



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

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Volume 15 | Number 2

Article 11

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6-1-2003

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#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

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**Title** The Charge of “Racism” in the Book of Mormon

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**Reference** *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003): 183-97.

**ISSN** 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

**Abstract** Some critics of the Book of Mormon reject the ancient text on account of its supposedly racist commentary. In response to these critics, this article incorporates biblical examples and traditions to show how certain words and phrases that could be seen as racist were used to illustrate a larger message.

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

John A. Tvedtnes

Determined to read the Book of Mormon in purely naturalistic, nineteenth-century terms rather than as an ancient text, a recent critic of that volume of scripture has taken offense at some descriptions of Lamanites in the text. This is particularly true when “cultural differences between Lamanites and Nephites are typically described in a manner that assigns pejorative terms, such as blood-thirsty, idolatrous, ferocious, idle, lazy, and filthy, to the dark-skinned Lamanites.”<sup>1</sup> The question is whether these terms can be considered “racist” and, in addition, whether supposed “racist” attitudes attributed to the Nephites are evidence that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon out of his own nineteenth-century, presumably racist bias. As one trained in anthropology, I personally dislike the term *race* and have tried to avoid using it for several decades. Humans of all sorts are much more like their fellows, even in distant parts of the world, than some breeds of dogs are like others. As David B. Goldstein and Lounès Chikhi express it:

One definite and obvious consequence of the complexity of human demographic history is that races in any meaningful sense of the term do not exist in the human species. The term race as popularly imagined implies groups that can be

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1. Thomas W. Murphy, “Laban’s Ghost: On Writing and Transgression,” *Dialogue* 30/2 (1997): 117.

cleanly separated from one another, and within our species, there simply are no such groups. . . . The majority of the genetic variation in the human species is due to differences between individuals within, rather than between, groups. . . . Differences between groups count for less than 15% of the total genetic variation in our species.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the latter issue, I must conclude that racism, however that ambiguous term is understood, does not influence the truth of the history of the Book of Mormon any more than it could influence the truth of the biblical account, which frequently disapproves of the people of Israel marrying foreigners (see, for example, Genesis 24:3, 37; 27:46; 28:1–2, 6–9; 9:11–12). 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” (Matthew 15:26)? 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” (Matthew 15:24) and must minister to the needs of those within the covenant?

### Nephite Descriptions of the Lamanites

Because some critics consider Joseph Smith to be the 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:

- 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; he also favored freeing the slaves.<sup>3</sup>

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2. David B. Goldstein and Lounès Chikhi, “Human Migrations and Population Structure: What We Know and Why It Matters,” *Annual Review of Genomics and Human Genetics* 3 (2002): 137–38. My thanks to John M. Butler for calling this article to my attention.

3. *History of the Church*, 5:217; 6:243–44.

- 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.<sup>4</sup>

- 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 between Abraham and the Egyptian king over patriarchal authority, not priesthood in general (Abraham 1:21–31). 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, from whom Latter-day Saints picked up the idea.<sup>5</sup>

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 racism in its typical sense does not seem to have been prevalent among the Nephites, considering the numbers who dissented from Nephite culture at various times to join the Lamanites. And it is recorded that whenever the Lamanites converted to the Nephite religion, the barriers separating these people dissolved (Alma 27:21–27; 3 Nephi 2:13, 14; 4 Nephi 1:17). 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>6</sup> This is hardly a term that one would expect to find in a society that holds racist views toward a neighboring people. And

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4. Newell G. Bringhurst, “Elijah Abel and the Changing Status of Blacks within Mormonism,” *Dialogue* 12/2 (1979): 24.

