

# Does DNA disprove Lehi story?

Author: [Michael De Groot](#)

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*First in a series of four articles*

Somewhere among the varied coasts of the two American continents was landfall for a small group of ancient Israelite seafarers led by a prophet named Lehi.

Whether they stepped upon the sands of an empty or crowded continent is at the heart of the DNA debate over the historical nature of the Book of Mormon.

Ugo Perego, an Italian-born researcher in human genetics, tries to look with a scientist's eye at the controversy surrounding DNA and the Book of Mormon.

He is a bit impatient with some of the strong conclusions of some critics and LDS apologists. There is too little data. He believes critics and apologists need to be cautious.

"I see that from both the critics' side and the LDS side there is quite a bit of misunderstanding on the subject," Perego said. "We should not fight over it. It seems to me to be almost a waste of time that people will actually entertain the thoughts that either DNA can prove or disprove the Book of Mormon."

The first rumblings about DNA and the Book of Mormon came about 10 years ago, according to Perego, a senior researcher at Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation.

Critics cobbled together data from a variety of early DNA studies and came to the unsurprising conclusion that the studies indicated an Asian origin for Native

Americans.

This, the critics argued, proved that the Book of Mormon was false. They claimed that the book says the continent was empty and if it was empty, then all Native Americans should have Lehi's Israelite DNA, not Asian DNA.

However, for about 50 years most LDS scholars have argued that the Book of Mormon took place not in vast empty continents, but in a limited-geographical area in Mesoamerica.

"Some people in the church still believe that all Native Americans, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, are descendants of Lehi, and that the double continent was completely empty when Lehi and his family came and therefore all the Native Americans who were here at the time of Columbus' arrival are descendants of Lehi," Perego said. "If that was true, then the critics would be right."

But if that wasn't the case, if Lehi's group came to a crowded continent, then Perego says the critics' arguments fall apart.

"It is very likely that Lehi came in an area that was not inhabited. He could have come to an area that would fit the 30 to 50 people who were in his party and allow them to settle in and start living," Perego said. "Probably, at the beginning, there was some interest in keeping the family together and marrying within the family. But pretty soon, as they began to spread, there was some integration of the surrounding population into Lehi's family."

The types of answers you receive depend upon the questions you ask, according to Perego. "If the question is, 'Are Native Americans of Asian origin?' The answer is, 'Yes.' (If the question is), 'Are Native Americans of Israelite origin?' The answer is, 'No.'"

Perego says the critic will then say, "OK. I've got my answers. I'm happy! Thank you! I'll put it in my book. The Book of Mormon is incorrect."

But, according to Perego, there are other questions to ask which bear more

directly to the plausibility of the Book of Mormon narrative.

"Try to ask this question to a population geneticist: 'Is it possible that a small family from Israel could have arrived in America, to a largely populated continent, and that no genetic evidence would survive after 2,600 years?'" Perego says. "Why don't they ask that question? That is exactly the question they need to ask."

Critics will counter that this is not an important question because they say Mormons believe that all Native Americans are only descended from Lehi.

This exposes the irony of the critics' arguments. Their argument doesn't rest primarily on DNA, but on the critics' rigid — even strangely fundamentalist — interpretation of the Book of Mormon. For their criticism to be correct you have no choice — you must believe the continent was empty.

In other words, to believe the critics are right about DNA, you must believe they are right about their narrow interpretation of the Book of Mormon and statements by select general authorities of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"We might someday (find) a big sign that says 'Welcome to Zarahemla.' ... And the critics will find a way to go around that and Mormons will jump all over it. But the issues with the DNA are different. We really don't know what Lehi's genetic signature was. ... We know that there were others here."

Next week: [Lehi's DNA — what's missing?](#)

*E-mail:* [mdegroote@desnews.com](mailto:mdegroote@desnews.com)