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DEMYTHICIZING THE LAMANITES’ “SKIN OF BLACKNESS”

Gerrit M. Steenblik

Abstract: *Racial bias is antithetical to the Book of Mormon’s cardinal purpose: to proclaim the infinite grandeur of the atonement of Jesus Christ. The book teaches that the Lord welcomes and redeems the entire human family, “black and white, bond and free” — people of all hues from ebony to ivory. Critical thinkers have struggled to reconcile this leitmotif with the book’s mention of a “skin of blackness” that was “set upon” some of Lehi’s descendants. Earlier apologetics for that “mark” have been rooted in Old World texts and traditions. However, within the last twenty years, Mesoamerican archaeologists, anthropologists, and ethnohistorians have curated and interpreted artifacts that reveal an ancient Maya body paint tradition, chiefly for warfare, hunting, and nocturnal raiding. This discovery shifts possible explanations from the Old World to the New and suggests that any “mark” upon Book of Mormon people may have been self-applied. It also challenges arguments that the book demonstrates racism in either 600 BCE or the early nineteenth-century.*

In approximately 600 BCE, a Jewish patriarch named Lehi and his wife Sariah led their four sons away from Jerusalem to escape the impending Babylonian conquest. After gathering a few others, the caravan traveled “in a south-southeast direction” in the wilderness “near the Red Sea” (1 Nephi 16:13–14). Before leaving the land of Jerusalem, Nephi, who was the youngest son, obtained a set of priceless brass plates from the treasury of a Jewish nobleman through an inspired and bold ruse. Those plates preserved the writings of Hebrew prophets, including the Pentateuch and prophecies of Joseph, who was sold into Egypt. Eventually these Lehites constructed and provisioned a ship and sailed to the New World. Shortly after they arrived, Lehi and his wife died and

their two oldest sons, Laman and Lemuel, plotted to kill their younger brothers so that they could rule the clan.

Being forewarned, Nephi fled into the wilderness with his own family and other followers who became known as Nephites. Faced with the task of starting over from scratch, Nephi took with them “whatsoever things were possible” (2 Nephi 5:7). This included seeds, animals, tools, and religious relics, including the irreplaceable brass plates.¹

Long before this family schism, the two eldest sons had rejected their father’s Messianic faith, believing him to be a fanatic who had turned against the political and religious leaders in Jerusalem and improvidently sacrificed their legacy of land and possessions. Their conflict may have been related to theology,² but seems to have been fueled primarily by suspicion and jealousy. They were convinced that Nephi had used “cunning arts” to deceive them and that he coveted leadership (1 Nephi 16:38). Therefore, when Nephi and his followers fled from their settlement, Laman and Lemuel were furious, to the point that Nephi feared that they would attempt to destroy him and his people (2 Nephi 5:14). From then on, Laman and Lemuel taught their followers, the Lamanites, that Nephi had robbed them and had wronged them in other ways (Mosiah 10:12–17; cf. Alma 20:13). Their hatred of the Nephites soon led to wars and conflict that lasted for generations.

Lehi had believed in and taught his children repentance, mercy, and forgiveness as well as inclusivity. Before leaving Jerusalem, his first heavenly vision led him to exclaim that God’s “power, and goodness, and mercy are over *all the inhabitants of the earth*” (1 Nephi 1:14).³ This universalistic point of view resounds throughout Lehi’s teachings and, indeed, the entire Book of Mormon.⁴

Nephi prepared a history of his people, including an account of two specific events at the time of the split that may have negatively influenced Latter-day Saint presuppositions about people of color. First, he said that the Lamanites fell under what Hebrews traditionally viewed as a “cursing”— that is to say, they were “cut off” from the presence of the Lord (2 Nephi 5:20). Second, according to Nephi, “the Lord did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them” (2 Nephi 5:21).

These words, in a book that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints accepts as having been translated “by the gift and power of God,” may shock readers who come to the Book of Mormon to learn the gospel of Jesus Christ. Drawing upon his own personal missionary experience, Patrick Mason poignantly reminds us how these words can offend and altogether discourage readers, particularly people of color.⁵ Those who

are willing to read further sometimes do so under the ominous spell of the “skin of blackness” and the “curse.” Without a rational explanation, and the text itself does not offer one, these words become barriers to entry. The issue is not merely academic, especially for Indigenous Americans, African Americans, and Africans.

In 2001, while I was serving as the mission president for Côte d’Ivoire, Togo, Benin, Cameroun, and the Central African Republic (Centrafrique), my wife Judy and I confronted this issue personally. We recall our first zone leader conference in Abidjan. I had just opened the floor to questions when a sincere African elder asked me what color of skin he would have in the resurrection. He worried that his blackness limited his opportunities in the Church and in eternity, and that he and his African companions needed to become “whiter” in order to be “delightful.”⁶ We sought to reassure our missionaries that our diverse complexions were beautiful, that they proved God’s love for individuality, that they were not determined by the righteousness of ancestors, and that they had no bearing on mortal or eternal potential.

A few months later our African and North American office elders brought us five pages of shameful, racist statements by early Church leaders that someone had discovered on the internet and used to confront our missionaries. Copies were beginning to be circulated. We empathized with our faithful sisters and elders and collectively felt the sting of 19th and 20th century bigotry. We spoke to them candidly about past prejudice, reassured them of God’s respect for diversity, inclusion, and equality, and prayed that they would forgive former Church leaders. Their magnanimous grace allowed our missionary efforts to progress.

To date, there are no reliable facts from which to conclude that the words “skin of blackness” and “mark” are euphemisms for the creation of a “race,” as we use that term today — a group of humans with distinguishing phenotypic features, including complexion. We do not know why Nephi chose these words, how Joseph Smith understood them, or whether, in the process of translation, they came to Joseph as merely the best words to use under the circumstances, even though they might be misunderstood. It may well be that any racial inference results from inherited social biases of readers — those same biases that led colonial America to tolerate slavery. Nonetheless, because today the words seem offensive, some Church members have relied upon these words as racial generalizations, even though some disciple scholars contend that they are mere tropes with a metaphorical meaning. This article offers new

insights based on recent interpretations of Mesoamerican artifacts that shed light on these words and how they may have been misunderstood.

Beginning in the 1850s, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints denied Black women and men of African descent the right to participate in its temple ordinances and ceased ordaining these men to its priesthood.⁷ At that time, American protestants were predisposed to read racism into the Hebrew scriptures. Southerners especially elevated slavery to “the status of the literal word of God.”⁸ This undoubtedly influenced the early Utah Saints, who fell “in line with predominant American attitudes and practices concerning race.”⁹

The Utah Saints also found support for their priesthood and temple ban in their so-called scriptural proof texts, chiefly Joseph Smith’s prophetic translation of ancient papyri known as the Book of Abraham.¹⁰ Terryl Givens says: “Catastrophically for the development of church policy, the Book of Abraham was interpreted to convey [cursedness as the fruit of past conduct] in the case of the black race. Antebellum Americans had for some time been reading the curse of Ham, Canaan’s father, as a divine warrant for slavery. ... Passages in the Book of Abraham were read into this preformed context.”¹¹

During his lifetime, however, Joseph Smith demonstrated a remarkable respect for diversity, inclusiveness, and equality. Joseph “never commented on the Abraham text or implied it denied priesthood to blacks.”¹² The Book of Abraham was not elevated to the status of scripture until 1880, when the Saints were in the West.¹³ Furthermore, the Utah Church never officially relied on the Book of Mormon to explain its priesthood and temple restrictions.¹⁴ But in the mid-1800s, race relations with both African Americans and Indigenous Americans was a contemporary issue of both local and national import. Therefore, it is no surprise that early Utah Saints came to view the Book of Mormon as the tale of two races and blamed the non-Christian culture of America’s Indigenous people for their somewhat darker complexion.¹⁵

In June of 1978 the Church made its priesthood and temple ordinances available to all worthy members “without regard for race or color.”¹⁶ Since then it officially has denounced any causal link between the curse upon the Lamanites and the mark or skin of blackness. It has condemned “all racism, *past or present*, in any form,” and it has disavowed “any theory that black or dark skin is a sign of a curse.”¹⁷ According to Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Church’s Quorum of Twelve Apostles, any theories that Latter-day Saints conjured up previously “to explain the [prior racial] restrictions are ‘folklore’ that must never be perpetuated.”¹⁸

Other influential Christian denominations that once tolerated racial bias also have issued forceful expressions of regret.¹⁹

Nevertheless, some analytical thinkers continue to question whether Book of Mormon references to the mark and skin of blackness reveal an inherent color code in the Church's keystone canon. They may ask how the Church in good faith can repudiate *all* past racism while at the same time revere prophets who, from 600 BCE to 421 CE, occasionally wrote words that now sound pejorative and that for generations have triggered assumptions about race and skin color.

Some critics go further and argue that the text is a byproduct of the early 1800s with a racial subplot that supports the "historicist explanation" for the Book of Mormon. They claim that Joseph Smith absorbed theories, images, and biases from upstate New York's rural culture, wrote them into the Book of Mormon, and that the entire text has an early 19th century racial agenda.²⁰ For them, the book is not ancient scripture, it is modern, man-made, and white privileged.²¹

In defense, Latter-day Saint scholars have argued that the Book of Mormon, at its core, is an unrelenting attack on elitism of every kind.²² Recently, David Belnap has shown that its prophets repeatedly denounced pride and discrimination, whether based on lineage, gender, education, social class, economic status, religious orthodoxy, or otherwise. With encyclopedic precision he has demonstrated the consistency of Lehi's universalistic and inclusive declaration in the book's first chapter that God's mercy is for "*all* the inhabitants of the earth." He has collated hundreds of egalitarian messages in thousands of the book's verses,²³ confirming that Lehi's preamble was not a pretext.

The specific accusation of racism in the Book of Mormon deserves an explicit response — one that is buttressed with facts, ideally from the New World. When analyzing such a vexing question, contemporary American philosopher John Searle urges a search for reliable, hard evidence. Searle says, "forget about the ... history of a problem," start with "what you know for a fact," and remember that "any theory has to be consistent with the facts."²⁴ Joseph Smith would not have shied away from that challenge. On one occasion, for example, he referred to the discovery of ruins in Central America by Stephens and Catherwood as evidence of a mighty Nephite and Lamanite civilization in the Americas. Joseph then said, "Facts are stubborn things" and "the world will prove Joseph Smith a true prophet by circumstantial evidence."²⁵

Unfortunately, some Latter-day Saints have encouraged a bi-racial interpretation of the Book of Mormon by selectively using "archaeological

myths” in proselytizing and teaching. For example, Latter-day Saints have pointed to Maya murals at Bonampak (circa 800 CE) and Chichen Itza (circa 1100 CE) as evidence of white Nephites and darker Lamanites. However, relying on these murals to support a bi-racial Book of Mormon is risky. “Playing the long shots” is how anthropologist John Sorenson describes this — attempting to prove the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon with limited field work, a few dates and places, and a lot of speculation.²⁶ Demythicalizing the skin of blackness requires more than that. It depends on “spade and trowel” archaeology and expert knowledge of Mesoamerican circumstances that correlate with Book of Mormon events — *cultural* insights about the “mark” in an original New World setting.²⁷

Until recently, however, New World facts regarding the “skin of blackness” have been in short supply. The burgeoning knowledge of ancient Mesoamerica is changing that. It allows us to consider whether a now proven Mesoamerican cultural tradition harmonizes with the Book of Mormon.

Relatively recent findings support a novel, promising, and fact-based explanation for the skin of blackness — the ancient Maya tradition of darkening the skin with charcoal-based body paint and stains. The hard evidence includes codices, murals, and polychrome earthenware vases and plates. This is illustrated in the detail of a Bonampak mural displayed in Sorenson’s *Images of Ancient America* where it appears that there is dark paint on the faces of two men in a ceremonial procession.²⁸ Scholars Brant Gardner and Mark Wright already have suggested that the pigmentation variances shown in Maya murals might be the result of the practice of painting the skin.²⁹ To date, however, Latter-day Saint disciple-scholars have not methodically addressed the Mesoamerican body paint artifacts and the opinions of America’s leading Mayanists who see them as evidence of a *mark* upon the skin that was utilitarian, episodic, artificial, and removable.

According to its title page, the Book of Mormon’s *raison d’être* is to testify of the atonement of Jesus Christ. To that end, it offers unique theological insights beyond the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. It emphasizes the universality of Christ’s mercy and power of deliverance with words like these: “*all* men are privileged, the one like unto the other,” the Lord invites “*all* to come unto him and partake of his goodness; “*all* are alike unto God;” and He “denieth none that come unto him, black *and* white, bond *and* free, male *and* female” (2 Nephi 26:28–33).

The "Mark" or "Skin of Blackness"

Nephi, the Book of Mormon's first scribe, engraved religious teachings and history on two sets of metal plates — his so-called large plates and small plates. Each tome had a particular purpose, and each introduced a unique descriptor of the Lamanites' physical appearance. It is worth considering which came first and how they differ.

Nephi first worked on his large plates and began by abridging Lehi's engravings in order to provide a "full account" of the history of his people, including their kings, wars, and contentions (1 Nephi 9:2–4). After several years he felt inspired, even commanded, to create a separate set of plates, the small plates, to persuade men to come unto God and to record the ministry of his people (1 Nephi 6:4 and 9:3). Centuries later, Mormon abridged the large plates in order to create his own volume — the plates of Mormon — that became the principal source for the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith began his translation with Mormon's abridgment of Nephi's more comprehensive large plates and referred to the earliest chapters of his translation as the record or Book of Lehi.³⁰

Book of Mormon scholars Reynolds and Sjodahl concluded that the Book of Lehi contained the original account of events related to the family schism after Lehi's death, including the most complete version of the prophecy related to the Lamanites' appearance, perhaps a word-for-word quotation.³¹ Taking the Book of Lehi as the source for Mormon's summary of early Nephite history, the Book of Lehi thus may have spoken of a "mark" that was "set upon" about a dozen adults: Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael (a Jerusalem Jew who had joined Lehi's pilgrimage, but who died in the Arabian wilderness before the voyage to the Americas), and these men's wives, whom Mormon referred to as "Ishmaelitish women" (Alma 3:6–7). Mormon's redaction of the information on Nephi's large plates may have preserved the most authentic version of the prophecy and the original use of the term "mark."

Reynolds and Sjodahl also concluded that it was 10 to 15 years later before Nephi created his small plates in which he introduced the term "skin of blackness." The Book of Mormon includes those words today because Mormon appended Nephi's small plates to his own abridged record. In 1828, through the misadventure of Martin Harris, Joseph Smith's scribe, 116 pages of the translation were lost, including the Book of Lehi. However, after Joseph had finished translating the remainder of Mormon's plates, he learned that Nephi's small plates that were attached behind them reported significant events and prophetic teachings from the same period. Therefore, to recover the essence of the

missing text, Joseph translated the small plates and inserted them where they fit chronologically.

Text that was originally in the Book of Lehi is now part of Alma 3:14–17. There Mormon repeated the prophecy that a “mark” would be “set on” both Lamanites and their allies and cited an example of the prophecy’s fulfillment. Describing a battle in 87 BCE, he explained that Lamanite allies had “marked themselves,” and that they had done this “*after the manner of the Lamanites*” but with “red in their foreheads” (Alma 3:4). Mormon repeatedly used the term “mark” in his abridgement of Nephi’s large plates, so “mark” also may have been Nephi’s preferred term.

Because Joseph inserted his translation of the small plates at the beginning of the Book of Mormon, readers are not introduced first to the term “mark;” instead their earliest impression of the Lamanites’ appearance after the family rift comes from the text’s mention of a “skin of blackness.” This term’s position of primacy can influence how readers, in their mind’s eye, see the Lamanites, and may lead to the *assumption* that Lamanites were punished with a black skin that covered their bodies, male and female, young and old, and from head to toe. For people of color and many others, this is a stumbling block.

However, it does not appear that Mormon, as the editor-in-chief, ever engraved the phrase “skin of blackness.” Because 116 pages of text taken from Nephi’s large plates were lost, we cannot be sure. But the distinctive phrase “skin of blackness” occurs only once in the published text in 2 Nephi 5:21, and it appears to be an alternative that Nephi employed just once for the word “mark” when he paraphrased and incorporated the prophecy from the Book of Lehi that was on his large plates. One must wonder whether common perceptions about the Lamanites would be different if readers first were introduced to the original account of the prophecy and to the Amlicites who intentionally “*marked themselves ... after the manner of the Lamanites*” rather than to Nephi’s abbreviated account of Laman and Lemuel having a “skin of blackness” set upon them.

This article considers previous scholarly research and introduces a “mark” and “skin of blackness” that are based on Mesoamerican artifacts and opinions of Mayanists. It details the ancient cultural roles of temporary body paint as part of a young man’s right-of-passage, a woman’s body décor, and a man’s ceremonial accoutrement and camouflage for warfare, hunting and plunder. It then tests the common assumption that the Lamanites’ complexion was in fact darkened after the schism, miraculously or naturally. In its search for an objective,

neutral and fact-based explanation for the skin of blackness, it invites readers to consider how the Mesoamerican tradition harmonizes reason, science, and the theology of the Book of Mormon.

Perceptions and Misperceptions

The source of racist accusations against the Book of Mormon is the assumption that God caused a *skin of blackness* to *come upon* the Lamanites as a *mark* of divine disfavor. The problem is compounded by the proximity of the text's references to the Lamanites' physical appearance and its descriptions of a *curse*. All of these italicized words are enigmatic, however. None of them has a plain meaning. They should be only the beginning of the inquiry. They challenge readers to question the text, to reconsider their own biases, and to search for verifiable facts.

To begin with, the phrase "skin of blackness" is unusual. The word "skin" does not *a priori* refer to human flesh. It can also be used to describe various thin external coatings that are put upon a surface or could refer to animal skins. The word "blackness" also is obscure and unconventional in this context, especially since in the 1830s Indigenous Americans were generally portrayed as "red men."³² Therefore, the term "skin of blackness" could describe a dark paint or other thin covering of the body or a stain that affects only the epidermis, regardless of the underlying natural complexion. Nephi was almost certainly acquainted with Ethiopians, since one had risen to prominence in the court of Zedekiah.³³ The term he chose may have been meant to distinguish between an artificial covering or stain and natural black skin.

The text describes the mark as "dark" only twice,³⁴ and it rarely mentions human skin, whatever the color.³⁵ In most encounters between Lamanites and Nephites, there is no mention of any discernible difference in complexion. Within just a few years after Lehi's death and the schism, Nephi's younger brother referred to the "darkness" of Lamanite skins (Jacob 3:9). But it was almost five centuries later before their appearance again was mentioned, this time linked with the red mark upon the foreheads of the Amlicites. After that, a century of silence passed until 15 CE when Mormon, without implicating divine intervention, reported that the Lamanites' skins became white when they "united with the Nephites" (3 Nephi 2:15). Although Mormon's book continues for another four centuries, this is his final reference to complexion. Therefore, it is hardly necessary to assume the existence of darkened flesh or a dark mark in all Nephite/Lamanite interactions.

Quite possibly the phrase “skin of blackness” describes the Lamanites’ stunning change in appearance only when Lehi’s family fractured.

An omission such as this can be eloquent. At the very least, it furthers the argument that the Lamanites, like the Maya, may have blackened themselves episodically. Given the book’s many cross-cultural encounters between Lehi’s descendants, the silence crescendos if in fact there had been a dramatic, genetic darkening of the Lamanites’ skin.

Furthermore, the word “mark” is vague. Linguistically, it does not suggest a genetic makeover or phenotypical change. It is commonly thought of as an external effect, like the red mark in the foreheads of Lamanite allies.³⁶ Indeed Mormon repeatedly refers to it as being “set upon” someone.³⁷ Nevertheless, as Brant Gardner notes, “it is much easier to compile a list of writers who take the phrase [skin of blackness] literally than of those who suggest an alternate reading.”³⁸ Thus, reinforced by nearly two centuries of tradition, most readers still visualize the Lamanites as having a darkened natural complexion.³⁹

John Sorenson does not agree that Lamanites had different phenotypical features than the Nephites. With nuanced words he concedes that “the text *implies* ... that [the Nephites] rivals (at least *as seen by Nephite eyes*) ... *exhibited* a skin of ‘darkness’ or even ‘blackness.’”⁴⁰ However, based upon his research, Sorenson says that “*both factions* of Lehi’s descendants may have shown but relatively minor variations from the bodily norms of their Mediterranean-type ancestors, who not uncommonly featured copper-olive skins.”⁴¹ He concludes that “it is unlikely that the mark or curse had anything to do with pigmentation.”⁴² Kerry Hull, a respected Latter-day Saint Mayanist, finds “absolutely no justification in the text for thinking that actual skin pigmentation plays any role in Book of Mormon society — none.”⁴³

For some devout Latter-day Saints the words “the Lord did cause” are a test of faith — they seem to demand that God miraculously altered the Lamanites’ complexion. That point of view relies on conflating the skin of blackness with the curse of being “cut off from the presence of the Lord” that Nephi, shortly after departing from Jerusalem, prophesied would come upon his two eldest brothers “in *that day*” when they rebelled against him (1 Nephi 2:16–23). The question of whether skin color and a curse are linked resurfaces six centuries later when Lamanites united with Nephites for their safety and, according to Mormon, the Lamanites’ skin “became white like unto the Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:15). Some skeptics question whether the Book of Mormon necessarily requires

these suspected metamorphoses to be supernatural events that seem to contradict reason, science, and the doctrine of free agency.

Concerns about all of these elusive words are compounded by descriptions of how the mark was applied. Mormon said that the words of Nephi's original prophecy, apparently taken from Nephi's large plates, used the term "set on" or "set upon" to describe the process (Alma 3:14–16).⁴⁴ On his small plates Nephi says that the skin of blackness did "come upon" them. Sorenson, again with carefully chosen words, notes that the text "says nothing about the *mechanism* that *might* have produced" a change.⁴⁵ Nephi's words could refer to a variety of processes. They do not imply a genetic mutation.

Apologists and Critics

It would be disingenuous and shameful to minimize or to attempt to hide racial bias in the Book of Mormon, *if it were there*. Consequently, in a tribute to transparency, a few Latter-day Saint scholars have begun to concede that the Book of Mormon exhibits what would be considered racism today.⁴⁶ Some of them contend that Book of Mormon prophets may have *described* racism, but that they should be forgiven because it was part of their culture and they never *prescribed* it. So, with the best of intentions some scholars seek to appease critical thinkers by pointing out that the most inspirational events in the Book of Mormon occurred when two previously hostile cultures united in their faith and lived together in peace for almost two centuries. This, they say, emphasizes the book's ultimate moral lesson — its redeeming social value — that prejudice, including racial bias, "can be overcome, and that religion can lead believers toward a higher, more just and compassionate perspective."⁴⁷ Going further, Jared Hickman sees the Book of Mormon as a voice of warning because it ends as a racial apocalypse and "exposes the tragic consequence of racism — the annihilation of the racist culture."⁴⁸ This reflects our growing sense of social justice and desire to learn whatever good we can from an allegedly intolerant text. But it also tends to "normalize" racism in what Latter-day Saints revere as the word of God.

