

Were the Lehiters Alone in the Americas?

The traditional LDS belief asserts that the Lehiters arrived to a nearly vacant New World, with the possible exception of some Jaredite survivors and the Mulekites. This tradition implies that most Native Americans are descendants of these Book of Mormon peoples.

Most LDS scholars, however, incorporating the tools of scholarship, science, and a closer reading of the Book of Mormon, suggest that the Book of Mormon peoples occupied a small area of Mesoamerica (see the brochure entitled “Where Did Book of Mormon Events Take Place?”) and intermingled with existing Native Americans.

That this view is accepted by at least some LDS leaders (and not just scholars) is evident from a statement made by Elder Oaks who said that while a student at BYU he “was introduced to the idea that the Book of Mormon is not a history of all of the people who have lived on the continents of North and South America in all ages of the earth.”¹

Orson Pratt, B.H. Roberts, Anthony Ivins, John Widtsoe, and other prominent LDS have all made comments suggesting the possibility that other non-Book-of-Mormon-peoples may have inhabited the New World.

While the Book of Mormon never explicitly states that *others* lived among the people, there are implicit hints that such was the case. Also, we know from archaeological and anthropological studies that others lived in the New World prior to, during, and after Book of Mormon periods.

Following are some of the implicit Book of Mormon passages that suggest that they encountered *others* in their new land.

When Nephi separated from Laman, Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael over contentions, Nephi took his family, Zorman, Sam, and their families with him, as well as “all those who would go with me...those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God” (2 Nephi 5: 6). Who were these *others* who, in addition to those already mentioned, followed Nephi? It is at this point that we get the terms “people of Nephi” and “the people who were now called Lamanites” (2 Nephi 5:9, 14). It’s possible that at this point such terms took on a cultural perspective and referred to *all* peoples who aligned themselves with Nephi or his contentious brother (for more details see the brochure entitled “Who Are the Lamanites?”).

In Jacob 7:1–26 we read of Sherem’s encounter with Jacob. Since Jacob was one of the original Lehiters in the New World, the maximum adult population among the Lehiters couldn’t have been more than a dozen people. Yet Sherem had come from another settlement and had *never met* Jacob, the chief Nephite priest.

Within 15 years Joseph and Jacob were made priests and teachers “over the land of my [Nephi’s] people” (2 Nephi 5:26). We read that within 25 years of their New World arrival, the Nephites were at “war” with the Lamanites. What kind of “war” could possibly exist with the few adults that may have been around without the infusion of pre-existing cultures?

Fifteen years later, some of the Nephite men began desiring “many wives and concubines” (Jacob 1:15). How many women could there have been if there were no others besides the original Lehiters party? This verse, like others, suggests that *others* were present in the land.

During Alma’s visit to the city of Ammonihah, Amulek introduced himself by saying, “I am a Nephite” (Alma 8:20). Considering that Ammonihah, a city of land of Zarahemla, was under Nephite rule, it would seem obvious that Amulek was a Nephite unless there were non-Nephite people living in the land as well.

By about 200 B.C. “corn” (American *maize*) is mentioned as the grain for preference among the Lamanites (Mosiah 7:22, 9:14). Corn, a uniquely American grain, could not have been brought from Lehi’s world and could not have been *discovered* wild upon arrival due to its complex cultivating techniques that will only reproduce new corn with human care. This strongly implies that *others* were already cultivating corn and taught the technique to Book of Mormon peoples.

Why are Others not Explicitly Mentioned in the Book of Mormon?

While it’s possible that the large plates of Nephi—the plates containing more historical information—might contain details on *others*, the portion of the Book of Mormon which we have is not a typical “history.” Instead, it is what Dr. John Sorenson calls a “lineage history.” The record is a history of a particular “lineage”—that of the Lehiters. *Others* are peripheral to the main story presented by Nephi and other New World scribes. The “Mulekites” (a term never used in the Book of Mormon) are barely mentioned in the Nephite record. Very little information is really given about the Mulekites, who, by descent, outnumbered the Nephites. For the most part, Nephite scribes are uninterested with the Mulekites. We see the same thing in the book of Ether. The primary character in the early chapters is the “brother of Jared.” His name is never given in the scriptures. Why? Because it is *Jared’s* lineage that is important, not the “brother of Jared.”

It’s also interesting to note that recent studies suggest that when the Lehiters traveled through the Arabian Peninsula, they would have taken well-known, generally well-traveled trails. In fact they most undoubtedly would have had to stop at guarded waterholes. It is nearly certain that they would have encountered at least some “others” while traveling toward their oceanic destination. Yet there is *no mention* of *others* along these frequented routes.

Objections to Others in the Land

What about scriptures and statements by Joseph Smith that appear to suggest there were no “others” in the land upon Lehi’s arrival?

