

Fourteen years down the road, the questions and issues raised in this letter remain substantially unanswered, to my knowledge unaddressed, by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

August 30, 2003
153 Canemah Way
Oregon City, OR 97045

President Gordon B. Hinckley
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints
50 East North Temple Street
Salt Lake City, UT 84150

Dear President Hinckley:

I have questions regarding The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints' doctrine and history. While even science must fall back on *faith*—axioms not verifiable by empirical means—"worldly" matters are subject to rational examination. Objective investigation of nuts-and-bolts religions issues remains as valid as teasing out the atoms in a DNA molecule.

While I am neither sage nor scientist, mine could be questions Socrates, René Descartes, or Isaac Newton, might pose; neither jurist nor sleuth, they could be questions Justice Holmes, Clarence Darrow, or TV's Colombo would ask. Legitimate, fair-minded, factually-based questions like, Why only one book—gold no less? And what about the wheel?

Be assured my inquiry is meant *in no way* to detract from your exemplary moral guidance, other church leaders, or members. Indeed much of today's "gentile" world would do well to emulate the virtues espoused and exemplified by a majority of LDS people. Nor are my questions about theology, God's role in the universe, but rather man's role in the genesis and history of a sect.

I sometimes brood over matters others have long since laid to rest. Likely you have addressed my questions. If this is so, please forgive my ignorance and bring me "up to speed."

Background

Circa 600 B.C.: According to the Latter Day Saint website, Lehi's group, a handful of *Jews* who never before sailed more than a stones throw from shore, built seaworthy vessels, left the Promised Land—the Land God Himself gave them—navigated four thousand miles of open ocean, and founded a new home in the Western Hemisphere.

1492 A.D.: Three Spanish vessels drop anchor off a Caribbean islet where Christopher Columbus reports sighting Stone Age people "naked as the day their mother bore them."

The early nineteenth century: Joseph Smith, a New England teenager, talks with God, Jesus Christ, and angels. In time the lad is guided to a book of gold tablets buried in a hill within walking distance of his home. The book is purported to chronicle human history in the Western World from Lehi's arrival 'til his final righteous heirs, the Nephites, were wiped out by depraved cousins, the Lamanites. Joseph translates the *Book of Mormon* from the gold plates and founds The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

The twentieth century: Researchers unearth artifacts and anthropological evidence that humans migrated from northeast Siberia to the Western Hemisphere at the end of the last Ice Age. The Asian look and manner of Eskimos and Aleuts renders these findings indisputable. Less pronounced, hints of Asian roots remain evident in North, Central, and South America indigenous people today. Consistent with archaeological findings, carbon fourteen dating proves humankind first inhabited the Western Hemisphere more than ten millennia *before* Lehi's purported arrival.

My Concerns

As I understand LDS doctrine, the indigenous folks Columbus found—Atlantic to Pacific, Point Barrow to Tierra del Fuego, Tlingit, Paiute, Iroquois, Seminole, Apache, Maya, Inca, hundreds of tribes—descend from Lehi's group. If the *Book of Mormon* is correct the first residents of the Western Hemisphere are heirs to an Old World people embodying one of the most sophisticated, enlightened, highly-ritualized, religious and cultural *civilizations* in world history. Smoke Jaguar and Quetzal Macaw, kings who worshiped animal gods and gloried in human sacrifice, are the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and Solomon. Today's North, Central, and South American native people, a hundred generations removed, descend from *Jews!*

If Lehi's group *were* first to populate the Western Hemisphere—forgetting for the moment the Jaredites—the timing is way off. Even BYU archeologists would be hard pressed to refute tangible proof humankind began inhabiting what became the Americas eons *before* 600 B.C. This fact has troubling implications for the *Book of Mormon*.

While not contemplating The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints' doctrine, a website summarizes facts seemingly critical with regard to LDS belief. Referring to the Mayas—whose roots extend back seven millennia—*One World Journeys Where People and the Planet Connect* (copyright 2000–2002 FusionSpark Media, Inc.) points out, “Without benefit of *metal tools, beasts of burden, or even the wheel, (my emphasis)* they were still masters of architectures, building elaborate pyramids and sprawling cities.” This *total absence* of metal other than ornamental gold, draft animals, and the wheel—common throughout the seventh century B.C. Eastern Hemisphere—holds true for the entire Western Hemisphere before 1492. The earliest New World citizens were *Stone Age* people, *not* the eastern Mediterranean, Iron Age culture of Lehi's time!

