

YEA, YEA  NAY, NAY

DNA STRANDS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

By Blake T. Ostler

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the second installment of a two-part essay in which LDS philosopher and theologian Blake T. Ostler employs the tools of logic and formal argumentation to assess recent claims against Book of Mormon historicity.*

IN PART I of this essay (SUNSTONE, March 2004, 70–72), I argued that the arguments from DNA against Book of Mormon historicity are logically invalid and unsound. I also suggested that we are not in an epistemic position to know whether we should expect to find DNA evidence of Semitic ancestors for modern Amerindians. Toward the end of that essay, I also suggested that one reason for the confusion many Latter-day Saints feel when faced with the recent DNA challenges to Book of Mormon historicity is the link in their minds between the issue of Amerindian origins and what they have been taught the Book of Mormon says about ancient American peoples. That is, when confronted with DNA evidence that doesn't track with what they've been taught about the inhabitants of Ancient America, many people confuse the issue of "that's not what I've been taught" with the matter of "what the Book of Mormon actually says about its peoples."

In this second half of the essay, I deal directly with this confusion, arguing for the importance of weighing DNA and other studies against what the Book of Mormon actually says about itself instead of against what others say that it says—even if those expressing such views have been or are currently Church leaders. I suggest that if we are serious about assessing whether what the Book of Mormon teaches is consistent with DNA evidence, we must assess it based on what it says and not on what others say about

it. Moreover, I am hardly the first one to note that the Book of Mormon itself speaks of others already present when Lehi arrived.¹

IN 1977, long before the advent of DNA population studies and their purported challenges to the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and also before I became aware of the work of LDS and RLDS scholars who'd begun to propose a "limited geography" model for Book of Mormon lands, I got into an argument with my missionary companion regarding whether the Book of Mormon describes the history of the North and South American continents and the origin of all American Indians, or whether it deals only with a small sub-group who lived somewhere in or around the American continents. We had just finished teaching some investigators a lesson in which my companion had told them that all American Indians descended from Laman and Lemuel. From my own previous study and mapping of Book of Mormon events, including the distances it took to travel between cities, it had become clear to me that the entire story reported in the Book of Mormon had taken place within an area about the size of Palestine. I had determined then that, at most, the setting of the events described in the book consisted of an hour-glass shaped land mass that had dimensions of about two hundred miles by four hundred miles. The Book of Mormon's internal mapping is remarkably consistent, and I believe that any attentive reader of the Book of Mormon who takes the time to review its geography based solely upon the statements made within the book itself will arrive at the same conclusion about the size of the lands described therein.

The same thing holds true about the populations described in the Book of Mormon.

Most of those who argue that the DNA studies which reveal Asiatic origins for today's Amerindians deal a significant blow to any claim of Book of Mormon historicity base their claims on the assumption that the Book of Mormon teaches that there were no other aboriginal cultures already present (somewhere) in the Americas prior to the Jaredites or Lehites. They claim that the view that there were other populations already in the Americas is contrary to the Book of Mormon. Brent Lee Metcalfe claims succinctly that the Book of Mormon "narrative says nothing of indigenous 'others' and in fact prophetically precludes them."² However, it seems evident to me that the Book of Mormon actually provides facts to the contrary.

THE "GREAT SEPARATION" AND INTERMARRIAGE WITH OTHERS.

WE must keep in mind that Nephi expressly states that the chronicle of the profane "history" of his people is written on different plates from those that Joseph Smith claims to have translated. The plates translated as 1 and 2 Nephi are meant to be a record of spiritual issues and discourses—and that is what they are. Notwithstanding this focus on spiritual experiences, the narrative does give occasional hints of mundane matters. In 2 Nephi 5, the text describes an important event, one that I refer to as "the great separation," which I believe reveals quite clearly the presence of "others" alongside those who descended from the family of Lehi and their traveling companions.

By the time the events described in 2 Nephi 5 occur, Lehi has recently died. Because of the threat posed by his elder brothers, Laman and Lemuel, Nephi writes that he took his family and fled into the "wilderness [along with] all those who would go with me" (2 Nephi 5:5). The "Nephites" are separated as a group from their own nuclear family members whose descendants will later come to be known as Lamanites. Nephi leaves with Zoram and his family, his brothers Jacob, Joseph, and Sam, and their families and perhaps his sisters (though that is not recorded). There are essentially six to eight families who "flee into the wilderness" with Nephi (2 Nephi 5: 6–7). They live in tents. This "great separation" occurs about twenty-five years after Lehi departs from Jerusalem. We don't know how many were in Nephi's party, but it seems fairly safe to say that if we count only Israelite family members, there were likely no fewer than twenty nor more than sixty souls.



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Within a few years after the “great separation” (or at least within the lifetime of Nephi’s brother Jacob), Nephi notes that the skin of the “Lamanites” had become dark—and Nephi interprets this change of skin color as a curse (2 Nephi 5:21; cf., 1:17; Alma 3:6–7). The most obvious explanation for such a change in skin color is intermarriage with indigenous populations who had darker skin. Nephi is clear that the darkness of the Lamanites’ skin is genetic in the sense that it is passed from one generation to another: “For the Lord did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. . . . And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing” (2 Nephi 5:21, 23).

