



12-1-2006

Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet. by Dan Vogel

Kyle R. Walker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Walker, Kyle R. (2006) "Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 45 : Iss. 4 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol45/iss4/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Dan Vogel. *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet.*

Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004

Reviewed by Kyle R. Walker

Following up on his five-volume *Early Mormon Documents* series, Dan Vogel recently completed a psychobiography on Joseph Smith. Vogel adopts a similar thesis to Robert D. Anderson's earlier work *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon*. The author highlights major portions of Anderson's earlier interpretations, and adheres to Anderson's conclusions about Smith (xi). Vogel, like Anderson, views the Book of Mormon as a fabricated history that was written by Smith as a medium for dealing with his dysfunctional family background and satisfying his own personal ambition. Having reviewed Anderson's psychobiography, as well as that of Thomas Morain's *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr. and the Dissociated Mind*, I found elements of both books heavily integrated into Vogel's work. Consequently Vogel's work suffers from many of the same weaknesses as these previous psychobiographies of Smith.

The author indicates in the introduction that he interprets "any claim of the paranormal . . . as delusion or fraud" (xii). Discounting the supernatural, Vogel then asserts that he will use an approach in interpreting Smith's personality that has "the fewest assumptions and inconsistencies, and requiring the least elaboration" (xvii). However, in borrowing from Anderson and Morain, who utilized an approach termed "applied psychoanalysis," Vogel adheres to a modality that requires a significant amount of elaboration and assumptions. Although psychoanalysis is grounded in scientific and academic history, it is only loosely based on the body of knowledge about social and psychological phenomena, and when utilized in evaluating limited historical information it requires extensive speculation. Vogel's applied psychoanalysis is rooted more in a system of beliefs and constructs than it is in a body of scientific knowledge. In turn, he speculates extensively that Joseph Smith's childhood led to impairment in his adult personality. This may be at least part of the reason why Vogel limits

his biography of Smith to the years 1805–1831, because psychoanalysts believe that most adult dysfunction stems from childhood.

In addition to psychoanalysis, Vogel proposes using family systems theory to further substantiate previous claims that Joseph Smith's upbringing was largely negative. He states in the introduction that he sees Joseph Sr. and Lucy Smith's marriage as "essentially dysfunctional" due to religious differences and financial burdens. However, he fails to document patterns of conflict that would lead to such an overarching conclusion. Besides documenting a single disagreement surrounding the Smith parents' religious differences, Vogel fails to cite ongoing turmoil to substantiate his claim. Instead, he hypothesizes that an episode such as Joseph Jr.'s refusal to drink alcohol during his leg surgery was evidence of chronic marital conflict over Joseph Sr.'s supposed misuse of the substance (28). Similarly, he conjectures that when the Smiths lost their Palmyra-Manchester farm, "The loss added stress to an already strained marriage. One can only speculate about the fallout that must have followed this event, and it is doubtful that Joseph Sr. would have escaped blame" (78). While Joseph Sr.'s decisions regarding the family finances certainly made life more difficult for the family, Vogel's interpretation of the limited information may lead to inaccurate conclusions.

Vogel additionally portrays Joseph Sr. as an alcoholic and Lucy Mack Smith as depressed and suicidal. For these overarching diagnoses, Vogel speculates extensively beyond available data. As an example, Vogel makes reference to a blessing Joseph Sr. gave to his son Hyrum in 1834, in which he states, "Though he [referring to himself] has been out of the way through wine, thou hast never forsaken him nor laughed him to scorn." Though Vogel cites antagonistic Palmyra neighbors for additional evidence of Joseph Sr.'s use of alcohol, his diagnosis of alcoholism may be greatly overstated. In this instance, Vogel uncharacteristically ignores context in early nineteenth-century America. This context would have shed light on whether Joseph Sr.'s drinking was even considered unusual at the time. He goes on to conclude that the Smith children "felt regret and embarrassment over his drinking habits and recognized the pain it caused his family" without documentation (28). Similarly, Vogel fails to provide sufficient evidence for diagnosing Mother Smith as depressed. The single instance cited was the time period following the deaths of Lucy's two older sisters. Lucy recounted feeling "pensive and melancholy, and often in my reflections I thought that life was not worth possessing." Vogel cites this solitary episode to account for his conclusion that Mother Smith struggled with "periodic bouts with depression" and had "suicidal fantasies" (4). Once again, Vogel may be prematurely drawing conclusions, as Lucy

may simply have been experiencing normal grief following the loss of two family members.

One major limitation of the book is that Vogel fails to substantiate claims of family dysfunctionality, and fails to carry the claim through to the end of the book. This is a critical error, because Vogel argues that the “singular environmental pressure’ motivating Smith’s behavior came primarily from his family” and that “he began his religious career, in part, to resolve family conflict” (xxi). If the family was indeed functional, then Vogel’s arguments lack validity. He assumes the reader is familiar with earlier works by Anderson and Morain to support his conclusions that the Smiths were a dysfunctional family and Joseph struggled with either bipolar disorder or a narcissistic personality. In an earlier review of Anderson’s book, the reader is made aware of the impropriety of diagnosing the dead—especially with a limited amount of historical information that would justify such far-reaching diagnoses.¹ The same could be said of Vogel’s case for family dysfunction, where he fails to provide sufficient documentation to justify his conclusions and carry it through to its conclusion, as the book veers in other directions.

