



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 15 | Number 2

Article 8

6-1-2003

Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations

Matthew Roper

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

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Roper, Matthew (2003) "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 15 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol15/iss2/8>

This The Book of Mormon: DNA Issues is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations

Author(s) Matthew Roper

Reference *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 91-128

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract

NEPHI'S NEIGHBORS: BOOK OF MORMON PEOPLES AND PRE-COLUMBIAN POPULATIONS

Matthew Roper

The Book of Mormon describes the migration of three colonies from the Old World to the New. Two of these were small Israelite groups that migrated to an American land of promise around 600 B.C. Many Latter-day Saint scholars interpret the Book of Mormon as a record of events that occurred in a relatively restricted region of ancient Mesoamerica. During and after those events, according to this view, peoples from this area—including some descendants of Book of Mormon peoples—may have spread to other parts of the Americas, carrying with them some elements of Mesoamerican culture. These Latter-day Saint scholars also believe that pre-Columbian populations of the Americas include within their ancestry many groups other than those small colonies mentioned in the Book of Mormon.¹

A recent critic of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has complained that “some LDS scholars, especially those associated with FARMS, . . . reinterpret Lamanite identity in the later part of the twentieth century”² and thereby “implicitly reject long-standing

1. See, for example, John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 81–95; John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 1–34.

2. Thomas W. Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 62.

popular Mormon beliefs, including those held by Joseph Smith, about Lamanites being the ancestors of today's American Indians."³ Of course, popular beliefs, longstanding or otherwise, are not crucial to the foundations of the faith of Latter-day Saints, which are based on revealed scripture.⁴ In regard to the ancestry of the Amerindians, the central issue for Latter-day Saints is not whether Native Americans are in some measure descendants of Israel but whether their ancestors are *exclusively* Israelite. Latter-day scriptures speak of a remnant of those people described in the Book of Mormon and of their prophetic destiny, suggesting that this remnant may be found among Native American groups known perhaps to Joseph Smith and others. While these revelations affirm an Israelite component to Native American ancestry, they never claim that all the Native Americans' ancestors were Israelite, nor do they deny the presence of other peoples in pre-Columbian America.

In 1993, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles made the following statement:

Speaking for a moment as one whose profession is advocacy, I suggest that if one is willing to acknowledge the importance of faith and the reality of a realm beyond human understanding, the case for the Book of Mormon is the stronger case to argue. The case against the historicity of the Book of Mormon has to prove a negative. You do not prove a negative by prevailing on one debater's point or by establishing some subsidiary arguments.

For me, this obvious insight goes back over forty years to the first class I took on the Book of Mormon at Brigham Young University. . . . Here I was introduced to the idea that the Book of Mormon is not a history of all of the people who have lived on the continents of North and South America in all ages of the earth. Up to that time I had assumed that it was. If that were the

3. *Ibid.*, 66.

4. See Matthew Roper, "Swimming in the Gene Pool: Israelite Kinship Relations, Genes, and Genealogy," in this number, pages 129–64.

claim of the Book of Mormon, any piece of historical, archaeological, or linguistic evidence to the contrary would weigh in against the Book of Mormon, and those who rely exclusively on scholarship would have a promising position to argue.

In contrast, if the Book of Mormon only purports to be an account of a few peoples who inhabited a portion of the Americas during a few millennia in the past, the burden of argument changes drastically. It is no longer a question of all versus none; it is a question of some versus none. In other words, in the circumstance I describe, the opponents of historicity must prove that the Book of Mormon has no historical validity for any peoples who lived in the Americas in a particular time frame, a notoriously difficult exercise. One does not prevail on that proposition by proving that a particular . . . culture represents migrations from Asia. The opponents of the historicity of the Book of Mormon must prove that the people whose religious life it records did not live anywhere in the Americas.⁵

Elder Oaks's observations, though made more than a decade ago, underscore a fatal weakness in some recent arguments against the Book of Mormon. Critics assume that genetic evidence—any genetic evidence—taken from any Native American population must be shown to be Israelite, or the Book of Mormon's claims are false. But there is no good reason to assume that Native American lineages and ancestors must be *exclusively* Israelite. In regard to the nature and identity of Lehi's people, Latter-day Saints have held a variety of opinions and expressed several interpretations historically, but whether *some* Native Americans, or *many* Native Americans, or even *all* Native Americans have Lehi as an ancestor, it does not follow that they did not have others.⁶

5. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Historicity of the Book of Mormon," in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 238–39. This talk was first given at the annual dinner of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies in Provo, Utah, on 29 October 1993.

6. See Roper, "Swimming in the Gene Pool," in this number.

Although a few statements made by Joseph Smith are sometimes used to justify the critics' complaints, they are not inconsistent with the idea that other people came to the Americas in pre-Columbian times. Also, a review of the development of Latter-day Saint ideas about pre-Columbian peoples as they relate to the Book of Mormon makes it clear that the idea that others resided in Lehi's promised land is not a recent revisionist conclusion or a ploy to deflect recent criticism. While not the only view, it is, in fact, an interpretation that has been discussed and entertained in Latter-day Saint literature in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The very few scripturally based potential objections that critics have raised against this interpretation are overwhelmed by the countering scriptural evidence presented below, all of which, I am persuaded, makes the best sense under the assumption that there were other pre-Columbian peoples in the American land of promise.

Joseph Smith and Indian Ancestry

In 1833 Joseph Smith penned a letter to the editor of the *American Revivalist and Rochester Observer* in which he described the Book of Mormon as follows:

The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians; having been found through the ministration of an holy Angel, translated into our own language by the gift and power of God, after having been hid up in the earth for the last fourteen hundred years, containing the word of God which was delivered unto them. By it, we learn that our western tribes of Indians, are descendants from that Joseph that was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them.⁷

7. "Mormonism," *American Revivalist and Rochester Observer*, 2 February 1833. The letter was written by commandment, but the Prophet never claimed that the words of the letter were inerrant, as some critics imply. See editors' introduction to *American Apocrypha*, vii.

The Book of Mormon may indeed be said to be a record of the forefathers of the American Indians, but Joseph Smith never claimed that it was the only one, nor need we believe from this statement that the Book of Mormon accounts for all the ancestors of Native Americans.

In another statement made in 1835, Joseph Smith described the visit of an angel to him twelve years earlier: “He told me of a sacred record which was written on plates of gold. I saw in the vision the place where they were deposited. He said the Indians were the literal descendants of Abraham.”⁸ This statement affirms the claim that Native Americans are descendants of Abraham, but it does not follow that this is the whole story. My great-great-grandfather is John Whetten, but it would not be reasonable to assume that in making this statement I am declaring that I have no other ancestors. Joseph Smith’s statement plainly allows for Abraham to be one ancestor among many others.

In his 1838 account of Moroni’s visit, the Prophet recounted: “He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang; he also said that the fulness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants” (Joseph Smith—History 1:34). Does this mean that the Book of Mormon tells us everything about Native American history and ancestry? Certainly not. While helping my family to move recently, I found a book giving an account of my ancestors who formerly inhabited this land and telling me where they came from. This book, which I had never seen before, gives an account of John Whetten, his family, and the Whetten line in my ancestry, but it says very little about my other ancestors: the Ropers, Mellors, Smiths, Van Wagonens, Gillespies, Hamblins, and so forth. While significant, that book tells only a small part of my family history. Similarly, one can accept Joseph Smith’s description of the Book of Mormon as an account of the ancient inhabitants of the promised land without insisting that it tells about all of them.

8. Quoted in *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, ed. Scott H. Faulring (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 51.

In 1842, at the request of John Wentworth, Joseph Smith prepared a brief outline of the events surrounding the early history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As part of this account, the Prophet described the visit of the angel Moroni in 1823.

I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country, and shown who they were, and from whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people was made known to me.⁹

Neither the Wentworth letter nor any other Joseph Smith account gives us a transcription of Moroni's actual words to Joseph Smith. Since Moroni offered Joseph Smith only a "brief sketch," it is unlikely that he revealed to Joseph a comprehensive knowledge of Native American origins. Within the context of introducing the plates, a more likely interpretation is that Moroni simply gave Joseph Smith a general description of the Book of Mormon story of Lehi's people who *came from* the land of Jerusalem. There is no need to read into this statement any more than this.