Since this issue of black skin as a sign of cursing causes modern readers so much concern in that it appears to sanction a form of racism, it is important to note that ancient Israelites would have had very different sensibilities. If the Book of Mormon narrative is to be believed, Nephi is an Israelite, someone whose acceptance of the Lord’s commands under the Law of Moses naturally would lead him to view intermarriage with any non-covenant peoples as requiring the curses of God. A primary concern throughout the entire history of the Old Testament is that the Israelites will breach their covenant with God by breeding with non-Israelites. Indeed, according to scholars of the Hebrew Bible, a breach of the covenant by intermarriage or interbreeding with indigenous peoples already present in the land constitutes a particular category of crime: an “abomination.” And the penalty for breach is “to be cut off from the Lord’s presence.”³ This is exactly how Nephi treats the same crime when committed by Laman and Lemuel. “Mixing seed” is a Hebrew idiom for marriage with foreigners outside of the covenant, and it constitutes a breach of covenant. The phrase “mixing seed” (זָרַע בְּעַמִּי - *zera’ ba’mi*) appears in the Old Testament, and it is treated as a clear breach of covenant.⁴

It appears from the Book of Mormon text that this sense of a curse and an abomination is what Nephi believes about the change in skin color, for he speaks of it as the result of “their iniquity. . . and hardened hearts against [the Lord], that they had become like unto flint” (2 Nephi 5:21). Nephi is clear that the cause of the curse that was manifested by a “skin of blackness” (v. 21) is the “mixing of seed,” which is a clear idiom for intermarriage with non-Israelite, non-covenant peoples (v. 23). It is extremely important to note that the “curse” in the Book of Mormon resulted from “mixing seed,” and that it mer-

ited the penalty for breach of covenant: being cut off (כָּרַת - *karath*) from the presence of the Lord: “Wherefore, the word of the Lord was fulfilled which he spake unto me, saying that: Inasmuch as they will not hearken unto my words they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And behold, they were cut off from the presence of the Lord” (2 Nephi 5:20).⁵

In addition to this evidence of the presence of indigenous others in Book of Mormon lands, a later discourse also evidences intermarriage with pre-existing populations. In Jacob 2 and 3, Jacob addresses a convocation of “brethren” in his capacity as high priest (Jacob 1:18–19; 2:2). One of his concerns is that the “people of Nephi” had taken “concubines” and “many wives” (Jacob 2:23–24). Given how close in time this convocation is to the great separation, where did all of these wives come from? We have at most two generations removed from the initial group of about eight families, so it is likely that every available woman is still either a sister, or a niece, or a grandniece not yet old enough to be espoused. It seems to me that the text once again presupposes an influx of others from an already existing population.⁶ Indeed, Jacob says that the taking of other wives is “abominable to me, saith the Lord” adopting terminology consistent with the Hebrew crime of breach of covenant by intermarrying with populations outside the covenant—an abomination (זֵוַעֲבָה - *to’ebah*). Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that within one or two generations, both the Lamanites and the Nephites had begun to intermarry with others from a preexisting population of “indigenous others.”

OTHERS ON ISLES OF THE SEA

THERE are other strong evidences of preexisting indigenous populations in the Book of Mormon. As discussed earlier, the eight families who went with Nephi at the time of the great separation likely numbered somewhere between twenty and sixty Israelites. Jacob gave a discourse as high priest to an assembled group of “brethren” who had gathered at the newly constructed Nephite temple.⁷ Like Nephi, Jacob was concerned with the issue of the covenant status of the new group, continually referring to their group as the “house of Israel” and others as “Gentiles,” quoting

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lengthy passages from Isaiah, and prophesying of Christ as the “Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 6–10). The assembly appears to have been a formal “covenant renewal” convocation and was evidently quite large—larger than we could reasonably expect given the number of “brethren” among about eight families who left with Nephi when he fled from Laman and Lemuel into the “wilderness.” Where did all of the “brethren” for this convocation come from? Again, I believe we must conclude that the text presupposes there had been an influx of people into

the Nephite population. And the only possible source for such an influx is indigenous others.

Jacob reads a text from Isaiah at the convocation that he later uses to reassure the Nephites that they remain a remnant of the covenant people even though they had been separated from Israel. The passage of Isaiah begins with the question Jacob addressed: “Yea, for thus saith the Lord: Have I put thee away, or have I cast thee off forever?” (2 Nephi 7:1; Isaiah 50:1) It appears that Jacob chooses to read from Isaiah 51–52:2 at this convocation because Isaiah affirms that those who have been cast off are still recognized as God’s chosen covenant people and “the isles [of the sea] (אִיִּים - *’yitim*) shall wait upon me” (Isaiah 51:5).⁸ Jacob observes that his people have “been led to a better land, for the Lord has made the sea our path, and we are upon an isle of the sea” (2 Nephi 10:20). He adds: “But great are the promises of the Lord unto them who are upon the isles of the sea; wherefore as it says isles; there must needs be more than this, and they are inhabited also by our brethren” (2 Nephi 10:21, emphasis added). It seems clear that Nephi and Jacob both place special emphasis on the “isles of the sea” because they see references to those who are on the isles as references to themselves and also to others who are already there on the isles of the sea (1 Nephi 19:16; 21:1 [Isaiah 49:1], 22:2–4; 2 Nephi 8:5 [Isaiah 52:5]). As Nephi states: “[T]hen will he remember the covenants which he made to their fathers. Yea, then will he remember the isles of the sea; yea, and all the people who are of the house of Israel. . . .” (1 Nephi 19:15–16). Indeed, the notion that the isles are specifically those found in the midst of the sea is so important that Jacob added the words “of the sea” to the Isaiah text when he read from it.⁹

Such statements suggest that Jacob places the followers of Nephi not on the mainland or a continent, but upon an island—and he believes that there are others living on islands of the sea who can be counted as belonging to the “brethren” he is addressing in his two convocations. Such statements are difficult to square with the continental model of Book of Mormon geography which critics of the limited geography model argue the Book of Mormon requires. For these reasons, it has always seemed reasonable to me to look for the Nephites in an islands setting rather than on the continental mainland. Most importantly, Jacob’s statements indicate that there are others already present on other islands, just like the people of Nephi.¹⁰

OUTSIDERS NOTED IN THE TEXT

ANOTHER incident bolsters the claim that the Nephites described in the Book of Mormon interacted with “others.” Somewhere between twenty and forty years after Lehi left Jerusalem, a man named Sherem “comes among the people of Nephi” (Jacob 7:1). It is fairly clear from this description that Sherem is an outsider, for if he were a Nephite, he would have already been among the Nephites. The text goes on to say that Sherem is educated in the language of the people of Nephi, indicating that he had learned the language by study (Jacob 7:4). Moreover, he does not accept the Nephite religion, which is devoted to faith in Christ (Jacob 7:2). However, he does accept the Law of Moses (Jacob 7:7). Most importantly, Sherem does not know Jacob when he first comes among the Nephites—he seeks him out to meet him (Jacob 7:6). Since the event takes place within Jacob’s lifetime, it is unlikely that Jacob doesn’t still know all of the Nephites, since the population at the time would have consisted solely of brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews, unless, as I argue, other people had been assimilated into the Nephite population.

