

# A Singular Reading: The Maori and the Book of Mormon

Louis Midgley

## **A Personal Introduction**

As an honor to John Sorenson, I wish to describe and comment on the way in which some of the Latter-day Saints in New Zealand have approached the Book of Mormon. Sorenson justly deserves recognition for his work on the Book of Mormon. For many years he prepared learned responses to the critics of the Book of Mormon and also to those anxious to engage in woolly-headed speculation about its contents.<sup>1</sup> But his interest in the peoples of the South Pacific is less well-known. It turns out that he shares my interest in the Maori.<sup>2</sup>

On one occasion I discovered that Sorenson had prepared a detailed commentary and criticism on a 1965 study by Erik Schwimmer entitled “Mormonism in a Maori Village: A Study in Social Change.”<sup>3</sup> In 1950 this so-called village consisted of four small Latter-day Saint branches clustered along a seven-mile stretch of coast just south of the entrance to the Bay of Islands. My mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints began that same year with visits to the Maori who in 1965 were members of the Whangaruru Ward and included in Schwimmer’s study of what he considered a Mormon religious revival in that area. On another occasion John and I discussed Elder John H. Groberg’s remarkable account of his missionary experiences in the early 1950s in Tonga.<sup>4</sup> Sorenson indicated that this book rang true; his own experiences among the Rarotongans in the Cook Islands, though they took place five hundred miles to the east and were several years earlier, were strikingly similar.

## **Differing Ways of Reading the Book of Mormon**

“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,” and so “it has been difficult for Mormon and non-Mormon alike to grasp the real intellectual problem of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup>

Bushman also argues that readers must realize that the Book of Mormon is “more than a patchwork of theological assertions, or a miscellany of statements about the Indians, like, for example, Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews*. We may miss the point if we treat the Book of Mormon as if it were that kind of hodgepodge.”<sup>7</sup> And Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment assumptions about the world shield us from subtle matters found in the Book of Mormon. Unfortunately, readers tend to “employ a proof text method in [their] analyses, taking passages out of context to prove a point,” while critics “seek to associate a few words or an episode with [Joseph] Smith or his time, the Masons here, republican ideology there, then a touch of Arminianism or of evangelical conversion preaching.”<sup>8</sup>

There are dangers inherent in such readings. For example, those who approach the Book of Mormon assuming that it is an assortment of theological opinions or that it can be explained by currently fashionable secular explanations “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.”<sup>9</sup> We should strive to

grasp “this larger world and relate individual passages to greater structures if we are to find their broadest meaning.”<sup>10</sup> We need to focus our attention on the world from which the Book of Mormon speaks.

But how can we come to know this world? Bushman holds that the Book of Mormon has “a peculiar power to draw readers into its world.”<sup>11</sup> Not all Latter-day Saints read the Book of Mormon the same way. What they see in the book depends to some extent on their particular cultural horizon. According to their immediate circumstances and the kinds of questions that concern them most—factors influenced at least partly by cultural differences—they necessarily appropriate its teachings and history in different ways. I will describe how the Maori in the early 1950s tended to read the Book of Mormon as an account of their past, or the past of a people much like themselves in various interesting ways.

### **The Maori Encounter the Restored Gospel**

The first Latter-day Saint missionaries to New Zealand arrived in 1854. Their work in and near Wellington and Christchurch was among those the Maori called Pakeha,<sup>12</sup> the white strangers who settled in Aotearoa<sup>13</sup> beginning in the early 1800s. Latter-day Saint missionaries took the restored gospel to the Maori in the 1880s. Initially, the missionaries were wholly unfamiliar with Maori customs, traditions, and language, and they had to rely on native translators.

Success with the Maori started north of Wellington with visits to Maori *pa*.<sup>14</sup> These small communities consisted of *whanau* (extended families) and perhaps one or more *hapu* (subtribes), often clustered around a *marae*.<sup>15</sup> When the missionaries arrived at a *pa*, they were often greeted by the Maori in the traditional fashion.<sup>16</sup> After they had explained the reason for their visit, they would be invited to preach and pray. When the missionaries made friends with the *rangatira* (heads of *whanau*) or the *ariki* (chiefs) of the *hapu* in control of a *marae*, they soon discovered that their new friends had kinfolk in other places who might assist in the favorable reception of their message. They crossed the Rimutaka Mountains east of Wellington to the Wairarapa area and then moved up the east coast to the Mahia Peninsula and Gisborne. There they encountered an *iwi* (a word meaning “bone” that identifies a tribe or alliance of *hapu*) known as the Ngati Kahungunu.<sup>17</sup>

In many instances the message and mode of prayer of the early Latter-day Saint missionaries seemed to those they encountered to be fulfillments of prophecies by Maori *tohunga* (skilled, learned persons, sometimes also charismatic figures). For example, unbeknown to the missionaries, the chiefs and leading *tohunga* of the Ngati Kahungunu had held a *hui* (meeting or conference)<sup>18</sup> in March 1881 at the dedication of a new meetinghouse at Te Ore Ore, near Masterton.<sup>19</sup> One of the questions considered at this *hui* was which of the Christian denominations was best for the tribe. They were dissatisfied with the Anglican and other sectarian versions of Christianity. After days of fasting and prayer, Paora Potangaroa, an aged *ariki* with great *mana* (prestige, authority, spiritual power), announced that none of the Christian denominations were right for the Maori.<sup>20</sup> He dictated what he called *Te Kawenata* (covenant), which soon thereafter some of the Maori converts saw fulfilled through their reception of the restored gospel.<sup>21</sup>

But other Maori *tohunga* had also issued what were considered prophecies that to the early Maori Latter-day Saints described the coming of their new faith and announced the signs by which it could be identified. From the Latter-day Saint perspective of the Maori, this new faith would be brought to their people by young men from the east who would travel in pairs, raise their right hands (or in one case their arms) over their heads when they

prayed,<sup>22</sup> and so forth. The Latter-day Saint missionaries and their message seemed to the early Maori Latter-day Saints to fulfill prophecies of four *tohunga* since as early as 1830. Within a few decades thousands of Maori had joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and numerous small branches had been established around the North Island. It seems that the Maori, especially those on the east coast of the North Island, had been prepared to receive the restored gospel.<sup>23</sup>

