

Signature Books News

564 West 400 North, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84116. www.signaturebooks.com.

Contact Tom Kimball, 801-531-1483
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Provo Symposium Features Book of Mormon DNA

Salt Lake City—Historically, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) have felt a kinship with Native Americans and Polynesians. This is based on the LDS belief that these people descended from the heroic figures described in the Book of Mormon. Modern Latter-day Saints face a dilemma over this: a matter of faith versus science.

Mormon tradition has it that Native Americans were Jewish and migrated to America about 600 BC. However, recent DNA studies have shown that the Indians came from the Lake Baikal area in Siberia about 18,000 BC and that Polynesians came from Taiwan and Malaysia.

These issues will be discussed during an all-day symposium on Wednesday, May 28, beginning at 9:00 a.m., at the Tahitian Noni International Center in Provo. Speakers include LDS General Authority Emeritus Hartman Rector Jr.; amateur geneticist Rod Meldrum; editor of the *Ancient American* magazine Wayne May; president of the Brigham Young Family Association Mary Ellen Elggren; and American Indian Services board member Harding Walker.

According to Australian geneticist Simon Southerton, “It’s an interesting amalgamation of eccentrics and enthusiasts. LDS apologists come in all stripes and colors, and they frequently contradict each other. They seem to be unable to accept the fact that Indians have no tangible connection, biologically or otherwise, to the Book of Mormon.” Southerton’s book, *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church*, was published in 2004 by liberal Mormon press Signature Books of Salt Lake City.

Last week, Southerton posted an essay on-line that divides defenders of a traditional Book of Mormon into four groups. Some of these conservative Mormons believe all Native Americans

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and Polynesians descended from Jewish sailors. Others believe Book of Mormon people arrived in a land already heavily populated by Siberian immigrants and that the newcomers stayed in Central America—the position championed by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute at Brigham Young University.

Others feel the Book of Mormon people inhabited only the northeastern U.S. seaboard or that, because of a discrepancy relating to pre-Columbian horses and elephants in the Book of Mormon, events described in this LDS scripture occurred somewhere altogether beyond the Americas.

Mel Tungate, an LDS member in California who hosts the *DNA and Book of Mormon* website, confirms that there has been a gradual fracturing in the “Mormon apologetic,” or defense of faith over DNA, but maintains that these “disagreements” are matters that “most rank and file Mormons don’t know about or don’t care about.”

In fact, rivalries among these groups are severe. The *FARMS Review*, published by BYU’s Maxwell Institute, presented a negative review of attempts to tie artifacts found in the Midwest to Mormon scripture—an endeavor championed by Wayne May. Rod Meldrum has dismissed the work of the Maxwell Institute, saying that it has fallen “far short of providing a solid answer that validates the claims of The Book of Mormon.”

Others have joined the discussion. The *Deseret News* recently reported that, according to LDS geneticist Scott R. Woodward, the Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation in Salt Lake City has discovered a trace of possible Jewish DNA in “Columbia, Brazil, and Bolivia.” Despite the *News* headline, “Was Hebrew DNA Found in South American Indians?” the study did not look specifically at American Indians but rather at the general populations of those countries—something the article did not disclose but is found in the article’s abstract on the company’s website. The results were therefore not surprising to geneticists. Nonetheless, Woodward supports a limited infiltration of Jews into the New World.

This also seems to be the official position of the LDS Church, based on its website

endorsement of articles published by the Maxwell Institute. According to Southerton, the institute’s research has been less than satisfying because so many of their scholars are non-geneticists: a museum curator, a surgeon, a linguist, an anthropologist, a philosopher, and so on. One article written by geneticist Ryan Parr was diversionary, comparing Indian origins to a species of fish that changes its sex according to circumstances, thus enabling genetic lines to disappear over relatively few generations. In a recent news release from the Maxwell Institute, BYU Professor of Arabic Daniel Peterson announced plans to edit these previously published articles into an anthology.

Meanwhile, such ongoing behind-the-scenes discussions led the LDS Church in 2006 to change the introduction in the Book of Mormon. It now states that ancient Jews are “among” the ancestors of the American Indians, where it previously stated that Jews were the “principal” ancestors of the Indians.

For traditional Latter-day Saints, there does not appear to be any forthcoming solution to the Book of Mormon DNA debate.

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Contact information:

Wayne May

Ancient American magazine

<http://ancientamerican.com/>

Rod Meldrum

DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography website

(Book of Mormon Evidences Symposium)

<http://bookofmormonevidence.org/index.php>

Daniel C. Peterson

<http://asiane.byu.edu/arab.php>

daniel_peterson@byu.edu

Simon Southerton

Losing a Lost Tribe (paperback from Signature Books)

<http://www.csiro.au/people/Simon.Southerton.html>

simon.southerton@csiro.au

Mel Tungate

DNA and Book of Mormon website

<http://www.tungate.com/murphy.htm>

Scott Woodward

Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation

<http://www.smgf.org/index.jspx>

Deseret News article: http://mormontimes.com/DB_index.php?id=1064

(summary of research: http://www.smgf.org/resources/papers/ASHG2005_Jayne.pdf)