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Conversions Through the Book of Mormon - XI. The Indians and the Mormons

Author(s): John Henry Evans

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JOHN HENRY EVANS

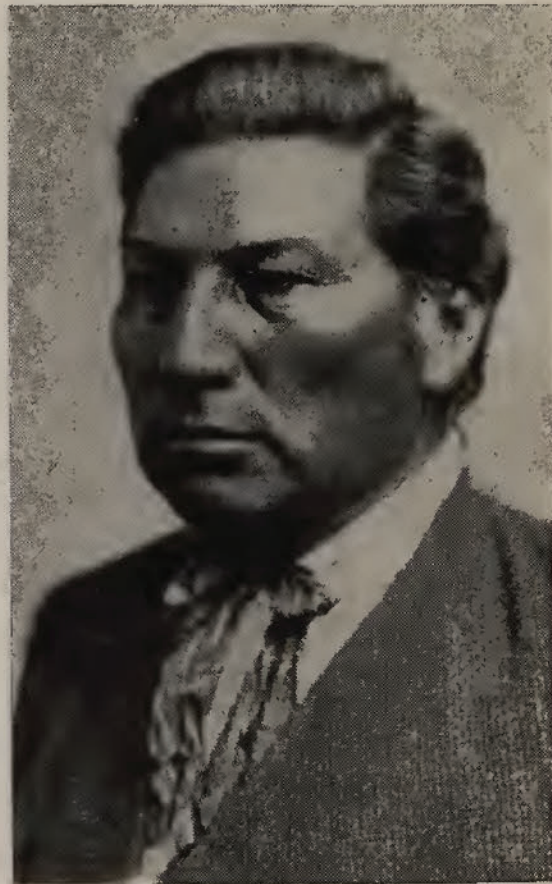
XI. *The Indians and the Mormons*

Thus far in this series we have been concerned with the way in which individuals singly have been influenced by their reading of the Book of Mormon. In some cases they have read that volume and have been led to join the Church; in other cases they have been members of the Church, and their faith has been established on a firmer foundation or their character has been influenced for good by what they have read.

In the present article we shall consider the influence of the Nephite Record in determining the relationship between the Church of Christ in our time and the Indians, or Lamanites.

On the whole the relationship between the white man and the red man in this country has been anything but satisfactory to either party. This is to put it mildly.

When Columbus reached the shores of the New World, he discovered that the land was already occupied by a race different from his own. And when explorers, early and late, penetrated to various sections of what is now the United States, they found natives everywhere in possession. From the east



A SHOSHONE INDIAN

sea to the west sea and from Canada on the north to the Gulf of Mexico on the south the natives were owners of the land.

As soon as Europeans began to arrive in the New World, they came in contact, of course, with the Indians. A superior race, as they felt, they had no hesitancy at all in taking possession of whatever lands they wanted, regardless of the rights which the natives believed they had

by prior occupancy. This was so not only on the eastern shores of the country, but as far west as the Indian land extended.

Without entering into the controversy as to the relative merits of a barbarous and a civilized people, it is clear that each claimed certain rights — the one of superior use and the other of original occupation. In some instances—as, for example, in Manhattan, where a paltry sum was paid for the land—the white man deemed it necessary to recognize the rights of the natives, but in most cases those rights were altogether ignored.

After the formation of the American nation, the Government seemed to feel that the Indians should be compensated for their ownership of the land. And so treaties were entered into between the two parties. But what happened to those treaties?

The treaty of Wayne, in 1809, was decidedly one-sided. By it the natives "were compelled" (Muzzy's phrase) to part with three million acres of land in Indiana. At Ghent the English and the Americans quarreled over Indian lands without even a recognition of any Indian claims. Hence the agreement only laid the groundwork for future disagreements — those between President Jackson and the Creeks, for instance. In this latter case we have the spectacle of a State nullifying a treaty entered into with the Indians by the Federal government. Jackson, called "Sharp Knife" by the natives, persuaded the natives to go beyond the Mississippi River. But they were

driven farther west later, when the white men became numerous and powerful enough to do the driving. And, later still, reservations were set aside for the Indians by the Government, to be supervised by agents who grew fat at their expense. It is a shameful chapter in our history.

