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The Lamanites Portrayed in the Book of Mormon

Author(s): Sidney B. Sperry

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Abstract: This article sets forth Book of Mormon characteristics and prophecies regarding the Lamanites. The Lamanites were used as a scourge to the Nephites; often the Lamanites were more righteous than the Nephites; the American Indians are descendants of Book of Mormon peoples; and the Lamanites will yet “receive the gospel” and become a “white and delightsome people.”

ONE of our hymns, written by William W. Phelps, expresses in part the Mormon belief concerning the ancestry of the Indians. It is entitled, "O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man," the first two verses of which read as follows:

O stop and tell me, Red Man,
Who are you, why you roam,
And how you get your living;
Have you no God, no home?
With stature straight and portly,
And decked in native pride,
With feathers, paints and brooches,
He willingly replied:

"I once was pleasant Ephraim,
When Jacob for me prayed;
But oh, how blessings vanish,
When man from God has strayed!
Before your nation knew us,
Some thousand moons ago,
Our fathers fell in darkness,
And wandered to and fro. . . ."

It should be emphasized that the Indian of our day is a remnant of a mixed group of peoples who were spared from the terrible destructions which took place on this continent after the Savior's death. (III Nephi 8, 9, 10.) The reader of the Book of Mormon will recall that in these destructions only the more righteous part of the Lamanites and Nephites were spared:

And it was the more righteous part of the people who were saved, and it was they who received the prophets and stoned them not; . . . (III Nephi 10:12; see also III Nephi 9:13.)

In III Nephi 10:18, Mormon makes another statement which proves that Lamanites as well as Nephites were preserved:

And it came to pass that in the ending of the thirty and fourth year, behold, I will show unto you that the people of Nephi who were spared, and also those who had been called Lamanites, who had been spared, did have great favors shown unto them, . . .

Following the glorious ministry of the resurrected Savior among these peoples, they became united into one people, as IV Nephi tells us:

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, . . .

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. (Verses 2, 17.)

THE LAMANITES



—From a painting by James Henderson—Courtesy, National Gallery of Canada.

I have made these explanations to keep us reminded of the fact that our present-day Indians are descendants of the people who were united during the Golden Era of Nephite history, rather than direct descendants of Laman and Lemuel and their immediate followers. The rift in the Nephite church which produced the ancestors of our American Indians took place about A.D. 195. Mormon tells about it when writing of Amos the record keeper:

And he kept it [the record] eighty and four years, and 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 Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land. (Italics author's. IV Nephi 20.)

LATTER-DAY SAINTS have concluded too readily that the Lamanites are direct descendants of Laman and Lemuel. Actually much Nephite blood flows in their veins, not to mention the blood of the Mulekites. In respect to the latter, it should be recalled that in the days of the younger Mosiah more of his people

were Mulekites than Nephites. Notice the following:

And now king Mosiah caused that all the people should be gathered together.

Now there were not so many of the children of Nephi, or so many of those who were descendants of Nephi, as there were of the people of Zarahemla, who was a descendant of Mulek, and those who came with him into the wilderness. (Mosiah 25: 1-2.)

From this statement we are probably justified in concluding that the "Nephites" of the period following Christ's appearance on this continent had more Mulekite blood flowing in their veins than Nephite blood. From the viewpoint of the Book of Mormon, then, our Indians are descendants of several peoples—Nephites and Mulekites, with some Lamanite influence thrown in for good measure. That Mormon seemed to recognize the fact that the Indians of our day would be his own people is shown by some of his last prophetic words:

And now, behold, I would speak somewhat unto the remnant of this people who are spared, if it so be that God may give

as portrayed in the Book of Mormon

unto them my words, that they may know of the things of their fathers; . . .

Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers, and repent of all your sins and iniquities, and believe in Jesus Christ, . . . (Mormon 7:1, 5; see also II Nephi 26:15.)

It may be well to point out that the simon-pure Lamanites of the Book of Mormon, if we may call them such, are dealt with in the Nephite record between II Nephi 5 and Omni 12. The first-named chapter records the great break between the followers of Nephi on the one hand and the followers of Laman and Lemuel on the other. In it we are told that the Lamanites were cut off from the "presence of the Lord" because they would not hearken to Nephi's words. (II Nephi 5:20.) Moreover, they were cursed because of their iniquities with a "sore cursing." In order that they would not be enticing to the Nephites, the Lord caused a "skin of blackness" to come upon them. (II Nephi 5:21.) The sacred account continues:

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

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. (*Idem* 22-23.)

