

THE ANCIENT BOOK OF MORMON AS TRIBAL NARRATIVE

By D. Michael Quinn

With the addition of some clarifying phrases, the following is an excerpt from a letter sent by D. Michael Quinn to his friend, Benjamin Clark, on 23 December 2004. Used by permission.

THE DNA EVIDENCE IS SIGNIFICANT, BUT QUITE frankly I'm irritated by intelligent people (including some good friends) who have rushed to assert that the current DNA comparison allegedly "disproves" the Book of Mormon's claim to have been written by ancient inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere.

So far as I am aware, the DNA evidence clearly proves one genetic fact: more than 90 percent of the indigenous peoples currently living in North and South America descended exclusively from ancient peoples residing in Northeast Asia. These are among tribes and groups in the Western Hemisphere which (by their own traditions) have *not* intermarried (or been raped by) the conquering Europeans.

By implication, current DNA evidence clearly disproves the common assumption of modern LDS leaders and typical Mormons that the 1830 translation (titled the Book of Mormon) describes the experiences of *all* peoples who lived anciently in the Western Hemisphere at the time the record was written and compiled. By extension, the DNA evidence definitely proves as clearly false any statement (such as the well-intended pronouncements of LDS president Spencer W. Kimball) that all "Indians"/"Native Americans" (indigenous peoples) from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego "are Lamanites" (the generic name for descendants of the Book of Mormon peoples). But disproving *assumptions* about the Book of Mormon (even by living prophets—who are as subject to error as any other human being) is very different from disproving the Book of Mormon as an ancient history.

In the October 2003 issue of *The American Journal of Human Genetics* (vol. 73, pages 1178–90), a scholarly article examines the evidence that about 7 percent of collected DNA from indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere matches DNA collected from North Africa and the Middle East. This was a follow-up to a 2002 *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* study (vol. 119, page 84) which began, "Haplogroup X represents approximately 3% of all modern Native North American mitochondrial lineages. . . ." This small minority of DNA samples from American indigenous people is different from a similar DNA from Northeast Asia (also different from 90 percent of the collected Asian DNA).

Therefore, according to current DNA evidence, there is a very small percentage of American indigenous DNA which does not match the overwhelmingly common DNA in Asia, nor does it exactly match a rarer DNA strain in part of Northeast Asia. By implication, the current DNA evidence still allows for the possibility of an ancient North-African/Middle-Eastern ancestry for the writers (as claimed) of the Book of Mormon. I certainly have no expertise in genetics or in science, but the scientific investigation and analysis still seem to be ongoing about these matters.

And by implication, this very small minority of DNA evidence supports the view of the Book of Mormon I developed before I became a missionary at age nineteen. From about age twelve to nineteen, I had repeatedly read the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible and concluded that both were tribal narratives. By my limited understanding as a decade-long history buff and English major, my

teenage mind conceived of both records as interested only in the experiences of the tribes which produced them. In essence, no one else existed in the narratives unless it was necessary to mention them with regard to the tribe's experiences. Thus Egyptians are mentioned only when necessary to explain certain aspects of Hebrew history and experience—otherwise, they are invisible in the Hebrew Bible.

As a teenager, my several readings of the Book of Mormon indicated to me that it described increasingly small groups of people, who couldn't have cared less about anyone else roaming the Western Hemisphere. The narrative of the original families of brothers Laman, Lemuel, Nephi, Sam, and Sam becomes a narrative of only the families of Nephi, Sam, and their descendants. Half the original population of interest essentially ceases to exist after a few pages in the Book of Mormon narrative, except when this invisible population thrusts itself into the Nephite tribal history through warfare. Wars end, and (again) Lamanites cease to exist. The same invisibility holds true for the mass of Nephites, when the record-keepers find themselves to be a minority of believers who must escape from persecution. So as a nineteen-year-old new missionary, I did not regard the Book of Mormon as a history of all ancient inhabitants of the Americas—just of one increasingly small tribe of religious believers (or fanatics, as viewed by their neighbors) that landed there generations *after* numerous other peoples were living very different lives, with different origins, religions, and customs. Just as many ancient civilizations of the Middle East (some discovered in recent times, such as Ebla) were unimportant and essentially invisible in the tribal history that is the Hebrew Bible, the centuries-older, millennia-older "original" inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere were unimportant and invisible in the tribal history that is the Book of Mormon.

In my late teens, I realized that this was not the "official" view of the LDS church, nor of any Mormons I knew, nor of anything I had read by an LDS author. So I kept silent about my "tribal view" of the Book of Mormon and Bible. Yet I felt embarrassed when I dutifully followed the missionary program of claiming that the Book of Mormon is the "ancient history of the American Indians"—because I didn't believe that was the case. I saw it as a sacred history by a small minority that became increasingly smaller. I didn't even offer my own view when people asked how the LDS missionary claim related to the Asian appearance of Eskimos and other "Indians" or to the evidence for pre-historic Asian island-hopping across the Aleutians, or an even older migration across the Aleutian "land bridge" before melting glaciers created the islands. I just said, "I don't deny scientific evidence for older populations in the Western Hemisphere, but examine the book for yourself." I left it at that.

When I read President Kimball's sermons about all Mexicans and South Americans being "Lamanites" and the Book of Mormon being "your" history, I used to cringe but say to myself, "Well, Mike, you must be wrong to think otherwise." Well, now the DNA evidence does not support more than one living prophet's Mormon version of egalitarianism, but it also does not disprove the venerable "Mormon Bible." Although now excommunicated from the LDS church, I maintain my youthful faith in the reality of God, the truth of His revelations (both ancient and modern), the existence of living prophets, and the fallibility of all prophets in word and deed (what the Book of Mormon itself refers to as "the weaknesses of men" among its prophet-writers, transcribers, translators).