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Anthony E. Larson, *parallel Histories: The Nephites and the Americans*

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *Parallel Histories: The Nephites and the Americans* (1989), by Anthony E. Larson.

**Anthony E. Larson, *Parallel Histories: The Nephites and the Americans*. Orem, UT: Zedek Books, 1989. 134 pp. \$8.95.**

Reviewed by Bruce D. Porter

This thin volume presents the author's viewpoint that "Americans are the modern counterparts of the ancient Nephites" (p. 5). Anthony Larson argues that the history of America very closely parallels the history of the Nephite nation. He identifies and discusses twelve such parallels, arguing that the two histories follow a pattern so similar that it is possible to make specific predictions about our future simply by examining the course of events in the Book of Mormon. Toward the end of the book, the author makes several predictions based on this method.

*Parallel Histories* is a very readable book and contains some interesting information and ideas. Some of the parallels the author draws are quite appropriate, such as his comparison of contemporary America with the Nephite nation prior to the Lord's visitation. Unfortunately, Larson carries his thesis of parallel histories to an extreme. As far as he is concerned, our history is not merely similar to that of the Nephites; it is virtually identical. Our future is determined inexorably by their past, even down to specific political events. This approach turns the lessons of history into a form of historical determinism. As a result, many of the author's parallels are flawed and the predictions he makes at the end of the book are of questionable validity.

The author's basic thesis derives from his first parallel, namely, that "the progenitors of both the Nephites and the Americans originated in the same place in the world, at almost the same time" (p. 5). Larson argues that the lost ten tribes of Israel emigrated from Palestine to various regions of Europe (the Caucasus, the Black Sea region, England, Ireland, Iberia, Germany, and so forth) and that their descendants eventually settled in America. He bases this point of view (which is not uncommon in the Church) largely on linguistic evidence borrowed from a handful of Latter-day Saint scholars.

If the author had stopped here, his only error might have been the total confidence with which he asserts a position that ultimately is a matter of speculation, unprovable by existing archaeological or linguistic evidence. But the author's more

serious error lies in not differentiating between members of the Church and American society generally. According to Larson, it is not merely members of the Church who descended from Israel, but *America as a whole*. This becomes the basis for his argument that American history must precisely parallel Nephite history.

We know that members of the Church in general can be regarded as literal descendants of the tribes of Israel, but why America as a whole should be seen as an Israelite nation is unclear. Heedless of the questionable basis for this assumption, the author carries his notion of parallel histories to its logical conclusion. If we are Nephites, then our enemies (first Nazi Germany, then the USSR and Eastern Europe) must be Lamanites. The Lamanite conquest of half of the Nephite territory mentioned in Helaman 4:16 is equivalent to the division of Europe after World War II. The growing wickedness of the Nephites and increasing righteousness of the Lamanites described in Helaman 6:34-36 is parallel with the collapse of Communism in the East and moral degeneracy of the West. Gorbachev's reforms represent a measure of "repentance" on the part of the people of the East bloc, who soon will be more righteous than those of the West. (The author switches back and forth between talking about the peoples of the East as a whole and about converts to the Gospel from these lands.)

Looking to the future, Larson predicts that there will be a broad and enduring rapprochement between East and West. He claims that the main threat to our security in the future will be from terrorists (the Gadianton robbers of our day). He emphatically asserts that the great destruction that will occur in the last days just prior to the Lord's Second Coming will be caused by natural disasters and not by nuclear weapons or other man-made technologies, just as it was natural disasters that caused destruction in the New World at the time of the Savior's crucifixion. He implies that Christ will not come in the year 2000, but at least thirty years later (just as he did not come in 1 B.C., when the sign prophesied by Samuel the Lamanite appeared, but only in A.D. 33). Larson even argues that when the Savior does come the second time, it will be exactly as he came in the Book of Mormon: descending slowly from heaven, dressed in white. The author decries as "mythic icons of antiquity" the notion that he will come dressed in a red robe, with the sound of a trumpet, or with a concourse of angels (p. 111).

These predictions are questionable at best and scripturally wrong on certain points. There *are* interesting parallels to be drawn between our situation today and that of the Nephites prior to the coming of Christ, but linking them to specific political events is a dubious approach. Such an approach may actually detract from the more important spiritual lessons of faith, righteous living, and patient waiting on the Lord, which are the core of the Book of Mormon message. For example, the author's description of Soviet reforms as representing a kind of repentance reflects a certain naivete about what is really happening in the USSR: many of the reforms are shams, and Soviet society today continues to be plagued by what may be the world's highest rates of alcohol abuse, abortion, divorce, petty crime, and sexual promiscuity. It is true that a religious revival is taking place among a minority of the Russian population, but it is exceedingly unlikely that the whole Russian nation will be converted *en masse*, like the mass Lamanite conversions of old to which Larson compares current events.

As to whether or not the destruction of the last days will involve nuclear weapons, the only answer is that we do not know. Since there were no nuclear weapons in Nephite days, the fact that they were not used then can hardly be used to predict that they will never be used in our era. But this Larson confidently asserts. His statement that we should study the Book of Mormon closely in order to understand what is happening in our own day is true enough, but the Book of Mormon is not a horoscope for predicting tomorrow's political and diplomatic news (the main thing Larson focuses on) in any detail.

As to the Second Coming, Larson should be less dismissive of "mythic icons of antiquity." When the Lord comes he emphatically will come in glory, with trumpets and concourses of angels (Matthew 24:30-31; D&C 49:23) and, yes, wearing red apparel (D&C 133:46-48; Isaiah 63:1-2). This will not be a visitation to an isolated branch of the house of Israel. It will be the beginning of the millennial reign of Christ on the earth.

Other criticisms of Larson's parallels could be made, but there is no point in making a comprehensive critique here. The author's inquiry is certainly sincere, and his emphasis on drawing lessons from the Book of Mormon for our contemporary world is admirable. When it comes to the future, however, we are best served by studying the revelations we already have, rather than trying to develop new predictions of our own about the precise course events will take.