

POLYNESIAN ORIGINS AND MIGRATIONS: ASPECTS OF THE MORMON VIEW AND CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP

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- 2 -

The thesis of this paper is: The Latter-day Saints view, that the Polynesians have ancestors from the Americas can be supported by scientific evidence. However, the same type of evidence indicates that the great bulk of the antecedents of this culture and of the Polynesian people have their origins somewhere in Asia. Hagoth, by LDS traditions, an ancestor of the Polynesians and a Book of Mormon character, cannot, by scientific evidence, be linked with an known migration into or within polynesia. Incomplete and frequently hazy Polynesian traditions, however, do support the contention that there was in prehistoric times, a contact with people who knew of the Biblical account of the patriarchs and the peoples of the Old Testament. This evidence, however, is controversial.

The argument presented here has nothing to do with a testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon or of the relationship of the Polynesians to the House of Israel. It is a Latter-day Saint truism that a testimony of the truths of the gospel is not based upon an scientific or human-generated evidence.

The Book of Mormon describes a man named Hagoth who flourished about the year 65 B.C. The Book of Alma 63:5-8, describes this man in a few terse verses:

5. And it came to pass that Hagoth, he being an exceedingly curious man, therefore he went forth and built him an exceedingly large ship, on the borders of the land Bountiful by the land Desolation, and launched it forth into the west sea, by the narrow neck which led into the land northward.
6. And behold, there were many of the Nephites who did enter therein and did sail forth with much provisions, and also many women and children; and they took their course northward. And thus ended the thirty and seventh year.
7. And in the thirty and eighth year, this man built other ships, and the first ship did also return, and many more people did enter into it; and they also took much provisions, and set out again to the land northward.
8. And it came to pass that they were never heard of more. And we suppose that they were drowned in the depths of the sea. And it came to pass that one other ship also did sail forth; and whither she did go we know not.

Hagoth has been presumed by some to be the Hawaii Loa of Hawaiian traditions, and a Book of Mormon and American ancestor of the Polynesian people. Moreover, more modern authorities, that is authorities of the Church, has cited Hagoth as an ancestor of the Polynesians. Patriarchal blessings that are conferred upon faithful Latter-day Saints have declared that Polynesians are of the house of Manasseh, one of the children of Joseph. Manasseh was the forefather of Lehi, the Book of Mormon prophet who migrated with his family from Jerusalem to the American continent in 600 B.C.

So much for the position of the Church. Now, what does modern science have to say about the migration patterns of the people of Polynesia? Generally speaking, scholars are agreed that there is a New World influence in Polynesia. The question is: how significant is this contact?

There were four major cultural groups in the Pacific Islands prior to the coming of the first Europeans in the Pacific during the age of the European discovery of the Pacific which began in the 16th century. These were the Australia Aborigines, among the most ancient inhabitants of the Pacific Islands. Carbon-14 dates place them in Australia 35 to 40,000 years ago. They were also a very culturally diverse group, and about 500 languages have been distinguished in Australia. Melanesia, the islands to the north of Australia and to the west of Polynesia, is the most culturally diverse area in the world today. There are literally hundreds of languages spoken in Melanesia, over 700 in Papua New Guinea alone. On the Melanesian borders of Polynesia there are local penetrations of Polynesians in such places as Ontong Jave, Renell and Belona Islands, Anuta, and others. Fiji, which also borders Melanesia and Polynesia, is obviously under the influence of both Melanesian and Polynesian peoples.

and cultures. In the eastern and coastal areas of Fiji there are strong Polynesian influences, while the peoples to the west and in the interior of the main island of Viti Levu are much more Melanesian, in appearance, language, and culture. To the north of Melanesia lie the Islands of Micronesia. There are eight or nine distinct cultural groups here.

To the east of Micronesia and Melanesia are the islands of the Polynesian triangle, an area that has as its three corners Hawaii in the north, Easter Island in the southeast, and New Zealand, home of the Maoris, in the southwest. Unlike the other Pacific island areas, the various cultures in Polynesia are variations on a central theme. The languages are very similar, almost being dialects rather than distinct languages. Cosmologies, traditions, legends, and genealogies, are all shared by all groups from Polynesia, again with local variations.

