

ARE ALL AMERINDIANS DESCENDANTS OF LEHI?

One of the “50 Questions to Ask Mormons” concerns our beliefs about Amerindians. What do we believe and teach?

How have Latter-day Saints Understood Amerindian Origins?

It is not surprising that some Church members have concluded that all Amerindians were descendants of Lehi/Mulek. In fact, this was the initial conclusion drawn by many contemporaries of Joseph Smith, including his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, W.W. Phelps, Parley P. Pratt, and Orson Pratt.

(The full wiki article contains all references. The link appears at the end of this article.)

Many later members and leaders continued to emphasize this perspective, that all present Amerindians are Lehi’s descendants. Elder LeGrand Richards, an apostle, made this statement: “The dark-skinned people who occupied this land of American from that time on were called ‘Lamanites,’ who are the people known generally as the American Indians, all of whom are of the house of Israel.”

A Re-evaluation

However, this idea was not universally supported. Elder Levi Edgar Young of the First Council of the Seventy stated in General Conference 1928,

There must be a clear distinction, it grows every year more evident, *between the origins of American’s ancient people and the source of their culture*. The human material of the pre-Columbian societies probably came from Asia by way of Alaska, the orthodox route long accepted for the American Indians.

A 1927 Book of Mormon study guide noted that:

All Indians Are Not the Descendants of Lehi ... Students of the Book of Mormon should be cautioned against the error of supposing that all the American Indians are the descendants of Lehi, Mulek, and their companions, and that their languages and dialects, their social organizations, religious conceptions and practices, traditions, etc., are all traceable to those Hebrew sources.

Jardites

Because the Jaredite record is very brief we are apt to forget that it embraces many centuries — how many, we have no means of ascertaining — and that it gives an epitome principally of the history of Moron, where the Jaredites first established themselves. It stands to reason that the Jaredites gradually settled in favorable localities all over the American continents, and that both Nephites and Lamanites came in contact with them, and that an amalgamation took place everywhere as in the case of the Nephites and Mulekites in Zarahemla. If so, the Jaredite culture must have become a factor in the development of the institutions and languages of the country. But the Jaredites came from some center of population in Asia.

The Presence of “Others”

In April 1929, President Anthony W. Ivins [Counselor in First Presidency] said in General Conference:

We must be careful in the conclusions that we reach. The Book of Mormon teaches the history of three distinct peoples, or two peoples and three different colonies of people, who came from the old world to this continent. It 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.

A Church study guide of 1938 was even more definitive:

Indian ancestry, at least in part, is attributed by the Nephite record to the Lamanites. However, the Book of Mormon deals *only with the history and expansion of three small colonies which*

came to America and it does not deny or disprove the possibility of other immigrations, which probably would be unknown to its writers. Jewish origin may represent only a part of the total ancestry of the American Indian today.

And, in 1940, members with the critics' attitudes were cautioned:

There is a tendency to use the Book of Mormon as a complete history of all pre-Columbian peoples. The book does not claim to be such an history, and we distort its spiritual message when we use it for such a purpose. *The book does not give an history of all peoples who came to America before Columbus.* There may have been other people who came here, by other routes and means, of which we have no written record. If historians wish to discuss information which the Book of Mormon does not contain but which is related to it, then we should grant them that freedom.

We should avoid the claim that we are familiar with all the peoples who have lived on American soil when we discuss the Book of Mormon ... There is safety in using the book in the spirit in which it was written. Our use of poorly constructed inferences may draw us far away from the truth. In our approach to the study of the Book of Mormon let us guard against drawing historical conclusions which the book does not warrant.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks, an apostle, noted that he had been taught this idea in the 1950s at BYU:

Here [at BYU] I 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. Up to that time, I had assumed that it was. If that were the claim of the Book of Mormon, any piece of historical, archaeological, or linguistic evidence to the contrary would weigh in against the Book of Mormon, and those who rely exclusively on scholarship would have a promising position to argue.

