



1-1-2015

# Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis

Ethan Sproat

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Sproat, Ethan (2015) "Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 24 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol24/iss1/7>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis

*Ethan Sproat*

THE BOOK OF MORMON AND THE KING JAMES VERSION of the Bible (KJV) are peppered with straightforward descriptions of (animal) skins being used as clothing or as some other sort of covering.<sup>1</sup> Roughly the same number of passages also unmistakably refer to skins as human flesh.<sup>2</sup> Yet the use of the word *skin* (or *skins*) is ambiguous in six specific Book of Mormon passages that refer to changing skin color or the cursing of skins. These latter have all traditionally been interpreted as referring to *human* skins, with traditional racial implications. Notably, though, five of these passages lack immediate contextual clues as to what sort of skin each passage describes (see 2 Nephi 5:21; Jacob 3:5, 8, 9; 3 Nephi 2:15), and the last (Alma 3:5–6) contains a description of Lamanite skins that suggests the possibility of a significant, nontraditional interpretation of these six passages—one focused on how the skins referred to in these texts may relate to Nephite temples and issues of covenantal inheritance.

---

1. See, for example, Enos 1:20; Alma 3:5; 43:20; 49:6; 3 Nephi 4:7; Genesis 3:18–21; 27:16; Exodus 25:5; 26:14; 35:7, 23; 36:19; 39:34; Leviticus 13:48, 51; Numbers 4:5–25; 31:20; Ezekiel 16:10; and Mark 1:6. Other passages refer to a “leathern girdle” or “girdle of leather” (see, for example, Mosiah 10:8; 2 Kings 1:8; Matthew 3:4). Still other passages refer to skins as animal hide in other non-clothing contexts (see, for example, 1 Nephi 17:11; Exodus 29:14; Leviticus 7:8; 11:32; 15:17; 16:27; Numbers 19:5).

2. See, for example, Mosiah 17:13; Alma 20:29; 44:18; Exodus 34:29–30, 35; Job 2:4; 7:5; 10:11; 16:15; 18:13; 19:20, 26; 30:30; 41:7; Psalm 102:5; Jeremiah 13:23; Lamentations 3:4; 4:8; 5:10; Ezekiel 37:6, 8; Micah 3:2–3; and much of Leviticus 13 (which addresses how to ceremonially treat diseases of the skin).

Alma 3:5–6 is comprised of two sentences, in each of which the word *skin(s)* appears. Commentaries handle the two sentences in one of three ways: (1) by treating both of them independently, as if two very different things were at issue; (2) by commenting on only the second of the two sentences, remaining silent about the first; or (3) by failing to comment on either sentence.<sup>3</sup> All three of these approaches miss the fact that, when read in context, the use of *skins* in the second sentence appears to form part of a historical explanation of the use of *skin* in the first sentence. Here is the text:

Now the heads of the Lamanites were shorn; and they were naked, save it **were skin which was girded about their loins**, and also their armor, which was girded about them, and their bows, and their arrows, and their stones, and their slings, and so forth. 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. (Alma 3:5–6)<sup>4</sup>

According to a reading I will defend in the course of this article, this passage suggests **the possibility that “the skins of the Lamanites” are to be understood as articles of clothing, the notable girdle of skin that these particular Lamanites wear to cover their nakedness**. Significantly, these are the only two references to skins in Alma 3, which contains the Book of Mormon’s most thorough explanation of the Lamanite curse

---

3. For representative studies embodying these three approaches, see, respectively, Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:70–73; Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Volume III—Alma through Helaman* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 17; and Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 342. I should note that of over thirty book-length and article-length commentaries I’ve read spanning from the mid-nineteenth century to now, every single one has treated Alma 3:5–6 in one of these three basic ways.

4. Any emphasis within Book of Mormon quotations has been added.

and the curse's relationship to skins. Thus situated, Alma 3:5–6 might serve as an interpretive Rosetta stone. If both instances of skins in Alma 3:5–6 refer to clothing, then the other five references to various-colored or cursed skins in the Book of Mormon could also refer to clothing and not—as traditionally assumed—to human flesh pigmentation.

Such a nontraditional interpretation garners additional support from the critical textual work of Royal Skousen. In his nigh-exhaustive *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, Skousen claims that the Book of Mormon uses the indefinite article *a* with the singular *skin* to refer to animal skins. Skousen specifically points to the use of the indefinite article *a* in Enos 1:20 (“a short skin”), Alma 43:20 (“a skin”), and 3 Nephi 4:7 (“a lamb-skin”).<sup>5</sup> Intriguingly, this same syntactical pattern also holds true in the KJV, in which the only passages using the indefinite article *a* with *skin* are unambiguous references to clothing (see Leviticus 13:48, 51; Mark 1:6). However, Skousen fails to note that other than those three Book of Mormon passages he cites, the only other instance of the indefinite article *a* preceding *skin* in the Book of Mormon appears in 2 Nephi 5:21 in which “the Lord God did cause *a skin* of blackness to come upon [the Lamanites].” Skousen’s comparison of Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; and 3 Nephi 4:7 would appear to suggest that when the text of the Book of Mormon describes “*a skin* of blackness” in 2 Nephi 5:21, it is referring to something made of animal skin.<sup>6</sup>

---

5. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Three: Mosiah 17–Alma 20* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006), 1635–36.

6. Interestingly, Skousen does not read 2 Nephi 5:21 this way. Rather, he treats the singular phrase *a skin* in 2 Nephi 5:21 as a textual anomaly when compared with plural instances of skins in the Book of Mormon, which he interprets as referring to human skins: “Generally speaking,” he asserts, “the current Book of Mormon text uses the plural *skins* to refer to the skin color of peoples.” See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon, Part Two: 2 Nephi 11–Mosiah 16* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2006), 980–81. However, Skousen’s systematization of the plural/singular distinction seems forced in a number of ways. For example, the reference to Abinadi’s skin (singular) being scourged in Mosiah 17:13 is an unmistakable reference to human flesh, as are the references to the injured human skins (plural) in Alma 20:29 and Alma 44:18. Inversely, Skousen overlooks the plural animal skins referred to in 1 Nephi 17:11 and the plural garments of skins mentioned in Alma 49:6, plural references to animal skin that seem

In light of these textual observations, I find myself asking a beguilingly simple question: what might be discovered if we follow the contextual lead of Alma 3:5–6—and the syntactical hint in 2 Nephi 5:21—and assume that the other four references to various-colored or cursed skins in the Book of Mormon narrative also refer to certain types of clothing made of animal skin and not to flesh pigmentation at all? It turns out we can discover quite a bit. In this article, I will argue that if the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon can be understood coherently as certain types of clothing, then two other interpretive observations follow. First, the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon can be interpreted as a type of garment associated with the Nephite temple. Second, the mark of the Lamanite curse would seem to be self-administered, removable, and inherited in the same way that covenantal vestments in the KJV are self-administered, removable, and inherited.

