



Type: Journal Article

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Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,
Volume 56 (2023)

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

Page(s): 171–258

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INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 56 · 2023 · Pages 171 - 258

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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UNDERSTANDING THE LAMANITE MARK

Clifford P. Jones

Abstract: *The Book of Mormon describes a dark mark on the skin that distinguished people who rebelled against God and his laws from those who obeyed God. The Old Testament refers to a mark that fits this description and has nothing to do with natural skin color. The law of Moses prohibited the Lord's covenant people from cutting sacrilegious marks (ancient tattoos) into their skin. The Bible simply calls these prohibited tattoos "marks" (Leviticus 19:28). This biblical meaning of the word mark, together with biblical meanings of other related words, helps us understand all Book of Mormon passages associated with the Lamanite mark.*

In this paper, I seek to identify the most plausible intended meaning of all terms used in the Book of Mormon that relate to a "mark" that was set upon Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and their followers (see Alma 3:6–7). Descriptions of this mark use the words *mark* and *skin* and always mention a *curse* (see 2 Nephi 5:20–24, Jacob 3:3–10, Alma 3:4–19, and 3 Nephi 2:15–16). The mark made skin *black* (see 2 Nephi 5:21) or *dark* (see Jacob 3:9 and Alma 3:6), and skin was *white* in its absence (see 2 Nephi 5:21 and 3 Nephi 2:15). A detailed review of these words and their cultural and linguistic context can help clarify the nature of this mark.

As explained below, Nephites preserved their written language by reusing, in their own records, words from biblical (and non-biblical) passages found on the brass plates. Also, the translated text of the Book of Mormon shows heavy influence of Early Modern English. It uses words in ways unique to Early Modern English texts, including Early Modern English translations of the Old Testament. These ancient and modern lexical ties suggest that English words in the Book of Mormon may often have the same meanings they have in those early English Bibles. A careful review of the words *mark*, *curse*, *skin*, *black*, and *white* as used in the

Book of Mormon indicates that Early Modern English biblical meanings do, in fact, apply. Indeed, these meanings can be applied consistently across the Book of Mormon — not just in selected passages.

With these meanings, these words appear to identify the Lamanite mark as a specific type of mark prohibited by the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). It was a sacrilegious, permanent mark made by incision (an ancient tattoo) which, under the law of Moses, represented rebellion against God and his laws. This doesn't mean that all tattoos indicate rebellion against God. In our day, tattoos are adopted for a wide variety of reasons. Even in the Book of Mormon, while the first Lamanites and some of their successors adopted this mark to rebel against God and his laws, others adopted it to continue traditions established by their fathers.¹

As explained in detail below, Mesoamerican art and archaeological studies confirm the presence of profane tattoos (and scarification) in the ancient Americas. These ancient tattoos support the proposal of this paper, though it, like any proposal on the meaning of the controversial mark of the Lamanites, admittedly involves a degree of speculation.

The analysis in this paper is guided by the following general principles:

1. The intended meaning of each Book of Mormon passage must align well with the stated intent of the Book of Mormon and with correct principles taught in the Book of Mormon and by today's living prophets.
2. The most plausible meaning of the text of the Book of Mormon is found in standard definitions of its revealed words, which are principally Early Modern English.
3. The most likely meaning of a Book of Mormon word doesn't always make for an easy read — it isn't always the meaning that comes readily to the mind of a modern reader. Like the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon was written by prophets who lived in an ancient culture. Their words were written from the perspective of their culture and must be understood from that perspective.
4. The intended meaning of each passage must harmonize with all passages and not just a few isolated verses.

1. See 2 Nephi 4:3–9; Jacob 3:5–9; Alma 17:15, 21:17, 23:3, 26:24, 37:9, 60:32; Helaman 5:19 and 51; 15:4–5 and 7–15. See also Galatians 1:14 and D&C 93:39.

A recent article by Jan J. Martin explains that Nephi’s “Lamanite descriptors in 2 Nephi 5 — *cut off*, *cursed*, *skin of blackness*, and *loathsome* — are best understood from within a covenant perspective, specifically from within the ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal covenant relationship that God made with Lehi’s family.”² She concludes that Nephi’s “skin of blackness was a self-inflicted mark (most likely a tattoo).”³ She doesn’t allow, however, that profane tattoos violated the law of Moses as found on the brass plates and doesn’t acknowledge their adoption as a violation of the suzerainty covenant. I further explain these differences below. The meanings I offer for Nephi’s “Lamanite descriptors” aren’t all identical to hers, but they likewise fit well within the suzerainty covenant perspective that she sets forth.

An earlier paper by Gerrit M. Steenblik,⁴ also discussed herein, suggests a mark temporarily painted on the skin — another practice well-represented in Mesoamerican art and archaeological studies. This valuable paper advances the scholarly discourse about the Lamanite mark, but some gaps in his proposal are resolved when sacrilegious tattoos that violate the law of Moses are considered.

An addendum to this paper examines alternative views of the Lamanite mark that have been offered by others.

The Specific English Words We Received From God

A growing body of evidence indicates that Joseph Smith didn’t compose the text of the Book of Mormon in his own mind. Its text reflects neither his vocabulary nor his sentence structure. The evidence indicates that he received fully composed words, phrases, and sentences, which he read

2. Jan J. Martin, “The Prophet Nephi and the Covenantal Nature of *Cut Off*, *Cursed*, *Skin of Blackness*, and *Loathsome*,” in *They Shall Grow Together: The Bible in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Charles Swift and Nicholas J. Frederick (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2022), 108. Martin explains that a suzerain-vassal covenant is “a type of covenant that was then common in the Middle East where a dominant party, the suzerain (God/Jehovah), set the terms of an agreement with a subordinate party, the vassal (Israel). As the weaker member, vassals had no power to negotiate or change the terms of the treaty. They could only agree to accept or reject whatever the suzerain offered.” *Ibid.*, 110.

3. *Ibid.*, 127.

4. Gerrit M. Steenblik, “Demythicalizing the Lamanites’ ‘Skin of Blackness,’” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 167–258, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/demythicalizing-the-lamanites-skin-of-blackness/>.

aloud to scribes, who wrote them down in the original manuscript. Royal Skousen says, “All of this evidence (from the witnesses’ statements, the original manuscript, the printer’s manuscript, and from the text itself) is thus consistent with the hypothesis that Joseph Smith could actually see (whether in the interpreters themselves or in his mind’s eye) the translated English text — word for word and letter for letter — and that he read off this revealed text to his scribe.”⁵ Jeff Lindsay adds

We now know there were numerous witnesses and remarkably consistent testimony showing that Joseph dictated [the text of the Book of Mormon] ... without notes, without manuscripts, and apparently without a Bible even when quoting Isaiah or other parts of the Bible. (Indeed, it appears that Joseph did not even have a Bible of his own until after completion of the Book of Mormon translation.)⁶

This evidence indicates that Joseph Smith humbly prepared himself to receive the words of the Book of Mormon by revelation, but seldom, if ever, puzzled over any specific word or phrase. It is consistent with a “gift from God” by which he could “look in” the interpreters and “translate” (Mosiah 8:13) by reading a text that he had little, if any, hand in composing. Marilynne Todd Linford explains that both Joseph Smith and King Mosiah translated “by acting in the office of seer, to *look*, meaning to *read*.”⁷ This process reflects a prophecy in which the Lord commands an unlearned man (Joseph Smith) saying “thou shalt *read the words* which I shall give unto thee” (2 Nephi 27:20). Later, the Lord gives instructions that apply after “*thou hast read the words which I have commanded thee*” (2 Nephi 27:22). Finally, the Lord again refers to Joseph Smith as “him that *shall read the words* that shall be delivered him” (2 Nephi 27:24). Stanford Carmack submits that these passages

5. Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 31, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1186&context=jbms>.

6. Jeff Lindsay, “Orson Scott Card’s ‘Artifact or Artifice’: Where It Stands After Twenty-five Years,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 30 (2018): 260–61, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/orson-scott-cards-artifodact-or-artifice-where-it-stands-after-twenty-five-years/#sdfootnote24anc>.

7. Marilynne Todd Linford, *The Book of Mormon is True: Evidences and Insights to Strengthen Your Testimony* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2015), 24.

indicate that the Lord “gave” or “delivered” specific words to Joseph Smith, who read them.⁸

Skousen and Carmack, who have analyzed the text that Joseph Smith dictated to his scribes (the earliest text), have concluded that it is primarily Early Modern English.⁹ The meanings that apply to its words and the rules it follows for arranging words into phrases and sentences have much more in common with texts written before the King James Bible than with Joseph Smith’s native dialect. Carmack’s comparison of certain syntactical structures in the Book of Mormon with those found “in the King James Bible and pseudo-archaic texts” finds that “Joseph Smith would not have produced this ... syntax ... in a pseudo-archaic effort.”¹⁰ Carmack adds:

The linguistic fingerprint of the Book of Mormon, in hundreds of different ways, is Early Modern English. Smith himself

8. See Stanford Carmack, “Joseph Smith Read the Words,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 18 (2016): 41–64. <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-smith-read-the-words/>. Also, compare the usage of the words *read* and *words* in Joshua 8:34; 2 Kings 22:8 and 23:3; and Jeremiah 36:6, 8, 10, and 15–16.

9. See, for example, Royal Skousen, “The Original Text of the Book of Mormon and its Publication by Yale University Press,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 7 (2013): 57–96, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-original-text-of-the-book-of-mormon-and-its-publication-by-yale-university-press/>; Stanford Carmack, “The More Part of the Book of Mormon Is Early Modern English,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 33–40, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-more-part-of-the-book-of-mormon-is-early-modern-english/>; Stanford Carmack, “The Implications of Past-Tense Syntax in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 119–86, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-implications-of-past-tense-syntax-in-the-book-of-mormon/>; Stanford Carmack, “The Case of the {-th} Plural in the Earliest Text,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 79–108, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-case-of-the-th-plural-in-the-earliest-text/>; Stanford Carmack, “The Case of Plural *Was* in the Earliest Text,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 109–37, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-case-of-plural-was-in-the-earliest-text/>; and Stanford Carmack, “How Joseph Smith’s Grammar Differed from Book of Mormon Grammar: Evidence from the 1832 History,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 239–59, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/how-joseph-smiths-grammar-differed-from-book-of-mormon-grammar-evidence-from-the-1832-history/>.

10. Stanford Carmack, “The Book of Mormon’s Complex Finite Cause Syntax,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 113, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-book-of-mormons-complex-finite-cause-syntax/>.

— out of a presumed idiosyncratic, quasi-biblical style — would not have translated and could not have translated the text into the **form** of the earliest text. Had his own language often found its way into the wording of the earliest text, its form would be very different from what we encounter.¹¹

This linguistic evidence is consistent with Nephi’s prophecy. For reasons perhaps only known to God, these words appear to show heavy influence from Early Modern English beyond what might be expected from an effort attempting to imitate biblical language. The linguistic data is not consistent with claims that Joseph fabricated the text, but it is consistent with the claim that the words themselves were revealed to Joseph.¹² The Lord said, “*I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee*” (2 Nephi 27:20).

Because this text came to Joseph Smith by revelation, one might expect it to be recognized as a beautiful, well-written text. This, however, was not the case. Carmack explains, “Early assessments of the quality of the English language of the Book of Mormon were largely dismissive. Many criticisms were merely unsubstantiated, derisive comments lacking in analysis, sometimes made for comic effect, while others were more substantive but still without an awareness of older English beyond that found in the King James Bible.”¹³ The text of the Book of Mormon can appear to be poorly formed until it is recognized as a primarily Early Modern English text whose vocabulary and syntax tend to predate the King James Version of the Bible by a century or so. Carmack explains:

A close syntactic examination of the language of the [Book of Mormon], however, reveals that the quality of English in the book is excellent and even sophisticated. But because in many cases it is English that we don’t use today, it seems to the casual observer to be deficient in many ways. The English certainly is very frequently different from and foreign to current

11. Stanford Carmack, “Joseph Smith Read the Words,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-Day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 18, (2016): 41, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-smith-read-the-words/>.

12. See Royal Skousen, “The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 57, no. 3 (2018): 107–108, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-language-of-the-original-text-of-the-book-of-mormon/>.

13. Stanford Carmack, “A Look at Some ‘Nonstandard’ Book of Mormon Grammar,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 210, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/a-look-at-some-nonstandard-book-of-mormon-grammar/>.

modes of expression. But it turns out to be nonstandard only sporadically. When we consider more advanced syntax ... we find the [Book of Mormon] to be quite elaborate in its patterns of use.¹⁴

The earliest text of the Book of Mormon has been described by friend and foe alike as ungrammatical, but Skousen explains, “The so-called bad grammar of the original text of the Book of Mormon turns out to be acceptable usage during the 1500s and 1600s, in the period that we call Early Modern English.”¹⁵ Carmack has called it “a well-formed Early Modern English text.”¹⁶ Skousen points out four specific aspects of the text that differ from a traditional Early Modern English text, then concludes that the text of the Book of Mormon is “a very complex and interesting mixture of specific language usage, but definitely not an ignorant mishmash of language imitative of the biblical style.”¹⁷

The Lord delivered to Joseph Smith — not just the general gist of concepts — but specific words, which he read by the gift and power of God. The meanings of these words and the syntactical rules they follow tend to match texts written in the 1500s and 1600s much more than they match texts authored by Joseph Smith or by others living in the 1800s — even those trying to mimic the English of the Bible. This paper acknowledges these facts, so all Book of Mormon quotations in this paper are from *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*¹⁸ (the Yale edition), and all definitions of Book of Mormon words cited herein are consistent with Early Modern English.

The Ancient Cultural and Linguistic Meaning of These Words

The revealed text of the Book of Mormon conveys thoughts originally written in an ancient language. Nephi’s prophecy explains that its words are “the words of them which have slumbered” (2 Nephi 27:6) or “slumbered in the dust” (2 Nephi 27:9), “for the Lord God hath said that the words of the faithful should speak as if it were from the dead” (2 Nephi 27:13). Unfortunately, it’s easy to misunderstand words written from the viewpoint of an ancient culture. If we apply contemporary meanings to ancient words, we can distort the clear picture they were

14. Ibid., 210–11.

15. Skousen, “Language of the Original Text,” 83.

16. Carmack, “Joseph Smith Read the Words,” 61.

17. See Skousen, “Language of the Original Text,” 106.

18. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

intended to present. This distortion is minimized as we learn more about the ancient culture (and the relatively modern source of some elements of our own culture).

As we seek to define any Book of Mormon word, we should compare how that word is used in other passages with similar cultural and linguistic context. While the most comparable passages will likely be found in the Book of Mormon, culturally and linguistically similar passages may also be found in Early Modern English translations of the Old Testament.

The words on the brass plates were a primary source for the ancient cultural and linguistic content of Nephite records. The brass plates contained a large pre-exilic collection of scripture, including ancient versions of many of the books in our Old Testament (see 1 Nephi 4:16, 5:11–13, and 13:23). This large ancient record was a lexicon of sorts from which Nephites learned to read and write. They studied it and wrote using its words, thus preserving their written language (see Omni 1:17). Familiarity with these words also helped them keep the law of Moses (see Mosiah 1:3–5). The writings of Nephi’s successors, including Amaleki (see Omni 1:14) and King Benjamin (see Mosiah 1:3) show that they remained familiar with the brass-plate record. Even Mormon, who lived about 1,000 years after Nephi, knew the brass plate record and referred to details of brass-plate prophecies (see, for example, 3 Nephi 10:15–17). Of course, we don’t have access to the brass plates or the gold plates for a direct comparison, but it’s likely that the gold plates used many ancient words and phrases that were preserved on the brass plates.

Providentially, the English in the Book of Mormon is mainly Early Modern English and there are several Early Modern English translations of the Old Testament. These Early Modern English translations of the Old Testament, including the King James Version, have both ancient roots and Early Modern English vocabulary in common with the Book of Mormon. These early English Bibles may translate some concepts with ancient roots into the same Early Modern English words as the Book of Mormon. So, the Oxford English Dictionary needn’t be our sole resource for understanding the Early Modern English words in the Book of Mormon. The English words in these early Bibles, if translated correctly, can also provide historical and cultural context. And the original Hebrew for these biblical words can help to clarify the intended meaning.¹⁹

19. This lexical connection between the Bible and Book of Mormon may be one way in which the two records can be “one in thine hand” (Ezekiel 37:17) and can

Usage of the Noun *Mark* in the Old Testament and Book of Mormon

Without context, the English noun *mark* can be relatively vague, but in Early Modern English versions of the Old Testament, this noun renders Hebrew nouns with very specific meanings.²⁰ Consequently, Paul Y. Hoskisson reasons that in the phrase *looking beyond the mark* (Jacob 4:14), the noun *mark* means target.²¹ This is based on the Hebrew noun *miphga*²² or *mattara*.²³ This same reasoning may apply to the same noun in Alma 3:4–19, where it refers repeatedly to darkened skin associated with a curse. The apparent dictionary definition is “a sign, badge, brand, etc., assumed by or imposed on a person.”²⁴ There are three Hebrew nouns translated as *mark* in Early Modern English versions of the Old Testament that might be deemed consistent with this definition, but a careful review suggests only one that fits well in this specific context.

“grow together unto the confounding of false doctrines” (2 Nephi 3:12).

20. A full text search of the 1611 King James Version and of the Geneva Bible of 1599 found nine verses that use the English noun *mark*. Only these specific verses were then reviewed in the Geneva Bible of 1587, the Bishops’ Bible of 1568, and the Coverdale Bible of 1535. Most reviewed verses use the English word *mark*. However, the King James Version uses the word *landmark* rather than *mark* in Deuteronomy 19:14 and 27:17, and the Coverdale Bible uses the word *letters* rather than *mark* in Leviticus 19:28 and the phrase *made me to stand in thy way* rather than *set me as a mark* in Job 7:20.

21. See Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Looking Beyond the Mark,” in *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J. Matthews*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 149–64, <https://rsc.byu.edu/witness-restoration/looking-beyond-mark>; and Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Missing the Mark,” *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* 29, no. 2 (2009), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol29/iss2/2/>.

22. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Enhanced Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), s.v. “מִפְּגָע.” *Miphga* means *thing hit* or *mark*. Rendered as *mark* in Job 7:20. Hereafter cited as “BDB.”

23. BDB, s.v. “מַטְרָה.” *Mattara* means *target* or *mark*; can also mean *guard*, *ward*, or *prison*. Rendered as *mark* in Job 16:12, Lamentations 3:12, and 1 Samuel 20:20.

24. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “mark, n.1,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114169?rskey=S0zDbe&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense IV.12.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

Genesis 4:15: (Oth) A Protective Token or Sign That May Not Have Affected the Skin

Genesis 4:15 says, “The Lord set a *mark* upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.” In Early Modern English Bibles, including the King James Version, the Hebrew noun *oth* is rendered as *mark* in this verse. This may be a translation error.²⁵ In all verses except Genesis 4:15, the King James Version renders *oth* as *sign*, *pledge*, or *token*. Some later translations of this verse render *oth* as *sign* or *token*. The English Revised Version says, “The LORD appointed a sign for Cain.” God’s Word Translation says, “The LORD gave Cain a sign.” Young’s Literal Translation says, “Jehovah setteth to Cain a token.” The Hebrew wording suggests a token of God’s promise to protect Cain from murder. Nothing in the Hebrew links this token with Cain’s skin. The token’s protective nature clearly distinguishes it from the Lamanite mark, which is associated — not with protection, but with a curse (see 2 Nephi 5:20–24, Jacob 3:3–10, Alma 3:4–19, and 3 Nephi 2:15–16).

From at least the 1600s through the 1900s, some Christians, eventually including some members and leaders²⁶ of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, taught that the mark set upon Cain was dark skin color imposed by God and that it was linked with a curse. It is now clear that these teachings were wrong. The Hebrew wording of Genesis 4:15 mentions neither a dark skin nor a curse.²⁷ The wording is specific to Cain with no indication that it might apply in any way to his seed.²⁸

25. *BDB*, s.v. “*אֹת*.” Although rendered as *mark* in Early Modern English versions of Genesis 4:15, including the King James Bible, the Geneva Bible of 1587, the Bishop’s Bible of 1568, the Coverdale Bible of 1535, and the Tindale Bible of 1526, *oth* is rendered as *sign*, *pledge*, or *token* in this well-considered authority, including in Genesis 4:15.

26. See, for example, Brigham Young, “Brigham Young Address,” Ms d 1234, Box 48, folder 3, February 5, 1852, Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Slavery,_Blacks,_and_the_priesthood; George Albert Smith, “Statement of the First Presidency” August 17, 1949, as cited on FAIR (website), https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Mormonism_and_racial_issues/Blacks_and_the_priesthood/Statements#1949; and Bruce R. McConkie, “Cain,” in *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 108–109. See also Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” (discourse, CES Religious Educators Symposium, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, August 18, 1978), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/alike-unto-god/>.

27. A curse mentioned nearby (Genesis 4:11–12) separates Cain from the fruits of the earth—he will have no harvest.

28. See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Moses 5; Genesis 4: The Two Ways” in *Genesis, Old Testament Minute Commentary Series*, ed. Taylor Halverson (Springville, UT:

An essay on the official website of the Church now counters the idea that God curses anyone by changing their skin color. “The Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse ... or that blacks *or people of any other race or ethnicity* are inferior in any way to anyone else.”²⁹ This suggests that no scripture, including Genesis 4:15 and any Book of Mormon passage, describes any curse from God that altered anyone’s skin color. There is simply no legitimate connection between the Book of Mormon’s cursed Lamanite mark and the protective token that the Lord gave to Cain.

Ezekiel 9:3–6: (Taw) A Protective Mark on the Forehead in the Intangible Context of a Vision

In Ezekiel 9:3–11, the noun *mark* is used in the context of a symbolic vision. In this vision, a man who is “clothed with linen, which had the writer’s inkhorn [writing equipment] by his side” (Ezekiel 9:3), is told to “set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for [are dismayed by] all the abominations [of Jerusalem]” (Ezekiel 9:3). Then, others are commanded to slay the people “but come not near any man upon whom is the mark” (Ezekiel 9:6). In this passage, the word *mark* translates the Hebrew noun *taw*, the name of a written letter (anciently shaped like an X) that could serve as a simple signature.³⁰ It appears that the man clothed in linen writes this mark on the foreheads of certain people to attest to (certify) their righteousness. In the nonphysical context of a vision, the mark visibly distinguishes those thus certified as righteous. This mark, like the token given to Cain, protects people from destruction. Both the intangible context of a vision and the protective nature of this mark distinguish it from the cursed physical mark that identified rebellious Lamanites.

This mark in Ezekiel 9:3 is placed on the skin (the forehead), but only in the symbolic context of a vision. Alma invokes similar symbolism

Book of Mormon Central, 2021), <https://biblecentral.info/library/commentary/moses-5-genesis-4/>, and Stephen O. Smoot, “The Book of Moses Introduction,” *The Pearl of Great Price: A Study Edition for Latter-day Saints* (Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central, 2022), 24–29 [at 5:40], <https://biblecentral.info/library/chapter/commentary-on-moses-5/>.

29. “Race and the Priesthood,” Gospel Topic Essays, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (website), December 2013, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>.

30. *BDB*, s.v. “תָּו.” *Taw* means *mark*. In Ezekiel 9:4 and 9:6, it is a mark on the forehead, a sign of exemption from judgment. In Job 31:35, the related word תָּוִי (*tawi*, literally *my mark*) means *my* (written) *mark* (in attestation).

as he urges Nephites to have the “image of God engraven upon [their] countenances” (Alma 5:19). He uses this symbolism shortly after the Amlicite rebellion in which Amlici and his followers had marked themselves on the forehead “after the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4) to distinguish themselves from the Nephites. This Lamanite-like mark brought a curse from God upon the Amlicites (see Alma 3:13–19). In contrast, Alma teaches that we can be saved in the kingdom of heaven only if our spiritual countenance and moral cleanliness certify that we are redeemed by God (see Alma 5:19–25).

