

DNA Genealogies of American Indians and the Book of Mormon

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March 17, 2000

I approach this letter with a degree of resignation. It doesn't matter that I have given my heart to Mormonism for three decades. This will count for naught to Mormons intent on uncovering the "real" reason I left the Church. Mormonism equips its adherents with a keen sense of judgment particularly when it is directed towards people who can so easily be branded apostates. With that label securely attached, Mormons seem to comfortably know how to think about a person who no longer believes. I know this is the way they often think because I used to think that way myself. In spite of this apprehension I am compelled to reveal my experiences in the hope that it will help others find the truth. My name is Simon Southerton, I am married to Jane and we are the parents of five children aged between 6 and 15 years. We left the Church together towards the end of 1998. At the time I was a bishop in Brisbane, Australia. To my surprise I have found that most exmormons I have communicated with since then were once committed believers like me and not the moral bankrupts depicted by the Church. I now have ample appreciation of the extent to which the LDS Church manipulates and conceals truth and controls the flow of information to members in order to maintain the faith of the saints.

In early August 1998, the life I had known as a Mormon came to an abrupt end. When I woke up on the 3rd of August 1998 my mind had finally accepted the truth. Some time during the night my subconscious had sorted my thoughts of the previous weeks and placed them in some sort of order. The two sides of my mind were on speaking terms and they set in place an inevitable sequence of conclusions. In the face of a mountain of evidence, my heart finally accepted what part of my mind already knew. The Book of Mormon was created in the mind of

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Joseph Smith and is not a historical account of former inhabitants of the American continent. While this realisation was sudden, I became aware of just how much my feelings about the Church had deteriorated over the last 20 years. This is an unbalanced story. Mormonism has its good points, among them being the close friendships that are formed through working and socialising as a close knit group. I will not be dwelling on these. I want to share a small portion of the truth that I have discovered and share some of my reflections on Mormonism.

Life as a Latter-day Saint

For at least a couple of centuries my father's ancestors had been committed members of the Church of England. I discovered this in Shrewsbury Library in Shropshire, England as I was researching my father's genealogy in the parish of Church Pulverbatch. My father, like his grandfathers before him, was a committed Anglican and actively involved in our parish in Sydney. In early 1970, however, he was experiencing a growing dissatisfaction with Anglicanism. In a sense our family had outgrown the Anglican parish we belonged to. Tensions had arisen between my father and the minister over reverence (silence) during the service. My father insisted that all eight of his children attend the weekly service in addition to Sunday School. He was sensible enough to know that if we didn't attend in our youth we were likely to maintain that habit throughout our lives. As a result of the strained relations, my father was in the mood to listen when the missionaries knocked on our door in Sydney. But he did not accept the Church at face value. After about nine months of serious investigation our family was baptised into the Mormon Church. I was ten years old at the time.

Attending the LDS Church made a change from hiding under the house to avoid the Anglicans. I found I enjoyed going to Church. Early in my youth I had become quite committed to the Church. I had every intention of following the prophet. I advanced through the priesthood with few distractions. I wanted to serve a mission, marry in the temple and raise a righteous family. The rest of my life would comprise enduring to the end. President Spencer W. Kimball, a white haired, croaky voiced man was the prophet during my formative years. I used to love listening to him speak at conference. The primary message he got through to me was to read the Book of Mormon. He encouraged us all to read it and gain a testimony of its truthfulness. I generally wanted to follow the prophet and do most of the things asked of me.

Throughout all of my teenage years my father was either my bishop or on the stake presidency. He was a committed Rotarian, a pillar in the Church and was loved and respected by many members in Sydney. I am only aware of one member of the Church that he had a serious difference of opinion with. Dad was

deeply troubled by proselyting methods missionaries were using in the Sydney Mission while he was a bishop. People were brought to the chapel and taught a very leading and high-pressure discussion and then committed and baptised on the spot. People had frequently been taught, baptised and had gone inactive before meeting the bishop or attending a single church meeting. My father made certain that the mission president (Loren Dunn) knew exactly what he thought of these methods. As a result the two obviously did not see eye to eye. Loren Dunn returned to Salt Lake but was asked to attend our stake conference in place of one of the apostles, several years later. When my father who was serving in the stake presidency found out he was coming he immediately knew he would be released. As a youth I was blissfully unaware of this as my mother told me many years later.

I rarely entertained doubts that Mormonism could be anything but true. Like most Mormons I may have had fleeting moments when I questioned Church teachings, but these were rare, soon chased away in the knowledge that these doubts originated with Satan. I was generally comfortable with the teachings of the Mormon Church. Few could not be satisfied with the assurance that families can be forever and I saw little reason to seriously question this and other Church teachings. Like most Mormons I didn't read books that weren't approved by the Church and seldom read LDS books approved by the Church. I was quite content that I, along with many other Mormons, had found the truth and need look no further.

The earliest signs of my emerging interest in science manifest themselves in my efforts as a young boy to grow vegetables. My father was a keen gardener, and wisely suggested I start with radishes, a particularly child-resistant plant. We spent many happy times together working in the vegetable garden. He also tried to encourage me to be diligent at school but I was an average student. The only subjects that I was interested in were agriculture and science and this interest was rarely translated into scholastic effort. Fortunately I managed a borderline entrance into the agricultural science degree at the University of Sydney. My father wanted me to study for a couple years before serving my mission because he felt I was too young to leave at the age of 18. Sadly my father died at the beginning of my second year at university.

In December 1980, after two years at university, I received my mission call from President Kimball to serve in the Australia Melbourne Mission. My disappointment at being called to a city just down the road didn't last long and I was excited when my new mission president wrote to me and welcomed me to the mission field. He asked me in his letter to read the Book of Mormon again before my arrival in Melbourne. I had just finished reading it weeks earlier, but I immediately started reading it for the second time, completing it on the plane to New Zealand on my way to the Missionary Training Centre (MTC). The MTC consisted of two weeks

of the most intensive study I had ever experienced. I was pleased to leave so that I could get into the mission field in Melbourne.

