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## The People of Canaan: A New Reading of Moses 7

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# THE PEOPLE OF CANAAN: A NEW READING OF MOSES 7

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Adam Stokes

**Abstract:** *Moses 7 is one of the most famous passages in all of Restoration scripture. It is also one of the most problematic in regard to its description of the people of Canaan as black (v. 8) and as a people who were not preached to by the patriarch Enoch (v. 12). Later there is also a mention of “the seed of Cain,” who also are said to be black (v. 22). This article examines the history of interpretation of Moses 7 and proposes an alternative understanding based on a close reading of the text. In contrast to traditional views, it argues that the reason for Enoch’s not preaching to the people of Canaan stems not from any sins the people had committed or from divine disfavor but from the racial prejudice of the other sons of Adam, the “residue of the people” (vv. 20, 22) who ironically are the only ones mentioned as “cursed” in the text (v. 20). In looking at the implications of this passage for the present-day Restoration, this article notes parallels between Enoch’s hesitancy and various attitudes toward black priesthood ordination throughout the Restoration traditions, including the Community of Christ where the same type of hesitancy existed. This article argues that, rather than being indicative of divine disfavor toward persons of African descent, this tendency is a response to the racist attitudes of particular eras, whether the period of the Old Testament patriarchs or the post-bellum American South. Nevertheless, God can be seen as working through and within particular contexts and cultures to spread the gospel to all of Adam’s children irrespective of race.*

**[Editor’s Note:** We are pleased to publish this article from an author outside The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but from a related Restoration faith tradition. Adam Stokes was formerly with the Community of Christ and currently is an ordained Apostle and Elder in The Church of Jesus Christ with the Elijah Message—The Assured Way

of the Lord. Adam notes that “while the Book of Moses is not officially part of my church’s canon, my own personal beliefs still accept the Joseph Smith translation/*Inspired Version* as inspired and sacred scripture and I read it often.” We are grateful for the faithful insights Elder Stokes kindly provides for the Book of Moses.]

Moses 7 is one of the most beautiful passages in the entire scriptural corpus of the restored Church of Jesus Christ. Its description of the heavenly Zion, a place of perfect peace where God himself dwells — in opposition of the earthly domain full of violence and bloodshed — is a powerful attestation to the necessity of God’s presence in the world and the consequences of rejecting God in our lives. The significance of Moses 7 is seen not only in its inclusion in the Pearl of Great Price but also in its inclusion in the Community of Christ’s (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (Doctrine & Covenants 36). It is one of only two texts from the Prophet’s Old Testament revisions included in the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants, the other being Moses 1.

At the same time, the history of interpretation of Moses 7, in conjunction with material from the Book of Abraham (both of which are part of the Church’s standard works), has been highly problematic within Latter-day Saint circles. Of particular concern is the text’s treatment of the issue of race and the question of whether skin pigmentation is a sign of divine disfavor. Such theories have, fortunately, been officially disavowed by the Church,<sup>1</sup> but questions remain about the meaning of some passages of scripture once used to justify disavowed theories or racist folk doctrine. In contrast to the Book of Mormon (e.g., 2 Nephi 5:21) where the first part of the construct phrase “skin of blackness” has a semantic range that does not necessarily imply physical pigmentation due to genetics,<sup>2</sup> black ethnicity (and, consequently, pigmentation) appears to be linked to a specific group, or perhaps two groups (the “seed of Cain” and “people of Canaan”) in Moses 7.

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1. “Race and the Priesthood,” Gospel Topics Essays, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016 (first published 2014), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>.

2. See, for example, Ethan Sproat, “Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 138–65, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1572&context=jbms>, and Gerrit M. Steenblik, “Demythologizing the Lamanites’ ‘Skin of Blackness,’” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* (forthcoming).

First, I must acknowledge that the Hebrew names of Cain and Canaan have different roots and thus give no evidence of a linguistic relationship based on the apparent similarity in the names. The “seed of Cain” and the people of Canaan may also be widely separated in time, though both groups seem to be antediluvian, having no known connection with the much later Canaanites of the Old Testament or Canaan, the son of Ham. But as presented in Moses 7, it is possible that the two groups are related. In Moses 7:4, we see the Lord showing Enoch a vision of “the world for the space of many generations” in which he sees the people of Canaan, who are despised by others after having a “blackness” come upon them (Moses 7:6–8). Later, in v. 22, Enoch sees the “seed of Cain” and notes that they “had not place among” the other sons of Adam, “for the seed of Cain were black.” This may indicate that these two groups are related, though whatever the blackness was that “came upon” the people of Canaan suggests they did not originally possess that blackness. The existence or absence of a relationship between the two groups does not affect the overall argument presented in this paper. In any case, as discussed later, both groups are identified as “black” and appear *not* to be under the same criteria for judgment as the other children of Adam to whom the Gospel was preached and who, consequently, had no excuse for their rejection of it.

One could argue that the seed of Cain and the people of Canaan in Moses 7 are so far removed from our own history that it is difficult to identify them and their descendants with any ethnic group currently in existence. However, the material in Moses 7 has been influential for common views in the Church on matters of race and, more specifically, for how the Church has understood the status of persons of African descent related to its ministry, and thus enhanced understanding of the issues in Moses 7 could be helpful to us today.

