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Abstract The Māori people read and understood the Book of Mormon from their own cultural perspective. Rather than examining particular verses for doctrinal content, the Māori viewed the Book of Mormon as a moral story of a people with failings and strengths. They likened the stories to themselves, feeling they lacked the spiritual strength to stay on a righteous path for long. They saw a tragic story of families in conflict and subtribes and tribes quarreling with each other and bent on revenge for personal insults and factional quarrels. The kinship ties seemed particularly relevant to them. The Book of Mormon can be read in multiple ways and will be interpreted according to the cultural background of those reading it.



A Māori View of the Book of Mormon

LOUIS MIDGLEY

“The Book of Mormon,” according to Richard Bushman, “portrays **another world** in many ways **alien to our OWN.**” This, he maintains, “is the hardest point for modern readers to deal with,” so “it has been difficult for Mormon and non-Mormon alike to **grasp** the real intellectual problem of the Book of Mormon.” Why? “The **preconceptions of the modern age** [have] led Mormons as well as critics **to see things** in the Book of Mormon **that are not there.**”





Most of the critics have supposed that the book is no more than a hodgepodge of Bible allusions, ideas drawn from Joseph Smith's New England milieu, and his imaginative story-telling. They characterize it as a random collection of unrelated notions, making it absurd to try to discover in the text a consistent Nephite culture or civilization.

Latter-day Saints generally have assumed that, since the Book of Mormon as they know it in English reads noticeably



Elaborately carved community meeting houses like this continued as centers of rural Māori life through the first half of the twentieth century and indicate the substantial degree of cultural continuity from pre-European days. Photo courtesy John W. Welch.

like their Bible, the cultural environment in which Book of Mormon events took place must have been roughly like that of the Old Testament. (They little understand how alien that Old Testament setting was when compared with our situation today and consequently how little of it we understand.) According to Bushman, in dealing with Book of Mormon religious teachings church members usually “employ a proof text method . . . taking passages [from the

This is the first of a series of articles explaining different ways in which various peoples have interpreted the Book of Mormon according to their particular cultural perspectives. It is an adaptation of part of the author's “A Singular Reading: The Māori and the Book of Mormon,” in Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 245–76.

Nephite record] out of context to prove a point.”² The points we try to prove are nearly always based on the assumption that Nephite beliefs and practices were essentially similar to those of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mormonism.

There are dangers inherent in reading the sacred record in either of these ways. Those who approach the Book of Mormon from the point of view that what is primary in it is a set of theological statements, on the one hand, or that it can be explained by currently fashionable secular explanations, on the other, both “lose sight of the larger world which the book evokes. The genius of the Book of Mormon, like that of many works of art, is that it brings an entire society and culture into existence, with a religion, an economy, a technology, a government, a geography, a sociology, all combined into a complete world.” We should, says Bushman, strive to grasp “this larger world and relate individual passages to greater structures if we are to find their broadest meaning.”³

To be sure, the basic message of the Book of Mormon can be read by people from any culture. Nephi's intentional “plainness” (2 Nephi 25:4) ensures that. Thus “the fulness of the gospel” can be discerned by all, although that “fulness” is only of core principles, not a complete inventory of doctrines springing from that core. Where a problem exists is in trying to discern those portions of the text that are more subtle. There is much wisdom and inspiration for us there that we may be missing if we are satisfied to read the scripture from just one—our usual—mind set. We should be anxious to learn more from the remarkable volume Mormon has prepared for us than gospel basics. At the feast of ideas, images, and meanings he presents in his book, we want to taste more than just bread and water, as initially satisfying as they may be to the hungry.

Of course not all Latter-day Saints read the Book of Mormon the same way. What they see in the book depends to a considerable extent on their cultural mooring. According to their history and also their immediate circumstances, they interpret its teachings and history in various ways. It would be naïve to suppose that LDS converts in Nigeria, Siberia, Japan, and Alabama will all draw the same range of meanings from the Nephite scripture. Certain aspects of its message they can share, but we can hardly suppose that any of us in our study of the book are capable of leaping clear across the cultural chasm that separates modern people from Mormon, the book's fourth-century A.D. editor in ancient America.