Leviticus 19:28: (Qaaqa) A Mark Imprinted on the Skin by Incision

Leviticus 19:28, which is part of the law of Moses, includes a prohibition against profane tattoos. Before discussing the nature of this prohibition, we should establish the likelihood that it was part of the law of Moses as recorded on the brass plates and obeyed by righteous children of Lehi. Jan Martin suggests that this prohibition originated “around 400 B.C.E.,”³¹ but Documentary Hypothesis literature indicates that it’s much older — old enough to be on the brass plates.

Scholars have differing opinions as to just when the Holiness Code — the part of the law of Moses found in Leviticus 17–26 (including Leviticus 19:28) — was composed in its present form, “ranging from a pre-Deuteronomic composition to a post-exilic one.”³² However, many scholars agree that “the writing of H [the Holiness Code in its present form] was not original, and ... several literary compilations of legal material preceded it and were incorporated into it. ... However, this legal material did not necessarily originate even in those literary compilations which preceded H. Sometimes these literary compilations were preceded by oral traditions, by means of which legal materials were transmitted from an early period. ... The legal material is not equally ancient, but, like the rest of the pentateuchal law codes, it has very early elements, some of which go back even to remote periods.”³³ Recent analysis suggests that the “kernel” of the Holiness Code “preceded the destruction of the first

31. Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 123.

32. Kerry Muhlestein, “Prospering in the Land: A Comparison of Covenant Promises in Leviticus and First Nephi 2,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 289n9, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/prospering-in-the-land-a-comparison-of-covenant-promises-in-leviticus-and-first-nephi-2/>.

33. Menahem Haran and David S. Sperling, “The Holiness Code,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 9, (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 320.

Temple.”³⁴ But the Holiness Code “preserves only fragments of a[n earlier] more comprehensive legislation.”³⁵ “From a historical perspective, ... the earliest recoverable literary layer of [the laws in Leviticus 18 and 19] may be relatively old [compared with other parts of the Holiness Code].”³⁶ This literature is consistent with an origination of the laws in Leviticus 19, including Leviticus 19:28, long before Lehi left Jerusalem. The Lord commanded Nephi to obtain the brass plates, which contained these ancient laws, so the Nephites could “observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses” (2 Nephi 5:10).

Leviticus 19:28 says, “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any *marks* upon you: I am the Lord.” This statute prohibits two different “unholy” practices (Leviticus 19:2). The first was a pagan practice of cutting gashes in one’s own body to mourn for the dead. The second practice, described with the English word *mark*, isn’t about mourning for the dead.³⁷ It involves cutting permanent, sacrilegious marks (ancient tattoos) into the skin.³⁸ The Hebrew word translated here as *marks* (*qaaqa*) is used only this once in the Old Testament. This passage forbids any *incision*, *imprintment*, or *tattoo*³⁹ that honors pagan gods (and some believe it forbids other tattoos).⁴⁰ Bearing such a mark

34. Ibid.

35. Henry T. C. Sun, “Holiness Code,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:256, https://archive.org/details/anchorbibledicti0003unse_b2a9/page/254/mode/2up.

36. Ibid.

37. The Hebrew doesn’t apply the term *for the dead* to the practice of imprinting permanent marks into the skin by incision. See Rabbi Anthony Manning, “Tattoos and Body Piercing,” RabbiManning.com, Issues in Contemporary Jewish Society, #133, May 2021, <http://rabbimanning.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Tattoos-and-Body-Piercing.pdf>. See also Gilad J. Gevaryahu, “Ketovet Ka’aka (Leviticus 19:28): Tattooing or Branding?,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 13–21, https://jbnqnew.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/381/381_ketovet.pdf. The syntax of virtually all English translations (including the KJV and the other Early Modern English translations) preserves this distinction, applying the term *for the dead* only to the first clause in the passage.

38. See also discussion of curses and cutting in Steenblik, “Demythicalizing,” 192.

39. *BDB*, s.v. “עָרַעַר.”

40. Among Jews, discussions about the scope of this second prohibition date back centuries. Ancient sages and modern scholars both tend to divide into two camps on this question. Some see this passage as a prohibition against almost all marks made by cutting the skin. This view has prevailed among Jews for the past 1,000 years (until recently). Others cite Old Testament passages that portray certain marks in a positive light (see Genesis 4:15, Isaiah 44:5, Isaiah 49:14–16, and Ezekiel

violated the law of Moses, so the mark itself was a curse — a cursed thing cut into the skin in violation of God’s law. As such, it fits the description of the Lamanite mark in Alma 3:4–19.

Consistently Literal References to Skin

Both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon refer to some body parts as metaphors for spiritual realities. These include metaphorical references to stiff necks, hard hearts, and clean hands (see Exodus 32:9, Ezekiel 3:7, 2 Samuel 22:21, 2 Nephi 25:16, and Alma 15:15). On the other hand, all 100 uses of the word *skin* in the Old Testament refer to literal, physical skin — the word *skin* is never used purely as a metaphor. Even the term “I am escaped with the *skin* of my teeth” (Job 19:20), the source of an English idiom for a narrow escape, is seen often by commentators as a reference to actual skin (with differing views about specifics) but may refer to the gums or the bones in which the teeth are set (here a wordplay involving an Arabic word may be involved).⁴¹ This consistently literal or physical meaning of the word *skin* across the Old Testament appears to apply in the Book of Mormon as well.

Blessings, Cursings, and God’s Covenant with the Children of Israel

The words *curse* and *cursing* aren’t common topics of discussion in our day. Nevertheless, curses that come from God, like blessings that come from God, are governed by the principles of agency, obedience, and repentance. Keeping covenants brings connection with God and

9:4, 6). They believe that this law only prohibits sacrilegious marks that represent or honor pagan deities or accompany apostate practices. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* s.v. “Tattoo;” 2d ed. vol. 19, 526; Rabbi Alan Lucas, “Tattooing in Jewish Law: A Conservative ruling on body ink,” *My Jewish Learning*, (website,) <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tattooing-in-jewish-law/>; Nili S. Fox, “The Biblical Body as Canvas,” *Reform Judaism Magazine*, Summer 2014, 34–35, https://issuu.com/reformjudaism/docs/rj_summer2014_reduced; and Dierdra Rutherford Fein, “Living with Leviticus: On Tattoos,” Arts & Culture, *TC Jewfolk*, (website), August 10, 2011, <https://tcjewfolk.com/living-leviticus-tattoos/>. The Lamanite mark reflected rebellion against God himself, so it may have either blasphemed the Lord or honored pagan gods. The archaeological record confirms profane tattoos in ancient America, so it supports the more restrictive view.

41. See David R. Blumenthal, “A Play on Words in the Nineteenth Chapter of Job,” *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1966): 497–501, davidblumenthal.org/images/Play%20on%20Words%20in%20Job.pdf. Also see the commentaries at “Job 19:20,” BibleHub, (website), <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/job/19-20.htm>.

access to many blessings. Breaking covenants separates us from God — bringing curses upon us. The separation inherent in each curse, however, is conditioned on repentance.

Usage of the Words Curse and Cursing in the Old Testament and Book of Mormon

Forms of the word *curse* appear 184 times in the Old Testament and 80 times in the Book of Mormon. If we are to understand the passages that use these words, we should explore their meanings. In Early Modern English versions of the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon, three different meanings can apply to the words *curse* and *cursing*. Often, they indicate a prophecy of an affliction or negative consequence that will come upon unrepentant people.⁴² For instance, Jeremiah declared, “Thus saith the Lord; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord” (Jeremiah 17:5). Similarly, Nephi declared, “Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men” (2 Nephi 28:31). This meaning applies to the curses set forth in Leviticus 26. They were consequences that were prophesied to afflict the children of Israel who strayed from the covenant path.

The words *curse* and *cursing* can also refer to a thing, a place, or even a people that is at odds with God’s law — a forbidden or cursed thing.⁴³ This meaning may be less common, but it’s well represented in the Old Testament. The Lord tells Jeremiah that wickedness has caused the children of Israel themselves to become *a curse*. He says, “I will deliver them to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth for their hurt, to be a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and a curse, in all places whither I shall drive them” (Jeremiah 24:9). The Lord later tells Zechariah that those who were once a curse would become a blessing. He says, “And it shall come to pass, that as ye were a curse among the heathen, O house of Judah, and house of Israel; so will I save you, and ye shall be a blessing” (Zechariah 8:13).

Moses taught the children of Israel, “The graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire: thou shalt not desire the silver or gold

42. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “curse, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46132?rskey=AOAwPL&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense 1.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

43. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “curse, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46132?rskey=AOAwPL&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense 3.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

that is on them, nor take it unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it is an abomination to the Lord thy God. Neither shalt thou bring an abomination into thine house, *lest thou be a cursed thing like it*: but thou shalt utterly detest it, and thou shalt utterly abhor it; for it is a *cursed thing*” (Deuteronomy 7:25–26). The spoil of idolatrous cities was to be burned and abandoned as a “cursed thing” (Deuteronomy 13:17).

So, something at odds with God’s law can be called a curse or cursed thing. It appears that the Lamanite mark, which was cut into the skin in violation of God’s law, was this type of cursing — a cursed thing on their skins. Jacob refers to it as “*the cursing* which hath come upon their skins” (Jacob 3:5). Similarly, Mormon explains that “the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, *which was a curse upon them*” (Alma 3:6). In these passages and others, the words *cursing* and *curse* refer to a forbidden or cursed thing — something at odds with God’s law.⁴⁴

In other settings, the words *curse* and *cursing* have one other meaning. They can refer to curses uttered by men. The Old Testament sometimes uses the word *cursing* to refer to such curses.⁴⁵ The Book of Mormon always uses the word *curse* for this purpose.⁴⁶

Blessings and Cursings of the Law of Moses

The blessings and cursings that the Lord promised to Nephi in the second chapter of the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 2:20–23) reflect blessings and cursings that the Lord promised to the children of Israel centuries earlier, which are recorded in Leviticus 26.

After the Lord redeemed the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, he entered into a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. He gave them the law of Moses, “a law of performances and of ordinances, a law which they were to observe strictly from day to day to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him” (Mosiah 13:30). Leviticus 26 records the blessings (positive consequences) that would apply “if ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do

44. This sense of the words *curse* and *cursing* may be fairly prominent in the Book of Mormon. Consider 1 Nephi 2:23; 2 Nephi 1:18, 1:22, 4:6, 5:21–24; Jacob 3:3; Alma 3:9, 18–19, Alma 17:15, Alma 23:18; and 3 Nephi 2:15.

45. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “curse, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46132?rskey=AOAwPL&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense 2.a. Includes Early Modern English examples. See also Genesis 12:3, Leviticus 19:14, and Leviticus 20:9.

46. See, for example, 2 Nephi 18:21, 2 Nephi 29:5, and Alma 49:27.

them” (see Leviticus 26:1–13) and the cursings (negative consequences) that would apply “if ye will not hearken unto me, and will not do *all these commandments*; And if ye shall despise my statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments, so that ye will not do *all my commandments, but that ye break my covenant*” (see Leviticus 26:14–39).

Kerry Muhlestein notes the covenant inherent in these blessings and cursings: “The Abrahamic Covenant is most fully outlined for Israel when it was reestablished with them during their journey from Egypt. This is presented in Leviticus 26.”⁴⁷ Muhlestein explains further:

Leviticus 26 represents the end of what scholars refer to as the “Holiness Code,” which is comprised of chapters 17–26 and which outlines a series of laws regarding rituals, sexual conduct, family relations, priestly conduct, regulations of religious festivals and the tabernacle, blasphemy, and redemption. The statutes and commandments that Israel is told to keep as part of the covenant most directly apply to the laws found in this section of scripture.

As is typical of covenant pericopes in the Old Testament, the promise of blessings for keeping the covenant was immediately followed by a presentation of the cursings that would follow if Israel did not remain faithful.⁴⁸

As children of Israel, Lehi’s family were under covenant to keep the law of Moses. In 1 Nephi 2:20–23, the Lord renews this covenant with Nephi, including the application of its blessings and cursings upon him and his brethren. Muhlestein explains the correlation between the blessings and cursings recorded in Leviticus 26 and those promised to Nephi as he begins his ministry. Muhlestein says, “There is a striking similarity between this Leviticus 26 covenant explication and the much more succinct version recorded by Nephi as he and his family left Jerusalem.”⁴⁹

Muhlestein notes that Nephi’s language “mirrors the Leviticus emphasis on how breaking the covenant would lead to punishment that would force Israel to return to God.”⁵⁰ Thus, Muhlestein conceptually links these blessings and cursings revealed to Nephi with those given by the Lord centuries earlier as the children of Israel covenanted to keep

47. Muhlestein, “Prospering in the Land,” 289.

48. *Ibid.*, 289–90.

49. *Ibid.*, 290.

50. *Ibid.*, 291.

the law of Moses. Because the provisions of the covenant described in Leviticus 26 *most directly apply to the laws found in* Leviticus 17–26, the many laws to which these blessings and cursings apply most directly include Leviticus 19:28, which prohibits profane *marks* on the skin (tattoos).

Two Types of Lamanite Rebellion and Two Resulting Curses

An important pattern is revealed through a careful comparison of three passages: 1 Nephi 2:19–24, in which the Lord sets forth blessings and cursings for Lehi’s posterity; 2 Nephi 1:13–29, in which Lehi admonishes his sons; and 2 Nephi 5:19–25, in which Nephi describes how some of these blessings and cursings have already come to pass. Each of these passages mentions two different types of rebellion by Nephi’s brethren and two different negative consequences or curses — one for each type of rebellion.

In 1 Nephi 2:22, the Lord promises that inasmuch as Nephi is righteous, he will “be made a ruler and a teacher over [his] brethren.” In 1 Nephi 2:21, the Lord promises that inasmuch as Nephi’s brethren “shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.” So, the first type of rebellion is rebellion against Nephi (and his teachings), and the consequence (curse) for doing so is to be cut off from the presence of the Lord.⁵¹

In 1 Nephi 2:23, the Lord promises that “in the day that [thy brethren] shall rebel against me [the Lord himself], I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed except they

51. Martin sees being *cut off* as different from being *cursed* (Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 118), but this distinction isn’t ironclad. Being *cut off* appears to be the stated covenantal penalty or curse for rebellion against Nephi (see 1 Nephi 2:21 where the Lord states the penalty and 2 Nephi 5:20 where Nephi confirms that this specific penalty had been imposed). To be cut off is a common penalty for violating a covenant with God. When God established the covenant of circumcision with Abram (Abraham), God said, “And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14). Jared T. Parker describes this as “a severe ‘cutting’ *penalty*” for breaking the covenant of circumcision, “Cutting Covenants,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 120, <https://rsc.byu.edu/gospel-jesus-christ-old-testament/cutting-covenants>. The Lord repeatedly declares similar cutting off penalties (either being cut off from God’s people or from his presence) in the law of Moses. In the Book of Mormon, the term *curse of Adam* (Moroni 8:8) means to be *cut off from the presence of the Lord* (Alma 42:9).

[thy seed] shall rebel against me also.” So, the second type of rebellion is rebellion against the Lord himself (and his laws) and the consequence for doing so includes “a sore curse” and a lack of power over Nephi’s righteous seed. Martin notes that this lack of power was the result of forfeiting “the protection and other spiritual blessings that Jehovah offered.”⁵²

Martin considers it significant that “there is no mention of a mark or a skin of blackness among the many curses,” suggesting that “the mark’s absence from the covenant cursings section is strong evidence that the mark, or skin of blackness, did not come as a direct consequence for breaking the suzerainty covenant.”⁵³ However, the covenant cursings section for rebellion against the Lord includes both a “sore curse” and a lack of power over righteous Nephites (see 1 Nephi 2:23). The *sore curse* on the Lamanites appears to have been the Lamanite mark, which was a *curse* upon their skins (see 2 Nephi 5:21 and Jacob 3:3–5; see also 2 Nephi 1:22 and Alma 3:6). The Lord’s explanation that others will be marked “that they may be cursed also” (Alma 3:15) similarly suggests that the mark itself was the sore curse mentioned earlier. Thus, the concept of the mark is not absent from the covenant cursings section.⁵⁴

In Lehi’s admonition to his sons, he mentions these two different types of rebellion and resulting curses, but he does so within the context of his greater concern for their eternal welfare, which he mentions three times. He fears lest “the Lord your God should come out in *the fullness of his wrath* upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed *forever*” (2 Nephi 1:17). He is concerned “that ye may not incur the displeasure of a just God upon you unto the destruction — yea, *the eternal destruction* — of *both soul and body*” (2 Nephi 1:22); and he has “none other object save it be *the everlasting welfare of your souls*” (2 Nephi 2:30).

Lehi’s words *or* and *also* separate his words about the more-limited curses mentioned earlier from his words about eternal consequences. He urges his sons not to rebel *against the Lord himself*, saying, “I desire

52. Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 121.

53. Ibid.

54. The cursings section may also contain, or at least allude to, a separate *sore curse* upon the Nephites. First Nephi 2:23–24 indicates that the Lamanites will not have power to destroy the Nephites unless the Nephites also rebel against the Lord, in which case, the Lamanites will be “a scourge” to them. Nephi and Jacob both later elaborate on this concept, indicating that this scourge could become a sore curse “even unto destruction” (2 Nephi 5:25, and Jacob 2:33 and 3:3; see also Alma 3:8 and Isaiah 28:14–18). This Nephite *sore curse* did not apply to the Lamanites. Their society, though cursed with a *sore curse*, was not destroyed.

that ye should remember to observe the statutes and the judgments of *the Lord*” (2 Nephi 1:16). He emphasizes eternal consequences, then says, “... *or that a cursing* should come upon you for the space of many generations and ye are visited by sword and by famine and are hated and are led according to the will and captivity of the devil” (2 Nephi 1:17–18). He later uses an inverted structure to reiterate “that ye may not be *cursed with a sore cursing*” (2 Nephi 1:22) before using the words “and also” to return to weightier eternal consequences.

Next, Lehi admonishes his sons not to rebel against their brother Nephi (see 2 Nephi 1:24–29). He says, “Rebel no more against *your brother*, whose views have been glorious, and who hath kept the commandments from the time we left Jerusalem, and who hath been an instrument in the hands of God in bringing us forth into the land of promise” (2 Nephi 1:24). He explains that if they “hearken unto *the voice of Nephi*, ye shall *not perish*. And if ye will hearken unto *him*, I leave unto you a blessing, yea, even my first blessing. But if ye will not hearken unto him, I *take away my first blessing* — yea, even my blessing — and it shall rest upon him” (2 Nephi 1:28–29). In other words, they will be blessed for obeying Nephi but will lose that blessing (be cursed) and *perish* (be *cut off* from the Lord; see 1 Nephi 22:19 and 2 Nephi 2:5) for rebelling against him.

Years later, Nephi describes the rebellion, curses, and blessings that have taken place, recounting both types of rebellion and the curses applicable to each. He first mentions the rebellion of his brethren against him and the application of the first curse:

And behold, the words of the Lord had been fulfilled unto my brethren which he spake concerning them, that I should be their ruler and their teacher. Wherefore I had been their ruler and their teacher according to the commandments of the Lord until the time that they sought to take away my life. Wherefore the word of the Lord was fulfilled which he spake unto me, saying that inasmuch as they *will not hearken unto thy words*, they shall be *cut off from the presence of the Lord*. And behold, *they were cut off from his presence*. (2 Nephi 5:19–20)

Note that Nephi ends this description of the first rebellion and curse with some finality. He then proceeds to describe the second rebellion and curse, which he ends with similar finality.

And he had caused *the cursing* to come upon them, yea, even *a sore cursing* because of their iniquity. For behold, *they*

had hardened their hearts against him [the Lord], that they had become like unto a flint. Wherefore as they were white and exceeding fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people, therefore the Lord God did cause *a skin of blackness* to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people save they shall repent of their iniquities. And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed, for they shall be *cursed even with the same cursing*. And the Lord spake it, and it was done. (2 Nephi 5:21–23)

As we've seen, each of these three passages mentions two kinds of rebellion by Nephi's brethren and two resulting curses — one for each type of rebellion. The first rebellion was against Nephi and his teachings, for which Nephi's brethren were cursed (cut off from the presence of the Lord). The second rebellion was directly against the Lord himself. For this rebellion, they were cursed with *a sore curse* (or *sore cursing*) — a cursed thing that Nephi calls *a skin of blackness*.⁵⁵ This cursing on their skins made them loathsome⁵⁶ to Nephi's people, subject to repentance.

These two rebellions and cursings didn't take place simultaneously. When Nephi's brethren rebelled against him and his teachings, he and his followers fled to the land of Nephi. Later, his brethren rebelled again, this time against the Lord himself and his laws, and received the *sore cursing*, or *skin of blackness*. This order of events identifies the approximate time when the Lord gave Nephi a revelation that isn't mentioned in Nephi's small-plate account but is quoted later by Mormon. In this revelation, the Lord says, "Behold, the Lamanites have I [already] cursed; and I will [later] set a mark upon them, that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed from this time henceforth and forever except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me, that I may have mercy upon them" (Alma 3:14). It would appear that Nephi received this revelation

55. Martin suggests, "Perhaps the Lamanites created the skin of blackness by 'inlaying the Colour of Black under their skins' through the process of tattooing," "Covenantal Nature," 122.

56. Martin explains that "Nephite feelings of loathsomeness would be the natural consequences of the Lamanites' engagement in sinful behavior." When the word *loathsome* is perceived through the Lehitic suzerainty treaty, it refers to a people who are "outside the covenant because they had not kept the commandments." This word "is used only three times in the Book of Mormon," and each time "was exclusively used to describe people who chose to be outside the covenant relationship." "Covenantal Nature," 125–26.

sometime after his brethren were already cursed for rebelling against him, but before their rebellion against the Lord, for which they were later cursed with a sore curse, or skin of blackness. In this revelation, the Lord calls this skin of blackness “a mark” that will separate the Lamanites from the Nephites until the Lamanites repent of their wickedness.⁵⁷

Mormon equates this “mark” with the sore curse or skin of blackness when he says, “The skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them” (Alma 3:6). He continues, explaining that “the Lord God set a mark upon them, yea, upon Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael and the Ishmaelitish women. And this was done that their seed might be distinguished from the seed of their brethren, that thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions, which would prove their destruction” (Alma 3:7–8).

It may be that Mormon’s words in Alma 3:6–7 are structured as a simple A, B, B, A chiasm that delineates the two rebellions and curses: “[A] And the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them because of their transgression [against the Lord] and [B] their rebellion against their brethren, which consisted of Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph, and Sam, which were just and holy men; [B] and their brethren sought to destroy them. Therefore they were cursed, [A] and the Lord God set a mark upon them, yea, upon Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael and the Ishmaelitish women.”

Mormon later notes that the Amlicite mark was also due to rebellion against God himself. He says, “Now the Amlicites knew not that they were fulfilling the words of God *when they began to mark themselves in their foreheads*. Nevertheless as they had come out *in open rebellion against God*, therefore it was expedient that *the curse should fall upon them*” (Alma 3:18).

