

**FAIR**

# What Does the Book of Mormon Mean by "Skin of Blackness"?



Brant A. Gardner

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The following is an excerpt from Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007–2008): 2:108–. It represents the commentary following the text introducing the phrase "skin of blackness" and analyzes the textual data to answer the question of meaning.

2 Nephi 5:21:

21 And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.

Two things happen to the Lamanites as a result of their "harden[ing] their hearts against him." The first is that they are cursed. The second is that Yahweh caused a skin of blackness to come upon them. The curse is a fulfillment of Lehi's prophecy about the land: "If iniquity shall abound cursed shall be the land for their sakes" (2 Ne. 1:7). That cursing was pronounced upon the land, but the iniquity must come from people, not land. The cursing follows the people who work iniquity. Thus, Nephi can claim that the Lamanites are cursed because they fall under that foundational prophecy of the land which included both a blessing and a curse, according to righteousness.

The second part of this verse indicates that, after the curse, another sign was placed upon the Lamanites that allowed for a separation between the Lamanites and Nephites. This barrier is very clearly a religio-political one, because it specifically forbids intermarriage. There are two important aspects to this declaration. One is this establishment of rules concerning potential marriage partners, and the second is the nature of the skin of blackness.

**Exogamy (marriage outside of the group) and the Lamanite Curse:** There is not only a geographic division between the brothers and their families, but a moral and religious chasm as well. The question of marriage is an important one, because Yahweh has now excluded a number of the potential marriage partners who might be seen as more desirable than the native populations because they are both racially and culturally similar to the Old World peoples among the Nephites. The early division of the Old World peoples into

are both racially and culturally similar to the Old World peoples among the Nephites. The early division of the Old World peoples into two mutually exclusive marriage groups would have caused a difficulty for the marriage patterns inherited from the Old World, where the preferred marriage partner was someone within the same tribe (Num. 36:5–9). However, there were also provisions for marriage outside of the tribe. Such unions were considered somewhat dangerous to tribal identity, and were frequently subject to either direct prohibitions or to regulations concerning inheritance. William Smith, a Bible scholar, notes:

The prohibitions relating to foreigners were based on that instinctive feeling of exclusiveness, which forms one of the bonds of every social body, and which prevails with peculiar strength in a rude state of society. The only distinct prohibition in the Mosaic law refers to the Canaanites, with whom the Israelites were not to marry, on the grounds that it would lead them into idolatry (Ex. 24:16, Deut 7: 3–4). But beyond this, the legal disabilities to which the Ammonites and Moabites were subjected (Deut. 23: 3) acted as a virtual bar to intermarriage with them, totally preventing the marriage of Israelitish women with Moabites, but permitting that of Israelites with Moabite women, such as that of Mahlon with Ruth. The prohibition against marriages with the Edomites or Egyptians was less stringent, as a male of those nations received the right of marriage on his admission to the full citizenship in the third generation of proselytism (Deut. 23:7–8).<sup>1</sup>

Because marriage dictated the flow of rights and properties, the legal problems of exogamy included regulations designed to keep land and goods inside the group. For this reason, it was much less of a problem for men to marry “outsider” women than for women to marry outsider men. The patriarchal laws of inheritance preserved lands and goods. The Nephite situation says nothing about inheritance rights, but only about avoiding the curse that was upon the Lamanites. This barrier is similar to the explicit prohibition against marrying Canaanites. The Canaanites were not only the people who lived in the land before Israel conquered it, but they were also a people with a similar religion. Hence, both from proximity and from familiarity of customs, they might make attractive marriage partners except that their religion was not Yahweh’s. The only explicit prohibition of marriage partners in the Old Testament thus precluded an attractive marriage pool, but did so on religious grounds. This is the same type of prohibition we see with the Lamanites. Nephites had to be explicitly prohibited from marrying Lamanites because they would otherwise be an attractive choice.

While the term “Lamanite” became a political designation for all non-Nephites (Jacob 1:13–4), it included lineal Lamanites and the specific location where they settled. The Nephites could not have survived without a wider range of marriage partners than the very small number of lineal Lehites who were in the city. Therefore, we should see this prohibition as similar to that against the Canaanites. It prohibited a particular city or land, based on the location of the other descendants of Lehi. It would be seen as a prevention of apostasy, exactly like the prohibition against marrying Canaanites in the Old World.

**Reading the Text or Reading into the Text:** When 2 Nephi 5:21 says, “The Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them,” the phrase has been interpreted quite literally as a change in skin pigmentation.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is much easier to compile a list of writers who take the phrase literally than of those who suggest an alternate reading.