Biological evidence used to be thought to be more conclusive about defining origins and migrations of people than it is presently. Contemporary physical anthropologists tell us that things are not so simple as they once appeared to be. The Polynesians are apparently of at least two racial groups, the origins of which are not entirely obvious. Polynesians do share blood-group affinities with American Indians, but the significance of this may be less than it once appeared to be. There are stronger biological affinities between Polynesians and American Indians than any other racial groups, but the closest affinity between Polynesians and any other racial groups is with a people who live in the interior of Indonesia! In any event, serologists advise us to use blood typing with caution. Other factors, such as disease, may complicate the blood type situation. Nonetheless, it is a piece of evidence.

The strongest single piece of evidence linking Polynesians with aboriginal Americans is the sweet potato, which ethno-botanists declare

to be a plant of South American origin. However, some scientists insist that it is just as likely that a group left Polynesia, sailed to the Americas, picked up a load of sweet potatoes, and returned back to the Pacific Islands as it is that people migrated from the American Continent into the Pacific bringing with them the sweet potato.

One of the interesting things about Hagoth's voyage or voyages is that these were colonizing expeditions. As the Book of Alma records man and women and children went into the ships with "much provisions." These were obviously colonizing expeditions and they would certainly have taken with them a useful food product such as the sweet potato.

The linguistic evidence in Polynesia is not too supportive of the proposition that the portion of Polynesian culture has its origins in the Americas. There are very few Polynesian language-American Indian language cognates. The most interesting and significant one of these is probably kumala, which in its various forms is the generic term in Polynesia for the sweet potato. This also, according to some, is a Quechua Indian term. The Quechua are people who live along the western shores of South America. Other than this, it appears very obvious that the Polynesians shared the original language that they spoke with other people who spoke the Austronesian language, which is actually a family of languages. Austronesian speaking people extend from the island of Madagascar off the coast of Africa, through the Indian Ocean into Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines and across the Pacific as far as Easter Island. Austronesian speakers are also found in China and in Taiwan. In the jumble of peoples and culture that is Melanesia, Austronesian speakers and non-Austronesian speakers live side by side.

It would have been much easier to trace the origins and migrations of Polynesia if they had had a written language which could record the

wheres and whys of their voyaging. That they did travel great distance at sea is evident. The greatest single material achievement of the Polynesian people was in canoe building and Navigation. There is plenty of evidence, both traditional and scientific, to support the notion that there were extensive voyages in prehistoric times, that is pre-European times, between the various islands areas. As far as origins are concerned, the traditions are fragmentary and not too clear. One of the problems with using these traditions is that it is highly possible, and in some cases quite likely, that the traditional evidence became mixed with more modern views in such a way as to obscure the original traditions.

In Eastern Polynesia there are a number of stories which tell of people traveling from place to place over long distances. These stories talk about homelands such as Hawaiiki or others that were the ancestral jumping-off points for these people. In Western Polynesia, particularly in Tonga or Samoa, there appeared to be no traditions of voyages or migrations from other areas. Rather, these people affirmed that they began where they are at the present time. These are autchonomous theories, that is, they do not claim to have come from someplace else. Rather, they insist, they had their origins in Samoa or in Tonga.

Of interest to Latter-day Saints would be accounts in Polynesian tradition that support the belief that Polynesians and their ancestors came from the Americas during the Book of Mormon period. There are a number of such stories, including a story from Tahiti about an Adam and Eve-like figure, a Hawaiian story of a man like Joseph, the son of Jacob in the Book of Genesis, one Cain and Abel-type story from Tonga. A few of these will be cited here.

The missionary scholar, William Ellis, arrived in Tahiti in 1816, fifty years after its discovery by European explorers, but only a couple

of years after the first Christian converts were made there. He wrote this account which he discovered in Tahiti.