After giving an account of the visitation of Moroni, the Prophet provided a description of the Book of Mormon as follows:

In this important and interesting book the history of ancient America is unfolded, from its first settlement by a colony that came from the tower of Babel, at the confusion of languages to the beginning of the fifth century of the Christian era. We are informed by these records that America in ancient times has been inhabited by two distinct races of people. The first were called Jaredites and came directly from the tower of Babel. The second race came directly from the city of Jerusalem, about six hundred years before Christ. They were principally Israelites,

9. *Autobiographical and Historical Writings*, vol. 1 of *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 431.

of the descendants of Joseph. The Jaredites were destroyed about the time that the Israelites came from Jerusalem, who succeeded them in the inheritance of the country. The principal nation of the second race fell in battle towards the close of the fourth century. The remnant are the Indians that now inhabit this country. . . . For a more particular account I would refer to the Book of Mormon.¹⁰

Does this statement discredit the idea of other people coming to the Americas because Joseph Smith only mentions two groups? Since Joseph Smith refers to the Jaredite colony as the “first settlement” of ancient America, are Latter-day Saints required to believe that no other people came to the Americas before that time? First, it is important to note that in the Wentworth letter, Joseph Smith starts with what the angel told him and then provides his own description of the Book of Mormon narrative for the press. Consequently, his words about the Jaredite and Israelite migrations do not come from the angel Moroni. In fact, this wording, for the most part, did not even originate with Joseph Smith but is essentially adapted from Orson Pratt’s 1840 pamphlet on the Book of Mormon,¹¹ as the comparison on the next page shows.

Second, the Jaredite migration is the earliest migration to America mentioned in the Book of Mormon, but the Book of Mormon itself does not claim that the Jaredites were the first human beings in the New World. When Joseph Smith’s statement is read within its context of the Wentworth letter, it is clear that he was actually, at that point, offering a general description of the time span of the book, indicating that the Book of Mormon narrative stretches from the Jaredite settlement to the beginning of the fifth century A.D. In so doing, he was not necessarily designating the Jaredite settlement as the oldest in the land, but merely as the oldest mentioned in the Book of Mormon account. Perhaps, like many other Latter-day Saints, he assumed that the Jaredites were the

10. Ibid., 431–32.

11. Orson Pratt, *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840), 14–15.

Pratt 1840	Wentworth Letter 1842
<p>In this important and most interesting book, we can read the history of ancient America, from its early settlement by a colony who came from the tower of Babel, at the confusion of languages, to the beginning of the fifth century of the Christian era.</p>	<p>In this important and interesting book the history of ancient America is unfolded, from its first settlement by a colony that came from the tower of Babel, at the confusion of languages to the beginning of the fifth century of the Christian era.</p>
<p>By these Records we are informed, that America, in ancient times, has been inhabited by two distinct races of people. The first, or more ancient race, came directly from the great tower, being called Jaredites.</p>	<p>We are informed by these records that America in ancient times has been inhabited by two distinct races of people. The first were called Jaredites and came directly from the tower of Babel.</p>
<p>The second race came directly from the city of Jerusalem, about six-hundred years before Christ, being Israelites, principally the descendants of Joseph.</p>	<p>The second race came directly from the city of Jerusalem, about six hundred years before Christ. They were principally Israelites, of the descendants of Joseph.</p>
<p>The first nation, or Jaredites, were destroyed about the time that the Israelites came from Jerusalem, who succeeded them in the inheritance of the country.</p>	<p>The Jaredites were destroyed about the time that the Israelites came from Jerusalem, who succeeded them in the inheritance of the country.</p>
<p>The principal nation of the second race, fell in battle towards the close of the fourth century.</p>	<p>The principal nation of the second race fell in battle towards the close of the fourth century.</p>
<p>The remaining remnant, having dwindled into an uncivilized state, still continue to inhabit the land, although divided into a “multitude of nations,” and are called by Europeans the “American Indians.”</p>	<p>The remnant are the Indians that now inhabit this country.</p>

first settlers of ancient America, but this goes beyond what the Book of Mormon says. It specifically mentions three migrations to the Americas but never claims that they were the only ones or the earliest.

Finally, Joseph Smith's description of the contents of the Book of Mormon in the Wentworth letter gives a brief overview of the text and not a comprehensive account. For instance, Joseph did not say that America was inhabited by *only* two races of people in pre-Columbian times, although presumably he could have said so. In the course of the letter, he directed the reader to the contents of the Book of Mormon three different times and on the third time advised, "For a more particular account I would refer to the Book of Mormon." In other words, Joseph Smith considered the Book of Mormon itself, rather than his letter to Wentworth, to be the authoritative word on the subject.

Latter-day Saint Views on Other Pre-Columbians

Latter-day Saints have long been open to the idea that peoples not mentioned in the Book of Mormon may have migrated to the Americas either before, during, or after the events described in the Book of Mormon and that these various peoples intermingled with those of Israelite or Jaredite descent.¹² The idea of other pre-Columbian migrations to the Americas has a long history and can be traced back to the earliest Latter-day Saints. In the 15 September 1842 issue of the *Times and Seasons*, the editor—Joseph Smith, according to the paper's masthead—cited favorably an account of Don Juan Torres, grandson of the last king of the Quiché Maya, which affirmed that

the Toltecas themselves descended from the house of Israel, who were released by Moses from the tyranny of Pharaoh, and after crossing the Red Sea, fell into Idolatry. To avoid the reproofs of Moses, or from fear of his inflicting upon them some chastisement, they separated from him and his brethren, and under the guidance of Tanub, their chief, passed from

12. For details, see John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, "Before DNA," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 11–13.

one continent to the other, to a place which they called the seven caverns, a part of the kingdom of Mexico, where they founded the celebrated city of Tula.¹³

“Whether such a migration ever took place or not,” states Hugh Nibley, “it is significant that the Prophet was not reluctant to recognize the possibility of other migrations than those mentioned in the Book of Mormon.”¹⁴

Interest in the possibility of additional migrations to the Americas seems to have persisted among Latter-day Saints. In 1852, the *Deseret News* cited with interest an account of a purported Welsh migration to America “three hundred yeeres before Columbus.”¹⁵ Orson Pratt of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles interpreted the promises found in the book of Ether regarding other nations inheriting the land as referring to pre-Columbian migrants to the Americas after the Nephite destruction at Cumorah.

Now, these same decrees, which God made in relation to the former nations that inhabited this country, extend to us. “Whatever nation,” the Lord said, “shall possess this land, from this time henceforth and forever, shall serve the only true and living God, or they shall be swept off when the fullness of his wrath shall come upon them.” *Since* this ancient decree there are *many nations* who have come here. And *lastly* Europeans have come from what is termed the old world across the Atlantic.¹⁶

It is significant that Pratt, one of the earliest converts to Mormonism, who did much to popularize the hemispheric model of Book of

13. “Facts Are Stubborn Things,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 September 1842): 922.

14. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 250. While Joseph Smith was nominal editor of the paper, John Taylor was likely the acting editor at this time. For our present purpose the identity of the author is of less concern than the idea of additional migrations to the New World not specifically mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

15. “Discovery of America, above three hundred yeeres before Columbus, by Madoc ap Owen Gwyneth,” *Deseret News*, 3 April 1852, 44.

16. Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:343 (27 December 1868), emphasis added.

Mormon geography in the nineteenth century, apparently had no difficulty simultaneously asserting that many other nations came to the Americas in the interval between the Nephites' destruction and the European arrival.

