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LDS Hispanic Americans and Lamanite Identity

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In September 1972, the *Ensign* published a piece called “What Is a Lamanite?” Using an “imaginary conversation” between different individuals of Latin American descent and a Church leader, this article got to the heart of the complexity of Lamanite identification within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹ When this piece was published in the 1970s—and even long before—some Church leaders strongly encouraged Hispanics to identify as Lamanites, a name referring to a people found in the Church’s founding scripture—the Book of Mormon. Even with the Church’s encouragement, however, not all Hispanics jumped to identify as Lamanites. The “What Is a Lamanite?” piece is one of the only documents during the President Spencer W. Kimball time period that explored the diversity of beliefs about this term among Hispanics; it was “an important, if not overlooked, reminder that not all Saints whom Church leaders such as Kimball saw as Lamanites understood themselves in those same terms.”²

This paper seeks to recover some of the diversity and complexity expressed in that article and to add further depth, context, and perspective. Hispanics, depending on the specific factors that influenced them, held an incredible

“Lamanite” carries with it several connotations, and the degree to which Hispanics identify with it varies greatly, from wholehearted and enthusiastic acceptance to a complete lack of identification.

variety of ideas regarding Lamanite identity by the decade of 1990. This paper will therefore provide a snapshot of Hispanic feelings toward Lamanite identity in the early 1990s;³ its analysis is historical, and the paper is therefore not a survey of 2018 attitudes. By the 1990s the influence of Church leaders and other prominent Mormons, the decline of Lamanite identification in official LDS discourse, the Chicano movement, and the process of Americanization contributed to shaping the following levels of Lamanite identification within LDS Hispanic Americans: positive and negative identification, nonidentification, and a primary identification as a child of God.

Aside from a few pieces by Jessie Embry, John-Charles Duffy, Orlando Rivera, Armand Mauss, Thomas W. Murphy, and a recent memoir by Ignacio García, few works deal with the history of LDS Hispanics in the United States or with Lamanite identification among Hispanics in general. The work of these authors is very important, but none has given extensive attention to Lamanite identification besides Duffy and Mauss.⁴ This article both expands and adds to previous work by investigating how Hispanics themselves felt about Lamanite identification. The main sources for this paper come from interviews housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections of the Brigham Young University library. Generally speaking, the discourse about what Lamanite identification means has been dominated by official Church sources, and Hispanics themselves have had less opportunity and fewer mediums to disseminate their experiences. But these oral history interviews take a great step in giving a voice to average LDS Hispanic Americans, allowing their own words to speak about how they viewed the word Lamanite.

These interviews were conducted in 1991–92 as part of a project headed by Jessie L. Embry, the LDS Hispanic American Oral History Project. Three native Spanish speakers (college students from or with roots in Peru, Argentina, and Mexico) conducted almost all of the ninety-four interviews. While these interviews are an invaluable source, they do present certain limitations. These interviews in no way statistically represent the beliefs and experiences of all Hispanics. Indeed, Embry describes the impossibility of creating a perfect sampling of LDS Hispanic Americans: “LDS Church records do not list nationalities, so it is impossible to determine how many Spanish-speaking Mormons live in the United States.”⁵

Over half of the interviews (fifty-two) took place in Utah, and thirty-four of the interviewees were BYU students. The large representation of BYU students does slant the results, as they did not typify the Latino Mormon

community at large. Students interacted daily with forces—such as a majority white student population—that could make them more or less likely to identify as a Lamanite. But many of these individuals had lived in various parts of the country before settling down in Utah, so their experiences do not solely represent life in Utah or at BYU.⁶ The interviewees were interviewed either at BYU or at their home, wherever their home might have been. However, I sought to analyze the words of interviewees from many different countries, age groups, and backgrounds. Even though it is impossible to collect a truly representative historical sample, these oral history interviews shed great light on how some LDS Hispanic Americans viewed Lamanite identity in the nineties, adding a variety of different perspectives that are told from a personal viewpoint.⁷

History of the Term Lamanites

The full history of the term Lamanite is too extensive to discuss in its entirety here, so I have selected the developments that prove most important to understanding how LDS Hispanic Americans came to identify with that term. The term Lamanite derives from the Book of Mormon. The book, considered a holy writ, tells the story of two groups of people in the ancient Americas, the Nephites and the Lamanites. Some believe the Book of Mormon describes the Nephites as literally white skinned and the Lamanites as literally dark skinned, while others think these descriptions are symbolic of inward spiritual conditions.⁸ The Nephites and Lamanites both go through periods of righteousness and apostasy, but in an early period of the book, the Lamanites are cursed by God for disobedience, becoming “an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, [that] did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Nephi 5:24). They were also described as “a wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people” (Mosiah 10:12). But the Book of Mormon also prophesied a glorious future for the Lamanites in which the “promises of the Lord” would be extended to them and they would be “brought to the true knowledge” and be numbered among God’s people again (Helaman 15:12–13).