In this essay I explain how I learned about one group of Latter-day Saints who came to emphasize aspects of the Book of Mormon that were quite different from

those I took for granted out of my Utah background. I will describe how the saints I knew among the Māori, the native people of New Zealand, in the early 1950s read the Book of Mormon in a way that had never come to my mind. They tended to see it as though it were an account of their own ancestors' past, the past of a people much like themselves.

I do not relate this to make a point that the Māori were right and I was wrong, or that I was right and they were wrong. I now realize that we were looking at a complex record from which multiple meanings can be taken. The situation has a parallel in "reading" a piece of art. If one person sees a sculptured figure in one light while another views it from a different perspective, we do not suppose that one perception is "right" and the other "wrong." In the case of any artifact, and especially a book, different interpretations may mean only that there are unexplored points of view regarding it beyond our own. We benefit by opening ourselves up to potentially enlightening alternatives.

The Māori Encounter the Restored Gospel

The first Latter-day Saint missionaries to New Zealand arrived in 1854. At first they worked among the white settlers who had begun arriving a generation earlier. The Māori called them Pākehā (pronounced "pah-ke-hah"). Not until nearly thirty years later did Latter-day Saint messengers take the gospel to the Māori. When that happened, something surprising took place.

In many instances the message and mode of prayer of the early LDS missionaries seemed to those they met to fulfill prophecies that had been made earlier by Māori *tohunga* (persons deeply learned in traditional lore). Prophecies by at least four individual *tohunga* had said that their people should wait to adopt a version of Christianity that would be brought to them by young men from the east who would travel in pairs; they would raise their right hand (or, in one prophecy, their arms) over their heads when they prayed. When Mormon missionaries did arrive, their prayers took this form. Within a few decades thousands of Māori had joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A majority of the natives, however, joined other Christian churches or hybrid Christian-native religious groups.

What happened when the LDS missionaries arrived and taught these people differed from place to place. At that time there was no such thing as a unified "Māori people." A locality was inhabited by a particular extended family, subtribe, or tribe. Each group more or less had its own set of traditions and connections. The relationships within and between these groups might be governed by friendship,

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cautious alliance, or bitter enmity. In some places the missionaries found favor with a particular powerful family, so their cause prospered locally and among that group's allies elsewhere. In other settings, circumstances were such that the Mormons failed to establish any foothold.

Historical records and memories tell us little about what the Māori saints were thinking in that pioneering period when they began to identify with Mormonism and started to read the Book of Mormon (the literacy rate quite quickly came to be high). But we know what happens around the world when rich, powerful, literate Western European civilization has an impact on simpler peoples dependent on oral tradition. The body of information and ideas that had been central to the weaker group's identity was inevitably

there were two mission districts and dozens of small branches and home Sunday schools. Initially, my missionary companions were Māori just out of high school. We had scant hope that the Pākehā would be interested in what they considered to be a Māori church; nevertheless, we stopped at many of their farms and sometimes were treated kindly. But rarely were they interested in our message. Most of them had never been in a Māori home, so they were astonished that I depended routinely on their darker-skinned neighbors for food and shelter.

Mostly we visited Māori people. They were small farmers scattered over the countryside. Generally they clustered at or near a traditional *pā* (gathering place) that often had a community meeting house that was also used for our reli-

We were welcomed into every Māori home, LDS or not. They always insisted that we have *karakia* (a word that meant praying, preaching, and singing). Our participation in these activities, along with our expressions of love and blessing on their homes and families, was what we offered them in return for their wonderful hospitality.

eroded, corrupted, and eventually forgotten for the most part. We simply do not know how the process went on over a century ago in New Zealand, but the result certainly was that the native people lost their way. Yet at least for some of the Māori, Mormonism and particularly the Book of Mormon furnished them materials to build a new bridge between their past and the modern world in which they found themselves.

I will describe what I observed about the way the Māori tended to read the Book of Mormon in the area in which I worked beginning in 1950. At that time our missionary routine gave me an unusual opportunity to learn how different their thinking was about life, God, and that scripture. I had many chances to hear old Māori stories, listen to their preaching, and converse with them at length, both saints and others. I was a naïve participant-observer who was also deeply enthralled with the Book of Mormon; hence, I was curious about the way they read this book.