Transparency also demands that racial bias of the book's translator be disclosed, *if it existed*. Joseph Smith was not perfect, nor did he claim to be.⁴⁹ Could he have "absorbed and echoed the racism that was prevalent in his day," as one historian recently wrote?⁵⁰ The evidence is thin.⁵¹

One Book of Mormon critic portrays the text as an ongoing *racial* conflict. Max Perry Mueller's historical research has raised legitimate

questions about the tense and often hurtful relationship between Latter-day Saints and people of color based on pronouncements by Church leaders that first gained “official” traction in the 1850s after the death of Joseph Smith.⁵² But Mueller’s scholarship falters when he theorizes that the root cause is a racial subplot in the Book of Mormon. His hypothesis is that Joseph, even in his early twenties, had a racial agenda, conceived of whiteness as “an aspirational identity, which even those cursed with blackness can achieve,” and preached *white universalism* through the voices of Nephite prophets within a story that is dominated by cultural divisions that were often “manifested as *racial* divisions.”⁵³ He contends that the book treats race as “mutable” based on faith and righteousness, and that it shows that “both *racial* progress [toward whiteness] *and* declension [are] possible.”⁵⁴ The thought that relevant New World evidence might exist seems never to have crossed Mueller’s mind. For him, “there is *no* archaeological evidence that matches the pre-Columbian civilization that the Book of Mormon describes.”⁵⁵

Mueller’s recent reiteration of the old race-based attack on the Book of Mormon confirms that faith-based scholarly apologetics have not yet satisfied detractors.⁵⁶ Nor have they eradicated the persistent assumption that the darker skin of Sub-Saharan Africans and Indigenous Americans somehow reflects the unrighteousness of their progenitors. As noted earlier, that perception with respect to Africans was part of Western culture for centuries. As for Indigenous Americans, some early Latter-day Saints were biased by references to a curse and skin of blackness in 2 Nephi 5:21, even though Joseph never explained that verse. It is a fact that in the 1830s “wholesale genocide of American Indians was preached and practiced.”⁵⁷ Therefore, bias against Indigenous Americans and Africans influenced many of Joseph Smith’s contemporaries. But not Joseph. He saw things differently and acted differently.⁵⁸

One theory for the skin of blackness argues that it was an authoritative garment made of animal skin, a “self-administered, removable, and inherited” vestment that is reminiscent of religiously significant clothing in the Hebrew scriptures. This theory is premised on the fact that nothing in the Book of Mormon “positively or unambiguously” indicates that colored “skins” refer to “human flesh pigmentation.”⁵⁹ That premise is true, so the skins-as-garments theory confronts the alleged racist inferences. But this theory does so only with Old World facts. It fails to consider the New World facts (discussed shortly) and is difficult to reconcile with the actual text.⁶⁰

Professor Hugh Nibley was intrigued by possible natural, environmental explanations for a rapid and reversible catalyst. He considered adaptation and segregation, which he believed, under unique circumstances, could cause darkening to occur very fast. However, he recognized that when Mormon said that the Amlicites intentionally had “*marked themselves with red in their foreheads after the manner of the Lamanites*” (Alma 3:4), Mormon was describing a process, and that “the Lamanites put the marks on themselves . . . not knowing that they were fulfilling the promise of the Lord that he would mark them.”⁶¹ Per Nibley, “When [the Amlicites] did it themselves, then they fulfilled the prophecy.”⁶² Nibley’s bottom line was this: “It is a reversible process. *It’s their choice; they control it.*”⁶³ Thus he directly challenged exclusively metaphorical explanations for a skin of blackness, whether in the Book of Mormon or the Hebrew scriptures.⁶⁴ Unlike Nephi, whose small plates portrayed the skin of blackness as an act of divine providence, Nibley surmised that the mark was a process so “natural and human” that it suggested nothing miraculous to the ordinary observer.⁶⁵

Nibley’s focus on “choice” invites consideration of a Mesoamerican tradition now confirmed by archaeologists, anthropologists, and ethnohistorians. During his lifetime, Nibley did not know of this custom, or at least he never mentioned it. However, he was constantly searching for new facts. Nibley frequently lamented how perfectly obvious something should have been to him and to others, but that nobody took notice.⁶⁶ He also anticipated a time when the findings of the people who study Central America could bring about a shift in thinking. “At any moment,” he said, “something might turn up (and often does) to require a complete reversal of established views.”⁶⁷

The Mesoamerican Facts

Officially, the Church takes no position on the specific geographic location of Book of Mormon events in ancient America.⁶⁸ There are various theories. Recently, so-called “Heartlanders” have made this a lively debate.⁶⁹ However, many scholars believe that Lehi’s descendants inhabited Mesoamerica. Kirk Magelby maintained that Joseph Smith advocated a Mesoamerican setting after he read about the exploratory work of Stephens and Catherwood in *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*.⁷⁰ In 1957, Hugh Nibley stated: “It is our conviction that proof of the Book of Mormon *does* lie in Central America.”⁷¹ Recently, Terryl Givens described John Sorenson’s *Mormon’s*

Codex as “comprehensive and compelling” evidence for a Mesoamerican locus.⁷²

The Maya preceded Lehi’s arrival in 590 BCE, and their cultural supremacy in Mesoamerica bookends all recorded Nephite and Lamanite history. The Maya flourished from as early as the second or third millennium BCE until the Spanish Conquest. After 1000 BCE their culture gradually expanded in the region, especially from approximately 300 BCE until 250 BCE when the Late Preclassic period ended. Their apex or Classic period lasted until 900 CE.⁷³

Lehi and his refugees disembarked upon a continent that already was densely populated. Mesoamerica was a melting pot with not only the Maya, but “a wide variety of ethnic or racial types,” some of them with natural complexions that were darker than the Lehites. Sorenson cites the work of González Calderón who, on the basis of his direct observation of thousands of figurines from Olmec sites in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán, and nearby La Venta, “has identified faces that show three distinct racial/ethnic groups: (1) a bearded white race with aquiline noses, probably Mediterranean in origin; (2) an oriental race, probably Han Chinese; and (3) a black race.”⁷⁴ Hugh Nibley stated that there “is not a word in the Book of Mormon to prevent the coming to [the Western Hemisphere] of any number of people from any part of the world at any time.”⁷⁵ According to Richard D. Hansen, one of the leading field archaeologists currently working in Mesoamerica, when Lehi arrived in the New World, and even after many generations, his descendants may have been inconsequential in number among the “millions of people” already there.⁷⁶ Anywhere in the Americas, Lehi’s colony would have been surrounded by competing cultures, with the Maya the most dominant.

Warfare was endemic in Mesoamerica.⁷⁷ Hansen has used LiDAR technology in the Mirador Basin of Guatemala to locate ancient Maya watch towers, ramparts, and moat-like trenches.⁷⁸ His findings agree with those of other archaeologists that warfare in the Maya civilization “was large-scale and systematic, and it endured over many years.”⁷⁹ In the late 1820s, Joseph Smith had no reason to think that America’s Indigenous people engaged in nearly continual combat on such a scale. Yet the Book of Mormon mentions similar defensive infrastructure and conflict that is almost perpetual.⁸⁰ It also colorizes the drama on the battlefields with a skin of blackness, a red mark on foreheads, and loin cloths dyed in blood.

Analyzing the mark referred to in the Book of Mormon should start with the fact that Lehi's descendants inhabited "a greatly restricted geographical area" and always were surrounded by a vast, influential, militarized population.⁸¹ In Mesoamerica, the Maya would have exerted a powerful external effect upon immigrants. Admittedly, neighboring tribes and ethnic groups do not automatically adopt each other's customs.⁸² However, hegemony often leads to cultural diffusion of successful traditions. Mormon, for example, reported that Lamanites copied superior Nephite military tactics.⁸³

John Sorenson is the pre-eminent discoverer of cultural markers that Book of Mormon people shared with ancient Mesoamericans, for which he coined the term *Mesoamericanisms*.⁸⁴ Independent evidence now suggests that body paint can be added to the list. Leading Mayanists now have curated, vetted, examined, and interpreted an impressive collection of proofs of the ancient Maya skin blackening tradition. Black body paint would not have been ideal for farming or other outdoor labor in a sun-drenched climate, but the experts unanimously agree that the Maya darkened their skins with paints, stains, and pigments for ceremonial purposes and as camouflage for warfare, hunting, and plunder. The artifacts shown later in this paper persuasively demonstrate that male torsos were blackened, while men's faces, hands, and feet often were not. Images of women, though rare, exhibit the decorative use of stains.

After the Spanish conquest of Central America, Franciscan friars were the first to mention body paint. Sylvanus Morley's classic, *The Ancient Maya*, states that Bishop Diego de Landa, who arrived in the Yucatan in 1549, observed that following a puberty ceremony "unmarried men began to live in a house set apart for them" and "painted themselves black until they were married."⁸⁵ Warriors, Landa said, painted themselves black and red and painted their prisoners in black and white stripes,⁸⁶ reminiscent of some prison uniforms today. Michael Coe, one of America's foremost Mayanists, confirmed these ancient rituals, stating that young men "stayed apart from their families in special communal houses where they presumably learned the arts of war," and until marriage they "painted themselves black." Coe concluded that Maya *warriors* artificially and intentionally painted themselves black "at all times."⁸⁷ They also applied paint around the eyes and nose to give a "fierce expression."⁸⁸

Maya art flowered during the first millennia of the Christian era (Mesoamerica's Late Preclassic and Classic period) as Maya artisans

began to produce murals and polychrome earthenware of lasting quality. Thus, surviving artifacts that display body paint postdate Lehi's arrival, and therefore, chronologically speaking, Book of Mormon references to marks of black and red upon skins may be the earliest record of this practice. However, no one disputes that the Maya tradition originated much earlier. Effective strategies of dominant ancient societies have a long lifespan, absent abrupt environmental changes or a conquest. Artifacts confirm the enduring multi-generational body paint custom throughout the Maya realm.

The Maya also employed “scarification, cicatrization [the process of wound healing], branding, piercing, stretching, and tattooing.” Their body painting, however, was unique. It was “impermanent.”⁸⁹ They could use it when needed and remove it at will. They could alter their appearance relatively quickly for hunting or for a military campaign, and “touch up” their black formal wear for a ceremonial occasion.

Skin-color rites of passage are not unique to the Maya. Ethnophotographers Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher document similar ceremonies in Africa but with the color selection reversed. During the Masai coming-of-age ritual, young men go to a sacred chalk bank. There they paint their bodies with white designs that convey a significant social message about their manhood. The initiated warriors then return to their village “where they believe that their mothers will not recognize them since they have metaphorically moved into the next stage of life.”⁹⁰

Stephen Houston, who is renowned for his research into pre-Columbian Maya civilization, has catalogued Mayan words for the body paint custom. These include *naban* meaning to paint oneself in the Colonial Tzotzil dialect, *nabi* in Ch'olti for “stain, *nab* in Yucatec for “anoint, smear, spot,” and in Tzendal, *nabel* for “makeup” and *nabantezon* meaning to “makeup, beautify with colors and daub with ochre.” In Colonial Yucatec, *hots ich* meant to work on oneself “as the Indians did anciently.” Maya body paint may have involved a common term for pigment, *bon* in Yucatec.⁹¹

In battle, the common Maya soldier fought with little clothing other than a loincloth and body paint,⁹² which he applied before going to war.⁹³ The paint allowed warriors, from a distance and up close, instantly to recognize friends and foes — a significant tactical advantage prior to the widespread development of textiles, thick clothing, and body armor. In the fog of war, and especially in hand-to-hand combat, paint was a protective mark. Lamanite warriors, who were “naked, save it were skin which was girded about their loins” (Alma 3:5), may have darkened

their flesh for the same tactical purposes and to appear fierce and intimidating.

Fascinating details about this tradition are revealed in a mural at Uaxactun in northern Guatemala (inhabited between 300 BCE and 900 CE).⁹⁴ According to Mayanists Coe and Houston, Figure 1 depicts a Maya personage who is painted in black (except for his hands and feet) and is greeting a visitor who is costumed as a Teotihuacan warrior. Both are wearing loincloths. According to these scholars, the three “noble ladies” seated nearby are displaying their body paint.⁹⁵ They suggest that face painting on females may have been seen as “alluring.”⁹⁶ Initially Nephi perceived that the skin of blackness, which may have been soot and charcoal at that time, would prevent his people from being enticed by Lamanites, who were “exceedingly fair and delightsome” (2 Nephi 5:21).⁹⁷ However, the flattering cosmetic decor upon the women in this mural illustrates how later, an artistic application of stains may have enhanced their natural beauty. Figure 2 shows additional detail from the same mural. It depicts two men wearing elaborate ceremonial garments about their loins. The upper torso of one is blackened.



Figure 1. Detail of Uaxactun mural (circa 300 BCE–900 CE). Museum Collections, 1950. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 50–1–20/22982.

Figure 3 is a ceramic Maya funerary plate from Mesoamerica’s Early–Late Classic Period (593–731 CE).⁹⁸ It confirms that Maya military leaders, perhaps Lamanite captains as well, may have been “resplendent on the battlefield.”⁹⁹ This leader’s ceremonial attire distinguishes him, but in solidarity with his warriors, his body is blackened, except for his hands, feet, and face.



Figure 2. Detail of men in Uaxactun mural. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University.



Figure 3. Maya ceramic plate (circa 593–731 CE). Courtesy of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, AC.8652.

Blackening is depicted on numerous cylindrical vases in Justin Kerr's impressive collection of photographs of Maya artifacts.¹⁰⁰ Mayanists associate the scene in Figure 4 with the ruler Sak Muwaan who reigned

sometime between 700 and 726 CE as the divine lord in the lowlands of Guatemala.¹⁰¹ The vase shows a ruler whose skin is darkened except for his face, shoulders, and hands. It is believed to have been a drinking vessel of the son of Sak Muwaan (whose name, paradoxically, translates as “White Bird”), ruler of Motul de San Jose.¹⁰² Justin Kerr’s roll-out view in Figure 5 shows four figures whose body paint is similar: the ruler and his three court attendants on the left. The person on the right, who appears to be making an offering, is not blackened.



Figure 4. Maya ceramic cylinder vase (circa 650–750 CE) courtesy of Justin Kerr, K2784, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC.

Experts still find it nearly impossible to understand semantically Maya body paint patterns.¹⁰³ It is unknown how often various colors or designs were used to distinguish different roles or to “define special moments.”¹⁰⁴ However, in ceremonial situations men’s faces, hands, and feet usually were left *au naturel*.



Figure 5. Enthroned Maya Lord and attendants courtesy of Justin Kerr, K2784, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC.

Hunting involved more variety, as shown in the following roll-out view of a deer hunting scene on a Maya vase. The hunters' designs, however, all had one obvious purpose. Each of them used black paint as a "form of camouflage for ... stealth" so that "the human body could thereby not be easily distinguished from the mottled light and color under the jungle canopy."¹⁰⁵ Black handprints, a primitive art form, were "set upon" hunters as well as warriors to conceal them in the shadows and forest greenery. It seems logical that Lamanites, as well as Nephites (see Enos 1:3, 20), would have relied on similar disguise when hunting, as do hunters today. By the way, it was no coincidence that the markings evident in figures 6 and 7 mimicked the jaguar, the largest of the world's spotted cats and the most feared predator in Mesoamerica.¹⁰⁶



Figure 6. Maya hunting scene courtesy of Justin Kerr, K1373, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC.

Body paint and stains facilitated thievery and plunder, a common practice among the Maya.¹⁰⁷ The Book of Mormon reports that some Lamanites sought riches by plundering (Alma 17:14) and that they "were a very cunning people, delighting in plunder" (Mosiah 24:7). Nephites likewise engaged in plundering and stealing (Helaman 4:12). Body paint and stains would have concealed any of Lehi's descendants when pillaging from the Maya or their own extended family.¹⁰⁸



Figure 7. Detail of camouflaged Maya hunters, courtesy of Justin Kerr, K1373, Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington, DC.

Bishop de Landa observed that black and red were the primary colors of the ancient Maya body paint palette. This corroborates the Book of Mormon's lexicon of colors associated with conflict.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, these are the only colors that Nephite prophets mentioned, except for white and one reference to gray hair. They employed color with "great restraint."¹¹⁰ Among the Maya, the first "quantum leap" in color complexity did not come until after about 300 BCE.¹¹¹

The diffusion and longevity of the blackening tradition are proven by the fact that the Aztec observed the custom after the Maya culture declined and long after Book of Mormon times.¹¹² Young Aztec men received extensive training in martial arts at a school known as the *telpochcalli*, which literally translates as "youth house," where, at sunset, they bathed and "painted their bodies black."¹¹³ Courageous warriors (*tiyahacauhtin*) "painted their bodies black and painted their face with black stripes on which they sprinkled iron pyrite (*apetztlitli*)."¹¹⁴ "Undistinguished warriors wore only body paint and a loincloth."¹¹⁵

The Mixtec culture flourished alongside the Aztec.¹¹⁶ A colorful Mixtec manuscript known as Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I corroborates the duration and widespread acceptance of Mesoamerican body painting while also illustrating its artistic evolution.¹¹⁷ Figure 8, a leaf from that codex, shows a painted soldier carrying a weapon on each side of the *Tree of Apoala*. Both warriors wear a skin of blackness

that mimics the Maya. They are surrounded by men engaged in various activities, painted in diverse colors and patterns.



Figure 8. The Tree of Apoala, Vindobonensis Codex (post 900 CE). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Used with permission.

The enlarged detail in Figure 9 is particularly striking. It reveals that the *Tree of Apoala* is womb-shaped and is in fact a light-skinned female with her head to the ground. From her birth canal, a young warrior emerges whose body already is painted, except for his face, feet, and hands. For the Mixtec, childbirth was “a female brand of war,” so as this woman experienced labor she earned the respect due a combatant. “For females and males alike, the reward was the same if they died in the process; they gained entrance to the celestial paradise of the sun.”¹¹⁸

The composition of ancient Mesoamerican paints has not been fully verified. For black, the Maya mainly used carbon, produced by burning resinous wood¹¹⁹ or insects and scorpions.¹²⁰ Residues of these organic materials could be removed with water. However, when mixed with resins they became a coating that stayed put on a sweaty body.¹²¹

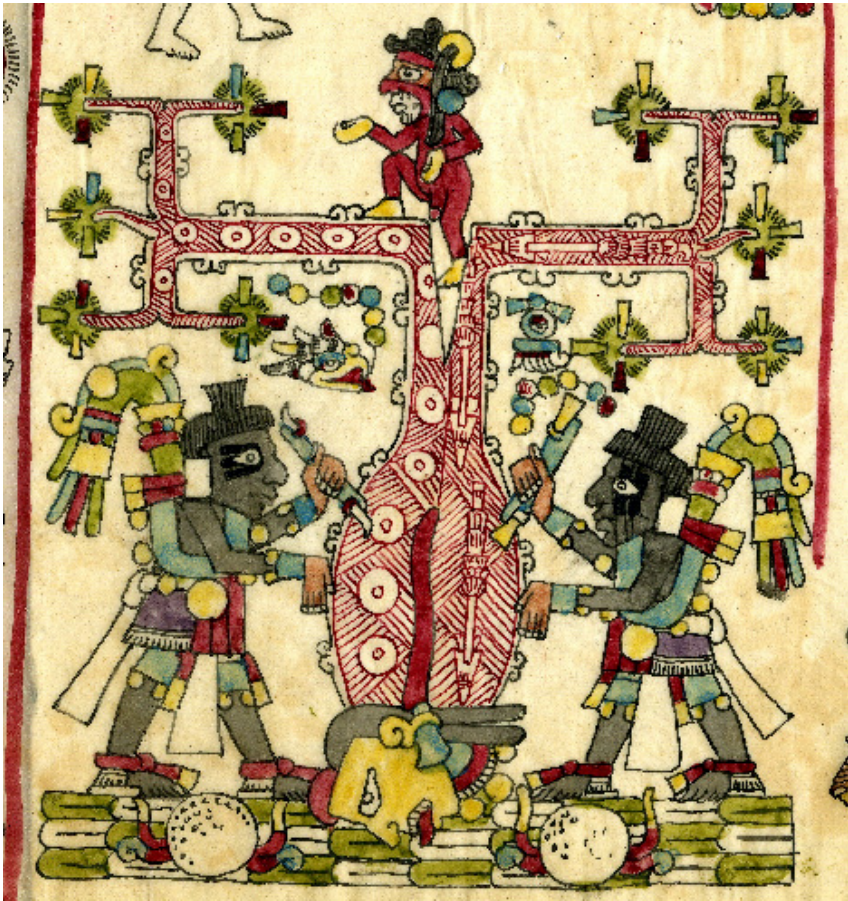


Figure 9. Detail of the Tree of Apoala. © The Trustees of the British Museum.
Used with permission.

In contrast, skin staining relied on plant-based pigments and extracts. For example, the huito plant, *Genipa americana*, grows naturally in the region's tropical forests and has been used for skin blackening by many Indigenous tribes. When the juice of its unripe fruit reacts with the human skin and oxidizes, it stains the skin black but darkens only the top layers, so it is temporary. Without additional applications, it fades within a few weeks.¹²² The juice of *Genipa* also has been used in native tropical medicine. Due to its insect repellent properties, it may be helpful in malaria prophylaxis.¹²³ It could have been "one of the plants" that according to Mormon removed the "cause" of the "fevers, which at some seasons of the year were very frequent" (Alma 46:40). Thus, charcoal-based body paint may have been used episodically for a battle,

for stalking game, and for looting, while pigment stains would have facilitated a prolonged military campaign as well as intricate and eye-catching body décor for women.

The Maya also applied paints and stains for social messaging. Colors and patterns became communiqués that could be erased and replaced. This allowed individuals and groups to express social values and to use their skin “as a painting surface like any other, to be wiped clean for other future displays.”¹²⁴ This purpose also would have been well suited to the Lamanites’ lifestyle. Their women may have used paint and stains to beautify themselves for special occasions or for courtship and marriage rituals. For men, the custom could have emphasized their social roles, demonstrated their rejection of Hebrew traditions, or signaled to the Maya that they were allies, just as the Amlicites marked their foreheads to denote their allegiance.¹²⁵

In short, the Lamanites’ mark or skin of blackness may have been nothing more than body paint and stains with practical, tactical, and ritual significance. Testing the cogency of this explanation, however, requires further consideration of the following:

- the timing and circumstances of the mark’s origin;
- the ancient cursing tradition and the curses pronounced by Lehi;
- the meaning of the words “the Lord did cause;”
- the Lamanite marriage taboo and Nephite concerns about exogamy;
- the nature of miracles;
- the fundamentals of human genetics; and
- the Latter-day Saint doctrine of moral agency.

