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Single word change in Book of Mormon speaks volumes



By Peggy Fletcher Stack
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Posted: 6:31 AM- The LDS Church has changed a single word in its introduction to the Book of Mormon, a change observers say has serious implications for commonly held LDS beliefs about the ancestry of American Indians.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe founder Joseph Smith unearthed a set of gold plates from a hill in upperstate New York in 1827 and translated the ancient text into English. The account, known as The Book of Mormon, tells the story of two Israelite civilizations living in the New World. One derived from a single family who fled from Jerusalem in 600 B.C. and eventually splintered into two groups, known as the Nephites and Lamanites.

The book's current introduction, added by the late LDS apostle, Bruce R. McConkie in 1981, includes this statement: "After thousands of years, all were destroyed except the Lamanites, and they are the principal ancestors of the American Indians."

The new version, seen first in Doubleday's revised edition, reads, "After thousands of years, all were destroyed except the Lamanites, and they are among the ancestors of the American Indians."

LDS leaders instructed Doubleday to make the change, said senior editor Andrew Corbin, so it "would be in accordance with future editions the church is printing."

The change "takes into account details of Book of Mormon demography which are not known," LDS spokesman Mark Tuttle said Wednesday.

It also steps into the middle of a raging debate about the book's historical claims.

Many Mormons, including several church presidents, have taught that the Americas were largely inhabited by Book of Mormon peoples. In 1971, Church President Spencer W. Kimball said that Lehi, the family patriarch, was "the ancestor of all of the Indian and Mestizo tribes in North and South and Central America and in the islands of the sea."

After testing the DNA of more than 12,000 Indians, though, most researchers have concluded that the continent's early inhabitants came from Asia across the Bering Strait.

With this change, the LDS Church is "conceding that mainstream scientific theories about the colonization of the Americas have significant elements of truth in them," said Simon Southerton, a former Mormon and author of *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA and the Mormon Church*.

"DNA has revealed very clearly how closely related American Indians are to their Siberian ancestors," Southerton said in an e-mail from his home in Canberra, Australia. "The Lamanites are invisible, not principal ancestors."

LDS scholars, however, dispute the notion that DNA evidence eliminates the possibility of Lamanites. They call it "oversimplification" of the research.

On the church's official Web site, [lds.org](https://www.lds.org), it says, "Nothing in the Book of Mormon precludes migration into the Americas by peoples of Asiatic origin. The scientific issues relating to DNA, however, are numerous and complex."

Mormon researcher John M. Butler and DNA expert further argues that "careful examination and demographic analysis of the Book of Mormon record in terms of population growth and the number of people described implies that other groups were likely present in the promised land when Lehi's family arrived, and these groups may have genetically mixed with the Nephites, Lamanites, and other groups. Events related in the Book of Mormon likely took place in a limited region, leaving plenty of room for other Native American peoples to have existed."

In recent years, many LDS scholars have come to share Butler's belief in what is known as the "limited geography" theory. By this view, the Nephites and Lamanites restricted their activities to portions of Central America, which would explain their absence from the general American Indian genetics.

Kevin Barney, a Mormon lawyer and independent researcher in Chicago, welcomes the introduction's word change.

"I have always felt free to disavow the language of the [Book of Mormon's] introduction, footnotes and dictionary, which are not part of the canonical scripture," said Barney, on the board of FAIR, a Mormon apologist group. "These things can change as the scholarship progresses and our understanding enlarges. This suggests to me that someone on the church's scripture committee is paying attention to the discussion."

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