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The Lamanite Mark

Rodney Turner

Desiring to inform and not offend, may I preface my remarks by acknowledging that in this day of ultra-sensitivity to anything that smacks of racism, the idea that God might be color conscious, or that one's pigmentation is an evidence of divine displeasure is understandably offensive to most people. Why there are different races making up the manifestly imperfect human family is known only to an all-wise God. But there are reasons; where the Lord is concerned, nothing happens by chance.

But God is not racist; he is no respecter of persons. Nephi wrote: "He denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Nephi 26:33). And Jehovah told Samuel: "The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Scripture makes it abundantly clear that moral and spiritual superiority are determined by conduct, not color. "Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God" (1 Nephi 17:35). The issue with God is righteousness, not race.

In denouncing one correspondent's blatant prejudice against the Indian peoples, Elder Spencer W. Kimball asked: "Is the implication . . . justified that the white race or the American people is superior? . . . If the Lord were to acknowledge a superior race, would it not be Israel, the very people whom you would spurn and deprive? Do you carry in your veins as pure Israelitish blood as those whom you criticize?" ("The Evil of Intolerance" 424). There are no superior races, only superior men and women.

Skin color, as we know it, is a purely temporal phenomenon. Indeed, when it comes to color, I believe that the contrast between the whitest white person and the blackest black is not nearly as great as that between any mortal man—of whatever hue—and the literal, physical glory of God.

Divine Judgments

God wields a two-edged sword. He who blesses also curses. Justice and mercy are fellow companions. Nowhere is this principle more clearly revealed than in the Book of Mormon which says that a "skin of blackness" came upon Laman and his followers subsequent to the spiritual and physical divisions of Lehi's colony (2 Nephi 5:21). The precedent for such a divine judgment dates from the murder of Abel by his brother Cain (Moses 5:40; 7:8, 22; see also Gen. 4:15). Laman also descended into spiritual darkness and the spirit of murder. Both Cain and Laman came out in open rebellion against God. Both were cut off from his righteous influence. Both became marked men.

While Cain's fate is known (Moses 5:23-25), we cannot be certain of the final fate of Laman and Lemuel; however, there is little doubt but that their punishment will be severe. We do know that Lehi warned both of a temporal cursing and the possibility of "eternal destruction of *both soul and body*" (2 Nephi 1:22; emphasis added). They rebelled without a just

cause; they were without excuse. They had seen an angel, had heard the voice of God, and had experienced his miraculous powers on more than one occasion (see 1 Nephi 3:29; 7:10, 18; 16:39; 18:21). They even stood condemned by their own mouths, for after being physically shocked by divine power they testified to Nephi: “We *know of a surety* that the Lord is with thee, for *we know* that it is the power of the Lord that has shaken us” (1 Nephi 17:55; emphasis added). Notwithstanding this fervent testimony and even attempting to worship Nephi, in due time they sought his life, thereby bringing upon themselves the wrath of God. Centuries later, in writing of the self-marked Amlicites, Mormon commented: “Now I would that ye should see that they brought upon themselves the curse; and even so doth every man that is cursed bring upon himself his own condemnation” (Alma 3:19). The dark spirit manifested by Nephi’s older brothers remained the dominant force in them all their days and infected their posterity with similar dispositions. The sins of the fathers were indeed visited on the children (see Jacob 3:9), not only to the third and fourth generation, but for over 500 years!

Predictions of the Mark

The first suggestion that a divine curse would come upon Laman and Lemuel and their posterity is contained in a revelation given to Nephi, their younger brother, a few weeks after Lehi and his family departed from Jerusalem—600 years before the birth of Christ—and shortly after the colony encamped in the wilderness bordering the Red Sea:

For behold, in that day that they [Laman and Lemuel] shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy [Nephi’s] seed except they shall rebel against me also (1 Nephi 2:23; see also Alma 3:6, 14; 9:14).

Although his record is silent on the point, it is likely that Nephi shared this revelation with his rebellious brothers. In any event, their father Lehi later confirmed it in his farewell to his family. Knowing that his death was imminent, the venerable patriarch pled with his wayward sons to awake from the “sleep of hell” lest “a cursing should come upon you for the space of many generations; and ye are visited by sword, and by famine, and are hated, and are led according to the will and captivity of the devil” (2 Nephi 1:13, 18; cf. v. 22). Then, in pronouncing a farewell blessing upon the innocent children of Laman, Lehi again alluded to a possible curse but promised them:

Wherefore, if ye are cursed, behold, I leave my blessing upon you, that the cursing may be taken from you and be answered upon the heads of your parents. Wherefore, because of my blessing the Lord God will not suffer that ye shall perish; wherefore, he will be merciful unto you and unto your seed forever (2 Nephi 4:6-7).

