/nonfiction distinction (perhaps replacing it with narrative/exposition) and that we should judge “empirical” and “fictional” narratives largely by the same standards:

- character (Can we relate to and understand the characters? Do they have reasons for what they do?)
- plot (Can we see why one thing leads to another?)

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40. Nancy F. Partner, “Making Up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History,” *Spectrum* 61 (1986): 97, emphasis in original, cited in Goff, “Uncritical Theory,” 186.

41. Social scientists sometimes tell stories (such as case studies), but these are peripheral and supplementary to studies that presumably are distinctly nonnarrative.

42. Ricoeur, “Narrative Function,” 289, cited in Goff, “Uncritical Theory,” 183, emphasis in original.

- conflict (Does the author create tension and interest by dramatizing the struggle of opposing forces?)
- description (Does the author bring the story alive through the use of colorful and precise details?)<sup>43</sup>

All these help us decide if historians have told a story “the best they can.”

The second half of the equation is “using the texts,” or drawing on primary documents. Put simply, no text means no history. We tend to think of these sources as being substantial and authoritative, even though we acknowledge that they are incomplete. I think Jenkins is on the right track, however, when he calls the primary documents *traces*, which strikes me as a sound description. As genealogists can tell you, the record of the past is much more random, even willy-nilly—make that helter-skelter—than systematic. The people of the past had an infinite number of reasons for either recording or not recording various events. Like us, they sometimes forgot or neglected to record matters they considered important, such as the births of children, while noting items that now seem insignificant, such as train schedules. Not surprisingly, tax and financial records now considered rather mundane tended to be preserved while many a family memoir that would now be considered priceless perished.

Again, whether or not a given record survives is a matter of chance. The fact that someone in the past thought an event important, recorded it, and carefully preserved that record in no way guarantees its survival (a rather disconcerting thought to those of us who assume we can ensure the life of certain records). That person’s descendants may lose the record or throw it in the trash heap; a new government may destroy the record for political reasons (or a family member for personal reasons); the ink or lead may fade (or the microfilm may turn brittle and break); the paper may disintegrate or be devoured by insects or rats (or the hard disk may crash); water may seep into the container holding the record (such as the cornerstone of a building) and damage it. As any

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43. These similarities have not escaped publishers, who will often promote a history by proclaiming that “it reads like a novel.”

genealogist can tell you, there is no end to the ways in which records can be lost or destroyed, including mishandling, misdating, misfiling, and mistranscribing by clerks and scribes. But the great bane of us genealogists is fire. We can all tell long and detailed stories of making good headway in our research only to be halted by the notation “courthouse records destroyed by fire.”<sup>44</sup>

This, then, is the state of the texts—they are random and haphazard and allow us, at best, only a *glimpse* of the past. In addition, they are not static pieces of evidence containing one and only one meaning. Rather, they have to be interpreted.<sup>45</sup> This makes it that much more important for historians to treat the traces of the past responsibly. So, if character, plot, conflict, and description are standards for evaluating how well the historian tells the story, what is the standard for evaluating the historian’s use of the texts? For what might be called academic history (a category that presumably includes the writings of Bushman, Givens, Vogel, and many others), I believe the most appropriate question is whether the historian does his or her best to deal with the texts honestly and fairly.<sup>46</sup>

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44. Virtually all of the 1890 U.S. census, a crucial record because of the great numbers of immigrants who entered the country during the previous decade, was lost through two different fires twenty-five years apart and by government foul-ups.

45. I would not claim with prominent British historian Geoffrey Rudolph Elton that the primary documents speak for themselves. At the same time, however, I disagree with Jenkins, who describes the documents as “absolutely mute,” which strikes me as an absurd claim. It makes more sense to say that texts speak but require interpretation or “translation” by the historian. The reader in turn must interpret the historian. As with every other question involving history, questions related to the sources are complex; they are answered quite differently by different people.

46. The recent trend has been to judge all forms of history by academic standards, but that won’t do. I do not believe, for example, that I am obligated to apply the same standards in compiling a family history as I am in preparing an article on the fur trade for an academic journal. If I discover that my grandfather made a serious mistake as a young man but later rectified it and went on to live an honorable life, I am not obligated to mention that mistake. True, I may decide to do so, but that all depends on the purpose and methodology I establish for the family history. If I write an autobiography, am I obligated to confess to and describe in detail every foolish mistake or harmful thing I ever did? I don’t think so. (And again, I will no doubt record things differently depending on whether I am writing a memoir for my children or a bestseller for Random House [not that they have offered me a contract recently].) In Sunday School manuals intended to strengthen the faith of members, is the church obligated to include affidavits hostile to

Is there an objective way to answer this question? Certainly not. I don't believe in objectivity. But that does not mean we are left without maps (or without a coastline). Groups of people still find principles they can agree on, allowing for what some call intersubjectivity. Many contemporary historians, for example, agree on such guidelines as (1) thorough research that attempts to account for all relevant texts; (2) emphasis on texts that are firsthand and early (as opposed to those that are secondhand or late); (3) emphasis on primary rather than secondary sources; (4) cross-referencing of sources to see which corroborate or contradict each other; and (5) accuracy in transcribing and referencing textual materials.<sup>47</sup>

Further, certain practices don't seem sound. For example, I could advance a thesis about Joseph Smith's involvement in treasure seeking. Then I quote a statement from one of Joseph's neighbors that apparently supports my thesis. So far, so good. But let's also suppose my quotation includes an ellipsis and that the excluded material runs counter to my thesis. That is clearly dishonest, just as it would be dishonest to fail to inform the reader of entire texts containing language that runs counter to my thesis. On the other hand, it does not seem fair if I spend all my time researching sources friendly to Joseph Smith and ignore hostile sources. Here is another valuable standard: Is the historian's approach to texts consistent? This implies that the historian describe that methodology and explain the rationale behind various choices, such as choosing one source over another.

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Joseph Smith from the likes of Willard Chase and Peter Ingersoll merely for the sake of doing thorough research? No, because that is expressly *not* the church's purpose. Does that give the church carte blanche to do history any old way it pleases? Of course not. Rather, the individual, group, or institution writing a history is obligated to establish careful and thoughtful principles for their history and consistently follow those principles. Even within the confines of my family history, there are ways that I can be fair or unfair, honest or dishonest. For a good examination of various traditions in religious historiography, see David B. Honey and Daniel C. Peterson, "Advocacy and Inquiry in the Writing of Latter-day Saint History," *BYU Studies* 31/2 (1991): 139–79.

47. Applying these standards is easier said than done. How does the reader (or the historian, for that matter), for instance, know when a reasonable effort has been made to account for all relevant texts? Which is better—a late firsthand or early secondhand source? Also, these standards involve assumptions that can certainly be argued. Why is early necessarily better than late? Doesn't it depend entirely on particular circumstances?

Therefore, although the primary sources of history are not what we assumed them to be, and although doing and reading history involves much more “subjective” interpretation than we imagined, we can still get our bearings and find ways to evaluate a historian’s use of the sources.

### The Question of Bias

In a response to a review of his book, Vogel seems to modify his views on objectivity. “True,” he writes, speaking of his own book, “it is Vogel’s Joseph Smith. But it’s also Bushman’s Joseph Smith, Brodie’s Joseph Smith, Donna Hill’s Joseph Smith, and Robert Remini’s Joseph Smith. There is no getting around it. A biographer can try to hide behind neutral language, but he is always present, even when quoting his subject.”<sup>48</sup> I agree. It is not a question of who is biased and who is not. Everyone is biased. This is simply to say that we all have beliefs and outlooks that influence the way we interpret and tell stories about the past. Every historian brings a preunderstanding of Joseph Smith to his or her work. I do not hold that Vogel’s beliefs disqualify him from doing Mormon history.<sup>49</sup> I do, however, have serious reservations

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48. Dan Vogel, “Seeing through the Hedges: A Response to Andrew H. and Dawson W. Hedges,” at [www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/making2.html](http://www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/making2.html) (accessed 30 March 2006). Vogel himself does not try to hide behind neutral language.