In adhering to Robert Anderson’s earlier assumptions, Vogel perhaps inadvertently adopts his same approach—where Anderson confesses that he would pay “increased attention to outside documentation and voices of others, including antagonists. These will include the townspeople in the Palmyra/Manchester area and his [Joseph Smith’s] wife’s relatives and friends in Pennsylvania. Generally, these voices paint what I see as a consistent picture of a progressively fabricated history.”² Vogel similarly places an increased emphasis on the voices of those outside the movement, relying heavily upon E. D. Howe’s *Mormonism Unveiled*. Though Vogel does a better job than Anderson or Morain of integrating the voices of those who were within the movement, and thus closest to Smith, in the end he superficially dismisses their accounts. An example is when Vogel cites accounts from Emma Hale Smith regarding the process of translation. Emma indicated that during translation, when Joseph had difficulty pronouncing names, he would spell it out—such as was the case with the name “Sariah”—then Emma would pronounce it for him. Vogel quickly disqualifies Emma’s account, conjecturing that the delay “was due to a difficulty Smith sometimes encountered in inventing new names.” When Emma expressed confidence in her husband’s gift of translating by noting that he lacked the ability to “write . . . [or] dictate a coherent and well worded letter,” Vogel concludes that she simply “overstated the case for Joseph’s illiteracy” (119). Vogel dismisses and then overlays his own interpretation so that the sources harmonize with his central thesis.

Historians may be most interested in the concluding chapters (29–31), as these chapters focus more on the history of Joseph Smith and early Mormonism. Chapters 1–7 comprise Vogel’s attempt to make a case for family dysfunction and its impact on Joseph Smith. The majority of the book (chapters 8–28) is reserved for what Vogel terms “The Book of Mormon Project, 1828–1830,” which is an analysis of how Joseph Smith purportedly integrated his own life experience into stories, characters, and doctrines found in the Book of Mormon. An example of how Vogel attempts to weave portions of Joseph Smith’s “dysfunctional” life experience into Book of Mormon narrative comes from the story of Amalickiah. States Vogel:

The Lamanite nation is at odds with itself and on the verge of self-destruction until Amalickiah steps in and does what is necessary to unite the military under his leadership. Interestingly, this is accomplished through deception and betrayal of a man named Lehonti, a possible link to father Lehi. However, Lehonti’s subsequent death by poisoning calls to mind Alvin, Joseph’s surrogate father, who died of poisoning. Although Joseph had nothing to do with this, he may have felt guilt about stepping into his older brother’s role. It is common for surviving siblings to feel such guilt, especially if the misfortune was preceded by envy. (256)

Such speculation is prevalent throughout this portion of the book. If Vogel fails to substantiate family dysfunction—such as his supposition that Father Smith was an alcoholic or that Alvin was indeed Joseph’s surrogate father—then Vogel’s interpretation regarding various individuals and stories within the Book of Mormon requires even greater hypotheticals.

One area in which I felt confused dealt with Vogel’s explanation of how Joseph dictated the Book of Mormon text from memory. He states that Smith had been rehearsing stories that would eventually appear in the Book of Mormon as early as 1823 (when Joseph was seventeen years old), which enabled him to dictate the stories from memory by the time the Book of Mormon was written. For an uneducated twenty-three-year-old farm boy to dictate a six-hundred-page book completely from memory—with only minimal subsequent changes—would require the work of a genius of exceptional talent and learning. Vogel concludes, “The Book of Mormon was a remarkable accomplishment for a farm boy” and “remained his most creative, ambitious work in scope and originality” (466). This summary left me wondering that if Vogel’s interpretations are correct, why those outside the movement of Mormonism haven’t made greater inquiries into the genius of Joseph Smith.

One of the strengths of Vogel’s book is his familiarity with the historical context of the day. He cites numerous sources that provide a rich background for the religious and political environment in which Joseph Smith

lived. One of Vogel's purposes in providing such context is to help explain how Joseph Smith would have been familiar enough with such historical context to enable him to incorporate those ideas into the Book of Mormon text. Again, I was perplexed on how a farm boy with limited educational opportunities and who in his youth was described by his mother as "less inclined to the perusal of books" would have been so intimately acquainted with such obscure works as cited by Vogel.³ As historian Richard L. Bushman recently summarized, "To account for the disjuncture between the *Book of Mormon's* complexity and Joseph's history as an uneducated rural visionary, the composition theory calls for a precocious genius of extraordinary powers who was voraciously consuming information without anyone knowing it."⁴ Once again, Vogel's interpretations are at odds with historical accounts. Still, the historical context provided by Vogel may be of interest to historians who want to learn more about the political and religious environment of Joseph Smith's day.

In summary, Vogel's book fails to document solidly patterns of individual and family behavior that would justify his conclusions regarding Joseph Smith and his family of origin. While I share the belief that tools from the mental health profession can assist in understanding historical topics and characters in a new light, such professionals must use historical sources responsibly and utilize sound methodology in order to find general acceptance by the historical community. Although Vogel has entertained psychological and family systems issues in his analysis of Joseph Smith, the thesis of the book fails to bridge the chasm between psychology and history, and instead diverges into other directions.

Kyle R. Walker (walkerk@byui.edu) received his PhD in Marriage and Family Therapy in 2001 from Brigham Young University. He has taught in the religion departments at BYU and BYU-Idaho for the past nine years. He is currently a faculty member in the Counseling Center at BYU-Idaho in Rexburg. He recently published an edited volume, *United by Faith: The Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications), 2005.

1. Kyle R. Walker and Douglas E. Craig, review of Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon*, and William D. Morain, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith, Jr. and the Dissociated Mind*, in *Journal of Mormon History* 30 (2004): 253–261.

2. Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), xxvi.

3. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors For Many Generations* (London: S. W. Richards, 1853), 84.

4. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 72.