The Great Division

Lehi’s death shortly after the colony arrived in America failed to have a sobering influence on Laman and Lemuel. To the contrary, it was “not many days” (2 Nephi 4:13) before their suppressed rage erupted into a firm determination to kill Nephi: “Let us slay him, that we may not be afflicted more because of his words. For behold, we will not have him to be our ruler; for it belongs to us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people” (2 Nephi 5:3; cf. Alma 54:17). “They had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint” (2 Nephi 5:21). Nephi wrote: “Wherefore, I had been their ruler and their teacher, according to the commandments of the Lord, until the time they sought to take away my life” (5:19). Warned by the Lord, Nephi fled (northward from the land where Lehi’s colony had first settled)¹ with his own family and those of Zoram

¹ Joseph Smith is said to have taught that Lehi “landed on the continent of South America, in Chile, thirty degrees south latitude” (Richards and Little 289).

and Sam and his brothers Jacob and Joseph, along with his sisters and “all those who would go with me” (2 Nephi 5:6). The spiritual schism in Lehi’s family had become a physical one as well.

Nephi’s escape greatly angered his envious brothers not only because they thirsted for his blood but also because it diminished the number of those over whom they could rule. Further, they accused him of robbing them of Laban’s plates of brass (Mosiah 10:16; see also 2 Nephi 5:12, 14; Alma 37:38). One has but to recall their ignorance of and indifference toward spiritual matters and their unreliable behavior vis-a-vis Laban (1 Nephi chapters 3 and 4) to appreciate the ludicrous nature of this accusation. Nevertheless, Nephi was branded a thief for taking the plates of brass, and a liar for claiming that God had chosen him rather than Laman or Lemuel to lead the people (see Mosiah 10:12-17). These false charges were endlessly repeated and handed down from generation to generation:

And thus they have taught their children that they should hate them, and that they should murder them, and that they should rob and plunder them, and do all they could to destroy them; therefore they have an eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi (Mosiah 10:17).

So far as the Lamanites were concerned, the Nephites were contemptible “sons of a liar” (Alma 20:13). Truly, Laman had “eaten a sour grape, and [his] children’s teeth [were] set on edge” (Jer. 31:29).

The Sign of Spiritual Darkness

Soon after the great division came into Lehi’s colony, the prophesied curse fell upon Laman, Lemuel and all of those who chose to remain with them. As they had driven Nephi, the Lord’s anointed servant, from among them, so did the Lord drive them from his presence. “And behold, they were cut off from his presence” (2 Nephi 5:20).

Symbolic of the withdrawal of the Spirit from their lives, a “skin of blackness”² came upon the rebellious Laman, Lemuel, their families, and those sons and daughters of Ishmael who chose to affiliate with them (2 Nephi 5:21). There can be no question but that their altered skin color was a miraculous act of God; it cannot be understood in purely metaphoric terms, nor as being nothing more than the natural consequence of prolonged exposure to the sun. Nephi was explicit that “the Lord God *did cause* a skin of blackness to come upon them” (2 Nephi 5:21; emphasis added). The prophet Jacob later spoke of how the Nephites hated the Lamanites “because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins,” and warned the immoral Nephites that unless they repented, the Lamanites’ “skins will be whiter than yours, when ye shall be brought with them before the throne of God” (Jacob 3:5, 8).³

Mormon, writing some five hundred years later, said that “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” (Alma 3:6). Laman and Lemuel had not only sought to kill Nephi, but also their other brothers, Sam, Jacob and Joseph. Therefore “the Lord God set a mark upon them, yea, upon Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael, and Ishmaelitish women” (Alma 3:7). Thus all who partook of the spirit of Laman and Lemuel partook of the spiritual and physical judgments which befell them. The darkened pigmentation of their skins became a dominant genetic trait that was inherited by their posterity from that time forth.

²The expression “skin of blackness” does not necessarily, or even probably, mean a black skin, only a darker skin. The pre-flood people of Canaan (Cain’s posterity) had a “blackness” come upon them after the Lord cursed their land “with much heat” (Moses 7:8). After Enoch’s city was translated from the earth Enoch beheld that “the seed of Cain were black” and were separate from all other peoples (Moses 7:22). I believe that “blackness” and “black” are not synonyms and that the Lamanite mark was only a relatively darker pigmentation, not a literally black skin. By the same token, a “white” skin is only relatively so (Jacob 3:8).

Respecting skin color, only in Alma is the word “mark” found in the Book of Mormon (Alma 3:6, 7, 10, 14-16). Mormon wrote that the Lord employed that term in telling Nephi three things: “Behold, the Lamanites have I cursed, and I will set a mark on them. . . . I will set a mark upon him that mingleth his seed with thy brethren, that they may be cursed also. . . . I will set a mark upon him that fighteth against thee and thy seed” (Alma 3:14-16).

Nephi quoted the Lord on the second point as follows: “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” (2 Nephi 5:23; emphasis added; cf. Alma 3:9). Thus we see that the mark of Laman not only came upon an original band of Israelitish rebels against God, but also upon anyone who “suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites” (Alma 3:10). This edict was to prove of great significance.

