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# Review of Two New Theories about the Lamanite Mark Recently Presented in Two Different Forums

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Clifford P. Jones

**Abstract:** *T. J. Uriona has offered two new theories about the meaning of Nephi's term "skin of blackness" in 2 Nephi 5:21. He suggests that Nephi's term may indicate impending death and/or it may be a literal reference to diseased or deathly skin. Both theories are based on a motif in an ancient Neo-Assyrian treaty that curses people to have skin as black as pitch and crude oil. I submit that these two theories are inconsistent with the larger context in the Book of Mormon.*

In "Understanding the Lamanite Mark" published last year in *Interpreter*,<sup>1</sup> I proposed that the dark mark on the skin that distinguished Lamanites from Nephites was a self-inflicted sacrilegious mark cut into the skin in defiance of the law of Moses. This profane ancient mark on the skin was permanent in nature, like a modern tattoo. (Of course, this doesn't mean that all of today's tattoos reflect rebellion against God. Today's tattoos are adopted for many non-rebellious reasons.) Profane marks made by incision, simply called "marks" in the Bible, were specifically prohibited by the law of Moses (Leviticus 19:28). People who had covenanted with God to obey this law would only have adopted these marks in rebellion against him and his law. Those who continued to keep the law would have seen these marks as evidence of apostasy.

When the Lord says, "I will set a mark upon" Lamanites and others

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1. Clifford P. Jones, "Understanding the Lamanite Mark," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 56 (2023): 171–258, [journal.interpreter-foundation.org/understanding-the-lamanite-mark/](http://journal.interpreter-foundation.org/understanding-the-lamanite-mark/).

(Alma 3:14–16), and when Nephi says that “the Lord did cause a skin of blackness to come upon” Lamanites (2 Nephi 5:21–22), their words don’t preclude a self-inflicted mark. The Lord sometimes says “I will” and “I will cause” to depict actions that he knows will be taken by men and women of their own free will (see, for example, Mosiah 12:5 and Helaman 15:16–17). Also, the passive voice can be used in phrases like “came upon” or “was set upon” (see Jacob 3:5 and Alma 3:6, 10) to describe a self-inflicted mark. Mormon demonstrates this when he says, “[T]hey [the Amlicites] *also* [like the Lamanites] had a mark *set upon them*; yea, *they set the mark upon themselves*” (Alma 3:13). Mormon also quotes the Lord, who says, “I will set a mark upon” Lamanites and others (Alma 3:14–16). Mormon explains that the Amlicites fulfilled these specific “words of God” as “they began to mark themselves” (Alma 3:18; see also Alma 3:13–16). Thus, Mormon clarifies that God “set a mark upon” the Amlicites *as they marked themselves*. Reason suggests that God may have “set a mark upon” the Lamanites as they marked themselves in a similar manner, which Mormon calls “the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4).

My paper explains in detail how this biblical meaning of the word *mark*, together with biblical meanings of other related words, the archaeological record, and relevant passages in the Book of Mormon (taking into account their primarily Early Modern English vocabulary and syntax) combine to support the view that the Lamanite mark was a self-imposed, permanent, profane mark on the skin.

## Two New Theories

In this research note, I review two new theories about the Lamanite mark, both of which reflect proposals made by T. J. Uriona. In December 2023, *BYU Studies* published Uriona’s article, “‘Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing’: New Context for ‘Skin of Blackness’ in the Book of Mormon.”<sup>2</sup> Uriona proposes what he sees as new context for the curse that the Lord brought upon Laman and Lemuel. This proposal, while novel, is not consistent with important context provided within the Book of Mormon.

