

button or bead that could be definitely assigned to them.¹ Indeed, until actual remains were found, it was quite possible and respectable to regard some of those civilizations as the invention of poetic fancy or legend.

So it is with the Nephites. All that we have to go on to date is a written history. That does not mean that our Nephites are necessarily mythical, since the case of those Old World civilizations has taught us by now that the existence of written records which no one claims the credit of having invented, is in itself good if not the very best evidence that a people really did exist. But as things stand we are still in the *pre*-archaeological and *pre*-anthropological stages of Book of Mormon study. Which means that there is nothing whatever that an anthropologist or archaeologist as such can say about the Book of Mormon. Nephite civilization was urban in nature, like the civilizations of Athens or Babylon, and was far more confined in space and time than either of them. It could just as easily and completely vanish from sight as did the worlds of Ugarit, Ur, or Cnossos; and until some physical remnant of it, no matter how trivial, has been identified beyond question, what can any student of physical remains possibly have to say about it? Everything written so far by anthropologists or archaeologists—even real archaeologists—about the Book of Mormon must be discounted, for the same reason that we must discount studies of the lost Atlantis: not because it did not exist, but because it has not yet been found.

The Bering Strait Theory

The normal way of dealing with the Book of Mormon “scientifically” has been first to attribute to the Book of Mormon something it did not say, and then to refute the claim by scientific statements that have not been proven.

¹Thirteen such civilizations are discussed in E. Bacon (ed.) *Vanished Civilizations of the Ancient World* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963).

A good example of this is the constant attempt to blast the Book of Mormon by assuming that it allows only one possible origin for the blood of the Indians (a perfectly false assumption), and then pointing out that the *real* origin is a migration via the Alaskan land-bridge or Bering Straits—a still unproven hypothesis. This is presented as the confrontation of crude 19th century superstition with the latest fruits of modern science. And that, too, is misleading. For in 1835 Josiah Priest wrote in his *American Antiquities*: "The manner by which the original inhabitants and animals reached here, is easily explained, by adopting the supposition, which, doubtless, is the *most* correct, that the northwestern and western limits of America were, at some former period, united to Asia on the *west*, and to Europe on the east."²

Therewith, for Priest, the question was settled: instead of being a fruitful and exciting *problem*, the theory of settlement by the Alaska land bridge was the final solution. And as such it has been accepted by North American anthropologists to this day, even though their colleagues in Europe and South America may shake their heads in wonder at such naive and single-minded devotion to a one-shot explanation of everything. We may find it strange that back in 1835, with no evidence to go by but the configuration of the map, anyone could have settled for such finality—the *problem* was real and wonderful, the *conclusion* premature and untested. But has the situation changed? Yes, there has been testing, but few people realize what dismally meager results have rewarded the vast expenditure of time and cash that has gone into the project. "Thus far," wrote Carleton Beals, summing up the situation in 1961, "nothing has been discovered to indicate human presence on or near the Bering Straits prior to five

²Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West* (Albany, 1835), p. 62, noting that "This was partly the opinion of Buffon, and other great naturalists."

thousand years ago.”³ It is still a problem, and very much alive, but the solution rests exactly where it did in Josiah Priest’s day: on a common-sense interpretation of the map.

The Race Question

To clinch the Bering Straits argument it is usual to point out that the Indians are Mongoloid and therefore cannot possibly be of the racial stock of Lehi. Again an unproven hypothesis is set against a false interpretation of the Book of Mormon. As to the hypothesis, it is fairly well known by now that the predominant blood-type among the Mongols is B, a type which is extremely rare among the Indians, whose dominant bloodtype is O, that being found among 91.3% of the pure-blooded North American Indians. “Here is a mystery,” writes Beals commenting on the disturbing phenomenon, “that requires much pondering and investigation.”⁴

But if we are to take the Book of Mormon to task for its ethnological teachings, it might be well at first to learn what those teachings are. They turn out on investigation to be surprisingly complicated. There is no mention in the Book of Mormon of red skins versus white, indeed there is no mention of red skin at all. What we find is a more or less steady process over long periods of time of mixing and separating of many closely related but not identical ethnic groups. The Book of Mormon is careful to specify that the terms Lamanite and Nephite are used in a loose and general sense to designate not racial but political (e.g. Moroni 1:9), military (Alma 43:4), religious (4 Nephi 38), and cultural (Alma 53:10, 15, 3:10-11) divisions and groupings of people. The Lamanite and Nephite division was tribal rather than racial, each of the main groups representing an amalgamation of tribes that retained their identity (Alma 43:13, 4 Nephi 36f.). Our text frequently

³Carleton Beals, *Nomads and Empire Builders* (Philadelphia and New York: Chilton Co., 1961), p. 76.

