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## The Lamanites - A More Accurate Image

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# *The Lamanites—A More Accurate Image*

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16

Richard O. Cowan

**T**he Book of Mormon is sometimes perceived as portraying the Lamanites only as a cursed and loathsome people—the “bad guys.” This inaccurate perception may actually discourage some Latter-day Saints from wanting to share the Book of Mormon with Lamanites today. In reality, however, the book shows that at times the Lamanites were the more righteous people and predicts that their latter-day descendants have a glorious destiny.

## The Great Division

Almost from the beginning of the Book of Mormon record, there was a clear distinction between the righteousness of Nephi and Sam, and the rebellion of their older brothers Laman and Lemuel. For example, Lehi, their father, was concerned about “the stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel; for behold they did murmur in many things against their father, because he was a visionary man . . . [and] because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them” (1 Nephi 2:11–12). Nephi, on the other hand, recorded that he had “great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore,

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I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers” (1 Nephi 2:16).

When Lehi assigned his sons to return to Jerusalem to obtain the scriptural record on the brass plates, he lamented the continuing rebellion of Laman and Lemuel. Speaking to Nephi, he said: “Thy brothers murmur, saying it is a hard thing which I have required of them; but behold I have not required it of them, but it is a commandment of the Lord” (1 Nephi 3:5). Nephi’s response to this assignment was quite different: “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (v 7). After Laman had failed in his attempt to obtain the plates, he was ready to return empty-handed to his father in the wilderness. Nephi, on the other hand, declared with an oath that he would not return until he had accomplished their assigned mission (vv 11–15). Similarly, about eight years later when Nephi announced that he had been commanded to build a ship to cross the ocean, Laman and Lemuel called him a fool for thinking that he could accomplish such a thing. Here again Nephi demonstrated his faith, testifying that God, who had led the Israelites out of Egypt, could instruct him on how to build a ship (17:17–29, 51).

Both Lehi and Nephi foresaw a bleak future for Laman and his followers. In his dream of the tree of life, Lehi was gratified to note that his wife Sariah, together with his sons Sam and Nephi, responded favorably to his invitation to partake of the precious fruit, which grew on the tree. He was sorrowed, however, when he saw that Laman and Lemuel, “would not come unto me and partake of the fruit” (1 Nephi 8:14–18). Nephi was privileged to receive by revelation an interpretation of his father’s dream and also to see in vision events that would later transpire. Speaking of the descendants of Nephi’s brethren, an angel declared, “Behold these shall dwindle in unbelief” (1 Nephi 12:22). Nephi then comments, “I beheld . . . they



became a dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people, full of idleness, and all manner of abominations” (v 23).

Near the end of Lehi’s life, he blessed his sons and prophesied the consequences of their differing ways of life. Speaking to Laman and Lemuel, he regretted that, because of the hardness of their hearts, they would be “cut off and destroyed forever,” and that a curse would come upon them because they would be “led according to the will and captivity of the devil” (2 Nephi 1:17–18). To Jacob, his first son born in the wilderness while they were on their way to the promised land, he lamented: “In thy childhood thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of thy brethren.” Nevertheless, Lehi promised this righteous son, “Thy soul shall be blessed, and thou shalt dwell safely with thy brother, Nephi” (2:1, 3).

The actual division of Lehi’s descendants into two contending groups occurred nearly three decades after they had left Jerusalem. Sometime after their father died, Laman and Lemuel sought to kill Nephi, but he was warned by the Lord to flee from them. As a result, Nephi led his family, Zoram and Sam, and their families, his younger brothers Jacob and Joseph, his sisters, and all others who “believed in the warnings and the revelations of God” and fled into a new land which they named the Land of Nephi. They came to be known as “the people of Nephi” or “Nephites,” and they kept God’s commandments, worked industriously to construct a temple and other buildings, and prospered in their agricultural pursuits (2 Nephi 5:10–17; compare Alma 3:11).

The people who followed Laman and Lemuel “hardened their hearts against [God], that they had become like unto a flint” (2 Nephi 5:21). The Lord, therefore, caused a “sore cursing” to come upon them “because of their iniquity.” They suffered spiritual death as they were cut off from his presence and “because of their cursing which was upon them they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the



wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Nephi 5:21, 24). This group became known as “Lamanites.”