The history of interpretation of these verses in Moses 7 and other relevant passages of our scriptures has been noted and discussed extensively by those both within and outside of the Church. These include Arnaud Mauss’ groundbreaking work, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage*, the recent 2018 edition of Newell Bringhurst’s *Saints, Slaves and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism*, and Richard Abanes’ explicitly polemical, anti-church work *One Nation under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church*.<sup>3</sup> As these researchers have noted, for well over

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3. A discussion of Smith’s alleged initial rationale for translating the Book of Abraham and its connection to uncovering the origins of the black African race

a century, many defenders of the Church turned to Moses 7 and other sacred texts to argue for persons of African descent as a “cursed race” and, consequently, unworthy and unable to receive the priesthood.<sup>4</sup> Even post-1978, with President Kimball’s revelation on the priesthood, the text has continued to provoke discussion both among adherents to the faith as well as opponents and critics. This paper will provide an alternative reading of Moses 7 which in some ways complements and counters standard Latter-day Saint views. Four arguments are made in this paper:

1. Moses 7 both reflects and challenges the prevailing understanding of race and ethnic prejudice in the ancient

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is found in Richard Abanes’ extensive (though clearly biased and anti-Latter-day Saint) account of the history of the church. See Richard Abanes, *One Nation Under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003), 449–58. For more scholarly and balanced treatments regarding the subject of race and the Book of Abraham, see Arnaud Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), and Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism* (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1981).

4. I am referring here only to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and several more fundamentalist offshoots who trace their teachings to Brigham Young. Some Book of Mormon belief traditions, including the Community of Christ, Bickertonites, and Fettingites, ordained persons of black descent to the priesthood from their inception.

For a discussion of the history of black membership and participation within the Community of Christ, see, Roger D. Launius, *Invisible Saints: A Study of Black Americans in the Reorganized Church* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1988); Mark A. Scherer, “From Reaction to Proaction?: African-Americans in the History of the Reorganized Church,” *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 20 (2000): 111–32.

It should also be noted that several men of African descent were ordained to the priesthood in Joseph Smith’s lifetime. Benjamin E. Park deals with this phenomenon extensively in his book, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020). Park focuses specifically on the person of Elijah Able and notes that “Able was evidence, at least to Smith, that racial uplift was possible” (140). At the same time Parks argues that Smith “also planted the seeds for future conflict. The Book of Abraham, published the previous year, claimed that the descendants of Ham — a cultural code name for those with African ancestry — were ‘cursed’ with regard ‘to the priesthood.’ *But the tether between priesthood authority and racial lineage remained tenuous, at least for the time being*” (ibid., emphasis added).



- world (yes, concepts of race and prejudice, though vastly different than ours, did exist in antiquity).
2. The “people of Canaan” of Moses 7 are never mentioned as being cursed in the text. Rather their blackness is the result of God cursing something else (i.e., the land).
  3. The only people mentioned as cursed in Moses 7 are the “residue of the people” (vv. 20, 22, 28) which, as the text itself notes, does not include the “seed of Cain” (7:20, 22). In contrast to the prevailing reading of Moses 7, the text implies condemnation not of the seed of Cain/people of Canaan but of this “residue of the people” due to both their hatred of the people of Canaan and their general rejection of the gospel message preached by Enoch.
  4. Enoch’s rationale for not preaching repentance to the people of Canaan in Moses 7 is not due to any personal animosity toward them or from the view that they are cursed. In other words, his rationale, as the text explains, is different from common interpretations and readings in the Latter-day Saint tradition.

This paper focuses solely on the material found in the Prophet’s revisions to the book of Genesis and will bring in parallel material from the Hebrew text of the Old Testament only when necessary and relevant. Joseph Smith’s revisions to the Old Testament were understood by the Prophet as restoring lost concepts and doctrines (removed in past centuries by those institutions controlling the Bible’s reception). This includes addressing issues and concerns that the Hebrew Bible, in the form we currently have it, is largely (though not entirely) silent about, such as ethnicity and race. In this regard, the Prophet’s revisions, while of course related to and informing us about the biblical text, must and should be examined on their own terms.

### **History of Interpretation**

In addressing the interpretive history of Moses 7, it is first necessary to ask how much influence this segment of Joseph Smith’s revisions would have had on Latter-day Saint understandings of race from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. While the record, particularly the revelations found in the Book of Commandments and the later Doctrine and Covenants, makes it clear that the Prophet was inspired to revise



the Bible during his lifetime,<sup>5</sup> these revisions did not gain prominence or a major audience until long after the Prophet's death, when they were published as part of the Pearl of Great Price in 1851. Even then, the majority were not included in the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the Community of Christ, for whom the revisions would become the *Inspired Version* and the official Bible of that church via Emma Smith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints re-affirmed the status of the King James Version as the authoritative Bible for the Church.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the placement of a portion of the revisions

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5. Book of Commandments 10:9 and the Latter-day Saint Doctrine and Covenants 37:1; 45:60–61; 76:15–18; and 90:13.

6. Many of Joseph Smith's revisions were included in the 1979 and later in the 2013 Latter-day Saint editions of the Bible, in the footnotes to actual books of the Bible and as an appendix ("Selections from the Joseph Smith Translation"). However, these selections are not taken from any official edition of the Inspired Version but stem from handwritten notes and copies of an early manuscript taken by one of the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. An excellent and very thorough history of these selections and their usage in the church can be found in *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, eds. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, Robert J. Matthews (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005). The BYU Religious Studies Center also has a very informative article written by W. Jeffrey Marsh on its website dealing with the inclusion of new passages from the Joseph Smith Translation in the official 2013 edition of the church's Bible. See, W. Jeffrey Marsh, "Revisions in the 2013 LDS Edition of the King James Bible," *Religious Educator* 15, no. 1 (2014): 69, <https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-15-no-1-2014/revisions-2013-lds-edition-king-james-bible>. Marsh writes:

By far the most doctrinally significant changes in the Bible are found in the expanded JST appendix. The typeface has been enlarged for easier reading and a new introduction has been written for the JST appendix; numerous new JST entries have been added or revised; the title of this section is now "Selections from the Joseph Smith Translation." This is a significant change. Some readers of the LDS edition of the Bible may have assumed that the 1979 "Joseph Smith Translation" section, and the other JST footnotes, contained every one of the inspired revisions the Prophet Joseph Smith made to the Bible; however, from June 1830 to July 1833, Joseph Smith was inspired to revise 3,410 verses in the Bible, of which only 1,111 (by my count) are noted in the LDS edition (about 33 percent). By changing the title of this section to read "Selections from the Joseph Smith Translation," students of the scriptures will know that there are other JST changes to search out and savor.