Other Latter-day Saints of the time agreed with Elder Pratt. In an article published in 1875, George M. Ottinger, a faculty member at the University of Deseret (later the University of Utah), explored the idea advanced by some scholars of the day suggesting that the Phoenicians may have helped to colonize the Americas in pre-Columbian times. After surveying this literature, he concluded "that the Phoenicians at one time held intercourse with Jared's people."¹⁷ Another Latter-day Saint author, in or about 1887, surmised that Lehi's people and the Jaredites "were contemporary co-workers in the work of civilizing the aborigines of the promise[d] land."¹⁸ He viewed the account of Mosiah's union with the people of Zarahemla as evidence for the existence of indigenous peoples already in the land when they arrived. Mosiah "had to teach the Nephite language to the Zarahemlans, for though the parents of both people had come from Jerusalem at about the same time, and must have then the same verbiage, their off-spring took rather to their mothers, as it was but natural. Probably those Aborigines mothers were more numerous and influential, than their Hebrew husbands." Such intermarriages may not have been confined to the Mulekites. "Were most of those who helped Nephi to build that great temple Hebrews, and the many wives and concubines who caused the reprimand of Jacob from within the walls of the very same temple, aborigines?"¹⁹ He argued the need for Latter-day Saints to preach the gospel among the Maya and other peoples of the region since, in his

17. George M. Ottinger, "Old America: The Phoenicians," *Juvenile Instructor* 10 (6 February 1875): 33.

18. *Plain Facts for Students of the Book of Mormon, with a Map of the Promised Land* (n.p., [ca. 1887]), 3. Although the document is undated, the writer speaks of President John Taylor as being alive and cites a letter from President Taylor to an unnamed member in Logan City, Utah, dated 20 November 1886 (*ibid.*, 4). John Taylor died on 25 July 1887.

19. *Ibid.*, 4n.

view, “most of the descendants of the genuine race of Lamanites, possibly live in Yucatan and Central America.”²⁰

Thus, the sentiments of B. H. Roberts of the First Council of the Seventy, expressed in 1909, were not entirely unfamiliar to Latter-day Saints: “It cannot possibly be in conflict with the Book of Mormon to concede that the northeastern coast of America may have been visited by Norsemen in the tenth century; or that Celtic adventurers even at an earlier date, but subsequent to the close of the Nephite period, may have found their way to America. It might even be possible that migrations came by way of the Pacific Islands to the western shores of America.” He also thought it “indisputable” that there have been at least some migrations from northeast Asia to North America over the Bering Strait.²¹ He continued, “It is possible that Phoenician vessels might have visited some parts of the extended coasts of the western world, and such events receive no mention in the Jaredite or Nephite records known to us.” While the Book of Mormon text does not specifically mention such migrations, Roberts conceded that “the records now in hand, especially that of the Jaredites, are but very limited histories of these people.” Transoceanic contacts may in fact have gone both ways: “It is not impossible that between the close of the Nephite period and the discovery of the western world by Columbus, American

20. *Ibid.*, 4.

21. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1909), 2:356. Years later, Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles spoke in similar terms: “The American Indians . . . as Columbus found them,” he said, “also had other blood than that of Israel in their veins. . . . It is quite apparent that groups of orientals found their way over the Bering Strait and gradually moved southward to mix with the Indian peoples. We have records of a colony of Scandinavians attempting to set up a settlement in America some 500 years before Columbus. There are archeological indications that an unspecified number of groups of people probably found their way from the old to the new world in pre-Columbian times. Out of all these groups would have come the American Indians as they were discovered in the 15th century.” Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 33. McConkie seems to have felt that these non-Israelite influences were minimal compared to those of Israel. As noted in this article, however, other Latter-day Saint leaders have believed that the non-Israelite influences in American Indian ancestry were more substantial.

craft made their way to European shores.”²² Thus, “even in Jaredite and Nephite times voyages could have been made from America to the shores of Europe, and yet no mention of it be made in Nephite and Jaredite records now known.”²³

In 1902, Anthony W. Ivins, then president of the Juarez Stake in Mexico, suggested in an article published in the *Improvement Era* that Coriantumr may have taken wives and fathered children before his death among the Mulekites, a position with which Roberts was inclined to agree.²⁴ One of the most influential writers on the Book of Mormon in the early twentieth century, Janne M. Sjodahl, went even further; in 1927 he asked, “Have the Lamanites Jaredite blood in their veins?” and answered the question in the affirmative.²⁵ Sjodahl interpreted the account in the book of Ether as “an epitome principally of the history of [the land of] Moron, where the Jaredites first established themselves.” He postulated that, over time, “the Jaredites gradually settled in favorable localities all over the American continents, and that both Nephites and Lamanites came in contact with them, and that an amalgamation took place everywhere as in the case of the Nephites and Mulekites in Zarahemla.”²⁶ During their long history, descendants of the original Jaredite colony, according to Sjodahl, could have become widely dispersed throughout the Americas at various times and would not have been directly involved in events associated with Coriantumr, Shiz, and their people. Under this interpretation, Ether’s prophecy of Jaredite destruction (Ether 13:20–21) concerned only those associated with Coriantumr’s kingdom near the narrow neck of land and not the entire northern hemisphere.²⁷

22. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 2:357.

23. *Ibid.*, 2:359.

24. Anthony W. Ivins, “Are the Jaredites an Extinct People?” *Improvement Era*, November 1902, 44; Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3:137–38 note k.

25. Janne M. Sjodahl, “Have the Lamanites Jaredite Blood in Their Veins?” *Improvement Era*, November 1927, 56–57.

26. Janne M. Sjodahl, “Suggested Key to Book of Mormon Geography,” *Improvement Era*, September 1927, 986–87.

27. Janne M. Sjodahl, “The Jaredite Lands,” *Improvement Era*, June 1939, 371; Sjodahl, “Have the Lamanites Jaredite Blood in Their Veins?” 57. Other Book of Mormon

In 1921, in an article published in the *Improvement Era*, Sjodahl observed:

The Book of Mormon has nothing to say about the occupation of America by man before the arrival of the Jaredites. If scientists find, beyond controversy, that there were human beings here before the building of the tower; in fact, before the flood and way back in glacial ages, the authors of that volume offer no objection at all. They do not touch that question. They only assert that the Lord led the brother of Jared and his colony to this country shortly after the dispersion, and they give the briefest possible outline of the political and ecclesiastical history of their descendants until their final overthrow. This has never been, and cannot be, disputed on scientific grounds. If America was occupied by any race of people—pre-Jaredites, we may call them—information concerning them must be gathered, not from the Book of Mormon, but from geological strata, or from archaeological remains extant. . . .

Are there in this country any Indians that are not descendants of these first Hebrew settlers? That is a question for the scientist to answer.

researchers also considered Sjodahl's hypotheses viable. "It is possible that companies of Jaredites broke away from the parent colony, journeying down the western coast as far as the southern point of South America." M. H. Morgan, "Of Interest to Book of Mormon Students," *Saints Herald* 84 (19 June 1937): 781. In 1939, J. A. and J. N. Washburn suggested, "There may have been many [descendants of the original Jaredite colony] in other parts of the land, to the far north and the far south. These may not have gathered to the central place at the time of the destruction. They may have had governments of their own in other localities." In later times these descendants could have been few or potentially have numbered in the "millions." J. A. Washburn and J. N. Washburn, *An Approach to the Study of Book of Mormon Geography* (Provo, Utah: New Era, 1939), 73; see also 200, 202. Subsequent Latter-day Saint scholars have noted further evidence for the survival of some Jaredites. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 237–52; Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived," 19–22. Elder Bruce R. McConkie was also willing to grant the possibility that "isolated remnants of the Jaredites may have lived through the period of destruction in which millions of their fellows perished." McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 33.

