

“Lamanites” and the Spirit of the Lord

By Eugene England

As the Editors’ Note at the beginning of the essay describes, this reflection was prepared as part of a special theme issue of *Dialogue* about “Lamanites” in Mormon history, prophecy, and theology funded by England’s parents.

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EDITORS’ NOTE:

This issue of DIALOGUE, which was funded by Dora Hartvigsen England and Eugene England Sr., and their children and guest-edited by David J. Whittaker, has been planned as an effort to increase understanding of the history of Mormon responses to the “Lamanites”—native peoples of the Americas and Polynesia. We have invited Eugene England, Jr., professor of English at BYU, to document his parents’ efforts, over a period of forty years, to respond to what he names “the spirit of Lehi”—a focused interest in and effort to help those who are called Lamanites. His essay also reviews the sources and proper present use of that term (too often used with misunderstanding and offense) and the origins and prophesied future of those to whom it has been applied.

MY PARENTS GREW up conditioned toward racial prejudice—as did most Americans, including Mormons, through their generation and into part of mine. But something touched my father in his early life and grew constantly in him until he and my mother were moved at mid-life gradually to consecrate most of their life’s earnings from then on to help Lamanites.

I wish to call what touched them “the spirit of Lehi.” It came in its earliest, somewhat vague, form to my father when he left home as a seventeen-year-old, took a job as an apprentice Union Pacific coach painter in Pocatello, Idaho, and—because he was still a farmboy in habits and woke up each morning at five—read the Book of Mormon and *The Discourses of Brigham Young* in his lonely boarding room. He has told me of becoming aware of the dramatic promises to the Lamanites made throughout the Book of Mormon and reinforced by Brigham Young—how the gentiles would become nursing fathers and mothers to them, carrying their children in their arms (1 Ne. 21:23, 22:6), and how they would play a crucial, even dominant role in the latter-day preparations for Christ (3 Ne. 20:14–16, 21:23). He was moved to a sense of responsibility and moral seriousness connected to the American Indians and to a conviction that the millennium would not come until those promises had been fulfilled.

When he was coming out of the ether from an appendicitis operation there in Pocatello, just after turning eighteen, he had a vision of the Savior, glorified, all in white, clearly recognizable. He was given assurance that he was accepted despite his youthful sins and would be blessed in serving the Lord. He returned home to complete high school as a twenty-two-year-old and then worked a few years to save money for training as an airline pilot. He decided to go on a mission instead. Then he had the same vision again; but this time, Christ was holding by the hand Dora Hartvigsen, whom my father had begun courting, and presented her silently to him. My father remembers the clear impression from those visions that his fate was tied irrevocably to my mother’s and both of theirs to that of the Lamanites. And that impression continued to haunt them through their struggling early married life, during the worst of the Great Depression, as students at Utah State in Logan, where I was born, and then while they began farming in Downey, Idaho, where my sister Ann was born. But their feelings were still unfocused until the spring of 1944, when a new apostle named Spencer W. Kimball spoke at their stake conference about his work as the first general Church leader assigned to the Lamanites and about the Book of Mormon promises. The conference was held in the Downey Ward, where my father was in the bishopric. He and my mother attended the luncheon served at a large table in the Relief Society room after the morning session and happened to be seated next to Elder Kimball. Mother remembers distinctly the spiritual force, unusual in her experience, radiating from the apostle as he continued to talk of the Lamanites.

I think that was the spirit of Lehi. I have felt clearly, many times, the related spirit which has been named the spirit of Elijah. It is what moved me to unexpected diligence and resourcefulness when I was called as a new graduate student to be genealogy chairman in the Stanford Ward, and it touched me with extraordinary energy and insight when I later searched for my own ancestors in Somerset, England. I have had a distinct sense of the gratitude of other-worldly beings, even their presence, as I have done temple work for the dead. And what I have felt in those experiences—brimming spiritual reality but also a hard sense of responsibility, even of promises made long ago that *must be kept*—is much like what my parents say they felt as they listened to Elder Kimball and then talked on the way home that afternoon about what they must do.

On the one hand, they were in debt \$40,000 to purchase the farm and were barely surviving. They had been paying their tithing and serving faithfully in the Church—wasn’t that enough? On the other hand, they had continued to read the scriptures together and knew that the promises to the Lamanites were not being fulfilled: they had not yet begun to “blossom as the rose” (D&C 49:24), and no one but Elder Kimball seemed to be doing much about it. My parents talked together of their temple promises to consecrate *all* they had and were to the work of Christ. Finally they decided to write a letter offering to budget \$50 a month to help support the Lamanite missionaries Elder Kimball had said were now becoming available. He was away on an extended assignment but answered after five weeks, writing, as they remember, “I know personally two young Mexicans who could go on missions, serve as branch and district leaders, and return to make the work in Mexico begin

to grow. Now Brother and Sister England, thank you for your offer, but if you could send *eighty* dollars a month we could send them *both*.” My father reports, “Well, we stretched—but then Spencer Kimball has always stretched us.”

