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The Lamanites

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Abstract: The Book of Mormon devotes a major part of its account to discussing the Lamanite nation. It is a mistaken idea that all the indigenous groups of people who were found in America following the landing of Christopher Columbus were Lamanites. A testimony is not based on the external but internal evidences of the Book of Mormon.

The Lamanites

President Antoine R. Ivins

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THE major part of the Book of Mormon is devoted to an account of the hand-dealing of the Lord with Lehi and his family whom he saw fit to lead out of Jerusalem before its destruction, bringing them to the land which we now know as America. We are told that at the time of departure the family of Lehi consisted of his wife Sariah and four sons: Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi. Lehi was warned in a dream of the impending destruction of Jerusalem. To save himself and his family he would have to leave Jerusalem and follow the leadership of the Lord into a new land.

It appears that Lehi was a man of considerable means which he would not be able to carry with him. One may safely assume that he did not relish the thought of abandoning the accumulations of his lifetime, but he was a man of extreme faith and set about at once the preparations for his journey. I imagine he little realized the extent of the journey as it finally developed, or that he had much of an idea of the privations which they must all undergo. It seems that his two oldest sons had absolutely no pleasure in the thought of leaving their belongings behind. They began to murmur and complain from the beginning, in every possible way voicing their lack of faith in their father and their younger brother, Nephi, whom, because of his very great faith, the Lord later chose to

recognize as the leader of the family. At no time during their lives did Laman and Lemuel show complete respect and loyalty to either their father or to Nephi. Their opposition ultimately took the form of open rebellion and warfare. As the people grew in numbers over the years, Laman and Lemuel, Sam and Nephi, and the others who left Jerusalem went the way of all flesh, but the strife engendered by Laman and Lemuel kept reappearing until the great final battle at Cumorah which resulted in the extermination of the faithful element, who had come to be called Nephites, while the rebellious and unfaithful had come to be called Lamanites. I feel that we are not justified in believing that all of the people who rallied to the banner of the Lamanites were actually descended from Laman and Lemuel or that all who called themselves Nephites were the actual descendants of Nephi, Sam, or other faithful sons of Lehi. The term *Nephite* soon came to mean the faithful, while the term *Lamanite* meant unfaithful people.

After the battle of Cumorah, the Lamanites were left in control, and it appears that there was but one faithful man left of the Nephites. To him we are indebted for the Book of Mormon, which tells us this story.

Because of this account, we are in the habit of thinking of all of the indigenous groups who were upon the land of the Americas when

Christopher Columbus landed here, as Lamanites. I wonder if we are justified in this assumption.

FROM the time of the depositing in the Hill Cumorah of the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated to the discovery of America by Columbus, as many years passed as were covered from the landing of Lehi's family in America to the exterminating battle at Cumorah. During this time great changes may have taken place in the populations of the Americas and among these changes may have been migrations of other groups to America. The Book of Mormon tells us of the Jaredites, the Mulekites, and Lehi's family. The Mulekites lived for years near to the Nephites before they were discovered by the latter. There may have been other peoples whom the Nephites never discovered living then on this great land. Or, as suggested, others may have come later. The very wide differentiation in the languages of the native races of the Americas would seem to indicate this possibility.

These thoughts, in no way, disturb my faith in the Book of Mormon. My testimony as to its truth is not based on external evidence, but has grown out of a study of its teachings. Its great evidence is internal rather than external. A careful, prayerful study of its message should give any sincere reader and student a testimony of its truth. Whether all of these indigenous peoples were descended from Lehi matters little. For the purposes of this short article we shall refer to them all jointly as Lamanites.

When the Americas were discovered by Cristobal Colon, there existed upon this land very extensive groups of people, some of whom had attained a very high degree of advancement. The most progressive of them were in Mexico, Central America, and northern South America. They had not only reached high development, but they had accumulated very great wealth in gold and silver, which the Spaniards, at once, undertook to transfer into the coffers of their rulers, making Spain then the wealthiest nation of the world. There were two great centers of civilization—one, Mexico City, and the other in Peru. The Aztecs ruled Mexico and Central America, while the Incas ruled Peru and lands to the southward. Both centers were extremely wealthy. At the time of conquest the Peruvians were not using a written language, but the Aztecs of Mexico had very voluminous records, written on a sort of parchment made from the fiber of the maguey plant, which the Spaniards deliberately destroyed. The people of both Mexico and Peru were great workers of gold and silver, examples of which are presently available for study in the museum of Mexico and other places. They also did excellent weaving, the Peruvians possibly excelling in this art. Astronomy was not unknown to them. The calendar of Mexico was actually superior to that brought them by the Spaniards.

