



Open

Church removes racial references in Book of Mormon headings

LDS scripture • Church drops "dark" and "skin of blackness" from Lamanite descriptions.



By Peggy Fletcher Stack The Salt Lake Tribune

• December 20, 2010 11:57 am

This is an archived article that was published on sltrib.com in 2010, and information in the article may be outdated. It is provided only for personal research purposes and may not be reprinted.

The LDS Church has made subtle — but significant — changes to chapter headings in its online version of the faith's signature scripture, The Book of Mormon, toning down some earlier racial allusions.

The words "skin of blackness" were removed from the introductory italicized summary in 2 Nephi, Chapter 5, in describing the "curse" God put on disbelieving Lamanites.

Deeper into the volume, in Mormon, Chapter 5, the heading changes from calling

Lamanites "a dark, filthy, and loathsome people" to "because of their unbelief, the Lamanites will be scattered, and the Spirit will cease to strive with them."

In both cases, the text itself remains unchanged.

Members of the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe founder Joseph Smith unearthed a set of gold plates from a hill in upstate New York in 1827 and translated the ancient text into English. The account, known as The Book of Mormon, first published in 1830, primarily tells the story of God's dealings with two Israelite civilizations living in the New World. One derived from a single family who fled Jerusalem in 600 B.C. and eventually splintered into two groups, known as Nephites and Lamanites.

Since that initial printing, millions of copies have been distributed throughout the world in more than 160 languages.

Chapter summaries were added in the 1920s, then rewritten by the late LDS apostle Bruce R. McConkie in 1981. That same year, a verse that used "white and delightsome" to describe what will happen to dark-skinned peoples when they repent was changed to "pure and delightsome."

Critics argued the change was made to address allegations of racism, since the Utah-based faith had a racial policy that, until 1978, barred blacks from being ordained to the church's all-male priesthood.

Not so, said Royal Skousen, a linguistics professor at Brigham Young University, who has noted every change in the scriptural text from 1830 to the present. Skousen said Smith himself changed "white" to "pure" in 1840, but left it elsewhere in the book.

"Eight other verses still use the phrase," Skousen said. "If the [church] was just responding to sensitivities, why wouldn't they have changed all the other ones?"

A decade later, the faith's governing First Presidency approved minor changes to some Book of Mormon chapter headings, explained church spokesman Michael Purdy.

The tweaks described above were made in several foreign editions, including Portuguese, Spanish and German translations. The original headings remained in most English editions until 2004, when Doubleday published the first trade version of the LDS scripture and implemented the editing.

Until this month, the 1981 headings remained in the church's online version at lds.org. When the church upgraded its website, the Doubleday changes were included online. The former version will continue — for now — in the printed English versions.

"When these types of changes are made, they are rolled out to various online and print editions as they become available," Purdy said in a statement. "A new English edition of The Book of Mormon is not scheduled to be printed at present. Since these changes are so minor, it is not necessary to include them until it is printed."

Nathan Richardson, a BYU graduate student at the time of the Doubleday edition, noticed some changes and decided to do a side-by-side comparison.

Richardson, now a speech therapist and book designer in Orem, concluded that the changes were done for "clarity, a change in emphasis and to stick closer to the scriptural language." (His study can be seen at ldsphilosopher.com)

Skousen, editor of a 2009 Yale edition of The Book of Mormon, sees the heading

changes as a nod to contemporary readers.

LDS officials don't want readers to focus on the kind of "overt statements about race that were in McConkie's 1981 summaries," he said. "There is a [personal] interpretation simply by what you choose to put in them. It's not a question of dishonesty or trying to hide things."

The online headings also change many words from a more archaic to a modern language, Skousen said. "Given our times, I think they did the right thing."

To Grant Hardy, an LDS historian at the University of North Carolina in Asheville who edited a "reader's edition" of The Book of Mormon in 2005, the changes are interesting.

"Headings do give readers a preview, a take on how to interpret what happens," Hardy said. "The church is clearly downplaying the 'skin of blackness.' "

Still, Hardy does not believe racist views are unusually prominent in the Mormon scripture.

"Even though this gets a lot of attention, there aren't that many verses that talk about skin color," Hardy said. "Race is not a main theme of The Book of Mormon. When it is talking about Lamanites, it is mostly cultural and spiritual differences."

There is a "temptation to read ancient texts in terms of modern suppositions," he said. "Probably everybody in history was racist in terms of modern America."

Does Hardy think the Nephites were racist? Well, yes, he said, but that would not be surprising.

Downplaying that element, Hardy said, "probably fits The Book of Mormon better overall."

pstack@sltrib.com —

2 Nephi, Chapter 5

Before the change •... Because of their unbelief, the Lamanites are cursed, receive a skin of blackness, and become a scourge unto the Nephites.

After the change • ... Because of their unbelief, the Lamanites are cut off from the presence of the Lord, are cursed, and become a scourge unto the Nephites.

Mormon, Chapter 5

Before the change • ... The Lamanites shall be a dark, filthy, and loathsome people. ...

After the change • ... Because of their unbelief, the Lamanites will be scattered, and the Spirit will cease to strive with them. ...





APPS

CONTACT US

ABOUT US

PRIVACY POLICY

LATEST

SUPPORT

The Salt Lake Tribune