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Who Are the Children of Lehi?

Author(s): D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens

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Abstract: In 3 Nephi 5:20-23, Mormon, who abridged the record of the Nephites, reveals two significant points. First, he announces that he is a “pure” descendent of Lehi. As was common in ancient (and not so ancient) times, Mormon is obviously citing his paternal lineage. His maternal heritage was not “a pure descendant of Lehi,” as Lehi’s sons, at least the older ones, married daughters of Ishmael. What is Mormon’s motivation for making this distinction if the children of Lehi are the sole occupants of the Americas? Clearly Mormon’s statement acknowledges that the Book of Mormon is a lineage record, concerned with one particular family line among many.



Chapter Ten

Who Are the Children of Lehi?

I am Mormon, and a pure descendant of Lehi. I have reason to bless my God and my Savior Jesus Christ, that he brought our fathers out of the land of Jerusalem

Surely he hath blessed the house of Jacob, and hath been merciful unto the seed of Joseph.

And insomuch as the children of Lehi have kept his commandments he hath blessed them and prospered them according to his word.

Yea, and surely shall he again bring a remnant of the seed of Joseph to the knowledge of the Lord their God. (3 Ne. 5:20–23)

In this passage, Mormon, who abridged the record of the Nephites, reveals two significant points. First, he announces that he is a “pure” descendent of Lehi. As was common in ancient (and not so ancient) times, Mormon is obviously citing his paternal lineage. His maternal heritage was not “a pure descendant of Lehi,” as Lehi’s sons, at least the older ones, married daughters of Ishmael. What is Mormon’s motivation for making this distinction if the children of Lehi are the sole occupants of the Americas? Clearly Mormon’s statement acknowledges that the Book of Mormon is a lineage record, concerned with one particular family line among many.

The second point places the first in the context of the bigger picture—the record keepers of the children of Lehi were most concerned with the covenant and with the restoration of the remnant of

Joseph to the knowledge of their God. John A. Tvedtnes, a linguist at Brigham Young University, in 2000 drew attention to the Old Testament parallel of this phrase “remnant of Joseph.” When this favored son of Jacob revealed himself to his brothers who had come to Egypt to buy grain, Joseph said, “And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance” (Gen. 45:7). Tvedtnes notes, “The Hebrew term rendered ‘posterity’ in this verse actually means ‘remnant’ and is the very same word used in the Hebrew of Amos 5:15—‘It may be that the Lord God of Hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.’”¹

When Captain Moroni rallied the Nephites to repel Lamanite aggression, he invoked their ancestor, Joseph:

Moroni said unto them: Behold, we are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; yea, we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph, whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces; yea, and now behold, let us remember to keep the commandments of God, or our garments shall be rent by our brethren, and we be cast into prison, or be sold, or be slain.

Yea, let us preserve our liberty as a remnant of Joseph; yea, let us remember the words of Jacob, before his death, for behold, he saw that a part of the remnant of the coat of Joseph was preserved and had not decayed. And he said—Even as this remnant of garment of my son hath been preserved, so shall a remnant of the seed of my son be preserved by the hand of God, and be taken unto himself, while the remainder of the seed of Joseph shall perish, even as the remnant of his garment. (Alma 46:23–24)

Tvedtnes concludes that “a remnant of Joseph” implies or even directly conveys the idea of being sent to another land in order to be preserved.² The sojourn of Joseph in Egypt and then that of the host of Israel, was not made in isolation; others also occupied the land.

In Zenos’s allegory of the olive tree, retold in full in the Book of Mormon, the gardener grafts in wild olive branches in an effort to preserve the root of the tame olive tree. “And it came to pass that the Lord of the vineyard looked and beheld the tree in the which the wild olive branches had been grafted; and it had sprung forth

and begun to bear fruit. And he beheld that it was good; and the fruit thereof was like unto the natural fruit” (Jacob 5:17). The wild branches bore fruit although they were not genetically part of the tame tree. In this instance, the tame tree is the house of Israel and the wild branches represent the Gentiles. But the allegory also refers to the “natural” branches that were grafted into wild trees growing in the nethermost parts of the vineyard. They were not planted directly into bare soil.

What of the children of Lehi? In view of the persuasive case for the interaction with indigenous populations in the Americas and in light of the principles of population genetics and the evidence of varied transoceanic contacts (discussed above), what are the implications for the prospects of finding a trace of “Lehite” DNA in the contemporary Native American population, which would confirm the presence of a small colony of ancient Israelites in the Americas?