In contrast, if the Book of Mormon only purports to be an account of a few peoples who inhabited a portion of the Americas during a few millennia in the past, the burden of argument changes drastically. It is no longer a question of all versus none; it is a question of some versus none. In other words, in the circumstance I describe, the opponents of historicity must prove that the Book of Mormon has no historical validity for any peoples who lived in the Americas in a particular time frame, a notoriously difficult exercise.

An “Official” Stamp of Approval?

In 1957, Elder Richard L. Evans, an apostle, prepared material for a secular audience, and 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.”

This article was republished twice (in 1963 and 1975), and the latter publication was re-approved for publication by the First Presidency.

It is astonishing that critics do not realize that this approval puts a fairly “official” stamp of approval on this perspective — at the very least, it is hardly out of the “mainstream” of Church thought to think that others besides Israelites make up modern Amerindians, and this perspective existed long before the DNA issue came to the fore.

More recently, the *Ensign* published an article from John Sorenson, one of the most prominent advocates of the presence of other non-Israelite peoples in the Americas:

Archaeological evidence from all New World areas where the early Nephites and Lamanites could have lived makes clear that peoples who descended from the Jaredite era also lived during the time of Lehi's descendants. Given Laman and Lemuel's ambition to rule, perhaps they or their descendants ruled over and absorbed such “natives.” Nephite record keepers perhaps did not know the details of that process, but that is the best explanation that I know of for the remarkable growth in the number of Lamanites.

The case of the numerous Amulonites [in Alma 43:13] can be explained on similar grounds — taking control over a resident population.

Does the Church Take an Official Position?

And, when asked about the Church's official position on this matter by a writer, a Church spokesman said:

As to whether these were the first inhabitants...we don't have a position on that. Our scripture does not try to account for any other people who may have lived in the New World before, during or after the days of the Jaredites and the Nephites, and we don't have any official doctrine about who the descendants of the Nephites and the Jaredites are. Many Mormons believe that American Indians are descendants of the Lamanites [a division of the Nephites], but that's not in the scripture.

Why have there been Different Opinions on this Matter?

We have seen that Simon Southerton and the other critics' claim that a "Lehi-only" teaching has been the unanimous voice of the prophets is false. To be sure, there clearly have been Church leaders who felt that all Amerindians were descendants of Book of Mormon peoples (and, as we will see below, population genetics demonstrates that this is true). Some leaders and members have also believed that the Book of Mormon peoples are the only, or major, ancestors of Amerindians.

But, there have *also* been those who believed that Lehi was only one ancestor among many. Later readers are more likely than early readers to hold a "many ancestors" view. Why?

All readers approach scriptures from their own cultural perspective, and with their own biases. What biases did readers of Joseph Smith's day have about American Indians?

One further theoretical issue dictated by the discussion in Joseph Smith's day should be mentioned here: only a few early nineteenth-century writers suggested multiple origins for the American Indians. The very term "Indian," as Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., has pointed out, embodied a unitary concept of the native inhabitants of the Americas invented by Europeans.

"By classifying all these many peoples as Indians," writes Berkhofer, "whites categorized the variety of cultures and societies as a single entity for the purposes of description and analysis, thereby neglecting or playing down the social and cultural diversity of Native Americans then — and now — for the convenience of simplified understanding."

Thus, in Joseph Smith's day, it was "common knowledge" that the Indians were a single racial group, and so most likely to have a single origin. Since the Book of Mormon seemed to teach that at least some Indians must have come from Israel, it was a natural conclusion to see them all as coming from Israel since the early Saints likely did not even conceive of there being multiple "groups" of Indians at all. To explain some was to explain them all.

Elder Brigham H. Roberts of the Seventy noted the prevailing wisdom of his era:

[The expert] Boudinot...hold[s] that the same color of the Indian generally is evidence of unity of race.

However, the understanding of "the Indians" as a single, monolithic group began to change, and it is not a recent change brought on by the critics' DNA material!

Talking Past Each Other?