7. As Philip Barlow notes, for most of the history of Mormonism, Latter-day Saints have upheld the superiority of the King James Version over and above any other translation of the Bible (and even over the Book of Mormon itself). Hence,

in the Pearl of Great Price as part of the Book of Moses assured that members would have access to them. With the canonization of the Pearl of Great Price as a standard work in 1880, these portions of the Prophet's revisions likewise gained canonical status as sacred scripture. Other revisions to the Old Testament made by Joseph Smith would be included, one century later, in the 1979 and 2013 official Latter-day Saint versions of the Bible in its appendix and footnotes. At a minimum, the revisions, while perhaps not being viewed with the same authority as the Genesis stories in the King James Bible, have been highly influential in how Latter-day Saint readers have interacted with and interpreted the biblical text and the primeval history (Genesis 1–11) in particular.

By itself, Moses 7 contains no material relevant to the issue of black African descent and the priesthood.<sup>8</sup> However, in conjunction with other scriptures there later emerged a racist interpretation of the text. The Book of Mormon contains reference to a “curse” placed upon a group of people, the Lamanites, for their sins (2 Nephi 5:20–24; Alma 3:6–7). Though never identified as black Africans, this curse appears to be

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there is a popular but largely accurate view that until the Book of Mormon revival of the late twentieth century, most Latter-day Saints quoted the KJV Bible much more often than the Book of Mormon. This tendency, as Barlow also notes, may have stemmed from a desire to assimilate and therefore avoid persecution from mainline Protestant American Christian culture, for whom the KJV was *the* Bible. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 162–98.

The official view of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the Joseph Smith Translation can be found on their website at “Joseph Smith Translation (JST),” *Bible Dictionary*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/joseph-smith-translation?lang=eng>:

Although not the official Bible of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the JST offers many interesting insights and is an invaluable aid to biblical interpretation and understanding. It is a most fruitful source of useful information for the student of the scriptures. It is likewise a witness for the divine calling and ministry of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

8. Richard Bushman notes this phenomenon in his discussion of both the Book of Abraham and the Book of Moses: “Later they [these two standard works] were used as a justification for refusing black people the priesthood. The Abraham verses say nothing of skin color, but the 1830 revelation of Moses had spoken of a blackness coming upon ‘all the children of Canaan, that they were despised among all people’ and Abraham said Pharaoh ‘was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites, by birth.’ Joining the verses in Abraham and Moses, some concluded that black people had descended from the Canaanites, the lineage cursed ‘as pertaining to the Priesthood.’” See Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 288.

associated with skin pigmentation and hence implies dark skin as a sign of divine disfavor.<sup>9</sup> The Book of Abraham, another standard work in the Church, then mentions the Egyptian-Canaanites. From the opening of the text, these Canaanites are viewed as adversaries of Abraham and are identified as descendants of the biblical patriarch Ham:

Now this king of Egypt was a descendant from the loins of Ham, and was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by birth. From this descent sprang all the Egyptians, and thus the blood of the Canaanites was preserved in the land. The land of Egypt being first discovered by a woman, who was the daughter of Ham. (Abraham 1:21–23)

The text then goes on to note that this woman, by means of her Hamite lineage, was responsible for creating “that race which preserved the curse in the land” (Abraham 1:24). This verse, when taken by itself, implies that the land rather than a particular group of people is cursed, paralleling statements in Moses 7. However, the larger context of the chapter does clarify the content of this curse as seen in its description of the first Egyptian Pharaoh:

Pharaoh, being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father, who blessed him with the blessings of the earth, and with the blessings of wisdom, but cursed him as pertaining to the Priesthood. (Abraham 1:26)

As Restoration theology developed in the decades after the Prophet’s death and as various voices attempted to provide an explanation for the priesthood ban to persons both within and outside of the Church,

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9. It should be noted that this is not necessarily the way that “skin of blackness” needs to be interpreted in the Book of Mormon. There is a long-standing tradition of interpreting the curse as spiritual rather than referring to physical pigmentation. Also see Ethan Sproat, “Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 138–65, and Adam Oliver Stokes, “‘Skin’ or ‘Scales’ of Blackness? Semitic Context as Interpretive Aid for 2 Nephi 4:35 (LDS 5:21),” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 27 (2018): 278–89. On the possibility that Mesoamerican body paint practices may be related to the description of the skins of the Lamanites, see Gerrit M. Steenblik, “Demythologizing the Lamanites’ ‘Skin of Blackness,’” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* (forthcoming, 2021).

