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KnowWhy #186 - Why Did Samuel Say the Lord “Hated” the Lamanites?

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Abstract: During Samuel’s prophetic warning to the Nephites, he declared that the Lamanites were a people whom the Lord “hath hated.” While modern readers may find this language to be unusually harsh, in the ancient world the terms “love” and “hate” had less to do with emotion and more to do with a vassal’s covenantal relationship with a lord. Those who violated the covenant and were unfaithful to their Lord were described as “hated,” and those who were within the covenant and faithful were “loved.” When read in this context, Samuel’s statement is more understandable and consistently represents God’s loving character and personality.



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Why Did Samuel Say the Lord “Hated” the Lamanites?

*“But behold my brethren, the Lamanites hath he hated because their deeds have been evil continually, and this because of the iniquity of the tradition of their fathers.”
Helaman 15:4*

The Know

During Samuel’s prophetic warning to the Nephites, he declared that his own people, the Lamanites, were a people whom the Lord “hath hated because their deeds have been evil continually, and this because of the iniquity of the tradition of their fathers” (Helaman 15:4). Such a seemingly harsh pronouncement can be difficult for modern readers to grasp, but in ancient societies, according to Raymond Westbrook, “Terms of affect such as ‘love’ [and ‘hate’] are employed in servant-master/vassal-overlord relations.”¹

David Bokovoy explained:

Scholars in recent decades have shown that in the biblical world the word love often represented a covenantal devotion to one’s superior, while its opposite, namely hate, at times signified the status of an individual outside of this affiliation. While the connotation of these words for Westerners usually signifies an intense emotional charge, in the ancient Near East, love and hate often carried the aforementioned unique covenantal connotation.

Bokovoy concluded, “Thus, the words love and hate in the biblical world often carried a deliberate connotation of political alliance (or lack thereof).”²

Examples of this usage can be found throughout the Old and New Testaments.³ In the time of Solomon, for example, Hiram, who was the king of a neighboring state, was described as “a lover of David” (1 Kings 5:1), when Hiram was simply serving under David.⁴ Jesus taught, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24; 3 Nephi 13:24). This either/or scenario is clarified when God and mammon are thought of as rival suzerains making competing demands on a vassal.⁵ The vassal can only be loyal (show “love”) to one, which necessarily would betray (show “hate” for) his or her covenant with the other.⁶

As another example of this concept in the Old Testament, Bokovoy referenced the Ephraimites, of whom the Lord declared, “I hated them ... [and] I will love them

no more” because of “the wickedness of their doings” (Hosea 9:15). Bokovoy noted, “in the context of ancient Near Eastern treaties these acts were tantamount to a political insurrection,” thus, “the Ephraimites were removed from God’s covenantal house or family.”⁷

Samuel clearly placed the Lamanites—his own people—on the “hate” side of this divide, noting that their “deeds have been evil continually” due to the “iniquity of the tradition of their fathers” (Helaman 15:4). “Significantly,” remarked Bokovoy, “Samuel uses the verb hate in the same context in which it appears in the book of Hosea. God hated the Lamanites in a parallel manner to the way he hated the Ephraimites: their evil acts had placed them outside the boundary of his covenantal relationship.”⁸

The Why

Recognizing that the words love and hate were technical terms used in ancient covenantal expressions, and realizing that God’s hatred, in its scriptural contexts, was about loyal covenantal allegiance (or its opposite) provides important clarification for Samuel’s statement. As Bokovoy explained, “Samuel’s message relates perfectly to the context of ‘love’ and ‘hate’ in the ancient sense of alliance.”⁹

Moreover, when Samuel’s words are read in their entirety, it becomes clear that he was actually aiming to demonstrate God’s ultimate love toward the Lamanites, who were still people of covenant. Samuel described how “salvation hath come unto them” (Helaman 15:4), how they now “do observe to keep his commandments” (v. 5), how “they are striving with unwearied diligence” to preach the gospel (v. 6), how they “believe the holy scriptures” (v. 7), how they “are firm and steadfast in the faith” (v. 8), how “they have buried their weapons of war ... because of their faith in Christ” (v. 9), and how “the Lord shall bless them and prolong their days, notwithstanding their iniquity” (v. 10).