5. See Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

6. See, for example, 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; 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.

if Joseph Smith's racism is reflected in the Book of Mormon, why does that volume have large numbers of Lamanites becoming righteous—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 a widely held belief, but what does the Book of Mormon itself say? As reported in Alma, the Lord, speaking to Nephi, distinguished between the *curse* and the *mark*. “Behold, the Lamanites have I *curse*d, and I will set a *mark* on them that *they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed*” (Alma 3:14). At the time this promise was given to Nephi, the curse had already been enacted, while the mark, a change in skin color, was yet to come. The Lord also told Nephi that others who mingled with the Lamanites (including his own posterity) would be both cursed and marked:

And again: I will set a *mark* upon him that minglenth his seed with thy brethren, that they may be *curse*d 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. (Alma 3:15–17)

Nephi described how the Lamanites, as a result of their consistent rebellion against God and because of the hardness of their hearts, were cursed by being “cut off from the presence of the Lord” (2 Nephi 5:20). This curse also resulted in the Lamanites being separated from God's people with the departure of Nephi (2 Nephi 5:1–7). 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 delightful, *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.* (2 Nephi 5:19–24)

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 (Jarom 1:5), the Lamanite practices of “drink[ing] the blood of beasts” (Jarom 1:6) and “feeding upon beasts of prey” (Enos 1:20) would have been abhorrent, being forbidden in the Mosaic code (Leviticus 7:26–27; 11:13–20).

Despite statements by such leaders as Nephi and his brother Jacob (Jacob 3:5), 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 (Alma 3:6). 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. (Alma 3:6–11)

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 deter the Nephites from accepting their wicked ways. Any individual from among the Nephites who, having rejected the Nephite religion, mingled with the Lamanites brought “the same *curse* upon his seed” and had “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 associate these traits with their skin color. Indeed, Alma 22:28 ties them 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 when Laman and Lemuel were unwilling to help him build the ship, long before there is any mention of change in skin color (1 Nephi 17:18). He also wrote of their “rudeness,” perhaps in that word’s original sense of savagery (1 Nephi 18:9; 2 Nephi 2:1). 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” (1 Nephi 12:23).

References to filthiness are not an allusion to skin color but clearly refer to a state of being “filthy . . . before God” (Jacob 3:3; see also verses 5, 9–10; 1 Nephi 15:33–34; 2 Nephi 9:16; Mosiah 7:30–31; Alma 5:22; 7:21; Mormon 9:4, 14). Similarly, both the Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants use the term *filthy* in reference to sinners.<sup>7</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 cannot be considered evidence that the text was necessarily a reflection of nineteenth-century American racist views. Parallels are known in other ancient cultures. For example, in the Florentine Codex, which is indisputably pre-Columbian, descriptions of the Otomi people of Mexico reflect Aztec ethnocentrism and could be considered just as pejorative as anything Nephi or Mormon wrote. 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

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7. See, for example, Ezra 6:21; Job 15:16; Psalms 14:2–3; 53:2–3; Proverbs 30:12; Ezekiel 16:36; 22:15; 24:13; 36:25; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 5:4; James 1:21; Revelation 17:4; 22:11; D&C 88:35, 102.

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 had worked the land they only wandered. Behold what they did: they went catching (game).”<sup>8</sup> These descriptions sound reminiscent of 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(-life),” “the one who in his lifetime does not have a house,” or “the awkward man living in the mountains.” He was “the one who does not know (i.e. cultivate) grain,” “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 were “a ravaging people, with canine instincts, like wolves.”<sup>9</sup> Referencing such descriptions, William F. Albright observed, “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-wuhúsh* ‘the wild beasts.’”<sup>10</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 to allow their own cultural sensitivities to obscure the meaning of the text.

### Positive Nephite Attitudes toward the Lamanites

Significantly, Nephi, who first reported the Lamanite “skin of blackness,” was also the one who wrote that the Lord accepts all

8. Bernadino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain*, 10.29, in Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson, trans., *Florentine Codex, Book 10* (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research and University of Utah, 1961), 178–79. My thanks to Matt Roper for this reference and the two that follow.

9. Quoted from a number of original sources in Giorgio Buccellati, *The Amorites of the Ur III Period* (Naples: Istituto orientale di Napoli, 1966), 330–32.

10. William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), 166.

who are willing: “And he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33). Nephi’s emphasis on the universal nature of God’s love becomes even more meaningful when understood as being directed to a people grappling with issues of ethnic and social diversity. Nephi’s family members would, of course, have understood “Jews” to be those who came out from Jerusalem and would have recognized that as a reference to themselves, but the additional reference to Gentile and heathen—which would only make sense if there were others in the land who had not come from Jerusalem<sup>11</sup>—is an open admonition to any among them who would look upon the darkness of another’s skin as a sign of God’s enduring hatred.

