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## KnoWhy #435 - Did "Others" Influence Book of Mormon Peoples?

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**Abstract:** Modern anthropological research tells us that the New World was already extensively populated when the Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites arrived. This situation agrees with a number of clues in the Book of Mormon that suggest these colonies quickly interacted with outsiders. The fact that the Book of Mormon is essentially silent about these other societies is consistent with the narrow focus of known ancient American texts. It also is consistent with the claims made by Book of Mormon authors themselves that they couldn't report even a hundredth part of their history.

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KnoWhy #435  
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“Dawn on the Land of Desolation” by James Fullmer

## DID “OTHERS” INFLUENCE BOOK OF MORMON PEOPLES?

*“And a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people, which now began to be numerous, cannot be written upon these plates.”*

Jacob 3:13

### THE KNOW

Modern anthropological research tells us that the New World was already extensively populated when the Jaredites, Lehiters, and Mulekites arrived. This may lead readers to wonder why other societies are never mentioned in the Book of Mormon? The first thing to consider is that there are actually quite a few clues in the text which suggest that “others” were living in the regions where these colonies settled. The following list summarizes some of these clues:<sup>1</sup>

1. The reported size of early Nephite populations, the accounts of their warfare, and their unsanctioned polygamous marriages all indicate that they had an unbelievably high population growth rate.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that outsiders mixed with and added to their population from the beginning.
2. In the book of Jarom, readers learn that the hunter-gatherer Lamanites had become “exceedingly more numerous” than the Nephites who cultivated the land (Jarom 1:6). This situation goes against the historical trend of higher population growth among agricultural societies. It seems that outsiders would have been necessary to swell the Lamanite population so disproportionately.<sup>3</sup>
3. Some researchers have felt that Jacob’s statements about Sherem, who “sought much opportunity” to speak with Jacob and who “had a perfect knowledge of the language of the people,” suggest that Sherem was an outsider to Nephite society (Jacob 7:3–4).<sup>4</sup> This is because it makes little sense to emphasize that a community insider had a good grasp of their language

or that he would have to seek out an encounter with Jacob.

4. For several reasons, the Nephites' quick ability to grow corn (maize) and raise flocks and herds seems unlikely unless they had obtained this knowledge from local natives.<sup>5</sup>
5. The Mulekites' language seems to have been "corrupted" too quickly for natural language evolution. This indicates that their language was being mixed with another language or languages from outside groups (Omni 1:17).<sup>6</sup>
6. The terms "Nephite" and "Lamanite" were broad enough to include a variety of ethnic and cultural sub-groups.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, there are examples of Book of Mormon societies adopting the name of a host group upon joining them.<sup>8</sup>
7. The way that Jaredite culture and names were preserved among the Nephites shows how cultural influence from one group upon another goes unmentioned and unexplained in the text.<sup>9</sup>
8. The use of some terms or group designations, such as "Lamanitish servants" (Alma 17:26) or "Ishmaelitish women" (Alma 3:7), hints at affiliated groups of outsiders.<sup>10</sup> If the social identity of the servants or women was one of the named groups in the Book of Mormon, then we would expect a straightforward label. Instead, the "ish" indicates that they may have been outsiders who were adopted into the Lamanite and Ishmaelite tribal groups.
9. Several prophetic interpretations of Isaiah hint that the Nephites were concerned with the spiritual welfare of "others" in the land.<sup>11</sup>

These textual clues suggest that the Book of Mormon and the secular history of the Americas are actually in agreement about the presence of other peoples in the land. However, these clues still don't explain why outsiders were never mentioned directly in the text. One likely answer can be found by comparing the Book of Mormon with other ancient American historical documents.

Anthropologist John L. Sorenson has noted that ancient Mesoamerican histories are similarly

ethnocentric—meaning that, like the Book of Mormon, they focus almost solely on a particular society or lineage and that they exclude political, cultural, or religious information that isn't directly relevant.<sup>12</sup> With this ancient American context in place, the Book of Mormon's lack of information about outside societies is perfectly understandable and even expected.