Effects of Spiritual Curse

Nephi recorded that “because of their cursing” the Lamanites “did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Nephi 5:24). As Satan gained ever greater influence over them, they descended deeper and deeper into barbarism.

Filled with an unquenchable hatred for the favored Nephites, the Lamanites “swore in their wrath that, if it were possible, they would destroy our records and us, and also all the traditions of our fathers” (Enos 1:14; cf. Mormon 6:6). They eventually did destroy the Nephites but not their records. In spite of this “the people of Nephi did seek diligently to restore the Lamanites unto the true faith in God” (Enos 1:20; see also Alma 17-26). Enos (c. 525-420 BC) wrote that because of their evil nature,

they became wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; and their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax. And many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat; and they were continually seeking to destroy us (Enos 1:20; cf. Jarom 1:6; Alma 17:14-15).

The centuries came and went, but the intense hatred the Lamanites held for their more obedient brethren remained undiminished. While its foundation was the false teachings of their fathers, this hatred was doubtlessly fed by feelings of inferiority engendered by the superior culture of the Nephites. Then too, evil is obliged to justify itself. The Lamanites used Laman's lies to justify their own blood-lust and depredations. They committed vicious crimes primarily because "their hearts were set upon riches, or upon gold and silver, and precious stones; yet they sought to obtain these things by murdering and plundering, that they might not labor for them with their own hands" (Alma 17:14). And so like many before and many since, the Lamanites hid their own greedy, evil deeds behind a facade of supposed ancient wrongs.

The Cause of Lamanite Barbarism

One can hardly suffer a greater loss in mortality than to lose the Spirit of the Lord (see Alma 28:14; D&C 84:45-46). To be without that divine influence is to be in a wholly carnal state. It is to be "without God in the world" and, therefore, "in a state contrary to the nature of happiness" (Alma 41:11). *Such was the real curse that came upon the Lamanites.* There is no warrant for assuming that being dark-skinned inevitably disposed the early Lamanites to idleness and savagery. The wretched state into which they fell was the natural consequence of adopting the negative characteristics of Laman and Lemuel. The two brothers were indolent and vicious long before the Lord cursed them. Being faithless, godless men, they inculcated a like

spirit into their children. Parental attitudes and behavior, combined with a conscious rejection of the Lord and his commandments, constituted the deadly formula which gave the devil his virtually unchallenged power over that benighted people for half a millennium.

The Lord's ancient caveat concerning this choicest of all lands of promise is still in force: "If ye will sin until ye are fully ripe ye shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord" (Ether 2:15). The withdrawal of his Spirit is the death-knell of any civilized society (see D&C 63:32), for the absence of his Spirit inevitably means the presence of the spirit of the devil. This reflects the eternal principle of moral opposition in all things (2 Nephi 2:15; D&C 29:39). Evil must have its agency. But when men willfully turn their backs on light and truth, they inevitably confront darkness and error. There is no third alternative. And the consequences are always the same: "After a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened, and thus their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things" (Alma 24:30).

It is quite apparent that the Lamanites would have become what they did become had they never been marked with a "skin of blackness." Indeed, in terms of the eternal principle of cause and effect, how could they have become anything else? When they drove the light of Christ from among them, what could result but darkness? The fates of the ancient Jaredites, the Lamanites and the Nephites are a solemn warning of the fate which awaits those who inhabit the Americas should they choose to follow the dark side of the principle of opposition in all things.

Original Purpose of the Mark

It was not vindictiveness on God's part that led him to make a physical distinction between the faithful followers of Nephi and

those who openly opposed him. Rather, its original purpose was that “their seed might be distinguished from the seed of their brethren, that thereby the Lord might preserve his people, that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions which would prove their destruction” (Alma 3:8; cf. 2 Nephi 5:21). As we shall see, this principle worked for both peoples.

There was good cause to fear that close association between those diverse peoples would lead to intermarriage and a consequent apostasy from the laws of God. Marriages between the daughters of Noah’s righteous sons and the “sons of men” (Moses 8:14) is prominently cited in connection with the general wickedness of Noah’s day which led to the deluge that swept mankind from the earth (see Moses 8:12-22). And the sorry account of Israel’s history in Canaan is a graphic example of the spiritual devastation which can result from social intercourse and intermarriage between an immature covenant people and those whose religious beliefs and practices, while manifestly false and inferior, are nevertheless enticing and pleasing to the carnal mind.

Although the physical distinction between the Nephites and the Lamanites was, in the main, an effective safeguard against such intermarriages, still some did intermarry with the Lamanites (for example Amulon and the renegade priests of king Noah; see Mosiah 20:1-4, 18; 23:31-35). Others who rebelled against Nephite law and leadership also dissented away to them (see W of M 1:16).

