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Reading Race, Reading Scripture: Assessing Recent Historical Works on Race and the Book of Mormon

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Different approaches to reading the Book of Mormon have influenced the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ teachings from 1830 to the present day. Scholars have long recognized that the definition of “Lamanites,” one of the primary groups described in the book, has shaped missionary work, Church policy, and public outreach. Indeed, in the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith received a revelation sending four missionaries to preach “among the Lamanites,” perhaps the first justification for preaching among Indigenous peoples.¹

Recent teachings have expanded the definition of Lamanite to include Native and Indigenous peoples on both American continents as well as Polynesians.²

Two recent books and a book chapter use the Book of Mormon to analyze Latter-day Saint beliefs about race, particularly among Indigenous peoples and Polynesians. To assess the ways that historians are currently studying race in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I examine how each author uses the Book of Mormon's text, or the interpretation of its text, to consider how Latter-day Saints have thought about race in relation to their sacred scripture.

Matthew Garrett’s *Making Lamanites: Mormons, Native Americans, and the Indian Student Placement Program* represents the integration of Book of Mormon studies into broader historical fields (in this case, Indigenous studies). In *Making Lamanites*, Garrett examines the Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP) as Native participants experienced it. Accordingly, most of his sources are oral histories, correspondence, and documents created by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that highlight how the program grew out of Church leaders’ interpretations of the Book of Mormon. Crucially, he centers on the voices and experiences of Native people in his telling of ISPP history.

Garrett defines colonialism in the ISPP context as the ways that white Latter-day Saints sought to impose “physical/material changes . . . upon Indian bodies” and teach ideas about the desirability of integrating into white society (p. 4). Despite the changes that white Latter-day Saints sought to impose on Native Americans, Garrett argues that Indigenous children and their parents had agency in their experiences and created both Latter-day Saint and Indian identities through participation in the program. In doing so, he emphasizes the ways that the ISPP benefited Indians and empowered Native students even while acknowledging that the program led to cultural disconnect in Indigenous communities.

In his first few chapters, Garrett explains how nineteenth-century white Latter-day Saints interpreted Book of Mormon passages dealing

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with Lamanites. "Mormons viewed themselves," Garrett argues, "as rescuing Native Americans from depravity and spiritual darkness" in order to prepare for the Second Coming (p. 34). In doing so, Latter-day Saints aligned with Protestant or Catholic programs designed to assimilate Indians into white society by working to "kill the Indian and save the man," that is, to help Native children learn to succeed in white culture through education and discipline and by giving up "backwards" practices and beliefs.

In the twentieth century, apostle and future Church president Spencer W. Kimball championed programs designed to uplift Indigenous peoples, especially the ISPP, based on his reading of the Book of Mormon. Fascinatingly, Garrett uncovers the ways that Kimball worked to gain approval for the ISPP before it received official Church sanction, by building bridges between state Indian programs and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, highlighting the many parties involved in creating a Latter-day Saint foster system. Although Kimball and his compatriots had a theological impetus for creating the ISPP and believed they were working as partners with Natives in their own eschatological preparations, white Latter-day Saints played "the dominant role in the relationship as saviors sent to indoctrinate and civilize their lost Israelite brethren" (p. 35). This reading of Book of Mormon teachings, combined with American racial attitudes toward Native peoples, led to the expansion of the ISPP.

Garrett shows that the Church's program was not as violent as other similar assimilation projects. Most white Latter-day Saints tolerated or encouraged some Native practices that did not overtly conflict with Latter-day Saint teachings; many white Latter-day Saints wanted to transform Indigenous peoples into a group that could thrive in white American society. Native Americans, however, largely participated in order to take advantage of "an exceptional educational opportunity" (p. 56). Doing so allowed Native ISPP participants who converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a way to more broadly navigate American society and Indian identity, "two worlds that many Indians eagerly sought to traverse" (p. 126). I admire Garrett’s approach
to studying the ISPP by seeking to understand how those who experienced it felt about it, but wish that he had more carefully considered the power dynamics in the program, both among the Church and among the Native peoples involved. Garrett’s analysis acknowledges colonialism but does not grant sustained attention to the damage the ISPP sometimes caused in Indigenous communities, such as creating a disconnect from family lives and cultural backgrounds (pp. 158–60). That criticism aside, his highlighting of Indigenous voices deserves high praise. Historically, scholars have rarely included the ways that non-white Latter-day Saints have interpreted scripture in their Book of Mormon studies scholarship. As Garrett shows, writing a history of how the Book of Mormon shaped Latter-day Saint racial relations is incomplete without hearing from non-white peoples.

From the field of religious studies, Max Perry Mueller’s *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* introduces new methodologies for approaching the study of race and the Book of Mormon. Mueller examines the ways that the Book of Mormon and other “texts” like patriarchal blessings created “the archive” of Latter-day Saint memory. Mueller has two definitions of “archive.” First, he uses the term to mean physical repositories, such as university special collections. The second use is in a memory studies vein: there, “the archive” is a term that signifies a collected set of remembrances and narratives used to explain the past. Through this usage, he shows how those who produce and interpret records continually remake the arguments based upon texts found in archives.