The morning after my arrival, my mission president proudly declared to his new missionaries that “the Australia Melbourne Mission, was a tracting, door knocking, house to house mission”. Those were his exact words and he was not wrong. It was not uncommon for missionaries to knock doors for 8 to 10 hours a day between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 9:30 p.m. I soon became accustomed to the workload and within a few months found that I actually enjoyed tracting. I used much of this time to memorise scriptures and missionary lessons as I walked endless miles from door to door. Every hour spent door knocking was tallied up each week and reported to senior missionaries. I was surprised by the heavy reliance on goal setting and statistics. I was not a goal setter. There was also a rigid pecking order with senior missionaries exercising authority over junior missionaries, however, few conflicts appeared to occur. There was generally a tremendous sense of community among most of the missionaries. The odd missionary hated the work and one or two I knew of did virtually no work their entire mission, spending it in shopping malls or surfing.

Within a few weeks of my arrival I began like many missionaries to desire my own witness of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. I had never doubted that it was true but I earnestly wanted to have my own answer to prayer as Moroni promised in the last pages of the Book of Mormon. I had heard many other members and missionary’s say that when they had prayed about it they had received a confirmation that it was true. I was a willing and diligent missionary and I felt my desire for a witness was appropriate. I was confident that the Holy Ghost could answer my prayers by causing a burning or warm feeling in my heart. I was confident that I would receive an answer.

During my evening and morning prayers for the first three months of my mission I pleaded for a witness that the Book of Mormon was true. Again and again I asked, but I did not receive the promised burning in the bosom. I soon became very despondent and so concerned that I spoke to my mission president. He assured me that the answers come in all sorts of ways and that perhaps I had already received mine. I soon satisfied myself that mine had come while reading the Book of Mormon. I even convinced myself that I didn’t deserve an answer because it would almost be like seeking a sign. After all I already believed it was true, I just wanted a spiritual manifestation that it was. I did wonder, however, why my Heavenly Father would withhold an answer to such earnest prayer, particularly when I desperately wanted it to be true. I felt unworthy and frequently struggled to comprehend the level of faith that must be required to receive this kind of witness. I wasn’t expecting a chorus of angels or a vision, just the simple warm feelings in my heart. I gradually put my concerns aside and began to testify that I

had gained a witness while reading the book. I never claimed that I had received a direct answer to prayer, however, I strongly felt that I knew it was true.

During my mission I frequently heard other missionaries talk about how the Spirit guided or prompted them in their work. Many described how he guided them to particular streets or houses and answered other prayers. This served to reinforce my feeling of inadequacy. I had pleaded for a witness of the truth of the Book of Mormon unsuccessfully for three months, yet others could virtually call upon the Spirit like he was an old friend. I had never been more righteous in my life and I was working very hard to obey all the mission rules and to work hard. Some of the missionaries claiming divine guidance were not particularly obedient. I often felt that I was simply not good enough to deserve the companionship of the Spirit that others had. Occasionally I thought that it was because I wasn't born in the Church. It was widely believed in the Church that those who were valiant in the premortal life accepted the Church in this life. I naturally concluded that those born in Mormon families must have been even more valiant in the pre-existence.

On the whole, my missionary years were the most challenging and yet some of the most rewarding of my life. I enjoyed my mission, however, I felt very strongly that when I got home I wasn't going to pine for the mission field like many returned missionaries did. I wanted to get on with my life. Within 3 months of my return I was engaged to Jane and the next thing we knew our engagement was announced at stake conference. At the time of my return from Melbourne, there was considerable pressure on the young adults to get married although I believe it has become worse in recent years. Jane and I didn't feel particularly pressured, however, we married 6 months later. We were married first in Sydney and then in the New Zealand Temple. One year later we became parents with the birth of our first daughter Jessica. Our civil marriage was never registered (slack ward clerk I guess) and we actually lived in sin for the first 15 years of our marriage. Australian law did not recognise temple marriages in those days.

A week after returning home from my mission I re-enrolled at university. At first I could not remember anything from the subjects I took before my mission, but within a few weeks things started to come filtering back. In fact my two years of intense scripture study and memorisation soon began to pay dividends. I discovered for the first time in my life that I could concentrate for long periods during study. I began to feel that with effort I might even be able to achieve an honours grade at graduation. Two years later I graduated with first class honours and immediately commenced studying towards my doctorate. I am certain that my missionary training saved me two years of research study, normally required before admission to a doctorate degree, because it led to such an improvement in my results.

My uncertainty with recognising the Spirit resurfaced during my first year back from my mission. Australia beat America in the America's Cup yacht race. To most Americans this was a non-event but for many Australians it was a huge thrill. Australia came from behind in the series to snatch victory in the face of almost certain defeat. I felt intensely warm feelings in my heart, as though it was going to burst. I had felt similar feelings when I was teaching discussions as a missionary. I could not understand why the strong emotional feelings I felt with such an event were essentially indistinguishable from what I had learned to interpret as the feelings of the Spirit. They were similar to the feelings I felt as I watched *The Sound of Music*, or *Fiddler on the Roof* or *Les Miserables*. Even today as I watch *The Sound of Music* for the 30th time it will still reduce me to tears. Other people felt these same feelings and many obviously felt them about their Church. I never resolved this issue, that non-members also felt the Spirit and that it also made them feel their Church was right.

Soon after I was married I was called to the position of young men president. For most of my adult years in the Church I served in the young men or in a bishopric where I was responsible for the youth. I found working with the young men to be challenging and fulfilling because I felt you could make a difference. I enjoyed the company of the youth more than the elders quorum or high priests group. It was a calling where you had to rely on your own belief in the Church as the youth were frequently questioning everything. The boys rarely had their own testimony and some didn't want to be there. In my last year in our small ward I was a counsellor in the bishopric, leading the young men, teaching early morning seminary at 6:30 a.m. five days a week and struggling to finish my Ph.D. I was a little relieved at the end of 1989 to be offered an overseas research scholarship. Early the next year my wife and I and our three children set off for the John Innes Institute in Norwich, England.