It will then be time to consider how the Mesoamerican evidence and these topics resonate with previous metaphorical arguments for the skin of blackness and with the text of the Book of Mormon.

The Origin of the Mark

Depending on a reader’s assumptions about the mark, it can be easy to miss clues in the text regarding its timing. Some see the mark as a *sudden* change that fulfilled the inspired prophecy that Nephi first received when his eldest brothers began murmuring when Lehi offered sacrifices in the wilderness.¹²⁶ In response to their complaints, Lehi rebuked them “with power, being filled with the Spirit, until their frames did shake before him” (1 Nephi 2:5–14). But Nephi seems to have foreseen that

their grumbling would lead to worse. In response, the Lord comforted Nephi with the words of a prophecy. The prophecy did not mention skin, blackness, or a mark, but rather warned that Laman and Lemuel would be cursed “*in that day* that they shall rebel against [Nephi].” It also consoled Nephi by foretelling the results: Laman and Lemuel would be “cut off from the presence of the Lord,” Nephi would be made “a ruler and a teacher” over them, and Laman and Lemuel would have “no power” over Nephi and his people unless they also rebelled against God (1 Nephi 2:16–23). Nephi observed these consequences time and again, even before Lehi’s family arrived in the Americas.¹²⁷

Other readers theorize that the Lamanites experienced a *gradual* pigmentation change over a period of time. However, according to the text, darkened skin did not show up first in Lamanite offspring decades after the schism. When Nephi said on his small plates that “the Lord did cause a skin of blackness to come upon *them*” he was referring to his eldest “brethren,” Laman and Lemuel (2 Nephi 5:19–21). Mormon’s more expansive account, presumably taken from the earlier Book of Lehi, added that the “mark” was set upon Laman and Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and also the Ishmaelitish women (Alma 3:7). When the mark is first mentioned, these pioneer Lamanites had children, including teenagers and young adults; curiously, however, as far as we can tell, the blackening affected only the Lamanites’ founding mothers and fathers. In short, it did not take generations or even years for the mark to appear. The words of Nephi and Mormon do not leave readers that choice.

The external appearance of Nephi’s two eldest brothers changed within at most a few years after Lehi’s death. The blackening might have been part of their plot to kill Nephi and his righteous brothers Sam, Jacob, and Joseph (Alma 3:6–7). It seems likely that it happened shortly after the rift, when Nephi was not present to observe it personally because he had fled into the wilderness “for the space of many days” (2 Nephi 5:7). This may be inferred from the fact that several years later, when Nephi engraved his condensed chronology of post-Lehi events on his small plates, he reported the blackening *before* mentioning any wars or contentions with the Lamanites. Nephi, who was focused on founding a new settlement and preparing to defend it, might not have learned of the blackening for some period of time. Nothing pin-points when the change occurred; however, based on the fact that the blackening apparently involved only a dozen adults, it seems reasonable to surmise that it occurred when or shortly after Nephi fled.

A change of phenotypical features at the time of the schism would be, in effect, a genetic mutation. If that notion does not square with logic, science, and theology, then the observed shift in their outward appearance must have been their own doing. The mark upon the murderous band, the darkness that Nephi's younger brother Jacob later would refer to as "filthiness," could have been charcoal, soot, paint, or stains that they applied, perhaps in diverse patterns.¹²⁸

The Lehite Curse: To Be Cut Off from the Presence of the Lord

All references to a curse in the Book of Mormon must be understood within the Hebrew cursing tradition. References to making a covenant in the Hebrew scriptures are often a translation of *kārat berit*, which literally means to "cut [*kārat*] a covenant [*berit*]." This refers to the ancient practice of making a contract or covenant that is ratified or made binding by slaughtering and cutting an animal, which can suggest a serious penalty for failing to keep the covenant. The concept of cutting has echoes in other covenant-related customs and events, such as circumcision (Genesis 17:14), the Nephite military commander who rent his coat to create a banner of liberty (Alma 46:12–13), and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. So too does the curse of being "cut off" if one violates covenants.¹²⁹ The Apostle Paul's chastisement of early Christian converts who continued to "preach circumcision" is a clever example. He used this play-on-words: "I would they were even cut off" (Galatians 5:11–12). Often the effect of a biblical curse was to be cut off from the Lord's presence or a sacred environment, as were Adam and Eve, or to be expelled from one's family or community, as was Cain after he murdered Abel.¹³⁰ The Lamanites are a case study of dissenters who severed themselves from covenants and religious observances and were "cut off" from the presence of the Lord. Throughout the Book of Mormon, the curse and its removal are correlated consistently to estrangement from and reunification with the Lord and his people.

The threat of being "cut off" is not unique to the Lamanites. Speaking to his entire family, Nephi quoted Isaiah's words to *all* of the house of Jacob: "for my name's sake I will defer mine anger, and . . . refrain from thee, that I *cut thee not off*" (1 Nephi 20:9). The risk of being cut off applied to *all* of Lehi's descendants — actually, to anyone who turned away from God.¹³¹ Moreover, readers often forget the harsher curse pronounced upon the Nephites. Because of their wickedness, the Lord damned them with "utter destruction" (Alma 9:18) — with "wars and

pestilences” and with “famines and bloodshed, even until the people of Nephi shall become extinct” (Alma 45:11).¹³²

The first of Nephi’s personal revelations that he recorded on his small plates prophesied that Laman and Lemuel would suffer a “sore curse” and be “cut off from the presence of the Lord” (1 Nephi 2:16–23). Separation was the essence of that curse. Nephi repeated that in 2 Nephi 5:20. In this same revelation Nephi learned that he would rule and teach his brethren and that Laman and Lemuel would have “no power” over him. But this original prophecy of a curse did not mention either a mark or skin of blackness. It warned of a spiritual estrangement that could occur in a day, indeed less than a day. Each time Laman and Lemuel rebelled they temporarily cut themselves off from the Lord, and each time they repented, they restored their relationship.

With Lehi’s dying words he bestowed upon Laman and Lemuel his “first blessing:” that they would prosper in the land (2 Nephi 1:20, 28). However, it was conditional, as was the curse. Laman and Lemuel simply could not allow Nephi to replace Lehi, so upon Lehi’s death they plotted to destroy their younger brothers, causing Nephi and his followers to flee far into the wilderness. More than ever before, the curse foretold in Nephi’s prophecy was fulfilled. The Lamanites were severed from intercessory prayers and sacrifices, from the holy scriptures, and from inspirational teachings. They were cut off from “the presence of the Lord.” This was a curse that without straining faith or reason could be and was fulfilled “in that day.”

In the next verse, 2 Nephi 5:21, the first sentence is followed by another that contains two independent clauses that cause confusion. This may be due, in part, to the biases of readers and the general absence of punctuation, paragraphs, and verses in the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon.¹³³ The separation of those two independent clauses by only a semicolon muddles two distinct concepts (the curse and skin color). Dividing them might create a more effective and sensitive distinction and leave less room for a biased interpretation. One verse could deal with the curse and its *internal* cause, which was the hardening of hearts. The other could describe the *outward* mark that Nephi observed. The two verses could be re-punctuated and paragraphed as follows:

20 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.

21 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.

The nuanced word “wherefore” at the beginning of the clause about the Lamanites’ fair appearance and the skin of blackness leaves room to speculate how soon it came upon the small group of adults. Notably, Royal Skousen, after studying Oliver Cowdery’s handwritten manuscript, agrees that the semicolon in the current printed version of verse 21 should be replaced with a period and that the word “wherefore” should be capitalized and begin a new sentence that mentions the “skin of blackness.”¹³⁴

Nephi’s Theology of Causation

The blackening process cannot be understood without deconstructing Nephi’s words “the Lord did cause.” Their theological import is not intuitive. Must they mean that by temporal intervention God immediately set a dark skin upon a dozen or so adults? Or could the Lamanites, like the Maya, have darkened themselves? Could the words “the Lord did cause” be merely a figure of speech? The solution may lie in the theology behind those words. Their purpose differs from what most Latter-day Saints expect.

Nephi venerated earlier Hebrew prophets. When he preached that Moses, “according to the power of God which was in him,” divided the waters of the Red Sea and *caused* water to come forth from the rock (1 Nephi 17:26–31), he was quoting Isaiah who also had written that the Lord “*caused* the waters to flow out of the rock” (1 Nephi 20:21). Many of Jeremiah’s prophecies were engraved on the brass plates (1 Nephi 5:13), and they often said that Jehovah had caused or would cause events. Ezekiel, who began to prophesy in 598 BCE, employed the same rhetorical style. Nephi mirrored this contemporary Hebrew metaphysical perspective on causality. He recognized, as Thomas Aquinas later argued, that Jehovah was the prime mover in the universe. He revered God’s omniscience and omnipotence and expressed his reverence through a traditional, formal Hebraism — “the Lord did cause.”

Hebrew scholar Michael Fishbane points out that in prophetic appeals to the seed of Abraham, God's power and providence repeatedly are "emphasized in order to assuage the nation's fears that their 'way' is hidden from God."¹³⁵ Nephi imitated his role models. Like them, he may have used the words "the Lord did cause" to reassure his followers of God's superior dominion and perpetual watchful care. He and other Book of Mormon prophets articulated this often, sometimes characterizing it as the "goodness of God."¹³⁶

According to Reynolds and Sjodahl, Nephi may have taken several years to prepare his small plates, as though he were creating not only sacred but epic literature for the Nephites, reminiscent of *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and other ancient heroic ventures such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*. Perhaps to inspire his people with respect for his prophetic role in the founding of the Nephite nation, Nephi's abbreviated historical account was personal and hero-centric. Nephi wrote that Laman and Lemuel conspired to slay *him* because under Lehi's patronage *he* had become their ruler and teacher, that *he* fled with *his* family and all who would go with *him*, that *he* feared reprisals, that "I, *Nephi*" made "many swords," that *he* "built a temple," and that *he* "caused [*his*] people to be industrious" (2 Nephi 5:1–17). Nephi wrote with the artistry and deliberative style of 7th-century BCE Jewish poets and prophets.¹³⁷ His narrative emphasized divine approbation, heavenly intervention, noble heritage, and the ability, if righteous, to triumph against all odds.¹³⁸ Nephi wanted to leave his posterity an undeniable witness that God was the ultimate source of prosperity (2 Nephi 5:11) and that disasters are the judgments of God — for the Lord "is mightier than all the earth" (1 Nephi 4:1) and "hath all power" (1 Nephi 9:6). The omnipotent God that Nephi hoped his descendants would remember and worship is summed up in his statement: "And the Lord spake, and it was done" (2 Nephi 5:23). So of course, drawing on Hebrew precedents, Nephi wrote that "the Lord did cause" the Lamanites' "skin of blackness," thereby recognizing God's supremacy and legitimizing the Nephites' cultural and religious exceptionalism.

Significantly, every Book of Mormon reference to the "mark" omits God from the calculus. For example, Mormon did not assert that it was in fact God who set the mark upon Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael and the Ishmaelitish women, only that the mark "was set upon" the Lamanites' fathers (Alma 3:6–7). Divine intervention is *implied* only in Nephi's small-plates account of the prophecy, when Nephi used the phrase "the Lord did cause" to describe the appearance of the "skin of

blackness.” His use of a traditional prophetic voice and a Hebraism do not justify making God the cause-in-fact.

The Nephite/Lamanite Marriage Taboo

When Nephi wrote about the skin of blackness, he had a growing tribe. He wanted to ensure that his sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews did not marry their vengeful cousins. He engraved his small plates specifically for his own clan.¹³⁹

So long as Nephi’s nieces and nephews were under the sway of Laman and Lemuel, they posed an existential threat. To make matters worse, Nephi recognized that the young Lamanites were “fair and delightful” and could become “enticing” (2 Nephi 5:21). He feared that “kissing cousins” would lead young Nephites into iniquity. Thus, Nephi foresaw that the skin-blackening tradition would discourage exogamy, and he viewed that as providential. Centuries later, Mormon echoed Nephi. During another crisis Mormon wrote that the “mark” then worn by the Lamanites in battle discouraged mixing that could lead Nephites to “believe in incorrect traditions which would prove their destruction” (Alma 3:7–8).

It is understandable for a parent to worry about a child marrying someone who is seeking revenge upon the parents themselves or their family members and friends. Notably, however, the Lord had told Nephi at the outset that Lamanite cousins would *not* be loathsome *if they would repent of their iniquities* (2 Nephi 5:22). When Nephites and Lamanites shared the same values they intermarried. There is no reason to infer racism in the fatherly concerns of Nephi and Mormon. The issue was always the Lamanites’ sins, not their skins.

Undoubtedly, Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and their wives had their own motives for marking themselves, and the record suggests that it had nothing to do with marriage. Nowhere in the Book of Mormon did Lamanites discourage their children from courting and marrying Nephites. On one occasion, apostate Nephite priests abducted 24 Lamanite maidens and forced them into marriage, yet when the brides had a chance to extricate themselves, instead they begged for compassion on their Nephite husbands. (Mosiah 20:1–5 and 23:33–34). A Lamanite King eagerly offered one of his daughters in marriage to a Nephite missionary (Alma 17:24). Later, a widowed Lamanite queen had no reservations about marrying a shrewd and ambitious Nephite and even allowing him to succeed to her husband’s throne (Alma 47). Unfortunately, the Lamanites have not yet had a chance to explain their

motives.¹⁴⁰ In their place, the artifacts of ancient Indigenous Americans now speak from the dust.

Miracles

The Book of Mormon soberly affirms that God is “a God of miracles” (2 Nephi 27:23). But what is a miracle? John A. Widtsoe, a noted scientist and academic who was the President of the University of Utah before becoming a member of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, wrote: “a miracle simply means a phenomenon not understood, in its cause and effect relations.” He cautioned: “There can be no chance in the operations of nature. This is a universe of law and order.”¹⁴¹ James E. Talmage, a chemist and geologist who also was the President of the University of Utah before being called to the Quorum of the Twelve, observed: “The human sense of the miraculous wanes as comprehension of the *operative process* increases.”¹⁴²

Bodypaint is an operative process that is natural, swift, and reversible. A child can understand and explain it. It requires no divine disruption of the natural order. It produces a skin of blackness on-demand and without making sibling rivalry the cause of celestial gene-splicing. Some miracles may forever remain mysterious, but the “mark” that some Nephite authors considered to be a blessing was the result of innovation and agency.

Without the Mesoamerican evidence, a relatively sudden skin color mutation that selectively applied only to Lehi’s two eldest sons and a few companions would seem like the act of an angry, impulsive, and capricious God. After all, Laman and Lemuel terrorized Nephi repeatedly during Lehi’s odyssey to the Americas. There were several earlier occasions to punish them: for example, when they beat Nephi with a wooden rod outside of Jerusalem (1 Nephi 3:28), bound him with cords, intending to leave him in the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts (1 Nephi 7:16), conspired to slay both Lehi and Nephi when Ishmael died (1 Nephi 16:34–39), attempted to throw Nephi from a cliff into the depths of the sea (1 Nephi 17:48–55), and, during the transoceanic voyage, bound him with cords, nearly causing the entire family to be drowned during a fierce storm (1 Nephi 18:11). However, despite repeated attempted fratricide (and even patricide), Lehi did not leave his eldest sons behind or cut them off, and the Lord did not blacken their skins. Why would God wait to set a mark upon them until they conspired against Nephi for the sixth time and he again had escaped?

The patriarch Jacob's blended family is instructive. His ten oldest sons abused their younger brother Joseph no less, and traumatized their parents even more. They threw Joseph into a pit to starve, trafficked him into bondage, divided the secret profits, destroyed their father's property, fabricated evidence of Joseph's violent death, and perpetrated a blood-stained cover-up. Yet Jehovah refrained from corporal punishment; indeed, eventually He rewarded them with fertile land in Goshen (Genesis 37–47). Similarly, the Lamanites ultimately inherited what the Nephites originally had hoped would be their own promised land.

It bears remembering that at times the Nephites became equally or even more wicked and depraved than the Lamanites. Yet there was no impact on their complexion.¹⁴³ Indeed, in 87 BCE the turncoat Nephites who were known as Amlicites personally marked their own bodies with red (Alma 3:4). God did not do it for them.

The Laws of Genetics

Variety in skin color is a function of melanin, the natural sunscreen pigment that is produced within melanocytes in the lowest layer of the epidermis.¹⁴⁴ Those cells are not instantly genetically modified to produce far more melanin and browner skin. There is no known on/off switch. Except in the case of a “selective gene sweep,” changes in the pigmentation of a significant population require far longer than the entire recorded history of Lehi's descendants.¹⁴⁵ In a small group, variations could occur rapidly, but the phenotypical features that are referred to as “race” developed over millennia. Innumerable minor genetic tweaks through natural selection and evolutionary adaptation allowed humans to achieve the “optimal level of pigmentation [and other features] for the regions they ended up in.”¹⁴⁶ These are laws of nature. They deserve respect. Indeed, the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has stated that it leaves to science questions regarding natural selection and adaptation of the species.¹⁴⁷ The agency of man and of nature itself is reflected in the diversity of humankind.¹⁴⁸

In an effort to accommodate science, a few Book of Mormon apologists have considered two potential ordinary biological processes for darkening the skin. Some have proposed intermarriage with darker Indigenous peoples. But that only could have *accelerated* changes. It would not account for the sudden skin of blackness. Moreover, as both John Sorenson and Brant Gardner point out, if the Lamanites intermarried with natives, the Nephites likely did the same.¹⁴⁹ Nibley once hinted at the possibility that a darker complexion may have

resulted from sun exposure.¹⁵⁰ It is true that UV rays can increase the production of melanin and, over time, produce a “near-doubling of the skin’s melanin content.”¹⁵¹ But that falls short of what Nephi seems to have referred to as a “skin of *blackness*.” And a so-called “farmer’s tan” is not genetically transferable. Besides, there is no evidence that Nephtite farmers and laborers were more fully clothed than their Lamanite kin, except during battles when Lamanite warriors were nearly naked.¹⁵² Furthermore, neither of these theories leads logically to the blackening of a select group of adults within at most a few years. Thus both contradict the text.

Moral Agency

A direct causal relationship between religious orthopraxy and natural skin color is not only unscientific and counter-intuitive, it controverts the revealed doctrine of moral agency and accountability. Moral agency requires freedom to choose and to act, without divine meddling (Doctrine and Covenants 101:78).¹⁵³ Father Lehi himself, in a farewell speech, made this doctrine a fact of life and a pre-eminent doctrine for Latter-day Saints. It is a revealed and reliable truth — what Elder Holland has referred to as “divine data.”¹⁵⁴

Shortly before Lehi died, he taught that all men are free “to act for themselves and *not to be acted upon*, save it be by the punishment of the law *at the great and last day*” (2 Nephi 2:26). It would mock Lehi’s doctrine of eternal justice to assert that God blackened the skins of the very adults to whom he spoke. As Fiona and Terryl Givens have said, it is axiomatic that “if consequences followed immediately and directly from actions, agency would be compromised.”¹⁵⁵ To be sure, poor choices lead to consequences, but not to a genetic mutation.

Metaphorical Arguments for the Skin of Blackness

Often disciple scholars have urged a metaphorical interpretation of the skin of blackness. Some have focused on the fact that the words “dark” and “blackness” are archaic Middle Eastern literary devices.¹⁵⁶ For example, the ancient Zoroastrians conceived of a cosmic conflict between good, represented by light, and evil, represented by darkness.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, these scholars argue that the “skin of blackness” was merely a metaphor. Applying this literary pastiche to the book’s few-and-far-between references to skin, they contend that as an ancient idiom the phrase “skin of blackness” should not be read as racially charged.¹⁵⁸

As for the word “white,” the 1828 *Webster’s Dictionary of the American Language* said that it referred to purity. True to that definition, the Book of Mormon often uses the word “white” when it refers to people who are cleansed through the “*blood of the Lamb*” (1 Nephi 12:11; Alma 13:11, 34:36; Mormon 9:6). In fact, almost half of the 28 or so Book of Mormon references to the words “white,” “whiter,” and “whiteness,” are figures of speech for spotlessness.¹⁵⁹

However, although light vs. dark juxtapositions in the Book of Mormon are consistent with ancient Middle Eastern culture,¹⁶⁰ this argument has its limitations. The counterpoint is that the “metaphoric contrast of white and black, so common today in Western culture, was not prevalent in the Bible.”¹⁶¹ Its authors used the imagery of light and darkness with great complexity.¹⁶² Moreover, when Book of Mormon authors intended a metaphorical meaning for white or for darkness, often their intent is obvious.¹⁶³

Nibley first called attention to the ancient *coincidentia oppositorum* of dark vs. light and argued that the “mark was not a racial thing.”¹⁶⁴ Nibley noted that this ancient dichotomy sometimes influenced not only perceptions about the human condition generally, but about individual circumstances, including one’s countenance or complexion.¹⁶⁵ Although he hypothesized, Nibley did not embrace an entirely metaphorical explanation for the mark. Nor did he see the conflict between the two Book of Mormon cultures as an allegory. Indeed, it would be a stretch to argue that when Nephite prophets reported real-time and sometimes eye-witness accounts of the Lamanites with terms like *skin of blackness*, *darkness of skins*, *mark*, or *filthiness*, they intended those words to be read centuries later not factually, but only metaphorically.

Often apologists start with the assumption that racism was part of Nephi’s cultural baggage — that he brought it with him. However, scholars today consider race and racism to be relatively recent social constructs. There is “no consensus among scholars of what racism is,” in fact, no consensus “whether races exist at all.”¹⁶⁶ Before the Common Era, religious beliefs, ethnicity, and geographic origin were often seen as relevant distinctions, but not race as we think of it today. In fact, according to available historical records, when Nephi left Jerusalem phenotypic features were not used to discriminate among humans. Pigmentation and other attributes that now are associated with “race” may have been observed, but skin color was not the basis for distinctions.

Joseph Smith’s revelations known as *Selections from the Book of Moses* tell of complexion-based prejudice before the time of the great flood.¹⁶⁷

However, in the post-diluvian world of Noah's descendants through the lineages of Japheth, Shem, and Ham there was great tolerance of racial diversity in the Middle East, especially in Egypt. There, "the long history of population intermingling along the Nile had made contacts between people of different skin colors routine."¹⁶⁸ Egyptians had been acquainted with and fought alongside black mercenaries at least as early as 2000 BCE and, "as a result of longstanding familiarity, saw nothing unusual in the Kushites' color or other physical characteristics."¹⁶⁹ Egyptians were "mostly tolerant of diversity in physical appearance."¹⁷⁰ So were their Middle Eastern neighbors.

