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## The Charge of Racism in the Book of Mormon

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## THE CHARGE OF “RACISM” IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

JOHN A. TVEDTNES

Let me begin by noting that, as one trained in anthropology, I abhor the term “race” and have tried to avoid using it for several decades. I view human beings as a spectrum, with a wide variety of skin colors and other physical features. Humans of all sorts are much more like their fellows, even in distant parts of the world, than some breeds of dogs are to others. Physical differences among humans that have been used to define “race” can often be present within families. My brother, for example has black hair and a rather swarthy complexion, while in my youth I was very fair-skinned and my hair was almost white. (As a child, I always wished that my hair were curly brown instead of straight platinum blond. That wish began to come true when I turned twelve and by the time I reached my thirties, when I began losing hair, it had finally become brown and curly.) One of the boys I knew in elementary school looked like he had stepped out of the Neanderthal mural at the American Museum of Natural History. He had a large upper torso, a very pronounced brow ridge, and a mandible that jutted out beyond his nose. He was so strong that it took three of us to subdue him when he started beating up on a younger boy. Having said that, let’s see what the Book of Mormon “racism” issue is all about.

### NEPHITE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE LAMANITES

Determined to read the Book of Mormon in purely naturalistic nineteenth century terms, rather than as an ancient text, recent criticisms of that volume of scripture are offended by some descriptions of Lamanites in the text. This is particularly true when the Nephites describe the Lamanites in pejorative terms, such as blood-thirsty, idolatrous, ferocious, idle, lazy, and filthy. The question is whether these terms can be considered “racist,” and whether supposed “racist” attitudes of the Nephites are evidence against the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

To the latter, we must conclude that racism does not impact the truth of the history of the Book of Mormon any more than it could impact the truth of the biblical account, which frequently disapproves of marrying foreigners.<sup>1</sup> Was Jesus being racist when he declined to bless the Canaanite woman, saying, “It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs?”<sup>2</sup> Or was he merely employing a saying of the time to illustrate the point he had just made, that he was “not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel?”<sup>3</sup>

Because the critics consider Joseph Smith to be the real author of the Book of Mormon, they see its supposed “racist” epithets as reflecting nineteenth-century American views rather than the views of the ancient Nephites. This view ignores some important facts:

1. There is no evidence, other than later hearsay, to indicate that Joseph Smith believed that skin color made someone inferior. On the other hand, there is clear evidence that he considered black Africans to be just as capable as whites, given the same opportunities, and he favored freeing the slaves.
2. At least two black men were ordained as elders during Joseph Smith’s time and the prophet himself signed the ordination certificate of one of them. That man, Elijah Abel, was later ordained a seventy and served as a missionary.
3. The Book of Abraham, frequently cited by later generations as evidence that blacks should not be ordained to the priesthood, says nothing about skin color and, in any event, describes a struggle over patriarchal authority between Abraham and the Egyptian king. One cannot read into the text anything about Egyptus being a descendant of Cain or having a black skin. Indeed, the idea of Ham having married a Cainite woman was prevalent among nineteenth-century American Protestants, whence Latter-day Saints picked up the idea. (I shall deal with this issue in a forthcoming review.)

Could the Nephites have been racist in their views of the Lamanites? Perhaps, in the same sense that the biblical patriarchs were racist when it came to their pagan neighbors, the Hittites, the Canaanites, and the Amorites, and did not want their offspring to marry these unbelievers. But once the Lamanites had been converted to the Nephite religion, the barriers separating these people dissolved. Even before they were converted, the Nephites considered the Lamanites to be “brethren,” a term used more than fifty times in reference to the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon.<sup>4</sup> This is hardly a term that one would expect to find in a society that holds racist views of a neighboring people. And if

Joseph Smith's racism is reflected in the Book of Mormon, why does that volume have large numbers of Lamanites becoming good guys and, indeed, more righteous than the Nephites in the decades before Christ's appearance?

