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Abstract Review of *El Libro de Mormon ante la crítica* (1992), by Josué Sánchez.

Josué Sánchez, trans. and ed., *El Libro de Mormon ante la crítica*. Salt Lake City, UT: Publishers, 1992. xxiii + 481 pp., with bibliographies and appendices. \$13.95.

Reviewed by Terrence L. Szink

With the growth of the Church, there is an increasing demand for Church materials in languages other than English. I experienced this personally when, while serving as a missionary in Mexico, I was frequently asked by members to translate into Spanish passages from English copies of *Mormon Doctrine* or other books written for Latter-day Saint readers. I was constantly asked by members, "When will these books be available in Spanish?"

Recently this has changed. While working as a clerk in a Latter-day Saint bookstore in Los Angeles (while writing my dissertation), I have noticed with interest an increasing number of books translated into Spanish. In addition to the scriptures¹ and basic works published by the Church, such as *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* and *Jesus the Christ*, titles such as Stephen Robinson's *Are Mormons Christians?*, Millet and McConkie's *Adam, the Man*, and many others have appeared. Unfortunately, in some cases the translations are not accurate or do not read smoothly because they are too literal. Furthermore, the materials used in printing the books are of varying quality, depending on the publishing companies involved.

Thus, I was pleased to be asked to review a book in Spanish dealing with the Book of Mormon. When I received my reviewer's copy, I was delighted to see that the translator and editor was Josué Sánchez, under whose supervision I first studied Spanish as a missionary in the Missionary Training Center.

There has recently been an explosion of high-quality research on the Book of Mormon. President Benson's emphasis on the Book of Mormon, and organizations such as the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University and F.A.R.M.S. have been catalysts. Yet ironically almost none of this material has been made available to the Spanish-speaking membership of the Church. This is unfortunate, for according to

¹ The First Presidency has in fact just announced the publication of a new Spanish translation of the Book of Mormon.

its title page, the Book of Mormon was written specifically to the descendants of the peoples of the Book of Mormon, many of whom speak Spanish. With *El Libro de Mormon ante la crítica*, Sánchez has made a first step in the direction of filling this void. He has provided a translation of a number of articles containing important, recent research concerning the Book of Mormon.

Sánchez has used his superb knowledge of both English and Spanish to produce translations that are both accurate and readable. He is also well read in Book of Mormon studies and thus has made a good selection of articles, choosing those that represent current research in a variety of areas. The articles are taken from Church magazines, journals such as *BYU Studies*, *Dialogue*, and publications from F.A.R.M.S. and the Religious Studies Center, as well as chapters from other books dealing with the Book of Mormon. When older articles are used, the reader is informed in footnotes of more recent scholarship or alternate views on the topic.

In addition to including the translation of previously published articles, the book also contains several original features. There is a bibliography on the Church and South America by Mark Glover and a select bibliography on the Book of Mormon. While, as pointed out in the introduction, there are more complete bibliographies available, these are the first included in a book directed specifically to Spanish-speaking readers.

Sánchez has included his own engaging articles on the translations and editions of the Book of Mormon in Spanish, and an article entitled "Show Me a Lamanite." The latter is very thought provoking although written in a militant style.² In it, Sánchez suggests that the term *Lamanite* should not be used because among other reasons: (a) there is no way to determine who are literal descendants of Laman as opposed to who may be descendants of the Nephites, Mulekites, Jaredites, or other non-Book of Mormon peoples who surely must have inhabited the Americas; (b) since the name comes from a rebellious man it has connotations which are injurious to those to whom the term is applied, (c) the term is essentially racist and can be considered a sacred parallel to the secular term *Indian* which, as Sánchez points out, also has negative connotations. There are many points in this article which should be addressed in much more

² Sánchez himself recognizes that the style is militant; appendix B of *El Libro de Mormon* is a survey of responses about the article which included the question "Were you offended by the militant style?" (p. 474).

detail than limited space here will allow. I would, however, like to touch on a few issues.

The first subject that needs to be discussed is the meaning of the term *Lamanite*. Sánchez believes that the term has been defined in different ways by writers based on "private understandings, predetermined conclusions, or personal prejudices and emotions" (p. 257). When the text is examined carefully, it is clear that its meaning undergoes an evolution independent of the thoughts or prejudices of any Book of Mormon commentator. Originally it must have referred to direct descendants of Laman. Very early on, the meaning was expanded to include anyone who sought "to destroy the people of Nephi" (Jacob 1:4). This meaning can perhaps best be characterized as political. After the visit of Christ the term falls into disuse, only to be revived by "a small part of people who had revolted from the church and taken upon them the name of Lamanites" (4 Nephi 1:20). Again, this meaning is different from the previous ones; there is no exclusive connection between these Lamanites and the descendants of Laman, or the expanded political meaning. Nibley writes concerning this:

The Book of Mormon is careful to specify that the terms Lamanite and Nephite are used in a loose and general sense to designate not racial but political (e.g., Mormon 1:9), military (Alma 43:4), religious (4 Nephi 1:38), and cultural (Alma 53:10, 15; 3:10–11) divisions and groupings of people. The Lamanite and Nephite division was tribal rather than racial, each of the main groups representing an amalgamation of tribes that retained their identity (Alma 43:13; 4 Nephi 1:36–37).³

Others have reached similar conclusions.⁴ The fact that *Lamanite* has a number of different meanings in the Book of Mormon is

³ Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2d ed., vol. 7 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 216.

