BOOK OF MORMON WORD CHANGE

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A recent word change to the introduction of the Book of Mormon has once again brought attention to the question regarding the historical reliability of one of Mormonism’s most sacred texts. Another change affirms the teaching that the Book of Mormon alone contains the fullness of the gospel.

Native American Origins. Since its founding in 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS or Mormon Church) has assumed that Native Americans are descendants of a people group described in the Book of Mormon as Lamanites (descendants of Laman). Recent conclusions from DNA research, however, have caused the LDS Church to rethink some of its earlier positions.

Basic Book of Mormon Content. Mormonism’s founder, Joseph Smith, claimed that in 1823 he was visited by an angel named Moroni, a resurrected fifth-century “Nephite” warrior who, before his death, was commissioned by his father Mormon to bury a record that was written on gold plates. According to Moroni, the plates, written in Reformed Egyptian, gave “an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang” (Joseph Smith, History of the Church 1:34). The book describes three migrations to the New World: the Jaredites who came from the Tower of Babel around the time it was built, Lehi and his family who came from Jerusalem around 600 BC, and the Mulekites who came from Jerusalem a few years later.

Much of the narrative focuses on the descendants of Lehi, a prophet from Jerusalem who was told by God to flee the city before it was captured and destroyed by the Babylonians. Lehi and his family sailed to the western hemisphere, but once they landed, a schism broke out between Lehi’s rebellious son Laman and his younger brother Nephi. This divided the family, resulting in a bloody conflict that lasted several hundred years. As a result of the Lamanites’ wickedness, God “did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them,” so that they might not be “enticing” to their “white and exceedingly fair and delightsome” counterparts, according to a verse in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 5:21).

According to the Encyclopedia of Mormonism (1:143), the Book of Mormon is an “ancient Hebrew lineage history” that for thirteen million Latter-day Saints, speaks of real people and real events. Its very existence testifies to Mormons that Joseph Smith was a true prophet sent by God to restore Christianity after centuries of apostasy. Skeptics have argued that the book is nothing more than a nineteenth-century novel promoting commonly held theories about early migrations to the New World, sprinkled with Bible verses.

The “Principal Ancestors” Change. The one-page introduction to the Book of Mormon, which gives a brief overview of its contents, was added in 1981 when the LDS Church released a revised text of the Book of Mormon. The introduction was written by Mormon Apostle Bruce R. McConkie, at the time considered to be one of the church’s most prominent theologians. The introduction stated, “After thousands of years, all were destroyed except the Lamanites, and they are the principal ancestors of the American Indians.”

New editions published by the LDS Church, however, will no longer include the phrase “principal ancestors.” They instead will read that the Lamanites are “among” the ancestors of the American Indian. This new alteration has already appeared in copies of the Book of Mormon published by Doubleday.

Critics believe that this recent alteration is anything but inconsequential because, in recent years, science has been challenging long-held Mormon beliefs regarding the origins of the American Indian people. Sandra Tanner, cofounder and director of the Utah Lighthouse Ministry based in Salt Lake City, sees this
change as a “concession in light of the DNA research that has been done in the last few years.” Despite what the Book of Mormon claims, genetic research does not support the notion that American Indians are of Hebrew origin; instead, research has confirmed the theory that they are of Asian descent.

Mormon apologists and scholars are conceding that genetic research does not help their cause. Dr. Daniel Peterson, a Brigham Young University professor and active Mormon apologist, has stated, “To the best of my knowledge, no serious Latter-day Saint scholar or scientist contends that, to date, research on Amerindian DNA provides significant affirmative support for the Book of Mormon” (“Prolegomena to the DNA Essays,” FARMS Review 15:2, 2003, p. 32). Dr. Trent Stephens, an LDS professor at Idaho State University, concurs, “No genetic evidence specifically supports the hypothesis that Native Americans descended from Middle Eastern populations. Furthermore, there is little reason to assume that additional data will reverse the current conclusions” (“Now What?” Sunstone, March 2004, 26).

The Intermarriage Theory. In order to conform more closely to scientific findings, Mormon apologists have had to revise currently held views regarding Indian origins. They have also had to reject claims made by past LDS leaders and either reinterpret or outright reject some of the actual text of the Book of Mormon. Supporters see no conflict with the revision. They insist that when Lehi arrived in the New World, his group was met by indigenous people of Asian descent. Over the course of time, intermarriage with other cultures eventually diluted the gene pool, thus obliterating the genetic evidence that directs the lineage of the Indians back to the Middle East.

Opponents insist that such an interpretation is incredibly strained. “Even the use of the word ‘among’ is without any support,” says Tanner. “There is nothing to indicate that any of the Indians prior to the arrival of the Europeans were of Semitic descent.”

According to the title page of the Book of Mormon, the book was written “to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to the Jew and Gentile.” Tanner asks, “If we can’t determine who a Lamanite is, [how can the Mormons] know who to take the book to?”