In 1830, when the Church was founded, Hispanics were not immediately linked to the Lamanites. Instead, Church leaders used the term Lamanite to describe Native American tribes in the western part of what is now the United States.⁹ But not too many years passed before Church leaders linked Hispanics to the peoples of the Book of Mormon. For example, in 1845 the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said that native peoples throughout North

and South America were “a remnant of the tribes of Israel,” or, in other words, Lamanites. In 1851, Parley P. Pratt issued an apostolic proclamation that read, “Red men of the forest; Peruvians, Mexicans, Guatimalians [*sic*], descendants of every tribe and tongue of this mysterious race, your history, your gospel, your destiny is revealed.”¹⁰ Church leaders like Pratt believed that Hispanics and other ethnic groups would discover previously unknown knowledge about their history and culture through the Book of Mormon, therefore helping them understand their true identity. That identity was wrapped up in a destiny, a destiny in which, as a people, they would play an important role in the events leading up to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Church leaders and missionaries would repeatedly make references to Latin Americans’ Lamanite heritage.¹¹ For example, Church leaders like Rey L. Pratt and Anthony Ivins believed firmly in the Israelite heritage of the peoples of Latin America.¹²

Church leaders encouraged members in Latin America to explore and articulate their Lamanite identity. One of the most prominent Latinos in the development of the term was Margarito Bautista, from Mexico. Bautista was, in the words of one historian, “an uncommonly gifted man and a gifted orator.”¹³ In his popular and controversial tome published in 1935, *La evolucion de Mexico*, he outlined his beliefs about Lamanite identity and Mexico’s place in the Restoration. His written work was some of the first expressions of Lamanite self-identification in Latin America.¹⁴ Bautista believed the Lamanites were the progenitors of the Chichimecas and the Aztecs, while the Nephites were connected with the Mayas and Toltecs.¹⁵

The book was received very well by native Mexicans, “many of whom took great pride in their mighty Lamanite ancestors.”¹⁶ Bautista’s writings gave Mexicans an honorable past and a hope-filled future.¹⁷ While he did acknowledge the wickedness of the Lamanites at times in the Book of Mormon, he claimed that “when the Lamanite tribes converted to true Christianity, we find them living a superlatively incomparable life.”¹⁸ Their civilization held much to admire. He wrote this regarding the Lamanites’ bright future: “With regard to everything lost, materially and spiritually, etc., we find a marvelous hope that will be a reality for all of us the descendants of those peoples of the past.”¹⁹ He also used several Book of Mormon scriptures to predict that the time of the Gentiles, or the dominance of Church affairs by Anglo members—whose authority Bautista chaffed under and who did not receive Bautista’s book well²⁰—would end and that the Lamanites’ “sovereignty in all of its

fullness will be restored.” He also claimed that the New Jerusalem would be built by native peoples.²¹ As previously stated, Bautista’s book was one of the first publications that embraced Lamanite self-identification, and his words inspired contemporary Mexicans to be proud of a Lamanite past and to have hope for a brighter future.

So while Church leaders and Hispanics had long identified the peoples of Mexico, Central America, and South America as Lamanites, “hemispheric Lamanite identification [that is, identifying all peoples with native roots in North and South America and the Pacific as Lamanites] enjoyed its heyday during the forty years of Spencer W. Kimball’s tenure [1943–1985] as LDS apostle and later Church president.”²² Spencer W. Kimball, both as an Apostle and as President of the Church, was extremely passionate regarding the Church’s duty to the Lamanites. He fervently believed that “the day of the Lamanite is surely here” and that the Church and its members were “instruments in helping to bring to pass the prophecies of renewed vitality, acceptance of the gospel, and resumption to a favored place as a part of God’s chosen people.”²³

Kimball believed that Lamanite people were “good,” “honest,” “warm-hearted,” and “loveable” people, a people that had “a natural faith” and were “close to the Lord.” He hoped to communicate to Lamanite peoples that they “belong[ed] to a great race” and were of “royal blood.”²⁴ Kimball promised Lamanite individuals that if they read the Book of Mormon “with a sincere desire to know its truth,” they would receive a spiritual confirmation that the people in that book were their ancestors, that the book was their history, and that they were also Lamanite.²⁵ Hoping that Lamanite identification would “counteract prejudice,” Kimball “encouraged [native peoples in the Americas and in the Pacific] to embrace Lamanite identity as their ‘true heritage’ and ‘true identity.’”²⁶

The 1980s were a decade in which Church leaders and scholars began to associate the Book of Mormon more with Mesoamerica. Mauss gives three reasons for this: (1) the lack of success of the programs for Native Americans in the US throughout the preceding decades, (2) the success of missionary work in Latin America, and (3) the work of several LDS scholars and scholarly institutions, such as John Sorenson and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), in making parallels between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica.²⁷ Duffy writes that this was a “crucial shift in LDS discourse”: it was a shift “from hemispheric Lamanite identification to

limited Lamanite identification or no Lamanite identification.”²⁸ According to this view of limited Lamanite identification, Lamanites would have inhabited a relatively small area in Mesoamerica, and the American continent had already been populated by many peoples before Lehi and his family ever arrived. This contrasted with hemispheric identification, the belief that the Lamanites were the progenitors of almost all the native peoples of the Americas.²⁹

During this decade of transition, Agrícola Lozano Herrera, the first “Mexican Lamanite” to become a stake president, continued to shape LDS Mexican conceptions of Lamanite identity. He wrote his own book, *Historia del mormonismo en Mexico*, in 1983. In it he identified himself and the Mexican people as Lamanites. According to one historian, he had a negative association with the term.³⁰ And it is true that Lozano believed that Lamanites were more prone to rebelling, criticizing, and opposing Church leadership and that the children of Laman were “stiff necked,” but his words do not indicate that Lamanite was strictly a pejorative term.³¹ While he believed that Lamanites had fallen as a people, they still had a proud heritage and a promising future. In fact, he opens his book about the history of Mormonism in Mexico by describing how the Restoration set in motion the Book of Mormon promises that the Lamanites would be redeemed.³² The Restoration, and those who brought its message to the seed of Lehi, taught indigenous peoples that they could “again walk the path that their fathers had tread” and that “their misery, their poverty, their apostasy, their darkness, did not correspond with their inheritance, their destiny, their possibilities, to their honor, to their seed as children of gods.”³³ In short, he believed the Lamanites had indeed once been righteous but had apostatized. And while their seed might still bear some negative characteristics, ultimately they had “possibilities” and a “destiny” that were exciting.