The Book of Mormon gives no direct information on that subject. It confines itself strictly to the history of the descendants of Lehi and Mulek. If science, after a careful investigation of the physical characteristics of the present-day Indians; their languages, their religious ideas, their myths and traditions, and their social institutions, should declare that there are evidences of other influences . . . that would not affect the authenticity of the Book of Mormon in the least.²⁸

In another article published in 1927 that discusses four divergent models of Book of Mormon geography—including two that placed the setting exclusively in the region of Central America—Sjodahl advised, “Students of the Book of Mormon should be cautioned against the error of supposing that all the American Indians are the descendants of Lehi, Mulek, and their companions, and that their languages and dialects, their social organizations, religious conceptions and practices, traditions, etc., are all traceable to those Hebrew sources. . . . Nor is it improbable,” he continued, “that America received immigrants from Asia and other parts of the globe, who may have introduced new creeds and institutions, although not mentioned in the Book of Mormon.”²⁹ He also suggested that “long before [the so-called Classic Maya period], the descendants of Lehi had invaded this region and assimilated with the people preceding them.”³⁰

In 1928, Latter-day Saint engineer Jean Driggs published a brief but cogently argued pamphlet suggesting that the Book of Mormon was the “record of a minority people.” Looking at the matter from the vantage point of his profession, he said, “It should not be expected

28. Janne M. Sjodahl, “The Book of Mormon and Modern Research,” *Improvement Era*, December 1921, 154–55, 156.

29. Sjodahl, “Suggested Key to Book of Mormon Geography,” 986–87. Washburn and Washburn also suggested in 1939 that “there were other people in the land than those of whom the Book of Mormon is a record.” Washburn and Washburn, *Approach to the Study of Book of Mormon Geography*, 33.

30. Janne M. Sjodahl, *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1927), 341.

that a study of the Book of Mormon lands will account for all the ancient monuments and cultural phases on this continent any more than that the Bible should account for all the civilizations of the Eastern Continent.”³¹

It was not only scholars and professionals from within the rank and file of the church who expressed this note of caution. In the April 1929 general conference of the church, Anthony W. Ivins, who had become a counselor in the First Presidency, admonished the Saints, “We must be careful in the conclusions that we reach. The Book of Mormon teaches the history of three distinct peoples, or two peoples and three different colonies of people, who came from the old world to this continent. *It does not tell us that there was no one here before them. It does not tell us that people did not come after.* And so if discoveries are made which suggest differences in race origins, it can very easily be accounted for, and reasonably, for *we do believe that other people came to this continent.*”³²

Nor was President Ivins alone among the General Authorities in this belief. In 1937, Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Quorum of the Twelve and Franklin S. Harris Jr. noted: “Three separate and distinct settlements of America are reported by the Book of Mormon. The first, the Jaredites, dates from the Tower of Babel, the other two, the Nephites and Mulekites, from the time of Zedekiah, King of Judah. There may also have been others not recorded in the Book or not known to the ancient authors.”³³

In 1938, the idea of others in the promised land entered the formal church curriculum when the church’s Department of Education published a study guide for the instruction of Latter-day Saint students and teachers that explained: “Indian ancestry, at least in part, is attributed by the Nephite record to the Lamanites. However, the Book of Mormon deals only with the history and expansion of three small colonies which

31. Jean Russell Driggs, *The Palestine of America* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1928), [1].

32. Anthony W. Ivins, Conference Report, April 1929, 15, emphasis added.

33. John A. Widtsoe and Franklin S. Harris Jr., *Seven Claims of the Book of Mormon: A Collection of Evidences* (Independence, Mo.: Zion’s Printing and Publishing, [1937]), 87.

came to America and it does not deny or disprove the possibility of other immigrations, which probably would be unknown to its writers. Jewish origin may represent only a part of the total ancestry of the American Indian today.” The study guide further stated: “A parallel is found in the Bible writings which mention only a small portion of the Old World geographical areas and its people, even though Palestine was the land bridge of ancient civilizations. The Hebrew writers mentioned other lands and people only when they came in contact with them.”³⁴ Two years later, the same department published another study guide that affirmed:

There is a tendency to use the Book of Mormon as a complete history of all pre-Columbian peoples. The book does not claim to be such an history, and we distort its spiritual message when we use it for such a purpose. The book does not give an history of all peoples who came to America before Columbus. There may have been other people who came here, by other routes and means, of which we have no written record. If historians wish to discuss information which the Book of Mormon does not contain but which is related to it, then we should grant them that freedom. We should avoid the claim that we are familiar with all the peoples who have lived on American soil when we discuss the Book of Mormon.

. . . There is safety in using the book in the spirit in which it was written. Our use of poorly constructed inferences may draw us far away from the truth. In our approach to the study of the Book of Mormon let us guard against drawing historical conclusions which the book does not warrant.³⁵

34. William E. Berrett, Milton R. Hunter, Roy A. Welker, and H. Alvah Fitzgerald, *A Guide to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1938), 47–48.

35. Roy A. West, *An Introduction to the Book of Mormon: A Religious-Literary Study* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1940), 11. “Inspiration and encouragement were offered by Albert E. Bowen [a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles]

In this second publication, “the student is reminded again of the possibility of still other groups, ethnically unrelated to the Nephites or Lamanites, inhabiting portions of the Americas.”³⁶

Other publications of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have offered similar counsel. In a 1950 article for the *Relief Society Magazine*, Elder Antoine R. Ivins, a member of the First Council of the Seventy and a son of President Anthony W. Ivins, observed that terms such as *Nephite* and *Lamanite* often referred to classifications other than the strictly biological. “We are in the habit of thinking,” he said, in mild chastisement of the human tendency to adhere to popular tradition, “of all of the indigenous groups who were upon the land of the Americas when Christopher Columbus landed here, as Lamanites. I wonder if we are justified in this assumption.” He pointed out that over a thousand years had elapsed between the final destruction of the Nephites and the arrival of Columbus to the Americas. “During this time great changes may have taken place in the populations of the Americas and among these changes may have been migrations of other groups to America.” While the Book of Mormon tells of the migrations of the Jaredites, Mulekites, and Lehites, he continued, Latter-day Saints need not suppose that there were no others. “There may have been other peoples whom the Nephites never discovered living then on this great land. Or, as suggested, others may have come later. The very wide differentiation in the languages of the native races of the Americas would seem to indicate this possibility.” Elder Ivins added that these thoughts did not disturb his faith in the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, concluding, “Whether all of these indigenous peoples were descended from Lehi matters little.”³⁷

Seven years later, in a statement approved for publication by the First Presidency of the church in a comparative work on American religions, Elder Richard L. Evans of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles described

who read the manuscript and offered constructive appraisal upon the contents of the study” (ibid., 4).

36. West, *Introduction to the Book of Mormon*, 63 n. 27.

37. Antoine R. Ivins, “The Lamanites,” *Relief Society Magazine* 37 (August 1950): 507–8.

the Book of Mormon as “part of a record, both sacred and secular, of prophets and peoples who (with supplementary groups) were *among* the ancestors of the American ‘Indians.’”³⁸ This article was subsequently reprinted in 1963 and 1975. Although the 1975 edition expressly stated that the article had been slightly modified and then reapproved for publication by the First Presidency of the church, this portion of Elder Evans’s article was left unchanged. It seems reasonable that language such as this, written by an apostle and twice approved by the First Presidency for publication in a work intended to represent the Church of Jesus Christ to the scholarly community, could be considered reliable.

This same view was, at the same time, being disseminated to members of the church as well. In 1961, Latter-day Saint writer and Book of Mormon scholar Ariel Crowley thought it “beyond any question true” that the Americas had received periodic migrations across the Bering Strait at various times. It would be incorrect, he argued, for one to say “that *all* American Indians are descended from Israel. Neither is it proper to say that no American Indians are descended from Mongolian sources. It is equally improper to assert that Indians may not be descended from both sources, and very probably others as well.” The mixture of populations in the Americas and throughout the world makes “definitive boundaries of descent very difficult to trace, and in most cases truly impossible.” Crowley insisted that past statements by church leaders were never “intended to be critical analyses of racial ancestries, nor intended to exclude migrations from other nations and intermarriages with Nephite or Lamanite people.”³⁹ The Book of Mormon “is no more the history of all peoples and doings of past ages on the American continents than the Bible is a history of all the peoples and nations of the East. Each covers its own time and provenance and makes no pretense beyond that.” Native Americans “are of mixed blood, very much like the mixtures

38. Richard L. Evans, “What Is a ‘Mormon?’” in *Religions of America*, ed. Leo Rosten (London: Heinemann, 1957), 94, emphasis added; reprinted as *Religions of America: Ferment and Faith in an Age of Crisis: A New Guide and Almanac* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975).