That, however, is not the whole story. The attitude of the white man toward the red man was one of enmity and cruelty on both sides. In the eyes of the American generally the Indian was but an animal, to be fought with all the weapons at hand. On what is known as the "Frontier" the Indian was regarded as no better than the wild animals that roamed the country, and as subject as these to the gun of the hunter. Men would as soon kill an Indian as a wolf or a coyote or a bear. That was how precious the native was looked upon. And Indians were shot to death by the frontiersmen by the hundreds, and the Indians, with their inferior weapons, retaliated but ineffectively.

When the Book of Mormon made its appearance in English dress, it opened the eyes of believers in it to a new view of the American natives. They were people, children of God, and therefore precious in His sight. Let us look at this thought for a moment, as the early Latter-day Saints viewed it.

According to the Book of Mormon, a small colony of Jews left Jerusalem about six hundred years before Christ and, under the divine direction, arrived in what we now know as America. Here they divided into two sections, after a quarrel

between the brothers, which could not be patched up. The one group called themselves Nephites, taking the name of their leader; the other went by the name of Lamanites, so called for their chief, Laman. The Lamanites, it seems, were more numerous at the very beginning than the Nephites. Moreover, the Ne-

not, however, until after the former had reached a high degree of civilization and culture, and not until after Jesus appeared to them after the Resurrection. The present Indians, therefore, are the descendants of Lehi and his friends, who made the first settlements in the years cited. They are therefore Israelites,



A GROUP OF INDIANS, CHIEF WASHAKIE IN CENTER

phites, having a written language and the Hebrew scriptures up to that time, were a civilized people, while the other group, lacking these means of cultivation, became a barbarous people, living on raw meat, the fruit of the chase.

As the rift between these two people widened, they had frequent wars. In one of these wars, which occurred after the coming of Christ, the Nephites were all but wiped out by their barbarous neighbors. But

and their ancestors were once "a white and delightful people." The Book of Mormon, according to this view, is a record of both the Nephites and the Lamanites, particularly of the Nephites, mainly on the religious side of their life.

As may be imagined, this fact made a deep impression on the minds of the early Mormons. Besides exciting their interest in an altogether new story of the origin of the American natives, the book awakened

their missionary zeal. Here were millions of people not only in need of conversion, but challenging them to change their lives from barbarism to Christianity. Besides, with this great book in their hands, the missionaries should be able to make conversions easily, far more easily than in the case of the Gentiles who had been viewing these people as mere animals.

It is not at all surprising, then, that the first missionary expedition made by the Mormons was to the Indians across the western border. In the fall of 1830, only a few months after the organization of the Church, Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Ziba Peterson, and Peter Whitmer, Jr., went through Ohio, Indiana, and Missouri, mostly on foot, to the natives over the river, with the intention of working with them religiously and teaching them the doctrines of the new book, their book.

That this mission proved a failure, was not their fault, but the fault rather of the Indian agent there. He said that the missionaries might incite the natives to rebellion by enlarging their ego with the idea that they were descended from important people. And so he forbade the Elders from working among his wards.

Subsequent efforts, however, to convert the natives, were more successful. When the Latter-day Saints, under the leadership of Brigham Young, entered the very heart of the Indian country, there was a very pressing need to do something toward conciliating them. And so, very early in the history of Utah,

missionaries were sent among the natives, to educate them, to teach them agriculture, and to induce them to join the Church.

In 1874, according to Andrew Jensen, "one hundred Goshute Indians were baptized by the Indian interpreter, William Lee, in Deep Creek, Tooele County, Utah. Hundreds of Indians were subsequently baptized at other places, and there was a general religious movement among the Lamanites." And in the following year, according to the same authority, "Bishop Culbert King baptized eighty-five Indians of Kanosh's band, at Kanosh, Millard county." Before this about two thousand natives had joined the Church. And in Idaho Amos Wright converted more than three hundred Indians, among them the famous chief, Washakie, for whom a very lively branch of the Church was named near Malad, in that State. It is officered entirely by Lamanites, or Indians.

Brigham Young's policy toward the Indians was formed around this conception of the native races, that they were Israelites, as were his own people.

Under this view he sent such men as Jacob Hamblin and Ira Hatch, to teach them the arts of reading, writing, and agriculture. A stable, industrial life, he believed, would enable them to get along better with the whites. It was under him, too, that so many of them were brought into the fold.

As a result of this humane policy toward the Indians the relations be-

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