So the question is—where did Sherem come from?¹¹ Unless the Nephites are interacting with “others,” how does a non-Nephite come among them so easily? Why doesn’t Sherem already know Jacob? The answer is fairly clear: the Book of Mormon assumes that readers will know that others are already there.¹² Sherem is an outsider from another population. Because at this time, Jacob also would have known all of the Lamanite families as well, Sherem is not Lamanite. Certainly Sherem would have introduced himself as so-and-so’s son had he

been a relation—but he is a stranger. As Metcalfe admits, the Book of Mormon is punctilious in noting whether a person is Nephite or Lamanite, yet Sherem is not designated as either Nephite or Lamanite, and it is evident that he is not one of the people who followed Nephi.¹³

There is another strong indication that there were indigenous others present in the Book of Mormon area, though it requires a careful reading to detect them. In Helaman 5, Mormon notes that “the more part of the Lamanites were convinced of [the truth] because of the greatness of the evidences which they had received.” (Helaman 5:50) As a result, “the Lamanites had become the more righteous part of them, a righteous people, insomuch that their righteousness did exceed that of the Nephites, because of their firmness and their steadfastness in faith” (Helaman 6:1). The Lamanites began to move freely among the Nephites, traveling to the Nephite city of Zarahemla so that “the Lamanites did also go withersoever they would, whether it were among the Lamanites or among the Nephites, and thus they did have free intercourse one with another” (Helaman 6:8).

In the midst of this openness among the Lamanites and Nephites, Nephi, the son of Helaman, goes northward among an unnamed people to preach to them. Indeed, not only Nephi but also the *Lamanites* go to the “people in the land northward” to preach: “And it came to pass that many of the Lamanites did go into the land northward; and also Nephi and Lehi went into the land northward, to preach to the people” (Helaman 6:6). However, these “people in the land northward” are so wicked that Nephi cannot remain among them.

There are two crucial points about Nephi’s missionary activities: (1) the text does not name the people to whom he preached but was rejected; and (2) these people are neither Nephites nor Lamanites because the Lamanites had become righteous and willingly accepted the gospel and went to preach to these people also. While the Nephites and Lamanites move freely through each other’s lands in a climate of peace, the people to whom Nephi goes are so antagonistic that he cannot remain among them:

Now it came to pass in the sixty and ninth year of the reign of the judges over the people of the Nephites, that Nephi, the son of Helaman, returned to the land of Zarahemla from the land northward. For he had been forth among the people who were in the land north-

ward, and did preach the word of God unto them, and did prophecy many things unto them; And they did reject all his words, insomuch that he could not stay among them, but returned again unto the land of his nativity. (Helaman 7:1–3, emphasis added)

The text twice refers to those to whom Nephi and the Lamanites preached not as Lamanites but as “the people in the land northward.” Why doesn’t the text just say that Nephi went to the Lamanites and that the Lamanites rejected him as it does virtually every other time that a Nephite goes to preach to Lamanites? It is fairly clear that in this instance, “the people who were in the land northward” are not Lamanites. We know this because the text states that the Lamanites had become righteous and many had accepted the gospel, and the Nephites had great missionary success among them. So who are these “other” people in the land northward who had rejected Nephi and the Lamanites? The text doesn’t say—but because those who rejected Nephi are neither Nephites nor Lamanites, it has to be a third group of people that remains unnamed in the text.

Further evidence that the Book of Mormon teaches there are other people already in the same land (somewhere) when Lehi arrives is that there are still Jaredites alive when the people of Zarahemla met Coriantumr, a Jaredite, some four hundred years after Lehi’s party touches the shore in the new land (Omni 21–22). It is also possible that the Mulekites were already present in the Americas when Lehi arrived (Omni 14–15). In fact, the Jaredites and Mulekites both co-existed with the Nephites for more than 350 years without the Nephites knowing about them. The Mulekites in Zarahemla actually met Coriantumr—and until that time, they too did not know of the Jaredites. So it is clear that there were large populations of Jaredites and Mulekites in nearby regions contemporaneous with the Nephites, but the Nephites didn’t know anything about them for more than three hundred years.

Hence the text is quite clear that large populations of peoples can co-exist for hundreds of years with the Nephites (who keep the record), without the Nephites knowing anything about them. Just as their knowledge of the extent of the land they inhabit is limited, clearly the Nephites are not aware of “others” whom the Book of Mormon states were in fact present. Thus, any citation from the Book of Mormon that is interpreted to

mean that *all* inhabitants of the Americas (or wherever Book of Mormon events took place) must be Israelite is contrary to the text itself because, at the very least, the Jaredites co-existed with them, and the Jaredites are not Israelites, and we don't know anything about their genetic markers. (As I argued in Part I of this essay, we know nothing about the genetic makeup of Lehi either.) Moreover, as Hugh Nibley argues in *The World of the Jaredites*, Book of Mormon textual evidence suggests that the Jaredites probably originated largely in Asia because the journey recounted in Ether appears to have traversed the steppes of Asia.¹⁴ Thus the Jaredites may well have been largely Asiatic. Moreover, the Book of Mormon does not identify the origins of the others who "mixed seed" with the Lamanites or whom the Nephites took as plural wives—although we now know any indigenous others had to be of largely Asiatic origins. So, based on the text of the Book of Mormon, we should expect to find Asiatic DNA in American Indians.