## THE NATURE OF THE CURSE

Was dark skin really a curse pronounced on the Lamanites by God? That seems to be the general consensus, but what does the Book of Mormon really say? Speaking to Nephi, the Lord distinguished between the *curse* and the *mark*. "Behold the Lamanites *have* I cursed, and I *will* set a *mark* on them that they and *their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed.*"<sup>5</sup> At the time this promise was given to Nephi, the curse had already been enforced, while the mark, a change in skin color, was yet future. The Lord also told Nephi that others, including his own posterity, who mingled with the Lamanites, would be both cursed and marked:

And again: I will set a *mark* upon him that mingleth his seed with thy brethren, that they may be *cursed also*. And again: I will set a *mark* upon him that fighteth against thee and thy seed. And again, I say he that departeth from thee shall no more be called thy seed; and I will bless thee, and whomsoever shall be called thy seed, henceforth and forever; and these were the promises of the Lord unto Nephi and to his seed.<sup>6</sup>

Nephi described how the Lamanites, as a result of their consistent rebellion against God and the hardness of their hearts were cursed by being *cut off from the presence of God.*<sup>7</sup> This curse also resulted in the Lamanites *being separated from God's people* with the departure of Nephi.<sup>8</sup> In connection with the curse of separation, the Lord is said to have set a *mark* upon the Lamanites. The purpose of the mark, according to the Book of Mormon, was to distinguish the Lamanites from the Nephites so that the Nephites would not intermarry with them and accept incorrect traditions. After Nephi had led away those who would follow him, he wrote:

And behold, the words of the Lord had been fulfilled unto my brethren, which he spake concerning them, that I should be their ruler and their teacher. 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. Wherefore, the word of the Lord was fulfilled which he spake unto me, saying that: Inasmuch as they will not

hearken unto thy words *they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And behold, they were cut off from his presence. And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity.* For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, *that they might not be enticing unto my people* the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: *I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy 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. And because of their cursing which was upon them *they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey.*<sup>9</sup>

A change in skin color would obviously not make the Lamanites “idle” or “full of mischief.” These were cultural, not racial traits. To the Nephites, who followed the law of Moses,<sup>10</sup> the Lamanite practice of “drinking blood”<sup>11</sup> and “feeding upon beasts of prey”<sup>12</sup> would have been abhorrent, being forbidden in the mosaic code.<sup>13</sup>

Despite statements by such leaders as Nephi and his brother Jacob,<sup>14</sup> some later Nephites considered being cut off from the presence of God as well as the mark upon the Lamanite skins to be a curse.<sup>15</sup> Thus we read,

And the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them because of their transgression and their rebellion against their brethren, who consisted of Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph, and Sam, who were just and holy men. And their brethren sought to destroy them, therefore they were cursed; and the Lord God set a mark upon them, yea, upon Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael, and Ishmaelitish women. *And this was done that their seed might be distinguished from the seed of their brethren, that thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions which would prove their destruction.* And it came to pass that whosoever did mingle his seed with that of the Lamanites did bring *the same curse upon his seed.* Therefore, whosoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites was called under that head, and *there was a mark set upon him.* And it came to pass that whosoever would not believe in the tradition of the Lamanites,

but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the tradition of their fathers, which were correct, who believed in the commandments of God and kept them, were called the Nephites, or the people of Nephi, from that time forth.<sup>16</sup>

So while at least some of the Nephites disdained the Lamanites because of their skin color, the Lord was concerned about the sinful nature of the Lamanites and merely used their physical characteristics to keep the Nephites from accepting their wicked ways. It is interesting that some Nephites, having rejected the Nephite religion, did mingle with the Lamanites, bringing “the same *curse* upon his seed” and having “a *mark* set upon him.” Again, we see that the curse and the mark, while going together, were two different things.

