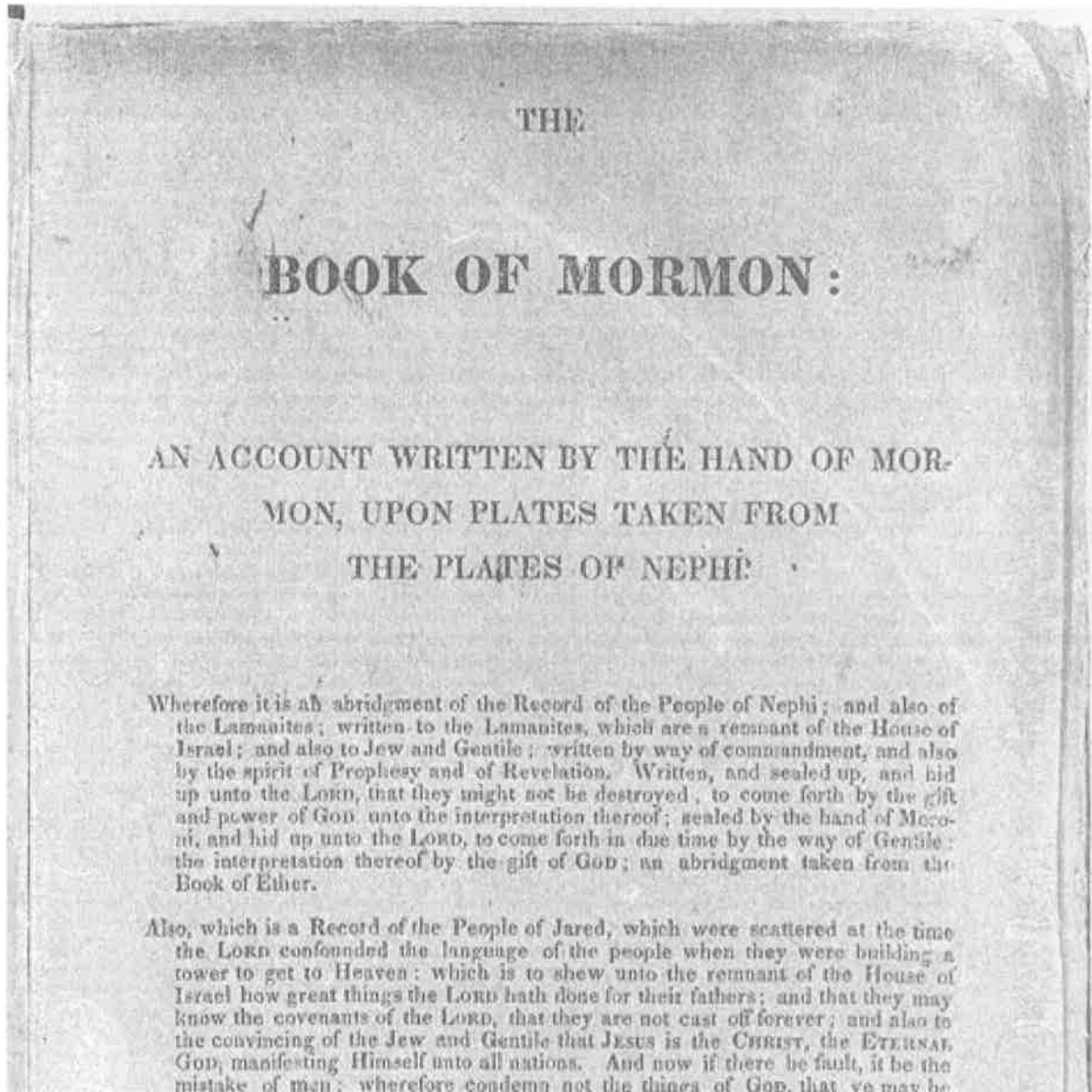


The Book of Mormon's Racial Legacy

by Jason L | Aug 22, 2017 | Book of Mormon, Featured, Racism | 5 comments



(Author's Note: This was a tough post to write and I expect a tough post to read. Please read carefully for what *I am* and *am not* saying before commenting. I think we can have a productive conversation, but only if we're committed to doing so.)

Before we dive into this post, we need to define a term: racism. The problem is, racism is persistent and evolving, so it can be hard to pin down. Personally, I find Ta-Nehisi Coates's formulation to be most helpful: racism involves plunder. Specifically, racism is an ideological

system that enables one group to plunder another group on the basis of the perceived inherent inferiority of the group (race) being plundered.

That's a lot to take in if you're not used to talking about race, so let me simplify a bit. Racism is a way of thinking that justifies theft, in large and small forms. It does so by claiming that there is something inherently wrong or inferior with the losing group, linked to their skin tone or ancestry.