As they stretched further in the next few years, my parents gradually began consciously living the covenant laws of sacrifice and consecration—which they understood to mean using all surpluses to serve the Lord. They bear steady witness of the resulting blessings—both a spirit of peace and confirmation they are doing right and an “opening of the windows of heaven” to provide increasing resources by which to expand their consecration. Good crops and prices allowed them to pay off the farm in three years. They increased the number of Lamanite missionaries they supported and gave management of the funds to the First Quorum of Seventy. Meanwhile, still in their early forties, though continuing to farm during the summer, they moved to Salt Lake City and began to make investments there.

In 1954 they were called to preside over the North Central States Mission, which set back their investment programs but multiplied their spiritual strengths and confidence: Dad says, “There I was, a sagebrush-grubbing homesteader from Bannock Valley, Idaho, debating with Lutheran ministers and teaching leadership to the likes of Clyde Parker and Russell Nelson.” Mom received the gift of speaking in public by the Spirit and was given, at times of great need, immediate, complete healings by the priesthood. Her undramatic but deeply felt testimonies of these events have greatly blessed us and our children, as well as many others. After their mission, my parents founded a nonprofit foundation to expedite tax-free transfer of their surpluses to the Church. Starting in the early sixties, Elder Kimball occasionally asked them to help with some educational needs for Lamanites (travel for students from Bolivia to Utah State and from Polynesia to the Church College of Hawaii and a scholarship to the Harvard Law School for an American Indian) and sometimes to expand their missionary help, when there were no Lamanites immediately ready, to others (they sent the first Asian Indian missionary from Fiji and the first native Chinese missionary).

My folks served from 1963 to 1966 as president and matron of the London Temple, and when they returned Dad was asked to serve as a host at the visitors center on Temple Square. One day his associate, Bill Bradshaw, told him about a Sister Arlene Crawley, a Primary teacher from Kaysville, who had felt inspired while teaching her class about the Book of Mormon to have them each buy a copy and put their picture and testimony in it so she could take them to be given to visitors at Temple Square. Bill told how he had given one copy to a Dutch family with a daughter the age of one of the Primary children; he had asked the Dutch girl to become a pen pal with the donor of the book and then asked the parents to receive missionaries to explain something about the book their daughter was reading. Then he had written the mission president in Holland to follow up, the family had joined the Church, and the Kaysville girl was saving her money for a mission to Holland.

My father, moved again I believe by the spirit of Lehi, agreed with Bill that such a program could have enormous power—every member could indeed become a missionary, by sending copies of the Book of Mormon, that testament of Christ written to the Lamanites. The enclosed pictures, testimonies, and envelopes for a

return letter would establish a personal connection and follow-through. With Bill's support, Dad took the lead in seeing if this procedure could be established as an official Church program. Temporarily, my parents and other donors supplied hundreds of copies of the Book of Mormon for mission presidents who requested them. Armed with statistics, success stories, and a large poster Sister Crawley had made with President McKay's picture and those of her thirteen students, inscribed "'Every Member a Missionary' By Sending a Book of Mormon on a Mission," Dad worked through the First Quorum of Seventy, the missionary committee, and the First Presidency until the program was fully accepted. It was managed for some time by Brother Bradshaw and as of late 1984 is directed by two missionary couples, Helen and Ray Barton and Audrey and Virgil Peterson, who report they handle about 15,000 gift copies each month, provided by members from all over the Church. A sample letter they received lately from a missionary in Chile reported thirty-six baptisms from seventeen of these personalized gift copies.

In 1968 the government began to tax charitable foundations, so my folks dissolved theirs and set up an investment partnership with my sister, Ann England Barker, me, and our children, to be used to develop properties and then give them directly to the Church to support Lamanite and other missionary work as needed. This cooperative method has provided my parents with a way to teach their descendants, through direct participation, the meaning of full consecration.

I have been pleased (and, I admit, a bit surprised) at how effective my parents' example has been in teaching their grandchildren to be personally committed to the covenants of sacrifice and consecration and to feel the spirit of Lehi. I now suspect that the intrinsic power of the covenants and of the spirit of Lehi itself explains much of the force of that example.