We can only surmise the course of events had not this physical distinction been raised between the two spiritually and culturally diverse branches of Lehi’s family. Mortals have a built-in propensity for succumbing to their fallen natures—especially under the impetus of Satan’s blandishments. It requires little effort to descend, but much to rise. Consequently, only the most dedicated and spiritually mature are able to maintain complete integrity toward God when confronted with the compelling temptations of the world around them.

As a group, the Nephites—like their forebears in Canaan—proved incapable of resisting the gravitational pull of their mortal imperfections for any length of time. Neither their isolation from the Lamanites nor the leadership of worthy prophets prevented their rapid moral decline into pride, selfishness and immorality following Nephi’s death.

Regarding the sin of immorality, the Nephites proved more wicked than the Lamanites who, whatever their other faults, were faithful to their wives. For this reason the Lamanites were declared to be “more righteous” than the “enlightened” Nephites, who despised them for their dark skins and primitive ways. It was their moral virtue that assured their preservation and eventual redemption, even as the immoralities of the early Nephites led to their destruction in the days of Mosiah I (see Jacob 3:39; Jarom 1:10; Omni 1:5, 12-13). This fact alone demonstrates the very high esteem in which the Lord holds the principle of chastity and the gravity of offenses against it.

While the dark skin was initially designed to insulate Nephi’s followers against the false traditions and godless ways of their Lamanite brethren, in a later turn-about it served to protect the Lamanite people from the fatal sin of their supposedly superior Nephite brethren. The Lamanites’ righteousness in this area was one reason why they were still flourishing more than two centuries after the *original* Nephite kingdom ceased to exist (see Omni 1:5). In the third century BC, Mosiah I led an exodus of “as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord” (Omni 1:13) from the land of Nephi farther northward to the land of Zarahemla, where they united with the more numerous people of Zarahemla (see Omni 1:12-19; see also Mosiah 25:2). Those who remained “in the land of their first inheritance” (Mosiah 9:1; 10:13) were either destroyed by the Lamanites or assimilated into their culture. Such was the irony of the curse!

Had Lehi’s colony remained undivided, all of his posterity may well have gone the way of ancient Israel and perished in the wilderness from the corrupting vapors of the “flesh pots of

Egypt.” But the Lord was determined that American Israel “shall not commit whoredoms, like unto them of old” (Jacob 2:33). To have permitted that entire branch of the house of Joseph to do so might well have voided the glorious prophecies given Lehi and Nephi concerning their posterities. Had that occurred, the labors of Mormon, Moroni and Joseph Smith, together with all else that we have come to associate with the content and coming forth of the Book of Mormon, might have been modified, delayed, or even precluded. An entire people may well have vanished in wickedness and perished in unbelief. But such was not to be.

The Lamanite mark did then prove, and will yet prove, a blessing in disguise. By reducing the probability of social interaction between the two peoples, it protected the early Nephites in their infant spiritual state from being overwhelmed by the false traditions with which Satan sought to ensnare them via their rebellious brethren. That “sore cursing” also constitutes a graphic witness to our generation of the evil that corrupt parents can bring upon their children in alienating them from the Lord and of the severity of God’s judgments upon those who willfully rebel against him. Further, as the curse initially protected the Nephites from the spiritual darkness of the Lamanites, so did it eventually protect the Lamanites of Jacob’s day from the fatal immoralities of the Nephites. Finally, it was a means of assuring that a fully representative remnant of Joseph would be worthy to receive the Holy One of Israel when he descended to the temple in Bountiful to minister to his “other sheep” (see 3 Nephi 11:1, 8-10; 15:21).

The Mark Is Lifted

It was never intended that the Lamanites should be forever banished from the presence of the Lord. Indeed, Lehi had blessed the children of Laman “that the cursing may be taken from you and be answered upon the heads of your parents”

(2 Nephi 4:6). The first recorded instance of its being removed was in connection with the fourteen-year ministry of the four sons of Mosiah II between 90 and 77 BC. They were instrumental in an unprecedented conversion of literally thousands of Lamanites through “the spirit of revelation and of prophecy, and the power of God working miracles in them” (Alma 23:6). Nor were these Lamanites merely caught up in a wave of religious enthusiasm; they “never did fall away” (Alma 23:6).

They forsook all of their ancient traditions and adopted a new name, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, “and were no more called Lamanites” (Alma 23:17).³ Having turned from spiritual darkness to light, they changed their whole way of life: “And they began to be a very industrious people; yea, and they were friendly with the Nephites; therefore, they did open a correspondence with them, and the curse of God did no more follow them” (Alma 23:18; emphasis added).

When the *cause* (spiritual darkness) no longer existed, there seems to have been no reason why its *effect* (a dark skin) should be perpetuated. In all likelihood the mark of Laman was fully lifted. If so, then the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi were the first Lamanites of record to become physically white as well as spiritually “pure and . . . delightful” (2 Nephi 30:6; see also W of M 1:8). In any event, Lehi’s blessing was beginning to be fulfilled in about 80 BC.