During my Ph.D. study I became fascinated with the power of molecular genetics to answer biological questions. I took the opportunity to learn many of the fundamentals of DNA technology in the stimulating and challenging environment of the John Innes Institute. In recent years this institute has grown to become a world-leading centre for plant science research. I was immediately called to serve with the youth in the local ward and within a few months I was called to be the young men president. This was the most enjoyable calling I ever had. The ward was large and we had about 20 boys attending. They were some of the nicest boys I have known and I really felt that I did the best that I could to lead them. It was very difficult to say goodbye to them when we returned to Australia in early 1992 when I took up a research position in Canberra.

About a month after my return I was called as the young men president of the Canberra district. I was happy to accept the calling but I was concerned at the high

turnover of youth leaders in previous years. During the interview I received an assurance that I would be given sufficient time in the calling to generate stability in the youth program. Canberra had a history of shuffling men through callings because of a chronic shortage of leadership. If a senior leader moved away, it was common for a chain reaction of leadership changes to take place. One year later and a week before our annual youth conference I was released and called as a counsellor in my local branch presidency. I was terribly disappointed. I learned soon afterwards the reason for my release. The district president had called someone from my branch to a district position. My branch president insisted that I be returned to the branch in order to square things up. The district president told me he wanted me to stay with the young men, but he felt compelled to let me return to my branch. Up until this time I had felt confident that most of my callings were inspired, but I struggled with this release. I had great difficulty believing that this was inspiration from above rather than desperation from below.

The LDS Church has struggled in Canberra for decades and most of the leadership, including the current stake presidency has a pretty good idea why. The Canberra membership has been divided into 5 small branches for as long as I can remember. The struggle to provide leadership in these small units is exacerbated by the fact that Canberra's population is highly transient. Numerous requests to area leaders and mission presidents that the units be combined have repeatedly been rejected. Many Canberra members believe that area leaders want as many branches as possible in Canberra so that on paper the church appears larger than it really is in the national capital. The real casualties of this policy were the youth, who were denied the opportunities for more friends and support and the continual struggling of the branches resulting in burned out and depressed members. I wondered at times why they called people to leadership positions in Canberra if they didn't trust their judgment on the tough decisions.

After my release I found myself in a branch full of people who had to drag themselves to Church. At a senior leadership testimony meeting I witnessed almost every man testify that the only thing that kept him coming to church was his testimony. I left that meeting feeling very disillusioned, because I was beginning to feel the same way myself. Since the church was a big part of our family life we decided to leave Canberra. In spite of the fact that I enjoyed my job I accepted a research position in Brisbane. After two years in Canberra we moved to Brisbane where we happily settled into a large ward. When we arrived I asked the bishop to give me a breather while I regrouped after my experiences in Canberra. He knew exactly what I had been through and respected my wishes, having had a similar experience himself. Two months later I was called to be one of his counsellors. He is one of the nicest, most genuine men I know and I will always respect him. I particularly enjoyed serving with him because he reminded me of my father. Towards

the end of the second year it became obvious that the ward was growing too large for the bishop and the building. The ward was split in late 1996 and I was called as the bishop of one of the wards.

I remember feeling a strong sense of helplessness about being called as a bishop. I felt that my life was almost out of my control and that someone else was calling the shots. I felt extremely inadequate because the previous bishop had been so good, but he was very supportive of my call. I had served in several bishoprics, but I knew being the bishop was a completely different challenge. I had an inkling of the tremendous strain that this call would place on my family but by the end of my first week as bishop I had had a full taste of it. Some inactive members repeatedly harassed me for financial assistance. It was clear that they had been extracting considerable financial assistance from previous bishops under false pretences. A new bishop was an easy target so they tried everything on me. When they failed to obtain any money they left the ward in search of another unsuspecting bishop.

At the end of January 1998 I took time off work and spent two months studying for an exam to enter a graduate medicine degree at the University of Queensland. The first subject I studied was biology. I find biology fascinating and after this period of study I felt I had gained a much broader appreciation of the subject than at any other time in my life.

Science and Mormon Doctrine

Soon after completing my study I read an article on the Flood and the Tower of Babel in the January 1998 issue of the Ensign magazine. According to this article faithful Latter-day Saints believe in a universal flood that killed all animals and presumably most plants, besides those on the ark. Those who believed anything less were lumped in with the unbelievers. It was claimed that these unbelievers were persuaded in their belief by the way that they interpreted geological evidence. There could not have been another time in my life when I would have reacted more strongly. I had come to accept that Noah was a real man, but that the Flood was a localised event. I strongly suspected that other LDS scientists thought the same way. If there was a major extinction in the last 5 to 10 thousand years then the biological and geological evidence has been removed. I didn't know any scientists who considered that there was evidence of a universal flood. I accepted that God had power to do many things, but covering, creating or distorting evidence to test His children was not a characteristic of the God I worshiped. I was deeply disappointed at this article. As a bishop I was sacrificing a large amount of my time serving in my ward, at the expense of my family. It hurt deeply to be labelled an unbeliever by an ignorant BYU scholar on the Church payroll.

While I was greatly troubled by this article, my testimony was unaffected. I had known for some time that things that are written in the Ensign are not necessarily doctrine. I had over the years, however, grown tired of the fact that modern biology was frequently an easy target for ignorant attack by uninformed Church leaders. About the only book in my limited LDS library that mentioned the Flood was *Mormon Doctrine* by Bruce R. McConkie. This was a relic from the black and white days of Mormonism from my youth. I was already acquainted with McConkie's ignorant position on evolution so I was not interested in what he had to say about the Flood. Like many Mormon scientists I saw no conflict between my religious faith and an acceptance of the principle of evolution. Evolution is simply one of the firmest facts ever to be validated by science. Despite this, it is surrounded with controversy and widely condemned by large numbers of people who generally haven't taken the time to carefully examine the evidence. In my experience in the Mormon Church, public criticism of evolution was acceptable while vocal support was frowned upon.