Nephi says that the Lamanites then became an "idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey." (*Idem* 24.) The Lord made use of them as a scourge to the Nephites, to stir them up in remembrance of him. The promise was made that if the Nephites did not remember the Lord, they should be scourged by the Lamanites unto destruction. (*Idem* 25.)

Little more is said about the Lamanites until we come to the Book of Jacob. Jacob distinguishes between Lamanites and Nephites by saying:

. . . I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi, . . . (Jacob 1:14.)

WHEN Jacob chastised his men folk from the temple precincts for their unchastity and lack of humility, he made some interesting comparisons between the Nephites and Lamanites. He pointed out that the Nephites were more iniquitous than the Lamanites. They had broken the hearts of their wives and had lost the confidence of their children. (Jacob 2:35.) ". . . the Lamanites. . . " he said, "whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins, are more righteous than you; . . ." (*Ibid.*, 3:5.)

They were more righteous than the Nephites because they kept the marriage laws which God had given his people in the beginning. A man was to have but one wife and no concubines. Jacob declared that because of their adherence to this commandment the Lord would not destroy them, but would be merciful to them, and some day they should be a blessed people. (See also II Nephi 30:3-6.) This promise has been partly fulfilled in our American Indians, and we may expect more of it to be realized in the not-too-distant future. One remark of Jacob's is of special interest to us. He said:

Behold, their [the Lamanites'] husbands love their wives, and their wives love their husbands; and their husbands and their wives love their children; and their unbelief and their hatred towards you is because of the iniquity of their fathers; wherefore, how much better are you than they, in the sight of your great Creator?

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. (Jacob 3:7-8.)

It is worthy of more than passing notice to observe that the Lamanites were eventually to triumph over the Nephites. Despite the fact that the Nephites were given the choice posi-

tion before God, with revelations, visions, and prophets to guide them, the Lamanites seem finally to have won out over the Nephites because they kept God's law respecting marriage. As Jacob predicted, ". . . because of this observance, in keeping this commandment, the Lord God will not destroy them, . . ." (*Idem* 6.)

The people who broke away from the Nephite church about A.D. 195 and who became known as Lamanites must have continued the old marriage customs praised by Jacob hundreds of years before. Therefore, their descendants were permitted to continue on this land after the destruction of the Nephites.

By Sidney B. Sperry, Ph. D.

DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

I have called attention elsewhere to the historical importance of the Book of Omni. Beginning with verse 12, it relates that

the elder Mosiah and a group of followers broke away from the main body of Nephites and fled into the wilderness, where they joined the Mulekites. The united band of Nephites and Mulekites, together with their descendants, is the central interest of the Book of Mormon history. But what became of the main body of Nephites from whence the elder Mosiah fled? The Nephite record is silent. Very probably these wicked Nephites later joined the Lamanites or were destroyed, so that their history became merged with that of the latter. The predictions of Jacob may give the clue to their sudden disappearance:

. . . the Lamanites . . . shall scourge you even unto destruction. And the time speedily cometh, that except ye [Nephites] repent they [the Lamanites] shall possess the land of your inheritance, and the Lord God will lead away the righteous out from among you. (*Idem* 3-4.)

THE "righteous" who were to be "led away" may well have been the elder Mosiah and his followers. If the main body of Nephites eventually joined the Lamanites, we have a fact of capital importance in Lamanite history. It would then be quite understandable why the Lamanites so overwhelmingly outnumbered the Nephites, as Mosiah 25:3 points out. If the main body of

(Continued on page 826)



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(Concluded from page 824)

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Throughout the pages of the Prophet's journal runs a spirit of love for his fellow men. He cherished his friendships, and spoke of them with so tender a love as to melt the heart. When he was urged to go to Carthage, where he was martyred, he said, "If my life is of no value to my friends it is of none to myself."¹² In the cause that he represented, he forgot himself and thought only of others.

By these tests, as by others, Joseph Smith was a great man.

¹²History of the Church, 6:549

Faith in God; love of truth; genuine humility; and sincere love of our fellow men, are always distinguishing marks of greatness. That applies not only to Joseph, but also to his followers now living.

These qualities also answer those who would have the Church founded through Joseph Smith make this or that change, set up this or that practice. The Church as an organization must never fail to appeal to God, or go beyond the bounds of truth; but must look upon itself as a mere instrument to accomplish God's purposes; and in all of its work must be a blessing to humankind.—J. A. W.