Abraham 1:26 was linked to the material in Moses 7 as a proof text. In the process of this merger, the “Canaanites” of the Book of Abraham (presumably identified by the Prophet as the same Canaanites mentioned in the Old Testament who inhabit the promised land) became fused with the “people of Canaan” mentioned in Enoch’s vision. One example of this can be found in the writings of Joseph Fielding Smith, who wrote:

Not only was Cain called upon to suffer [for killing Abel], but because of his wickedness he became the father of an inferior race. A curse was placed upon him and that curse has been continued through his lineage and must do so while time endures. Millions of souls have come into this world cursed with a black skin and have been denied the privilege of Priesthood and the fulness of the blessings of the Gospel. These are the descendants of Cain. Moreover, they have been made to feel their inferiority and have been separated from the rest of mankind from the beginning. Enoch saw the people of Canaan, descendants of Cain, and he says, “and there was a blackness came upon all the children of Canaan, that they were despised among all peoplej. ...

In the spirit of sympathy, mercy and faith, we will also hope that blessings may eventually be given to our negro brethren, for they are our brethren — children of God — notwithstanding their black covering emblematical of eternal darkness.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Smith combines the material in Moses 7 with the Canaanite priesthood ban in Abraham even though his only explicit quotation of scripture comes from Moses 7, which contains no reference to a priesthood ban connected to black skin. Smith’s explanation would become common in the Church until the 1960s. In dialogue with the civil rights movement, Latter-day Saint voices would later reject the notion of a divine curse upon persons of African descent (ironically, such a rejection is a correct reading of Moses 7) while at the same time upholding the priesthood restriction.<sup>11</sup> From the time of the 1978 revelation onward, Church doctrine highlighted the superior status of

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10. Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1935), 101–102.

11. Sterling McMurrin, author of the 1963 statement on civil rights released by the Church, quoted President David O. McKay as saying, “There is not now, and there never has been a doctrine in this Church that Negroes are under a divine

Official Declaration 2 over earlier theological discussions of race and the priesthood. Hence, Elder McConkie's famous statement:

It doesn't make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before the first day of June 1978. It is a new day and a new arrangement, and the Lord has now given the revelation that sheds light out into the world on this subject. As to any slivers of light or any particles of darkness of the past, we forget about them. We now do what meridian Israel did when the Lord said the gospel should go to the Gentiles. We forget all the statements that limited the gospel to the house of Israel, and we start going to the Gentiles.<sup>12</sup>

Notwithstanding, some scholars and writers highlighting the post-1978 dispensation of the priesthood to all worthy male members of the Church reflected the earlier standard scriptural interpretation in their discussion of the topic. For example, David Ridges in his commentary on the Pearl of Great Price writes:

One of the great blessings of our day is that we live in the long-awaited time when the gospel is going forth into all the world. The priesthood is available to all worthy males. This is according to the revelation that President Spencer W. Kimball received in 1978.<sup>13</sup>

Ridges is commenting on Moses 7:22, which in and of itself does not mention the priesthood in relation to blacks. That he discusses Official Declaration 2 presupposes a reading of Moses 7 in conjunction with the statements on the priesthood in Abraham.

Furthermore, within some Book of Mormon belief traditions this merged, racist reading of Moses 7 persists, as seen in the recent statements made by the now excommunicated Denver Snuffer. In his book *Passing the Heavenly Gift*, he argues that Official Declaration 2 represents a theological about-face to Joseph Smith's original teachings as contained in his Bible revelations and the pre-1978 Church. As he puts it, rejection of the Church's traditional interpretation of Moses 7 as

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curse." Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 79.

12. Dennis B. Horne, *Bruce R. McConkie: Highlights from His Life and Teachings* (Roy, UT: Eborn Books, 2000), 165.

13. See David J. Ridges, *Your Study of the Pearl of Great Price Made Easier* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2009), 99.

supporting the priesthood ban “may have fulfilled an ominous prophecy about latter-day Gentile rejection of the fullness of the Gospel.”<sup>14</sup>

A far more explicit and nefarious interpretation is evident in the teachings and writings of convicted FLDS leader Warren Jeffs. Though he does not explicitly cite chapter and verse of Moses 7, it is clear that he is drawing on a tradition of racist readings of it as seen with his connection of Cain to the black race. It should also be noted that for all fundamentalist Mormons (i.e., polygamist sects) the *Inspired Version*, compiled from Joseph Smith’s Old Testament revisions, is *the Bible* over and above the King James Version or other English translations. To provide a couple of Jeffs’s quotes:

[Cain was] cursed with a black skin and he is the father of the Negro people. He has great power, can appear and disappear. He is used by the devil, as a mortal man, to do great evils.

If you marry a person who has connections with a Negro, you would become cursed.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that Jeffs and his views have been thoroughly denounced by all mainstream Book of Mormon believing traditions. My contention here is that racialist interpretations such as his are not the only possible way to read Moses 7 and, furthermore, that they represent an inaccurate way of reading the text.

### **Moses 7 in Dialogue among Different Racial Perspectives Prevalent in the Ancient World**

Critics and opponents of the Church often point to Moses 7 as an example of modern racist thought in a text purporting to be ancient. As such, they argue, the text is in fact not ancient at all but reflects the social and ideological influences on Joseph Smith in the early-to-mid nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> As much as my academic context often restrains me from

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14. Denver C. Snuffer Jr., *Passing the Heavenly Gift* (Salt Lake City: Mill Creek Press, 2011), 239.

15. “Intelligence Report: In His Own Words,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, Spring 2005, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20100203152005/http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?sid=342>.

