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## Others in the Book of Mormon

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## *Others in the Book of Mormon*

The traditional LDS belief asserts that the Lehitese arrived to a nearly vacant New World, with the possible exception of some Jaredite survivors and the Mulekites. This assumption, like many other assumptions about the Book of Mormon, comes from a naïve reading of the text that was filtered through the nineteenth-century misunderstanding of the human migrations that populated the ancient New World. Early American settlers were fascinated with the fact that indigenous people already inhabited the New World. From where did these people originate? A number of frontiersmen theorized that the Indians were remnants of the ten lost tribes of Israel. At first blush, this theory seemed to fit fairly well with the overall story of the Book of Mormon, even though the Book of Mormon peoples do not purport to come from any of the “lost tribes.”

According to archaeologists, anthropologists, and DNA specialists, the first human migrations to the New World happened at least 15,000 years ago and probably came in three distinct migrations across a land bridge (the Bering Strait) that once connected Alaska to Siberia. A number of scientists also recognize the possibility of multiple small transoceanic crossings from the Old to New World by way of watercraft.

While the question as to the earliest date and route of populating the Americas is still hotly debated, scientists almost universally agree that the earliest people arrived in the New World thousands of years before Book of Mormon people came on the scene. Likewise, virtually all LDS scholars, regardless of their views on the location of the narrative, argue that a closer reading of the Nephite scripture suggests that Book of Mormon civilizations occupied a small area of Mesoamerica and intermingled with existing Native Americans (see Chapter 14).

A number of critics claim that the Church of their youth taught one thing while modern apologists are now altering Church doctrine to conform to scientific positions such as DNA findings in the New World. First, it is important to understand that such issues are not doctrinal, so changes in theories are irrelevant to gospel

truths. Second, changes in understanding the scriptures have come about in great part because the scriptures have been read with greater care. The belief that non-Nephite people lived in the Americas was accepted by many LDS scholars long before the advent of DNA science.

In 2004, Matthew Roper gave a FAIR Conference presentation wherein he noted the numerous LDS discussions on this topic. In 1921, for instance, the *Improvement Era* (the precursor to the *Ensign*) published an article that read,

If scientists find... that there were human beings ...way back in glacial ages, the authors... offer no objection at all. ...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.... The Book of Mormon ...confines itself strictly to the history of the descendants of Lehi and Mulek. If science ...should declare that there are evidences of other influences . . . that would not affect the authenticity of the Book of Mormon in the least.<sup>1</sup>

In April 1929, First Presidency counselor Anthony W. Ivins said in General Conference:

We must be careful in the conclusions that we reach. The Book of Mormon... 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.<sup>2</sup>

In a 1957 statement approved for publication by the First Presidency, Elder Richard L. Evans described 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.’”<sup>3</sup> In December 1975 the author of an article in the *Ensign* claimed that the term “Lamanite” could also refer to those who “descended from other groups of whom we have no record.”<sup>4</sup> That this view is accepted by at least some LDS leaders (and not just scholars) is evident from a statement made by Elder Dallin Oaks who claimed that while a student at BYU he “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.”<sup>5</sup>

Orson Pratt, B.H. Roberts, Anthony Ivins, John Widtsoe, and other prominent LDS have all made comments suggesting the possibility that other non-Book-of-Mormon peoples may have inhabited the New World.

While the Book of Mormon never explicitly states that others people lived in Book of Mormon lands, there are implicit hints that such was the case. Following are

some of the implicit Book of Mormon passages that suggest that the Lehiters encountered others in their new land.

Not long after arriving in the New World, Nephi separated from Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael over contentions. We read that Nephi took his family, Zoram, Sam, and their families with him, as well as “all those who would go with me...those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God” (2 Nephi 5:6). Who were these others who, in addition to those already mentioned, followed Nephi? The most plausible reading is that *other* people converted by Nephi also followed him—Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael certainly did not. Who else was there to go? It is here that we first get the terms “people of Nephi” and “the people who were now called Lamanites” (2 Nephi 5:9, 14). At this point these terms took on a cultural perspective and referred to all peoples who aligned themselves with Nephi or his contentious brother (for more details see Chapter 16).