A very generally received Tahitian tradition is, that the first human pair was made by Taaroa, the principal deity acknowledged by the Tahitian nation. On more than one occasion, I have listened to the details of the people respecting his work of creation. They say, that after Taaroa had formed the world, he created man out of ararea, red earth. . . some relate that Taaroa one day called for the man by name. When he came, he caused him to fall asleep and that while he slept, he took out one of his ivi or bones, and with it made a woman, whom he gave to the man as his wife, and they became the progenitors of mankind.¹

The boy seaman, Will Mariner, who was captured and kept ashore in Tonga for a number of years in the early 1800's was told of a story about a man who murdered his younger brother and was then cursed by the Tongan God Tangaloa. Tangaloa said:

Put your canoes to sea, and sail to the east, to the great land which is there, and take up your abode there. Be your skins white like your minds, for your minds are pure; you shall be wise, making axes, and all riches whatsoever, and shall have large canoes. I will go myself and command the wind to blow from your land to Tonga; but they (the Tonga people) shall not be able to go with you with their bad canoes.

Tangaloa then spoke to the others:--You shall be black, because your minds are bad, and shall be destitute; you shall not be wise in useful things, neither shall you go to the great land of your brothers. How can you go with your bad canoes? But your brothers shall come to Tonga, and trade with you as they please.²

In Hawaii the Congregationalist missionary, Sheldon Dibble, collected a story in the 1830s about the character named Waikelenuiaiku, one of ten brothers and one daughter.

The story of Joseph is comparable to the story of Waikelenuiaiku, one of ten brothers and one daughter, the children of Waiku. Waikelenuiaiku was the favorite of his father, but was despised by his brothers, who threw him into a pit. The oldest brother drew him out of the pit and gave him to another man with instructions to care for him. Waikelenuiaiku fled to a country governed by a king named kamahoalii, where he was again imprisoned. While in

this prison Waikelenuiaiku told his prison companions to dream dreams and report them to him. Four of the prisoners dreamed dreams which Waikelenuiaiku interpreted. He told the dreamers to the first three dreams that they would die; to the fourth dreamer he promised deliverance and life. The dreams were fulfilled as Waikelenuiaiku had foretold. The fourth dreamer told the king of Waikelenuiaiku's power to interpret dreams. The king sent for him and made him chief in his kingdom.³

These stories were not accepted without skepticism. Ellis said, regarding the Adam and Eve like story that "this always appeared to me to be a mere recital of the Mosaic account of the creation which they have heard from some European, and I never placed any reliance on it, although they have repeatedly told me it was a tradition among them before any foreigner arrived."⁴

As far as the Cain and Abel story from Tonga, John Martin, who compiled Mariner's book says, regarding this story:

Mr. Mariner took particular pains to make inquiries respecting the above extraordinary story, with a view to discover whether it was only a corrupted relation of the Mosaic account; and he found that it was not universally known to the Tonga people. Most of the chiefs and matabooles [lesser chiefs, often learned men] were acquainted with it, but the bulk of the people seemed totally ignorant of it. This led him at first to suspect that the chiefs had obtained the leading facts from some of our modern missionaries, and had interwoven it with their own notions; but the oldest men affirmed their positive belief that it was an ancient traditional record, and that it was founded in truth.⁵

These are few of the interesting parallels with Old Testament characters who would have been known to a Book of Mormon people. We will say more about the reliability of these accounts a bit later.

Traditional Migration Accounts

We might also expect to find accounts in Polynesian traditions dealing with migrations of Polynesian peoples from other places. Such

a tradition is fairly well stated in Maori oral history which has the early Maoris leaving a homeland. Hawaiki, and sailing for New Zealand. The term Hawaii, or its variations, turns up in several places in Polynesia: Hawaii in the present-day Hawaii, and Savaii in Samoa. The ancient name for Raiatea in French Polynesia was, according to some, Havaii. The name also shows up in one Marquesan story in which the people of Hivaoa sailed to Havaii and back in a bamboo raft which have five levels, two below the water and three above.

