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“Skin” or “Scales” of Blackness? Semitic Context as Interpretive Aid for 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21)

Adam Oliver Stokes

Aims and Motivations

Few verses in the Book of Mormon are as problematic and controversial as 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21).¹ Critics of the Book of Mormon have routinely pointed to this verse and its reference to Lamanites receiving a “skin of blackness” as evidence of racism and racist theology in Mormonism’s sacred scriptures.² The verse has also failed to escape ridicule

1. I use here the versification of my own tradition (the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints/Community of Christ) in all references to the Book of Mormon. I place standard LDS versification between parentheses for convenience.

2. For critical views of the Mormon tradition and its relation to race-based issues, see R. Philip Roberts, with Tal Davis and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism Unmasked* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 1998); Latayne C. Scott, *The Mormon Mirage: A Former Member Looks at the Mormon Church Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009); Shawn Aaron McCraney, *Where Mormonism Meets Biblical Christianity Face to Face: An A to Z Doctrinal Comparative between Mormonism and Biblical Christianity* (New York: Alatheia Press, 2011). Roberts’s work only briefly touches on the issue of race in Mormonism, but both Scott and McCraney devote a significant amount of time to the subject (see McCraney, *Where Mormonism Meets Biblical Christianity*, s.v. “Cain” and “Race”). For scholarly treatments of the history of racial attitudes in Mormonism, see Lester E. Bush and Armand L. Mauss, eds., *Neither White nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church* (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1984).

in pop-cultural depictions of Mormonism, as seen most recently in the hit Broadway musical, *The Book of Mormon*.³ The verse and its interpretation are of perennial interest to readers of the Book of Mormon, believing or not, since the racial stance of the volume seems to center around the interpretation of the passage.

In this brief article, I advocate for an alternative to standard interpretations of 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21). Traditional interpretations understand the phrase “skin of blackness” to refer, straightforwardly, to the color of human skin. At the same time, there exists a long history

Though dated, Bush and Mauss's groundbreaking work gives a detailed account of the issue of race in Mormonism and the views of various presidents of the Latter-day Saint Church from its inception. More recent discussions include Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). Mauss documents and studies various non-racial readings of Mormon scripture (and of the Book of Mormon more specifically). Reeve argues convincingly that early Mormon readings of the Book of Mormon were progressively non-racial until Mormonism sought to appease and ingratiate itself to mainstream white Protestantism beginning in the early twentieth century and as such adopted white Protestantism's racial dialectic of black versus white. Against criticisms of the Book of Mormon as a racist text, Richard Bushman has argued that the Book of Mormon actually critiques racialist notions of white superiority in its account of God sparing the ancestors of the American Indians, the Lamanites, while destroying the white Nephites (Bushman assumes the traditional interpretation of “skin of blackness” as a literal reference to skin pigmentation). See Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 99.

3. The musical centers on two Mormon missionaries, Elder Cunningham and Elder Price, who have been sent to the black African nation of Uganda. In one scene, Elder Cunningham paraphrases 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21) for the Ugandans who have come to hear him speak: “And lo, God was so displeased with the Lamanites that he caused a cursing of blackness to come upon them. Wherefore they WERE WHITE and delightful, the Lord God did cause a skin of BLACKNESS to come upon them!” Sensing that his audience might be offended or insulted, he stops reading this verse and says that he will “skip to another part” of the book. See Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, *The Book of Mormon: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (New York: New Market Press, 2011), 53–54; emphasis in the original.

of interpreting the verse in a non-racial manner—namely, as referring to spiritual/religious rather than physical darkness (albeit according to a different argument than my own). Notable examples of this include the work of Armand Mauss, W. Paul Reeve, and Ethan Sproat.⁴ I offer, in contrast with traditional interpretations, what I wish to call a “midrashic” interpretation of the text, distinct in important ways from other alternative interpretations of the text in question. By “midrashic,” I refer to a type of interpretation, common within rabbinic Judaism, that serves the purpose not only of philologically explaining difficult passages in scripture, but of also providing insights into any possible hidden or deeper meanings to the text.⁵ In the “midrashic” interpretation I offer here, I render the phrase “skin of blackness” as “scales of blackness,” suggesting that the author of this section, Nephi, refers to spiritual darkness rather than physical pigmentation.