A Self-Imposed Mark of Rebellion

As mentioned above, Nephi’s description of the sore curse as “a skin of blackness” (2 Nephi 5:21) may link it conceptually with Leviticus 19:28, the statute prohibiting sacrilegious tattoos.⁵⁸ Because this cursing was

57. Martin suggests that “Laman and Lemuel’s flinty hearts, hearts full of a consuming desire for separation and autonomy, created the need for the mark.” “Covenantal Nature,” 121.

58. An anonymous peer reviewer of this paper notes that the claim that a curse applies to Leviticus 19:28 may be “even better than may first appear.” The reviewer

due to rebellion against the Lord himself, the term *skin of blackness* may refer to a permanent black mark on the skin (tattoo) that was blasphemous against the Lord or honored other gods.⁵⁹ Nephi’s description of this *skin of blackness* doesn’t clearly state that it was self-imposed, but Mormon’s words, if read carefully, tend to clarify this point.

Alma 3:1–3, the three verses that precede Mormon’s discussion of the Amlicite and Lamanite marks in Alma 3:4–19, may explain why the topic of marks on the skin appears at this point in the account. These verses explain that after the battle with the Lamanites and Amlicites, “the Nephites which were not *slain* by the weapons of war” (Alma 3:1) buried all the slain Nephites, who were too numerous to be counted (see Alma 3:1). They didn’t, however, bury all the slain Lamanites and Amlicites. Instead, their bodies were cast “into the *waters of Sidon*” (Alma 3:3). It appears that marks on the skin helped these survivors distinguish the bodies of the Amlicites “from the Nephites” (Alma 3:4).⁶⁰

The Lamanites were easier to distinguish because their heads were shorn and they were mostly naked. In addition, Mormon tells us that “the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the *mark* which

explains, “The penalty ‘that soul shall be cut off from among his people’ (analogous to being ‘cut off from the presence of the Lord’ — i.e., excommunication) is attached to the statute in Leviticus 19:8.” The reviewer cites William Brownlee, who has argued that the later term “I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:28) is the equivalent of saying “I am the one who brings it to pass” or “I am the one who makes it happen.” William H. Brownlee, “The Ineffable Name of God,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 226 (1977): 45. The reviewer concludes, “In other words, when the statute says ‘I am the Lord’ in Leviticus 19:28, that is a promise that the Lord will bring to pass the excommunication penalty mentioned earlier in Leviticus 19:8.” Review correspondence to author, June 25, 2022. See also Matthew L. Bowen, “‘Creator of the First Day’: The Glossing of the Lord of Sabaoth in D&C 95:7,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 55–56, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/creator-of-the-first-day-the-glossing-of-lord-of-sabaoth-in-dc-957/>.

59. The adoption of this mark diminished or opposed the role of circumcision, God’s token of his covenant with Israel. God told his people, “This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you” (Genesis 17:10–11). For those who had accepted this covenant, a second and counterfeit cutting in the skin, especially one that blasphemed God or implied allegiance to false gods, would have been an obvious, visible sign of rebellion against God himself.

60. See Brant A. Gardner, “Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture Chapters 14 & 15,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 35 (2020): 273–74, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/labor-diligently-to-write-the-ancient-making-of-a-modern-scripture-6/>.

was set upon their fathers, which was a *curse* upon them because of their transgression” (Alma 3:6). If the mark that darkened their skins was a forbidden mark cut into their skin contrary to the law of Moses, then it served as a visible sign of their rebellion and their cursed state. Because the Lamanite mark was once incorrectly associated with their natural skin color, it has been assumed to cover all skin from head to toe. The Book of Mormon, however, never expressly supports such a mark, and the word *mark* is never used in the Old Testament with any such meaning. Mormon’s statement may refer to a more limited mark — one that covered only part of the skin, like the mark mentioned in Leviticus 19:28. His phrase *according to* can be read to mean “corresponding to something; agreeing, matching”⁶¹ and may indicate that the skins of the Lamanites were dark only where they were marked.⁶²

A permanent mark that covered only a relatively small part of the skin is consistent with another Book of Mormon account. Captain Moroni planned a nighttime operation that required a Nephite soldier who could pass as a Lamanite. To find such a soldier, he “caused that a search should be made among his men that perhaps he might find a man which was a descendant of Laman’s among them” (Alma 55:4). The need for a search to identify a descendant of Laman suggests a permanent characteristic that wasn’t obvious. It may have been a more-limited permanent mark. Gardner suggests that it may have been an accent or a peculiarly Lamanite manner of speaking.⁶³ It may have been both. In any event, they found a descendant of Laman who had recently lived

61. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “according, adj. and adv.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1177?rskey=VZbjyc&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid>. Sense A.1; see also sense B.1.b. Both include Early Modern English examples. Cf. Martin, who suggests that the phrase *according to the mark* may indicate that “it was the Nephites who identified the dark skin as the fulfillment of the prophesied mark, not Jehovah.” “Covenantal Nature,” 122.

62. The phrase *according to* has similar meaning in Mosiah 4:26, where King Benjamin teaches his people to “impart of [their] substance to the poor, every man *according to* that which he hath.” See also Enos 1:10 (his brethren to be blessed “*according to* their diligence”) and Alma 11:1 (judges received wages “*according to* the time which they labored”). In Alma 3:6, the adverbial phrase *according to* modifies the English term *were dark*, which may render a verb like the Hebrew verb *shachar*, which means to be or turn black or dark (*BDB*, s.v. “שָׁחַר”).

63. See Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 4, Alma (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 696–97, as cited by Steenblik, who suggests that temporary body paint could quickly make any Nephite soldier appear to be a Lamanite but the very ease of such deception shows the very real dangers facing any Lamanite or Nephite

among the Lamanites. The point is that this account is easily reconciled with a self-imposed permanent mark on the skin and may suggest that a descendant of Laman, even one who retained such a mark, was treated as a Nephite by his comrades in arms.

The Amlicites “had not shorn their heads like unto the Lamanites,” but “*they had marked themselves with red in their foreheads after the manner of the Lamanites*” (Alma 3:4). So, both Lamanites and Amlicites bore marks on their skin. The Amlicite mark was a self-imposed red (reddish) mark placed on the forehead. The Lamanite mark was dark (probably black).⁶⁴ The text places the Lamanite mark on the skin, but doesn’t limit it to the forehead, so it may have been placed elsewhere on the skin or perhaps in multiple locations.

Mormon later says, “Now we will return again to the Amlicites, for they also *had a mark set upon them; yea, they set the mark upon themselves, yea, even a mark of red upon their foreheads*” (Alma 3:13). Thus, Mormon equates the fact that the Amlicites “set the mark upon themselves” with having “a mark set upon them.” This second description of the Amlicite mark helps Mormon explain how “the word of God [was] fulfilled” (Alma 3:14). The word of God to which Mormon refers is the prophecy mentioned earlier that was recorded by Nephi, but not on the small plates. In it, the Lord specifies three groups who will be cursed and marked — the Lamanites, dissenters who will mingle with the Lamanites, and traitors who will fight against the Nephites. The Amlicites clearly belonged to the third group. This word of God reads as follows:

Behold, the Lamanites have I cursed; and *I will set a mark upon them*, that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed from this time henceforth and forever except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me, that I may have mercy upon them. And again, *I will set a mark upon him* that mingleth his seed with thy brethren, that they

who might attempt to rely on such paint for battlefield identification. Steenblik, “Demythcizing,” 216.

64. See J. Eric S. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” *Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology* 3, no. 63 (1946): 18–25, reprinted in *The Carnegie Maya III: Carnegie Institution of Washington Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1940–1957*, comp. John M. Weeks (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2011), 253, where black is the prominent color mentioned with Mayan tattooing, but red is also suggested in iconographic evidence.

may be cursed also. And again, *I will set a mark upon him* that fighteth against thee and thy seed. (Alma 3:14–16)

After quoting this prophecy, Mormon again states that it was fulfilled by the self-imposed Amlicite mark. “Now the Amlicites knew not that *they were fulfilling the words of God when they began to mark themselves in their foreheads*. Nevertheless as they had come out in open rebellion against God, therefore it was expedient that the curse should fall upon them” (Alma 3:18). But how, one might ask, could Mormon equate a self-imposed mark with one that the Lord himself will “set upon” rebellious people? Curses from the Lord, including those stated in the first person, are often fulfilled in the natural course of events as people on the earth exercise their agency (see, for example, Mosiah 12:5 and Helaman 15:17). Mormon explains, “Now I would that ye should see that they brought upon themselves the curse. And even so doeth every man that is cursed[, he]⁶⁵ bringeth upon himself his own condemnation” (Alma 3:19). So, after the Lord had promised to “set a mark upon him that fighteth against” the Nephites (Alma 3:16), he fulfilled that promise as the Amlicites “set the mark upon themselves, yea, even a mark of red upon their foreheads” (Alma 3:13) and “brought upon themselves the curse” (Alma 3:19).

Just as the word of God was fulfilled by a self-imposed Amlicite mark, it appears that it was likewise fulfilled, beginning centuries earlier, by a self-imposed Lamanite mark. In the prophecy, the entire phrase *I will set a mark upon* is used three times, suggesting consistent meaning. The Lord repeatedly associates the mark with a curse — clearly the same curse each time.

65. Early Modern English syntax helps us understand the earliest text of Alma 3:19. Stanford Carmack identified this similar early modern passage:

Lastly, the terrene plow **makes** the earth more fit for the seede; **Euen so doeth** the tearing of the heart by true repentance, **makes** it the more apt to embrace the mercie of God.

(1616, William Jackson, *The celestiall husbandrie: or, The tillage of the soule*, *Early English Books*, University of Michigan, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?cc=eebo;c=eebo;idno=a04199.0001.001;seq=82;vid=7913;page=root;view=text>)

Based on this passage, Carmack suggests that the earliest text of Alma 3:19 should have a comma after *cursed* and an understood *he* right after that comma. (Personal correspondence to author, March 29, 2020.) This reading helps clarify that the curse, like the Amlicite and Lamanite marks, was, in essence, self-imposed (as all curses are).

If it can be said, as Mormon says, that it was God who “set a mark upon” the Amlicites when the red mark on their foreheads was obviously self-imposed, it stands to reason that God could also have “set a mark upon” the Lamanites in the same self-imposed manner. Indeed, Mormon tells us that the Amlicites marked themselves “*after the manner of the Lamanites*” (Alma 3:4). Then, after talking at length about the Lamanite curse and mark, Mormon returns to the Amlicites, telling us that they “*also had a mark set upon them*” (Alma 3:13). The Early Modern English meaning of the word *also*, like the term *after the manner of the Lamanites*, indicates that, in Mormon’s eyes, even though the self-imposed Amlicite mark was red and the Lamanite mark was black, the Amlicite mark was similar to or “in the very manner of”⁶⁶ the Lamanite mark. Color was clearly not the attribute that made the two marks similar, so it would appear that they were similar because both were adopted in the manner associated with the curse.⁶⁷

The most plausible Old Testament meaning for the word *mark* in this context is the meaning in Leviticus 19:28 — a permanent, visible mark cut into the skin in defiance of the law of Moses. With this meaning, the prophecy in this passage indicates that Lamanites, Amlicites, and other dissenters would all distinguish themselves from Nephites by adopting such a mark. Martin suggests that Laman, Lemuel, and their followers adopted such a mark “in pursuit of their desires, desires that dictated what would ‘be done unto [them]’ (D&C 11:17) by a just and trustworthy suzerain who honored both the treaty and their agency.”⁶⁸

Appropriately Measured Blessings and Cursings

Neither the blessings and cursings described by the Lord in Leviticus 26 nor the related blessings and cursings mentioned by him in 1 Nephi 2:20–23 are unjust. “Curses [from God] are a manifestation of God’s divine love and justice.”⁶⁹ The Lord’s words in Leviticus 26 don’t require or state

66. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “also, adv. and n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/5740>. Sense A.2. Includes Early Modern English examples: “Expressing likeness: in the very manner of something else; in like manner, in the same way, likewise, similarly. *Obs.*”

67. See Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 138n93. The text never suggests a reason for the difference in color. One might speculate that each color had cultural significance to the society adopting it.

68. Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 121.

69. Guide to the Scriptures s.v. “Curse, Curses,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (website), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/curse-curses>.

that the entire set of curses applies to each individual act of disobedience any more than they require or state that the entire set of blessings applies to each individual act of obedience. Similarly, the Lord’s words to Nephi describe blessings and cursings that apply “inasmuch as” the people are obedient or disobedient. President Ezra Taft Benson explains: “God gives us commandments to bless us. The devil would have us break these commandments to curse us. Daily, constantly, we choose by our desires, our thoughts, and our actions whether we want to be blessed or cursed, happy or miserable.”⁷⁰ Elder Carlos E Asay explains further:

No commandment or requirement of the gospel is nonessential. Each has its place, and all are to be respected. Not one is to be trifled with or placed aside as inconvenient. . . . Let us remember that with every commandment, God has promised a blessing. If we expect to claim the blessing, we must keep the commandment. Otherwise, if we ignore or break the commandment, we are cursed by losing the blessing.⁷¹

God, who irrevocably predicates each blessing on our obedience to the applicable law (see D&C 130:20–21) correspondingly predicates each cursing on our disobedience to the applicable law. The Lord’s promises to Nephi confirm that we are blessed and cursed “inasmuch as” we obey or disobey the Lord (see 1 Nephi 2:20–23). The extent of either our prosperity (blessings) or our separation from the Lord (cursings) depends on the extent of our obedience or disobedience.

Thus, if I obey one of God’s laws, I will eventually receive the blessings for my obedience. Should I choose to obey a second law, I will eventually receive even more blessings. Similarly, if I choose to disobey one of God’s laws, I will eventually lose the blessings for obeying that law. Stated another way, I will eventually be cursed (separated from God) by that disobedience. Should I choose to disobey a second law, I will eventually lose even more blessings — I will be cursed again for that additional act of disobedience. Of course, all of this is conditional on the thoughts and intents of my heart and on my repentance, but if I act willingly and don’t repent, I will eventually suffer the just consequences (curses) applicable to each law I choose to disobey. Elder Boyd K. Packer

70. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Great Commandment—Love the Lord,” *Ensign* 18, no. 5 (May 1988), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1988/05/the-great-commandment-love-the-lord>.

71. Carlos E. Asay, “The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood,” *Ensign* 15, no. 11 (November 1985), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1985/11/the-oath-and-covenant-of-the-priesthood>.

taught, “Often, very often, we are punished as much by our sins as we are for them.”⁷² This principle applied as the Lord brought curses upon the Lamanites. In reality, the Lamanites brought curses upon themselves by their own disobedience. Each curse, though imposed by the Lord, was in large measure a natural consequence of their disobedience.

Further Rebellion

After cutting themselves off from the presence of the Lord, the Lamanites not only adopted a forbidden mark on the skin, but they were led by Satan from one bad act to another. Nephi tells us, “And *because of their cursing* which was upon them, they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Nephi 5:24). In other words, when they rebelled against the Lord, they no longer had his Spirit to guide them, so they were soon mired in more sin. Martin indicates that the covenant breakers (Laman and his followers) “lost the Spirit (see Mormon 1:14; 5:16) and became increasingly captive to the devil (see Mosiah 10:17; Enos 1:14; Omni 1:10).”⁷³ The specific words in this passage clarify this growing rebellion.

The first item, becoming “an idle people” (2 Nephi 5:24; see also Alma 17:15), doesn’t seem too grievous, but it disregards one of the first commandments God gave to Adam (see Genesis 3:19), and an important aspect of the law of the Sabbath, which says, “six days shalt thou labour” (Exodus 20:9). In contrast to the Lamanites, Nephi taught his followers to be industrious (see 2 Nephi 5:17). As we might expect, the repentant Lamanites who became the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi “began to be a very industrious people” (Alma 23:18).

The cursed Lamanites also became “full of mischief and subtlety” (2 Nephi 5:24). In the Old Testament, the word *mischief* often connotes significant evil, harm, and injury (see, for example, Genesis 42:38, Esther 8:3). As used in Early Modern English, it can mean “evildoing, wickedness”⁷⁴ (see also 3 Nephi 16:10). Similarly, the word *subtlety* may be used here to mean “Craftiness, cunning, [especially] of a treacherous

72. Boyd K. Packer, “Why Stay Morally Clean,” (discourse, General Conference, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, April 1972), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1972/04/why-stay-morally-clean>.

73. Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 119.

74. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “mischief, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/119293?rskey=aQrRV6&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. Sense III.5. Includes Early Modern English examples.

or underhanded nature.”⁷⁵ This sense fits here and in the other Book of Mormon verses that use the words *subtle* and *subtlety* (see Alma 12:4 and Alma 47:4; see also Genesis 3:1 and 27:35 and Psalm 105:25).

Modern readers may not recognize a problem with Lamanites who “did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Nephi 5:24). However, one generation later, Lamanites are described as worshiping idols, “feeding upon beasts of prey,” (Enos 1:20) and later, “drink[ing] the blood of beasts” (Jarom 1:6), all of which violated the law of Moses (see Leviticus 11; 19:4, 26; and 26:1). The provision in 2 Nephi 5:24 appears to allude to similar behavior. After the Lamanites were cut off from the presence of the Lord, their rebellion against the Lord eventually grew to include several violations of the law of Moses.⁷⁶

Curses Subject to Repentance

As explained earlier, curses, like blessings, reflect God’s divine love and justice. Each curse is lifted upon repentance. For instance, The Lord refers to the fall, by which Adam and Eve were cut off from his presence, as “the *curse* of Adam” (Moroni 8:8). This curse has fallen upon all mankind, but it can be overcome through the Atonement as we repent and come unto Christ. Indeed, repentance is all about replacing cursings with blessings. Mormon explains, “repentance is unto them that are under condemnation and under *the curse of a broken law*” (Moroni 8:24). If we have broken God’s law, our curse and condemnation are overcome only on the condition of repentance (see Alma 17:15 and 42:12–15 and Helaman 5:11 and 14:11–19).

In Leviticus 26, after the Lord lists curses that apply to disobedience to the law of Moses, he offers restored blessings through repentance (see Leviticus 26:40–45). Near the end of the Old Testament, the Lord reminds his people, “Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and

75. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “subtlety, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/193191?redirectedFrom=subtlety#eid>, See sense 3.b. Includes Early Modern English examples.

76. Centuries later, the Nephites followed a similar path to cursedness and affliction. They, however, rejected the higher law of the gospel. Mormon describes their downfall in words that are reminiscent of Nephi’s words about the earliest Lamanites: “They were once a delightsome people. And they had Christ for their shepherd; yea, they were led even by God the Father. But now behold, they are led about by Satan, even as chaff is driven before the wind, or as a vessel is tossed about upon the waves without sail or anchor or without any thing wherewith to steer her; and even as she is, so are they” (Mormon 5:17–18).

I will return unto you” (Malachi 3:7). He follows this invitation with a specific example, reminding them that they are cursed for not paying tithes and offerings. He says, “Ye are *cursed with a curse*: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation” (Malachi 3:9). Immediately after this reminder, he explains that the withheld blessings can be restored through repentance (see Malachi 3:10–12).

Similarly, the Book of Mormon repeatedly mentions curses upon the land. In each case, the land is cursed only with respect to the wicked. It is always blessed with respect to the righteous. All curses upon the land end with sincere repentance.⁷⁷

The Lamanite curses also ended with sincere repentance. “And [the Lord] had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, ... Wherefore ... the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people *save they shall repent of their iniquities*” (2 Nephi 5:21–22). The Lord also said: “Behold, the Lamanites have I cursed; and I will set a mark upon them, that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed from this time henceforth and forever *except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me*, that I may have mercy upon them” (Alma 3:14).

Mormon taught that individual Lamanites could repent and become Nephites: “And it came to pass that whosoever would not believe in the tradition of the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the tradition of their [righteous] fathers, which were correct, which believed in the commandments of God and kept them, were called the Nephites or the people of Nephi from that time forth” (Alma 3:11). God’s promises “were extended unto them *on the conditions of repentance*” (Alma 17:15).

These promises are verified by two Book of Mormon accounts of repentant Lamanites. The people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi repented and kept the commandments. After their conversion, “the curse of God did no more follow them” (Alma 23:18) and “they were numbered among the people of Nephi, and also numbered among the people which were of the church of God” (Alma 27:27). Later, other Lamanites repented.

77. See, for example, 1 Nephi 17:35; 2 Nephi 1:7–8; Jacob 2:29; 3:3–4; Alma 37:28, 31; 45:16; Helaman 13:17–19, 23, 30, 35–36; Mormon 1:17–18; and Ether 7:23; 9:16, 28; 11:6; and 14:1.

About 42 years⁷⁸ after “the more part of the Lamanites” (Helaman 5:50) were converted, “all the Lamanites which had become converted unto the Lord did unite with their brethren the Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:12) and they “were numbered among the Nephites. And their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites. And their young men and their daughters became exceeding fair; and they were numbered among the Nephites and were called Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:14–16).⁷⁹

Citing Alma 3:13, 14, and 18, Hugh Nibley taught, “While the fallen people [the Lamanites and Amlicites] ‘set the mark upon *themselves*,’ it was none the less God who was marking them. . . . Here God places his mark on people *as a curse*, yet it is an artificial mark which they actually place upon themselves.”⁸⁰ Nibley also taught that this mark and the associated curse could eventually be overcome through true repentance. He cited Alma 3:14 to explain that the Lamanite mark was a consequence of wickedness that could end with repentance. He says, “A permanent mark forever and ever? No, [God] puts a limit on it here, ‘except they *repent of their wickedness and turn to me* that I may have mercy upon them.’” It is a reversible process. It’s their choice; they control it.⁸¹

Although Nibley never offered an opinion on profane tattoos as the Lamanite or Amlicite mark, such tattoos fit quite comfortably with his reasoning. He saw their mark as an artificial, self-imposed mark. Their own actions subjected them to a curse from God. He speculated that the mark might represent a change that occurs over the course of a generation or so.⁸² He taught that the mark was subject to Lamanite agency and would end after repentance. This paper agrees with each of these ideas taught by Nibley.

78. The conversion took place in the 62nd year of the reign of the judges (see Helaman 4:18 and 5:1). The righteous Lamanites were numbered among the Nephites in the 13th year from the sign of Christ’s birth (see 3 Nephi 2:13–14), which was the 104th year of the reign of the judges (see 3 Nephi 2:5–8). $104 - 62 = 42$ years.

79. The meanings of the words *white*, *fair*, and *became*, as used in this and other passages, are discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

80. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988) 74.

81. Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, Pt. 2, (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 249.

82. *Ibid.*, 195–97.

Correlations Between the Marks of Leviticus 19:28 and the Marks of Alma 3:4–19

The marks prohibited in Leviticus 19:28 have much in common with the Lamanite and Amlicite marks described in Alma 3:4–19. In each case, the mark indicates rebellion against God and is tied to a curse from God. In each case, individuals can choose whether to mark themselves and whether to teach the tradition of marking the skin to their children.