In the first few chapters, Mueller argues that early members of the Church “read race on and onto the bodies of ‘black’ and ‘red’ Americans. Africans’ and Indians’ dark skins told the history of their ancestors’ sins” (p. 19). According to Mueller, race as presented in the Book of Mormon is a “holistic problem with a holistic solution”; divine curses could be lifted by conversion to the Church. Whiteness, Mueller argues, is the default race for humanity in the Book of Mormon. He contends that whiteness is the default race in the Book of Mormon, and that this “white universalism” suggests that all non-white people are somehow
recipients of a divine curse (p. 26). However, Mueller argues that baptism provided a way for those believed to be cursed to be “redeemed” from their dark skin.

Mueller’s use of “white universalism” is a valuable framing device, describing Latter-day Saint beliefs while also connecting their theology to the white Protestant Atlantic World that most of them occupied. Others viewed whiteness as the default race, while non-white people were cursed, as allegedly were the descendants of Ham or Cain. In that way, early Latter-day Saints did not need “any more Bible” (2 Nephi 29:3) to justify their white universalism, though it may have informed their religious and racial worldviews. It is important to note, though, that, contrary to Mueller’s claims, there are no contemporary examples of early Latter-day Saints using the Book of Mormon to justify their treatment of black peoples of African descent (though he does footnote a Huffington Post article from 2012 suggesting that Latter-day Saints believed this). Thus, while Mueller profitably finds a connection between sacred scripture and the making of racial difference, it’s unlikely that the Book of Mormon was used to justify the priesthood and temple restriction, even as early Latter-day Saint readings supported missionary work among Indigenous peoples.

In later chapters, Mueller argues that non-white Latter-day Saints fought for inclusion in the Latter-day Saint “archive.” Non-white Latter-day Saints created texts meant to circumscribe them in sacred memory through the creation of documents. However, because he does not specify which form of archive he refers to in each instance, it is difficult to assess his arguments because the term slips between signifying repositories and the more ethereal memory “archive.” In the case of the archive of Latter-day Saint memory, his argument is more compelling. Certainly, the nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints of color that the Church knows best are those who created documents or had documents created about them. In doing so, Mueller points to the issues of the ongoing construction of the archive of Latter-day Saint memory: those with relative privilege and power are able to tell the stories of those who cannot, or did not, tell others how they felt about their contributions to
the physical archive. Although a more precise use of both definitions of the archive would have made his arguments stronger, Mueller’s analysis and innovative methodology have much to teach Latter-day Saints and scholars of American religion.

Patrick Q. Mason’s article in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History* examines the role of the Book of Mormon in which Restoration scripture, particularly the Book of Mormon, has shaped Latter-day Saint beliefs regarding race. He begins with an overview of how Native American General Authority George P. Lee’s reading of the Book of Mormon differed from that of the First Presidency, highlighting the several readings of the book by racial groups. He follows with a description of how readers interpreted the Book of Mormon’s text in nineteenth-century America, connecting curses associated with wickedness and idleness to non-white skin. Although many scholars have begun to dismantle those readings, the “persistent correlation of righteousness and whiteness means that the Book of Mormon’s dominant narrative troubles but never entirely overturns the white racial ideology” espoused by the book’s narrators and nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint readers (p. 162).

Mason argues that the assumption of Nephite whiteness coincided with the bulk of early Latter-day Saint missiological success in the United States and Western Europe. However, as historian Paul Reeve has demonstrated, many Americans did not view Latter-day Saints as “white,” and an ever-shifting definition formed to create space between powerful groups and those they viewed as inferior.¹ This experience led to Latter-day Saint racial theologies and practices that justified policies and programs directed toward non-white peoples as well as a subscription to American colonial strategies (as seen in the works by Garrett and Mueller). In the last forty years, following the canonization of Official Declaration 2, Mason argues that the Church has worked to highlight

the racial diversity of its membership in the United States and across the globe. He notes, though, that “the iconic Mormon pioneer” remains white and that one of the twenty-first century Church’s biggest challenges will be to pull white Americanism apart from its global message (p. 168). He also suggests that one of the greatest challenges for scholars studying the Latter-day Saints will be the ways that they incorporate critical race studies and find, nurture, and encourage scholars of color.

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon is a powerful text that enables Latter-day Saints to better understand the world around them. The three works examined herein reveal certain trends in the field of Book of Mormon studies. First, and most importantly, each author examines the ways that non-white Latter-day Saints read and interpreted sacred texts, particularly the Book of Mormon, in ways that asserted their intrinsic worth and theological place in the Church. This new emphasis on how Indigenous peoples felt about Lamanite identity will be crucial to the development of the field through future works. This is important for many reasons. First, Mormon studies and Book of Mormon studies are still developing as academic fields, and the work of recovering lost voices remains essential to expanding the literature. Second, re-discovering the multiplicities of Book of Mormon readings opens up new possibilities for modern interpretation and exegesis. Each author also places the Book of Mormon within broader fields, borrowing his frameworks to make the Book of Mormon more accessible—and to highlight its importance in American religion—for scholars and interested non-specialists alike.

In addition to these important historiographical additions, the field needs further studies on the reception of the Book of Mormon in non-white, non-American, and non-Western contexts to flesh out the history concerning how Latter-day Saint scripture has molded religious and racial beliefs. Nevertheless, as the study of Latter-day Saints and their beliefs continues to mature as a field, I am confident that scholars will include the voices and scholarship of non-white and non-American
Latter-day Saints who have valuable perspectives and arguments to contribute to this field.

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