The inclusion of the Jaredite account within the text, along with the claim of at least some contemporaneity of Jaredites and Nephites, further complicates an easy dismissal of the Book of Mormon on the basis of DNA tests showing Asiatic origins for present-day Amerindians. It is just not credible to believe that a population the size of the Jaredites existed without many of them separating themselves from the larger culture and creating new settlements. Given limited communication and technology, those who wrote the epic contained in the Book of Ether could not have known about those who left their immediate vicinity. In other words, like many ancient texts, the Book of Ether appears to be dynastic in nature. Even though it presents itself as a totalizing account of *all* Jaredites, it is far more likely only a dynastic report of a minority. No human writer could possibly know that every last one of the Jaredites was included within the population whose slaughter is recounted in the epic tale of the various Jaredite dynasties.

As a genre, dynastic histories claim to tell the total story when in fact they treat only the story of particular, dynastic families. We must remember that those who wrote anciently did not follow (or even know)

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modern canons of historical scholarship, and their accounts of events were often intended to function as propaganda to support a particular monarch or ruler. Thus, ancient records often make claims that purport to be the story of virtually everyone, when in reality, they are reports of the doings of a small subgroup. Viewed as an ancient text in the genre of dynastic history, the Book of Mormon does not preclude the presence of many "others" besides those in whom it is particularly interested. (For a separate argument that follows a similar line of reasoning, see the sidebar by D. Michael Quinn, page 67.)

For these reasons and others, the DNA argument cannot disprove the possibility that the Book of Mormon is a historical document. It seems to me that the DNA argument is based upon overly simplistic

assumptions about the text which are not consistent with what the text itself says.

What about Statements by Church Leaders Claiming Native Americans Are Lamanites?

IN teaching our investigator that the Book of Mormon is a history of all Amerindians and that its descriptions of lands northward and southward correspond to the North and South American continents, my companion had presented a view that he and many Latter-day Saint have been taught about Book of Mormon peoples and lands. It was his good-faith belief, just as it is of most who teach it today. But a good-faith belief, even when taught by someone we revere as an inspired spiritual leader, is not necessarily true. "Straw man" versions of the Book of Mormon are much easier to disembowel than is the book as it actually reads. The Book of Mormon must be assessed based on what it says and not on what others say about it.

It is a fact that many Church leaders, including Joseph Smith, have at times assumed and taught that all Amerindians are descended solely from Israelites. However, it seems to me that such statements should be seen as having the status of "doctrinal overbeliefs" or presuppositions that are subject to revision. As Kenneth Godfrey observes:

[I]n 1834, when Zelph was found, Joseph believed that the portion of America over which they had just

traveled was "the plains of the Nephite," and that their bones were "proof" of the Book of Mormon's authenticity. By 1842, he evidently believed that the events in most of Nephite history took place in Central America. While it is possible to reconcile these two views—for example by believing that the bulk of Nephite history occurred in Central America while only certain battles or excursions took place in Illinois—it is likely that the thinking of the early church leaders regarding Book of Mormon geography was subject to modification, indicating that they themselves did not see the issue as settled.¹⁵

Most of those who attack the Book of Mormon insist that we must read the book in light of the assumption that it teaches a two-continent view. It seems to me that critics insist on this view for two reasons: First, it is a much easier interpretation to discredit, since it is demonstrably false. Second, it plays into an assumption that many Latter-day Saints bring to their reading of the book—an assumption that is contrary to LDS theology but which many Latter-day Saints accept anyway. The assumption works something like this: Catholic doctrine teaches that the Pope is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*, but most Catholics don't seem to believe it anyway. LDS doctrine teaches that prophets can make mistakes and that they speak as prophets only when speaking in the name of the Lord, but Latter-day Saint believe that their prophets are always infallible anyway. The critics count on Latter-day Saints bringing to the text this "cultural overbelief"—a belief that is not warranted by LDS scripture or revelation but which is accepted as a part of the Saints' general cultural presuppositions. The morally reprehensible belief that blacks could not receive the priesthood because LDS scriptures teach they were "fence-sitters" in the pre-existence is another example of such cultural overbeliefs, one that thankfully has been transcended. The fact that no such view is taught in LDS scripture becomes irrelevant in such arguments; rather, if such a view is believed by some of its members, that is enough to establish it as a cultural overbelief.

Thus, one of the implicit arguments that critics rely upon to stir the pot among Latter-day Saints who believe in Book of Mormon historicity goes something like this:

- (1) Many LDS prophets taught that all Amerindians are

descendants of Israelites.

- (2) Whatever a prophet teaches either must be true or the prophet is a false prophet.
- (3) Therefore, either all Amerindians are descendants of Israelites or the LDS prophets are false prophets.

Premise (1) is unquestionably true. Yet it is clear that the argument derives its force from premise (2)—which is false, according to LDS views of prophetic fallibility. Thus, the argument is unsound because premise (2) is false. Premise (2) is a statement of a “cultural overbelief” that Latter-day Saints have inherited from the evangelical view of scripture. Latter-day Saints do not accept scriptural or prophetic infallibility, and for very good reasons.¹⁶

One of the primary purposes of my 1987 article, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source” was to expose how the complex of beliefs implicit in premise (2) are used to create “straw man” arguments against the Book of Mormon. It seems to me that the Latter-day Saint prophets who believed that all Amerindians are Lamanites reached that conclusion based upon a less-than-thorough reading of the Book of Mormon. If they reached a false conclusion based upon a facile reading of scripture, then we ought to recognize that they can err just like the rest of us. If the Book of Mormon doesn’t claim that all Amerindians are of Israelite descent, then what others, even prophets, say is irrelevant.