49. Just as I believe that Vogel’s beliefs neither qualify nor disqualify him as a historian, I also believe that his academic credentials (or lack thereof) are not relevant. I am therefore not comfortable with Andrew and Dawson Hedges’ apparent attempt to discredit Vogel because he does not have a graduate degree in history. They write, “Just as one must train in formal programs for several years in a formal setting to be a good lawyer or doctor, so one must train for several years in a formal setting to be a good historian.” Andrew H. Hedges and Dawson W. Hedges, “No, Dan, That’s Still Not History,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 208 n. 2. I find this claim problematic for several reasons. First, it is not clear what “several years” means, nor is it clear if a degree in history is required or if a degree in another field will do. Second, the comparison to law and medicine strikes me as a false analogy. Law and medical students are not legally allowed to practice their crafts in the United States until they receive an advanced degree and pass certain tests. Therefore, we have no way of knowing whether a nongraduate could be a good doctor or lawyer (I suspect it is entirely possible). Those interested in history, on the other hand, are quite free to “do” history by writing articles and books. We therefore have perfect opportunity to judge their ability by their writings. Also, I believe one can raise counterexamples to the Hedges’ claim by pointing out a number of good historians (at BYU and elsewhere)

about Vogel's statement that while "there is value to such a method [of relating events as the participants themselves experienced them], I am reluctant to dispense with critical tools and become a storyteller or narrator of the supernatural."

This is precisely where Vogel makes a serious mistake. First of all, narrating events as the participants reported them in no way means that the author abandons critical tools. Quite the opposite: a careful narration requires historians to bring all of their critical tools to bear. Just as Vogel applies source criticism in his selection and annotation of early Mormon documents, the biographer of Joseph Smith must also apply similar criticism in deciding whether and how much to rely on various documents, asking such questions as these: Was the author of the document a first- or secondhand (or hearsay) witness? What do we know about that person's reliability? When was the document written? Do other sources either corroborate or contradict this source? Second, narrating events as the witnesses reported them does not mean the historian believes or agrees with those accounts, thus becoming a "narrator of the supernatural." Vogel seems particularly concerned with this, but I don't understand why. After all, he knows the sources as well as anyone, and he can construct a narrative based on the documents. As a reader, this helps me understand the people and events being discussed. But I do not assume that Vogel (or any other historian) agrees with the claims made in the sources.

Again, Vogel writes, "I, too, want to understand Smith on his own terms, but I would like to be able to explain him" (p. xv). Now we are really getting to the heart of the matter. Certainly, historians have every right to use source criticism to explain and interpret things.

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who do not have graduate degrees in history. A good example of a top-notch historian who completed *no* graduate training in history is Dale Morgan, who studied commercial art at the University of Utah. Trained "on the job," Morgan worked initially for the Utah Historical Records Survey. He eventually edited the *Utah Historical Quarterly* and was later appointed senior historian at the University of California Bancroft Library. Two of Morgan's works on the early fur trade, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1954; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1967), and *The West of William H. Ashley* (Denver: Old West, 1964), are among the best books produced on the subject. (Dan Vogel, by the way, has more formal training in history than I do.)

In this instance, however, Vogel does not intend to “explain” Joseph Smith by drawing on the primary documents. Instead, he intends to explain Joseph Smith based on a nonhistorical standard—that is, his own private belief that, in the words of Sterling McMurrin, “you don’t get books from angels and translate them by miracles.”<sup>50</sup>

Vogel has thus stepped outside of historical methodology (and, as far as I’m concerned, abandoned the principles espoused in *Early Mormon Documents*) to take up what is essentially a religious (or antireligious) position. He has failed to see that understanding Joseph Smith “on his own terms” and denying that Joseph had authentic religious experiences are mutually contradictory goals. Since Vogel does not believe in the supernatural, he can only explain Joseph Smith by contradicting what Joseph himself says in the primary documents (such as his 1832 history). This results in a puzzling irony: Vogel, who took such care in researching and compiling the primary documents, has taken an adversarial position toward those same documents, where he has to discount them or ignore them in order to make his case for atheism.

Preoccupied with this need to promote his own views, come what may, Vogel enters into discussions that mystify me. He says, for example, that “there is simply no reliable proof for the existence of the supernatural” and “the burden of proof rests with those making supernatural claims” (p. xvi). But why is he raising these points at all? Does he mean to tell us that the biographer of a religious figure, whether it is Jesus, Muhammad, or Buddha, has to first of all determine the nature of the universe so he can editorialize on the rightness or wrongness of that figure’s theology?

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50. Blake T. Ostler, “An Interview with Sterling M. McMurrin,” *Dialogue* 17/1 (1984): 25. In his Internet article, Dan Vogel mentions how biographer Alan Taylor used James Fenimore Cooper’s novel *The Pioneers* “to illuminate Cooper’s troubled relationship with his father” (“Seeing through the Hedges,” p. 30). I think this is legitimate, just as a biographer of Hemingway might use *A Farewell to Arms* to illuminate Hemingway’s experiences as an ambulance driver in World War I. But there is a crucial difference between Cooper and Hemingway on one hand and Joseph Smith on the other. Both novelists claimed authorship of their novels, but Joseph claimed to be the *translator* of the Book of Mormon. Vogel must therefore directly contradict Joseph Smith in any attempt to use the Book of Mormon to illuminate Joseph’s personal life, which is not true at all of Cooper’s or Hemingway’s biographers.

Vogel quotes a number of historians in an attempt to gather support for his “interpretive” study, but the trouble is, these historians understandably have their hands full with “normal” historical conundrums and do not address the specific question of how to deal with the matter of belief when writing about a religious figure. One notable exception is Brad S. Gregory, associate professor of history at Notre Dame University, author of *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, and winner of Harvard University Press’s Thomas J. Wilson Prize.

“What Did It Mean to Them?”<sup>51</sup>

As Gregory puts it,

The distinctiveness of religion demands methodological astuteness if we want to understand its practitioners, lest we misconstrue them from the outset. In seeking to explain religion, many scholars have employed cultural theories or social science approaches in ways that preclude its being understood. Instead of reconstructing religious beliefs and experiences, they reduce them to something else based on their own, usually implicit, modern or postmodern beliefs.<sup>52</sup>

I believe this is an apt description of what Vogel has done: he has precluded Joseph Smith from being understood by attempting to reduce Joseph’s beliefs to something else.

Gregory continues:

What people believed in the past is logically distinct from our opinions about them. Understanding others on their own terms is a completely different intellectual endeavor than explaining them in modern or postmodern categories. . . . I fail to follow the logic of a leading literary scholar who recently implied, during a session at the American Historical Association

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51. Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 15.

52. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 9.

convention, that because he “cannot believe in belief,” the religion of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century people is not to be taken seriously on its own terms. Strictly speaking, this is an autobiographical comment that reveals literally nothing about early modern people. One might as well say, “I cannot believe in unbelief; therefore, alleged post-Enlightenment atheism should not be taken seriously on its own terms.”

Could bedfellows be any stranger? Reductionist explanations of religion share the epistemological structure of traditional confessional history. Just as confessional historians explore and evaluate based on their religious convictions, reductionist historians of religion explain and judge based on their unbelief.<sup>53</sup>

Taking Gregory’s approach of asking “What did it mean to them?” hardly means the historian is reduced, in Vogel’s words, to writing a “simple chronological narrative.” As Gregory explains, “Contextual understanding compels us to relate religion to other aspects of life—social, political, economic, cultural—while resisting absorption by any of them.” Nor is the historian required to accept primary sources at face value. Gregory does not mean to “imply that no early Christian used religion in deliberately manipulative ways. Doubtless some did, perhaps quite a few. But this is a matter for empirical demonstration, not methodological assumption.”<sup>54</sup> Likewise, I believe that Vogel (or any other historian) is free to examine the motives of Joseph Smith and others, as long as he bases his conclusions on the documents, not his *a priori* assumptions about the existence of God and angels.

