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COLUMN ONE

Bedrock of a Faith Is Jolted

DNA tests contradict Mormon scripture. The church says the studies are being twisted to attack its beliefs.

By William Lobdell
Times Staff Writer

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From the time he was a child in Peru, the Mormon Church instilled in Jose A. Loayza the conviction that he and millions of other Native Americans were descended from a lost tribe of Israel that reached the New World more than 2,000 years ago.

"We were taught all the blessings of that Hebrew lineage belonged to us and that we were special people," said Loayza, now a Salt Lake City attorney. "It not only made me feel special, but it gave me a sense of transcendental identity, an identity with God."

A few years ago, Loayza said, his faith was shaken and his identity stripped away by DNA evidence showing that the ancestors of American natives came from Asia, not the Middle East.

"I've gone through stages," he said. "Absolutely denial. Utter amazement and surprise. Anger and bitterness."

For Mormons, the lack of discernible Hebrew blood in Native Americans is no minor collision between faith and science. It burrows into the historical foundations of the Book of Mormon, a 175-year-old transcription that the church regards as literal and without error.

For those outside the faith, the depth of the church's dilemma can be explained this way: Imagine if DNA evidence revealed that the Pilgrims didn't sail from Europe to escape religious persecution but rather were part of a migration from Iceland — and that U.S. history books were wrong.

Critics want the church to admit its mistake and apologize to millions of Native Americans it converted. Church leaders have shown no inclination to do so. Indeed, they have dismissed as heresy any suggestion that Native American genetics undermine the Mormon creed.

Yet at the same time, the church has subtly promoted a fresh interpretation of the Book of Mormon intended to reconcile the DNA findings with the scriptures. This analysis is radically at odds with long-standing Mormon teachings.

Some longtime observers believe that ultimately, the vast majority of Mormons will disregard the genetic research as an unworthy distraction from their faith.

"This may look like the crushing blow to Mormonism from the outside," said Jan Shipps, a professor emeritus of religious studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, who has studied the church for 40 years. "But religion ultimately does not rest on scientific evidence, but on mystical experiences. There are different ways of looking at truth."

According to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, an angel named Moroni led Joseph Smith in 1827 to a divine set of golden plates buried in a hillside near his New York home.

God provided the 22-year-old Smith with a pair of glasses and seer stones that allowed him to translate the "Reformed Egyptian" writings on the golden plates into the "Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ."

Mormons believe these scriptures restored the church to God's original vision and left the rest of Christianity in a state of apostasy.

The book's narrative focuses on a tribe of Jews who sailed from Jerusalem to the New World in 600 BC and split into two main warring factions.

The God-fearing Nephites were "pure" (the word was officially changed from "white" in 1981) and "delightful." The idol-worshipping Lamanites received the "curse of blackness," turning their skin dark.

According to the Book of Mormon, by 385 AD the dark-skinned Lamanites had wiped out other Hebrews. The Mormon church called the victors "the principal ancestors of the American Indians." If the Lamanites returned to the church, their skin could once again become white.

Over the years, church prophets — believed by Mormons to receive revelations from God — and missionaries have used the supposed ancestral link between the ancient Hebrews and Native Americans and later Polynesians as a prime conversion tool in Central and South America and the South Pacific.

"As I look into your faces, I think of Father Lehi [patriarch of the Lamanites], whose sons and daughters you are," church president and prophet Gordon B. Hinckley said in 1997 during a Mormon conference in Lima, Peru. "I think he must be shedding tears today, tears of love and gratitude.... This is but the beginning of the work in Peru."

In recent decades, Mormonism has flourished in those regions, which now have nearly 4 million members — about a third of Mormon membership worldwide, according to church figures.

"That was the big sell," said Damon Kali, an attorney who practices law in Sunnyvale, Calif., and is descended from Pacific Islanders. "And quite frankly, that was the big sell for me. I was a Lamanite. I was told the day of the Lamanite will come."

A few months into his two-year mission in Peru, Kali stopped trying to convert the locals. Scientific articles about ancient migration patterns had made him doubt that he or anyone else was a Lamanite.

"Once you do research and start getting other viewpoints, you're toast," said Kali, who said he was excommunicated in 1996 over issues unrelated to the Lamanite issue. "I could not do missionary work anymore."

Critics of the Book of Mormon have long cited anachronisms in its narrative to argue that it is not the work of God. For instance, the Mormon scriptures contain references to a seven-day week, domesticated horses, cows and sheep, silk, chariots and steel. None had been introduced in the Americas at the time of Christ.

In the 1990s, DNA studies gave Mormon detractors further ammunition and new allies such as Simon G. Southerton, a molecular biologist and former bishop in the church.