My reading is largely influenced by (or finds its justification in) what I take to be the Semitic context of the Book of Mormon. It will look specifically at the term *ʿôr* in Hebrew and the related term *ʿūr* in Aramaic. I argue that the lexical range for these terms includes both skin pigmentation, which is permanent, and coverings that are impermanent, such as

4. See the discussion of Mueller and Reeve in footnote 2. In his reading of 2 Nephi 4, Sproat argues that “skin” in the Book of Mormon refers not to physical pigmentation but to ritual clothing, namely, the garments used in temple ritual by the priesthood from which the Lamanites, because of their disobedience, are now excluded from participating. See Ethan Sproat, “Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 138–65.

5. For discussion on the concept of midrash as a deeper level of scriptural interpretation, see Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Midrash: Reading the Bible with Question Marks* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013). For notable examples of midrashic interpretation, see Reuven Hammer, *The Classical Midrash: Tannaitic Commentaries on the Bible* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995); and Louis Ginzberg’s classic work, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). Ginzberg’s retelling of the midrash on the creation of the world highlights the multilayered meaning of scripture presupposed by midrashic interpretation in that it finds multiple meanings for each of the Hebrew letters used in the creation story. The use of the letter *bet*, for example, to begin the Hebrew Bible is explained as both stemming from its use as a preposition (“in”) as well as the letter’s superior worthiness/righteousness in the sight of God over and above other letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

scales or husks—and I argue that this latter meaning is how a believing reader should understand the term “skin” in reference to “skin of blackness” in 2 Nephi 4 (LDS 2 Nephi 5). In my argument, in other words, the likelihood that ‘*ôr/’ûr* lay behind Nephi’s words in this section of the Book of Mormon indicates spiritual darkness on the part of the unbelieving Lamanites (in contrast to the believing Nephites). Consequently, I believe, ‘*ôr/’ûr* in the Book of Mormon would act as theological terms, and not as terms used for racial identification. Such an interpretation is supported by the fact that the “skins” of the Lamanites are not permanent (which would not be the case with skin pigmentation), but rather change and indeed are removed when the Lamanites receive the fullness of the gospel in the course of the narrative (3 Nephi 1:52; LDS 2:15).⁶

My contribution to this conversation is to provide an explicitly *Semitic* precedent for non-racial readings of 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21). This task seems to me worthy of pursuit for those committed to the Book of Mormon’s historicity. Furthermore, I have already implied that I am motivated by a concern to defend the Book of Mormon against the suggestion that it is a racist text. But in addition to wishing to respond to traditional critiques of Mormonism and of the Book of Mormon, I wish to distance the book from other appropriations of the text. There has emerged in recent years an alt/far-right element within Mormonism that has strongly advocated for a racial reading of 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21), aiming to equate dark pigmentation with divine disfavor and, consequently, light or white pigmentation with divine favor.⁷ While

6. Max Mueller’s *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (see footnote 2) has been published since I wrote this article. Mueller makes the argument that the changeability of race in the Book of Mormon marks out its theological novelty in the landscape of nineteenth-century American religious thought. I cannot deal in any depth here with Mueller’s argument, but it should be clear that, by beginning from the Semitic background of the Book of Mormon, my orientation stems from a different point of view.