Gregory seeks to “reconstruct, not deconstruct” the experiences of early modern Christians. He acknowledges that “‘understanding’ does not mean ‘perfect reconstruction.’” But, he adds, “the impossibility of the latter neither justifies a general skepticism nor warrants the adoption of reductionist theories.”<sup>55</sup>

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53. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 10–11.

54. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 13, 15.

55. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake*, 11, 15.

I believe Gregory has explored the questions surrounding the writing of religious history with unique clarity and insight. Certainly, if I am reading a biography of St. Francis of Assisi, for example, I want the biographer to follow Gregory's standard—so that I can, as much as possible, understand St. Francis's experiences the way *he* perceived them. If St. Francis himself was inconsistent about what he said, or if others viewed his reports skeptically, discussions of these topics are quite acceptable because they will be based on the sources. (Moreover, if the author makes certain historiographical points in his endnotes, I am also fine with that.) Indeed, a look at Gregory's book shows his methodology to be wonderfully efficient: we gain fresh insights into the beliefs of early modern Christians and feel that we are really beginning to *understand* them (and I, for one, am delighted to see that Gregory, a Roman Catholic, makes no judgment whatsoever about the beliefs of Protestants put to death by Catholics). Vogel, unfortunately, has produced a work that is, in Gregory's words, reductionist. (Put another way, he's doing missionary work.)

### Reconstructing the Visit of Moroni

The flaws in Vogel's approach become quite evident when we compare his book to Bushman's. Their respective narrations of the night of 21–22 September 1823 (when Joseph Smith said he was first visited by Moroni) are reproduced below, following the accounts from Joseph Smith himself:

#### *Joseph Smith's 1832 Account*

I fell into transgressions and sinned in many things which brought a wound upon my soul and there were many things which transpired that cannot be written and my Fathers family have suffered many persicutions and afflictions and it came to pass when I was seventeen years of age I called again upon the Lord and he shewed unto me a heavenly vision for behold an angel of the Lord came and stood before me and it was by night and he called me by name and he said the Lord had forgiven me my sins and he revealed unto me that in the Town of

Manchester Ontario County N.Y. there was plates of gold upon which there was engravings which was engraven by Maroni & his fathers the servants of the living God in ancient days and deposited by the commandments of God and kept by the power thereof and that I should go and get them and he revealed unto me many things concerning the inhabitants of the earth which since have been revealed in commandments & revelations and it was on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of Sept. AD 1822 and thus he appeared unto me three times in one night.<sup>56</sup>

*Joseph Smith's 1838 Account*

In consequence of these things I often felt condemned for my weakness and imperfections; when on the evening of the above mentioned twenty first of september, after I had retired to my bed for the night I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me that I might know of my state and standing before him. For I had full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation as I had previously had one. While I was thus in the act of calling upon God, I discovered a light appearing in the room which continued to increase untill the room was lighter than at noonday and <when> immediately a personage <appeared> at my bedside standing in the air for his feet did not touch the floor. He had on a loose robe of most exquisite whiteness. It was a whiteness beyond any<thing> earthly I had ever seen, nor do I believe that any earthly thing could be made to appear so exceedin[g]ly white and brilliant, His hands were naked and his arms also a little above the wrists. So also were his feet naked as were his legs a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. I could discover that he had no other

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56. "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith," in Joseph Smith Letterbook 1, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 12–13. The section prior to this, which describes the first vision, is in Joseph Smith's handwriting; this section is in the hand of Frederick G. Williams. The year is incorrectly given as 1822—it was actually 1823, which is consistent with Joseph saying he was seventeen years old.

clothing on but this robe, as it was open so that I could see into his bosom. Not only was his robe exceedingly white but his whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning. The room was exceedingly light, but not so very bright as immediately around his person. When I first looked upon him I was afraid, but the fear soon left me. He called me by name and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me and that his name was Nephi <Moroni>. That God had a work for me to do, and that my <name> should be had for good and evil among all nations kindreds and tongues. or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people. He said there was a book deposited written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fullness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it as delivered by the Saviour to the ancient inhabitants. Also that there were two stones in silver bows and these (~~put~~ <stones fastened> ~~into~~ a breast plate) ~~which~~ constituted what is called the Urim & Thummin deposited with the plates, and <the possession and use of these stones> ~~that~~ was what constituted seers in ancient or former times and that God <had> prepared them for the purpose of translating the book. After telling me these things he commenced quoting the prophecies of the old testament, he first quoted part of the third chapter of Malachi and he quoted also the fourth or last chapter of the same prophecy though with a little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles. Instead of quoting the first verse as reads in our books he quoted it thus, “For behold the day cometh that shall burn as an oven, and all the proud <yea> and all that do wickedly shall burn as stubble, for <they day> that cometh shall burn them saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.” And again he quoted the fifth verse thus, “Behold I will reveal unto you the Priesthood by the hand of Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dread-

ful day of the Lord.” He also quoted the next verse differently. “And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers, if it were not so the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming.” In addition to these quotations he quoted the Eleventh Chapter of Isaiah saying that it was about to be fulfilled. He quoted also the third chapter of Acts, twenty second and twenty third verses precisely as they stand in our new testament. He said that that prophet was Christ, but the day had not yet come when “they who would not hear his voice should be cut off from among the people,” but soon would come.

He also quoted the second chapter of Joel from the twenty eighth to the last verse. He also said that this was not yet fulfilled but was soon to be. And he further stated the fulness of the gentiles was soon to come in. He quoted many other passages of scripture and offered many explanations which cannot be mentioned here. Again he told me that when I got those plates of which he had spoken (for the time that they should be obtained was not yet fulfilled) I should not show <them> to any person, neither the breastplate with the Urim and Thummim only to those to whom I should be commanded to show them. If I did I should be destroyed. While he was conversing with me about the plates the vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited and that so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it.

After this conversation communication I saw the light in the room begin to gather immediately around the person of him who had been speaking to me, and it continued to do so until the room was again left dark except just round him, when instantly I saw as it were a conduit open right up into heaven, and he ascended up till he entirely disappeared and the room was left as it had been before this heavenly light had made its appearance.

I lay musing on the singularity of the scene and marvelling greatly at what had been told me by this extraordinary messenger, when in the midst of my meditation I suddenly discovered that my room was again beginning to get lighted, and in an instant as it were, the same heavenly messenger was again by my bedside. He commenced and again related the very same things which he had done at his first visit without the least variation which having done, he informed me of great judgements which were coming upon the earth, with great desolations by famine, sword, and pestilence, and that these grievous judgements would come on the earth in this generation: Having related these things he again ascended as he had done before.

By this time so deep were the impressions made on my mind that sleep had fled from my eyes and I lay overwhelmed in astonishment at what I had both seen and heard:

But what was my surprise when again I beheld the same messenger at my bed side, and heard him rehearse or repeat over again to me the same things as before and added a caution to me, telling me that Satan would try to tempt me (in consequence of the indigent circumstances of my father's family) to get the plates for the purpose of getting rich, This he forbid me, saying that I must have ~~no~~ no other object in view in getting the plates but to glorify God, and must not be influenced by any other motive but that of building his kingdom, otherwise I could not get them. After this third visit he again ascended up into heaven as before and I was again left to ponder on the strangeness of what I had just experienced, when almost immediately after the heavenly messenger had ascended from me the third time, the cock crew, and I found that day was approaching so that our interviews must have occupied the whole of that night.<sup>57</sup>

*Vogel's Version*

Joseph's involvement with Robinson's hill began, according to Joseph's own account, on the night and early morning hours

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57. *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 233–36.

of 21–22 September 1823. Earlier that evening, according to what Martin Harris later told Palmyra minister John A. Clark, Joseph had acted as seer for a local treasure-seeking expedition.<sup>58</sup> It had been an especially propitious night for treasure hunting. The moon was full and the evening marked the autumnal equinox,<sup>59</sup> but as usual, the seekers returned home empty-handed. Lucy, who by this time was attending Palmyra's Western Presbyterian Church and may have begun to have misgivings about her husband's involvement in magic, did not mention the digging that occurred on this astrologically significant night. Instead, she related that her family stayed up late into the evening "conversing upon the subject of the diversity of churches that had risen up in the world and the many thousand opinions in existence as to the truths contained in scripture."<sup>60</sup> Not an unlikely topic for a late Sunday night conversation, but Lucy probably minimized the intensity of this discussion since young Joseph's reaction was more pronounced than usual.