The most typical reading is that there was some type of dramatic change that turned white skin into black skin. A representative of this school of thought is Milton R. Hunter of the Council of the Seventy:

As is well-known, two peoples—a white race and those of a darker color—inhabited ancient America for approximately one thousand years’ time. The white race was called Nephites and the darker race Lamanites. . . . The reader may say: “Yes, we understand that there were a white race and a dark race in ancient America from approximately 600 BC until approximately 400 AD, but we have understood also that by the latter date all the white people (Nephites), except Moroni, had been killed in a war with the darker people or Lamanites.”

It is true that the Nephite nation ended toward the close of the fifth century AD, but probably many of the white Nephites were saved from death by joining the Lamanites. These then would not be followers of Christ and would be unfaithful ones. The last great war was not fought entirely on the lines of race, but probably the determining factor was that one group allied itself with the Lamanite traditions, and the other group followed the Nephite traditions, including a belief in Jesus Christ. Thus there probably were dark and

traditions, and the other group followed the Nephite traditions, including a belief in Jesus Christ. Thus there probably were dark and white people in each army.<sup>3</sup>

For Elder Hunter, the change in the skin color is absolutely physical and remains a distinction throughout Book of Mormon history. He provides no explanation for how this alteration occurs, other than to note that it comes through God. Rodney Turner, LDS professor of religion, attributes this pigmentation change to God's direct and miraculous action:

Symbolic of the withdrawal of the Spirit from their lives, a "skin of blackness" came upon the rebellious Laman, Lemuel, their families, and those sons and daughters of Ishmael who chose to affiliate with them (2 Ne. 5:21). There can be no question but that their altered skin color was a miraculous act of God; *it cannot be understood in purely metaphoric terms, nor as being nothing more than the natural consequence of prolonged exposure to the sun.*<sup>4</sup> (emphasis mine)

Along with the assumption that the skin pigmentation was darkened as part of the curse, there were many who also believed that the conversion of dark-skinned "Lamanites" to the gospel would lead to a physically whiter skin.<sup>5</sup>

A contrasting reading is that the changed skin color does not involve a physical change in the pigmentation. John L. Sorenson suggested:

What about the "dark skin" of the Lamanites and the "fair skin" of the Nephites? In the first place, the terms are relative. How dark is dark? How white is fair? An early Spaniard, Tomas Medel, noted around AD 1560 that the Indians in the Pacific coastal areas of Guatemala, where I place the earliest Lamanites, were darker than those in the cooler, higher areas, where the first Nephites lived. The highlanders, Medel said, "appeared but little different from the Spaniards." That observation is underlined by a historical incident that took place at the other end of Mesoamerica during Cortez's conquest of the Aztecs. Faced by a rebellion at his base on the Gulf of Mexico, the commander sent spies from Central Mexico to assess the situation. Among a party of his Indian allies he sent along two Spaniards of relatively dark complexion, clothed like the natives. They succeeded in being in the camp of the rebel Spaniards for a lengthy period, then returned to report the state of affairs, their own Spanish identity never being detected by their countrymen. Padre Thomas Gage called the Indian people of central Chiapas "fair of complexion" and the natives of Nicaragua "indifferent white." On the other hand, the color of other Indians approached what could be called "a skin of blackness" (2 Ne. 5:21; this metaphor was used only once in the text—all other references are only to "darkness").

The skin shades of surviving peoples in Book of Mormon lands include a substantial range, from dark brown to virtual white. These colors cover nearly the same range as were found anciently around the Mediterranean coast and in the Near East. It is likely that the objective distinction in skin hue between Nephites and Lamanites was less marked than the subjective difference. The scripture is clear that the Nephites were prejudiced against the Lamanites (Jacob 3:5, Mosiah 9:1–2, Alma 26:23–25). That must have influenced how they perceived their enemies. The Nephite description of the Lamanites falls into a pattern known in the Near East. The Sumerian city dwellers in Mesopotamia of the third millennium BC viewed the Amorites, Abraham's desert-dwelling relatives, as "dark" savages who lived in tents, ate their food raw, left the dead unburied, and cultivated no crops. Urban Syrians still call the Bedouin nomads "the wild beasts." The Nephite picture of their relatives, in Jarom 1:6 and Enos 1:20, sounds so similar to the Near Eastern epithets that this language probably should be considered a literary formula rather than an objective description, labeling applied to any feared, despised, "backward" people. But all this does not exclude a cultural and biological difference between the two groups. The question is how great the difference was; we may doubt that it was as dramatic as the Nephite recordkeepers made out.<sup>6</sup>