### Traditional interpretations

Before I develop my alternate interpretation further in the subsequent sections of this article, I want to first acknowledge the ways that my conclusions fly in the face of over a century and a half of traditional interpretations.<sup>7</sup>

---

at odds with the singular references in Enos 1:20; Alma 3:5; Alma 43:20; and 3 Nephi 4:7. And even among the ambiguous passages that refer to skins of various colors, two are singular references (2 Nephi 5:21; 3 Nephi 2:15), while four are plural (Jacob 3: 5, 8, 9; Alma 3:6). The single/plural distinction in these passages simply does not affect the basic meaning of the skins in these passages. Instead, it is ultimately the aggregate of textual evidences that determines what sort of skin or skins is being described—whether it is human flesh, animal hide, or clothing.

7. For histories and analyses of the different interpretations of Lamanite skins, see the following: Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 2:108–23; Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 41–157; W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 52–105.

The longest-held and most widely circulated interpretive tradition follows the lead of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints who understood colored or cursed skins in the Book of Mormon to refer to human flesh pigmentation.<sup>8</sup> This strand of interpretation holds that, in some circumstances, God causes a darker flesh pigmentation to come upon certain iniquitous peoples as a sign of a curse. Some commentators have made concerted efforts to mitigate these traditional interpretations of races and divine curses with less ethically troubling theological perspectives.<sup>9</sup> More recently, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as an institution has distanced itself from all such interpretations and now officially “disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin [that is, darker flesh pigmentation] is a sign of divine disfavor or curse.”<sup>10</sup>

But more importantly than any ethical motivation, I find a traditional racial interpretation unsatisfying for a simple textual reason: nothing in the text of the Book of Mormon itself positively or unambiguously indicates that the various-colored or cursed skins are definitely human flesh.<sup>11</sup> Instead, a racial interpretation apparently relies

---

8. For example, see Mark E. Petersen, *Race Problems—As They Affect the Church* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University L. Tom Perry Special Collections, 1954), 9–11; Wilford Woodruff, “The Object of Assembling Together,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 22:173; Brigham Young, “Reorganization of the High Council,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:336.

9. For example, see Spencer W. Kimball, “The Day of the Lamanites,” in Conference Report, October 1960, 32–37; Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary of the Book of Mormon: Volume I—First and Second Nephi* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 224–25; Monte S. Nyman, *I, Nephi, Wrote this Record: A Teaching Commentary on the First Book of Nephi and the Second Book of Nephi* (Orem: Granite Publishing, 2003), 439–41; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 3:122–23; Rodney Turner, “The Lamanite Mark,” *Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 133–57.

10. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Race and the Priesthood,” <http://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood> (accessed December 8, 2013). In its disavowal of earlier theories, the LDS Church’s “Race and the Priesthood” essay does not cite any of the six ambiguous passages in the Book of Mormon that mention various-colored or cursed skins.

11. It should be noted how frequently *skins* refers to animal skins in the Book of Mormon and the KJV. In addition to already-cited Book of Mormon passages referring

on the textual ambiguity that it is possible for the term *skins* to refer to human flesh (as opposed to clothing or animal hide). At most, some surrounding passages indicate that a curse can be generationally perpetuated through mingling or mixing seed (see, for example, 2 Nephi 5:23; Alma 3:9, 14–15). But to read descriptions of transgenerational curses and then conclude that the associated skins are descriptions of human flesh is to rely on the inference that transgenerational curses can be interpreted racially (as opposed to culturally or ideologically).

Such inference was perhaps ostensibly sensible and self-explanatory to the Book of Mormon's initial Euro-American, nineteenth-century audience. In a recent article in the journal *American Literature*, Jared Hickman acknowledges the pervasiveness of racial inferences among early Book of Mormon audiences. According to Hickman, although Joseph Smith “never referred to the Nephite-Lamanite division in explicitly racial terms, it is clear that most early readers apprehended ‘Lamanite’ as an ethnoracial category that corresponded to contemporary nonwhite, specifically Amerindian, peoples.”<sup>12</sup> Hickman, for his part, proceeds with the same fundamental racial inference and (as an extension of that inference) builds a compelling analysis of the Book of Mormon as an “Amerindian Apocalypse [that] not only undoes the white supremacist apocalypse of many Euro-American biblicists; it opens onto a global apocalypse whose standard of judgment is truly ecumenical.”<sup>13</sup> Hickman's reading is grand and sweeping in its complexity and is arguably the most sophisticated treatise to date on the supposed racial aspects of

---

to animal skins used as clothing, the word *skins* refers to the animal hide used to make a bellows (see 1 Nephi 17:11). In the KJV (excluding Leviticus 13, which addresses how to treat diseases of the skin—such as leprosy), twenty-four of the forty-four uses of the word *skin(s)* refer to clothing of some sort. Interestingly, in the three Book of Mormon references to skins where human flesh is unambiguously meant (see Mosiah 17:13; Alma 20:29; 44:18), it is always within the context of an injury to the flesh.

12. Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” *American Literature* 86/3 (September 2014): 455–56. Hickman specifically cites an 1830 example of this racial inference by German Reformed pastor Diedrich Willers and an 1887 example by David Whitmer, who had an insider's perspective during the early days of the Latter-day Saint movement.

13. Hickman, “Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” 455.

the Book of Mormon. But in terms of interpretive traditions, Hickman's reading (by his own admission) is also the most recent development in a long line of racial interpretations that rests on the Euro-American inferences articulated by the Book of Mormon's first audiences.

The dilemma is that a long-held and widely circulated inference is still only an inference—not a definitive observation. While most any textual interpretation (including my own) incorporates inferences, some interpretive inferences have more textual support than others. A striking aspect of racial interpretations of the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon is the absence of any definitive internal textual support. I am not suggesting that the immediate context for every ambiguous passage contradicts traditional racial interpretations. But without more exploration into the contextual evidence, traditional racial interpretations seem to proceed from the subtle but significant assumption that the various-colored skins refer to human flesh.

Traditional racial interpretations thus face a textual burden that is at least threefold. First, should we assume that the skin referenced in Alma 3:5 be interpreted differently from the skins referenced in the very next sentence in Alma 3:6? Second, should we assume that the use of the indefinite article *a* with *skin* in 2 Nephi 5:21 be interpreted differently from all other similar uses in the Book of Mormon and KJV, including Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; 3 Nephi 4:7; Leviticus 13:48, 51; and Mark 1:6? And third, should we assume that the other four ambiguous references refer to flesh pigmentation without examining their contextual implications beyond the assumptions of nineteenth-century readers of the Book of Mormon? In the end, although a wealth of secondary literature and scholarship spanning from 1830 to 2015 assumes a racial interpretation of the Book of Mormon's talk of skins, I see nothing in the text itself that privileges a racial interpretation.