Although other Lamanites were also converted to Christ in later generations and enjoyed great spiritual blessings (see Helaman 5 and 6), the first *explicit* reference to the mark’s being totally removed as miraculously as it had been imposed was in connection with critical events in AD 13. In that year the growing

³The converted Lamanite king renamed his son and successor Anti-Nephi-Lehi. His people and fellow converts then took their new king’s name upon themselves (Alma 23:17; 24:3). In this instance, the prefix “Anti” does not mean opposed to, but the image or reflection of. Thus these Lamanite converts sought to emulate or become like Nephi and Lehi (see Hel. 5:6-7).

threat of the second Gadianton band to both the Nephites and Lamanites alike resulted in a partial union of these two peoples:

And it came to pass that those Lamanites who had united with the Nephites were numbered among the Nephites; And their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites; 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 (3 Nephi 2:14-16).

This is a noteworthy passage. First, it demonstrates that the spiritual curse and its temporal sign were two separate, but related, things. Having previously “become converted unto the Lord” (3 Nephi 2:12), these Lamanites were spiritually alive. Still it was only after uniting with the Nephites that they became “white like unto the Nephites.” Further, the exact nature of the physical mark is made evident from the fact that both parents and children alike experienced a miraculous change of pigmentation. The critical phrase in all this is “and thus ended the thirteenth year.” In other words, less than a year after these righteous Lamanites had united with their Nephite brethren, they and their young sons and daughters became “white like unto the Nephites . . . exceedingly fair.”

The final and most inspiring Book of Mormon reference to the lifting of the spiritual curse and its accompanying sign occurred following the coming of the resurrected Christ in AD 34. His several appearances to the “more righteous part” of the people included “those who had been called Lamanites, *who had been spared*” (3 Nephi 10:12, 18; emphasis added). The possibility that there were Lamanites who did not repent and accept Christ following his initial ministry in the land Bountiful must be considered remote if we accept at full value Mormon’s statement that “it was [only] the more righteous part of the people who were saved” from the devastating destructions that came upon the land at the time of the Savior’s crucifixion (3 Nephi 10:12; cf. 9:13).

In 4 Nephi we learn that within two years of the Savior's coming "the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites" (1:2). We are further informed that in this Zionlike era: "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" (v. 17; emphasis added).

Although there is no specific reference to the removal of the mark, the fact that there were not "any manner of -ites" would seem to indicate that all physical, spiritual, and cultural distinctions of whatever kind were eliminated (Smith 3:122). The extent of intermarriage during that period between those who had descended from Nephi and Laman must have been extensive since there is no known reason why such should not have been the case. Those "incorrect traditions" (Alma 3:8) which had warranted the ancient separation of the two peoples no longer existed. Everything points to the fact that a righteous remnant of the Lamanite nation became fully identified with and assimilated into the surviving membership of the Nephite nation.

Being one in Christ, they "were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift" (4 Nephi 1:3), so much so that they were privileged to be the first, and thus far only, people to receive those awesome revelations the brother of Jared had sealed up to come forth only after the Savior's resurrection (see Ether 4:1-4). Without a doubt, these same revelations will be made known to the Latter-day Saints when similar conditions prevail among them (vv. 6-7).

Restoration of the Curse

The golden age of Lehi's posterity continued without blemish for approximately 160 years. Then, sadly, around AD 194 the idyllic, millennial-like union described by Mormon was marred when a number of the people apostatized from the Church and assumed the name Lamanites: "Therefore there

began to be Lamanites again in the land” (4 Nephi 1:20). While some of these defectors may well have been descendants of Nephi, in all likelihood the majority descended from Laman (see 4 Nephi 1:35-38; D&C 3:18). History repeated itself:

They did wilfully rebel against the gospel of Christ; and they did teach their children that they should not believe, even as their fathers, from the beginning, did dwindle. And it was because of the wickedness and abomination of their fathers, even as it was in the beginning. And they were taught to hate the children of God, even as the Lamanites were taught to hate the children of Nephi from the beginning (4 Nephi 1:38-39).

Whether or not the ancient sign of the loss of the Spirit was imposed immediately, or gradually over a period of many years, or only after the final destruction of the Nephite nation in the late fourth century is unknown. There is no explicit reference to the restoration of the dark skin in the Book of Mormon.⁴

Nephi saw in vision that the opposing armies in the climactic wars between the Nephites and the Lamanites would be composed respectively of his posterity and that of his brethren (4). He saw his people utterly destroyed as a nation by the Lamanites. Writing of the victorious Lamanites, he said:

And the angel said unto me: Behold these shall dwindle in unbelief. And it came to pass that I beheld, *after* they had dwindled in unbelief they *became* a dark, and loathsome and a filthy people, full of idleness and all manner of abominations (1 Nephi 12:22-23; emphasis added).