Where Rodney Turner clearly believes that the change is not metaphorical, Sorenson just as clearly declares it to be precisely metaphorical. Nibley stands on the metaphorical side of the issue, though he still suggests that exposure to the sun could create the "blackness."<sup>7</sup> With this much disagreement on a single phrase in the text, how can we know how it should be read? There are some keys that we should use, and the very first is to remember the dangers of reading ourselves into a text in ways that the text did not intend.<sup>8</sup>

that we should use, and the very first is to remember the dangers of reading ourselves into a text in ways that the text did not intend.<sup>8</sup> As Bruce Malina (professor of theology at Creighton University) and Richard Rohrbaugh (professor of religious studies at Lewis and Clark College) point out:

Readers and writers always participate in a social system that provides the clues for filling in between the lines. Meanings are embedded in a social system that is shared and understood by all participants in any communication process. Although meanings not rooted in a shared social system can sometimes be communicated, such communication inevitably requires extended explanation because a writer cannot depend on the reader to conjure up the proper sets of related images or concepts needed to complete the text.<sup>9</sup>

The problem of social context is exacerbated when a reader from one culture reads a text written in and for a different culture, and when the text includes none of the necessary explanations:

Each time a text is read by a new reader, the fields of reference tend to shift and multiply because of the reader's cultural location. Among some literary theorists this latter phenomenon is called "recontextualization." This term refers to the multiple ways different readers may "complete" a text as a result of reading it over against their different social contexts. . . . Our thesis is that this particular recontextualization, this modernization of the text, is profoundly social in character, and that readers socialized in the industrial world are unlikely to complete the text—in ways the ancient authors could have imagined.<sup>10</sup>

What we need to know is what that phrase means in the context of the people and times in which it was written. That is a not a simple task as we don't have a wealth of information. It is not, however, an impossible task.

Before beginning with the text itself, it is important to clarify some facts that will help us sort the textual usage from our modern assumptions. The first is the notion of a particular color associated with skin. All human populations have variations in color, and there are pigmentation differences in all populations. While there is a set of people whose skin can be very black, they are not native to the western hemisphere. Saying that any Amerindian has a black skin is incorrect even in modern skin color nomenclature. They are called "red." It should be recognized, however, that they are not "red." Those whose skin is called "white" are also not white. Asians are termed "yellow," although they certainly do not have yellow skin. Skin color designations are cultural descriptions, not scientific ones. They are based on some visual perception, but coalesce into large categories that reflect the human tendency to categorize people.

Even though skin color has come to be associated with race, the value of relative skin color was social, not racial. In Elizabethan England and in earlier Roman culture, the dark skin was the sign of a common laborer, and the lighter, whiter skin the sign of nobility. This perceived difference was simply related to sun exposure, indicating whether the person was required to work outside for a living. The Romans used a chalk-based compound to lighten their skins to further this perceived difference.<sup>11</sup> Humans have certainly placed values on the color of one's skin, but for most of history the value is social. The association of the presence of skin color with race is purely descriptive. The use of that skin color to make cultural assumptions about race is social.

Colors also have social meanings that are quite separate from describing the eye's perception of light waves. Humans tend to make binary-opposed sets, of which black and white form a classic set. The two "colors" are considered to be opposites of each other. To each of them a social value is attached, with white representing good and black representing bad (with good/bad being similar binary oppositions). Thus, someone may have a "black heart," but this descriptor is of a quality, not a pigment.

Armand L. Mauss, professor emeritus of sociology at Washington State University, discusses this very issue:

In modern colloquial English (or American) we sometimes speak of people as having "thick" or "thin" skins, without intending any literal dermatological meaning. Attributions of "white" versus "black" or "dark" skins could be read in a similarly figurative manner, as they might have been by Joseph Smith himself (or by his Nephite authors). The reader therefore need not attribute racist intentions when the Book of Mormon uses such terms as *dark* or *filthy* versus *white* or *pure*, especially when "racial traits" such as skin color

when the Book of Mormon uses such terms as *dark* or *many* versus *white* or *pure*, especially when racial traits, such as skin color, are not even explicitly mentioned—which is the case most of the time.<sup>12</sup>

There are many ways in which color may be associated with a person. The Book of Mormon makes those associations, and the question is what the text means when it makes those associations. The possibilities range from simple description to metaphorical value judgments. We should not presume that their meanings are our meanings. We must understand how the text sees those statements.

