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Robert E. Parsons

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has shown deep interest in the Polynesian people almost from the time the Church was organized in 1830. Just thirteen years later, in 1843, the Prophet Joseph Smith sent the first missionaries to the islands of the Pacific. The interest in the people of the Pacific comes from a brief account in the Book of Mormon of one Hagoth, a Nephite shipbuilder who left the Americas and sailed away and was “never heard of more” (Alma 63:8). This paper will review the traditional beliefs of the Church regarding the Polynesian people, and will thus explain the Prophet Joseph’s early interest in these people of the Pacific Islands. It will not thoroughly examine the current or past theories of the origin of the Polynesians, but concentrate on the Book of Mormon account and supplementary interpretations that have led to the traditional beliefs.

The story of Hagoth is recorded in just six verses (4–9) of Alma 63. Great wars between the Nephites and Lamanites had just concluded and there seemed to be a restlessness among the survivors. At that time thousands (even tens of thousands) migrated to the land northward (Alma 63:4). In 55 BC, Hagoth built an “exceedingly large ship” and launched it into the West Sea by the narrow neck of land and went north with many men, women, children, and provisions (Alma 63:5–6). This ship returned in 54 BC, was provisioned and sailed north again never

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to be heard from thereafter. An additional ship was launched that year, and it also was never heard from again (Alma 63:7–8). Interest in this one-half page abridgment of two years of Nephite history has led to the interpretations that will follow.

What happened to these lost ships? Only speculation and theories can be advanced, but the most common is that the ships were lost at sea. This is what the Nephites thought happened to them (Alma 63:8).

A second theory is that they went to Japan. The basis of this theory is the prayer Elder Heber J. Grant offered when he dedicated Japan in 1901 to receive the restored gospel.

According to Alma Taylor's reminiscences of the event, Elder Grant "spoke of those who, because of iniquity, had been cut off from among the Nephites . . . and said we felt that through the lineage of those rebellious Nephites who joined with the Lamanites, that the blood of Lehi and Nephi [and of all Israel] had been transmitted unto the people of this land, many of whom have the features and manners of the American Indians, [and he] asked the Lord that if this were true that He would not forget the integrity of His servants Lehi and Nephi and would verify the promises made unto them concerning their descendants in the last days upon this [the Japanese] people for we felt that they were a worthy nation" (Palmer 91).

A third theory is that they went to Hawaii. In speaking to the Hawaiians at Laie, Elder Matthew Cowley said to them: "Brothers and sisters, you are God's children—you are Israel. You have in your veins the blood of Nephi" (Cole 384). Expounding this theory, some believe that they went not only to Hawaii, but also to other Polynesian Islands as well; this theory is the emphasis of this paper.

Does the Church have an official position on any connection between Hagoth and the Polynesians? In a letter to the mission president of the Samoan Mission dated September 6, 1972, and signed by N. Eldon Tanner and Marion G. Romney, under the letterhead of the First Presidency, they wrote:

In your letter of September 6, 1972, you ask if the Polynesian people are Lamanites or Nephites. There has been much speculation about the origin of these people. We have, however, no scriptural evidence

or revelation from the Lord that would tell us exactly where these people came from or their background.

Teachings of General Authorities

Notwithstanding this 1972 letter from the First Presidency, we have many definite statements from members of the Twelve, and from Presidents of the Church reiterating their firm belief that the Polynesians originated from Lehi's American colony. Elder Mark E. Petersen, in his conference message of 1962, says:

The Polynesian Saints are characterized by a tremendous faith. Why do they have this great faith? It is because these people are of the blood of Israel. They are heirs to the promises of the Book of Mormon. God is now awakening them to their great destiny. 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 (Petersen 457).

The building of temples among the Polynesian people has been the source of many statements connecting these people with the Book of Mormon. When the cornerstone was laid at the New Zealand Temple, Elder Hugh B. Brown stated in the closing prayer:

We thank Thee, O God, for revealing to us the Book of Mormon, the story of the ancient inhabitants of America. We thank Thee that from among those inhabitants, the ancestors of these whose heads are bowed before Thee here, came from the western shores of America into the South Seas pursuant to Thy plan and now their descendants humbly raise their voices in grateful acknowledgement of Thy kindness, Thy mercy, and Thy love for them and those who went before them.

