

REVIEW ESSAY

WHERE IS JOSEPH SMITH NOW?: BEGINNING THE SECOND QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JOSEPH

JOSEPH SMITH: ROUGH STONE ROLLING

by Richard Lyman Bushman

Alfred A. Knopf, 2005

740 pages, illustrations, index, \$35.00

JOSEPH SMITH: THE MAKING OF A PROPHET

by Dan Vogel

Signature Books, 2004

744 pages, illustrations, index, \$39.95

Reviewed by Mark D. Thomas

great-grandfather and Vogel's citation of the 1827 list of liquor purchases by Joseph Smith Sr., I began to long for something that feels more like Joseph to me: a few lines from a Rossini opera, perhaps. Something on a bolder scale to articulate who Joseph Smith Jr. was. Indeed, one might accuse both scholars of believing in the dictum: "more is less." No one deserves such a slow death by suffocation of detail. But these authors had other projects in mind, and I suppose too much detail is better than not enough. I am grateful for the gift of these two fresh and provocative approaches.

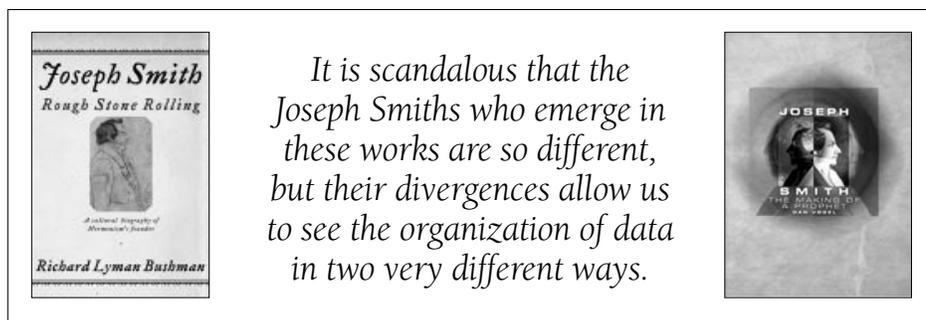
Even as I write this, however, I hold it to be a scandal of Mormon scholarship and an embarrassment for historians that these two biographies describe what appears to be the life of two entirely different people. Even their choices about the shorthand way to refer to their subject—Bushman uses "Joseph" while Vogel uses "Smith"—reveals much about their approaches. Bushman is interested in the person with a complex spirituality who became an enigmatic, biblical-style prophet while Vogel is interested in the phenomenon of the boy/man who grew through daring deceit and fraud to declare himself God's power broker on earth. With these very different approaches, Joseph seems to be slipping deeper in the earth, even as we dig for him. Though it is scandalous that the Joseph Smiths in their works are so different, these divergences can work to our advantage since they allow us to see the organization of data in two very different ways.

At the end of this essay, I suggest that these two biographies, along with the pending publication of the Joseph Smith papers and the internationalization of Mormonism, mark the beginning of what might be called a "second quest" for the historical Joseph. And just as with the new quest for the historical Jesus, we will leave behind many inns before reaching Mormonism's home. I believe this second quest for the historical Joseph will encompass and yet transcend the historical puzzle-making.

TWO AUTHORS, TWO PORTRAITS

RICHARD Bushman is a respected professor at Columbia University, a former Mormon stake president who currently serves as stake patriarch. *Rough Stone Rolling* is Bushman at his best, presenting his most objective, his most astute, critical scholarship. In this book, Bushman acts as a neoclassical scholar—balanced like granite Ionic pillars, with an interior of rich

It is scandalous that the Joseph Smiths who emerge in these works are so different, but their divergences allow us to see the organization of data in two very different ways.



AS A PRESENT for Joseph Smith's 200th birthday, Latter-day Saints and others interested in Mormonism receive two new and very detailed biographies, each representing very different ways of scrying for the Mormon prophet. In many ways, the books and biographers are perfect complements to each other, though I believe the success of the two diggings differs markedly.