THE LAMANITES AS PORTRAYED IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

(Continued from page 793)

Nephites joined the Lamanites as has been suggested, it must have been sometime between the days of the elder Mosiah and the days of Zeniff, who led Nephites from Zarahemla to the land of their forefathers. Zeniff makes no mention of finding descendants of the main body of Nephites after arriving at the place of their inheritance. (See Mosiah 9:3-8.)

The Lamanites at their worst are described in the Book of Mormon as having an evil nature and as being wild, ferocious, bloodthirsty, idolatrous, and filthy, dwelling in tents, and feeding upon beasts of prey. (Enos 20.) They went about with short skin girdles around their loins, and their heads were shaven. (*Ibid.*) They were skilled in the use of the bow, the cimeter, and the ax. Many ate nothing but raw meat, and they sought continually to destroy the Nephites. (*Ibid.*) At their best many Lamanites were converted by the Nephites and became model members of the Nephite church. A good example of such conversion is found in Alma 23. Here it is recounted that the king of the Lamanites sent a proclamation forth prohibiting anyone from laying hands upon the four missionary sons of King Mosiah or in any way preventing them from carrying out their ministry. Thousands of Lamanites were brought to a knowledge of the truth. The sacred record testifies:

And as sure as the Lord liveth, so sure as many as believed, or as many as were brought to the knowledge of the truth, through the preaching of Ammon and his brethren, according to the spirit of revelation and of prophecy, and the power of God working miracles in them—yea, I say unto you, as the Lord liveth, as many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away.

For they became a righteous people; they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion, that they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren. (Alma 23:6-7.)

This is a wonderful testimony to the faithfulness of the converted Lamanites. The greatest war story in the Book of Mormon concerns the faith and valor of the two thousand "sons of Helaman," actually the sons of Lamanites who had renounced war and killing forever. (See Alma 24; 53:10-22; 56-58.) Nor should we forget Samuel, the great Lamanite prophet who foretold the signs of Christ's birth and death. (Helaman 14.) The resurrected Savior held Samuel in such great favor that he commanded that the Nephite records be amended to record the fulfillment of his prophecies. (III Nephi 23:9-13.)

When the Lamanites fully understood the word of God, they were extremely faithful, and in many instances the curse of a dark skin was taken from them. (See III Nephi 2:11-16.) Furthermore, they were quite capable of preaching to the Nephites. Samuel the Lamanite is

an illustrious example of this fact.

Let us summarize this brief account of the Lamanites:

1. The Lamanites as portrayed in the Book of Mormon are descendants of the combined Nephite, Mulekite, and Lamanite peoples who were spared on this continent at the time of the Savior's crucifixion.

2. The Lamanites were a scourge to the Nephites to keep them faithful to the Lord.

3. The Lamanite people survived the Nephites because they observed the Lord's commandments respecting marriage as predicted by the prophet Jacob. (Jacob 3:6.)

4. The main body of Nephites from which the elder Mosiah and his followers departed (Omni 12, 13) were probably either destroyed or lost their identity by joining the Lamanites.

5. When the Lamanites understood the Lord's word, they were very faithful and renounced their filth and their crude methods of living. Samuel the Lamanite was one of the greatest prophets of the Book of Mormon.

6. The promise of the Lord to the Lamanite remnant, our Indians, is that they shall yet receive the gospel and become a white and delightful people.

AND UNTO THEE OUR LIVES IN PURITY

By Caroline Eyring Miner

(This poem was written for and read at the dedication of the Riverton First Ward Chapel, December 28, 1947. May it symbolize a great movement all over this Church.)

TODAY we dedicate this house to thee,
Dear Lord, this glorious chapel we have built,
Its spire, a finger lifted reverently
Toward thee whose precious blood was
freely spilled

For us. It is the symbol of our love,
Our unity, our hope of better things;
Our faith in leaders with a dream above
Self-interest, whose fulfillment brings
A satisfaction known alone to those
Who act as loving shepherds to the fold
Leading aright their precious flocks to en-
close

Them in a sheltered haven where no cold,
No unbelief, no hurt, nor harm can come.

From this day on let quiet peace be here!
Let here be tolerance for all; let some
Sweet music, gracious deed, kind word of
cheer,

Given some lonely heart within this place,
Lead him to look with joy upon thy face.
Let here be faith and hope and charity,
No discord, only joyous harmony.
Today we dedicate this house to thee,
And unto thee our lives in purity.

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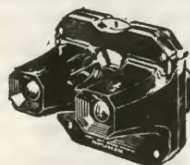
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