An Amlicite Mark Adopted Long Before the Amlicite Battles

Some readers of the Book of Mormon may assume that when Lamanite allies arrived to help the Amlicites fight the Nephites, the Amlicites hastily painted red marks on their foreheads so the Lamanites could distinguish their new allies from the Nephite enemy. However, the limited scriptural account doesn't pinpoint the time when the Amlicite mark began to distinguish Amlicites from Nephites. Mormon tells us that, "the Amlicites knew not that they were fulfilling the words of God *when they began to mark themselves* in their foreheads" (Alma 3:18). The term *began to mark themselves* is suggestive of an effort that continued for a long time. It may suggest that the Amlicite mark, like the Lamanite mark, began among a core group before it eventually spread throughout a rebellious people. As we consider the realities faced by Amlici as he slowly garnered political and then military support, it's plausible that, as his power grew, he either mandated or encouraged his people to begin marking themselves with a red tattoo on the forehead as an indelible sign of loyalty and group identity. A thesis written by PhD candidate Alice Claire Gorman notes that "permanent modifications [including tattoos] ... are all are common ways of marking membership in a distinct group," adding that "the irreversible modifications indicate a life-long commitment."⁸³ Martin notes that "tattoos were often used to mark both men and women as belonging to a specific group, such as to a tribe or genealogical line."⁸⁴

Several scholars posit that the Amlicite movement grew for years before the Amlicite battles began, eventually garnering the support of

83. Alice Claire Gorman, "The Archaeology of Body Modification: The Identification of Symbolic Behavior through Usewear and Residues on Flaked Stone Tools," (thesis submitted for PhD candidacy, University of New England, 2000), 33, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/34237169_The_archaeology_of_body_modification_the_identification_of_symbolic_behaviour_through_usewear_and_residues_on_flaked_stone_tools.

84. Martin, "Covenantal Nature," 124.

a numerous people. The Amlicites eventually became powerful enough to pose a threat to the Nephites. These scholars don't discuss the nature of the Amlicite mark, but they describe a timeline during which such a mark could have begun and spread among the Amlicites.

J. Christopher Conkling explains his view of the rise of the Amlicites:

It is highly unlikely that Amlici could rise to prominence with almost half the population's support, undertake a lively national election, receive an illegitimate coronation, raise a huge army, move major parts of the Nephite population, form alliances with the Lamanites, and manage three major battles all in one year (see Alma 2:2–3:25). Even modern dictators with advanced transportation and mass communications have not accomplished all that in a single year. Alma tells us specifically that much of it did indeed happen in a single year — at least “all these wars and contentions” (Alma 3:25). But the slow building up of a power base and the forging of foreign alliances may have been going on for years before. This is how real people and movements in history work.

Another example from secular history makes this point: modern disruptive groups such as Communists and Nazis have a tendency to continue to linger, regroup, transform themselves, or reappear in various forms. So too in the Book of Mormon.⁸⁵

Benjamin McMurtry disagrees with much of Conkling's analysis, but as to Conkling's description of a lengthy period for the rise of the Amlicite movement, McMurtry says, “In this, Conkling is surely correct.”⁸⁶

A. Keith Thompson shares a similar, but even longer timeline for the growth of the Amlicite movement. He says, “Like Conkling, I believe the conflicts at the beginning of Alma's reign as chief judge had been building

85. J. Christopher Conkling, “Alma's Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 114, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1395&context=jbms>.

86. Benjamin McMurtry, “The Amlicites and Amalekites: Are They the Same People?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 273, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-amlicites-and-amalekites-are-they-the-same-people/>.

for some time.”⁸⁷ Thompson, however, sees the Amlicite movement as a continuation of a conflict that began even earlier, “The incidents with Nehor and Amlici did not happen instantly or in isolation. It is likely that there had been conflict in Zarahemla for a long time before the judicial republic was created.”⁸⁸ These scholars describe a sequence of events during which Amlici might have slowly gained the firm support of many of the people of Zarahemla. At some point in this process, his people may have adopted a permanent mark on the forehead as an irrevocable sign of loyalty and group identity.

Such a permanent mark may also explain why, after the battles, surviving Amlicites didn’t remove a little paint and sneak home, unmarked, to Nephite lands. They were permanently marked as enemies of the Nephites, so they “were scattered on the west and on the north, until they had reached the wilderness, which was called Hermounts; and it was that part of the wilderness which was infested by wild and ravenous beasts. And it came to pass that many died in the wilderness of their wounds and were devoured by those beasts and also the vultures of the air. And their bones have been found and have been heaped up on the earth” (Alma 2:37–38).

This analysis doesn’t, of course, prove that the Amlicite mark was a permanent tattoo, but it supports a plausible scenario in which a permanent mark on the skin could have identified Amlicites and distinguished them from Nephites long before they went to battle (and long after).

Righteous Nephites Who Knew and Honored the Specific Prohibitions of the Law of Moses

The term *law of Moses* appears only 15 times in the Old Testament and 7 times in the New Testament, but it appears 43 times in the Book of Mormon. This abundant usage suggests that this law was particularly significant among righteous children of Lehi. They knew the details of

87. A. Keith Thompson, “Apostate Religion in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 196, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/apostate-religion-in-the-book-of-mormon/>.

88. Ibid. Val Larson speculates that the Amlicite movement was a continuation of Nephite contentions dating back to Mulekite dissatisfaction with the appointment of the first king Mosiah, and that these contentions may have come to a head when the second king Mosiah chose to form a judicial republic rather than conferring the kingdom upon a descendant of Mulek. See Val Larsen, “In His Footsteps: Ammon₁ and Ammon₂,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 3 (2013): 89–91, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/in-his-footsteps-ammon-and-ammon/>.

this law and obeyed it until it was replaced by a higher law.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, most prohibitions of this law, including the prohibition in Leviticus 19:28, are not directly repeated in the Book of Mormon. Their prophets sometimes refer to prohibited acts without expressly mentioning the prohibition. For example, it was against the law of Moses to worship idols, to eat beasts of prey, and to drink the blood of beasts (see Leviticus 11; 19:4, 26; and 26:1), but Book of Mormon authors discuss these practices without noting that they are prohibited by the law (see Enos 1:20 and Jarom 1:6). Perhaps these prophets assumed that their readers would know the specific prohibitions of this important law as well as they did.

Tattooing (and Scarification) in the Ancient Americas

Tattooing and scarification are well represented in archaeological writings about the ancient Americas.⁹⁰ J. Eric S. Thompson reported in 1946 that “There is a considerable body of material, both in the literature and in archaeological collections, on the practices of tattooing and scarification among the Maya.”⁹¹ Some of this literature was written shortly after the European conquest. Thompson cites Bishop Landa’s report “that the young men tattooed themselves only to a slight degree before marriage, and that the women tattooed their bodies from the waist up, except for the breasts, and that the designs were more delicate and beautiful than those of the men.”⁹² Thompson also quotes Landa’s account of tattooing:

89. See 1 Nephi 4:14–18; 2 Nephi 5:10; 25:24, 30; Jacob 4:5; Jarom 1:5, 11; Omni 1:14; Mosiah 1:3, 2:3, 3:14–15; Alma 25:15–16, 30:3, 34:13, 37:3, Helaman 13:1, 15:5; and 3 Nephi 1:2, 24, 9:17.

90. Martin notes that “Tattooed mummies and tattooing tools have ... been found among Pre-Columbian American cultures across North and South America,” “Covenantal Nature,” 123. “Although the [children of Lehi] cannot be equated with the Maya, Maya culture was already widespread in Mesoamerica in the Preclassic period (400 BC — AD 250) and appears to have exerted great influence on surrounding cultures. We have the best data for this culture, thanks to the preponderance of carved stone monuments and ceramic vessels painted with historical and mythological scenes and texts that have been preserved archaeologically. As plausibly influential neighbors of the [children of Lehi], the Maya exemplify the kind of religious ideas to which some [children of Lehi] accommodated.” Mark Alan Wright and Brant A. Gardner, “The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 34, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-cultural-context-of-nephite-apostasy/>.

91. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 250.

92. Ibid. See also Michael D. Coe and Stephen Houston, *The Maya*, 9th ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 234; and Steve Gilbert, *Tattoo History: a Source Book* (New York: Juno Books, 2000): 98–101.

“The professional workers first painted the part which they wished with color, and afterwards they delicately cut in the paintings, and so with the blood and coloring matter the marks remained in the body. This work is done a little at a time on account of the extreme pain, and afterwards, also, they were quite sick with it, since the designs festered and matter formed. On account of all this they mocked those who were not tattooed.”⁹³ Other accounts are similar, but not identical. One says that “tattooing ...of men took place at the age of twenty-five or over. The men were decorated on the arms, legs, and face; the women, on the breasts and arms.”⁹⁴

Direct archaeological evidence for these practices in ancient times is scant, “in part because human remains do not survive well in the tropical climate of [Mesoamerica], [but] there is iconographic evidence.”⁹⁵ Thompson suggests that tattooing may have been a privilege of persons of noble blood, but evidence from “an increase in excavations of commoner residences” since Thompson’s time tends to counter that idea.⁹⁶ Thompson notes that depictions of tattoos and scarification on stelae, stone figures, pottery figurines, and the like “show abundant evidence of tattooing or scarification.”⁹⁷ He describes a variety of such objects. One prevalent design is “a line of dots along the side of the chin.”⁹⁸ In another, the decoration treats “the chin, the corners of the mouth, and apparently the area around the ear.”⁹⁹ In others, there are “spirals and curves around the mouth and on the side of the chin.”¹⁰⁰ Another “has tattooing or scarification on both cheeks, around one eye, and on the chin.”¹⁰¹

93. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 250.

94. *Ibid.* 250–51.

95. Cara G. Tremain, “A Multidisciplinary Approach to Ancient Maya Adornment and Costume: Mobilizing the Body and the Senses,” *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2011): article 6, <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol19/iss1/6>.

96. Pamela L. Geller, “Transforming Bodies, Transforming Identities: a Consideration of Pre-Colombian Maya Corporeal Beliefs and Practices,” (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 369, https://www.academia.edu/3863168/Transforming_bodies_transforming_identities_A_consideration_of_pre_Columbian_Maya_corporeal_beliefs_and_practices.

97. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 252.

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.*

100. *Ibid.*

101. *Ibid.*

Thompson describes other examples as well — too many to be discussed individually here. He notes that “the archaeological catalogue of examples of tattooing or scarification could be greatly extended,” but his intent “is merely to show that the archaeological evidence supports the accounts of the early writers and also to indicate that the custom has a respectable antiquity.”¹⁰² Other sources add that tattooing and scarification in the Americas date from as early as 1,400 BC through the European conquest.¹⁰³

The instruments mentioned by Thompson for cutting the skin include “stone lancets,”¹⁰⁴ and “a lancet or flint.”¹⁰⁵ Other instruments may have been used as well. As for color, Cortez and his conquistadors described natives who “imprinted on their bodies the images of their demons, held and perpetuated *in black color* for as long as they live, by piercing the flesh and the skin, and fixing in it the cursed figure.”¹⁰⁶ Thompson says, “there is no mention of any color in addition to black, although, as we have seen [in iconographic evidence], red and black tattoo marks may occur in the Temple of the Chacmool, Chichen Itza.”¹⁰⁷

The archaeological evidence doesn’t, of course, prove that Lamanites or Amlicites bore such marks, but it does suggest the possibility. Perhaps the Lamanites borrowed such practices from indigenous neighbors in the promised land. Or the idea to adopt such practices may have come from the Old World, where they were prevalent enough to be prohibited by the law of Moses.

Distinguished by Obedience to God and Not by Parentage

Additional context in Alma 3:9–11 corroborates the idea that the Lamanite mark was self-imposed and not their natural skin color. The mark designated those who followed Lamanite traditions, regardless of parentage. Anyone who chose to be led by the Lamanites was marked

102. Ibid., 253.

103. “Olmec Stone Mask,” “A History of the World in 100 Objects,” Episode 29, British Broadcasting Corporation, (website), 2014. Transcript at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/transcripts/episode29/>; Coe, *The Maya*, 168, 234; and Gilbert, *Tattoo History*, 98–101.

104. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 250.

105. Ibid., 251.

106. Gilbert, *Tattoo History*, 99, emphasis added. See also Ali Kellogg, “The Purpose, Function and Significance of Body Modification Among the Preclassic through Postclassic Maya,” Academia.edu (website), <https://ucla.academia.edu/AliKellogg>.

107. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 253.

and called a Lamanite. Mormon explains: “And it came to pass that whosoever did mingle his seed with that of the Lamanites did bring the same curse upon his seed. Therefore whomsoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites were called under that head, and there was a mark set upon him” (Alma 3:9–10). It might be suggested that the term *mingle his seed* has sexual, and therefore genetic, connotations, but this idea isn’t supported by the usage of the word *mingle* in other passages (see 2 Nephi 15:22, Alma 5:57 and 50:22, and Helaman 1:12; see also 2 Nephi 5:23). In this passage, the word *therefore* clarifies Mormon’s meaning by linking two parallel concepts. It equates one who *did mingle his seed with that of the Lamanites* with one who *suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites*.¹⁰⁸ The next verse confirms this meaning by contrasting these converts to Lamanite traditions with converts to Nephite traditions, who “would *not* believe in the tradition of the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the traditions of their fathers, which were correct, which believed in the commandments of God and kept them” (Alma 3:11; see also Alma 50:22). Citing Alma 3:10, Nibley states, “The mark was not a racial thing but was acquired by ‘whosoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites.’”¹⁰⁹

Mormon clarifies that the term *Nephites* doesn’t necessarily designate Nephi’s literal descendants. It includes all who repent, keep the commandments of God (including the law of Moses) and follow righteous Nephite traditions. “And it came to pass that whosoever would not believe in the tradition of the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the tradition of their fathers, which were correct, which believed in the commandments of God and kept them, were called the Nephites or the people of Nephi from that time forth” (Alma 3:11). Citing this verse, Nibley reiterates, “the difference between Nephite and Lamanite [is] a cultural, not a racial, one.”¹¹⁰

The Lord didn’t define Nephi’s “seed” as his natural posterity. They were those who kept the commandments. “He that departeth from

108. These words appear to describe what happened to the Zoramites, who first “began to mix with the Lamanites” (Alma 35:10) and then, apparently within the same year, “became Lamanites” (Alma 43:4). Compare 3 Nephi 6:3, where some Gadianton robbers who were “set at liberty” (3 Nephi 5:4) still made a choice “to remain Lamanites.”

109. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 74.

110. *Ibid.*

thee shall no more be called thy seed; *and I will bless thee — etc. — and whomsoever shall be called thy seed, henceforth and forever*” (Alma 3:17). Similarly, Nephi’s brother Jacob doesn’t define Lamanites and Nephites by bloodlines. He says, “I shall call them Lamanites, they that *seek to destroy the people of Nephi*, and they which *are friendly to Nephi* I shall call Nephites or the people of Nephi” (Jacob 1:14).

All Lamanite curses, including the Lamanite mark, were caused by unrighteousness. As long as Lamanites remained unrighteous (opposing God and his people), their curses and mark remained. However, when any individual Lamanite stopped believing “in the tradition of the Lamanites” (including, presumably, the tradition of marking themselves) and “believed in the commandments of God and kept them” (Alma 3:11) (no longer opposing God and his people), the curses of God no longer applied, and that Lamanite was called a Nephite.

The Absence of the Mark as a Lagging Indicator of Repentance

While all curses from God end with repentance, a permanent Lamanite mark would have remained on the skin throughout the life of a repentant, no longer cursed, individual. Like many other consequences of sin, this mark didn’t immediately disappear due to repentance. Righteous descendants of repentant Lamanites, however, were not marked. The text in the Book of Mormon is consistent with this sequence of events, but the consistency may not be obvious at first glance. Conversion made the mark irrelevant and therefore no mark is mentioned with respect to recent Lamanite converts. All that is expressly stated, however, fits the narrative of a life-long mark. For instance, Alma 3:10 explains that a mark was set upon each dissenting Nephite, but Alma 3:11 doesn’t say that the mark was removed from any repentant Lamanite.

In economics and business, the term *lagging indicator* refers to an indicator that changes sometime after the initial change with which it is correlated. Lagging indicators confirm changes, but only after the changes have happened (like baptism is a lagging indicator of faith and repentance). Thus, the absence of the mark among a repentant people was a long-term (generational) lagging indicator of repentance.

For example, the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi completely forsook their unrighteous traditions. They took “their swords and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man’s blood” and buried them “deep in the earth” (Alma 24:17). It’s possible that these weapons “used for the shedding of man’s blood” included not only weapons of war, but also other instruments used in pagan rituals that shed human blood and

violated the law of Moses, including tattooing, scarification, and perhaps bloodletting¹¹¹ (see Leviticus 19:28 and 21:1 and 5; Deuteronomy 14:1; and 1 Kings 18:28).

The Nephites invited the presumably still marked, but covenant-keeping Anti-Nephi-Lehies, who would not use weapons of war, to their lands. The Nephites agreed to defend them with their own lives in exchange for “a portion of their substance to assist [the Nephite armies]” (Alma 27:24). These converted Lamanites were called “the people of Ammon” (Alma 27:26), and were “numbered among the people of Nephi, and also numbered among the people which were of the church of God” (Alma 27:27). They were “distinguished for their zeal towards God and also towards men” (Alma 27:27) and were a “beloved people” (Alma 27:30).

Even though a permanent mark on the skin would have remained with these converts throughout their lives, the account doesn’t directly mention either the presence or the absence of any mark after their conversion. The sole reference to a curse after their conversion says, “the curse of God *did no more follow them*” (Alma 23:18). In this phrase, the word *curse* may mean *cursed thing* and may therefore refer to the mark itself. If so, these words indicate that no mark followed these converts to the next generation.¹¹² Of course, the repentance of these converts immediately ended their separation from God (see Alma 34:31). The unrighteous tradition of marking the skin also ended with them, so their righteousness kept this mark from reaching their offspring.

The Book of Mormon never identifies any group whose righteous seed bear a mark on the skin after the conversion of the parents. This includes the children of the people of Ammon — the stripling warriors who served under Helaman, calling themselves Nephites (see Alma 53:16). Although these young warriors were descendants of Laman (Alma 56:3), they’re never referred to as having a dark skin or otherwise having an appearance that might be mistaken for the Lamanite enemy on the battlefield. The account never suggests that any of these young Nephite warriors bore a Lamanite mark.

The account of “the more part of the Lamanites” (Helaman 5:50) who were taught by Helaman’s sons Nephi and Lehi (and by thousands

111. See Coe, *The Maya*, 13, 89, 129, 150, 184, 242, and 274.

112. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “follow, v.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72569?rskey=4dpT4m&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense III.16.a: “To happen or occur after (something) in time; to come after (something) as an event; to succeed.” Includes Early Modern English examples.

of their Lamanite converts), is also silent about whether the initial converts bore a mark. They, like the people of Ammon, “did lay down their weapons of war, and also their hatred and the tradition of their fathers” (Helaman 5:51; see also Helaman 15:7–10). They interacted with Nephites during the first three years after the great conversion (see Helaman 6:3–8), but both peoples were soon occupied with difficulties caused by robbers. There appears to have been little interaction between these peoples for the next 39 years during which these covenant-keeping Lamanites lived the law of Moses (see Helaman 6:34, 13:1, and 15:5), and therefore would not have marked their skins. However, as long as the converted Lamanites remained in Lamanite lands, the Nephites continued to call them Lamanites. (See Helaman 6:1, 3–4, 8–9, 37, 13:1–2, 16:15, and 3 Nephi 1:29–30.)

Like the army of Helaman before them, the descendants of these Lamanite converts weren’t bound by the covenant made by their fathers. So, after 42 years, when this converted people chose to fight the Gadianton robbers, those who had made that covenant would have been too old for battle. For comparison, note that in the days of Moses it took 40 years for all the men of war who left Egypt to pass away (see Joshua 5:6). Likewise, after 42 years, most of the original (marked) Lamanite converts would also have died, including those who suffered untimely deaths due to their covenant not to defend themselves with the sword (see Helaman 5:51 and 15:9).

Mormon uses the word *became* twice as he describes the descendants of those original converts. The simple past tense verb *became* simply means *came to be*.¹¹³ It can indicate a gradual change. For example, Mormon says that some Nephites in the land northward “*became* exceeding expert in the working of cement” (Helaman 3:7). He also says that, due to the preaching of Alma, Amulek, and many others, “the establishment of the church *became* general throughout the land” (Alma 16:15).¹¹⁴ Likewise, in Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, after Nephi sees the destruction of his people, he sees “many generations pass away” (1 Nephi 12:21) and an angel tells him that the people “shall dwindle in unbelief” (1 Nephi 12:22). Nephi then says that “*after* they had dwindled in unbelief, they *became* a dark and loathsome and a filthy people, full

113. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “become, v.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/16784?redirectedFrom=become#eid>. See sense II.5.b. Includes Early Modern English examples.

114. See other similar uses of the word *became* in Jacob 5:74, Enos 1:20, Jarom 1:7–8, and 4 Nephi 1:10.

of idleness and all manner of abominations” (1 Nephi 12:23). The word *after* could suggest an immediate change, but the historical context indicates that their moral state gradually worsened as they dwindled in unbelief, so in this setting the word *became* has a connotation similar to *had become*. In Ether 9:16, Moroni uses both *had become* and *became* to describe parallel decades-long gradual changes. He says that “in the space of sixty and two years,” the house of Emer “*had become* exceeding strong, insomuch that they *became* exceeding rich.” Thus, the simple past usage of the word *became* doesn’t rule out a decades-long gradual change.

In 3 Nephi 2:15–16, Mormon may use the word *became* with similar meaning. He tells us that 42 years after the great conversion, “all the Lamanites who had become converted unto the Lord did unite with their brethren, the Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:12). After describing their reasons for joining forces, he adds, “and their curse was taken from them, and their skin *became* white like unto the Nephites. And their young men and their daughters *became* exceeding fair; and they were numbered among the Nephites and were called Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:15–16). Here again, the word *became* may describe a change that took place gradually over the course of decades.

This passage uses the word *white* with the word *skin*, so (as explained in more detail below) similarly worded biblical passages and 2 Nephi 5:21 suggest that the word *white* literally describes skin. It appears to refer in the broad ancient sense to the clean, unstained skin of these covenant-keeping Lamanites. Similarly, the word *fair* appears to describe attendant attractiveness,¹¹⁵ perhaps suggesting that they appeared to be worthy, under the law of Moses, to marry righteous Nephites. The emphasis on *their young men and their daughters* may highlight the pure, unstained skin of the younger generations.

Another passage may also allude to the absence of the mark as a lagging indicator of repentance. Within two years after Christ appeared at the temple in Bountiful, “the people were all converted unto the Lord upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites” (4 Nephi 1:2). Even though all Lamanites were converted at that time, one detail about the unity of this converted people isn’t mentioned for about 75 more years.

115. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “fair, adj. and n.1,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67704?rskey=i3x4qi&result=2#eid>. See sense A.I.1.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

At that late date, after nine of the original twelve disciples “and also many of that generation” (4 Nephi 1:14) had passed away, we learn that there were no “Lamanites nor no manner of ites, but they were in one, the children of Christ and heirs to the kingdom of God” (4 Nephi 1:17). The latter part of this statement, that the people *were in one, the children of Christ and heirs to the kingdom of God*, might have applied some 75 years earlier. However, this statement may apply at this later date because by then, no Lamanite marks remained. With nobody marking their skin for 75 years, there were no longer people marked as *Lamanites nor no manner of ites*.

Sadly, after another hundred years or so, “a small part of the people ... revolted from the church and took upon them the name of Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land” (4 Nephi 1:20). This brief passage doesn’t indicate the parentage of those who chose to take upon themselves the name of Lamanites. They may or may not have been literal descendants of Laman. Nor is there any mention of any mark. In fact, no Lamanite mark is mentioned anywhere in the balance of the Book of Mormon account. The absence of this word, however, doesn’t rule out the likelihood of a resurgence of the mark. The choice to assume the name of Lamanites was likely a choice to adopt the traditions of the former Lamanites, including the tradition of marking themselves “after the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4).¹¹⁶

Ancient Meanings of the Words *Black* and *White*

Modern readers face two challenges as we try to understand the words *black* and *white* as used in the Bible and Book of Mormon. One challenge is to avoid applying the common meanings of our day to these words — meanings that automatically come to our minds because of our present culture but weren’t in use when ancient prophets made their records. The other challenge is to apply ancient meanings to these words — meanings that don’t come naturally to us in our day because they are not part of our present culture but were in use back then. Our modern culture can obscure our view of the intended meanings of these words.

