

E. JAMES DIXON. *Quest for the Origins of the First Americans*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993. xvi; 154 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$24.95.

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Until recently most scholars have accepted the theory that the ancestors of all Native American cultures in the New World migrated by foot from Asia during the Pleistocene Era, when the sea level was lower and a narrow strip of land called the Bering Land Bridge connected the two continents. In his new book, *Quest for the Origins of the First Americans*, E. James Dixon challenges this traditional view and presents an impressive and compelling body of evidence suggesting that the first inhabitants of ancient America actually arrived on ocean-worthy vessels—the first as early as 35,000–40,000 years ago. Dixon is one of the leading authorities on the archaeology of eastern Beringia, the chain of islands which once formed the ancient land bridge connecting Asia with present-day Alaska. Although no one doubts the existence of this land bridge or its potential as a conduit for human migration, Dixon demonstrates that it is not realistic to conclude that the land bridge was the sole mechanism for populating the Americas.

The geology and paleoecology of the region suggest that the Bering Land Bridge did not become passable for human overland migration until about 9500 B.C. Consistent with this date is the lack of documented evidence of human occupation anywhere in the Beringian corridor before about 9000 B.C. However, there is ample evidence of early occupation along the west coasts of both North and South America that date at least two or three thousand years before that time. Since there was no way of crossing overland at that early date, Dixon asserts that these settlements must have been founded by seagoing peoples. It is well documented that the Pacific coasts of Asia were dotted with numerous settlements; these coasts may have been one of the most densely populated regions of the world at that time. Dixon suggests that shortly before 12,000 B.C., as the climate became abruptly warmer, the sea level began to rise rapidly and engulfed the communities around the Asian Pacific rim (something like a Pleistocene version of the

movie *Waterworld*). This deluge may have triggered a massive wave of eastward migrations that followed the prevailing ocean current into the New World. By the time the Bering Land Bridge became passable, the descendants of these early travelers had already settled over a vast segment of the coastline of North and South America and had even moved inland into the area which today comprises the southwestern United States.

Perhaps more intriguing are the even earlier traces of human occupation in South America—such as the reported dates of 30,000 B.C. at Monte Verde, Chile, and 31,000 B.C. at Pedra Furada, Brazil. Dixon concludes that the most plausible explanation for these early occupations is settlement by colonists who traveled in oceangoing vessels across the Pacific Ocean. This possibility is reinforced by the fact that Australia, which was never connected to Asia by a land bridge, was colonized by at least 40,000 B.C., presumably by people traveling via watercraft. The Lapita culture of Polynesia is known to have occupied the islands of the Pacific Ocean by at least 4,000 years ago. Dixon suggests that such transoceanic migrations began much earlier and that some of the earliest occupations in South America may have been the result of direct ocean crossings. Ancient migrations need not have ended at these early dates. Dixon supports the theory that

humans may have populated the Americas by migratory ‘dribbles’ over long periods of time. Some of the migrations may have been successful, and others . . . could have been genetically swamped by later groups, possibly exterminated by warfare or the introduction of disease . . . or perhaps died out from an inability to adapt to new environments.¹ (130)

Latter-day Saint scholars have long been interested in the issue of transoceanic crossings to the ancient New World, although they have found scant support among most experts in the field. Likewise, Dixon at one time was “sharply and swiftly” (129) criticized by several of his colleagues for even suggesting the possibility of transoceanic migrations and was counseled to drop the subject for fear of losing credibility within the profession. Although Dixon still encounters some reservations regarding his theory of transoceanic voyaging, his newest book has been received with great fascination.²

Dixon himself admits that “the idea of pre-Columbian trans-oceanic contacts between the New and Old Worlds is not popular among New World prehistorians” (129) because of the tendency by some outside the field to explain virtually all similarities between the two great cultural regions on the basis of diffusion across the oceans. I agree that this subtle form of racism serves to deny to Native Americans their own creative genius and ability to build sophisticated civilizations independent of the Old World. Nevertheless, in the light of new archaeological discoveries, it must now be accepted, as Dixon argues, that humans were perfectly capable of making long-distance voyages across open water as early as thirty-five to forty thousand years ago to colonize the Pacific coast of South America. By extension, one may reasonably assume that the help of the Lord as well as thousands of years of refining sailing skills, seagoing vessels, and navigational ability would enable small colonies of Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites to make the trip and settle in the New World as well.

NOTES

¹See also Stephen C. Jett, “Before Columbus: The Question of Early Trans-oceanic Interinfluences,” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 2 (1993): 245; and John L. Sorensen and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1990).

²See also the following reviews of *Quest for the Origins of the First Americans* by E. James Dixon: Jack Donahue, *Geoarcheology* 8 (October 1993): 434–36; Gary L. Fogelman, *Indian Artifact Magazine* (August 1993): 54; M. McCormick, *Choice* 31 (December 1993): 642; Elizabeth Salt, *Library Journal* 118 (April 1, 1993): 113; Alan Tack, *Native Peoples: The Journal of the Heard Museum* (summer 1993): 66–67; Larry J. Zimmerman, *South Dakota History* 23 (winter 1993): 350.