⁴ For example, Eugene England notes that there are at least three different meanings for the term Lamanite in the Book of Mormon, "'Lamanites' and the Spirit of the Lord," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Winter 1965): 25–32. Gordon Thomasson also identifies a variety of meanings in "Lamanites," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:804–5.

further evidence that the book is far more complex than anti-Mormons would have us believe.

In our day the meaning of the word *Lamanite* has been broadened to include all the inhabitants of North and South America, and the islands of the Pacific. While it is most probable that not all of these peoples are literal descendants of the Book of Mormon peoples, let alone of Laman or Lemuel, there is at present no way to determine which of them are.⁵ One reason they are called Lamanites is because Moroni used this term on the title page of the Book of Mormon. To refer to them as "descendants of Joseph," or "Lehites" at that point would have denied the reality that in his day there was a real division between two groups of people, one called Nephites and another Lamanites.

Another reason for the use of the term *Lamanite* in our day is that the Lord himself uses it. In the Doctrine and Covenants we are told that the "Lamanites" will "come to the knowledge of their fathers, and that they might know the promises of the Lord, and that they may believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ, and be glorified through faith in his name, and that through their repentance they might be saved" (D&C 3:20), and that the "Lamanites" shall "blossom as the rose" (D&C 49:24). Note that in these references great blessings are promised. Eugene England has urged that we have this meaning in mind when we think of the term today as opposed to past meanings which may carry negative connotations.⁶

President Spencer Kimball, whose love for the Lamanites cannot be questioned, affirms that it is the Lord who is responsible for using the name *Lamanite* in our day, and it is to be used in a positive way:

The Lord chose to call them Lamanites. They are fulfilling prophecies. They are a chosen people with noble blood in their veins. They are casting off the fetters of superstition, fear, ignorance, prejudice, and

⁵ John Sorenson discusses the inclusion of all the peoples of the American continents under the term *Lamanite* in *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985), 93-94.

⁶ England, "'Lamanites' and the Spirit of the Lord," 31.

are clothing themselves with knowledge, good works, and righteousness.⁷

This brings us to a second point—the portrayal of the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon. Sánchez repeatedly makes the point that in the Book of Mormon the Lamanites were bad while the Nephites were good. A close reading of the text shows that this was simply not the case. For example, in his speech to the Nephites, King Benjamin points out that the Nephites of his day were “filthy,” while the Lamanites were not “filthy” although they had been cursed with a sore cursing (Jacob 3:3). Two verses later he states, “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 have not forgotten the commandment of the Lord, which was given unto our father” (Jacob 3:5). In this instance he uses “filthiness” referring not to the condition of the Lamanites, but to the Nephites’ perception of the Lamanite condition.

The curse of the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon has to do with the oft-repeated phrase “the traditions of the fathers.” When the Lamanites were able to overcome the power of these traditions and were converted to the gospel they became much stronger in the faith than the Nephites. Note the following passages:

And thus we see that, when these Lamanites were brought to believe and to know the truth, they were firm, and would suffer even unto death rather than commit sin. (Alma 24:19)

And now it came to pass in the eighty and sixth year, the Nephites did still remain in wickedness, yea in great wickedness, while the Lamanites did observe strictly to keep the commandments of God, according to the law of Moses. (Helaman 13:1)

And thus there became a great inequality in all the land, insomuch that the church began to be broken up; yea, insomuch that in the thirtieth year the church was broken up in all the land save it were among a few of the Lamanites who were converted unto the true faith; and they would not depart from it, for they were firm,

⁷ Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 358.

and steadfast, and immovable, willing with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord. (3 Nephi 6:14)

And now, my son, I dwell no longer upon this horrible scene. Behold, thou knowest the wickedness of this people [the Nephites]; thou knowest that they are without principle, and past feeling; and their wickedness doth exceed that of the Lamanites. (Moroni 9:20)

In fact, the reason the Nephites were allowed to be destroyed was because they had sinned against the knowledge of the gospel while the Lamanites were ignorant of the truth (again because of the “traditions of the fathers”) and thus were less culpable and allowed to remain on the land.⁸ Nibley has written concerning this situation:

Every Latter-day Saint knows that [the Book of Mormon] is a tale of Nephites versus Lamanites, conveniently classified as the Good Guys versus the Bad Guys. In a book called *Since Cumorah*, I pointed out that a line drawn between the two peoples does not automatically separate the righteous from the wicked at all. Far from it—the Lamanites were often the good guys and the Nephites the bad guys; and they had a way of shifting back and forth from one category to the other with disturbing frequency. In the end, as Mormon sadly observes in letters to his son, it is a toss-up as to which of the two is the worse. Cumorah was no showdown between good and evil; it was not even a contest to pick the winner, for while the Nephites did get wiped out, the Lamanites went right on wiping each other out, “and no one knoweth the end of the war” (Mormon 8:8).⁹

Finally, Sánchez states that “no matter the time, place, or society, nobody has liked being called ‘Lamanite’ ” (p. 294). I have spoken to a number of Church members who are Lamanites (Native Americans, Mexicans, Mexican-Americans,

⁸ See D&C 3:18 for this distinction.

⁹ Hugh W. Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, vol. 8 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 436–37.

and South Americans), and many, rather than being offended by the term *Lamanite*, are in fact proud because they see it as linking them to the peoples of the Book of Mormon. They also feel honored that the Book of Mormon was "Written to the Lamanites" (Book of Mormon title page), and feel that they are in fact part of the fulfillment of the prophecy that "the Lamanite shall blossom as the rose" (D&C 49:24).

On the other hand, others I spoke with do indeed take offense at being called Lamanites for many of the reasons Sánchez has mentioned. The fact that they are not happy with the term *Lamanite* should not be discounted. President Kimball was aware of the problems associated with the term and on occasion used the term "Lamanite-Nephite."¹⁰

There are at least two ways to approach this dilemma: The first is to cease using the name *Lamanite*. There is indeed scriptural precedent for this. In the Book of Mormon a number of Lamanites became converted and took upon themselves the name Anti-Nephi-Lehies "and were no more called Lamanites" (Alma 23:17). Apparently these people also had misgivings about the term *Lamanite*. Perhaps this term should be adopted by people who have joined the church and reject the term *Lamanite*. Sánchez seems to prefer the designation "descendants of Joseph." The problem with this label is that it is only marginally more precise than *Lamanite* because (1) the Mulekites were descendants of Judah; (2) any surviving Jaredites were not only not descendants of Joseph, but not even Israelites; (3) most likely there were people who came to the American continents independent of any of the peoples mentioned in the Book of Mormon, and could in no way trace lineage back to Joseph.

However, there are real problems with this first solution. Names used to identify groups have become a complicated and delicate issue in our society. For example, to the uninformed, the names Mexican, Mexican-American, and Chicano all refer to the same people, yet to those identified by them, these terms have significant differences. The names Mormon and Christian were both originally pejorative terms, but now are used proudly by those who identify themselves as such, although in other circles both continue to have negative connotations. At one time *Colored* was used to refer to Americans of African descent. This was replaced by *Negro*, which in turn was rejected in favor of *Black*. Currently the generally accepted term is either *African-*

¹⁰ Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, 301, 358.

American or *Black*. What is to be noted is that while the name has changed, the prejudices and hatred remain and are soon transferred to the new name. As I see it, the problem is not in the name, but in people's attitudes toward the group which is designated by the name. By only changing the name, the roots of the problem—ignorance, hatred, and racism—are not attacked.

The second approach is to educate both Lamanites and gentiles as to the historical and current meanings of the term *Lamanite*, and that the term should no longer be seen as a pejorative but that it is to be associated with promised blessings from the Lord. As noted above, this is the thrust of Eugene England's article " 'Lamanites' and the Spirit of the Lord." Racism begins when we take the characteristics of an individual as we perceive them from our association with him or her and apply them to the group from which he or she comes. To overcome stereotypes, we must become more familiar with the cultures of others and associate with members of that culture.¹¹ For example, as a missionary I was exposed to the language, culture, and people of Mexico (beginning with Josué Sánchez himself) and grew to love them. Thus for me, the label *Mexican* has positive connotations.

The ultimate solution lies in the future. Nephi told his brothers, "Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God" (1 Nephi 17:35). I look forward to the day when we likewise can esteem all flesh in one, when we all will have taken upon ourselves the name of Christ and there will, to paraphrase the Book of Mormon, "be no manner of -ites; but all will be in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God" (4 Nephi 17).

I am impressed with this book and am pleased that Sánchez is concerned with making available such materials to the Spanish speakers of the Church. His own article, "Show Me a Lamanite," raises significant questions about our use of the term *Lamanite*.

¹¹ In suggesting that we become familiar with the cultures of others, I am not advocating the controversial forced pan-culturalism. The type of education I encourage should take place on an individual basis as a result of a sincere desire to learn of, and appreciate, other peoples and cultures.