Nonetheless, a search of the *Book of Mormon* reveals the following words in the numbers indicated: sword 157, brass 37, iron 18, copper 8, steel 5, wheel 1. In 2 Nephi, chapter 5, verse 15, the writer boasts of teaching his people in uses of iron, copper, brass, gold, silver, and steel. With two hundred and twenty-five textual references to metal in the pre-Columbian Western Hemisphere, surely over the past five centuries someone somewhere in the Americas would have unearthed *one* brass, iron, copper, or steel implement: a blade, hammer, hoe, nail, needle. We haven't.

Steel? First Nephi verse 16 refers to a bow of “fine steel.” Apart from an extremely rare—if ever—instance where iron ore and pure carbon were accidentally heated to nearly sixteen hundred degrees Celsius and the ancient metallurgist had no clue what he'd accomplished, decent quality steel was virtually unheard of 'til the mid-nineteenth century. While “fine” is subjective, producing high quality steel was a hit and miss—much more often miss than hit—operation until Henry Bessemer perfected the science in 1856, half a century *after* Joseph Smith's birth.

What's more, there is *no hint* these folks *regressed* from iron to stone tools. To the contrary, implements and cultural clues show Western World aboriginals *progressed*, slowly to be sure, from cobblestone choppers and spear points to meticulously crafted stone and bone tools. Over millennia they perfected the atlatl, bow, arrow, needle, awl, cordage, more serviceable clothing, sandals, and pottery. Over the past five centuries tens- if not hundreds-of- thousands of such artifacts have been found, but *not one* Iron Age implement.

In what became the Americas, human shelters evolved from caves, stick houses, and mud huts to tents, long-houses, and multistory adobe and stone dwellings. Current consensus is the people who built and inhabiting the structures of Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon are indeed ancestors of today's America Indians. Current Hopi pueblos bear testimony to this continuum. There is, however, no hint these folks' ancestors migrated from the eastern Mediterranean.

To bush off the dearth of Iron Age implements in what would become the Americans as a consequence of moral decay is indefensible. Sadly the *moral* backsliding of civilizations is all too familiar. - To abandon the *material* benefits of civil development is not. To forget or reject the obvious advan-

tage of an iron axe for a stone chopper, leaving no tangible evidence the axe ever existed, defies reason. It is inconceivable—no matter how depraved—descendents of seventh century B.C. Jews could reject or forget, not only Iron Age implements and housing, but millennia of rituals, traditions, language, writing, art, music, the *Old Testament*, irrevocably, *totally*, without a trace!

Where else in the ladder of recorded—indeed unrecorded—human history has a culture descended from the Iron to the Stone Age? Barring famine, draught, and pestilence, for people to regress from animal husbandry and olive groves to hunting and gathering, to descend from the temples, shops, and homes of Jerusalem to caves, sagebrush shelters, and mud huts is unprecedented.

Were Jaredites, Jews who the *Book of Mormon* says sailed to the Western Hemisphere prior to Lehi's voyage, the earliest humans of the New World? As I understand it, the last of Jared's people purportedly died some time after Lehi's arrival. To suggest Jaredites as first to inhabit the North and South American continents falls short for the same reasons as Lehites. They came nine millennia or so *after* the last ice age, after the earliest evidence of human life in the New World. They were Iron Age folks sharing the aforementioned Jewish culture, history, traditions, and faith. Moreover, killing off every human resident of the Western Hemisphere, coast to coast, Arctic to Antarctic, before and about Lehi's time calls for a gradual or sudden mass extinction to beggar imagination.

Beyond the merely physical however, first, last and above all, Lehite or Jaredite, we are talking about *Jews*, people with a compelling, thousands-of-years-old belief in one God, *their* God, the God who, over millennia, protected and guided His *Chosen People* from Ur of the Chaldee to the Promised Land. *God*, literally the key to Jewish survival from Abraham to Egypt to the Holocaust to today's Israeli/Palestinian atrocities and heartaches. Could *any* Jew, however loathsome, however depraved, *totally* forget *Him*?

Regarding the *Book of Mormon* manuscript, after five hundred years occupation by those of us from across the Atlantic and Pacific, why in all the Americas has only one "book" predating 1492 A.D. been found. Over two millennia between Lehi's and Columbus' arrival, to culminate in a work of *pure gold*, volumes of more prosaic construction surely were written. Didn't Lehi actually bring texts from the Holy Land? If millennia-old sandals, fabric, and coprolites are unearthed in the Americas some evidence of a book after the manner of Jewish writings, a scrap of papyrus, a tattered goat skin bearing characters reminiscent of Hebrew, Greek, even Egyptian hieroglyphics, must long since have been unearthed from a Mayan temple, an Adena mound, a Central Oregon cave, or New England potato patch. Such discovery has yet to be made.