Some of the Maori accepted the restored gospel at least partly because they felt that Latter-day Saint beliefs were similar to teachings they already partly understood but could not find in the Christian denominations with which they were familiar. While Maori religion generally involved seeing the divine in oceans, trees, rivers, mountains, and so forth, some *tohunga* had preserved old teachings concerning a god known as *Io Matua* (Io, the father of all). The Io cult also included teachings about the origin of souls and their fate after death.<sup>24</sup> Pieter H. de Bres got it right when he argued in 1971 that “the Mormons have incorporated in their theology the Maori religious concept *Io*, believed by many to be the supreme God of the ancient Maori. The *Io* myth, which has become part of the belief of the Mormon Maori, proves to him that the ancient Maori had a conception of God similar to that of the Israelites. This does not only suggest that the ancestry of the Maori is rooted in the Bible, but it also gives lustre to the Maori past.”<sup>25</sup> But some writers claim that the detailed teachings of the Io cult had been fashioned in the 1850s under Christian influences on traditional Maori lore.<sup>26</sup> One writer argues that “it will never be known for certain how old the Io tradition was. A number of modern scholars have doubted that the idea of a supreme God in Polynesia antedated Christianity.”<sup>27</sup>

However, Io was also known in the Cook Islands and elsewhere in the eastern Pacific.<sup>28</sup> At least the name *Io* and some or even much of what went into the Io cult in Aotearoa/New Zealand seems to predate possible Christian influences on Maori traditions. For both the Maori and the Rarotongans to have independently fashioned both the name and a strikingly similar ideology would be crediting them with extraordinary imaginative powers. Be that as it may, striking parallels to the Maori Io cult can be found among the aboriginal peoples elsewhere in the eastern Pacific.

The best account of the Maori Saints is found in R. Lanier Britsch’s history of Latter-day Saints in the Pacific.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, though this account is both detailed and competently done, it contains virtually nothing about how the Maori read the Book of Mormon. Peter Lineham, an astute non-Mormon historian, has written a sensitive treatment of what he believes were the transactions that took place between differing cultural horizons beginning in the 1880s as the Maori became Latter-day Saints.<sup>30</sup> But he also has little to say about the way the Maori read the scriptures, including the Book of Mormon.

There are reasons for the neglect of this topic. Most of what can now be recovered by historians about the Maori Saints is found in mission records and missionary diaries. For the most part, these sources are silent on many aspects of how the Maori experienced and understood the restored gospel. The Maori have oral traditions but have left virtually no records. Of course, a story can be built on memories and oral traditions, as well as on textual materials, but professional historians are apprehensive about grounding accounts in anything other than texts or text analogues.<sup>31</sup>

### **Getting Behind the Surface of Events**

Lineham strove to discover “what was involved on both sides of the cultural exchange” as the Maori became Latter-day Saints. He viewed the process of Maori conversion to Mormon teachings as a cultural transaction wholly understandable in secular terms. Given his agenda, he had little to say about the way the Maori read the Book of Mormon. I wish to describe what I observed about the way the Maori tended to read the Book of Mormon. From 1950 through 1952 I heard the old stories, listened to the preaching, and conversed with the Maori Saints. I was a kind of naive participant-observer. My own enthrallment with the Book of Mormon, coupled with my fondness for making it the key to the restoration of the gospel, led to conversations about it with my Maori friends.

From virtually the beginning of their encounter with Anglican, Methodist, and Roman Catholic missionaries, the Maori entertained the notion that they were linked in some unknown way to ancient Israel, perhaps to the lost tribes or other descendants of migrating biblical peoples. This is, of course, rather well-known. Lineham argued that the Latter-day Saint missionaries “associated the Mormon message with the popular Maori desire to ‘locate’ themselves in the Bible.”<sup>32</sup> And the Book of Mormon became the special link. Lineham thus noted that “when missionaries wanted to get support for translating the Book of Mormon, they emphasized that ‘it was a history of God’s dealings with their forefathers.’”<sup>33</sup>

It is, however, a mistake to assume that Latter-day Saint missionaries taught the Maori that the peoples described in the Book of Mormon were somehow part of their past. It seems just as likely that the Maori themselves made the connection between the Book of Mormon and their past, for the missionaries initially approached the Maori with virtually no understanding of their culture or lore. It is more likely that the Maori Saints, finding in the book of Alma the brief account of seafaring adventurers who eventually disappeared somewhere in the Pacific, drew the conclusion that Hagoth’s people had somehow touched their own people, thereby linking them in some way to the Nephites and hence to Israel.<sup>34</sup>

It is also a mistake—all too common—to assume that the Maori Saints see themselves as Lamanites. Instead, the Maori Saints think of themselves as somehow at least partly of Nephite descent.<sup>35</sup> The Maori also do not see themselves as involved in the “Lamanite curse of a dark skin.”<sup>36</sup> They may, it is true, sometimes liken themselves to the Lamanites, saying that in certain acts of forgetfulness or rebellion they are *like* the Lamanites; but the Maori Saints trace part of their roots to the Nephite faction, and not to the Lamanite faction, of Lehi’s colony.

Lineham also mentions that the “passionate and fanciful exegesis of the Bible by Maori Saints (for example, rejecting Mihinare [Anglican] baptism because making the sign of the cross over a person was to consign the person to the evil power of the cross) reflected the way in which Maori interpreted stories of their own past.”<sup>37</sup> Lineham is certainly correct in holding that the Maori tended to interpret the scriptures through the categories available to them in their own culture and traditions. Lineham claims that the Book of Mormon accounts “of Israel in America fascinated many Maori,” but he also believes “it is difficult to judge the extent to which it became part of Maori literature.”<sup>38</sup> Difficult but not impossible, as I will attempt to show.