As noted above, Nephite writers consistently refer to the Lamanites as their *brethren*. The entire Book of Mormon bears the message of the Father’s love for all his children of whatever background, and its stated purpose is to reclaim them all and bring them into the covenant (see Book of Mormon title page). The “curse” of the Lamanites is only a curse in the context of opposing ideologies of the Nephites and Lamanites. Once the two peoples become 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 (see 4 Nephi 1:17).

Nephi’s brother Jacob publicly chastised the Nephites for hating the Lamanites because of their skin color (Jacob 3:5). 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 (Jacob 3:5–7) and that such external differences as skin color are temporal and do not necessarily signify spiritual states (Jacob 3:8). He commanded the Nephites to repent

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11. See Matthew Roper, “Nephi’s Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations,” in this number, pages 91–128.

and no longer revile against the Lamanites because of the darkness of their skins (Jacob 3:9–10).<sup>12</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. (Jacob 3:5, 8–10)

Jacob's son Enos noted that the Nephites "did seek diligently to restore the Lamanites unto the true faith in God" (Enos 1:20). Subsequent generations were able to convert large numbers of Lamanites. Significantly, when the sons of Mosiah proposed to go and preach to the Lamanites, their fellow Nephites reacted by telling them of Lamanite wickedness, but they did not mention skin color (Alma 26:24).

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12. Compare Nephi's comments on the Jews in 2 Nephi 29:4–6 with those of Mormon in 3 Nephi 29:8.

Critics dismiss all such passages as simply masking what they choose to believe is implicit racism in the Book of Mormon, opining that “the making and existence of the Book of Mormon as an authentic document that portrays an American past tied to the racial myths and sacred history of the Old World gives Joseph Smith and his prophetic descendants a dangerous power of representation over the ancient Lamanites depicted in this ‘word of God.’”<sup>13</sup> But this secular perspective blinds them to the larger context and message of the Book of Mormon. While ethnic differences must have been apparent to the Nephite record keepers, we are never told that skin color was a prerequisite for blessings from God or salvation. In fact, many times the righteousness and faithfulness of the Lamanites far exceeded the righteousness of the Nephites (Helaman 6:1–2, 34–38; 15:5–10; 3 Nephi 6:14). Only in one instance in the entire Nephite record did Nephite prophets report any change in the darkness of the skin of the Lamanites (3 Nephi 2:12–16), but this, significantly, was *after* these Lamanites had been converted and had united with the Nephites. Whether this change occurred through intermarriage or by some other process, the Nephites apparently considered it 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 as skin color were irrelevant for those numbered with Christ. After this, there are no further references to Lamanite skins becoming dark, nor any indication that skin color was a significant factor in Nephite belief or society.<sup>14</sup>

### “White” versus “Pure”

According to the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, Nephi, speaking of the latter-day restoration, discussed the future conversion

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13. Murphy, “Laban’s Ghost,” 117.

14. Some readers of the Book of Mormon have interpreted statements by Nephi (1 Nephi 12:23) and Mormon (Mormon 5:15) as referencing a Lamanite curse of dark skin following the destruction of the Nephites, yet these passages seem to refer to a spiritual state of Lehi’s children rather than racial distinctions.

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 a delightful people" (2 Nephi 30:6). In 1840 the Book of Mormon was "carefully revised by the translator," Joseph Smith,<sup>15</sup> and in that edition the expression "white and delightful" was changed to "pure and delightful." This change seems to reflect the Prophet's concern that modern readers might misinterpret this passage as a reference to racial changes rather than to changes in righteousness. Possibly his sojourns in Ohio and Missouri had altered his perspective of the racial connotations of the term *white* in the contemporary United States, particularly among slaves and slaveholders. He may not have gained much understanding of this matter during his upbringing in New England and New York State, where slavery was not as common.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately for subsequent Latter-day Saint interpreters, following the Prophet's death the changes in the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon were not carried over into subsequent printings, which were instead based on an edition prepared by the Twelve Apostles in Great Britain after a copy of an earlier edition. The apostles, being in England, were not familiar with the 1840 edition. 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.<sup>17</sup> Some critics have been fond of citing statements of earlier Latter-day Saint leaders, who once interpreted 2 Nephi 30:6 to mean that conversion leads to a change of skin color; however, to use such statements today is anachronistic at best and disingenuous at worst since these statements were all expressed previous to the 1981 correction and merely echo a

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15. See introduction to the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon.