Nephi introduces the term *skin of blackness* in this manner:

And [the Lord] had caused *the cursing* to come upon [Laman

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2. T. J. Uriona, “‘Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing’: New Context for ‘Skin of Blackness’ in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 62, no. 3 (2023): 121–40, [byustudies.byu.edu/article/life-and-death-blessing-and-cursing/](http://byustudies.byu.edu/article/life-and-death-blessing-and-cursing/).

and Lemuel], yea, even a *sore cursing* because of their iniquity. *For behold*, they had hardened their hearts against him, 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. (2 Nephi 5:21)<sup>3</sup>

This immediate context indicates that an intended consequence of the *skin of blackness* was a disagreeable change in appearance that would make those who acquired it *unenticing* to those without it. Uriona's hypothesis, however, doesn't consider this unenticing nature of the skin of blackness.

Uriona suggests that the term *skin of blackness* "need not be interpreted literally."<sup>4</sup> He attempts to align Nephi's words with what he sees as a motif based on "the ancient Near East culture that Nephi was familiar with."<sup>5</sup> A literary motif is an idea that has a consistent symbolic meaning across related literary works. Uriona seeks to rely on this concept to link Nephi's words in this passage to a specific term written more than a century earlier in a Neo-Assyrian treaty. That treaty—the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon—contained many curses. One of them attempted to intimidate those who might violate the treaty by saying, "May they [the gods] make your skin and the skin of your women, your sons and your daughters—dark. May they be as black as pitch and crude oil."<sup>6</sup> Uriona suggests that this threat of becoming *as black as pitch* is "a motif for death in relation to being cursed."<sup>7</sup> Thus, Uriona argues that Nephi's term *skin of blackness*, like that treaty's term *may they be as black as pitch and crude oil*, may symbolically portend impending death.<sup>8</sup>

This symbolic view of the term *skin of blackness* dominates

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3. All quotations from the Book of Mormon are from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). This edition, while sometimes harder to read than the current Latter-day Saint edition, should correspond more closely with the text that was dictated by Joseph Smith to his scribes.

4. Uriona, "Life and Death," 137.

5. Uriona, "Life and Death," 139.

6. Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Treaty Curses," *Biblioteca Sacra* 158 (2001): 432, [academia.edu/39924918/Nahums\\_Rhetorical\\_Allusions\\_to\\_Neo\\_Assyrian\\_Treaty\\_Curses](http://academia.edu/39924918/Nahums_Rhetorical_Allusions_to_Neo_Assyrian_Treaty_Curses).

7. Uriona, "Life and Death," 139.

8. Uriona, "Life and Death," 135–36.

Uriona's article, but his concluding paragraph indicates that this view does not eliminate "additional nuance to its meaning."<sup>9</sup> This paragraph briefly suggests that *skin of blackness* may also refer to something that literally darkens one's appearance. He lists possible causes of this dark appearance offered by scholars, including ancient tattoos, a dark skin garment, and body paint. In addition, he introduces a new possible cause — a diseased or deathly skin.<sup>10</sup> Although his article doesn't elaborate on this second theory, an August 2023 podcast by *Saints Unscripted* covers it in more detail:

It's possible that the Lamanites were plagued by a chronic skin condition or disease that fell (or at least was perceived to fall) under the umbrella of Old Testament leprosy. This theory would fit within the framework of Old Testament blessings and cursings; it would explain how the Nephites were able to physically identify a Lamanite; it would explain how the curse could come upon someone but later be taken away; and it could give the Nephites yet another reason to stay away from Lamanites.<sup>11</sup>

### Analysis of the Two Theories

A suzerain-vassal covenant between the Lord and members of Lehi's family is the starting point for understanding any view of the Lamanite mark, including Uriona's theories that 1) the term *skin of blackness* may refer generally to impending death and destruction and that 2) it may refer to a skin disease.

A suzerainty treaty [was] a type of covenant . . . common in the [ancient] 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

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9. Uriona, "Life and Death," 139.