### **Kinship and Tribes**

Traditional Maori society centers on kinship relations among extended families, subtribes, and tribes, all symbolized by ancestors common to each grouping. Elaborate genealogies keep these things sorted out. Many Maori can still trace their ancestral tribal identities back to, for example, a number of legendary canoes—the so-called Great Fleet—that brought them to New Zealand from places like Rarotonga in the Cook Islands or from

Raiatea in the Society Islands in the 1300s and that seem to have moved them around Aotearoa/New Zealand. Archaeological evidence indicates that a people very much like the Maori may have inhabited Aotearoa/New Zealand perhaps as early as AD 800.<sup>39</sup> Be that as it may, the lives of the Maori were once entirely organized around what we tend to label myths, legends, and genealogies that provided them with an identity and a structured way of life. With the arrival of the Pakeha, at least some but not all of this knowledge was lost or transformed.

The Europeans found in the Maori a people who had to make do in a rather cold, densely forested, mountainous land and who lived without land mammals other than the rats and dogs they had brought with them from the eastern Pacific. The Maori lived on fern roots, fish, and other seafood, and they cultivated *kumara* (a sweet potato). It is little wonder that the Maori were attracted by the material culture of the Pakeha. They soon acquired a taste for such things as firearms, land mammals, woolen blankets, metal tools, and leather. They could see that European clothing and woolen blankets were better than bird feathers and flax clothing. The Pakeha also made foods and drink available that were previously unknown to the Maori, who quickly became fond of pork and enslaved by beer. The encounter with the Pakeha immediately began the more or less rapid transformation of elements of Maori material culture.

The Pakeha also brought to the Maori the Bible and sectarian conflicts over its meaning. Soon after their initial contact with the Maori, Christian missionaries and others began recording Maori lore and established a remarkable written version of the previously unwritten Maori language.<sup>40</sup> With British rigor and persistence, they set out to teach the Maori to read their own language.<sup>41</sup> One reason for this effort was to make the Bible and the wonders of a Christian (and English) civilization available to the primitive, pagan Maori. Bronwyn Elsmore describes the process by which Maori became familiar with the Bible: "Bearing in mind the Maori's extraordinary enthusiasm for learning to read, and the extreme rapidity with which the skills of literacy spread, then even should the numbers of scriptures made available to the Maori be few to begin with, it is most likely that knowledge of the content of each volume spread quickly and widely."<sup>42</sup> So it was not long before many and eventually most Maori were literate and even eventually bilingual, and also at least nominally Christian.

One writer claims that "by the 1880s New Zealand had one of the highest rates of literacy in the world—a rate which was pushed up by the phenomenal levels of literacy among Maori youth. There was a pervading sense in Maori society of the new displacing the old."<sup>43</sup> As a result, "the impact of literacy, also introduced by the missionaries, quickly undermined the precepts of the Maori oral tradition."<sup>44</sup> The culture flowing from and regulated by oral traditions began to erode.

Soon after various Maori chiefs signed the Treaty of Waitangi<sup>45</sup> on 6 February 1840, at least some of the Maori found themselves increasingly at odds with the Pakeha. One reason was that the Pakeha saw themselves as bearers of a superior Christian civilization and loathed Maori learning and the culture it sustained and regulated. But even more important, it seemed to the Maori that Pakeha greed violated the very Christian principles they had been taught by Anglican and other missionaries. This greed was manifested in the theft of Maori lands, which presumably were protected by the Treaty of Waitangi. An old Maori saying runs something as follows: "The early Christian missionaries brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ to us, and taught us to go down on our knees and close our eyes in prayer to our Heavenly Father, but when we opened our eyes the land was gone."<sup>46</sup>

The Maori were aware of Pakeha hypocrisy. The Maori had sincerely embraced one or another of the competing sectarian brands of Christianity. Gradually they became somewhat dissatisfied with what they had adopted. But

they did not cease reading their Bibles, nor did they give up their Christian convictions altogether: “Despite some outward appearances, and contemporary generalisations, many Maori did not abandon their faith when the stylized European Christianity they had welcomed began to take second place among the European settlers to more earthly interests. While some [Maori] stuck with their denominations, others forged new sects, which were a concoction of seventeenth-century English heretical sects, Judaism, and traditional Maori religion.”<sup>47</sup>

The Maori who first heard the message of the restored gospel had at least partly entered the literate culture of the Pakeha; they treasured and were familiar with the Bible, which they consulted for an understanding of the circumstances in which they found themselves since the arrival of the Pakeha. For many years they were in the habit of drawing from the Bible—especially from the stories they found in the Old Testament—various parallels to their own life experiences, including their struggles with each other and with the Pakeha.

It was at this point, when some of the Maori were unhappy with the versions of Christianity given to them by early sectarian missionaries, that Latter-day Saint missionaries first approached them. The Maori who embraced the restored gospel began to be transformed by their new faith into what is essentially a doctrine-based community, rather than the more traditional tribal-based community. The restored gospel became the central organizing element in their Mormon Maori identity.<sup>48</sup> Lineham offered a nice inventory of reasons why the Latter-day Saint missionaries seem to have both succeeded and failed with the Maori.<sup>49</sup> On the positive side, the missionaries depended on their Maori hosts, learned their language and bits and pieces of their culture, and loved the Maori. In the Latter-day Saint missionaries, the Maori found—sometimes for the first time—Pakeha with whom they could enjoy a satisfactory, loving relationship.

### **A Difference in Readings**

The largest branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1950 was in Auckland. It consisted of more than one hundred Latter-day Saint families spread over a large area. Since only a few families owned automobiles, this branch was possible because the Saints made use of trolleys and buses as transportation to social gatherings and meetings. Elsewhere in Aotearoa/New Zealand, circumstances were different. Outside of Auckland and a few other provincial towns, the church consisted of numerous small branches, many of which were located in traditional Maori pa.