16. As seen, most recently, on the attacks on the Joseph Smith Translation from some notable ex-Mormons such as Bill Reel and John Dehlin. See also Haley Wilson Lemmon, interview by John Dehlin, *Mormon Stories*, “Haley Wilson Lemmon — The BYU Undergrad Who Discovered Joseph Smith’s Plagiarisms in his Bible ‘Translation,’” Podcast No. 1338, July 19, 2020, Apple, [Mormonstories.libsyn.com](https://mormonstories.libsyn.com/).



doing so, I cannot prevent the apologist in me from responding to this accusation. To summarize something that I could go into much further depth about, I firmly believe — as the Prophet himself stated — that he was divinely inspired to restore many plain and precious truths to the Bible lost throughout the centuries.

We can debate profusely on what the term “inspired” means in the context of Joseph Smith’s Old Testament revisions, but for myself this means that the Prophet was given the means to interact with what was indeed an ancient and lost text/version of the Bible.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the discussion of race in Moses 7 points to the ancient nature of the text — a text in dialogue with other perspectives on race in the ancient world. This stands in contrast to the prevailing anti-Mormon view that the Book of Moses, like the *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* or the *Oahspe Bible*, is merely another example of American (-created) biblical apocrypha.<sup>18</sup>

When one hears the term “racism” today in the West one almost automatically thinks of prejudice based on the color of a person’s skin. In the United States, anti-black racism immediately comes to mind for most of us. However, even this understanding of racism, as Benjamin Isaac

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com; and Jim Bennett interview by John Dehlin, *Mormon Stories*, “Belief After the CES Letter — God, Jesus, Prophets, and the ‘One True Church’ — Jim Bennett Pt. 1,” Podcast No. 1377, Dec. 31, 2020, Apple, [mormonstories.libsyn.com](https://mormonstories.libsyn.com).

17. As much as I admire and love this scholar’s work, here I disagree and depart from Thomas Wayment, who argues that the Joseph Smith translation is a conflagration of what Joseph considered to be “revealed” content as well as Joseph’s own interaction and dialogue with prominent Bible commentaries and scholars of the early nineteenth century. In this way, Wayment is able to counter the criticism of John Dehlin regarding the Prophet’s supposed use and knowledge of Adam Clarke’s Bible commentary while making his revisions to the Bible (something that is shocking and scandalous to Dehlin but that Latter-day Saint scholars and researchers have known about and mentioned in their works for decades). For notable examples of his work on the Prophet’s revisions, see Thomas A. Wayment, *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the Old Testament: A Side-by-Side Comparison with the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009). However, note that a careful comparison of Joseph’s translation work with the Bible and Adam Clarke’s commentary shows that there is no meaningful evidence that Joseph relied on material from Adam Clarke. See Kent P. Jackson, “Some Notes on Joseph Smith and Adam Clarke,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 40 (2020): 15–60, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/some-notes-on-joseph-smith-and-adam-clarke/>.

18. For primary texts and a discussion of their content, see *American Scriptures: An Anthology of Sacred Writings*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).



notes, does not encompass modern examples of racism in their fullest form.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it represents a form of racism that would have been largely unknown to persons prior to 1600 CE and incomprehensible to the ancients. In other words, “racism” as we define the term today is a relatively if not exclusively modern innovation.

This is not to say that racial prejudice did not exist, but as Isaac also points out, it was a prejudice unconnected to skin color. Rather, the ancients promulgated the idea of inferior and superior peoples irrespective of their pigmentation.<sup>20</sup> Hence Aristotle viewed non-Greeks as “inferior” peoples, though admittedly the Greeks living in the era of his pupil, Alexander the Great, had an appearance similar to the Persians that he and other Greeks despised.<sup>21</sup>

At first glance, this ancient form of racial prejudice may seem to run counter to what we find in the book of Moses. Yet, later in the Greco-Roman era there does emerge a negative association between blackness and black skin color. It is important to note here that blackness at this time is not yet equated with inferiority. Rather this association stems from Greco-Roman dualism, which equates light with good and dark with bad/evil. Hence, to give one example, in *The Life of St. Antony*, a late Christian Roman text, the devil appears to Anthony as a black African man, not because black Africans are viewed as inferior, but because their skin color links them with the attribute of darkness (and consequently evil).<sup>22</sup> Again, it is only in the seventeenth century and

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19. Benjamin Issac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 45, 51. Isaac notes the contrast between anti-black and anti-Jewish racism, noting that in the former, “blacks were never forced to wear the equivalent of the Star of David for the sake of identification.” *Ibid.*, 51.

20. *Ibid.*, 45.

21. For scholarly discussion of the skin pigmentation of the ancients and how both the archaeological and textual evidence suggests that pigmentation was nearly one and the same for various different ethnic and social groups, see Tim Whitmarsh, “Black Achilles,” *Aeon*, May 9, 2018, <https://aeon.co/essays/when-homer-envisioned-achilles-did-he-see-a-black-man>. Whitmarsh’s article was written in response to the controversy surrounding the casting of a black South African as the Greek hero Achilles in the recent Netflix miniseries *Troy: Fall of a City*.

22. In section 6 of *The Life of St. Antony*, we read:

At last when the dragon could not even thus overthrow Antony, but saw himself thrust out of his heart, gnashing his teeth as it is written, and as it were beside himself, he appeared to Antony like a black boy, taking a visible shape in accordance with the colour of his mind. And cringing to him, as it were, he plied him with thoughts no longer, for guileful as

beyond that this view of darkness as evil is linked with racial inferiority leading to the emergence (but not exclusiveness) of the color-based racism that presently exists.