⁴Beals, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.

goes out of its way to specify that such and such a group is only *called* Nephite or Lamanite. (2 Nephi 5:14, Jacob 1:2, Mosiah 25:12, Alma 3:10, 30:59, Helaman 3:16, 3 Nephi 3:24, 10:18, 4 Nephi 36-38, 43, Moroni 1:9.) For the situation was often very mobile, with large numbers of Nephites going over to the Lamanites (Words of Mormon 16, 4 Nephi 20, Moroni 6:15, Alma 47:35f.), or Lamanites to the Nephites (Alma 27:27, Mosiah 25:12, Alma 55:4), or members of the mixed Mulekite people, such as their Zoramite offshoot going over either to the Lamanites (Alma 43:4) or to the Nephites (Alma 35:9—not really to the Nephites, but to the Ammonites who were Lamanites who had earlier become Nephites!); or at times the Lamanites and Nephites would freely intermingle (Helaman 6:7-8), while at other times the Nephite society would be heavily infiltrated by Lamanites and by robbers of dubious background. (Moroni 2:8.) Such robbers were fond of kidnaping Nephite women and children. (Helaman 11:34.)

The dark skin is mentioned as the mark of a general way of life, it is a Gypsy or Bedouin type of darkness, "black" and "white" being used in their Oriental sense (as in Egyptian), black and loathesome being contrasted to white and delightful. (2 Nephi 5:21-22.) We are told that when "their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes" they shall become "a white and delightful people" (2 Nephi 30:6), and at the same time the Jews "shall also become a delightful people." (v. 7.) Darkness and filthiness go together as part of a way of life (Jacob 3:5, 9); we never hear of the Lamanites becoming whiter, no matter how righteous they were, except when they adopted the Nephite way of life (3 Nephi 2:14-15), while the Lamanites could by becoming more savage in their ways than their brother Lamanites actually become darker, ". . . a dark, a filthy, and a loathesome people, beyond the description of that which ever hath been . . . among the

Lamanites.” (Moroni 5:15.) The dark skin is but one of the marks that God places upon the Lamanites and these marks go together; people who joined the Lamanites were marked like them (Alma 3:10); they were naked and their skins were dark (Alma 3:5-6); when “they set the mark upon *themselves* . . . the Amlicites knew not that they were fulfilling the words of God,” when he said “I will set a mark on them. . . . I will set a mark upon him that mingleth his seed with thy brethren . . . I will set a mark upon him that fighteth against thee (Nephi) and thy seed.” (Alma 3:13-18.) “Even so,” says Alma, “doth every man that is cursed bring upon himself his own condemnation.” (v. 19.) By their own deliberate act they both marked their foreheads and turned their bodies dark. Though ever alert to miraculous manifestations, the authors of the Book of Mormon never refer to the transformation of Lamanites into “white and delightsome” Nephites or of Nephites into “dark and loathesome” Lamanites as in any way miraculous or marvelous. When they became savage “because of their cursing” (2 Nephi 5:24), their skins became dark and they also became “loathesome” to the Nephites. (v. 21f.) But there is nothing loathesome about dark skin, which most people consider very attractive: the darkness like the loathsomeness was part of the general picture (Jacob 3:9); Mormon prays “that they may once again be a delightsome people” (Words of Mormon 8, Moroni 5:17), but then the Jews are also to become “a delightsome people” (2 Nephi 30:7)—are they black?

At the time of the Lord’s visit, there were “neither . . . Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites,” (4 Nephi 17), so that when the old titles of Lamanite and Nephite were later revived by parties deliberately seeking to stir up old hatreds, they designated religious affiliation rather than race. (4 Nephi 38-39.) From which it would seem that at that time it was impossible to distinguish a person of Nephite blood from one of Lamanite blood by appearance.