Not so glamorous, but worthy of mention, was a development in the eastern part of the United States. Here a confederacy of several nations existed and had made considerable advancement. Under white

domination each of these civilizations has either disappeared or become decadent.

THE inspired prophets of Book of Mormon times felt constrained to make very great promises

to the Lamanites, contingent upon their changing their ways and coming to God in faithful obedience to his teaching. Because of these promises and the charge which has been given to us to warn the entire



Photograph by Willard Luce

CLIFF DWELLING, MESA VERDE NATIONAL PARK, COLORADO

world, we have a very peculiar interest in all of these peoples. The Church was but an infant when the first mission was sent to the "Lamanites." The indications are that

it would have been highly successful had our missionaries been allowed free access to the Indians. Opposition raised its head then and has continued to do so. The net re-



Photograph by Willard Luce

A YOUNG NAVAJO SQUAW FROM BLANDING, UTAH

sult of our missionary work has not yet been very great. The greatest number of conversions has been made among the Mexicans who, when properly approached, listen

freely and make excellent members of the Church. At present we have two missions among the Mexicans, the Spanish-American mission in the United States and the Mexican



Photograph by Willard Luce

CLEMENT YOUNGEAGLE, PUEBLO INDIAN

Mission in Mexico and Central America. There are two other Spanish-speaking missions and one where Portuguese is spoken, but they do not deal directly with indigenous peoples. Most of the work which has been done with the Mexican people has been during my own lifetime. You will see by this that it is not very old.

Work among other native races has been very spasmodic. At different times and in different sections of the country Indians have been made members of the Church, usually not in large numbers. I have been told, but have never verified the statement, that in early days in St. George, where I was born, as many as two hundred Indians were baptized, but I cannot remember ever seeing an Indian in one of our sacrament meetings up to the time I left St. George in 1896. They seem to have been baptized and left pretty much to their own devices. Within the last few years this work in the stakes and missions has been stimulated. It is only a short time ago that the Navajo-Zuni Mission was organized. It has now grown into the Southwest Indian Mission and is operating under its second mission president. The results have been even better than was originally expected. When it is remembered that the missionaries do not learn the languages of the Indians and have to work through interpreters, the results seem all the more remarkable. It is a thrilling thing to observe the effects of the gospel in the lives of these people when they accept it. Because they have been an underprivileged people for so many years,

the transition is more apparent than among other people whose living plane has been higher. It is interesting to note the enthusiasm of the men and women who are called to labor among them. Although it is a difficult assignment, both the young men and young women enter into it with great devotion and become sincerely attached to the people they work with.

WHEN one considers the little that has been accomplished and the fact that south of the United States there must be more than one hundred millions of these people, to say nothing of the numbers in the United States and Canada, the problem becomes almost appalling. Great promises have been made to these people in the Book of Mormon and, when realized, they will be the result of great changes in their manner of life. These changes should come through the observance of the principles of the gospel which must be taken to them by the Priesthood bearers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Let us not fail them in their extremity.

I said our greatest success was had among the Mexican people, but we have baptized far more people among the Islanders of the Pacific. My feeling, however, is that while they most likely are of the house of Lehi, they are more likely to be of the faithful branch than of the other. One writer whom I have read, who seems to have made a very extensive study of those peoples (Miles Poindexter in his book *The Ayar-Incas*), says that the people who ruled in New Zealand were



Photograph by Ray Loomis

NAVAJO FAMILY



Photograph by Willard Luce

NAVAJO BABIES

originally a large white race. Tradition tells us of an earlier native race, far inferior to the whites, who inhabited New Zealand. Poindexter thinks that the present dark skin of the Polynesians may have come from intermarriage with these smaller, darker people. That may possibly account for the color problem. It seems to be a pretty well established fact that both Samoa and Hawaii were settled from New Zealand. From these and other rather limited studies which I have

made, I am inclined, especially when I note the avidity with which these people absorb the gospel, to the belief that they should be called Nephites. Their size, and their faith indicate that they are Hebraic, and their traditions would indicate that they left the Americas before the great final battle and even before the advent of Christ among the Nephites. We have come far more nearly complying with our obligation towards them than towards the indigenous mainland groups.

Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me (3 Nephi, 9:14).