Recognizing racism in this way should make us look at the Book of Mormon a bit differently.

Nephi, Jacob, and Mormon all express racist ideas. They state that dark skin is a curse, an inheritance tied to loathsomeness, sinfulness, and filth. They believe the Lamanites of their time to be worthy of lesser things because they are – based on the sign of their skin color – inferior people. Furthermore, Nephi explains that the darkness was intended to preserve the purity of the Nephite race from the pollution of miscegenation. (For a slightly different – and more detailed – analysis, see this post from Miguel.)

This leaves believers with a central question: **Whose racism are we seeing here?**

Is God racist? Did He really use skin color as a marker, bestowing greater blessings upon some and withholding blessings others, simply on the basis of their skin tone? Furthermore, did he encourage the Nephites to act similarly by creating these racial distinctions in the first place?

Or, were these prophets racist, inventing racial explanations to justify their behavior toward and beliefs about the Lamanites? Where they seeing inherent inferiority where there was none? In this, of course, they wouldn't be alone. Modern Church leaders embraced racism, so it wouldn't be that surprising if ancient prophets had done likewise.

And before you trot out the "it was different back then" and "we have to judge them by the morals of their time" arguments, let me tell you about one other Book of Mormon man, one who gets little attention. He was never regarded as a prophet, his peers seemed to think he was crazy, and Mormon's narrative treats him like a fool. But he's one of my heroes: Zeniff.

Zeniff, if you'll remember, was originally part of a group sent to spy on the Lamanites so that the Nephite armies could destroy them. (This aggressive plan we know only from Zeniff's account – Mormon makes no other mention of it.) But despite his upbringing, he "saw that which was good among them" and "was desirous that they should not be destroyed" (Mosiah 9:1). Desiring that someone not be destroyed seems like a pretty low bar for the people of Christ, but it caused quite a contention with Zeniff's fellow spies, to the point of bloodshed.

Eventually, Zeniff brought another group to the land, one that was determined to inherit the land without resorting to war. Their plan worked, imperfectly, for a time. Zeniff's record is not without it's share of anti-Lamanite rhetoric, especially in explaining why they continually attack his people. But notably, he never references their skin color. And in fact he goes to great pains to provide a cultural explanation for their customs and antipathy toward the Nephites. For Zeniff, the Lamanites are different not because of a divine curse connected with their skin tone

but because they've been taught to hate the Nephites. The same Nephites which he had once joined in plotting to slay all the Lamanites.

So, it was possible to adopt a non-racist attitude toward the Lamanites, even when they repeatedly tried made war with your people. When we question the racial attitudes of Nephi, Jacob, and Mormon we're not applying some retroactive idea of modern liberal racial morals. We're asking, why couldn't Nephi or Jacob or Mormon see as clearly as Zeniff? Why couldn't they look past skin and see people, wonderfully complicated people who were equally as valued by God as anyone else?

Back to the central question: If the Book of Mormon is a real account of ancient peoples and contains these racist depictions of Lamanites, who is to blame? Neither answer is comfortable for the Church, especially after a clear statement condemning racism as "morally wrong and sinful." But there can really only be one choice for believers: If God is no respecter of persons, He cannot be racist. But some of the Book of Mormon prophets were.

It is high time we faced the implications of this head-on. Only if we're willing to do so can we begin to heal from our own history of racism.

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Jason L

Jason L grew up in Arizona as a Mormon Democrat with a lawyer father – and heard all the jokes. Now he's got a Ph.D. in history, is married to a sugar sorceress, and enjoys raising their sweet son.

All posts by Jason L

5 Comments



Brian on August 22, 2017 at 10:04 am

Does the historical evidence tend to indicate that the most likely answer is that this is an aetiological myth created by late 18th, early 19th century thought to explain that the native Americans are descendants of Hebrews, how they have dark skin, and how they crossed the ocean? I think the CES letter and many other sources point to a number of early 19th century written materials that show that these issues were all being discussed and treated by other authors. The Book of Mormon provides a nice comprehensive answer that works in the

context of the time it was written – the early 19th century. That aspect of your question should seriously be considered along with all other possible solutions.

Reply



Kathy on August 22, 2017 at 11:00 am

It's possible that Nephi made the wrong assumption that it was God who cursed the offspring of Laman and Lemuel with dark skin and not himself doing the cursing. Most likely Nephi knew nothing about genetics, all he knew is his brothers tried to kill him a few times, then they left and most likely intermarried with the darker skin natives in the region and had dark skin babies. So he made a bad assumption. Isn't that what fuels racism a lot of the time, wrong assumptions? But then nearly 30 years later Nephi comes to the correct conclusion that God is truly no respecter of persons, 2Ne 26:33, "...he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female;.."