Scholarly reactions to the Book of Mormon are often biased by the assumption that it recounts the history of *all* the native inhabitants of the entire New World.³ These scientists are rarely, if ever, thoroughly familiar with the primary text. As has been pointed out, their conclusions are as flawed as those arrived at by some Latter-day Saints.⁴ What does the record itself suggest?

Anthropologist John L. Sorenson has examined the question of whether Lehi’s colony encountered others upon their arrival in the New World. He cites a number of incidents in the Book of Mormon that clearly suggest others were present and, indeed, interacting with Lehi’s party. For example, when Jacob the brother of Nephi had become elderly, “there came a man among the people of Nephi whose name was Sherem.” Upon meeting Jacob, Sherem says, “I have sought much opportunity that I might speak unto you; for I have heard that thou goest about much, preaching” (Jacob 7:6). Sorenson conservatively calculates that the population of Nephi’s party by this time could not have exceeded fifty men—the population of a small village. How could Sherem have not met Jacob previously? How would he have had difficulty encountering the principal teacher of the people? From where did Sherem come when he arrived among the Nephites? Where was Jacob going

about to preach, other than in his own village?⁵

As another example, Alma the younger, on a missionary journey to the city of Ammonihah, asked a stranger for food. This stranger, Amulek, gave an odd reply: “I am a Nephite” (Alma 8:20). Sorenson asks, “Why would he say that? Wasn’t it obvious? Clearly Amulek had recognized Alma as a Nephite, either by his speech or his appearance, or perhaps by the way he had referred to God when he opened the conversation. But to what other social or ethnic category might Amulek have belonged? His abrupt statement makes sense only if most of the people of the place were not Nephites and also if Amulek’s characteristics did not make it already apparent to Alma that he was a Nephite.”⁶

Frequently, LDS readers assume that the key Nephites are homogeneous. Sorenson briefly analyzes the assorted references that suggest internal variety among the Nephites: “Nephite(s)” or “the Nephites” occurs 339 times; (2) “people of the Nephites,” 18 times; (3) “people of Nephi,” 4 times; (4) “children of Nephi,” twice; and (5) “descendants of Nephi,” twice. The meaning of the first expression is defined early in the record when Jacob says, “Those who are friendly to Nephi, I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi according to the reign of kings” (Jacob 1:14). This definition suggests that the label “Nephite” hinges on their political allegiance to the Nephite king and has less to do with their literal descent from Nephi or other males of his founding group.

The term “people of the Nephites” is perhaps even more indicative of social and cultural variation among the Nephites. “It connotes,” comments Sorenson, “that there existed a social stratum called ‘the Nephites’ while another category was ‘people’ who were ‘of,’ that is subordinate to, those ‘Nephites,’ even while they were under the same central government and within the same broad society. Limhi was ready to accept such second-class status for his people the Zeniffites and assumed that the dependent category still existed as it apparently had when his father had left Zarahemla.”⁷

Sorenson concludes, “Hereafter, readers will not be justified in saying that the record fails to mention ‘others’ but only that we readers have hitherto failed to observe what is said and implied

about such people in the Book of Mormon.”⁸

We obviously do not know any specifics about population growth among the descendants of Lehi’s colony between 600 B.C. and A.D. 1500, but we can make some educated inferences based on known population dynamics. It has been estimated, based on a number of sources, that the world population in A.D. 1 was 300 million people. That population had grown from roughly 150 million in 3500 B.C., which in turn had grown from 10 million in 10,000 B.C. Therefore the time required to double the population between 10,000 and 3500 B.C. was roughly 1600 years, whereas the doubling time from 3500 to A.D. 1 was 3,500 years. The population of the world is believed to have experienced little or no net growth between A.D. 1 and 1000, ending that period at about 300 million people. And again, after the “Black Death” (plague) of the fourteenth century, the world population was back to about 300 million. Therefore, the time covered by the Book of Mormon coincided with a period of world history where the population generally was growing very slowly, due to constant warfare, disease, and famine—conditions from which the Nephites and Lamanites were obviously not exempt.

