

What about statements that say the Lehites came here alone?

By Michael R. Ash

Published: 2010-03-22 00:17:48

From a textual and scientific standpoint there is no escaping the conclusion that other native populations co-existed and intermarried with the Lehites, so let's move on to our second question: What about statements from leaders or verses in the Book of Mormon that suggest Lehites arrived to a continent void of other people? This article and the following article will address that question.

While I recognize that more than one LDS Church leader has implicitly or explicitly stated the New World was uninhabited before arrival of the Jaredites, there is no official statement or revelation on this issue. Like Book of Mormon geography, the genetic and cultural constitution of New World inhabitants is not a doctrinal issue and opinions on the topic -- even when made by leaders -- should be weighed in light of our earlier discussion on the role of prophets.

Probably the most frequently quoted verses that imply the traditional folk view of Book of Mormon populations comes from 2 Nephi 1:6-11, wherein Lehi prophesied that "there shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord." Their promised land would be "kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations." And if the people would keep God's commandments they would possess this land "unto themselves ... and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance." But, Lehi warned, "when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief" God would "bring other nations unto them." These powerful nations would cause them to be "scattered and smitten."

To understand this prophecy in the context of a real-world setting, we must first ask what is meant by "this land." Modern readers tend to interpret this on a large scale -- that "this land" refers to all the Americas. In Part 19 of this series, however, it was shown that ancient writers frequently used references such as earth or land to denote a smaller geography. It's also significant to point out that in the Book of Mormon the "promised land" referred to more than one location (such as both in the Old and New Worlds) and in practice was attached to the righteous Nephites rather than to the land itself (more on this issue once we get to Book of Mormon geography).

A closer look at 2 Nephi is also helpful in determining what is really going on in regards to Lehi's prophecy. Chapter 1 takes place sometime shortly after the Lehites arrived in the New World. Lehi, who was nearing death, spoke to his posterity with counsel and warning. He said the Lord offered the land of promise in covenant to Lehi, his children and "all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord" (v. 5) and that none would come to the land except those brought by the hand of the Lord. So we can certainly presume that the Lord brought others into the Promised Land prior to, during and after Lehi's arrival. Such statements do not preclude the possibility that others already lived in

close proximity to the Lehites.

The Lord promised that their people would be "kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations" (v. 8) as well as "kept from all other nations" (v. 9). As ethnohistory specialist Brant Gardner explains, "Lehi comforts his people by indicating that there will not be foreign nations overrunning them 'as yet'" (Second Witness 2:25). While modern readers automatically assume that these "nations" must come from across the sea, in Lehi's limited-land view, other "nations" could come from over the next mountain or valley. Verse 9's "kept from all other nations" also means "kept from domination by."

And what does Lehi mean by "nations"? In Lehi's home world -- the ancient Middle East -- a "nation" would have referred to large powerful nations such as Babylon and Egypt. Smaller societies, such as the hamlets the Lehites might have encountered upon landing in the New World would not merit the description of "nations." As LDS researcher Matthew Roper explains, when Lehi prophesied that they would "possess" the "land unto themselves" (v. 9), this doesn't necessarily mean the Lehites are "the only inhabitants but can also mean -- as it often does in Book of Mormon contexts -- that a group has the ability to control and exercise authority over the land and its resources (see, for example, Mosiah 19:15; 23:29; 24:2; Alma 27:22, 26)" (Nephi's Neighbors, FARMS Review 15:2, 115).

MormonTimes.com is produced by the Deseret News in Salt Lake City, Utah.
It is not an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Copyright © 2009 Deseret News Publishing Company