Other more recent interpretations have suggested that color differentiation in the Book of Mormon is best understood metaphorically. Such interpretations suggest that white represents a righteous person while black represents a wicked person, perhaps in the same symbolic sense that we might describe an envious person as green, a sad person

as blue, or an embarrassed person as red. However, these newer metaphorical interpretations also face some basic textual difficulties.

A metaphorical interpretation of color in the Book of Mormon may stem from ancient Near Eastern cultural associations. Some have argued that since the story of the first-generation Nephites asserts ancient Near Eastern origins, then it follows that the Nephites could have carried with them the tradition of metaphorically labeling their enemies as black and their righteous people as white.<sup>14</sup>

Other editorial changes to the Book of Mormon would seem to support metaphorical interpretations. For example, consider the editorial change in 2 Nephi 30:6 from “white and delightful” to “pure and delightful” and the addition of a footnoted cross-reference from “skin of blackness” in 2 Nephi 5:21 to “scales of darkness” in 2 Nephi 30:6.<sup>15</sup> Some of these changes go back to Joseph Smith.<sup>16</sup> Taken together, they seem to imply that references to various-colored peoples in the Book of Mormon refer to varying levels of spiritually symbolic darkness (wickedness) or lightness (righteousness) rather than to flesh pigmentation.

There are certainly several internal textual supports for these sorts of metaphorical interpretations. Consider the first-generation Lamanites in 2 Nephi 5:21 who are described as “white” and “fair” before they receive “a skin of blackness.” Traditional racial interpretations have understood the terms *white* and *fair* in this verse as referring to human

---

14. For example, see Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, [1952] 1988), 73–74; Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 1* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 286–87; John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1996), 90–91; John A. Tvedtnes, “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 183–97. It should also be noted that such Near Eastern cultural observations ultimately originate outside the actual text of the Book of Mormon or KJV.

15. For example, see Douglas Campbell, “‘White’ or ‘Pure’: Five Vignettes,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29/4 (1996): 119–35; Marvin Perkins, “How to Reach African-Americans,” FairMormon Conference, 2005. <http://www.fairmormon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/2005-Marvin-Perkins.pdf> (accessed December 5, 2013).

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

flesh pigmentation. However, the only other three passages in the Book of Mormon that describe people as *white* and *fair* lend themselves to understanding *white* and *fair* in a metaphoric or spiritually symbolic sense (see 1 Nephi 11:13; 13:15; Mormon 9:6). In 1 Nephi 11, for example, Mary is described as “fair and white” as she holds an infant Jesus while being directly compared to the white tree from Lehi’s dream, which represents “the love of God” (see 1 Nephi 11:8–13, 22). Also, a specific group of latter-day gentiles are described as “white” and “fair” after being clearly described as having the “Spirit of the Lord” upon them (see 1 Nephi 13:15). Perhaps the most clearly metaphoric use of *fair* and *white* comes in a pronouncement in Mormon 9:6 that declares that those who “cry mightily unto the Father in the name of Jesus . . . may be found spotless, pure, fair, and white, having been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, at that great and last day.” According to the pattern suggested by this passage, people become “spotless, pure, fair, and white” by being “cleansed by the blood of the Lamb.” This passage particularly lends itself to a metaphoric interpretation because describing something being made “white” through “blood” is clearly a symbolic description. The list of near-synonyms “spotless, pure, fair, and white” thus emerges as a string of spiritually symbolic descriptions.<sup>17</sup>

More intriguingly, the combination of the terms *spotless*, *pure*, and *white* in Mormon 9:6 brings this metaphoric interpretation back to other Book of Mormon passages involving garments. Specifically in Alma 5:24, holy prophets from the past are described as wearing “garments [that] are cleansed and are spotless, pure and white.” Similarly, in Alma 13:12, another group of righteous people is described as “being sanctified by the Holy Ghost, having their garments made white, being pure and spotless.” From these observations, we face what looks like a simple poetic rephrasing: skins that are white are analogous (if not equivalent) to garments that are white, pure, and spotless. Thus, when

---

17. In the 1828 edition of *Webster’s Dictionary* the entry for the word *fair* begins with “1. clear, free from spots.” By connecting “fair” with “free from spots,” this Webster’s definition from 1828 indicates how these specific words may have been used at the time Joseph Smith was preparing the Book of Mormon for publication.

read alongside other passages using similar terms of color, the Lamanite color shifts in 2 Nephi 5:21 and later in 3 Nephi 2:15–16 take on a more clearly metaphoric edge. From such a metaphoric stance, we might reasonably read 2 Nephi 5:21 this way: As the Lamanites had previously been close to the love of God (or had had the Spirit of the Lord upon them, or had previously been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb), “that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a [garment] of blackness to come upon them.”

Furthermore, metaphoric color shifts (and not literal flesh pigmentation changes) help explain why visual distinctions between Nephites and Lamanites are sometimes awkwardly absent in the Book of Mormon narrative. For example, as Brant Gardner points out, the events in Alma 55:4–15 do not necessarily rely on flesh coloring at all and even suggest that Nephites and Lamanites look a lot alike. In this passage, a descendant of Laman—who is also, coincidentally, named Laman—leads a squad of Nephite soldiers pretending to be escaped Lamanite combatants in order to infiltrate past some Lamanite guards. If flesh pigmentation were the cultural determiner in this narrative, then the mission should fail right when the Lamanite guards see Laman’s Nephite companions—who, traditional racial interpretations suggest, supposedly have paler flesh pigmentation than the Lamanites. Instead, the ruse succeeds based on how Laman speaks to the Lamanite guards (Alma 55:9)—not on how Laman looks. Based on this and other readings, Gardner therefore suggests that color differences between Nephite and Lamanite are best understood as metaphorical and not literal descriptions of flesh coloring.<sup>18</sup>

However, as compelling as these metaphorical interpretations are, they also tend to face some basic textual difficulties. The foremost advocates of these metaphoric interpretations (as referenced in footnotes 14, 15, and 18) still seem to accept that the skins of various colors in the Book of Mormon ostensibly refer to human flesh but that references to such skins are yet still symbolic in some way. But this sort of assumption

---

18. Brant Gardner, “What Does the Book of Mormon Mean by ‘Skin of Blackness?’,” *FairMormon Blog*, <http://www.fairmormon.org/perspectives/publications/what-does-the-book-of-mormon-mean-by-skin-of-blackness> (accessed August 2, 2015).

suggests further unaddressed questions. If the color differentiation of skins refers to human flesh coloring (even symbolically), why would the Nephites be culturally concerned with human flesh coloring (even symbolically)? And if skin is symbolic (as, for example, “scales of darkness” is symbolic), why would the Nephites be culturally concerned with skin as a symbol?

In brief, there appear to be significant textual difficulties for both racial and metaphoric interpretations. On one hand, the assertion that the text of the Book of Mormon describes a literal change in flesh pigmentation lacks any explicit internal textual support but relies instead on a long-standing, nontextual traditional assumption that the various-colored or cursed skins definitively refer to flesh pigmentation. On the other hand, the assertion that the text of the Book of Mormon uses color to describe metaphorical spiritual states overlooks other specific textual references to skins, thus leaving unaddressed what those skins might be.