Both Richard L. Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* and Dan Vogel's *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* come to us as labors of a lifetime, each containing carefully

crafted portraits of Mormonism's founder. Both are important reference works for scholars of early Mormonism. Approximately one-fourth of each of these 700+ page books consists of footnotes, demonstrating both authors' strong grasp of primary and secondary sources. And both stand in contrast with more general and summary-type works on Smith by Robert Remini and Donna Hill.¹

Yet for all of their wonderful details, there is something un-Joseph-like about many of the little pieces in this puzzle-making competition. Somewhere between Bushman's long list of accomplishments of the prophet's



MARK D. THOMAS has spent his adult life researching and writing about the Book of Mormon. He is the founder of the Book of Mormon Round Table—a group of Mormon and non-Mormon scholars who meet annually. He lives with his wife, Christine, in Holladay, Utah, and is currently director of field studies at BYU's Marriott School of Management.

woodwork and Tiffany lamps. Good judgment and continuous quality are evident in every detail. It is a cautious, class act.

Dan Vogel is a prolific historian toiling late in the night from his home in Westerville, Ohio. Vogel is the iconoclast, a captious crusader writing with a switchblade in his hand, a marathon runner picking apart the details of the would-be prophet/king. While Joseph Smith sought to teach us how to believe in a world of doubt, Vogel seeks to teach us how to doubt in a world of belief. Vogel states that he offers us a balanced, objective view of the prophet (vii–xii), but he fails to deliver. Bushman's biography is by far the more balanced of the two. Vogel is dis-

his better judgment and logic.

But these are mere matters of style and approach. Let us turn to a summary of each book and conclude with what these books suggest for future Joseph Smith research.

Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling

WHILE VOGEL'S PORTRAIT covers just Joseph Smith's early years, Bushman covers his whole life. I very much like the way Bushman portrays the Prophet—without heavy-handed pronouncements, choosing instead to quietly reveal Joseph's character through concrete events of his life. This balance and attention to detail is likely to make

Bushman sees Joseph Smith as a man of deep strengths and weaknesses, perpetually on the verge of financial and spiritual catastrophe. Yet he also presents him as a mammoth and generous personality who, like Abraham Lincoln, came out of nowhere. Bushman's Joseph combined profound love and charisma with vindictiveness—he would not be crossed. He was creative and bold—and often foolish and boastful. Joseph disdained high society. He was a populist who at times appeared raucous, impious, and certainly playful. Yet he could also muster enormous dignity and composure when circumstances called for it. Joseph was chief visionary and chief executive of the

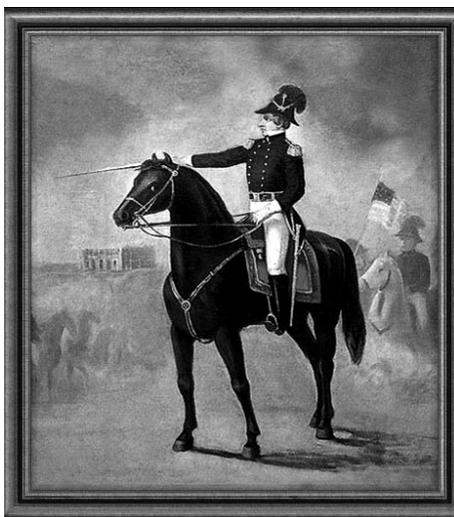
BUSHMAN IS INTERESTED IN THE PERSON WITH a complex spirituality who became an enigmatic, biblical-style prophet while Vogel is interested in the phenomenon of the boy/man who grew through daring deceit and fraud to declare himself God's power broker on earth.



missive of religion, including Mormonism's founder.

A better analogy for the contrasting approaches of the two biographers would be to compare Bushman to a judge who must balance all the evidence, piling all the specifics in separate stacks and carefully giving a verdict on which stack is higher. If Bushman is the judge, Vogel is the prosecuting attorney. As prosecuting attorney, Vogel is out to make a case. Unfortunately for Vogel, his useful and clever arguments often go beyond what the evidence can bear. But nothing is lost in this case. Each side learns from the other. As long as readers understand Bushman's caution and Vogel's guesswork, both books together make for interesting, enlightening, and occasionally baffling reads.