Moreover, there were no pure-blooded Lamanites or Nephites after the early period, for Nephi, Jacob, Joseph, and Sam were all promised that their seed would survive mingled with that of their elder brethren. (2 Nephi 3:2, 23, 9:53, 10:10, 19f., 29:13, 3 Nephi 26:8, Moroni 7:1.) Since the Nephites were always aware of that mingling, which they could nearly always perceive in the steady flow of Nephite dissenters to one side and Lamanite converts to the other, it is understandable why they do *not* think of the terms Nephite and Lamanite as indicating race. The Mulekites, who outnumbered the Nephites better than two to one (Mosiah 25:2-4), were a mixed Near Eastern rabble who had brought no written records with them and had never observed the Law of Moses and did not speak Nephite (Omni 18); yet after Mosiah became their king they "were numbered with the Nephites, and this because the kingdom had been conferred upon none but those who were descendants of Nephi." (Mosiah 25:13.) From time to time large numbers of people disappear beyond the Book of Mormon frontiers to vanish in the wilderness or on the sea, taking their traditions and even written records with them. (Helaman 3:3-13.) What shall we call these people—Nephites or Lamanites?

And just as 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.⁵ Strictly speaking the Book of Mormon is the history of a group of sectaries preoccupied with their own religious affairs, who only notice the presence of other groups when such have reason to mingle with them or collide with them. Just as the desert tribes

⁵The bones of the last Jaredites were still lying in the open in a state of fair preservation cir. 120 B.C. (Mosiah 8:8-9)

through whose territories Lehi's people moved in the Old World are mentioned only casually and indirectly, though quite unmistakably (1 Nephi 17:33), so 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 14-17.) Indeed the Lord reminds the Nephites that there are all sorts of migrations of which they know nothing, and that their history is only a small segment of the big picture. (2 Nephi 10:21.) There is nothing whatever in the Book of Mormon to indicate that everything that is found in the New World before Columbus must be either Nephite or Lamanite. On the contrary, when Mormon boasts, "I am Mormon and a pure descendant of Lehi," (3 Nephi 5:20), we are given to understand that being a direct descendant of Lehi, as all true Nephites and Lamanites were, was really something special. We think of Zarahemla as a great Nephite capital and its civilization as the Nephite civilization at its peak; yet Zarahemla was not a Nephite city at all: its inhabitants called themselves Nephites, as we have seen, because their ruling family were Nephites who had immigrated from the south.

There were times when the Nephites like the Jaredites broke up into small bands, including robber bands and secret combinations, each fending for itself (2 Nephi 7:2-3), and when all semblance of centralized control disappeared, "and it was one complete revolution throughout all the face of the land." (Moroni 2:8.) Who is to say how far how many of these scattered groups went in their wanderings, with whom they fought, and with whom they joined? After the battle of Cumorah the Lamanites, who had been joined by large numbers of Nephite defectors during the war, were well launched on a career of fierce tribal wars "among themselves." (Moroni 1:2.) It would be as impossible to distinguish any one race among them as it would be to distinguish two; there may have been marked "racial" types, as there are now among the Indians

(for example, the striking contrast of Navaho and Hopi), but the Book of Mormon makes it clear that those Nephites who went over to live with Lamanites soon came to look like Lamanites. An anthropologist would have been driven wild trying to detect a clear racial pattern among the survivors of Cumorah. So let us not over-simplify and take the Book of Mormon to task for naive conclusions and images that are really our own.

The Plates

It is hard for us to realize today that for many years the idea of writing a sacred record on gold plates was considered just too funny for words and that the mere mention of the "Golden Bible" was enough to shock and scandalize the world. Today at least a hundred examples of ancient writing on metal plates are available, the latest discoveries being three gold plaques found in 1964 near an ancient shrine on the coast of Italy; they are covered with Punic and Etruscan writing and date from about 500 B.C. Punic, it will be recalled, is Phoenician, a language and script that flourished in Lehi's day a few miles from Jerusalem.⁶ It was also in 1964 that the writing on a thin gold plate from Sicily was identified as Hebrew; though the plate has been known since 1876, Hebrew was the last thing anybody expected.⁷ The golden plates of Darius, discovered in 1938, which in their form and the manner of their preservation so strikingly resemble the plates described by Joseph Smith, were augmented by new findings in the 1950's; the contents of the latter plates, a pious mixture of religious declamation and history, are as suggestive of the Book of Mormon as their outward appearance is of the plates.⁸ We have already spoken of the Copper Scrolls,

⁶G. Colonna, in *Archaeology*, 19 (1966), p. 21.

⁷U. Schmoll, in *Zeitschr. der dt. Morgenländ. Gesellschaft*, 113 (1964), pp. 512-4.

⁸H. H. Paper has translated the text of the new plates in the *Jnl. of the American Oriental Society*, 72 (1953), pp. 169f.