From the time of Moses forward, the Hebrews saw themselves as a chosen people who were called to respect the *Torah's* command not to vex a stranger, to treat him as "one born among you," and to "love him as thyself" (Leviticus 19:34). Scholars tell us that the earliest Jews distinguished themselves not by race, but by their monotheism, cultural practices, diet, and language. The *Torah* legitimized slavery, but *without* making a value judgment about physical appearance.¹⁷¹ Holy writ allowed Hebrews to make servants of both fellow Hebrews and the children of strangers, whether among them or in adjoining lands (Leviticus 25:39–45). It appears that Jewish racism may not have surfaced until they themselves were enslaved during their Babylonian exile, *after* Jerusalem was sacked in 586 BCE.¹⁷² Only after that date do scattered Talmudic and Midrashic sources evidence Jewish reliance on the so-called "Hamitic curse" to deem Canaanites, and perhaps also the Blacks of Africa, suitable for perpetual bondage.¹⁷³

Because Lehi foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem, he and his followers escaped in time to avoid the Babylonian conquest. Thus, the perspectives of Lehi and Nephi on strangers and foreigners, including Africans, were not tainted by the biases that emerged during the exilic period. The brass plates that they carried with them contained the words of the "holy prophets even down to the reign of Zedekiah" (1 Nephi 5:11–13), including prophecies of Isaiah that expressed a universalistic theology. Isaiah's influence upon Nephite beliefs is undeniable. So that his people would "lift up their hearts and rejoice for *all* men," Nephi engraved many of Isaiah's words upon his small plates, including one of Isaiah's earliest visions — that "the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains ... and *all* nations shall flow unto it" (2 Nephi 12:2).¹⁷⁴ It is noteworthy that the first verse of prophecy that Nephi engraved on the small plates was his own father's visionary and inclusive declaration that

the “power, and goodness, and mercy” of the Lord, God Almighty “are over *all* the inhabitants of the earth” (1 Nephi 1:14).

The brass plates also included many of the prophecies of Jeremiah (1 Nephi 5:13), and Lehi’s departure occurred just as a conspiracy of Jewish princes who rejected dooms-day prophecies had cast Jeremiah into prison (1 Nephi 7:14). Often forgotten is the fact that it was Ebed-melech, a black Kushite from Ethiopia and confidant of King Zedekiah (the name can mean “servant [or slave] of the king”¹⁷⁵), who intervened on Jeremiah’s behalf. With Zedekiah’s approval, he made a rope of worn-out clothes and rotten rags and secretly rescued Jeremiah from the miry dungeon where the princes had left him to die (Jeremiah 37:15 to 38:28).¹⁷⁶ For Lehi and Nephi, Ebed-melech, who had risen to prominence in Zedekiah’s court, would have been a hero.¹⁷⁷

Antiquity’s historical archives are admittedly incomplete, but the apparent absence of skin color-based xenophobia in the pre-exilic Middle East suggests that Nephi was not expressing an inherited cultural bias when he wrote that “the Lord did cause a skin of blackness to come upon” Laman and Lemuel (2 Nephi 5:21). There is scant evidence for branding Nephi as a bigot or inferring systemic racial bias in the Book of Mormon, despite its internecine rivalry. From a historian’s point of view, to impute racism as we know it to that period would be anachronistic — it emerged later and elsewhere. Nephi seems to have authentically reflected his own era and upbringing when he declared that the Lord “inviteth *all* to come unto him and partake of his goodness,” including “*black and white*,” and that “*all* are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33).

It might be tempting to tilt toward a metaphorical explanation for the “skin of blackness” because the same verse in which these words appear mentions the curse and then figuratively likens the hearts of Laman and Lemuel “unto a flint” (2 Nephi 5:21), a possible reference to the black obsidian that was widely used in Mesoamerica. Both hearts and skins are anatomical, so inferring another analogy for the mark upon the Lamanites’ skins may not seem unreasonable. However, the hearts/flint simile has limited probative value regarding what Nephi observed. The Book of Mormon almost always describes it only as a “mark” and never expressly uses it symbolically for anything.

Occasionally the Book of Mormon uses “white” to describe the incomparable radiance, brightness, and glory of God’s presence, which rabbinic literature refers to as the *Shekinah*. For example, Jehovah touched 16 transparent stones causing them to shine (Ether 3:1–6), the tree of life in Lehi’s vision bore fruit that “was white, to exceed all the whiteness

that [he] had ever seen" (1 Nephi 8:11), and in Nephi's Messianic vision, the virgin Mary appeared "exceedingly fair and white" when she was under the influence of the Holy Spirit before giving birth to the Lamb of God (1 Nephi 11:13–21). Nephi foresaw in vision that the disciples of the Lord would be "made *white* in the blood of the Lamb because of their faith" (1 Nephi 12:8–11). And indeed, the book's account of the visit of Jesus to the Americas after His resurrection says that He blessed His disciples and they were transfigured in His presence and made white. At that moment, "there was nothing upon earth so white" as the whiteness of the countenance and garments of the glorified Lord and His disciples as He smiled upon them (3 Nephi 19: 25, 30).¹⁷⁸

Despite these superlatives, however, the common Middle Eastern ancestry of Mary, the Nephites, and the Lamanites, suggests that all these individuals had dark hair, dark eyes, and a Mediterranean complexion. None had what we refer to today as white skin.¹⁷⁹ They were not Northern Europeans. The *Shekinah* illuminated Mary and the Nephite Twelve, and it enlightened the tree of life, its fruit, and the transparent stones.

The Book of Mormon appears to refer to a white natural human complexion only three times. Twice it is in Nephi's words. In neither of these cases, however, is "white" a trope for purity.

First in Nephi's futuristic vision of America he foresaw Gentiles who lived across the "many waters," who would be led by the spirit to flee from captivity, battle their "mother" Gentiles, and be delivered, although, as foreseen by Nephi, chiefly by the "power of God" and because the "wrath of God was upon all those who were gathered together against them" (1 Nephi 13:11–19). These Gentile colonists he described as "*white*, and exceedingly fair, and beautiful like unto the Nephites" *before* their eventual destruction (1 Nephi 13:15). However, Nephi's reference to white Gentiles merely contrasted the less melanated skin of both the Nephites and the Western European immigrants to the darker natural complexions or artificially darkened bodies that he had observed either in the Old World or the New. Nephi's vision foresaw that the colonists "humbled themselves before the Lord" and that "the power of the Lord was with them" (1 Nephi 13:16), but he did not describe the colonists as pure.¹⁸⁰ Likewise, the Nephites often were not pure. Indeed, beginning 200 years *before* their destruction they began to tolerate "all manner of wickedness" (4 Nephi 1:27); and near the end of their civilization, Mormon, in his final letter to his son Moroni, said that he could not even describe in words the extent of their "depravity" (Moroni 9:18–19).

Nephi's second mention was his nostalgic reference to the Lamanites as white *before* the family schism (2 Nephi 5:21). This reminiscence refers to their *comparatively* lighter appearance, like that of Lehi's entire colony, among other peoples. Although the daughters and sons of Lehi and Sariah had Mediterranean complexions, they had less melanin than some ethnic groups in the Old World who were familiar to Nephi, for example, the dark-skinned inhabitants of Palestine before the arrival of the Semitic people, Ethiopians in the court of Zedekiah, or the descendants of Cush in southern Arabia where Lehi's pilgrimage likely travelled.¹⁸¹ Anciently, similar diversity existed in the New World. The "skin shades of surviving native peoples in Mesoamerica ... range from dark brown to virtual white."¹⁸² Thus, after arriving in the Americas, Nephi also may have observed inhabitants with darker complexions.

The third time, it was Mormon as editor who used "white" to describe all of the Lamanites who had become converted to the Lord in 15 CE and who merged with the Nephites when robbers were spreading "death and carnage throughout the land." All who resisted the robbers' threats, including previously converted Lamanites, "were compelled for the safety of their lives" to unite. Mormon, without hyperbole or relying on divine intervention, says that the skin of those who were Lamanites "became white *like unto the Nephites*" (3 Nephi 2:11–15). Notably, at that time the spiritual paradigm was inverted. These Nephites were far from pure. They "did still remain in wickedness, notwithstanding the much preaching and prophesying which was sent among them" (3 Nephi 2:10, 19).¹⁸³ The coalition, therefore, was a military necessity rather than the result of a religious epiphany. Mormon's observation about the Lamanites' complexion had nothing to do with their conversion. They were already righteous, indeed, more righteous than the Nephites. There is no reason to assume that a supposed change in the Lamanites' complexion six centuries earlier was genetically reversed in 15 CE. It is more practical to infer that for various reasons they renounced the use of soot, body paint, and stains and exposed their natural complexion.¹⁸⁴

One might be tempted to ask whether the Lamanites used white body paint or bleaching agents to become "white like unto the Nephites." The text offers no hint of that. Besides, it would have served no practical or tactical purpose, as did darkening. Although a few instances of white body paint in Mesoamerica have been documented,¹⁸⁵ so far Mesoamerican artifacts do not link white with religiosity. In Maya art, blue, which is never mentioned in the Book of Mormon, eventually became the color associated with priests and gods.¹⁸⁶

Nephi knew how to use the word “black” to describe skin color. When he stated that the Lord welcomes all, “black and white, bond and free, male and female,” he was describing biological and cultural conditions. He did not use “black” as a synonym for evil, nor “white” as a substitute for pure. He did not use “black and white” to proclaim sinner and saint “alike unto God.” Rather, for Nephi, despite *any* differences in the human family, *all* are “privileged the *one like unto the other*” (2 Nephi 26:28–33). Nephi testified of a God who welcomes all, whatever their complexion, sex, or social standing; whose “power, and goodness, and mercy are over *all* the inhabitants of the earth” (1 Nephi 1:14); and whose Holy Messiah will “make intercession for *all* the children of men” (2 Nephi 2:9).

Today the obscure and unconventional phrase “skin of blackness” seems to have come out of nowhere, but it is not intrinsically racist, nor would it have been in Nephi’s day. Arguably it is a Mesoamericanism — a unique expression that is “fully understandable only in terms of the civilization that prevailed in that part of the ancient world before AD 1500.”¹⁸⁷ It might have been a Mayan term of art, an ancient Middle Eastern idiom, or both. It may have been meant to distinguish between a naturally black complexion and one that was artificial. These linguistic questions are for Mayanists and scholars of Hebrew, Assyrian, and other influences on Jewish culture before the Babylonian exile. For reasons that are not yet known, Nephi chose a phrase that was cryptic. But it was not a slip of Nephi’s stylus, of Joseph Smith’s tongue, or of Oliver Cowdery’s pen. Moreover, the terms “skin of blackness” and “mark” were racially neutral; they had no racist connotation whatsoever.

It is a slippery slope to rationalize or to impute a chronologically distant metaphorical sense to words or to a religious/cultural conflict between two peoples whose phenotypic features are merely assumed to be different. It is offensive to people of color to suggest that the Book of Mormon is color coded, even in a nonliteral way based on a Middle Eastern tradition. The book’s authors, including Nephi who created both the large and small plates as well as Mormon who abridged Nephi’s large plates and created his own eponymous volume, never hinted that they were compiling an extended allegory about a bi-racial society. Mormon’s son Moroni finished his father’s work not by praising him for writing inspirational literature, but by declaring that the record was “true” (Moroni 10:4, 29). For Nibley as well, the Book of Mormon was not a racial jeremiad. His conviction of its “divine provenance” was based on faith, not tangible proof.¹⁸⁸ Yet, he devoted his life to proving that

the book, “indisputably” and “on the world’s terms,” was an authentic ancient record of *actual events*.¹⁸⁹

Reconciling the Book of Mormon with the Body Paint Tradition

Nothing in the Book of Mormon explicitly or implicitly contradicts the body paint rationale. Readers who are willing to interact with the text in a racially-neutral way will find that all of its text, including sermons and cross-cultural stories, can be squared with the custom. Reviewing these social interactions in fresh, thought-provoking ways requires both *exegesis* — taking an interpretation out of the plain words on the page — as well as *eisegesis*, which according to James Faulconer, means “this is what I thought [what I brought into the text] when I read that particular scripture.”¹⁹⁰ Faulconer urges us to question the text, but at the same time question all of our presuppositions.

The many Lamanite/Nephite encounters are fertile ground for applying this approach to the long periods of silence in the text about skin color. Often, when a reference to physical appearance might be expected there is not a word. My personal musings about several cross-cultural events that might have triggered color commentary, if there had been an actual skin color difference, are in the Appendix.

One event shortly after Nephi’s death deserves singular scrutiny. Nephi’s younger brother Jacob first took the occasion to rebuke Nephite men for their pride (Jacob 2:13–16). He testified that God “created *all* flesh” and that “one being is as precious in his sight as another” (Jacob 2:21). He then emphasized that point saying: “revile no more against [the Lamanites] because of the *darkness of their skins*” (Jacob 3:9). He condemned Nephite prejudice based on that one aspect of the Lamanites’ appearance. He also censured the Nephite men for their moral filthiness while extolling the chastity of the Lamanite husbands and fathers. Jacob said that unless the arrogant, adulterous, lecherous Nephites repented, the Lamanites would be, figuratively, “whiter” in the eyes of God (Jacob 3:3–8).

Viewed through a racially neutral lens and with a Mesoamerican filter, Jacob’s reference to the “darkness” of his nephews’ skins certainly could have referred to their use of charcoal, soot, or body paint — a “filthiness” they had taken upon themselves “*because of their fathers*” (Jacob 3:9). His words parallel and were the precursor for those of Mormon who later said that “the skins of the Lamanites were dark according to the mark which was *set upon their fathers*” (Alma 3:6). When Jacob preached

this sermon, the Lamanites vividly remembered and resented Nephi's escape. Perhaps more than ever they were forced to survive by stalking wild beasts and plundering. Jacob sharply contrasted the Lamanite men who, notwithstanding their more primitive living conditions, loved their wives and their children (Jacob 3:7) to the Nephite men who, instead, loved their riches, grieved the hearts of their wives and children, and were guilty of "fornication and lasciviousness, and every kind of sin" (Jacob 2:7–10, 12–13; 3:10, 12).

A hasty reading of Jacob's speech might infer a confusing link between the curse of being cut off and the Lamanites' dark appearance. The Nephites, he said, despised their "brethren" because of "the *cursings* which hath come upon their skins" (Jacob 3:5).¹⁹¹ This curious plural noun, which appears in the original printer's manuscript, deserves a word search.

In the Book of Mormon, the curses of captivity, destruction, and being cut off from the Lord are often referred to as cursings.¹⁹² These oaths were a common ancient warfare practice and Hebrew military tradition. Joshua, the leader of Israel's armies, recited cursings to his people. After vanquishing the city of Ai, he assembled the elders, officers, judges, and priests on each side of the ark, erected an altar, wrote the law of Moses upon stones, and then read "the blessings and *cursings*" (Joshua 8:32–35). The Torah refers to an oath of cursing (Numbers 5:21) and to words of cursing (Deuteronomy 30:19); the Psalms, to a wicked mouth that is full of cursing (Psalms 10:7; 59:12).

The Book of Mormon recognizes the rhetorical value and military role of cursings, not only upon enemies, but upon comrades and even oneself. Before going to war, Lamanites "*swore* in their wrath" to destroy the Nephites and their records and traditions" (Enos 1:14). One bloodthirsty Lamanite leader publicly cursed himself and his warriors with the words "*we will perish* or conquer" (Alma 44:8). Another cursed God and swore "with an oath" to drink Nephite blood (Alma 49:27). The Nephites had a similar custom that also included self-malediction. In a dramatic pre-war ceremony, Nephites warriors symbolically rent their garments and cast them at the feet of their captain. They then covenanted that if they fell into transgression, they likewise should be cast at the feet of their enemies, imprisoned, sold as slaves, or slain (Alma 46:22–23). The self-cursing tradition reappeared in South America centuries later in the motto embroidered on Simon Bolivar's black banner "Muerte o Libertad!"¹⁹³ In North America, it became Patrick Henry's vow: "Give me liberty, or give me death!"

Maya warfare was entwined with religion and was a “deeply rooted ritualized institution.”¹⁹⁴ As part of pre-war dedication or consecration rituals, ancient Mesoamericans “were proficient in imbuing or ensouling places with supernatural powers.”¹⁹⁵ In times of war, cursings likely were common. When Lamanites applied body paint, they may have simultaneously cursed their enemies, and probably even themselves, swearing “we will perish,” if they failed to exact revenge. This could clarify Jacob’s nexus between “cursings” and the skins of enemy Lamanites.

The War of Words

The Book of Mormon is the account of siblings and cousins who sometimes fought with weapons and occasionally, with words. The Lamanites’ stereotypical anti-Nephitisms were *liars, deceivers, and robbers*. They had their reasons for these clichés. Laman and Lemuel could hardly forget Nephi’s subtlety when, as payback for Laban’s extortion in Jerusalem, Nephi killed Laban, disguised himself in his garments, absconded with Laban’s armor, breastplate, and sword, impersonated Laban in order to deceive his servant and convince him to remove the brass plates from Laban’s treasury, and then seized Laban’s servant outside Jerusalem’s walls and held him captive until he agreed to join Lehi’s secretive exodus (1 Nephi 3–4). For Laman and Lemuel, Nephi cemented his reputation for being cagey when, just in the nick of time, he stole away from Lehi’s New World settlement with all of the family’s heirlooms and “whatsoever things were possible.”¹⁹⁶

At times, Nephites reciprocated with ethnocentric anti-Lamanitisms that today sound pejorative. Their reductive stereotypes included *loathsome, lazy, idle, bloodthirsty, wild, hardened, stiffnecked, and ferocious*.¹⁹⁷ However, demeaning words occur relatively rarely in 500-plus pages spanning 1,000 years of history. More frequently, Nephite prophets praised the Lamanites.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, they reserved some of their most biting criticism for the Nephites themselves.¹⁹⁹

Critical thinking about the text’s behavioral-based stereotypes led Kerry Hull to conclude that they were often demonstrably incorrect.²⁰⁰ For example, given Nephi’s legacy, it was ironic for Nephites to demean the Lamanites as those who resorted to *mischief and subtlety* (2 Nephi 5:24). One Nephite leader recognized the Lamanites as “a strong people” (Mosiah 10:11). Others conceded that Lamanites prospered through trade and wisdom (Mosiah 24:7), that it was only the “*more idle part*” who “lived in the wilderness” (Alma 22:28), and that Nephites also indulged in idleness, thieving, and robbery (Alma 1:32).

Finally, no epithets for the Lamanites evidenced racism.²⁰¹ Not one of them is the equivalent of a modern day racial or ethnic slur. Offense taken by contemporary readers seems to be influenced by current cultural prejudices. Even after many generations, the Lehites were one extended family and, despite some intermarriage with other peoples in the land, likely had similar physical features with relatively minor variations from the bodily norms of their Mediterranean-type ancestors.²⁰² As far as we know, they never considered themselves to be two races or distinct ethnic groups. Although Lehi and Sariah parented two competitive clans, colonies, cultures, societies, and quasi-nation-states, the Nephites continually referred to the Lamanites as their brethren — a term of endearment that affirms their homogeneity as an extended family. Remarkably, Moroni who watched Lamanites savagely destroy his father, family, and friends, still considered his bloodthirsty enemies to be close relatives — charitably referring to them in his closing chapter as his “beloved brethren” (Moroni 10:18–19). Nephite authors used similar terms for Lamanites more than 50 times, sometimes even calling them “dearly beloved.”²⁰³ As John Tvedtnes pointed out, these are not “terms that one would expect to find in a society that holds *racist* views toward a neighboring people.”²⁰⁴

Reading *racial* intolerance in the words of Nephite authors would be anachronistic to the Book of Mormon era. Moreover, Joseph Smith never referred to the Lamanite–Nephite division in racial terms.²⁰⁵ From the tense opening scenes of the book he translated until its apocalyptic finale, Lehi’s posterity were one people in the eyes of the Almighty, who, according to the text, did not play favorites based on lineage or appearance.²⁰⁶

Conclusion

To date, Latter-day Saint scholars have depended upon traditions and textual analysis rooted in the Old World to defend the Book of Mormon.²⁰⁷ This approach anchors the text within the Semitic tradition and adds gravitas to the Church’s rejection of any theory that black or dark skin is a sign of a curse. However, prior explanations regarding the “skin of blackness” fail to consider the data now available from the ancient New World.

Relevant Mesoamerican data in the form of murals, vases, plates, and codices have been a long time in coming, and surely other artifacts are yet to be unearthed. But expert opinions about the evidence curated

from what seems to be the most likely *mise-en-scène* finally yields a fact-based theory that:

- reveals the practical and tactical motives for a self-administered, removable skin of blackness;
- honors the doctrine of moral agency;
- respects the principles of human genetics; and
- removes any racial inference that might be implied in the words “blackness,” “dark,” and “mark.”²⁰⁸

A forté of this thesis is that it is based on authentic artifacts that have been interpreted by Mayanists who are not Latter-day Saints, and whose opinions about the use of body paint appear to be objective and neutral.

Whether the Lamanites lived within the Maya realm or elsewhere, the use of black paints and stains was congruent with their hunter-gatherer-warrior lifestyle, especially during their early years.²⁰⁹ Simply put, it meant less insect bites by day, fewer casualties on the battlefield, and better camouflage by night and in the forests.²¹⁰ It would have been a common-sense response to their environment. It may well be another example of Ockham’s razor, the so-called law of parsimony. Among the competing theories for the skin of blackness, the simpler one — removable body paint — should be preferred.

Elder James E. Talmage taught that *Genesis* was “never intended as a textbook on geology, archaeology, earth-science, or man-science.”²¹¹ Nor is the Book of Mormon. But it does describe a setting in which the Lamanites could have applied soot, paint, and stains to their skins for any number of reasons: to spite Nephi, to spurn his religious traditions, to seek revenge when he ransacked their camp, to show allegiance with the Maya, to camouflage themselves when hunting, to facilitate stealth and plunder, to appear intimidating on the battlefield, to distinguish themselves in close-quarters combat, to allow their women to adorn their skins with designs, and to send social messages. Cultural archaeology now allows readers to picture the Lamanites setting that skin of the blackness upon themselves and to recognize, as Nibley presciently predicted, that it was a “reversible process,” that it was “their choice,” and that they controlled it.²¹²

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a myth as a “traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events. A widely held but false belief or idea.”²¹³ New World facts now challenge all prior assumptions about the skin of blackness. Demythicalizing that distinctive phrase consigns the notion that the

Lord darkened the Lamanites' natural complexion to where it belongs: the folklore shelf of the "Gospel Library." With newfound curiosity, reluctant readers and especially people of color can read the book for its precepts and for its witness of a God who invites all to come unto Him without wondering when an unwelcome inference about the mark or skin of blackness will appear.