16. Use of the term *white* for the concept of purity was well attested at the time Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, as well as in his cultural context. Out of six meanings for the term given in Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, three concern purity, while only two concern color. The last concerns venerability.

17. For a more detailed explanation of the history of this textual variant, see Larry W. Draper, "Book of Mormon Editions," in *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon*, ed. M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V. P. Coultts (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 43.

misinterpretation of the Book of Mormon text rather than the authoritative text itself. Moreover, a change in Lamanite skin color was clearly never intended by the “white/pure and delightful” passage that the Prophet Joseph modified because it does not refer to the Lamanites at all, but to the Nephites and Jews in the latter days who turn to Christ (see 2 Nephi 30:1–7).

But is the Prophet’s change from “white” to “pure” justified in the scriptural context? The answer is yes. The terms *white* and *pure* are used synonymously in Daniel 7:9, Revelation 15:6, and Doctrine and Covenants 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 (Alma 5:24; 13:12; 32:42; Mormon 9:6; D&C 20:6). Similarly, Mormon expressed the hope that the Nephites “may once again be a delightful people” (Words of Mormon 1:8). 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. (Mormon 5:15)

The use of black-and-white imagery to typify purity and righteousness is exemplified in the works of Ephraim of Syria, a fourth-century A.D. Old World Christian writer, who commented on Philip’s baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–39) 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 baptised 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>18</sup> One of

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18. “*The Pearl: Seven Hymns on the Faith*” 3:2, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1890–1900; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 13:295. My thanks to Mark Ellison for bringing this passage to my attention.

Ephraim's poems explains that "bodies that were filled with stains are made white" by means of anointing and baptism.<sup>19</sup> The Qur'an, a seventh-century Semitic text, also speaks of the day of judgment as "the day when some faces will be white and some faces will be black" (3:106). This could be taken as a reference to purity and righteousness on the one hand and impurity and wickedness on the other, or to salvation and damnation, but certainly not to race, since Islam has always been reasonably color-blind.<sup>20</sup> Modern Arabic still uses the idiom *sawwada wajhuhu* to describe the act of discrediting, dishonoring, or disgracing a person, but its literal meaning is "to blacken the face" of someone.

### An Anti-Racist Document

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. (Helaman 7:23–24)

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19. This translation comes from text 16, stanza 7, of a forthcoming edition of selected poems of Saint Ephraim the Syrian, edited and translated by Sebastian P. Brock and George A. Kiraz, to be published in a bilingual side-by-side format by Brigham Young University Press in 2004. See also Sebastian Brock, trans., *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of St. Ephrem*, 2nd ed. (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1983), 49. My thanks go to Daniel C. Peterson for this reference and the next.

20. Bernard Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).



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” (1 Nephi 12:23).

Clearly, the Book of Mormon describes various people—including the Nephites themselves—as being dark, filthy, and loathsome in a spiritual sense. However, the Nephites who dissented to the Lamanites obviously did not consider them in such a negative way, and the Lord himself does not use such language 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.

I 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 cultural trait. The critics’ assertions, therefore, are fatally flawed on two counts. First, the appearance of racism in the Book of Mormon is not evidence of a nineteenth-century origin or of authorship by Joseph Smith. Second, in spite of its frank documentation of racist feeling, the Book of Mormon is not in itself a racist document. In fact, it advocates and even idealizes the exact opposite: rather than promoting concepts of racial inferiority, the events and teachings within it clearly suggest that people of different ethnic backgrounds and traditions can truly overcome old hatreds and misconceptions and attain peace, happiness, and unity through the gospel of Jesus Christ.