

## Chapter Ten

# A SOTERIOLOGY OF ROBES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

## Recontextualizing Race and Redemption

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In Jacob's discourse on the Atonement in 2 Nephi 9, he speaks of the day of judgment when the righteous will be "clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness" (v. 14). The notion of having a heavenly garment returned to humanity at the moment of exaltation has deep roots in ancient Christianity and other Near Eastern traditions. In this paper, I trace the complex theological meanings associated with this "robe of righteousness." Early traditions state that Adam and Eve, our first ancestors, lost such a heavenly garment at the time of the Fall and recovered it when they were finally redeemed, setting the divine pattern for each of us. I first discuss the Pauline metaphor of *induere Christum* ("putting on Christ") at baptism and how this informs other clothing imagery in scripture, particularly in Jacob's speech in 2 Nephi 6–10. I broaden the topic by then examining color (black, dark, white) and clothing metaphors in the Book of Mormon, particularly in relationship to the "curse" on the

Lamanites and the “mark” mentioned by Mormon. I offer compelling evidence both from the text itself and from Near Eastern cultures and early Christian sources that “dark skin” was strictly a metaphor for those who had not yet been enlightened by the gospel and “white skin” as those who had embraced the teachings of Jesus Christ. I also show that both “dark skin” and “white skin” are symbolically linked to earthly and eschatological “robes.” There are precise correlates to the Book of Mormon metaphorical usage, in which some people are “white” (spiritually pure) and others are “dark” (spiritually impure), to the language used by early Christian Fathers, adding credence and clarity to this proposed symbolism in the Book of Mormon. The curse, as I contend, was unrelated to skin color and instead indexes an idle, uncivilized, and sinful lifestyle that was outside of the covenant. I also propose that the “mark” was a self-administered identity emblem, not a biological change in melanin content of the skin. Finally, I argue that charges of racism in the Book of Mormon are anachronistic and baseless since modern-day notions of “racism” were demonstrably not present in ancient cultures. I suggest that a careful reading of the text of the Book of Mormon through the lens of robe imagery helps to dispel much of the confusion that has resulted from misreading the text through a skin-tone-based, racialized prism. Indeed, Jacob shows himself to be fully aware of the soteriological origins, meaning, and metaphorical extensions of heavenly robes and garments, and his discussion of them significantly illuminates our understanding of race and reconciliation in the Book of Mormon.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2 Nephi 6–10, Jacob, a priest after the “holy order” among the Nephites (2 Nephi 6:2), gives one of the more theologically significant sermons recorded in the Book of Mormon. Taking place about forty years after the Lehites fled Jerusalem and soon after the completion of the first Nephite temple, Jacob’s discourse focuses on the meaning and purpose of the Atonement. He begins by citing various passages and chapters from Isaiah (for example, chapters 13, 35, 40, 49, 50–52, 60) specifically so that the people would “learn and glorify the name of [their] God” (2 Nephi 6:4)

## DARK AND WHITE

Leaving aside the irrationality of value judgments associated with skin color, one of the most pervasive dichotomy metaphors in all languages is between black and white,<sup>96</sup> or better, between darkness<sup>97</sup> and light. I quote at length HaCohen's insightful remarks:

Black can also be used metaphorically. Politically incorrect as it may sound, this colour has always suffered from bad reputation. Humans are diurnal animals that depend predominantly on their sense of sight in order to survive and thrive. Therefore, the symbolism that assigns positive values to white colour (and light) and negative ones to black colour (and darkness) is not a racist Western bias, but universal. Even in the lower Congo, white signifies "right, good order, reason, truth, health, generosity, good luck," whereas black signifies "wrong, guilt, envy, intention to kill, grief," and so on. . . . The fact that white garments (or skin) turn dark with dirt, while the opposite is not true, has also contributed to black's bad image. Racism has viciously strained this colour symbolism in order to impose a hierarchy on humans by means of their skin colours. *Scholars, however, should be careful not to read actual (skin) colour into their sources when mere colour symbolism is meant.*<sup>98</sup>