The Lord also placed upon these Lamanites the mark of a dark skin. Nephi recorded: “. . . that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness [Hebrew uses the same word for “blackness” and “darkness”] to come upon them” and promised that “they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquities.” The Lord warned that anyone who mingled with the wicked would also become subject to their curse (2 Nephi 5:21–23). The Lord wanted to protect the righteous “that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions which would prove their destruction.” In fact, any Nephite who did mingle with the Lamanites “did bring the same curse upon his seed” (Alma 3:8–9).

### The Lamanite “Dark Ages”

Throughout the next five centuries the image of the Lamanites as portrayed in the Book of Mormon was almost entirely negative. Jacob, for example, reported that all efforts to reclaim them were in vain, “for they delighted in wars and bloodshed” (Jacob 7:24). Enos likewise recorded that the Nephites’ efforts to convert the Lamanites to the gospel failed because the latter had become

wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people, full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents, and wandering about in the wilderness with a short skin girdle about their loins and their heads shaven; and their skill was in the bow, and in the cimeter, and the ax. And many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat; and they were continually seeking to destroy us. (Enos 1:20)

Jarom contrasted the Nephites, whose kings “were mighty men in the faith of the Lord,” with the Lamanites, who “loved murder and would drink the blood of beasts” (Jarom 1:6–7).

One exception to this otherwise negative image occurred when Jacob had to point out to some unrighteous Nephites:



The Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins, are more righteous than you. . . . Behold, their husbands love their wives, and their wives love their husbands; and their husbands and their wives love their children; and their unbelief and their hatred towards you is because of the iniquity of their fathers; wherefore, how much better are you than they, in the sight of your great Creator? (Jacob 3:5, 7)

## The Division Begins to Break Down

For centuries the Nephites and Lamanites had remained essentially separate groups. After 150 BC, however, the Book of Mormon records that increasing numbers defected from one group to the other.

A group of King Noah's wicked priests, who were Nephites led by Amulon, abducted and married Lamanite women and eventually joined that people (Mosiah 20:4–5; 23:30–35). The followers of Amlici, who had sought to become king of the Nephites, joined forces with the Lamanites (Alma 2). Later, Amalikhiah, who also had failed in his attempt to become the Nephites' king, led his followers over to the Lamanites and through murder and treachery became their king (Alma 46–47).

Other groups of Nephite dissenters included the Zoramites and Amalekites, who had been influenced by the anti-Christ Nehor. Often such apostate groups were even more hardened against the Nephites and their beliefs than were the Lamanites and typically brought evil among them (Alma 21:3). "And thus we can plainly discern," historian Mormon later observed, "that after a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened, and thus their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things" (24:30).

On the other side, however, between 90–77 BC, Ammon and his three brothers, sons of king Mosiah, went on a very successful mission among the Lamanites. Many among king Lamoni's people declared that "their hearts had been changed;



that they had no more desire to do evil. . . . And as many as did believe were baptized; and they became a righteous people, and they did establish a church among them” (Alma 19:33–35). “And thousands were brought to the knowledge of the Lord, yea, thousands were brought to believe in the traditions of the Nephites. . . . As many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away. For they became a righteous people; they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion, that they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren” (23:5–7). The record points out that the converts were “actual descendants of Laman and Lemuel,” while those who rejected the gospel generally came from groups that had dissented from the Nephites (24:29).

When the converted Lamanites were persecuted by the unconverted majority, Ammon led them to a refuge in the land of the Nephites. These converts came to be “distinguished for their zeal towards God, and also towards men; for they were perfectly honest and upright in all things; and they were firm in the faith of Christ, even unto the end” (Alma 27:27).

Two thousand of their sons later became a most outstanding example of faithful youth. The prophet Helaman led these young Lamanites into battle in defense of their new homeland. “They were exceedingly valiant for courage, and also for strength and activity; but behold, this was not all—they were men who were true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted. Yea, they were men of truth and soberness, for they had been taught to keep the commandments of God and to walk uprightly before him” (Alma 53:20–21). As they entered battle, “they did not fear death; and they did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives; yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them” (56:47).

