

Introduction

*And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread
abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south:
and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*

—Genesis 28:14

When Christopher Columbus launched into the Sea of Darkness over 500 years ago, his intention was to find a quick route from Spain to the riches of the Indies. Relying upon Ptolemy's (AD 90-168) maps of a spherical earth bearing only the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, Columbus was certain he had achieved this goal when he landed in the Bahamas in 1492. It was about where he had expected the Indies to be. All his life he stubbornly refused to accept that he had discovered a new continent—the world he knew having had no room for a western hemisphere. His error was due to calculations of the earth's circumference that made the earth a quarter too small. Centuries later, Europeans came to grips with the geography of the quarter of the earth that had eluded Ptolemy's pen. This miscalculation lives on in the popular misunderstandings about the origins and diversity of native people who inhabit that geography.

Europeans were at first mystified by the presence of people at such great distances from the centers of civilization that were familiar to the Judeo-Christian world. Not surprisingly, early attempts to account for their origins were ensnared in the biblical mindset, the widely accepted worldview among members of the European societies that emerged from the ashes of the Roman Empire. In many cases the native inhabitants of the Americas and the Pacific were regarded as savages, the degraded remnants of once civilized nations whose origins could be traced back to Noah's offspring. A common and persistent theory among early Europeans was that Native Americans and Pacific Islanders were the scattered remnants of the House of Israel.

For over a century, the vast majority of scholars and scientists have been satisfied that Native Americans and Pacific Islanders share a common ancestry. But it is not in Israel. The academic world has accumulated a comprehensive library of work that links each of these groups with an ancient homeland in Asia. Most scholars now accept that the ancestors of the American Indians began migrating to the Americas from somewhere in the vicinity of southern Siberia, across an icy Bering Strait, over 14,000 years ago. Similarly convincing are the signs that the early colonizers of the Pacific Isles began emerging from Southeast Asia about 30,000 years ago. The most recent of these migrations, within the last 3,000 years, resulted in the colonization of the vast expanse of Polynesia.

Remarkably, it is among members of the Mormon church that we find some of the strongest resistance to mainstream views of New World and Pacific colonization. Not only do Mormons link Native American culture with ancient seafarers, most Latter-day Saints hold that the ancestors of indigenous Americans were Israelites, derived from small groups of immigrants who arrived hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. The Polynesians are believed to be descended from these maritime Hebrews as a consequence of further nautical excursions from their New World settlements. These beliefs are widely held among Mormons. For well over a century, such tenets have pro-

foundly influenced church policies and played a major role in the conversion of indigenous peoples from both regions.

The staunch resistance to mainstream scientific views stems from Mormon faith in the Book of Mormon. First published in New York in 1830, it is believed by Mormons to be an American counterpart of the Bible describing the literal arrival and history of Hebrews in the New World. Joseph Smith, the prophet who brought forth the Book of Mormon, claimed the book was a direct translation from the record he said was inscribed on gold plates and buried in a hill near his home in the village of Manchester, New York. Smith said he went to the hill in 1827 and that the gold plates were delivered to him by an angel named Moroni, a prophet who had lived in America in about AD 400. According to Smith, Moroni was the last of a line of prophets who had written on the plates and the one who deposited them in what is now known as the Hill Cumorah. The Book of Mormon is considered by Mormons to contain a literal account of God's dealings with the people who lived anciently in the New World.

According to the Book of Mormon, most of its fifteen books were collated and abridged by the penultimate prophet-historian Mormon, after whom the book is named. Those who believe in the book's religious message, are, therefore, known as Mormons. The book is primarily devoted to a small group of Jews who, we are told, sailed from Jerusalem in 600 BC. The descendants of these colonists multiplied rapidly, splitting into two large nations. One nation is depicted as a culturally advanced society that was populated with a light-skinned race. The other nation was culturally inferior and was cursed by God with a dark skin. During most of the thousand-year Book of Mormon history, these light- and dark-skinned races remained in continual conflict. Eventually, the white-skinned nation descended into wickedness and was eliminated by the dark-skinned race around AD 400. It is to the descendants of the dark-skinned race that the Book of Mormon is most specifically addressed. Mormons believe that this race constitutes the principal ancestors of the American Indians.