Perhaps, one might argue that Bushman is too institutionally acceptable and too willing to accept Joseph Smith at his word. Compared to Bushman, Vogel is the gambler who risks it all on a single hand—presenting great detail, interesting insights, speculative guesses, logic, laughable interpretations of the Book of Mormon along with useful interpretive insights. Vogel is a great blessing to Mormonism because he forces Mormons to examine the darker side of their origins, but his efficient cruelty is both the sun of his great insights and the arrow that often falls



Bushman's biography a definitive and respected history of the life of Joseph Smith for the foreseeable future.

Bushman presents Joseph as a complex, ironic character. He makes summations of aspects of his character but clearly believes we cannot get at some things. At these points, Bushman points out the possibilities and moves on. His conclusions never go beyond what the data will support. Certainly, he brings his own perspective to the work. But when he can, he tries to let the story speak for itself.

Church, as well as chief developer of real estate. He received revelations as if from an inexhaustible spring (232–51, 294–304, 323–25, 332, 343–44, 390–92, 399, 409, 423, 488–90).

At times, Bushman seems puzzled by Joseph's actions. In the case of plural marriage, he asks: "What lay behind this egregious transgression of conventional morality? What drove him to a practice that put his life and his work in jeopardy, not to mention his relationship with Emma?" (442) He wonders what lay behind Joseph's calling this a commandment and statements that those who reject it would go to hell. In trying to make sense of this, Bushman writes that the God of Joseph "was both kind and terrible" (442). In passages such as these, we see Bushman struggling to make sense of the Prophet's mind. While Joseph recognized the potential for deceptions from Satan, he never admitted deception as a possibility in the case of plural marriage (443). Bushman acknowledges the prophet's marriages to women who were already married and who lived with their husbands after marrying the prophet. This leads Bushman to conclude that this doctrine may ultimately be less about plural marriage than about a family theology. While stating that sexual relations were part of the package, at least in some of the marriages, he concludes

that Joseph “did not lust for women so much as he lusted for kin” (445). Bushman goes into much more detail about the logic of plural marriage than I can list here. But this gives readers an idea of how he treats one of the more controversial aspects of the prophet’s thought and practice.

The subtitle of Bushman’s biography is from the prophet himself, and is apt. Bushman sees Joseph as “an extremist prophet,” who “gave God a voice in a world that had stopped listening” (279). Each episode in this book illuminates something about Joseph Smith as an independent and idiosyncratic thinker. What we get from Bushman is character that evolves, finds dark

seeking and stone-gazing, judging folk magic his preparatory gospel (47–57). The Book of Abraham is “an awkward and unsuccessful attempt to blend a scholarly approach to language with inspired translation” (294). It is “an apocryphal addition to the Genesis story of Abraham” (286–94). How and why did the priesthood and endowment evolve? (313–23) What was the Council of Fifty, and why was Joseph Smith declared King of the world? (523–31) Bushman admits that with the rise of recent scholarship, proponents of the Book of Mormon as an ancient document face an uphill battle (93). He addresses all of these issues with frankness and balance.

The primary weakness of Bushman’s work

is his seeming acceptance at face value of Joseph Smith’s late statements about his own youthful years. For Bushman, Joseph’s pronouncements seem to be generally straightforward and factual—even late versions of early events. I believe a great deal of work remains to be done to uncover the events of early Joseph Smith from later inaccuracies and performance variations in his story.

Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet

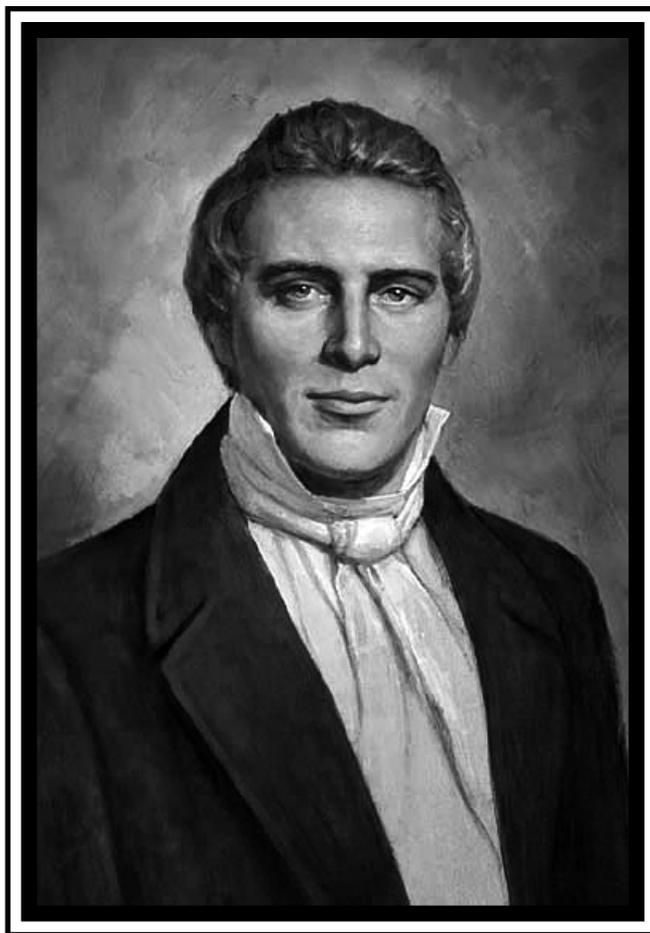
IN CONTRAST TO Bushman’s treatment, Vogel’s biography seeks an overall psychological interpretation of the life of Joseph Smith as well as a broad interpretation of the Book

AN EXPLOSION IN THE CREATION OF CULTURE-specific images of Joseph Smith is likely to occur soon. That it is coming is, I believe, the elephant in the room that very few are discussing.



days, thinks and acts big, moves ahead of his followers (and, therefore, keeps silent at times), rains curses on his opponents, blesses and inspires—and keeps rolling like a stone hewn from the mount without hands. Bushman notes the many roughnesses of Mormonism that stem from this unpolished prophet: its authoritarian, yet populist nature (154, 252–70, 523–31); its cruelty and seeming incapacity to accept criticism while at the same time capable of great compassion and love for fun (251, 293–304); its “mixing of the mystical with the plain” (483–84).

Rough Stone Rolling addresses pressing issues in Mormon history: Is Joseph Smith culpable for the excesses of the Danites? Bushman’s answer: Yes—he egged them on with his rhetoric and gave them legitimacy, even though he may not have known all that they were doing (375). Did women get the priesthood in Nauvoo? No—but the Relief Society organization was patterned after the priesthood and gave women power in an evolving church (451–53). Bushman forthrightly deals with Joseph’s treasure-



of Mormon. As its subtitle suggests, it is an interpretation of how Smith came to think of himself as a “prophet.” While Bushman seeks insights into a complex person by drawing from detailed events, Vogel operates from a single, grand thesis that explains it all: Smith was a “pious fraud.” But ultimately Vogel finds more fraud than piety in Smith.

By “pious,” Vogel means that Joseph Smith had some sort of religious vision/conversion experience in his youth, and he believed that God commissioned him to call the world to repentance. By “fraud,” Vogel means that Joseph Smith “occasionally” used deceptive means to accomplish that mission (vii–xxii). But when we actually see what Vogel actually believes to be fraudulent, it seems that it could include the bulk of Smith’s major religious claims and activities.

Vogel suggests that Joseph Smith may have fabricated evidence and used fraud during his money digging career (xi–xx, 80–86, 98–101) and engaged in the same tricks used by modern-day psychics to convince people

that he was a real seer (69–70). He also claims that this fraudulent activity reflects on the nature of the translation of the Book of Mormon (xvi–xvii).

Vogel admits that it is possible that Joseph Smith had visions after his first vision but is clearly skeptical that they occurred. (xi–xv). For instance, due to the changes in the stories as they were told over time, Vogel has difficulty believing Smith's story of the 1823 vision of Moroni. This leads Vogel to state that he treats "Smith's visions in terms of the evolving stories he told people about them rather than as actual events" (42–44).