A particularly dangerous situation developed for the Nephites in about 35 BC when many of their numbers defected to the Lamanites who were preparing an attack (Hel 4:4, 11–13).



With the help of these dissenters, the Lamanites were able to capture even the Nephite homeland of Zarahemla. Recognizing that iniquity was the true cause of the Nephite crisis, Nephi and Lehi, the sons of Helaman, launched an effort to convert their own people to the gospel. Beginning in the land Bountiful at the north, they preached among all the Nephites and eventually to the Lamanites who were still occupying Zarahemla. As the people responded and repented, prosperity returned (Hel 4:14–15).

In 30 BC, Nephi and Lehi next turned their attention to the main body of Lamanites in the land of Nephi, and thousands were converted. Even Nephite dissenters who had joined the Lamanites were converted back to their own people “to repair unto them the wrongs which they had done” (Hel 5:16–19). As both the Nephites and the Lamanites began living the gospel more fully, peace prevailed and barriers to communication between the two peoples disappeared (6:7). These conditions undoubtedly allowed an even further mixing of the Nephites and Lamanites.

### Nephites and Lamanites Swap Roles

Following the preaching of Nephi and Lehi, most of the Lamanites had become converted, “insomuch that their righteousness did exceed that of the Nephites” (Hel 6:1). In fact, “there were many of the Nephites who had become hardened and impenitent and grossly wicked, insomuch that they did reject the word of God” (v 2). Significantly, Lamanites went down to the Nephite homeland in Zarahemla “and did declare unto the people of the Nephites the manner of their conversion, and did exhort them to faith and repentance. . . . And many did preach with exceedingly great power and authority, unto the bringing down many of them into the depths of humility, to be the humble followers of God and the Lamb” (vv 4–5).

In the midst of the prosperity which followed this period, many of the people became so attached to worldly things that



they were even willing to kill for material gain. Consequently, the murderous band established by Kishkumen and Gadianton flourished among both the Nephites and Lamanites.

When the Lamanites found that there were robbers among them they were exceedingly sorrowful; and they did use every means in their power to destroy them off the face of the earth . . . the Lamanites did hunt the band of robbers of Gadianton; and they did preach the word of God among the more wicked part of them, insomuch that this band of robbers was utterly destroyed from among the Lamanites. (Hel 6:20, 37)

The Nephites, on the other hand, tolerated the robbers and “did build them up and support them” allowing them to spread their influence throughout the land, and even to “obtain the sole management of the government” (Hel 6:38–39).

The record states that in 6 BC “the Nephites did still remain in wickedness, yea, in great wickedness, while the Lamanites did observe strictly to keep the commandments of God, according to the law of Moses” (Hel 13:1). It was in this setting that the Lord sent Samuel, a Lamanite, to call the Nephites in the land of Zarahemla to repentance. Although he expounded gospel principles and even prophesied the imminent advent of Jesus Christ into mortality, the Nephites rejected Samuel and he barely escaped with his life. While some casual readers of the Book of Mormon may assume that Samuel was an exception, it is clear from what Samuel says in his prophecy to the Nephites that he was just one of many examples of reversed roles among the Nephites and Lamanites. Samuel had declared that “the more part of them [the Lamanites] are in the path of their duty, and they do walk circumspectly before God . . . and they are striving with unwearied diligence that they may bring the remainder of their brethren to the knowledge of the truth.” Samuel then testified that as many as had been brought to repentance were “firm and steadfast in the faith” (15:5–8).



## The Nephites and Lamanites Join Forces

Even following the sign of Christ's birth, wickedness increased among the Nephites and the Gadianton band expanded their power. In response to the robbers' threat, those who were righteous both among the Nephites and the Lamanites found it necessary to unite in AD 13 "for the safety of their lives" (3 Nephi 2:12). The righteous Lamanites came to be numbered among the Nephites: "And their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites" (vv 14–15). Thus, there was an even further erosion of the distinction between the descendants of Laman and Nephi.