Lucy noticed that seventeen-year-old Joseph seemed withdrawn as if in deep contemplation. He was quiet but not unaffected. What he may have felt about his part in the treasure hunt, it was undoubtedly his parents' religious turmoil that most stirred him, in the words of his mother, "to reflect more deeply than common persons of his age upon everything of a religious nature."<sup>61</sup> Joseph more than any of his siblings well understood the religious quandary in which his parents found themselves. There was much that he could say, but in the swirl of emotional debate, who would hear him? Besides, he was just a youth with little standing or authority in such matters. More than anything, Joseph's silence likely resulted from his ambivalent feelings and the high emotional price of choosing

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58. {John A. Clark to Dear Brethren, 24 August 1840, *Episcopal Recorder* (Philadelphia) 18 (5 September 1840): 94 (*Early Mormon Documents*, 2:264).}

59. {See D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 141–44.}

60. {Lucy Mack Smith, Preliminary Manuscript, 40 (*Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289).}

61. {L. M. Smith, Preliminary Manuscript, 40 (*Early Mormon Documents*, 1:289).}

sides. Very little was resolved when the Smiths finally retired for the night.

As Joseph lay in his bed, likely troubled by his family's religious conflicts, he may have prayed for deliverance—perhaps asking God to soften his parents' hearts. He may have asked that God would give him the words to convert his father, but he knew that words alone were not sufficient to persuade. Joseph Sr.'s intellectualized approach to the Bible and Universalistic beliefs seemed like impassible barriers to Joseph Jr. From his failed attempt to persuade him in 1820/21, Joseph knew that his father resisted visionary experiences. Joseph's line of authority with his father was his gift of seeing. Perhaps for the good of the family and his father's future welfare, Joseph might call upon that influence to bring his father to repentance and give his family the religious harmony they so badly needed. These were desperate thoughts, but in Joseph's mind, the situation called for decisive action.

He would later claim that his mind was preoccupied only with thoughts of his unworthiness before God and that he began to pray "to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me that I might know of my state and standing before him."<sup>62</sup> Shortly an "angel" appeared at his bedside, declaring that his sins were forgiven and that God had a special work for him to perform. This messenger proceeded to tell Joseph about a history of the ancient inhabitants of America written on gold plates and hidden in a nearby hill. (pp. 43–44)

At this point Vogel drops his narrative in favor of an editorial aside. "[Joseph's] willingness to change this and other visions in order to meet later needs prompts one to wonder whether the visions were invented to serve utilitarian purposes," he writes (p. 44).

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62. {Joseph Smith, Manuscript History, Book A-1, 5, LDS Church Archives (*Early Mormon Documents*, 1:63).}

*Bushman's Version*

The Smiths had spent the evening of September 21, as Lucy recalled, “conversing upon the subject of the diversity of churches . . . and the many thousand opinions in existence as to the truths contained in scripture.”<sup>63</sup> That night after the others in the crowded little house had gone to sleep, Joseph remained awake to pray “to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies.”<sup>64</sup> While praying he noticed the room growing lighter until it was brighter than broad daylight. Suddenly, as he later reported, a person appeared in the light standing above the floor.

He had on a loose robe of most exquisite whiteness. It was a whiteness beyond anything earthly I had ever seen, nor do I believe that any earthly thing could be made to appear so exceedin[g]ly white and brilliant, His hands were naked and his arms also a little above the wrist. So also were his feet naked as were his legs a little above the ankles. His head and neck were also bare. I could discover that he had no other clothing on but this robe, as it was open so that I could see into his bosom. Not only was his robe exceedingly white but his whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning.

This time all the accounts agree on the burden of the message. If Joseph initially understood the First Vision as his conver-

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63. {This memory may not be entirely trustworthy because Lucy thought Moroni was the one to tell Joseph the churches were wrong. Her lack of knowledge of the First Vision confused her sense of the sequence of events. L. M. Smith, Preliminary Manuscript, 335.}

64. {Manuscript History of the Church A-1, in, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:276. The frame house remained unfinished in 1823, and unless some family members slept there to relieve congestion, Joseph received Moroni in the cabin. Larry C. Porter, “Study of the Origins of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the States of New York and Pennsylvania, 1816–1831” (PhD diss. Brigham Young University, 1971), 25–26. In 1835 Oliver Cowdery commented that Joseph prayed when “slumber had spread her refreshing hand over others beside him.” *Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, 79.}

sion, similar to thousands of other evangelical conversions, this vision wrenched Joseph out of any ordinary track.

The being, who identified himself as Moroni, assured Joseph that his sins were forgiven, but then said God was giving Joseph a work unlike any envisioned in his time. He was told about a book “written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fulness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it as delivered by the Saviour to the ancient inhabitants.” Besides that, “there were two stones in silver bows and these stones fastened to a breast plate constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim deposited with the plates, and the possession and use of these stones was what constituted seers in ancient or former times and that God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book.”<sup>65</sup> All this was buried in a nearby hill that Joseph saw in his vision.

The rest of the vision was more familiar and comprehensible. Moroni quoted Old and New Testament prophecies relating to the final days of the earth: the third and fourth chapters of Malachi, Acts 3:22–23, Joel 2:28–32, and Isaiah 11. These were the texts the clergy used to teach about the millennium. Joseph knew them well enough to note small departures from the words in the Bible. Hearing the familiar texts from the angel confirmed the common belief that the last days were near and Joseph was to prepare.<sup>66</sup>

Moroni warned him not to show the plates and the Urim and Thummim to anyone, and then the light began to gather around him until the room was dark except near his person. “Instantly I saw as it were a conduit open right up into heaven,

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65. {Manuscript History of the Church A-1, in *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:276–78.} Joseph said nothing about forgiveness of sins in his 1838 account, but Oliver Cowdery mentioned this personal message twice in his 1835 letters. *Messenger and Advocate*, February 1835, 78–79; and July 1835, 155–56. In his 1838 account, Joseph said the angel called himself “Nephi,” a puzzling mistake. For discussion of possible reasons why, see Anderson, ed., *Lucy’s Book*, 336–37; *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:277; Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 198–99.}

66. {Manuscript History of the Church A-1, in *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:278–79.}

and he ascended till he entirely disappeared.” Joseph lay back in astonishment, trying to understand what had happened, when the room brightened again, and the angel reappeared. Moroni repeated every word he had said before and then added comments about “great judgements which were coming upon the earth with great desolations by famine, sword, and pestilence.” Moroni again ascended but soon after appeared a third time to repeat everything again. This time he added the warning that “Satan would try to tempt me (in consequence of the indigent circumstances of my father’s family) to get the plates for the purpose of getting rich.” Joseph was to have no other object “but to glorify God.”<sup>67</sup>

### Comparing Vogel to Bushman

These two versions reveal much about the differences between Vogel’s and Bushman’s methodologies. But first things first. Since Joseph Smith’s 1832 history was the first document giving details on Moroni’s visit, I am quite surprised that neither Vogel nor Bushman even mentions it. I consider it a key source and believe both of their retellings are the weaker for not confronting it.

The first difference between Vogel and Bushman is quite conspicuous: Vogel places the events of 21 and 22 September in a treasure-seeking context while Bushman does not. Vogel does this by referring to a document written by John A. Clark. Here is the quotation in question, which Clark wrote in 1840 (taken from—where else?—*Early Mormon Documents*): “According to Martin Harris, it was after one of these [money-digging] night excursions, that [Joseph Smith], while he lay upon his bed, had a remarkable dream. An angel of God seemed to approach him, clad in celestial splendour. This divine messenger assured him, that he, Joseph Smith, was chosen of the Lord to be a prophet of the Most High God, and to bring to light hidden things, that would prove of unspeakable benefit to the world.”<sup>68</sup>

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67. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 43–45. In what appears to be an editing mistake, Bushman provides no note here for the internal quotations from Joseph Smith, but these quotations are from his 1838 history.