President Russell M. Nelson's ministry has refocused The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on removing divisive attitudes and practices and gathering God's entire family. He has emphasized that the Lord's blessings are for *every* person who chooses to "let God prevail in his or her life."²¹⁴ To that end he has called upon Church members to abandon their prejudices, to "*work tirelessly* to build bridges of understanding rather than creating walls of segregation," and to minister "to those who are excluded, marginalized, judged, overlooked, abused, and discounted."²¹⁵ He has urged Latter-day Saints not to merely passively accept, but to pro-actively champion diversity, inclusion, and equality in order rightfully to claim the title "the Restored Church."

Latter-day Saints often associate that title with the *restoration* of priesthood authority, doctrines, ordinances, spiritual gifts, temples, and church officers — all of which are vital links to Christ's New Testament church. However, President Nelson seems to envision these as means, not ends. He sees God's purpose as uniting the entire human family and *restoring* all of God's children "to wholeness," with special care for those who "suffer on the margins of society."²¹⁶

Faith in the Book of Mormon may be grounded in the book's compelling witness of the Savior's atonement; it may stem from a conviction that the book not only teaches spiritual truths but is an authentic ancient record of historical facts; or it may spring from the goodness of the lifestyle and sense of divine presence to which the book's precepts lead.²¹⁷ Readers have different perspectives on what is truth and how they discern it. As Terry and Fiona Givens write, "different ways of *knowing* exist," and "the body of Christ needs its *full* complement of members."²¹⁸ Regardless of the source of their faith, Latter-day Saints consecrate their time, talents, and resources to the kingdom of God. This includes Church members who have sincere questions about the Book of Mormon translation process, DNA evidence, 19th century material that appears in the text, references to horses and steel, the skin of blackness, etc.

All these believers seek assurance of God's universal love. As Joseph Smith recognized, "for any rational being" to center her or his life

in God, it is “essentially necessary” to believe that God “is *no respecter of persons*; but in *every nation*” those who fear God and work righteousness are “accepted of him.”²¹⁹ Thus, particularly in an era of racial and ethnic strife, many readers yearn to know that the Book of Mormon has no hidden racial agenda or subplot that demeans people of color and that its prophets and translator exemplified God’s love for the entire human family. Whatever the nature of one’s conviction, Moroni, the book’s final author, promises that a sure witness comes through faith, prayer, a sincere heart, real intent, and the power of the Holy Ghost (Moroni 10:4–5).

Evidence of the Mesoamerican body paint custom is not proof of that sort. But it is an objective evidence-based rebuttal to the charge of racism in the Book of Mormon. It reinforces the book’s message that God embraces people whose skin tones cover the entire sepia spectrum, from ebony to ivory; that He desires that *every* creature experience joy and fulfill the measure of *its* creation; and that He loves all women, men, young adults, youth, and children “*because of our unique personalities and differences rather than in spite of them.*”²²⁰ It allows the book to take its rightful place as prime proof that peace and harmony abound only within a social framework of equality.²²¹ It removes what Joseph Smith referred to as “shackles” of “superstition” and “bigotry” and helps to heal racial wounds.²²² It is a factual imprimatur upon the Book of Mormon’s prophetic promise that “God is *mindful of every* people, whatsoever land they may be in ... and his bowels of mercy are over *all* the earth” (Alma 26:37).

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Coast, Togo, Benin, Cameroun, and the Central African Republic. France appointed him to be its Honorary Consul in Arizona, a position he held for 19 years and for which he was decorated as Chevalier de l'Ordre national du Mérite. For his years of service to young men, the Boy Scouts of America awarded him the Silver Beaver. In 2015, when the Arizona Ecumenical Council became an interreligious organization (Arizona Faith Network), Gerrit was called to represent the Church on its Board of Directors. He continues in that role, and with his wife, Judy, serves on the Church's Phoenix Metro Communications Council. They have three children, five grandchildren, and are actively engaged in interfaith outreach, especially to the African American Christian clergy and community leaders.

Appendix:

Textual Consistency with the Body Paint Tradition

For many Latter-day Saints playing a word association game, “dark skin” would likely be one of the common responses to the word “Lamanite.” This stigmatizing generalization ignores the fact that in the Book of Mormon there are long periods of silence about skin and skin color. In most Lamanite/Nephite interactions there is not a word about complexion, even in settings when a reference to skin color might be expected if in fact there had been a significant difference.

In approximately 200 BCE a small band of daring Nephites left their own territory and sought to reclaim the land where Lehi's colony first lived — long since occupied by Lamanites. The explorers sent Zeniff as a “spy among the Lamanites,” and he spent enough time to see that there was “good among them” (Mosiah 9:1). He remained undetected. Apparently, his skin was no different. Zeniff became convinced that the two cultures could jointly occupy the lands, so he established a Nephite enclave. About twenty years later, the Lamanites launched a surprise attack on these Nephite settlers. The Lamanite warriors had shaved their heads and were naked except for a leather girdle about their loins, but the record is mute about their skin color (Mosiah 10:8). Zeniff's disciplined soldiers prevailed, and the Nephites continued to cohabit the land.

In 90 BCE, Nephites went as missionaries to Lamanites who many Nephites then despised as “a wild and a hardened and a ferocious people” (Alma 17:14). Mormon reports that the “curse of God” had fallen upon these Lamanites “because of the traditions of their fathers” but he did not define the curse. He said, however, that the Lord's promises would be extended to them upon repentance, suggesting that the curse meant

being cut off (Alma 17:15). Within a few years, many Lamanites were converted and became “friendly with the Nephites,” so that curse “did no more follow them” (Alma 23:17–18). Their complexion was never mentioned.

Figures 1 and 2 are Classic-period Maya murals, not Nephite art. But if readers will indulge a light-hearted comparison, they can imagine Book of Mormon themed captions for these images. If the Nephites had the “copper-olive complexion” that Sorenson describes, perhaps bronzed further by exposure to the sun, Figure 1 could represent Ammon, one of those missionaries, presenting himself to a Lamanite king who is wearing a ceremonial skin of blackness, with three noble, attractive women seated nearby, perhaps one of them being the daughter that the king urged Ammon to take to wife (see Alma 17:18–24). Figure 2 could represent Ammon’s brother, who before departing as a missionary was the heir to the Nephite throne, encountering a more powerful Lamanite king who is elaborately dressed (see Alma 22).

These missionaries were blessed with remarkable success. A great many Lamanites were not only converted to the Lord but became strict pacifists. They took a solemn oath never again to make war, washed their swords that had been blood stained in battle, and buried them deep in the earth (Alma 24:11–18). That they previously had stained their skins for warfare may be inferred from words of their king who explicitly likened their personal “stains” that had been “taken away” to their swords that had been stained with the blood but “washed bright” before being buried (Alma 24:12–13).

One might argue that the king’s use of the word “stain” referred metaphorically to guilt, but in plain English it suggests an external substance, like the word “mark.” The Hebrew scriptures use “stain” to describe an external effect, rather than as a metaphor for guilt.²²³ Also, “stain” is used in only one other account in the Book of Mormon. When Alma accused Nephites of being “murderers” (Alma 5:23), he preached that their garments were “stained with blood and all manner of filthiness” and must be purified “from all stain” (Alma 5:21–23). Apparently, some of his listeners had shed blood; perhaps they still had traces of it on their clothing. Although the converted Lamanite king said that it was God who had taken away their stains, it is not a foregone conclusion that he used the word “stain” only symbolically for guilt as a result of all manner of wickedness.

The conversion of so many Lamanites triggered decades of warfare beginning in 87 BCE, during which several events occurred without any

mention of skin color. For Hugh Nibley, Mormon's report of the first epic battle was a principal source for interpreting the word "mark" as something that is applied to the skin's surface. When Mormon chronicled that battle, he made no comment on complexion and did not implicate God as the cause of the mark. In a matter-of-fact way he reported that Nephite dissenters who called themselves Amlicites joined with Lamanites and for their battlefield insignia painted a red mark on their foreheads. During hand-to-hand combat, the Amlicites needed this mark in order to recognize their own platoon. Meanwhile, blackened Lamanites needed to be able to distinguish Amlicite allies who were helping to spring a trap from enemy Nephites who were falling into it.²²⁴ Mormon says that the Amlicites "*set the mark upon themselves*" (Alma 3:13) and did this "*after the manner of the Lamanites*" (verse 4). According to Nibley, this suggests that the Lamanites had applied a mark to their skin as well.²²⁵ Nephi had prophesied that a *mark* would be set upon the Lamanites' allies (Alma 3:15–16), and Mormon opined that even though the Amlicites' marked only their foreheads with something that was temporary, they were "fulfilling the words of God" (verse 18). Logically, therefore, Lamanites also would have fulfilled the words of God merely by marking themselves with removable war paint. In this same account, Mormon recognized that the Lamanites' mark and their estrangement from the Lord would end if they would "repent of their wickedness" (Alma 3:14).²²⁶ In light of the Mesoamerican body paint tradition, removing the mark by washing away war paint is an objective explanation. A divinely engineered genetic change in melanin content would violate the principle of moral agency as well as the laws of nature, at least as we know them.

Just 15 years after the converted Lamanites had buried their weapons of war, the conflict became so intense that 2,000 young sons of the converted Lamanite pacifists volunteered to become part of the Nephite infantry. They were needed for brutal close quarters warfare against seasoned Lamanite troops (Alma 53–58). In the fierce fighting, soldiers would have needed to make split-second decisions about the use of lethal force. If both the Lamanites and the boy soldiers had naturally dark skin, the battle would have been more deadly for each side. Therefore, it seems likely that the Lamanites still blackened themselves, but that the striplings, like their parents, had abandoned the staining tradition. A thousand Lamanites died, and many of the boys were wounded, but miraculously, not one of them lost his life (Alma 58:40).

In 63 BCE, Captain Moroni, a Nephite military leader, devised a stratagem to free Nephite hostages taken during the on-going wars. Moroni needed to find someone to gain the confidence of the Lamanites who were guarding the prisoners and, without raising suspicions, get them drunk. Applying similar body paint to that worn by the guards would not be enough. As Brant Gardner points out, the infiltrator would have needed to speak with the Lamanites' accent, use their salutations and colloquial expressions, know their drinking customs, and be able to persuade them to binge on wine.²²⁷ If Lamanites were naturally dark-skinned, a converted Lamanite among the Nephite army would have stood out to Captain Moroni. But the record tells us that he had to "search" his army "that *perhaps* he *might* find" someone who could pass for a true Lamanite (Alma 55:4–5). It sounds as though he did not expect to find the right man. But he did; he "found *one*:" an actual descendant of Laman, whose name was Laman, and who had all the attributes needed to deceive the guards, except perhaps a matching coat of black paint and haircut. Thus, Laman and a few Nephite companions likely disguised themselves with a skin of blackness before approaching the sentries. When the Lamanites hailed them from a distance, Laman called out that he was their comrade, that he had escaped from the Nephites with wine, and that the Nephites were asleep. As he and his companions stepped into view their blackened skin would have reassured the guards; the wine sealed the deal (Alma 55:6–23). The Nephite members of Laman's squad could have remained inconspicuous as the guards imbibed.

Brant Gardner has thoughtfully interpreted this classic vignette without assuming that the complexion of Nephites and Lamanites were different and without implicating war paint. However, the foregoing colorized version of the ruse also makes sense, especially if the Lamanite soldiers had continued to mark themselves as they did several years earlier when this prolonged warfare began. Both approaches demonstrate Mormon's ingenuity and Laman's chutzpah and support the conclusion that skin color was not "the defining difference" between Nephites and Lamanites.²²⁸

Common misperceptions about the relationship of skin color to religious devotion are upended at those times when the Nephites became so hardened in iniquity that the traditional Nephite *spiritual* hierarchy was reversed. For example, the Nephites' skin color was not darkened in 29 BCE when the Lamanites needed to preach to and convert them (Helaman 6). Also, no worthiness-based color code applied in 23 BCE when the Lamanites were the more righteous (Helaman 7:24). By 6 BCE

Nephite culture had deteriorated to the point that God called Samuel a Lamanite prophet, to preach repentance from the walls of the Nephites' capital city. Nephites rejected Samuel, but not because of his skin color. They took offense because Samuel dared to decry their gross wickedness (Helaman 13–14). His complexion was not an issue.

Samuel predicted that the Nephites would observe celestial signs when the Messiah was born in the Holy Land. His prophecies were fulfilled, and there was a resurgence of righteousness. But by 15 CE, wickedness reigned, and righteous Lamanites and Nephites were required to unite for their mutual safety. Mormon succinctly describes two results, without suggesting that either was a miracle. He reports that the curse was taken from the Lamanites — they were no longer cut off from the Lord. Moreover, he says that their “skin became white like unto the Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:1–16). Many Latter-day Saints have believed that at this time, six centuries after the text first mentions the skin of blackness, the Lamanites' phenotypical features suddenly were reversed. However, Mormon does not describe God as the cause. The Lamanites' ability to abandon the body paint tradition offers a more objective, fact-based explanation.

In 21 CE, the war paint tradition took a gruesome twist when a mafia of both Lamanites and apostate Nephites known as Gadianton robbers attacked the Nephites. Both the Lamanites and the robbers stained themselves with blood (3 Nephi 4:5–7). This showed their solidarity and made their appearance more intimidating. If the Lamanites had been naturally dark, both groups would not have needed to apply dried blood stains for an effective strategy. Bloodstains on their lighter skins would have been revolting.

In 34 CE, after catastrophic earthquakes, fires, storms, and loss of life, Jesus Christ manifest Himself in glory to the more righteous surviving Nephites and Lamanites. As a result, the two cultures became united. There were no Lamanites, “nor any manner of -ites; but they were one” and all the people were “exceedingly fair and delightsome” (4 Nephi 1:1–17). Again, Mormon describes their similar appearance as a matter of fact, not as the result of divinely-directed gene therapy. According to John Sorenson, after this time, there were only sociocultural distinctions. Several generations later, a Lamanite culture reappeared, but until the end of the Book of Mormon era, the differences were in theology and lifestyle (4 Nephi 1:35–39) with “no mention of phenotypical (visible, biological) characteristics as markers.”²²⁹

In 322 CE, Lehi's descendants fractured again along their original patriarchal blood lines into Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites. All these historical lineages were unrighteous. Wickedness prevailed "upon the face of the whole land" (Mormon 1:13). The people coalesced into two military alliances, but the enemies were indistinguishable in appearance. Mormon, who was an observant contemporary teenage witness, referred to the warring factions simply as "two parties" (Mormon 1:9). They had never become two races or genetically different ethnic groups.

In 384 CE Mormon repeated Nephi's prophecy about the future remnants of the Lehite civilization becoming "dark" (1 Nephi 12:23). Mormon recognized that because of their unbelief and idolatry the survivors would become "a dark, a filthy, and a loathsome people" (Mormon 5:15). Mormon lived long enough to observe the onset of the moral eclipse. Within Mormon's own lifetime the Lamanites were eating and forcing their prisoners to eat human flesh (Moroni 9:8). The remnant Nephites were equally degenerate (Moroni 9:9). Mormon's adjective "dark" described the depravity of *all* of Lehi's remnants, not their skin color, evidencing that Nephite authors sometimes used the term dark metaphorically. Mormon echoed Alma's prophecy that the Nephites would perish because of their "works of darkness" (Alma 45:11–12).

It seems that the Maya, Inca, Mixtec, and Aztec assimilated the Lehite remnants, and it is indisputable that the achievements of these cultures rival those of any ancient civilization. They have only begun to be appreciated and are barely understood. However, viewed from a prophet's perspective, Mormon's doomsday vision of Lehi's descendants after their existential war and after being dispersed found fulfillment in the moral depravity of some of these Mesoamerican cultures. The Aztecs, for example, not only worshipped idols but offered human sacrifice.²³⁰ Notably, their warriors continued to paint their bodies black.²³¹

Finally, what about the Nephites? Did they also use charcoal, soot or body paint? Surely their use of disguise did not culminate in the shadowy streets of Jerusalem where Nephi donned Laban's clothing, impersonated him, and cleverly conned his servant into retrieving the brass plates from Laban's treasury.

Like many bow hunters today, Nephi may well have camouflaged himself, including blackening his arms and face, when he went up into the mountains to slay wild beasts for his starving family, armed only with his sling, stones, wooden bow, and one arrow (1 Nephi 16:18–31). Other Nephite bow hunters may have followed suit (see Enos 1:3).

Nephites also may have blackened themselves when spying on Lamanite armies (Mosiah 10:7, Alma 2:21, 43:23, 28, 30, and 56:22).

Body paint also would have helped conceal Nephites when they attacked Lamanites by night (3 Nephi 4:21). On New Year's Eve of 65 BCE, Teancum, an audacious Nephite warrior, perhaps wearing dark clothing and with darkened skin, stole into the Lamanite army's camp without being detected, entered the tent of Amalickiah, their king, and put a javelin into his heart (Alma 51:33–35). When the Lamanites awoke, they "were affrighted" and "abandoned" their battle plan. They hastily retreated to their city where they "sought protection in their fortifications" and appointed Amalickiah's brother Ammoron to be their king (Alma 52:1–3).²³² Not long after that Teancum surreptitiously breached another Lamanite stronghold, again by night and likely camouflaged, and killed the new king (Alma 62:36).

Endnotes

- 1 The treasures also included the garments, armor and breastplate of Laban, a Jewish nobleman, Laban's sword of "exceedingly fine" workmanship with a hilt of "pure gold" and a blade of "the most precious steel," and Lehi's brass compass of curious workmanship that was known as the Liahona that led Lehi and his followers in the wilderness and upon the seas (2 Nephi 5:7–12).
- 2 Val Larsen has made a compelling case for a legitimate, scripture-based faith crisis in Lehi's family — a theological rift between Laman and Lemuel who may have been followers of King Josiah, a Deuteronomist, vs. the Messianic theology of Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob that affirmed the existence of Christ. Val Larsen, "Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 217–65, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni/>.
- 3 Italics are used for emphasis in quotes from canonized scriptures.
- 4 Following Lehi's footsteps, Nephi taught that the Holy One of Israel "suffereth the pains of ... *every living creature*, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam" (2 Nephi 9:21). Jacob preached that "one being is as precious in [God's] sight as the other" (Jacob 2:21) and condemned prejudice that was based on physical appearance (Jacob 3:9). Benjamin, one of the book's most

influential kings, refused to permit his people to “make slaves one of another” (Mosiah 2:13). Benjamin’s son, King Mosiah, created a government that would ensure that “every man” was entitled to enjoy his rights and privileges (Mosiah 29:32). Alma, a pivotal prophet in Book of Mormon history, commanded, “Ye shall not esteem one flesh above another” (Mosiah 23:7). Alma’s son preached that angels declare glad tidings of great joy among *all* people (Alma 13:24), warned his people against “supposing that ye are better one than another” (Alma 5:54), condemned the “inequality of man” (Alma 28:13), and declared that “the Lord doth grant unto *all* nations, of their own nation and tongue, to preach his word” (Alma 29:8). Ammon, the book’s most memorable missionary, proclaimed that God “is mindful of *every* people,” and that his “bowels of mercy are over *all* the earth” (Alma 26:37). Mormon taught that “*all* children are alike unto me ... for I know that God is not a *partial* God” (Moroni 8:17–18). Moroni quotes the Lord as saying to the Brother of Jared, “Yea, even *all* men were created in the beginning after mine own image” (Ether 3:15).

- 5 Patrick Mason recalls teaching a young couple who were enthused about his church and his message until they encountered the skin of blackness in 2 Nephi 5:20–22. Then, Mason says, “the wheels came off.” To their reaction and questions, he had no answer. He could “see it in their eyes — the fire was gone, extinguished by doubts about whether true prophets called by God would really write words or establish policies that discriminated against people based on the color of their skin.” Patrick Q. Mason, *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 99–101. Mason writes:

I gave them the standard-issue illustrated *Book of Mormon Stories*, the same one that I had grown up with. They loved it — that is, until they got to the part where Lehi dies and the Lamanites are cursed for refusing to follow Nephi. The book graphically illustrates the Lamanites’ “skin of blackness” (which in the pictures looks more reddish-brownish) and general state of being “loathsome” (2 Nephi 5: 21–22)

The matter was laid bare by a series of innocent but perceptive questions Does God love white people more than black people? No. Does God want everyone to follow the gospel and receive all the ordinances of the church? Yes.

Does God lead his church through prophets? Yes. Then why did God either inspire prophets to create a policy, or at the very least allow prophets to perpetuate a policy, that barred blacks from full participation in the church? And even if the policy had originated in something other than direct revelation, why didn't God intervene until 1978 — almost a quarter century after the Montgomery Bus Boycott? Shouldn't prophets be a step ahead, not a step behind?

- 6 In the first edition of the Book of Mormon, the words “white and delightful” appeared in 2 Nephi 30:6, a prophecy regarding the future condition of the Lamanites when they would be restored to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith personally changed “white” to “pure” in the 1840 edition. John A. Tvedtnes, “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003), 194.
- 7 See W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). The policy began with Brigham Young but hardened over time and became fully implemented in 1908. “Race and the Priesthood,” Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (2013), <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood>. “As he explained the restriction, Brigham echoed a widespread but mistaken idea that God had cursed people of black African descent. Yet he also stated that at some future time, black Saints would ‘have all the privileges and more’ enjoyed by other Church members.” *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days, Volume 2: No Unhallowed Hand, 1846–1893* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020), 182, <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/saints-v2/part-2/12-their-faces-are-zionward>.
- 8 Jared Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (Sept. 2014): 429, 432.
- 9 Eugene England, “Becoming a World Religion: Blacks, the Poor — All of Us,” *Sunstone* 21, no. 2 (June–July 1998) 49–60, <http://eugeneengland.org/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/1998>.
- 10 Early Latter-day Saint converts were influenced by Protestant misconceptions regarding descendants of Ham when they misinterpreted the statement in Joseph Smith’s Book of Abraham that Pharaoh was “a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by

birth” (Abraham 1:21). The Book of Abraham, which was inspired by Joseph Smith’s study of ancient Egyptian papyri, does not even mention Cain, and according to Egyptian scholar John Gee, a “close reading of the text ... does not sustain claims of racism;” the book “does not discuss race and curses no one with slavery;” and racial interpretations “were not originally applied to the Book of Abraham.” John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2017), 162. Joseph Smith’s Book of Moses arose through his effort to make inspired corrections to the Hebrew scriptures. See Kent P. Jackson, “How We Got the Book of Moses,” in *By Study, and by Faith: Selections from the Religious Educator*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), <https://rsc.byu.edu/study-faith/how-we-got-book-moses>. The Book of Moses rephrases but essentially incorporates the Genesis account of a “mark” set upon Cain but does not state that the mark was a darkening of Cain’s natural complexion. Neither book was canonized until long after Joseph’s death, and no Church leaders who cited them to justify racial bias were claiming new revelation. Almost certainly the early Utah Saints were influenced by a desire to “brand” their Church as a mainstream “white church” and promote its “acceptance and respectability in America.” Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 205–10.

