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## Reckoning with Race in the Book of Mormon: A Review of Literature

Author(s): Russell W. Stevenson

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# Literature Review

## Reckoning with Race in the Book of Mormon: A Review of Literature

*Russell W. Stevenson*

Scholars of Mormonism have seen a deluge of race literature on the Book of Mormon flow over the past five years. Compared to the robust scholarship on the use of biblical literature in constructing race, Mormonism strikes one as the particularly colorful character who showed up late to the party. For a faith system that has started to imagine itself in global terms, the implications of this recent increase are profound and invite commentary from a variety of disciplines ranging from literary criticism to forensic anthropology. This review essay holds humble aspirations for itself: to trace the basic contours of racialization and deracialization in the Book of Mormon's historiographical record, illustrating how the contestedness of the racial narrative reflects a variety of needs for Mormon reception of the Book of Mormon text. To close, I will speak to the Book of Mormon's relevance as a point of entry for undermining Anglo-Saxon knowledge control.

## Race as Evidence of Historicity

At the forefront of this discussion is a question: What is an analysis of race in the Book of Mormon meant to accomplish? Amanda Hendrix-Komoto has maintained that many historians of Mormonism, including the author of this review, seek to use these narratives to pastoralize: to assuage the concerns of race-conscious Latter-day Saints trying to make sense of a complicated past.<sup>1</sup> Yet considering race scholarship's ends as primarily pastoral, while useful, is also blinkered. Whatever the positive benefits of pastorality—and, at best, it is incidental to the scholarly enterprise—it must not supersede the need for scholars to stay firmly tethered to the foundational issues of evidentiary analysis, power, sovereignty, racial taxonomization, and exegesis. On a more practical level, those on the receiving end of racial language deserve to be privileged at the center of any scholarly analysis—as subjects, rather than objects.

As Mormonism's first publicly disseminated work of canon, the Book of Mormon's racial components have come under considerable scrutiny. The opening of the narrative chronicles the journey of a family—headed by the patriarch Lehi—traveling from sixth-century Palestine to settle in a new land—formally unidentified, but universally interpreted as a location in the Americas. Edited, compiled, and analyzed by Mormon, a self-proclaimed “pure descendant of Lehi” (Mormon 1:5), his narrative seeks to produce an ethno-political and didactic Gibbon-esque history of the rise and fall of the region's leading families: the “Nephites” and the “Lamanites,” both named after siblings in the original settler family

For most of Mormonism's history, Mormon scholars have read the phenotypic descriptions in the Book of Mormon through the lens of American racial precedent; its racial language backed the apologetic enterprise. Two examples will suffice. First, in their early apologetic compilation, George M. Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl wrote

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1. Amanda Hendrix-Komoto, “Do They See Me?: Race and Mormon History,” *Reviews in American History* 44/3 (2016): 456.

that “there can be no doubt that the Indians originally were ‘white.’”<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, Sjodahl, and others considered the Book of Mormon to be a forward-looking document intended to empower ethnic minorities and defy polygenetic scientists such as Louis Agassiz, maintaining that “the complexion of individuals and groups can be affected by food, climate, habits and even emotions,” citing Franz Boas’s student Thomas T. Waterman, an anthropologist who rejected that Africans were *fundamentally* inferior to Caucasians while also arguing that Africans were “anachronisms” on the verge of extinction.<sup>3</sup>

Second, in 1956, Milton R. Hunter, a leading proponent of the “white Indian” theories among Mormon observers observed during a trip to Guatemala that the “Quiche Maya Indians of Guatemala were nearly white, but that there was another tribe of Indians—a primitive wild people, living in the jungles of southern Mexico [the Lacandons] . . . who were really white.” As Hunter looked on the Lacandon community, he mused, with some wonder: “Here is a remnant of that ancient, proud, intelligent, highly cultured, and mighty race—the Nephites.”<sup>4</sup> Michael Robinson has shown how the search for a Lost White Tribe informed much of the European colonial enterprise in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>5</sup> The “white” ethnic makeup of certain indigenous groups served as an exhibit demonstrating the Book of Mormon’s verisimilitude; for Hunter, Mormonism had made indigenous America “legible” to the West.

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2. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955), 1:278.