Southerton, a senior research scientist with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization in Australia, said genetic research allowed him to test his religious views against his scientific training.

Genetic testing of Jews throughout the world had already shown that they shared common strains of DNA from the Middle East. Southerton examined studies of DNA lineages among Polynesians and indigenous peoples in North, Central and South America. One mapped maternal DNA lines from 7,300 Native Americans from 175 tribes.

Southerton found no trace of Middle Eastern DNA in the genetic strands of today's American Indians and Pacific Islanders.

In "Losing a Lost Tribe," published in 2004, he concluded that Mormonism — his faith for 30 years — needed to be reevaluated in the face of these facts, even though it would shake the foundations of the faith.

The problem is that Mormon leaders cannot acknowledge any factual errors in the Book of Mormon because the prophet Joseph Smith proclaimed it the "most correct of any book on Earth," Southerton said in an interview.

"They can't admit that it's not historical," Southerton said. "They would feel that there would be a loss of members and loss in confidence in Joseph Smith as a prophet."

Officially, the Mormon Church says that nothing in the Mormon scriptures is incompatible with DNA evidence, and that the genetic studies are being twisted to attack the church.

"We would hope that church members would not simply buy into the latest DNA arguments being promulgated by those who oppose the church for some reason or other," said Michael Otterson, a Salt Lake City-based spokesman for the Mormon church.

"The truth is, the Book of Mormon will never be proved or disproved by science," he said.

Unofficially, church leaders have tacitly approved an alternative interpretation of the Book of Mormon by church apologists — a term used for scholars who defend the faith.

The apologists say Southerton and others are relying on a traditional reading of the Book of Mormon — that the Hebrews were the first and sole inhabitants of the New World and eventually populated the North and South American continents.

The latest scholarship, they argue, shows that the text should be interpreted differently. They say the events described in the Book of Mormon were confined to a small section of Central America, and that the Hebrew tribe was small enough that its DNA was swallowed up by the existing Native Americans.

"It would be a virtual certainty that their DNA would be swamped," said Daniel Peterson, a professor of Near Eastern studies at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, part of the worldwide Mormon educational system, and editor of a magazine devoted to Mormon apologetics. "And if that is the case, you couldn't tell who was a Lamanite descendant."

Southerton said the new interpretation was counter to both a plain reading of the text and the words of Mormon leaders.

"The apologists feel that they are almost above the prophets," Southerton said. "They have completely reinvented the narrative in a way that would be completely alien to members of the church and most of the prophets."

The church has not formally endorsed the apologists' views, but the official website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — <http://www.lds.org> — cites their work and provides links to it.

"They haven't made any explicit public declarations," said Armand L. Mauss, a church member and retired Washington State University professor who recently published a book on Mormon race and lineage. "But operationally, that is the current church's position."

The DNA debate is largely limited to church leaders, academics and a relatively small circle of church critics. Most Mormons, taught that obedience is a key value, take the Book of Mormon as God's unerring word.

"It's not that Mormons are not curious," Mauss said. "They just don't see the need to reconsider what has already been decided."

Critics contend that Mormon leaders are quick to stifle dissent. In 2002, church officials began an excommunication proceeding against Thomas W. Murphy, an anthropology professor at Edmonds Community College in Washington state.

He was deemed a heretic for saying the Mormon scriptures should be considered inspired fiction in light of the DNA evidence.

After the controversy attracted national media coverage, with Murphy's supporters calling him the Galileo of Mormonism, church leaders halted the trial.

Loayza, the Salt Lake City attorney, said the church should embrace the controversy.

"They should openly address it," he said. "Often, the tack they adopt is to just ignore or refrain from any opinion. We should have the courage of our convictions. This [Lamanite issue] is potentially destructive to the faith."

Otterson, the church spokesman, said Mormon leaders would remain neutral. "Whether Book of Mormon geography is extensive or limited or how much today's Native Americans reflect the genetic makeup of the Book of Mormon peoples has absolutely no bearing on its central message as a testament of Jesus Christ," he said.

Mauss said the DNA studies haven't shaken his faith. "There's not very much in life — not only in religion or any field of inquiry — where you can feel you have all the answers," he said.

"I'm willing to live in ambiguity. I don't get that bothered by things I can't resolve in a week."

For others, living with ambiguity has been more difficult. Phil Ormsby, a Polynesian who lives in Brisbane, Australia, grew up believing he was a Hebrew.

"I visualized myself among the fighting Lamanites and lived out the fantasies of the [Book of Mormon] as I read it," Ormsby said. "It gave me great *mana* [prestige] to know that these were my true ancestors."

The DNA studies have altered his feelings completely.

"Some days I am angry, and some days I feel pity," he said. "I feel pity for my people who have become obsessed with something that is nothing but a hoax."

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