Recent genetic studies indicate that Polynesians were connected to ancient America. Careful reading of native sources led European scholar Michel Graulich to conclude that pre-Columbian Americans held beliefs that may arise out of the Christian tradition. Whether he or those he opposes are correct, the caution to allow more than one interpretative stance remains appropriate.

Interpretations of scriptural history are possibly “contingent upon the theoretical inclinations” of the investigators.

The historical process of the Anufo people of the Ivory Coast territory suggests how “robbers” or “secret societies” could have grown to be players on the sociopolitical scene in Mesoamerica.
Genetics Indicates That Polynesians Were Connected to Ancient America

In recent years investigators of genetic links in and to the Americas have come up with new evidence for early connections between some Pacific-basin groups, including Polynesians and New World peoples. Substantial indication of such ties based on cultural and linguistic data existed already, but detractors remained skeptical. Evidence for genetic ties linking the two areas is now "hard" enough to support a picture of substantial historical connections among Polynesian and American groups.

A summary of some of the new findings recently appeared in Hawaii Magazine. Writer Jim Borg's article there was based on an interview with Dr. Rebecca Cann at the University of Hawaii. Cann is one of the most active scientists dealing with this topic. She told him of studying particularly native Hawaiians whose pedigrees excluded those whose ancestors had mixed with non-Hawaiians in the last 200 years. Results show that one element in the population sampled in this DNA study must have been connected to Native Americans. "More and more people," Cann observed, "are thinking there's a low level of gene flow across the entire Pacific Ocean," according to Borg and Cann. Offspring of Polynesians and Indians could have migrated north from South America to Vancouver Island.

This and other studies also show that Polynesians are far from being a homogeneous people. They include at least three distinct subgroups in terms of genetics. One includes about 95 percent of native Hawaiians, 90 percent of Samoans, and 100 percent of the Tongans sampled. This segment of the Polynesian population shares a common DNA marker that is found also in some Indonesians, native Americans, Micronesians, Malays, Japanese, and Chinese. The second group includes a
small minority in Hawaii, Samoa, and the Cook Islands. The third group appears to link Samoa to Indonesia.

Meanwhile, other new DNA data have failed to resolve the long-standing question whether Asian ancestors of the Polynesians came into the Pacific through Melanesia (west of Polynesia) figuratively by an “express train” migration that took only a very short time, or whether a more complicated genetic history waits to be unraveled. Some geneticists and anthropologists maintain that the new information fits nicely with a theory of rapid settlement by people from Southeast Asia, but others are dissatisfied. Much more complete sampling of the human genome must be done before the complex matter can be resolved. Henry Harpending, a population geneticist at the University of Utah, holds that interpretations of settlement history that propose only one or two migration routes and a limited portion of the possible DNA evidence are not convincing. Such models fail to “consider other explanations such as migration from South America.”

A Cautionary View of What the Ancients Believed

Scholarly studies published by European scholar Michel Graulich in the 1980s and 1990s on the traditional beliefs of the Aztecs and other Mexican peoples make an important point for those engaged in Book of Mormon scholarship.1

Graulich warns against missing important information concerning pre-Spanish native thought by depending uncritically on the opinions of leading scholars of the native sources whom he considers to be in error. He claims that the prevailing view incorporates biases and theories that do not hold up to what he finds in the ancient texts. When he untangles the traditions themselves, he finds historical and religious beliefs that other researchers have disavowed. The conventional claim has been that the Spanish priests who recorded many of the Indians’ traditions arbitrarily included ideas that sound too “Christian” to be believed. According to Graulich what has happened is that these experts’ own assumptions along evolutionist lines cause them to suppose that the Mexican Indians “could not” have been thinking what the Spanish fathers sometimes recorded.

These critics have claimed that Mesoamerican peoples generally did not believe in an afterlife or in the idea that rewards and punishments after death depended on a person’s moral behavior while in mortality. Graulich’s own careful reading of native sources leads him to conclude that pre-Columbian Americans really did hold beliefs that sound as though they came out of the Christian tradition. For example, humans sprang from a divine creator couple who lived in an original paradise where all creatures lived in harmony. But their transgression caused them to be exiled so that from then on humans have striven to regain that lost paradise. Obviously that sounds like the Bible’s account of Adam and Eve in Eden, but Graulich insists that the ideas are found in such native forms in such varied traditions that they should be considered authentically native, not just Spanish impositions. Other concepts that he finds reflected in the traditions are that humans (at least some categories) are to be rewarded or punished after death depending upon their behavior in this life, and also that at least some could expect to be reborn into a supra-mortal sphere of life after death (as the Book of Mormon, an ancient American record, anticipates).

