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THE SPIRIT OF PROPHECY AND THE SPIRIT OF PSYCHIATRY: RESTORATION OR DISSOCIATION?

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The thesis and purpose of The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind, by William D. Morain, M.D., is fairly summarized in its title. Those well-versed in the issues and terminology of clinical psychology and related therapeutic fields, given the title, could deduce the substance of the book. It is an attempt to read the life of Joseph Smith and his work as the result of severe psychopathology produced by childhood trauma and Joseph’s subsequent unsatisfactory psychosexual development. Taken on its own terms, this work is a fairly typical example of psychohistory from a very traditional psychoanalytic (Freudian) perspective. While it fits in well with similar works of psychohistory on notable historical figures (for example, Adorno’s famous study of the “authoritarian personality”1 as an account of Fascism), the book seems to me a bit less sophisticated, not anchored by careful historical research, and more expressive of the personal motives and perspectives of the author (Morain) than one might wish in such ventures into postmortem psychoanalysis.


The fundamental thesis of the book is that the trauma produced by the intense physical pain Joseph Smith experienced during three surgeries (performed without the benefit of anesthesia) on the bone of his lower leg, coupled with the unhappy coincidence that the trauma occurred during the time he would normally be in the throes of intense Oedipal conflict (lusting after his mother and fearing castration from his father), produced in Joseph a powerful and recurring dissociative disorder (a splitting, of sorts, of the psyche from reality). Further, Joseph continued to live out an acute unresolved Oedipal situation, leading to a series of problems in his life centered around sexuality, neurotic guilt, father figures, and an inflated sense of his own importance and mission. Morain also contends that Joseph suffered throughout his life from unconscious fears relating to blood, dismemberment, and sharp instruments—thus the title of the book.

The author relies on three main qualifications in defense of his thesis concerning Joseph Smith and the origins of Mormonism. First, Dr. Morain is a retired plastic surgeon with over two decades of experience, including surgery with young children. Second, during his medical training, Dr. Morain received some training in psychiatry at Harvard University. Finally, Morain draws upon what he describes as his own "mystical childhood world" (p. xix), as he was reared within the tradition of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. By his own account, he has had little contact with the church for over twenty-five years; however, the experiences of Morain's youth played a role in his attention to the life of Joseph Smith and the production of this book: "A connection between my mystical childhood world and my current profession was intriguing" (p. xix).

The author's assessment that his own religious upbringing was in some quintessential way "mystical" betrays a bias rendered abundantly clear throughout the text—that the religious is fundamentally mystical and that all mysticism belongs together as a class of phenomena contrasting to the more secular and scientific, and therefore more accurate, view of reality. That one could take this hardheaded analytical position and, at the same time, invoke psychoanalysis as an analytical framework is the source of some considerable irony, since
psychoanalysis, of all scholarly and secular explanations for human behavior, must surely rank among the most "mystical" and least supported by empirical data or sharp analytical reasoning and research. Any reader of The Sword of Laban would be wise to keep this fact in mind. What is and is not hardheaded analytical thinking is still a matter of debate in scholarly social scientific circles, particularly in regard to questions of the secular versus the religious. Thus I will first turn to an evaluation of the psychology underlying Morain's analysis.

I mentioned to a colleague that I was reviewing Morain's book, and as I told him a bit about its thesis, he asked, "Isn't it hard enough to psychoanalyze a living person, let alone a dead one?" The question, although meant to be humorous, is nonetheless important. A principal problem with the sort of psychohistory we are considering here is that the object of analysis is mute, unable to provide details or even to defend him- or herself. This fact has the capacity to unfetter creative minds from the constraints of fact and to eliminate an important source of validation for the story being woven. Thus psychological analysis and creative writing come uncomfortably close. It is worth noting that in the same way Joseph Smith was not able to give responses that would satisfy his critics who would slander him during his lifetime, he is unable to answer those who would analyze him after his death. The intellectual merits of such a posthumous psychoanalysis are not unlike those exemplified in another instance reported to me by a friend who had just come back from a national conference on Shakespeare studies in which a room full of educated colleagues had seriously debated whether Hamlet had a brother.

Morain himself summarizes the intent as well as the supposition guiding his study of Joseph Smith: "Religious themes may be dialectically reduced to projections of early parental relationships, childhood sexuality, and the confrontation with death" (p. xxv). Although the author maintains that such a rendering of religion "cannot take away the impact that these themes have through their universal appeal" (p. xxv) to the religious person, particularly to one with a strong personal testimony, the rendering of the sacred in terms of the secular results in the destruction of the sacred and of faith itself. As Maurice
Merleau-Ponty once argued against the extreme subjectivity of the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre over the question of human freedom, it matters whether the slave really is free. It matters whether Joseph Smith talked with God, whether he had golden plates, whether Peter, James, and John really conveyed authority to him. At its very best, the analysis presented in Morain's book secularizes and thus privatizes religion, making it a matter of universal symbols of unknown or mystical origin. At its worst, the analysis has the potential to sow the seeds of faithlessness.