116. Mormon may suggest that, near the end of the Book of Mormon account, some wicked Nephites also began to mark themselves after the manner of the Lamanites. He refers to Nephites of his day who “have fallen into transgression and have been murdered, plundered, and hunted and driven forth and slain and scattered upon the face of the earth and mixed with the Lamanites *until they are no more called Nephites*, becoming wicked and wild and ferocious, yea, even *becoming Lamanites*” (Helaman 3:16; compare Alma 43:4).

Significant Changes in the Usage of the Words Black and White Since the 1400s

In the classical writings of the Greco-Roman era (roughly from 800 BC through AD 500) the writers rarely identify their countrymen or others in terms of skin tone. In fact, “the most remarkable aspect of all this [classical literature] is the *absence* of the kind of obsessive and corrosive concern with ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ that so disfigures our modern world.”¹¹⁷ Many centuries after the Greco-Roman era, however, usage of the words *black* and *white* began to change as the transatlantic slave trade brought the modern social construct of race into being.

As early as the 1440s, before the European discovery of America, the Portuguese began an intense African slave trade by capturing slaves along the west coast of Africa and selling them to Europeans. The Portuguese word for the color black, *negro*, was first used as a noun referring to a person with black skin in the 1400s.¹¹⁸ After the discovery of America, some Europeans chose to produce sugar in South America and in the Caribbean. At the same time, others chose to produce tobacco in the Caribbean and in North America. These products required a significant amount of labor, and the producers chose to base this production on slave labor. They initially acquired slaves from several sources, but Africa soon became their most prominent source of slaves.¹¹⁹ By the 1600s the Spanish word for black, also *negro*, was used as a noun with the same meaning. At about the same time, the same noun was borrowed into the English language with the same meaning.¹²⁰ Initially, there were some Africans in the Americas who were free and those who were slaves worked alongside slaves from other lands. During the 1600s, however, the slaveholders saw the benefits of establishing a slave class that could be identified and

117. James H. Dee, “Black Odysseus, White Caesar: When Did ‘White People’ Become ‘White’?,” *The Classic Journal* 99, no. 2 (2004): 162, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3298065?read-now=1&seq=9#page_scan_tab_contents.

118. See examples of such usage in Robin Blackburn, “The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2953313>.

119. Steven Mintz, “Historical Context: Facts about the Slave Trade and Slavery,” History Resources, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, (website), <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/historical-context-facts-about-slave-trade-and-slavery>.

120. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Negro, n. and adj.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125898?redirectedFrom=negro#eid>. See sense A.1.a.

kept in bondage in perpetuity based on inherited physical traits.¹²¹ The resulting system tied enslavement directly to physical features, focused primarily on natural skin color. This system of enslavement eventually deprived freedom from almost all people of African descent living in the Americas. Consequently, across the New World, one's natural skin color became his or her most significant physical characteristic. Freedom itself depended on skin color.

The culture that condoned this perpetual slavery system changed European and colonial languages. These changes included a redefinition of the word *race*¹²² and the adoption of the new terms *white race* and *white people* to distinguish the unenslaved, free class from those doomed to perpetual enslavement. These new terms were used “no earlier than the 1600s.”¹²³ In the English language specifically, the usage of the words *black* and *white* and other related words changed significantly from the 1400s, with changes continuing through the 1800s.¹²⁴

121. Yasuko I. Takezawa, et al., “Race,” *Britannica*, (website), November 23, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human>. See also Audrey Smedley, “Origin of the Idea of Race,” *Anthropology Newsletter* (November 1997), at Public Broadcasting System, (website), <http://to.pbs.org/1P5HnAJ>; George M. Fredrickson, “The Historical Origins and Development of Racism,” *California Newsreel* (2003), at Public Broadcasting System, (website), <https://to.pbs.org/30S2p5m>; and David R. Roediger, “Historical Foundations of Race,” Smithsonian, National Museum of African American History & Culture, (website), <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/historical-foundations-race>.

122. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “race, n.6,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157031?rskey=oN6jMM&result=6&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense I.1.d. Compare senses I.1.a, I.1.b, and I.1.c.

123. Dee, “Black Odysseus,” 164.

124. Usage of the word *white* to designate a group of people based on natural skin pigmentation began in the late 1500s and became common in the 1700s. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “white, adj. (and adv.) and n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/228566?rskey=sQdTP8&result=1>. See senses I.5.a. and especially I.5.b.; See also Dee, “Black Odysseus,” 162. Other related English words came into usage at this same time. The English noun *black* was rarely used to mean a person with dark skin before the 1600s, but such usage soon became common. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “black, adj. and n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/19670?rskey=LcxmKH&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense A.3.a. The English word *race* didn't denote broad classifications of people with common physical characteristics until the late 1700s. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “race, n.6,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/19670?rskey=LcxmKH&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. Although different sources can at times be inconsistent, this statement about the meaning of the English word *race* is consistent with the more general statement made earlier that the term *white race* wasn't used in European

Long after the end of legally sanctioned enslavement, the heightened cultural importance of natural skin color and these language changes persist in present-day culture. Today, it can generally be assumed that the word *white* or *black*, when used to describe a person or a person's skin, refers to natural skin color, but this was not the case prior to the 1400s. Our culture brings this meaning to mind as we read these words, but today's common uses for these words came into being centuries after the books of the Bible and Book of Mormon were recorded.

Much more might be said about the social changes and language changes that took place between the 1400s and the 1900s,¹²⁵ but the discussion in this paper is centered on changes surrounding the altered usage of the English words *black* and *white*. It should be noted, however, that the unscientific categorization of people by race¹²⁶ eventually became buttressed by a wide range of pseudo-religious and pseudo-scientific beliefs. One of these was the notion mentioned earlier that the mark set upon Cain was dark skin color imposed by God. In the past, many — perhaps most — readers of the Book of Mormon followed a similar line of reasoning to conclude that the Lamanite mark was itself a dark natural skin color imposed by God.¹²⁷ They — understandably perhaps, but incorrectly — applied the racial culture of their era to the words of the Book of Mormon. This cultural confusion needn't occur today.

This paper invites readers to view the Book of Mormon's ancient words from the cultural perspective of ancient Israel — a culture not immersed in the modern social construct of race. This ancient record employs the same ancient usages of the words *black* and *white* that are found in the Old Testament. By resisting presentism as we read the Book of Mormon, we avoid disorientation caused by cultural remnants of the transatlantic slave trade.

languages before the 1600s. The urbane but inaccurate word *Caucasian* wasn't coined to refer to a member of the white race until 1807. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Caucasian, adj. and n.," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29052?redirectedFrom=Caucasian#eid>. See sense A.

125. Takezawa, et al., "Race."

126. See Dee, "Black Odysseus," 165.

127. See, for example, Rodney Turner, "The Lamanite Mark," in *Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 133–57, <https://rsc.byu.edu/book-mormon-second-nephi-doctrinal-structure/lamanite-mark>; and Blake T. Ostler, "Yea, Yea, Nay, Nay: DNA Strands in the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone*, May 2005, 63–71, <https://sunstone.org/issue-details/?in=137>.

Usage of the Words Black and White in the Old Testament

Like the classical writings of the Greco-Roman era, the Old Testament rarely refers to natural skin color. Even when it uses the words *black* and *white* with the word *skin*, it always refers to other things. Four foundational principles govern the usage of the ancient words translated as *black* and *white* in the Old Testament.

- **There were few ancient Hebrew color names, so each covered not a single color, but a range of colors.** The entry for “Color” in the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia says, “There are but few real color-terms found in Biblical or traditional literature.”¹²⁸ This entry mentions *white*, *red*, and *green* as color terms “distinguished by name,” and later adds the term “‘shaḥor’ (black) [transliterated herein as *shachor*]”¹²⁹ as “the usual term in the Bible to express the idea of darkness.”¹³⁰ A comprehensive study completed in 1969 by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay concluded that color names tend to come into languages gradually. Some languages have only two color names — one (black or dark) encompassing all darker/colder colors and another (white or bright) encompassing all lighter/warmer colors. Eventually, a third color name emerges (red) to distinguish reddish hues. The fourth color name to emerge (green or yellow) generally distinguishes greenish-yellowish colors.¹³¹ In languages with few color names, each represents a wide band of colors.

128. Emil G. Hirsch and Caspar Levias, “Color,” *The 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia*, at JewishEncyclopedia.com, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4557-color>.

129. *BDB*, s.v. “שָׁחֹר.”

130. Hirsch, “Color.”

131. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 2, https://books.google.com/books/about/Basic_Color_Terms.html?id=sGDxruwl9OkC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false. This research was updated and enhanced in 2009 in Paul Kay et al. *The World Color Survey* (Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford University, 2009). See also M. Vejdemo-Johansson, S. Vejdemo, and C.H. Ek, “Comparing distributions of color words: Pitfalls and Metric choices,” *PLOS ONE* 9, no. 2 (February 25, 2014): e89184, at National Library of Medicine (website), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3934892/>; and C.L. Hardin, “Berlin and Kay Theory,” *Encyclopedia of Color Science and Technology* (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2013), DOI 10.1007/978-3-642-27851-8_62-2, http://imbs.uci.edu/~kjameson/ECST/Hardin_BerlinKayTheory.pdf.

- **The Hebrew sometimes mentions something known for its appearance (without naming a color), but the English translation adds the English color name.** The English Bible identifies more colors than the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the Hebrew for Numbers 12:10 and 2 Kings 5:27, contains only the word *sheleg* (snow)¹³², but the English translation says “as white as snow.” Similarly, the Hebrew word *shani*,¹³³ the name of an insect (*coccus ilicis*), whose dried, powdered remains are used to dye cloth, is translated as *scarlet* (see, for example, Genesis 38:28–30 and Isaiah 1:18). The Hebrew word *sebah* refers to hoary hairs — the hairs of old age.¹³⁴ This non-color word is sometimes translated as “gray hairs” (Genesis 42:38; 44:29 and 31).
- **Ancient Israel used colors as symbols according to specific, ancient symbolism.** White, which included the brighter hues of daytime, symbolized joy and purity. Black, which included the darker hues of night, symbolized mourning and affliction. The 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia says, “Black or dark color points to mourning or affliction On the other hand, white suggests purity ... and joy.”¹³⁵ Similarly, the 1915 International Standard Bible Encyclopedia explains that in the Bible, the English word *black* can refer to mourning and that the word *white* can be a symbol of purity.¹³⁶ These symbolic meanings cause cross-cultural confusion for readers who are unaware of the symbolism.
- **Some non-color Hebrew words relating to luster — dimness or brightness — are translated to the English words *black* and *white* in the Old Testament.**

These four foundational principles, together with other context, can help us understand English Old Testament passages that use these words to describe either skin or people.

132. *BDB*, s.v. “שֶׁלֶג.”

133. *BDB*, s.v. “שָׁנִי.”

134. *BDB*, s.v. “שֵׁבַח.”

135. Hirsch, “Color.”

136. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance Company, 1915), s.v. “Color, Colors,” 675–676, <https://archive.org/details/theinternationalstandardbibleencyclopedia/The%20International%20Standard%20Bible%20Encyclopedia-%2002/page/676/mode/2up>.

Skin-Specific Old Testament Passages That Use the Words *Black* or *White*

Biblical passages that describe skin as black or white always describe actual skin and are never solely idiomatic. In some cases, however, the words *black* and *white* add a layer of idiomatic meaning to a literal reference to skin. Here are all such passages:

Leviticus 13 describes various maladies, all called leprosy. In this passage, forms of the word *white* (*laban*)¹³⁷ can indicate either pale leprous skin (see Leviticus 13:24–25) or clean, non-leprous skin (see Leviticus 13:13 and 17). The ancient literal meaning of the word *white*, which covers a wide range of lighter hues, fits well here. As mentioned above, in other passages describing leprosy, the word *snow* is translated to mean “as white as snow.” Again, the broad ancient literal meaning applies. Leprous skin wasn’t “snowy white” as that term is used today, but compared with healthy skin, it had a paler (more snow-like) appearance.

Job 7:5 describes “flesh ... clothed with worms and encrusted with dirt” and skin that “hardens, then breaks out afresh.”¹³⁸ In this context, Job tells us “My skin is black upon me” (Job 30:30). In this verse, the Hebrew verb *shachar* means *to be black*.¹³⁹ Job’s affliction literally caused his skin to become dark, or black in the broad ancient meaning, but this word also connotes affliction and mourning. Verse 28 uses the word *qadar* (to be dark; figurative of mourning)¹⁴⁰ and Verse 31 uses the word *ebel* (mourning)¹⁴¹, adding to this sad context.

Song of Solomon 1:5–6 uses the broad ancient meaning of the word *black* to refer to dark (tanned) skin. In it, a woman says, “I am black” twice. In verse 5, the word *black* again translates the Hebrew word *shachor*.¹⁴² Verse 6 uses the related word *shecharchoreth*, (blackish).¹⁴³ The woman says she is dark “because the sun hath looked upon me.”

Joel 2:6 and Nahum 2:10 both describe terrifying destruction. In the King James Version and the Geneva Bible of 1587, this destruction

137. BDB, s.v. “לָבָן.”

138. In the KJV, the wording of Job 7:5 is “My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken, and become loathsome.” The exact wording I use is taken from the Berean Standard Bible and the English Standard Version translations.

139. BDB, s.v. “שָׁחַר.”

140. BDB, s.v. “קָדַר.”

141. BDB, s.v. “אֵבֶל.”

142. BDB, s.v. “שָׁחַר.”

143. BDB, s.v. “שֶׁחַרְחֹרֵת.”

causes the faces of people to “gather blackness.” The Bishops’ Bible of 1568 and the Coverdale Bible of 1535 refer to faces that are “black as a pot.” The Hebrew words translated here are *qabats parur*. *Qabats* is a common verb that means to gather or collect.¹⁴⁴ The noun *parur* is used only in these two verses. Its meaning is unclear, but it may refer to beauty or to a glow.¹⁴⁵ Translations that use the words *blackness* and *black*, may refer to faces that become flushed (darker) due to terror or they may symbolically suggest acute affliction. Other translations indicate faces that “grow pale” (their beauty is gathered in), due to terror. I favor the latter translations, so I’ve included these passages here with others that describe skin (the word *skin* isn’t used, but skin covers the face).

In the King James Version, Lamentations 5:10 says, “Our skin was black like an oven because of the terrible famine.” The Bishops’ Bible of 1568 reads, “Our skin is as it had been made black in an oven, for very sore hunger.” The Coverdale Bible of 1535 says, “our skin is as it had been burnt in an oven, for very sore hunger.” In this verse, the word *black* (or *burnt*) translates a form of the Hebrew verb *kamar*, which reflects an increase in warmth (either figurative or literal).¹⁴⁶ Also, the term *terrible* (or *very sore*) renders the word *zalaphah*, which is a raging heat.¹⁴⁷ A more direct translation would be, “Our skin is hot like an oven because of the raging heat [fever] of famine.” The Hebrew doesn’t describe appearance, so this passage doesn’t appear to portray a visual aspect of the skin.

No other Old Testament passages use the words *black* or *white* with the word *skin* (or with context that clearly refers to skin). These passages always describe actual skin, but never refer to natural skin color. Sometimes, the word *black* or *white* carries additional symbolic meaning.

Non-Skin-Specific Old Testament Passages That Use the Words *Black* or *White*

The following passages describe people (as opposed to skin) as either black or white. In passages that describe people, but don’t use the word *skin*, the words *black* and *white* don’t reflect colors. In this setting, these words are either used figuratively according to the symbolism of ancient Israel or literally, but to describe brightness or dimness rather than color.

144. BDB, s.v. “קבצ.”

145. BDB, s.v. “פֶּאֶרֶוֹר.”

146. BDB, s.v. “כָּמַר.”

147. BDB, s.v. “זֶלְעָפָה.”

Under the law of Moses, a plant called hyssop was used in cleansing ceremonies (see, for example, Leviticus 14:4). In Psalm 51, David cries to the Lord for forgiveness, saying “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness” (Psalm 51:7–8). Here, the verb *laben* (to be white) connotes moral (ethical) purity.¹⁴⁸ David isn’t praying for a visibly white appearance. He seeks redemption — divine cleanliness, purity, and joy.

Daniel 11:35 is a prophecy about the tragic deaths of some righteous people. These tragic deaths will have a morally purifying effect on those who remain. They will serve “to try them, and to purge, and to make them white.” Here again, the same verb (*laben*) connotes moral (ethical) purity.¹⁴⁹ The same verb is used again in the Lord’s words “Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried” in Daniel 12:10.¹⁵⁰

In Jeremiah 8:21 and 14:2, the Hebrew verb *qadar* (to be dark)¹⁵¹ is again translated as *black* and figuratively depicts mourning. In Jeremiah 8:21, the prophet laments afflictions caused by the destruction of Jerusalem saying, “For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold on me.” In Jeremiah 14:2, he uses the same verb with the same meaning: “Judah mourneth, and the gates thereof [the people at the gates of the city] languish; they are black unto the ground; and the cry of Jerusalem is gone up.”¹⁵²

Ecclesiastes 9:7–9 suggests that we should joyfully receive life’s blessings and comforts. This joyful setting includes advice to “Let thy garments always be white, and let thy head lack no ointment” (Ecclesiastes 9:8). A plural form of *laban* depicts white clothing (signifying cheerfulness and joy).¹⁵³ Two commentaries suggest that, in this setting, the word *white* refers to clean clothing (garments are lighter when clean).¹⁵⁴

148. *BDB*, s.v. “לָבַן.”

149. *Ibid.*

150. *Ibid.*

151. *BDB*, s.v. “קָדַר.”

152. *Ibid.*

153. *BDB*, s.v. “לָבַן.”

154. See commentaries quoted at “Verse by Verse Bible Commentary,” StudyLight.org, (website), <https://www.studylight.org/commentary/ecclesiastes/9-8.html>, including *Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible*, which says, “That is, neat and clean, not vile and sordid; what is comely and decent;” *Clarke’s Notes on the Bible* quotes the Targum as saying, “At all times let thy garments be washed and pure from the stain of sin.” These meanings fit well in the joyful setting, also symbolized by the word *white*.

In the Book of Mormon, Alma uses the word *white* to mean morally clean when he says, “there can no man be saved except his garments are *washed white*; yea, his garments must be purified until it is *cleansed from all stain* through the blood of [Christ]” (Alma 5:21). He later repeats this concept, referring to “all the holy prophets, whose garments are *cleansed* and are *spotless, pure, and white*” (Alma 5:24).

In Lamentations 4:1, Jeremiah observes “How is the gold become dim!” Later, he further develops this metaphor of precious things that have lost their luster. He notes sins and iniquities as reasons for affliction (see vv. 6, 13, and 22). The Nazarites (consecrated or distinguished ones) were once “purer than snow” and “whiter than milk” (v. 7), but now, “their visage [appearance] is blacker than a coal” (v. 8). The Hebrew verb translated as *purser* is *zakak*, which means *to be bright, clean, or pure*. Although the prevailing meaning for this word in this passage is figurative of the splendor of nobles, it may reflect purity in God’s sight and moral purity (as it does elsewhere).¹⁵⁵ The Hebrew word translated as *whiter* is *tsachach*, which means *to be dazzling*¹⁵⁶ and the Hebrew word translated as *blacker* (*chashak*) means *to be or grow dark*.¹⁵⁷ Thus, the change from “whiter” to “blacker,” is from dazzling (bright) to dark (dim). While this passage details an afflicted state due to famine and exposure,¹⁵⁸ its words appear to extend the metaphor about gold, which laments a fall from radiant moral purity to the dimness or darkness of sin.

Song of Solomon 5:10 uses a similar Hebrew word, *tsach*, which means dazzling, glowing, or clear,¹⁵⁹ to describe a woman’s white (dazzling) young lover. It can be interpreted literally (as glowing health) and figuratively (as dazzling moral purity). If this poem reflects the relationship between Israel and her God, both meanings may be intended.

These are all the Old Testament passages in which the words *black* or *white* describe people, but not skin. These passages either use these words figuratively or describe brightness or dimness.

155. BDB, s.v. “זָכַק.”

156. BDB, s.v. “צָחַח.”

157. BDB, s.v. “חָשַׁק.”

158. Joseph Benson suggests that this passage refers to a change in complexion from light to dark. “Commentary of the Old and New Testaments,” at *BibleHub.com*, s.v. “Lamentations 4:7–9,” <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/lamentations/4-7.htm>. Such a change would not be a change in natural skin pigmentation, but a result of famine and exposure. Other commentaries similarly discuss complexion.

159. BDB, s.v. “צָחַח.”

Incidental Biblical References to Natural Skin Color

Differences in natural skin color appear to have been as unimportant in the writings of ancient Israel as they were in classical Greco-Roman writings. Other differences among people, including religious differences and geographical origin, were more important. Classical Greco-Roman writings, however, do include a few incidental references to skin color,¹⁶⁰ and the same can be said for the Bible.

Jeremiah 13:23 asks rhetorically, “Can the Ethiopian [Cushite] change his skin?” This question suggests a difference in natural skin color between most Cushites and most Israelites,¹⁶¹ but even this rhetorical question employs neither the word *black* nor the word *white*. And the fact that this is the only incidental reference to natural skin color in the entire Old Testament suggests that skin color wasn’t very significant in ancient Israel. Although some modern commentators suggest that the name *Cush* itself (which doesn’t mean *black* in Hebrew) may also mean *black*,¹⁶² there is no etymological support for this suggestion. The more accurate view, held by others, sees *Cush* as simply a name and *Cushite* as a reference to descendants of Cush or residents of Cush.¹⁶³

The New Testament was written long after Lehi left Jerusalem, but it too is a product of the culture of ancient Israel that rarely, if ever, refers to natural skin color. It uses the word *skin* once — to refer to John the Baptist’s “girdle of a skin about his loins” (Mark 1:6). The word *black* appears three times in the New Testament, but not to refer to people or their skin (see Matthew 5:36 and Revelation 6:5, 12). The word *white* is much more common, but it doesn’t describe natural skin color either.¹⁶⁴

160. See, for example, James H. Dee, “Black Odysseus” 157.

161. See *Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Cush,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (website), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/cush>.

162. See, for example, *Easton’s Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Cush,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/eastons-bible-dictionary/cush.html>; and *Smith’s Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Cush,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/smiths-bible-dictionary/cush.html>. In Modern Hebrew, the Hebrew word for Cushite has become a highly offensive pejorative term for a person with a dark skin (see Ibrahim M. Omer, “‘Kushi’ is not demeaning,” *The Jewish Magazine*, December 2013, <https://www.jewishmag.com/180mag/kushi/kushi.htm>).

163. *BDB*, s.v. “כּוּשִׁי.” See also *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Cush,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/cush-1.html> and Abarim Publications s.v. “Cush,” <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Cush.html#WRoxktLyu01>.

164. More than half of the New Testament instances of the word *white* are in the symbolic book of Revelation. They include a reference to the luster of the

Acts 13:1 contains the sole possible reference to natural skin color in the New Testament. This verse identifies three Christian “prophets and teachers” who set Barnabas and Saul (Paul) apart for a mission. They were “Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen.” *Niger* is a Latin word for black. In the culture of ancient Israel (and the culture of ancient Rome), this byname might refer to his profession, to tanned skin, or to some other dark event or item. It wouldn’t have suggested skin color with the automatic racial overtones of our day, but the text gives no context at all, so a reference to skin hue can’t be completely ruled out. Another of these men, Lucius of Cyrene, is from Africa, which might also suggest a dark skin, but the text is silent about his skin hue.¹⁶⁵ Different shades of skin probably existed among leaders of the early Christian church, but in their culture, skin color simply wasn’t a notable characteristic.