To be sure, Graulich may be in error and those he criticizes may be right, but the caution is still appropriate that a single interpretative stance should not be allowed to overwhelm consideration of well-informed alternative positions.

Did Individuals Shape (Scriptural) History?

Among those specialist scholars who write history today, as well as among many people who simply read the historical accounts the scholars produce, there are two extreme positions about the nature of history and its causes. One view, commonly held by students who operate within the framework of the social sciences, maintains that it is nations, peoples, or cultures who shape “history.” As one prominent anthropologist put the matter, “all men are but chips floating on [the] stream [of ongoing culture].” Some archaeologists have spoken of “historyless” peoples, meaning groups for which no individuals can be identified in the limited record decipherable from the discarded material remains.

A contrary view is common among traditional historians. It
emphasizes heroes and key events as the prime determiners of the flow of history. Most people who think about historical writing locate themselves somewhere between those two extremes.

In relation to the Book of Mormon in particular, but also touching the Bible, the nature of the data and approaches commonly used in "Book of Mormon studies" more often is to look for "patterns" (for example, chiasmus, a literary mechanism) at the expense of identifying particular individuals as crucial determiners of what went on.

The decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphic monuments which is proceeding apace reflects these contrasting views of the nature of history. Those specialists who are most concerned with the texts themselves consider that a genuine history is being worked out, consisting of a sequence of rulers and their replacements at various Maya city-kingdoms. Those primarily dedicated to archaeology, however, tend to characterize the monument texts as "political propaganda" by vain-glorying kings and their lineages. The dirty archaeologists maintain that the texts may not relate significantly to the ongoing pattern of living manifested by the majority of the population.

Hanns J. Prem, a German specialist on Mesoamerican ethnohistory, recently addressed the question, are there "Historical Personalities among 'Historyless' Peoples?" To answer the query he examines documented cases from the past two centuries. His prime example examines the role of Wovoka, a Paviotso Ute Indian on the Walker River/Walker Lake Reservation in Nevada. Driven from their lands by white settlers and dumped on a reservation with few resources and a promise of government aid someday, by 1889 his people were in desperate straits. Wovoka, who had been raised in the home of a white man, learned something of Christian faith and probably also of Mormonism. At length he reported having a vision during a total solar eclipse. His resulting prophecies looked to the return of the Paviotso's ancestors and the setting in of a paradisical era. A "Ghost Dance" cult arose (a revival and modification of rites that had become prevalent for a short time a generation earlier). This set of notions spread rapidly to other reservations throughout the West before skepticism set in. Was Wovoka a force in Nevada Indian history? Prem believes that he was, although had white men not made records, he would have remained relatively invisible in any formal history.

After citing other examples from what happened among American Indians in the last century and a third, Prem concludes that the two views of history first discussed both apply in these cases. The actions of individual persons can be influential, if not decisive, in determining the course of events. But the social environment in which the person lives must have reached a state of readiness in order for his role to become socially significant. So individual personalities can be influential in shaping history, yet those with the potential to be movers and shakers fail to have serious impact due to social, cultural, economic, and political forces prevailing in the group surrounding them.

Applying Prem's model to the Book of Mormon, we note that Lehi remained historically invisible among the Jews of his day, just as Mormon and Moroni did within their historical era. At least until now we find no trace of them in "Mesoamerican history." We would expect not to detect traces of these three notable individuals in secular history, for the societies in which they lived did not accept their influence nor confer lasting fame on them within their homelands. But possibly a Mosiah, Alma, or Moroni, did affect the history of a whole people. Without external records, however, we may look in vain for evidence of the presence or influence of those men who loom so large in the written "lineage history" that Mormon left us.