I believe that in the great councils of the preexistence, before this earth was populated, we premortal spirits were given to understand that human agency and the resulting vicissitudes of history would make it impossible for God to give all of us the gospel to enjoy on the earth, that most of us would suffer in ignorance and terrible injustice. A third part of us recoiled in such horror and fear as to rebel and lose all opportunity to come here. But those of us who welcomed the challenge turned to each other, I believe, and made holy covenants that if we were the fortunate ones we would bend all efforts to do genealogy and temple work for the others, so they could share vicariously but fully in Christ's gospel ordinances as well as his atonement. Those covenants create the remarkable spiritual energy that I have felt in the spirit of Elijah.¹ By the same token, I am convinced that the spiritual energy in the spirit of Lehi comes from the covenants we made with each other in those same councils when we realized that we would be cast into various roles on earth—black or white, bond or free, male or female, Lamanite or Nephite, gentile or Jew, I believe we promised that rather than taking comfort, pride, or despair in our condition, we would give ourselves in sacrificial love to help the others find salvation, whether by "scourging them up to remembrance" if we were Lamanites or "carrying them on our shoulders" if we were gentiles.

Almost all who read this essay will be gentiles. The spirit of Lehi should encourage in us a special sensitivity (and response) to the condition, needs, and

promised roles—from scourge to victim to flourishing blossom to scourging “lion” again—of all those scattered children of Israel who helped populate the Americas and Polynesia. The descendants of all these Israelites (whether Lamanites, Nephites, Ishmaelites, and Zoramites from Joseph or Mulekites from Judah) are designated by Mormons as “Lamanites.” But so are native peoples, such as Eskimos and Fijians, who probably moved in from Siberia and the Far East and may not be literal descendants of Israel, certainly not of Laman.² And all of these are generally thought to inherit dark skins and other vaguely defined “curses” from Book of Mormon times. The first step in responding to the spirit of Lehi is to disabuse ourselves of these notions, and the best help is to read the Book of Mormon more carefully.

In 2 Nephi 5, when Laman and Lemuel rebel, the Lord seems to curse them and their descendants, genetically, with a dark skin. But a much more naturalistic reading (and one consistent with the impartial, non-racist God we know from other scriptures) emerges from the complete record. For instance, later when the Amlicites (former Nephites) marked themselves with “a mark of red upon their foreheads” as part of becoming Lamanites, we are told that “thus the Word of God is fulfilled . . . which he said to Nephi [back in 2 Nephi 5]: “Behold, the Lamanites have I cursed, and I will set a mark on them that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed . . . except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me” (Alma 3:13). This implies strongly that the original Lamanite “curse,” as well as this one on the Amlicites, was propagated by the Lamanites themselves—which they could easily do either through marking their own skin or by intermarrying with darker New World people around them. There is no need for a genetically inherited curse from God to explain the Book of Mormon record.

My argument is not that God cannot do genetic tricks, but rational and scriptural evidence indicates that he does not. The prophet in Alma 3 states unequivocally that “every man” that is cursed brings “upon himself his own condemnation” (Alma 3:19) rather than receiving it through his race. And passages throughout the Book of Mormon that have been assumed to describe racial intervention by God are actually about other kinds of reasonable, law-fulfilling, individual spiritual change. For instance, though 2 Nephi 30:6 has been thought to promise the future righteous Lamanites a miraculous change in skin color it actually refers to “scales of darkness” falling from their eyes and their resulting state has now been changed from “white and delightsome” back to the first edition’s “pure and delightsome.” Other passages make most sense as descriptions of natural processes resulting from changed life style and intermarriage (Mormon 5:15), rather than as the wholesale and sudden genetic-intervention of a race-conscious God.

Actually, it was the people themselves (not God), who were race-conscious, both the often vengeful Lamanites and also the Nephites. The Nephites, for instance, rejected the Lamanite prophet Samuel, at least in part, because of racism and then conveniently left his prophecies out of the written records until Christ strongly directed them to correct the oversight (Hel. 14:10; 3 Ne. 23: 9–13). In fact, that particular neglect suggests that the entire record probably reflects the Nephites’ own elitist, race-conscious—even somewhat paranoid—perspective, as they looked out at the threatening, dark-skinned peoples all around them.³ We should not let their

limited, though perfectly understandable, perspective determine our understanding of race any more than we should let certain limitations in the perspective of Old Testament writers determine our concept of God.

Another way that careful reading of the Book of Mormon could foster the spirit of Lehi is by helping us to reconsider our use of the term “Lamanite,” in its negative connotations, to refer to modern native Americans (North or South) or Polynesians. We should use the term only with some very careful qualifications about what it should mean *now*. “Lamanite” was used in the first part of the Book of Mormon to designate the descendants of Laman, Lemuel, and others joining with them who rebelled against Nephi and Sam, lost contact with the religious records (and thus both literacy and righteousness) and, for whatever reasons, began to appear to the Nephites as more uncivilized and dark-skinned than themselves. But the term quickly lost any legitimate racial significance as, on the one hand, various reprobate Nephite groups (Amlicites, etc.) defected to become “Lamanites” and, on the other, groups like the “Anti-Nephi-Lehies” accepted the gospel, moved to Nephite lands, and “were no more called Lamanites” (Alma 23:17).