In an effort to move beyond these textual quandaries, my interpretation in this article proceeds from the basic premise that in the question of the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon narrative, the best arbiters of meaning are the Book of Mormon itself and its closest literary analog, the KJV. While scholarly due diligence is always necessary when grappling with any textual dilemma, sometimes an experimental reboot as an interpretive exercise may prove fruitful. In this effort, I am reminded of the critical methodology frequently employed by the philosopher John Searle: “Try to forget about the . . . history of a problem and remind yourself of what you know for a fact. Any . . . theory has to be consistent with the facts. Of course, something we think is a fact may turn out not to be, but we have to start with our best information.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus in this article, I’m taking an experimental step back from the varied and complex interpretive history surrounding the terminology of skins in the Book of Mormon. Instead, I’m proceeding with my best information, which can be summarized in four basic textual observations.

---

19. John R. Searle, “Biological Naturalism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, ed. Max Velmans and Susan Schneider (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 325.

First, a terminology of skins is pivotal in six ambiguous passages in the Book of Mormon dealing with color and curses. Second, most of those six ambiguous passages lack immediate or otherwise definitive contextual clues as to the exact nature of such skins. Third, the word *skin(s)* is used in a straightforward manner to refer to clothing in several Book of Mormon passages—including one of the six ambiguous passages (Alma 3:5–6). And fourth, the initial ambiguous passage (2 Nephi 5:21) uses a syntactical maneuver (“a skin”) that is only replicated in the Book of Mormon and KJV when used in a straightforward manner to refer to clothing (Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; 3 Nephi 4:7; Leviticus 13:48, 51; Mark 1:6). These textual observations compose my investigative springboard—the starting point of the textual exegesis that forms the basis of this article. In what follows I will closely examine how the Book of Mormon and KJV lend themselves to interpreting skins in ways that go beyond pigmentation and metaphor.

### Skins and the Nephite temple

To proceed in earnest with such an exegesis, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the Nephite temple in everything that follows. As will become clearer in the course of this article, textual evidences suggest that the Nephite temple served not only as a physical metaphor for “the presence of the Lord” (2 Nephi 5:17–20), but also as the ideological backdrop to the deep cultural and religious conflicts between the Nephites and their various enemies. Indeed, the Nephite temple emerges as the central theme in the question of the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon.

Such realizations begin with a basic textual observation: four of the six ambiguous passages related to skin color or skin curses have the Nephite temple as their context. For instance, 2 Nephi 5:21–25 is bookended by the building of the first Nephite temple (see 2 Nephi 5:16) and the consecration of Jacob and Joseph as priests (see 2 Nephi 5:26). The next three ambiguous passages appear in Jacob 3:5, 8, 9 within the context of a discourse delivered in the first Nephite temple. A fifth passage, Alma

3:5–6—while not explicitly referring to the temple—notes that certain skins were darkened because of the conflict that took place at the time of the first Nephite temple as described in 2 Nephi 5:16–26. This overarching temple context suggests that garment-skins may somehow have been associated with the Nephite temple and (more specifically) that the Nephites may have used skins as an item of temple clothing.

According to the text, the Nephite temple was built—and, likely, presumably operated—after the manner of the ancient Israelite temple (see 2 Nephi 5:16). Among the major components of Israelite temple worship were special clothing or garments.<sup>20</sup> Most significantly, a recurrent item of ancient Israelite temple garments described in the KJV is an embroidered coat, or *kthnth* in Hebrew. This same word is used to describe Adam’s and Eve’s coats, made of skins, from the Eden narrative. The literary parallel between these two uses of coat (or coats) is significant. In Genesis, God uses coats of skins to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve (see Genesis 3:21), and in Exodus, God directs Moses to use a coat (among other garments) to ceremonially cover the nakedness of Aaron and his sons after they are washed at the tabernacle (see Exodus 40:12–15). Thus in these two Mosaic books, Adam’s and Eve’s original coats of skins are rhetorically converted via *synecdoche* into, simply, coats when associated with the temple.

*Synecdoche*, in the sense just mentioned, is an ancient rhetorical trope closely associated with metaphor. Definitions of *synecdoche* vary somewhat from theorist to theorist, but Kenneth Burke’s definition is most useful here, according to which *synecdoche* is a functional rhetorical device for describing “part for the whole, whole for the part, container for the contained, sign for the thing signified, material for the thing made, cause for effect, effect for cause, genus for species, species for genus, etc.”<sup>21</sup> Burke further suggests that “all such conversions [via *synecdoche*] imply an integral relationship, a relationship of convertibility, between the two

---

20. Important passages on temple clothing can be found in Exodus 28, 29, and 39, and Leviticus 6, 8, and 16.

21. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 507–8.

terms.”<sup>22</sup> We see uses of synecdoche all around us, particularly in terms of materials and the objects made of those materials—for example, “glasses” can refer to spectacles, “irons” to handcuffs or shackles, “silver” to fancy cutlery, or “pigskin” to an American football. In a similar way, the name of the Israelite temple coat functions as a synecdoche that harks back to Adam’s and Eve’s coats of skins. In a parallel manner, the garment-skins of the Nephite temple could also be read as referring to Adam’s and Eve’s coats of skins in some sort of synecdoche relationship.

The plausibility of this literary association between the Israelite temple coat and the Nephite temple skin is further reinforced by the use of coat/*kthnth* in Genesis 37 to describe the token of covenantal inheritance that Jacob gives to his favored son Joseph—namely, the coat of many colors. Joseph’s coat and Adam’s and Eve’s coats are the only two uses of the English word *coat* or the Hebrew word *kthnth* in the KJV before the Israelite temple coat/*kthnth* is described in Exodus 28. Consequently, the Israelite temple coat likely recalls both Joseph’s coat as well as Adam’s and Eve’s coats, thus serving as an emblem of inherited covenants.<sup>23</sup> Readers of the Book of Mormon know that the story of Joseph’s coat and its relationship to inherited covenants is one with which the Nephites strongly identify themselves—evidenced especially in Captain Moroni’s specific reference to Joseph’s coat when Moroni marshals Nephites to defend the title of liberty (see Alma 46:23–24). The fact that Moroni’s title of liberty is made of his own coat (see Alma 46:12–13, 23–24) or garment (see Alma 46:19) is perhaps the primary

22. Burke, *Grammar of Motives*, 508.

23. Hugh Nibley makes a similar observation in his lecture series transcribed in *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 3* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 60–63. Nibley references the eleventh-century Islamic scholar Tha’labi in support of the claim that the coat that Israel gives Joseph is the exact same coat that the Lord gave Adam in the Garden of Eden. Nibley concludes that this coat was the primary emblem of Israel’s covenants from the beginning through the tabernacle and First Temple eras. Nibley further concludes that Captain Moroni is drawing on the same Hebrew tradition Tha’labi draws on when speaking about Joseph’s coat in Alma 46. However, Brian Hauglid has since revealed some serious translation errors in Nibley’s treatment of Tha’labi, which considerably weaken Nibley’s Alma 46 argument. See Brian Hauglid, “Garment of Joseph: An Update,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 4 (2003): 25–29.

reason the title of liberty is so striking to the faithful Nephites who rally to it. Moroni's title of liberty illustrates Marshall McLuhan's observation that "the medium is the message."<sup>24</sup> Moroni's coat or garment—as the medium that conveys the message—may be more important to the nature and power of the message than anything written on the coat or garment. Crucially, just as Joseph's coat represents Israel's covenantal inheritance, the Nephites who rally to defend the title of liberty identify their garments as representing their covenants—claiming that to abandon and desecrate their garments is symbolically and rhetorically equivalent to abandoning and desecrating their covenants (see Alma 46:22).

