

Dismissing Book of Mormon geography inaccuracies

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One issue that relates in important ways to Book of Mormon geography is the human composition of the ancient Americas. The traditional LDS folk-belief asserts that the Lehitites arrived to a nearly vacant New World, with the possible exception of some Jaredite survivors and the Mulekites. This tradition implies that virtually all Native Americans are descendants of exclusively Book of Mormon peoples.

This assumption -- like many other assumptions about the Book of Mormon -- comes from a naive reading of the text that was filtered through the 19th century misunderstanding of the human migrations that populated the ancient New World.

Early American settlers were fascinated with the fact that the New World was already inhabited by indigenous people. 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, however, the Book of Mormon peoples did not purport to come from any of the "lost tribes."

Science tells us a different story. 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 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 date of earliest date and route of populating the Americas is still hotly debated, scientists almost universally agree that the earliest Americans arrived to 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, believe that the Lehitites were a small incursion into a larger and all-ready-present Amerindian population.

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 science such as DNA findings in the New World (the topic of DNA will be discussed in the very near future). First, it's important to understand that such issues are not doctrinal, so changes in theories are irrelevant to gospel truths. Secondly, 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 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 which 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."

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."

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.'"

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."

And in 1993, Elder Dallin H. Oaks 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."

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