Usage of the Words *Black* and *White* in the Book of Mormon

The original text of the Book of Mormon sprang from an ancient cultural and linguistic heritage similar to that of the Old Testament. Its ancient text was written centuries before it became common to use the words *black* and *white* to note a person’s natural skin color. Had the words of the Book of Mormon come to us from the culture of the 1800s, their meaning might be based on that culture. The linguistic data, however, is consistent with words that were revealed to Joseph Smith — ancient words with ancient meanings.

The four foundational principles reviewed above for color words in biblical passages also appear to apply to the same words in Book of Mormon passages.

resurrected Christ’s hair and face (see Revelation 1:14) and references to symbolic white clothing worn by righteous people, including angels (see Revelation 3:4–5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13–14; 15:6; and 19:8). They also mention other things that are symbolically white, including a stone (2:17), horses (6:2, and 19:11 and 14), a cloud (14:14), and a throne (20:11). Passages in other books describe how the Savior shone at his transfiguration (see Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:3; and Luke 9:29) and the similar brightness of angels (see Matthew 28:3; Mark 16:5; John 20:12; and Acts 1:10). Two passages metaphorically compare wicked men to sepulchres (clean and white on the outside, but filthy on the inside) (see Matthew 23:27 and Acts 23:3). One describes ripe fields as white (light in color) (see John 4:35). In one, Jesus refers to white hair (see Matthew 5:36).

165. Acts 8:27 likewise mentions “a man of Ethiopia” without any mention of skin hue.

- The Book of Mormon appears to use only three true color names: *white* (including *whiteness* and *whiter*), *red*, and *black* (including *blackness* and sometimes *dark*), so each color name appears to cover a range of colors (not just one narrowly defined color).
- The Book of Mormon also uses the word *scarlets* twice (1 Nephi 13:7–8) perhaps translating the ancient word *shani*.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, the Book of Mormon uses the word *gray* once in the term *gray hairs*, probably a translation of *sebah*.¹⁶⁷ In fact, it seems likely that the Book of Mormon phrase “their gray hairs were about to be brought down to lie low in the dust; yea, even they were near to be cast with sorrow into a watery grave” (1 Nephi 18:18) intentionally echoes the Old Testament phrase “ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave” (Genesis 42:38).
- In the Book of Mormon, the words *black* and *white* also express the specific symbolism of ancient Israel. Nephi quotes the words of Isaiah, which speak of *blackness*. “I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering” (2 Nephi 7:3). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated to *blackness* in this verse is *qadruwth*, which means darkness or gloom.¹⁶⁸ The sadness connoted by this word is bolstered by Isaiah’s reference to sackcloth. In two other passages, Lehi and Alma rely on ancient symbolism as they use the word *white* to describe the fruit of the tree of life. Lehi emphasizes joy, saying, “I beheld that *the fruit thereof was white to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen. And as I partook of the fruit thereof, it filled my soul with exceeding great joy*” (1 Nephi 8:11–12). Alma emphasizes purity, saying, “by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and *which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure*” (Alma 32:42),
- The word *white* is sometimes used in the Book of Mormon to reflect the concept of luster, as in the English Old Testament, so the word *white* refers to brightness (see, for example, 3 Nephi 19:25).

166. BDB, s.v. “שָׁנִי.”

167. BDB, s.v. “שֵׁבָה.”

168. BDB, s.v. “קָדְרוּת.”

These passages suggest that color words in the English Book of Mormon follow the ancient patterns found in the English Old Testament. These ancient words don't reflect the modern social construct of race. Indeed, it could be considered anachronistic for an ancient record to use color words with meanings that arose due to the transatlantic slave trade.

Nephi's Description of the Lamanite Mark

As we've seen, the Lord said that when the Lamanites rebelled *against him*, they would be cursed with a sore curse (see 1 Nephi 2:23). Nephi describes the sore curse that came upon them due to this rebellion as "a skin of blackness" (2 Nephi 5:21). The conceptual link between the blessings and cursings of 1 Nephi 2:20–24 and those of Leviticus 26 can suggest that this *skin of blackness* was a black sacrilegious tattoo that violated the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). Mormon's description of the Lamanite mark in Alma 3:4–19 also appears to depict such a tattoo — a cursed thing cut into the skin in rebellion against God. The archaeological record confirms the existence of black profane tattoos (and red tattoos as well) in ancient America. The paradigm and symbolism of ancient Israel connect Nephi's words *skin of blackness* with Mormon's words in Alma 3:4–19 as well as the words of Jeremiah, Daniel, and the Book of Job.

The biblical phrase that most closely resembles Nephi's phrase *skin of blackness* may be Job's words "My *skin* is *black* upon me" (Job 30:30). As mentioned earlier, Job's words refer literally to diseased skin that is unnaturally black (in the broad ancient meaning) and symbolically to a time of affliction and mourning. Similarly, Nephi's words refer literally to tattooed skin that is artificially black and symbolically to a time of affliction for his brethren similar to that mourned by Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 8:21 and 14:2 and Lamentations 4:1–8).

Nephi says, "They had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become *like unto a flint*." (2 Nephi 5:21). In the Old Testament, Zechariah makes a similar comparison, saying "Yea, they made their hearts as *an adamant stone*, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets" (Zechariah 7:12). The Hebrew word translated as *an adamant stone* (*shamir*) can also be translated as *flint*.¹⁶⁹ The New King James Version says, "they made their hearts like *flint*." Nephi's metaphor may entail more than general hardheartedness. The Old Testament (Exodus 4:25

169. BDB, s.v. "שִׁמְרִי."

and Joshua 5:2–3) and the scholarship on Mesoamerica¹⁷⁰ both mention flint used to cut skin. Nephi’s word *flint* may suggest the way his brethren acquired a skin of blackness.

Nephi’s description of the fulfillment of blessings and cursings under the covenant with the Lord was written from his unique point of view. To him, the Lamanite mark was a *skin of blackness* in contrast with an earlier time when he saw his brethren as “white, and exceeding fair and delightsome” (2 Nephi 5:21).¹⁷¹ This contrast indicates that the word *white*, like the word *blackness*, describes skin — skin that is now blackened (darkened), but was once white (clean and therefore lighter in appearance). In addition, biblical meanings of Nephi’s words *white and exceeding fair and delightsome* suggest an earlier time when Nephi saw his brethren as pure and joyful — a somewhat surprising idea that invites further examination of these words.

The English word *fair* can have several meanings. Three meanings might be relevant here: (A) “Beautiful to the eye; of attractive appearance; good-looking;” (B) “Of a person’s character, conduct, reputation, etc.: free from moral imperfections; exemplary, unblemished;” or (C) “Of hair or complexion: light as opposed to dark in colour”¹⁷² The first two meanings both suggest Hebrew words found in the Old Testament, but the third meaning (light complexion) isn’t found in the Bible, making it unlikely that this third meaning applies here. In the English Old Testament, the word *fair* translates several Hebrew words including *towb*,¹⁷³ *yaphah*,¹⁷⁴ and *yapheh*.¹⁷⁵ The word *towb*, in particular, often rendered as *fair*, can mean pleasant, agreeable, or good. It can refer to one who is pleasant to the sight, but it’s also the word used as God declares various parts of the creation to be “good” (see, for example, Genesis 1:4). It’s the Hebrew source for the English word *good* in “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9) and in “knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

170. See Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 252, where flint is mentioned as an instrument used for tattooing and scarification among the Maya.

171. Martin, however, suggests that the Nephi’s terms *exceeding fair and delightsome* may describe the Lamanites from their own point of view, rather than that of Nephi, “Covenantal Nature,” 122.

172. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Fair, adj. and n.1,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67704?rskey=JC0gvi&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See senses A.I.1, A.III.12, and A.IV.17.

173. *BDB*, s.v. “טוֹב.”

174. *BDB*, s.v. “יָפָה.”

175. *BDB*, s.v. “יָפָה.”

So, in the Book of Mormon, the word *fair* can mean pleasant to look upon, but might also connote goodness.¹⁷⁶ Further context provided by the word *delightesome* suggests that this specific reference is to moral goodness rather than worldly beauty.

The word *delightesome* generally means giving or providing delight.¹⁷⁷ It appears only once in the English Old Testament, but eight times in the Book of Mormon. In Malachi 3:12, the land of the righteous is described with the Hebrew word *chephets* (pleasure, delight),¹⁷⁸ rendered as *delightesome*. In the Book of Mormon, terms used together with *delightesome* include “white [pure and joyful],” and “believe[ing] in Christ” (2 Nephi 30:6–7); “[those who] come to the knowledge of God, yea, the redemption of Christ” (Words of Mormon 1:8); “blessed” (3 Nephi 24:12); “fair [pleasant or good]” and “blessed according to the multitude of the promises which the Lord had made unto them” (4 Nephi 1:10–11); “they had Christ for their shepherd; yea, they were led even by God the Father” (Mormon 5:17); and “civil” [as opposed to uncivilized] (Moroni 9:12).

These contextual words suggest that *delightesome*, as used with the words *white* and *fair*, points rather consistently to a time of moral purity. Although this idea counters the common view that Laman and Lemuel were always bad to the bone, Nephi’s limited account does allow for just such a time. He mentions no iniquity or contention from the time when he taught his brethren about his vision of the tree of life until the time of the broken bow — a period that covered “many days,” (1 Nephi 16:15) and may have included several months, a year, or longer (see 1 Nephi 16:4–20). This may have been a joyful, clean, and pure interlude before Laman, Lemuel, and their followers, who later became Lamanites, ultimately hardened their hearts.

After Nephi received his vision of the tree of life, he exhorted his brethren “with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord” (1 Nephi 16:4). In response, “they did humble themselves before the Lord, insomuch that I had joy and great hopes of them, that they would walk

176. Also consider Matthew Bowen’s insightful discussion of the words *good* and *fair*, as used in the Book of Mormon, in which he suggests that these words, like the name *Nephi* “are derived from Egyptian word *nfr*, ‘good,’ ‘goodly,’ ‘fine,’ ‘fair,’ ‘beautiful.’” Matthew L. Bowen, “O Ye Fair Ones’ — Revisited,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 315–44, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/o-ye-fair-ones-revisited/>.

177. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “delightesome, adj.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/49394>.

178. *BDB*, s.v. “רָצוּן.”

in the paths of righteousness” (1 Nephi 16:5). This hope is supported by an absence of any signs of rebellion for quite some time. Nephi gives no time markers during the eight-year sojourn in the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 17:3–4), so we can only estimate the length of this evidently harmonious time. After sharing this hope, Nephi says that his father “dwelt in a tent” (1 Nephi 16:6), a phrase that may mark the passage of time (see 1 Nephi 2:15, 9:1 and 10:16). While they continued to dwell in the valley of Lemuel, Lehi’s sons and Zoram all became married (see 1 Nephi 16:7). Later, Lehi received the Liahona and was commanded to move on (see 1 Nephi 16:9–10). No murmuring is mentioned as they began their journey even though some of the women may have been expecting or nursing — a cause for murmuring at a later time (see 1 Nephi 17:20). One might also have predicted contention as they started out, but none is mentioned (see 1 Nephi 16:11–12).

After they crossed the river Laman, the workings of the Liahona suggest unity, faith and diligence. They “did follow the directions of the ball, which led [them] in the more fertile parts of the wilderness” (1 Nephi 16:16). King Benjamin teaches that this “ball or director ... was prepared by the hand of the Lord that thereby *they might be led, every one, according to the heed and diligence which they gave unto [the Lord]*” (Mosiah 1:16). Similarly, Alma suggests that the Liahona wrought miracles only while “they had faith to believe that God could cause that those spindles should point the way they should go” (Alma 37:40). It faltered when “they were slothful and forgat to exercise their faith and diligence” (Alma 37:41). All may have remained faithful during these initial travels, so the Liahona led them through fertile places. Sadly, this faithful interval eventually ended. After they once again pitched their tents to rest and obtain food (see 1 Nephi 16:17), Nephi broke his bow, and then not only Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael, but also Lehi, murmured (see 1 Nephi 16:20). Lehi soon repented and Laman and Lemuel later helped Nephi build the ship. By the time they reached the promised land, however, the hearts of Laman, Lemuel, and their followers became hardened.

God knew in advance that these earliest Lamanites would ultimately forfeit his protection and guidance as they rebelled — first against being led by Nephi, and then against being led by God. Their rebellion against God included the choice to mark themselves with a *skin of blackness* — a permanent self-imposed mark that identified them as apostates. It fulfilled God’s word that they would “not be enticing unto” righteous

Nephites (2 Nephi 5:21) but would “be loathsome” (2 Nephi 5:22) to those who chose to keep their covenants.

The unrighteous actions of the Lamanites themselves distinguished them from the Nephites “that thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, that they might not *mix and believe in incorrect traditions*, which would prove their destruction” (Alma 3:8). Nibley emphasizes the importance of traditions: “[The Lord] doesn’t want them to mingle with incorrect traditions.”¹⁷⁹ As explained above, some of the traditions adopted by the Lamanites violated sacred covenants. They would remain cursed and branded as apostates until they repented and turned again to the Lord.

An ancient tattoo could literally, visibly, be “set upon” specific rebellious adults when it began with “Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael and the Ishmaelitish women” (Alma 3:7). Then, the Lamanites could have continued a wicked tradition by which “whomsoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites were called under that head, and *there was a mark set upon him*” (Alma 3:10).

Thus, the term *skin of blackness*, when viewed through the eyes of Nephi’s ancient culture, has nothing to do with the modern social construct of race. It describes skin blackened by a permanent, self-imposed mark. This mark was forbidden by the law of Moses and adopted in rebellion against God, a rebellion that eventually included other violations of the law as well.

All other Book of Mormon passages once thought to refer to natural skin color can also be read in light of the paradigm and symbolism of ancient Israel. It can be hard for modern readers to accept these ancient patterns of use for the words *black* and *white*. But they were firmly in place for centuries before natural skin color became such a prominent aspect of modern culture.

Nephi’s Declaration That God Invites All to Come Unto Him

As we read Jeremiah’s words, “I am black,” (Jeremiah 8:21) our culture tends to lead us initially, almost instinctively, but incorrectly, to consider his natural skin color. Nephi lived in the days of Jeremiah. His words reflect the same culture, but our cultural instincts likewise suggest skin color as we read the words *black and white* in the following passage written by Nephi: “[The Lord] inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness. And he denieth none that come unto him, *black*

179. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, 249.

and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen. And all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33).

Most modern readers initially assume that the words *black and white* in this passage refer to natural skin color. Our present culture suggests that this reading could be essential to Nephi’s teaching that all people everywhere are alike unto God. This passage is often cited, very appropriately, to emphasize the wrongness of racial prejudice.¹⁸⁰ But these ancient words teach this essential message about God’s perfect love from outside the modern social construct of race. The historical evidence indicates that these words were written, and should be read, from the cultural perspective of ancient Israel. This passage never mentions skin. Similar passages in the Bible use the word *black* to symbolically designate mournful, afflicted people and use the word *white* to symbolically designate the pure and joyful. These ancient meanings certainly don’t pop into the minds of modern readers, but they fit perfectly in this ancient passage.

At various times in our lives, each of us might be white (pure and joyful due to repentance and righteousness) or black (afflicted and mournful due to sin). With these meanings, the words *black* and *white* jointly cover all of God’s children. Many scriptures confirm that God denies none who come unto him.¹⁸¹ For example, Jesus invites latter-day Gentiles to “turn ... from your wicked ways ... and come unto me” (3 Nephi 30:2).

This ancient symbolism for the words *black* and *white* adds meaning to an often-unexplained difference between the two visions of the tree of life. Near the beginning of Lehi’s vision, he finds himself in two dark and dreary (black and mournful) places — first a dark and dreary wilderness, and then a dark and dreary waste (see 1 Nephi 8:4–8). Feeling lost, he prays “unto the Lord that he would have mercy on me, according to the multitude of his tender mercies” (1 Nephi 8:8). These specific words allude to Psalm 51:1, which says, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions”.¹⁸² McConkie and Millet

180. See, for example, Official Declaration 2, 30 September 1978, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (website), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/od/2>.

181. See, for example, Matthew 11:28; Enos 1:2–6 and 27; and Alma 5:32–37.

182. See “Why Did Lehi Quote from a Psalm of Repentance in His Dream?” KnowWhy #325, *Book of Mormon Central*, June 12, 2017, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral>.

suggest that the “dark and dreary waste” represents “fallen man in the lone and dreary world.”¹⁸³ Lehi seeks the mercy of the Atonement. His plea brings him to the tree. Nephi, on the other hand, never mentions anything dark or dreary. He “comes unto” the tree from a bright, pure, joyful (white) place — a mountaintop (symbolic temple) where the Spirit of God rejoices with him (see 1 Nephi 11:1–8). These contrasting scenes, both of which result in partaking of the fruit of the tree, symbolically suggest that God “inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness,” including those who are black (afflicted and mournful) and those who are white (pure and joyful).

Within this ancient symbolism, the words *black and white* refer to situations (being afflicted and mournful or pure and joyful) that can change as we exercise our agency, while the other word pairs in 2 Nephi 26:33 refer to more innate qualities. This interesting combination of innate and changeable attributes is also found in two other Book of Mormon passages. Alma 1:30 describes good people who were generous to all, including “both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church.” Three of these word pairs describe relatively innate attributes, but one, those who are “out of the church or in the church,” can change based on agency. Similarly, Alma 11:44 teaches that the resurrection “shall come to all,” including, “both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous.” Once again, three word pairs describe fairly permanent qualities and one word pair, “the wicked and the righteous,” describes a quality we can change through our agency.

Marvin Perkins suggests that these passages reveal a pattern in which the words *black and white* are tied to the concepts “the wicked and the righteous,” and “out of the church or in the church.”¹⁸⁴ If the words *black and white* reflect the symbolism of ancient Israel, an interesting relationship exists among these passages. Our use of agency to be disobedient and wicked, including a choice to leave the church, tends to make us black (afflicted and mournful). Our use of agency to be obedient and righteous, including a choice to join the church, tends to make us white (pure and joyful).

[org/knowhy/why-did-lehi-quote-from-a-psalm-of-repentance-in-his-dream](http://www.fairmormon.org/knowhy/why-did-lehi-quote-from-a-psalm-of-repentance-in-his-dream).

183. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 1:56.

184. Marvin Perkins, “Blacks in the Scriptures,” (lecture, 2014 FairMormon Conference, Provo, UT, August 7, 2014), <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2014/blacks-scriptures>.

The underlying meaning of 2 Nephi 26:33, that all of God’s children are alike unto him and that he invites all of us to come unto him, is the same whether the words *black and white* reflect ancient symbolism or the modern social construct of race. Nephi’s words, however, were written anciently and wouldn’t have relied on a modern social construct that is chronologically out of place in ancient writings.

Uses of the Word White in the Symbolic Context of Nephi’s Vision

About one fourth of the instances of the word *white* in the Book of Mormon appear in the context of Lehi’s and Nephi’s symbolic visions of the tree of life. The word *skin* is never used in these visions. This context helps us understand these uses of the word *white*. Based on biblical usage, it’s unlikely that any of these passages has anything to do with skin. As we’ve seen, the concept of race was beyond Nephi’s worldview. A modern reader may assume that Nephi felt a need to identify people by race, but his usage of the word *white* fits better culturally and historically within the paradigm and symbolism of ancient Israel.

Various white objects seen in these visions (robes, garments, a tree, and fruit) don’t give rise to cross-cultural confusion. On the other hand, when these visions involve people described as white, our cultural instincts can improperly suggest natural skin color. For example, in Nephi’s vision, both a tree and a virgin are depicted as white and beautiful (see 1 Nephi 11:8–9 and 13–15). The tree and virgin are clearly similar symbols in the vision. One brings forth white fruit that symbolizes the love of God and the other brings forth the pure Savior of the world who personifies the love of God. As soon as Nephi sees the pure virgin holding the Son of God, he understands that the pure tree represents the love of God (see 1 Nephi 11:16–22). We, like Nephi, can see the whiteness of the tree as a symbol of purity. However, our racial culture can suggest that the word *white*, when describing a pure, holy woman, must depict her natural skin color. The ancient cultural context, however, indicates that her whiteness, like that of the tree, is symbolic of purity. Natural skin color doesn’t enhance the vision’s message, but the message requires both a pure virgin and a pure tree. This symbolism doesn’t require a perfect woman. Her purity indicates that she was faithful enough to serve as a precious instrument in the Lord’s hands.

The same ancient context can help us defuse the cross-cultural confusion that tends to arise as we read later passages from the same vision. After Nephi saw the Savior appear to his people, he “looked and beheld three generations did pass away in righteousness, and their

garments were white, even like unto the Lamb of God. And the angel said unto me: *These are made white* in the blood of the Lamb because of their faith in him.” (1 Nephi 12:11). This symbolism doesn’t refer to natural skin color. Nor does it mean that these Nephites were flawless, but they were repentant and were made pure (white) through the Atonement.

After Nephi sees these generations of pure, faithful (and, in that sense, white) Nephites, he sees a wayward, afflicted (black) generation of Nephites, associated with “*filthy water*,” “*mists of darkness*,” and hardened hearts, who are slain by the Lamanites (see 1 Nephi 12:16–19). Much later, Nephi sees a specific group of Gentiles who were “white and exceeding fair and beautiful,¹⁸⁵ *like unto my people before that they were slain*” (1 Nephi 13:15). The symbolic context suggests that these Gentiles were white (pure) “like unto” the specific Nephites depicted as white earlier in the vision, before the Nephites became wicked and were afflicted and slain. Thus, these Gentiles, like those earlier Nephites, were “*made white* in the blood of the Lamb *because of their faith in him*” (1 Nephi 12:11). Like those Nephites, these Gentiles also feared God and had faith in him. Neither group was perfect, but both groups were faithful and humble. Another passage that appears to describe these same Gentiles calls them “a few which are the humble followers of Christ” who nevertheless “are led that in many instances they do err because they are taught by the precepts of men” (2 Nephi 28:14). Nephi’s vision shows that “the power of the Lord was with [these Gentiles]” (1 Nephi 13:16), suggesting that they, though misled in some things, were good, humble, and faithful.

Jacob’s Words About People, Skin, and Curses, Which Reflect His Ancient Culture

After the death of Nephi, his brother Jacob taught some Nephites that they would be cursed (mournfully afflicted) with destruction if they didn’t repent of their wickedness and hypocrisy. Even though the Lamanites were cursed with a sore cursing (a mournful affliction represented by the marks on their skins), the moral filthiness of these Nephites was worse. They, unlike the Lamanites, were violating the law of chastity and they also hated the Lamanites. Jacob said:

185. The word *beautiful*, like the word *fair* (see footnotes 169 to 173 herein), can mean pleasant to look upon, but can also depict righteousness and moral goodness. See 1 Nephi 11:8, 15; 13:37; 2 Nephi 8:24; 14:2; Mosiah 12:21; 15:15–18; 18:30; 3 Nephi 20:36, 40; and Moroni 10:31.

But woe woe unto you that are not pure in heart, *that are filthy this day before God*, for except ye shall repent, the land is *cursed* for your sakes; and *the Lamanites*, which *are not filthy like unto you* — nevertheless *they are cursed with a sore cursing* — shall scourge you even unto *destruction*. And the time speedily cometh that *except ye repent*, they shall possess the land of your inheritance and the Lord God will lead away the righteous out from among you.