In most cultures, including ancient cultures, we find that people frequently use *exonyms* to refer to those outside their own group. An exonym is a name by which one group refers to a foreign group—a name not used by the foreign group themselves. For instance, people of the United States refer to one European group with the exonym “Germans.” The Germans, however, call themselves “Deutsch.” We also refer to the native people of the Americas as “Native Americans,” or “Indians”—neither of which is applied to these people from within their own groups. From a close reading of the Book of Mormon text, we find that Nephites and Lamanites were socio-political names. The Book of Mormon writers were Nephites and virtually everyone else is referred to with the exonym “Lamanite.”

In Jacob 7:1–26 we read of Sherem’s encounter with Jacob. Because Jacob was one of the original Lehiters in the New World, the maximum adult population among the Lehiters could not have been more than fifty people—there is no way that all of those people weren’t familiar with each other. Yet Sherem came from another settlement and had never met Jacob, the chief Nephite priest.

Within 15 years Joseph and Jacob were made priests and teachers “over the land of my [Nephi’s] people” (2 Nephi 5:26). We read that within 25 years of their New World arrival, the Nephites were at “war” with the Lamanites. What kind of war could possibly exist with the few adults that may have been around without the infusion of pre-existing cultures? Fifteen years later, some of the Nephite men began desiring “many wives and concubines” (Jacob 1:15). How many women could there have been if there were no others besides the original Lehite party? This verse, like others, suggests that *others* were present in the land.

During Alma’s visit to the city of Ammonihah, Amulek introduced himself by saying, “I am a Nephite” (Alma 8:20). Considering that Ammonihah, a city in the land of Zarahemla, was under Nephite rule, it would seem obvious that Amulek was a Nephite unless there were non-Nephite people living in the land as well. By about 200 B.C. “corn” (American maize) is mentioned as the grain for preference among the Lamanites (Mosiah 7:22, 9:14). Corn, a uniquely American grain, could not have been brought from Lehi’s world and could not have been discovered wild upon ar-

rival due to its complex cultivating techniques that will only reproduce new corn with human care. This strongly implies that *others* were already cultivating corn and taught the technique to Book of Mormon peoples.

## *Why are Others not Explicitly Mentioned in the Book of Mormon?*

When Nephi began recording their history from Jerusalem to the New World, he may have included details about encounters with native New World peoples. This would have been recorded on what is known as the “large plates” of Nephi (1 Nephi 9), which were later abridged by the prophet Mormon. Mormon—who wrote his abridgement roughly 1000 years later—may or may not have felt it important to include details about “others” from a millennium earlier.

Once Nephi had written his history, the Lord commanded him to write another record with a strict focus on the religious doings and “ministry” of his people. This record is referred to as the “small plates” and comprises 1 Nephi through Omni. Mormon was later inspired to add the “small plates” of Nephi into the stack with his own record.

After Joseph Smith translated the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon (which would have included Mormon’s abridgement of Nephi’s history on the Large Plates), Martin Harris lost the translated pages. When the translation resumed, it is likely that Joseph began with Mosiah, which was the first Mormon-abridged chapter that continued the Nephite history after the Small Plates came to a close. The Small Plates would have been translated later.

Why didn’t Nephi include explicit information about “others” in the Small Plates? As noted above, unlike the Large Plates—which recorded the more mundane, political, and warring elements of Nephite history—the Small Plates focused on Nephite ministry.

Ethnohistorian Brant Gardner calls the Small Plates an “ethnogenesis” of the Nephite people. The people of God are no longer Israelites or Lehites but are a new people who identify themselves as “Nephites.” This new people would have been the blend of Old World Nephites and New World “others” (who were adopted into Israel’s blessings) but formed a “new community” that “required an emphasis on the new community, not its non-Israelite components. Nephi doesn’t mention the ‘others’ because he considers them already part of the new ethnicity by the time he writes.”<sup>6</sup>

The Book of Mormon could be referred to as a lineage history, dynastic history, or tribal narrative. Like the Hebrew Bible it is a history of a particular lineage—in this case the Nephite lineage. The Small Plates narrative begins with the account of Lehi and all his children but eventually changes to that of Nephi and his descendants.

While dynastic histories claim to tell the entire story, they actually only deal with the story as it relates to a particular dynastic family. And unlike modern scholarly histories, ancient accounts often served as propaganda to support a particular leader or group. “Others” are peripheral to the main story presented by Nephi and

other Book of Mormon scribes. In traditional tribal narratives no one else exists unless it was necessary to mention them with regard to interaction with the tribe.