68. Clark to Dear Brethren, 24 August 1840, 94 (*Early Mormon Documents*, 2:264).

Vogel takes it as a given that the Smiths had indeed engaged in a treasure-seeking excursion on the evening of 21 September 1823. But here is the problem. Clark is at least a thirdhand source. He claims his information came directly from Martin Harris, probably in the autumn of 1827, but we do not know where Martin Harris got his information (nor do we know if Clark reported Martin Harris accurately or if Martin Harris reported whomever accurately). Well, there is evidence and there is evidence. As Vogel himself said, “historians are guided but not bound by the rules of evidence practiced in United States courts of law,”<sup>69</sup> and courts and historical studies are both naturally skeptical of hearsay testimony.<sup>70</sup> The hearsay rule is the “basic rule that testimony or documents which quote persons not in court are not admissible. Because the person who supposedly knew the facts is not in court to state his/her exact words, the trier of fact cannot judge the demeanor and credibility of the alleged first-hand witness, and the other party’s lawyer cannot cross-examine (ask questions of) him or her.”<sup>71</sup> However, the law recognizes the difficulty of always going to the source, whether because of impossibility or impracticality, and so there are several exceptions to this rule, such as excited utterances, present sense impressions, declarations of physical condition, and business records (to name a few).

Historians, of course, also make exceptions to the hearsay rule. The great majority of David Whitmer documents, for example, are secondhand because they were recorded by someone other than David Whitmer himself. Still, these interviews are considered valuable historical documents. However, thirdhand statements are another matter. The claim that “it was after one of these night excursions” that Joseph claimed to have seen an angel is a case of “he said he said

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69. *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:xiv–xv.

70. Historians, of course, are considerably more liberal in their attitude toward hearsay evidence. If no firsthand accounts are available, a historian may make a plausible case by quoting independent secondhand witnesses (something not likely to be allowed in a courtroom). Still, historians and jurists agree that the farther removed from the source, the more suspect a witness is.

71. Definition of “hearsay rule” from law.com dictionary, at [dictionary.law.com](http://dictionary.law.com) (accessed 17 March 2006).

he said.” In other words, “John Clark said that Martin Harris said that Joseph said.” (Even this is giving Vogel the benefit of the doubt because Martin Harris did not reveal his source. It is possible that he talked to a neighbor, who said that Joseph said he had been searching for treasure that night—making Clark a fourthhand source.) I believe this is too far removed to carry substantial weight. (I also assume that Clark’s claim cannot be corroborated. If so, Vogel would have mentioned it in *Early Mormon Documents*.) The proper place for Clark’s comment is in an endnote.

Judging from the standards Vogel uses in evaluating Oliver Cowdery’s purported courtroom declaration, I would expect him to relegate Clark’s comment to an endnote. After all, the two cases are quite similar. Most of the Cowdery statements come from Charles M. Nielsen, who said he heard a man by the name of Robert Barrington relate the experience of hearing Oliver Cowdery bear his testimony. Nielsen’s account is therefore thirdhand, and, as Vogel says, “rests on less than satisfactory grounds.”<sup>72</sup> The very same is true of Clark’s claim.

Not only that, but Lucy Mack Smith, a firsthand witness of events on the night of 21 September 1823, gives this account: “One evening we were sitting till quite late conversing upon the subject of the diversity of churches that had risen up in the world and the many thousand opinions in existence as to the truths contained in scripture.”<sup>73</sup> Lucy not only fails to corroborate Clark’s claim, she strongly implies that it is not accurate—how could the family engage in a long religious conversation if Joseph and his fathers and brothers were out searching for treasure the same night?

So how do Vogel and Bushman deal with Clark’s thirdhand account and Lucy’s firsthand account? Vogel gives precedence to Clark, describing the entire evening in terms of treasure seeking and even suggesting that Lucy did not mention the money digging because she may have had misgivings about her husband’s involvement in magic. This is making a firsthand source subordinate to a thirdhand source. That is not what I call good source criticism. (And it is hard to escape the conclusion that

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72. *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:468.

73. Anderson, ed., *Lucy’s Book*, 335.

Vogel is manipulating the sources to fit his preconceived notion of what happened.) Bushman, on the other hand, excludes Clark's thirdhand statement from his narrative (a choice I agree with, although I think he should have mentioned Clark in an endnote).

The second half of the treasure-seeking issue has to do with Vogel's claim that "it had been an especially propitious night for treasure hunting." Vogel cites Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* as a source. When we check Quinn, however, we find no evidence (despite Quinn's rather strenuous efforts to manufacture it) that the Smith family themselves saw 21 September as being "astrologically significant." All we really have is Quinn's speculation on that issue. When Vogel, therefore, describes Moroni's visit in a treasure-seeking context, he does so by relying on uncorroborated thirdhand testimony and conjecture from a secondary work, resulting in a strained narrative that wrests the truly good sources.

The night of 21–22 September 1823 was undoubtedly a crucial night in Joseph Smith's life, perhaps more crucial than any other. It would therefore seem like a biographer's dream that Joseph left such extensive firsthand accounts (totaling more than 1,500 words) of the experience. The natural temptation would be to quote too much from Joseph, as well as quoting from such secondhand sources as Lucy Mack, William, and Katharine Smith and Oliver Cowdery. If the biographer were not careful, he could lose his narrative (and distract the reader) in a long series of quotations. For the judicious author, however, Joseph's accounts offer a gold mine (no pun intended) of memorable details.

So how do Vogel and Bushman deal with these firsthand accounts? Vogel quotes exactly twenty-nine words (about Joseph praying for forgiveness) and says virtually nothing about Moroni and nothing at all about his three different visits. The more one thinks about this, the more incredible it seems: Vogel, a master of the sources, has written a book of over 700 pages about a man who claimed to converse with heavenly messengers, and he essentially bypasses that man's firsthand and detailed account about what an angel looked like and what he said. More than anything else, this illustrates just how much Vogel's "bias" (more properly, his making his own religious beliefs—actually

antireligious beliefs—the overarching and controlling bias of his “history”) has destroyed his ability to tell the story by drawing from the sources. How can the reader possibly understand Joseph Smith (or trust Vogel, for that matter) when Vogel refuses to let Joseph speak for himself?<sup>74</sup>

Not surprisingly, Bushman quotes from Joseph Smith at length, just as Robert Remini does.<sup>75</sup>

As if it is not enough to ignore Joseph Smith’s accounts, Vogel presumes to do Joseph’s speaking for him. As Andrew and Dawson Hedges say, “Vogel takes it upon himself to 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.”<sup>76</sup> Vogel has once again put himself in an adversarial relationship with the sources, trying to convince us that *something else* happened. But rather than reaching these conclusions through source criticism, Vogel deduces them based on his idea of *what must have happened*.

Bushman’s version once again offers a striking contrast. He sticks with the sources, does his speculating (still related, however, to the sources themselves) in his endnotes, and asks what the events meant to the people themselves, offering a retelling they would probably recognize.

Echoing a common theme, Vogel writes that “an ‘angel’ appeared at [Joseph Smith’s] bedside, declaring that his sins were forgiven” (p. 44). Vogel puts the word *angel* in quotation marks, implying that Joseph did not initially use the word. “Unlike the ‘vision’ Smith would later narrate for an audience that would be unreceptive to folk-magic,” says Vogel, “the earliest accounts identify the heavenly messenger as a ‘spirit’ who visited Joseph three times in a ‘dream’” (p. 45). Other critics, including Ronald Huggins and William D. Morain, have made

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74. Drawing on a multitude of primary sources, Matthew B. Brown creates the kind of detailed and fascinating narrative that I had hoped for from Vogel. See *Plates of Gold: The Book of Mormon Comes Forth* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2003), 3–12.