The Nephites' strong affinity to the story of Joseph and his coat likely arises because Lehi is a descendant of Joseph (see 1 Nephi 5:14; 2 Nephi 3:4). Also, notable parallels with the biblical story of Jacob and Joseph are written into the Nephite story of origin: Jacob and Lehi both live in a promised land in which their families are strangers (see Genesis 37:1; 1 Nephi 18:23); both set apart a younger son as favored (see Genesis 37:3; 1 Nephi 2:22); the younger, favored son in both narratives has visions concerning the future of his family (see Genesis 37:5–7, 9; 1 Nephi 12); the older sons in both narratives resent having a younger brother rule over them (see Genesis 37:4, 8; 1 Nephi 16:37–38); and the older brothers in both narratives plot the destruction of the favored son (see Genesis 37:18–20; 2 Nephi 5:3–4). These literary parallels are so notable and the Nephites' affinity to Joseph's coat of many colors so profound that the apparent lack in the parallel Nephite story of any comparable article of clothing is puzzling. Yet if the skins of various colors in the Book of Mormon refer to a type of garment, we then have a parallel garment among Lehi's sons, inextricably connected to matters of inheritance, ruling, and covenants.

This feature of the Nephite story emerges specifically in 2 Nephi 5. At the beginning of that chapter, Nephi's eldest brothers Laman and Lemuel complain about him: "Our younger brother thinks to rule over

---

24. Marshall McLuhan coined the mass-media dictum "the medium is the message" in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

us, . . . [but] we will not have him to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people” (2 Nephi 5:3). The **issue here is inheritance**: Who will rule in Lehi’s branch of the house of Israel? God had earlier appointed Nephi to be the “ruler” of the family (1 Nephi 2:22), something Laman and Lemuel resent from the start. When the situation becomes unmanageable, Nephi takes his followers and settles in a different land (see 2 Nephi 5:5–7). Only a few verses later, Nephi and his people build their first temple (see 2 Nephi 5:16–17). The presence of that temple is vital to the next several verses. Only after it is built is **Nephi anointed king** (see 2 Nephi 5:18). The temple also seems to legitimize Nephi’s status as a ruler and teacher (see 2 Nephi 5:19). And **perhaps because the Lamanites do not have access to the Nephite temple, they are “cut off from the presence of the Lord”** (2 Nephi 5:20). Thus, the lack of the Nephite temple appears to constitute the essence of the “cursing” that comes upon the Lamanites, for it is in this context that Nephi then states that “the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon” the Lamanites, along with various curses (see 2 Nephi 5:21–25).

**Lest any reader think this skin and curse have nothing to do with vestments or the temple, Nephi immediately juxtaposes the curse bestowed upon his wicked brothers with the blessings conferred on his righteous brothers: “I, Nephi, did consecrate Jacob and Joseph, that they should be priests” (2 Nephi 5:26).** As God instructs Moses in Leviticus, consecrating priests and clothing them in “holy garments” was necessary to have them perform temple sacrifices for ritual atonement (Leviticus 16:32–33). As a people who follow the law of Moses, it would be odd for the Nephites to consecrate priests without similar holy garments. In parallel, the text of 2 Nephi 5 appears to report on the cursed skins (or garments) of his older, rebellious brothers and the holy garments (or coats of skins) bestowed upon his younger, obedient brothers. If references to the black Lamanite skin refer to a type of garment, it is evidently a sort of garment with powerful rhetorical signals for the Nephites. **That is to say, when Nephites see Lamanites wearing particular non-Nephite garment-skins, the Nephites can know**

that such Lamanites are cursed, that they are cut off from the temple (“the presence of the Lord”), that they are not rightful priests, and that they are not rightful kings who can rule and reign in Lehi’s branch of the house of Israel.

The association between garment-skins and the temple is subsequently solidified in the temple address delivered by Jacob, one of the consecrated temple priests mentioned above. He opens his address by referring to his clothing: “I, Jacob, according to the responsibility which I am under to God, to magnify mine office with soberness, and that I might *rid my garments of your sins*, I come up into the temple this day that I might declare unto you the word of God” (Jacob 2:2). This focus early in Jacob’s discourse, associating its temple setting with ritual clothing, suggests that a reference later in the discourse to skins provides context for it to be read in a similar fashion. Still speaking in the temple, Jacob admonishes his Nephite audience:

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. . . . 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. (Jacob 3:5, 8, 9)

If readers can assume continuity in rhetorical strategy across Jacob’s address, the skins to which Jacob refers might well be a kind of garment. At any rate, *Jacob’s reference to garments being rid of sin, as perhaps his reference later in the same discourse to skins being white, follows a consistent symbolic theme of Nephite religious rhetoric in which certain clothing is made spiritually clean or is made metaphorically white.*<sup>25</sup>

---

25. See, for instance, 1 Nephi 12:10–11; 2 Nephi 9:44; Jacob 1:19; Mosiah 2:28; Alma 5:21–22, 24, 27; 7:25; 13:11–12; 34:36; 3 Nephi 19:25; 27:19; Mormon 9:35; Ether 12:37–38; 13:10.

