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Mormon Scientist, Church Clash Over DNA Test

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Anthropologist Thomas W. Murphy set out to test a key principle of his Mormon faith with the latest technology.

He wondered: Would DNA analysis show -- as taught by the Book of Mormon -- that many American Indians are descended from ancient Israelites?

His finding: negative.

The result: excommunication -- if a church disciplinary panel today finds him guilty of apostasy.

The sacred writings of many faiths make claims that might not stand up to scientific tests. But most faiths avoid conflict with scholarship either because their claims relate to events too far in the past to be tested or because they have reinterpreted their scriptural claims as metaphors, rather than assertions of literal fact.

For devout Mormons, however, neither of those defenses is available. The Book of Mormon, made public by Joseph Smith in 1830, is a cornerstone of church doctrine and is taken literally by the faithful. It teaches, among other things, that many American Indians are descendants of ancient Israelites who came to this continent 600 years before Christ -- a time period within the reach of modern archeology and genetics.

As a result of that assertion and others, the church hierarchy has repeatedly warred with historians, anthropologists and others who have questioned its doctrines. Murphy appears to be the first member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to face expulsion for genetic research.

His case marks “the first biological challenge” of Mormon scripture, said Michael Whiting, an authority on DNA and an assistant professor at church-affiliated Brigham Young University.

Murphy’s supporters, who include other dissident Mormons, hail him. “Tom Murphy is the Galileo for Mormons,” said Maxine Hanks, a former Mormon excommunicated in 1993 for her feminist writings.

Supporters say they plan a series of candlelight vigils tonight in U.S. cities, including one outside the Mormon temple in Salt Lake City.

But Whiting, for one, rejects any comparison to Galileo, who was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church in 1633 for correctly claiming that the Earth orbits the sun.

“It’s an inappropriate comparison,” Whiting said. “The difference is Galileo got the science right. I don’t think Murphy has.”

Church leaders declined to comment on the specifics of Murphy’s case.

“Matters of church discipline are handled on a confidential basis between church members and their local leaders,” said church spokesman Dale Bills in Salt Lake City. “Local church leaders determine what, if any, disciplinary action is appropriate.”

Murphy, chairman of the anthropology department at Edmonds Community College in Lynnwood, Wash., and other scientists say that DNA research demonstrates what

anthropologists have long said: The ancestors of the American Indians came across the Bering Sea from Asia, with no traces of Middle Eastern ancestry.

Those findings echo the work of other secular scholars who have yet to uncover evidence, DNA, archeological or otherwise, of an ancient Hebrew tribe that lived in America.

To reach his conclusion, Murphy, 35, analyzed data collected by a multimillion-dollar “molecular genealogy” project at Brigham Young as well as other, similar projects that track ancestry from people worldwide via DNA in blood samples.

Scholars more closely aligned with the Mormon church than Murphy argue that the lack of genetic evidence of an ancient Hebrew tribe in America does not undermine the Book of Mormon, which also includes what the book asserts is an eyewitness account of the ministry of Jesus Christ on the American continent following his resurrection in Jerusalem.

“The idea that America may have been overwhelmingly peopled by folks from northeastern Asia is perfectly compatible” with Mormon doctrine, said Daniel Peterson, a lifelong Mormon and professor of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young. Genetic evidence that some Native American ancestors came from the Middle East could easily be lost over thousands of years, he said.

Murphy disagrees, pointing to examples of other groups of people where genetic evidence can be found of ancient influences by foreign populations.

Murphy published his findings last year on a Web site run by Mormon intellectuals who openly debate the historical accuracy of the Book of Mormon. His work then appeared in *American Apocrypha*, an anthology about the Book of Mormon published in May by Signature Books, a small academic press in Salt Lake City that often releases books critical of church doctrine.

His conclusion is that “the Book of Mormon is a piece of 19th century fiction,” said Murphy, a lifelong Mormon who calls himself a Latter-day skeptic. “And that means that we have to acknowledge sometimes Joseph Smith lied.”

At the same time, Murphy says, he and other like-minded Mormon skeptics agree that “the book might be fiction, but inspired as well.”

“We can use science and history to understand the Book of Mormon to an extent and show it’s a 19th century document, but nothing can tell us if it’s divinely inspired,” he said.

In many Christian and Jewish congregations, that approach to scripture would be routine.

While both religious traditions have branches that believe in the literal truth of the Bible, they also have adherents who see the texts as divinely inspired, but not historically accurate.

But the Mormon church, a religion that is relatively young, has never considered that sort of nonliteral reading of its holy books acceptable.

“Unfortunately, there’s no such thing as a loyal opposition,” said Kathy Worthington, a Salt Lake City resident and church critic. “They say, ‘When the prophet speaks, the thinking has been done.’ They honestly believe people in the church shouldn’t discuss and dissent.”

The church, said Hanks, “just doesn’t know what to do with any of the factions outside its orthodoxy.”

Church critics say they fear that the prospect of Murphy’s excommunication will have a chilling effect on other Mormon scholars who want to stay in the church.

Murphy acknowledges that his position means “the odds for staying in the church are overwhelming arrayed against me.”

“The Mormon faith is going to survive one way or another,” he said, but the important question is how it will handle new, scientific evidence. “The Catholic Church survived Galileo, but they first had to admit they were wrong.”