Behold, the Lamanites your brethren, *whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins*, are more righteous than you. For ... [they keep the law of chastity] ... [W]herefore because of this observance in keeping this commandment, *the Lord God will not destroy them but will be merciful unto them, and one day they shall become a blessed people*.

Behold, their husbands love their wives and their wives love their husbands, and their husbands and their wives love their children. And their unbelief and their hatred towards you is because of the iniquity of their fathers; wherefore how much better are you than they in the sight of your great Creator? O my brethren, *I fear that unless ye shall repent of your sins that their skins will be whiter than yours when ye shall be brought with them before the throne of God*.

Wherefore a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye *revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skin*. *Neither shall ye revile against them because of their filthiness*, but ye shall remember *your own filthiness* and remember that their filthiness came because of their fathers. (Jacob 3:3–9)

Throughout this passage, the word *filthiness* refers to moral foulness or corruption¹⁸⁶ (as it always does throughout the Book of Mormon). Jacob mentions that the Lamanites “are cursed with a sore cursing” (Jacob 3:3). As noted earlier, the Lord, Lehi, and Nephi all use the term *sore curse* or *sore cursing* to refer to the curse of the Lord upon the Lamanites for rebellion against him (see 1 Nephi 2:23; 2 Nephi 1:22 and 5:21). This term points to the mark on their skins — the mark that was

186. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “filthiness, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70284?redirectedFrom=filthiness#eid>. See sense 2. Includes Early Modern English examples.

a curse upon them for rebellion against God. Jacob then uses the word *the* (the definite article) to refer again to “*the* cursing which hath come upon their skins” (Jacob 3:5) (the same self-imposed mark). Jacob later uses the term “the darkness of their skin” (Jacob 3:9; see also Alma 3:6) to refer again to this mark. All these terms jointly apply to the Lamanite mark.

Jacob appears to use the words *skins* and *skin* literally, as is always done in the Bible. Likewise, his words *darkness* and *whiter* can logically be taken to follow biblical patterns, referring to literal aspects of the appearance of skin. These Nephites hated the Lamanites because of “the darkness of their skin” (Jacob 3:9; see also v. 5). While this could be read as metaphorical for their wickedness, a literal visible difference due to a physical mark on their skins could have played a role in this hatred. It could be that they reviled against them because they saw them as wicked — morally filthy and cursed by God as evidenced by the literal dark mark (cursing) on their skins. It appears that Jacob also uses the word *whiter* literally to depict the relative luster (brightness) of glorified, resurrected bodies. While this luster can be read as metaphorical, it can also be literal. Jacob is referring to the day of judgment — a day that follows the resurrection, in which the resurrected bodies of chaste Lamanites will have greater glory and their immortal skins will evidently shine brighter than the resurrected bodies of impenitent, unchaste Nephites (see 1 Corinthians 15:40–42, 3 Nephi 19:25, D&C 76:70–82, and Joseph Smith — History 1:31–32).

The Descendants of the More Part of the Lamanites

As explained earlier, in 3 Nephi 2:15–16, the word *white* refers to the clean, mark-free skin of descendants of Lamanite converts. They had been living the law of Moses for over 40 years but had been separated from the Nephites. By the time they united with the Nephites, the mark had gradually disappeared from among them as the initial converts passed away and unmarked young people came of age.

Nephi’s Prophecy About Children of Lehi in the Latter-days

Nephi prophesies that in the last days (our day), descendants of Lehi will accept the teachings of the Book of Mormon, rejoice, shed their spiritual blindness, and become *white*. “And then shall they rejoice, for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God. And their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes. And *many generations shall not pass away among them save they shall be a white*

and a delightful people” (2 Nephi 30:6). This ancient use of the word *white*, with no mention of the word *skin*, should *not* be read as a reference to physical appearance. Here, the words *white* and *darkness* are both used metaphorically. These descendants of Lehi who accept the Book of Mormon will be joyful, will begin to see the truth, and will become a morally pure, delightful people. This passage has nothing to do with skin. It’s a prophecy about a time of purity, light, and joy.

In the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon (the third edition), the word *white* in this passage (2 Nephi 30:6) was changed to *pure*, almost certainly by Joseph Smith.¹⁸⁷ Skousen considers this change to be one of the few clarifications made by Joseph Smith to the meaning of words or phrases.¹⁸⁸ In 1981, the Church Scriptures Committee applied this change in the official LDS version of the Book of Mormon. According to Skousen, “The evidence will not support the claim that for the second and third editions Joseph received a grammatically corrected, revealed text from the Lord.” Rather, “the unevenness of Joseph’s editing” suggests that he was trying to do his best, given time limitations, to standardize grammar (and clarify a few phrases).¹⁸⁹ Joseph Smith didn’t give us any further information about this change, but, as we have seen, in this setting, when one applies the usage found in the English and Hebrew Old Testaments, the word *white* means pure. It also connotes joy, but this passage already mentions joy, so the word *pure* provides helpful clarification. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the original translation to the word *white*, but the change to the word *pure* can also be seen as accurate. It tends to clarify that, in this verse, the English word *white* has the specific symbolic meaning it had in similar settings in ancient Israel: “morally or spiritually pure.”¹⁹⁰

187. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, Part Two: 2 Nephi 11 — Mosiah 16, (Provo, UT: FARMS, Brigham Young University, 2014), 894, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/atv/p2/>.

188. See Royal Skousen, “Changes in The Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 169–70, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/changes-in-the-book-of-mormon/>.

189. Royal Skousen and Stanford Carmack, “Editing Out the ‘Bad Grammar’ in the Book of Mormon,” (lecture, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, April 6, 2016), <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/grammatical-variation.pdf>.

190. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “white, adj. (and adv.) and n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/228566?rskey=664CeI&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense II.7.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

We've now reviewed all Book of Mormon passages that refer to the Lamanite mark. These passages appear to be written from the point of view of ancient Israel. When read in light of word usage from that ancient culture, they never suggest a change in natural skin color. We've also reviewed other Book of Mormon passages that use the word *black* or *white* to describe people (with no reference to skin). It appears that in these passages the word *black* symbolizes affliction and the word *white* either symbolizes purity or joy or reflects brightness or luster.

Other Factors That Point Away From a Change in Natural Skin Color

The scriptural record, properly understood, gives us no precedent anywhere in the history of the world for any change in natural skin color imposed by God. As explained above, the notion that the mark set upon Cain (see Genesis 4:15) was dark skin color imposed by God has no place in the Church and no foundation in the Hebrew words of Genesis 4:15. Nor does any other scripture, properly understood, indicate that God ever imposed a dark skin (or any other genetic characteristic) upon any of his children as a curse or sign of disfavor.¹⁹¹ Rather, God designed our bodies in a way that allows for a wide variety of natural physical characteristics, all of which are equally good in the sight of God (see Moses 2:27, 31).

The idea that the Lamanite mark was a dark skin color also opposes what David M. Belnap calls “the inclusive, anti-discrimination message of the Book of Mormon.”¹⁹² Belnap reviews and categorizes many Book of Mormon passages, concluding that “the inclusive messages in the

191. The word *blackness* in Moses 7:8 and the word *black* in Moses 7:22 should, like other ancient words revealed to the prophet Joseph Smith, be read in harmony with the culture of ancient Israel and not our own culture. Because there is little other textual context in these verses, people in our post-transatlantic-slave-trade culture may assume that they discuss skin pigmentation. Ancient writers in ancient cultures, however, probably didn't even consider this meaning. Neither passage mentions skin. In that ancient culture, the limited context may hint at mournful affliction. For another thoughtful view that doesn't rule out skin pigmentation, consider Adam Stokes, “The People of Canaan: A New Reading of Moses 7,” *Interpreter, A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, 47, (2021): 159–80, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-people-of-canaan-a-new-reading-of-moses-7/>.

192. David M. Belnap, “The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon,” *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/>.

Book of Mormon are consistent with the position advocated by current Latter-day Saint leaders condemning all racism and disavowing racist hypotheses such as those derived from a few Book of Mormon verses.”¹⁹³ This paper has reviewed all verses from which such hypotheses have been derived. As these verses are read in light of ancient culture and the usage of the words *black*, *white*, and *mark* by ancient prophets in the Old Testament, it becomes evident that these verses were never meant to be read from the modern social construct of black and white races.

God simply would not support any scheme that relied on Nephites disfavoring their brethren because of natural skin color. It would be totally out of character for God to condone treating any of us preferentially because of any bodily feature over which we have no control. The Book of Mormon consistently teaches that only our righteousness, which we choose for ourselves, including our willingness to make and keep sacred covenants, affects our salvation (see 1 Nephi 17:35 and Jacob 2:21). Similarly, the Church’s General Handbook states, “Favor or disfavor with God depends on devotion to Him and His commandments, not on the color of a person’s skin or other attributes.”¹⁹⁴ This principle is emphasized in official statements of the Church¹⁹⁵ and has repeatedly been emphasized by Church leaders, including President Gordon B. Hinckley,¹⁹⁶ President Dallin H. Oaks,¹⁹⁷ and President Russell M. Nelson.¹⁹⁸

193. Ibid., 195.

194. General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 38.6.14, “Prejudice,” https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title_number220.

195. Official Statement, released August 13, 2017, and update released August 15, 2017, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-statement-charlottesville-virginia>; and Official Statement, “Race and the Church: All Are Alike Unto God,” February 29, 2012, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/race-church>.

196. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Need for Greater Kindness,” *Ensign* 36, no. 5 (May 2006): 58, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2006/05/the-need-for-greater-kindness>.

197. Dallin H. Oaks, “President Oak’s Remarks at Worldwide Priesthood Celebration,” (discourse at the “Be One” celebration, Conference Center, Salt Lake City, June 1, 2018). Transcript at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-oaks-remarks-worldwide-priesthood-celebration>.

198. News Release, “President Nelson Shares Social Post about Racism and Calls for Respect for Human Dignity,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

It has been suggested that although God didn't miraculously intervene to alter Lamanite skin color, his cursing was fulfilled as their descendants intermarried with a darker skinned indigenous population.¹⁹⁹ This idea can't be correct. It assumes that a loving God would bless Nephites for irrational, uncharitable prejudice. It also runs counter to the Book of Mormon account. It disagrees with 2 Nephi 5:19–21 and Alma 3:6–7, both of which indicate that Nephi's adult brethren and their followers were the earliest Lamanite recipients of the mark.

The laws of genetic inheritance might establish a uniformly dark-skinned people through a multigenerational process that couldn't begin until the third Lamanite generation. Laman, Lemuel, and Lamanites of their (first) generation were monogamous (see Jacob 3:5–7) and married others from Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 16:7), so their children had no indigenous genes. If the children of those children (contemporaries of Enos) intermarried with indigenous people, the next generation (that of Jarom) would be the first with indigenous genes. Natural selection couldn't establish a uniform skin color for dozens of generations (hundreds of years) after that. However, the Lamanite mark reliably identified the Lamanites before Enos came of age (see Jacob 3:5). Moreover, genetics can't explain a mark that was set upon adult Nephite dissenters (see Alma 3:10) or one that disappeared among descendants of "the more part of the Lamanites" (Helaman 5:50) only 42 years after their fathers were converted (see 3 Nephi 2:12–16).

The Book of Mormon tells us that the Nephites allied with the people of Zarahemla. This indicates that Nephites were sometimes willing to unite with like-minded groups. Over time, there were repeated waves of dissention and conversion among the various groups. The continuous pattern of intercultural movement adds to the implausibility that natural skin color could ever have reliably distinguished Nephites from Lamanites.

Intentionally Vague References to the Lamanite Mark

While we can glean quite a bit of information from mark-related Book of Mormon passages, the wording in these passages isn't particularly descriptive. It's not surprising that these relatively vague words have been interpreted in several different ways. Perhaps Mormon shared more information on this topic in the part of his record that was lost by

day Saints, June 1, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-nelson-shares-social-post-encouraging-understanding-and-civility>.

199. See, for example, Ostler, "Yea, Yea, Nay Nay," 63–71.

Martin Harris. Or maybe the vagueness is intentional. Perhaps Nephite prophets intentionally avoided more clarity.

Nephi chose not to write about the worst aspects of the Jewish culture of his day. He says, “For I Nephi have not taught them many things concerning *the manner of the Jews*, for their works were *works of darkness* and their doings were *doings of abomination*” (2 Nephi 25:2). He doesn’t spell out the specifics, so he refers vaguely to “the manner of the Jews.” Moroni uses a similar term to refer to secret combinations. He says, “I Moroni do not write *the manner of their oaths and combinations*” (Ether 8:20). Elsewhere, Mormon explains, “I write a small abridgment, daring not to give a full account of the things which I have seen because of the commandment which I have received — and also that ye might not have too great sorrow because of the wickedness of this people” (Mormon 5:9).

Perhaps the term “the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4) was also intentionally vague.²⁰⁰ Maybe all of these “manner of” terms are used to buffer readers from wickedness. Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni, like Alma, may have been wary of providing a template from which readers might copy an improper practice (see Helaman 6:25).

A Persistent Mark that Signifies Rebellion

Gerrit Steenblik’s paper offers a mark based on the ancient Maya tradition of temporarily painting²⁰¹ the skin with charcoal-based body paint and stains.²⁰² This paint could have visibly distinguished Lamanites from Nephites from time to time, including while they were on the battlefield. Temporary paint could repeatedly be applied and removed “at will”²⁰³ with no applicable curse²⁰⁴ or need for true repentance.²⁰⁵ Nevertheless,

200. References to *the manner* of something are only vague when used without mentioning more details. On the other hand, the term *the manner of* sometimes introduces or alludes to more detailed information. See, for example, 1 Nephi 17:8–9, 18:2, 2 Nephi 5:14–16, Mosiah 25:18, Alma 13:3, 49:8, 51:27, Moroni 3:1, 4:1, 5:1, and 6:9.

201. The words *painted*, *painting*, and *paintedst* are found in the KJV (see Jeremiah 4:30, 22:14, Ezekiel 23:40, and 2 Kings 9:30), but not in the Book of Mormon. If the Lamanite mark were paint, it seems likely that the common words *paint* and *painted* might have been used rather than the ill-fitting *mark* and *marked*.

202. See Steenblik, “Demythicalizing,” 172.

203. *Ibid.*, 182.

204. *Ibid.*, 242n134.

205. *Ibid.*, 215.

in Steenblik’s model, some repentant Lamanites concurrently²⁰⁶ or eventually²⁰⁷ abandoned the utilitarian skin-painting tradition.

Four Book of Mormon passages (2 Nephi 5:20–24, Jacob 3:3–10, Alma 3:4–19, and 3 Nephi 2:15–16) describe the Lamanite mark (or its absence). Therefore, these four passages give us virtually all the information in the Book of Mormon about this mark. To be consistent with the text of the Book of Mormon, a theory about the nature of this mark should at least acknowledge all features of the mark confirmed in a majority of these sources. There appear to be at least four such features. These passages jointly indicate that the Lamanite mark was:

- a black or dark mark on the skin that
- visibly distinguished Lamanites from Nephites, and
- had a clear connection with the sore curse that came upon the Lamanites because of their rebellion against God, such that
- skin became marked due to rebellion against God and remained marked during rebellion, but repentance eventually caused the mark to cease.

Paint temporarily made skin dark, so it accommodates the first of these features. We now consider how it accommodates the others.

A Mark that Visibly Distinguished Lamanites From Nephites

These four passages describe this visible distinction as a “mark” by which Lamanites are “distinguished” from Nephites (Alma 3:7–8); a “mark” by which Lamanites are “separated” from Nephites (Alma 3:14); as a “skin of blackness” that keeps Lamanites from being “enticing” and makes them “loathsome” to Nephites (2 Nephi 5:21–22); and as “the *darkness* of [Lamanite] *skin*” (Jacob 3:9), which is reviled against by unrighteous Nephites.

Paint applied temporarily for certain events and easily removed soon afterwards distinguishes those who painted themselves from others, but only during those events. Such a temporary “mark” would be an unreliable candidate for a mark that “distinguished” or “separated” Lamanites from Nephites because the distinction would have been intermittent. Much of the time, there would have been no distinction. Furthermore, Steenblik suggests that righteous Nephites, like Lamanites,

206. Ibid.

207. Ibid., 204.

may have temporarily painted themselves from their earliest days.²⁰⁸ If so, it would be hard to argue that such paint distinguished Lamanites from Nephites at all.

Gorman states, “Body painting, tattooing and scarification have different functions related to their permanency: painting, because it can be rubbed off, is more suitable for expressing inner states or situations that hold for short periods of time, while tattooing/scarification is an indelible mark, acquired through pain, that represents permanent states of being.”²⁰⁹ An indelible, self-imposed mark representing a covenant-breaking tradition would more likely serve as a means of long-term group identification²¹⁰ for Lamanites and as a persistent warning to righteous, covenant-keeping Nephites against such traditions.

A Mark and Curse That Represented Rebellion Against God

In these four passages, the words *mark* and *curse* are often used together and conceptually linked with transgression, rebellion, hardened hearts, and iniquity. The passages mention a “*mark* ... which was a *curse* upon [Lamanites] *because of their transgression*” (Alma 3:6); a “*mark*” that was “set upon” anyone who “*suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites*” (Alma 3:9–10); Amlicites who “had come out in *open rebellion against God*” and marked themselves because “it was expedient that *the curse* should fall upon them” (Alma 3:18); a “*mark*” set by God upon those who joined the cursed Lamanites “that they *may be cursed* also” (Alma 3:14–16); a “*skin of blackness*” that came upon Lamanites “*because of their iniquity*. ... For behold, they had *hardened their hearts* against him” (2 Nephi 5:21); “*the cursing* which hath come upon [the Lamanites’] skins” (Jacob 3:5); and repentant Lamanites whose “*curse* was taken from them, and their skin became white” (3 Nephi 2:15). Every reference to the Lamanite *mark* in these passages is near a corresponding use of the word *curse* or *cursing*. This consistency across all of these sources, together with the context in which these words appear, tends to confirm a vital relationship between the words *mark* and *curse*.

Nevertheless, Steenblik holds that the mark was “unequivocally decoupled”²¹¹ from any curse. He suggests that, in some passages, improper, uninspired punctuation artificially links the words *curse* and *mark*, so he offers punctuation that he believes avoids any such link. He

208. Ibid., 218–19.

209. Gorman, “Body Modification,” 370, see also 71.

210. Ibid., 33.

211. Steenblik, “Demythicalizing,” 242n134.

also proposes that “in a few instances” the wording in these passages represents imperfections in the Book of Mormon. Then he suggests that in Jacob 3:5, the word *cursings* should replace the word *cursing* and, with this change, he opines that this verse doesn’t discuss a cursing from God, but rather multiple cursings uttered by Lamanites.

Punctuation and Context

Steenblik feels that uninspired punctuation muddles the distinct concepts of a mark and a curse.²¹² He suggests that the words *mark* and *curse*, when used in consecutive independent clauses and separated by proper punctuation, become conceptually disconnected.²¹³ This rationale is questionable. In the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and other literature, consecutive independent clauses often repeat or refine closely related thoughts.²¹⁴ The grammatical structure of these clauses is essentially the same whether they are separated by a period, a comma, or a semicolon. While other punctuation choices and editorial changes of punctuation in the Book of Mormon can lead to shifts in meaning,²¹⁵ a change from one delimiter to another between independent clauses rarely, if ever, significantly alters meaning.

In each of the passages to which Steenblik applies this rationale, 2 Nephi 5:21, Alma 3:14, 3 Nephi 2:15, and Alma 3:7, the context, especially the greater context that considers the other passages, clearly suggests an intended association between the Lamanite mark and a curse. This affiliation flows quite naturally from the context regardless of which delimiters are used.

Possible Imperfections

Steenblik suggests that a few passages in which the Lamanite mark itself is called a curse may be imperfections in the Book of Mormon.²¹⁶ He only cites Alma 3:6 as a potential imperfection, but his reference to “a few” problematic passages may also implicate Jacob 3:5 and 2 Nephi 5:21,

212. Ibid., 193; 251n184; 257n226.

213. Ibid., 242n134.

214. See, for example, 1 Nephi 17:47; 2 Nephi 4:20 and 10:7–8.

215. For example, see Scott L. Howell et al., “The Diachronic Usage of Exclamation Marks across the Major Book of Mormon Editions,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 53 (2022): 265–86, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-diachronic-usage-of-exclamation-marks-across-the-major-book-of-mormon-editions/>.

216. See Steenblik, “Demythicalizing,” 242n134.

each of which can be read to refer to the mark (or skin of blackness) as a curse upon the Lamanites or upon their skins.

In Alma 3:6, Mormon says, “The skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, *which was a curse upon them* because of their transgression.” In Jacob 3:5, Jacob chastises wicked Nephites who hate Lamanites “because of their filthiness and *the cursing which hath come upon their skins.*” Nephi’s words in 2 Nephi 5:21 also appear to equate *the cursing* with *a skin of blackness*. In a nutshell, he says, “[*The Lord*] had caused the cursing to come upon them.... For ... they had hardened their hearts against him... Wherefore ... *the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them*” (2 Nephi 5:21).

These passages were written by each of the three Book of Mormon prophets who discuss the Lamanite mark. It’s unlikely that each of them independently added a problematic passage whose meaning is nevertheless confirmed by the other two. These passages honor correct principles. In each, the word *curse* or *cursing* identifies the mark as a cursed, forbidden thing, such as a profane tattoo intentionally placed on the skin in rebellion against God.

A Cursing From God

Steenblik also suggests that Jacob’s words in Jacob 3:5 have nothing to do with a curse from God but were written to describe curses uttered by Lamanites as they painted themselves. In this verse, Jacob tells some wicked Nephites that they are less righteous than “the Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of *their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins.*” Steenblik notes that, in the printer’s manuscript, this passage contains the plural word *cursings*.²¹⁷ He doesn’t consider Royal Skousen’s detailed analysis indicating that “the plural *cursings* in Jacob 3:5 is a scribal error for *cursing*.”²¹⁸ Steenblik adds a suggestion that the covenant of Captain Moroni and his men to keep the commandments of God or be destroyed (see Alma 46:21–23) reflects a Nephite “self-cursing tradition.”²¹⁹ He holds that these ideas support an inference that “when Lamanites applied body paint, they may have simultaneously cursed their enemies, and probably even themselves.”²²⁰

Steenblik’s inference, however, requires additional premises. It also requires that (A) the Nephites knew of these Lamanite utterances; that

217. Ibid., 207.

218. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 978.

219. Steenblik, “Demythicalizing,” 207.

220. Ibid., 208.

(B) these uttered words somehow “came upon” the Lamanite skins; and that (C) the Nephite hatred condemned by Jacob was kindled by these specific uttered words. This string of inferences may be plausible, but the more direct reading reviewed earlier herein seems more so.

All mark-related passages jointly and consistently indicate that the Lamanite mark was closely affiliated with God’s curse upon the Lamanites for rebellion. None of the explanations offered by Steenblik convincingly depicts a Lamanite mark and curse that were “unequivocally decoupled.”

A Mark That Continued During Rebellion, but Ended After Repentance

The Lamanite mark began after the Lamanites rebelled against God and his laws. “[The Lamanites] had *hardened their hearts against [the Lord]*, ... Wherefore ... the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them” (2 Nephi 5:21). “The skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them *because of their transgression*” (Alma 3:6). Others who adopted Lamanite practices were also marked: “Whomsoever *suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites* were called under that head, and there was a mark set upon him” (Alma 3:10).