Beyond such rhetorical themes, this reading of Jacob's reference to skins suggests that the Lamanites may be understood as having had garments and ceremonial practices similar in form to certain Nephite garments and ceremonial practices. The text indicates that Nephites and Lamanites shared ritual practices—even ritual practices associated with the temple. Given the Nephite temple as a site for consecrating Nephite kings (see Mosiah 1–6, especially Mosiah 1:10; 2:30; and 6:3), some sharing of ceremonial practices would seem to be indicated by a note later in the Book of Mormon when a Lamanite king “put forth his hand . . . as a token of peace, which custom they had taken from the Nephites” (Alma 47:23). It seems reasonable to suggest that, in a similar manner, the Lamanites imitated or adapted Nephite ceremonial practices and authoritative garments associated with the temple in an effort to legitimize their contested claims to kingship.<sup>26</sup>

From this perspective, it may also be significant that Laman and Lemuel assert Israelite heritage more strongly than Nephi. For instance, Laman and Lemuel proudly proclaim that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were actually “a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses” (1 Nephi 17:22). Regardless of future deviations from the law of Moses, Laman and Lemuel emphasize in the beginning that they want to keep the law of Moses—including, presumably, temple practices that confer kingship. In this sense, the various-colored Lamanite skins can be understood as Laman's and Lemuel's authoritative clothing

---

26. Matthew Brown makes a similar claim specifically about the Gadianton robbers—that they may have imitated the ceremonial clothing of Nephite temple priests in order “to make a claim for legitimate priestly power.” See Matthew B. Brown, “Girded about with a Lambskin,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 146. Other scholars have made analogous claims about Gadiantons imitating Nephite ceremonial practices. See Daniel C. Peterson, “Notes on Gadianton Masonry,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 174–224; and Victor L. Ludlow, “Secret Covenant Teachings of Men and the Devil in Helaman through 3 Nephi 8,” in *The Book of Mormon: Helaman through 3 Nephi 8, According to Thy Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 265–82.

that specifically supports their claim that they ought to rule over the Nephites.

This interpretation of garment-skins in the earlier parts of the Book of Mormon finds further confirmation in later Nephite stories. If Laman and Lemuel wore authoritative garment-skins, it would easily follow that they passed down authoritative garment-skins to succeeding generations—heirs who also believed that they had the right to rule over the Nephites. Indeed, every single reference in the Book of Mormon that unambiguously describes animal skin as clothing also refers to people who set themselves as would-be conquerors over the Nephites: (1) Enos describes the girdle of skin as common clothing among his Lamanite cousins who “were continually seeking to destroy” the Nephites (Enos 1:20); (2) the Lamanite warriors who attack Zeniff’s Nephite colony in part because they claim that the Nephites have unjustly “taken the ruling of the people out of their hands” are “girded with a leathern girdle about their loins” (Mosiah 10:15, 8); (3) Lamanites combining with an army of Nephite dissidents wear a girdle of skin in their efforts to overthrow the Nephite government (see Alma 3:5); (4) Zerahemnah, whose goal is to “gain power over the Nephites by bringing them into bondage,” leads an army of Lamanites, Zoramites, and Amalekites also wearing a girdle of skin (Alma 43:8; see v. 20); (5) Lamanites and Amalickiahites clothe themselves in “garments of skins” when attempting to “overpower and subject their brethren to the yoke of bondage” (Alma 49:6–7); and (6) dissenter Giddianhi’s Gadianton robbers similarly “had a lamb-skin about their loins” as they try to take over the Nephites’ cities, lands, and possessions (3 Nephi 4:7; see 3 Nephi 3:6).

In some of the examples just cited, a garment-skin is clearly worn with other defensive armor as a kind of personal shielding or protection (see Alma 3:5; 49:6; 3 Nephi 4:7). The ceremonial nature of these garment-skins is nevertheless driven home in four of the passages above in which these garment-skins are used specifically to cover nakedness, in another allusion to the biblical narrative of Adam and Eve (see, for example, Mosiah 10:8; Alma 3:5; 43:20; 49:6). From all these examples, it would seem that Lamanites, Zoramites, Amalekites, Amalickiahites,

and Gadianton robbers all understood certain articles of their clothing to be connected to their claim that they should rightfully rule over the Nephites. From the Nephite perspective as represented in Jacob's sermon and thereafter, however, those same articles of clothing seem to serve as a clear mark of a curse that separates corrupted traditions from the righteous practices of a covenant people.

Giddianhi's army of Gadianton robbers is a particularly stark example of corrupted tradition. During the chaotic conflicts just prior to Jesus's visit to the Nephites, the Gadianton robbers wear "a lamb-skin about their loins, and they were dyed in blood" (3 Nephi 4:7). There is, of course, narrative precedent in the KJV for this sort of drastic battlefield attire. In an Israelite conflict over which side of the family would rule Israel, King David's nephew Joab "put the blood of war upon his girdle that was about his loins" and eventually seeks refuge at the altar in the tabernacle before being killed by one of King Solomon's men (1 Kings 2:5; see vv. 28–34). In both Joab's bloodstained girdle and the Gadiantons' bloodstained garment-skin, it is not difficult to see a direct mimicry of an Israelite temple ordinance in which Moses sets apart Aaron and his sons as priests and leaders in Israel. Moses sacrifices the "ram of consecration" and then takes "the blood which was upon the altar, and sprinkled it upon Aaron, and upon his garments, and upon his sons, and upon his sons' garments with him; and sanctified Aaron, and his garments, and his sons, and his sons' garments with him" (Leviticus 8:30). In ancient Israel, when the temple priest emerged from the temple after this ordinance, his bloodstained ceremonial clothing conveyed even to distant viewers outside the temple that ritual atonement had been performed. Thus when the Gadianton robbers present themselves to the Nephites in battle array, given the latter's adherence to the law of Moses, it would indeed have been "great and terrible" for the Nephites to see them wearing garment-skins "dyed in blood" (3 Nephi 4:7).

All these details suggest a consistent tradition running through the Book of Mormon, according to which garment-skins were associated with the temple, as well as with the biblical narratives of Adam and Eve, of Jacob and Joseph, of Moses and Aaron, and of David and Solomon.

This in turn suggests the real textual possibility that references to skins changing color in the Book of Mormon mean something rather different from what is traditionally assumed. In order to make this possibility still more plausible, however, it is necessary to turn from temple context to some specific narratives that help illustrate how the mark or the curse associated with skins operates in the Book of Mormon.

### The cursing of skins

Especially important to understanding the Book of Mormon's conception of skins being cursed or marked is the account of the Amlicites in Alma 3. This narrative clearly illustrates how a mark of the Lord's curse can be self-administered and also indicates how such a curse could have nothing to do with race or flesh pigmentation. As early as the 1950s, in fact, Hugh Nibley argued that 2 Nephi 5:21 should be interpreted in light of the Amlicite story, such that the reference to God's causing "a skin of blackness to come upon" the Lamanites actually "describes the result, not the method, which is described [in Alma 3]."<sup>27</sup> This point deserves extended attention.

As mentioned earlier, Alma 3 contains the Book of Mormon's most thorough explanation of the Lamanites' mark, curse, and skins. It begins by describing the aftermath of a horrific (but successful) battle between the Nephites and a combined army of Lamanites and Amlicites. The text goes on to describe how the Amlicites (Nephite insurrectionists) distinguish themselves from the Nephites, their former kinsfolk: "the Amlicites were distinguished from the Nephites, for they had marked themselves with red in their foreheads *after the manner of the Lamanites*" (Alma 3:4). Apparently, just as the Lamanites mark themselves, so do their new Amlicite allies mark themselves. The next verse describes other ways the Lamanites mark themselves—including, crucially, a description of their distinctive girdle-skins (see Alma 3:5).

