

Genetic Research a "Galileo Event" for Mormons

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Genetic research into Native American and Polynesian origins is sending shock waves through Mormon communities around the world. The Book of Mormon, claimed as scripture by 11 million members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), purports to tell of three migrations from the ancient Middle East to the Americas. The title page claims that the descendants of these migrants from Jerusalem "are the principal ancestors of the American Indians." Mormon folklore, likewise, postulates a Middle Eastern heritage for Polynesians.

Simon Southerton, a plant geneticist, was a bishop in the LDS Church in Brisbane, Australia, in 1998 when he first read "the most damning scientific evidence facing the Church today." A few weeks later, Southerton resigned his position as bishop and withdrew his church membership. In Mar 2000, he published the story of his disillusionment on the Internet. He "failed to find anything that supported migration of Jewish people before Columbus" and found "no reliable scientific evidence supporting migrations from the Middle East to the New World."

Southerton has completed a book-length manuscript on the subject. Investigation of mitochondrial DNA of more than 5,500 living Native Americans reveals that 99.4% can be traced back to Asia primarily via maternal lineages known as A, B, C, D and X. Only 0.6% came from Africa or Europe, most likely after 1492. Lineages A through D are only found in Asia. While the X lineage also is found in Europe and the Middle East, Asian and American lineages have distinctive markers that indicate an ancient separation long before the events described in the Book of Mormon. Similar results from nearly 1,000 paternal lineages substantiate a Northeast Asian origin of American Indians. Likewise, approximately 99% of the Polynesians surveyed to date can trace their maternal lineages back to Southeast Asia. The other 1% almost certainly came from Europe in the recent past.

Thomas Murphy, PhD candidate in cultural anthropology at the U of Washington, reviews the same genetic research in "Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," an essay published in the May 2002 anthology *American Apocrypha*. This Latter-day Skeptic concludes, "While DNA shows that ultimately all human populations are closely related, to date no intimate genetic link has been found between ancient Israelites and indigenous Americans, much less within the time frame suggested by the Book of Mormon." He highlights Native American objections to the Book of Mormon as a perpetuation of the old slur



Lorraine Cook, an Apache Indian, protesting the Lamanite DNA issue in support of Thomas Murphy on Dec 8, 2002, in Salt Lake City at the Mormon Temple Square.

Photo courtesy of the Salamander Society (www.salamandersociety.org).

that Native Americans lacked the capability to develop "civilization" without inspiration from the Old World. Murphy observes, "As Mormons, we have a moral and ethical obligation to discontinue this view of Native American origins and publicly disavow the offensive teaching that a dark skin is a physical trait of God's malediction."

In response to these statements, LDS ecclesiastical leaders scheduled a disciplinary council on Dec 8, 2002, to consider excommunicating Murphy on the charge of apostasy. Murphy's students allied with Mormon dissidents to organize candle light vigils in 10 different US cities in support of the man they generously dubbed "Mor-

monism's Galileo." Responding to such adverse publicity, church leaders "indefinitely postponed" the hearing. Murphy's supporters then cancelled all but the vigil in Salt Lake City, UT.

Participants at the vigil exemplified the costs of Mormon beliefs and practices. Lorraine Martinez Cook of Reno, NV, shared the tragic story of her newborn granddaughter (mixed heritage of Mexican, Apache and Yaqui) questioning the practices of the LDS Family Services. Cook has reasonable suspicions that an LDS bishop pressured the birthmother toward adoption, and LDS Family Services persuaded the birthmother to subvert the paternal rights of Cook's non-Mormon son. In his doctoral dissertation, Murphy documents the Mormon practice of the removal of Native American children back to the 1840s, rather than the 1940s, the era usually claimed as the informal beginnings of the Mormon Indian Student Placement Program. The Placement Program, deemed cultural genocide by critics, removed over 70,000 Native American children from their homes from 1954-96 and placed them with urban white Mormon families in systematic efforts to turn Indians "white and delightful." Kristy Sumner, a direct descendant of Penina Shropshire Cotten, one of the Native American children adopted by Mormons prior to the evacuation of Nauvoo, IL, in 1846, also joined in the vigil. Sumner's presence and Cook's allegations suggest that the practice of adopting Native American children not only started a century earlier than claimed but may still continue today, albeit under a new guise.

Folk biological claims of an Israelite ancestry, a curse with a dark skin, and a whitening of dark-skinned Native American and Polynesian Mormons fail to stand up to scrutiny among scientifically literate Latter-day Saints. In today's multicultural world, fewer Mormons find attractive these folk biological concepts exemplifying the naturalization of white authority and justifying the erosion of Native cultures, beliefs and practices. ■

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Simon G Southerton (simon.southerton@csiro.au), PhD U of Sydney, is a senior research scientist with CSIRO Forestry and Forest Products, a specialist division of the Australian Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation. His essay "DNA Genealogies of American Indians and the Book of Mormon" appears at www.exmormon.org/whyif125.htm. The data presented here come from his address "DNA Genealogies of Native Americans and Polynesians," presented at the Oct 2002 Ex-Mormon General Conference in Salt Lake City.