39. Ariel L. Crowley, *About the Book of Mormon* (Idaho City, Idaho: n.p., 1961), 142.

produced in modern America, the ‘melting pot’ of nations. The Book of Mormon attests the presence of the blood of Israel. It is not in the least impugned by extraneous proof that other blood, by other migrations, found this land and mingled with the peoples there.”⁴⁰

Latter-day Saint anthropologists shared Crowley’s opinion. In 1976, in an article for the church’s *Liahona* magazine, archaeologist Ross T. Christensen noted that the diversity in Native American languages makes it clear that “the original forefathers of the Indians came from diverse ethnic groups from many distant lands in the Old World. For this reason it is impossible to declare with certainty that *all* American Indians are Lamanites. The Book of Mormon does not make this claim, although it is affirmed by some members of the Church.”⁴¹ In this he concurred with his colleague M. Wells Jakeman, who had stated two years before Elder Evans’s article that “the Nephite record does not purport to give the history of *all* the New World for *all* the time before Columbus” nor “claim to give the origin of *all* the American Indian peoples found inhabiting the New World at the coming of the Europeans.”⁴²

A year before Christensen’s article appeared, the *Ensign* responded to the question “Who and where are the Lamanites?” Its author, Lane Johnson, noted that latter-day “Lamanites,” in addition to being descended from Lehi, Ishmael, Zoram, and Mulek, “may also be descended from other groups of whom we have no record. Certainly they have mixed with many other lineages at the far reaches of their dispersal in the Americas and most of the islands of the Pacific since the time when Moroni bade them farewell in A.D. 421.” Yet notwithstanding the mixed nature of these groups, they all “have a legitimate claim to the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.”⁴³

40. *Ibid.*, 145.

41. Ross T. Christensen, “¿Son lamanitas todos los indios americanos?” Preguntas y Respuestas, *Liahona*, November 1976, 9.

42. M. Wells Jakeman to Dr. R. E. C., 12 November 1955, quoted in *Progress in Archaeology: An Anthology*, comp. and ed. Ross T. Christensen (Provo, Utah: University Archaeological Society, Brigham Young University, 1963), 141.

43. Lane Johnson, “Who and where are the Lamanites?” I Have a Question, *Ensign*, December 1975, 15.

Hugh Nibley had broached this idea of claim upon the covenant as early as 1952 when he wrote of the possibility that these others in the land were not accidental arrivals but had been led to it by the hand of God for his own purposes, as the Book of Mormon colonists had.

Just because Lehi's people had come from Jerusalem by special direction we are not to conclude that other men cannot have had the same experience. And by the same token the fact that the Jaredites were led to the land of promise at the time of the dispersion gives us no right to conclude that no one else was ever so led, either earlier or later than they. It is nowhere said or implied that even the Jaredites were the first to come here, any more than it is said or implied that they were the first or only people to be led from the tower.

. . . Now there is a great deal said in the Book of Mormon about the past and future of the promised land, but never is it described as an empty land. The descendants of Lehi were never the only people on the continent, and the Jaredites never claimed to be.⁴⁴

Fifteen years later he noted: "The Book of Mormon offers no objections whatever to the free movement of whatever tribes and families choose to depart into regions beyond its ken, so it presents no obstacles to the arrival of whatever other bands may have occupied the hemisphere without its knowledge; for hundreds of years the Nephites shared the continent with the far more numerous Jaredites, of whose existence they were totally unaware."⁴⁵ In fact, he added, "The idea of other migrations to the New World is taken so completely for granted that the story of the Mulekites is dismissed in a few verses (Omni 1:14–17)."⁴⁶

One of the most prominent proponents of the idea that Native American populations were not confined to those of Israel is anthropologist John L. Sorenson. His views on how the Book of Mormon relates to

44. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 249–50.

45. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 218–19.

46. *Ibid.*, 219.

ancient Mesoamerica actually began circulating in preliminary form as early as 1955.⁴⁷ In 1985, an expanded version of his work was published, and since then he has published additional works relating to the question.⁴⁸ Sorenson argued that the Book of Mormon was not intended as a history of all the American Indians but is primarily a “lineage history” or a “record of the people of Nephi” written by the elite of that people.⁴⁹ He also contended that many elements found in the Book of Mormon text can best be accounted for under the assumption that Nephites and Lamanites included other people in addition to those descended from the original founding colony. For example, Lehi’s son Jacob’s condemnation of the Nephites having “‘many wives and concubines’ . . . seems to call for a larger population of females,” which could not have been the case with Lehi’s party just one or two generations after their arrival. Male casualties in battles involving such tiny numbers could hardly have been very many. This would suggest the incorporation of “‘other’ people.”⁵⁰

The activities and words of Sherem also support this view. Jacob says that “there came a man among the people of Nephi, whose name was Sherem” (Jacob 7:1). In his conversation with Jacob, Sherem indicates that he had “sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you; for I have heard and also know that thou goest about much, preaching that which ye call the gospel, or the doctrine of Christ” (Jacob 7:6). Sorenson estimated that the population of actual descendants of the Nephite colony “could not have exceeded fifty by that time,” hardly “enough to populate one modest-sized village. . . . 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

47. See John L. Sorenson, “Where in the World? Views on Book of Mormon Geography,” unpublished paper, 1955, revised 1974.

48. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*; Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived,” 1–34.

49. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 50–56.

50. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived,” 3–4.

Sherem ‘*came . . . among the people of Nephi*’ (Jacob 7:1)?”⁵¹ Sorenson also noted references to wars, flocks, and domesticated corn as suggesting the presence of other people.⁵² Even more recently, Brant Gardner has marshaled additional evidence suggesting that the Nephites were a minority people in the midst of many other Mesoamerican groups with whom they interacted.⁵³

The idea that people other than the Book of Mormon colonists also inhabited the pre-Columbian Americas is not a new or revisionist concept. It has a well-documented history that began in the early generations of the restored Church of Jesus Christ and has carried on uninterrupted to the present day. It has been presented, discussed, and published openly and in authorized contexts throughout that history. It has been promoted and defended by some of the church’s most distinguished leaders and scholars, and it continues to inform the work of faithful Book of Mormon researchers today. As ever more scientific evidence arises in support of it, one can hope that it will in time fully supersede the erroneous but “long-standing popular Mormon beliefs” defended by the Book of Mormon’s critics.⁵⁴

Possible Scriptural Objections to the Presence of Others

In seeking possible scriptural objections to the proposition that there were others in the land, some have suggested that two Book of Mormon passages (Ether 2:5 and 2 Nephi 1:8) require an

51. *Ibid.*, 4.

52. *Ibid.*, 4–6. “Maize is so totally domesticated a plant that it will not reproduce without human care. In other words, the Zeniffites or any other of Lehi’s descendants could only be growing corn/maize because people already familiar with the complex of techniques for its successful cultivation had passed on the knowledge, and the seed, to the newcomers. Notice too that these passages in Mosiah [7:22; 9:14] indicate that corn had become the grain of preference among the Lamanites, and perhaps among the Zeniffites. That is, they had apparently integrated it into their system of taste preferences and nutrition as a primary food, for which cooks and diners in turn would have had familiar recipes, utensils, and so on” (*ibid.*, 5).

53. Brant Gardner, “The Other Stuff: Reading the Book of Mormon for Cultural Information,” *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 35–37.

54. Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics,” 66.

empty hemisphere previous to the arrival of Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites.⁵⁵ However, it is evident that the passage from Ether 2:5, stating that the Jaredites were “commanded . . . that they should go forth into the wilderness, yea, into that quarter where there never had man been,” when taken in context, actually refers to the wilderness through which the Jaredites were to travel in the Old World and says nothing about the populations of the New World at that time. The second reference, from Lehi’s prophecy, reads as follows:

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 if it so be that they shall keep his commandments they shall be blessed upon the face of this land, and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance; and they shall dwell safely forever. (2 Nephi 1:8–9)

One reading of this statement could be that Lehi’s people inherited an empty promised land when their ship arrived, but the Book of Mormon allows for other interpretations.⁵⁶ Is there a distinction, for example, between “nations” and other social groups? Lehi would

55. “What about the claim that the Jaredite migration from the Middle East was to ‘that quarter where never had man been’ (Ether 2:5)? Or, Lehi’s claim between 588 and 570 BC that ‘it is wisdom that this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations’ (2 Ne 1:8)?” Thomas Murphy, open e-mail to Michael Whiting, 25 January 2003.