Even as the Book of Mormon’s historical backdrop was increasingly more associated with Mesoamerica, after Kimball’s death in 1985 there was “a sharp, immediate decline in Lamanite identification by top-level Church leaders.”³⁴ Church leaders became more concerned with promoting unity within the Church, not elevating one ethnic group of people above others. President Kimball’s death wasn’t the only factor. Mauss also adds that missionary success in many areas of the world led to a decline in any “references to different lineages and their special blessings or curses . . . [,] [which] became untenable in the face of the conversion and faithfulness of people from so many

lineages having *no* obvious ‘racial’ identification.”³⁵ They also saw the need to pull back on previous claims that *all* natives of North and South America and the Pacific were descendants of the Lamanites. This retreat came as a reaction to the scientific community, which accepted other theories as to how the Americas were populated.³⁶

The oral history interviews of LDS Hispanic Americans that form the foundational sources for this paper were conducted in 1991, a time when Lamanite identification was declining among Church leaders but also a time when Mesoamerica was becoming increasingly linked as the setting for the Book of Mormon. All of the interviewees, therefore, grew up during the Kimball era of encouraging Lamanite identification, but some of the younger interviewees came of age during the period of decline in official Lamanite identification. The influence of many of these factors is evident in some of the interviewees’ responses with regard to the word Lamanite—that influence will be explored further in the following pages. This term carries with it several connotations, and the degree to which Hispanics identify with it varies greatly, from wholehearted and enthusiastic acceptance to a complete lack of identification.

Positive Identification

Pre-Columbian Heritage

Those who embraced Lamanite identity did so for a variety of reasons. One reason was that being Lamanite connected individuals back to their pre-Columbian ancestors. For some, part of the appeal of connecting to one’s ancestral roots had to do with the values of the Chicano movement. Those who had contact with the Chicano movement typically connected more positively with the term Lamanite. The Chicano movement was the civil rights movement of Mexican Americans during the 1960s and 1970s. Ignacio M. García, an LDS member and one of the foremost scholars on the Chicano movement, described it as “a cultural radical nationalist current.” It “was a strange combination of rural traditionalism, leftist ideas, and liberal presumptions. Never a defined ideology, this political current attracted young people in search of identity, older people seeking to reaffirm traditional values, and middle-class militants whose cry was *Ya basta!* or ‘Enough already!’”³⁷

The Chicano movement proudly promoted indigenous peoples and civilizations of the Americas and provided a lens that made positive identification with Lamanites natural. It wasn’t until Ignacio García started to study

the works of Chicano intellectuals while in college that he began to attach a historical identity to Mexicans, one the Book of Mormon provided added depth to:

Taking [Octavio] Romano's [a Chicano scholar] work and tying it to the Book of Mormon allowed me to see Mexicans and eventually Latinos as a historical people with a rich—and sometimes tragic—history, with heroes, philosophy, and even prophets. . . . It was my way of trying to develop not only a Chicano identity but also a Mormon one that was different from that of my white brothers and sisters, and so necessary, I believed, to free us mormones from the idea that we would always be a people to be shepherded and led by others outside our flock.³⁸

This identity provided a paradigm, shaping García's view of the past, his present, and the future of Hispanics in the Church.

Another individual who was influenced by the Chicano movement was Orlando Rivera, who was a bishop of the Spanish-speaking Lucero Ward in Salt Lake City as well as a professor at the University of Utah. He wrote, "In the Church, people refer to us as Lamanites. Some have thought this to be offensive. But for most of us it is not, especially those of us who identify ourselves as Americans of Mexican descent. We call ourselves Chicanos, and all Chicanos think of themselves as having an Indo-Hispanic background, of having ancestral roots native to America as well as to Europe. Thus, your considering us Lamanites is in no way offensive, but rather acceptable to our people."³⁹ Rivera explicitly linked Chicano ideology with Lamanite identification. Several of these pre-Columbian civilizations were renowned for their glory and accomplishments. Some of their cities (such as the Aztecs' Tenochtitlan) were densely populated, even more so than Europe's biggest cities. Some had written languages and excelled in astronomy. In short, they were powerful civilizations that one could feel pride in. Making a link between these civilizations and Lamanite identity imbued Lamanite history—which the Book of Mormon describes as both righteous and rebellious—with great secular accomplishments.

Rivera also did not want his cultural identity to be wholly subsumed by an LDS identity. He disagreed with white members who believed that "LDS' is a sufficient and complete culture independent of anything else, and that we [LDS Hispanics] should all be able to leave behind whatever traditions or characteristics of our life-style we may have." He believed that he could "adopt the central norms and values associated with the ordinances and doctrines" without leaving behind his heritage, which led to conflict with American

members of the Church who believed US Mormon culture to be the equivalent of gospel culture. "This uncritical assumption," he says, "prescribes that we 'foreigners' should change culturally but that no such requirement is imposed upon those of the 'central Mormon culture.'"⁴⁰ Chicano and Lamanite identity provided an opportunity for Hispanics to, as Mauss described when discussing LDS converts in Latin America, "claim a special or divine distinction in contrast to . . . their Anglo-Mormon coreligionists."⁴¹ It allowed Hispanics to participate as part of the Church without having to abnegate their identity and melt into a mostly white American Church membership.

Spiritual Heritage

However, some Latinos did not know of or did not associate with the Chicano movement; instead, they connected more with the spiritual history of their ancestors than with any tie that they might have made between the Lamanites and the great civilizations of the Americas, such as the Aztecs, Mayas, or Incas. Lorenza Zamarron was of Mexican descent and converted to the Church when she was eleven. She said, "When it comes to ancestors, they really made me proud that my ancestors once had the light that I have now. Even though they lost that knowledge, I am aware that they had it before. I come from them, and it is a blessing that I have this knowledge."⁴² Zamarron identified with and claimed a heritage that went all the way back to the Book of Mormon peoples, a legacy that she was proud of, as it purported that her ancestors held the same Christian beliefs she currently held.