As materialism increased, however, there continued to be evidence that the righteousness of the Lamanites exceeded that of the Nephites. As a result of class distinctions based on wealth and opportunities for learning, by AD 30 "the church was broken up in all the land *save it were among a few of the Lamanites* who converted unto the true faith" (3 Nephi 6:12–14; emphasis added). Hence, the righteous who were preserved during the three days of darkness at the time of the Savior's crucifixion would have included many of the righteous descendants of Laman and Lemuel as well as of Nephi and Sam.

Following the Savior's marvelous visit to his "other sheep" in America, the people lived in peace and harmony for nearly two centuries. During this "golden age," any remaining distinctions between the former Nephites and Lamanites vanished. "The people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, *both Nephites and Lamanites*, and there were no contentions and disputations among them. . . . And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free. . . . *Neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites*; but they were . . . one" (4 Nephi 1:2–3, 17).



## “Lamanites” and “Nephites” Reappear

Unfortunately, this period of peace and unity lasted less than two hundred years after the visit of Christ. At that time “a small part of the people . . . revolted from the church and [*took upon them*] the name of Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land” (4 Nephi 1:20; emphasis added). By AD 231 there arose a people “*who were called the Nephites, and they were true believers in Christ . . . [and] they who rejected the gospel were called Lamanites.*” Those who rejected the gospel “did not dwindle in unbelief, but they did wilfully rebel against the gospel of Christ” (vv 36–38; emphasis added). Note that the record does not say the descendants of Laman once again rebelled, but rather that those who revolted from the church *chose* to call themselves “Lamanites.” Thus we see that the new “Nephites” and “Lamanites” were distinguished not by pedigree or genealogy, but rather according to whether or not they accepted and lived the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

By AD 367, Mormon recorded: “It is impossible for the tongue to describe, or for man to write a perfect description of the horrible scene of the blood and carnage which was among the people, both of the Nephites and of the Lamanites; and every heart was hardened, so that they delighted in the shedding of blood continually.” He was appalled to report that the Lamanites even sacrificed women and children to idols (Mormon 4:11, 14). Nevertheless, the mark of the dark skin had not yet returned to the wicked. Mormon noted that the remnant of this people would “become a dark, a filthy, and a loathsome people, beyond the description of that which ever hath been amongst us, yea, even that which hath been among the Lamanites” (5:15).

By the time of the final battles at Cumorah in AD 385, the “Nephites” had become so wicked that they were destroyed as a nation. Mormon lamented: “O ye fair ones, how could ye have departed from the ways of the Lord! O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive



you! Behold, if ye had not done this, ye would not have fallen” (Mormon 6:17–18).

Who, then, were the “Lamanites” that survived the battle at Cumorah? Because during previous centuries there had been a thorough mixing of Nephites and Lamanites, the survivors were descendants of both Nephi and Laman. Even during the closing days of the Nephite nation, many “deserted over unto the Lamanites” (Moroni 9:24). Hence, although the survivors were identified with “Lamanites,” their heritage was really broader than that of the original Lamanites. Their background included righteous Nephites, courageous Lamanites—such as Helaman’s two thousand warriors and the prophet named Samuel—as well as wicked descendants of Laman. Elder Spencer W. Kimball explained:

The Lamanites are a mixture of many lines. Undoubtedly, there is in their veins the blood of Nephi, Joseph, and Jacob, as well as that of Laman, Lemuel and Sam, and also that of the Mulekites of Judah. . . . The name “Indian” was given to the early possessors of the Americas by Columbus. As they intermarried with the invading European conquerors and nations were formed, they became Mexicans, Peruvians, Bolivians, Guatemalans, and others. But the correct name for *all* the descendants of Lehi and Ishmael is “Lamanite.” This is an *honorable* name. It was the Lord who so designated them, and every descendant of Lehi should proudly say, “I am a Lamanite and I am proud of my heritage.” (“The Lamanites,” 1–2; compare Alma 45:13–14; D&C 3:16–18; 10:48)

## The Lamanites’ Destiny and Our Responsibility

Contrary to the opinion of those who may have read the Book of Mormon only superficially or who have not read it at all and formed opinions based on hearsay, it *does not* portray a consistently negative image of the Lamanites. It *does* suggest a glorious future for this choice people. Samuel the Lamanite testified: “The promises of the Lord have been extended to our brethren, the Lamanites; and notwithstanding the many afflictions which they shall have, and notwithstanding they shall be driven to and fro upon the face of the earth, . . . they shall again



be brought to the true knowledge, which is the knowledge of their Redeemer, and their great and true shepherd, and be numbered among his sheep” (Hel 15:12–13; see also 3 Nephi 5:21–23).