That Lehi’s group intermarried with those of other cultures is deemed by many to be not only an argument from silence, but a contradiction of the text. In a November 7, 2007, letter to the editor of the Salt Lake Tribune, reader Philip Long pointed out that the LDS Church is either mistaken or not being honest when its official Web site states, “Nothing in the Book of Mormon precludes migration into the Americas by people of Asiatic origin.” Long noted that a prophecy given in 2 Nephi 1:8 precludes such a conclusion when it states, “And behold, 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.” Long insists that that was exactly what he was taught as a Mormon, “that the Americas were uninhabited until the Book of Mormon people arrived.”

Statements from past LDS leaders concur with Long’s statement. For instance, in a general conference message titled “Our Divine Constitution,” Mormon President Ezra Taft Benson cited 2 Nephi 1:8 and concluded, “For centuries the Lord kept America hidden in the hollow of His hand until the time was right to unveil her for her destiny in the last days.” Benson was among several LDS leaders who felt that this prophecy did not come to fulfillment until the arrival of Christopher Columbus (Ensign, November 1987, 4).

The Significance Question. Some Mormons feel that because the change does not affect the actual text of the Book of Mormon, it is not as significant as some critics assume. Kevin Barney, a board member of the Mormon organization Foundation for Apologetics Information and Research, told the Salt Lake Tribune that he has always felt “free to disavow” the language in the introduction, as well as in other noncanonical portions of the Book of Mormon, such as the footnotes and dictionary (“Single Word Change in Book of Mormon Speaks Volumes,” Salt Lake Tribune, November 8, 2007). Barney sees the change as a positive step because it shows that his church is paying attention to progressing scholarship.

The Mormon Church has used this Indian/Lamanite connection extensively in proselytizing efforts. It remains to be seen how this gradual reinterpretation of what actually constitutes a Lamanite will affect members who see this relationship as a special place of honor.
Undesirable Methods. Hugo Olaiz, a third-generation Mormon from Argentina, welcomes the word change in the introduction, but expressed his disappointment at the timing and method of announcing the change. In his Sunstone article titled, “How Is It That Ye Could Have Fallen!—A Requiem for the Lamanites” (December 2007, 69), he expressed dismay “that instead of announcing the change to Church members, LDS leaders chose a back-alley way to implement it; instructing a non-Mormon publishing house…to make the desired revision…The media learned of the change only through Doubleday senior editor Andrew Corbin, who is quoted in the Salt Lake Tribune as saying he was told the new wording was ‘in accordance with future editions the church is printing.’ This method of announcement,” said Olaiz, “reminds me of the way the First Presidency ended church-sanctioned polygamy—not by communicating directly with the members who had sacrificed so much for the doctrine and practice, but by sending a telegram to Washington.”

To Olaiz, his church “seems to be moving towards the notion that the only good Lamanite is a dead Lamanite—one who lived centuries ago in an undisclosed location.” Olaiz fears “that most white Latter-day Saints will fail to ask themselves the most important question: What does this change mean for millions of Latter-day Saints who have been told—and many of whom have treasured the knowledge, that they are the children of Lehi?”

The “As Does the Bible” Change. Another change in the introduction that has been given very little notice is found in the first paragraph. “The Book of Mormon is a volume of holy scripture comparable to the Bible. It is a record of God’s dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas and contains, as does the Bible, the fulness of the everlasting gospel.” New editions of the Doubleday printing have deleted the phrase, “as does the Bible.” This alteration seems to comport more closely with several passages in the Doctrine and Covenants that speak only of the Book of Mormon as containing the “fulness of the everlasting gospel” (Doctrine and Covenants 27:5). In 1841, Joseph Smith left little doubt regarding the Book of Mormon’s superiority over the Bible when he announced that a man would get “nearer to God” by abiding by the precepts in the Book of Mormon “than by any other book” (History of the Church 4:461).

In what some believe was a response to the accusation that Mormons do not place a lot of value in the Bible, Mormon Apostle M. Russell Ballard gave a conference talk in April 2007 titled “The Miracle of the Holy Bible.” In it he insisted that Latter-day Saints were “true and full believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and in His revealed word through the Holy Bible” (Ensign, May 2007, 80). He began by stating that the Bible’s four thousand years of sacred history were recorded and “preserved” by the prophets, apostles, and inspired churchmen. Missing from his talk, however, was any mention of Article Eight of the Articles of Faith, considered to be official doctrine by the LDS Church since 1880. It reads, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly.”

LDS leaders and scholars understand Article Eight more in terms of how the Bible was “transmitted” rather than how it was translated. In October 1843, Joseph Smith declared that the Bible was corrupted by “ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests.” This view has not been relegated to Mormonism’s past. In the March 2008 edition of Ensign, Mormon Apostle Boyd K. Packer spent considerable space discussing the LDS notion that the “Bible once contained the fulness of the gospel,” but had been corrupted by the “great and abominable church” mentioned in 1 Nephi 13:26 (emphasis added). Packer wrote, “Jacob defined the great and abominable church in these words: ‘Wherefore, he that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, shall perish; for they are they who are the whore of all the earth; for they who are not for me are against me, saith our God’ (2 Nephi 10:16).” For many Bible-believing Christians, statements such as these will no doubt keep the embers of suspicion burning for quite some time.

— Bill McKeever