NOTES AND COMMENTS

Polynesian Origins: More Word on the Mormon Perspective

RUSSELL T. CLEMENT

In few cases is the Mormon Church at such odds with "the learning of men" as in its answers to the intriguing questions of Polynesian origins and migrations. Apostle Mark E. Petersen expressed the Mormon viewpoint in a conference address on April 8, 1962: "As Latter-day Saints we have always believed that the Polynesians are descendants of Lehi and blood relatives of the American Indians, despite the contrary theories of other men." The scientific community indeed favors a contrary theory, that of an approach to Polynesia from the west. Based upon an impressive and increasingly cohesive array of archaeological, linguistic, ethnographic, and ethnobotanic evidence, modern Pacific scholars accept a Southeast Asian origin for Polynesians. With minimal exceptions, scholars agree that explorers called Lapita (Mongoloid and Melanesian Australoid Phenotypes) migrated from Southeast Island Asia through Melanesia and reached Western Polynesia by 1200 BC. From Tonga and Samoa, scholars conclude, they settled the Marquesas, Easter Island and finally Hawaii and New Zealand.

In addition to these disparate theories about Polynesian origin, recent statements by President Spencer W. Kimball about internal Polynesian migration and settlement are equally at odds with the academic community. A brief overview of both sides of the issue is needed to understand and appreciate the little-known but extremely significant remarks of President Kimball delivered between February 13, 1976, and February 24, 1976, at Brigham Young University—Hawai'i Campus and at the Area Conferences of Samoa, New Zealand and Tonga.

RUSSELL T. CLEMENT is the special collections librarian at BYU-Hawai'i. He is co-editor of the 1980 edition of Who's Who in Oceania and has published articles in Journal of American Folklore, Hawaiian Journal of History and Serials Review.
For over two centuries people have discussed, written and argued about how the many islands of Polynesia, flung over some twelve million square miles of ocean and separated by hundreds of miles from continental coasts, were discovered and settled. How could primitive man have crossed thousands of miles of the world’s greatest ocean to colonize these islands without sophisticated navigational skills and ships? During the late eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, Polynesians were variously traced to India, many parts of Asia, the Americas and even to an exotic lost continent in the middle of the Pacific. Until well into the twentieth century, confusing and contradictory theories abounded.2

AMERICAN ORIGIN THEORIES

American origin theorists, beginning in 1803 with a Spanish missionary in the Philippines named J. de Zuñiga, have included notable Hawaiian scholar William Ellis and, most recently, Thor Heyerdahl. Zuñiga and Ellis based their reasoning on the opinion that prevailing winds and currents came from the east. Heyerdahl renewed their theories of American origins a century later after he completed his well-known and publicized Kon Tiki expedition in 1947. Although Heyerdahl’s adventure and writings have attracted a large public following, he has gained scant support from Pacific scholars. Researchers have viewed his work with widespread skepticism and have countered with serious objections, derived chiefly from the subjective and unsupported nature of his comparisons between Polynesians and South Americans.3 However, Heyerdahl is credited with having had a positive effect on the growth of Pacific archaeology by prompting careful reviews of earlier assumptions and by generating new research.

In recent years almost all of the purported evidence favoring an American approach to Polynesia has been challenged to the extent that most scholars would concur with Glen Barclay’s summation: “What seems beyond question is that, wherever the Pacific peoples might have come from in the first place, they reached the Pacific by way of Asia.”4 The major evidence which has traditionally maintained American origin theorists includes physical resemblance of Polynesians to South American Indians, blood genetic relationships, botanical and linguistic evidence, migration legends and modern east-to-west “drift” voyages such as the Kon-Tiki.

Briefly, scientists answer the supposed similarities of external physical features such as skin pigmentation, hair color and skull shape with the claims that these characteristics are “too variable among Pacific peoples to be reliable indicators of origin,”5 and that both groups are Mongoloids of ultimate East Asian derivation. On the other hand, anthropologists use physical evidence to support western origin theories.6 While it was once thought that certain blood group percentages indicated a direct connection between Polynesians and South Americans, this hypothesis is no longer considered valid by scientists.7

Botanical evidence of New World contact generally concerns the supposed human introduction of the American sweet potato (Ipomoea batatas), bulrush
(Scirpus riparius, commonly known as totara), cotton (Gossypium) and several other species. Although seeds of the bulrush reed and cotton are usually explained as having been carried by migratory seabirds, the presence of the sweet potato throughout Eastern Polynesia continues to stump scientists. Those researchers who do accept an Andean origin for the sweet potato are cautious to include, as Bellwood maintains, that “this need not of course imply a massive colonization by South American Indians.” A one-way, accidental drift voyage may have introduced the plant into Eastern Polynesia, perhaps to the Marquesas Islands.