Other examples of this belief come from the *Ensign*. Jennie Duran, "a convert of Spanish and Indian ancestry," said, "I get a strange and wonderful feeling when I realize that my veins are rich with the blood of Ephraim of the house of Joseph. [The Book of Mormon states that Lamanites are descendants of the house of Israel.] I have two precious heritages." She added, "'The Lord's Church teaches that an individual must have self-esteem, a righteous pride in his family, and pride in his ancestry,' Jennie says. 'I am thankful to belong to a Church where different cultures can enjoy fellowship in the house of the Lord, "no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens" (Eph. 2:19) in the household of God.'"⁴³ Duran credited the Church with bringing her knowledge of her "precious heritages," which instilled in her "self-esteem" and "righteous pride" in her ancestry. It seems these beliefs allowed her to interact with more self-confidence with members of the Church of different cultures. Perhaps that was part of the appeal of Lamanite identity for LDS Hispanic

Americans. It gifted them a distinct identity within the Church, one that didn't make them like every other white member of the Church but, because of their "royal blood" (as President Kimball said), still raised them above the prejudices of white members, making them fellow citizens in the Church.

Hope-Filled Future

Hispanics not only related with pride to the past but also identified hopefully with the bright future that LDS scripture and discourse promise the descendants of the Lamanites. One such scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants reads, "But before the great day of the Lord shall come, . . . the Lamanites shall blossom as the rose" (D&C 49:24). Reacting to this scripture, Zamarron stated, "When I was growing up, I always heard that the Lamanites would progress. They would blossom like a rose. I was looking forward for that day. I think that is coming more and more. I think that prophecy is going to be fulfilled."⁴⁴ Echoing a similar statement, Kenneth Gonzales—a recent convert from California of Mexican heritage—responded to the question of how LDS doctrines and values had shaped his outlook on the future of Spanish speakers by saying, "Especially in relation to the Lamanite cultures, I would say that Spanish speakers have a definite place in the LDS church." He then went on to describe that Spanish speakers particularly will contribute as leaders of the LDS Church.⁴⁵

This bright future was seen by many as both spiritual and secular. Ignacio García wrote, "The promises there of a 'blossoming of the rose' seemed to imply that both Native Americans and their *primos* the *mestizos* would one day arise from the ashes of exploitation, poverty, segregation, and inferiority to take command of their lives and eventually unshackle themselves from the rule of the 'gentile' which to us was simply the gringo."⁴⁶ The hope of this prophecy no doubt resonated with many Hispanic Americans who struggled daily against "exploitation, poverty, segregation, and inferiority." And because global, regional, and sometimes even local Church leadership was mostly white, one could see how the Lamanites blossoming would instill hope in someone like Kenneth Gonzalez that Hispanic leaders would be able rise up and lead the flocks of the Church.

Gonzalez also identified positively with the term Lamanite for several other reasons. Gonzalez had been a devout Catholic before heading off to BYU, where he found an Anglo population that he called "over abundant." The lack of other ethnic groups on campus cemented his opposition to being

baptized in the LDS Church. He questioned, "How could this Church say that it is true when the population is so extreme in the Anglo population?"⁴⁷ However, his barriers against baptism slowly began to come down when he joined the Lamanite Generation, which the *Deseret News* called "Brigham Young University's premier ethnic music and dance company."⁴⁸ The group rehearsed and performed musical and dance numbers reflecting Polynesian, Native American, and Hispanic culture. It began in 1971, created by a white BYU student and his wife, who was Maori. It was originally designed to be "a vehicle for cultivating pride in the Indian/Lamanite identity among its Indian performers" but eventually began to include other groups besides Native Americans, "expanding the public definition of *Lamanite* to include other ethnic groups and giving worldwide attention to the part played by all these groups in the work of the church."⁴⁹ At the peak of its productivity, 1977, the Lamanite Generation gave forty-five performances in one year.⁵⁰

Gonzalez's experience with the group shows that Lamanite identity was not merely to inform one's ethnic identity but also to inspire one's religious identity. Before joining the group, Gonzalez said he didn't know much about it except that "it was a group showing and sharing the different Lamanite cultures," which he thought "was the coolest thing."⁵¹ He soon attended a Lamanite Generation retreat; he said it was the "first time I saw these brown people get up and start bearing their testimony. It had a total, definite effect on me."

Gonzalez not only admired these "Lamanites" but also felt them to be distinct from and perhaps more spiritual than the general white LDS population. Acknowledging his own potential partiality, Gonzalez explains: "Maybe this is a biased point of view, but I still believe that the Lamanite people have a special spirit that Heavenly Father gave them, and it is very, very strong. It is a little different than what I think the Anglos have in their spirit. It all comes from the Holy Ghost, but there is just a little extra something." He later added, "You can feel the spirit all the time, but it is never as strong and powerful and unique as when you're with the Lamanite Generation." This view demonstrates a belief in the chosen and special nature of Lamanites, who are intrinsically different than white members of the Church. Their spirit was just stronger because of their connection to their Book of Mormon heritage, perhaps. But this train of thought made positive Lamanite identification exciting and uplifting.