The multiple valences of dark and light across cultures urge caution in assuming connotative meanings. Indeed, many parts of the Bible would be incomprehensible if strained through literalism and without a proper understanding of the color symbolism among the cultures mentioned in its pages, particularly with "dark" and its often-negative entailments.<sup>99</sup> In scriptural terms, metaphorical "darkness" is explicitly the lack of light (that is, the light of the gospel). The Bible standardly uses darkness as a metaphor for sin (see 2 Samuel 22:29; Job 3:3–6; Psalm 82:5; Matthew 6:23; Luke 22:53; John 3:19–20; 12:35; Romans 1:21; 13:12; 2 Corinthians 4:6; 6:14; Ephesians 4:18; 5:8, 11; 1 John 1:5–6; 2:9–11). In Isaiah 29:15, sinful acts are done in "darkness": "Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord, and their works are in the dark [Hebrew *mahšāk*], and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?" The Book of Mormon also provides clear insights into the metaphorical semantics

of “dark” behavior, or sin. Various prophets speak of “mists of darkness” (1 Nephi 12:4); “secret works of darkness” (2 Nephi 9:9); and “works of darkness and abominations” (Helaman 6:28). The Lord explains, “If thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If, therefore, the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!” (3 Nephi 13:23). And Joseph, the son of Lehi, was told that in the last days his descendants would help remnant Israel in the New World to be brought “out of darkness unto light” (2 Nephi 3:5).

There are only three cases where authors in the Book of Mormon describe Lamanites *or* Nephites as “dark” (see 1 Nephi 12:23; Alma 3:6; Mormon 5:15). None of these authors are making value judgments based upon the people’s skin hue; instead, they are consistently making judgments based on the people’s evil works (compare 2 Nephi 25:2; 26:10; 27:27; Alma 5:7; 26:15; 45:12; Helaman 6:28–30; 8:4; 13:29; Mormon 8:27). Describing their skins as “dark” is merely meant to show that they had become unclean through sin. Brant Gardner has persuasively argued precisely this point: “The condition of darkness comes with dwindling in unbelief. When that occurs, darkness falls—on their hearts and metaphorically on their skins.”<sup>100</sup>

There is no doubt that the dichotomy of dark = sinful and white = righteous permeates the text of the Book of Mormon, not vis-à-vis skin pigmentation but rather regarding metaphor, acting as a somatic description of the human condition. When God is described as “light,” brightness and inevitably whiteness is likewise viewed as a manifestation of righteousness. Darkness (see, for example, 1 Nephi 12:4) is associated with a lack of light—a lack of righteousness—or the presence of sin (or minimally of Satan’s influence). Alma 26 describes how the Lamanites “were in darkness, yea, even in the darkest abyss, but behold, how many of them are brought to behold the marvelous light of God” (v. 3). In these and numerous other cases in scripture, the use of the term *darkness* indicates not having the light of the gospel.

Alma, recounts the time when a group of Nephites were taken captive by the Lamanites in the wilderness near the city of Nephi, but God delivered them from bondage (see Alma 5:3–5). More importantly, however, they were also saved spiritually when Alma, baptized them in the waters of

Mormon and “changed their hearts; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God. Behold, they were *in the midst of darkness*; nevertheless, their souls were *illuminated by the light of the everlasting word*” (v. 7; emphasis added). Alma<sub>2</sub> then connects this to the metaphor of keeping one’s garments clean: “I say unto you, ye will know at that day that ye cannot be saved; for there can no man be saved except his *garments are washed white*; yea, his *garments must be purified until they are cleansed from all stain*, through the blood of him of whom it has been spoken by our fathers, who should come to redeem his people from their sins” (v. 21; emphasis added). This verse has important implications for understanding the relationship among purity, whiteness, and clothing. It also provides a new way to look at skin color in the Book of Mormon.