56. George Reynolds followed this interpretation, noting, however, that this would not apply to the Jaredites, since “we have no account in the sacred records that God shut them out from the knowledge of the rest of mankind when he planted them in America.” George Reynolds, “History of the Book of Mormon VI: The Contents of the Records,” *Contributor* 5 (April 1884): 242. See also George M. Ottinger, “Old America: The Phoenicians,” *Juvenile Instructor* 10 (6 February 1875): 33.

have been familiar with nations such as Babylon and Egypt that had well-organized armies capable of waging sophisticated warfare and extending their power over large distances. Lehi's prophecy could allow for smaller societies that did not yet merit the description "nations." For instance, Sorenson's model of Book of Mormon geography places the land of Nephi in highland Guatemala near the site of Kaminaljuyú. At the time Nephi and his people separated from Laman's followers to found their own settlement in the early sixth century B.C., archaeological evidence shows that that region had only scattered, sparsely populated villages.⁵⁷ Also, to "possess this land unto themselves" does not necessarily mean to be the only inhabitants but can also mean—as it often does in Book of Mormon contexts—that a group has the ability to control and exercise authority over the land and its resources (see, for example, Mosiah 19:15; 23:29; 24:2; Alma 27:22, 26).⁵⁸ Significantly, however, even Lehi's statement about "other nations" is conditional. Lehi indicates that the promised protection from threatening nations would be removed when his children dwindled in unbelief. Sorenson has observed that the Lamanites, at least, dwindled in unbelief from the beginning.

How then could Lehi's prophecy about "other nations" being brought in have been kept long in abeyance after that? Furthermore, the early Nephites generally did the same thing within a few centuries. Their wickedness and apostasy culminated in the escape of Mosiah and his group from the land of Nephi to the land of Zarahemla (see Omni 1:13–14). And if the Lord somehow did not at those times bring in "other nations," then surely he would have done so after Cumorah, 1100 years prior to Columbus. Even if there

57. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 85. For an overview of the argument for a limited Book of Mormon geography, see Sorenson and Roper, "Before DNA," 7–10. For an overview of the evidence of archaeology and other sciences for population diversity in the New World, see *ibid.*, 18–23.

58. See also John L. Sorenson, *Nephite Culture and Society: Collected Papers*, ed. Matthew R. Sorenson (Salt Lake City: New Sage Books, 1997), 205–7.

were no massive armed invasions of strange groups to be reported, we need not be surprised if relatively small groups of strange peoples who were neither so numerous nor so organized as to be rivals for control of the land could have been scattered or infiltrated among both Nephites and Lamanites without their constituting the “other nations” in the threatening sense of Lehi’s prophecy. Thus in the terms of Lehi’s prophecy, “others” could and probably even should have been close at hand and available for the Lord to use as instruments against the straying covenant peoples any time after the arrival of Nephi’s boat.⁵⁹

Scriptural Support for the Presence of Others

Prophecies about the Scattering

The scriptural evidence against the presence of others, then, is sparse and unimpressive. The scriptural evidence for the presence of others, however, is abundant. For instance, prophecies from the Old Testament would have led Lehi’s people to expect to be placed in a new land in the midst of other people. The prophets of ancient Israel had foretold that the tribes of Israel would be “scatter[ed] . . . among all people” (Deuteronomy 28:64) and “removed to all the kingdoms of the earth” (Jeremiah 29:18) and that they would become “wanderers among the nations” (Hosea 9:17). Further, Moses informed them, “The Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and ye shall be left few in number among the heathen, whither the Lord shall lead you” (Deuteronomy 4:27). These prophecies make plain that the whole house of Israel was subject to being scattered among non-Israelite peoples who would be more numerous than they.⁶⁰ Lehi taught his

59. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived,” 7–8. For an earlier but similar view, see Gareth W. Lowe, “The Book of Mormon and Early Southwest Cultures,” *U.A.S. [University Archaeological Society] Newsletter*, no. 19 (12 April 1954): 3.

60. D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens, “Who Are the Children of Lehi?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 38, 46–51.

children that they should consider themselves to be a part of this scattering: “Yea, even my father spake much concerning the Gentiles, and also concerning the house of Israel, that they should be compared like unto an olive-tree, whose branches should be broken off and should be scattered upon all the face of the earth. Wherefore, he said it must needs be that we should be led with one accord into the land of promise, unto the fulfilling of the word of the Lord, that we should be scattered” (1 Nephi 10:12–13).

The allegory of the olive tree, as recounted by Jacob, spells their fate out even more plainly. Branches broken off the tame tree, which represents historical Israel (Jacob 5:3), are to be grafted onto the roots of wild trees, meaning non-Israelite groups. In other words, there is to be a demographic union between two groups, with “young and tender branches” from the original tree, Israel, being grafted onto wild rootstock in various parts of the vineyard or the earth (Jacob 5:8; see also 14). Jacob 5:25 and 43 clearly identify Lehi’s people as such a broken-off branch. That branch is to be planted in the choicest spot of the vineyard. In that prime location, the Lord has already cut down “that which cumbered this spot of ground” (Jacob 5:44)—clearly a reference to the destruction of the Jaredites.⁶¹ In addition, the statement that one part of the new hybrid tree “brought forth good fruit,” while the other portion “brought forth wild fruit,” is an obvious reference to the Nephites and Lamanites respectively (Jacob 5:45).

So the Lehite “tree” of the allegory consists of a population geographically “transplanted” from the original Israelite promised land and “grafted” onto a wild root—or joined with non-Israelite people. Note that the Lord considers the new root to be “good” despite its being wild (Jacob 5:48). This allegorical description requires that a non-Israelite root—other peoples, in terms of this discussion—already

61. The previous tree, or at least that part which cumbered the ground, is said to have been “cut down,” not uprooted. Younger olive branches can be planted or grafted into an older rootstock or stump. For pictures of such hybrid olive trees, see *The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 536, 539.

be present on the scene where the “young and tender branch,” Lehi’s group, would be merged with them.

Open-ended Promises concerning the Land

Book of Mormon prophets describe for latter-day readers the responsibilities that rest upon those who inherit the land of promise. But these conditions did not begin with Lehi’s family or even with the Jaredites; this land has been one of promise from its beginning (Ether 13:2).⁶² Those conditions specify that the people and nations who inhabit the land are to be free from bondage, captivity, and “all other nations under heaven” *if* they will serve God (Ether 2:12). The reverse is also implicit in Moroni’s statement: those who do not serve God have no promised protection and may expect to be subjected to bondage, captivity, and affliction by other nations who will come to the land and exercise God’s judgment upon them. Some people, then, are brought to the land for their righteousness, and others are brought to scourge the inhabitants. Moroni also states that unrighteous nations or people may be swept off the face of the land, but “it is not until the fulness of iniquity among the children of the land, that they are swept off” (Ether 2:10), suggesting that those peoples who do not reach a “fulness of iniquity” may yet remain in the land.

“And he raiseth up a righteous nation, and destroyeth the nations of the wicked. And he leadeth away the righteous into precious lands, and the wicked he destroyeth, and curseth the land unto them for their sakes” (1 Nephi 17:37–38). Nephi’s statement in the context of his own family’s journey to a New World land of promise suggests that their experience is not unique but indicative of the activities of other groups. Upon his family’s arrival, Lehi explained the nature of the covenant by which they would inherit the land. The Lord had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, “but, said he, notwithstanding our afflictions, we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other

62. I interpret the “waters” in this passage to refer to the waters of creation (Genesis 1:9–10) rather than to the waters of the flood of Noah.

lands; a land which the Lord God hath covenanted with me should be a land for the inheritance of *my seed*. Yea, the Lord hath covenanted this land unto *me*, and to *my children* forever, and *also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord*" (2 Nephi 1:5). We know that the Mulekites were, like the Lehites, led out of the land of Jerusalem "by the hand of the Lord" (Omni 1:16). Lehi's reference to "other countries" suggests countries other than the land of Jerusalem. Modern readers may correctly include in that category gentile peoples who migrated to this hemisphere during historic times, yet Lehi does not limit the application to post-Columbian gentile groups. Their identity is left open and unspecified.

