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The Editor's Notebook

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Abstract Introduction to the current issue.

THE EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

Recent media attention to DNA studies that potentially touch on the Book of Mormon's reliability as a record of ancient American peoples stands within the wider debate about whether science can either establish or disprove events that belong to the domains of history and faith. Naïveté suggests that science can serve as a dispassionate arbiter of questions of history and faith, a view that experience declares to be too simple. The real issues boil down to two—designing a scientific experiment that will accurately measure what has happened among human populations, and then coming to recognize the limitations of science when dealing with matters of history. Properly, one of the few scientific endeavors devised to uncover our past is archaeology. However, in the interpretation of archaeological data, the questions that demand answers show that an accurate understanding does not automatically come with a person's efforts to dig literally into the earth.

On the topic of DNA and the Book of Mormon, readers are treated to the considered opinions of four specialists in the field of DNA research. Providing essential context for that collective discussion is the article by John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, which sets out the major cultural, historical, and theological questions that a person must attempt to answer before turning to science. Though necessarily brief, their answers to 14 questions bring us inside what scholars have learned during the past century about ancient America.

Michael F. Whiting's DNA-related work on walking sticks that re-evolved the ability to fly 50 million years after losing it was featured in the 16 January 2003 issue of the journal *Nature.* Whiting, a BYU professor of biology, frames the challenges of creating an experiment that could determine scientifically which Native Americans are descendants of any of the three known colonizing groups mentioned in the Book of Mormon. He concludes that, given the present state of science, such an experiment is impossible to design and would not be taken seriously by the scientific community.

In a short piece, John M. Butler, the lead scientist in developing DNA tests that identify the victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, points to the insurmountable difficulties in identifying the genetic heritage of the chief ancestors of the Lehite peoples. One of his points is that the females in the Lehite colonies all inherited their mitochondrial DNA from Ishmael's wife, about whom we know almost nothing, including whether she was a full-blooded Israelite.

A pair of biologists from Idaho State University, D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens, focus on DNA questions touching on the descendants of Lehi and Sariah. One of their chief points has to do with the traceable genetic characteristics that a person inherits from distant ancestors. By appealing to straightforward genealogical research, they show that the chance of scientifically tracing a person's genetic heritage by DNA alone is highly remote. This observation has important consequences for any DNA research that seeks to identify descendants of the Lamanite survivors from the devastating wars of the fourth century A.D.

Continuing the scientific interest, but in a very different vein, Benjamin R. Jordan examines the scientific literature on ice-core samples taken from Greenland and Antarctica for evidence of volcanic activity between A.D. 30 and 45. As most readers may know, a recent study by BYU's Bart J. Kowallis has pointed to the possibility that the terrible storm that occurred in the New World at the time of Jesus' death and that is described in 3 Nephi 8 was the result of volcanic activity. Jordan analyzes this hypothesis in light of the latest ice-core research.

Following a completely different line of research, Paul Mouritsen tests critics' claims that Joseph Smith wrote into the Book of Mormon the expressions *secret combinations* and *flaxen cord* rather than translating them. Such claims assume that these expressions were peculiar to Joseph Smith's environment and that he simply borrowed them. Mouritsen's careful probe demonstrates that these terms were actually in widespread usage and appear with very different meanings in the Book of Mormon.

The studies of Leslie A. Taylor and Mark D. Thomas lead us within the pages of the Book of Mormon itself. Taylor very deftly takes off the wrappings that surround the expression *the word of God* and shows the rich literary and cultural adornments that attach to this phrase in the Book of Mormon, measuring it against what is known from the ancient world. On his part, Thomas takes a fresh look at Moroni's three attempts to bring the Book of Mormon to a close. He skillfully tests the notion that Moroni's three dissimilar endings actually form a "remarkable narrative strategy" that resolves the irony of ending a "book of life" as a "book of death."

Once again, the unusual variety of studies that grow out of the Book of Mormon and its world demonstrates the rich character of its pages and the significance of its message. —ED.