The sound argument on this subject is actually as follows:

- (1) Many LDS prophets taught that all Amerindians are descendants of Israelites.
- (2*) If a Prophet teaches something that is false, then either that prophet is: (a) not a true prophet; or (b), not speaking prophetically.
- (3*) Therefore, either all Amerindians are descendants of Israelites or: (a) these are not true prophets; or (b), the LDS prophets were not speaking prophetically when they taught that all Amerindians are descendants of Israelites.

I suggest that premise (2*) more accurately captures the LDS view of prophets and prophecy. Given (2*), the conclusion (3*) is rather innocuous but quite instructive. Critics are banking on readers concluding (3*a), yet faithful Latter-day Saints who are

not under the influence of the cultural overbelief will conclude (3*b). Moreover, the Expansion Theory suggests a third alternative. All scripture reflects the linguistic and cultural horizons of the prophets through whom they come. Even when a prophet is speaking prophetically, the revelation reflects the prophet’s assumptions, language, and cultural horizons.

Consider how Brent Metcalfe’s March 2004 SUNSTONE article, “Reinventing Lamanite Identity,” relies on the assumptions contained in premise (2). Metcalfe doesn’t actually make the argument given above. Yet without the assumptions embodied in premise (2), his conclusions in the article have no force. He argues that apologists have recently invented the view of a limited geography to save the Book of Mormon from recent anthropological arguments. Metcalfe’s claim about the birth of the limited geography model and the driving force behind its current momentum is patently false. As Matthew Roper demonstrates, convincingly in my view, the limited geography model emerged before the turn of the century and was derived from a careful reading of the Book of Mormon text itself, not a desire to escape challenges from science or anthropology.¹⁷ It has been rather widely taught and accepted by those who have carefully considered the text.

Metcalfe quotes Joseph Smith at length attempting to establish that he believed that all Amerindians were of Israelite origin. Why does he go to such lengths to point out what Joseph Smith believed, when we can just read the book to see what it claims for itself? Unless we employ something like the implicit argument given above, the obvious response is to point out that “all Amerindians are of Israelite origin” isn’t what the Book of Mormon teaches, and so Joseph Smith was in error. Without premise (2) and the implicit conclusion (3), an argument about what Joseph Smith believed about the book is a yawner. To see what the Book of Mormon teaches, we shouldn’t rely on what Joseph Smith said about it. We should read what the Book of Mormon says about itself.

Critics such as Metcalfe know that the notion that Joseph Smith held erroneous views about the Amerindians and what the Book of

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Mormon says will bother many Latter-day Saints because the critics know that these Saints harbor the cultural overbeliefs entailed in the implicit argument. However, if we adopt the view of those who accept the limited geography model, that Joseph Smith may have been uninformed in his beliefs about the Book of Mormon geography, then arguments about what Joseph Smith believed are beside the point. A clear-eyed view of whether what the Book of Mormon says is true or scientifically defensible recognizes that what is relevant is what the Book of Mormon says and not what others say it says.

But didn’t Joseph Smith claim to be intimately acquainted with Nephite prophets and culture? After all, his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, tells us that Joseph told about Nephite dress and customs.¹⁸ However, seeing a vision of Nephite dress and customs is a

far cry from knowing where the Nephites lived or being able to draw a map of Book of Mormon events.¹⁹

Does the Book of Mormon “Prophetically Preclude” a Limited Geography?

METCALFE argues that the Book of Mormon itself won’t allow for a limited geography because its prophecies and theological worldview require a continental perspective. I disagree. Metcalfe’s exegesis is simplistic because he assesses the Book of Mormon as if it were modern writing that makes claims with a clear meaning ready at hand. By treating the text as he does, he rather begs the question against those who accept an ancient background for the text.

Furthermore, we must consider a prior question: Are the theological claims made in the Book of Mormon intended as statements about population and genetic origin? I doubt it. It is a common practice in ancient texts to hyperbolically overstate population and areas of land seized to demonstrate the enormity of the feat accomplished. For example, as Old Testament scholar David M. Fouts argues, theological and population claims served numerous purposes in ancient texts,

and they tend to be hyperbolic figures of speech for rhetorical and literary purposes rather than historically verifiable claims as in modern histories.²⁰ Population figures or military numbers in ancient works, both religious and secular, have little resemblance to historiographic reality. For example, according to Herodotus, Xerxes' Persian army numbered 1.7 million when it invaded Greece.²¹ Yet, given the transportation and food-handling technology of that day, the Persians could not possibly have supplied such an army. Thus more generous historians today cut the figure for Xerxes' army to a tenth, or about 180,000 troops. More skeptical historians think that even this figure is too high and cut it to 100,000 or so. Similarly, Samuel 24:9 says that Judah and Israel had a total of 1,300,000 soldiers in battle (1 Chronicles 21:5 says 1,570,000). This, of course, is a ridiculously high number for a battle between two tribal armies in 1000 BCE. (In 2001, the United States had only about 1,370,000 active-duty soldiers.) Similarly, 1 Chronicles 21:5 states that David's army consisted of 1,100,000 men from Israel and 470,000 men from Judah. Again, this number is impossibly large.²²

The point is that when we read the Book of Mormon in light of ancient practices, rather than as modern history based on reliable and verifiable sources, most of the kinds of arguments made against it lose their force. Even if the Book of Mormon claims that God gave the entire North and South American continents to the Nephites as a matter of God's covenant grace (though it certainly doesn't say with that kind of precision), such a claim would have to be read in light of the practice of hyperbolic overstatement. Moreover, as we read the text, we must keep in mind the extent of the geographic knowledge it would have been possible for the Nephites to possess. They were not in a position to know how large the entire land mass was—especially since the text reveals that the area in which the events recounted in the Book of Mormon occur is no larger than an area about the size of Palestine. It seems to me that claims made in the Book of Mormon must be in read in light of ancient practices, and critics must allow for such practices when they engage the text.