10. Uriona, "Life and Death," 140.

11. "Is the Book of Mormon's 'Skin of Blackness' Curse Racist?," *Saints Unscripted* (website), 18 August 2023, [saintsunscripted.com/faith-and-beliefs/the-restoration-of-christs-church/book-of-mormons-skin-of-blackness-curse-racist/](https://saintsunscripted.com/faith-and-beliefs/the-restoration-of-christs-church/book-of-mormons-skin-of-blackness-curse-racist/). The quote is taken from the transcript of the podcast episode, found at the noted web page.

of the treaty. They could only agree to accept or reject whatever the suzerain offered.<sup>12</sup>

At Mount Sinai, the Lord entered into such a covenant with the children of Israel, giving them the law of Moses and pronouncing blessings and cursings for obedience and disobedience to the law. After Lehi's family left Jerusalem, the Lord renewed this covenant with them. Several Book of Mormon passages, including 2 Nephi 5:21, which contains the term *skin of blackness*, provide context for understanding the blessings and cursings that applied under this renewed covenant.

Uriona makes a reasonable case that, given Nephi's training as a scribe, Nephi could have been aware of the Neo-Assyrian treaty mentioned earlier.<sup>13</sup> He offers one of the motifs found in the treaty as specific new context for the term *skin of blackness*.

### Theory One: Death and Destruction

Uriona's first theory proposes that Nephi wrote the term *skin of blackness* relying on the motif in the Neo-Assyrian treaty that refers metaphorically to impending death. As explained earlier, however, the way in which Nephi uses the term *skin of blackness* (2 Nephi 5:21) suggests not impending death, but a change in appearance that covenant-keeping Nephites found unappealing in Lamanites. Uriona's first theory appears to clash with this context and with several other key passages in the broader context of the Book of Mormon, none of which are cited or considered in Uriona's article.

The concept, first mentioned in 2 Nephi 5:21, that the Lamanite mark was visibly unappealing to righteous Nephites, is reaffirmed in the very next verse, which states that the *skin of blackness* would make unrepentant Lamanites *loathsome* to Nephi's people. Alma 3:4–19 likewise reaffirms that an intended consequence of the self-inflicted Lamanite mark was a change in appearance that would distinguish Lamanites from the Lord's people and might dissuade the Lord's people from believing in "incorrect traditions, which would prove their destruction" (v. 8). Those who mixed with the Lamanites would also acquire

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12. 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: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2022), 110.

13. Uriona, "Life and Death," 129–30.

this sore cursing (see 2 Nephi 5:23). However, this repugnant, self-inflicted (see Alma 3:4–19) “cursing which hath come upon their skins” (Jacob 3:5) was subject to repentance (see 2 Nephi 5:22 and Alma 3:14). Thus, more than a generation after the repentance of a group of marked Lamanites, their descendants were not cursed with a self-inflicted mark, but had white (clean) skin (see 3 Nephi 2:12–16). These passages mutually reinforce the visible, self-inflicted nature of the *skin of blackness*.

In addition, a significant rhetorical divide appears to separate Nephi’s term *skin of blackness* from the treaty’s motif. All of Uriona’s Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources for this motif refer to pitch (bitumen, a natural asphalt) or crude oil. In doing so, these sources may jointly portray a consistent motif for impending death,<sup>14</sup> but Nephi’s words vary significantly from those in these sources. His words invoke a different metaphor or motif—that of hardheartedness. He introduces the term *skin of blackness* by saying, “They had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint” (2 Nephi 5:21). Flint is a hard stone. Zechariah uses basically the same motif for hardheartedness: “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*. The New King James Version says, “They made their hearts like flint.”

Nephi explains that because of this flint-like hardheartedness, an unenticing skin of blackness came upon Nephi’s brethren (2 Nephi 5:21). Nephi’s word *flint* may allude to cutting the skin. The Old Testament (Exodus 4:25 and Joshua 5:2–3) and scholarship on Mesoamerica<sup>15</sup> both mention that flint was used to cut skin, so Nephi may have used this word to suggest the means by which his brethren acquired the skin of blackness. The word *blackness* refers primarily to the blackness of the mark they cut into their skin, but it may also hint

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14. See Uriona, “Life and Death,” 130–35. Uriona suggests that some biblical passages may allude to the Mesopotamian motif for death and destruction. One or more of those passages, if they don’t invoke a contradictory metaphor or motif, may allude to the Mesopotamian motif.