The main linguistic evidence for the South American originists is connected with the alleged Quechua word for the sweet potato, cumar, which closely resembles Polynesian names for the plant. As D. D. Brand states, however, the word cumar, “is not a Quechua word; and the word cumar never was used for sweet potato anywhere along the coast of South America.”

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many elaborate, romantic migration theories were founded on voyaging tales and traditions. For examples, writers such as Abraham Fornander of Hawaii, S. Perry Smith of New Zealand and others contributed theories of navigational technique and settlement based on fanciful legends. Later and better trained anthropologists and historians have discounted these tales and particularly this method of conjectural history. Thor Heyerdahl’s belief in the legends of white-skinned, red-haired peoples in America and Polynesia has likewise been discounted.

There have been several modern attempts to retrace possible Polynesian migration patterns such as Heyerdahl’s 1947 raft voyage from Peru to an uninhabited reef off the Tuamotu Archipelago. In 1973, Levison counted six more experimental rafts that had voyaged westward to Polynesia from the coast of Peru. As exciting and popular as these adventures are, scholars like Levison point out that “at certain critical early stages of all the modern voyages, as much westing as possible was made by the crews specifically to avoid being swept to the Galapagos or back to the mainland coast.” He concludes that “it is most unlikely for drift voyages . . . to reach Polynesia from the South American coast unless they begin some three or four hundred miles off the coast.” Barclay termed Heyerdahl’s feat “a human achievement of truly Polynesian greatness, but it did nothing to prove that Polynesians had ever done it themselves.”

SOUTHEAST ASIAN ORIGIN THEORIES

While scholars and scientists have refuted, at least to their satisfaction, evidences of American origins of Polynesians, the academic world continues to build the case for west-to-east migration and settlement. Volumes have been written on the theory which has been generally accepted since 1940. Barclay sums up the major evidence for Southeast Asian origins:

The people who swept over the Pacific Ocean were descendants of the same East Asian peoples who had earlier settled in the Marianas.
Linguistic studies of the various tongues of what became known as Polynesia confirmed that these languages together formed one element in a linguistic super-family of Malay-Polynesian speech. Archaeological studies of pottery and adzes in the Pacific Islands indicated a link between Malay-Polynesian speakers and the Lungshan cultures of South China, themselves linked with the cultures of North China. Biological evidence is consistent with the findings of linguistics and archaeology: the prevalence of so-called ‘shovel-shaped’ incisors among Polynesians is a distinctive Mongolian trait, and reinforces the proposition that the Polynesians originated as a mixed Caucasian-Mongolian racial group, who launched out into the Pacific Ocean from much the same parts of Eastern Asia as the first adventurers, with whom they intermarried extensively.12

Regarding internal Polynesian migration, the consensus of the scholarly community is that after Tonga and Samoa were settled between 1200 and 1000 B.C., the Marquesas Islands were settled about A.D. 300, Easter Island by A.D. 400, and Hawaii by A.D. 500. A second movement to Tahiti or the Society Islands occurred by A.D. 600 and from there New Zealand was settled by A.D. 800. Secondary migrations from Tahiti to Hawaii and New Zealand happened after A.D. 1000.13 It is important to keep this scholarly pattern in mind as the comments by President Kimball are presented.

THE MORMON VIEWPOINT

Mormons have long adhered to and periodically reaffirm the belief that Polynesians are descendants of Book of Mormon peoples, beginning with that “exceedingly curious man” Hagoth. Unfortunately, the account of Hagoth in Alma 63:5–8 is sparse on details. Three ships were built in which “many of the Nephites . . . took their course northward.” The Mormon assertion that Polynesians descended from Lehi and Book of Mormon people via Hagoth is well-documented.14 Indeed, Mormons have shown a keen interest in Polynesia since Joseph Smith’s time.

Apparently, the first attempt to relate the two groups is found in the journal of Louisa Barnes Pratt, wife of Premier Polynesian Mormon missionary Addison Pratt and Mormonism’s first female missionary. Louisa Pratt recorded addressing a group on Tubuai in October, 1851, and explaining that “The Nephites were the ancient fathers of the Tahitians,” something in which they were very interested.15 Since then, significant statements and reaffirmations have been pronounced by such Mormon leaders as George Q. Cannon, Parley P. Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph F. Smith, Heber J. Grant, George A. Smith, Joseph Fielding Smith, David O. McKay, J. Reuben Clark, Matthew Cowley, Hugh B. Brown, Mark E. Petersen, Gordon B. Hinckley and Spencer W. Kimball.16

Two of the most famous and unequivocal statements were made by Presidents Heber J. Grant and Joseph F. Smith. At the dedication of the Hawaiian temple on November 27, 1919, President Grant prayed: “We thank thee that thousands and tens of thousands of the descendants of Lehi, in this favored land, have come to a knowledge of the Gospel.”17 Joseph F. Smith reportedly
said to a group of Maori Saints in Salt Lake City, "I would like to say to you brethren and sisters from New Zealand, you are some of Hagoth's people, and there is no perhaps about it."