**Racism in the Book of Mormon:** The Book of Mormon is, in fact, racist, although not at all in the usual sense of the term.<sup>13</sup> It represents a particular culture with a distinctive worldview. Even though it was written for a future audience, it was written in a time and manner that reflected the social constructions of the authors, not those of modern readers. This referential gulf between intent and interpretation explains our tendency to read “skin of blackness” with modern racial overtones. The ancient world was actually quite prejudiced but did not necessarily base such prejudices upon skin color. Their prejudices ran deeper and broader, as Malina and Neyrey explain: “In their assessment of their fellow human beings, elite ancients utilized a set of fixed categories, each with a limited range of descriptive, distinct features. . . . It is important to note that these categories were regularly presented. Invariably, the usual way of thinking was in terms of A/not-A, either/or, for/against, true/false, in/out, heaven/earth—with no middle term. This so-called principle of excluded middle was the prevailing logic.”<sup>14</sup>

Each ancient culture usually saw itself as the center of the universe—the norm, the standard, the “good.” Using the logic of the excluded middle, “others” must be bad. This is the origin of the term “barbarian,” which the Greeks frequently used as a generic term for anyone who was not Greek and who was, therefore, inferior.<sup>15</sup> Israelites also shared this widespread prejudice against “others,” as Malina and Neyrey point out: “First-century members of the house of Israel felt concerning all other peoples the way the Greeks felt about barbarians.”<sup>16</sup>

This cultural background contrasts the ancient collectivist personality with the modern individualist personality. Modern society prefers to see differences as individualized and therefore prejudicial when applied to a group. In contrast, ancient society saw reality as communally related. The group was the meaning, and individuals who did not conform were considered deviant. According to this model, the Book of Mormon would predictably follow a model of a collective, excluded-middle, conception of others as “bad,” opposed to themselves as “good.” If it did not, it would not accurately represent the culture that produced it.

The Book of Mormon is indeed prejudiced against the Lamanites. However, that prejudice always arises along the insider/outsider boundary, not the white/dark boundary. Descriptions of Lamanites repeat the same stock phrases over time:

1. (ca. 587 BC, written ca. 540–550 BC) 1 Nephi 12:23: 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.
2. (ca. 575 BC, written ca. 540–550 BC) 2 Nephi 5:24: “And because of their cursing . . . they did become *an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety*, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey.”
3. (ca. 350–360 BC) Enos 1:20: “The Lamanites . . . were led by their evil nature that *they became wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness*; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; and their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax. And many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat; and they were continually seeking to destroy us.
4. (ca. 120 BC) Mosiah 10:12: They were a *wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people*, believing in the tradition of their fathers. . . .
5. (ca. 82 BC) Alma 17:12–14: And it came to pass when they had arrived in the borders of the land of the Lamanites, that they

5. (ca. 82 BC) Alma 17:13–14: And it came to pass when they had arrived in the borders of the land of the Lamanites, that they separated themselves and departed one from another, trusting in the Lord that they should meet again at the close of their harvest; for they supposed that great was the work which they had undertaken. And assuredly it was great, for they had undertaken to preach the word of God to *a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people; a people who delighted in murdering the Nephites, and robbing and plundering them*; and their hearts were set upon riches, or upon gold and silver, and precious stones; yet they sought to obtain these things by murdering and plundering, that they might not labor for them with their own hands.

6. (ca. 49 BC) Helaman 3:16: And they have been handed down from one generation to another by the Nephites, even until they have fallen into transgression and have been murdered, plundered, and hunted, and driven forth, and slain, and scattered upon the face of the earth, and mixed with the Lamanites until they are no more called the Nephites, *becoming wicked, and wild, and ferocious*, yea, even *becoming Lamanites*.

7. (ca. AD 372) Mormon 5:15: 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.

Each quotation describes “how the Lamanites are.” While there is at least a possibility that the description was true when Nephi began this traditional stereotyping of the Lamanites, it was untrue by the time of Enos if not earlier. It is conclusively untrue in Alma where the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies discusses the many cities of the Lamanites (Alma 23:9–15).

Furthermore, these descriptions of the Lamanites as the opposite of the Nephites vanish as soon as the Lamanites cross the outsider/insider boundary. Once they are Nephites, they are fully and wholly Nephites, incorporating all of the “good” qualities of Nephites. Separation occurs with the label “Lamanite,” not because of skin color.

Note how Jacob uses the “filthy” label that accompanies “dark” in 1 Nephi 12:23 Mormon 5:15: “But, wo, wo, unto you that are not pure in heart, that are filthy this day before God; for except ye repent the land is cursed for your sakes; and the Lamanites, which are not filthy like unto you, nevertheless they are cursed with a sore cursing, shall scourge you even unto destruction” (Jacob 3:3). In normal reference, the Lamanites are “dark” and “filthy.” However, that “filthiness” is obviously a moral quality. At the point Jacob addresses his people, he applies this outsider label to them directly to highlight their adoption of outsider practices. (See commentary accompanying Jacob 3:3.)