We humbly thank Thee that this building is erected in this land, so that those faithful Maoris who came here in early days, descendants of Father Lehi, may be remembered by their descendants and saved through the ordinances that will, in this House, be performed in their behalf (Cummings 63; quoted in Cheesman 14).

In the opening sentences of his dedicatory prayer at the New Zealand Temple, April 20, 1958, President David O. McKay stated:

We express gratitude that to these fertile islands thou didst guide descendants of Father Lehi and hast enabled them to prosper (McKay 2).

Later, Elder Gordon B. Hinckley commented upon Europeans being assembled with the Maoris of the Pacific at the dedication of the New Zealand Temple: “Again, there was something prophetic about it. Here were two great strains of the house of Israel the children of Ephraim from the isles of Britain, and the children of Lehi from the isles of the Pacific” (509).

Nearly twenty years later, in a talk to the Samoans in 1976, President Spencer W. 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. . . . [He then read the account of Hagoth.]

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 Spencer W. Kimball continued by quoting former President Joseph F. Smith as saying:

“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!” 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 (15).

It might be of interest to you to know that when Elder Spencer W. Kimball set me apart for my mission to New Zealand in 1946, he said: “We bless you with power and the ‘gift of tongues’ to learn the language of the Maoris. . . . We set you apart among the Children of Lehi to do good.”

Besides these many statements from the Prophets, we have added insights from patriarchal blessings. Paul Cheesman notes in *Early America and the Polynesians* that Bruce G. Pitt, a graduate student, “viewed a portion of microfilm #34 in the BYU library” which contained the patriarchal blessings given to these people in regard to the lineage declared in the blessings. The following information was found: “Of 321 total Polynesian lineages viewed, 155 were declared to be of Manasseh, 2 of Manasseh and Ephraim, 68 of Joseph, 62 of Israel, 4 of Jacob, 28 of Ephraim, 1 of Lehi and 1 of Japeth. . . . Another [graduate] researcher, Max Hirschi, recorded that out of 35 patriarchal blessings given to Polynesians, thirteen were from the tribe of Ephraim, fourteen were told they were from Manasseh, and the other eight were of the tribe of Joseph” (15).

During Dr. Paul Cheesman’s visits to the islands, he questioned patriarchs in the various places and found “that nearly three-fourths [of the declared lineages] were from Manasseh and one-fourth were from Ephraim, with some being designated as descendants of the tribe of Joseph” (15). Since Lehi was a descendant of Manasseh (Alma 10:3) and Ishmael was a descendant of Ephraim (*Journal of Discourses* 23:184), the common lineage of these two descendants of Joseph who was sold into Egypt and the Polynesian Saints gives support to the theory that the Polynesians came from the American Nephites.

Another evidence of a connection between the Nephites and the Isles of the Pacific is the oral traditions among the Latter-day Saint Polynesian people. I asked Elder John Groberg, who has spent years among the Tongans, if they had any traditions concerning their coming to the islands. He said they had nothing as detailed as the Maori, but that Church members among both Tongans and Samoans were adamant in their tradition that they came from the *east*, not the *west* as some modern scholars affirm. Elder Groberg is well-qualified to speak concerning these people. He served as a missionary to Tonga, then as mission president, regional representative, and when he was ordained a member of the First Quorum of

Seventy, he served as an area supervisor of the Polynesian people.

Returning to the Maoris, my favorite oral tradition, one I learned among the Maoris, is as follows: I haere mai o tatou tipuna, i tawhiti nui, i tawhiti roa, i tawhiti pamamao i te hono i wai rua. English: Our Fathers came from a great distance, an extended distance, an extremely great distance the joining of two waters. It is this last phrase, "the joining of two waters," that is so interesting to us Latter-day Saints.

Elder Matthew Cowley gave an interesting explanation of this tradition as he introduced one of his Maori friends who was visiting the United States.

Now we have with us here my good Israelite friend (Wi Pere Amaru). I am glad he has come to speak to us Gentiles, to bring to us a message right from the heart and blood of Israel. You know, in the 63rd chapter of Alma, there is a little story which tells of Hagoth who was such an exceedingly curious man that he built a boat, and he went out on the seas, and he came back. He built other boats, and then finally the boats went forth and never returned. We are told in The Book of Mormon the place where those ships were built was near a narrow neck of land.

