

REFRAMING THE BOOK OF MORMON

BOOK OF MORMON studies are at a crossroads, and the issues and debates are becoming more public, reaching new ears both outside and inside Mormonism. With the recent publicity over DNA studies that have confirmed long-held scientific notions that Amerindians descend from Asian—not Middle Eastern—peoples, those who hadn't already been thinking about the Book of Mormon's claim to be a literal history of the indigenous peoples of the Americas have begun to pay attention. The news has spread like wildfire among various Christian groups eager to win the souls of potentially disillusioned Latter-day Saints. More important, perhaps, is the questions produced by these studies have also begun to reach Latter-day Saints in the pews.

In the wake of this new attention, LDS scholars, particularly those at FARMS and BYU, have scrambled to educate lay Latter-day Saints on where Book of Mormon studies currently stand. For the past twenty-five years or so, believing Book of Mormon theorists have been steadily attempting to work out the details of a new paradigm for the Book of Mormon—one that shifts Book of Mormon events from a full-hemispheric to a limited-geography model. In other words, instead of Book of Mormon events taking place in North America (the land northward), South America (the land southward) and Central America (with the Isthmus of Panama being the “narrow neck of land”) as had traditionally been envisioned, scholars now suggest the Book of Mormon took place in a relatively small locale in Mesoamerica. These scholars have vigorously refuted suggestions that the DNA findings constitute a dilemma for believers in the Book of Mormon, citing their own work pointing towards the limited-geography model and the notion that Book of Mormon populations were much smaller than originally believed. In response to media interest in the implications of the DNA findings, the Church's official website even linked to several *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* articles, allowing web users to view and download them for free.

This is a striking development, for in its attempt to redirect attention from the Amerindian DNA question, the Church seems to have tacitly endorsed the limited-geography model and its attendant implications for the identity of Book of Mormon peoples. Should Latter-day Saints still view the Book of Mormon, as its current Introduction claims, as “a record of God's dealings with the ancient inhabitants of the Americas, . . . the principal ancestors of the American Indians”? Statements from Church leaders, from Joseph Smith to the present, including one as recent as 1990, have assumed a hemispheric setting for Book of Mormon events.

As the limited-geography, limited-population paradigm becomes more visible, many faithful members are looking for guidance. In the discussion period following a January 2003 presentation at BYU, a young Peruvian student named José

summed up the dilemma. He told the audience and panelists how he grew up believing he was a Lamanite and now felt “overwhelmed with the surprise coming from the science. . . . We don't know where the Book of Mormon took place. We don't know where the Lamanites are. If we don't know who the Lamanites are, how can the Book of Mormon promise to bring them back? It's an identity crisis for many of us that [must] be understood.”

Things are truly at a crossroads. We need a Liahona.

WITHOUT claiming in any way to be divine pointers themselves, the essays that follow in this “Reframing the Book of Mormon” section illustrate some of the issues that now occupy center stage. In the first essay, Book of Mormon scholar Brent Lee Metcalfe examines several elements of the increasingly visible apologetic paradigm, querying how well they fit with the book's own understanding of itself, as well as with past prophetic understandings of the Book of Mormon as an account of the origins of Native Americans. Implicitly, Metcalfe poses the challenging question, “Is the tail wagging the dog?” in current Book of Mormon studies. Are these LDS apologists, rather than Church leaders, creating new doctrine, and, if so, by what right?

In the second essay, Latter-day Saint scientist Trent D. Stephens helps clarify some of the issues surrounding the DNA findings. More importantly, he also weighs various practical approaches to science-versus-religion questions, ultimately arguing there is still an important place for faith.

The final two articles, by chemist Ralph A. Olsen and psychiatrist C. Jess Groesbeck, differ from the others by offering alternate framings for the Book of Mormon. Olsen's proposal, although startling in many ways, may nevertheless hold a certain appeal for readers who believe the Book of Mormon to be literal history. Exhausted from trying to reconcile inconsistencies between Book of Mormon accounts and the favored Mesoamerican settings for the book's events, Olsen proposes an alternative that he believes accommodates all the textual and logical requirements for Book of Mormon lands: the Malay Peninsula!

Deeply influenced by Jungian psychology with its ideas about archetypal patterns in human experience, and by his own lifelong interest in shamanism and ancient healing practices, Groesbeck advances a grand theory of the Book of Mormon as “symbolic history.” In dialogue with historians of religion and students of mythic structures, Groesbeck's article lays the groundwork for understanding the Book of Mormon as powerful and true in the most important ways while explaining the limitations facing all approaches that attempt to fix the Book of Mormon to any literal historical or social setting.