Moses 7 presents a dualistic connection between skin color and good/evil *similar* to what we find in other ancient texts. The blackness that comes upon the children of Cain as an after-effect of the Lord cursing the earth seems to be interpreted by the other groups mentioned in the text as a negative attribute and something worthy of ridicule. At no time is it said in the text that the other nations view the children of Cain as inferior but only that they hate them because they are now black when, presumably, they were once white or fairer skinned. Hence, one of the most prominent features of racist thought in modern times — the connection of skin color to inferiority — is lacking and absent in Moses 7. This is to be expected if we are indeed dealing with an ancient text that in some way was revealed to and interpreted by Joseph Smith. At the same time, in contrast to what one finds in ancient Greco-Roman literature, this association of blackness with evil is clearly condemned in the Lord's rebuke of the other nations for having hatred in their heart for

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he was, he had been worsted, but at last spoke in human voice and said, 'Many I deceived, many I cast down; but now attacking thee and thy labours as I had many others, I proved weak.' When Antony asked, Who art thou who speakest thus with me? he answered with a lamentable voice, 'I am the friend of whoredom, and have taken upon me incitements which lead to it against the young. I am called the spirit of lust. How many have I deceived who wished to live soberly, how many are the chaste whom by my incitements I have over-persuaded! I am he on account of whom also the prophet reproves those who have fallen, saying, "Ye have been caused to err by the spirit of whoredom." For by me they have been tripped up. I am he who have so often troubled thee and have so often been overthrown by thee.' But Antony having given thanks to the Lord, with good courage said to him, 'Thou art very despicable then, for thou art black-hearted and weak as a child. Henceforth I shall have no trouble from thee, "for the Lord is my helper, and I shall look down on mine enemies."' Having heard this, the black one straightway fled, shuddering at the words and dreading any longer even to come near the man.

Athanasius, *Vita S. Antoni*, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, series 2, vol. 4, trans. H. Ellershaw, Jr., eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1892), 197, <https://archive.org/details/aselectlibraryn01wacegoog/page/n294/mode/2up>. Also available at "The Life of Anthony," *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <https://ccel.org/ccel/s/schaff/npnf204/cache/npnf204.pdf>, 570–71, and at *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2811.htm>.

their black brethren. As other scholars have noted and as we will address later, this finds parallel with the condemnation of racism presented in other restoration scriptures, such as the Book of Mormon.

### **Moses 7: Human Sanctioned Prejudice against The People of Canaan or the Seed of Cain**

Thus far we have dealt extensively with the subject of how various persons have engaged with the Moses 7 text from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. It is now time to look at the content of the text in and of itself and on its own terms. From henceforth, all references to Moses 7 will be taken from transcription of the original revisions as presented in the Joseph Smith Papers Project.<sup>23</sup>

No mention of the priesthood is explicitly made in regard to the people of Canaan (nor the seed of Cain) in Moses 7 though admittedly the text *does* suggest that they do not receive the full dispensation of the Gospel since Enoch did not preach to the people of Canaan (v. 12). The majority of our information about the black people of Canaan comes from Moses 7, which provides an expanded narrative on the biblical patriarch Enoch. Whereas there is only a single mention of Enoch in the Hebrew text, the revelatory material provided in these chapters gives an account of Enoch's youth and prophetic calling. At the beginning of Moses 7, Enoch has a vision of two clans of people, which reads:

it came to pass <that> I beheld in the vally of Shum and lo! a great people which dwelt in tents which were the people of Shum and again the Lord said unto me look and I looked towards the North and I beheld the people of Canaan which dwelt in tents and the Lord said into me prophecy and I prophecied saying behold the people of Canaan which are numerous shall go fourth <forth> in battle aray against the people of Shum and shall slay them that they shall utterly be destroyed and the people of Canaan shall divide themselves in the land and the land shall be barren and unfruitfull and none other people shall dwell there but the people of Canaan (Moses 7:5–7)<sup>24</sup>

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23. For transcriptions and images of Joseph Smith's Old Testament revisions, see "Bible Revision Manuscripts," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr5>.

24. Joseph Smith Jr., *The Joseph Smith Papers*, "Old Testament Revision 1," June 1830–ca. 7 March 1831, p. 16, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-1/17>.

In the following verse, the people of Canaan are explicitly identified as being black:

for behold the Lord shall curse the land with much heat and the barrenness thereof shall go forth <forth> forever and there was a blackness come upon all the Children of Canaan that they were dispised among all people (Moses 7:8)<sup>25</sup>

It is important to note here the object of God's wrath. It is *not* the people of Canaan themselves but rather the *land/earth* that is cursed by God.<sup>26</sup> Their "blackness," according to the text, is a result of environmental factors that arise in the aftermath of this curse.<sup>27</sup> The

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25. Ibid. It should be noted that a variant reading of this verse exists in RLDS editions of the Doctrine and Covenants from the late 1960s that reads "a blackness came *unto* them" rather than upon them. This suggests that the blackness is spiritual (perhaps to be equated with the "blackness" of Satan in Moses 1/JST Revelation to Moses) and approaches the Canaanites rather than physical blackness as a result of the earth being cursed with scorching heat. To my knowledge, no scholarship has been done on the source of this variant and I have not been able to determine this source myself. In my view, the variant is deliberate and represents an attempt to tone down language deemed racially problematic during the civil rights era of the 1960s.

26. It can be argued that the "land" in this passage is to be understood as a reference to the people who inhabit it. If this reading is accepted, then it would indeed indicate that the people of Canaan themselves are cursed. Against this view, it is important to note that the Prophet makes very clear distinctions between curses directed toward the land and those directed toward particular people or groups of people. See, for example Moses 5:52 with 5:56:

Moses 5:52: Wherefore the Lord cursed Lamech, and his house, and all them that had covenanted with Satan.

