

RACISM IN THE BOOK OF MORMON – YEP, IT'S THERE

by Miguel Barker-Valdez | Aug 21, 2017 | Book of Mormon, Featured, Prophets, scripture | 2 comments



***Note:**

This essay draws heavily from the work of Dr. Armand Mauss', *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage*. For the sake of flow, I will not be footnoting nor putting quotation marks when I am using Dr. Mauss' work or his thoughts; you can safely assume that the early part of this essay is Dr.

Mauss' thinking. Although most of the essay relies on his research, the conclusion on how to interpret scripture are mine. My interpretations of race and racism and scripture draw upon the works of Dr. W. Paul Reeve's book, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and Mormon Struggle for Whiteness*; Russell Stevenson's work, *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Black and Mormonism, 1830-2013*; Dr. Ignacio Garcia's memoir, *Chicano While Mormon: Activism, War and Keeping the Faith*; My conversations with Dr. Darron Smith on the podcast series, *Racism 101 With Dr. Darron Smith*; My

conversations with Dr. Sheldon Greaves on the New Testament podcast series, *The CES Podcast*; Dr. David Bokovoy's book, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis Through Deuteronomy*; Dr. Michael Austin's work, *Rereading Job: Understanding the World's Most Ancient Poem*; Dr. Grant Hardy's book, *Understanding the Book of Mormon, a Reader's Guide*; and lastly, my private conversations I've had with my Black and Latino and White friends as I've tried to understand their own experiences.

First, I must explain who I am and how I view the Book of Mormon. On my father's side (who was white), I am many generations Mormon. On my Guatemalan mother's side, I am second generation Mormon. At age 43, I began self identifying as Latino-American but for all intents and purposes, I was raised white. In identifying as Latino-American, I am now often on the receiving end of racism.

Regarding my view of the Book of Mormon, I view it as scripture. I love the Book of Mormon. However my view of scripture does not rely on the historicity of scripture. As the Bible scholar, Dr. Greaves, has taught me, *"History is not the point of scripture. Scripture is being used to make a point."*

I simply don't know objectively if the Book of Mormon is an historical document or not; but right now the scholarly evidence seems to be pointing towards it not being such. Regardless, I believe God revealed it as scripture to the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr.

I began thinking about the Lamanite cursings this year and was trying to figure out a way that those cursings could be viewed differently than how they have traditionally been viewed – while allowing those who view the Book of Mormon as a historical document to keep their faith intact. The importance of this was really thrust at me last week when a white Mormon woman told me, *"Miguel, you are not in the Book of Mormon. Your skin color may be the result of that curse, but you are not cursed"*.

The LDS construction of "Lamanite" has historically relied on the racist words of the Book of Mormon prophets, Nephi and his brother Jacob.

Nephi wrote in **2 Nephi 5:**

21 ...wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.

(In a single 1840 edition "fair and delightsome" was printed instead of "white and delightsome." In the 1981, "white and delightsome" was changed to what we have now, "fair and delightsome.")

22 And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquities.

23 And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was done.

24 And because of their cursing which was upon them they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey.

This scripture is important because it racializes skin color. That is, it was because of the dark skin, that we know the Lamanites were *bad hombres*. This as opposed to the idea that the Lamanites were sinful and thus they were cursed with a dark skin. Also note that the dark skin was a mark of marriage prohibition. This is racism 101. Let me provide an example to help better understand what I mean

“How do we know Blacks (insert negative stereotype) act that way?”

“Because their skin is black and black people always act that way.”

There is no way **2 Nephi 5:21-24** can be read metaphorically.

2 Nephi 30:6

And then shall they rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a pure and a delightsome people.

This scripture *can* be interpreted as metaphorical.

Jacob said (**Jacob 3:5,8**):

3 Behold, the Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins, are more righteous than you...
5 O my brethren, I fear that unless ye shall repent of your sins that their skins will be whiter than yours, when ye shall be brought with them before the throne of God.

This scripture cannot be read metaphorically.

Mormon’s editorial comments in **Alma 3:6** confirms the previous non-metaphorical views of the skin cursing:

6 And the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them because of their transgression and their rebellion against their brethren, who consisted of Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph, and Sam, who were just and holy men.

Unlike 2 Nephi 21-24, this scripture seems to lend itself to the interpretation that the dark skin color was a result of Lamanite transgression. As opposed to “We know the Lamanites are transgressors because they have dark skin,” as found in **2 Nephi 5:21-24**. This is a large and important difference between the two scriptures.

The dark skin of the Lamanite has always been a necessary part of the Lamanite identity, as constructed by Mormonism. The prophet Spencer W. Kimball said the following in a BYU

address in October 1960:

"Truly the scales of darkness are falling from their eyes, and they are fast becoming a white and delightful people.