Critics are fond of citing Church leaders such as Spencer W. Kimball, who was certainly a powerful advocate for the Amerindians or "Lamanites." For example, President Kimball said:

With pride I tell those who come to my office that a Lamanite is a descendant of one Lehi who left Jerusalem six hundred years before Christ and with his family crossed the mighty deep and landed in America. And Lehi and his family became the ancestors of all Indian and Mestizo tribes in North and South and Central America and in the islands of the sea, for in the middle of their history there were those who left America in ships of their making and went to the islands of

the sea.

Clearly, President Kimball here considers all Amerindians under the rubric of “Lamanite.” Does this support Southerton’s argument? It might be that President Kimball is expressing the point of view which Southerton attributes to all the “prophets.” If so, we must remember that other leaders expressed different views.

With the arrival of DNA data, critics have insisted that this proves that LDS prophets who have mentioned such ideas (as with President Kimball above) are “wrong.” Poorly researched newspaper accounts have sometimes dramatically recounted how Church members from various Amerindian groups (e.g. Navajo, Pacific Islanders) have expressed dismay at the idea that DNA has “proved” that they are not “really” descendants of Lehi as the Church has taught them.

Regardless of the population model that one uses (Lehi as small, major, or exclusive source of Amerindian DNA), or the Book of Mormon geographical model (hemispheric or limited), this claim of the critics is demonstrably false.

All from Lehi

The popularity of Dan Brown’s novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, led many Christians to consider the question of whether (as the novel postulates) Jesus Christ could have sired children and have living descendants today.

Non LDS-writer Steve Olson (an expert in population genetics) wrote:

If anyone living today is descended from Jesus, so are most of us on the planet. That absurd-sounding statement is an inevitable consequence of the strange and marvelous workings of human ancestry ...

Say you go back 120 generations, to about the year 1000 B.C. According to the results presented in our Nature paper, your ancestors then included everyone in the world who has descendants living today ... If Jesus had children (a big if, of course) and if those children had children so that Jesus’ lineage survived, then Jesus is today the ancestor of almost everyone living on Earth.

True, Jesus lived two rather than three millenniums ago, but a person’s descendants spread quickly from well-connected parts of the world like the Middle East ... In addition to Jesus ... we’re also all descended from Julius Caesar, from Nefertiti, from Confucius ... and from any other historical figure who left behind lines of descendants and lived earlier than a few thousand years ago.

Genetic tests can’t prove this, partly because current tests look at just a small fraction of our DNA. But if we’re descended from someone, we have at least a chance — even if it’s a very small chance — of having their DNA in our cells ...

People may like to think that they’re descended from some ancient group while other people are not. But human ancestry doesn’t work that way, since we all share the same ancestors just a few millenniums ago.

If Lehi existed, and if he left *any* descendants who survive to the modern day, then it is overwhelmingly likely — via the laws of population genetics — that virtually *all* modern Amerindians count Lehi among their direct ancestors. (If someone in the Middle East at the time of Christ would be the ancestor of everyone currently alive, then Lehi’s entry to the Americas 600 years prior to that time almost assures *that* he would be the direct ancestor of all Amerindians.)

In a similar fashion, it is even more certain that all Amerindians are descendants of “the Lamanites,” regardless of whether one considers Lehi’s group to have been “the whole show” genetically or a mere drop in a genetic sea.

And, by the same token, the chance of actually having “Lehi’s DNA” or a DNA marker from Lehi is vanishingly small under most population models, unless Lehi is literally the *only* source of DNA for the continent, and even then not all descendants will have a given marker.

Conclusions:

LDS leaders and members have been of a variety of opinions regarding the degree of contribution which Book of Mormon peoples provided to the Amerindian gene pool. Church spokesmen indicate that there is no official position. As Church members have understood that there was more than one “group” of Indians, they have read the Book of Mormon as being on a *partial* history of Amerindian ancestors.

Population geneticists would agree that if Lehi had an descendants, population genetics virtually guarantees that all Amerindians have him as a common ancestor. More importantly, Church discussions of Lamanite ancestry (or Israelite ancestry generally) is not about genetics, but is focused on covenant promises and blessings.

<http://www.ldsmag.com/critics/080318lehi.html>

The full FAIR wiki article, including all scriptural and academic references, may be accessed at http://en.fairmormon.org/Amerindians_as_Lamanites