Moses 5:56: And God cursed the earth with a sore curse.

Moses 7:48-49: And it came to pass that Enoch looked upon the earth; and he heard a voice from the bowels thereof, saying: Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which has gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face? And when Enoch heard the earth mourn, he wept, and cried unto the Lord, saying: O Lord, wilt thou not have compassion upon the earth?

27. I note here that this is what the text says rather than my own view about the origins of race, if, as modern geneticists and biologists would argue, such a category can even be said to exist. The notion of environmental factors as creating race is a thoroughly nineteenth-century concept that, for critics of the Prophet (and Mormonism in general), may call into question the "inspired" nature of his Bible revisions. However, very ancient texts also understood environmental

heat and barrenness in the land produces a physical change to the people of Canaan, namely black skin, but the “blackness” itself is *not* a curse. In other words, a distinction needs to be made between the object(s) of the divine curse, the land, and the victims of the negative effects of this curse, namely the people of Canaan.

It should also be noted that the theme of divine wrath toward the land in the aftermath of human violence parallels what one finds elsewhere in both the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and in the Prophet’s Old Testament revisions. In the Genesis flood story, for example, the violence of humanity results in the land becoming corrupted (*nišhatâ* in Genesis 6:12) and eventually destroyed. Prior to Enoch’s vision in Moses 7, it is said that “God cursed the earth with a sore curse” because of the wickedness of the people (Moses 5:56). The theme of human wickedness brings us to our next observation, namely, the identity of the people who are explicitly mentioned as “cursed” in Enoch’s vision.

### **The Accursed People: Not the People of Canaan**

There is only one reference to a “cursed” people in Moses 7. This reference follows the description of Zion, God’s utopian city. As Moses 7:19 informs us, Enoch builds the city at God’s command and calls it “the City of Holiness.” Enoch is so impressed with the city and its glory that he boasts, “Surely Zion shall dwell in safety forever” (Moses 7:20). Enoch’s boast is met with the following reply from the deity: “Zion have I blessed, but the residue of the people have I cursed” (Moses 7:20).

Who are the “residue of the people”? We have a clear identification of them a few verses later in Moses 7:22, which reads:

and Enoch also beheld the residue of the people which were the sons of Adam and they were a mixture of all the seed of Adam save it were the seed of Cain for the seed of Cain were black and had not place among them.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, this “residue” cursed by God includes everyone *except* the black people of Canaan. They are the other peoples on the earth who have engaged in wickedness and unrighteousness facilitating

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factors as connected to race origin. See, for example, the origin of the Ethiopians in Greek Mythology where Phaethon’s chariot burns the African continent (and consequently makes the African people dark). Such parallels suggest in my view that the Prophet did indeed have access to an ancient, if scientifically flawed, text, though this is a topic for a different paper.

28. Smith, “Old Testament Revision 1,” 17, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-1/18>.

the need for a global flood so that humanity can restart as noted in Moses 8. This identification is reinforced in Moses 7:23, which notes that after “Zion was taken up into heaven, Enoch beheld, and lo, all the nations of the earth were before him.” In other words, this “residue” does not consist of the righteous who have been granted access to Zion and taken into heaven but the wicked who remain on the earth and who comprise all peoples or races (from our modern perspective) with the exception of the black people of Canaan.

### **Enoch’s Prohibition against Preaching to the Black People of Canaan and the Community of Christ’s Doctrine and Covenants 116**

Shortly following the description of the people of Canaan at the beginning of Moses 7, we are presented with this passage regarding Enoch’s prophetic ministry:

[A]nd it came to pass that Enoch continued to call upon all the people save save it were the people of Canaan to repent. (Moses 7:12)<sup>29</sup>

Traditionally, Latter-day Saint voices generally before 1978 appealed to this verse in support of the position that missionary work should not be undertaken among black communities either in the United States or globally. In conjunction with other scriptural passages such as Abraham 1, this reading implied that persons of black African descent were themselves culpable for the circumstances behind the prohibition. Yet, an examination of the larger context of Moses 7 reveals a deeper issue and provides us with insight into the reasons for Enoch’s interdiction.

First, the prohibition against preaching to the people of Canaan is not described as a divine injunction. Nowhere in the book of Moses does the Lord command Enoch not to preach to the people of Canaan. The prohibition, then, may stem from Enoch’s own concerns and not from God. This leads us, however, to the question of why Enoch himself instituted it. Clues to his rationale can be found at the end of Moses 7:8, which notes that after receiving their “blackness,” the people of Canaan were “despised among all people.” Later, in Moses 7:22, which mentions the accursed “residue of the people,” it is noted that the seed of Cain were absent because “the seed of Cain were black, and had not place among them.”

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29. *Ibid.*



Might it be that Enoch's choice or commandment to not preach to the people of Canaan does not stem from anything that the people of Canaan themselves have done but from the prejudice of the other sons of Adam toward them? Might it be possible that if Enoch had attempted to preach to the people of Canaan, the hostility that he had already encountered from his fellow human beings would have been intensified making it impossible for him to succeed in his prophetic ministry? Though other possible explanations exist for the hatred incurred upon the people of Canaan by the rest of humanity, the rest of Moses 7 strongly supports this view and suggests God's own disapproval of the racial hatred of the other sons of Adam toward the black people of Canaan. In Moses 7:29, Enoch asks the Lord "How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity?"<sup>30</sup> The Lord's reply provides us with one of the most powerful repudiations of prejudice in all of the scriptures:

behold these thy breatheren they are the workmanship of mine own hands and I gave unto them their knowledge in the day I created them and in the garden of Eden gave I unto man his agency and unto thy breatheren have I said and also gave commandment that they should love one another and that they should cho[o]se me their father but behold they are without effection and they hate their own blood and the fire of mine indignation is kindled against them (Moses 7:32–34)<sup>31</sup>