The Book of Mormon is deeply embedded in the Mormon faith. Joseph Smith once affirmed that it was “the most correct of any book on earth,” a claim that has been disputed since the day it was published. He went on to state that the book was “the keystone of our religion,” which is undoubtedly true. The Book of Mormon was crucial to the establishment of the Mormon church. Adherents claim that if this record is true, then it follows that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God. If Joseph Smith was a true prophet, then the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true church on the face of the earth because Smith said so.

While its claims may appear extraordinary today, the Book of Mormon narrative mirrors the myths that permeated the society from which the church emerged. Most American colonists held to a very literal interpretation of the Bible, including the idea that there was a rapid colonization of the earth after the Flood in 2500 BC. The most widely accepted explanation for the origin of the so-called Red Man in the New World was that they were a degraded descendant of the scattered House of Israel. Indians were blamed for having annihilated another race that was believed to have been responsible for the construction of the elaborate buildings and cultural artifacts that American colonists uncovered as they advanced westward over the Appalachian Mountains. This other race was assumed to have been light-skinned.

To the dispassionate reader, the Book of Mormon is not the story of a small group that encountered an already largely populated America. The voyaging Israelites arrived in a land “kept from the knowledge of other nations” (2 Ne. 1:8). There is no mention of any non-Israelite people in the New World during the thousand-year period covered by the Book of Mormon. The narrative includes descriptions of large civilizations with populations reaching into the millions and the practice of Christianity, a written language, metallurgy, and the farming of several Old World domesticated plants and animals. In addition, the immigrant Hebrew Christians found horses, oxen, cattle, and goats in the New World.

Anthropologists and archaeologists, including some Mormons and former Mormons, have discovered little to support the existence of these civilizations. Over a period of 150 years, as scholars have seriously studied Native American cultures and prehistory, evidence of a Christian civilization in the Americas has eluded the specialists. In Mesoamerica, which is regarded by Mormon scholars to be the setting of the Book of Mormon narrative, research has uncovered cultures where the worship of multiple deities and human sacrifice were not uncommon. These cultures lack any trace of Hebrew or Egyptian writing, metallurgy, or the Old World domesticated animals and plants described in the Book of Mormon. Likewise in Polynesia, the accumulating scientific evidence suggests a west-to-east pattern of migration and a lack of any Old World cultural imprint before the arrival of white Europeans.

The absence of physical evidence supporting the Book of Mormon has had little impact on the millions of Mormons who consider the book to be a true record of the ancestors of Native Americans and Polynesians. Many LDS scholars have been eager to leap to the defense of the book and to criticize mainstream scientific views. The church employs academics at its own university who defend the Book of Mormon on a professional basis. Mormons are liberally provided with uplifting accounts of evidence that seems to support the book. Frequently this proof—and criticism of Gentile (non-Mormon) science—is delivered to church members by General Authorities speaking during world conferences. Consequently, Mormons remain deeply suspicious of Gentile theories, particularly any that conflict with widely accepted beliefs of the church.

However, the weight of evidence has forced Mormon scholars to rethink the scale, location, and nature of the historical account in the Book of Mormon. Over the past decade, there has been a marked shift among these scholars away from the views of the wider LDS community. Most LDS scholars today want to limit the Israelite colonization to the region of Mesoamerica, while a growing subset shrinks the

book's claims even further. But seemingly oblivious to this revisionist scholarship, LDS leaders continue to teach that all or most Native Americans and Polynesians are literal descendants of the Israelites described in the Book of Mormon. The majority of faithful members believes likewise and resists the theories of LDS academics. Most Mormons of Native American or Polynesian ancestry—about one in five globally—believe that their family histories trace back to Israel.

The claim that Native Americans and Polynesians are the remnants of an early Diaspora is susceptible to investigation within a range of scientific disciplines, but it is the field of human genetics that provides Book of Mormon critics with the latest and most compelling evidence to challenge LDS claims. The recent sequencing of the human genome has captured the scientific spotlight. Less publicized has been the enormous progress in the field of human molecular genealogy, showing how our species emerged and spread across the earth. Human DNA genealogy reinforces the multi-disciplinary findings of how our ancestors spread throughout the earth over a period of many thousands of years to all the continents by at least 14,000 years ago. This research offers little comfort to those who are wedded to a literal interpretation of the Bible, which has our first parents walking the earth as recently as 6,000 years ago and all races springing from the loins of Noah a mere 4,400 years ago.