3. Reynolds and Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 1:278. For a discussion of Waterman’s adoption of *culture* rather than *race* as definitive human attributes, see T. T. Waterman, “The Subdivisions of the Human Race and Their Distribution,” *American Anthropologist* 26/4 (1924): 490: “If whites are to be recognized as a separate type, their claim in truth rests rather upon their history than their bodily peculiarities.”

4. Milton R. Hunter, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 147, 149.

5. Michael Robinson, *The Lost White Tribe: Explorers, Scientists, and the Theory That Changed a Continent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

## The Race to End All Race?

Throughout the 1960s, the rise of newly independent African nation-states from former empires cultivated a class of Mormon academics attuned to the past, present, and future of once colonized peoples. In 1973, Dr. John L. Sorenson, an anthropologist studying rural Utah who later became a Mesoamericanist, concluded that “the whole record of the Book of Mormon . . . may be read as a commentary on the irrelevance of any one culture to successful gospel living.”<sup>6</sup>

Mormon race scholarship responded to these shifting engagements with the secular academy. With their engagement came increased tools of academic analysis and a willingness to subject the Mormon canon to some kind of textual criticism. Among Mormon adherent scholars, the following theses gained currency among the Mormon scholarly community: (1) the Book of Mormon took place in Mesoamerica; (2) it took place within a fairly limited geography; and (3) the Book of Mormon narratives unfolded against a pre-existing, indigenous context. While all three theses had precedent, they had never before enjoyed popularity. For the Mormon narrative, the ethnic footprint of the Lehite colony held existential significance: *Who*, exactly, were the “Lamanites”? (Mesoamericans or North American Amerindians?) And was the United States, in fact, the “promised land”? And had American Mormonism’s costly project of assimilation into (white) American life become irrelevant?

In 1967, Hugh Nibley became one of the first Mormon academics to suggest that the terms “Nephite” and “Lamanite” ought not be read as stable racial identities, but rather as “loose and general” labels “to specify not racial but political, military, religious, and cultural divisions.”<sup>7</sup> More saliently, Nibley observes that while Book of Mormon peoples never failed to note a miraculous intervention, there is no evidence of a Nephite or Lamanite becoming “dark” or “white” via divine

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6. John L. Sorenson, “Mormon World View and American Culture,” *Dialogue* 8/2 (1973): 21.

7. Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 215.

decree—suggesting that change in skin pigmentation developed exclusively through natural mechanisms. “A way of life produces this darkening of the skin,” Nibley argued, echoing Reynolds and Sjodahl.<sup>8</sup> Eugene England agreed that “Lamanite” genetic identity in the Book of Mormon had not been imposed by a deity but rather had been constructed by the culturally dominant Nephites: “The entire record,” England wrote, “probably reflects the Nephites’ own elitist, race-conscious—even somewhat paranoid perspective.” England’s argument set a precedent for a line of racial analysis: “not that God cannot do genetic tricks, but . . . that he does not”—the Book of Mormon’s Lamanites darkened their skin, he posited, either through self-marking or through sexual relationships with indigenous peoples.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars also subjected Book of Mormon terms such as *skins*, *curse*, *pure*, and *white* to scrutiny in ways that past scholars had not. In 1985, Sorenson, now firmly a Mesoamerican anthropologist, urged Latter-day Saints to “give up the romantic pastime of searching for mysterious bands of ‘white Indians,’” observing that skin pigmentation did not divide Nephite from Lamanite at the close of the Book of Mormon narrative.<sup>10</sup> Sorenson maintained that “white,” “black,” and other color references saw in the text a differentiation of skin tone: “The skin shades of surviving peoples in Book of Mormon lands include a substantial range, from dark brown to virtual white.” He suggested that while the lighter skin tone could present evidence of Near Eastern ancestry, “they would not have differed all that much from some Mesoamerican groups.”<sup>11</sup>

Other scholars have since denied that the text referred to epidermal pigmentation altogether. Douglas Campbell has conducted the fullest analysis of the use of “whiteness” in the Book of Mormon, arguing

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8. Hugh W. Nibley, “Lecture 44,” in *Teachings of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 2:244.

9. Eugene England, “‘Lamanites’ and the Spirit of the Lord,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18/4 (1985): 30.

10. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 351.

11. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 90.

that in each instance, it reflects a metaphor.<sup>12</sup> Brant Gardner, a committed historicist, has rejected Sorenson's argument, maintaining that Mesoamericans reflected more uniformity of skin tone than Sorenson allowed and that "blackness" represented a literary flourish: "Whatever Nephi wrote and Joseph Smith translated, there is every reason to believe that [blackness] was a metaphor" and "no evidence that it was literal."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, literary scholar Ethan Sproat argued that *skins* are better understood as attire worn to distinguish Lamanite and Nephite sociopolitical groups from each other—no reference to skin pigmentation required.<sup>14</sup> Joseph Stuart has submitted that the Book of Mormon text, at times, requires a racial interpretation, noting that the fluidity of racial constructs according to righteousness resonate well with antebellum notions of white "racial loss."<sup>15</sup>

Another verse from the Book of Mormon that has become a flash point for questions of phenotypicality in the Book of Mormon is where Nephi, an original founder of the Palestinian colony in the New World, predicted that the day would come when his brethren, now "dark" and wayward, would someday "become a white & a delightsome people" (2 Nephi 30:6; 1830 printer's manuscript). On the textual history of this

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12. Douglas T. Campbell, "'White' or 'Pure': Five Vignettes," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29/4 (Winter 1996): 119–35, esp. 132–35. He identifies six categories: (1) attire, (2) fruit, (3) stones/hair, (4) Mary/Jesus, (5) Gentiles, and (6) white(ned) Nephites.

13. Brant Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), Kindle. For another instance of a metaphor-rooted argument, see Stephen Olsen, "The Covenant of the Chosen People: The Spiritual Foundations of Ethnic Identity in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 21/2 (2012): 14–29. Olsen argues that Jacob's language of filthiness, for example, should be read solely as metaphorical since he uses the same language to describe both Lamanite and Nephite populations. However, it's also possible that Jacob was engaging in some wordplay: it is entirely possible that Jacob was attempting to use "filthy" literally in the Lamanite context in order to highlight Nephite spiritual uncleanness.

14. Ethan Sproat, "Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 138–65.

15. Joseph Stuart, "Holy Races: Race in the Formation of Mormonism and the Nation of Islam" (Master's thesis, University of Virginia, 2014), 22–28.



verse alone, textual scholar Royal Skousen opined, uncharitably: “There has been more ink shed . . . on this one change than any other, [and] most of the discussion has been an embarrassment.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1840, Joseph Smith authorized the verse to be changed from the original “a white & a delightsome” to read “a pure and a delightsome people.” In 1841, the Quorum of the Twelve—then in the United Kingdom and unaware of the 1840 publication—published an *additional* version of the Book of Mormon using the 1837 text as the template, placing four distinct versions of the Book of Mormon with varying readings in circulation at the time of Joseph Smith’s edit: 1830 (US), 1837 (US), 1840 (US), and 1841 (UK). The 1841 edition thus re-adopted “a white and a delightsome people” in 2 Nephi 30:6.

The change prompted Book of Mormon defenders to either reframe earlier ethnic arguments or to retrench. Many threw up their hands in confusion. Robert J. Matthews reported that in the editorial process for the 1981 edition, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve sought to incorporate the earliest extant text in most instances—except for their decision to incorporate “pure and delightful” based on Joseph Smith’s editing and “the judgment of living prophets.”<sup>17</sup> “For some reason,” Bruce Harper wrote in the October 1981 *Ensign*, editions between 1840 and 1981 “reverted to the original wording.”<sup>18</sup> Years later, Monte S. Nyman still attributed the failure to use “pure and delightful” between 1840 and 1981 to “some unknown reason.”<sup>19</sup> Campbell more convincingly maintained that the 1841 UK edition, typeset without knowledge of Joseph Smith’s 1840 edits, served as the template for subsequent editions in the nineteenth

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16. Royal Skousen, “Changes in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 169.