Significantly Latter-day Saints shall have a role in assisting the Lamanites to achieve their destiny. Nephi spoke of the time when the Gentiles would take the Book of Mormon to the remnant of his people:

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. 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 pure and a delightsome people. (2 Nephi 30:5–6)

The Lord likewise reminded Joseph Smith that the Lamanites would obtain the

knowledge of a Savior . . . through the testimony of their fathers. . . . For this very purpose are these plates preserved, which contain these records—that the promises of the Lord might be fulfilled, which he made to his people; and that the Lamanites might come to the knowledge of their fathers, and that they might know the promises of the Lord, and that they may believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ, and be glorified through faith in his name. (D&C 3:16–20)

The Savior declared that “the Lamanites shall blossom as the rose” (49:24). To accomplish this, he has commanded the Latter-day Saints to “go unto the Lamanites and preach my gospel unto them; and inasmuch as they receive thy teachings thou shalt cause my church to be established among them.” (28:8)

Over the years, Church leaders have emphasized the Saints’ responsibility to the Lamanites. “The Lamanites must be brought into the covenant; they must receive the Gospel from us,” declared George Q. Cannon. “We must be their ‘nursing



fathers and their nursing mothers” (Journal of Discourses 22:282). President John Taylor insisted:

The work of the Lord among the Lamanites must not be postponed, if we desire to retain the approval of God. Thus far we have been content simply to baptize them and let them run wild again, but this must continue no longer; the same devoted effort, the same care in instructing, the same organization of priesthood must be introduced and maintained among the house of Lehi as amongst those of Israel gathered from Gentile nations. As yet, God has been doing all, and we comparatively nothing. He has led many of them to us, and they have been baptized, and now we must instruct them further, and organize them into churches with proper presidencies, attach them to our stakes, organization, etc. In one word, treat them exactly, in these respects, as we would and do treat our white brethren. (247)

Speaking of our responsibility to the Lamanites as president of the Church, Spencer W. Kimball asserted, “The Lord’s work in these latter days can in no wise be complete until these children of great promise are brought back into the fold” (“Our Paths” 4).

Elder Delbert L. Stapley recalled how President George Albert Smith had re-emphasized the Church’s responsibility to the Lamanites declaring that, “The day is here for the gospel to go to the Lamanites, and we must never fail them again.” He also noted that President David O. McKay had affirmed that “God would hold us accountable if we failed.” Elder Stapley then emphasized that *only we* “have the authentic record which furnishes the true origin of the American Indians, their history and God’s work and gospel teachings among them. Great are the promises of the Lord unto the Indians, which spiritual blessings,” he stressed, “this people [the Latter-day Saints] alone hold the keys, rights, and powers to grant and bestow upon them” (Stapley 417).

In 1947, Elder Spencer W. Kimball envisioned the Lamanites’ glorious future. He saw them as leaders in business, law, government, the arts, literature, and in the Church. “I saw the Church growing in rapid strides and I saw wards and stakes organized. I saw stakes by the hundreds [and] a temple” (Van



Orden 3). The first truly “Lamanite” stake was organized in Mexico City in 1961, and by 1989, there were 100 stakes in Mexico alone (Hart 3). In 1983 a temple was dedicated there, and within a few years one half dozen temples were opened in predominantly Lamanite areas of Latin America and Polynesia. In 1990, 58% of the Church’s 330,877 converts were baptized in Latin America.

The Lamanites truly are a people of destiny. When Church members more accurately appreciate the image and more fully understand the teachings of the Book of Mormon concerning the Lamanites, they should not feel the least hesitancy or embarrassment about sharing this book and its message with the descendants of these people. On the contrary, they should be eager to fulfill their responsibility to do so.

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