Molecular genealogists are now constructing DNA family trees of paternal and maternal ancestors and tracking the earliest human migrations around the world. These family trees have been particularly informative in such places as the New World and Polynesia, which are among the most recent areas colonized by humans. Molecular genealogy has allowed us to follow the footsteps of our ancestors, following the pathways of their genes, as they multiplied and replenished throughout every corner of the earth unto the isles of the sea.

Moving the Spirit

People do not join the Church because of what they know. They join because of what they feel, what they see and want spiritually.

—Jeffrey R. Holland, 2001

Ten centuries ago a handful of Norse sailors slipped into Newfoundland, established small colonies, traded with local natives, then sailed back into the fog of history. In spite of the small scale of their settlements and the brevity of their stay, unequivocal evidence of their presence has been found, including metalwork, buildings, and Norse inscriptions. Just six centuries earlier, the Book of Mormon tells us, a climactic battle between fair-skinned Nephites and dark-skinned Lamanites ended a millennial dominion by a literate, Christian, Bronze Age civilization with a population numbering in the millions. Decades of serious and honest scholarship have failed to uncover credible evidence that these Book of Mormon civilizations ever existed. No Semitic languages, no Israelites speaking these languages, no wheeled chariots or horses to pull them, no swords or steel to make them. They remain a great civilization vanished without a trace, the people along with their genes.

Most Latter-day Saints have accepted the Book of Mormon based on what they *feel* about its message. Some now question the book because of what they *know* about its historical claims. Many are unsettled by the book's portrayal of a dark, corrupted race and the doctrine that America is God's promised land, issues that are uncomfortably reminiscent of the widespread prejudices of Joseph Smith's time. After decades of Mormon and non-Mormon academic research and LDS apologetics, the rank-and-file are beginning to find themselves faced, not only with the absence of reliable evidence for the presence of Israelites who sailed to America and established a great Christian civilization, but also the fact that these Israelites made no discernible contribution to the gene pool of native peoples, either on the continent or across the expanse of Polynesia. Many Latter-day Saints, discovering this for the first time, are disquieted by how far the Book of Mormon is from reality, as well as by how far the apologists have strayed from traditional Mormon beliefs.

The remaining option for many Mormons, whose integrity prevents them from ignoring the stark contradictions between science and Book of Mormon claims and who wish to maintain their fellowship in the church, is to keep their doubts to themselves. They are mindful of church president Gordon B. Hinckley's counsel to those who have problems with doctrine: "They can carry all the opinion they wish within their heads ... but if they begin to try to persuade others, then they may be called in to a disciplinary council" (Hinckley 1998). Consequently, there are many bright and faithful Mormons who have chosen to keep their intellectual struggles between their own two ears. Increasingly, these Saints occupy the ranks of the less active or the back rows of LDS congregations. Many in Utah choose this option because to do otherwise risks alienation from community, work environment, and families. In communities where workmates, closest friends, and most relatives are multi-generational Latter-day Saints, Mormonism is a part of one's cultural heritage and identity.

A growing number of Mormons find comfort in the church's cur-

rent outreach to people of other faiths and attempt to establish a position of respect and acceptance within the larger society. This includes, in part, a willingness to emphasize similarities and to de-emphasize some of the differences, among which the claim to have a real history of ancient America may one day be counted (Metcalf 1993). Some scholars within the church have decided that the once all-consuming battle over the Book of Mormon's historicity was a waste of energy and that members should have devoted their attention to mining the book's spiritual gems (Thomas 1999). The Community of Christ, formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, tolerates a range of opinions concerning the Book of Mormon. This Missouri-based church is the only sizeable group thus far to have broken away from the Utah church. Its worldwide membership is about 250,000. The Community of Christ discarded the problematic Book of Abraham when the papyri Joseph Smith used to "translate" the record were discovered and studied. Some of the Missouri church's senior leadership consider the Book of Mormon to be inspired historical fiction. For leaders of the Utah church, this is still out of the question. The Brethren, and most Mormons, believe that the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon is what shores up Joseph Smith's prophetic calling and the divine authenticity of the Utah church. The Brethren undoubtedly also link the flagging numerical performance of the Community of Christ with this and other dramatic doctrinal about-faces such as the decision to ordain women to the priesthood.

The Utah leadership remains unwilling or incapable of respectfully approaching those who honestly struggle with the disparity between the Book of Mormon's claims and the documented history of Native Americans and Polynesians. With its own schools, universities, public relations, and an annual income of about six billion U.S. dollars per year (Ostling and Ostling 1999), the LDS church has the resources necessary to defend its stand. With employment in LDS educational institutions and the Church Educational System conditioned on unquestioning obedience to leaders, the church receives a continuous in-

flux of new apologetic muscle, which is required to shore up the flagging theology. But just how far can that muscle be stretched in order to save the Book of Mormon?