17. Robert J. Matthews, “The New Publication of the Standard Works,” *BYU Studies* 22/4 (Fall 1982): 399.

18. Bruce T. Harper, “The Church Publishes a New Triple Combination,” *Ensign* (October 1981): 19.

19. Monte S. Nyman, “Come to Understanding and Learn Doctrine,” in *Second Nephi: The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Charles D. Tate and Monte S. Nyman (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1989), 37.



and early twentieth centuries and thus preserved the “a white and a delightsome” language in subsequent editions (e.g., 1852, 1879, 1921).<sup>20</sup>

But few could let go of the “whiteness”-centered reading. Matthews himself was quick to observe that the 1981 change “does not negate the concept that future generations of Lamanites will become white.”<sup>21</sup> Insisting on the “white and delightsome” language, Roy W. Doxey urged readers to consider this text in conversation with other similar texts that neglected to mention skin pigmentation: “the principal thought in the expression ‘white and delightsome,’” Doxey opined, “is centered in the change of disposition, *as well* as in the complexion.”<sup>22</sup> In 1987, Robert S. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie minimized the significance of the change, noting that the difference between the two words is “slight”; they conclude that the change should not be interpreted to mean that “righteous and faithful Lamanites will not also lose their darker skin.”<sup>23</sup> In Rulon T. Burton’s more recently published *We Believe*, he continues to make allowance for the possibility of racial change based on righteousness.<sup>24</sup>

Joseph Smith’s black box of “translation” looms over the implications of “white and delightsome.” A hypothetical Nephi—a son of seventh-century Jerusalem—would have invoked “whiteness” with all the contradictory associations he inherited. “Whiteness” both suggested purity (Isaiah 1:8: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white [*lavan*] as snow [*sheleg*]”) as well as leprosy (*tsarat*) and death, though

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20. Campbell, “‘White’ or ‘Pure,’” 119.

21. Matthews, “New Publication of the Standard Works,” 399.

22. Roy W. Doxey, *Prophecies and Prophetic Promises from the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 115; emphasis added.

23. Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 1:356; They re-assert this position in 3:17.

24. “Whether or not the Lamanites eventually become white skinned, it is clear from scripture that one of the signs of the last days will be that the Lamanites will blossom in the gospel sense” (Rulon T. Burton, *We Believe: Doctrines and Principles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994], D-408; emphasis added).

the pairing of “white” with “delightful” makes the morbid reading unlikely.<sup>25</sup> Independent scholar John A. Tvedtnes argues that “a scriptural context” might justify Joseph’s change of language.<sup>26</sup> But for scholars who place Joseph Smith at the center of the Book of Mormon’s creative process, contextualization against an antebellum context requires engagement with “whiteness” as an American racial construct—a meaningful concession for those who accept the text as ancient.<sup>27</sup>

### Principal Ancestors

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Thomas Murphy and Simon Southerton, former Mormons and academically trained forensic geneticists, weaponized a now-old argument—the lack of Middle Eastern DNA in indigenous American groups—to engage in the broader argument about Mormon racism. Forensic genetics served as their academic theater, but their interest was not purely academic; both imagined forensic genetics as a mechanism for inviting sociocultural change in how Mormons imagined race. Not only did the absence of Middle Eastern DNA demonstrate the Book of Mormon’s non-historicity, Murphy maintained, but it also demonstrated a logical positive: that the Book of Mormon was a man-made racist text produced against the context of early nineteenth-century Caucasian discourse about Native Americans.

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25. J. Dyneley Prince concludes that *tsarat*’s symptoms reflected modern leprosy. J. Dyneley Prince, “Note on Leprosy in the Old Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 38/1–2 (1919): 30–34. See also Exodus 4:6, “Behold, his hand was leprous [*tsarat*] as snow” [*sheleg*]; Leviticus 13:17: “If the plague be turned into white [*lavan*]; then the priest shall pronounce him clean that hath the plague: he is clean”; Numbers 12:10, “Miriam became leprous [*tsarat*], white [*lavan*] as snow [*sheleg*]. See Randall Bailey, “‘They Shall Become White as Snow’: When Bad Is Turned into Good,” *Semeia* 76 (1998): 99–114; and Ben Spackman, “Why Bible Translations Differ: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Religious Educator* 15/1 (2014): 41.