Reply



Jason L on August 22, 2017 at 11:41 am

No, racism hasn't historically been built on 'bad assumptions.' It's usually sprung from a desire to profit from division (as I discussed in the opening of the post). I suspect that the racist ideas of Nephi and Jacob helped give cover for their already-existing antagonism toward the Lamanites. And I don't think Nephi's statement on the broad acceptance of all people by God means that he had abandoned his racial thinking. He just believed that God loved even inferior people (to Nephi's eyes).

Reply



Scott S. Mitchell on August 22, 2017 at 12:18 pm

This post is unworthy of Rational Faiths, or it should be. It's so easy to write a post accusing others of racism, whether they're long dead or contemporary, because it makes you feel good about yourself and cements your purported moral superiority, and no one imposes any burden of proof on you. You thus "dig a pit for your neighbor," a practice the Book of Mormon specifically denounces. When you feel comfortable accusing others of racism, and cite to no evidence to support your accusations, you feel no need to account for the most anti-racist statement in all of Christian or non-Christian scripture, 2 Nephi 26: 33, quoted by "Kathy" above. Nephi's race views seem to have evolved, but by the end of his writings, he had gotten it right, as evidenced by the scripture

quoted above. You provided no evidence of racist ideas by Jacob or Mormon, but when you're morally superior, I guess you don't need evidence. The accusations themselves should suffice, right?

You even presume to create your own definition of racism, and in so doing, you shoot your own argument in the foot. Who in the Book of Mormon tried to plunder those of another skin color the most, the Lamanites or the Nephites? Did the Lamanites' plundering episodes prove that they, too, were racist, per your novel definition? If so, why did you omit any reference to that fact? Or could it be your whole thesis is just wrong, and relations between Nephites and Lamanites never had anything to do with racism, but rather, differences over behavioral standards?

The Book of Mormon says in several places that the Lamanites' conduct was superior to that of the Nephites, Jacob being the first to observe this, and Mormon repeating it. But, hey, why let the actual text of the Book of Mormon get in the way of condemning the purported morally inferior views of ancient prophets?

You say that your post was hard to write. But it wasn't hard enough to get you to read the Book of Mormon more carefully to see if its text actually supported your criticism. You also proclaim the need to "face the implications" of Book of Mormon racist views. But what are the implications of presuming to accuse others of racism, without feeling the need to weigh the inconvenient evidence?

Reply



Jason L on August 22, 2017 at 1:56 pm

I find that when authors identify racism many readers respond as though the author were making an ad hominem attack. The readers act as though the word 'racist' were merely a slur, something uttered to tear someone down. They thus assume that the author can only have written out of animus.

But that response ignores the fact that racism is a real thing. It has historical and contemporary manifestations. Whether Book of Mormon authors thought in those terms is an important question for our own study, especially if we believe they were real people writing an inspired testimony of our Savior. And my reading of Moroni suggests that he wants us to be use the book to critically improve ourselves by (in part) distinguishing that which is of God from the authors' human errors.

As far as my analysis of racist thinking in the Book of Mormon: My definition is not novel. It comes from extensive study and reading up on racism, especially by scholars of color. That's part of how I attempt to address my own biases. It's also how I work to be a good ally within the

institutions to which I belong. Being a believing Mormon, that must include thoughtful consideration of the Book of Mormon. That's what I've shared here.

You've made several unfounded accusations which I hope you'll reconsider. First, of course, the idea that my writing is intended to "dig a pit" for others. Second, that I'm suggesting I am free of racism. I have never and will never make such a statement. That's something we all have to personally address in our lives, considering the society we live in. Third, you have accused me of not read the Book of Mormon carefully or provided any evidence. Both are false: I have studied the Book of Mormon extensively over decades and provided links to key passages.

Considering these false assumptions and accusations, it does not appear that you are actually interested (yet) in a careful discussion of the Book of Mormon's text. Suffice it to say, for now, that a few praiseworthy comments about another race do not disprove anyone's racist thinking.

Reply

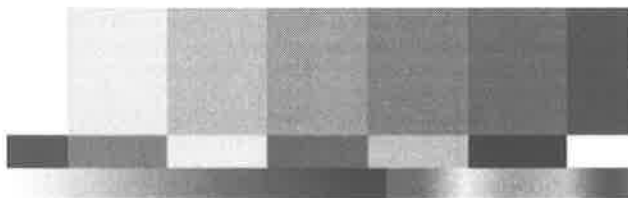
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