**Textual Evidence for Actual Skin Pigmentation:** Does the Book of Mormon text contain events where distinguishing race by skin color becomes important? In order to remove the possibility that our assumptions are coloring our reading of the text, it is important to find locations in the text where the action of the text would create circumstances where a difference in pigmentation would be obvious. There is only one clear example.

Captain Moroni, working to free Nephite prisoners, sends wine to their Lamanite guards, hoping to intoxicate them (Alma 55). Because they would not accept such a gift from a Nephite, Moroni finds a Lamanite in his own troops, a former guard of the Lamanite king. Accompanied by other Nephites, this soldier takes the wine to the guards, and Moroni’s plan is successful. Of significance is the fact that Moroni had to “search” for a Lamanite soldier. Had he been “black” in contrast to the “white” of the Nephites, his identity should

have been readily apparent. Furthermore, on his mission to the guards, Nephites accompany him. A color difference should have immediately been apparent to the guards, but they do not notice the discrepancy. The best explanation for needing an authentic Lamanite is that Moroni needed his language skills, not his skin color, for the ruse.

**Book of Mormon Language about Skin Color:** The curse is expressed in two antithetically parallel phrases: “as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them” (2 Ne. 5:21). The phrases describe a previous condition and its succeeding condition, pivoting upon causation. Yahweh changed the Lamanites from what they had been to what they had become.

The before/after relationship is “fair and delightsome”/“skin of blackness.” Both conditions are structural opposites. “Fair and delightsome” contains no reference to either “skin” or “white.” It would be a mistake, however, to assume that their absence means they are not part of the oppositional pairing since they do appear in other contexts. For example, 3 Nephi 2:14–15 reads: “And it came to pass that those Lamanites who had united with the Nephites were numbered among the Nephites; And their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites.”

This reversal of the curse (not repeated here but “skin of blackness”) implies its opposite (articulated here): “skin became white.” The Lamanites have crossed the insider/outsider boundary, becoming those who were “united with the Nephites” and “numbered among” them. Because they have become Nephites, they therefore “became white like unto the Nephites.” This shift in *skin of blackness* to *skin became white* on the basis of a change from outsider to insider explains why the first appearance of the idea of the curse on the Lamanites has a different inception than this mention in 2 Nephi 5:21. In 1 Nephi 12:23, Nephi prophesies: “And I beheld, after they had dwindled in unbelief they became a dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people.” This is a reference to the Lamanites who survive the wars that destroy the Nephites (1 Ne. 12:19–20). In prophecy, Nephi places the darkness of the Lamanites over 1,000 years later than we find it in 2 Nephi 5:21. Why the discrepancy in time? There is no discrepancy. The condition of darkness comes with dwindling in unbelief. When that occurs, darkness falls—on their hearts and metaphorically on their skins. It is not a physical change and therefore does not have a specific point of inception. It is as accurate when described in 2 Nephi as it is prophetically at the end of Nephite culture.

Another example is the dark/white pairing from the 1830 first edition of 2 Nephi 30:6: “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 delightsome people.”<sup>17</sup> This verse parallels “fair and delightsome,” since “fair” and “white” are structural equivalents. Although the fair/delightsome pair occurs twice (2 Ne. 5:21, 4 Ne. 1:10) and white/delightsome occurs only once, nevertheless these phrases are repeating the same concept.

Fair/white is paired with dark/black in the antithetical parallel. The opposite of “delightsome” is “loathsome.” The term “loathsome is paired with “dark” in 1 Nephi 12:23 and is the reason for the cursing in 2 Nephi 5:22.<sup>18</sup> The curse’s purpose is to set a social barrier between the two peoples. When the curse is operating and the Lamanites are outsiders, they are “loathsome” (the opposite of “delightsome”)—not desirable marriage partners. When they are insiders, they are “delightsome,” available as marriage partners. Just as the white/black or fair/dark terms function along the insider/outsider boundary, so too does the delightsome/loathsome dichotomy describe social repercussions.

Are these social functions metaphors or do they actually denote pigmentation? Alma 3:6 is the closest thing in the text to evidence for pigmentation change: “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.” This verse clearly indicates that Lamanite skin was dark and that it “mark[ed]” them, thus denoting some visible indication. The use of “mark” quotes Genesis 4:15, stating that God set a mark on Cain. E. A. Speiser, an archaeologist and Old Testament scholar, suggests that Cain’s mark was like other protective marks in the Old Testament, all of which were signs on the forehead.<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel 9:4–6 describes literally marking the forehead as a protection: “And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity: Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary. Then they began at the ancient men which were before the house.”

According to Speiser, this mark is the letter *taw*, and none of the examples he cites refer to skin color. All refer to identifying letters.