I felt a need to talk to other members about my concerns but when I made an attempt a member in my ward, who overheard a private conversation, reported me to the stake president! From that point on I became very reluctant to talk to members about things that troubled me. I soon felt quite alone in my thoughts at church. I could only discuss things with my wife, my friends at work and some of my family. I concluded that the Internet was the quickest and most readily available avenue for me to find out what other Latter-day Saints thought about the Flood. Or so I thought. I found material written by Mormons on evolution, Book of Mormon archaeology and many other subjects but after two weeks I had made no progress.

Without doubt the article that had the most impact on me was a statement published by the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C. concerning the Book of Mormon. In very strong language this statement spoke of a complete lack of evidence for any connection between the Old World and the New World. The strength of this statement jolted me. Scientists rarely make such dogmatic statements unless they have plenty of evidence (or none in this case) to back them up. I had been told in seminary that the Smithsonian had been known to use the Book of Mormon in their research. The statement utterly refuted this claim. In fact the Smithsonian have grown tired of responding to Mormons who regularly contact them to see how the Book of Mormon is helping them out. I believed the Book of Mormon was true and that Hebrew civilisation had occurred on the American continent. I firmly believed that there was a connection between the Old and the New World, however, I had never taken the time to seriously examine this. I was confident that somewhere in the scientific literature there must be some reliable research that supported this. There is an abundance of Mormon literature that

claims strong links between the two worlds. With this in mind I decided to look for myself for research that supported Old World migrations to the Americas.

I began searching for research papers having some connection with American Indians or Polynesians. Because I was familiar with plant genetics I became interested in recent research on the DNA of American Indians. The principles of DNA analysis are applicable to all living things so it was relatively easy to jump from the plant to the animal kingdom. I rapidly accumulated many scientific papers comparing the mitochondrial DNA of American Indians from numerous tribes with the mitochondrial DNA of other populations around the world. Mitochondrial DNA is passed from mother to child each generation. It is essentially a female genealogical lineage, or a maiden name if you like, stored in the mitochondrial DNA sequence. This part of the total DNA genome is used for population studies in many animal species. It is very simple to study because the mitochondrial genes don't get rearranged each generation like most genes, which are inherited as a mixed bag from previous generations. I was equally interested in more recent Y-chromosome DNA studies. Male lineages, much like DNA surnames, are passed from father to son and clearly reveal male genealogical lineages.

In the last decade scientists from several research groups had tested the mitochondrial DNA of over 2000 American Indians from about a hundred tribes scattered over the length of the Americas. It soon became apparent to me that about 99% of their female lineages were brought into the Americas in excess of 12,000 years ago. Almost all of these lineages are most closely related to those of people in Asia, particularly in southern Siberia near Mongolia. Several tribes in Mesoamerica (which included Aztecs and Mayans) had been tested and all but a couple of individuals out of about 500 had mitochondrial DNA of Asian origin. The small fraction of Native American lineages that were not from Asia appeared to originate in Europe, most likely Spain. DNA studies also showed that the female ancestors of the Polynesians came from South East Asia and not the Americas. Y-chromosome studies, which trace male migrations, strongly support the mitochondrial work, except that the European influence is higher (about 10% in the Americas).

For two weeks I wrestled with the research. I collected more and more research papers but failed to find anything that supported migration of Jewish people before Columbus. Enough is known about the DNA lineages of Jews to be very confident that they are clearly distinguishable from Asian lineages. They would also be easily identifiable if they were present in the Americas in significant numbers. I struggled with the complete discrepancy between the research and my understanding of the Book of Mormon and the doctrine of the Lamanites. The Book of Mormon describes the occurrence of Hebrew civilizations in the Americas numbering in the millions. It is clear that the victorious Lamanites would have

numbered in the millions in about 400 AD. I could not understand how such large numbers of people could have escaped detection.

Until this point in my life my intellectual study of the Book of Mormon was minimal. I had read it several times from cover to cover and knew the first few chapters of I Nephi very well. I had only taken a passing interest in New World prehistory. Perhaps this was because I am an Australian. I suspect that few Americans have an interest in Australian prehistory. Perhaps it was because I was so busy in the Church that I just didn't have the time. For whatever reason I had happily assumed that BYU scholars were uncovering evidence supporting the Book of Mormon. I began to closely examine the text of the Book of Mormon. The Introduction to the book states that the principle ancestors of the American Indians are the Lamanites. The original founders of both major Book of Mormon civilisations fled to a Promised Land kept from the knowledge of other nations. Historical accounts of these civilisations only mention the presence of people in the New World whose Hebrew origin is accounted for in the text. People who migrated away from these civilisations appeared to be entering further unoccupied territories. There is not a single mention of non-Israelite people in the entire history. According to the Book of Mormon there was clear reason to consider it Mormon doctrine that the American Indians are predominantly the offspring of Hebrew ancestors. The Lamanites with their dark skin curse and loincloths appeared as stereotypical American Indians. This strong scriptural foundation is apparently the reason that most Latter-day prophets and senior leaders consider this to be the case today. Arguably the most frequently repeated message in the Book of Mormon is that the seed of the Lamanites would receive the Gospel in the Latter days from the gentiles. This is further supported in the Doctrine and Covenants where God himself refers to any Indians at the frontiers as Lamanites. How could God allow the book to give the overwhelming impression that the descendants of Lehi were numerous, when they are now virtually undetectable?