### **LAMANITE FILTHINESS**

Mosiah 9:12 describes the Lamanites as “a lazy and an idolatrous people,” but it does not tie this to their skin color. Indeed, Alma 22:28 ties it to geographical or cultural conditions, saying that “the more idle part of the Lamanites lived in the wilderness.” More important is the fact that Nephi described his brothers’ laziness long before the change in skin color came into being, when Laman and Lemuel were unwilling to help him build the ship.<sup>17</sup> He also wrote of their “rudeness,” evidently in the original sense of that word, i.e., savagery.<sup>18</sup> In his vision, Nephi “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.”<sup>19</sup>

References to filthiness are not an allusion to skin color, but clearly refer to a spiritual state of being “filthy before God”<sup>20</sup> rather than a physical characteristic.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, both the Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants use the term “filthy” in reference to sinners.<sup>22</sup>

We should not be surprised to find attitudes of superiority and the attribution of negative characteristics to foreign people and cultures among the Nephites, and the existence of such in the Book of Mormon is not evidence that the text was influenced by nineteenth-century American racist views. Parallels are known in other ancient cultures. For example, descriptions of the Otomi people of Mexico in the Florentine Codex reflect Aztec ethnocentrism and could be considered just as pejorative, even though they are pre-Columbian. According to this text, the Aztecs commonly described the Otomi as

“untrained, stupid” and “very covetous, that is, very desirous, greedy. That which was good, they bought all; they longed for all of it even though it was not really necessary.” They were “very gaudy dressers–vain people.” They were “lazy, shiftless, although wiry, strong; as is said, hardened; laborers. Although great workers of the land, they did not apply themselves to gaining the necessities of life. When they worked the land they only wandered. Behold what they did: they went catching game.”<sup>23</sup> These descriptions resemble Nephite descriptions of the Lamanites.

In the ancient Near East, the Amorite was described as “a tent dweller” the “one who does not know city” “the one who in his lifetime does not have a house” or “the awkward man living in the mountains.” He is “the one who does not know (i.e. cultivate) grain,” or “the one who digs up mushrooms at the foot of the mountain” or he “who eats uncooked meat” and “who on the day of his death will not be buried.” They are “a ravaging people, with canine instincts, like wolves.”<sup>24</sup> Referencing such descriptions, William F. Albright observes,

This is naturally a somewhat extreme description, but it vividly illustrates the attitude of the sedentary folk of Babylonia at an undetermined period in the third millennium. It may be added that the Arab peasants of Syria still call the nomads *el-wuhush* “the wild beasts.”<sup>25</sup>

As the above examples from both ancient Mesopotamia and pre-Columbian Mesoamerica suggest, we should not be surprised to find that the Nephites and Lamanites may have struggled with their own ethnocentrism. Still, modern readers should be careful not allow their own cultural sensitivities to obscure the meaning of the text.

## **POSITIVE NEPHITE ATTITUDES TOWARD THE LAMANITES**

Significantly, Nephi, who first reported the “skin of blackness,” also wrote that the Lord accepts both “black and white” who are willing to come unto him.<sup>26</sup> Nephite prophets and writers consistently referred to the Lamanites as their *brethren*. When Nephite prophets referred to the “curse” of the Lamanites they explained that it was only a curse in the context of opposing ideologies of the Nephites and Lamanites. Once united in tradition and beliefs, skin color and other ethnic or tribal differences become irrelevant as far as the Lord and the Nephite prophets are concerned.



Nephi's brother Jacob publicly chastised the Nephites for hating the Lamanites because of their skin color.<sup>27</sup> While some Nephites looked upon the darkness of skin as a curse, Jacob corrected this erroneous assumption of superiority by noting that the Lamanites of that time were more virtuous and pure than some of their Nephite contemporaries,<sup>28</sup> that such external differences as skin color were temporary and do not necessarily signify spiritual states.<sup>29</sup> He commanded the Nephites to repent and to no longer revile against the Lamanites because of the darkness of their skins.<sup>30</sup> Here is an extract from his discourse:

Behold, the Lamanites *your brethren*, whom ye hate because of their *filthiness and the cursing* which hath come upon their skins, are *more righteous* than you; for they have not forgotten the commandment of the Lord, which was given unto our father—that they should have save it were one wife, and concubines they should have none, and there should not be whoredoms committed among them . . . 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. Wherefore, a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye 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. Wherefore, ye shall remember your children, how that ye have grieved their hearts because of the example that ye have set before them; and also, remember that ye may, because of *your filthiness*, bring your children unto destruction, and their sins be heaped upon your heads at the last day.<sup>31</sup>