The families and descendants of Laman and Lemuel essentially cease to exist in the Nephite tribal narrative except when they emerge in warfare with the Nephites. Once the wars end, they once again cease to exist. Likewise, the Mulekites, who by descent outnumbered the Nephites, are barely mentioned in the Nephite record and very little information is really given about them. For the most part, Nephite scribes are uninterested with the Mulekites (the term “Mulekite” is never used in the Book of Mormon). We see the same thing in the book of Ether. The primary character in the early chapters is the “brother of Jared.” His name is never given. Why? Because it is Jared’s lineage that is important, not the lineage of the “brother of Jared.”

We find the same thing with ancient Middle Eastern civilizations such as the people of Ebla who were essentially invisible to the tribal narrative recorded in the Bible. Likewise the Egyptians are generally invisible in the Bible. The only times they are mentioned is when it is necessary to explain certain aspects of Hebrew history, experience, or encounters with the Egyptians.

During the Lehiite’s trek through the Arabian Peninsula they would have unavoidably encountered others along the way—especially at the guarded water-holes *en-route* to Bountiful. That other people inhabited these lands is inferred when the Lord told the Lehiites not to light fires to cook their food—presumably for fear that their fires would be seen by others (1 Nephi 17:12). Despite this inference and the fact that encounters would have been unavoidable, Nephi never specifically mentions others during their Old-World exodus.<sup>7</sup>

### *Objections to Others in the Land*

What about scriptures or statements by Joseph Smith that appear to suggest there were no others in the land upon Lehi’s arrival?

It seems likely that Joseph Smith would have understood the Book of Mormon according to traditions and suppositions of his day. He likely believed in a hemispheric geography with the Lehiites as the primary (if not sole) progenitors for the Native Americans. Some of his personal comments certainly give such an impression. Joseph’s opinions on the subject do not, however, constitute revelation. Joseph no doubt had many opinions that would clash with modern science, continued revelation, or greater research on various topics. While Joseph’s opinions might be interesting, they are nevertheless opinions and can be discounted when they conflict with revealed doctrine, scientific facts, or in-depth examination. The fact that Joseph had opinions that were contrary to what we find in the Book of Mormon is a strong indication that he *translated* rather than *wrote* the text. At times, he was no better than his friends and neighbors at understanding the book he published.

While the Prophet and other Church leaders have implicitly or explicitly stated that the New World was uninhabited prior to the arrival of the Jaredites, there is no official statement or revelation on this issue. Like Book of Mormon geography, the



genetic and cultural constitution of New World inhabitants is not a doctrinal issue and opinions on the topic—even when made by leaders—should be weighed in light of our Chapter 3 discussion on the role of prophets.

Probably the most frequently quoted verses that imply the traditional folk-view of Book of Mormon populations comes from 2 Nephi 1:6–11 wherein Lehi prophesied that “there shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord.” Their Promised Land would be “kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations.” And if the people would keep God’s commandments they would possess this land “unto themselves. . . .and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance.” But, Lehi warned, “when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief” God would “bring other nations unto them.” These powerful nations would cause them to be “scattered and smitten.”

On the surface, this seems to support the traditional interpretation that the Lehitites were the primary progenitors for the American Indians. The first question that might be asked, however, is what is meant by “this land.” Modern readers frequently tend to interpret this on a large scale—that “this land” refers to all the Americas. In Chapter 5, however, it was shown that ancient writers frequently used references such as *earth* or *land* to mean a smaller geography.

It is also significant to point out that in the Book of Mormon the “Promised Land” referred to more than one location (such as both in the Old and New Worlds) and in practice, was attached to the righteous Nephites rather than to the land itself (see Chapter 14).

A closer look at 2 Nephi is also helpful in determining what is really going on in regards to Lehi’s prophesy. Chapter 1 takes place sometime shortly after the Lehitites arrived in the New World (before Nephi and his brothers separated and before the first use of the terms “Nephite” and “Lamanite”). Lehi, who was nearing death, spoke to his posterity with counsel and warning. He said that the Lord offered the land of promise in covenant to Lehi, his children, and “all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord” (v. 5) and that none would come to the land except those brought by the hand of the Lord. So we can certainly presume that the Lord brought others into the Promised Land prior to, during, and after Lehi’s arrival. Such statements do not preclude the possibility that others already lived in close proximity to the Lehitites.