What is the "mark" in the Book of Mormon? Alma 3:6 tells us that the mark was the curse (according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them), so the reference is circular. However, in the context of the Old Testament mark on the forehead we find:

Thus the word of God is fulfilled, for these are the words which he said to Nephi: Behold, the Lamanites have I cursed, and I will set a mark on them that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed, from this time henceforth and forever, except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me that I may have mercy upon them.

And again: I will set a mark upon him that mingleth his seed with thy brethren, that they may be cursed also.

And again: I will set a mark upon him that fighteth against thee and thy seed. (Alma 3:14–16)

The mark is pigmentation if and only if the curse is pigmentation. Marking the forehead with paint appears to be sufficient to create an identifying "mark" that falls significantly short of altering body pigmentation. Possessing the mark cannot prove that the curse is skin color, because that would beg the very question that needs to be proved. The function of the mark is social separation, but it is the same insider/outsider barrier already discussed. Since the mark/curse can be removed by simply traversing that boundary, I conclude that it is unlikely that the mark or curse had anything to do with pigmentation.

Reinforcing the insider/outsider // white/black concept is Jacob 3:8, comparing the Nephites unfavorably to the Lamanites: "Unless ye shall repent of your sins . . . their skins will be whiter than yours, when ye shall be brought with them before the throne of God." This passage associates skin with color, in this case, white. However, Jacob compares white/whiter, not white/black. How can Lamanites be whiter than the Nephites? Nephites cannot be Nephites and not be "white." "White" defines the insider. Therefore, the Nephites do not become black. They are white by cultural definition. Nevertheless, in terms of righteousness, the Lamanites would be whiter. There is no change in the Lamanite skin color here. The Lamanites do not become righteous, they become comparatively righteous because of Nephite wickedness. That situation creates the need for a comparison, but since the Nephites cannot be "dark" the Lamanites by default become "whiter" than the Nephites. The logic of the passage relies upon the metaphorical use of the insider/outsider terminology to mean unrighteous/righteous. This is a marvelous rhetorical device because the collectivist perspective of this ancient culture would consider such a condition unthinkable.

3 Nephi 19:24–25 records another similar white/whiter occurrence during Jesus's visit to the New World:

When Jesus had thus prayed unto the Father, he came unto his disciples, and behold, they did still continue, without ceasing, to pray unto him. . . .

And it came to pass that Jesus blessed them as they did pray unto him; and his countenance did smile upon them, and the light of his countenance did shine upon them, and behold they were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus; and behold the whiteness thereof did exceed all the whiteness, yea, even there could be nothing upon earth so white as the whiteness thereof.

The disciples' transforming spiritual experience makes them become "as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus." This shade is not a natural skin color nor does anything in this passage encourage a "natural" interpretation. Its very point is the episode's uniqueness. Nevertheless, "white" Nephites become even whiter. Obviously, the writer is not describing their skin color, but their spiritual state.



their spiritual state.

This comparison of white/whiteness also occurs in Nephi's description of the tree: "I looked and beheld a tree; and it was like unto the tree which my father had seen; and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow" (1 Ne. 11:8).

The tree's whiteness symbolizes righteousness or heavenliness. It is not intended to be a physical description. Similarly, I conclude that the association between skin and white/black is metaphoric, not intended to indicate pigmentation. Douglas Campbell, a professor of computer science at Brigham Young University, examined the textual uses of "white" in the Book of Mormon and concludes that the term is used metaphorically for purity and/or cleanliness.<sup>20</sup> The metaphorical use of color terms echoes that of the Bible. Lamentations 4:7–8 (Revised English Version), ascribes metaphorical color to capture the before/after conditions of the Babylonian captivity:

Her crowned princes were once purer than snow, whiter than milk; they were ruddier than branching coral; their limbs were lapis lazuli.

But their faces turned blacker than soot, and no one knew them in the streets; the skin was shriveled tight over their bones, dry as touchwood.

Obviously no pigmentation change occurred as the "white" faces of the princes became "blacker than soot." Here are two other examples:

Before their face the people shall be much pained: all faces shall gather blackness. (Joel 2:6)

She is empty, and void, and waste: and the heart melteth, and the knees smite together, and much pain is in all loins, and the faces of them all gather blackness. (Nahum 2:10)

The metaphor can also use "skin": "When I looked for good, then evil came unto me: and when I waited for light, there came darkness. My bowels boiled, and rested not: the days of affliction prevented me. I went mourning without the sun: I stood up, and I cried in the congregation. I am a brother to dragons, and a companion to owls. My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat" (Job 30:26–30).

Even the reversal, becoming white, is a metaphor: "And some of them of understanding shall fall, to try them, and to purge, and to make them white, even to the time of the end: because it is yet for a time appointed" (Dan. 11:35).