There are, then, traditions of the movement of people from place to place--hardly surprising considering the island character of Polynesia. Migration accounts are more frequently found in Eastern Polynesia than in Western Polynesia, where autochthonous theories are the rule. Our question here, though, is whether we can find any tradition that suggests an affinity with the Hagoth account in the Book of Mormon, any event that occurred 1600 years before the first Europeans entered the Pacific to note and record any Polynesian traditions. The answer here is yes, but...In 1920, Handy recorded a Marquesan tradition of a great double canoe, the Kaahua, which sailed from Hivaoa east to Tafiti. (The Polynesian word Tafiti or Tahiti designates a foreign place.) Some explorers left the vessel there while others returned. Handy's informant insisted that the voyage was in the direction of the rising sun, that is, toward South America, not southwest toward the island of Tahiti.

The most striking Polynesian account of a Hagoth-like voyage is that of Hawaii Loa, or Hawaii-nui. (He is called Hawaii Loa or Ke Kowa i Hawaii in the Fornander story and Hawaii-nui in the Kepelino version.) Mormon tradition has it that Hawaii Loa and Hagoth are the same person, and LDS temple records show them as being the same.

The Hawaii Loa story is a part of the Kumuhonua legends referred to above.

A portion of Fornander's account which he got from Samuel Kamakau and Kepelino) follows:

Hawaii Loa, or Ke Kowa i Hawaii. He was one of the four children of Ainani ka Lani...Hawaii Loa and his brothers were born on the east coast of a country called Ka Aina kai Melemele a Kane (the land of the yellow or handsome sea). Hawaii Loa was a distinguished man and noted for his fishing excursions which would occupy sometimes months, sometimes the whole year, during which time he would roam about the ocean in his big vessel (waa), called also a ship (he moku), with his people, his crew and his officers and navigators. . . .

One time when they had thus been long out on the ocean, Makalii, the principal navigator, said to Hawaii Loa: "Let us steer the vessel in the direction of Iao, the Eastern Star, the discoverer of land. . . .There is land to the eastward, and here is a red star 'hoku ula' (Aldebaran) to guide us, and the land is there in the direction of those big stars which resemble a bird....

So they steered straight onward and arrived at the easternmost island. . . .They went ashore and found the country fertile and pleasant, filled with awa, coconut trees, etc., and Hawaii Loa the chief, called that land after his own name. Here they dwelt a long time and when their vessel was filled with food and with fish, they returned to their native country with the firm intention to come back to Hawaii-nei [i.e., here in Hawaii] which they preferred to their own country. They had left their wives and children at home; therefore they returned to fetch them.

And when they arrived at their own country and among their relations, they were detained a long time before they set out again for Hawaii.

At last Hawaii Loa started again, accompanied by his wife and children and dwelt in Hawaii and gave up all thought of ever returning to his native land. He was accompanied also in this voyage by a great multitude of people...steersmen, navigators, shipbuilders and this and that sort of people. Hawaii Loa was chief of all this people, and he alone brought his wife and children. All the others came singly without women. Hence Hawaii Loa is called the special progenitor of this nation.⁶

A problem with these traditional accounts is that they were recorded in the post-European period. Some of them were actually not written until almost a century after the arrival of the first Europeans. For example, the Hawaii Loa story, which is certainly suggestive of the Hagoth account, is part of a collection written by Abraham Fornander which he took

from notes furnished him by the Hawaiian historians Kepelino and Samuel Kamakau. No other Hawaiian tradition or legend refers to the Hawaii Loa account, according to Dorothy Barrere, who has written critically of these late 19th century Biblical-like traditions. Barrere accuses Kepelino and Kamakau of creating the Hawaii Loa Legend, saying:

In the Hawaii Loa legend(s) Fornander's informants departed from Biblically-inspired tales and entered the realm of pure invention in their attempts to account for the peopling of the Hawaiian islands. Kepelino's story as written in 1868 is a plausibly told legend, but the embellishments and "biographical" material found in Fornander's notes. . . . reveal the extent of the invention. They also disclose a knowledge of Pacific geography and of an ethnic relationship among Polynesian peoples that were unknown to the Hawaiians before western contact, and so could hardly have been incorporated in an authentic tradition.⁷

