

Who Are the Lamanites?

Many Latter-day Saints have taken seriously the admonition to study the Book of Mormon. Such study and research has led to a greater understanding of the book—not only spiritually, but also from an historical perspective. This greater knowledge has led to the discovery that some of our traditional ideas about the Book of Mormon are not supported by the text. (See, for example, the FAIR brochure entitled “Where Did the Book of Mormon Events Take Place?”)

One traditional assumption that does not conform to an enlarged understanding of the text is the once-held opinion that the Lehighites populated all of the Americas. (See the FAIR brochure “Were the Lehighites Alone in the Americas?”) Most LDS scholars agree that the Lehighites were a small incursion into a larger existing population of Native Americans. (This would account for the disappearance of Lehighite DNA. See the FAIR brochure entitled “Is an Historical Book of Mormon Compatible With DNA Science?”)

With this expanded appreciation of New World inhabitants, some members have wondered if an acknowledgement of non-Lehighite populations runs counter to the many statements by LDS scriptures, prophets, and general authorities who have referred to American, Central American, and South American natives as “Lamanites.”

There are three different aspects to this issue: genetics, culture, and genealogy:

Genetics. This has to do with DNA. We do not pass all of our DNA to our offspring, and we do not have all of the DNA possessed by our ancestors. Thus, modern Native Americans who are actual descendants of Lehigh may not have inherited Lehighite DNA. (See the DNA article noted above for more details.)

Culture. Culture is learned and generally passes from parents to children. Sometimes, however, people change or assimilate cultures (or, at least, their children become part of the new culture). Thus we have “Americans” who are culturally American, although they (or their ancestors) might have come from Africa, Europe, Asia, or many other parts of the world. Terms such as “African,” “Asian,” “Jew,” “LDS,” “Indian,” and others are social constructs, not biological or genetic classifications. It is now widely recognized that “race” is not biological, but is rather a cultural descriptor.

The first Lamanite group was a *cultural* organization. Both Laman and Lemuel (and those who joined them) were called “Lamanites.” While the original Lamanite party would certainly have had Lehighite DNA, anyone who joined the Lamanites would be called “Lamanite” by the Nephites. Nephi tells us that shortly after his people fled Laman’s group they had to make weapons to defend themselves against “the people who were now called Lamanites” (2 Nephi 5:14).

Intertwined with cultural identification is a concept from anthropology known as *emic* vs. *etic* discourse—basically perceptions of “insider” vs. “outsider.” *Emic* is how a people understand themselves, whereas *etic* is how a people are understood by outsiders. Often these two views are very different. Romans, for example, called one people “Greeks,” who called themselves “Hellenes.” Those called “Egyptians” by the Greeks were “Mizraim” to the Hebrews and neither term to the Egyptians themselves. To us, some Europeans are “German,” to the Italians “Tedesco,” to the French “Allemand,” but to themselves they are “Deutsch.” We call the early inhabitants of this continent “Native Americans” or “Indians,” but that is not how they referred to themselves. To the Nephites all non-Nephites were “Lamanites,” while to Latter-day Saints, all Native Americans are “Lamanites.”

Not only can these cultural conceptualizations be different depending on an “insider” or “outsider” perspective, they also can shift over time or circumstance. Jews in Utah, for example, can also be referred to as “Gentiles.” Even outside of Utah the term “Jew” is dependent on circumstances. A “Jew” is someone who is descended from Judah as well as someone who adopts the Jewish culture and religious life. Someone can be born a Jew as well as become a Jew through conversion. Likewise, in 1 Nephi 14:2 we read that righteous Gentiles would become numbered among the “house of Israel” as well as the “seed” of Lehigh.

The term “Lamanite” meant different things to Nephi, Alma, Mormon, and even Joseph Smith (which is what we would expect—and happen to find—if the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text written by multiple authors over many centuries). As with Jews, we read in the Book of Mormon that someone could “become” a Lamanite. After Christ’s visit to the New World, Book of Mormon peoples lived in harmony for many decades. During that time, there were “no Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were one, the children of Christ” (4 Nephi 1:17). Several decades later we read of a small revolt of people who had “taken upon them the name of Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land” (v. 20).

Genealogy. Finally, we have genealogy—one’s ancestry. Everyone has two parents, and each parent has two parents. If you go back to two generations (to your grandparents) you have four ancestral slots filled by two grandfathers and two grandmothers. As we go further back in our genealogy the number of ancestral slots increases geometrically. These slots don’t represent the actual number of ancestors, however, because intermarriage among relatives will cause some ancestors to fill multiple ancestral slots.

If we were able to do the genealogy for a modern Native American to Lehigh’s generation, we would have approximately 90 to 100 generations (we’ll choose 90 to keep it conservative). This Native American would have over 1.2 *octillion* ancestral slots (that’s more than 1.2 *trillion* x 1 *quadrillion*). Now obviously she would not have 1.2 *octillion*

ancestors (there haven't been that many people in the entire history of the world) since the same ancestors would fill many of these slots. Nevertheless, on a giant genealogy chart, there would be 1.2 *octillion* ancestral slots. From how many slots would our Native American be descended? All of them. If Laman (or a descendant of Laman) was an ancestor in just one of these 1.2 octillion ancestral slots, then it can legitimately be claimed that our Native American is a descendant of Lamanite.

Recent studies suggest that we are related in several ways, and that many large groups of humans are often related in distinct ways as well. Such studies indicate that a large percentage of all people may have traces of Israelite ancestry, and that most people may be descendants of Abraham (see Genesis 22:17). In regards to the Book of Mormon, one scholar who has studied this concept notes: "The numerical dynamics of population mixing make it easily feasible...that most Amerindians are descended from Book of Mormon peoples, even if Book of Mormon peoples were originally a minority of ancient American populations and are thus only a part of the ancestry of most individuals."¹

In summary, while there is no evidence for a genetic link between modern Native Americans and the Lehite/Lamanites (and there is no reason to suspect that Lehite DNA would be detectable in modern native peoples), LDS scriptures and prophets are justified in referring to them as "Lamanites" due to the likelihood of cultural and genealogical affiliations.²



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¹ Brian D. Stubbs, "Elusive Israel and the Numerical Dynamics of Population Mixing," *FARMS Review* 15:2 (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2003), 179–180.

² Much of the information in this article was shamelessly pilfered (both in thought and diction) from MorgbotX's posts on ZLMB (<http://p080.ezboard.com/fpacumenispagesfrm67.showMes sageRange?topicID=126.topic&start=1&stop=20>, accessed 08-25-04). His/her true identity remains undisclosed.