Nibley observes: "This amazing *coincidentia oppositorum* is the clash of black and white. With the Arabs, to be white of countenance is to be blessed and to be black of countenance is to be cursed; there are parallel expressions in Hebrew and Egyptian."<sup>21</sup>

Why should a metaphor of color describe the skin or face if it does not refer to pigmentation? Why should metaphorical righteousness/unrighteousness be manifest in a "color" of skin? It is not significantly different from ascribing emotion to the heart, which is an organ having no biological relevance to emotions at all. Underlying these biblical and Book of Mormon metaphors are the assumptions of the collectivist social world. Malina and Neyrey describe this mentality for the ancient Mediterranean cultures: "Human

beings are distinctive in that they exhibit a considerable range of physical shapes, hues, and structures. Yet as in the case with other animate beings, the shape of the individual human more than adequately reveals the type of personality he or she can be and explains his or her 'nature.' For humans, too, anatomical form determines behavior and reveals the nature of the human being in question."<sup>22</sup>

In the Mediterranean world the understanding of personality through physical characteristics was called physiognomics. Malina and Neyrey note:

Physiognomics, then, is the study of human character on the basis of how people look and act. . . . A succinct definition of "physiognomics" can be found in Pseudo-Aristotle's *Physiognomics*, a work dating to before the first century BC. This treatise offers a set of stereotypes of human character based on: "the natural and acquired character traits that affect the signs studied by physiognomists . . . a person's movements, postures, colors, facial expressions, hair, type of skin, voice, flesh-tone, parts of the body and overall physique." (Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomics* 806a, our translation). . . .

The task, then, is pragmatically to observe the dispositions (*dianoiai*), that invariably correlate with specific forms. This gives salience to the old sayings, "Birds of a feather flock together" and "A man is known by the clothes he wears" or "the company he keeps."<sup>23</sup>

Such an idea runs counter to modern constructions of human beings as individuals, but it reflects accurately, I believe, the different social view of Nephi's world. Malina and Neyrey continue: "When considering a person, the ancients thought that there was really nothing inside that did not register on the outside."<sup>24</sup> In this conception of humanity, the skin or face would be the logical location for spiritual characteristics to register. Even metaphorically, the skin and face were legitimate locations for the "display" of these spiritual characteristics.

What can we say about how the "skin of blackness" was perceived by those who wrote our Book of Mormon? Armand Mauss, a professor emeritus of sociology and religion at Washington State University, discusses the assumption of those who are critical of the Book of Mormon:

Although Joseph Smith presented the Book of Mormon to the world as his translation of an ancient document, it is generally regarded by non-Mormons as a nineteenth-century product, whether or not it was divinely inspired. Accordingly, passages like those excerpted above [concerning dark skin] are taken as simply reflections of nineteenth-century American racist understandings about the origins of various peoples of color. Such conventional wisdom seems justified both by the mysterious provenance of the Book of Mormon itself and by the meanings that Mormons themselves have traditionally attributed to such passages. Yet it is not entirely certain that Joseph Smith himself or even most others of his immediate family and contemporaries would have understood these passages in quite the same literal sense that modern readers have.

As one consideration, the Book of Mormon does not use the term *race* at all. In an 1842 letter (known in Mormon history as the Wentworth letter), the one recorded case in which Smith used the term in reference to the Book of Mormon, he was distinguishing *not* between Lamanites and Nephites but between them and the Jaredites, all of which parties he obviously considered to be peoples of the same Semitic origin. Furthermore, Smith, before his death, had begun replacing the seeming skin-color references with terms that clearly referred instead to spiritual quality. Finally, a comprehensive review of the Book of Mormon text as a whole shows that it uses *white* almost always as a figurative synonym for *pure, clean, luminous*, and similar concepts, not in reference to such "racial" traits as skin color.<sup>25</sup> (emphasis his)

The "skin of blackness" was certainly intended to be a pejorative term, but it was not a physical description. Modern readers may be uncomfortable with Nephite racial prejudices, but they existed. They were not, however, based on skin color as has been part of the more modern U.S. culture. Nephite prejudices were developed on distinctions more common to the ancient world and used reasons other than pigmentation.

## Notes

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>William Smith, *Smith's Bible Dictionary* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1970), 376–77.

<sup>2</sup>Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 4–2:897, appears to follow the suggestion that there was a physical change in skin color. Discussing the change of *white* to *pure* in 2 Nephi 6:30 for the 1840 edition, he notes: “Of course, the 1840 change of *white* to *pure* avoids . . . the need to interpret the remnant of the Nephites as being dark skinned. In other words, the editing change to *pure* may represent a conscious attempt at avoiding what was perceived as a difficult reading (the Nephites as being dark skinned), which therefore explains why the change from *white* to *pure* was made here—and only here—in 2 Nephi 30:6. There has never been any attempt to emend any of the passages that directly comment on the dark skin of the Lamanites.”