The Lamanites had been in a state of apostasy for nearly two hundred years, and the Nephites for nearly 100 years, when

⁴ That there were white Lamanites is attested to in *History of the Church* (hereafter *HC*). In June 1834, the “Zion’s Camp” expedition to Missouri uncovered the skeletal remains of a man whom the Propet Joseph Smith described as “a white Lamanite, a large, thick-set man, and a man of God. His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and a chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus, who was known *from the eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains. The curse was taken from Zelph, or, at least, in part*” (*HC* 2:79—80, 1904 ed.; emphasis added). Heber C. Kimball wrote that “It was made known to Joseph that he had been an officer who fell in battle, in the *last destruction* among the Lamanites, and his name was Zelph” (“Excerpts from H. C. Kimball’s Journal” 6:788; emphasis added). This incident does not prove that all Lamanites were white. Indeed, it may be an argument against that proposition.

they met at Cumorah for the final struggle (4 Nephi 1:45). How long they dwindled in unbelief before the mark was reimposed upon them, we can only conjecture, but one thing is certain—the presence of the physical sign reflected the spiritual darkness into which Lehi’s posterity fell after the coming of the Savior. Mormon described that fall in language reminiscent of that used by Nephi:

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 (Mormon 5:15; cf. Alma 50:21).

Note that, as the overall context shows, “this people” is a mixture of all of Lehi’s posterity. Also note that Mormon distinguishes between those who had partaken of the *first* cursing and those who would subsequently partake of it following the Nephite genocide (see Alma 45:11; Helaman 13:10).

As previously stated, a more-or-less thorough integration of the Nephites, Lamanites, and Mulekites must have occurred during that long age of unity when there were no “-ites.” Consequently, although the later mark would be similar to that which was first placed upon the Lamanite nation, the point to note is that it would not be restored only upon the posterity of Laman and his companions, but also upon the descendants of those Nephites and Mulekites who had “taken upon them the name of Lamanites” (4 Nephi 1:20).

That such was the case is borne out by Mormon’s parenthetical comment concerning the decline and fall of the Nephite nation wherein he stated that in his own day those who had taken the name “Nephites” (in contradistinction to those apostates from the Church of Christ who had taken the name Lamanites) had been “slain and scattered upon the face of the earth, and mixed with the Lamanites until they are no more called the Nephites, becoming wicked, and wild, and ferocious, yea, *even becoming Lamanites*” (Helaman 3:16; emphasis added).

This fulfilled the prophecy Alma gave his son Helaman in 73 BC wherein he predicted that four hundred years after Christ's appearance to them, the Nephites would "see wars and pestilences, yea, famines and bloodshed, even until the people of Nephi shall become extinct" (Alma 45:11). He noted, however, that "whosoever remaineth and is not destroyed in that great and dreadful day, shall be *numbered among the Lamanites*, and shall become like unto them" (v. 14; emphasis added).

Mormon (who was killed by the Lamanites between AD 385 and 400 [see Mormon 6:15; 8:2-3]) wrote to his son Moroni that "many of our brethren have deserted over unto the Lamanites, and many more will also desert over unto them" (Moroni 9:24). These desertions explain, in part, why the angel told Nephi that the Gentiles of the latter days would not "utterly destroy the *mixture* of thy seed, which are *among* thy brethren" (1 Nephi 13:30, emphasis added; cf. D&C 3:17-18).

Since a remnant of the doomed Nephite nation of the third century BC united with the more populous people of Zarahemla (Mulek's colony), we may expect to find representatives of the tribe of Ephraim (through Ishmael), of Manasseh (through Lehi), and of Judah (through Mulek) among so-called modern Lamanites. Other Israelitish tribes may also be represented as well, for although the tribe of Judah is identified with the people of Zarahemla, there is no justification for assuming that the blood of other Israelitish tribes was not also found among both them and Lehi's group.

The original inter-tribal boundaries of Israel were neither precisely defined nor rigidly maintained, and normal freedom of movement and settlement was not restricted to one's own ancestral area. The presence of Lehi and Ishmael in the southern kingdom of Judah at a later period is not at all surprising (see 2 Chron. 15:9; 2 Nephi 30:4; 33:8; D&C 19:27; cf. 57:4). Thus we can only surmise the extent of Israel's tribal representation among Book of Mormon peoples. It is manifestly incorrect to declare all modern Lamanites as being only of the lineage of

Joseph through Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael. Reference to them as “the children of Lehi,” or Lehites, or as a “remnant of Jacob” is more accurate than the term Lamanites.⁵

The House of Joseph

The mark which distinguished the Lamanites from the Nephites for some five hundred years began to be lifted with the conversion of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. It was totally removed following the conversion of the “more righteous” Lamanites who survived the awesome destructions at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion (3 Nephi chapters 8 and 9). However, within fewer than 350 years—in the fourth generation after Christ’s coming (1 Nephi 12:11; 3 Nephi 27:32)—both branches of American Israel became “strong in their perversion,” indulging in grotesque acts of idolatry, human sacrifice, rape, murder, and cannibalism (Moroni 9:7-19; Mormon 4:14-15). Having been raised to unprecedented heights of light and truth, the Nephites and Lamanites descended to unprecedented depths of darkness and depravity.