Wherefore, this land is consecrated unto *him whom he shall bring*. And if it so be that they shall serve him according to the commandments which he hath given, it shall be a land of liberty unto them; wherefore, they shall never be brought down into captivity; if so, it shall be because of iniquity; for if iniquity shall abound cursed shall be the land for their sakes, but unto the righteous it shall be blessed forever. (2 Nephi 1:7)

Lehi's words parallel similar promises in both the Book of Mormon and latter-day revelation:

Cursed shall be the land, yea, this land, unto *every* nation, kindred, tongue, and people, unto destruction, which do wickedly, when they are fully ripe. (Alma 45:16)

And thus the Lord did pour out his blessings upon this land, which was choice above all other lands; and he commanded that *whoso* should possess the land should possess it unto the Lord, or they should be destroyed when they were ripened in iniquity; for upon such, saith the Lord: I will pour out the fulness of my wrath. (Ether 9:20)

And I said unto them, that it should be granted unto them according to their faith in their prayers; yea, and this was their faith—that my gospel, which I gave unto them that they

might preach in their days, might come unto their brethren the *Lamanites*, and also *all that had become Lamanites because of their dissensions*. Now, this is not all—their faith in their prayers was that this gospel should be made known also, if it were possible that *other nations should possess this land*; and thus they did leave a blessing upon this land in their prayers, that *whosoever should believe in this gospel in this land* might have eternal life; yea, that it might be free unto *all of whatsoever nation, kindred, tongue, or people they may be*. (D&C 10:47–52)

In both the Book of Mormon and modern-day scripture, the language of the scriptural promises concerning the land is open-ended. It refers to “*whoso should possess the land*” (Ether 2:8), “*whatsoever nation*” (Ether 2:9, 12), “*he that doth possess it*” (Ether 2:10), “*all men . . . who dwell upon the face thereof*” (Ether 13:2), “*whosoever should believe in this gospel in this land*” (D&C 10:50), “*all of whatsoever nation, kindred, tongue, or people they may be*” (D&C 10:51). The covenant conditions under which blessings may be inherited are explained, while the identification of who may inherit them is left unspecified in terms of both identification and time. Whoever they are, whenever they come, whatever their origins, the Book of Mormon makes clear that “*this land is consecrated unto him whom he shall bring*” (2 Nephi 1:7).

The People of Nephi

After telling us that “*Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael were angry with me because of the admonitions of the Lord*” (2 Nephi 4:13) and were planning to kill him (2 Nephi 5:3), Nephi then relates:

And it came to pass that the Lord did warn me, that I, Nephi, should depart from them and flee into the wilderness, *and all those who would go with me*. Wherefore, it came to pass that I, Nephi, did take my family, and also Zoram and his family, and Sam, mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters, *and all those*

who would go with me. And all those who would go with me were those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God; wherefore, they did hearken unto my words. (2 Nephi 5:5–6)

At the time the Nephites and the Lamanites separated, then, Nephi was accompanied by his own family, Zoram and Sam and their respective families, his younger brothers Jacob and Joseph, and his sisters, in addition to “all those who would go with me.” Who were these others who “believed in the warnings and the revelations of God”? The most likely answer seems to be other people living in the land, not of Lehi’s family. Significantly, at this point in the text Nephi introduces the term *people of Nephi* for the first time in reference to his followers (2 Nephi 5:9), a term that may be suggestive of a larger society including more than his immediate family.

It is also at this point that the term *Lamanite* first appears. Nephi explains that he made preparations to defend his people “lest by any means the people *who were now called Lamanites* should come upon us and destroy us; for I knew their hatred towards me and my children and those who were called my people” (2 Nephi 5:14). As demographer James Smith observes, “One reading of the latter phrase is that ‘Lamanites’ is a new name for the family and followers of Laman, Nephi’s brother-enemy from whom Nephi fled. Another possible reading is that some people not previously called ‘Lamanites’ were now so called, presumably because of Laman’s affiliation with them.”⁶³

After explaining how he and his people separated themselves from Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and their people and having told how the people of Nephi became established in the land, Nephi quotes a prophecy of the Lord. “And cursed shall be the seed of *him that mixeth with their seed*; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. *And the Lord spake it, and it was done*” (2 Nephi 5:23). This prophecy anticipates future mixing and intermarriage with the Lamanites, but the immediacy of Nephi’s personal observation that “the Lord spake it,

63. James E. Smith, “How Many Nephites? The Book of Mormon at the Bar of Demography,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 272.

and it was done” suggests that the process was already underway at the time Nephi left or very shortly after the separation. That is, unidentified people had, at this early period, already joined with the Lamanites in their opposition to Nephi and his people and had become like them, and Nephi saw this event as a fulfillment of the Lord’s prophecy. Since Nephite dissensions are not explicitly mentioned until several generations later,⁶⁴ Nephi’s statement about unidentified peoples intermarrying with the Lamanites seems to indicate the presence of other non-Lehite peoples who had joined or were joining the Lamanites.

Being Numbered with the People of God

In light of the possibility that additional non-Lehite peoples had united with both the Nephites and the Lamanites, the teachings of Nephi and Jacob relating to Isaiah take on greater significance. After explaining that “we had already had wars and contentions with” the Lamanites (2 Nephi 5:34), Nephi inserts a lengthy sermon delivered by his brother Jacob (2 Nephi 6–10). Jacob indicates that he has previously spoken about “many things” (2 Nephi 6:2) but that Nephi now wants him to preach from Isaiah. In fact, Jacob says that Nephi had even selected the scriptural passages he was to discuss: prophecies of Isaiah that concerned the relationship between scattered Israel and the Gentiles (2 Nephi 6:4). Further, Jacob asks his people to *liken* these passages from Isaiah to their present situation (2 Nephi 6:5) and suggests that the application of these teachings concerns “things which *are*” as well as things “which are to come” (2 Nephi 6:4). As Latter-day Saints, we quite appropriately focus

64. Although wars and contentions are mentioned by nearly every chronicler who wrote on Nephi’s small plates, most of these conflicts are specified as being between Lamanites and Nephites. It is not until Amaleki, the last of these chroniclers, begins his account that dissent among the Nephites themselves is implied. He records in Omni 1:12–13 that Mosiah, “being warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi,” departed into the wilderness with “as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord” and eventually encountered the people of Zarahemla. This exodus, reminiscent of Nephi’s departure from the land of first inheritance generations earlier due to family contention, is estimated to have occurred sometime between 279 and 130 B.C.

on the latter, but what was the context that made likening Isaiah's words to themselves meaningful to the Nephites?

Jacob prophesies that in the latter days some Jews will reject the Messiah and be destroyed, while others will believe and be saved (2 Nephi 6:14–15). Jacob also interprets Isaiah as referring to two distinct groups of Gentiles: those who nourish and unite with Israel (2 Nephi 6:12; 10:18–19), and those who fight against Zion (2 Nephi 6:13; 10:16). In the latter days, both groups of Gentiles will play an active role in the drama of Israel's gathering and redemption. "Wherefore, he that fighteth against Zion, both *Jew* and *Gentile*, both bond and free, both male and female, shall perish; for they are they who are the whore of all the earth; for they who are not for me are against me, saith our God" (2 Nephi 10:16). Certainly, Jacob's sermon looks to the future, but I am persuaded that in likening Jacob's teachings to themselves, Nephite contemporary listeners would have drawn the obvious parallel with their own situation. As a branch of scattered Israel in a new land of promise, they sought to establish Zion but were opposed, hated, and persecuted by their former brethren. Even when Jacob applies these prophecies to the latter days, his words have immediate relevance to his contemporary listeners, who would likely have seen their Lamanite persecutors as the "Jews" of Jacob's prophecy and the "Gentiles" as those non-Lehite peoples who had joined with the Lamanites against the people of Nephi. However, in his application of Isaiah to the Lehiters, Jacob explains that not all Gentiles would oppose Zion and that some would be joint heirs with the people of Lehi in the blessings of the land: "But behold, this land, said God, shall be a land of thine inheritance, and the Gentiles shall be blessed upon the land" (2 Nephi 10:10). How would the Gentiles in the land be blessed? By being numbered among the children of Lehi.

