

Why aren't other peoples mentioned in the Book of Mormon?

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Last week it was explained that the Lehiters were a small incursion into a larger existing New World population. Such a position raises at least two questions:

1. If the Lehiters met "others" in the New World, why are they not mentioned?
2. What about those verses that imply that the Lehiters were alone in the Americas?

Let's discuss the first question today.

When Nephi began recording their history from Jerusalem to the New World, it's possible he 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 was later abridged by the prophet Mormon. Mormon -- who wrote his abridgement roughly 1,000 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's 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."

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. 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's 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 recently discovered 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's necessary to explain certain aspects of Hebrew history, experience or encounters with the Egyptians.

Even during their trek through the Arabian Peninsula, the Lehites never mention any others, although such encounters would have been unavoidable as they made their way to the guarded water-holes en route to Bountiful (this trek will be discussed in greater detail in future issues).

Ethnohistory specialist 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" (Brant Gardner, *Second Witness* 1:352-3).

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