The psychology employed by Morain in analyzing the life of Joseph Smith is a fairly traditional brand of heavily Freudian psychoanalysis, augmented by the more recent work of a number of psychoanalytically oriented scholars on the effects of trauma on children. This traditionalist version of psychoanalysis, giving Freud himself a fairly literalist reading, is by no means at the cutting edge of psychological theorizing. Even psychoanalytical theorists have, for at least the past four or five decades, deemphasized the literalist reading of Freud and adopted a metaphorical one, a reading in which the development of meaning, language, and identity supplant sexuality as the prime mover and the master motive of human action.

Views of the unconscious have undergone evolution. Morain's analysis of Joseph Smith and the origins of Mormonism requires accepting the existence of an extremely creative, powerful, and tortured unconscious mind. Such a view of the unconscious is problematic because it serves as a "guardian angel" of psychoanalytic explanations. If something needs to be explained (such as a claim to revelation) in the face of no confirming evidence in a person's outward conversations (no objective history of unusual behaviors by Joseph), it can be explained as originating in the unconscious (dissociative disorders). Since the unconscious is unavailable to outside observers (especially the unconscious of dead persons), and even to the person him- or herself, no amount of hard evidence can be mustered in refutation of the psychoanalyst's explanation. For this reason, treatments such as Morain's are difficult to rebut. They must simply be classified as what they are—creative accounts in which secular psychology subsumes persons, their experiences, and the possibility of the reality of the divine.
More specifically, Morain's analysis of Joseph Smith's life and work is unsatisfactory from a scholarly perspective. In the first place, Morain's entire thesis rests on the assumption that there is the sort of unconscious mind Freud described and others have written about. However, in contemporary philosophical psychology circles, this assumption is very much in question. At one level, the unconscious is a most mundane phenomenon. We seldom bother to be consciously aware of everything we do and why. To do so would be very disorienting (e.g., consciously moving the tongue to make every phoneme as we speak). This is hardly the kind of unconscious mind offered as the grounding of Joseph Smith's life and the founding of Mormonism. That there is a more sophisticated unconscious mind capable of the very sophisticated things Morain suggests is, at this point, a matter of faith, not fact. Nonetheless, in the best psychoanalytic style, Morain not only assumes such an unconscious mind but follows the common (and often criticized) psychoanalytic move of using the absence of a behavior as hard evidence for the unconscious origins of that very behavior. For example, on page 33, Morain suggests that the fact that Joseph never went into detail about the horror and trauma of his leg surgery is positive evidence that the trauma and horror were real and that he had put them into the unconscious mind in an act of dissociation. The logic of the committed psychoanalytic thinker is such that his analysis is irrefutable by any standard of analysis except his own, since what one does and what one does not do take the analyst to precisely the same conclusion.

An irony is inherent in scholarly treatments of the life of Joseph Smith and the founding of Mormonism. Morain's scholarly treatment is different from some in that he extends his analysis to include an explanation for Joseph's actions and the unique doctrines of the church. However, it should be noted that the fundamental logic employed in such critical scholarly treatments as Morain's is precisely the same as the logic employed in historical treatments that are offered in defense of Joseph's character and work. Scholars not enamored of the church and the message of the restoration will reject such "faithful" histories as being without logical grounds. They ask what evidence might exist that any of the supernatural events Joseph reports ever occurred, or that he was indeed a prophet. The defender of the
faith might respond by referring to Joseph's life and works and their fruits. To the skeptic this is circular reasoning: How do we know he was a prophet? Look at what he did. And how was he able to do that? Because he was a prophet. Morain's argument is no different in its essence. The defender of the church might ask: How do you know Joseph had a dissociative disorder and his work was simply a manifestation of pathology? Look at what he did. And why did he do those things and act that way? Because he had a dissociative disorder. One should not be too impressed with arguments and histories that merely seem to seize the higher logical ground. Morain's book is one of those.