15. See J. Eric S. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” *Notes of Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology*, 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: University Press of Colorado, 2011), 251, where flint is mentioned as an instrument used for tattooing and scarification among the Maya.

at the fact that flint itself is often dark or black. In 2 Nephi 7:3, the word *blackness* clearly connotes affliction. This additional connotation may also apply in 2 Nephi 5:21, referring to a black mark cut into the skin that caused both physical and spiritual affliction.

The words of the Book of Mormon also reveal another significant incompatibility with Uriona's proposed motif for death and destruction.<sup>16</sup> The term *skin of blackness* applies to rebellious Lamanites, not to rebellious Nephites. If this term refers to impending death or destruction, there should be something in the account to suggest that rebellious Lamanites faced greater death and destruction than rebellious Nephites. However, rebellious Lamanites are consistently described as being more numerous than Nephites (see Jarom 1:6, Mosiah 25:3, and Helaman 4:25), a continuing situation that counters the idea that rebellious Lamanites suffered more death and destruction than rebellious Nephites.

In fact, in the Book of Mormon, the people specifically cursed with impending death and destruction are rebellious Nephites, and not rebellious Lamanites. The Lord's promise to protect Nephites from destruction by Lamanites was conditional. It only applied "except [the Nephites] shall rebel against me also" (1 Nephi 2:23), in which case the rebellious Lamanites would "scourge them even unto destruction" (2 Nephi 5:25). Jacob also warns of this "sore curse, even unto destruction" (Jacob 2:33). This unique sore curse upon rebellious Nephites eventually arrived as the Nephites turned from God, were "left in their own strength" (Helaman 4:13, see also Helaman 7:22–23), and were destroyed by the powerful rebellious Lamanites (see Helaman 4:23–26 and Moroni 9:22.)

Unlike the Nephites, the descendants of Laman and Lemuel are *specifically not cursed with impending death or destruction*. Lehi tells the children of Laman, "Because of my blessing *the Lord God will not suffer that ye shall perish*; wherefore he will be merciful unto you and unto your seed forever" (2 Nephi 4:7). He then tells the children of Lemuel, "I leave unto you the same blessing which I left unto the sons and daughters of Laman; wherefore *thou shalt not utterly be destroyed*, but in the end thy seed shall be blessed" (2 Nephi 4:9). Accordingly, centuries later, the Lord says this:

*I will not utterly destroy [the Lamanites], but I will cause [I know] that in the day of my wisdom they shall return again*

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16. See Uriona, "Life and Death," 136.



unto me, saith the Lord. And now behold, saith the Lord concerning the people of the Nephites, if they will not repent and observe to do my will, *I will utterly destroy them* [I know they will be utterly destroyed], saith the Lord, because of their unbelief, notwithstanding the many mighty works which I have done among them. (Helaman 15:16–17)

Thus, in the Book of Mormon, a literary motif of death and destruction would fit rebellious Nephites better than rebellious Lamanites.

Uriona's first theory, that Nephi's term *skin of blackness* may refer metaphorically to impending death, should be thoughtfully considered. However, the larger context of the Book of Mormon, which is not discussed by Uriona, doesn't fit well with that meaning. All the text in the Book of Mormon fits better with a self-inflicted, permanent mark made in rebellion against God. This mark visibly distinguished Lamanites who rebelled against God from Nephites who followed him. Those who rebelled could repent of their rebellion. However, when all of Lehi's seed eventually rebelled against God and his laws, the Lamanites, whose curse did not include death and destruction, utterly destroyed the Nephites.