Jacob's son Enos noted that the Nephites "did seek diligently to restore the Lamanites unto the true faith in God."<sup>32</sup> Subsequent generations were able to convert large numbers of Lamanites, and the righteousness and faithfulness of the Lamanites sometimes exceeded the righteousness of the Nephites.<sup>33</sup> Only in one instance in the entire Nephite record do we find Nephite prophets reporting any change in the darkness of the skin of the Lamanites, and this was after they had already converted and united with the Nephites.<sup>34</sup> Whether this change occurred through intermarriage or some other unknown process, the event for the Nephites was apparently unique and unprecedented. Within the context of Nephite society and culture, this exceptional event would no doubt have been viewed as a sign from God that such distinctions were irrelevant for those numbered



with Christ. After this there are no further references to the Lamanite skins becoming dark or that this was a significant factor for the Nephites.

## **WHITE AND DELIGHTSOME**

In the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon Nephi, speaking of the latter-day restoration, discusses the future conversion of Lehi's descendants, "And then shall they rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a white and delightsome people."<sup>35</sup> In 1840 the Book of Mormon was "carefully revised by the translator" Joseph Smith and in that edition the words "white and delightsome" were changed to "pure and delightsome." This change seems to reflect the Prophet's concern that modern readers might misinterpret this passage as a reference to Latter-day racial changes rather than righteousness. Unfortunately for subsequent LDS interpreters, following the Prophet's death, the changes in the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon were not carried over into subsequent LDS printings, which were based upon the edition prepared by the Twelve Apostles in Great Britain. Consequently, Latter-day Saints did not reap the benefit of the Prophet's clarification until it was restored in the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon. Interpreting this passage as meaning that conversion leads to a change of skin color echo a misinterpretation of the Book of Mormon text rather than an anachronism in the text itself.

But can we justify the prophet's change from "white" to "pure?" The answer is yes. The terms "white" and "pure" can be found in parallel in Daniel 7:9, Revelation 15:6, and D&C 110:3. They are also found together in a number of passages where they clearly refer to those who are purified and redeemed by Christ.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, we must note that the "white/pure and delightsome" passage that the prophet Joseph modified does not refer to the Lamanites, but to the Jews and Gentiles in the latter days who turn to Christ.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Mormon expressed the hope the Nephites "may once again be a delightsome people."<sup>38</sup> It was also of the Nephites that he wrote,

And also that the seed of this people may more fully believe his gospel, which shall go forth unto them from the Gentiles; 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.<sup>39</sup>

The use of black and white imagery to typify purity and righteousness is exemplified in the writings of Ephraim of Syria, a fourth century A.D. contemporary of Mormon in the Old World who commented on Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch as follows. "The eunuch of Ethiopia upon his chariot saw Philip: the Lamb of Light met the dark man from out of the water. While he was reading, the Ethiopian was baptized and shone with joy, and journeyed on! He made disciples and taught, and out of black men he made men white. And the dark Ethiopic women became pearls for the Son."<sup>40</sup>

The Book of Mormon makes it clear that the color of one's skin has no bearing on one's status as a righteous or sinful person. Nephi, the son of Helaman, declared to the Nephites,

For behold, thus saith the Lord: I will not show unto the wicked of my strength, to one more than the other, save it be unto those that repent of their sins, and hearken unto my words. Now therefore, I would that ye should behold, my brethren, that it shall be better for the Lamanites than for you except ye shall repent. For behold, they are more righteous than you, for they have not sinned against that great knowledge which ye have received; therefore the Lord will be merciful unto them; yea, he will lengthen out their days and increase their seed, even when thou shalt be utterly destroyed except thou shalt repent.<sup>41</sup>

This passage is reminiscent of Nephi's vision of the future of the Lamanites: "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."<sup>42</sup> Clearly, the Book of Mormon describes various people—including the Nephites themselves—as being dark, filthy, and loathsome in a spiritual sense. The Nephites who dissented to the Lamanites would not have considered them in such negative terms, and the Lord himself does not use such verbiage to describe the Lamanites. Moreover, Nephites such as the sons of Mosiah and their generation, who welcomed converted Lamanites into their society, have only good things to say about these converts.