When I was on my first mission as a young boy, I used to ask the oldtimers out there, "Where did you come from?" They would say in Maori, "We came from the place where the sweet potato grows wild, where it is not planted, does not have to be cultivated."

There is only one place in all the world where the sweet potato grows wild, and that is within the environs of that narrow neck of land where Hagoth built his ships. They will tell you that they came from several degrees of distance. One degree of distance, a greater degree of distance, and then a far greater degree of distance.

The Maori scholars tell you that "i te hono i te wai rua" means the place where the spirits are joined. But I have a little different interpretation of that. *Wairua* in the Maori language means "spirit." It also means "two waters," *wai* meaning water, *rua* meaning two.

In the Hawaiian language *Wailua* means "two waters"; in the Samoan language *Vailua* means "two waters." The word for *spirit* in those other languages isn't *Wairua*, the same as in the Maori language.

The Maori scholars say that they came from a far distant place, where the spirits are joined, or where the body returns to the spirit. But I

say, knowing the story of Hagoth as I do, that they came from the joining of two waters, a narrow neck of land between two bodies of water which joins those two great continents (114–16).

Stuart Meha, a great Maori High Priest, agreed with Matthew Cowley's interpretation of "wairua" and added the following:

My name is Brother Stuart Meha. While in Salt Lake City in 1957, President David O. McKay asked me to write him an article on the origin of the Maori. This is my humble effort. It is particularly interesting to note that all the students of Maori history and lore have come to the one and same conclusion; namely, that the Maori, in the long dim past have come from India. With due respect to the academic qualifications of these men, we beg to differ and positively aver and maintain, not so with the fleet. We say clearly and unmistakably that the fleet of seven canoes came together from Hawaiki, which name is Hawaii to the Hawaiians, and the striking similarity of these names in the two languages should be good enough proof for the most critical. However, we do say that some other canoes could have come from India. We do not deny the scholars that, but positively not the fleet.

I will now give the tradition just as it was couched in words by our forefathers, also its translation into English. The tradition must be literal in order to retain as near as possible the real meaning which our antecedents wished to pass down to posterity. Here is the tradition: "I haere mai taua i Hawaiki, tawhiti nui, tawhiti roa, tawhiti pamamao i te hono i wai rua." No more, no less.

Translation: "I haere mai taua i Hawaiki." English: You and I have come from Hawaiki. "tawhiti nui, tawhiti roa, tawhiti pamamao." English: A great distance away, an extended distance away, an extremely remote distance away. "i te hono i wai rua." English: even from the joining at the two waters. Putting all the English into compact form we have: "You and I have come from Hawaiki a great distance away, an extended distance away, an extremely remote distance away, even from the joining at the two waters." The last part, "i te hono i wai rua" is where the students of Maori history fall into error. The last two words, 'wai rua' were taken as one word, "wairua," and regarded in that manner it means "spirit." Thus, their translation read, "from the joining of the spirit," presumably with a body. We hold that the view they took is erroneous, and that the old Maori migrant meant just what he had said orally—that he had come from the joining of two great lands at the two waters. . . .

I will now give the best proof of all because it came from the lips of a prophet of God. In 1913, with five others, I went to the U.S.A.—our objective being to go through the House of the Lord at Salt Lake City. On arrival outside of Vancouver, our boat, the R.M.S. Niagara, stood outside the bay awaiting medical clearance. With the doctor came a letter for me, a letter of welcome from Elder Benjamin Goddard, at that time President of the New Zealand Missionary Association of Zion. We landed and were met by two missionaries who were laboring in Vancouver and who had been requested to meet us and make arrangements for our stay in this British metropolis. They took us to the finest hotel here and made us to feel welcome. They then took me to the telegraph office, and I sent a message to Brother Goddard, thanking the Association for its welcome to our party and for all the arrangements for our stay here.

In the wire, I also said, “Who knows but that some of Hagoth’s people had arrived, *pea*?” I added the little word “*pea*” not because of any element of doubt on my part, but I wanted to raise comment, which I succeeded as will be seen later.