What difference does this make? A recent review of two books on Mesoamerican archaeology contrasts how two teams of authors have produced drastically different pictures as a result of their assumptions about the role of individuals in the process of history. The case is summarized by Robert N. Zeitlin of Brandeis University in "Two Perspectives on the Rise of Civilization in Mesoamerica's Oaxaca Valley." He compares a 1999 book by Richard E. Blanton and four colleagues on ancient Oaxaca with another by Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery on Zapotec civilization. He observes that "They draw on a mutually accepted body of data, much of it acquired through their own research, and employ many of the same interpretive techniques. Yet despite these commonalities, the two books come to widely different conclusions concerning the nature of society in ancient
Oaxaca.” The contrast Zeitlin considers “sobering.” Blanton et al. interpret events at early Monte Alban as a society’s impersonal “adaptive response to an increasingly complex and turbulent world.” Marcus and Flannery, on the contrary, subscribe to “action theory,” which emphasizes the role of bold, assertive individuals (whose names we do not happen to know in this case). At key periods in prehistory such people are seen as crucial in reshaping “the prevailing system of social and ecological relations.” Marcus and Flannery are critical of those, like Blanton, who attempt to account for changes in society by reference to vague evolutionary forces that “makes humans little more than cogs in a machine.” Instead they believe that “aggressive, charismatic leaders … govern the course of history.”

At the least this case points out that interpretations of history are “contingent upon the theoretical inclinations of the particular investigators.” “The facts” do not speak for themselves. So might it not be possible for those whose “theoretical inclinations” include acceptance of the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient source legitimately to come up with an interpretation of Mesopotamian history quite different than either of these sets of scholars?

How a “Robber” Group Became a People

Within Mormon’s lifetime, he reported that “robbers” were a component of the Nephites’ enemies as much as were the “Lamanites.” It is not clear whether those robbers constituted a single body or several. Even before the Nephites left their Zarahemla homeland, “the land was filled with robbers and with Lamanites” (Mormon 2:8). Later, the Nephites made a treaty with “the Lamanites and the robbers” (Mormon 2:28). After his father had perished, Moroni, observed “there are none save it be the Lamanites and robbers” upon the land (Mormon 8:9). It is clear that those robbers had existed as organized socio-political entities apart from the Lamanites for well over a century (compare 4 Nephi 1:41–47). How mere opportunistic robbers could become transformed into a powerful social and military element of significance may be illustrated by an interesting historical case reported from West Africa.

The Anufo or Chakosi people who dwelt in Ivory Coast, Togo, and Ghana some fifteen years ago numbered about 30,000. They trace their ancestry back to a band of mercenaries (paid soldiers) who struck out from the Middle of Ivory Coast territory about 250 years ago and settled in northern Togo. They gradually spread to surrounding areas. Until German colonists put a stop to their depredations in 1911, the Anufo subsisted entirely on slave raiding, marauding, and squeezing tribute from the original inhabitants, the various Paragurma peoples. Gradually those locals became “Anufoized” in language and culture, the hybridized population becoming “the Anufo” known today.11

The historical process of their development suggests how “robbers” or “secret societies” could have grown to be players on the sociopolitical scene in Mesoamerica. □
ision is from third person to second person, to second-person plural. This verse presents many difficulties. The above translation reflects the suggestions discussed in *Genesius* Hebrew Grammar, 462. Though one may question the validity of this reading, enunciation is still attested in the movement from third to second person.

As noted above, the pattern seems to be too sweeping to be labeled as either coincidence or textual corruption.

10 Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Steven & Wallis, 1948), 110.

Paul Henning: The First Mormon
Archaeologist
Robert W. Fullmer


3 Among Henning's most important publications are *Apuntes sobre la historia del Chichihuatul en America* (Mexico: Secretaria de Fomento, 1911); (with others) *Tamoanchan, Estudios Arqueologicos e Historicos* (Mexico: Museo Nacional de Arqueologia, Historia y Etnologia, 1912); *Estudios Mayas, 2 vols.* (Mexico: Muller, 1919).

Out of the Dust


New Light


11 According to an unpublished paper by Jon P. Kirby, "The Non-Conversion of the Anfu of Northern Ghana," a copy of which was given to John Sorenson by Kirby when he lectured at BYU in January 1986, he had served as a Christian missionary among the Anfu before training as an anthropologist.