7. For mainstream discussion on the rise of this recent phenomenon, see Jim Dalrymple, “Meet the Alt-Right Mormons: Inside the Church’s Vocal White Nationalist Wing,” *BuzzFeed*, March 27, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/jimdalyrpleii/meet-the-alt-right-mormons-inside-the-churchs-vocal-white?utm_term=.wb3jk1ezy2#.gogPEaVj9r; Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Mormon Blogger Trumpets Alt-Right Racial Views, But

this view has been explicitly and publicly denounced by the Church, it nonetheless reflects a tradition of interpreting the Book of Mormon in a particular way, namely, in a racialist manner.⁸ I wish, in part, therefore, to remove this particular text as much as possible from the possibility of such deliberately racist appropriations of the text.

Is Out of Tune with Her Religion,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, March 29, 2017, <http://www.sltrib.com/home/5116879-155/mormon-blogger-trumpets-alt-right-racial-views>. On one alt-right Mormon site, the blogger explicitly states that “unlike Catholics or Protestants, Mormons have additional scriptures which are crystal clear on the races being different” (Ayla Stewart, “In Search of the Christian Culture That Made Our Country Great,” *Wife with a Purpose*, March 13, 2017, <https://wifewithapurpose.com/2017/03/14/mormon-rap-and-the-destruction-of-white-western-mormon-culture/>).

8. Official statements were issued by Mormon Newsroom (the official news branch of the LDS Church) on August 13 and August 15, 2017. The August 15 statement reads: “It has been called to our attention that there are some among the various pro-white and white supremacy communities who assert that the Church is neutral toward or in support of their views. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the New Testament, Jesus said: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’ (Matthew 22:37–39). The Book of Mormon teaches ‘all are alike unto God’ (2 Ne. 26:33). White supremacist attitudes are morally wrong and sinful, and we condemn them. Church members who promote or pursue a ‘white culture’ or white supremacy agenda are not in harmony with the teachings of the Church.” The August 13 statement reads: “It is with great sadness and deep concern that we view the violence, conflict and tragedy of recent days in Charlottesville, Virginia. People of any faith, or of no faith at all, should be troubled by the increase of intolerance in both words and actions that we see everywhere. More than a decade ago, the late Church president Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) addressed the topic of racism when speaking to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He powerfully and clearly taught this principle: ‘No man who makes disparaging remarks concerning those of another race can consider himself a true disciple of Christ. Nor can he consider himself to be in harmony with the teachings of the Church of Christ.’ For members of the Church, we reaffirm that teaching today and the Savior’s admonition to love our neighbor. Our prayers are with those who are suffering because of this intolerance and hatred. We pray for peace and for understanding. Above all, we pray that we may treat one another with greater kindness, compassion and goodness” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Church Issues Statements on Situation in Charlottesville, Virginia,” *Newsroom*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-statement-charlottesville-virginia>).

One further motivation deserves notice. I write as a member of a Latter-day Saint tradition, a member of the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints or RLDS), and 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21) has been particularly influential in how the Book of Mormon is interpreted and understood within my denomination. In recent years, the Community of Christ has moved away from an understanding of the Book of Mormon as a historical record in favor of categorizing it within the larger genre of American literature—albeit “inspired” literature.⁹ In large part, this development in my own tradition has been a consequence of the type of interpretation developed in both anti-Mormon critique and alt-right Mormonism, and thus premised on the assumption that the Book of Mormon is racially problematic. The reading I offer here supports the view that this assumption need not be the case and that we can in fact