At a reception tended [tendered] our party at Wandamere Park, Salt Lake City, President Joseph F. Smith and his counsellors and several of the Twelve and others of the General Authorities of the Church, Governor Spry of Utah and many of the leading citizens of the city were present. President Smith in his welcome said:

“I would like to say to you brethren and sisters from New Zealand, you are some of Hagoth’s people, and there is *pea* about it!”

This is the word of a prophet of God, and we need go no further to look for proof of the origin of the Maori. (Meha tape, Waipawa, Hawke’s Bay, New Zealand, July 1962).

Ever since President Smith told that to the Maori visitors, the members of the Church in New Zealand have had no questions in their minds as far as their connection with Hagoth and their origin to that land. Since the Brethren have spoken so plainly about that in the quotations above, and since the Maori’s themselves have that tradition, we might ask ourselves, how did this teaching that the Polynesians came from the Book of Mormon people first begin? When did we first start talking about all of this in the Church?

Back in the 1830s and 40s, during Joseph Smith’s time, there was nothing that was ever said that we are aware of that

would tie the Polynesians with the Book of Mormon people. Elder George Q. Cannon is credited with first connecting the Hawaiian people and other Polynesians to the house of Israel.

The doctrine that the Hawaiian people and all other Polynesians are heirs to the blessings promised to the posterity of Abraham had its origin through George Q. Cannon. While he was at Lahaina, he received a knowledge directly from the Lord that the Hawaiians were of the house of Israel. From this time on Elder Cannon and his associates began to teach that the Hawaiian people were an offshoot branch of Israel through the posterity of Lehi, the Book of Mormon prophet (Britsch 97–98).

At a recent Mormon History Association meeting held in Hawaii, the linking together of these people with the people of Hagoth was treated.

The Israelite descent of the Polynesians is more difficult to trace in Mormon doctrine. Indeed, there is no evidence that Joseph Smith or the first Mormon missionaries sent to Polynesia in the 1840s ever made the connection. As far as is known, the doctrine was first preached publicly by Tahitian LDS missionary Louisa Pratt who identified the Nephites as “the ancient fathers of the Tahitians” at a meeting in 1851. The Israelite ancestry of the Hawaiians was also preached by the Mormon missionaries in Hawaii from the following year at least. By the late 1850s, Mormon leader Brigham Young was referring to this doctrine, and an article in a Mormon periodical in 1868 claimed with respect to the “Sandwich Islanders” that “it is well understood by us that these peoples are of the same stock as the Lamanites.” This article also claimed that native New Zealanders “have the same origin.”

A connection between the Maori and the history of the Nephites and Lamanites was firmly established at this time. On April 7, 1888, Ezra F. Richards gave the Maori conference attenders “a short account of their forefathers leaving the land of Jerusalem and going to America, and touched briefly upon some of their great battles, some building boats and leaving America.” On the 8 April, Sondra Sanders, Jr., gave the Saints “an account of some of the wars and contentions that arose between the Nephites and Lamanites, also the reason that they became a dark skinned people and the promises that had been made concerning their becoming ‘a white and delightsome people.’” And on the 9 April, after discussing the scattering of Israel, M. S. Marriot suggested that the time had come for “the gathering of the Maori people.” Thereafter, the Book’s teachings on Israelites became a focus for proselyting work among the Maori. As Francis Kirkham,

an LDS missionary to the Maori in the 1890s remembered, “we would go to them, hold up a copy of the Book of Mormon and tell them that we had a book that told the history of their ancestors” (Barber 12–15).

The Coming of the Church to New Zealand

Elder Matthew Cowley tells of a great convention held in 1881 that represented all of the native tribes of New Zealand. They were gathered at a native village near Mastertown, near Wellington. Many who attended that conference were old enough to have seen the first Christian missionaries arrive in New Zealand, and all who attended belonged to a Christian church. They were Catholics, Methodists, or Presbyterians. One of the dominant topics considered was why the Maoris were no longer religiously unified as they had been before Christianity came to them. If Christianity was the higher light—the true religion—why were they divided into many churches? So they began asking themselves which of these Christian churches was the right one for the Maori race and which one they should all belong to so that there would be only one church among them. Not knowing the answer and not being able to decide in their debate, they turned to their wisest sage, Paora Potangaroa, and asked him which church they should all join. He said he would have to think on it and then went to his own residence which was nearby. After three days of fasting and prayer, asking Jehovah which was the right church for the Maori people, he returned to his people and said: “My friends, the church for the Maori people has not yet come among us. You will recognize it when it comes. Its missionaries will travel in pairs. They will come from the rising sun. They will visit with us in our homes. They will learn our language and teach us the gospel in our own tongue. When they pray they will raise their right hands” (Cowley 200–01).