During Spencer W. Kimball's tenure as President of the Church, he has repeatedly made explicit, significant statements regarding Polynesian derivation. In the December, 1975, Ensign, for example, he said "These descendants of the Book of Mormon peoples . . . numbered in the millions and covered the islands of the Pacific and the Americas . . . I rejoice that it has been my privilege to carry the Gospel to the Lamanites from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic . . . and in the islands from Hawaii to New Zealand." This article also connects the Polynesians to the Lamanites, an important point members of the First Presidency were apparently unwilling to define as recently as September 19, 1972.

**STATEMENTS MADE IN 1976 BY PRESIDENT SPENCER W. KIMBALL**

Possibly the most significant statements and clearest explanations of the Mormon belief regarding Polynesian origins and internal migration made by a Mormon prophet were delivered by President Kimball at Brigham Young University-Hawaii Campus, Laie, Hawaii. Due to the significance of this important yet almost unknown address, the entire text is reprinted. The original typescript of the address is housed at BYU-HC.

What a happy occasion to find all of you good people here waiting in between rainstorms to have this delightful opening session. As President Tanner has said, we are on our way to the South Seas. We're going to visit Samoa and Tonga and Tahiti and Fiji, as well as New Zealand, and Australia. We shall meet tens of thousands of your loved ones in the Islands of the Sea.

A long time ago the Lord, I think, decided that the Middle East wasn't good enough for some of his people, so he sent Lehi and his associates to America where they would find the greatest land, the choicest land in all the world. After they had lived there for some 600 years, I think he found out that the people, some of the people, were too fine, too good for the Americas that he had given them, so He sent Hagoth and his associates, several thousand of them, to Northward. We think they lodged here, and then that they moved from here to the Southland.

President Joseph F. Smith, who was President of the Church said to the New Zealanders, "Now, you are from Hagoth who is the founder of your nation." We understand from the Maoris that they came from the North, so it all fits quite well together. We think that it will be a wonderful thing to visit your people, you who are the natives of the Islands of the Sea, and so we anticipate greatly being with them these coming weeks.

And now it is our privilege to join with you in the breaking ground for this library which will be an important element in the development of this great school. In the library is frozen great treasures of wisdom and understanding, and we hope that the youth of this great school will enjoy and profit by those frozen treasures of knowledge and truth.
We realize that when Hagoth came here, he must have had some inspiration. He came from the Mainland, out here to the islands, and peopled the South Seas. There are thousands of islands, many of which are populated by the people here.

Now the Church has considered for a long time that it was important that we select one of the islands, and there build a great institution where all of the boys and girls from all of the islands could come at a lesser cost, and in their same general environment where they might receive the word of the Lord. And so this institution was organized so that it could teach all of the boys and girls who come to it the truths of the Gospel as well as the truths of the world in which we live.

So we are very happy today to say that the Lord is showing His great interest in the people of the Islands by establishing here this institution, by enlarging it, by building this building that will become a very important part of it. This is your school. We hope that you will enjoy it and use it to the fullest possible advantage. Schools in the United States are very common. But when you get a school like this, in an island far away, that is really something to be proud of and to be happy for.

So we're hoping that you young men and women will look forward, and all of your brothers and sisters and cousins in the islands will look forward to the day when they can qualify to come here to this institution to finish, to complete their training and education.

God bless you, that you will use this institution to its greatest capacity, and obtain from it all the good that is there for you. May peace be with you. May the Lord bless you as you continue your education in this magnificent institution. I pray all this with my love and affection for you in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

The important details in the address are contained in paragraphs two and five. President Kimball explains that the Lord "sent Hagoth and his associates, several thousand of them, to Northward (Compare Alma 63:6). We think they lodged here, and then that they moved from here to the Southland." In paragraph five, he states that Hagoth was guided by inspiration and reemphasizes that "He came from the Mainland, out here to the islands, many of which are populated by the people here."

