

Mingled Destinies:

The Lamanites and the Latter-day Saints

By Dean L. Larsen

The early history of the restored Church presents an apparent paradox in the interest of Church leaders in the American Indians and the larger group of Lamanite nations. This interest seems, at first glance, to have been out of proportion to any possible significance these people might have in the development and destiny of the Church.

The viewpoint of the early Church leaders toward the latter-day Lamanites was an optimistic one and was completely contradictory to the prevailing opinion of the time. In a day when the American Indians were being written off as the “Vanishing Americans,” when a bounty was actually being offered for their destruction in some states and territories, Church leaders were predicting an illustrious future for them.

When the newly formed Church was struggling to establish itself and was much in need of experienced and qualified leadership, its first formal missionary expedition was directed, paradoxically, not to the prospective population centers of the northeastern states, but to the semicivilized Indian tribes in the western lands. This endeavor engaged the full effort of two of the most prominent leaders of the Church, Oliver Cowdery and Parley P. Pratt, thus removing them for a time from any direct contribution to the central administration of Church affairs.

To the casual contemporary observer, this apparent preoccupation of the Church leadership with a beleaguered and rejected people must have seemed somewhat illogical and futile. Even some priesthood officers acknowledged that the Church’s missionary efforts among the Lamanites presented a challenge to their faith.

Elder Wilford Woodruff said on January 12, 1873:

“The Lamanites will blossom as the rose on the mountains. I am willing to say here that, though I believe this, when I see the power of the nation destroying them from the face of the earth, the fulfillment of that prophecy is perhaps harder for me to believe than any revelation of God that I ever read. It looks as though there would not be enough left to receive the Gospel; but notwithstanding this dark picture, every word that God has ever said of them will have its fulfillment, and they, by and by, will receive the Gospel.” (*Journal of Discourses* 15:282.)

Though the future of the Lamanites appeared bleak a hundred years ago, the faith and vision of Joseph Smith and his successors with regard to these chosen people of the Lord are being vindicated in our day.

The story that begins six months after the organization of the Church with the mission of Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Whitmer, and Ziba Peterson to the Lamanites is a fascinating one. In its fabric are threads of high hope, frustration, enduring patience, and gradual fulfillment. The final and most dramatic chapters are still to be written. It is a uniquely faith-promoting element in the general history of the Church. Its foundations are interestingly intertwined with the prophetic promises—carried through the years since Old Testament times—to a remnant of a people with whom the Lord made irrevocable covenants. In some ways the mission of Elders Cowdery, Pratt, Whitmer, and Peterson was the beginning of a prophetic drama that has profound importance in the redemptive work to be accomplished by the Lord and his servants in this, the culminating gospel dispensation.

Latter-day Saints who understand the origin and content of the Book of Mormon should have no great difficulty in appreciating why Joseph Smith was so intensely committed to initiating the work of redemption among the Lamanites of his day. He had translated from the gold plates the title page of the Book of Mormon. This title page includes the following injunction, which must have made a vivid impression upon the mind and heart of the young prophet:

“Wherefore, it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites—Written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel. ...”

The Lord had given emphatic confirmation to this decree in a revelation to Joseph Smith following the loss of the translated manuscript that had been entrusted to Martin Harris: “And this testimony shall come to a knowledge of the Lamanites, and the Lemuelites, and the Ishmaelites, who dwindled in unbelief because of the iniquity of their fathers. ...

“And for this very purpose are the plates preserved, which contain these records.” (D&C 3:18–19.)

It is interesting to contemplate the bond that must have existed between Joseph Smith and Moroni. In all of the recorded accounts concerning his association with Moroni, Joseph speaks of the keeper of the records in reverential tones, of course, as befits any reference to an angel of the Lord. But Moroni was a guiding and protecting companion through all of Joseph’s initial instruction and early trials, and there must have developed between them an unshakable bond of love and shared concern. Joseph apparently also had a special acquaintance with other great characters in the Book of Mormon drama. Those who heard him speak of these people testify that he could describe their physical attributes and personal qualities as though they were his most intimate associates.

Think of the obligation Joseph must have felt to those who preserved the Nephite-Lamanite record. His own life's purpose and destiny became so intertwined with theirs that they must have seemed to him to be his own contemporaries. Imagine, then, how heavy upon his conscience must have weighed the yearning words of Nephi:

“And then shall the remnant of our seed know concerning us, how that we came out from Jerusalem, and that they are descendants of the Jews.

“And the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be declared among them; wherefore, they shall be restored unto the knowledge of their fathers, and also to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, which was had among their fathers.” (2 Ne. 30:4–5.)

The impassioned plea of Enos must also have left a deep impression:

“And after I, Enos, had heard these words, my faith began to be unshaken in the Lord; and I prayed unto him with many long strugglings for my brethren, the Lamanites. ...

“And I had faith, and I did cry unto God that he would preserve the records; and he covenanted with me that he would bring them forth unto the Lamanites in his own due time.” (Enos 1:11, 16.)