We conclude, then, that while some Nephites seem to have been racist in the sense that they were repulsed by the skin color of the Lamanites, this was not a general trait. Rather than promoting concepts of racial inferiority, Book of Mormon events and teachings clearly suggest that people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds and traditions can truly overcome old hatreds and misconceptions and attain peace, happiness and unity through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Genesis 24:3, 37; 27:46; 28:1-2, 6-9; Ezra 6:21; 9:11.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 15:26.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 15:24.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob 2:35; 3:5; 7:24, 26; Enos 1:11; Jarom 1:2; Mosiah 1:5, 13; 22:3; 25:11; 28:1; Alma 3:6; 17:9, 11, 30-31, 33; 19:14; 24:7-8; 26:3, 9, 13-14, 22-23, 26-27; 27:8, 20-24; 28:8; 29:10; 43:14, 29; 48:21, 23-25; 49:7; 53:15; 59:11; Helaman 4:24; 11:24; 15:11-12; 3 Nephi 2:12; 4 Nephi 1:43; Mormon 2:26; 9:35-36; Moroni 1:4; 10:1.

<sup>5</sup> Alma 3:14.

<sup>6</sup> Alma 3:15-17, emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Nephi 5:20.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Nephi 5:1-7.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Nephi 5:19-24, emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Jarom 1:5.

<sup>11</sup> Jarom 1:6.

<sup>12</sup> Enos 1:20.

<sup>13</sup> Leviticus 7:26-27; 11:13-20.

<sup>14</sup> Jacob 3:5.

<sup>15</sup> Alma 3:6.

<sup>16</sup> Alma 3:6-11, emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Nephi 17:18.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Nephi 18:9; 2 Nephi 2:1.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Nephi 12:23.

<sup>20</sup> Jacob 3:3; see also vss. 5, 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Nephi 15:33-34; 2 Nephi 9:16; Mosiah 7:30-31; Alma 5:22; 7:21; Mormon 9:4, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Job 15:16; Psalm 14:2-3; 53:2-3; Proverbs 30:12; Ezekiel 16:36; 22:15; 24:13; 36:25; 2 Corinthians; Ephesians 5:4; James 1:21; Revelation 17:4; 22:11; D&C 88:35, 102.

<sup>23</sup> Bernadino de Sahagun, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, Book 10, in Dibble and Anderson, *Florentine Codex* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1961), Part 11:178-9.

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Buccellati, *The Amorites of the Ur III Period* (Naples: 1966), 330-332.

<sup>25</sup> William Foxwell Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 166.

<sup>26</sup> 2 Nephi 26:33.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob 3:5.

<sup>28</sup> Jacob 3:5-7.

<sup>29</sup> Jacob 3:8.

<sup>30</sup> Jacob 3:9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Jacob 3:5, 8-10.

<sup>32</sup> Enos 1:20.

<sup>33</sup> Helaman 6:1-2, 34-38; 12:2; 15:5-10; 3 Nephi 6:14.

<sup>34</sup> 3 Nephi 2:12-16.

<sup>35</sup> 2 Nephi 30:6 1830 edition.

<sup>36</sup> Alma 5:24; 13:12; 32:42; Mormon 9:6; D&C 20:6.

<sup>37</sup> See 2 Nephi 30:1-7.

<sup>38</sup> Words of Mormon 1:8.

<sup>39</sup> Mormon 5:15.

<sup>40</sup> *The Pearl: Seven Hymns on the Faith* 3:2, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 13:295. Thanks to Mark Ellison for bringing this passage to my attention.

<sup>41</sup> Helaman 7:23.

<sup>42</sup> 1 Nephi 12:23.