My first experience was in an area north of the capital, Auckland, the largest city in New Zealand. In the area

gious meetings. We were welcomed into every Māori home, LDS or not. They always insisted that we have *karakia* (a word that meant praying, preaching, and singing). Our participation in these activities, along with our expressions of love and blessing on their homes and families, was what we offered them in return for their wonderful hospitality. In these domestic devotional sessions I often told about the restoration of the gospel and Joseph Smith. Even the non-LDS people had heard this message before and often believed what we told them, although they did not act on their belief. After *karakia* we would eat a large meal and then continue in conversation as old stories were repeated—this was still an oral culture despite the fact that most could more or less read and write English.

I would tell them that the gospel had been restored through Joseph Smith and that the Book of Mormon was the word of God; therefore they should come into the church. They explained that their problems were not with our message but with sin. I was stunned by their candor. They explained in painful detail that they were too weak,

too addicted to beer or other vices, to join the church. They pointed out that they were very much like the people described in the Book of Mormon; they lacked the spiritual strength to stay on a righteous path for long. In fact, they saw the Nephite book as a description of their own situation, and they saw themselves as, at least partially and in some way, descendants of Lehi's colony in America.

What the Māori Saw in the Book of Mormon

The Māori read the Book of Mormon differently than I did. I was anxious to find proof texts and was busy harmonizing its teachings with what I understood to be correct doctrinal teaching back in Utah. The Māori, in contrast, saw it as a tragic story of families in conflict and subtribes and tribes quarreling with each other and bent on revenge for personal insults and factional quarrels. They looked more at the larger patterns of events and less at what might be construed from particular verses. They saw stories of ambitious rivals to traditional authority trying to carve out positions of power and territory for themselves. They perceived how ambition led to quarrels within families and between extended families and tribes. They understood the atonement as an exchange of gifts between our Heavenly Father and his children, somewhat in the way their own relationships were marked by reciprocal acts of hospitality as manifestations of love. They found that the Book of Mormon described patterns of events similar to those in their traditional lore as well as in their present situation. In that sense the book was *their* history, or at least it was their kind of history—a mirror of both the noble and base qualities in their own past and present, on an individual as well as a community level.

For the Māori I knew, the Book of Mormon was not, as it was for me, a source of information about puzzling doctrinal matters. Instead, they were fascinated by the narrative portions of the Book of Mormon. I merely glanced at those stories to locate particular teachings that interested me. They saw messages and moral instruction embedded in the stories. I focused on individual verses and saw them as authoritative teachings on matters I had learned from other books that the Māori saints were mostly unaware of. They tended to focus on context, on the accounts of evils inflicted on communities by pride and ambition, by struggles for power and the abuse of power, by quarrels and wars. They saw signs of kinship and the order it provides as well as the rivalry it engenders. In the Book of Mormon they found the consequences of divine blessings, and also the curse brought on by the breakdown of family ties. The rise of secret combinations was interpreted as a result of lawless gangs organized by ambitious leaders who had

created them as surrogate families that were no longer controlled by traditional standards.

The Māori were also astonished by certain Book of Mormon events that I took for granted. For example, they were stunned by the audacity of Nephi in challenging his older brothers, when he claimed to be the rightful interpreter of the revelations his father had received. Age and birth order were still powerful qualifications in Māori society, so the actions of young Nephi in challenging his elders were shocking. But precisely because it defied traditional understandings, they saw importance in the story of Nephi. They could also understand the opposition of Laman and his faction to Nephi's claims. They noticed and understood the persistence of insults and conflicts that fuel the factional disputes recorded so often in the Nephite record. They were



Mormon missionaries were among the few Pākehā who became active participants in Māori life. *Photo courtesy John W. Welch (the missionary shown is Welch's grandfather).*



Branches of the LDS Church in Māori areas were formed around large extended families. *Photo courtesy John W. Welch.*

reminded of similar tales of insults and resentments in their own past. They also noticed that some of the success of Nephite religious teachers seemed to depend on their skill in dealing through distant kin and hence involved subtle matters of kin relationships.

