



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 24 | Number 1

Article 1

January 2004

Review Responds to Distortions of DNA Evidence, Mormon Origins

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights>



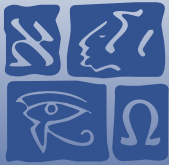
Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(2004) "Review Responds to Distortions of DNA Evidence, Mormon Origins," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 24: No. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol24/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD

VOLUME 24 | 2004

Number 1

<http://farms.byu.edu>

Review Responds to Distortions of DNA Evidence, Mormon Origins

The latest issue of the *FARMS Review* (vol. 15, no. 2, 2003) responds in full measure to two works challenging the historicity of the Book of Mormon and the foundational events of the restored Church of Jesus Christ. The contributing scholars not only expose fatal flaws in the critics' arguments and methods but also provide background information and perspectives that readers will find instructive. In addition, this issue of the *Review* evaluates several other recent publications in Mormon studies and includes a Book of Mormon bibliography for 2002.

In his introduction, *Review* editor Daniel C. Peterson focuses his remarks on Thomas W. Murphy, heralded by his partisans as a "Mormon Galileo" for his supposedly devastating claim that DNA science discredits the Book of Mormon. "Is Thomas Murphy really the Galileo of Mormonism?" Peterson asks. In answer he quotes BYU biology professor Michael Whiting, who told the *Los Angeles Times*, "It's an inappropriate comparison. The difference is Galileo got the science right. I don't think Murphy has." Peterson's extensive comments on the Murphy affair, and on Grant H. Palmer's book that challenges fundamental LDS beliefs from a so-called insider's view, establish an enlightening context for the scholarly refutations that follow.

DNA and the Book of Mormon

The first five papers examine the question of whether DNA science can be said to disprove the Book of Mormon. David A. McClellan, a BYU biology professor, provides a helpful conceptual framework for appreciating the complexity of DNA science and the crucial necessity of formulating testable hypotheses

and exercising caution in interpreting ambiguous data and drawing conclusions. The basic concepts that he outlines in his paper, "Detecting Lehi's Genetic Signature: Possible, Probable, or Not?" are intended to "empower nonbiologists to judge for themselves the accuracy of [my] conclusions . . . [which] I am confident . . . will illustrate the complete harmony between scientific thought and the fundamentals of Latter-day Saint belief." He observes that "detractors have no basis for their claims that current human genetic data calls into question the story line of the Book of Mormon. Current genetic data cannot, nor will any future data ever, falsify the Book of Mormon story line." McClellan explains at length in nontechnical terms why, according to the philosophy of the scientific method, that is so—namely, because the record's story line "does not present a rejectable hypothesis. Genetic data can never be used to invalidate these claims; its only possible use would be to support them."

In "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations," Institute scholar Matthew Roper argues that "there is no good reason to assume [as critics do] that Native American lineages and ancestors must be *exclusively* Israelite" in order for scientific fact to agree with Book of Mormon claims. Roper reviews Joseph Smith's statements regarding the Lamanite heritage of the American Indians and draws on the published opinions of B. H. Roberts, Orson Pratt, and other notable

in this issue

- Update: Was Aminadab a Zoramite?
- Lecture Report
- Divine Providence in History

continued on page 6

Review continued from page 1

Latter-day Saint leaders and scholars, as well as the Book of Mormon itself, to debunk that notion.

In his second paper, “Swimming in the Gene Pool: Israelite Kinship Relations, Genes, and Genealogy,” Roper explains that kinship terms such as *Israelite*, *Lamanite*, and *Nephite* are not necessarily indicative of genetic distinctions, because over time they take on sociocultural and political meanings and include outsiders who

intermixed with those groups. Roper observes that although there is no scriptural warrant behind the idea that *all* Native Americans are Lehi’s literal descendants, that scenario is in fact possible: an entire population’s common ancestry can emerge

within hundreds (rather than thousands) of years, as contemporary models of population genetics demonstrate. Even so, he concludes, “scientific studies in genetics at present permit only a very finite peek at the panoramic mosaic of an individual’s ancestry.”

In “Elusive Israel and the Numerical Dynamics of Population Mixing,” linguist Brian Stubbs uses mathematical probabilities to demonstrate how quickly (within eight generations) one population can diffuse into another and become genetically indistinguishable from it. This biological phenomenon makes “easily feasible” the view that “most Amerindians are descended from Book of Mormon peoples.” Stubbs identifies several serious flaws in the *DNA vs. the Book of Mormon* video put out by Living Hope Ministries and concludes that DNA science is still in its infancy and may yet yield “evidence for multitudes of Lehite posterity in the Americas.”