Let's look closely at Metcalfe's two strongest scriptural arguments suggesting that the Book of Mormon text does not allow for indigenous others "theologically." He cites 2 Nephi 1:8–9 and concludes that it means that only Israelites could possess the "promised land," which he claims refers to all of North and South America:

And behold, it is wisdom that this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations; for behold, many nations would overrun the land, that there would be no place for an inheritance. Wherefore, I, Lehi, have obtained a promise, that inasmuch as those whom the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves . . . and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance; and they shall dwell safely forever.

Is Metcalfe's interpretation sound? The first thing to notice is that the scope of the phrase, "this land," is vague.²³ Does it mean this immediate area, this island, this valley, this country, this continent, this hemisphere or this-land-I'm-standing-on? I suggest that we don't know—except we know that it cannot be a very large area, because if it is interpreted as larger than the distance that can be traversed by walking several days, then the statement was already false at the time it was made because, as discussed earlier, according to the Book of Mormon itself, there were others, non-Israelites, already present. At the time Lehi landed (*wherever* he landed), there were already Jaredites within a distance of several days travel by foot. If the land spoken of means an area much larger than Palestine, then by their presence, this statement is textually falsified at the time it is made. Thus it seems fairly clear to me that Lehi's statement cannot mean what Metcalfe claims it does.

The second thing to notice is that those who were brought "out of the land of Jerusalem" refers to the immediate people of Nephi, not to everyone already present on the face of the land. The third thing to notice about the promise that if they keep the commandments, they shall have the land to themselves and "dwell in safety forever," is that the promise was nullified within one generation, because the Nephites didn't live in safety for even one generation, let alone forever. Isn't this scripture better seen as no more than a promise that God has granted the descendants of Nephi a choice parcel of land in a very limited area, and that if they are faithful, they will get to keep it in peace forever?

Metcalfe argues that his interpretation is buttressed by statements that the Lamanites

who are "seed of [Nephi's] brethren. . . were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten" (1 Nephi 13:14). Metcalfe claims that this statement compels the conclusion that "the Amerisraelite promised land is expansive, encompassing North American venues for the arrival of the British and European settlers, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the construction of the New Jerusalem."²⁴ How does he know that the descendants of Laman and Lemuel had to be smitten in North America? The text certainly doesn't say so, and historically, this prophecy could have been fulfilled anywhere in the New World, given the genocide of indigenous populations by Europeans throughout South, Central, and North America, not to mention the surrounding islands. Thus, this prophecy hardly entails that all Amerindians must be Israelites.

Conclusion

WE Latter-day Saints are entitled to read the text in light of the best scientific evidence we have available. I did not come to the view of a limited geography for Book of Mormon events because of DNA or anthropological and archeological evidence (rather, I came to that view by reading the text itself). However it is entirely appropriate for Latter-day Saints to re-read the Book of Mormon in light of the fact that DNA studies establish that there is clear evidence of Asiatic progenitors among Amerindians. However, this evidence does not establish that there were not others from elsewhere also present, just as there is no concrete evidence to establish that there were, either.

The Book of Mormon itself does not require the view that all Amerindians are of Israelite origin. Even in the absence of DNA evidence, the book is best read as a testimony (not a history) of an ancient people who occupied a very limited area but had unfulfilled hopes of occupying much more. Indeed, it is best read as assuming the existence of others already in the land with whom the Nephites and Lamanites interacted, intermarried, and became assimilated. Since many have read the book that way long before the advent of DNA evidence, it is no leap of faith nor expression of bad faith to continue to do so.

However, we need to be forthright in confronting false assumptions that Latter-day Saints may make about the Book of Mormon. It is likely that not all Amerindians are descendants of Lamanites. It serves us to be up front about that. We don't know where the events in the Book of Mormon took place. To

be honest about that fact, we ought to cease “Book of Mormon tours.” Moreover, there is no such thing as Book of Mormon archaeology unless and until we find something that can be directly linked to the text somewhere. While I believe that there is compelling evidence for the antiquity of the Book of Mormon, my belief about this doesn’t come from New World archaeology. And I suggest that we don’t know enough to know whether we should expect such evidence.

NOTES

1. I don’t claim any particular originality to my arguments—though I did come up with them without consulting what others had said about them. After submitting this paper, I learned that similar arguments for “others” already present when Lehi arrived have been made since the turn of the century. Matthew Roper gives a history of such arguments and of the “limited geography” model of the Book of Mormon in “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 226–75. He also reviews the history of Later-day Saint acceptance that non-Israelites were already present when Lehi arrived. See, “Nephi’s Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations,” *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 91–128.

2. Brent Metcalfe, “Reinventing Lamanite Identity,” *SUNSTONE*, March 2004, 21.

3. See Stefan Schreiner, “*Mischen-Ehebrach-Ehescheidung: Betrachtungen zu Mal. 2:10–16*,” *ZAW* 91 (1979), 207–28; and Clemens Locher, “*Altes und Neues zu Malachi 2:10–16*,” in *Melanes Dominique Barthelemy*, ed., P. Cassette et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 241–71.

4. Ezra accused the Israelites of violating the covenant by “mixing seed” (זרע בעמי) with those who already possessed the land: “doing according to their abominations (רועיבדוקים), even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, [and] the Jebusites . . . for they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons; so that the holy seed have mingled themselves (זרע תקדש בעמי) - *zera’ haqodish ba’mi*) with the people of those lands” (Ezra 9:1–2). Malachi also addressed the breach of the covenant by intermarriage with those already in the land: “Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, by profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah hath dealt treacherously; and an abomination (רועיבדה) is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the Lord which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god. The Lord will cut off (כרתה) the man that doeth this” (Malachi 2:10–12). Hence, if the followers of Laman and Lemuel conceived children outside of the covenant by marrying others already in the land, Nephi would have naturally viewed them to be like Israelites who denied the covenant by intermarrying with Moabites or Babylonians.