If the Lehiite population, starting with a liberal estimate of roughly fifty people, was growing at the rate of world growth at the time (i.e., a doubling period of 1600 years), the entire population would have been about seventy people at the time of Christ’s appearance in A.D. 34. The total population would still be fewer than 200 upon Columbus’s arrival in the Americas. These numbers seem quite low, but bear in mind that higher growth rates would have been extraordinary compared to the world population at large. If we increased the population growth rate for Lehi’s group to about 0.7 percent (that’s the growth rate for the United States at the present, which most experts agree is phenomenal by ancient standards), the doubling time would be approximately 100 years. With such a rapid doubling period, beginning with a colony of fifty people, there would have been roughly 3,200 people in the population at the time of Christ and about 50,000 people at the time of the destruction of the Nephites in A.D. 421. If we assume that the great

battles that ended the Nephite civilization had little effect on the total population (say only 1/200 were Nephites), then the population would keep growing unchecked for another thousand years, reaching a total population of 100 million by the time Columbus arrived. There are estimates of 80 million people in the New World at A.D. 1500, which could have been achieved by a small founding population like Lehi's colony, arriving in 600 B.C., *only* if it experienced phenomenal growth rates unlike those that existed anywhere in the world prior to the modern era and only if we also assume no wars, disease, or famine that affected population growth. But the Book of Mormon record is a story of frequent wars and contention, fraught with disease and famine.

Recently, John Kunich, a judge advocate with a biology background, provided an in-depth discussion of Book of Mormon population sizes.⁹ He similarly concluded that the numbers cited in the death counts resulting from warfare between Nephites and Lamanites, or among the Nephites themselves, could not be accounted for without invoking extraordinary rates of population growth. He then explores all sorts of hypothetical but improbable explanations for an extraordinarily accelerated growth rate, while discounting the most obvious and most reasonable explanation—i.e., the incorporation of indigenous people into the ranks of the Nephites and more especially the Lamanites. His reason for rejecting this possibility is based on his reading of Lehi's prophecy recorded in the Book of Mormon itself:

It is wisdom that this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations; for behold, many nations would overrun the land, that there would be no place for an inheritance.

Wherefore, I, Lehi, have obtained a promise, that inasmuch as those whom the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves. And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments they shall be blessed upon the face of this land, and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of

their inheritance; and they shall dwell safely forever. (2 Ne. 1:8–9)

We also read in Mosiah 25:2-3:

Now there were not so many of the children of Nephi . . . as there were of the people of Zarahemla. . . .

And there were not so many of the people of Nephi and of the people of Zarahemla as there were of the Lamanites; yea, they were not half so numerous.

This statement is very curious concerning the number of Lehi's descendants. If we assume that there was a relatively even split between the Nephites and Lamanites when Nephi took his followers out of the land where Lehi died and fled into the wilderness to found the land/city of Nephi (2 Ne. 5:7), then where did all the Lamanites come from? Mosiah 25:2–3 states that there were more Mulekites than Nephites and more Lamanites than Nephites and Mulekites combined. In other words, some 450 years after the separation, there were over twice as many Lamanites as Nephites. This difference seems to have occurred during this period in spite of the report by the Nephite recorders that they were being blessed of the Lord whereas the Lamanites were constantly being killed off whenever they attacked the Nephites. Where did all the extra Lamanites come from?

It appears that the Nephites were not all that aware of other people beyond the immediate scope of their experience. Certainly "others" rarely make it into the Nephite record. True, sometime between 279 and 130 B.C. when Mosiah led the righteous Nephites out of the city of Nephi into the wilderness (again) where they stumbled on the previously unknown descendants of Mulek in the city of Zarahemla, it seems to have been an accidental encounter, in spite of the fact that they had been living in the promised land for at least 300 years (Omni 1:12–14). Furthermore, the Nephites seem to have had little knowledge of what the Lamanites were doing all this time (Omni 1:27–30). Their primary interactions were hostile; the Lamanites would suddenly burst out from the wilderness and attack Nephite settlements. Were the Lamanites making contacts

with and assimilating other people of whom the Nephites were completely unaware, simply ignored, or did not explicitly mention?

Clearly, many who have read the Book of Mormon have interpreted “this land” to mean the entire Western Hemisphere—all of the Americas—and assumed that, in God’s wisdom, all the Americas were isolated from other nations until the European discoveries beginning with Columbus (or a few earlier Norsemen, Australians, or Chinese). However, our modern notions of “land” and “nation” are likely much different from those of people in the first millennium B.C. When Lehi referred to the “land of their inheritance,” he very likely had no concept of the entire Western Hemisphere. Indeed, the notion of a “Western Hemisphere” didn’t even exist until after a period of extensive exploration, which would have been impossible for Lehi and his followers, at least by conventional means.