Paora Potangaroa then asked Ranginui Kingi to write down what he was going to say and his words were proclaimed to his people at the “eight-years house” on the 16th day of March 1881. Several things were said of interest to us: First, the year

1881 is the “day of fulness”; that is the year that the missionaries first taught the fulness of the gospel to the Maori people. It is also the year W. M. Bromley arrived to preside over the mission. He was told before leaving Utah “that the time had come to take the gospel to the Maori people.” Potangaroa said the next year, 1882, would be the year of the “sealing.” It was in 1882 when they were first taught about the sealing ordinances performed in the temple. He said the third year, 1883, would be the year of “the honoring,” when they would pay “tribute to whom tribute was due, custom to whom custom . . . honor to whom honor” (See Romans 13:7). Elder Cowley interpreted that as the year when Maoris joined the Church in great numbers and gave “tribute to whom tribute was due [and] custom to whom custom” was due as they began worshiping the Lord (203–04).

The prophecy went on to say that they were the lost sheep of the house of Israel. They would learn of the scepter of Judah, and of “Shiloh, the king of peace.” They would also learn of “the sacred church with a large wall surrounding it.” There would be an “increase of the[ir] race” and of their faith, love, and peace (203). That was at a time when the Maoris were beginning to be exterminated, much as the American Indian was in the United States. There was a great deal of apprehension among them, a fear they would disappear as a people.

This covenant was written down on a piece of paper, and at the top of the piece of paper they drew an “all-seeing eye.” This prophecy was then placed in a cement monument in the eight-years house where the convention was held. It remained there from 1881 until 1929, when a Maori sect known as the Ratana Church, in groping for substantiation that they were the true church of the Maoris as foretold by Potangaroa, broke open the cement monument to get at his prophecy, hoping to find something in it that would establish their claim to be the right church for the Maori (203–04).

Unfortunately, the storage chamber which contained the prophecy had not been hermetically sealed and the paper had been so damaged by moisture that nothing was legible on it.

That was 1929. In 1944, Matthew Cowley was the New Zealand mission president. He was there during the war years, and the only American missionaries he had were himself, his wife, and their daughter. They held a convention for the Maoris in the same area where Paora Potangaroa gave his prophecy in 1881. Present at the 1944 convention was Eriata Nopera, another great Maori chief. When he rose to speak, he told his people that he had been a little boy there when Paora Potangaroa gave his prophecy and repeated what he remembered of the prophecy. At the end of that day's convention, one of the women attending the convention had her husband go fetch parcel wrapped in brown paper from a trunk in their house. When he brought her the parcel, she called President Cowley and Eriata Nopera into an adjoining room and gave it to them. They opened the parcel and found a photograph of Potangaroa's written prophecy wrapped up in it (205).

What had happened was that in 1881, when the prophecy was written down by Ranginui, a photographer in Wellington had heard that a Maori had made a prophecy. He traveled out to that village and asked for permission to photograph it. This was granted and he photographed the prophecy before it was sealed in the cement monument. This woman's family got a copy of that photograph and had kept it since. She then gave it to Brother Nopera, who in turn gave it to President Matthew Cowley (205). That is the way we know what was in Paora Potangaroa's prophecy.

In conclusion it seems fair to state that although the Church has no official, published declaration on the origin of the Polynesians, there have been enough semi-official statements by prophets of the Lord to leave little doubt that the Church believes that the Polynesians are direct blood relatives of Lehi's colony and that Hagoth's lost ships provide at least one connection between the Americas and Polynesia. This is further supported by patriarchal blessings given to the members of the Church among these people and by oral traditions. The brief account of Hagoth recorded in the book of Alma is important

to an understanding of the blessings given to the descendants of Joseph, as the inhabitants of the isles of the sea.

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