COURTING THE ENEMY

Most LDS apologists now accept that Native Americans are principally descended from Siberian ancestors who migrated across the Bering Strait thousands of years before Lehi arrived and that the descendants of Lehi made up an infinitesimally smaller proportion of the New World populations. However, this change in perspective has not been granted the church's blessing in any official way. The general membership would not believe that Lehi's descendants could have made such a minimal impact in the Americas. In fact, millions of Mormons consider Lehi to be the father of the New World and believe that he stands at the head of their own family pedigrees. Despite decades of work by apologists, their work has yet to be discussed openly in the various public forums the church sponsors. In attempting to serve two masters, the apologists may end up pleasing none. Ordinary church members will resist the idea that Nephite and Lamanite civilizations were powered by displaced Siberians who fought their wars and erected their temples for them when they were not granted the dignity of a single mention in the record. The Brethren will find such stark rationalizations equally unpalatable, particularly if broadcast to wide audiences because the ideas contrast so profoundly with the deeply held beliefs of most Mormons.

There is the further problem for apologists that in trying to rescue the Book of Mormon from science, they have had to reject the clear pronouncements of every church president from Joseph Smith to the present. While apologists have long accepted the fact that other groups outside of the Book of Mormon record made their way to the New World, few apologists would have predicted that the Lamanite influence would be virtually undetectable. The accumulating DNA data have provided the first quantitative measure of an Israelite presence in

the New World gene pool, and it is slim to none. The apologists are unable to find an Israelite genetic signature in the Pacific, the Americas, or in the more limited territories of Central America and Mesoamerica outside of what can be explained by recent migration. So they have chosen instead to reinterpret the meaning of statements by modern prophets.

Acceptance of the molecular evidence creates further problems for Latter-day Saints. Anyone reading the responses coming from LDS biologists will discover that they have not quibbled with the evidence for the colonization of the Americas over 13,000 years ago, for the occupation of Asia and Australia roughly 60,000 years ago, and for the emergence of humans in Africa over 100,000 years ago. Church members who were initially only curious about the Israelite DNA issue are confronted by challenges to other closely held beliefs such as the placement of Adam and Eve on the earth and a post-Flood colonization, events that most Mormons believe occurred within the last six thousand years. LDS doctrine clearly states that Adam and Eve lived in the vicinity of Independence, Missouri, despite abundant evidence that all of the earliest members of the human family dwelt in sub-Saharan Africa. LDS apologists need to explain how Australian Aboriginals and Native Americans and many other native groups have lived continuously on separate hemispheres for tens of thousands of years unperurbed by a global deluge.

REINTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

The research at BYU by defenders of the Book of Mormon has produced a sweeping reinterpretation of LDS doctrine. BYU professors have felt compelled to shrink the scale of the assumed Israelite incursion into the Americas and to magnify the term Lamanite to embrace numerous Native Americans who inhabited the continent for over 10,000 years, contrary to a plain reading of the Book of Mormon.

In the past, the Brethren, along with the rank and file, have not taken well to reinterpretations of the Book of Mormon, especially

when the revisionists have impinged on the scale and location of the Lehigh presence. Already in 1938 apostle and future church president Joseph Fielding Smith spoke out against advocates of a limited geography. Scholars who have argued for a Mesoamerican Cumorah have been greeted with mixed suspicion and hostility (Reynolds 1999). In 1985 the *Ensign* published a condensation of John Sorenson's trend-setting work, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. However, Sorenson's work found acceptance only among a small circle of LDS intellectuals. The research at BYU remains virtually unknown by most Mormons, who prefer to see the Lehigh setting as a literal reality and global in scale. They strongly resist factual arguments to the contrary.

The reason for this is that Latter-day Saints have been taught such concepts from childhood—anecdotal stories and popular mythology about the Indians and Polynesians. A favorite children's hymn, sung to the beat of a stereotypical Indian tom-tom dance, is "Book of Mormon Stories that My Teacher Tells to Me." Generations of youth have been assured that scientific institutions like the Smithsonian have used the Book of Mormon to guide their research. Many thousands of church members, young and old, have made a pilgrimage or two to the Hill Cumorah Pageant in New York to see a clichéd Book of Mormon extravaganza brimming with white skinned, sword-wielding Nephites and half naked, dark-skinned, stereotypical Lamanite "Indians." It would be extremely painful for people to escape the heavy historical baggage accompanying this folklore.