---

27. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 74.

In Nibley's interpretation of this situation, the Amlicites "set the mark upon *themselves*," thus following a process "so natural and human" that "it suggested nothing miraculous to the ordinary observer," even though "it was none the less God who was marking them."<sup>28</sup> Key to Nibley's interpretation is the text's statement that "the Amlicites knew not that they were fulfilling the words of God when they began to mark themselves in their foreheads; nevertheless they had come out in open rebellion against God; therefore it was expedient that the curse should fall upon them" (Alma 3:18). Nibley concludes, "God places his mark on people as a curse, yet it is an artificial mark which they actually place upon themselves, . . . which makes the difference between Nephite and Lamanite a cultural, not a racial, one."<sup>29</sup> Nibley further relies on the text of Alma 3, according to which,

whosoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites was called under that head, and . . . 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. (Alma 3:10–11)

The difference between the Nephites and Lamanites described in this passage is all the more clearly rhetorical and ideological—not racial. Grant Hardy observes in connection with this passage that "belief in the correct traditions of the Nephites seems to have been the most important criteria in deciding who was or who was not a Nephite (apparently this acceptance of tradition was more significant than actual lineage)."<sup>30</sup>

Neither Hardy nor Nibley connects their observations to the matter of Lamanite skins. Nibley, for instance, places a limit on his conclusions by stating simply that the "cultural picture may not be the whole story of

---

28. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 74.

29. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 74.

30. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 301.

the dark skin of the Lamanites.”<sup>31</sup> But if the Lamanites’ cursed skins are a type of garment with rhetorical and ideological associations, then the Lamanites can put on and take off the mark of their curse just as easily as the Amlicites can put on and take off theirs. The Lamanite curse thus seems to fit well into a larger theological scheme in the Book of Mormon, according to which “it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished” (Mormon 4:5). God is the one who marks and curses the wicked, but he uses the wicked as the instrument of their own marking and cursing.

The interpretation I offer here also speaks to the curious descriptions in the Book of Mormon of the curse and mark being removed. Traditionally, the account of the converted Lamanites in 3 Nephi 2:15 (whose “skin became white like unto the Nephites”) has been read in racial terms. However, if the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon narrative indeed refer to a certain type of garment, we discover a different possible meaning of the text. Right around the same time that Giddianhi’s army of Gadianton robbers was harassing the Nephites, “all the Lamanites who had become converted unto the Lord did unite with their brethren, the Nephites,” and they embraced the principles that Captain Moroni had earlier written on his coat or garment, namely, “to maintain their rights, and the privileges of their church and of their worship, and their freedom and their liberty” (3 Nephi 2:12). Consequently, the converted Lamanites are numbered among the covenant people (see 3 Nephi 2:14). It is at this point that the converted Lamanites’ “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” (3 Nephi 2:15–16). If the lack of the Nephite temple lies at the heart of the Lamanites’ curse (see 2 Nephi 5:16–21), and if separation from the Lord’s covenant people thus concerns authority-granting clothing (skins or garments or coats), then when Lamanites unite themselves with the covenant people and gain access to the Nephite temple, it is presumably their clothing that is symbolically made white.<sup>32</sup>

31. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 74.

32. It might be noted that no change concerning skins is explicitly mentioned in connection with the Lamanites converted by Ammon and the other sons of Mosiah in

Up to this point, nothing here yet fully explains how such curses can be passed down generationally. In other words, how can a curse (due to separation from the temple) and its related mark (apparently the use of an apostate garment) come upon people when they mix or mingle their seed with someone who is cursed (see 2 Nephi 5:23; Alma 3:9)? Yet when the Lamanite converts' curse is lifted in 3 Nephi 2:15, they gain access to Nephite temple rites, and their sons and daughters become "exceedingly fair," with the consequence that those "fair" children are "numbered among"—that is, presumably, they marry—the children of the Nephites (3 Nephi 2:16). There seems to be a suggestion here that mingling in marriage among children has something to do with whether parents share temple rites. Actually, from the very first generation of Lehi's children, the curse laid on the Lamanites focuses on perspective and marriage—that is, on how covenant people perceive those outside the covenant in terms of possible marriage relations. According to Nephi, God symbolically darkens the Lamanites' garment-skins specifically so that the Lamanites "might not be enticing" to the Nephites (2 Nephi 5:21–23). Presumably, God does this because those who do not marry in the covenant will bear children outside the covenant.

Additionally, the KJV contains further narrative precedent for this sort of curse in the postexilic concern over marriage with non-Israelites. In Nehemiah, Israel enters into a covenant with God with the following characteristics: (1) Israelites separate themselves from all other peoples in the course of making a covenant into which they are "sealed" (see Nehemiah 9:2, 28, 38; 10:1); (2) Israelites covenant to obey the law of the Lord and agree to face an associated "curse" should they prove disobedient (see Nehemiah 10:29); and finally, (3) Israelites also covenant to keep their children in the same covenant by preventing them from

---

Alma 17–26. Alma 23:18, however, indicates that after these Lamanites were converted, "they were friendly with the Nephites; therefore, they did open a correspondence with them, and the curse of God did no more follow them." Like the later Lamanites of 3 Nephi 2:15, Ammon's Lamanite converts have their curse removed when they ideologically unite themselves with the Nephites. It may further be of significance that Ammon uses the language of darkness and light to describe the conversion of the Lamanites: "Our brethren, the Lamanites, were in darkness, yea, even in the darkest abyss, but behold, how many of them are brought to behold the marvelous light of God!" (Alma 26:3).

marrying outside the covenant (see Nehemiah 10:30). Thus, like the Nephites, postexilic Israel makes significant covenants in connection with temple building, agreeing to a “curse” if they prove unfaithful, and working to protect their children from the curse by preventing them from marrying outside the covenant. For postexilic Israel, this process explains a loosely “genetic” way that curses are passed down from generation to generation—that is, through marrying outside of, or apostatizing from, the covenant. Such apostasy has nothing to do with flesh pigmentation or with genetics in the biological sense; instead, it has everything to do with perpetuating the covenant status.

In providing a narrative precedent, Hebrew biblical texts show how certain Israelite practices and covenants are passed from one generation to another through authoritative garments—and participation in temple ordinances. In connection with the Israelite temple, blessings are passed down from generation to generation in the form of sacred clothing. After detailing the washing, anointing, and clothing of Aaron and his sons, the account in Exodus asserts, “And the holy garments of Aaron shall be his sons’ after him, to be anointed therein, and to be consecrated in them. And that son that is priest in his stead shall put them on” (Exodus 29:29–30; see 40:12–15). When Aaron later died, Moses made sure that exact thing happened: “Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and put them upon [Aaron’s son] Eleazar,” who then became the high priest in Aaron’s stead (Numbers 20:28).