Skousen’s argument for the reason for the editorial change is persuasive. It persuades, however, that the *reader’s* understanding of the text related to a change in pigmentation. It does not discuss the point made in this commentary of the text’s use of *skin* as a metaphor rather than as a literal description.

<sup>3</sup>Milton R. Hunter, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 191.

<sup>4</sup>Rodney Turner, “The Lamanite Mark,” in *Second Nephi: The Doctrinal Structure*, edited by Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989), 138. While Turner reads the statement of pigmentation change literally, he does not read the word “blackness” literally: “The expression ‘skin of blackness’ does not necessarily, or even probably, mean a black skin, only a darker skin. The pre-flood people of Canaan (Cain’s posterity) had a ‘blackness’ come upon them after the Lord cursed their land ‘with much heat’ (Moses 7:8). After Enoch’s city was translated from the earth Enoch beheld that ‘the seed of Cain were black’ and were separate from all other peoples (Moses 7:22). I believe that ‘blackness’ and ‘black’ are not synonyms and that the Lamanite mark was only a relatively darker pigmentation, not a literally black skin. By the same token, a ‘white’ skin is only relatively so (Jacob 3:8).” *Ibid.*, footnote 2.

<sup>5</sup>Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 30.

<sup>6</sup>Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, 90.

This same assertion is found in Daniel Ludlow: “This is the only reference in the entire Book of Mormon where a definite color adjective is used to refer to this mark. All other references call it, a ‘skin of darkness’ or a ‘dark skin.’” Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 132. The assertion about “all other references” is the same as Sorenson’s, but Ludlow adds the assertion that there is a reference to “dark skin.” Only Alma 3:6 suggests that Lamanite skins were dark. There are other indications that the Lamanites were dark (1 Ne. 12:23; Morm. 5:15). These two references to the Lamanites (as opposed to their skin), both indicate a trilogy of attributes: “dark, filthy, loathsome.” The repetition of that specific trilogy suggests that it is a formulaic epithet.

<sup>7</sup>For the color change relating to sun exposure, see: Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon—Semester 1: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1993), 244. For the metaphorical meaning of “blackness,” see *ibid.*, 287, and Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 84–85.

<sup>8</sup>Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992), 3, 18–19.

<sup>9</sup>*ibid.*, 10.

<sup>8</sup>ibid., 10.

<sup>10</sup>ibid., 13–14.

<sup>11</sup>"Sun and Clouds: The Sun in History," <http://www.chemheritage.org/EducationalServices/pharm/chemo/readings/tsih.htm> (accessed January 2004).

<sup>12</sup>Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 128.

<sup>13</sup>John A. Tvedtnes, "The Charge of 'Racism' in the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 183–197, argues against the common allegation of racism in the modern pejorative sense rather than the more ancient sense for which I argue here.

<sup>14</sup>Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 102.

<sup>15</sup>ibid., 106.

<sup>16</sup>ibid. Malina and Neyrey described Israelite culture about six hundred years after Nephi. Nevertheless, Malina, writing with another coauthor, feels that this cultural phenomenon has endured for the intervening two thousand years and would, hence, probably agree that it was in place at Nephi's time as well: "In the circum-Mediterranean region, five millennia of common participation in conquest, colonialism, connubium, and trade, along with a mixed, small-scale farming and herding village economy embedded in a series of larger agrarian empires, created a set of common cultural institutions that have likewise persisted over time. The resulting 'Mediterranean culture-continent' exists yet today." Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 4.

<sup>17</sup>The 1981 (current) edition of the Book of Mormon changed "white" to "pure," following the 1840 edition. The constructions examined here suggest that "white" would actually be a better translation but that the meaning is essentially equivalent to "pure."

<sup>18</sup>The parallel in the phrasing indicates the parallel in the intent, even though the 1 Nephi 12:23 passage refers to an event over 1,000 years in the future to the discussion in 2 Nephi 5:21.

<sup>19</sup>E. A. Speiser, *Genesis, Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 31, citing Exodus 13:16; Deuteronomy 6:8, 11:18; Ezekiel 9:4, 6. In Exodus 28:36–38, Aaron has a mark meaning "Holiness to the Lord" on his "mitre," or headdress, worn over the forehead.

<sup>20</sup>Douglas Campbell, "'White' or 'Pure': Five Vignettes," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 132–134.

<sup>21</sup>Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 71.

<sup>22</sup>Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 100.

<sup>23</sup>ibid., 109.

<sup>24</sup>ibid., 108.

<sup>25</sup>Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 117–18.



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