

MORMONS AND DNA

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One of Mormonism's key doctrines is under increasing attack, and the *coup de grace* may now have been delivered. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints teaches that all the Native American tribes are descended from a Jewish family who came to these uninhabited continents in the sixth century before Christ. Here Christ himself visited them after his resurrection. For years scientists have been questioning this belief, and now DNA evidence demonstrates conclusively that this belief is false.

The LDS version of ancient American history

In 1830 Joseph Smith published his *Book of Mormon*. He claimed that it was a divinely guided translation of golden tablets written in an Egyptian dialect. These tablets, he claimed, were written some 1,400 years earlier by a man named Mormon and completed by his son Moroni.

Mormon had been the last great general of the Nephite people in America. His ancestor, Nephi son of Lehi, had sailed to America about 589 B.C. with his older brother Laman. They were a Jewish family, fleeing from the sinful people of Israel and the impending judgment coming upon them through the Babylonians.¹ God had appeared to Nephi, and had ordered him to construct a boat and make this long voyage of 8,500 miles.² Landing probably in Central America, Nephi and his family found the new land uninhabited.³ Over the next six centuries they multiplied greatly, filling the entire Western Hemisphere with people descending from the two main branches of Nephi and Laman, the Nephites and the Lamanites.⁴ The more godly Nephites were fair-skinned and attractive, while God judged the rebellious Lamanites by making them dark-skinned.⁵ According to Mormon teaching, Jesus appeared to these people after his resurrection in a special revelation.⁶

There had been strife between the Nephites and the Lamanites for centuries. Jesus' appearance caused the strife to die down for a couple hundred years. However, hostilities resumed. Finally, in A.D. 326 Mormon, the last general of the Nephites, challenged the Lamanites to battle. This last battle between the two races took place near Mount Cumorah, in modern upstate New York. The vastly superior numbers of the Lamanites crushed the Nephites, and wiped them out. 230,000 Nephites were killed in the battle; only Mormon himself and his son Moroni escaped.⁷ Moroni, after the death of his father, completed the golden tablets and hid them on Mount Cumorah. It was the same Moroni who appeared in resurrected form to Joseph Smith in 1827 and showed him the location of the tablets.⁸ In subsequent centuries the Lamanites continued to increase and occupy both continents of North and South America. They became the Native American tribes, often referred to as the American Indians.

The *Book of Mormon*, the *Pearl of Great Price*, and the *Doctrines and Covenants* all declare that the Native American tribes encountered by the Europeans from Columbus on through to Joseph Smith's time were of Jewish descent. Particularly, they were descendents of Laman, son of Lehi, of the Israelite tribe of Joseph.⁹ It is this teaching that recent genetic research contradicts.

The LDS version refuted by DNA

When Joseph Smith first published his *Book of Mormon*, the public had no scientific way of evaluating his claim that the Native Americans were of Jewish descent. In fact, people often wondered how these tribes arrived in the New World. They obviously had come before the voyage of Columbus in 1492, and before the English settlers came to Virginia and Plymouth. Smith's idea sounded plausible to many, and it seemed to elevate America in the plans and purposes of God. Those who were not trained in biblical doctrine did not recognize his many serious errors of theology, and the Mormon Church absorbed many people. Today it numbers over eleven million members.

While orthodox Christians since the beginning have used the Bible to oppose the teachings of Joseph Smith and his followers,¹⁰ scientific evidence against his version of history has accumulated only more recently.

- *Physical anthropology* is the science that compares the anatomy and physical features of various races of humans; it has demonstrated that Native Americans are most like tribes in East Asia, particularly in Siberia and Mongolia, not like Jews from the Middle East.
- *Archaeology* examines remains and artifacts of previous civilizations; it has found that the cultures and artifacts of Native Americans are again like those of East Asia, not of the Middle East. Rather than sailing thousands of miles from the Middle East, the first Native Americans crossed the Bering Strait, once a land bridge, and now a relatively short crossing of fifty miles. Further, archaeology has not discovered any evidence of any historical person, place, or event recorded in LDS scriptures.
- *Comparative linguistics* analyzes spoken and written languages; once again, it demonstrates that none of the over 800 Native American languages derives from the Hebrew language.

Now, the conclusions of these three sciences are confirmed by *molecular biology*. The study of the DNA strand in living cell nuclei demonstrates conclusively the parentage of the individual. DNA evidence is acceptable in court to decide legal cases. Family descent can be traced over hundreds of generations using two methods: mitochondrial DNA traces female descent, and Y-chromosome DNA traces male descent. In both these cases, the DNA patterns are not changed from generation to generation, except for rare mutations. They both show remarkable stability over thousands of years of history.