In other articles and essays, Vogel has been more forthcoming about his outright skepticism about Smith's visions, suggesting, for instance, that Smith spent a sleepless night on 21–22 September 1823, wrestling with the "moral dilemma, whether or not to proceed with his story of finding gold plates." Vogel suggests that Smith's decision to tell others of a visit by an angel as a "decisive moment in Smith's career."²

In this book, a more cautious Vogel states that the visit of John the Baptist to Smith and Cowdery may have been a vision, or it may have been pure fabrication for theological reasons (306–07). He concludes that the visions of the three and eight witnesses were "group hallucinations" with Joseph Smith acting as "facilitator" (446–69). He suggests that Smith may even have put rocks or sand in a box for the eight witnesses to left as an aid to helping them believe the experience that Smith and the hallucinatory state induced by prayer—"two hours with fanatical earnestness"—suggested they were having (468–69).

In other places throughout the book, Vogel points out that Joseph Smith lied about plural marriage (ix), may have made the golden plates himself (98–99), and believed that God deceives people for their own good (xxix). For this reason, according to Vogel, perpetrating such deceptions would not overly trouble the would-be prophet: "If Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon, became a prophet, and founded his church as a pious invention, he possessed the psychological means to explain and justify such acts" (xxi).

Despite Vogel's consistent caution in using "may" and other terms that soften his claims about Smith's fraud, Vogel just as consistently uses the inflammatory language of a prosecuting attorney rather than more neutral language of an objective scholar. In speaking of Smith, he uses titles such as "deceiver" (x), "fraud" (xv), "magician" (xiv), "charlatan" (xiv), "religious pretender" (xix), and "pious

manipulator" (xx). Vogel also uses prejudicial descriptors for persons whom he believes are models against which to measure Smith: "fraudulent seer" (xiii), practitioners of "trickery" (xii–xiii), "mentalism" (xiii), and "confidence schemes" (xiii–xiv).

Though the book is well researched and rich in historical detail, I find Vogel's interpretation of texts, especially the Book of Mormon, invalid, and his logic unpersuasive. Following are two representative examples of Vogel's problems with texts and logic.

Vogel interprets the Book of Mormon as a complex autobiography of Joseph Smith—a sort of autobiographical allegory revealing multiple levels of meaning in Smith's life. Vogel gives at least six levels of meaning to the journey of Lehi (130–46, 379–402). For example, Nephi represents Joseph Smith Jr., Lehi is the "good" Joseph Smith Sr., and Laban is the "bad" Joseph Smith Sr. Vogel gives two possible meanings for Nephi's killing of Laban: his killing the "backsliding Universalist and sword-bearing treasure seeker" so that "the good father can emerge." A second possible meaning is Joseph Smith Jr. wanted to kill his father in order to "free the Bible from the intellectualizing grip of his father and those like him, to interpret scripture for himself more literally and through the spirit of God" (135). Vogel spends many pages outlining psychobiographical readings of Book of Mormon people and events. They are extremely speculative and interesting theories that beg to be tested. Let us test one. For simplicity's sake, let's stay with the Nephi/Laban story.

Certainly Lehi and Nephi are character types "even as the prophets of old" (1 Nephi 1:20) and certainly quite like the prophet of the Restoration. As I see him, Joseph Smith, like Lehi, was a social outcast, left the doomed city, and, guided by his seer stones, sought a new, promised land. But this is not the kind of analysis that Vogel gives us.

In the Book of Mormon text itself, the narrator gives an explicit social/psychological meaning of the Laban story—that with God's aid, the weak outcast can overcome the powerful—and indeed Nephi explicitly compares himself and his brothers' battling Laban with Moses and the children of Israel's battling the Pharaoh of Egypt. But Vogel's analysis contradicts that explicit thesis. Vogel argues that Joseph Smith Sr. was a social outcast, "impotent," had a melancholy disposition, a man who felt inadequate, and was essentially a drunken failure who needed to be saved by his son (9–15, 42, 154). Vogel portrays Joseph Jr. as more powerful and able than his father, even before the coming forth of the

Book of Mormon (42). According to Vogel, the psychological message of Laban's story is that strong things (Joseph Jr./Nephi) overcome weak things (Joseph Sr./Laban), the exact opposite of what the text says about itself.