After the fall of the Nephite nation in AD 385 (Mormon 6:5-22), the Lamanites “went forth in multitudes upon the face of the land” and Nephi saw “*many generations*” pass away in “wars and rumors of wars” (1 Nephi 12:20-21; emphasis added). Moroni observed the beginnings of that process in AD 401: “The Lamanites are at war one with another; and the whole face of this land is one continual round of murder and bloodshed; and no one knoweth the end of the war” (Mormon 8:8). How far-ranging were these conflicts over the centuries, and what changes did they bring about in the Western Hemisphere?

⁵ The term “Lamanites” is used eleven times in the Doctrine and Covenants (3:18, 20; 10:48; 19:27; 28:8-9, 14; 30:6; 32:2; 49:24 and 54:8) primarily in reference to various North American Indian tribes. “Nephites” appears four times (1:29; 3:17-18; 38:39). In 3:17-18, the composition of Nephi’s original colony is distinguished from that of Laman’s group.

Archeologists believe that around 1200 BC Mesoamerica (Middle America: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador) was settled by various peoples of unknown origin beginning with the mysterious Olmecs and then, later, the Maya and Zapotecs.⁶ The advanced Maya (a name for a group of ethnically and linguistically related Indian peoples) and Zapotec civilizations are identified with the Classic Period (AD 250-900), while the Toltec, Mixtec, and Aztec civilizations arose in the Post-Classic period (AD 900-1500). However, Mesoamerica is also thought to be the location of the lands of Zarahemla, Bountiful, and Desolation. In an effort to explain how Book of Mormon peoples could occupy the same region occupied by other civilizations in Mesoamerica, some LDS scholars maintain that these other civilizations were contiguous to and contemporaneous with, but independent of, the Book of Mormon peoples.⁷ On the other hand, the physical identification of the Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites with the aforementioned Indian civilizations is not beyond the realm of possibility. The nature and extent of interracial and/or intercultural exchange during the three thousand year period beginning with the Jaredites and ending in those “many generations” following the fall of the Nephites is conjectural. But almost surely any migra-

⁶ It is LDS doctrine that the pre-flood Western Hemisphere—the then-geographical extent of which is unknown—was inhabited by Adam and his posterity from about 4000 BC to the time of the world-wide flood. The Book of Mormon indicates that America was first reinhabited by the Jaredites about 2200 BC and, sixteen hundred years later, by Lehi’s colony (see Ether 1:38, 42; 2:10-13; 13:2).

⁷ Some LDS archeologists believe that there were a number of cultural groups in the Western Hemisphere for thousands of years before the Jaredites (c. 2200 BC). Further, they believe that the overall Jaredite-Nephite-Lamanite territory was essentially a cultural island a few hundred square miles virtually surrounded by other contemporary Indian populations. While a plausible case can be made for these assumptions, they are at variance not only with significant statements in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, but also with statements by Joseph Smith and other church authorities. If, as LDS doctrine affirms, the fall of Adam occurred about 4000 BC, and if he was the first human to dwell upon this earth, any presumed dates for peoples antecedent to that time are manifestly in error. Also, “the land which is choice above all other lands” given to Lehi’s posterity (1 Nephi 13:30) is much more extensive than the relatively small geographical area comprising Central America.

tions to or within the Western Hemisphere by non-Book of Mormon peoples only added to the ethnic mix of the population on both continents (*HC* 2:79-80).

It should be recalled that the Lord's edict concerning the imposition of the Lamanite mark was not limited as to duration and extent (2 Nephi 5:23). In all likelihood most pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Americas—of whatever original race or culture—eventually came under the edict: "I will set a mark upon him that mingleth his seed with thy brethren, that they may be cursed also" (Alma 3:14-15). If so, then through assimilation and intermarriage other peoples, like the surviving Nephites, became Lamanites (Hel. 3:16). In this way the blood of Joseph was scattered among the diverse Indian peoples of the Western Hemisphere (Kimball, ". . . who is my Neighbor?" 277).

That such was the case is supported by many statements by latter-day prophets. Regardless of current theories to the contrary, every prophet from Joseph Smith to the present has declared that, in the main, the Indian peoples of the Western Hemisphere, as well as certain Pacific islanders, are of Israel through Joseph (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 17, 92-93, 232, 266-67, [hereafter *TPJS*]; Jessee 324; *Journal of Discourses* 2:200, 7:336; Kimball, ". . . who is my Neighbor" 277; "The Evil of Intolerance" 423).