- 11 Terryl Givens with Brian M Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism’s Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 135. The dubious Biblical-based “folk doctrine” about the so-called “mark” of Cain as an argument for racial prejudice also found its way into the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Influential Church member Brigham H. Roberts may have been the first to espouse it in print. “Question: How did the ‘curse of Ham or curse of Cain’ become associated with Mormonism?,” *Fair Latter-day Saints*, https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Question:_How_did_the_%22curse_of_Ham%22_or_%22curse_of_Cain%22_become_associated_with_Mormonism%3F. Racial interpretations of the book did not appear in the Church until 1895, and they were officially discontinued in 1978. Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 163.

- 12 Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 289. Even Max Mueller, who alleges that the Book of Mormon reflected the racist mind-set of Joseph Smith, concedes that there is “no evidence that Joseph Smith Jr. ever cited his books of Abraham and Moses to justify black exclusion during his lifetime.” Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 151.
- 13 Givens, *The Pearl of Greatest Price*, 7.
- 14 Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 56. Reeve documents the history of the priesthood and temple restriction, as do others. See Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds., *The Mormon Church & Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 44–91.
- 15 See, e.g., the *Introduction* to the Church’s official publication of the Book of Mormon prior to the 2006 edition. In 1946, President George Albert Smith referred to the Book of Mormon as describing the “extermination of the white race in [the Americas].” George Albert Smith, *Church News*, 16 February 1946, cited in *Teachings of George Albert Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 187. Douglas Campbell calls attention to the lyrics of an early Latter-day Saint hymn composed by Charles W. Penrose, a Latter-day Saint Apostle: “Great Spirit, Listen to the Red Man’s Wail.” It promised: “Not many moons shall pass away before the *curse of darkness* from your skins shall flee.” Douglas Campbell, “‘White’ or ‘Pure’: Five Vignettes,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 130 (italics in original), <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/articles/white-of-pure-five-vignettes/>.
- 16 Doctrine and Covenants, Official Declaration–2.
- 17 “Race and the Priesthood” (italics added). The essay further states that the Church “disavows ... that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way.”
- 18 Jeffrey R. Holland, interview, *The Mormons*, Mar. 4, 2006, <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/holland.html>.
- 19 “Methodists Issue Sweeping Apology for Church’s Racism,” *Beliefnet*, 2000, <https://www.beliefnet.com/news/2000/05/methodists-issue-sweeping-apology-for-churchs-racism.aspx>. R. Albert Mohler Jr.,

- “The Heresy of Racial Superiority — Confronting the Past, and Confronting the Future,” June 23, 2015, <https://albertmohler.com/2015/06/23/the-heresy-of-racial-superiority-confronting-the-past-and-confronting-the-truth/>. “Presbyterian Church Votes to Apologize for Racism,” *World Religion News*, June 28, 2016, <https://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/christianity/presbyterian-church-votes-to-apologize-for-racism>.
- 20 Max Mueller endorses the historicist theory, referring to the Book of Mormon as a “historical phenomenon.” Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 23. But Mueller gives it a racist twist. He reasons that young Joseph Smith was caught up with the race issue, that he felt a “divine mandate to solve humanity’s race problem,” (ibid., 13) and that he used skin color in the Book of Mormon to promote his own “radical new racial hermeneutic,” which Mueller christens restorative racial universalism or *white universalism* (ibid., 27). Thomas Murphy wrote that the Book of Mormon “incorporated the American biological, physical, political, and religious milieu of the nineteenth-century” and was “posited by the author to have existed for at least 1,000 years ... in pre-Columbian America.” Thomas W. Murphy, “Laban’s Ghost: On Writing and Transgression,” *Dialogue* 30, no. 2 (1997): 114, <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/articles/labans-ghost-on-writing-and-transgression/>.
- 21 Richard L. Bushman describes the historicist theory in “The Book of Mormon and Its Critics,” *Believing History: Latter-Day Saint Essays by Richard Lyman Bushman*, ed. Reid L. Nielson and Jed Woodworth, (New York: Columbia University, 2004), 117–18. The critics’ list of presumed cultural influences include anti-masonry, republicanism, theories of origin of Indigenous Americans, and romantic nationalism, which Bushman says, “roughly resemble elements in the Book of Mormon.” Contemporary culture may affect any translation of an ancient text, but in Richard Bushman’s opinion, the historicist theories “leave too many other elements unexplained.” For a purported history of the origins of Indigenous Americans, the book contained none of the cultural markers that were familiar to New Englanders such as wigwams, corn, beans, squash, peace pipes, teepees, feathers, blankets, canoes, moccasins, burial mounds, braves, squaws, papooses, wampum, etc. See Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 97. Moreover, the Book of Mormon is not merely

sympathetic to America's native peoples, when it is compared to other contemporary theories, it grants them a favored position in both the history and future of the Americas. *Ibid.*, 99.

- 22 For example, the book condemns elitism among the Nephites, who generally saw themselves as religiously superior, and more specifically among apostate Zoramites who proclaimed themselves economically and intellectually superior (Alma 31). Mueller argues, however, that it was racist for the Nephites to omit from their records the prophecies of Samuel the Lamanite. He calls this a "significant lacuna" and uses it as a pillar for his racist thesis. Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 49. As I read the text, Mueller misses the point. The Nephites merely failed to include one event that fulfilled Samuel's prophecies — the fact that many saints arose from the dead, appeared unto many, and actively ministered unto the people at the time of Christ's resurrection. Compare Helaman 14:25 with 3 Nephi 23:9–11. After the widespread death and destruction in the Americas at the crucifixion of Jesus, the surviving Nephites and Lamanites sorely needed to remember that angelic ministry that demonstrated Christ's compassion and the role of resurrected beings. Given the respectful treatment that Nephite prophets already had given to Samuel and his chronologically precise prophecies, it is hard to argue that the omission of this event was racially motivated.
- 23 David M. Belnap, "The Inclusive Anti-Discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 195–370, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-inclusive-anti-discrimination-message-of-the-book-of-mormon/>.
- 24 Ethan Sproat, "Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 148, quoting John R. Searle, "Biological Naturalism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, ed. Max Velmans and Susan Schneider (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1572&context=jbms>. Searle recognized the risk to any hypothesis that La Rochefoucauld had identified with these clever words, "There goes another beautiful theory about to be murdered by a brutal gang of facts." Elder Neal A. Maxwell often referred to this 17th-century maxim. See Neal A. Maxwell, *For the Power is in Them* (Salt Lake City: Deseret

- Book, 1970), 25; Neal A Maxwell, *The Smallest Part* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 6.
- 25 Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), Section Five 1842–1843, loc. 4330 of 6562, Kindle.
- 26 John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, UT: Research Press, Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 17 and 129 (Bonampak); 16 (Chichen Itza). The Bonampak battle scene at page 129 shows the dangerous confusion of hand-to-hand combat. Previously, some observers interpreted the Chichen Itza boating scene on page 16 as showing subjugation of light-skinned people by a darker-skinned ethnic group after a military defeat.
- 27 See “Question: Did Dee F. Green say that there is no such thing as Book of Mormon archaeology?,” *Fair Latter-day Saints* (website), https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Question:_Did_De_F_Green_say_that_there_is_no_such_thing_as_Book_of_Mormon_archaeology%3F.
- 28 Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America*, 17.
- 29 Brant A. Gardner and Mark Alan Wright, “John L. Sorenson’s Complete Legacy: Reviewing Mormon’s Codex,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 14 (2015): 209–21, 219, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/john-l-sorensons-complete-legacy-reviewing-mormons-codex/>. Gardner and Wright question whether in Mesoamerica during Nephite times “there were peoples of fundamentally differing skin pigmentations.” This theory, they say, “makes the mistake of assuming that painted colors [in surviving murals] *necessarily* reflect skin pigmentation” (*italics added*).
- 30 “Lost Manuscript of the Book of Mormon,” Church History Topics, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/lost-manuscript-of-the-book-of-mormon>.
- 31 George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 62. Their treatise states: “Our conclusion is that [the words that Mormon quoted] were first written upon the larger plates, and that Mormon copied them direct from the original source. We also conclude that these words were part of the translation of

- the Book of Lehi which was lost through the misadventure of Martin Harris.”
- 32 Jeremy Talmage, “Black, White, and Red All Over: Skin Color in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 28 (2019), 55.
- 33 Jeremiah 38:7–9.
- 34 Jacob 3:9 (“revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skins” and “filthiness” that “came upon them because of their fathers”); and Alma 3:6 (“and the skins of the Lamanites were dark according to the mark which was set upon their fathers”).
- 35 Mosiah 17:13 (King Noah’s priests scourged Abinadi’s skin in 147 BCE); Alma 3:6 (the skins of the Lamanites were dark during battle in 87 BCE); Alma 20:29 (the skins of Ammon’s brethren were worn exceedingly because of being bound with strong cords in 90 BCE); Alma 44:18 (Lamanite skins were exposed to the sharp swords of the Nephites during a battle in 74 BCE); 3 Nephi 2:15 (converted Lamanites’ skins became white in 15 CE).
- 36 See Alma 3:4, 13, 18.
- 37 See Alma 3:6, 7, 10, 14, 15, 16.
- 38 Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2 Second Nephi through Jacob (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), “Commentary on 2 Nephi 5:21,” loc. 2882 of 21265, Kindle. For example, John Tvedtnes assumed that when the curse was first pronounced, “the mark, a change in skin color, was yet to come.” Tvedtnes, “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon,” 186. Rodney Turner states: “There can be no question but that their altered skin color was a miraculous act of God.” Rodney Turner, “The Lamanite Mark,” *Second Nephi: The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman, and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989), 138. In note 2, Turner adds: “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).”
- 39 Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” 455.

- 40 John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 550 (italics added).
- 41 Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 235.
- 42 Gardner, Second Witness, loc. 3135 of 21265, Kindle. Gardner also wrote that references to a skin of blackness “cannot be supported as a pigmentation change.” Brant Gardner, “If Lamanites were black, why didn’t anyone notice?” *FairMormon* (website), May 21, 2012, <https://www.fairmormon.org/blog/2012/05/21/if-lamanites-were-black-why-didnt-anyone-notice>.
- 43 Personal correspondence to author, April 10, 2021.
- 44 Reynolds and Sjodahl concluded that these verses were taken from Nephi’s large plates and quoted the prophecy “word-for-word.” Reynolds and Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 62.
- 45 Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 550 (emphasis added).
- 46 Grant Hardy, “What about the Book of Mormon’s focus on skin color? A perspective from Professor Grant Hardy,” *Shoulder to the Wheel*, Dec. 3, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171208123435/http://shouldertothewheel.org/what-about-the-book-of-mormons-skin-color-racism-a-perspective-from-professor-grant-hardy/>. Earlier, Hardy had written that the “Nephite racism or ethnocentrism is not really a matter of skin color, which is very rarely mentioned; instead their prejudice is most clearly manifest in their assumption of Lamanite passivity.” Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 268n14. Jared Hickman refers to 2 Nephi 5:21–24 as “patent racism” and to Nephi as “the narrator of the racial curse of his brothers.” Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” 436, 447. Later Hickman asked rhetorically how the Book of Mormon can be considered racist when, in the end, the Lamanites are no more wicked than the Nephites, emerge as the victors, and are promised that a remnant of their seed will be entrusted to build a New Jerusalem with the help of white Gentile American converts. *Ibid.*, and Jared Hickman, “The Perverse Core of Mormonism: The Book of Mormon, Genetic Secularity and Messianic Decoloniality” in *To Be Learned is Good: Essays on Faith and Scholarship in Honor of Richard Lyman Bushman*, ed. J. Spencer Fluhman, Kathleen Flake, and Jed Woodworth (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2017),

- loc. 2160, 2297–309 of 6262, Kindle. Jeremy Talmage concedes that the book is a “racialized representation.” Talmage, “Black, White, and Red All Over,” 47.
- 47 Hardy, “What about the Book of Mormon’s focus on skin color?” According to Hardy, the seemingly racist words at least serve as a “constant reminder that moral progress is possible” and “help us recognize and transcend our narrow cultural biases.” Jessica Nelson expresses hope that we can “learn from life experiences and remain open to new information” and “alter” our positions on race. Jessica M. Nelson, “Imagining a Better Future: The Context and Development of Joseph Smith’s View on Race and Slavery,” in *Know Brother Joseph: New Perspectives on Joseph Smith’s Life and Character*, ed. R. Eric Smith, Matthew C. Godfrey, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Desert Book, 2021), 112.
- 48 Hickman, “The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse,” 429.
- 49 Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, xx.
- 50 Nelson, “Imagining a Better Future,” 111.
- 51 It is based on one essay, cast as a letter to Oliver Cowdery, that was published in early 1836 in the Church’s Kirtland newspaper, *The Messenger and Advocate*, over the name of Joseph Smith. “Letter to Oliver Cowdery, circa 9 April 1836,” 289, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-oliver-cowdery-circa-9-april-1836/1>. It is unlikely that Joseph wrote the essay, although it did appear with his knowledge. Richard Bushman is “not aware of anything on any subject that appeared in the papers over his name that Joseph wrote himself. His practice was to let others write for him.” Richard Bushman, personal correspondence to author. Viewed in its historical context and in comparison to the racial slander in the Northern Press at the time (not to mention Southern pro-slavery tracts), the essay is far from an “anti-abolitionist diatribe,” as one naysayer described it. See Max Perry Mueller, “History Lessons: Race and the LDS Church,” *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 1 (January 2015): 153, and Eugene H. Berwanger, “Negrophobia in Northern Proslavery and Antislavery Thought,” *Phylon* 33, no. 3 (1972): 266–75.
- 52 See the book review by W. Paul Reeve “Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill, NC University

- of North Carolina Press, 2017),” *Church History* 87 (2018): 918–20, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/church-history/article/abs/race-and-the-making-of-the-mormon-people-by-max-perry-mueller-chapel-hill-university-of-north-carolina-press-2017-xii-352-pp-17-illus-notes-bibl-index-3250-paper/0A2EEC53D731DFC3E5D87148B4A94156>.
- 53 Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 36.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 22 (italics added). He does not even mention Sorenson’s work in his bibliography.
- 56 In 1834, an early critic argued that the book had a racial slant based on the known prejudices of a portion of the community.” Talmage, “Black, White, and Red All Over,” 58.
- 57 Ronald W. Walker, “‘Seeking the ‘Remnant’: The Native American During the Joseph Smith Period,” *Journal of Mormon History* 19, no. 1 (1993): 5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23286334>.
- 58 He foresaw a “transformation” of Indigenous Americans. Talmage, “Black, White, and Red All Over,” 60n59. He viewed them a chosen people entitled to the blessings of Israel. (Smith, *Teachings*, Section One, “1830–1834,” loc. 185 of 6562, Kindle.) Joseph foresaw an opportunity to befriend, teach, and collaborate with them. In 1830, he sent Oliver Cowdery and others to preach the gospel and cause a church to be established among them (Doctrine and Covenants 28:8). The elders preached the noble legacy and potential of America’s First Nations to the Seneca, Wyandot, Shawnee, and finally the Delaware. *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Volume 1: The Standard of Truth: 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 105 (Wyandot), 115–17 (Delaware); Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 58 (Shawnee and Seneca). In Nauvoo, Joseph expanded this ministry. Delegations of several Indigenous Nations visited the Prophet in August 1841. Led by the celebrated Chief Keokuk, one hundred chiefs, warriors, and family members ferried the Mississippi and Joseph earnestly spoke to them. “History, 1838–1856, volume C-1 Addenda,” 10, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-addenda/10>. Joseph Smith’s Presidential platform also addressed the rights of Indigenous Americans. It

called for westward expansion to occur but with their consent, and it accused land-grabbing opportunists of claiming unsettled lands and then bribing judges to deny the rights of the "humble, honest man, red, black, or white." "General Smith's Views of the Powers and Policy of the Government of the United States, circa 26 January–7 February 1844," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/general-smiths-views-of-the-powers-and-policy-of-the-government-of-the-united-states-circa-26-january-7-february-1844/1>.

- 59 Sproat, "Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon," 142.
- 60 The Book of Mormon's few references to Lamanite apparel describe loincloths as their quotidian attire. One Nephite prophet says that Lamanites wore a "short skin girdle about their loins" when they were "wandering about in the wilderness" (Enos 1:20). Others describe opposing warriors with "a leathern girdle" (Mosiah 10:8), with "skin girded about them" (Alma 3:5), with "skins girded about their loins" (Alma 43:20), and with "garments of skin" (Alma 49:6–7). Nothing in the text suggests that the Lamanites wore loincloths in priestly, authoritative, or ceremonial roles or that their leather girdles had mystical or religious significance. Furthermore, when the book describes marauding guerilla warriors who wore lambskins, it gives no indication that their loincloths had ritual significance or that it was their loincloths, rather than their skins, that were dyed (3 Nephi 4:7). The printer's manuscript states clearly that these thieves, known as Gadianton robbers, dyed their bodies in blood: "they were girded about after the manner of robbers & they had a lamb skin about their loins & they were dyed in blood & their heads were shorn." "Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, circa August 1829–circa January 1830," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 369, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/printers-manuscript-of-the-book-of-mormon-circa-august-1829-circa-january-1830/373>. The theory also fails to explain why a dark loincloth would cause the wearers to "not be enticing" to the Nephites (see 2 Nephi 5:21). Moreover, archaeological support is lacking. Mesoamerican artifacts show human skins painted black, not loincloths.
- 61 Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 2* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1993), 244. (Page numbers differ between the printed

- documents cited herein and the electronic versions, see <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/do/search/?q=Nibley%20semester%20&start=0&context=12244982>.)
- 62 Ibid., 247–48.
- 63 Ibid., 249 (italics added).
- 64 In his 1986 Brigham Young University lectures, Nibley said that Cain “cut himself off” from the Lord; that his name means the “wandering blacksmith” in Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic; and that anciently the blacksmith blackened his face “professionally” because he worked at the forge. “This is a mark of his profession, the blackened face.” Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Pearl of Great Price* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 248–49 (italics added.) In his 1988–90 Book of Mormon lectures, Nibley extended his thinking to the Lamanites who cut themselves off from the Lord and put the marks on themselves. Gardner points to the research of E. A. Speiser, an archaeologist and Hebrew scripture scholar, who suggests that Cain’s mark was like other “protective marks” that “were signs on the forehead.” Gardner, *Second Witness*, loc. 3111 of 21265, Kindle.
- 65 Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 84–85.
- 66 John W. Welch, “Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon,” in *Hugh Nibley Observed* (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2021), 442.
- 67 Nibley, *Approach*, 435–42.
- 68 “Book of Mormon Geography,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (website), <https://www.lds.org/manual/gospel-topics/book-of-mormon-geography>.
- 69 Helpful works on this issue include the following: Matthew Roper, “John Bernhisel’s Gift to a Prophet: Incidents of Travel in Central America and the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 16 (2015): 207–53, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/john-bernhisels-gift-to-a-prophet-incidents-of-travel-in-central-america-and-the-book-of-mormon/>; Neal Rappleye, “‘War of Words and Tumult of Opinions’: The Battle for Joseph Smith’s Words in Book of Mormon Geography,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 11 (2014): 37–95, <https://>

- journal.interpreterfoundation.org/war-of-words-and-tumult-of-opinions-the-battle-for-joseph-smiths-words-in-book-of-mormon-geography/; Brant A. Gardner, "Examining the Heartland Hypothesis as Geography," The Interpreter Foundation (blog), Aug 22, 2015, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/blog-examining-the-heartland-hypothesis-as-geography/>; and other articles listed at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/?s=heartland&submit=Search>.
- 70 Kirk Magelby, "Hugh Nibley and Book of Mormon Geography," Book of Mormon Archaeological Forum, http://www.bmaf.org/articles/hugh_nibley_geography__magleby, (Magelby, *Hugh Nibley and Book of Mormon Geography*). Joseph, without knowledge of the dominance of the Maya in Mesoamerica or of the difference between their vast influence compared to the almost undetectable Lehite civilization, once commented that it was gratifying that these early explorers had found "the remains and ruins of those mighty people." Smith, Teachings, loc. 4311–321 of 6562, Kindle.
- 71 Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 6 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 442 (italics in original).
- 72 Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, xvi.
- 73 Lynn V. Foster, *The Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17–49. See Tom Clynes, "Exclusive: Laser Scans Reveal Maya 'Megalopolis' Below Guatemalan Jungle," *National Geographic*, Feb. 1, 2018, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2018/02/maya-laser-lidar-guatemala-pacunam/>.
- 74 Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 250. DNA techniques show "that there were at least 11 major lineages [or biological lines in the Americas], possibly more." Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America*, 16. According to Sorenson, "only a fraction of the various contemporary peoples in Mesoamerica have been tested and analyzed for mtDNA or Y-chromosome DNA." Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 250. According to Mark Wright, "there were scores of different cultures that inhabited Mesoamerica anciently, co-existing in space and time." Mark Alan Wright, "Axes Mundi: Ritual Complexes in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 46 (2021), 233–48, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/>

- axes-mundi-ritual-complexes-in-mesoamerica-and-the-book-of-mormon-2/. Sorenson was the first to conclude “that there were substantial populations in the ‘promised land’ throughout the period of the Nephite record, and probably the Jaredite era also.” John L Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1992): 34, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=jbms/>
- 75 Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 253.
- 76 Richard D. Hansen, personal correspondence to author, January 9, 2019.
- 77 David Webster, “The Not So Peaceful Civilization: a Review of Maya War,” *Journal of World Prehistory* 14, no. 1 (2000): 65–119, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25801154?seq=1> (the Maya were “warlike to their deepest Preclassic roots”). See James M. Ambrosino, Traci Arden, and Travis W. Stanton, “The History of Warfare at Yaxuna,” in *Ancient Mesoamerican Warfare*, ed. M. Katherine Brown and Travis W. Stanton (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2003), 109.
- 78 Personal conversation with Richard D. Hansen, February 12, 2019.
- 79 Clynes, Laser Scans.
- 80 John Sorenson estimates that more than one-third of the Book of Mormon text involves warfare, including reports of 100 military actions or campaigns. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 381.
- 81 Terryl L. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 116–18. The book, he continues, does not claim that the Lamanites and Nephites were alone, “though a 1981 introduction to the LDS version of the Book of Mormon implied as much.” Elsewhere, Terryl and Fiona Givens state: “The Book of Mormon itself permits the reasonable inference that Lehi’s colony represented one of any number of migrations by sea and by land bridge. His descendants, according to readings of the text now prevalent, likely occupied a relatively small region and intermingled and intermarried with other people and cultures over succeeding generations.” Terryl L. Givens and Fiona Givens, *Crucible of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 9.