I desperately tried to find holes in the research but soon realised just how fruitless this was. I was not upset by it and strangely my belief remained intact. I was on a detached journey of discovery in a field of science that was new to me. The gravity of the situation completely escaped me at first, however, gradually I became aware of the contradiction that I was faced with. When I woke up on the 3rd of August 1998 I felt I had solved a puzzle I had been battling with for as long as I could remember. During the night my subconscious must have found the space to sort things out. All the problems I had been struggling with evaporated when I reached one simple conclusion. As much as I wanted the Book of Mormon to be true, I suddenly knew that it wasn't. It might be full of some remarkable stories and scriptural writings, but it wasn't history about real people. My belief in the Book of Mormon was the foundation for my belief in Mormonism. When

it was shattered it brought a lot down with it. I immediately knew that I must be released from my calling. I rang my stake president that day and arranged to have an interview the next night. I told one of my counsellors and my close friend Kevin Thomson serving in another bishopric, about why I was going to be released. Both were in a good position to defend my reputation in the face of the rumours that would certainly start. Few bishops are released before serving two years and knowing some members in my ward, the gossip was certain to travel quickly.

Soon after I came to the realisation that the Book of Mormon is not what it claims to be, I became deeply upset. I had firmly believed that it was true. I had not been looking for evidence to prove it wrong. I had been looking for research that could be viewed as supportive. It was a shock to have my belief shattered so quickly. For about three days the thought of all this reduced me to tears, at almost any hour of the day. I went for days wondering if anything at all that I believed was true. As a Mormon I believed that all other Churches were false. I was in no hurry to rush out and join another Church.

I was released within two weeks of speaking to my stake president. I spoke at my release and asked the members not to gossip among themselves about why I was released. I told them that all they needed to know was that it was the right thing to happen. For some reason, at the time I felt strongly that the senior leaders of the church needed to know about the science so that they could be prepared for what lay ahead. I was strangely protective of the Church. My stake president and his counsellors were very compassionate and never judgemental. They suggested that I speak to the area leaders in Sydney. I soon discovered that other members and leaders were less considerate. Several clearly assumed I had sinned and one man in my ward took it upon himself to call me to repentance.

I was surprised to receive, out of the blue, a very thoughtless and judgemental letter from a member of the area presidency. He launched into his letter by quoting a scripture in II Nephi 9:28-29, which was probably conceived by Joseph Smith to put the fear of God into someone questioning his authority.

O, that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and frailties, and foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish. But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God.

The rest of the three-page letter contained a collection of statements that were purely intended to fill me with fear and guilt. I was warned that I would damage my family's reputation and hurt my mother, family, wife, children and future

generations. I was warned that I would become a hollow shell of a man without the Church. It was clear that the area leaders had not even spoken to my stake president and had written the letter on the basis of idle rumours. I had asked to be released because I was honestly concerned and it was the correct thing to do. I could not simply pretend that I was not troubled. At the time I was still shocked and confused and had not decided that I was going to leave the Church. Even my stake president and the new bishop were disappointed when they saw the content of the letter. I firmly yet politely responded to this letter and received a letter shortly afterwards apologising for acting on hearsay.

The area leaders initially questioned the validity of the science and assumed that my interpretation was incorrect. They were of the view that the American Indians were Lamanites and if the science doesn't agree with that conclusion then the science is wrong. They suggested I speak to a BYU professor who was an expert in this field. I was irritated by the fact that they trusted Mormon scientists at BYU more than non-Mormon scientists, but I guess I had grown accustomed to this prejudice in the Church. I corresponded with this BYU professor on about four occasions until I became even more convinced of the seriousness of the situation. He was a very nice man and he was very honest with me. In the midst of his lengthy defences of the Church he acknowledged that greater than 98% of American Indians came from Asia and that this conflicts with current thinking in the church regarding the whereabouts of the Lamanites today. Not only did he confirm my conclusions, he strengthened them even further. He confirmed that scientists at BYU had tested 3000 American Indians from Peru and they came up with the same problem of virtually all the female DNA lineages coming from Asia. Now I knew that all three major civilisations in the Americas the Aztecs, Maya and Incas were comprised of people who trace their genealogy back to Siberia. Data from Peru had been conspicuously lacking in my research.

My communication with the area presidency stalled when they became aware that my correspondence with BYU had confirmed my interpretation. It was evident that they were seeking advice from more senior leaders and that these leaders were hastily speaking to scientists at BYU. The explanations that eventually came back to me were that the term Lamanite was a cultural or political term and that we don't know precisely where they currently live. The BYU professor had struggled for a number of years with the research, but had managed to settle most of his concerns. He had come to the conclusion that it wasn't doctrine that the American Indians were Lamanites. I was dumbfounded. If this doctrine could be so easily dismantled then no doctrine in the Church was safe. I have since come to the conclusion that LDS leaders have realised that it is much harder to change the truth than to change doctrine. So they simply change the doctrine. I used to

think that doctrine was the truth and that the truth is the same yesterday, today and forever.

I began to read some of the material published by people at BYU and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). The most widely accepted theory at BYU was that the descendants of Lehi lived in Mesoamerica. I closely examined the claims of archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon. I quickly came to the conclusion that none of it can be considered evidence. At a stretch it could be used to make it appear that the occurrence of Hebrews in ancient America was plausible if you want to believe. Many exaggerated claims of the past have steadily evaporated under the weight of objective research. Major weaknesses have now been found in the widely touted evidences for the Book of Mormon such as Quetzalcoatl, stele 5 (Lehi's tree of life) and others. The truth is that there is no reliable scientific evidence supporting migrations from the Middle East to the New World, just as the Smithsonian statement had said. Some Mormon scholars and indeed Apostles are aware of this and quietly acknowledge it in academic circles behind closed doors. This is never revealed to the Church at large presumably because it isn't faith promoting.

Alternative theories of how Lehi's descendants established their civilisations in the Americas are now being contrived. Soon the most popular theory will be that after the arrival of Lehi's family in the New World, his descendants recruited a large peasant population that formed the base of their civilisations. These poor people would have been none other than the Native Americans. Some derive support for this idea from the writings of John Sorenson, a senior FARMS scholar. He claims to have found numerous references in the Book of Mormon to "other" people being there when Lehi arrived and later during the Book of Mormon period. Apparently those that miss these evidences are lazy readers with only superficial interest in getting to the deep truths in the book.