In short, the racial hatred that the sons of Adam displayed toward the black people of Canaan, a hatred condemned by God himself, may have been so strong and prevalent that it would have interfered with Enoch's preaching had he attempted to direct his message to the people of Canaan. This would also explain why the Canaanites are not part of the races actually cursed by God, the non-black sons of Adam. They are not culpable for rejecting the Gospel given that it was not offered to them by Enoch. Of course, in the modern dispensation, at a time when

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30. There is a significant textual variant here. Old Testament Revision 2 reads that Enoch cried over the fallen state of humanity and its corruption of the earth, whereas Old Testament Revision 1 reads that God himself wept, which is what we have in both the Inspired Version and Pearl of Great Price. For a comparison of the different Bible revision manuscripts (OT 1 and 2), see, Thomas Wayment, *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 37.

31. Smith, "Old Testament Revision 1," 18, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-1/19>.



racial issues, however bleak at times, have improved overall, the Gospel is available to all of the children of Adam.

Enoch's reluctance to preach unto the black people of Canaan parallels a situation within my own former tradition, the Community of Christ. In the Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants, a specific revelation, Doctrine and Covenants 116, was given to Joseph Smith III regarding ordaining and ministering to persons of African descent. In this respect, the revelation is similar to Official Declaration 2 found in the Latter-day Saint scriptures. At the same time, the Community of Christ revelation implies a situation similar to Enoch's during the antediluvian period as rationale for this reluctance. It reads:

Be not hasty in ordaining men of the Negro race to offices in my church, for verily I say unto you, all are not acceptable unto me as servants, nevertheless I will that all may be saved, but every man in his own order, and there are some who are chosen instruments to be ministers to their own race. Be ye content, I the Lord have spoken it. (Community of Christ Doctrine and Covenants 116:4)<sup>32</sup>

In modern versions of the Community of Christ's Doctrine and Covenants, the introduction to Doctrine and Covenants 116 notes that the revelation, given in 1865, "should be studied against the background of the American Civil War and with the social and educational status of the American Negro of that period in mind."<sup>33</sup> While the revelation as a whole approves of black membership and ordination into the Church, its message and context seem to suggest that being "hasty" in accepting and ordaining blacks may result in hostility. As with the Enoch material in Moses 7, this hostility does not come from black opposition or unwillingness to accept the Gospel but rather the cultural and social context of the time. At the end of the Civil War, black Americans were only beginning to be recognized as American citizens, and the fierce opposition to the idea of black citizenship would continue into the Reconstruction era and beyond. Hence, caution was necessary if the spreading of the restored gospel was to be successful.

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32. Citing the current Community of Christ edition. See, *Doctrine and Covenants* 116:4 (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2016).

33. *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to provide an alternative exegetical reading of Moses 7 dealing with the black people of Canaan. I have proposed that this passage of scripture never curses the people of Canaan with black skin but that this “blackness” is the result of another object incurring divine wrath, namely, the earth itself which, as in the Hebrew flood story, is cursed due to the violence of the people inhabiting it.

I have also argued that Enoch’s decision not to preach to the people of Canaan stems not from any personal animosity toward them but likely from concerns that the hatred of the other sons of Adam toward the people of Canaan would hinder people from accepting the gospel message. When read in this light, Moses 7, far from being a racially problematic text, presents a progressive racial message in which God himself condemns the prejudice and cruelty of the other sons of Adam. It is this cruelty, in conjunction with their rejection of the gospel, that results in the “residue of the people” being cursed, a curse from which the people of Canaan themselves are spared.

I find it necessary to provide a point of comparison here between my reading of Moses 7 and David Belnap’s excellent analysis of the depiction of the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon. In his recent article for *Interpreter*, “The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon,” Belnap takes a radically different approach to the sacred text focusing not on the presentation of the Nephites in the Book of Mormon — the standard default position for Book of Mormon exegetes — but that of the Lamanites.<sup>34</sup>

Belnap persuasively and effectively argues that while the negative statements about the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon have been highlighted both by the book’s advocates and opponents, the text ultimately and primarily presents them in a highly positive light. As such, the Book of Mormon ultimately promotes a radical egalitarian and anti-racist ethic which elevates the “dark,” blackened Lamanites over and above their “pure” and “white” Nephite counterparts.<sup>35</sup> He notes that in the majority of instances that the Lamanites are mentioned in the Book of Mormon it is either as equal or better than the Nephites and

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34. David M. Belnap, “The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message of the Book of Message,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-Day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 195–370, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-inclusive-anti-discrimination-message-of-the-book-of-mormon/>.

35. *Ibid.*, 212.

that in many cases the Lamanites are presented as spiritually superior to the Nephites.<sup>36</sup>

There are obvious and immediate differences between how the Lamanites are depicted in the Book of Mormon and the depiction of the people of Canaan in Moses 7. The latter text provides little *explicit* information in regard to the spiritual state or standing of the people of Canaan. At the same time, Moses 7 infers that while excluded from Enoch's preaching they are under no condemnation themselves and they are not convicted of the same sins that their counterparts — the other sons of Adam — are judged and condemned for. The hatred for them comes from purely human sources reinforcing the idea that racial hatred then and now is a human problem, not a divine one.

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36. Ibid., 226–27.