Attempts to redefine the term Lamanite so that it includes superior numbers of non-Israelite Native Americans make for stimulating apologetics, but it will remain extra-canonical because the Book of Mormon is silent on the matter. The book's narrative is uncomplicated on that score. It clearly depicts the settlement of an area of the world that was previously unpopulated. It portrays Lehi and his posterity, isolated from all other nations on earth, prospering to the extent that they built a great civilization. The descendants of Laman remained

alive to see the arrival of the Gentiles whose coming was predicted and connected to the recovery of the gold plates.

Rather than side with the revisionists, the General Authorities continue to tell members in selected areas of the world that they are the offspring of Father Lehi, a doctrine Joseph Smith and all subsequent prophets have endorsed. As recently as 2000, the First Presidency reminded Saints in Central and South America that they are the “sons and daughters of Father Lehi.” Further apostolic authority was added when these statements were incorporated into temple dedicatory prayers. Hundreds of thousands of people have heard this doctrine preached from the mouths of prophets, and many people consider themselves to be card-carrying Lamanites, having received a patriarchal blessing informing them of their Israelite ancestry via Lehi. On the basis of this belief, the church invests a disproportionate amount of funding for schools in Central and South America and Polynesia compared to what it spends in Africa or Asia, for instance. The Mormon church continues to impose a deeply flawed colonial mythology upon native peoples across the Americas and the Pacific, with apparent disregard for these peoples’ own local mythologies, cultural history, and distinct genealogies.

FEELINGS OVER FACTS

It is likely that the church will continue to carry on a rearguard defense of the Book of Mormon, quietly promoting apologetic scholarship but not officially endorsing it. Officially the church claims to have no position regarding Book of Mormon geography, yet it provides funds for researchers whose focus is almost exclusively on Mesoamerica. Publicly, the church urges members to steer clear of any attempt to link the Book of Mormon with current geographical locations. Meanwhile, apologists subject the Book of Mormon to radical reinterpretation to accommodate their findings. Their apostolic patrons know to distance themselves from these interpretations, at least publicly, so the church has the option, after seeing how members might react to the

gradual accumulation of information and apologetic responses, to either endorse or denounce them as the timing might dictate.

It seems that among the obstacles facing the church, the real stumbling block is not the failure to find evidence for horses, metallurgy, or the wheel in the New World, or the fact that there is no evidence for a Hebrew influence in Mesoamerica, or the preponderance of Asian DNA among living Native Americans and Polynesians. The real challenge comes from a failure to openly confront the evidence and state what it means for the church, as well as a failure to accommodate the apologists, who themselves feel hemmed in by the church's insistence that members believe tenets that are clearly untrue. From the perspective of some members, the apologists have been lured into the enemy camp of mainstream science. The theories of the apologists concerning a miniscule Lehite colony that existed in some unknown corner and had no lasting impact on the Americas are equally unsatisfying to mainstream scientists. Orthodox Mormons cannot conceive of such a reinterpretation of the Book of Mormon, and therefore the current prophets are reluctant to publicly address the problems. This leaves the apologists cut off from the broader church community.

The Brethren no doubt recognize that to change the way Mormons think about the Book of Mormon would bring disruption and turmoil and risk undermining the foundation on which many people have based their religious convictions. The faith of most Latter-day Saints is anchored by an emotional, feeling-based "knowledge" that the Book of Mormon is a true history of the Americas—a knowledge that is unencumbered by the facts. These religious feelings are believed to be the means by which the Holy Spirit can reveal all truth to all mankind on earth. Millions of members feel a familial bond with Father Lehi, an emotion that frequently plays a central role in people's conversion to the church. The General Authorities are aware of just how deep-seated and crucial these feelings are in the processes of conversion and retention. To date, no workable middle ground has been discovered—no means to reinterpret the Book of Mormon in a way that would detach it

from the real histories of Native Americans and Polynesians without doing damage to everything else the church professes on spiritual and moral issues. The church's dim view of scientists and intellectuals extends to theologians and philosophers, who may be the best suited to render assistance at such a time. Failing that, the conflict promises to continue into the very distant future without hope of resolution.