9. As seen in the sentiment expressed by former Community of Christ president W. Grant McMurray who stated that the “proper use of the Book of Mormon as sacred scripture has been under wide discussion in the 1970s and beyond, in part because of long-standing questions about its historicity and in part because of perceived theological inadequacies, including matters of race and ethnicity” (W. Grant McMurray, “They ‘shall blossom as the rose’: Native Americans and the Dream of Zion,” Keynote address, Independence, MO, February 17, 2001). The “inspired” literature view has become increasingly prominent in recent years, especially from scholars and theologians within the Community of Christ. See, for example, Dale E. Luffman, *The Book of Mormon’s Witness to Its First Readers* (Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013). While viewing the Book of Mormon as “inspired” fiction, Luffman maintains that the readers should still consider the work prophetic in the sense that it represented the medium whereby Joseph Smith could address issues of relevance to the state of Christianity in his own time (early to mid-nineteenth century). See also Alan D. Tyree, *Millions Call It Scripture: The Book of Mormon in the 21st Century* (Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013). Tyree, also from the Community of Christ tradition, argues that there are multiple ways of interpreting and reading the Book of Mormon at present, and that these options were largely unavailable to its original readers. While not explicitly advocating an “inspired” literature approach, Tyree nonetheless leans against the option of viewing the Book of Mormon as an actual ancient document. For a response to this view, from the Latter-day Saint tradition, see Stephen O. Smoot, “The Imperative for a Historical Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, November 13, 2017, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/imperative-historical-book-mormon>.

read the Book of Mormon as a racially *unproblematic* text. This would, in my view, help to undercut the motivation for my own tradition to move away from the historicity of the text.

Rereading 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21)

Looking at the Book of Mormon as a whole, most Mormon scholars would agree that whatever language Moroni identifies as “reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 4:98; LDS 9:32) and Nephi refers to as consisting of “the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:1; LDS 1:2) is in some way related to biblical Hebrew and other Semitic dialects.¹⁰ This point is relevant here because the way terms are understood and used in Semitic languages—particularly biblical languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic—can inform us as to the meaning of terms and phrases found in the Book of Mormon and as to how, most importantly, Nephi and his descendants would have understood these terms. Naturally, believing scholars working on the Book of Mormon will inherently turn to biblical Hebrew as a source for understanding the text of the book, both due to its predominance in the Hebrew Bible and due to the fact that Aramaic appears in the Hebrew Bible only in connection with later texts, which originate after the time that the Nephites would have left Jerusalem.

It is worth noting, however, that multiple terms in the Book of Mormon point to some influence from Aramaic—as seen, for example, in the *nun* (in English, “n”) consonantal ending that appears at times (e.g., Helaman, Kishkumen, and Morianton). This consonantal ending more closely parallels the style of the biblical Aramaic found in such books as Daniel and Ezra, as well as the style of extra-biblical Aramaic

10. Hugh Nibley, for example, identified Reformed Egyptian with Demotic but cautioned against attempting to determine the actual language of the golden plates noting that emphasis should be placed on the revelation on the text in English. See Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books and FARMS, 1988); and Nibley, “New Approaches to the Book of Mormon Study,” in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1989), 97.

from the same period, over and above the later style of Aramaic-related languages such as early Christian Syriac. From this observation, one can tentatively conclude that a relationship exists between the “reformed Egyptian” mentioned in the Book of Mormon and biblical Hebrew/Aramaic. If we know what a term means in biblical and extra-biblical Aramaic, this knowledge can serve as an aid for determining the meaning of words and expressions in biblical Hebrew as a background language for the Book of Mormon. And this should ultimately help us in answering whether the statement in 2 Nephi can be interpreted as referring solely to physical blackness, or whether it has a larger semantic range.

In trying to determine what Semitic terms might correspond to the terms found in 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21), it might be best to begin by providing the English text of the verse. I should explicitly state here that my text is based on the 1908 Authorized Edition published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which is still the official version used by the Community of Christ.¹¹ The text reads: “Wherefore, as they were white, and exceeding fair, and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people, the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.”

As should be obvious by this point, my interest here lies in investigating the Hebrew and Aramaic terms that might underlie the phrase “a skin of blackness.” Of particular interest to me, however, is not the underlying term translated “blackness,” but the underlying term translated “skin.” In Hebrew, the term in question would presumably be *’ôr*, while the closely related Aramaic counterpart would be *’ûr* (same consonantal root: *’wr*).