After I wrote several drafts of this paper, I became aware that Roper makes a similar argument about intermarriage with others in “Nephi’s Neighbors,” 121–23.

5. Moreover, just as in Malachi, the breach of the covenant is occasioned by “dealing treacherously

every man against his brother” (Malachi 2:10), for the great separation and curse occurred when Laman and Lemuel dealt treacherously with their brother Nephi by attempting to take his life.

6. John Sorenson analyzes the numbers as follows:

Within a few years Nephi reports that his people “began to prosper exceedingly, and to multiply in the land” (2 Nephi 5:13). When about fifteen years had passed, he says that Jacob and Joseph had been made priests and teachers “over the land of my people” (2 Nephi 5:26, 28). After another ten years, they “had already had wars and contentions” with the Lamanites (2 Nephi 5:34). After the Nephites had existed as an entity for about forty years (see Jacob 1:1), their men began “desiring many wives and concubines” (Jacob 1:15). How many descendants of the original party would there have been by that time? We can safely suppose that adaptation to foods, climate, disease, and natural hazards would have posed some problems, although we cannot quantify those effects. Let us at least start to bracket the possible growth in numbers by setting an upper limit that is at the edge of absurdity. Assume a birth rate twice as high as in today’s “less developed countries,” a rate perhaps not even attainable by any population. Let us also suppose no deaths at all! Under those conditions, if the initial Nephite group was comprised of twenty-four persons, as I calculate generously, by the time of Jacob 2, they would have reached a population of 330, of whom perhaps seventy would be adult males and the same number adult females. Of course the unreality of that number means we must work downward. Using a more reasonable figure for the birth rate and factoring in deaths, we see that the actual number of adults would be unlikely to exceed half of what we first calculated—say, thirty-five males and thirty-five females. Even that is far too large to satisfy experts on the history of population growth. With such limited numbers as these, the group’s cultural preference for “many wives and concubines” would be puzzling. The fact that the plural marriage preference for the early Nephites is reported as a cultural fact seems to call for a larger population of females. If so, it could only have come about by incorporating “other” people.

John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 1–34.

7. References for Jacob’s use of “brethren” are 2 Nephi 6:2; 9:1, 4, 50, 54; 10:1.

8. The words in brackets were added to the Isaiah passage by Jacob.

9. The words “of the sea” are absent from the KJV translation, though the word יַיִם (*yiim*) translated as “isles” could be taken as a plural reference to islands in the waters. Jacob took this reading for granted when he referred back to it later in his address (2 Ne. 10: 21–23).

10. It is possible that from Jacob’s limited access to geographic information, he thought the Nephites were on an island because it *appeared* to be surrounded by water from where he was while, in fact, it was not an island. It is also possible that Jacob means that the Nephites inhabited a coastland area. The Hebrew יַיִם means “coast, island, shore, region.” In the KJV, it is translated “isles” thirty times, “islands” five, and “country” once. In the NASV, it is translated “coastland” four times, “coastlands” twenty-six times, and “islands” six times, including “islands” in the critical reference to Isaiah 49 cited by Jacob, because that is what the context demands. Jacob’s point is precisely that there must be others around them because Isaiah says “isles”—and he says that “we are on an island of the sea”—singular. Jacob also states, “wherefore as it says isles, there must needs be more than this, and they are inhabited also by our brethren.” In this context, translating יַיִם as “coastland” makes no sense. It appears to me that Jacob means “islands.” Now, I think that Jacob couldn’t possibly have a complete geographic knowledge of the Americas. But it seems quite probable he would know if they were on an island—he could know that by circumnavigating the island.

11. A similar argument is made by Sorenson in his “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?”, 3–4.

12. As Sorenson observes (*Ibid.*, 4):

The account of Sherem’s encounter with Jacob reiterates the question [of others who are outsiders]. ‘Some [ten more?] years had passed away,’ and Jacob was now verging on ‘old’ (cf. Jacob 7:1, 20–26). At that time ‘there came a man among the people of Nephi whose name was Sherem’ (Jacob 7:1). Upon first meeting Jacob, he said, ‘Brother Jacob, I have sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you; for I have heard . . . that thou goest about much, preaching’ (Jacob 7:6). Now, the population of adult males descended from the original group could not have exceeded fifty at that time. This would have been only enough to populate one modest-sized village. Thus Sherem’s is a strange statement. Jacob, as head priest and religious teacher, would routinely have been around the Nephite temple in the cultural center at least on all holy days (see Jacob 2:2). How then could Sherem never have seen him, and why would he have had to seek ‘much opportunity’ to speak to him in such a tiny settlement? And where would Jacob have had to go on the preaching travels Sherem refers to, if only such a tiny group were involved? Moreover, from where was it that Sherem ‘came. . . among the people of Nephi’ (Jacob 7:1)? The text and context of this incident would make little sense if the Nephite population had resulted only from natural demographic increase.”

See also, Kevin Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament,” in *Farms Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 86–88.

13. Metcalfe, 21.

14. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 175–200.

15. Kenneth Godfrey, "What is the Significance of Zelfh?", *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 72.

16. For a list of several reasons Latter-day Saints reject this view, see my "Bridging the Gap," in *FARMS Review* 11, no. 2 (Provo: FARMS, 1999), 103–77.

17. Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations."