26. Michael J. Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

27. John A. Tvedtnes, “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 195.

Murphy hoped he would illustrate, once and for all, that “dark skin is not a physical trait of God’s malediction.”<sup>28</sup>

In 2004, Southerton expanded on Murphy’s arguments, arguing that the Book of Mormon was no more than a racist fantasia born of antebellum anxieties about the survival of Euro-descended populations in the New World.<sup>29</sup> Southerton explained that he was motivated to write his book, *Losing a Lost Tribe*, “because I want to pressure the church to change its teachings and doctrines that are racist and wrong.”<sup>30</sup>

The nature of the ensuing debate revealed how the plate tectonics of Mormon notions of race had shifted radically since the days of Reynolds and Hunter; gone were the days when the Book of Mormon’s racial discourse was heralded as a sign of its authenticity. Sorenson and Matthew Roper argued that Murphy and Southerton had imposed an unnecessarily dogmatic ethnography onto the Book of Mormon. Not only was ethnic composition in Mesoamerica more complicated than Murphy and Southerton had allowed; a belief in pre-existing indigenous groups, while hardly normative, nevertheless enjoyed a meaningful precedent in Latter-day Saint thought.<sup>31</sup> Murphy and Southerton rejected such arguments—not on genetic grounds but as betrayals of the Mormon tradition. Murphy suggested that Roper and Sorenson were making cynical arguments: they “implicitly reject long-standing popular Mormon

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28. Thomas L. Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 68.

29. Simon Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000).

30. Simon Southerton, “My Court of Love,” *Mormon Curtain*, July 18, 2005. While the original site has been taken down, the Google Cache copy is still available at <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:mtjfg7kEp4J:https://www.exmormon.org/mormon/mormon406.htm+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>. Screenshot in author’s possession.

31. John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 1–34; Matthew Roper, “Nephi’s Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 94.

beliefs, including those held by Joseph Smith.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Southerton had once acknowledged that “if a small group of Israelites . . . entered such a massive native population, it would be very hard to detect their genes today.” But, he continued, “such a scenario does not square with what the Book of Mormon plainly states and what the prophets have taught for 175 years.”<sup>33</sup>

The question became what the Book of Mormon text claimed for itself. Subsequent work from geneticists Ugo A. Perego and John Butler also challenged Southerton’s and Murphy’s assessment of Mormon historical depictions of indigenous demographics, arguing that the discovery of DNA from a small Nephite/Lamanite group two thousand years ago would have been absorbed into the broader population.<sup>34</sup> Butler concluded: “We do not have enough information . . . to confidently determine a source population for the Lehaites or the Mulekites.” Blake Ostler rooted the difficulty in “the informal link in many people’s minds between the issue of Amerindian origins and *what they have been taught* the Book of Mormon says about ancient American peoples.”<sup>35</sup> In 2007, the Latter-day Saint Church Scriptures committee changed the Book of Mormon’s explanatory text regarding the Lamanite relationship to

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32. Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis,” 68.

33. Southerton’s first comments were made at <http://www.signaturebooks.com/excerpts/Losing2.htm>. That site has been taken down. However, the comments are reproduced in Blake Ostler, “Simon Says, But That Doesn’t Make It So,” *Sunstone Magazine*, November 2005: 5; Seven years later, Southerton continued to root his critiques in his ethnic reading of the Book of Mormon: “For the last 175 years, the Book of Mormon has been presented to Native Americans and Polynesians as a history of their ancestors,” a conclusion coming “from the prophetic statements of the church’s leadership.” See Simon Southerton, “Apologetic Response to Losing a Lost Tribe,” *Simon’s DNA Musings*; published originally in 2005 on the Signature Books website, reposted May 9, 2012, <http://simonsoutherton.blogspot.com/2012/05/apologetic-response-to-losing-lost.html>.

34. Ugo A. Perego, “The Book of Mormon and the Origin of Native Americans from a Maternally Inherited DNA Standpoint,” in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert Millet (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2011), 171–217.