My first experiences in Aotearoa/New Zealand were in the Northland, the area north of Auckland where there were two mission districts and dozens of small branches and home Sunday schools.<sup>50</sup> Initially, my missionary companions were Maori just out of high school. We had scant hope that the Pakeha would be interested in what they saw as a Maori church; nevertheless, we stopped at many of their farms. Sometimes they were kindly, but generally they were not interested in our message. Even when they were interested, they allowed us to visit only irregularly. Sometimes they were mildly curious about both Mormon and Maori things. Because they knew the Maori only at a distance and had almost never been in a Maori home, they were astonished to find that I depended on the Maori for food and shelter. Some of the Pakeha were sufficiently curious that they would eventually allow lessons, but only after a long period in which we had become friends and gained their confidence. For the Pakeha to become Latter-day Saints meant entering a world in which Maori culture dominated and in which Utah cultural mannerisms were secondary. For example, our branch and district conferences were conducted more or less in the tradition of Maori hui—in fact, they were called hui. The Saints and others assembled for these hui from long distances to enjoy the singing, preaching, considerable feasting, and other cultural events that were thoroughly Maori.

As missionaries we set out to visit the Maori, most of whom were scattered over the countryside in or near traditional pa. We were welcomed into every Maori home. Their mana was evident in their hospitality. They insisted that we have *karakia*,<sup>51</sup> a word that once meant a chant much like a prayer or incantation to the gods but that had come to identify praying, preaching, and singing. Our participation in these activities, our expressions of love, and our blessing on their homes and families was the *koha* (reciprocal payment) we offered them for their wonderful hospitality. During these *karakia* I would often explain the restoration, telling about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Even the Maori who were not Latter-day Saints had already heard this message and often said that although they believed what I told them, they liked beer or were enslaved by some other vice. Yet they still believed that the gospel had been restored through Joseph Smith. After *karakia* we consumed a large meal and continued in conversation as the old stories were repeated. Maori hospitality made it difficult to visit more than a few homes in a day. The habits of an oral culture lingered. Though at the time there were things that bothered me—the slow pace, rain, long distances, bad roads, cold, fleas, strange food—those were days never to be forgotten.

I had gone to Aotearoa/New Zealand anxious to argue that the gospel had been restored through Joseph Smith and that the Book of Mormon was the word of God. But the Maori explained that their problems were not with this message but with sin. I was stunned by their candor. Those whom Latter-day Saints would now call “less active” would explain in painful detail that they were weak and easily tempted by beer or another vice and thus had been in and out of the church. Others would try to explain why they had never joined, indicating that they had once been offended by someone or something. They seemed to give and receive insults easily, and they remembered each one. When I insisted that because they believed the Book of Mormon to be true they were obligated to follow its teachings, they would usually agree. But they pointed out that they found themselves in situations very much like those of the people described in the Book of Mormon. In fact, they saw the book as a description of their own situation, and they saw themselves as at least partly the descendants of Lehi’s colony.

I soon discovered that the Maori read the Book of Mormon differently than I did. For example, I was anxious to find proof texts and was busy harmonizing its teachings with what I understood to be the received teachings among the Saints in Utah, whereas the Maori saw the 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 at the larger patterns of events and less at what might be construed from specific verses. They saw stories of ambitious rivals to traditional authority trying to carve out a space for themselves. They noticed how ambition led to quarrels within families and between extended families and tribes. They saw the atonement as an exchange of gifts between our Heavenly Father and his children somewhat in the way their own relationships were marked by reciprocity in acts of hospitality manifesting love. They found that the Book of Mormon described patterns of events similar to those in their traditional lore and also in their present situation. In that sense the book was their history or at least their kind of history—a mirror of both the noble and base in their own past and present, on an individual as well as community level.

For the Maori in the early 1950s, the Book of Mormon was not, as it was for me, a source of information about puzzling doctrinal matters. Instead, the Maori were fascinated by the narrative portions of the Book of Mormon. I merely glanced at the narratives to locate the more overt teachings, whereas they saw messages and moral instruction embedded in stories. I focused on individual verses and saw them as authoritative teachings on matters I had learned from other books that the Maori Saints were mostly unaware of. They tended to focus more on context, on the accounts of the 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 signs and consequences of divine blessings and also the curse

brought on by the breakdown of family ties. The rise of secret combinations was seen as a result of lawless gangs led by ambitious leaders who had created surrogate families no longer controlled by traditional norms.

The Maori 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 by claiming to be the rightful interpreter of his father's founding revelations. To the extent that their traditional norms were still in place, the Maori were deferent to age and birth order. 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 quarrels that fuel the factional disputes recorded in the Nephite record, and they were reminded of similar tales of insults and resentments that constituted part of their own past. They also noticed that some of the successes of Nephite preachers seemed to depend on their dealing with their own distant brethren and hence on subtle matters of kinship.

The Maori 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 Hagoth and hence to Nephi's tribe, but they also saw themselves as replicating the tragic tale told in the Book of Mormon of the woes that come upon a disobedient covenant people. To me, on the other hand, the ease with which the Nephite faithful fell away and, 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 Maori Saints to begin to cull from the scriptures the kinds of proof texts they employed in teaching the restored gospel to the Pakeha. However, the Maori tended to ignore such admonitions, fastening instead on the historical narratives and the messages they carried. They seemed to think that much of importance to them was to be found in seeing the moral implications embedded in stories. As I look back on my experience living among the Maori, it seems that they were still operating as a culture in which stories and aphorisms provided, illustrated, and enlivened moral messages.