75. Remini, *Joseph Smith*, 43–45.

76. Hedges and Hedges, “That’s Still Not History,” 210–11.

similar claims.<sup>77</sup> But let's look at what two volumes of *Early Mormon Documents* reveal on the matter.

Vogel makes it clear that the earliest references to the Book of Mormon both date to June 1829. The first, dated 17 June, was a letter from Jesse Smith, Joseph Sr.'s older brother, to Hyrum. The first paragraph reads as follows:

Once as I thot that my promising Nephew, You wrote to my Father long ago, that after struggling thro various scenes of adversity, you and your family, you had at last taught the very solutary lesson that the God that made the heavens and the earth w[o]uld at onc[e] give success to your endeavours, this if true, is very well, exactly as it should be—but alas what is man when left to his own way, he makes his own gods, if a golden calf, he falls down and worships before it, and says this is my god which brought me out of the land of Vermont—if it be a gold book discovered by the necromancy of infidelity, & dug from the mines of atheism, he [Joseph Jr.] writes that *the angel of the Lord has revealed to him the hidden treasures of wisdom & knowledge, even divine revelation*, which has lain in the bowels of the earth for thousands of years [and] is at last made known to him, he says he has eyes to see things that are not, and then has the audacity to say they are; and the angel of the Lord (Devil it should be) has put me in possession of great wealth, gold & silver and precious stones so that I shall have the dominion in all the land of Palmyra.<sup>78</sup>

The second reference, dated 26 June, is from a local newspaper:

Just about in this particular region, for some time past, much speculation has existed, concerning *a pretended discovery*,

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77. See Ronald V. Huggins, "From Captain Kidd's Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni: Changing *Dramatis Personae* in Early Mormonism," *Dialogue* 36/4 (2003): 17–42; and William D. Morain, review of *The Making of a Prophet*, by Dan Vogel, *Journal of Mormon History* 31/1 (2005): 212.

78. Jesse Smith to Hyrum Smith, 17 June 1829, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:551–52, emphasis added.

*through superhuman means, of an ancient record, of a religious and a divine nature and origin, written in ancient characters impossible to be interpreted by any to whom the special gift has not been imparted by inspiration. It is generally known and spoken of as the "Golden Bible." Most people entertain an idea that the whole matter is the result of a gross imposition, and a grosser superstition.*<sup>79</sup>

Although they are both hostile, these accounts clearly set the story of the angel and the plates in a religious rather than treasure-seeking context. Vogel has therefore misrepresented the sources he himself went to so much trouble to compile. And if the counterargument is given that the earliest people to *hear* the story—such as Willard Chase—told of a treasure guardian, it can easily be shown that individuals who heard the story before Chase—such as Joseph Knight Sr., Joseph Knight Jr., Lucy Mack Smith, and William Smith—told of an angel.<sup>80</sup>

### Deus ex Machina

In ancient Greek drama, play producers sometimes lowered deities by a crane or “machine” to rescue the hero or heroine from a tight spot. The Greek phrase used to describe such divine intervention was *theos ek mekhanes*. As William Harmon explains, “Such abrupt but timely appearance of a god, when used to extricate characters from a situation so perplexing that the solution seemed beyond mortal powers, was referred to in Latin as *deus ex machina* (‘god from the machine’). The term now characterizes any device whereby an author solves a difficult situation by a forced invention.”<sup>81</sup>

Dan Vogel has made up a detailed narrative about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Like any other historian, he plots his story

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79. Palmyra (NY) *Wayne Sentinel*, 26 June 1829, in *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:218–19, emphasis added.

80. I cover all this in detail in my review “I Should Have an Eye Single to the Glory of God?: Joseph Smith’s Account of the Angel and the Plates,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 11–81. See also Mark Ashurst McGee, “Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 35–100.

81. William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 147–48.

by showing how one thing leads to another. But Vogel has worked himself into a corner by insisting on “addressing” Joseph’s religious claims, something that historians like Brad Gregory and Robert Remini do not find at all necessary. Since Vogel’s “inclination” (hardly a strong enough word) is to “interpret any claim of the paranormal” as “delusion or fraud,” he develops “natural” explanations (such as the influence of the magic worldview and the effects of a dysfunctional family) for Joseph Smith’s experiences. This is inevitably Vogel’s only solution to the question of why one thing leads to another. When these elements are introduced into the narrative, however, they jar conspicuously with the causes and effects apparent in the sources. In what is a doubly ironic twist, Vogel has attempted to solve his “plot problems” not by drawing on early Mormon documents but by calling on a god in a machine.

### Concluding Unscientific Postscript

Dan Vogel has published a letter in *Dialogue*<sup>82</sup> responding to a letter of mine.<sup>83</sup> Since the topic in question—whether Joseph Smith first described Moroni as a heavenly messenger or a treasure guardian—is relevant to my review of Vogel’s book, I will respond to Vogel’s letter. My letter was a response to Ronald V. Huggins’s article “From Captain Kidd’s Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni: Changing *Dramatis Personae* in Early Mormonism,”<sup>84</sup> in which Huggins claims that Joseph’s account of the angel and the plates originated as a “money-digger’s yarn” and was later transformed into “restoration history.”<sup>85</sup> I also subsequently published a much more detailed review of Huggins.<sup>86</sup> Huggins was apparently unaware that Mark Ashurst-McGee had previously published an important paper on this same topic, which is reprinted in this issue of the *Review*.<sup>87</sup>

82. Dan Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” *Dialogue* 39/2 (2006): vii–xi.

83. Larry E. Morris, “Folklore Rebutted,” *Dialogue* 38/3 (2005): vi–x.

84. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 17–42.

85. Huggins, “Changing *Dramatis Personae*,” 19.

86. Morris, “Joseph Smith’s Account,” 11–81.

87. See Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni: Angel or Treasure Guardian?” *Mormon Historical Studies* 2/2 (2001): 39–75; reprinted with some changes and additions as “Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 35–100.

My primary criticisms of Huggins were that he fails to provide a historical context for treasure seeking, he neglects important documents, he obscures the timeline, and he hides crucial details. I further argued that, if one wants to discover what Joseph originally said about the plates and how his account may have changed over time, it is necessary to systematically examine all relevant sources (identifying what Joseph said and when he said it) and to develop a method for judging the relative value of these sources. Agreeing with Ashurst-McGee's statements that "eyewitness testimony is the most important standard of historical reliability" and that "sources composed closer to the time of the event" take precedence over "sources composed later on,"<sup>88</sup> I proposed dividing the primary sources into four categories: (1) those coming from individuals who talked directly to Joseph Smith, (2) those coming from individuals who talked to a second party who had talked to Joseph, (3) those composed before 1850, and (4) those composed after 1850. I referred to these categories as first- and secondhand and early and late, arguing that the best sources were those that were both firsthand and early.

I next examined thirteen different accounts of what Joseph Smith said about the angel and the plates, listing them in the order these individuals talked to Joseph (or to a second party who had talked to Joseph) and showing what details they included, as summarized in table 1. Those accounts marked by an asterisk are what I call prime witnesses, meaning that they are both firsthand (based on a direct conversation with Joseph) and early (composed at least by 1850). The date after the person's name tells when he or she talked to Joseph Smith; the date in brackets indicates when the account was recorded.

Four specific claims by Vogel are numbered below:

1. *"Historical standards are guides in assessing evidence, not apologetic devices designed to dismiss out-of-hand undesirable testimony."*<sup>89</sup>

With this statement, Vogel begins a series of what amounts to rhetorical tricks. He characterizes my argument in such a way that anyone accepting that characterization is bound to agree that Vogel is right and I am wrong. After all, who would argue that historical

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88. Ashurst-McGee, "Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian," 53 above.