And why Joseph Smith? What made this young man so special, so blessed as the sole mortal since Jesus Christ to chat face-to-face with God and angels? Over uncounted generations, perhaps a billion human beings, on planet Earth between the crucifixion and Joseph Smith's birth, surely one or two truly pious souls must have pleaded for His enlightenment. Were there no such people? If there were, why were their prayers ignored?

Finally, the wheel. Returning to the Iron versus Stone Age business, there is no hint pre-Columbian inhabitants of what became the Americas developed or employed one of humankind's most highly valued and serviceable inventions. If Lehi's *or* Jared's people were first to populate the Western Hemisphere why on Earth did they not bring along, if no other Old World device, the *wheel*, or build a pair right off the boat? Common throughout the Eastern Hemisphere millennia before 600 B.C., no hint, not even a drawing of a wheel has been discovered in the five centuries non-indigenous people have swarmed the Western Hemisphere. No matter how downfallen, ignorant, or ungodly, it is inconceivable folks fully familiar with chariots, carts, and wagons would in stead choose to lug goods on their shoulders, manhandle granite blocks up slopes of pyramids, and invent the travois for animals to drag their possessions across the prairie?

Hypothesis

Frankly President Hinckley, the *Book of Mormon's* purported origin troubles me a lot. Doubtless you have addressed this proposition, but it is fair to argue that, caught between the fervor of a religious revival and emerging awareness American Indians are not the ignorant, a-cultural, godless savages previously assumed, some early nineteenth century New Englander(s)—Joseph Smith or others—combined religions zeal with current affairs and wrote from imagination, not gold tablets. Along with the book's alleged roots and character, as best I can determine wholly unique among all volumes ever written, at least half-a-dozen facts and observations support this hypothesis.

First, writing and books: The Olmecs, precursors to the Mayas and Incas, are credited with inventing writing in the Western Hemisphere around 650 B.C.. While the timing is right for Lehi's group, the stylized symbols of the Olmec system hint at neither Hebrew nor any other Middle Eastern writing.

Whether on papyrus or wooden tablets, the only books approximating a form which seventh century B.C. Jews and early nineteenth century New England folk would recognize: bound volumes, covers, pages, seem to be the Mayas' codex. To my understanding neither these nor any other New World writing prior to Columbus' arrival—the *Book of Mormon's* purported manuscript excepted—reflect either the structure or content of an Hebrew text

Second, the form and organization of the *Book of Mormon*: Despite or perhaps *because of* its scriptural nature, the text is too *Bible-like* for comfort. Suddenly after a couple of millennia with no trace in the Americas of *any* book in the classic Middle Eastern or European sense, like Moses of old, Joseph Smith goes to the wilderness and is handed the inspired word of God: books, chapters, verses.

Third, gold tablets: Forgive me, but it's fair to suggest that *if* the book were actually conjured up by Joseph Smith or someone else, the author overplayed his hand in selecting the alleged medium. Heavy and fragile, gold plates were a lousy choice! Sufficiently serviceable gold tablets in a number commensurate with the size of the *Book of Mormon* would comprised a "weighty" tome indeed. The choice of gold seems far more to reflect the worldly values of a New Englander farmer than God the Father. Man, not God, cherishes gold.

Forth, human prejudice: While my knowledge of the *Book of Mormon* is indeed meager, at least one passage seems more to reflect the ignorance of an upstate New York Yankee than the wisdom of an omniscient, all-loving God. As I read it, regarding to Jews:

. . . for this people shall be scattered, and shall become a dark, a filthy and a loathsome people, beyond the description of that which ever hath been amongst us, yea, even that which hath been among the Lamanites, and this because of their unbelief and idolatry. (Mormon 5, verse 15)

One wonders how Jews and Native Americans (Lamanites), along with black, brown, and yellow people worldwide, view this damning, anti-Semitic, indeed anti-non-fair-skinned sentiment, this seeming blanket indictment of four-fifths of Earth's population.

Fifth, Joseph Smith: I need not repeat my previous concern regarding this youth's seeming exalted status among mortals.

Sixth, Iron Age artifacts: If Latter Day Saint doctrine is correct the previously elaborated absence throughout the Americas of tools and devices—in particular the wheel—common in the 600 B.C Eastern Hemisphere is inexplicable.