It seems likely that Joseph Smith would have understood the Book of Mormon according to rumors and supposititious of his day—a hemispheric geography with the Lehiters as the primary progenitors for the Native Americans. Some of his comments in letters to others certainly give such an impression. Joseph’s opinions on the subject do not, however, constitute revelation. Joseph no doubt had many opinions that would disagree with modern science, continued revelation, or greater research on various topics. While Joseph’s opinions might be interesting, they can be discarded when they conflict with revealed doctrine, scientific facts, or in-depth examination. The fact that Joseph had opinions that were contrary to what we find in the Book of Mormon is a strong indication that he *translated* rather than *wrote* the text. (For more detail on opinions vs. doctrine, see the brochure entitled “What is Official LDS Doctrine?”)

Lehi's sermon in 2 Nephi 1:6–11 seems to preclude non-Lehite inhabitants in the "land of promise." Traditional, and perhaps erroneous, interpretations arise when we read Lehi's remarks that "shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord" (v. 6), and that the promised land "should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations; for behold, many nations would overrun the land, that there would be no place for an inheritance" (v. 8). Lehi told his children that if they remained righteous that they would prosper and "be kept from all other nations" so that they would "possess" the land "unto themselves" (v. 9).

On the surface, this seems to support the traditional interpretation that the Lehtes were the primary progenitors for the American Indians. A closer look at 2 Nephi, however, is helpful. This chapter takes place some time shortly after the Lehtes arrived in the New World (before Nephi and his brothers separated and *before* the first use of the terms *Nephite* and *Lamanite*). Lehi, who is nearing death, spoke to his posterity with counsel and warning. He said that the land of promise was offered by the Lord in covenant to Lehi, his children, and "all those who should be led out of *other* countries by the hand of the Lord" (v. 5, emphasis added) and that none would come to the land *except* those brought by the hand of the Lord (and we can certainly presume that the Lord brought others into the promised land prior to, during, and after Lehi's arrival). Such statements do not preclude the possibility that *others* already lived in the land of promise. The Lord promised that other nations—which up till this point had referred to Old World nations—would not know about and overrun their land. (Imagine the changes that may have happened had the New World been common knowledge among European and Old World nations of Lehi's day!)

The promise to keep the land secure has a caveat; as long as those brought from Jerusalem (Lehi and his family) *remain righteous*, they would prosper and be "kept from other nations" (v. 9). Lehi warned, however, that the time would come that they would "dwindle in unbelief" (v. 10) after which the Lord would allow "other nations" to take their possessions and cause them to be "scattered and smitten" (v. 11). While traditional LDS thought has supposed that this refers to the coming of the Spaniards (which may possibly account for a future and dual fulfillment of Lehi's prophecy), Lehi immediately launched into an exhortation to his children telling them that as "one generation passeth to another there shall be bloodshed" (v. 12). This suggests that Lehi suspected the coming of "other nations" in the near future. The appearance of the "other nations" is directly linked to not only the wickedness of Lehi's descendants, but also to a scattering and smiting of those who become wicked.

Shortly thereafter (chapter 5) we find that Laman and Lemuel were so unrighteous that they wanted to kill Nephi. It is at this point that Nephi and his followers (now called "Nephites") separate themselves from his brothers and their followers (now called "Lamanites"). According to Lehi's prophecy, when his children became unrighteous the Lord would allow "other nations" to smite them (2 Nephi 1:11). This wouldn't be possible unless there were already others present, or others arrived immediately after Laman and Lemuel fell back into their unrighteous habits. And in fulfillment of Lehi's prophesy, when Nephi departed he took away the Liahona, the plates of brass, and the sword of Laban (the "possessions" important to the Lehtes). In time we read how the Lamanites were "scattered and smitten."

Several centuries later, we find Alma exhorting his people to righteousness and recounting the story of Nephi's wayward brothers as an example of the consequences of wickedness (Alma 9:13-14). Now the Nephites were becoming wicked and were at risk for the same fate. We see the prophecies of Lehi—the promises and curses (which would include the invasion of "others")—as having already been (or continuing to be) fulfilled.

Accordingly, it seems that a possible scenario might be thus: When the Lehtes arrived they would have found sparse communities of "others" (perhaps too small to be called "nations") in their new land. The Lehtes would have continued to peacefully coexist (perhaps even intermingling) with these "others," pursuant to their righteousness. The wickedness of the Lamanites, however, might have brought aggressive "others" ("other nations") into the Lehte colony who could have merged with the Lamanites and joined in their quest to destroy the Nephites (who may also have joined with peaceful "others"). When the Nephites separated from the Lamanites the promises and warnings of Lehi would have been realized (and like many prophecies in the Bible, may have seen multiple fulfillment).

More Information

For more information and greater detail on this topic see the following:

Matthew Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations," *FARMS Review* 15:2 (2003), 91-128.

John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 1–47.

John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, "Before DNA," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12:1, 6–23.

John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992).



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ⁱ Dallin H. Oaks, "The Historicity of the Book of Mormon," *History and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2001), 238.