In 1833 the Lord stated that after the gospel had been taken to the Gentiles, "then cometh the day when the arm of the Lord shall be revealed in power in convincing the nations, *the heathen nations, the house of Joseph*, of the gospel of their salvation" (D&C 90:9-10; emphasis added). Those Indian and island peoples who, in 1833, were classified among the heathen peoples of the earth, will be claimed by that ancient patriarch as his own, even as those Gentiles who come unto Christ are adopted into the family of Abraham (Abr. 2:9-11). As the mark served to segregate the Nephites from the Lamanites anciently, so has it served to segregate Lehi's descendants from the Gentiles in more modern times. Now, and even more so in the future, the blessings

of Joseph will be extended to a mighty remnant of “Ephraim and his fellows” (D&C 133:34) even among the non-believing nations.

The blood of the patriarch Joseph has spread across the Americas and the islands of the Pacific. And where his blood is found, there will his blessings be found as well. Brigham Young said all of North and South America has been designated the land of Joseph (*JD* 6:296), a land “which is choice above all other lands” (2 Nephi 1:5). Joseph Smith declared: “*The whole of America is Zion itself from north to south, and is described by the Prophets, who declare that it is the Zion where the mountain of the Lord should be, and that it should be in the center of the land*” (*TPJS* 362; emphasis in original).

Conclusion

Millions of Joseph’s modern descendants bear the temporal and spiritual burdens imposed upon them by their fathers. Insofar as mortality is concerned, they did not choose darkness; they were born into it. In God’s providence, most are numbered among earth’s impoverished and downtrodden peoples.

The Gentile inhabitants of America have received the blessings the ancient Nephites and Lamanites forfeited by their wickedness (Mormon 5:19). This has contributed to the white man’s historic oppression and denigration of Indian peoples. However, the Gentiles would do well to liken to themselves the words Jacob gave the ancient Nephites: “Revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skins; neither shall ye revile against them because of their filthiness; but ye shall remember your own filthiness, and remember that their filthiness came because of their fathers” (Jacob 3:9).

Elder Spencer W. Kimball noted: “Our redskin [Indian] brothers are today called unclean and common, but formerly it was we, the Gentile nations, who were the outcasts. . . . Today

we revile the Jew and his brother Israelite, the Indian. ‘What fools we mortals be!’ ” (“ . . . who is my Neighbor?” 336). There can be no better measure of the depth of our commitment to Christ, or of the presence of his Spirit in our lives, than the degree to which we manifest meekness and love toward the children of Lehi. They symbolize all racial minorities wherever they may be found. And there is every reason to believe that they will fulfill a major role in the Lord’s “strange work” (D&C 101:95) in these latter days. They will, said Elder Kimball, “assist in the building of the New Jerusalem with its temple” (“The Evil of Intolerance” 474; see D&C 90:9-11; 3 Nephi 21:14-29).

The prophetic cycle will be completed: as the spiritual curse with its attendant sign was lifted from Lehi’s worthy descendants when the Savior first visited them, so will it be lifted from all of Lehi’s righteous posterity when “the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob” (Isaiah 59:20). Just as the spiritual scourge was lifted from some anciently, so is it being lifted from some of Lehi’s posterity in these latter days. Jacob testified that “one day they shall become a blessed people” (Jacob 3:6). While this promise has been, and is presently being fulfilled in part, its most glorious and extensive realization lies ahead in connection with the literal establishment of Zion.

In concluding his message to his latter-day brethren, Nephi prophesied that “the *remnant* of our seed” would rejoice when they were brought to a knowledge of their fathers and of Jesus Christ: “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” (2 Nephi 30:4, 6; emphasis added).

A spiritually pure and delightsome people are the Lord’s covenant people. Therefore, as many of the Jews “as shall believe in Christ shall also become a delightsome people” (2 Nephi 30:7). So too will he delight in his covenant people among the Gentiles. “For the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with

them that repent and believe in his Son, who is the Holy One of Israel” (v. 2). Thus, any and all become “pure and delightsome”⁸ when they have “washed their garments in my blood, because of their faith, and the repentance of all their sins, and their faithfulness unto the end” (3 Nephi 27:19; cf. Ether 13:11).

The temporal and spiritual deliverance of a righteous remnant of Jacob will presage a like deliverance for all of those—from whatever race and whatever nation—who come unto their Savior and Redeemer. In that day when the “great division” (2 Nephi 30:10) has cleansed the earth of its rebellious inhabitants, contentions will cease, peace will prevail, the blessings of father Lehi upon the children of Laman and Lemuel will be fully realized, “and there shall be one fold and one shepherd; and he shall feed his sheep, and in him they shall find pasture” (1 Nephi 22:25).

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⁸ Except the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon, in all editions prior to 1981 this verse read “a white and delightsome people.” The 1981 change was made in conformity with the 1840 edition (the only one personally revised by Joseph Smith) where the word “pure” rather than “white” is found. Commenting on this point, Robert J. Matthews wrote: “The decision to use ‘pure’ in this passage was made not on the basis of the original manuscripts (as were most other cases) but on the 1840 revision by the Prophet Joseph Smith and the judgment of the [current] living prophets. This correction does not negate the concept that future generations of Lamanites will become white, but it removes the concept that one has to be white to be delightsome to the Lord” (398-99).

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