Summary

(1) Humankind roamed what became the Americas ten or so millennia before Lehi's people arrived. (2) There seems no rationale for Iron Age people, however decadent, to forget or turn their back on metals and everyday devices which make life easier and more efficient. (3) It is inconceivable that Jews, one of the great civilizations of world history, would not only abandon their culture and *God*, but regress to pagan religion, human sacrifice, and chipping dots, squares, circles, spi-

rals, snakes, antelope, big-horn sheep, and hunters with dangling phalluses on sandstone ledges. (4) The first true “writing” in the Western Hemisphere is clearly not of Jewish origin. *If* a book of gold tablets survived centuries, surely a faded page or tattered llama skin with inscriptions reminiscent of Hebrew, Greek, even Egyptian hieroglyphics would long since have turned up somewhere. (5) After eighteen centuries of humankind on planet Earth since the crucifixion, I am at a loss to understand why Joseph Smith was favored above all to converse with God, Jesus Christ, and angels and restore His church. (6) If no other artifact, surely evidence of the wheel should attest to the presence of Lehi’s people in the Western Hemisphere. (7) Argument can be made that white-skinned, nineteenth century, New Englander(s) *made up* the *Book of Mormon*.

Questions

In view of these issues, please be so kind as to address a few questions.

1. Did *all* humans populating the Americas at Columbus’s arrival, and do their heirs today, descend from Lehi’s group?
2. If your response to question 1 is, Yes, how do you account for tangible proof human beings inhabited the Western Hemisphere at least ten millennia *before* 600 B.C.?
3. If your response to question 1 is, No, does this not refute the *Book of Mormon* and represent a critical break from fundamental tenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints?
4. If your response to question 1 is, Some but not all native Americans descend from Lehi’s group, who’s who?
5. If Iron Age Jews first inhabited the Western Hemisphere, what and where is the *physical* evidence? (Forgive me, but given museums, laboratories, and storehouses heaped with Stone Age artifacts the, God works in mysterious ways, response only undermines the LDS position.)
6. If the *Book of Mormon* is true and artifacts or other tangible supporting evidence *are not* forthcoming, why has no hint of Iron Age people—implements, books, cultural clues—been discovered in the Americas?
7. Why has no other book—papyrus, calfskin, whatever—remotely similar to the alleged *Book of Mormon* manuscript been found in the Western World?
8. In particular, if no other Old World invention, why did Lehi’s group not take advantage of the wheel?
9. After two thousand years of uncounted, devout God-loving mortals, why was Joseph Smith so favored above all others?

It seems crucial The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints address the issues I raise. Given available wealth and resources—Brigham Young University, theologians, scholars, researchers, historians, lawyers—a credible response is certainly within your grasp.

The notion Lehi’s people were first to populate the Western Hemisphere flies in the face of fact. If you can provide evidence to refute scientific findings and rationale to explain the glaring discrepancies mentioned, converts might be advised to flock to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. If not, the church along with the genesis and thesis of the *Book of Mormon* are seriously suspect.

I look forward to your response.

Respectfully yours,

E. Dean Conklin

The Church’s Reply

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
OFFICE OF THE FIRST PRESIDENCY
47 EAST SOUTH TEMPLE STREET, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH 84150-1000

September 4, 2003

E. Dean Conklin
153 Canemah Way
Oregon City, OR 97045

Dear Brother Conklin:

Thank you for your letter of August 30, 2003, addressed to President Gordon B. Hinckley. He has asked that I respond to your inquiry.

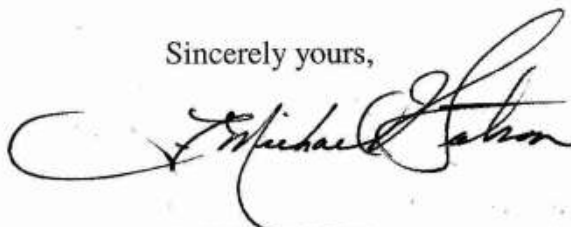
While it is certain that every detail surrounding the coming of the Nephites and other ancient peoples to the Americas is not known, and that references to various archeological and historical matters are not fully explained in the Book of Mormon or by historians, it would indeed be unfortunate to set aside the gospel principles contained in the Book of Mormon because we do not have these answers. To prove every aspect of the Book of Mormon by artifact or geological feature would remove the element of faith that is required of the honest seeker of heavenly truth (see Ether 12:6).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints declares the Book of Mormon to be the word of God, and a companion volume to the Bible in setting forth the saving principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Literally millions of men, women, and children have gained a testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon through the gift of the Holy Ghost, following the pattern as set forth on page 529 (Moroni 10:3-6).

You are encouraged to set aside your concerns and sincerely and prayerfully consider the promises noted in the above-referenced passages.

I have been asked to thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts and feelings with the Brethren who have asked that I extend to you their best wishes and warmest regards.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "F. Michael Watson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "F" and "W".

F. Michael Watson
Secretary to the First Presidency