"...For years they have been growing delightful, and they are now becoming white and delightful, as they were promised. The day of the Lamanites is nigh. For years they have been growing delightful, and they are now becoming white and delightful, as they were promise. In this picture of the twenty Lamanite missionaries, fifteen of the twenty were as light as Anglos; five were darker but equally delightful. The children in the home placement program in Utah are often lighter than their brothers and sisters in the hogans on the reservation.

"At one meeting a father and mother and their sixteen-year-old daughter were present, the little member girl—sixteen—sitting between the dark father and mother, and it was evident she was several shades lighter than her parents—on the same reservation, in the same hogan, subject to the same sun and wind and weather. There was the doctor in a Utah city who for two years had had an Indian boy in his home who stated that he was some shades lighter than the younger brother just coming into the program from the reservation. These young members of the Church are changing to whiteness and to delightfulness. One white elder jokingly said that he and his companion were donating blood regularly to the hospital in the hope that the process might be accelerated."

This was and still is such a deep part of the Mormon racist ethos. Those of us who served Spanish-speaking U.S., Mexican, Central and South American missions carry with us stories of a small community where there are Mexicans, Central Americans, or South Americans (depends on who is telling the story) who are white. How could this be? Of course the answer is that these white people are/were in fact Nephites. It is impossible to take most of the Book of Mormon's scriptures, which deal with the dark skin cursing, as metaphorical.

The problem with this Lamanite construction is that it relies on a reading of the Book of Mormon that isn't paying close attention to what the text actually says about the changing meanings of "Lamanite." A close reading of the Book of Mormon reveals something different.

The division of Lamanite and Nephite, by Jacob and Nephi, was dependent upon skin color, which explained their "loathsomeness". Just before Jesus' appearance in the Americas, the curse is reversed on a small group of Lamanites and after Jesus' visit, the Lamanite/Nephite division is constructed differently.

3 Nephi 2:15,16

15 And their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites;

16 And their young men and their daughters became exceedingly fair, and they were numbered among the Nephites, and were called Nephites. And thus ended the thirteenth year.

4 Nephi verses 2, 10, 17 (notice how the white Nephites become “fair and delightsome.”)

2 And it came to pass in the thirty and sixth year, the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another.
10 And now, behold, it came to pass that the people of Nephi did wax strong, and did multiply exceedingly fast, and became an exceedingly fair and delightsome people
17 There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God.

In **verse 20**, with the return of Lamanites, Lamanite is not constructed around racist ideas attributed to skin color. Rather it is constructed around the self-identifying moniker which is attached to their rebellion against the Church of Christ.

20 ... there was still peace in the land, save it were a small part of the people who had revolted from the church and taken upon them the name of Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land.

And by the next time the word Lamanite appears in the Book of Mormon (**Mormon 1:8,9**) it is used only to describe two warring factions. Skin color and its racism are never again unambiguously attached to “Lamanite” after Jesus’ appearance.

8 And it came to pass in this year there began to be a war between the Nephites, who consisted of the Nephites and the Jacobites and the Josephites and the Zoramites; and this war was between the Nephites, and the Lamanites and the Lemuelites and the Ishmaelites.
9 Now the Lamanites and the Lemuelites and the Ishmaelites were called Lamanites, and the two parties were Nephites and Lamanites.

Mormon 5 does complicate the non-racist verses of **Mormon 1: 8 & 9** a bit. It all hinges upon the phrase “*this people*” (vs. 15) Is “this people” referring to the house of Jacob , or the Jews, or the Lamanites, or the Nephites – all of whom the prophet-General, Mormon, is writing to in the previous verses?

15...for this people shall be scattered, and shall become a dark, a filthy, and a loathsome people, beyond the description of that which ever hath been amongst us, yea, even that which hath been among the Lamanites, and this because of their unbelief and idolatry.

Verse 17 further complicates things a bit:

17 They were once a delightsome people, and they had Christ for their shepherd; yea, they were led even by God the Father.

Mormon 7:1 may lead the reader to believe that “the remnant” are the Lamanites and thus “this people” in Mormon 5 are the Lamanites who become a “dark” people who were once “delightsome”.

1 And now, behold, I would speak somewhat unto the remnant of this people who are spared, if it so be that God may give unto them my words, that they may know of the things of their fathers; yea, I speak unto you, ye remnant of the house of Israel; and these are the words which I speak

However, it seems Mormons have incorporated the chapter heading of Mormon 7 as scripture. In doing so, we have continued the racist Mormon cultural reading of Lamanite without closely reading the text itself and have just assumed “this people” who will become “dark” and “scattered” are the Lamanite people – even though Mormon writes of twenty four Nephites who survives (Mormon 6:15). We are never clear who “this people” are. Are “this people” to whom Mormon was writing, the House of Jacob, the Jews, the Nephites, or the Lamanites? It is not obvious. The chapter heading of Mormon 7 reads as follows:

“...Because of their unbelief, the Lamanites will be scattered, and the Spirit will cease to strive with them---They will receive the gospel from the Gentiles in the latter days. About A.D. 375-84.”