Other biblical narratives appear to follow this same pattern. The prophet Elijah is described as wearing “a girdle of leather about his loins” as his prophetic mantle (2 Kings 1:8). In an analysis of the Hebrew text, David Stec suggests that Elijah’s “hairy mantle” of animal skin may be the same authoritative garment that Elijah passed to his pupil Elisha as a mark that Elisha was to become the prophet in Elijah’s stead (see 1 Kings 19:13, 19; 2 Kings 2:8, 13–14).<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, several scholars have long held that John the Baptist specifically imitates Elijah by also

---

33. David M. Stec, “The Mantle Hidden by Achan,” *Vetus Testamentum* 41/3 (July 1991): 357–58.

wearing “a girdle of a skin about his loins” (Mark 1:6; see Matthew 3:4).<sup>34</sup> It is reasonable to infer from biblical narratives that John the Baptist, as the son of the temple priest Zacharias, received his Elijah-like mantle of animal skin the same way Elisha did—as a bestowed mark of authority from one generation to the next. Even though Aaron’s garments (and perhaps Elijah’s animal skin mantle and John the Baptist’s leather girdle) are inherited, transgenerational marks of authority, such inheritance is completely tied to custom and ideology and not to racial features at all.

Ultimately, the text of the Book of Mormon lends itself in many ways to the interpretation that the skins of various colors have nothing to do with flesh pigmentation but are rather ritual garments of some sort that can accommodate a whole range of textual data. Not only are there textual motivations for thinking that marks associated with curses were self-applied and removable in a nonbiological sense, it is also possible to explain strictly in terms of comparable biblical narratives how such marks and curses might have been passed from generation to generation in the form of ritual garments or authoritative clothing made of animal skin.

## Conclusion

The overarching significance of garments in the Book of Mormon is evidenced in the Nephites’ use of garment-skins as focal totems in their decisions about who can rule (see 2 Nephi 5:19–21), in their divisions of ethnicity (see 2 Nephi 5:21–24; Alma 3:5–11), in their temple discourses

---

34. See, for example, G. Ernest Wright, “Israelite Daily Life,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 18/3 (September 1955): 64; Donald Joseph Selby, “Changing Ideas in New Testament Eschatology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 50/1 (January 1957): 30; Ivor Buse, “St. John and ‘The First Synoptic Pericope,’” *Novum Testamentum* 3 (January 1959): 58; W. J. Bennett Jr., “The Herodians of Mark’s Gospel,” *Novum Testamentum* 17 (January 1975): 11; Morton Smith, “Messiahs: Robbers, Jurists, Prophets, and Magicians,” *Proceedings of the Academy for Jewish Research* 44 (1977): 190–91; Brown, “Girded about with a Lambskin,” 131. The similar authoritative leather girdles of Elijah and John the Baptist also receive attention by some Freemasonry authors; see, for example, George Oliver, *Signs and Symbols: Illustrated and Explained in a Course of Twelve Lectures on Freemasonry* (Grimsby, 1827), 184–85.

(see Jacob 3:3–9), in their marriage customs (see 3 Nephi 2:12–16), and in their public squares (see Alma 46:11–36; 51:20; 62:4). This significance is also markedly evidenced among the Nephites' various enemies who wear garment-skins while contesting Nephite sovereignty (see Enos 1:20; Mosiah 10:8; Alma 3:5; 43:20; 49:6; 3 Nephi 4:7).

Consequently, passages in the Book of Mormon that have traditionally appeared to lend themselves to racial interpretations need not be read that way. If the textual observations I have laid out in this article are sound, it may in fact be preferable to find in such passages rather different possibilities. In the end, I find in the Book of Mormon a remarkable silence regarding flesh pigmentation. Of course, in spite of all the direct and indirect textual evidences to the contrary, the belief that flesh pigmentation is still a major part of the Book of Mormon narrative may be difficult to overcome.<sup>35</sup> But if we look directly to the text of the Book of Mormon for indications of flesh pigmentation, the only passages we find that overtly refer to skins of different colors are the six passages, ultimately ambiguous, that I believe can be responsibly (and richly) read as referring to a type of garment instead. As far as internal textual evidences go, the Lamanites and Nephites could be understood to have had any possible flesh pigmentation, or both groups might have had wide ranges of flesh pigmentation among their populations. The text need not be read as addressing these questions.

---

35. Arguably, this possibility undergirds a certain strand of LDS thought that seeks to situate the Book of Mormon in a limited geography model in ancient Mesoamerica. Foremost in this tradition is John Sorenson, who points out that early European explorers of the New World evidently recorded encounters with various Mesoamerican inhabitants who ranged in flesh pigmentation from very pale to very dark. Interestingly, Sorenson's book also identifies ancient Mesoamerican cults that used animal skins as personal symbols of power. See Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 89–90, 301. It should also be noted that color descriptions in ancient Mesoamerica (as with most other ancient cultures) reflected extensive semiotic schemes that drew on complex social and symbolic associations. For recent studies, see the collection of anthropological articles assembled under "Color in American Prehistory," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 61/62 (Spring/Autumn 2012): 279–366. Nonetheless, as with comparisons to ancient Near Eastern cultural attitudes toward color, such historical observations of ancient Mesoamerica also ultimately originate outside the actual text of the Book of Mormon or KJV.

Nevertheless, I suspect some may worry that my interpretation harbors an attempt to make the Book of Mormon more palatable to sensibilities of our day, to make the Book of Mormon politically correct. Such concerns are understandable. Yet my worry is that traditional interpretations that have appealed to prevailing sensibilities were precisely what led nineteenth-century Euro-American readers to assume that the text of the Book of Mormon was somehow referring to flesh pigmentation.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than attempting, like earlier interpretations, to make the Book of Mormon cohere with current sensibilities, I mean here to examine the text itself more closely to suggest a different interpretive model that is more internally coherent than previous models. As with any new contribution to any larger conversation of textual interpretations, I look forward to seeing how those who adhere to previous interpretations might respond to the interpretive model I've articulated throughout this article.

More to the point, those who want to claim that the Nephites are white and the Lamanites are black in a racial sense must especially justify their position through careful reanalysis of the relevant texts. Specifically, such critics will have to argue against the possibility or likelihood that the various-colored or cursed skins in the Book of Mormon are kinds of garments. Whatever the ultimate conclusions will be about skins in the Book of Mormon, I expect the interpretive model I offer here will bear serious engagement.

**Ethan Sproat** received his PhD in English rhetoric and composition from Purdue University in 2013. He is assistant professor of English at Utah Valley University, where he teaches courses in rhetoric, writing, technical communication, editing, and speculative fiction. His research interests include rhetorical theory (particularly the works of Kenneth Burke), philological histories of rhetoric, and the histories and theories of speculative fiction.

---

36. For the most current overview of the racial sensibilities of nineteenth-century Euro-American Latter-day Saints, see Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*. Pages 52–105 are most helpful in exploring early LDS attitudes toward Amerindian peoples and the supposed racial aspects of the Book of Mormon (see especially 55–57, 77–78, and 81).