When asked how he felt about mate selection, Gonzalez responded that he would prefer to marry “a beautiful Lamanite young woman.” His answer to this question demonstrates a pride in and love for Lamanite people. Spouses influence their partner and children in many ways, such as the language spoken at home, the cultural customs observed, and the family identity. For instance, Myriam Lopez Furrows, from Puerto Rico, married an American and cited her marriage as a possible reason as to why over the past ten years she has lost more and more of her cultural background, “adapting more to the white American culture.”⁵² Gonzalez’s preference in marrying a “beautiful Lamanite” woman shows a desire to perpetuate his identity throughout his life and the lives of his future children. “I want my sons and my daughters to know who they are and what their purpose here is,” he said. “I want them to have a strong sense of who they are, a strong sense of their identity. . . . I want them to have a strong sense of importance of culture, importance of friends, importance of family, and importance of religion.”⁵³

Negative Identification

Although some Hispanics identified positively with the word Lamanite, not all did, and some of the negative feelings surrounding that identification sometimes emanated from white members of the Church. Although President Kimball and other Church leaders believed that Lamanite identification would wear away the “vestiges of paternalism and prejudice among the non-Lamanites in the Church,” the opposite sometimes occurred.⁵⁴

Mario Valencia, who was born in Texas and whose mother and father were both Mexican, related something his sister had experienced. One day, while waiting outside an LDS temple, his sister ran into an acquaintance and began to converse in Spanish. Hearing the Spanish, “this Anglo girl turned to her, and she said, ‘Are you Hispanic?’ My sister said, ‘Yes. I come from a Mexican family.’ She said, ‘I guess that is okay. The curse has been taken off of the Lamanite people anyway.’ I asked my sister, ‘Was she joking?’ She said, ‘No, she was very serious.’” Valencia continued, “I think a lot of times the white LDS person who is born into the Church believes he was more spiritual for some reason and he was a lot more worthy than you were because you were born into a Lamanite family with darker skin and maybe a family who wasn’t LDS at the time but was Catholic, Methodist, or whatever religion before they became a Mormon. . . . There are a lot of them that have that opinion.”⁵⁵

White members of the Church could sometimes view the word Lamanite as pejorative. It represented a history of curses and rebellion to them and provided a spiritual hierarchy with which to place themselves above Hispanic Americans. Naturally, when used in this manner, Lamanite identity could become negative and hurtful.

This viewpoint was also expressed in the *Ensign* article “What Is a Lamanite?” when the author represented a Chilean as saying, no doubt referring to the same curse as the Anglo woman mentioned in the previous story, “We do not think of ourselves as a benighted people.”⁵⁶ The reference to a “benighted people” is describing what happened to the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon, who were cursed because of their rebellion (see Alma 3:6). Because of this curse, “they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety” (2 Nephi 5:24). While there are other passages that are more favorable to the Lamanites, these passages would be difficult to overlook for Hispanics when being taught by Church leadership that they were Lamanites, making it easy to reject Lamanite identification altogether.

One interview shows the complexity not only within LDS Hispanic Americans as a whole but also the complex feelings about Lamanite identification within one person. When asked about how LDS values and doctrines influenced his perceptions about Hispanics’ future, Francisco Guajardo responded, “Both positively and negatively. I like the fact that we’re told that we’re chosen people. Being a Lamanite is a great blessing, and I believe that.” But immediately after, he described the negative impact that Lamanite identification had on his life:

I also struggle with the fact that sometimes the issue of race, the issue of whether you’re a Lamanite, or whether you’re this or that, is too much of an issue in the Church. Sometimes you forget about the individual. We go through life, and we’ve placed so many tags on us already. It’s hard to live with all those tags. You’re someone from the United States. You’re not only a Lamanite, but you’re also a minority, a Hispanic, you’re a lot of things. Sometimes I feel within the Church, that can be a cause of division.

For example, when I was a kid, people would never let you forget that being a Lamanite was a curse and the color of your skin was a punishment. That mentality, that idea, was sort of put into your head. It created some problems for your self-esteem. You weren’t exactly proud to have darker skin. It was not that you should be proud, but you were very, very conscious of it.

His thoughts then flipped 180 degrees. “Yet I’m also proud of it,” he said. “For someone that has been ashamed of that all their lives, reading in the scriptures the blessings and the great things that the Lamanites really were, and

the great blessings that were promised to, is a great source of help. It helps us identify stronger as a people; it helps us with our self-esteem; it gives us a lot more pride.”⁵⁷

These are some complex feelings. It seems that Guajardo’s pride was stoked when he was able to read the scriptures and discover what being Lamanite meant for himself. He was able to discover the positive aspects of the history of the Lamanites and the future blessings that were promised to them. However, when other members of the Church used the word Lamanite to either degrade him racially or set him apart from other members, Lamanite identification could also be hurtful, damaging his self-esteem. As this identity could serve as a double-edged sword, the source and intent of Lamanite identification could drastically alter how one individual felt about being designated as a Lamanite.

Perhaps there is another reason for Guajardo’s ambivalent comments: the possibility that his interview occurred at BYU. The interviewer said that the interview was taking place in Provo, Utah, but does not specify if it is BYU or Guajardo’s home. It could have been either, as interviewers conducted sessions both in interviewees’ homes and at BYU. If done at BYU, it could have influenced his responses. Many of his initial comments were profoundly negative with regard to the Lamanite “tag” that he felt had been placed on him. But then he balanced his criticism with some positive comments about Lamanite identification. Perhaps because he was being interviewed at a largely white institution, he felt that he must be less critical of this tag that some white members had encouraged him to adopt. This would partly explain why those Hispanic Americans at BYU may have expressed conflicted attitudes.

Lack of Identification

Some Hispanic Americans stated that they never identified themselves as a Lamanite. One reason for this lack of Lamanite identification is that many Hispanics, particularly those from the Southern Cone of South America, do not have indigenous roots. As the previously mentioned *Ensign* article discussed, “Argentine and Uruguayan members . . . descended from the gentile nations of Europe.” The article also reminds readers that “by no means are all Spanish-speaking members of the Church Lamanites.”⁵⁸ Tracing one’s ancestry back to Europe instead of to the indigenous peoples of the Americas would obviously rule out any ancestral link to Lamanites.