35. Blake T. Ostler, “Assessing the Logical Structure of DNA Arguments against the Book of Mormon,” *Sunstone Magazine*, December 2005: 72.

indigenous Americans from “they are the principal ancestors of the American Indians” to “they are among the ancestors of the American Indians.”<sup>36</sup>

### The Book of Mormon as a Key to Global Mormonism

Regardless of the historicity of the Book of Mormon text, does the ethnicized construct of the “Lamanite” and “Nephite” perform theological work in upending white theological super-structures? Christian racial liberation theology has relied on two key—and somewhat contradictory—foundations: (1) the qualitative division between the deified Concrete (i.e., Jesus, Barth’s *concretissimum*) and humanity and its ethnicized false constructs about self-identity, and (2) the centrality of ethnic concreteness in defining the “Christ of faith” as he manifests himself in space and time as Jesus of Nazareth. As a narrative text of human interactions with Jehovah/Jesus, it might be argued, the Book of Mormon narrative reveals the tragic outcome of the falsehood of such constructs. In his recent volume, Max Mueller argues that the Reynolds/Sjodahl reading of the Book of Mormon’s ethnic messaging reflected the text’s broader meaning in nineteenth-century America: “Faith more than paternity shaped both an individual and even a people’s racial identity.” Mueller suggests that Mormon theology promoted a kind of “white universalism” in which “whiteness” equated with *racelessness*. Early Mormon adherents believed that the Book of Mormon provided a template by which non-white Mormons may aspire through commitment to godly commandments to acquire a state of *racelessness* and thus liberation.<sup>37</sup> “In [its] very nature,” Richard

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36. Jared [Tamez], “Change(s) in the Book of Mormon Introduction,” *Juvenile Instructor*, November 8, 2017, <https://juvenileinstructor.wordpress.com/2007/11/08/change-in-book-of-mormon-introduction>.

37. Max P. Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), Kindle. In an intriguing way, Mueller’s argument-highlights and Arthur P. Lovejoy’s argument coheres. Race had long served as a manifestation of Great Chain imaginary, and in this regard, Lovejoy and Mueller cohere. From Lovejoy: “Man, at least, was not intended to occupy forever the same place. . . .

Bushman concurred, in his monumental biography of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon “overturns conventional American racism. . . . [It] is not just sympathetic to Indians; it grants them dominance.”<sup>38</sup> Jared Hickman has extended both Nibley’s and England’s arguments further: he argues that the Book of Mormon’s “formal logic” makes “its theology of Native and/or nonwhite liberation irrepressible.” Hickman maintains that the Book of Mormon’s “patent racism” is “undone by the very text in which it is articulated.”<sup>39</sup>

Theologian J. Kameron Carter has challenged the standard foundations of ethnic liberation readings; by this reading, much of the Book of Mormon endeavors to transform the Nephite-Lamanite relationship from what Carter calls oppressor-oppressed (“I-It”) subject-object relationships into relationships defined by “separate-but-equal” theological discourses defined by distinctive black and white theologies (“I-Thou”). Crafting a distinctively “black” theology, Carter concludes, is a “settlement with the blackness that whiteness created,” thus rendering it “a settlement with whiteness, albeit in the idiom of cultural blackness or cultural nationalism.”<sup>40</sup>

As Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmi has noted, the West enjoys “continued dominance . . . in the production of knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> At its best, the mythology of Mormon globality is Campbellian: a clue “to the spiritual potentialities of [Mormon] life,” but not reflective of Mormonism’s white- and

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The scale is literally a ladder to be ascended, not only by the imagination but in fact.” Lovejoy concludes that, contrary to the argument that the “defining defect of man” is his commitment to “visions of perfections which he cannot possess.” Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 205.

38. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 99.

39. Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” *American Literature* 86/3 (2014): 436.

40. J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 190.

41. Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), Kindle.



American-heavy demographics.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, “the “Western Academy is sick,” historian of global Christianity Andrew Walls observed years ago; if developing world academies “do not develop a proper capacity for leadership in theological studies,” he concludes, “there will for practical purposes be no theological studies anywhere worth caring about.”<sup>43</sup> Can the Book of Mormon’s very locality and particularity serve as a feature, not a bug, as a part of a broader endeavor in de-centering Mormon knowledge systems from the West?

Mormon scholars have underutilized globality in understanding Book of Mormon reception history. Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh have suggested that Christianity has thrived because it has been a globally “translatable” faith, that is, capable of traversing geo-cultural and linguistic spaces while retaining its core message.<sup>44</sup> In a recent lecture given for the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Samuel M. Brown argued that the Book of Mormon establishes a precedent for localized canon—a canon suited to the particularized needs and interests of the surrounding community. In no major world religion has a place/time-oriented canon explicitly offered this model of ethno-cultural agility.<sup>45</sup>

Sanneh has argued that there is a “radical pluralism associated with vernacular translation wherein all languages and cultures are in

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42. Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2011), 5. As of January 2018, 41.5 percent of the Church’s membership hails from the United States, whereas 39.7 percent are from a Latin American country. Data available through [www.mormonnewsroom.org](http://www.mormonnewsroom.org).