Omni refers to, “a certain number who went into the wilderness to . . . possess the land of their inheritance” (Omni 1:27). Zeniff and a band of followers went from Zarahemla through the wilderness and “after many days wandering” arrived at “the land of our fathers” (Mosiah 9:1–4). These passages make it clear that, to the people living at the time, the “land of their inheritance” was a specific place some distance through a “wilderness” from Zarahemla and that the term clearly does not refer to the entire Western Hemisphere. It is very unlikely that a group of people who routinely became lost in this local wilderness had any inkling of the geography beyond a few days’ travel in any direction.

But Lehi goes on to predict the fate of the Lehitites should they be slow to remember their God.

But behold, when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief, after they have received so great blessings from the hand of the Lord—having a knowledge of the creation of the earth, and all men, knowing the great and marvelous works of the Lord from the creation of the world; having power given them to do all things by faith; having all the commandments from the beginning, and having been brought by his infinite goodness into this precious land of promise—behold, I say, if the day shall come that they will reject the

Holy One of Israel, the true Messiah, their Redeemer and their God, behold, the judgments of him that is just shall rest upon them.

Yea, he will bring other nations unto them, and he will give unto them power, and he will take away from them the lands of their possessions, and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten. (2 Ne. 1:10–11)

Kunich assumes, as have many commentators, that the “other nations” spoken of by Lehi, that would take possession of the lands of their inheritance, would be the Gentiles, specifically the colonizing Europeans. In support he cites passages from Nephi’s vision, the teachings of Jacob, and the commentary by Mormon, which do indeed speak of the Gentiles scattering the remnant of the Lamanites. These later passages clearly refer to the Gentiles’ future arrival, but Lehi’s earlier, more general prophecy, about whether his descendants prosper or dwindle in the land, aren’t initially fulfilled by the arrival of the Gentiles. What did the Gentiles have to do with the demise of the Nephite civilization, which had occurred in A.D. 421, almost 1100 years before Columbus? And was the fulfillment of Lehi’s prediction concerning Lamanites delayed for an entire millennium? No; as Moroni laments the destruction of his people at the hands of the “Lamanites,” he also notes that the Lamanites and robbers have turned upon themselves. In fact, he witnessed a virtual “world war” erupting in the Western Hemisphere:

And behold, the Lamanites have hunted my people, the Nephites, down from city to city and from place to place, even until they are no more; and great has been their fall; yea, great and marvelous is the destruction of my people, the Nephites.

And behold, it is the hand of the Lord which hath done it. And behold also, the Lamanites are at war one with another; and the whole face of this land is one continual round of murder and bloodshed; and no one knoweth the end of the war. (Morm. 8:7–8)

He observes that only Lamanites and robbers are left. They are the “others” from the Nephite perspective.

The annihilation of the Nephites was simply one episode of

the social and political disintegration that was taking place on a widespread scale in the region. “But behold . . . there was blood and carnage spread throughout all the face of the land, both on the part of the Nephites and also on the part of the Lamanites; and it was one complete revolution throughout all the face of the land” (Morm. 2:8).

Recent discoveries in Mesoamerican archeology have shed new light on the situation described by Mormon.¹⁰ Archeologists and historians of Mesoamerica have traditionally considered the period of time spanning the Book of Mormon record to have been a golden age of peace. This academic reconstruction was at odds with Mormon’s description of continual warfare, which reached a climax for the Nephites between about A.D. 330 and 421. However, the archeological paradigm began to shift as early as the 1950s when archaeologists discovered Mesoamerican monument art that depicted victory scenes of overlords treading on defeated rival warriors. Next, regional evidence of the fortification of large cities was systematically uncovered. In many instances, indication of rural populations is lacking as people moved into cities for protection from marauding armies. Numerous sites are described as having ditch and rampart construction, frequently from material scavenged from nearby structures. The collapse has been portrayed as involving severe population reduction, abandoned settlements, and fragmentation into small local factions. Sorenson asks, “Is the last ditch warfare and ethnic extermination in the Book of Mormon credible? The issue had not been addressed until very recently. The question is, was the intensity and scale of the warfare detected by archeologists ever great enough to account for the extermination of people like the Nephites? Now the answer is a clear cut yes.”¹¹

The Petexbatun Regional Archeological Project has carefully documented evidence of warfare and fortification in southern Yucatan between the eighth and ninth centuries A.D.¹² This time frame postdates the demise of the Nephite civilization, but the detailed study period exemplifies the pattern that prevailed. The project found that the region’s population was virtually destroyed by a state of siege and fortification warfare. Within decades, only 5 to