For the first time in Mormon thought, a Church president has publicly explained migration within Polynesia. President Kimball makes it clear that Hagoth came first to Hawaii, then these descendants of Lehi "moved from here (i.e., Hawaii) to the Southland," eventually colonizing many of the South Sea islands. This concept of Polynesian migration from Hawaii southward is as contrary to scientific thought and findings as the Church's belief of ultimate American origins for Polynesians. President Kimball's significant address is a clear explanation and stands for a major document of Mormon thinking on the subject. During the next few days, at the February, 1976, Area Conferences in Samoa, New Zealand and Tonga (to which President Kimball alludes to his BYU–HC address), he reasserted these ideas and added further interpretations of Alma 63:4–10.
During the First General session of the Samoa Area Conference, held at 10 A.M. on Tuesday, February 17, 1976, at the Church College of Western Samoa in Apia, Western Samoa, President Kimball said

I thought to read to you a sacred scripture which pertains especially to you, the islanders of the Pacific. It is in the sixty-third chapter of Alma, and it says, “In the thirty and seventh year of the reign of the judges, there was a large company of men, even to the amount of five thousand and four hundred men, with their wives and their children, departed out of the land of Zarahemla into the land which was northward.

“And in the thirty and eighth year, this man built other ships. And the first ship did also return, and many more people did enter into it; and they also took much provisions, and set out again to the land northward.

“And it came to pass that they were never heard of more. And we suppose that they were drowned in the depths of the sea. And it came to pass that one other ship also did sail forth; and whither she did go we know not.

“And it came to pass that in this year there were many people who went forth into the land northward. And thus ended the thirty and eighth year.

“And it came to pass in the thirty and ninth year of the reign of the judges, Shiblon died also, and Corianton had gone forth into the land northward in a ship. . . .” (Alma 63:4,7–10.)

And so it seems to me rather clear that your ancestors moved northward and crossed a part of the South Pacific. You did not bring your records with you, but you brought much food and provisions. And so we have a great congregation of people in the South Seas who came from the Nephites, and who came from the land southward and went to the land northward, which could have been Hawaii. And then the further settlement could have been a move southward again to all of these islands and even to New Zealand. The Lord knows what he is doing when he sends his people from one place to another. That was the scattering of Israel. Some of them remained in America and went from Alaska to the southern point. And others of you came this direction.

President Joseph F. Smith, when president of the Church, said to the people of New Zealand, “I would like to say to you brethren and sisters from New Zealand, you are some of Hagoth’s people, and there is NO PERHAPS about it!” (Joseph F. Smith, quoted by William A. Cole and Elwin W. Jensen, Israel in the Pacific, p. 388.) He didn’t want any arguments about it. That was definite.

So you are of Israel. You have been scattered. Now you are being gathered.21

Four days after the Samoan address, on Saturday, February 21, 1976, at 10 A.M., President Kimball spoke at the first general session of the New Zealand Area Conference held at the Church College at Temple View, New Zealand.
The most pertinent section of his address is included, where President Kimball states unequivocally that the Maoris came from Hawaii and that Hagoth’s people remained in the Pacific:

The Maori people came from the north country, from Hawaii. Their origin is recorded in the Book of Mormon where Alma gives an account of their journeys. Their common ancestor was Hagoth.

‘He being an exceedingly curious man (says Alma), therefore he went forth and built him an exceedingly large ship, on the borders of the land Bountiful, by the land Desolation, and launched it forth into the west sea, by the narrow neck which led into the land northward.

“And behold, there were many of the Nephites who did enter therein and did sail forth with much provisions, and also many women and children; and they took their course northward . . .

“And in the thirty and eighth year, (approximately two years later), this man built other ships. And the first ship did also return, and many more people did enter into it; and they also took much provisions, and set out again to the land northward.

“It came to pass that they were never heard of more. And we suppose that they were drowned in the depths of the sea. And it came to pass that one other ship also did sail forth; and whither she did go we know not.” (Alma 63:5–8.)

Corianton was a member of that sailing party. President Joseph F. Smith, the president of the Church reported, ‘you brethren and sisters from New Zealand, I want you to know that you are from the people of Hagoth.’ For New Zealand Saints that was that. A prophet of the Lord had spoken. Nothing was said about records, or educational material, so it is reasonable to conclude that Hagoth and his associates were about nineteen centuries on the islands, from about 55 B.C. to 1854 before the gospel began to reach them. They had lost all the plain and precious things which the Savior brought to the earth, for they were likely on the islands when the Christ was born in Jerusalem.22

President Kimball’s longest explanation of Hagoth and Israel in the Pacific daring the South Pacific Area Conferences in February, 1976, occurred at the Tonga Area Conference, held February 24–25, 1976, at the Liahona High School in Nuku’alofa, Tonga. On Tuesday, February 24, 1976, during the first general session, President Kimball said

The children of Israel then became enslaved in Egypt. But they were eventually brought out of that experience they had in Egypt and were brought back into Palestine. After some centuries, however, they were taken captive again into the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys.