This is just one example of Vogel's strained reading of the text. Time and time again during my reading, I asked, "Do Vogel's psychobiographical speculations help me understand the book or Smith better?" Usually the answer is "No."

Vogel does offer some good insights into the Book of Mormon. I like, for example, his description of the fortification of mound builders in Joseph Smith's environment and how they compare to Book of Mormon fortifications (257–59). He also offers some very useful summaries of Universalism, king men, and other issues in their nineteenth century context (e.g. 200–03, 260).

The irony of Vogel's book is that it is so rich in wonderful detail, and yet his thesis of Joseph Smith as a pious fraud contradicts the primary data in his own book. For example, Vogel portrays the Smiths as a family of sincere visionaries. Lucy Mack's sister had a vision of Christ. Solomon Mack has seen visions of lights. Lucy claimed to see a spiritual light through a veil. Joseph Sr. had many dreams that he considered visions. And he was one of the eight witnesses that Vogel claims had a "visionary" experience similar to the three witnesses (e.g., 8–9, 15–20, 26–28, 31, 46, 50, 466–67). The sincerity of their visionary claims is just one aspect of the deep religious character of the Smith family, as portrayed by Vogel.

Joseph Jr. utilized the same visionary techniques as his family, yet Vogel argues that many of his religious activities and claims are intentional deceptions. In short, according to Vogel's own data, Joseph Smith Jr. seems to be fundamentally different from his family. Yet one of the foundations of Vogel's argument is that we can understand Joseph Smith best as a product of his family (xx–xxi). Thus Vogel's Joseph Smith is a stranger to his own historical setting. In fact, Vogel's argument and evidence force me to accept the portrait of Joseph Smith's character and visions Bushman draws rather than Vogel's portrait of Smith as a consistent liar with claims of visions devoid of sense data. Vogel's data actually supports Bushman's conclusions better than do his own.

Objective observers are likely to agree that we can, with certainty, conclude that Joseph Smith lied during his lifetime. The prime example is Joseph Smith's deception to hide plural marriage. (Vogel also points to

the golden plates as a prime example of deception and fraud, but Latter-day Saints are less likely to accept this.) But I believe it is too great a leap to conclude from one or perhaps two examples that Joseph Smith can be summarized as a fraud with good intentions, and as a charlatan.

There is a nearly universal belief that deception is sometimes justified, and showing occasions of deceitfulness is an insufficient method for distinguishing frauds, magicians,



WORDS OF MORMONS Can't Find a Book?

*These stores specialize in
out-of-print and hard-to-find
LDS books*



BENCHMARK BOOKS

3269 S. Main, Suite 250
Salt Lake City, UT 84115
(801) 486-3111
(800) 486-3112 (toll free for orders)
<<http://www.benchmarkbooks.com>>
email: <benchmarkbooks@mcleodusa.net>
Buy, Sell, Trade



KEN SANDERS RARE BOOKS

268 S. 200 E., Salt Lake City, UT 84111
(801) 521-3819; Fax (801) 521-2606
Email: <ken@dreamgarden.com>
<<http://www.kensandersbooks.com>>
*appraisals, catalog, mail orders
search service, credit cards*
10 A.M.–6 P.M., Monday–Saturday

or charlatans from true visionaries. Ask any spy. See the movie *Goodbye, Lenin*. Ask a mother speaking to the dying, or a man commenting on his wife's haircut. If Joseph Smith is a charlatan, he is not so easily distinguished from generally honest folk.

THE SECOND QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JOSEPH

ALFRED North Whitehead states that “the death of religion comes with the repression of the high hope of adventure.”³ So it is with the future of Mormonism and research on Joseph Smith. That adventure will be dictated both by the ongoing and newly discovered facts of history and by the needs of future readers. So the second quest for the historical Joseph will be based on at least these features. I believe there are three leading indicators for determining the future direction of research on Joseph Smith: (1) reaction to Bushman's and Vogel's books; (2) the forthcoming multi-volume publication of the Joseph Smith papers; and (3) the internationalization of Mormonism.