Finally, as a psychologist, I have always had difficulty making conceptual sense of explanations based on lost or repressed memories of severe traumas and privations. Even granting that such things happen occasionally, that they can explain the life of Joseph Smith and the roots of Mormonism itself seems distinctly implausible. Morain claims that the most prominent factors in Joseph's life that brought about the dissociative disorder that produced Mormonism are physical trauma, a universal Oedipal conflict, poverty, and the death of a beloved sibling. If these factors are seen as the causal foundations of Mormonism, we might expect prophets (almost one from each family), books of scripture, and churches with the staying power of Mormonism to have sprung up everywhere, since the Oedipal conflict is ubiquitous, and poverty, physical traumas of various sorts, and loss of siblings were nearly universal facts of early nineteenth-century American life. The holocaust in the twentieth century should have produced thousands of similarly spiritually rich and successful movements. Of course the defense would be that Joseph was unique and that the account of the rise of Mormonism in psychoanalytical terms is exclusive to Joseph. However, universal phenomena make very poor explanations of unique events. Morain offers no explanation for Joseph's uniqueness, merely claiming, albeit implicitly, that he was one of a kind. This failure to explain then leaves the reader to wonder whether Joseph's singularity lies in the world of facts or merely in the creative tale that Morain weaves.
Morain spends a good deal of time uncovering symbols in the Book of Mormon. Finding symbols of father-son rivalry and warfare and dismemberment, and even looking for phallic symbols, is a pastime that has occupied dedicated scholars for many years. Precisely because psychoanalysis takes itself to be a universal explanation, the list of possible symbols that can represent the meanings of life as understood psychoanalytically must be very long indeed. Any story that really did take place during the time frame of the Book of Mormon, or that was written as if it did, is very likely to have many swords, towers, and much violence in it. Those were violent times. It would be difficult to write an account of our own times without similar symbols. In my judgment, Morain's use of symbols again is a testimony to the creativity of psychoanalytically trained writers, rather like the well-known “hammer principle.” When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

Any reader of The Sword of Laban should be mindful of another of its claims. Morain seems to suggest (see p. xxiii) that his book is a history. If so, it is not a good one. And it is in this regard that the author's motives are most obviously in question. He reports that histories of Joseph Smith are polarized—from the faithful to the critical. He makes no attempt, however, to review or include much at all of the faithful history. Indeed, Morain both criticizes (when, in Morain’s judgment, it is too faithful) and praises (when it seems to supports his analysis) one of his major faithful sources, Lucy Mack Smith’s history. For the bulk of his “history” Morain relies on the standard exposes from Fawn Brodie, D. Michael Quinn, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, and the venerable E. D. Howe. He includes affidavits and recollections from a number of early apostates and critics.

5. E. D. Howe, Mormonism Unveiled (Painesville, Ohio: by the author, 1834).
For LDS readers familiar with the anti-Mormon genre, this book presents nothing new. For those unfamiliar with anti-Mormon arguments and claims, this book presents some of the most common and most unfortunate in an uncritical fashion. It might be well for the reader to review Hugh Nibley’s analysis of the commonalities among this genre of work critical of the church, or some other faithful account, as one undertakes a reading of Morain’s book. Suffice it to say that there is no evidence that Morain attempted to verify or evaluate the “historical” information he cites. But presenting an accurate historical overview was, of course, not the purpose of his book. He seems merely to have found these critical accounts useful to his analysis and purposes. In my mind, Morain’s use of the traditional anti-Mormon literature was overkill. In fact, it compromises Morain’s avowed scholarly motives and purposes. Add to this Morain’s public exposure of part of the temple ceremony and our beliefs about the temple garment, and most LDS readers will feel uncomfortable. suspecting that beyond any scholarly motive, Morain seems intent on working out his own misgivings and feelings about his “mystical” RLDS upbringing.

In summary, The Sword of Laban is not a compelling scholarly work. It is not an important contribution to the social sciences based on the level of its psychological or psychiatric merits. It will have interest in this arena to a small cadre of already converted psychoanalytically oriented psychohistorians. Nor is the book a contribution to Mormon studies. It breaks no new ground, choosing, rather, to resurrect and present uncritically all the old anti-Mormon material. It is quite simply an attempt to subsume the spiritual by means of an intellectually self-conscious naturalism that seems reassuring to Morain alone. In regard to the Book of Mormon in particular, Morain’s conclusion at once falls flat and reveals the underlying naturalistic perspective that seems to have motivated the work from the beginning: The Book of Mormon is "probably no more nor less fic-

tional than such Old Testament books as Genesis or Ruth... It is 'valid,' however, as one person's metaphorical expression of the themes of guilt, punishment, redemption, grief, and the ambivalent relationship of man to 'father' and 'brother'" (p. 126). In response to Morain's assessment, I am drawn to Hugh Nibley's observation that the simplest and least convoluted explanation of the Book of Mormon is that it is what it claims to be. On grounds of logic as well as faith, Nibley's explanation rises above Morain's.