Another reason for this lack of identification seems to be the process of Americanization that molded some first-, second-, or third-generation Hispanic Americans. Despite Hispanics’ ethnic heritage, they may have identified more broadly with the country that had become their new home. Ivan Sanchez was born in Guatemala but moved to the United States when he was ten. He stated flatly, “I consider myself more of a ‘gringo’ than a Latin because I have been here longer.”⁵⁹ Tina T. Serrano Ruiz grew up in Chicago as a granddaughter of Mexican immigrants. She was asked by the interviewer if she had ever felt like a Lamanite. The question seemed to take Serrano a little off guard, as if it was something she hadn’t contemplated before. After a follow-up question and a long pause, Serrano responded, “I never thought of myself as a Lamanite because I guess I always felt I was more American. Maybe that was just by the way I was brought up. I did have Hispanic influence in the home, but mostly it was just American.”⁶⁰ This quote highlights how LDS Hispanic Americans linked Hispanic identity and Lamanite identity. Typically, Hispanics who took great pride in their ancestors’ heritage also connected strongly to Lamanite identity. But the process of Americanization could weaken that association.

Stella Moris Abraham is another example of how integrating into American society could sometimes lead to a lack of identification with Lamanite identity. Abraham was born in Argentina, where she grew up a devout Catholic. She described how she “seldom had the opportunity to talk with a Hispanic person” and was “always mingling with the main culture.” Her isolation from Hispanics caused her Spanish-speaking ability to decline. “Therefore, when I got into the Church,” she said, “I didn’t see myself as a Lamanite,” even though “one of my grandmothers was a pure Indian from South America. She is the only grandparent who is not a mixture of European and Argentinean or is a pure European or Middle Eastern.”⁶¹ Despite not identifying as a Lamanite, it seems that Abraham became more involved in the Hispanic community, as she described how the week before the interview she attended a Lamanite conference. Her recollections of the conference show the dual meaning Lamanite identity could have. As she sat there, Abraham wondered how Hispanics “see themselves within the Church.” Then the stake president, a Spanish-speaking Hispanic, stood up and began to speak. The messages that Abraham gathered from his remarks were that “from the very beginning the Lamanites were considered sort of lesser people, people with a lot of faults, a lot of shame, and a lot [of] guilt. The future destiny, according

to the gospel, is that they will emerge as a very strong people. The president of the stake was raising a lot of ‘weaknesses’ among the Lamanites.”⁶² She then began to lament the challenges that Hispanic communities face throughout America. Perhaps she chose not to identify as a Lamanite because she did not want to attach herself to any of the perceived negative characteristics of Lamanite identity.

Duffy, in his article about the use of the term Lamanite, cites that changing views of race, blood, and lineage may have contributed to Hispanics not identifying as Lamanites: “As a worldview that emphasized lineage became less important for many Saints, so too did Lamanite identity.”⁶³ As Serrano and Abraham also described in their interview, bloodlines and ethnic heritage weren’t as important in determining identity as were one’s own life experiences and current cultural surroundings.

Another piece of evidence that many LDS Hispanic Americans didn’t identify with Lamanites at all is because they did not discuss the term at all in many of their oral interviews. Of the thirty-two interviews I analyzed, less than one-third directly discussed possible Lamanite heritage. As already discussed, many Hispanics from the Southern Cone region don’t trace their ancestors to America. So they would of course not bring up Lamanite heritage in their interviews. Part of the reason other Hispanics did not bring up the topic may be that interviewers rarely asked interviewees about the term Lamanite directly. However, they did ask many questions that might have allowed interviewees to discuss Lamanite identity if they chose or if it were an ever-present part of their self-image. Questions like “How have you been accepted by white Latter-day Saints?” or “Do other Latter-day Saints tend to relate to your color and ethnic background or to you as a person?” invited LDS Hispanic Americans to bring up Lamanite identity and how it has affected their interactions with other Church members without explicitly asking them about their feelings of their heritage. Some interviewees mentioned a Lamanite heritage, and some didn’t, giving an insightful window into how LDS Hispanic Americans truly thought of their place in a largely American church without being given explicit verbal cues about the word Lamanite.

Identification as Children of God

One of the foundational doctrines within the LDS Church is that all human beings are the spirit children of God. Members sing songs such as “I Am a Child of God” from childhood. The theme for the youth program for young

women begins with the phrase “We are daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us, and we love Him,” and one of the values highlights the “divine nature” of young women.⁶⁴ This doctrine is emphasized frequently among adults as well. This emphasis no doubt influenced LDS Hispanics and their identity. This identity is grounded in a doctrine of complete equality.

But Hispanic Mormons often have to confront white American Mormons who act in prejudiced ways, despite a shared belief that all humans are children of God. Ignacio García described his own experience when living in South Texas: “In Kingsville, people were good but not too many had arrived at that point of spiritual refinement that could help them transcend class, ethnicity, and political ideology. It was a congregation of decent people but ones nonetheless caught up in the reality of racially divided South Texas.”⁶⁵ He felt that some white members, influenced by politics and racial beliefs from US culture, struggled to apply the high ideals of the Christian doctrine within their wards and stakes.

Pilar Herrera’s parents were both from Spain, though she was born in Venezuela. She identified as white and Spanish, yet referred to Mexican and South American culture as a part of “our culture,” identifying to some degree with Latin America. She said, “Some people accept the fact that I am Spanish. But with some other people, I notice that there is a lot of racism, discrimination here in Utah. . . . It makes me real mad.” Herrera’s understanding of Mormon doctrine then led her to comment, “God doesn’t say, ‘You are white; I am going to love you more. Or you are darker, so I’m sorry, no.’ He made that difference. I don’t know what the reason was, but I think He made us all and He loves us all.” When asked to express any last thoughts in the interview, she added, “We should start getting closer to people without the fact of that you are Hispanic, that you are Russian, or that you are from South Africa. I think we shouldn’t care about those things. If God made us different, it was for a purpose. Maybe we don’t know what that purpose was, but it was for a purpose. He loves us all the same.”⁶⁶ By emphasizing her shared identity with white Americans as children of God, Herrera pushed back against the prejudice she encountered in the United States. She emphatically stated that it was wrong, that it especially should have no place in the Church, because a divine familial relationship should trump one’s culture, color, and language.