89. Vogel, "Treasure Lore Revisited," vii.

Table 1. Reminiscences of Joseph’s Account

	Toad	Treasure guardian	Black clothes/ horse	Plates disappear	Shock	Bring someone	Divine purpose	Angel
*Lucy Smith 1823 [1844–45]				♦	♦		♦	♦
William Smith 1823 [1883, 1884]				♦	♦		♦	♦
Lorenzo Saunders 1823 [1884]			black horse			♦	♦	♦
*Knight Sr. 1826 [circa 1835–47]				♦		♦	♦	“personage”
Knight Jr. 1826 [1862]							♦	♦
Willard Chase 1827 [1833]	♦	“spirit”	black clothes and horse	♦	♦	♦		
Benjamin Saunders 1827 [1884]	♦							♦
Orlando Saunders 1827 [1881]								♦
John A. Clark 1827–28 [1840]				♦	♦	♦	♦	♦
Lewis brothers 1828 [1879]		bleeding Spaniard			♦	♦		
*Oliver Cowdery 1829 [1835]					♦		♦	♦
*Henry Harris 1829 [circa 1833]						♦	♦	♦
Fayette Lapham 1830 [1870]		murder victim	black clothes	♦	♦	♦	♦	

standards should be used as apologetic devices? Who would claim that it is acceptable to dismiss out-of-hand undesirable testimony? I certainly do not. Vogel thus fashions a straw man: he has described a weak position and then falsely attributed that position to me.

Vogel also gives the impression that one can use historical standards to do anything one wants, easily casting aside contrary evidence. But if that were true, it seems that the so-called standard would immediately be suspect. One could hardly employ a reasonable standard and then accept or reject evidence on a whim. The standard itself would not allow that.

So, the question arises, is my standard flawed? In an earlier essay, I suggested the following principles of dealing with historical documents: (1) firsthand accounts are preferred over second- or thirdhand, (2) early statements are preferred over late statements, (3) all relevant sources must be accounted for, (4) corroboration (or a lack thereof) is a key criterion in evaluating sources, and (5) each separate claim within a document must be judged on its own merits.<sup>90</sup>

Does Vogel honestly think that this five-point standard could really be used to quickly dismiss contrary sources? As I see it, a quick dismissal would mean that the standard was not being followed. And, as I said in my letter, “all accounts—both hostile and friendly to Joseph—deserve careful study.”<sup>91</sup>

Here’s what Vogel himself said on the topic of standards:

Not all historical documents are created equal. Each must be evaluated to determine its significance, and readers should not confuse actual historical events with written descriptions. The informant records his or her perceptions or interpretation of the event. . . . These documents reflect the bias, personality, and world view(s) of the men and women who produced them—they are never mere records of events.

When evaluating human testimony, historians are guided but not bound by the rules of evidence practiced in United States

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90. Morris, “Joseph Smith’s Account,” 12.

91. Morris, “Folklore Rebutted,” ix-x.

courts of law. Ideally, one wishes for firsthand testimony from unbiased witnesses, but this is rarely found in either historical sources or courts of law.<sup>92</sup> Instead we are left to sift judiciously through various kinds of testimony, imperfectly recorded, and without the benefit of cross examination. But where a court may be unable to convict the guilty or exonerate the innocent, historians, with the benefit of hindsight, enjoy greater perspective and, in some ways, more flexibility when evaluating testimony. Historians, for example, do not automatically exclude hearsay, perjured, or even biased (or interested) testimony.

In Mormon studies it can be especially difficult to find disinterested witnesses. Nevertheless, despite the believer's zeal and the antagonist's scorn, such testimony can yield valuable insight. An enemy, for example, may notice something an average observer would miss, or a friend may take for granted (and fail to mention) things outsiders would find distinctive or significant. The particular side of an issue an informant falls on should never be reason alone for ignoring or dismissing his or her testimony.

The time-lapse between an observation and its recollection is important. Generally the closer to an event, the more reliable the document. But not always. One contemporary source might report only hearsay testimony, whereas a document written many years later might be from an eyewitness. Yet the hearsay source may report the information more accurately, while time and faulty memory may obscure and distort the eyewitness account. The same applies in determining the character or reliability of witnesses. Often a reluctant or even hostile witness is the most candid. In matters of religion, the religious are sometimes tempted to lie, just as nonbelievers may be more inclined to discount the miraculous.<sup>93</sup>

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92. I believe there is no such thing as an unbiased witness and therefore feel this part of Vogel's discussion is misdirected.

93. *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:xiv–xv. (I have not included Vogel's parenthetical references to various works.)

Now, how would Vogel respond if someone said, “You may call that a set of standards, but it’s really just a polemical device that you are using to easily dismiss evidence you don’t agree with”? I would expect Vogel to say that his set of standards allows no such thing.

Furthermore, although I did not have Vogel’s statement in front of me when I fashioned my five points, I had read and carefully marked his statement several years earlier. His standard influenced mine. In fact, I believe that all five of my points are stated or implied in Vogel’s statement. Vogel and I also agree that evaluation of sources is an intricate business and that, as he says in his letter, “applying these standards is not . . . mechanical and automatic. . . . Historical sources and their relationships to one another can be complex, and often there are other complicating factors to consider.”<sup>94</sup> As the above table shows, I carefully considered a wide variety of sources in attempting to determine what Joseph originally said about the plates, including statements hostile, friendly, and seemingly neutral to Joseph; first- and secondhand statements; and early and late statements. I took careful note of when conversations were said to have occurred and when they were recorded, and I closely checked for corroboration among all sources. I believe that such a systematic approach has so many checks and balances built into it that it would simply not be possible to summarily dismiss “undesirable testimony.”

2. *“The best example of Morris’s misuse of historical methodology is his hasty dismissal of Willard Chase’s 1833 report of what he had learned from Joseph Smith Sr. in 1827 about Joseph Jr.’s claimed 1823 encounter with ‘Moroni.’”*<sup>95</sup>

I did not dismiss Chase at all; rather, I simply pointed out that his statement is secondhand (because, purportedly, he got his information from Joseph Sr. rather than Joseph Jr.) and that this statement is not the earliest account concerning the plates (as Huggins claimed). Still, in retrospect, I believe I should have given more emphasis to the Chase document in my *Dialogue* letter. It is an important source, and, as Vogel points out (and as the table above makes quite clear), “many

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94. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” vii.

95. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” vii.

of its details are corroborated in other independent sources.”<sup>96</sup> But more on Chase later.

3. *“Although [Benjamin Saunders’s 1884] account meets Morris’s requirement for ‘firsthand’ testimony, he dismisses the toad story as a later embellishment without acknowledging support from Chase’s 1833 statement.”*<sup>97</sup>

This claim mystifies me. Here is what I actually wrote about Saunders:

“Accounts emphasizing a treasure guardian came later. Benjamin Saunders reported in 1884 that he had heard Joseph say, ‘there was something down near the box that looked like a toad that rose up into a man which forbid him to take the plates.’ This conversation took place in 1827, shortly after Joseph obtained the plates.”<sup>98</sup> Nowhere did I use the word *embellishment* (this is not the only time that Vogel implies I used a certain word when I did not). I simply pointed out that Saunders’s statement was not recorded until 1884. Nor do I dismiss Saunders’s statement. Along with quoting it in my letter, I include it in the above table. (I will grant Vogel’s point that I could have mentioned Chase in this context.)

4. *“Cole prefaced his statement with ‘it is well known,’ so Morris’s fabrication-for-the-sake-of-revenge thesis is highly unlikely.”*<sup>99</sup>

Here again, Vogel has misrepresented my position. I never said that Cole fabricated his story—nor do I believe it. Rather, I pointed out that Cole took a very neutral tone when he first discussed the Book of Mormon and that his tone changed radically after he had a confrontation with Joseph Smith (which occurred because Cole was illegally publishing excerpts from the Book of Mormon in violation of Joseph’s copyright). If Cole had any solid evidence that Luman Walter(s) or anyone else was involved in the creation of the Book or Mormon, he did not mention it in his initial articles. After the confrontation with Joseph, however, Cole launched a parody of the Book of Mormon

96. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” viii.

97. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” viii.