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, thus saith our God: I will afflict thy seed by the hand of the Gentiles; nevertheless, I will soften the hearts of the Gentiles, that they shall be like unto a father to them; wherefore, the Gentiles shall be blessed and numbered among the house of Israel. Wherefore,

I will consecrate this land unto *thy seed*, and *them who shall be numbered among thy seed*, forever, for the land of their inheritance; for it is a choice land, saith God unto me, above all other lands, wherefore I will have *all men* that dwell thereon that they shall worship me, saith God. (2 Nephi 10:18–19)

The Lord's promise, delivered to the people of Nephi by Jacob, is a perpetual one, having application from their own time forward. In the context of its time, Jacob's sermon can be read as addressing the immediate question of how Lehite Israel was to relate to and interact with non-Lehite peoples in the promised land.⁶⁵ The answer was that they might, if they so chose, join with the people of God in seeking to build up Zion as joint inheritors of the land. Once they did so, they too became Israel and were numbered with Lehi's seed. Some have wondered why, if other people were present in the land during Book of Mormon times, they were not mentioned more frequently in the record. The precedent of making no distinction between Lehi's descendants and converts from the rest of the population, introduced by the Nephites' first priest, would have been foundational to the unity of Nephite society, would have influenced the words of later Nephite prophets, and may have set the additional precedent of viewing all peoples in the land in polar terms, such as *Zion/Babylon* or *Nephite/Lamanite*. Previous cultural identity would have been swallowed up in this polarized frame of reference. An example of this process can be seen in the case of Nephi's righteous brother Sam. When Lehi blesses Sam, he promises, "Blessed art thou, and thy seed; for thou shalt inherit the land like unto thy brother Nephi. And thy seed shall be numbered with his seed; and thou shalt be even like unto thy brother, and thy seed like unto his seed; and thou shalt be blessed in all thy days" (2 Nephi 4:11). Lehi blesses all his children, but only Sam is promised that his seed will be numbered with Nephi's. Interestingly, when Lehite tribal designations

65. For a similar perspective, see Brant Gardner, "A Social History of the Early Nephites, Part 1," *Meridian Magazine*, 2003, www.meridianmagazine.com/sci_rel/030731fair.html (accessed 16 October 2003).

are mentioned, there is no tribe of Sam (Jacob 1:13; 4 Nephi 1:35–38). Why? Apparently because when one is numbered with a people, one takes upon oneself the name and identity of that people. Similarly, Gentiles, once numbered with Israel or Lehi, are thereafter identified with their covenant fathers without respect to biological origin. From then on, they too are simply Israel.

Nephi's emphasis on the universal nature of God's love is even more meaningful if written and taught to a people grappling with issues of ethnic and social diversity. "And he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Nephi 26:33). Nephites would understand Jews to be those who came out from Jerusalem, yet the additional reference to Gentiles and heathen would only make sense to a Nephite if there were others in the land.

Likening Isaiah unto the Nephites

If there were others in the land, it would also help explain why many of Nephi's people had difficulty understanding Isaiah, although not all of them did (2 Nephi 25:1–6). Converts who had never lived in the ancient Near East would have lacked the historical and cultural background that made the words of Isaiah "plain" to Nephi. It is also apparent that some Isaiah passages cited by Nephite prophets would make better sense to a Nephite if there were others in the land. Here we will mention just three.

- *Strangers join the house of Israel.* "For the Lord will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land; and the strangers shall be joined with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob" (2 Nephi 24:1). Such prophecies may quite properly be applied to latter-day readers of the Book of Mormon as we liken the scriptures to ourselves, but they need not refer to us exclusively. How would the Nephites have likened this scripture to their own situation, as their prophets invited them to do? They would no doubt recognize

the great mercy of the Lord in bringing them out from Jerusalem and saving them from destruction, and they would also see the Lord's hand in setting them in a new land of promise where they could establish Zion. Significantly, this prophecy would also suggest to the ancient audience that there were "strangers" in the land who had joined or would join with them in accepting the teachings of Nephi and could be numbered with the house of Jacob.

- *Temples and people.* "And it shall come to pass in the last days, when the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills, and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (2 Nephi 12:2–3, quoting Isaiah 2:2–3). While there are several ways of reading this passage, the Nephites would likely have thought about their own temple, recently constructed at the direction of Nephi "after the manner of the temple of Solomon" (2 Nephi 5:16). This was the temple at which Jacob taught (Jacob 1:17; 2:11) and likely the one at which Nephi's own teachings to his people and his quotations of Isaiah were presented. Isaiah's reference to "many people" coming up to be taught would evoke the idea of people joining the Nephites and accepting their traditions and beliefs.

- *A confederacy against Zion.* Nephi cites Isaiah's prophecy concerning the alliance of Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel, against Ahaz, king of Judah (2 Nephi 17–22, quoting Isaiah 7–12). Ephraim, Judah's brother-tribe, has allied itself with a non-Isaelite nation (Syria), and they seek to depose Ahaz and replace him with someone of their choosing (2 Nephi 17:1–6, quoting Isaiah 7:1–6). Responding to the crisis and the fears of the king and the people of Judah, Isaiah prophesies that the conspiracy of their enemies "shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass" (2 Nephi 17:7, quoting Isaiah 7:7) and urges Ahaz simply to have faith and be faithful (2 Nephi 17:9, quoting Isaiah 7:9). The application to Nephi's day is plain: In his ambition to gain power and assert his claims to rulership, Laman, leader

of the brother-tribe of “the people who were now called Lamanites” (2 Nephi 5:14), has very possibly, like Pekah of Israel, acquired non-Israelite allies and made war on another ruler of Israelite descent, Nephi, and his people (2 Nephi 5:1–3, 14, 19, 34). Perhaps frightened by the superior numbers of their enemies, the people are counseled to trust in the Lord.

Although, as Sorenson posits, the Book of Mormon may be a lineage history with an accordingly narrow focus, scriptural evidences hinting at the presence of other peoples in the New World are abundant within the Book of Mormon and other scriptures. Many of these passages, in fact, take on a clearer meaning when their wording, content, and context are considered with the possibility in mind that Lehi’s family and the Mulekites were merely two groups among many others in the land of promise.

Conclusion

It is true that the assumption that Native Americans are of exclusively Israelite heritage has been around for a number of years. Unfortunately for those who would like to use it to denounce the Book of Mormon, it is neither revelatory nor canonical. Regardless of who may have believed or propounded it in the past or under what circumstances they may have done so, it has never been anything more than an uncanonized, unscriptural assumption.

On the other hand, many Latter-day Saints over the years, including a number of church leaders, have acknowledged the likelihood that before, during, and following the events recounted in the Book of Mormon, the American hemisphere has been visited and inhabited by nations, kindreds, tongues, and peoples not mentioned in the text. They also concede that these groups may have significantly impacted the populations of the Americas genetically, culturally, linguistically, and in many other ways. Latter-day Saint interest in historical and scientific evidence for such migrations began early in the history of the restored church and has not waned appreciably since then.

Finally, neither in the Book of Mormon itself nor in the scriptural revelations concerning it is there anything to contradict the view that Nephi had neighbors in his New World land of promise. There is, on the other hand, much within these sources that seems to support this idea. Like the God whose gospel they proclaim, these scriptures and revelations are not respecters of persons. They insist upon a place for Israel in the ancestral heritage of Native Americans, but they do not insist upon an exclusive one.