11. The Community of Christ also authorizes a conservative modernization of the text of the Book of Mormon first published in 1966, under the title “Revised Authorized Version.” Apart from reversing the order of the final two clauses and two extremely minor stylistic changes (“exceeding” becomes “exceedingly,” and “unto” becomes “to”), the text is the same in the revised edition. It might be further noted that current LDS editions similarly replace the earlier “exceeding” with “exceedingly.” It might also be noted that Royal Skousen’s *Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) restores the word “therefore” to the text before its final clause, although it had been removed by Joseph Smith early in the text’s transmission.

In Hebrew, the term *‘ôr* refers to both human skin, along with its pigmentation (see, for example, Genesis 3:21; 27:11; Exodus 4:6; Leviticus 13; Numbers 5:2; Numbers 12:10), and to animal skin, including pigmentation (see, for example, Genesis 21:14,15; Exodus 25:5; Judges 4:19; 1 Samuel 10:13; 25:18). Most often, the use of the term in connection with animal skins refers specifically to animal hide used for water flasks. The use of the term is particularly prominent in the priestly literature of the Hebrew Bible, where it is used in discussing criteria for determining whether or not a person’s skin displays signs of leprosy (or skin diseases more generally). Hence, in Leviticus 13:2, we read:

‘ādām kî-yihyeh bē‘ôr-bēsārô šēet ô-sapaḥat ô baheret wēhāyāh bē‘ôr-bēsārô lēnega šār’at wēhūbā ‘el-ahārôn hakōhēn

(Any man, when he has in his skin a lifted up part or a scab then it is the plague of leprosy in his skin. Then he must come to Aaron the priest.¹²)

It seems clearly the case that the Hebrew word that would most likely lie behind the Book of Mormon text in 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21) would be one that refers straightforwardly to the physical epidermis of both humans and animals. Although the skin in question can be removed from animals and used for other purposes, the word would seem simply to refer to literal skin.

In turning to biblical Aramaic, however, and keeping in mind the plausible connections between Nephite Hebrew and Aramaic as used in the era of the Hebrew Bible, we find the counterpart of the Hebrew term, the Aramaic *‘ūr*. It is significant that the meaning of *‘ūr* differs in interesting ways from the Hebrew *‘ôr*; these differences would have potential implications for determining the original meaning of 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21) and its reference to Lamanites having a “skin of blackness.”

The Aramaic term *‘ūr* is found only once in the Old Testament, where it appears in the book of Daniel. This is not surprising considering

12. All transliterations and translations of Hebrew and Aramaic texts are by the author of this article unless otherwise noted.

that Daniel is one of only two biblical books (the other being Ezra-Nehemiah) that contain significant portions of text in Aramaic. In Daniel 2:35, where this particular Aramaic term appears, we read:

*bē'dayîn dāqû kahādāh parzēlā' haspā' nēhāsā' kaspā' wēdahābā'
wahāwô kē'ûr min-'idrê-qayîṭ*

(Then the iron, clay, brass, silver and gold broke apart as one and were like chaff from the threshing floor.)

Several aspects of this passage from Daniel are noteworthy for our discussion here. First, as the straightforward translation of the text makes clear, *'ûr*, despite being the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew *'ôr*, is not used here to refer to skin or its associated pigmentation. Rather, the word has an agricultural meaning here, referring to the “chaff” or “husks” that cover and conceal the wheat before it is threshed. In other words, the term here simply refers to a temporary covering of something, a covering that will eventually fall off or be removed—similar to how scales are shed from a creature (snakes, for example) as they grow and reach maturity. In other words, in contrast to *'ôr*, “skin,” which is necessary for human beings and animals to retain throughout their entire life span to survive and function, *'ûr* indicates something more general, a covering that might in fact be skin, but that also can be something neither long-lasting nor permanent.