Joseph Spencer notes that many now believe that the Book of Mormon narrates the history of only “a relatively

- small proportion of indigenous Americans” He points to the relatively recent change to the introduction to official editions that now describe Lehi’s descendants as “among the ancestors” of the American Indians. Joseph M. Spencer, “Isaiah 52 in the Book of Mormon: Notes on Isaiah’s Reception History,” *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 6, no. 2 (2016): 197n29, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/3287/>.
- 82 In Sub-Saharan Africa neighboring groups that have been in contact for centuries often display very different mannerisms and practices. Email from Spencer L. James, January 30, 2021.
- 83 Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 418. Sorenson cites the example in 74 BCE of Nephite warriors who went to battle wearing “thick clothing” (Alma 43:19), a primitive form of body armor, and how two years later the Lamanites returned having also “prepared themselves” with “very thick garments to cover their nakedness” (Alma 49:6).
- 84 Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 3. See also Daniel C. Peterson, “A Brief Defense of Apologetics,” in *Perspectives on Mormon Theology: Apologetics*, ed. Blair G. Van Dyke and Lloyd Isao Ericson (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2017), 57–60.
- 85 Sylvanus G. Morley and George W. Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 4th ed. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1983), 233. Mayanists have not yet deciphered the meaning of various patterns. Stephen D. Houston, David Stuart, and Karl Taube, *The Memory of Bones: Body, Being, and Experience among the Classic Maya* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2006), loc. 648 of 8579, Kindle.
- 86 Morley and Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 237.
- 87 Michael D. Coe and Stephen Houston, *The Maya*, 9th ed. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), loc. 335 of 483, Kindle.
- 88 Foster, *The Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World*, 338.
- 89 Houston, Stuart, and Taube, *The Memory of Bones*, loc. 490 of 8579, Kindle. A Maya who is applying body paint with a brush or quill is shown in the detail of a carved jar photographed by Justin Kerr and shown as Figure 1.15. *Ibid.*, loc. 702 of 8579, Kindle. Tattooing and decorative scarification began only after wedlock. Morley and Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 233; Coe and Houston, *The Maya*, 335.

- 90 Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, *African Ceremonies* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 15–16.
- 91 Houston, Stuart, and Taube, *The Memory of Bones*, loc. 465 of 8579, Kindle. The book’s authors acknowledge John Robertson who supplied a version of his exhaustive scanned database of Mayan dictionaries from the Gates Collection at Brigham Young University. *Ibid.*, 317.
- 92 Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 381. Morley’s treatise states that the principal garment of the men was the loincloth, called *ex* in Mayan. “It was a band of cotton cloth, five fingers wide and long enough to be wound around the waist several times and passed between the legs.” The men also wore “the *mastil* ... between the legs, which was a large strip of woven *manta*, which, tying it on the abdomen and giving it a turn below, covered their private parts.” Morley and Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 235.
- 93 At a symposium of the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, researchers reported that Maya use of “black body paint makes sense given the association of this color with warfare.” Gabrielle Vail and Christine Hernandez, “Human Sacrifice in the Late Postclassic Maya Iconography and Texts,” in *New Perspectives on Human Sacrifice and Ritual Body Treatments in Ancient Maya Society*, ed. Vera Tiesler and Andrea Cucina (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2007), 156, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226693438_Human_Sacrifice_in_Late_Postclassic_Maya_Iconography_and_Texts. With respect to pre-war ceremonies, see Jonathan B. Pagliaro, James F. Garber, and Travis W. Stanton, “Evaluating the Archaeological Signatures of Maya Ritual and Conflict,” in *Ancient Mesoamerican Warfare*, 75–89. The authors also discuss reverential and desecratory termination rituals after a military conquest.
- 94 A reproduction of the mural is shown at <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/maya/Uaxactun-mural.jpg>.
- 95 Coe and Houston, *The Maya*, Illustration VI, 50. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University.
- 96 Houston, Stuart, and Taube, *The Memory of Bones*, loc. 641–53 of 8579, Kindle.
- 97 In the Book of Mormon context and as shown in this image the word “fair” correlates with the definition “Pleasing to the eye; handsome

- or beautiful in general.” *Webster’s Dictionary of the American Language* (1828), s.v. “fair,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/fair>. Likewise, a meaning given for “white” is “Having the color of purity; pure; clean; free from spot; as white robed innocence.” *Ibid.*, s.v. “white,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/white>. Such meanings may explain the occasional conjunction of “fair” with “white” in Nephi’s writings. See 1 Nephi 11:13, 1 Nephi 13:15, and 2 Nephi 5:21.
- 98 The author’s photograph is used with permission of the Denver Museum of Nature & Science.
- 99 Foster, *The Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World*, 147 (italics added). The Bonampak Maya murals (circa 790 CE) in what is now Chiapas, Mexico, vividly depict close combat by soldiers with different skin colors who are wearing only loincloths.
- 100 These include the vases in Justin Kerr’s collection of roll out photographs as image K2803 (depicting a Maya ball game), image K1184 (depicting the birth of a supernatural who was nicknamed “Baby Jaguar”), image K791 (depicting two painted dancers), and image K8469 (depicting the keeper of the books kneeling before a ruler on a portable throne). These can be viewed at <http://www.mayavase.com/>.
- 101 “Politics and History on a Maya Vase,” Khan Academy, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-americas/early-cultures/maya/a/politics-and-history-on-a-maya-vase>.
- 102 The vase can be viewed as image K2784 at <http://www.mayavase.com/>.
- 103 “Available contexts,” they say, “are too vague to pinpoint meaning.” Houston, Stuart, and Taube, *The Memory of Bones*, loc. 641–53 of 8579, Kindle.
- 104 *Ibid.*, 674 of 8579. Murals at Palenque — that are yet to be interpreted — show exposed human skins painted red and the skins of the gods painted blue. Coe and Houston, *The Maya*, 216.
- 105 Houston, Stuart, and Taube, *The Memory of Bones*, loc. 641–51 of 8579, Kindle; and Figure 1.14. The vase can be viewed as image K1373 at <http://www.mayavase.com/>.
- 106 Among the Maya, jaguars were associated with the god of the underworld and were a symbol of power. Some jaguars were

- all black, and their paws and pelts were highly prized. Coe and Houston, *The Maya*, 26, 148, and Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 32.
- 107 Personal conversation with Richard D. Hansen, Feb. 12, 2019.
- 108 Lamanite plundering from fellow Lamanites is described in Alma 17:26–27 and Alma 18:7.
- 109 2 Nephi 5 (when Nephi's brothers sought to take away his life, a skin of blackness came upon them); Alma 3:4 (when the Amlicites went to war, they marked their foreheads red). Except for references to the Red Sea, the color red is mentioned only in Alma 3:4 and 13. The word “blackness” is mentioned only twice: once to describe the Lamanites in 2 Nephi 5:21 and once in reference to the heavens being clothed in blackness (2 Nephi 7:3). The word “black” also is mentioned only twice, once to describe hair color (3 Nephi 12:36), and again in the statement that the Lord invites all to come unto him (2 Nephi 26:33).
- 110 Nibley, *Approach*, 441. Gold and silver are mentioned only as metals. The Bible also mentions colors sparingly. When testing the authenticity of an ancient text, Nibley, speaking figuratively, suggested that scholars focus on whether the “local color” is correct. See Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, 119. Joseph Smith did not randomly colorize pre-Columbian literature with black and red warpaint.
- 111 Stephen Houston et al., *Veiled Brightness: A History of Ancient Maya Color* (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2009), 69.
- 112 Vail and Hernandez, *Human Sacrifice*, 156.
- 113 Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 100. A reviewer of this article, with expertise in the Nahuatl language, pointed out that *telpoch-tli* means “youth” and *calli* means “house.” The same reviewer also pointed out that there are alternate Nahuatl spellings for “someone who is brave or valiant” — *tiahcauh*, *tiacauh*, *tiyacauh* — and that the suffix *tin* indicates plurality.
- 114 *Ibid.*, 111.
- 115 *Ibid.*, 109–10.
- 116 The Mixtec, known for their artistic abilities, occupied an area at the western edge of Mesoamerica, now part of the state of Oaxaca. Aguilar-Moreno, *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*, 18.

- 117 The portion of this manuscript that shows the Tree of Apoala can be viewed at https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=561007001&objectid=3179214.
- 118 Annabeth Headrick, "Butterfly Wars at Teotihuacan," in *Ancient Mesoamerican Warfare*, 165–67.
- 119 Houston, *Veiled Brightness*, 62–63. Maya paint technology was complex. To produce long-lasting colors, the Maya drew from mineral pigments, lakes (a kind of synthetic pigment), and organic compounds. *Ibid.*, 61–62.
- 120 According to one 16th-century source from Central Mexico, some black body paint was created by burning insects and scorpions. See "Clothing: Skirt, Huipil," Body Paint, Mesolore (website), <http://www.mesolore.org/tutorials/learn/24/Clothing-Skirt-Huipil/87/Body-Paint>.
- 121 Houston, Stuart, and Taube, *The Memory of Bones*, loc. 655–56 of 8579, Kindle.
- 122 J.E. Brauch, "Underutilized Fruits and Vegetables as Potential Novel Pigment Sources," *Handbook on Natural Pigments in Food and Beverages*, ed. Reinhold Carle and Ralf M. Schweiggert (Cambridge, MA: Woodhead, 2016), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/agricultural-and-biological-sciences/genipa-americana>.
- 123 *Ibid.*
- 124 Houston, Stuart, and Taube, *The Memory of Bones*, loc. 484–93 of 8579, Kindle.
- 125 They distinguished themselves, however, by using red only upon their foreheads (Alma 3:4). In Mesoamerica, the reddish pigment used anciently was probably an organic material like annatto. *Ibid.*, loc. 647–56, Kindle. It produces hues that are closer to orange than red. Houston, *Veiled Brightness*, 60.
- 126 Laman and Lemuel may have been followers of Josiah and the Deuteronomists who "mandated that sacrifices be made only in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 12:13–14)." Larsen, "Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni."
- 127 Within days after leaving Jerusalem, Lehi's sons returned to bargain for the brass plates. When Laban, their owner, cheated and threatened them, Laman and Lemuel beat Nephi with a wooden

rod. An angel intervened, and Nephi succeeded in obtaining the plates (1 Nephi 3–4). During their second return to persuade Ishmael to join them, Laman and Lemuel bound Nephi with cords, intending to leave him in the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts, but the Lord answered Nephi’s prayers and the “bands were loosed” (1 Nephi 7:16–18). After Ishmael died in the wilderness, Laman urged Lemuel and Ishmael’s sons to slay both Lehi and Nephi, but “the voice of the Lord chastened” the conspirators “and they did turn away their anger” (1 Nephi 16:34–39). Next, when Nephi tried to build a ship they attempted to throw him from a cliff and drown him in the depths of the sea, but the power of God shook them into submission (1 Nephi 17:48–55). Also, during the transoceanic voyage, Laman and Lemuel mutinied, bound Nephi with cords, and nearly caused the entire family to be drowned in the sea during a fierce storm, but they finally recognized that the “judgments of God were upon them” and they were about to be swallowed up in the depths of the sea,” so they repented and released Nephi (1 Nephi 18:11–15).

- 128 Mormon’s more comprehensive history states that according to the original words of the prophecy, “a mark” would be “set upon” a dissenter who “minglenth his seed” with the Lamanites (Alma 3:15) and upon enemies: “him that fighteth against” Nephi and his seed (Alma 3:16). In each case, “a mark” was described as being “set upon” the person, but the repeated use of the words “a mark” suggests that all marks may not have been the same. For example, the Amlicites “had marked themselves with red in their foreheads after the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4).
- 129 Jared T. Parker, “Cutting Covenants,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, The 38th Annual BYU Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), <https://rsc.byu.edu/gospel-jesus-christ-old-testament/cutting-covenants>.
- 130 See 2 Nephi 9:6 (after the fall, Adam and Eve were “cut off from the presence of the Lord”) and Genesis 4:16 (Cain “went out from the presence of the Lord”). The Lord described those who risked being cut off when he spoke to the surviving Nephites and Lamanites in 34 CE. He promised that in that future day when the Lord performed His “great and marvelous work,” unbelievers, adversaries, witchcrafts, graven images, lyings, deceivings,

- envyings, strifes, priestcrafts, whoredoms, and whosever will not repent" would be cut off (3 Nephi 21:9–20).
- 131 Mormon made that clear (Alma 50:20). The Nephite prophet Alma cautioned his sons with these same words. See Alma 36:30 and 37:13 (speaking to Helaman) and Alma 38:1 (speaking to Shiblon). To Corianton, he said that the process applied to "all mankind" (Alma 42:14). The Book of Mormon teaches that Adam and Eve were the first to be "cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of the Lord" (Alma 42:6). A Nephite priest and king known as Benjamin described how one can be cut off (Mosiah 2:37–39). See also Doctrine and Covenants 121:13–19. Yet, God's "charity endures forever," even for those who "deny" him, "if they will repent and come unto him." Jeffrey R. Holland, "Prophets in the Land Again," *Ensign* (November 2006), 104, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2006/11/prophets-in-the-land-again.html>. Through repentance and the atonement, all can again come unto Christ, who is "merciful" and whose "arm is lengthened out all the day long" (2 Nephi 28:32).
- 132 See also Helaman 7:28 and 15:17. Nephi foresaw that after the tragic end of his descendants, Gentiles would come to the Americas, but they could not claim to be chosen, nor claim the land to be exclusively their own, neither by right or inheritance. They would be trodden down "as salt that hath lost its savor" if they rejected the fulness of Lord's gospel (3 Nephi 16:10–15). For the "earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof," reserved for those who have "clean hands and a pure heart (Psalms 24:1–4). Thus, although the Book of Mormon speaks of "precious," "promised," and "chosen" lands (e.g., 1 Ne. 17:38; 2 Nephi 9:2; Ether 13:2), Rosalynde Welch concludes that it does not endorse the idea of a chosen people. "If there is any group to whom it seems there is some kind of deep connection to and right to the land, it is the ... indigenous native peoples of the Americas," which include remnants of Lehi's seed, primarily through the Lamanites. Rosalynde Welch and James E. Faulconer, "Briefly Ether with Rosalynde Welch and James E. Faulconer," MIPodcast #121, Nov. 6, 2020, <https://mi.byu.edu/mip-bti-welch/>.
- 133 The lack of punctuation and versification for our current 2 Nephi 5:21 is evident on page 57 of the printer's manuscript, where it occurs at the bottom of the page. "Printer's Manuscript

of the Book of Mormon, circa August 1829–circa January 1830,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 57, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/printers-manuscript-of-the-book-of-mormon-circa-august-1829-circa-january-1830/61>. The typesetter for the 1830 edition corrected spelling and added capitalization, punctuation, verses, and initial paragraphs. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), xlv. He did a remarkable job, working eleven-hour days, six days a week, and making corrections on the fly as he set type by hand. For the 1879 edition, Orson Pratt created shorter chapters and numbered verses, but did not change the punctuation of these clauses. Campbell, “‘White’ or ‘Pure’: Five Vignettes,” 121. Punctuation, paragraphs, and the division into verses may have been influenced by early North American insensitivity to the racial overtones of not distinguishing the skin of blackness from the curse.

- 134 Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, 90. Confusion also can arise from Mormon’s synopsis of the Nephite battle against Lamanites and Amlicites. He distinguished the curse from the mark in Alma 3:7 and Alma 3:14 by using the words in separate clauses, inferring that they are not the same, but in verse 6 of that same chapter he referred to “the mark as a curse upon Laman and Lemuel because of their rebellion” (Alma 3:6). Alma, however, was the actual eyewitness and original author of this war-time account. Alma’s own words in speeches that he delivered shortly after that battle unequivocally decoupled the curse and the mark. He repeated three times that transgressing God’s commandments fulfilled the curse by cutting one off from God’s presence (Alma 9:13–14). Conflating the curse and the mark in a few instances may be an imperfection in Mormon’s writings, a risk that his son acknowledged before finishing the record (see Mormon 8:12).
- 135 Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarah*, (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 13.
- 136 Noel B. Reynolds, “The Goodness of God and His Children as a Fundamental Theological Concept in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 46 (2021): 131–56, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/>

the-goodness-of-god-and-his-children-as-a-fundamental-theological-concept-in-the-book-of-mormon/.

- 137 John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," *Ensign* (February 1972), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/1972/02/chiasmus-in-the-book-of-mormon>; Noel B. Reynolds, "Chiastic Structuring of Large Texts: Second Nephi as a Case Study," in "To Seek the Law of the Lord": *Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 333–50, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/chiastic-structuring-of-large-texts-second-nephi-as-a-case-study/>.
- 138 For example, when Laman and Lemuel tied Nephi up and left him to die in the wilderness, it was the Lord who loosened the bands from his hands and feet (1 Nephi 7:18). According to Nephi, the Lord blessed Lehi's family to be able to live on raw meat in wilderness (17:2). He said that the Lord promised to "carry" Lehi's people across the sea (17:8). When Nephi's brothers bound him with ropes during their stormy ocean voyage, "nothing save it were the power of God, which threatened them with destruction" could cause them to loosen him (18:10–22). These words were meant to inspire his family, however, his words about some alledged effects of the curse should not be taken literally. For example, a curse cannot reasonably be construed to cause idleness, mischief, subtlety, and hunting for beasts of prey. See 2 Nephi 5:24. At times Nephi recognized natural causes and the role of human initiative and agency. The Lord's promise to carry the Lehites across the sea was fulfilled in the form of ore, timber, stones that create fire, skins of beasts, bellows, tools, labor, supplies, and a boat that, with someone to steer and the aid of the compass-like Liahona, was driven by the wind (1 Nephi 17–18).
- 139 Examples of Nephi's family-focus are numerous. He repeatedly stated that he was writing for "my children" and "my people." Originally, he vaguely perceived that there was another "wise purpose" (1 Nephi 9:5), and he eventually learned in a vision that the writings of his successors concerning the ministry of the Lamb would go to other people (1 Nephi 13:35). But until almost the end of his writings on the small plates, Nephi's children remained his target audience — their salvation, his primary concern (see 2 Nephi 25:26). Only at the end of his small plates did he expand his audience to include the Jews and all the "ends of the earth" (see

- 2 Nephi 33:10). In contrast, Mormon knew that his abridgement was destined for the Lamanites, Jews, Gentiles, and indeed “all nations.” See the title page.
- 140 Although history is usually one of the “spoils of war,” the “reverse is true of the Book of Mormon. The Lamanites vanquished the Nephites and survived; yet by virtue of a record that went into the earth with them, the Nephite’s version of history is the one we now read.” Richard L. Bushman, “The Lamanite View of Book of Mormon History,” in *Believing History: Latter-Day Saint Essays by Richard Lyman Bushman*, ed. Reid L. Nielson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University, 2004), 79.
- 141 John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist: A Contribution to Mormon Philosophy* (Salt Lake City: The General Board Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Associations, 1908), 35, https://books.google.com/books?id=un9559MrJAUC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.
- 142 James E. Talmage, *Jesus The Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 149 (italics added).
- 143 See Jacob 2:5; Helaman 4:11, 6:37–40, 7:24; 15:3–6; 3 Nephi 6:14; 4 Nephi 1:45; and Moroni 9:20.
- 144 Nina G. Jablonski, *Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 12.
- 145 Nina Jablonski reports that in the absence of a selective genetic sweep, 10,000 to 20,000 years may have been required for optimal skin color adaptation to the respective regions of the world. Jablonski, *Living Color*, 52. However, “major changes in pigmentation may have happened in as little as 100 generations (\approx 2,500 years) through selective sweeps.” Wikipedia s.v. “Human Skin Color,” last edited September 24, 2021, 19:10, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_skin_color.
- 146 Jablonski, *Living Color*, 52.
- 147 “In 1931, when there was intense discussion on the issue of organic evolution, the First Presidency of the Church . . . addressed all of the General Authorities of the Church on the matter, and concluded, ‘Our mission is to bear the message of the restored gospel to the world. Leave geology, biology, archaeology, and anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind,

- to scientific research.” William E. Evenson, “Evolution,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, vol. 1, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 478, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/EoM/id/3666> and <https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Evolution>.
- 148 In the same year that the Book of Mormon was published, “the founder of the University of Louisville’s School of Medicine ... released a polygenesis treatise in which he argued that the book of Genesis contained the origin story of only the Caucasian race.” Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 13–14. The Book of Mormon contradicts the polygenesis theory, teaching that the Holy One of Israel would suffer the pains of “every living creature, both men and women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam” (2 Nephi 9:21), who with his wife Eve, “brought forth the family of *all* the earth” (2 Nephi 2:19–20; cf. 2 Nephi 26:33).
- 149 Brant Gardner states: “The Nephites could not have survived without a wider range of marriage partners than the very small number of lineal Lehites.” Gardner, *Second Witness*, loc. 2887 of 21265, Kindle. Sorenson agrees that “the Nephites must have gained population by amalgamation of native peoples.” Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 39. However, James Faulconer cites reasons why there may have been little intermarriage with other indigenous people, at least not until after Book of Mormon times when assimilation was a matter of survival. The text never states that marriage with the natives occurred. There are only two references to “Lamanitish” people (Alma 17:26 and 19:16), which might infer inter-marriage, and there are no references to “Nephitish” people. The Lamanites were monogamous, the Nephites shunned exogamy, and neither group left a lot of descendants. Moreover, even the Lamanites continued to consider themselves in some sense, Israelite, as descendants of Lehi. James C. Faulconer, telephone conversation, June 1, 2020.
- 150 Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 2*, 244.
- 151 Jablonski, *Living Color*, 20.
- 152 Amerigo Vespucci, who like Nephi was a Mediterranean, recognized the effect of nakedness on a “farmer’s tan.” He encountered dark natives on the New World shores and said, “I believe that, if they were properly clothed, they would be white