Barrere says that for Kepelino, "the problem of accounting for the peopling of Hawaii had been a topic for discussion among those who wish to replace the older mythological traditions with the more modern and credible account."⁸ Barrere accuses Kepelino and Kamakau of intellectual dishonesty and outright fabrication. These tales, she says, were part of "an ongoing attempt by some Hawaiians of that time introduce traditions compatible to Christian teachings."⁹

The Polynesian's capacity for adaption has been noted in more recent years. Alfred Metraux, in his study on Easter Island published a few years ago declares that:

The natives who are still acquainted with their folk literature have no scruples about introducing new details gained from visitors with whom they have discussed their islands' past. Lavacherty and I have our Easter Island friends an account of their ancestors' behavior towards the first voyagers who landed on the island. I was greatly surprised to find later that details the Easter Islanders had learned from us or from other travellers had slipped into the modern versions of these tales.¹⁰

The fact, of course, that these legendary accounts are under suspicion does not mean that they are therefore false or that they do not have some relationship with genuine traditions which had its origins in a common tradition carried by people initially from Jerusalem to the Americas and then to the Pacific. What we are simply saying here is that all of these things, perhaps, are not to be taken at face value.

Current explanations of Polynesian origins and migrations suggest, as has been said, that the bulk of the people and of the cultures have their origins somewhere in Asia, but that for a certainty there was a South American contact. Archeological evidence suggests that Western Polynesia, that is Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, were the first settled areas of polynesia. Fiji seem to been peopled by at least by 1300 B. C., Samoa, and Tonga by 1100 B.C. There appears then to have been migration from Western polynesia into the Marquesas islands and from thence to Eastern Polynesia in about A.D. 300. From here, according to the evidence we have to this date, Easter Island was inhabited by A.D. 400, Hawaii by A.D. 500, the Society island by A.D. 600, and New Zealand by A. D. 800. These dates, of course, are tentative, and as more archeological evidence is obtained it may indicate an even earlier settling of these areas.

Conclusion: For Mormons the relationship of the Polynesian peoples with the house of Israel is an unquestioned fact. It is, however, based upon faith, and not upon the wisdom of man. To rely upon questionable evidence from questionable sources to support, by scientific evidence, that the peoples of polynesia came from the Americas is perhaps unwise. Such information is better based upon faith. To utilize the reasoning of man to support one's position in this connection means that we must play the game by different set of rules. At the moment the winners in the

game are not those who support the settlement of Polynesia by a Book of Mormon people. It is unlikely that science can either prove or disapprove LDS beliefs about a Book of Mormon people settling in Polynesia. May I suggest, in concluding, that it does not matter. We have our faith, and what is most important, is not where the peoples of Polynesia came from but, rather, where they are going.

FOOTNOTES

My position on the relationship of traditional beliefs and the Hagoth account is developed more fully in my article, "Hagoth and the Polynesian Tradition," Brigham Young University Studies 17, Autumn 1976, 59-73. A summary of the theories of Polynesian origins is found in a chapter by Alan Howard, "Polynesian Origins and Migrations: A Review of Two Centuries of Speculation and Theory," in a 1967 Bernice P. Bishop Museum Publication, Polynesian Culture History.

¹William Ellis, Polynesian Researches. Polynesia (1831; reprint ed., Rutland, Vt. and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1969, p. 110.

²Will Mariner, An Account of the Natives of the Tonga Islands. . . Compiled from the Communications of W. Mariner by John Martin, 2 vols. (London: Constable, 1827), 2:112-13.

³Sheldon Dibble, A History of the Sandwich Islands (Honolulu: Thomas G. Thrum, 1909), p. 18.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 113

⁶Abraham Fornander, Fornander Collection of Hawaiian Antiquities and Folk-Lore, Memoirs of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Vol. 6 (Honolulu, 1919-1920), p. 278.

⁷Dorothy Barerre, The Kumuhonua Legends: A Study of Late Century Hawaiian Stories of Creation and Origins, Pacific Anthropological Records Number 3 (Honolulu: Department of Anthropology, Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1969), p. 38.

⁸Ibid., p. 37

⁹Ibid., p. 2

¹⁰Alfred Metraux, Easter Island (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957). p. 229.