Frequently, instead of identifying primarily as a Hispanic or Lamanite, LDS Hispanic Americans identified as a child of God, something they shared with every single individual on the planet, regardless of his or her skin color

or heritage. A perfect example of this inclusive worldview is Esmeralda Meraz. Esmeralda was born in California but moved to Mexicali, Mexico (where her parents were from), when she was four. About five years later, she moved back to the United States. When discussing the benefits of education for Hispanics, Meraz rejected the belief that educated Hispanics need to be a “pillar of strength” for other Hispanics, for those who belong to *la raza*, “the race,”⁶⁷ a term Meraz says she hates. “For me it is not like that at all,” she said. “Whenever I think of helping someone or being a pillar of strength, it is not for just my people. I never think of my people as the ‘Mexican people.’ I always think of being a pillar of strength to everyone. I don’t care what color they are.” She then spelled out who she believed her people were: “My people are within the Church and those people that are outside of the Church that are seeking to find a better way.”⁶⁸ She rejected exclusively defining her people as those who are from *la raza*. She did not focus on solely helping those who shared a common heritage but on seeking to help everyone, irrespective of who they were.

Mario Valencia, despite being a proud American who was also proud of his Mexican heritage, described how he thought of himself: “I know I’m Hispanic, but I don’t walk around or wake up every morning and think ‘I’m Mexican. . . .’ I just have thought of myself as human. I know that I am a child of God.”⁶⁹ Valencia’s words show that LDS Hispanic Americans, however, did not ditch their pride in being Mexican, Guatemalan, or Argentinian; instead, they felt that their identity as a fellow human being or a child of God superseded other still-important identities.

Another example is Teresa Andrade. In 1962 she came without documentation as an eighteen-year-old to the United States. Referencing her experience in the Church, she added, “There are a lot of them [whites] that probably don’t think we are in the right place. But one thing tells me they are sons and daughters of God just like I am. I happen to be born on this side, and I happen to be born this color.” But Andrade also believed that even though all humankind belonged to God’s family, there were differences between different peoples that must be overcome. “Sometimes there is a question, ‘Who wanted to be born black, or brown or yellow? Who wanted to be born this way or this other way?’ I know it was my choice.” She later added, “We live here, and we have to try and live together.”⁷⁰

One final example is Imelda Lom, who grew up in the Mormon colonies in Mexico. She said she had experienced discrimination from white

American members both in the colonies and to a lesser degree in the United States. When asked how she thought these problems would be resolved, she responded, “We should try to see people equal as we are. We are the same. We only have one Heavenly Father, and we are the same. We should be equal.” While acknowledging feeling a bond for her “people,” Spanish-speaking members, she also felt that “we should all be united because we share the same gospel and we share the same Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.”⁷¹

What were some of the reasons that these individuals placed such a premium on their identity as children of God? One possible explanation is that, unfortunately, some white members of the LDS Church did, and still do, have prejudiced views toward Hispanics. While many Hispanics in the oral histories reported having been accepted by whites very well, that was not the case for everyone. Some did indeed face cultural misunderstanding and outright prejudice. Identifying as a child of God, and as an equal member of a cosmic family, provided a counterargument to any racial or political beliefs that members of the Church might have had. When Hispanics encountered discrimination, a doctrine that teaches everyone is an equal child of God allowed Hispanics to challenge that discrimination with phrases like Andrade’s: “They are sons and daughters of God just like I am.” The child-of-God identity gave Hispanics the ability to denounce white members’ attitudes by using language that members could easily recognize as part of Church doctrine.

Another reason that these Hispanics identified more as a child of God than as a Lamanite may also be because of the lack of official discourse encouraging Hispanics to identify as Lamanites, a decline that was the result of several factors. As mentioned previously, Armand Mauss and John-Charles Duffy identified several of these factors, including “an intensified emphasis on the universal, Christ-centered aspects of LDS teaching; decreased attraction to doctrines of lineage as a result of the Church’s international growth and shifting social attitudes about race; and rhetorical exigencies occasioned by Church leaders’ desire to dismantle special Indian programs.”⁷² These factors contributed to LDS Hispanics’ view of themselves in a changing world and a growing Church.

Conclusion

The term Lamanite is a complex word whose history carries vestiges of racial superiority, rebellion, and curses on the one hand and righteousness and

glorious promised blessings on the other. It is not surprising, therefore, that by the early 1990s LDS Hispanic Americans expressed a myriad of responses to their own perceived or nonperceived Lamanite identity. As this article shows, there are a number of factors that contributed to the formation of their beliefs about the subject. LDS Hispanic Americans were not and are not a monolithic bloc. While many of them do share many similar characteristics, such as language and religion, they are a group with diverse beliefs and opinions. This paper has sought to explore and discuss the assortment of ideas about Lamanite identity among the people themselves. While a representative sample has not been possible to collect, one cannot argue against the significance of these individuals' shared ideas and experiences. But more research still needs to be done to continue to dissect the complexities of how LDS Hispanic Americans felt *in the past* as well as how they feel *now* about Lamanite identity. Hopefully, this paper and future research will reinforce and strengthen our resolution to refrain from making blanket statements and assumptions about one group of people, instead encouraging us to be humble, ask questions, and dig deeper to seek understanding. **RE**