Some at BYU thought that the now obvious link to Asia could be explained by the Jaredite migrations. Hugh Nibley speculated that the Jaredites had migrated 8,000 kms across Asia and then sailed to America from China. Doubtless they picked up a few Asians on the way. This was a new theory to me and I was utterly astonished at the book by Hugh Nibley that expounds it. I was amazed at the way educated Latter-day Saints at BYU accommodated the contradictions between science and the Book of Mormon. Some simply avoid these difficulties with a dismissive citing of the work of Nibley or Sorenson. Oh that problem was solved years ago! At best Nibley's work was a feeble attempt at solving the Asian problem, but it did nothing to solve the absence of a link to Israel which was so starkly revealed by the DNA evidence. Native Americans clearly migrated from Asia, but it was at least 12,000 years ago and it was almost certainly on foot. The archaeological and anthropological evidence for this is considerable and it is

universally accepted by non-Mormon scientists. It should be kept in mind that these scientists are as diligent and truthful as anyone else. This conclusion is the result of capable people trying to honestly explain the evidence to the best of their ability. For several decades Mormon scholars have disputed these conclusions, however, the evolving theories about the current location of the Lamanites have been heavily influenced by mainstream theories of New World colonisation.

I was amazed at the lengths that FARMS went too in order to prop up faith in the Book of Mormon. I felt that the only way I could be satisfied with FARMS explanations was to stop thinking. On the other hand I was also surprised at how readily the declarations of the prophets, including Joseph Smith, could be overlooked in order to salvage the wreck. Some argue that Joseph Smith was never clear about where the Lamanites were located. I doubt Joseph Smith felt it necessary to be specific because he so obviously thought that all American Indians were Lamanites. It is very clear in the Doctrine and Covenants that the God speaking to Joseph Smith thought the Indians in Missouri were Lamanites. The explanations of the FARMS researchers stretched the bounds of credibility to breaking point on almost every critical issue. I could not force myself to accept their conclusions no matter how hard I wanted it to be true. I continuously found myself thinking that there is a simple explanation for all this.

I could not believe that Lehi and his family conquered thousands of Native Americans soon after their arrival in America and that they became adopted as Lamanites. I also could not accept that the title Lamanite was essentially political. Its only political use was to distinguish divisions among the Lehites and Mulekites. Many prophecies about the Lamanites also refer to their seed in the latter days, clearly implying a genealogical link. I couldn't believe that a people could be so worthless in the sight of God and the Nephite prophets that they were simply not mentioned in the Book of Mormon. I was troubled by the statements made by Joseph Smith and all the prophets about where the Lamanites currently live. Millions of members of the Church have been misled into believing that the Lamanites are all over America and Polynesia. I am certain that thousands of Native Americans and Polynesians have been attracted to the Church in the belief that the Book of Mormon contains an account of their ancestors.

Abandoning the old ship Mormonism

After communicating with scientists at BYU and reading numerous FARMS publications I told the area presidency what I had learned and I asked for their advice. I asked them a direct question. Should I accept the FARMS theories limiting Lehi's impact to a small colonisation and at the same time reject the words of the prophets or should I reject all the science and go back to what the Book of Mor-

mon and prophets have said? In their letter of response they deliberately avoided answering my question. Their advice was that from time to time things will come along that seem to discredit the church but that I should “*Stick with the old ship, it will pull you through*”. I was also instructed that I didn’t need to explain to other members what my difficulties were. The final humiliation was the inclusion in the letter of dialogue I could memorise and quote, like a mindless zombie, to members who inquired about my troubles. I should respond by saying. . .

“We are all tried in different ways in the Church; and through those trials comes either increased faith and greater commitment, or a lost faith. I am committed to spending as much time as I need with the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price to get my previous witness back again as it was before.”

Stop thinking, hope it will all go away and pretend that something was currently wrong with me. The thought of quoting this pathetic response to members inquiring about my current situation made me ill. I soon learned what they meant by “things that seem to discredit the church” or what they also referred to as the “interesting Church issues list”. I became aware for the first time in my life about many other issues surrounding the origin of the Church. I was particularly troubled to learn more about the Book of Abraham, another Latter-day Saint scripture originating with Joseph Smith. Joseph claimed that it was a direct translation from some papyri written by the hand of Abraham. I learned that the papyri were thought to have been destroyed in a fire in Chicago, however, they were discovered in a museum in New York in 1966 and returned to the Church the following year. They are unmistakably the ones used by Joseph Smith as they contained facsimile 1, which is printed in the current Book of Abraham. In addition the church had a copy of Joseph’s Egyptian alphabet and grammar. This document written by Joseph Smith contains a column of hieroglyphics copied from the papyrus next to a column of definitions. All of the symbols in the alphabet were found on a small portion of the recovered papyri. Pictures of the papyri were published in the *New Era* and *Egyptologists*, including several Latter-day Saints, translated the text. They were found to be nothing more than common funeral texts that were traditionally placed with mummies at burial and they dated to about 100 AD. This event occurred just before I was baptised into the Church. Thirty years later I had never heard anything about it.

I read the apologies offered by Mormon scholars, the most predictable being that they haven’t found the correct papyrus. Other FARMS scholars hunt for references to Abraham in other papyri as though this supports the Book of Abraham. I found that the same mental acrobatics required to accept the Book of Mormon defences were necessary to salvage the Book of Abraham. I read several of Hugh

Nibley's comments after the papyri were found and he was clearly stumped. I was astonished to read a statement by him a decade later claiming that no one had laid a glove on the Book of Abraham. This is an absolute lie and a prime example of the art of lying for the Lord. It wasn't faith that was required to accept the apologist's conclusions, rather, it was a pigheaded, dogmatic insistence that Mormonism was right. The Book of Abraham has been completely and utterly exposed as a piece of fiction originating in the mind of Joseph Smith.