98. Morris, “Folklore Rebutted,” vii–viii.

99. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” x.

called “The Book of Pukei.” That treatment (a sort of nineteenth-century tabloid journalism) has all the earmarks of rumormongering. Even when Cole later makes statements about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, he offers vague accusations without supplying specific dates (making it virtually impossible to either prove or disprove his claims). Also, Cole’s saying that something was well known hardly shows that it was. Such a statement needs supporting evidence, and Cole offers none. Any careful discussion of Cole must take all of this into account.

### The Willard Chase Document

One of the main things Vogel takes me to task for is my supposed “hasty dismissal” of the Willard Chase statement. While I agree that this statement is important, I believe that Vogel himself makes hasty conclusions that cause him to miss crucial details related to the Chase account.

Vogel is correct that the Chase version includes several details confirmed by other sources (indeed, the table shows that Chase mentions six of the eight categories). Because of this, Vogel jumps to the conclusion that Chase is “highly credible,”<sup>100</sup> apparently assuming that the Chase affidavit is therefore a reliable guide to what Joseph Smith Jr. said about the angel and the plates.

But Vogel (like Huggins, for that matter) has glossed over the fact that Chase is a hearsay witness because he talked to Joseph Sr., not Joseph Jr. And the whole point of my investigation (and of Huggins’s article) is to discover what *Joseph Jr.* originally said and how that account may have changed over time. I agree with Vogel that we should not automatically exclude Chase’s claims because they are secondhand. At the same time, however, we don’t automatically accept them either. What we must do is carefully consider what Vogel calls complicating factors.

The key question is this: how do we determine what Joseph Jr. originally said about the plates? The answer is obvious: we look at the

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100. Vogel, “Treasure Lore Revisited,” viii.

accounts of those who talked to Joseph about this subject. (If these accounts are found to be unsatisfactory for some reason, we would then move to hearsay accounts.) This is not as simple as it may seem because, as Vogel points out, the relationships among historical sources can be quite complex. We have to consider when these individuals talked to Joseph, when they recorded their experiences, whether they were friendly or hostile to Joseph, and whether their claims can be corroborated by other sources. It can be argued that even a witness who talked to Joseph can be unreliable for one reason or another. This is true enough (and it is also true of those who talked to his father). But the way we protect against that contingency is by looking for corroboration among sources. And what do we find when we compare the four prime sources (identified as such because they were all first-hand and early)?

As the table shows, Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Knight Sr., Oliver Cowdery, and Henry Harris are remarkably consistent.<sup>101</sup> They all agree on the divine purpose associated with the plates and with the appearance of an angel (although Knight uses the term *personage*—the same term Joseph uses in his 1838 account). Furthermore, not a single one of these witnesses mentions a detail not mentioned by at least one other witness. Finally, none of them makes any mention of black clothes or a black horse, a treasure guardian, or a toad.

Such consistency safely allows us to use these prime sources as a standard. There is no need to use Chase's account to tell us what Joseph Jr. said—that would only have been necessary if the firsthand sources had been shown to be unreliable.<sup>102</sup> Of course, establishing a standard

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101. Ideally we would have two friendly sources and two unfriendly, balancing the human tendency to naturally emphasize details consistent with one's personal beliefs. Nevertheless, the Henry Harris statement offers a reasonable degree of "balance" because Harris was quite hostile and because he recorded his statement earlier than Lucy Smith, Oliver Cowdery, or Joseph Knight Sr. In terms of being early and firsthand, Harris's statement is *the* prime source. (In addition, the candid tone of Joseph Knight Sr.'s statement makes it doubtful that he excluded any details for the sake of making Joseph look good.)

102. At best, Chase's account is a guide to what Joseph Sr. said about the plates. But even this is problematic because Chase is the only person who talked to Joseph Sr. and recorded his experience early. Also, there are no accounts from believers who talked to Joseph Sr., leaving us with a lack of balance. Finally, Fayette Lapham, who recorded his

does not mean that we have discovered exactly what Joseph originally said. Absolute proof is not possible because we are only working with traces of the past. Nevertheless, these are the best sources available, and the fact that they confirm rather than contradict each other indicates a reasonable level of reliability. The best evidence thus indicates that Joseph Smith mentioned the following when he first told of the plates:

- There was a divine purpose associated with the visit of an angel.
- The plates disappeared and a “shock” prevented Joseph from retrieving them.
- The angel instructed Joseph to bring someone with him to obtain the plates.

As for Chase and Lapham, consider this: they both talked to Joseph Sr., and they both mention the need for Joseph Jr. to wear black clothes or bring a black horse and the presence of a treasure-guardian spirit, while none of the four prime sources mentions these details. Furthermore, the four prime sources all include religious elements of Joseph Jr.’s experience in a way that Chase and Lapham do not (with Chase conspicuously making no mention of the angel or a divine purpose while the great majority of the other sources do).

A conspicuous pattern emerges: those who talked directly to Joseph Jr. emphasize the religious aspects of the story and deemphasize the “Captain Kidd” aspects, while those who talked to Joseph Sr. do the exact opposite. It therefore seems quite reasonable to conclude that this is merely a reflection of the different ways that Joseph Sr. and Joseph Jr. viewed or reported the experiences of the Prophet. This is hardly surprising. Who has not had the experience of hearing of an event directly from the person involved only to later hear a second-hand report with quite different nuances and shades of meaning?<sup>103</sup>

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statement in 1870, corroborates several of Chase’s details, but he was a frequent visitor to Palmyra who could have talked to Chase. He also could have seen Chase’s published statement in *Mormonism Unveiled*, which was published in 1834.

103. I have personally seen several examples of how hearsay statements can differ from firsthand statements. My grandfather was a well-known patriarch in Rexburg, Idaho, and left dictated accounts of several spiritual experiences. I later heard retellings of some of

Vogel and Huggins have failed to examine systematically which details of the Chase statement are confirmed by which witnesses. It is quite striking, for instance, that not a single prime source mentions the black clothes or horse, the treasure guardian, or the toad. In addition, the sources (other than Chase and Lapham) who do mention these details all recorded them quite late (the Lewis brothers in 1879 and the Saunders brothers in 1884), greatly increasing the possibility that they unintentionally conflated statements they had heard from various sources in the past.

In this light, it is quite revealing to reread the statement of Henry Harris. He had quite a negative view of Joseph Smith and had every reason to mention details likely to embarrass or discredit the Prophet. Rather than offering a “Captain Kidd” tale, however, Harris reports that Joseph “said he had a revelation from God that told him [the plates] were hid in a certain hill and he looked in his stone and saw them in the place of deposit; that an angel appeared, and told him he could not get the plates until he was married, and that when he saw the woman that was to be his wife, he should know her, and she would know him.”<sup>104</sup> Harris says nothing at all about a toad, a spirit guardian, or the need for black clothes or a black horse. Interestingly, this account sounds remarkably like that of Joseph Knight Sr., a friendly source who also talked with Joseph Smith.

The dating of Harris’s conversation with Joseph (another factor not carefully analyzed by Huggins or Vogel) is also important. As Vogel says, the conversation “evidently occurred sometime after Martin Harris’s trip to New York City in February 1828 and before the Book of Mormon’s publication in March 1830. It possibly occurred during Smith’s visits to Palmyra/Manchester in early June and late June to late September 1829 in preparation for printing the Book of Mormon.”<sup>105</sup> This information allows us to establish a timetable of sorts for the prime witnesses. Lucy Mack Smith heard of the plates and the angel in

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those experiences from people who talked to my grandfather. Their accounts have invariably differed in major ways from my grandfather’s firsthand accounts.

104. *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:76.

105. *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:76–77 n. 7.

1823, Joseph Knight Sr. in 1826, Henry Harris between 1828 and 1830, and Oliver Cowdery between 1829 and 1835. Given the consistency of these sources, it is clear that Joseph Smith was giving the same kind of account at the end of the 1820s as he did in 1823. Far from beginning with a “Captain Kidd” version and later altering it, Joseph related a religious experience from the start, a point confirmed by hostile and friendly witnesses alike.