Indeed, the evidence regarding the size of the area reflected in the Book of Mormon is so clear and convincing and has been argued so thoroughly (virtually every person has attempted to map the area based upon the distances reported in the book itself), that I have been surprised at the position taken by Earl M. Wunderli who maintains that believers in the Book of Mormon must accept some form of the entire North-South American continents view for Book of Mormon geography. In his "Critique of a Limited Geography for Book of Mormon Events," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 161–99, Wunderli places particular weight upon the phrase "a choice land above all others" repeatedly used to describe the land to which Lehi was brought by the Lord. Wunderli maintains that this description requires a continental view of the "land" (p. 172–79). I think that Wunderli overstates his conclusion in a grand way, for there is nothing indicating the size of the land referred to, nor is there any claim that the Nephites inhabited the entire land. In fact, the Book of Mormon makes it clear that the Nephites and Lamanites did not inhabit the entire land because they so easily became lost in the vast wilderness. In my view, the text simply will not support his reading of it given the very limited traveling distances expressly reported in the text. Brant A. Gardner provides a creditable response that substantially undermines Wunderli's arguments in my view. Brant A. Gardner, "An Exploration in Critical Methodology: Critiquing a Critique," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 173–223. For serious attempts to provide a map of the Book of Mormon that meets the internal criteria of the Book of Mormon itself, see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985, 1996); John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo: FARMS, 2000); John L. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Sourcebook* (Provo: FARMS, 1992); Ross T. Christensen, "Geography in Book of Mormon Archaeology," in *Progress in Archaeology: An Anthology*, ed. Ross T. Peterson (Provo: BYU Press, 1963), 81–88; Joseph L. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Orem: S.A. Publishers, 1989); and Allen, *Sacred Sites: Searching for Book of Mormon Lands* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant, 2003); David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1981). Indeed, Wunderli himself admits that the Book of Mormon's own internal statements support a limited geography: "A limited geography model could solve other problems . . . including . . . clues in the book about distances, climate, terrain, directions, and other geographical factors." (p. 197).

18. Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor, eds., *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 111–12.

19. Metcalfe attempts to buttress his conclusion that Joseph Smith claimed to know *through revelation*

that all Lamanites were of Israelite origin by referring to the Zelfh story. However, the events surrounding this story are sufficiently in dispute that I don't believe any sound conclusions about its being revelatory can be drawn. In a letter written to his wife Emma on 3 June 1834, a day after the event, Joseph Smith wrote:

The whole of our journey, in the midst of so large a company of social honest and sincere men, wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionally the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as a proof of its divine authenticity, and gazing upon a country the fertility, the splendour and the goodness so indescribable, all serves to pass away time unnoticed.

The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, comp. and ed., Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 324.

This historically verifiable account by Joseph Smith refers only to the "plains of the Nephites" in western Ohio—and he neither claims to know it through revelation, nor does he make any reference to "Zelfh." The record establishes only what we already knew: i.e., that Joseph Smith assumed at that time that all American Indians were Lamanites.

The journals of other Latter-day Saints who heard Joseph establish that some present talked about a Zelfh who was a white Lamanite—but I believe that the reliability of these accounts and the timing of their having been set in writing are sufficiently suspect that we are best advised to be careful about their claims.

Further, the relationship between "Zelfh" and the events recounted in the Book of Mormon is extremely unclear, but even if we accept the story just as Metcalfe tells it, it establishes nothing more than that at some time a person who could claim to be a Lamanite or of Lamanite descent was present in western Ohio. Such information is not incompatible with a limited geography because even if there was a Zelfh (which remains in doubt) he could have been a descendant of Lamanites who had wandered far from where the events in the Book of Mormon occurred. We just don't know enough about this incident to claim anything reliable. See, Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Zelfh Story," *BYU Studies* 29:2 (1989), 31–56; Kenneth W. Godfrey, "What is the Significance of Zelfh in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography?," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999), 70–79; Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of

Mormon," 238–41.

20. David M. Fouts, "A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 3 (September, 1997): 377–87.

21. *The Persian Wars*, Book VII, Section 60. For instance, Donald W. Engels calculates that Alexander's army of 65,000 needed, at a minimum, 1,500 pack animals—and as many as 8,400 whenever it had to cross a dry or desert area—just to carry one day's supplies. *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1978), 19. That figure increases to 50,400 pack animals for a four-day march in a desert. In a fertile area, Alexander still needed 40,350 pack animals at a minimum to carry his supplies for ten days of marching. *Ibid.*

22. See George E. Mendenhall, "The Census Lists in Numbers 1 and 26," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 77 (1958), 52; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Dutton, Longman, Todd, 1961), 65ff.; A. Lucas, "The Numbers of Israelites at the Exodus," *PEQ* 76 (1944), 167; J. B. Payne, "The Validity of the Numbers in Chronicles," *Biblia Sacra* 136 (1979), 109–28; 206–20.

Another example: The Qumran covenants believed that they constituted the numerous hosts of Israel who would fight the eschatological battles for God—a belief that required literally hundreds of thousands of warriors. One could conclude that their view required that there must have been hundreds of thousands at Qumran for such numbers to make sense. Yet their community consisted of merely hundreds. Their theological views expressed hope that in fulfillment their numbers would reflect this dramatic presentation of their beliefs. See, 1QM 1:9–15; J.J. Collins, "The Mythology of Holy War in Daniel and the Qumran War Scroll: A Point of Transition in Jewish Apocalyptic," *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975): 596–612.

23. In his review of Metcalfe's "Reinventing Lamanite Identity" ("Reinventing the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 [2004], 91–106), John A. Tvedtnes argues just as I do that Metcalfe has misunderstood the scope of the Promised Land in 2 Nephi 1:8–9. Indeed, Tvedtnes points out that both John Sorenson and Matt Roper have argued that this same scripture supports the presence of others precisely because the Nephites violated the covenant and thus God had warned that others would take their lands from them.

24. Metcalfe, 21.

THE FLOCK

BY JEANETTE ATWOOD