## Theory Two: Skin Disease

As mentioned earlier, the *BYU Studies* article introduces Uriona's second theory—that the Lamanite mark was diseased or deathly skin.<sup>17</sup> This idea is further described in the *Saints Unscripted* podcast, which cites Uriona for the idea that the Lamanites might have been “plagued by a chronic skin condition or disease”<sup>18</sup> like biblical leprosy and that covenant-keeping Nephites would therefore have needed to avoid contact with Lamanites. This idea is also hard to reconcile with the Nephite-Lamanite account, which doesn't depict Lamanites as a people daunted by a painful, debilitating skin disease, but as fierce, powerful warriors. Lamanites “were a strong people as to the strength of men” (Mosiah 10:11). Their strength matched that of Nephites “man for man” unless the Nephites received divine assistance (Helaman 4:25–26). And although the Lord's people considered Lamanites to be (covenantantly) loathsome and unenticing (2 Nephi 5:21–22), the account

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17. Uriona, “Life and Death,” 140.

18. “Is the Book of Mormon's ‘Skin of Blackness’ Curse Racist?,” *Saints Unscripted*.

offers only Lamanite hatred and weapons as reasons for Nephites to avoid close physical contact with Lamanites.

As noted previously, the Lamanites are consistently described as more numerous than the Nephites. If, however, the Lamanites were cursed with a skin disease like biblical leprosy, their faster population growth would be hard to explain. Death due to disease would have slowed population growth, and fear of contracting disease would have discouraged Nephites from joining the Lamanites. No such fear is mentioned, however, as many Nephite dissenters join the Lamanites on many occasions throughout their history (see, for example, Jarom 1:6, Mosiah 25:3, Helaman 4:4; and Moroni 9:24). Similarly, assimilation with surrounding peoples is often suggested as a means for rapid Lamanite population growth, but such assimilation would be unlikely if disease made Lamanites repulsive.<sup>19</sup>

Nor does fear of disease show up in other close-contact situations. It doesn't come up as the people of Zeniff choose to settle in lands just vacated by cursed Lamanites (see Mosiah 9:1–7). Neither is such fear mentioned as King Benjamin sends a party to learn the fate of the people of Zeniff (see Mosiah 7:1–2). No fear of disease (or instance of disease) comes up as Lamanites attack Nephites over the centuries, or as Nephites fight them in hand-to-hand combat, dispose of their dead bodies, or guard them as prisoners. Fear of or protection against disease isn't mentioned as Mosiah lets his sons preach among the Lamanites (see Mosiah 28:6–8), as former Lamanite prisoners settle in Nephite lands (see Alma 62:27–29), as the brothers Lehi and Nephi preach among the Lamanites (see Helaman 5:16–52), or as peaceful Lamanites and Nephites freely travel throughout the land (see Helaman 6:6–8). Also, it is inconceivable that Nephite military leaders would jeopardize the health of their army by allowing a recently arrived (diseased) Lamanite to join their team (see Alma 55:4).

This lack of evidence of any fear of disease coincides with other context. No Lamanite or group of Lamanites is portrayed as suffering from disease. No merciful healing from disease is mentioned as Lamanites are converted to the Lord. Indeed, if we don't interpret the term *skin of blackness* as a reference to skin disease, then nothing in the record suggests any uniquely Lamanite skin disease.

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19. See John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land Did They Find Others There?," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 1–34, [scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol1/iss1/2/](http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol1/iss1/2/).

## Conclusion

While Uriona's proposal of a connection between a term used by Nephi and an ancient Assyrian treaty is intriguing, it seems unlikely that the treaty sheds light on the meaning of Nephi's term *skin of blackness*. The Book of Mormon's internal context tends to challenge both the idea that this term is a motif for Lamanite death and destruction and the idea that it refers to a skin disease. This same internal context is easily aligned with a sacrilegious mark that was intentionally cut into the skin in rebellion against God and his laws, as explained more completely in my paper.



**Clifford P. Jones** *was born in New Mexico and grew up in small towns across the southwestern United States. He earned a BS in accounting from Brigham Young University and a JD with honors from J. Reuben Clark Law School. After practicing law for several years, he became an entrepreneur and businessman. His understanding of and love for the scriptures has come primarily through personal and family scripture study. He and his wife Sharon have four adult children and a growing contingent of grandchildren.*