The practice of marking the skin continued during rebellion but ended with repentance. The mark remained on repentant persons, but they chose not to mark their children. “The Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people *save they shall repent of their iniquities*” (2 Nephi 5:21–22). “I [the Lord] will set a mark upon them, that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed from this time *henceforth and forever except they repent of their wickedness*” (Alma 3:14). Later, some 42 years after a large group of Lamanites repented, when Nephites encountered their descendants, they learned that as time had passed, “their curse was taken from them, and *their skin became white* like unto the Nephites.” (3 Nephi 2:15).

Temporary paint, on the other hand, had nothing to do with a curse from God. Skin painting was a utilitarian practice available to anyone, including righteous Nephites,²²¹ for whom it might provide a benefit. It needn’t have begun with the rebellion that gave rise to any curse, needn’t have occurred only during rebellion, and needn’t have ended after repentance ended any curse.

221. *Ibid.*, 218–19

The Lamanite mark described in these passages was a black (dark) mark on the skin that visibly distinguished Lamanites, who rebelled against God and were cursed by him, from Nephites, who kept the law of Moses. This description may reflect a Lamanite tradition of cutting a permanent dark mark into the skin in defiance of the law of Moses — a tradition that began with the rebellion of Laman and Lemuel and ended with the repentance of any individual Lamanite.

The Need for Archaeological Evidence

This paper holds that the Lamanite mark visibly distinguished Lamanites from Nephites at all times. Steenblik’s paper, on the other hand, holds that the Lamanite mark visibly distinguished Lamanites from Nephites from time to time, including on the battlefield. These two approaches rely very differently on the archaeological record. This paper relies on the archaeological record only to confirm the presence of profane tattoos among ancient Americans during the Nephite-Lamanite period. The historicity of such tattoos confirms the plausibility of my thesis, because the tattoos would necessarily have distinguished Lamanites from Nephites at all times. All further required evidence is inherent in the Book of Mormon account. As explained above, all the words in the Book of Mormon can be read to support the view (1) that the Lamanite and Amlicite marks were profane tattoos prohibited by the law of Moses, and (2) that covenant-keeping Nephites lived that law and therefore would not have adopted either mark. As long as Nephites remained a peculiar people who lived the law of Moses, their appearance differed from all marked (tattooed) people. The archaeological record confirms the historicity of profane tattoos and therefore correlates seamlessly with this view.

Steenblik’s candidate for the mark — temporary body paint — doesn’t receive the same level of direct support from the Book of Mormon account, so his paper must rely more heavily on the archaeological record. The Book of Mormon account offers no religious reason for Nephites to avoid using temporary body paint or to use it differently from other societies.²²² Since the Book of Mormon suggests no religious prohibition that might keep Nephites from using temporary paint, Steenblik must rely on the archaeological record for evidence that temporary paint, like these marks in the Book of Mormon account, *distinguished members of one society from another*. Such archaeological evidence, however, is

222. Ibid., 218–19, 181, and 186.

missing. The available evidence never depicts societal identification based on temporary body paint. This, the only mark-based differentiation found in the Book of Mormon, isn't confirmed by the archaeological record.

Steenblik provides plenty of conjecture for this essential point,²²³ but he doesn't provide the "hard evidence"²²⁴ he needs. He acknowledges that his hypothesis requires "spade and trowel' archaeology and expert knowledge of Mesoamerican circumstances *that correlate with Book of Mormon events.*"²²⁵ However, the "codices, murals, and polychrome earthenware vases and plates"²²⁶ that he presents never depict body paint used to distinguish *any society from its neighbors*. One might suggest that the Book of Mormon itself provides the required evidence because it never describes Nephites as marked, even on the battlefield. This circular reasoning, however, simply begs the key question: Were Lamanites and Amlicites marked with a permanent or a temporary mark?

The text of the Book of Mormon inherently supports a permanent mark — righteous Nephites obeyed the law of Moses and therefore weren't marked. Temporary body paint only fits with the Book of Mormon account if something in the archaeological record confirms that such paint likewise distinguished whole armies of allies from their adversaries. But the use of temporary paint for this purpose is problematic. Reason suggests the folly of relying, in life and death situations, on a difference that can be changed "at will" by the enemy. The archaeological record doesn't depict such a distinction between neighboring societies and therefore the evidence given for temporary body paint doesn't correlate with actual Book of Mormon events.

The limited archaeological evidence presented in this paper is sufficient to support the claim that sacrilegious tattoos distinguished Lamanites and Amlicites from righteous Nephites at all times. The more extensive archaeological evidence presented in Steenblik's paper fails to indicate that temporary body paint served to consistently distinguish adversaries at all, even on the battlefield.

Conclusion

The limited language describing the Lamanite mark makes it hard to conclusively prove any interpretation of this mark. The view presented

223. Ibid., 175–76, 181–83, 190, Appendix 214–19.

224. Ibid., 171–72.

225. Ibid., 172, emphasis added.

226. Ibid.

herein is more plausible than other proffered interpretations. It's a comprehensive interpretation that can soundly be applied to all Book of Mormon passages. It reflects the archaeological record, the ancient roots of the language on the gold plates, and the primarily Early Modern English vocabulary and syntax of the Book of Mormon's revealed text. Under this view, the Lord foresaw that Laman and his followers would rebel against his law and adopt apostate traditions, including marking their skin in violation of the law of Moses. He warned the Nephites not to follow these traditions. The self-imposed Lamanite mark was a curse upon the Lamanites and helped establish a clear division between unrighteous Lamanites, with their improper traditions, and righteous Nephites who kept the law of Moses. This mark made it unenticing for righteous Nephites to unite with Lamanites and adopt their traditions. Sadly, some Nephites dissented and became marked as Lamanites. Happily, some Lamanites repented and were called Nephites. The skins of their righteous descendants were unmarked, just like those of other Nephites.

Addendum: Other Theories About the Lamanite Mark

The body of this paper explains that the Lamanite mark was a permanent, self-imposed mark — an ancient tattoo — cut into the skin in defiance of the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). This addendum compares the relevant words in the Book of Mormon with several other suggested interpretations of the Lamanite mark, all of which agree that the Lamanite mark had nothing to do with natural skin color, but each of which interprets this mark differently.

Not a Metaphor for Nephite Bias against Lamanites as Outsiders

As our modern culture rejected some of its prejudice based on natural skin color, John L. Sorenson and Brant A. Gardner recognized the unlikelihood that bias based on skin hue would have existed in the ancient Nephite culture.²²⁷ Appropriately, they attempted to explain terms describing the Lamanite mark in the context of ancient cultures.

227. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 90–91; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007): 2:108ff. Excerpt found at FairLatter-daySaints.org, entitled “What Does the Book of Mormon Mean by ‘Skin of Blackness’?,” <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/archive/publications/what-does-the-book-of-mormon-mean-by-skin-of-blackness>.

Unfortunately, they focused on other prejudices more common to ancient cultures, concluding that the phrases *skin of blackness* and *the darkness of their skins* are pejorative terms that mention skin only metaphorically to reflect a Nephite cultural prejudice against Lamanites — not based on differences present on the skin, but because Lamanites were cultural outsiders.

The text of the Book of Mormon doesn't appear to support this conclusion. As explained in the body of this paper, David M. Belnap's research finds that the themes of the Book of Mormon are overwhelmingly inclusive in nature despite the fact that inclusive messages were uncommon in Joseph Smith's day.²²⁸ Although the Book of Mormon suggests that some Nephites disparaged marked Lamanites (see for example Jacob 3:5), terms such as *skin of blackness* and *the darkness of their skins* were written by prophets of God. They were not written to express or condone such disrespect (see Jacob 3:9), but rather to describe a visible mark on the skin adopted by rebellious Lamanites in defiance of the law of Moses. This mark served God's purposes by making the Lamanites and their unrighteous way of life unenticing to righteous Nephites (see 2 Nephi 5:21), thus helping God "preserve his people" (Alma 3:8).

To attribute the preservation of the Nephites to their own prejudices is to paint an unflattering picture not only of the Nephite prophets who authored these phrases, but also of God himself. God would never rely on pride-based Nephite prejudice to preserve a supposedly righteous Nephite people. God and Book of Mormon prophets consistently condemn prejudice (see, for example, 1 Nephi 17:35, Jacob 2:21, and Moroni 8:12, 18).

Although God never invites his children to ostracize others just because they don't share the same culture, we are not to support "teachings, practices, or doctrine contrary to those of [the Church]"²²⁹ Even so, he condemns hatred, even against known apostates. Accordingly, Jacob reproved wicked Nephites who showed disdain towards marked Lamanites (see Jacob 3:5), saying, "Wherefore a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye revile no more against [the Lamanites] because of the darkness of their skin" (Jacob 3:9). While

228. Belnap, "The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message," 263.

229. See temple recommend question 7, R. Scott Taylor, "President Nelson Announces Revised Temple Recommend Questions," *Church News*, October 6, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/president-nelson-announces-revised-temple-recommend-questions>.

some proud Nephites succumbed to such arrogance, righteous Nephites resisted this temptation and shared kindness and gospel truths with Lamanites when possible (see for example, Enos 1:20, Alma 17 to 27, and Helaman 5).

The Lord tells Nephi, “I will curse [the Lamanites] even with a sore curse, and *they shall have no power over thy seed* except [thy seed] shall rebel against me also” (1 Nephi 2:23). These words suggest that one aspect of the covenantal curse was that cursed Lamanites would have no power over righteous Nephites.

The passages that discuss the source of Nephite power over the Lamanites teach that faithful, prayerful Nephites received God’s power to win difficult battles against unfaithful, unrighteous Lamanites. (See, for example, Jarom 1:5–12 and Mosiah 2:31.) However, Nephites could also become powerless against enemies through disobedience. (See, for example, Jacob 3:3–4 and Mosiah 1:13.) To the degree that Nephites became prejudiced against marked Lamanites, God withdrew his power from the Nephites (see Jacob 3:3–10). God forbids such prejudices (see Jacob 3:9–11 and Moroni 7:18), as explained by President Dallin H. Oaks:

Throughout history, many groups of God’s children are or have been persecuted or disadvantaged by prejudices, such as those based on ethnicity or culture or nationality or education or economic circumstances. As servants of God who have the knowledge and responsibilities of His great plan of salvation, we should hasten to prepare our attitudes and our actions — institutionally and personally — to abandon all personal prejudices. As President Russell M. Nelson said following our recent meeting with the national officers of the NAACP: “Together we invite all people, organizations, and government[s] to work with greater civility, eliminating prejudice of all kinds.”²³⁰

The righteousness of God’s role (and that of righteous Nephites) with respect to the Lamanite mark becomes clear as we dissociate it from prejudice against outsiders. Both Sorensen and Gardner acknowledge that there may have been some visible aspect to the Lamanite mark. The body of this paper asserts that this mark was visible. It was a self-imposed, permanent mark on the skin adopted in violation of the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). Because the mark was direct evidence of the bearer’s apostasy, those bearing the mark would “not be enticing” (2 Nephi 5:21)

230. Oaks, “President Oak’s Remarks at Worldwide Priesthood Celebration.”

to righteous Nephites. God knew that the rebellious Lamanites would establish a long-term tradition of bearing this apostate mark and that the mark would distinguish them from righteous Nephites “that thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions, which would prove their destruction” (see Alma 3:8).

In a way, righteous Nephites did treat rebellious Lamanites as cultural outsiders. When Lamanites rebelled against God and violated the law of Moses, they left the covenant God had made with the house of Israel. Righteous Nephites acknowledged the Lamanite rebellion against God’s laws as apostasy and chose not to join with them in their incorrect traditions.

Gardner recognizes that Book of Mormon passages use the words *black* and *white* both literally and symbolically as they are used in the Bible, in harmony with the culture of ancient Israel. The body of this paper explains this usage in detail.

Not a Dark Animal Skin Worn as Clothing

Ethan Sproat, in an essay entitled “Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon,” also challenges the view that the Lamanite mark was genetic in nature.²³¹ He suggests that “in the question of the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon narrative, the best arbiters of meaning are the Book of Mormon itself and its closest literary analog, the KJV.”²³² His suggestion is that the terms describing the Lamanite mark don’t describe a mark on the Lamanites’ own native skin, but refer instead to dark animal skins worn by them as clothing.

Although Sproat considers a skin used as clothing to be the Lamanite *mark*, the Oxford English Dictionary doesn’t contain any Early Modern English definition of the word *mark* that reflects this usage. The noun *mark* is never used anywhere in the Bible to refer to an animal skin or any other article of clothing. Similarly, the verb *to mark* is never used in the Bible to describe wearing any article of clothing.

Sproat’s analysis is based on two assertions. First, he asserts that the word *skin* (or *skins*) is ambiguous in passages that use it with a possessive reference (a pronoun or prepositional phrase, such as “their skins” or “the skins of the Lamanites”). He also asserts that in the term “a skin of

231. 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/jbms/vol24/iss1/7/>.

232. *Ibid.*, 148.

blackness” (2 Nephi 5:21), the word *a* (the indefinite article) signifies an animal skin rather than the native skin. Unfortunately, each assertion opposes basic rules of English usage.

In English usage, a possessive reference to the skin of a person or group (without further context) always refers unambiguously to the native skin. Even in descriptions of the skins of things other than people, such as potatoes, such a possessive reference always refers unambiguously to the natural or original outer covering of the potato or other thing. Additional contextual language can alter meaning, but, absent such additional language, the meaning is unambiguous. This is the case in English texts dating back at least to the 1500s.

Sproat doesn’t cite a single example in any text to support his suggestion that a possessive reference used with the word *skin* is an ambiguous construct that doesn’t consistently refer to native skin. I have reviewed applicable phrases across many English texts, including the entire Old Testament, all the online magazines of the Church,²³³ and thousands of instances found on the Corpus of Contemporary American English.²³⁴ This review confirms that this construct always refers to native skin (usually literally, but sometimes metaphorically). No exception was found. There is no ambiguity. This meaning applies consistently in English texts across the centuries. Sproat’s assertion of ambiguity simply doesn’t accord with this consistent meaning.

In fact, Sproat doesn’t apply his suggestion of ambiguity consistently even within the Book of Mormon. He sees ambiguity in Jacob 3:5 (*their skins*), 8 (*their skins*), and 9 (*their skins*); 3 Nephi 2:15 (*their skin*); and Alma 3:6 (*the skins of the Lamanites*) but rules out ambiguity in similar terms in 1 Nephi 17:11 (*the skins of beasts*); Mosiah 17:13 (*his skin*); Alma 20:29 (*their skins*); or 44:18 (*their naked skins*).

The true rule applies wherever the word *skin* is used with only a possessive reference describing the native skin. Accordingly, all Old Testament passages that use the word *skin* (or *skins*) with only a

233. See, for example, all such possessive references in the magazines of the Church. One example is Carol A. Snyder, “Can You Hear the Wind?” *Friend* 19, no. 6 (June 1989), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/friend/1989/06/can-you-hear-the-wind>, where a deerskin on which a boy plans to paint a picture is called “his skin canvas” (the word *canvas* adds context) and where the earth talks to a boy through “his skin,” clearly his own skin, as he walks — even though he is wearing moccasins (made of animal skins).

234. Website link to look up words at <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>.

possessive reference refer to the native skin.²³⁵ The few Old Testament passages that refer to animal skins worn as clothing don't include such a possessive reference but always include other words (such as *clothed*, *shod*, *put upon* or *about their loins*) identifying the animal skins' external (clothing) nature (see Genesis 3:21; 27:16; Ezekiel 16:10; and 2 Kings 1:8).

It's reasonable to assume that the Book of Mormon follows this universal, long-standing rule. In the Book of Mormon, all passages that use the word *skin* (or *skins*) with only a possessive reference (see 1 Nephi 17:11, Jacob 3:5, 8–9, Mosiah 17:13, Alma 3:6, 20:29 and 44:18, and 3 Nephi 2:15) consistently refer to the native skin. When something else, such as an animal skin used as clothing, is meant, other words are always added to clearly identify that something else.

Sproat's analysis resists this rule. He suggests ambiguity in a passage in which a possessive reference unambiguously describes native skin, "*the skins of the Lamanites*" (Alma 3:6). He asserts that necessary additional context is provided by a nearby reference to "*a skin which was girded about their loins*" (Alma 3:5). His actual suggestion is that these clothing-related words needn't even be nearby to change the meaning of a possessive term. In his view, this one instance of clothing-related words in Alma 3:5 not only lends context to the term *the skins of the Lamanites* in the next verse, but somehow also lends it to the three instances of the term *their skins* in Jacob 3:5–9 (written centuries earlier in a different book by a different author) and to the instance of the term *their skin* in 3 Nephi 2:15 (written later), which, he suggests, are all ambiguous without the extra context.

The unambiguous meaning supplied by a possessive term, however, isn't altered by distant text. For example, in Alma 43:20, warriors are described as "naked save it were *a skin which was girded about their loins*." Later in the account, a possessive reference tells us that "*their naked skins*" (Alma 44:18) — clearly their own skins — were exposed to Nephite weapons. (Their similarly uncovered [naked] animal skin loincloths were also exposed to these weapons, but the possessive reference *their naked skins*, like all similar possessive references, refers unambiguously to native skin and not to animal skins worn as clothing.)

Similarly, the unambiguous possessive term *the skins of the Lamanites* (Alma 3:6) refers to the Lamanites' own skins despite a contextually unrelated, but nearby, reference (in Alma 3:5) to an animal

235. See Genesis 27:16; Exodus 22:27; 29:14; 34:29–30, 35; 35:23; Leviticus 4:11; 7:8; 16:27; Numbers 19:5; Job 7:5; 16:15; 18:13; 19:20, 26; 30:30; 41:7; Psalm 102:5; Jeremiah 13:23; Lamentations 3:4; 4:8; 5:10; and Micah 3:2–3.

skin used by Lamanite warriors as clothing. Additional context about the Amlicite and Lamanite marks reinforces the fact that the Lamanite mark was on their own skin. Alma 3:4–19 discusses these two similar color-based marks — each of which brings a curse upon the bearer. The Amlicite mark is clearly not an article of clothing, but a mark placed on the forehead — the skin. To acquire this mark on the skin, the Amlicites “marked *themselves* ... after the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4). The phrase *after the manner of the Lamanites* tells us these two groups of people marked *themselves* in the same manner. It indicates that the Lamanites, like the Amlicites, marked *themselves* — they marked their own skins. Thus, their skins “were dark, *according to the mark*” (Alma 3:6) that was set “upon *them*” (Alma 3:14). A *mark*, not an *article of clothing*, was set upon *them*. In other words, the Amlicites, like the Lamanites, “also had a *mark* set upon *them*” (Alma 3:13). This clear context is discussed further in the body of this paper. It corroborates the fact that the possessive term *the skins of the Lamanites*, like every similar possessive term in the scriptures (and, to my knowledge, in all other English texts), refers to the native skin and not to a skin worn as clothing.

Sproat’s second assertion deals with a passage that doesn’t contain a possessive term. That passage says that the Lord caused “a skin of blackness” (2 Nephi 5:21) to come upon Laman and his followers. Sproat also sees this phrase as a reference to an animal skin. He notes that the word *a* (the indefinite article) in this phrase aligns it with three other passages, all of which contain the indefinite article and all of which describe animal skins worn as clothing (see Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; and 3 Nephi 4:7). He asserts that in these three other passages the indefinite article causes the word *skin* to refer to an animal skin.

However, using the indefinite article with the noun *skin* merely indicates that this noun is a count noun (not a mass noun). Such use doesn’t, on its own, create a reference to an animal skin. The noun *skin* is used as a count noun in two specific contexts. The first context is found in 2 Nephi 5:21. It identifies *a specific type of skin* (such as *a delicate skin*, *a sunburned skin*, or *a blackened skin — a skin of blackness*). The second context applies in the other three passages, each of which identifies a *skin of an individual animal*.²³⁶ The source of this context in these passages isn’t the indefinite article — it’s the phrase *about their*

236. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “skin, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/180922?rskey=uaRj4f&result=1#eid>. See sense II.8.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

loins. This phrase clearly provides such context in each passage (see Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; and 3 Nephi 4:7). This phrase, however, isn't present to provide this context in 2 Nephi 5:21. Without it, the indefinite article merely identifies a specific (blackened) type of native skin. Thus, the *skin of blackness*, like all darkened skin described in other Book of Mormon passages, is unambiguously native skin.

Sproat's unique view of the Lamanite mark doesn't bear scrutiny. The contexts for the terms *a skin of blackness* and *the skins of the Lamanites were dark* and all related terms unambiguously identify the Lamanites' own native skins and not skins of animals worn as clothing.

Not Merely an Idiom for Unrighteousness

In his presentation on blacks in the scriptures,²³⁷ Marvin Perkins makes several important points. He teaches that the Lamanite mark isn't natural skin color. He also teaches the meaning of the word *curse* and applies the doctrine of repentance to all curses mentioned in the Book of Mormon. He recognizes that the Lamanite and Amlicite marks mentioned in Alma 3:4–5 are tattoos. He also explains that, in the Old Testament, the words *black* and *white* are often used idiomatically — with the ancient symbolism discussed in the body of this paper.

However, in the Old Testament, each time the words *black* or *white* are used with the word *skin* (or with context that clearly refers to skin), the reference is to the skin itself. Each such Old Testament passage describes actual skin that is unusually darker or lighter than its natural hue. In some cases, this literal meaning is supplemented by the ancient symbolism of the words *black* and *white*, but this symbolism always leaves the literal meaning of the word *skin* intact. Thus, while the words *black* and *white* often have symbolic meaning in the Old Testament, the word *skin* always refers to actual skin. Because Perkins doesn't recognize this distinction, he doesn't acknowledge the literal meaning of the word *skin* in similar Book of Mormon passages.

In the body of this paper, I assert that these passages refer to the presence or absence of an actual permanent, self-imposed mark — an ancient tattoo — placed on the skin in defiance of the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). While this view of these passages differs from Perkins, it supports his conclusion that the Lamanite mark had nothing to do with natural skin color.

237. Perkins, "Blacks in the Scriptures."

David M. Belnap's paper, "The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon" holds that "the inclusive messages in the Book of Mormon ... are consistent with the view that skin color in the Book of Mormon is not literal but is metaphorical."²³⁸ His conclusion might be reworded to say that the Book of Mormon's inclusive messages are consistent with the view that passages describing skin as black, dark, or white don't describe natural skin color. In support of his conclusion, Belnap cites with approval Marvin Perkins, Brant A. Gardner, Hugh Nibley, Ethan Sproat, and others. Some of the specific views of these authorities are quite inconsistent with each other. Sproat, in particular, suggests a literal, physical mark (dark clothing), rather than a metaphorical mark. Nevertheless, Belnap treats Sproat's views, like those of the other authorities, as metaphorical because they have nothing to do with human skin pigmentation.

Like the various authorities cited by Belnap, the body of this paper also supports a non-racial mark. It asserts that each Book of Mormon passage that uses the word *black*, *dark*, or *white* together with the word *skin* refers to the presence or absence of an actual, permanent, self-imposed mark — an ancient tattoo — placed on the skin in defiance of the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). While this interpretation of these passages, like that of Sproat, is not metaphorical, it aligns with Belnap's thesis that the Lamanite mark had nothing to do with race.

In summary, none of the explanations of the Lamanite mark reviewed in this addendum adequately accounts for the words in the Book of Mormon that refer to this mark and a curse or cursing. These words are sufficiently vague that it may not be possible to prove that a given explanation is correct. Nevertheless, the view set forth in the body of this paper harmonizes better with all applicable provisions than any other suggested explanation.

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238. See Belnap, "The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message," 195.