The most pressing concern of Moroni himself as he made his last entry in the record of his people was for the Lamanites who would continue upon the lands of their possession until the last days. As he begins the final chapter of the book that bears his name, he makes clear to whom he is directing the stirring challenges and promises that we now so freely apply to all who receive an opportunity to read the Book of Mormon: “Now I, Moroni, write somewhat as seemeth me good; and I write unto my brethren, the Lamanites. ...” (Moro. 10:1.)

Joseph Smith did not have many opportunities himself to directly teach the descendants of the Book of Mormon peoples. On one occasion, however, he was called upon by the Indian chief Keokuk. It was the summer of 1841 in Nauvoo. Keokuk was accompanied by Kiskukosh, Appenoose, and about one hundred chiefs and braves of the Sac and Fox tribes, along with their families. Elder B. H. Roberts gives the following account of this visit:

“They were brought over from the Iowa side on the ferry and two large flat boats. The legion band and a detachment of the legion met them at the landing, but as soon as Keokuk failed to recognize President Smith among those who had come to bid him welcome, he refused to land or allow any of his party to go ashore until the president made his appearance. ...

“At the grove President Smith addressed the Indians at some length, upon what the Lord had revealed to him concerning their forefathers, and recited to them the promises contained in the *Book of Mormon* respecting themselves. ... How their hearts must have glowed as they listened to the prophet relate the story of their forefathers—their rise

and fall; and the promises held out to them of redemption from their fallen state!”

According to Elder Roberts, Keokuk made a response to Joseph in which he said, “I have a *Book of Mormon* at my wigwam that you gave me a number of moons ago. I believe you are a great and good man. Keokuk looks rough, but I am a son of the Great Spirit. I have heard your advice. We intend to quit fighting, and follow the good talk you have given us.” (*A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2:88–89.)

Occasions of this kind must have provided the prophet with a good deal of personal satisfaction.

Those who came west with the Saints carried with them a vision of the redemption of the Lamanites. Actual experience with the Indian tribes encountered in the western settlement did not always serve to brighten this vision, however. President Brigham Young, who gained a reputation for his policy of “feeding” Indians rather than “fighting” them, occasionally found it necessary to instruct the Saints on the matter. In July of 1866 he said, “Brother Ezra T. Benson’s remarks referring to our present difficulties with the Indians, and prospects of future difficulties, should well be considered by this people. As we have here an assemblage of the people from other settlements, I wish to impress them with the necessity of treating the Indians with kindness, and to refrain from harboring that revengeful, vindictive feeling that many indulge in. ... If the Elders of Israel had always treated the Lamanites as they should, I do not believe that we should have had any difficulty with them at all. This is my firm conviction, and my conclusion according to the light that is in me. I believe that the Lord permits them to chasten us at the present time to convince us that we have to overcome the vindictive feelings which we have harbored towards that poor, downtrodden branch of the house of Israel.” (*JD* 11:263.)

At an earlier date he had said, “I arise, brethren and sisters, to make a very few remarks, particularly upon one point, that is the subject of the Lamanites. ... It is according to good sense and reason that these natives should be looked to and sought after, for they are the seed of promise; they act according to the light they have pertaining to all matters that have come within the reach of their minds, and it is the duty of the Latter-day Saints to treat them kindly, and try to save them.” (*JD* 9:229–30.)

A study of the conference addresses delivered by the General Authorities in the decades following the Latter-day Saint settlement in the West reveals that the obligation of the Church to the Lamanites was never far from their minds. Numerous powerful sermons were given on the subject.

Some of the earliest missionary work undertaken outside the United States and Canada was directed to the Lamanite people. In 1844 a

mission was opened in the Society Islands. Missionaries were banished from these islands in 1852 by the French government, but were permitted to return in 1892.

The mission in Hawaii was opened in 1850, and several years later the work was extended to the Lamanites in New Zealand. All of these missions proved to be very productive.

In 1851 the first missionaries to South America, Elders Parley P. Pratt and Rufus Allen, landed at Valparaiso, Chile, and found that country in the throes of a civil war. No permanent mission was established, and the missionary effort on the South American continent was deferred until 1925, when Elder Melvin J. Ballard, accompanied by Elders Rulon S. Wells and Rey L. Pratt, knelt in a grove of weeping willow trees near the bank of the Rio de la Plata in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and dedicated the land of South America to the preaching of the gospel. In his prayer, Elder Ballard made this reference to the work that would be done among the Lamanites in the South American lands:

“And we also pray that we may see the beginning of the fulfilment of thy promises contained in the Book of Mormon to the Indians of this land, who are descendants of Lehi, millions of whom reside in this country, who have long been downtrodden and borne many afflictions and suffered because of sin and transgression, even as the prophets of the Book of Mormon did foretell. ...

“Oh, Father, let thy spirit work upon them and manifest the truth of these things unto them, as we and thy servants who shall follow us shall bear witness of thy precious promises unto this branch of the House of Israel.”