1. Reaction to the Biographies

WHAT DO PROFESSIONAL and lay historians think of these two works? Bushman's work is too new to have been read widely, but the publisher has told me that there has been high interest in the book for some time. Deseret Book has purchased several thousand copies to sell through its many outlets, which tells me that some will view the book as receiving an informal endorsement from official Mormonism. From what little data I've been able to gather, non-Mormon scholars who have read the book seem to be impressed. And *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* will certainly receive much praise from the same history organizations that honored Vogel's biography.

Vogel's *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* has been available long enough to have been assessed by competent scholars. In an effort to get a sample of opinions on Vogel's biography, I recently called a dozen professional historians and students of Mormonism from all sides of the theological spectrum. In all but a few cases, I found that Mormons and non-Mormons alike feel an ambivalence and suspicion of Vogel's methodology in the book. Some called his work “apologetic” in the sense that he defends a position, often with speculative and controversial material. A non-Mormon film producer working on Mormonism stated that

he found Vogel's book strange and unconvincing. A historian in an eastern university stated his preference for Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* to Vogel's *Making of a Prophet*. Two well-published Mormon historians who work in official Church capacities both reported that they did not feel it was worth reading at all. The most positive review came from a Community of Christ scholar who accepts Vogel's work as “right on the money.”⁴

As I've considered what I heard in these interviews, I've concluded that Vogel's book is likely to remain very controversial but also a force to be reckoned with for some time to come. Bushman's approach is more likely to be considered a standard for the future, though a minority of readers will certainly take Vogel into account, especially those who have a religious ax to grind against Mormonism. The great divide of divergent views is not likely to be bridged any time soon.

2. The Joseph Smith Papers

WE DO NOT yet have all of the pieces of the puzzle. A number of Mormon scholars are working on an exciting project to publish all of Joseph Smith's papers. The first three volumes of this series should come out within the next few years. This series will help provide better texts for what we already have and a set of new texts.

Ron Esplin, executive editor of the series, has stated that among other important topics, these texts will provide new material to better interpret the School of the Prophets, the endowment in Kirtland temple, and the Danites. The legal papers, in particular, should give us new insights into Joseph Smith. Richard Bushman has had the advantage of seeing many of these new documents, but his book had to be completed before the full impact of the documents could be included in his present work. This coming forth of this series is a leading textual indicator in interpreting Joseph Smith. This new evidence may tend to support Bushman, since he has seen it. Vogel has stated to me that even though he has published five volumes of early documents related to the Restoration, there are significant materials among the papers being collected that are not yet accessible to him and other scholars.

3. Needs of the International Readers

MILTON TAUGHT US that “a scholar is a candle which the love and desire of all men will light.”⁵ For now and into the foreseeable

future, the main persons carrying the matches to light Joseph Smith are Mormons. So what are the growing needs of Mormons? I believe the third leading indicator in the new quest for the historical Joseph is the internationalization of Mormonism. Mormon expansion—both geographically and academically—will change the way research is done about the prophet.

Mormon scholarship is something more than history. And Mormons are something more than Americans. One example of how the prophet is likely to be viewed in future Mormonism can be seen in how artistic depictions of Jesus changed as Christianity spread across the world. In the art of sub-Saharan Africa, Jesus is invariably portrayed as a Black African. The portraits of Jesus in Northern Europe depict him as a Northern European Jesus. This process of creating “culture specific” Josephs is already at work in the art and history of Mormonism as it becomes global. So, what will Joseph Smith look like to a Brazilian who is a believer in spiritualism, Catholicism, and Mormonism? How will a Guarani Indian in Paraguay hear the message of Jesus’ prophet when his people were once massacred and enslaved in the name of Jesus?