The Lord promised that their people would be “kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations” (v. 8) as well as “kept from all other nations” (v. 9). As Gardner explains, “Lehi comforts his people by indicating that there will not be foreign nations overrunning them ‘as yet.’”<sup>8</sup> While modern readers automatically assume that these “nations” must come from across the sea, in Lehi’s limited-land-view other “nations” could come from over the next mountain or valley. Verse nine’s “kept from all other nations” also means “kept from domination by.”

And what does Lehi mean by “nations”? In Lehi’s home world—the ancient Middle East—a “nation” would have referred to large powerful nations such as Babylon and Egypt. Smaller societies, such as the hamlets that the Lehitites might have

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encountered upon landing in the New World, would not merit the description of “nations.” As LDS researcher Matthew Roper explains, when Lehi prophesied that they would they would “possess” the “land unto themselves” (v. 9), this does not necessarily mean that the Lehites are “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).”<sup>9</sup>

The promise to keep the land secure has a caveat; as long as those brought from Jerusalem (Lehi and his family) remain righteous, they would prosper and be “kept from other nations” (v. 9). Lehi warned, however, that the time would come when they would “dwindle in unbelief” (v. 10) after which the Lord would allow “other nations” to take their “possessions” and cause them to be “scattered and smitten” (v. 11). While traditional LDS thought has supposed that this refers to the coming of the Spaniards (which may possibly account for a future and dual fulfillment of Lehi’s prophecy), Lehi immediately launched into an exhortation to his children telling them that as “one generation passeth to another there shall be bloodshed” (v. 12). Apparently Lehi suspected the coming of “other nations” in the near future. Gardner explains,

If we read these verses in the context of known history, the ‘as yet’ defines the conditions into which the Lehites landed. There was a population in the land, but no foreign conqueror ‘as yet.’ I suggest that this promise comes because of the implicit reality that other nations would indeed come, and would attempt to overrun Lehi’s descendants. Lehi receives a promise that they will be protected from those other nations upon condition of righteousness. This is a promise that is of no value unless others *do* come and threaten the Nephites.<sup>10</sup>

The appearance of the “other nations” is directly linked to not only the wickedness of Lehi’s descendants, but also to a scattering and smiting of those who become wicked.

Shortly thereafter (Chapter 5) we find that Laman and Lemuel were so unrighteous that they wanted to kill Nephi. At this point Nephi and his followers (now called *Nephites*) separate themselves from his brothers and their followers (now called *Lamanites*). According to Lehi’s prophecy, when his children became unrighteous the Lord would allow “other nations” to smite them (2 Nephi 1:11). This would not be possible unless there were already others present, or others arrived immediately after Laman and Lemuel fell back into their unrighteous habits. And in fulfillment of Lehi’s prophesy, when Nephi departed he took away the Liahona, the plates of brass, and the sword of Laban (the “possessions” important to the Lehites—both Nephites and the Lamanites). In time we read how the Lamanites were scattered and smitten.

Several centuries later, we find Alma exhorting his people to righteousness and recounting the story of Nephi’s wayward brothers as an example of the consequences



of wickedness (Alma 9:13–14). The Nephites were becoming wicked and were at risk of the same fate. We see the prophecies of Lehi—the promises and curses (which would include the invasion of others)—as having *already* been (or continuing to be) fulfilled.

Accordingly, it seems that a possible scenario might be as follows: When the Lehitites arrived they would have found sparse communities of others, perhaps too small to be called “nations,” in their new land, the limited area they now inhabited. The Lehitites would have continued to peacefully coexist, perhaps even intermingling with these others, pursuant to their righteousness. The wickedness of the Lamanites, however, might have brought aggressive others (“other nations”) into the Lehite colony who could have merged with the Lamanites and joined in their quest to destroy the Nephites, who may also have joined with peaceful others. When the Nephites separated from the Lamanites the promises and warnings of Lehi would have been realized, and as with many prophecies in the Bible, may have seen multiple fulfillments.

Some have claimed that the righteous Nephites, adhering to Israelite beliefs, would not have married other non-Israelites. While the Nephites would undoubtedly have preferred to marry within the tribe, after the Lamanite split there would have been a small pool of eligible singles. In ancient Israel, marrying outside of the tribe was discouraged but was, nevertheless, permitted. Dr. Robert L. Hubbard, non-LDS professor of Biblical literature at North Park University, explains that early Jewish commentaries claim that Israelite men were permitted to marry Ammonite and Moabite women, but that Israelite women were not allowed to marry non-Israelite men.<sup>11</sup> This would likely have been the course taken by Nephites as well as the Lamanites.