10 percent of the original population remained. (For comparison purposes, the Nephite decline and disappearance took a little more than sixty years.) What toll did this extended period of warfare have on the population genetics of the Native Americans in this region? First thought to be a local conflict between rival sibling rulers, new data indicate that such conflicts were the beginning of much more extensive warfare that escalated throughout the region, precipitating the collapse of the Classic Maya civilization. By A.D. 810 almost all western Maya cities were abandoned or destroyed.¹³ If Petexbutan was typical of this style of warfare, we might speculate that, during the preceding battles, the Nephites were not only essentially exterminated, but the aggressor Lamanites suffered extreme population reduction as well, especially in the wake of their continued warring among themselves. The vacant cities and abandoned villages are stark monuments to the extinct genotypes eliminated from the gene pool.

Considering those that may have survived, what are the chances of seeing their chromosomes represented in individuals from a population twenty generations later? We might point to the example of the nine-thousand-year-old “Cheddar Man” (named because he was found in limestone caves near Cheddar, England, in 1903). These bones date from approximately 7150 B.C.; but in 1997, DNA analysis linked him to a high school teacher, Adrian Targett, living in the same town today. The DNA match is very similar despite the 10,000 years that separate the two; only one base pair—that is, one letter of the genetic alphabet—is different out of three hundred. It took a sample of only twenty local Cheddar residents to find this close match with the DNA from Cheddar Man’s molar.¹⁴ The specific sequence from the tooth is present in an estimated mere 1 or 2 percent of the modern British population. Scientists said the odds of finding a match were not as enormous as might appear because of the relatively small number of people who lived in Britain’s Stone Age—a case of founder effect at work.

In other words, the example of Cheddar Man turns the Lehigh situation on its head. A small founding population of ancient Britons constituted the principal, if not the sole, inhabitants of the

region. Therefore, shared genes of the relatively closely related members of this ancient population are expressed with higher frequency in the local contemporary resident population—in the case of Cheddar man a whopping 1–2 percent. In contrast, the genes present in Lehi’s founding colony must have been a mere drop in the Western Hemisphere gene pool, making a trivial contribution, genetically speaking. Furthermore, this gene pool experienced a succession of extreme bottlenecks.

The Book of Mormon itself is clearly biased in its presentation of the record of the Nephites. However, to any observant reader the implicit acknowledgement of “others” is evident. The term “Lamanite” encompasses these other people who fought against the people of Nephi. The modest genetic contribution of the literal children of Lehi to the gene pool of the Western Hemisphere was sharply diminished during the extended period of warfare that annihilated the Nephites and then spread to cover the face of the land. The archeological record reveals evidence of centuries of extensive protracted warfare in a region that is now most commonly accepted as coinciding with Book of Mormon lands. The chances of detecting distinctive gene markers from the surviving children of Lehi, in today’s Native American gene pool are, because of these constraints, expected to be extremely remote, if not altogether nil.

Notes

¹John A. Tvedtnes, “The Remnant of Joseph,” *FARMS Update* 20, no. 8 (2000), <http://www.farms.byu.edu/publications/insightsvolume.php?insightsid=148&volume=20&number=8> (accessed October 31, 2007).

²*Ibid.*

³Robert Wauchoppe, *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Michael D. Coe, “Mormons and Archaeology: An Outside View,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (1973): 40–48.

⁴John W. Welch, “B. H. Roberts: Seeker after Truth,” *Ensign*, March 1986, 60–61.

⁵John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 11 (1992): 4.

⁶Ibid., 9.

⁷Ibid., 12.

⁸Ibid., 34.

⁹John C. Kunich, “‘Multiply Exceedingly’: Book of Mormon Population Sizes,” *Sunstone* 14 (June 1990), 27–44.

¹⁰John L. Sorenson, “Last Ditch Warfare in Ancient Mesoamerica Recalls the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9 (2000): 44–53.

¹¹Ibid., 50.

¹²Arthur A. Demarest, “The Violent Saga of a Maya Kingdom,” *National Geographic*, February 1993, 95–111; Arthur A. Demarest, *Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rainforest Civilization* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹³A. R. Williams, “A New Chapter in Maya History: All-Out War, Shifting Alliances, Bloody Sacrifices,” *National Geographic*, October 2002, xvi..

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Nicholas Wade, “The Human Family Tree: 10 Adams and 18 Eves,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2000; Larry Barham, Phillip Priestly, and Adrian Targett, *In Search of the Cheddar Man* (Stroud, Eng.: Tempus Publishing, 2000).