In relation to this broadened meaning, the usage of *'ûr*—like other terms—within the context of Daniel 2:35 is allegorical rather than literal, referring to various Gentile superpowers who have ruled over the earth throughout the course of human history. This allegorical usage is indicated beginning in the very next verse of the chapter: “This is the dream and we will provide its meaning to the king” (Daniel 2:36). The terms of Daniel’s vision thus serve directly as metaphors of the spiritual darkness and imprisonment that Gentile kings, from Nebuchadnezzar to Alexander the Great, inflicted on the earth. Ultimately, this darkness is temporary in that the stone that represents God’s power (i.e., the Messiah) will strike the foundation of these other powers and remove their presence from the earth. As Daniel Berrigan notes: “Three kingdoms

will succeed the Babylonians: the Persian, Greek and Roman. These will eventually fade to a diminishing power and grandeur. . . . They proclaim that the admirable new order signals the onset of the realm of God.”¹³ In connection with these overtly allegorical images, Daniel 2:35 uses the simile of the wheat husks, employing the image of fragmented and ground-up ‘*ûr* to describe the breaking up of temporary darkness as the Messiah comes to deliver Israel.

From an interpretive standpoint, this understanding of the use of the term ‘*ûr* in Daniel correlates well with statements found near the end of 2 Nephi, in which Nephi predicts the restoration of the Lamanites and notes that they will be “restored unto the knowledge of their fathers, and also to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. . . . And their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes” (2 Nephi 12:82–84; LDS 30:5–6). The spiritual darkness that blinds the Lamanites to the truth of the Gospel and of the Messiah, Jesus, will be lifted so that they can clearly see the light of God and be purified of their sins. The fact that the Aramaic ‘*ûr* can mean “scales” in fact might suggest that some such term originally lay behind Nephi’s “scales of darkness.” I would like to suggest the possibility that a similar original reading lay behind 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21): the “skin of blackness” that was caused to come upon the Lamanites might be just these “scales of darkness” that Nephi later predicts will fall away as the Lamanites come to see Jesus as the Christ. What begins in 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21) is prophesied to end in 2 Nephi 12:82–84 (LDS 30:5–6).¹⁴

Conclusion

In this brief article, I have proposed a reading of the Book of Mormon text, specifically 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21), informed by insights

13. Daniel Berrigan, *Daniel: Under the Siege of the Divine* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1998), 37, 40.

14. Such an interpretation, of course, raises questions about the nature of Joseph Smith’s translation of the gold plates since it would assume that one phrase in Aramaic-inflected Hebrew is translated in two very different ways in the English text. This is a problem that would need to be addressed on another occasion.

from Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Aramaic. I have done this because the Book of Mormon itself claims to be a Semitic text written in a (now lost) Semitic language. Using Semitic languages as an interpretive guide, and paying particular attention to a language with some apparent connections to Nephite linguistic patterns and with a wide semantic range for the word translatable as “skins,” I have argued that one can understand the mention of the Lamanites receiving a “skin of blackness” as referring to spiritual darkness rather than physical pigmentation. By way of summary, in biblical Aramaic, the term for skin, *‘ûr*, has a metaphorical sense and can refer not only to pigmentation but to “chaff” or “scales” that fall off of wheat when it is ripe for harvest. This meaning closely parallels the reference to the Lamanites having their “scales of darkness” removed in 2 Nephi 12 (LDS 30).

As mentioned before, there is a history of interpretation in the Mormon tradition that has viewed “skin of blackness” in 2 Nephi as referring to spiritual darkness. My proposal contributes to this history by adding Semitic precedent in favor of this type of interpretation. My agenda here is not to critique Joseph Smith’s rendering of the text as it currently stands in the Book of Mormon or to claim that the prophet translated the received material incorrectly. Rather, as someone who believes in the Book of Mormon as scripture and that God speaks through scripture in multiple ways, my goal is to open up and expose the multifaceted readings available in the sacred text. I believe that this is of special importance in the current racial climate that exists both in the larger Mormon community and in the United States as a whole. We would all do well to redirect our attention again to the scriptures and remind ourselves of Nephi’s proclamation that the Lord “denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female” (2 Nephi 11:114; LDS 26:33).

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