During the past twenty years the DNA of thousands of Native Americans from all over North and South America has been tested and compared to other ethnic groups in the world. The results are consistent. Native Americans are descended from East Asians, particularly in Siberia. There is no connection to the Hebrew race.¹¹ Approximately 99.4% of the mitochondrial and Y-chromosome DNA of living Native Americans comes from progenitors in East Asia, and the remaining 0.6% comes from European or African sources. That 0.6% is the result of intermarriage with later immigrants to America; when ancient remains¹² are examined, it is discovered that there is no European or African connection at all.¹³ Thus, this major tenet of the Mormon religion is scientifically debunked.

The Mormon dilemma

The LDS church faces a dilemma. It claims that the writings of Joseph Smith are inspired and infallible, providing the basis for all the church's doctrines. On the other hand, it recognizes the validity and importance of science, especially genetic science. For years it has encouraged genetic science in its application to the study of human genealogy, a great emphasis of the LDS church. But now this same science stands opposed to their holy book.

It is reported that several hundred Mormons have left their church because of this evidence.¹⁴ But most Mormons seem to be holding on to their old beliefs. The church has established a center at Brigham Young University dedicated to defending Mormon doctrines against these recent attacks.¹⁵ The leadership of the church is in denial.¹⁶ Many Mormons are remaining in the church, but are reinterpreting the church's relationship to Joseph Smith and the church's scriptures. Others are reinterpreting the historical sections of their scriptures to somehow harmonize with modern science, but their efforts are failing on both fronts. This is an excellent time to confront members of the LDS church with the evidences of DNA. It forces them to confront the errors of their church, and provides an opportunity to show them the true Word of God.

Christians have a great advantage in this age of modern scientific discovery. Unlike the *Book of Mormon*, the Bible's statements are being confirmed by all areas of study. Not one person, place, or event from the *Book of Mormon* has been confirmed from any other source in America. On the other hand, archaeologists continue to discover biblical names, places, and events as they bring more historical records to light. The Bible has stood the tests of time; the *Book of Mormon* has not.

¹ 1 Nephi 1; 10:1-3; Lehi was of the tribe of Joseph (1 Ne. 5:14).

² 1 Nephi 17:8. The voyage was to the east, across the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

³ 2 Nephi 1:8.

⁴ Helaman 3:1-14 describes the great civilization of the Nephites: "And it came to pass that they did multiply and spread, and did go forth from the land southward to the land northward, and did spread insomuch that they began to cover the face of the whole earth, from the sea south to the sea north, from the sea west to the sea east" (He. 3:8). The Lamanites were even more numerous. "The whole face of the land had become covered with buildings, and the people were as numerous almost, as it were the sand of the sea" (Morm. 1:7).

⁵ 2 Nephi 5:21.

⁶ 3 Nephi 11.

⁷ Mormon 6; 8:2-9.

⁸ “Brief Analysis of the Book of Mormon” (introductory page to the Book of Mormon).

⁹ This is still the official teaching of the church. “The existing Indian tribes are descendants of the immigrants whose history is contained in the book of Mormon, and that therefore they have sprung from progenitors who were of the house of Israel” (James E. Talmage, *A Study of the Articles of Faith* [a volume in the *Missionary Reference Library*; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988], 257).

¹⁰ Such works are legion. An excellent example is Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 9-87.

¹¹ Documentation is abundant. See, for example, Anne C. Stone and Mark Stoneking, “mtDNA Analysis of a Prehistoric Oneota Population: Implications for the Peopling of the New World” *American Journal of Human Genetics* (1998) 62:1153-1170; this article is online at

<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/AJHG/journal/issues/v62n5/970850/970850.text.html>.

¹² Ancient remains are defined as Native American remains from before A.D. 1492.

¹³ A fascinating video is now available, produced by Joel Kramer and Scott Johnson of the Hope Christian Fellowship in Brigham City, Utah, *DNA vs. the Book of Mormon*. The video records interviews with eight scientists, including two former Mormons (one of them a bishop) who left their church because of this evidence. These scientists strongly present the evidence from DNA studies showing the *Book of Mormon* to be in error and Joseph Smith as deceiving people. This video can be viewed online at <http://www.mormonchallenge.com>. DVDs or videos of this presentation are also available from their website for a donation. I highly recommend it.

¹⁴ John W. Kennedy, “Winning Them Softly,” *Christianity Today* (February 2004; available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/002/14.18.html>).

¹⁵ The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). Their website is <http://farms.byu.edu/>.

¹⁶ See an excellent example in the 2002 interview of LDS President Gordon B. Hinkley in the video mentioned above, note 13.