There were large volumes of other "interesting Church issues" that I discovered. With my eyes now open the difficulties with the Book of Mormon seem endless. They range from a complete absence of all the Old World crops and animals mentioned in the text through to the absence of metallurgy, horse drawn wheeled vehicles and any Hebraic or Egyptian-like writings in pre-Columbus America. With the origin of the Book of Abraham exposed, and my faith in the Book of Mormon so recently shattered, I have no faith in anything that the Mormon Church claims. At almost every turn, facts are distorted and truth concealed in order to maintain the faith of most inquiring Latter-day Saints. In order for me to remain with Mormonism my struggles with the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham would have completely drained me. I would have indeed become the hollow shell of a man the area leaders forecast I would become.

Soon after these events we moved back to Canberra. I have lost contact with essentially all of my friends in the Church. In the 18 months since I left the church I have told very few Mormons about the difficulties I have with the Book of Mormon. Of those that I have told, several have left the church. My friend Kevin Thomson asked to be released three weeks later and then left the church with his wife and three children a couple of weeks before us. The DNA evidence was only the catalyst. They left when they became aware of the difficulties surrounding the Book of Abraham and the recurrent sanitising of Church history. They found most of the troubling information in Church publications. It is surprising what you see when your eyes are open. Kevin had struggled early in his mission with so many missionaries claiming to feel the Spirit guide their every move. At the time he had also felt very inadequate and unworthy, a feeling we both had shared. Few former LDS friends of theirs speak to them now that they have left, including their bishop who was a good friend of both of us. They are very happy and treasure the time they now have together as a family.

My brother and his wife and five children left at about the same time and are now happily attending another church. The DNA evidence was just another problem in a long list of issues that seriously troubled them about the church. My brother had served in many senior leadership positions including seven years as a bishop, as a stake young men president and as a member of a mission presidency. His wife had known for years that the Church was not true. She had realised that

many of her friends shared just as strong feelings about the churches that they attended. She couldn't continue to feel that they were any less important in God's eyes, or that their feelings were any less valid. She struggled for years to hide this from the extended family group. They were both greatly relieved when all their children left with them. Since "going inactive" both my brother and I and our families have not had a single home teaching or visiting teaching visit from the Church. It is clear that senior leaders have given instructions that we should not be visited.

It has been essentially pointless telling most of my family why I was troubled. They seem to know already why I was released and left the Church. Communication channels are completely choked with emotions and discussion of concerns about the Church is off limits. This has stifled conversation at family gatherings where a favourite topic used to be remonstrating over little things at Church. Some probably feel that I must never have really believed the gospel. Others think I was stressed because of the workload of being a bishop. One sister-in-law is convinced I committed adultery. At times it hurts to see the stranglehold the church has over the minds of people close to me. Two years ago I was a respected member of my family and I still would be if I had lied to myself that there was no problem. Like many Mormons their testimonies of the Church are tied very close to their emotions. Most have never seriously looked at the Church's history or doctrines, and if they have it has only been through approved Church sources. Some have probably never read the Book of Mormon right through. It is a strange irony that those with a superficial understanding of the Book of Mormon generally won't appreciate the theological basis for my concerns.

I am sure that some are comforted in their belief by the thought that scientists at BYU are not troubled. Area leaders have probably reassured my family and other members that because faithful scientists at BYU know about the DNA research, all is well. They probably didn't mention that since the Church owns BYU it can control what its staff say or publish. Members who criticize the Church or its teachings at BYU face being sacked and excommunicated. Scholars paying too close attention to the details of Church history have been severely repressed in recent years. The same censorship of scientists has occurred before in BYU's history and it will happen again. In the heartland of Mormonism the consequences of this action can be devastating for an individual, who could find themselves unemployed and an outcast in his family and community. Many scientists have learned that the best way to deal with these difficult issues is to not deal with them. Some keep Church and science safely locked in separate mental compartments and never attempt to resolve any conflicts. They reason that they have the eternities to resolve these conflicts. I must have been doing this myself to a certain degree. It disappoints me greatly to see the Mormon Church hiding behind

academics at BYU. I wonder how many of those academics harbour real concerns about the Church but are afraid to speak out. In most cases educational institutions have helped open the eyes of the masses, but BYU is being used to prop up Mormonism as its scholars revise history and defend the books of scripture attributable to Joseph Smith.

Some reflections on Mormonism

I didn't leave the LDS Church and stop believing because it was easy. I desperately wanted the comforting teachings of the Church to be true. I don't have any brilliant insight to offer about the meaning of life, and I haven't found another "true Church". Curiously, in some conversations with Mormons the fact that I haven't resolved these problems seems to reassure them that I am wrong. I realised recently that for most of my life my family was the most powerful force motivating me to stay in the Church. Honestly telling my family of my concerns over the years was almost unthinkable. I think back to the time on my mission when I was pleading for a witness that the Book of Mormon was true. As with all young Mormons searching for the truth, there was a lot riding on those prayers. It was not simply a matter between God and me. There were going to be many people enormously disappointed in me if I didn't get the right answer, including parents, family, friends, companions and my mission president. Most young men gain their testimony of the Church when they are a missionary. Not surprisingly, I have never heard of a missionary returning from his mission early because he didn't believe the Church was true. The fear of hurting the feelings of those you love the most is an extremely powerful motivation to not rock the boat.

Not long before we left the Church I glanced through the latest Sunday School manual on the life of Brigham Young. If I had not known anything about Brigham Young I would have been convinced, after reading this manual, that he lived a monogamous life, marrying a second time after the death of his first wife. The manual borders on deception, completely omitting the fact that Brigham had more than 20 wives and fathered 47 children. When I brought this to the attention of a recent convert I was accused of spreading lies about the Church. In an interview with my current stake presidency, one counsellor bravely expressed his disappointment at the current trend in the Church to rewrite history. The trend towards sugar coated Mormonism, where only the most palatable and uplifting parts of the history is retained concerned me greatly during my last few years in the Church. For similar reasons I could rarely face reading the Church News where all the news was good news.