In short, the Lamanites had rejuvenated their covenant status with the Lord, and Samuel hoped that he could inspire the backsliding Nephites to do the same.

Ultimately, the Lord extends His love, loyalty, and allegiance to all who come unto Him. In fact, the Book of Mormon repeatedly emphasizes God’s eternal love and mercy for all His children, including the Lamanites.¹⁰ In

both the Old and New Worlds, Jesus commanded His disciples to be like God in doing likewise: “And behold it is written also, that thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy; But behold I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you and persecute you” (3 Nephi 12:43–44; cf. Matthew 6:43–44).

Thus, when taken in its proper ancient scriptural context, Samuel’s prophetic forewarning actually demonstrates the preeminence of God’s eternal love for all of His children—especially His willingness to forgive those who, like the Lamanites, have committed grave sins. As President Thomas S. Monson taught,

Actually, love is the very essence of the gospel, and Jesus Christ is our Exemplar. His life was a legacy of love. The sick He healed; the downtrodden He lifted; the sinner He saved. At the end the angry mob took His life. And yet there rings from Golgotha’s hill the words: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”—a crowning expression in mortality of compassion and love.¹¹

Further Reading

RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Treaties and Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 48–61, 128–129.

David E. Bokovoy, “Love vs. Hate: An Analysis of Helaman 15: 1–4,” *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 22, no. 2 (2002): 2–3.

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NOTES

1. Raymond Westbrook, “Patronage in the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, no. 2 (2005): 213. For more on suzerain/vassal relations in the Book of Mormon, see Book of Mormon Central, “What did It Mean to be ‘King Over All the Land’? (Alma 20:8),” *KnoWhy* 128 (June 23, 2016); Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Converted Lamanites Call Themselves Anti-Nephi-Lehies? (Alma 23:17),” *KnoWhy* 131 (June 28, 2016). RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Treaties and Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 48–61, 128–129.
2. David E. Bokovoy, “Love vs. Hate: An Analysis of Helaman 15:1–4,” *Insights: A Window on the Ancient World* 22, no. 2 (2002): 2. This was clarified in 1963, when an Ancient Middle Eastern scholar named William L. Moran was reading a text called the Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon. The Assyrian king Esarhaddon wanted to make sure that those ruling under him would continue to be loyal to his successor, Assurbanipal, so he said to them, “You shall love Assurbanipal as yourselves.” To Moran, this seemed like a strange thing to say. As biblical scholar James Kugel put it, “Love? Surely the vassals were not being told to become enamored of the future king’s winning personality! It seemed to Moran as if love here must have less to do with emotion than with loyalty, political loyalty.” See James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2007), 353.
3. See also Deuteronomy 10:12; 11:1, 13, 22; 30:19–20, which all equate love with serving God, just as the vassal serves the suzerain.
4. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 354.
5. See also Malachi 1:2–3, where the Hebrew word for “love” can be understood as referring to political alliance. Compare this to a similar statement in Moses 7:20 which makes the point clearer: “But the Lord said unto Enoch: Zion have I blessed, but the residue of the people have I cursed.” Those in the covenant are blessed; those outside the covenant are not.
6. Thus, an ancient ruler who was serving under Pharaoh could write to the Pharaoh and say, “My lord, just as I love the king my lord, so [does] the king of Nuhasse [love him, and] the king of Ni’i ... —all these kings are servants of my lord.” This letter directly associates loving the king with being a servant to the king. Another such letter describes a civil war by saying: “Behold the city! Half of it loves the sons of ‘Abd-Asirta, half of it [loves] my lord.” These examples demonstrate the close relationship between love and loyalty in antiquity. See Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, 354.
7. Bokovoy, “Love vs. Hate,” 2.
8. Bokovoy, “Love vs. Hate,” 2.
9. Bokovoy, “Love vs. Hate,” 2.
10. For a small sampling of this theme, see 1 Nephi 17:35; 2 Nephi 26:33; Jacob 3:5–8; Enos 1:13; Mosiah 2:21–22; Alma 26:23–26; Helaman 11:9–17; 3 Nephi 10:5–6; Mormon 6:17; Ether 12:33–34; Moroni 7:45–48.
11. Thomas S. Monson, “Love—the Essence of the Gospel,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 91, online at lds.org.