Senior Institute scholar John A. Tvedtnes responds to Murphy on another matter in “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon.” Tvedtnes easily refutes the idea that the Nephites’ use of pejorative terms to describe their Lamanite brethren makes the Book of Mormon a racist and thus fraudulent book because it reflects typical

19th-century attitudes introduced by Joseph Smith. He notes, “If Joseph Smith’s racism is reflected in the Book of Mormon, why does that volume have large numbers of Lamanites becoming righteous—indeed, more righteous than the Nephites—in the decades before Christ’s appearance?” He discusses the difference between the Lamanites’ curse (separation from God) and the later mark of the curse (a change in skin color), noting that many of the epithets applied to the Lamanites were based on geographic and

cultural differences, not on skin color. Tvedtnes finds the critics’ arguments fatally flawed and argues that the Book of Mormon “advocates and idealizes the exact opposite [of racist attitudes]: . . . peace, happiness, and unity through the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“Scientific studies in genetics at present permit only a very finite peek at the panoramic mosaic of an individual’s ancestry.”

Historicity of Mormon Origins

Four reviews respond to Grant H. Palmer’s *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*. Palmer is a retired CES employee whose outsider, revisionist polemic against Joseph Smith and the origins of Mormonism has been publicized as (in the words of reviewer Steven C. Harper) “the benevolent act of a knowledgeable, official church teacher, self-commissioned to save the Saints from ignorance.”

In “The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (But Look What He Doesn’t Tell Us),” Davis Bitton, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Utah who served as assistant historian for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, focuses on Palmer’s duplicity in masquerading as a church insider and reliable “spokesman for a virtual unanimity of scholarly opinion.” Bitton demonstrates the emptiness of that position and takes Palmer to task on many points: his trivialization of personal inspiration, selective disbelief of Joseph Smith’s teachings and history, misrepresentation of opposing scholarly views, dismissal of relevant facts and scholarship, and overall disingenuousness and incongruity of method.

In “A One-Sided View of Mormon Origins” Mark Ashurst-McGee, a scholar at BYU’s Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, presents faithful alternative interpretations of the founding events that Palmer challenges and misinterprets in pursuing his agenda of “demythologizing” Mormon origins. For example, Palmer portrays the angel Moroni as a capricious guardian spirit of hidden treasure and argues that Joseph Smith borrowed his account from Romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story “The Golden Pot.” Ashurst-McGee finds the alleged parallels between the two accounts to be weak, forced, or nonexistent and Palmer’s analysis to be “studded with factual errors” and “key manipulations” and devoid of convincing evidence. Ashurst-McGee goes on to counter Palmer’s claim that Smith dropped superstitious dimensions of the encounter with Moroni in order to give it a Judeo-Christian legitimacy at the time the church was founded; he shows that the historical record does not support Palmer’s view but does affirm the accuracy and integrity of Joseph Smith’s account.

Steven C. Harper, an assistant professor of church history and doctrine at BYU, continues the discussion of how Palmer ignores the rules of sound historical scholarship in order to secularize Joseph Smith’s religious encounters. In “Trustworthy History?” Harper discredits Palmer’s claim to be writing “New Mormon History,” instead placing him squarely in “an ideological tradition abandoned by the historical profession generally”—characterized by an overconfidence that past events can be accurately and scientifically discerned, combined with a skepticism of revelation and faith. “Palmer does not realize that there is no promised land where the past is unmediated, where the truth about what really happened is only as far away as the last edition of original documents.” Harper offers correctives to Palmer’s take on the witnesses of the gold plates, priesthood restoration, and the first vision and concludes that Palmer’s tendentious book “bespeaks incongruity. It feigns objectivity. It defines incredibility.”

In “Prying into Palmer,” Louis Midgley, a BYU professor emeritus of political science, uncovers

the roots of Palmer’s book in its first incarnation in 1984, a draft entitled “New York Mormonism,” written under the anti-Mormon pseudonym of *Paul Pry Jr.* Midgley demonstrates that the very foundations of *An Insider’s View* are shaky in that “Palmer had swallowed, ‘hook, line, and salamander,’ the revisionist anti-Mormon propaganda popular at that time.” Midgley also fleshes out Palmer’s pertinent career background and explores how Palmer has filled the void created by his disbelief with a vague “sentimentality about Jesus.”

On the brighter side, a book published in 2001, *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, edited by BYU professor of ancient scripture Paul Y. Hoskisson, contains essays by believing Latter-day Saint scholars who defend the historical integrity of the Book of Mormon and other works in the Latter-day Saint scriptural canon. In “Holding Fast to the Word,” reviewer Keith H. Lane, a religion professor at BYU–Hawaii, notes a recent trend among some secular scholars to “give an alternative reading to Latter-day scripture, seeing, for example, the Book of Mormon as an elaborate parable or as a book containing meaningful ethics or theology, but whose characters and events have no basis in history and whose origin is not what Joseph Smith claimed it was.” For that reason, Lane observes, *Historicity* is a timely and important book. It presents detailed, well-reasoned arguments about why there can be no middle ground in this matter and why Latter-day Saints can confidently hold fast to their traditional understandings and dismiss misguided naturalistic explanations of their revealed scripture.

This issue of the *Review* looks at other recent publications as well: Will Bagley’s *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, Robert A. Pate’s *Mapping the Book of Mormon*, Boyd Petersen’s *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*, Clark Pinnock’s *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness*, and Robert V. Remini’s *Joseph Smith*.

To purchase a copy of the *FARMS Review*, use the enclosed mail-order form or visit the FARMS section (under “BYU Publications”) of byubookstore.com. 