I had learned to mine the Book of Mormon for discreet 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 aphoristic, highly symbolic, and formalized messages. Instead, I wanted the Maori Saints to read the Book of Mormon for the kinds of things that I found interesting in it. But the Maori loved the Book of Mormon for different reasons. They had their own way of reading it. First and foremost, they read the Book of Mormon as a tale of a people very much like themselves. The Maori were a tribal people with genealogies and accompanying accounts of noted ancestors, and they were keenly aware of the traditional hostilities between the different tribes, subtribes, and extended families. Much of the Maori lore was directly or indirectly related to tales of family and tribal conflicts. The Maori 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 of others. They saw a dire warning against this sort of thing when they read the Book of Mormon.

In the 1950s virtually all the Maori used English. Some were marvelous preachers in both Maori and English. I later discovered that this was the result of their own highly developed oratorical tradition, which was focused on the rituals of the marae and was the vehicle for transferring the culture to the next generation. But most of the Maori were no longer conducting their business in their homes in Maori, and the schools taught English exclusively. The Maori were therefore essentially bilingual, but their hold on their native language was slipping. They studied and knew the scriptures in English, though some treasured Maori translations. Looking back, I can

now see that the Maori I encountered in the 1950s read the Book of Mormon with a different set of assumptions because of their unique cultural horizon.

Although the Maori Saints still seem to trace their identity to their whanau and hapu, they have added stories of how their ancestors became Latter-day Saints. In addition, they have the Book of Mormon, which they see as filled with materials that, similar to their traditional lore, helps give their lives meaning and moral direction. A significant part of their identity is found in their belief that part of what they are is set forth in the Nephite record. There is more to the Maori attachment to the Book of Mormon than a fascination with Hagoth: the Book of Mormon supplies them with a way of retaining certain of the noble portions of their traditional culture as they become a belief-centered people.

### **An Oral Culture Encounters the Literate World**

In 1814, when Samuel Marsden, the first of many Christian missionaries to Aotearoa/New Zealand, arrived there, he found an indigenous people without a written language. Before the coming of the Pakeha, the culture of the written word was unavailable to the Maori. Those first Christian missionaries found that the Maori identity was grounded in stories about their past and embedded in elaborate genealogies providing what the Maori thought worth remembering about their past. This lore, which included elaborate myths tracing Maori origins back to Io and other divine beings, pointed them toward a future dependent on their actions here and now and preserved accounts of their notable individuals and the events out of which they drew moral instruction and the norms regulating their communities.

In order to have a past and thus an identity, the Maori had to commit to memory the knowledge that seemed to them to be normative. With the incursion of the Pakeha, however, all that began to change. Those who are products of a literate culture and whose life experiences are grounded in, and stored and communicated through, written artifacts may have difficulty appreciating the situation of a people who are grounded in oral tradition. It seems that when an oral culture comes in contact with a written culture, as happened in the late eighteenth century in Aotearoa/New Zealand, oral traditions are inevitably eroded, corrupted, and eventually perhaps even forgotten. Among the Maori, the introduction of writing reduced the need for the earlier elaborate, detailed oral transmission of traditional lore, a task that was assigned to gifted *tohunga*.<sup>52</sup> Inevitably, much of the old knowledge, including the cultural traditions and institutions grounded on that knowledge, would not be passed on, as it had been, to the next generation.

### **The Debasing of Mores**

One particularly vexing challenge to understanding the past and the culture of a people whose identity is grounded in an essentially oral culture is that, as one writer has put it, an oral culture “leaves very little trace on the historical landscape.”<sup>53</sup> Once the living link to the past is broken, it is difficult if not impossible to reconstitute it in its original form. The Pakeha who first encountered the Maori produced a written version of their language and taught them to read it and English as well. The Maori quickly became literate, but what Alexis de Tocqueville described as the “habits of the heart” remained largely embedded in the old oral culture.

When we attempt to understand or reconstitute the learning of an oral culture, even the little that may happen to have been written down suffers from the inaccuracies and the unavoidable misunderstandings of those who do both the telling and the writing. In addition, those who record oral traditions do so under the influence of their own agenda and the horizon of meaning they necessarily bring to their efforts. For these reasons, it is difficult to

discover the intellectual world of the Maori before the Pakeha arrived. Nostalgia for such a thing—the longing for a noble past—expresses a desire for a solid guide for the present and a hope for the future, or at least a window to a different world.

To what degree those who recorded Maori lore were influenced by the notion that they were confronted with something primitive and pagan remains an open question. Because the Maori had lost much of their contact with the past that was previously kept alive in their oral culture by genealogies, carvings, rituals, traditions, and stories, those of Maori descent who now feel a nostalgia for a mostly lost past must struggle to recover that past through the medium of writing, that is, through what just happened to get recorded by the Pakeha—those who for the most part were from an alien culture and may not have understood much of what they were told. As one writer explains, “The outcome of this almost anarchic approach was that much of what was written, and what later formed the basis for further research, had been either significantly altered by the transcribers, or had been collected from poor sources.”<sup>54</sup>

Other difficulties made the recording of Maori lore problematic. Much of the material that was recorded appeared as a jumble to the Pakeha. It seemed to them to be mythological or legendary even though on the surface it tended to “resemble eye-witness accounts of incidents.” In these accounts, which did not take the form expected by the Pakeha, “there is a distinct focus on the main events, and generally less attention is paid to detail such as dates. Also, the emphasis is on what actually happened, and on the moral of the incident. There is little interpretation, and even less historiography. The center of interest is around the moral judgements of events, and the qualities of the people involved.”<sup>55</sup>

Those whose life experience is essentially bound up with the written word, who live in a world in which writing rules, may have difficulty appreciating the time-consuming, somewhat cumbersome, and fragile way in which oral cultures transmit knowledge and a sense of identity. Those who live in a world where writing dominates may also have a low opinion of what could be remembered and transmitted in an oral culture, because they see writing as the primary way to acquire, store, and communicate information, and they sense the weakness of their own inattentive and untrained memories.