43. Andrew Walls, “Theology Is Moving South,” *Trust: Center for Theological Schools*, 2003, <http://www.intrust.org/Magazine/Issues/New-Year-2003/Theology-is-moving-south>.

44. Lamin Sanneh, “The Significance of the Translation Principle,” in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 41.

45. Samuel M. Brown, “To Save the Bible, First You Must Kill It,” Maxwell Institute Guest Lecture from the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Provo, UT, July 25, 2017.

principle equal in expressing the word of God.”<sup>46</sup> Global Christianity effuses with the local and has “translated naturally into the terms of all cultures.”<sup>47</sup> Roland Robertson has crafted the concept of *glocality* to reflect the heterogeneity defining global systems of information and identity diffusion—that capacity of global systems to tailor themselves to local circumstances.<sup>48</sup> Nephi assures us that his text of the Book of Mormon does not hold exclusive claims to scriptural truth; other records reflect the experiences of peoples throughout the globe. In 2 Nephi, the Lord tells Nephi that he “command[s] all men, both in the east and the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them” (2 Nephi 29:11). No ethnic group enjoys a pre-eminent status in receiving—or producing—canon. As a local narrative devised to define the contours of a global faith, the Book of Mormon turns glocality on its head—an explicitly local product that simultaneously celebrates its own locality while promising more of itself the world over.<sup>49</sup>

Mormon scholarship on the Book of Mormon remains far removed from this ideal.<sup>50</sup> The Igbo translation of the Book of Mormon, for instance, reflects a colonial Christian formation of the word “God”: *Chineke* (derived from the individual spirit-deity, *chi* combined with *eke*, meaning “snake,” rather than the indigenous *Chukwu*).<sup>51</sup> Similarly,

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46. Sanneh, “Significance of the Translation Principle,” 48.

47. Sanneh, “Significance of the Translation Principle,” 41.

48. Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in *Global Modernities*, ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (London: Sage Publishing, 1995), 25–45.

49. For a broader discussion of this concept’s potential utility in Mormon studies, see Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, “The Oak and the Banyan: The ‘Glocalization’ of Mormon Studies,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 70–79.

50. For sound examples of scholarship that traces the use of Christian writing across national boundaries, see Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–37.

51. For an extended discussion on the distinction between these identities, including the profound contradictions underlying the name of *Chineke*, see I. Chukwukere,

in the Hmong edition, “peace” is frequently translated as “a field of opium and a pregnant daughter-in-law” (*thaj yeeb nyab xeeb*). To suggest this kind of language adaptation represents an unmitigated linguistic imperialism that ignores agency on the part of indigenous groups.<sup>52</sup> The tools necessary for capturing the Mormon milieu require that Mormon scholars of race broaden their vistas—that they engage in comparative black, comparative Asian, and comparative Latin American Mormon historical analyses.

## Conclusion

The struggle to define Book of Mormon racial identity reveals fractures in Mormonism’s relationship with itself—both as a locally grown identity born in rural America and a movement aspiring to be defined as “global.” But the transition for historians of the Book of Mormon and race has not been clear or even, and Mormon efforts to read its own scripture reveals the unevenness of the path from insularity to glocality. That unevenness notwithstanding, the Book of Mormon contains within it seeds of a kind of radical inclusion, seeds with fruits—whether “white,” “brown,” or “black”—that remain to be seen.

**Russell Stevenson** is the author of *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830–2013* (2014; winner of the 2015 Mormon History Association Best Book Award). The winner of the Martin Luther King Endowed Scholarship and the West Africa Research Association Fellowship, he has published widely on comparative African/African American Mormonisms.

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“Chi in Igbo Religion and Thought: The God in Every Man,” *Anthropos* 78/3–4 (1983): 519–34.

52. For a key example of indigenous agency in re-tooling Christian rhetoric, see J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).