About that time, you know, was when Lehi left Jerusalem with his family and began your race. Through a thousand years of difficulties, these people, the Lamanites and the Nephites, wandered through the American world, having come here across the ocean.

Hagoth, the Shipbuilder

After the people had been pretty well scattered over the earth it was necessary that there be a gathering of Israel. And so the Lord began
the gathering processes. Hagoth, who was from among the Nephites, apparently came into the islands of the Pacific. The country had become a little too well settled for him in America, I suspect, so Hagoth went north in some boats that he had made and took thousands of his people, mostly Nephites, with him. (This was still a part of the scattering.) And then about fifty-five years before Christ was born, this large contingent of people, Nephites, came to the islands of the sea. Hagoth gathered together 5,400 men with their wives and their children. Then they departed from their land going westward and northward. He was a very curious man and a very well trained man. (See Alma 63.)

Israel in the Pacific

As we talked with some of the New Zealanders the other day, they said that there were traditions which indicated that the people of the islands of the sea came from far away and then from farther away and then from still farther away where two oceans met together. The narrow neck of land which connects North America and South America is what they apparently were talking about at that time.

We were amazed at the scattering of Israel through the islands of the Pacific. There must have been many well trained mariners among these men who went north with Hagoth. I suppose as they grew and multiplied through the hundreds of years that have passed since then, that the little country of Hawaii probably became too small for them. The New Zealanders tell us that the traditions of their fathers indicate that they came from the north in seven vessels. In this way, the thousands of islands in the Pacific became populated.

The Book of Mormon says further that there were many of the Nephites who entered into these newly made ships of Hagoth and his companions. "And (they) did sail forth with much provisions, and also many women and children" (Alma 63:6). In the thirty eighth year of the reign of the judges there were still others who went, including Corianton who was also one of the scattered Israelites. We assume that because there must not have been any records taken, that the record was lost of their migrations to the islands of the sea. It would have been a most interesting history if we had all the details of what happened in that thousand years after Christ came. Little or nothing was ever heard from these people in an official way.

As we have toured the islands of the sea, we have learned that many of the native people have retained in their traditions and their memories certain genealogies of their people. And so we are expecting that the good people of these islands will bring forth the numerous charts of their genealogies that have been memorized and try to reproduce them, so that they can take them to the temple, where the work can be done for their relatives who have passed away. Now that the genealogical program and the temple work is under the direction of the high priests all over the Church, we hope that they will get very busy and work out many, many temple names.

The Lord put it into the heart of Hagoth and others; they wanted to move, they wanted to travel. And perhaps that was the way the Lord was to get the scattering of Israel accomplished. In the beginning the Lord created the heavens and the earth, and made all these islands beautiful places to live. He perhaps would not have accomplished his
CONCLUSIONS

This series of addresses contains the most explicit and lengthy explanations of the official Mormon view regarding Polynesian origins and migrations. It is interesting to note that no Mormon leader has intimated the possibility of racial mixing in the Pacific.

The purpose of this short essay was to present both sides of a major discrepancy between Mormonism and the scientific, academic world. No doubt the debate over the fascinating problems of Polynesian origins and migrations will continue although it appears unlikely that new discoveries and research could completely reconcile the differences. In light of the Mormon Church’s firm assertion and long-standing beliefs on the matter, one must conclude that Mormonism will likely continue to oppose conflicting anthropological theories, choosing instead to rely on the statements of its leaders.

NOTES


5Sharp, p. 125.


Bellwood, p. 36. For further discussion see D. E. Yen, The Sweet Potato and Oceania: an Essay in Ethnobotany. (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Bulletin Number 236, 1974). See also Barclay, p. 7, for information on Asian and American cotton plants.


Levison, p. 47.

Barclay, p. 9.

Barclay, p. 6. See also Bellwood, pp. 16–65 and Peter S. Bellwood, Man's Conquest of the Pacific (Auckland: Collins, 1978), pp. 296–423; and Jennings, pp. 1–60, 249–379 for in depth, scholarly discussions of recent research on the prehistory of Polynesia.


Louisa Barnes Pratt. Journal, in Heart Throbs of the West, compiled by Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1947), vol. 8, p. 273.

See Jensen, pp. 1–10.


Cheesman, p. 13.


Official Report of the New Zealand Area Conference Held at Church College at Temple View, New Zealand, February 20, 21, and 22, 1976 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1977) p. 3.