## THE WHY

These findings suggest that the Book of Mormon's lack of detail about surrounding peoples and cultures is a subtle evidence of its historical authenticity. It is also consistent with claims made by several Book of Mormon authors that they couldn't record even a "hundredth part" of their peoples' history.<sup>13</sup>

They directly tell us that much more is going on in the background. Therefore we shouldn't be surprised to discover that large amounts of historical or cultural information, such as descriptions of other societies, is missing from the text. As President Anthony W. Ivins of the First Presidency stated in 1929, "We must be careful in the conclusions that we reach. The Book of Mormon ... does not tell us that there was no one here before them. It does not tell us that people did not come after."<sup>14</sup>

The strong likelihood that others were in the land also has implications for DNA studies. The Church essay on this topic has explained,

When a small population mixes with a large one, combinations of autosomal markers typical of the smaller group become rapidly overwhelmed or swamped by those of the larger. The smaller group's markers soon become rare in the combined population and may go extinct due to the effects of genetic drift.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, when a small colony like the Jaredites, Lehites, or Mulekites mixes with a larger population, as we would expect them to have found in ancient America, then the DNA of the immigrant colonies would likely be lost to us within only a few generations. For this and other reasons, "DNA studies cannot be used decisively to either affirm or reject the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon."<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the unmentioned presence of other peoples should help us remember why the Book of Mormon was written in the first place. Nephi explained, "I do



not write anything upon plates save it be that I think it be sacred” (1 Nephi 19:6).<sup>17</sup> Mormon similarly stated that his record was written so that a remnant of his people would “know concerning your fathers, and also the marvelous works which were wrought by the power of God among them” (Mormon 7:9).<sup>18</sup>

In essence, the Book of Mormon is a spiritual and religious history. Its focus is on particular groups of people, their sacred revelations, and their miraculous experiences. It was never meant to be a cultural survey of the Nephites and Jaredites, or any of the others who interacted with them. Its narrow spiritual focus can help us remember to similarly prioritize spiritual things—especially the realty and teachings of Jesus Christ—in our own lives.

As Elder Russell M. Nelson explained,

Some authors have focused upon [the Book of Mormon’s] stories, its people, or its vignettes of history. Others have been intrigued by its language structure or its records of weapons, geography, animal life, techniques of building, or systems of weights and measures.

Interesting as these matters may be, study of the Book of Mormon is most rewarding when one focuses on its *primary* purpose—to testify of Jesus Christ. By comparison, all other issues are incidental.<sup>19</sup>

## FURTHER READING

Matthew Roper, “[Nephi’s Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations](#),” *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 91–128.

Brant A. Gardner, “[The Other Stuff: Reading the Book of Mormon for Cultural Information](#),” *FARMS Review* 13, no. 2 (2001): 29–37.

John L. Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?](#)” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 1–34.

3. See Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived](#),” 26–32.
4. See Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived](#),” 4; A. Keith Thompson, “[Who Was Sherem?](#)” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 1–15; Kevin Christensen, “[The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament](#),” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004), 86–88.
5. See Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived](#),” 4–6.
6. See Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived](#),” 18–19.
7. See Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived](#),” 8–17.
8. See Book of Mormon Central, “[What Does the Book of Mormon Teach about Families?](#) (Mosiah 25:12),” *KnoWhy* 382 (November 16, 2017); Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Did Lehi Divide His People into Seven Tribes?](#) (Jacob 1:13),” *KnoWhy* 319 (May 29, 2017).
9. See Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived](#),” 19–21. See also Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Volume 5 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 242–263.
10. See Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived](#),” 31.
11. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Did Interactions with ‘Others’ Influence Nephi’s Selection of Isaiah?](#) (2 Nephi 24:1),” *KnoWhy* 45 (March 2, 2016).
12. See John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 104–106.
13. See [Jacob 3:13](#); [Words of Mormon 1:5](#); [Helaman 3:14](#); [3 Nephi 5:8](#); [26:6–7](#); [4 Nephi 1:40–42](#); [Ether 15:33](#).
14. Anthony W. Ivins, in Conference Report, Apr. 1929, 15; as cited in “[Book of Mormon and DNA Studies](#),” Gospel Topics, online at lds.org.
15. “[Book of Mormon and DNA Studies](#),” online at lds.org.
16. “[Book of Mormon and DNA Studies](#),” online at lds.org. See also, Matthew Roper, “[Nephi’s Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations](#),” FairMormon Conference, 2003, online at archive.bookofmormoncentral.org; Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Hasn’t Lehi’s DNA Been Found?](#) (Introduction),” *KnoWhy* 280 (February 27, 2018).
17. See Book of Mormon Central, “[Why Do the Authors on the Small Plates Follow a Pattern?](#) (Jacob 7:27),” *KnoWhy* 74 (April 8, 2016).
18. See Book of Mormon Central, “[What Was Mormon’s Purpose in Writing the Book of Mormon?](#) (Mormon 5:14),” *KnoWhy* 230 (November 14, 2016).
19. Russell M. Nelson, “[A Testimony of the Book of Mormon](#),” *Ensign*, November 1999, online at lds.org.

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## NOTES

1. These textual clues are mostly adapted and summarized from John L. Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?](#)” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 1–34.
2. See Sorenson, “[When Lehi’s Party Arrived](#),” 1–4.