These people also found nothing surprising in how rapidly individuals and communities of Lehi's descendants forgot their duties. This was exactly what they considered the reality of their own lives and the history of their people. They not only believed that they were somehow related to the Nephite sailor Hagoth, and thus to Nephi's (not Laman's) tribe, but they also saw themselves replicating the tragic tale told in the Book of Mormon of a disobedient covenant people upon whom woes and darkness had come. To me, on the other hand, the ease with which the Nephite faithful fell away and later, when chastened by preachers or adverse circumstances, returned to the fold, was the least believable feature of the book.

It was not uncommon for missionaries to urge the Māori saints to begin to cull from the scriptures the kinds of proof texts we employed in teaching the gospel to the

Pākehā. However, the Māori tended to ignore such admonitions, fastening instead on the historical narratives and the messages they carried. They thought that much of importance to them was to be found in the moral lessons embedded in the stories.

On the contrary, I had learned to mine the Book of Mormon for discrete bits of information about divine and human things, and I had little appreciation for the way in which stories and their plots can carry a message. I was not sensitive to highly symbolic and formalized messages. Instead, I wanted the Māori saints to read the Book of Mormon for the kinds of things that I found interesting in it. But they loved the book for different reasons. First and foremost, they read it as a tale of a people much like themselves. The Māori were a tribal people with genealogies and accompanying accounts of noted ancestors. Much of Māori lore was directly or indirectly related to tales of family and tribal conflicts. The Māori were known for the ease with which they gave and received insults, and the passion with which they kept alive over many generations real or assumed

The Māori were known for the ease with which they gave and received insults, and the passion with which they kept alive over many generations real or assumed offenses by others, in the manner of the Lamanites and Nephites.

offenses by others, in the manner of the Lamanites and Nephites. The LDS Māori saw a dire warning against this sort of thing when they read the Book of Mormon.

I now see that a significant part of their identity was found in their belief that part of what they are as a people and as individuals is spelled out in the Nephite record. There is more to the Māori attachment to the Book of Mormon than a fascination with the story of Hagoth: The Book of Mormon supplies them with a way of holding on to certain noble portions of their traditional culture as they become a belief-centered people.

Hindsight

In 1950, when I first encountered the Māori way of reading the Book of Mormon, I was confident that they were missing some important elements of the book. Perhaps I was right. What I did not initially see, however, was that *my* way of reading the Book of Mormon had its limitations. With more experience I now see that their way of reading has certain advantages and may open up meanings that I had overlooked precisely because of the limits of the cultural horizon within which I was taught to read scripture.

I now believe there is an important lesson to be learned about the limits imposed on us by our own rather narrow cultural horizon as we approach our sacred texts. At least in part I have learned this lesson from my early encounter with the Māori way of handling the Book of Mormon. We make a mistake when we assume that our (Deseret) way, whatever that may be, is the only way to faithfully read the scriptures. My belief, bolstered by reflections on my experience among the Māori, is that there are multiple plausible, alternative, and still faithful, ways of reading Mormon's record. Our traditional, Utah-based way seems completely natural to us. Yet it does not exhaust the range of meanings to be found in that inexhaustible store of meanings in the sacred books.

We majority Latter-day Saints can, I believe, benefit from a deepened and broadened understanding of God's dealings with humanity shown to us by other cultural traditions. They can provide us with alternative perspectives on sacred history that they gain by bringing to bear on the scriptures different cultural assumptions than ours. Our fellow saints from other backgrounds can help us break out of our taken-for-granted cultural cocoon. I believe that saints who escape the confines of their cultural assumptions can, like an insect pupa emerging from its protective chrysalis, move to a more beautiful and freer state of being—the spiritual and cultural equivalent of becoming a butterfly. My experience with the Māori and their manner of seeing the Book of Mormon tended to move that process ahead in my life. □

ENDNOTES

A Māori View of the Book of Mormon Louis Midgley

1. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 133.
2. Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History," in *New Views of Mormon History: Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington*, ed. Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 5.
3. Ibid.