In the report of these proceedings, Elder Ballard added this note: “Each of the brethren spoke briefly. ... They blessed each other and felt that as a result of opening this mission, many Europeans in that land would receive the gospel; but that, ultimately, the great work of the mission would be to the Indians. This was a momentous day.” (*Sermons and Missionary Services of Melvin J. Ballard*, Bryant S. Hinckley, Deseret Book Co., 1949, pp. 96–97.)

At the October 1879 conference of the Church, three missionaries were called to open a mission in Mexico City. An earlier attempt (1876) to establish a mission in Mexico had not succeeded. Interruptions in the work occurred in later years as a consequence of the revolutionary period in Mexico. Nevertheless, the missions in Mexico are now among the most successful in the world, and a high percentage of those who have become members of the Church in Mexico can claim Book of Mormon origins. The 1960 census in that country indicated that as many as 26 million of its people at that date were of Indian ancestry.

From 1855 to 1860 a mission was maintained in the Indian territory of the eastern United States among the Cherokee, Creek, and Choctaw

Indians. Illness among the missionaries and a lack of responsiveness among the people led to a termination of this effort.

In 1878 Elder Anthony W. Ivins, in company with Elder Erastus Snow, fulfilled a mission to the Navajo and Pueblo Indians in Arizona and New Mexico. Elder Wilford Woodruff made significant visits to Indian tribes in these same states during 1879–80.

Moses Thatcher headed up an important mission to the Indian tribes in Idaho and Wyoming in 1883. He and his companions went as far north as the Rosebud River, where they visited with the Crow Indians.

Although many other enterprises among the Lamanites of North and South America and the islands of the Pacific have met with outstanding success over the years, perhaps the most dramatic events in the Church's efforts among the Lamanites have occurred during the past twenty years. Many of the more recent developments have been motivated in large measure by President Spencer W. Kimball, who for a number of years served as chairman of the Church Indian Committee.

An extensive educational system has been developed throughout the Pacific and in Mexico, Central America, and South America. Nearly 16,000 students are attending Church-operated schools in Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Mexico, Fiji, New Zealand, Western Samoa, Tahiti, and Tonga. The great majority of these students are of Lamanite descent. They are receiving opportunities to develop talents and leadership abilities that will undergird the great growth of the Church yet to occur in these same areas.

In addition to those young people attending Church schools in the locations just mentioned, another 13,000 are enrolled in seminary classes as they attend public schools and federal schools in the United States and Canada. Approximately 1,500 attend Brigham Young University at its Provo, Utah, and Laie, Hawaii, campuses.

One of the unique programs sponsored by the Church for Lamanite members in the United States is the Indian Student Placement Program. Through this program, thousands of Indian boys and girls have been taken into the homes of non-Indian Church members to enjoy the advantages of superior public schools, full Church activity, and the special intercultural exchanges that occur in this setting. Many of these young people have gone on to receive advanced education in Church schools and elsewhere, motivated by the incentives offered in this program. Hundreds have served effectively as missionaries to their own people and are now filling key leadership roles in Church organizations.

Today more than thirty stakes of the Church are organized in areas with predominantly Lamanite membership. The missionary work is prospering among these people more than ever before. It is estimated that there are currently 350,000 members of the Church who are of Lamanite descent; this is slightly more than 10 percent of the total Church membership.

In order to fully appreciate the prophetic nature of this work, one must return again to the inspired predictions in the Book of Mormon. The Savior himself said to the forefathers of the present-day Lamanites as he ministered among them on the American continent, “And then shall the work of the Father commence at that day, even when this gospel shall be preached among the remnant of this people. Verily I say unto you, at that day shall the work of the Father commence among all the dispersed of my people, yea, even the tribes which have been lost, which the Father hath led away out of Jerusalem.” (3 Ne. 21:26.)

Citing the words of Isaiah, the Master continued, “For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my people be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.” (3 Ne. 22:10.)

Elder Wilford Woodruff expressed difficulty in accepting these prophecies a hundred years ago, as has already been cited. In the light of recent developments in our day, however, it is not so difficult to see how the hand of the Lord has been and is moving to restore the descendants of the Book of Mormon people to their place among the tribes of Israel. The faith of the earlier brethren is being vindicated.

Even though significant strides have been made, the day of the Lamanite has only begun its dawning. A great work must still be done by the Lord’s people in order to fulfill all that the Book of Mormon prophets and the latter-day Church leaders have predicted. There is a prophetic bond that welds the destinies of the Lamanite nations and the Latter-day Saints together. Gentiles and Lamanites who hearken unto God have like promises. Referring to our day, when the restoration of the gospel would occur among the gentile peoples who would possess this land, the angel of the Lord told Nephi, “And it shall come to pass, that if the Gentiles shall hearken unto the Lamb of God in that day that he shall manifest himself unto them in word, and also in power, in very deed, unto the taking away of their stumbling blocks—

“And harden not their hearts against the Lamb of God, they shall be numbered among the seed of thy father; yea, they shall be numbered among the house of Israel; and they shall be a blessed people upon the promised land forever; they shall be no more brought down into captivity; and the house of Israel shall no more be confounded.” (1 Ne. 14:1–2.)

Dean L. Larsen is director of instructional materials for the Church and also serves as a Regional Representative of the Twelve.