- like ourselves.” Amerigo Vespucci, *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci*, trans., Clements R. Markham (London: Hakluyt Society, 1894), 6, <https://archive.org/details/lettersofamerigo00vesprich/page/6/mode/2up>. See Sorenson, *Ancient Setting*), 87–90.
- 153 See D. Todd Christofferson, “Free Forever, to Act for Themselves,” *Ensign*, (November 2014):16.
- 154 Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century” (2018 *Annual Report of the Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*), 17.
- 155 Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, *The Christ Who Heals: How God Restored the Truth that Saves Us* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 70. The Church’s second Article of Faith declares that “men are to be punished for their own sins.” Articles of Faith, 2. Sterling McMurrin opined: “Nothing in the Mormon conception of man is more in evidence or relates more importantly to the total theological structure than the affirmation of the freedom of the will. Nothing is permitted to compromise that freedom as the essential meaning of personality, whether human or divine, and at every turn of Mormon theological discussion the fact of moral freedom and its implied moral responsibility must be met and accounted for.” Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1965), 77.
- 156 John Tvedtnes points to Old World sources, including early Christian and Islamic texts, where “black-and-white imagery” is used to typify “purity and righteousness” versus “impurity and wickedness” or “salvation and damnation.” Tvedtnes, “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon,” 195–96. Following this line of reasoning, Douglas Campbell concludes: “White-skinned Nephites and black-skinned Lamanites are metaphors for culture, not for skin color.” Campbell, “‘White’ or ‘Pure’: Five Vignettes,” 134 (italics in original). Armand Mauss reminds us that 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.” Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 128. Marvin Perkins says that the words

- “black” and “white” in the scriptures never refer to race per se but are synonymous with “wicked and righteous” and “out of the church or in the church.” Marvin Perkins, “Blacks in the Scriptures,” (lecture, FairMormon Conference, Provo, UT, August 7 and 8, 2014), <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2014/blacks-scriptures>. Brant Gardner wrote that “white” is “almost always used in the Book of Mormon in a figurative sense.” He suspected that the Maya used body paint, but he also concluded “that the association between skin and white/black is metaphoric, not intended to indicate pigmentation.” Gardner, *Second Witness*, loc. 3158–207 of 21265, Kindle.
- 157 Jablonski, *Living Color*, 116.
- 158 Tvedtnes, “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon,” 197. In the Book of Mormon, there are in fact very few references to complexion, and almost always they occur during a time of conflict or reconciliation. They include Nephi’s reference to the “skin of blackness” at the time of the rebellion after Lehi’s death; shortly thereafter, Jacob’s reference to the “darkness” of Lamanite skins; Mormon’s account of the marks and dark skins of Lamanites and the marks upon the Amlicites in 87 BCE; and in 15 CE Mormon’s statement that the Lamanites’ skins became white when they united with the Nephites. Armand Mauss admonishes readers not to “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, are not even explicitly mentioned — which is the case most of the time” Mauss, *Abraham’s Children*, 128.
- 159 Campbell, “‘White’ or ‘Pure’: Five Vignettes,” 133. One refers to hair: “thou canst not make one hair black or white” (3 Nephi 12:36), reflecting the binary choice between the hair colors of Mediterraneans — black during youth, and white in old age.
- 160 Jablonski, *Living Color*, 116.
- 161 Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman II, eds, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 97–98. In the earliest Hebrew tradition darkness was not always perceived in a negative way. Jehovah was in the dense cloud by day, as well as in the pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21). Also, the Torah tells us that as the people stood afar off, “Moses

- drew near unto the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 20:21). However, long after Nephi wrote, the Apostle John made the contrast between light and darkness a major theme of his gospel.
- 162 Diedre Nicole Green, *Jacob: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 75–76.
- 163 E.g., “secret works of darkness” (2 Nephi 10:15); “everlasting darkness and destruction” (Alma 26:15). In Lehi’s dream of the tree of life, he saw himself in “dark and dreary waste,” travelling “for the space of many hours in darkness,” praying for the Lord’s mercy, and then beholding a tree with fruit that was “white, to exceed all whiteness” and that filled his soul “with exceedingly great joy.” He also dreamed that humanity was travelling through a “great mist of darkness” and that many lost their way (1 Nephi 8). Kerry Hull reminds me that the prophet Ammon describes certain Lamanites, prior to their conversion, as being “in darkness, yea, even in the darkest abyss” (Alma 26:3); that Helaman refers to “works of darkness and abominations” (Helaman 6:28); and that the Book of Mormon pairs darkness with other human conditions, including being filthy, indolent and uncultured (1 Nephi 12:23). Personal correspondence to author, April 11, 2021.
- 164 Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 85.
- 165 Citing what he referred to as a linguistic coincidence of opposites, he said: “With the Arabs, to be white of countenance is to be blessed and to be black of countenance is to be cursed.” Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 84. In his lectures during the 1990s Nibley explained, “As I said, ‘shahor’ is a skin of blackness, which means dark. A good source for that would be Morris Jastrow’s Aramaic Dictionary. For the word black it gives dark, unpleasant — everything sort of uncomplimentary.” Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 1* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1993), 287.
- 166 Miriam Eliav-Feldon, Benjamin Isaac and Joseph Ziegler, eds., *The Origins of Racism in the West* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.
- 167 In a personal conversation, Darius Gray, one of the pillars of the Genesis Group in Salt Lake City, drew my attention to bias in the pre-diluvian era against two groups of people. First, in a barren

- land “with much heat,” Enoch saw the children of Canaan, upon whom “there was a blackness” and who “were despised among all people” (Moses 7:8). Second, some of the posterity of Cain were black and they also were marginalized and ostracized. The text says that they “had not place among” the residue of the seed of Adam (Moses 7:21–23). Enoch was stunned by God’s reaction: “the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept.” The heavens too shed “forth their tears as the rain” (Moses 7:28). Deeply distressed, Enoch asked God twice, “How is it that thou canst weep?” (Moses 7:29, 31). God’s response denounced racial bias. He told Enoch that He wept because He had commanded Adam’s posterity to “love one another” and to “choose God as their Father,” but instead “they are without affection, and they hate their own blood” (Moses 7:33). God called their failure to love one another “great wickedness” and foretold where that would lead: “misery shall be their doom, and the whole heavens shall weep over them” (Moses 7:33–37). Adam Stokes recently has written that the Lord’s reply to Enoch “provides us with one of the most powerful repudiations of prejudice in all of the scriptures.” Adam Stokes, “The People of Canaan: A New Reading of Moses 7,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 47 (2021), 159–80, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-people-of-canaan-a-new-reading-of-moses-7/>.
- 168 Jablonski, *Living Color*, 109–14. Benjamin H. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 6.
- 169 Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.
- 170 Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 2. Contact between lighter-skinned Egyptians and darker-skinned Nubians began more than five thousand years ago. Although the complexion of people living along the Nile from Upper Nubia to the delta differed greatly, they “were not designated by color terms, and slavery was not associated with darker skin.” Jablonski, *Living Color*, 105–6.
- 171 Jablonski, *Living Color*, 114.
- 172 David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 337n144.

- 173 Ibid., 87.
- 174 Isaiah 2:2. Other writings of Isaiah that expressed a universalistic theology include Isaiah 5:26 (the Lord “will lift an ensign to the nations from afar”); Isaiah 45:22 (“be ye saved, all the ends of the earth”); Isaiah 49:6 (covenant Israel will be a light to the nations and take “salvation unto the end of the earth”); Isaiah 56:7 (the Lord’s house will be “an house of prayer for all people”); and Isaiah 66:18–21 (the Lord “will gather all nations and tongues” and “take of them for priests and Levites”).
- 175 See The Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew And English Lexicon, comp. Francis Bacon, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs (CD-ROM, Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2000), s.v. “מֵלֶךְ עֹבֵד”, <https://hebrewcollege.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/BDB.pdf>.
- 176 Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice*, 7.
- 177 It is conceivable that Zoram may have been a trusted Ethiopian servant. He became Nephi’s true friend and received a patriarchal blessing from Lehi just prior to Lehi’s death. 2 Nephi 1:30–32.
- 178 These references are in the same genre as the New Testament’s description of Christ’s transfiguration and the angel who appeared at his resurrection. “And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them” (Mark 9:3). “His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow” (Matthew 28:3).
- 179 Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 234–35. See Sorenson, *Ancient Setting*, 81–83.
- 180 For example, notwithstanding their religiosity, early colonists tolerated the enslavement of Africans even though a Book of Mormon prophet rejected the idea that people “make slaves of one another” (Mosiah 2:13); before enacting the Constitution and adopting the Bill of Rights, they persecuted religious dissent even though the Book of Mormon favored a society in which it was “strictly contrary to the commands of God” that there should be a law “against a man’s belief” (Alma 30:7); and, according to Nephi, they scattered and smote the remnants of the Lehites (1 Nephi 13:14).
- 181 The Ibscha Relief from the tomb of Khnumhotep II shows lighter-skinned Semitic traders (possibly the Hyksos) encountering darker skinned Egyptians. Philippe Bohstrom, “Were Hebrews Ever Slaves in Ancient Egypt? Yes,” *Haaretz*, March 25, 2021,

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/were-hebrews-ever-slaves-in-ancient-egypt-yes-1.5429843>. Other images showing the diversity of complexions are found elsewhere in Egyptian tombs and art. See Snowden, *Before Color Prejudice*. See also the reference to Ham and his descendants in the Bible Dictionary in the Latter-day Saint version of the Holy Bible.

- 182 Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 551. See note 74 and accompanying text.
- 183 The desperate circumstances led the Nephites to "repent of all their sins" (3 Nephi 3:25).
- 184 The punctuation in the 1830 edition is suspect. See note 133. It shows the typesetter's insensitivity to race, a common bias at that time. Based on the manuscript, he could have placed a period after the words "curse was taken from them" and moved the following words to the next sentence that describes physical appearance. This minimalist revision would better distinguish the curse from the mark and could be printed as follows:
- 15 And their curse was taken from them.
- 16 And their skin became white like unto the Nephites; and their young men and their daughters became exceedingly fair. And they were numbered among the Nephites, and were called Nephites, and thus ended the thirteenth year
- 185 Bishop Diego de Landa observed that the Maya painted captives with black and white stripes. Morley and Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 233–37. Stephen Houston points to one artifact that shows "white painted celebrants about to torch the back of a captive." Houston, Stuart, and Taube, *The Memory of Bones*, loc. 4834 of 8579, Kindle. Because black body paint was common, the question arises whether the murals at Chichen Itza or Bonampak show a white body paint tradition with a particular purpose. See Gardner, "John L. Sorenson's Complete Legacy: Reviewing Mormon's Codex," 119. But so far archaeologists, anthropologists, and ethnohistorians have not come to that conclusion.
- 186 The Maya painted the skins of their gods blue. Coe and Houston, *The Maya*, 216. Bishop de Landa also observed that "priests were painted blue." Morley and Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 237.
- 187 Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 3–4.

- 188 Marilyn Arnold, “‘Words, Words, Words’: Hugh Nibley on the Book of Mormon,” in *Hugh Nibley Observed* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation, 2021), 312.
- 189 *Ibid.*, 307.
- 190 James Faulconer and Blair Hodges, “Briefly Mosiah, with James E. Faulconer,” MIPodcast #106, April 17, 2020, <https://mi.byu.edu/mip-bti-faulconer/>. Faulconer explains:
- Exegesis and eisegesis represent ideal, nonexistent ends of a continuum along which interpretations lie. If interpretations tend too far in the direction of putting things into the text (*eis*, the prefix of *eisegesis*, means “into”), they are not good interpretations. Yet if they tend too far toward only saying what can be taken from the text (*ex*, the prefix of *exegesis*, means “out of”), then they tend to be empty; they tend in the direction of being little more than a paraphrase of the original. Good interpretations lie somewhere between the two poles of exegesis and eisegesis, relying on assumptions and being as open about those assumptions as possible. (*Ibid.*)
- 191 Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers* (Facsimile Edition), Revelations and Translations, vol 3, part 1, Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2015), 217. The plural word “cursings” has been replaced by “cursing” in the current printed edition.
- 192 See 2 Nephi 1:18, 22; 5:21, 24; Alma 45:16.
- 193 Richard E. Bennett, *1820, Dawning of the Restoration* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020), 316.
- 194 M. Kathryn Brown and James F. Garber, 2003, “Evidence of Conflict During the Middle Formative in the Maya Lowlands: A View from Blackman Eddy, Belize” in *Ancient Mesoamerican Warfare*, 91. Sorenson agrees: “Religion and cult, which emphasize religion’s ritualistic aspects, were integral to the conduct of war in Mesoamerican cultures and affected every aspect of warfare.” Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 387.
- 195 Jonathan B. Pagliaro, James F. Garber, and Travis W. Stanton, “Evaluating the Archaeological Signatures of Maya Ritual and Conflict,” in *Ancient Mesoamerican Warfare*, 76.

- 196 Laban had previously confiscated all of Lehi's gold, silver, and riches without offering anything in return and had attempted to kill Lehi's sons. Laman and Lemuel saw the property that Laban had extorted as their own inheritance, not Nephi's alone, and, indeed, as the elder sons, they had a legitimate claim. See 1 Nephi 2:11. The reasons for their animosity also may include the challenges of a blended family with two or perhaps three different mothers for Lehi's six sons, as was the case with Jacob's dysfunctional, blended Hebrew household.
- 197 Arguably, the terms *wild*, *hardened*, and *ferocious* to describe Lamanites were complimentary descriptions of people whose survival depended upon hunting wild beasts and warfare. Nephites described Lamanite warriors as courageous (Alma 43:43). Nephites tried to dissuade missionaries from going to the Lamanites by arguing that they were a stiffnecked people (Alma 26:24), but the authors of the Book of Mormon apply that term more often to the Nephites themselves.
- 198 In addition to Jacob's encomium of Lamanite husbands and fathers (Jacob 3:5), other Nephite prophets spoke approvingly of Lamanites, especially those who converted and were baptized (Alma 17:4; 19:31–36; 23:3–13). They praised Lamanites as zealous for keeping the commandments (Alma 21:23). After living among Lamanites for 14 years, Ammon, a Nephite prince who became a missionary praised them for refusing to take up arms, even in self-defense, but being willing to "sacrifice their lives" rather than "to take the life of their enemy" (26:32) and for being "perfectly honest and upright in all things" (Alma 27:27). He called them "a highly favored people of the Lord" (Alma 27:30). Describing their brotherly love, Ammon said: "And now behold, I say unto you, has there been so great love in all the land? Behold, I say unto you, Nay, there has not, even among the Nephites" (Alma 26:33). He highlighted one Lamanite woman's exceeding faith, saying "there has not been such great faith among all the people of the Nephites" (Alma 19:10). Nephite prophets praised the sons of converted Lamanites for heroism and for fighting with miraculous strength because of their exceeding faith (Alma 56–57). They reported that the Lamanites preached to and converted many Nephites and even succeeded where the Nephites had failed miserably by converting the Gadianton robbers, a mafia-like group that had infiltrated their society (Helaman 6:4, 37). They also paid tribute to Lamanites who

were baptized by fire and the Holy Ghost because of their faith and yet were so humble that “they knew it not” (3 Nephi 9:20). Nephite record keepers may have initially omitted the fulfillment of one prophecy by Samuel, a courageous and gifted Lamanite seer, but they had included most of Samuel’s explicit Messianic prophecy (Helaman 13–15), and they promptly amended their records when Jesus reminded them of Samuel’s additional words about graves being opened (3 Nephi 23:8–13).

- 199 A Nephite military leader berated his own governor for idleness, slothfulness, and exceedingly great neglect, for loving glory and the vain things of the world, and for sitting upon his throne in a state of “thoughtless stupor” (Alma 60). Furthermore, Mormon explicitly compared the Nephites to two ritually unclean animals that the Jews of Lehi’s time had despised. Early in the Christian era, within a span of a few years the Nephites went from great wickedness (3 Nephi 2:3) to being a people among whom “there was not a living soul ... who did doubt in the least the words of all the holy prophets” and who served God “with all diligence day and night” (3 Nephi 5:1–3), but they swiftly degenerated again to a “state of awful wickedness” (3 Nephi 6:17). Incorporating unsavory terms from Proverbs 26:11, Mormon accused them of turning from righteousness “like the dog to his vomit, or like the sow to her wallowing in the mire” (3 Nephi 7:8). The current King James version of Proverbs 26:11 refers only to a dog: “As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly.” But the writings of Peter suggest that the “true proverb” on which the slur is based originally referred to both dogs and swine. 2 Peter 2:22. The proverb predated Lehi’s departure, and Mormon used its apparently more ancient form.
- 200 Personal correspondence to author, April 10, 2021.
- 201 Nephite prophets and political leaders disavowed both slavery and racism. Nephi’s success in obtaining the brass plates led to the Book of Mormon’s first act of social justice — Nephi’s offer to free Laban’s servant (1 Nephi 4:30–36). King Benjamin would not suffer his people to make slaves of one another (Mosiah 2:13). In contrast, servitude of mix-race people may have existed among the Lamanites. Ammon’s missionary report describes as “Lamanitish” King Lamoni’s servants who were charged with tending the royal flocks and who were killed if they allowed the flocks to be

- scattered (Alma 17:26–27). When these Lamanites converted, they offered to become slaves to the Nephites as penance for their murders (Alma 27:8). But it was against Nephite law to have slaves (Alma 27:9). Lamanites were not conscripted into Nephite armies; indeed, even when converted Lamanites were desperately needed for defense, the Nephites honored their conscientious objection to taking up arms (Alma 53:9–15).
- 202 Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 234–35. See note 41 and accompanying text.
- 203 Tvedtnes, "The Charge of 'Racism' in the Book of Mormon," 185. For example, Ammon, a Nephite, described descendants of Laman and Lemuel as "dearly beloved brethren" (Alma 26:9). Samuel the Lamanite prophet delivered his stern warnings to Nephites while Nephite archers shot arrows at him, but still addressed them as his "beloved brethren" (Helaman 15:1).
- 204 Tvedtnes, "The Charge of 'Racism' in the Book of Mormon," 185 (italics added).
- 205 Hickman, "The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse," 455–56.
- 206 The Lord made this clear during His 34 CE ministry to the Lamanites and Nephites. In describing the distant future of Lehi's descendants, after they were to be scattered by the Gentiles, He did not refer to the eventual survivors as Lamanites. He used interchangeably and collectively the terms "thy seed," "your seed," "my people," "a remnant of Jacob," "my people who are of the covenant," and "the remnant of this people" (3 Nephi 21).
- 207 Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, 118. Tvedtnes also relied on idioms from the Hebrew scriptures and the Middle East, although he cites one example of prejudice (not based on skin color) in Aztec-era writings. Tvedtnes, "The Charge of 'Racism' in the Book of Mormon." Sproat relies on biblical traditions and definitions of "skins." Sproat, "Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon." In the 1940s, Nibley believed that "the search for external evidence was a misdirection." At that time, he suggested a literary approach focused on Old World language and customs. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, 118–19; Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 1*. Later, however, he came to consider John Sorenson's early work on

- a Mesoamerican setting to be “our best hope to replace the pseudo scholarship of previous generations with substantive insights.” Magelby, *Hugh Nibley and Book of Mormon Geography* (italics added).
- 208 Many intriguing questions remain. See Houston, Stuart, and Taube, *The Memory of Bones*, loc. 674–93 of 8579, Kindle; and Houston, *Veiled Brightness*, 42. For example, were pigments used for body décor while charcoal-based paints were used for hunting and war? Were brushes and quills used for body décor while paints for hunting were applied by hand? What emotions and aesthetic values were linked to various colors? For what special moments did the Lamanites use body paint, other than for warfare, hunting, plunder, and ceremonies? Did warriors paint themselves during oath-making ceremonies? Did leaders paint themselves for royal occasions? Did the use of black relate to the cult of the jaguar? It is the “overriding impression” of Mayanist color experts that “black is a color of supernaturals or the near supernatural, and of dark and foreboding places.” Houston, *Veiled Brightness*, 35.
- 209 If the Lamanite pioneers did not mimic the Maya tradition, they may have invented it themselves. At sporting events we routinely see intimidating face and chest painting; during the annual deer hunt, we observe camouflaged archers with their faces blackened; and I have watched young boys invent similar concealment techniques at night when playing capture the flag in the woods.
- 210 Email from Richard D. Hansen.
- 211 Elsie Talmage Brandley was quoting a speech by her father, James E. Talmage, “The Earth and Man,” delivered on August 9, 1931, as reported in *Deseret News*, Nov. 21, 1931, 7–8. Elsie Talmage Brandley, “The Religious Crisis of Today,” Jenifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook, eds., *At the Pulpit* (Salt Lake City, Intellectual Reserve, 2017), 137.
- 212 Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 2*, 249.
- 213 Oxford Reference (website), s.v. “myth,” <https://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=myth>.
- 214 Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” *Ensign* (November 2020), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2020/11/46nelson>.
- 215 “President Nelson Shares Social Post about Racism and Calls for Respect for Human Dignity,” *Press Release of The Church of*

- Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, June 1, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-nelson-shares-social-post-encouraging-understanding-and-civility>, (italics added).
- 216 Patrick Q. Mason, *Restoration: God's Call to the 21st-Century World* (Meridian, ID: FaithMatters, 2020), 16–17.
- 217 This type of witness was anticipated by Joseph Smith when he said that a person “would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.” Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:461.
- 218 Givens, *Crucible of Doubt*, 20, 107 (italics added).
- 219 Lectures on Faith 3, “Doctrine and Covenants, 1835,” p. 38, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/46>, (italics added).
- 220 Patricia T. Holland, “Fulfilling the Measure of Your Creation” (speech, Brigham Young University, Jan. 17, 1989), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/patricia-t-holland/filling-measure-creation/>. This concept conveys a breathtakingly expansive view of all of God’s creations.
- 221 Arnold, *Nibley Observed*, 317.
- 222 Letter from Joseph Smith to Isaac Galland, March 22, 1839, Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri, published in *Times and Seasons*, Feb. 1840, 1:53–54 (spelling and grammar modernized), <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/religious-freedom>.
- 223 The word “stain” is rarely used in the Hebrew scriptures. There is one reference to a stain upon pride, but otherwise it describes an external effect. See Job 3:5 and Isaiah 63:3.
- 224 Gardner, “If Lamanites were black, why didn’t anyone notice?”
- 225 Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Semester 2*, 244.
- 226 The original typesetter added punctuation, verses, and initial paragraphs. Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, xliv. In this case his punctuation contributes to confusion between the curse and the mark. In verse 14, the reference to the mark would be expressed more clearly and sensitively in a parenthetical phrase, in this manner:
- 14 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.

- 227 Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 4 Alma (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2007), 696–97.
- 228 Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:696 (emphasis added).
- 229 Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 280.
- 230 Aguilar-Moreno, *Aztec Handbook*, s.vv. “idolatry,” “human sacrifice.”
- 231 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 232 This brazen assassination came one year to the day after Teancum’s Nephite battalion had defeated the Lamanite army (Alma 50:35). In a personal conversation, Richard Hansen pointed out that the Maya calendar has 18 months of 20 days each plus a five-day period at the end of the year that was known as *Uayeb* and considered to be unlucky. Thus, Teancum was strategic when he killed Amalickiah on the anniversary of the earlier defeat. Two successive military disasters, each under the five unlucky days of Uayab, “would have had a devastating and demoralizing effect on the Lamanites” and must have been “an ominous augury” for the Lamanites’ intended military conquest.