A recent brutal, vulgar, and powerful novel by Alan Duff, who has become perhaps the foremost Maori literary figure, depicts what has happened to his people as they have moved into an urban setting without having taken advantage of an education in which books—the written word—provide both the norm and the power to ennoble.<sup>56</sup> Duff depicts the social despoliation of Maori who have lost touch with their own past, or what remains of that past since the coming of the Pakeha: they have none of the traditional “cultural learning, no social precedents, rules, no regulated teaching.”<sup>57</sup> Without the advantages of a literate culture, Duff contends, any semblance of traditional Maori ways simply cannot provide the means to move them from the bottom of the social heap.<sup>58</sup>

Duff argues that “as far back as Plato those opposed to the written word were loud and shrill in their arguments against it. It is the reactionary standard of the oral cultures that they have an overpowering hatred of the written word.”<sup>59</sup> Duff opposes the currently fashionable notion that there is a learning grounded in the traditional oral culture that can by itself fit the Maori for the world in which they find themselves. Thus he pictures in *Once Were Warriors* homes without books, and children and adults who simply do not read. One also notices that the women, as well as the men, in Duff’s novels are constantly having their “smokes,” even while children are going without food or other vital attention.

In these scenes Duff spells out some of the dreadful effects on the Maori of what he calls “the turning of the collective back on the written word.” He points out that Maori women have “the highest lung cancer rate in the world. This is in stark contrast to our European fellow New Zealanders, who have been part of this vast written debate in every publication you could imagine, whose cigarette smoking consumption has gone the complete opposite direction: down.”<sup>60</sup> He describes this as “but one graphic example of ignoring the written word.” And so, according to Duff, “we Maori let it slip by our very noses as we languished in basically unread ignorance. And even now, there are a majority of us who refuse—point blank refuse—to recognize this failing on our part.”<sup>61</sup>

Without their close attention to the written word and to education, Duff believes the Maori will continue to languish. And, ironically, without literacy those he pictures in his novels cannot even acquire the traditional lore of the Maori, for that lore is now available only in books written by Pakeha and in books by Maori scholars that build on those early Pakeha-written accounts, since the living link with the traditional past has long since been severed.

And so the salvation of the Maori, according to Duff, cannot be found in the social control exercised by extended families, or by the rituals and protocol of the marae, or even through a kind of nostalgic renaissance of some of the norms that once governed the Maori. Nor can a mere Maori cultural revival or Pakeha sentimentality about Maori things do much good. As Maori culture is presumably revived, it is also being transformed and re-created, but not exactly, according to Duff, in ways that fit the Maori to live well in a literate world where knowledge found in books rules.

Can the urban Maori now find in a nostalgia for the old traditions the discipline necessary to restrain them from enslavement to cigarettes, beer, violence, and sloth? Duff is confident that neither nostalgia nor a continued tribalism will improve the situation of the Maori. And he is right.

But Duff knows only too well the degradation of the urban Maori who have lost both their language and the moral discipline of the traditional culture and have turned away from the written word. For him the only hope seems to be in something much more than a mere continuation of, or even a revival of, the traditional culture, if such a thing were really possible. He pleads for attention to education—for the fruit of the written word. Unfortunately, he seems to know nothing of the Maori Latter-day Saints who have found ways of linking the more noble family and tribal elements of their traditional culture with a book that has offered them a form of Christianity filled with a prophetic message that they see—or at least once saw—as directed at their own condition. It is a mistake to neglect the role of the Book of Mormon in the lives of the Maori Saints, for it serves to stabilize and unify a people whose traditional culture is undergoing radical and not entirely desirable changes. It is a book that firmly grounds a moral and intellectual discipline, both communal and individual, and that strives to ground a community dedicated to achieving proper parenting, a community that insists on literacy and commends education, the very elements that Duff thinks the Maori currently lack.

And where Duff portrays deracinated youths—mongrels—leagued together in gangs that substitute for the extended families of traditional Maori culture, the Maori Saints fight a battle against these dreadful evils. The central message of Duff’s terrible tales of degradation is that without their traditional past, the Maori have become slaves, for “without the past they were nothing.”<sup>62</sup> But all the resources that flow from a genuine commitment to the Book of Mormon and the account of its recovery are meant to provide a meaningful past, and also a future in both this world and beyond the grave that nurtures a genuine hope.

## Notes

1. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985).
2. The word *maori* when used as an adjective simply means “normal, usual, ordinary.” As an adjective it is found in several cognate forms throughout the South Pacific. Hence the expression *tangata maori* (man, or human being as distinguished from supernatural beings) is *kanaka maoli* in Hawaiian. In Hawaiian the *l* sound displaces the Maori *r* sound. Hence *aroha* (love) becomes *aloha* in Hawaiian. As a proper noun, *Maori* first came into use on the Banks Peninsula near Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1836 to distinguish the indigenous people from the *Pakeha* (foreigners or strangers). See Herbert W. Williams, *A Dictionary of the Maori Language*, 7th ed., s.v. “maori.”
3. Master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, 1965. See Schwimmer’s article “The Cognitive Aspect of Culture Change,” *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 74 (June 1965): 149–81.
4. See John H. Groberg, *In the Eye of the Storm* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993).
5. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 133.
6. Ibid.
7. 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.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
0. Ibid.
1. Ibid., 14.
2. One writer claims that the immigrants to New Zealand from the United Kingdom were called *Pakeha* by the Maori because they “appeared to look like fairies or fair-skinned supernatural beings.” He insists that the name *Pakeha* “is not used for all foreigners, only those who have white skin.” And the name “is not a term of denigration in Maori usage, but rather one of respect in associating the new settlers with supernatural beings or godlike people (at least in terms of their appearance)” (Cleve Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro: Key Concepts in Maori Culture* [Auckland, New Zealand: Oxford University Press, 1991], 87).
3. *Aotearoa* is the Maori name for New Zealand, and it is now common to see the compound name *Aotearoa/New Zealand*. It means something like “land of the long white cloud.”
4. Once a fortified place or stockade or its inhabitants, and hence a village.
5. This enclosed space, courtyard, or common (often but not necessarily a lawn) in front of a meetinghouse is constructed in such a way as to symbolize the traditional ancestor of the *tangata whenua* (people of that place) and is often decorated with carvings. For a useful account of the details concerning contemporary Maori marae and also something of their history, see Hiwi and Pat Tauroa, *Te Marae: A Guide to Customs and Protocol* (Birkenhead, Auckland, New Zealand: Reed Books, 1986). Currently the word *marae* identifies not merely the enclosed common area, but all of the buildings associated with the community, including the symbolic representation of the tribal ancestor in the form of an elaborately carved sacred house, eating facilities, and so forth. Marae are a symbol of tribal identity. Once they were found only in rural areas, but urban marae have recently been established to serve the needs of those who now live in cities. See Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro*, 71–4.
6. For an indication of what that would have constituted, see the appropriate entry in Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro*; and Tauroa, *Te Marae*, 25–99.