Mormonism’s scholarly strength is history. But as the Church expands and matures, other disciplines are likely to make important contributions in the quests for the historical Joseph. We have already seen sociologists, biblical scholars, theologians, and others enter the field. Emile Durkheim argues that all religions are true in the sense that they answer, each in a different way, the fundamental problems of human existence. If one agrees with this premise, one important quest for the historical Joseph Smith will include the ways the Prophet addressed the universal issues of death, poverty, meaninglessness, guilt, and the like—all important elements in the Restoration. But to date, Mormon biographers and authors, including me, have not yet reached the level of sophistication required to create the kinds of studies suggested here.

Certainly, we will never abandon the details of Joseph Smith’s historical setting, as detailed by Bushman and Vogel. But as Mormonism goes global, the general view of Joseph Smith is likely to change from an exclusive, American prophet to a universal one. Both Vogel and Bushman are aware of this larger prophetic context, but neither has yet explored it in detail. I believe that such comparisons will undermine Vogel’s thesis of Smith as pious fraud and could also make Bushman nervous by tying Joseph more

closely to the prophetic eccentrics that surrounded him. But it seems to me that because of the empowerment that comes from doing so, an explosion in the creation of culture-specific images of Joseph Smith is likely to occur soon. That it is coming is, I believe, the elephant in the room that very few are discussing.

When we set Joseph Smith in the context of world religions instead of western New York, what could he look like? Visions of angels and the light from stones place Joseph Smith in a broader tradition of prophets, mystics, and shamans. The description of Joseph Smith seeing light in the darkness is reminiscent of a broad group of religions. How does Joseph Smith’s gazing at shining stones in a hat to access the spiritual world compare to the use of shining stones by shamans the world over?

CONCLUSION

WE have been well-served by the work of these two historians—Bushman and Vogel. And we need to be humble enough to keep listening to these fine historians in the future to help us see what we might have missed in the past. We can also disagree with them. I say to myself and to all who read and write about the prophet: “Think that you may be wrong.” Humility and openness to new insights is the first banner of science and the first article of our faith in a growing global community. With an eye that can catch the sleight of hand, with an ear for the rumor of angels, let us sing praise to the man who communed with Jehovah and to his two recent biographers. We are better for having read their works. 



NOTES

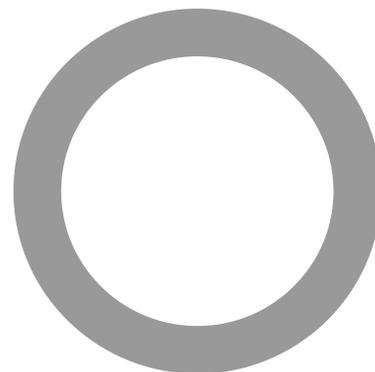
1. Robert V. Remini, *Joseph Smith* (East Rutherford, N. J.: Penguin Books, 2002); Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).

2. See Dan Vogel, “The Prophet Puzzle Revisited” in *The Prophet Puzzle*, Bryan Waterman, ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1999), 57–58. Vogel’s strong skepticism about the nature of Smith’s visions is also on display in a letter to the editor in *Dialogue: Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2004), viii–xii.

3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York, Macmillan, 1925), 296.

4. Notes from these conversations in my possession.

5. John Milton, quoted in Harold Bloom, “Why Read?” *Cornell Magazine Online*, September–October 2000 (accessed 22 October 2005 <http://cornell-magazine.cornell.edu/Archive/Sept2000/SeptBloom.html>).



LIU SHAHE

His speech makes measured music in the old Sichuan dialect. He quotes Confucius, Walt Whitman and Li Po then tells the American writer her name sounds like pearls dropping in a dish—
Hong-ting-ting.

During the long darkness Liu shaped hard wood with plane and saw, fashioned cabinets tight as tombs. As witness to his children, he wrote poems in the night. When the Red Guards came he burned the scraps of paper, then threw the ashes on the wind.

These days he stays home, writes old style poems—
“traces of the saw tooth’s edge—
cipher of awl and auger”—
and complains about young poets writing crazy verse.

“My children no longer read my poems,” he says, “They just rock and roll . . .

Rolling Stones.”

—ROBERT REES