By the time of the two-hundred-year reign of peace after Christ’s visit, there had been periods (such as under Samuel) when the “Lamanites” exceeded the “Nephites” in righteousness. Then the complete intermingling and unified righteousness after Christ produced a condition such that “neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites” among them (4 Ne. 1:17). When this Utopia dissolved about 231 A.D., “they who rejected the gospel were called Lamanites” and the “true believers in Christ” were called Nephites (4 Ne. 1:38), but the terms had again become completely devoid of genealogical or racial meaning.

At the end of the Book of Mormon, the Lamanites were no more literal descendants of Laman than were the Nephites they destroyed—and according to Mormon’s testimony both were equally wicked (Morm. 4:11–12). The surviving group was still called Lamanites only because they had allied themselves with those who had earlier rejected the gospel. So what can it mean when we still use the term “Lamanite” for all the native peoples of America and Polynesia, including those who accept the gospel and become faithful Church leaders—as well as for light-skinned Central and South Americans of Spanish descent?

Charlotte and I learned one harmful thing “Lamanite” means when we were missionaries in Samoa. Many Polynesians we met had decided, from being called Lamanites by white people who clearly connected the term with its meaning in the first part of the Book of Mormon, that it meant racially inferior and cursed. We saw them refuse moral and leadership responsibilities on the grounds they were inherently incapable—because they were “Lamanites.”

If we are going to use the term at all, it must be in the third sense suggested in the Book of Mormon. “Lamanite” should properly be used as a morally and racially neutral designation for all the post-Book of Mormon but pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Americas and Polynesia and all their descendants, whatever their ancestry. It refers to those whom Christ, when he prophesied their dramatic role in preparing for his second coming, called “the remnant of Jacob” (3 Ne. 21:23), those to whom the Book of Mormon, including its great promises concerning their roles in the latter

days, is specifically extended. It is those Spencer W. Kimball (1954) in a great prophetic chastisement of us all for our racism, with obvious concern to avoid the usual misuse of the term Lamanite, once referred to as “Lehites” or, in turn, “Nephite-Lamanites” or “Lamanite-Nephites.” As Elder Dean L. Larsen of the First Quorum of Seventy recently taught a group of us at BYU, the name and identity of “Lamanite” is used properly for modern peoples only to remind them and us of those special blessings and responsibilities that are theirs and ours. He added that that explanation ought to be an essential part of any discussion of Book of Mormon peoples (1984).

The preface to the Book of Mormon announces the book as “written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the House of Israel.” Moroni closes the book with a great promise about coming to know it is true “by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Moro. 10:4), a promise which he addressed not to us gentiles but “unto my brethren, the Lamanites.” And Christ spends six chapters of 3 Nephi prophesying to the Lamanites their central role in the final preparation for his coming, when all their enemies “shall be cut off” (3 Ne. 20:17) and they will inherit the gentiles’ land, cities, and strength, “no weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper” (22:17) and “in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (20:27). Those references are not to the rebellious children of Laman or the wild and dark-skinned enemies of Mormon. Those references are to the diverse, multi-colored, and multi-talented North and South American Indians and Polynesians of today, in and out of the Church. Those peoples have a great mission still to perform beyond what they have already achieved, and they have been promised the help, however uncomprehending or weak, of all of us who will respond to the spirit of Lehi.

NOTES

1. Elder John A. Widtsoe suggested this idea in a quotation from one of his many talks on genealogy that I read when I was genealogy chairman in the Stanford Ward but cannot now locate. The idea has recently been reinforced by Elder Neal A. Maxwell, in a sermon called “Foreordination” given in a district sacrament meeting in Jerusalem, October 1978, and circulated by the Church Education System to its institute teachers. Elder Maxwell quotes from Elder Orson Hyde (*Journal of Discourses*, 7:134) in support of his own suggestion that “the degree of detail involved in the covenants and promises we participated in [in the pre-existence] may be a more highly customized thing than many of us surmise.” And he quotes President Joseph F. Smith to show that we can receive “inklings of those promises”: “By the power of the spirit, in the redemption of Christ, through obedience, we often catch a spark from the awakened memories of the immortal soul, which lights up our whole being as with the glory of our former homes” (pp. 13–14).

2. For an authoritative argument that there were many other people already in the Americas when Lehi (and even the Jaredites) arrived, but that they were very understandably lumped together with their estranged relatives, the “Lamanites,” by the Nephite record keepers, see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1985), pp. 84–86. He discusses proper use of the “Lamanite” on pp. 93–94.

3. Sorenson 1984, 90. Nephite prejudice is also clear in Jacob 3:5, Mosiah 9: 1–2, and Alma 26:23–25.

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