7. Maori identity, until the Pakeha arrived, began with extended families (*whanau*) and mounted up through subtribes (*hapu*) to tribes (*iwi*). Each level had male leaders: *kaumatua* (elders), *rangatira* (bosses or minor chiefs), and *ariki* (chiefs). At most levels the *mana* (the privileges, spiritual power, authority of chiefs) was mostly hereditary, though it was also an expression and extension of the group. Though the Maori now appear on the surface to have been assimilated into the larger Pakeha culture, remnants of these kinship structures still function in locating Maori identity. For some purposes, especially when facing the Pakeha, the Maori may see themselves as sharing a single identity. For other purposes, however, and perhaps for most purposes, they still tend to see themselves as divided into extended families, subtribes, and tribes.
8. For a rich account of various kinds of hui, see Anne Salmond, *Hui: A Study of Maori Ceremonial Gatherings* (Wellington, New Zealand: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1975).
9. At one time, only properly endowed tohunga were permitted to enter the carved house that represented the founding ancestor of a hapu. See Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro*, 73.
0. This is a Latter-day Saint understanding of what went on at this hui. For details, see Matthew Cowley, "Maori Chief Predicts Coming of L.D.S. Missionaries," *Improvement Era* 53 (Sept. 1950): 697–8.
1. See Matthew Cowley, "Maori Chief Predicts," in *Matthew Cowley Speaks* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 200–5, for a translation of Potangaroa's prophecy, a description of its interpretation by the Maori Saints, and an account of how he came to possess a photograph of the original but lost text of *Te Kawenata*.
2. In 1830 Arama Toiroa, from Mahia, gathered his family and gave them his final testament, which included, among other things, the sign that the one who would eventually introduce to his descendants the true form of worship would "stand and raise both hands to heaven" when he prayed. In 1884 Elder William Thomas Stewart and others visited Korongata (Bridge Pa), where they held Sabbath services. When Elder Stewart closed those services, "he raised both hands and invoked God's blessings upon the people." Te Teira Marutu, a grandson of Toiroa, recognized this as the sign of the coming of the true faith to the Maori. Soon those living in Korongata and many in Mahia, familiar with Toiroa's prophetic testament, were baptized. See the translation of the account by Toiroa's famous Latter-day Saint descendant, Hirini Whaanga, entitled "A Maori Prophet," *Juvenile Instructor* 37 (1 Mar. 1902): 152–3.
3. For details see Ian Rewi Barker, "The Connection: The Mormon Church and the Maori People" (master's thesis, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, 1967); and Brian W. Hunt, *Zion in New Zealand: A History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in New Zealand, 1854–1977* (Templeview, New Zealand: Church College of New Zealand, 1977), which is the published version of his 1971 master's thesis at Brigham Young University. However, the most accessible account has been provided by R. Lanier Britsch in "Maori Tohunga and the Growth of the Church," in his *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 272–8.
4. The lo cult was celebrated and passed along through *wananga* (special schools) of tohunga. A *whare wananga* is the house in which the school meets. Hence a university is now called a *whare wananga* (see Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro*, 156–9). The central teachings of the traditional *whare wananga* concerned what the Maori involved in the lo cult called "baskets of wisdom," which included elaborate cosmogenic lore such as knowledge of the ten heavens and other matters concerning the gods, the descent of man into this world, and the return of the soul to the divine realms governed by lo.
5. Pieter H. de Bres, *Religion in Aotearoa: Religious Associations and the Urban Maori* (Wellington, New Zealand: Polynesian Society, 1971), 18. In an effort to explain how Latter-day Saints "get the Maori," de Bres adds that "the Mormon view of death as only a temporary separation of the deceased from the living ('we will meet again') is also important to the Maori. The study of genealogies (*whakapapa*) received a

new meaning because it offered an opportunity to incorporate the ancestors [of the Maori] into the Church through baptism for the dead” (ibid.).

6. Hence the following from an anthropological study of a Maori village: “The ancient religion of the Maori is imperfectly understood since many of the early records were ‘contaminated’ by Christian conceptions either on the part of the authors or on the part of their informants. Much has been made by some of the esoteric cult of Io, reputed to have been a . . . being worshiped by a special secret priestly cult. There is practically no direct evidence upon which the existence, scope, or distribution of such belief and worship can be assessed” (James E. Ritchie, *The Making of a Maori: A Case Study of a Changing Community* [Wellington, New Zealand: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1963], 20). “Much has been made of the so-called cult of Io. This is said to have been a special aristocratic worship of a supreme being whose very existence was kept hidden from the knowledge of common folk” (ibid., 120).

Eric Schwimmer has argued that a group of Maori “folk scholars, drawn from widely separated parts of the North Island, held two protracted meetings around the year 1860 in order to establish a common version of Maori cosmology, metaphysics, and very ancient history.” Out of these meetings, Schwimmer argues, came “an elaborate doctrine that the ancient Maoris had a supreme God called Io. . . . It was maintained that though the Io traditions were very ancient they were also very secret and known only to the most esoteric class of tohungas. Thus it was explained why no surviving record of Io antedates the two meetings” (Eric Schwimmer, *The World of the Maori* [Wellington, New Zealand: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1966], 114). Allan Hanson, a clever anthropologist, has argued that all “culture” and “tradition” are merely “inventions designed to serve contemporary purposes.” He therefore brushes aside all Maori accounts of intentional migration to New Zealand and also claims that the antiquity of the Io cult is questionable. See his article “The Making of the Maori: Culture Invention and Its Logic,” *American Anthropologist* 91 (Dec. 1989): 890–6.