Mormon’s son Moroni also furthers the complication of who is scattered, dark, and not delightsome. **Ether 4:3** can easily be read as hyperbole. No Nephites left? But isn’t Moroni a Nephite?

3 And now, after that, they have all dwindled in unbelief; and there is none save it be the Lamanites, and they have rejected the gospel of Christ; therefore I am commanded that I should hide them up again in the earth.

So we have to ask, “How did Mormon construct the Lamanite identity towards the end of the Book of Mormon?”

Mormon 9:9 and 20 are part of a letter from Mormon to Moroni. In verse 9 (which has been traditionally misused in teaching about sexual chastity) and verse 20 we have the Nephite/Lamanite boundaries further blurred:

9 And notwithstanding this great abomination of the Lamanites, it doth not exceed that of our people in Moriantum...

20 ...thou knowest that they are without principle, and past feeling; and their wickedness doth exceed that of the Lamanites.

Verse 24 also makes us ask the question, “Who is a Lamanite?” Are Nephite deserters also Lamanite?

24 And if it so be that they perish, we know that many of our brethren have deserted over unto the Lamanites...

The larger questions regarding the 19th, 20th, and 21st century LDS construction of Lamanite are these:

- *What purpose has the racist Lamanite construction served, if there is little to no textual evidence to uphold the racist interpretation?*
- *Has the racist interpretation made it easier for White American Utah Mormonism to evangelize among the dark Lamanite if the Lamanite is depraved and if their cursed black skin can be changed?*
- *Who needs salvation if they are not depraved?*
- *Should the traditional interpretation of Lamanite be read through the lens of benevolent racism and white-Mormon colonialism? Is it still?*
- *If one is defending the traditional, racist interpretation of Lamanite, for what reason, is it to protect something, such as one's whiteness?*
- *If you are someone who considers yourself an ex-Mormon, why do you often bring up the earlier verses of the Book of Mormon and the Church's traditional racist interpretation? What are you protecting? Is it your own white supremacy? Do you point to the LDS Church and The Book of Mormon as evidence that you are not racist?*
- *If you consider yourself a Lamanite and defend the traditional interpretation, why? What benefit does it carry for you? Does it allow you to see yourself as special amongst a sea of white Mormons? Is the cost worth that benefit?*

Unlike many white Mormons who have white guilt regarding these Book of Mormon verses and want them removed, I do not believe these racist verses should be removed. I submit that these racist verses of the Book of Mormon can be reinterpreted while maintaining one's belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon. How does one do that? The Church adds footnotes and changes its manuals to explain that these verses teach us what racism is and what it looks like. Prophets make mistakes. They are part of their own time. Nephi, Jacob, and Mormon made a huge mistake. Their mistake was describing the Lamanites in racist ways.

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2 Comments

Rui Belo on August 21, 2017 at 6:45 am



The Church has a history of making subtle, masterful changes such as the “fair and delightful” in the 1840 edition being printed instead of “white and delightful.” and then in 1981, the “white and delightful” change to the “fair and delightful.” we have now. These quiet subtle changes, for the most part go unnoticed by the membership or treated as insignificant.

Reply



FarSide on August 21, 2017 at 7:23 am

Thanks for your essay, Miguel. Quite informative. I must, however, disagree with your last two sentences: “Nephi, Jacob, and Mormon made a huge mistake. Their mistake was describing the Lamanites in racist ways.”

I think you are engaging in “presentism,” i.e., interpreting past events in terms of contemporary values and beliefs.

The Middle East Culture that Lehi and the Jaredites brought to the Americas was tribal. Everyone—and I do mean everyone—had an “us” vs. “them” mentality. Loving your neighbor meant only loving the members of your tribe, and you used every means at your disposal to distinguish and elevate your group over the “other,” including racial characteristics. The Old Testament is replete with examples of such attitudes. Simply stated, if Nephi, Jacob and Mormon had NOT characterized the Lamanites in racial terms, the book would not be credible.

I do not, however, feel the same way about Brigham Young and, especially, his successors. Among his contemporaries were leaders of other religions who had, through prayerful thought and consideration of the scriptures, come to the conclusion that slavery and discrimination were wrong and contrary to the will of the Lord. Further light and knowledge regarding the evils of racism were being provided, and the fact that it took our church took so long to come to this realization is an ugly stain on our history. But to lay that at the doorstep of Nephi, Jacob and Mormon would be a “huge mistake.”

Reply