We might wonder how Nephi, as a member of a small incursion into a larger populace could become king over a people that included a majority of “others.” Gardner suggests that Nephi may have utilized his metalworking skills (with small personal objects) to trade with others. Because it would have given him trade power, the process was likely guarded. This would have “increased the economic presence of the hamlet and provided enough economic and social benefits that there were some in the village who were willing to follow him ‘up’ to what became the city of Nephi.” As the principal developer of the trade goods, he could easily have become leader of his hamlet and “as economic prosperity encouraged other hamlets to join, he was elevated to king. That general process appears to be the way Mesoamerican cities were formed (around basically a few entrepreneurs).”<sup>12</sup>

How do population estimates match what we currently know from Mesoamerican studies? Critics frequently contend that the Book of Mormon tells of millions of Nephites and Lamanites yet there is no sign of their existence from the archaeological remains. As LDS scholar John Tvedtnes has pointed out, however,

...only the Jaredites are ever said to have numbered in the ‘millions,’ and only at the end of their history, when we read that nearly two million men had been slain with their families (Ether 15:2). On the other hand, the Nephites and Lamanites, whose thousand-

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year history comprises most of the Book of Mormon ...are described in terms of ‘thousands’ or, at most, ‘tens of thousands.’ [By Mormon 2:9, for instance, we read that the Mormon’s 42,000 soldiers were up against 44,000 Lamanite soldiers.]<sup>13</sup>

There are a number of important things to understand when we attempt to deduce Book of Mormon population numbers. First, virtually all LDS scholars agree (based on evidence from archaeology, history, and within the Book of Mormon itself) that the Lehites were a small incursion into an larger existing population and that the terms *Nephite* and *Lamanite* changed through the years to accommodate an insider/outsider perspective just as we find with similar examples throughout history.

Second, if we approach the text as authentically ancient we should compare it to other ancient texts. It was shown in Chapter 5 that Old Testament population figures are often overstated for rhetorical and literary purposes. Non-LDS linguist Dr. Joel Hoffman points out that population figures or military numbers in ancient secular and religious works often “have little resemblance to historiographic reality.” One ancient author, for instance, claimed that the Persian army had 1.7 million soldiers when they invaded Greece but modern scholars claim that “the Persian army consisted of fewer than 200,000 soldiers at most.”

In the first Gulf War, the United States sent some 500,000 troops to the Middle East. A reasonable but wrong conclusion would have been that those troops contained several million individual soldiers. After all, a boy-scout troop, a girl-scout troop, or, for that matter, the F-Troop (from the television series) usually has more than a dozen members. The confusion comes because the word “troop” at once means “group of people” and “person.” Without external supporting evidence, it might be difficult for a researcher in several hundred years to figure out when the word means what.<sup>14</sup>

Even if, however, we assume that the numbers in the Book of Mormon are accurate, we really do not have any serious problems. By about 76 B.C. we read about “tens of thousands of Lamanites” that were killed in battles. The number of war casualties tell us that the overall population had to be larger than those who fought and died in war (which were typically males aged 15–30). These demographics were reviewed by Dr. James E. Smith, who (at the time of publishing the article herein cited) was a senior research associate at the Unit of Ageing at Cambridge University for a group on the History of Population and Social Structure.

Dr. Smith points out that calculating population from casualties can be difficult because of so many other factors. In Alma 2:19 we read that about 19,000 total soldiers were killed in a civil war between the Nephite-loyalists and Amlicites. Smith notes that population estimates based on this figure range from 300,000 to 1.5 mil-

lion. Easy answers are not forthcoming when we try to extrapolate population statistics from an ancient text.<sup>15</sup>

How do even these rough estimates fit with what we know about ancient Mesoamerica? Dr. John Clark, a professional archaeologist who specializes in Mesoamerican studies, explains that “Estimating ancient populations is one of the most difficult tasks archaeologists undertake, and it may require another fifty years to reconstruct Mesoamerica’s demographic history. Enough is known, however, to address some claims about lands and peoples.” “...it is important to recognize,” notes Clark, “that Mesoamerica was the most densely populated spot in the Americas and had millions of inhabitants, an order of magnitude that supports the general plausibility of Book of Mormon demography.”<sup>16</sup>

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