My most frequent companion during my experience in Mormonism was the feeling of inadequacy. This was particularly true during my mission and the years

immediately following. If I had just worked a little harder or cared more or followed the Spirit more closely I could have helped save more souls. Being told over and over again that we will be held accountable for the souls that we should have saved ate away at me at times. It was fashionable to retell motivating stories of our premortal commitment to bring the Gospel to certain people we would meet in this life. These stories did nothing to ease my anxiety, and neither did pathetic Church film strips such as “My Name is Thad” with an irritating little kid who had an uncanny knack for converting every unsuspecting person he met. Initially I was asking myself am I going to suffer for eternity because I didn’t bring the Gospel to my friend or I allowed a young man go inactive or I didn’t reactivate my in-laws? I remember being inspired in a meeting to ring a close friend and to invite him to stake conference. I had felt guilty for years that I had never invited him to Church and was crushed when he flatly declined the invitation. He was not at all interested in the Church. I was left wondering if my previous failure to introduce him to the Church led to his lack of interest. Early in my married life I also frequently felt anxious about the inactivity of my wife’s parents. Was I doing enough to help them come back to Church? When others from their ward invited them to Church I felt pangs of guilt because I hadn’t invited them. Our relationship has blossomed since leaving the Church. I sometimes wondered if I had already failed and was there any point prolonging the agony. When I failed to visit the nine families I was assigned to visit each month, the same inadequacy gripped me. Even when we did achieve 100% home teaching, the feeling of achievement was always fleeting, as the next monthly goals loomed large.

The pernicious Church teaching that we will be held accountable for the lives of people we could have saved left me thinking at times that I would rather not have been brought up in the Church. That way I wouldn’t have this knife hanging over my neck my whole life. As the years passed it was not possible to sustain the guilt and gradually I drove much of it from my thoughts. Clearly other members must have done the same thing because nobody I knew was perfect. It was obvious from the talks at General Conference that many parents felt enormous guilt when their children went astray despite being brought up in the Church. According to Mormon scripture, parents are responsible for their children’s sins if they go astray because of a failure on the part of the parents to teach their children. How could a parent who has a child who has left the Church not blame themselves? There is always something extra that the parents could have done because we are only human. They might not have had Family Home Evening every Monday night of the child’s life. They might not have prepared adequate lessons, or set a perfect example, etc. Not only do the parents feel the distress of perhaps losing a child for eternity, they have to suffer with the uncertainty that they might be eternally punished for their failures. I thought about this teaching frequently, wondering

what sort of a being would expect this of His children. And what about the people we should have saved but didn't? Could God allow one of His children to suffer for eternity because another failed to bring the Gospel to them? Is that in any way fair for the person on the non-receiving end? Perhaps God had backup people or a series of backup people to deliver the Gospel message to those unfortunate enough to have slack Mormon friends?

A frequent companion to my sense of failure was the thought that something was wrong with me. Why did I have to drag myself to hundreds of meetings a year? Others seemed to love meetings. Many of these meetings seemed to achieve so little especially when you considered that these people could have been at home with their families. Each year as bishop I missed about 150 evenings with my children because I got home so late. The Church continues to pride itself on being family centred. Why did I hate getting up at 5:30 every morning to take my kids to early morning seminary? Why did I find the temple a relatively meaningless experience? Why did I feel that Home Teaching and Visiting Teaching was invasive of peoples privacy? It was widely accepted in my last stake that the role of the visiting teacher was to get into the sisters homes to see if they were on top of the washing and ironing, house cleaning and of course obeying the commandments. Why did I constantly feel uncomfortable about baptising people into the Church within days of being met by the missionaries? I guess I inherited this fault from my father. For many years, however, I was convinced that the answer to these questions was that something was wrong with me. I wasn't righteous enough, didn't read the scriptures enough, didn't pray enough, didn't do my home teaching enough, etc., etc.

A constant difficulty I had was the feeling that whenever we were asked to commit to something, the level of commitment required was almost always more than could be reasonably achieved. When we lived in Sydney there were goals set by the stake leaders to attend the temple four times a month. Achieving this meant at least twelve hours in the temple and probably another six hours in travel. Why did I feel this was a burden, while other couldn't seem to get enough of the temple. In most wards we were required to home teach between 5 and 9 families a month. In order to achieve this it was necessary to be out a minimum of two nights per month visiting. Scheduling for two home teachers and the families they visit to be available on the same night was a monthly nightmare. This problem was made more difficult by the fact that only a few nights in the month were left after all the meetings were taken out. The women in the Church experienced similar struggles and sense of failure as they were equally burdened with the responsibility to visit the sisters every month. The worst thing about these monthly responsibilities was the feeling that the goal could never be achieved. As soon as it was done the next month arrived. Many bishops I knew were frustrated at the difficulty they had in

motivating members to keep doing their Home and Visiting Teaching. By the time I left the Church, I think I had become numb to the whole thing.

I have finally resolved the issue that troubled me almost 20 years ago on my mission and which dogged me my whole life in Mormonism. I now know that those feelings that most members are conditioned to recognise as the Spirit are not the exclusive property of the Mormon Church. All people experience strong emotions and warm feelings in their hearts, and many people feel them about their church. I do not believe that they exclusively tell people that the Mormon Church is the only true Church on earth. I don't deny that many members of the Church, including myself, have had powerful "spiritual" experiences when they feel warm feelings in their heart. Like many Mormons, however, I had invalidated the feelings of non-members, rationalising that they only feel portions of the Spirit because they have portions of the truth. If that was true, then how does a person distinguish between a portion of the Spirit and a full dose? Why would God make so much rest on such an impossibly hard decision. I am now convinced that He cares more about how genuinely good a person is than their ability to allow their feelings to direct their lives.