7. Schwimmer, *World of the Maori*, 114. But another writer claims that “it is quite possible that in some of the historically late Maori cosmogonic texts, the composers were moved to create an account that maximized similarities with Christian ideas—not by borrowing from Christianity so much as by accentuating those indigenous ideas that most approximated Christian ones. I suspect that the *Whare Wananga* account was influenced in some way by the encounter with Christianity” (Gregory A. Schrempp, *Magical Arrows: The Maori, the Greeks, and the Folklore of the Universe* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992], 107). But Schrempp is not inclined to say exactly how.

8. J. Frank Stimson (*Tuamotuan Religion* [Honolulu, HI.: Bishop Museum, 1933], 69–80, 88–9) attempts to trace the Maori Io cult back to earlier high esoteric cosmology involving *iho*, *kio*, and *kiho*, found widely in the eastern Pacific. See also the many entries under *Io* in the impressive Rarotongan Maori dictionary. Perhaps because the Io cult among the Maori of New Zealand was found among the hapu on the east coast and was essentially secret, there is no entry on Io in Williams’s *Dictionary of the Maori Language* (see n. 2). This dictionary, a wonderful source of information about the Maori language, was originally crafted by William Williams, an Anglican bishop, and published in Paihia in the Northland of New Zealand in 1844.

9. See Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea*, 253–345. Incidentally, as an undergraduate at Brigham Young University, Britsch was a student of John L. Sorenson.

0. Peter Lineham, “The Mormon Message in the Context of Maori Culture,” *Journal of Mormon History* 17 (1991): 62–93.

1. Even an anthropological study like that of Schwimmer contains little on how the Maori Saints in Whangaruru read the scriptures.

2. Lineham, “Mormon Message,” 81.

3. Ibid.

4. One writer has argued that the notion of what he calls “the Semitic Maori lived on in the preaching of Mormon missionaries who began to proselytize among the Maoris in the late nineteenth century. According to the Book of Mormon, the Polynesians were descended from American Indian Semites who first landed in Hawaii in 58 BC.” This is an example of the confusion manifested by otherwise competent scholars concerning exactly what the Maori Saints believed about their links with the Lehi colony. See M. P. K. Sorrenson, *Maori Origins and Migrations: The Genesis of Some Pakeha Myths and Legends* (Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 1979), 16–7, and the source he cites for his opinion.
5. See *ibid.* Also see Schwimmer, “Mormonism in a Maori Village,” 149 (see n. 3). In 1991 I and a group of BYU students and other faculty heard a tribal elder (*kaumatua*) at the Takapuwahia marae in Porirua proclaim that Elder Spencer W. Kimball, next to Joseph Smith, was the greatest prophet of this dispensation. But, he added, Elder Kimball had made one serious mistake—he had wrongly assumed that the Maori were Lamanites.
6. Lineham, “Mormon Message,” 83.
7. *Ibid.*, 88.
8. *Ibid.*
9. For a detailed discussion from a number of different perspectives, see Douglas G. Sutton, ed., *The Origins of the First New Zealanders* (Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 1994); or the discussion by Alan H. Grey in his *Aotearoa and New Zealand: A Historical Geography* (Christchurch, New Zealand: Canterbury University Press, 1994), 83–8.
0. The first efforts to construct a written version of the Maori language began as early as 1820 with the preparation of a short lexicon and grammar by the Church Missionary Society. Samuel Lee, a professor of Arabic at Cambridge, eventually set out a satisfactory orthography. See Williams, *Dictionary of the Maori Language*, xxiii.
1. The Maori were thus made literate, first in Maori and then in English. They gradually became bilingual and then began to use only English.
2. Bronwyn Elsmore, *Mana from Heaven: A Century of Maori Prophets in New Zealand* (Tauranga, New Zealand: Moana Press, 1989), 24.
3. Paul Moon, *Maori Social and Economic History to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Henderson, Auckland, New Zealand: Birdwood Publishing, 1993), 73.
4. *Ibid.*, 77.
5. This treaty effectively made the British Crown the legal sovereign over New Zealand.
6. This version of the saying is in Lineham, “Mormon Message,” 77.
7. Moon, *Maori Social and Economic History*, 79–80.
8. Eric Schwimmer seems to feel that the Maori used Mormonism to justify certain portions of their old traditions and lore as they found ways to change other elements of their culture. Schwimmer’s study also tends to make Latter-day Saints out to be cultural imperialists bent on transforming Maori culture, or what he calls the old Maori ways. In reality, much of the traditional ways that Schwimmer thought were being replaced by an American religion amounted to such things as quarrels within and between families and especially the consumption of beer.
9. See Lineham, 72–93.
0. There are now two Latter-day Saint stakes in this same area.
  1. See Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro*, 36–7.
  2. See Barlow, *Tikanga Whakaaro*, xv, for an account of his own selection as “the keeper of the whakapapa or genealogy for the families in our district.”
  3. Moon, *Maori Social and Economic History*, 42.
  4. *Ibid.*

5. Ibid.
6. Alan Duff, *Once Were Warriors* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). The shocking, stunning, and depressing motion picture based on this novel does not do justice to the subtle messages offered by Duff.
7. Ibid., 127.
8. See Alan Duff, *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge* (Auckland, New Zealand: HarperCollins, 1993).
9. Ibid., 7.
0. Ibid.
1. Ibid.
2. *Once Were Warriors*, 172. See the sequel to his novel entitled *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted?* (Glenfield, Auckland, New Zealand: Vintage, 1996).