#### PURE/WHITE

One of the ostensibly overt verses possibly indicating a skin color change is 2 Nephi 30:6. In the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, this verse read: “And then shall they rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a white and delightsome people.” However, Joseph Smith himself altered this verse to read “pure and delightsome” in the 1840 edition published in Cincinnati, Ohio—certainly not an insignificant change! Future editions through the 1970s, however, used the previous 1830 language (based upon the 1841 edition published in England, which did not contain Joseph’s clarifying emendation). The First Presidency returned the phrasing to “pure” in the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon. Why did Joseph Smith make a special effort to change “white” to “pure”? We can only speculate, but considering the fact that Joseph never spoke of the Nephite/Lamanite distinction in reference to skin color,<sup>101</sup> it could be that he wanted to ensure the meaning of the verse was correct: what made the Nephites “fair<sup>102</sup> and delightsome” was their “purity.” The use of the word *white* was correct, since in the ancient world *white* and *pure* were almost universally synonymous, but Joseph seems to have felt the need to clarify its meaning, possibly to avoid precisely the misinterpretations that have developed from reading modern-day notions of “race” into the text.<sup>103</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Book of Mormon is filled with metaphorical language relating to color and clothing. Jacob's use of the metaphor "robes of righteousness" provides a helpful framework for viewing ancient conceptions of righteousness and unrighteousness through garment imagery. Throughout the Book of Mormon, skin color metaphors emerge as the preferred imagery to index one's commitment to God's covenants.<sup>176</sup> As I have argued here, "dark skin" in the Book of Mormon symbolically represents one having their "garments" stained with sin, and references to skin as "white" or "pure" refer metaphorically to those whose "garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb" (Alma 13:11)—both descriptive metaphors also used by numerous early Church Fathers. Apart from the connotative meanings of *black* and *white*, Nephite society embraced the spiritual metaphor of dark skin "as a typology for sin," in Rhamie's words,<sup>177</sup> with no conception of an actual skin-hue change. The discursive strategy of Book of Mormon authors employing a dark/white dichotomy was strictly tied to scriptural symbolism of darkness representing sin (that is, noncovenantal behavior) and whiteness representing purity (that is, correct covenantal behavior).

A lack of understanding regarding this dark/light metaphor in the Book of Mormon has led to generations of readers who believed literal skin-color change took place throughout the record. On the other hand, some have willfully read racialism in the record's pages because they believe the text is a product of the nineteenth-century. Stevenson has succinctly summarized this dangerous motivation to read racism *into* the text of the Book of Mormon: "For scholars who place Joseph Smith at the center of the Book of Mormon's creative process, contextualization against an antebellum context requires engagement with 'whiteness' as an American racial construct—a meaningful concession for those who accept the text as ancient."<sup>178</sup> Readers of the text, however, need to avoid the trappings of a postmodern critique, whereby definitions of race arising since the seventeenth century obscure our understanding of the cultural subtleties in this ancient record. Interpreting skin color symbolism in the Book of Mormon based on modern descriptions is by definition anachronistic and destined to mislead. I fully concur with Byron's observation that "it is more fruitful to explore the symbolic meanings and the possible implications within

the *ancient context*” when trying to understand notions of “blackness” in antiquity.<sup>179</sup> Issues of race in the Book of Mormon are highly complex, and they deserve to be analyzed in the ancient cultural context in which they occurred.

While ethnocentric and prejudicial views were no doubt held by some actors in the text (as would be expected for some among any culture), the Book of Mormon does not contain the racial tensions often ascribed to it. “Racism” against Lamanites, according to modern definitions, is simply not present in the book. In contrast, the Book of Mormon in fact elevates the status of the Lamanites in God’s eyes as a highly favored people, which goes completely against the prevailing views of the nineteenth century. It is the Lamanites who are expressly promised longevity in the Book of Mormon, not the Nephites (see Alma 9:16–18; Helaman 15:4). It is the Lamanites who are given divine assurance that they will help build Zion, not the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 21:23–25). All of this is utterly counter to the racist views against Native Americans in Joseph Smith’s day. As Bushman keenly observed, the Book of Mormon “overturns conventional American racism. . . . [It] is not just sympathetic to Indians; it grants them dominance.”<sup>180</sup>

What does not square with a racialized reading of the Book of Mormon is its overwhelmingly inclusive history and theology. All are welcome in God’s tent. The Lord, Nephi wrote, “Inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33; compare Acts 10:34; 1 Corinthians 12:13).<sup>181</sup> As Belnap argues, the Book of Mormon does not promote racial stereotyping; rather, “It advocates and even idealizes the exact opposite.”<sup>182</sup> A close reading of the text proves beyond any doubt that the Book of Mormon emphasizes all races and genders are equal in the eyes of God—and all are eligible to have their robes washed “white” and free of sin through God’s grace.<sup>183</sup> As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has affirmed, “If we will be faithful, there is a perfectly tailored robe of righteousness ready and waiting for *everyone*.”<sup>184</sup>