Notes

1. Harold Brown, "What Is a Lamanite?," *Ensign*, September 1972, 62–63.
2. John-Charles Duffy, "The Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 151.
3. In the early 1990s the oral history project that serves as one of the main sources of this paper was conducted.
4. Duffy's article "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse" tracks the usage of the term Lamanite in official Church discourse. While it does touch on how Hispanics typically have diverse reactions to that term, the article focuses more on the discourse of Church leaders. Armand L. Mauss's book *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2003) is a fascinating study about the evolution of the concepts of race and lineage in Mormon thinking. See chapters 3–5 particularly for this discussion about the peoples whom have been labeled as Lamanites. Thomas W. Murphy's article discusses two prominent LDS Mexicans' histories of the Church in Mexico. See Thomas W. Murphy, "Other Mormon Histories: Lamanite Subjectivity in Mexico," *Journal of Mormon History* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 179–214. For other insightful perspectives on LDS Hispanic Americans' experiences, see Jessie L. Embry, "In His Own Language": *Mormon Spanish Speaking Congregations in the United States* (Provo, UT: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1997), which discusses the effectiveness of Spanish-speaking wards and branches; Ignacio M. García, *Chicano While Mormon: Activism, War, and Keeping the Faith* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), a memoir about García's own experience as an LDS Hispanic American, including his thoughts about Lamanite identity; Orlando Rivera, "Mormonism and the Chicano," in *Mormonism: A Faith for All Cultures*, ed. F. LaMond Tullis (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 115–26,

a chapter that discusses why Hispanics struggle with their identity not only in America but also in the Church. He briefly touches on how many Hispanics proudly identify as Lamanites.

5. Embry, "In His Own Language," 9.
6. Embry, "In His Own Language," 10.
7. Of the ninety-four interviews housed in the collection, I examined thirty-two.
8. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 127.
9. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 122.
10. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 126; P. P. Pratt, *Proclamation! To the People of the Coasts and Islands of the Pacific; of Every Nation, Kindred and Tongue by an Apostle of Jesus Christ* (C. W. Wandell, 1851), 9, <https://archive.org/details/proclamationtopeoopratt>.
11. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 131–32.
12. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 33.
13. F. LaMond Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1987), 122.
14. Thomas W. Murphy, "Other Mormon Histories: Lamanite Subjectivity in Mexico," *Journal of Mormon History* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 196; see also Stuart Parker, "Queso y Gusanos: The Cosmos of Indigenous Mormon Intellectual Margarito Bautista," in *Just South of Zion: The Mormons in Mexico and Its Borderlands*, ed. Jason H. Dormady and Jared M. Tamez (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 115–16.
15. M. Bautista, *La evolucion de Mexico: Sus verdaderos progenitores y su origen, el destino de america y europa* (Mexico City: Apolonio B. Arzate, 1935), 25, 510, 513; unless otherwise indicated, all the translations from Spanish sources have been translated by the author.
16. Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*, 122, 123.
17. Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*, 125.
18. Bautista, *La evolucion de Mexico*, 130.
19. Bautista, *La evolucion de Mexico*, 98.
20. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 147.
21. Bautista, *La evolucion de Mexico*, 41; see also, Murphy, "Other Mormon Histories," 196. For more on Margarito Bautista and his story and beliefs, see Murphy, "Other Mormon Histories," and Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico*.
22. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 122.
23. Elder Spencer W. Kimball, "Church Growth and Lamanite Involvement" (speech given at Brigham Young University, 7 November 1972), https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/kimball-spencer-w_church-growth-lamanite-involvement/.
24. President Spencer W. Kimball, "Of Royal Blood," *Ensign*, July 1971, 10.
25. Kimball, "Of Royal Blood," 6–10.
26. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 139, 143.
27. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 136, 145, 153.
28. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 150n115.
29. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 121.
30. Murphy, "Other Mormon Histories," 209.
31. Agricol Lozano Herrera, *Historia del mormonismo en Mexico* (Mexico City: Editorial Zarahemla, 1983), 98–99.
32. Lozano Herrera, *Historia del mormonismo*, 1.
33. Lozano Herrera, *Historia del mormonismo*, 2–3; thank you to Moroni Martínez, who helped with this particularly tricky translation.

34. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 151; see also, Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 17, 37, 276.
35. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 276.
36. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 156–57.
37. Ignacio M. García, *Chicano While Mormon: Activism, War, and Keeping the Faith* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 171.
38. García, *Chicano While Mormon*, 173.
39. Orlando Rivera, "Mormonism and the Chicano," in *Mormonism: A Faith for All Cultures*, ed. F. LaMond Tullis (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 116.
40. Rivera, "Mormonism and the Chicano," 122–23.
41. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 149.
42. Lorenza Zamarron, interview by Katuska Serrano, Provo, UT, 9 September 1991, MSS OH 1655, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT (hereafter Perry Special Collections).
43. "Portraits in Miniature," *Ensign*, November 1973, 60–61.
44. Lorenza Zamarron, interview by Katuska Serrano.
45. Kenneth Gonzales, interview by Esmeralda Meraz, Provo, UT, 20 March 1991, MSS OH 1279, Perry Special Collections.
46. García, *Chicano While Mormon*, 172.
47. Kenneth Gonzales, interview by Esmeralda Meraz.
48. "Lamanite Generation to Perform 'Living Legends,'" *Deseret News*, 6 January 1991, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/140855/LAMANITE-GENERATION-TO-PERFORM-LIVING-LEGENDS.html?pg=all>.
49. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 92.
50. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 92. The history of the Lamanite Generation is more complex than the brief summary here, but that history is outside the scope of this paper.
51. Kenneth Gonzalez, interview by Esmeralda Meraz.
52. Myriam Lopez Furrows, interview by Katuska Serrano, Provo, UT, 3 July 1991, MSS OH 1259, Perry Special Collections.
53. Kenneth Gonzales, interview by Katuska Serrano.
54. M. Dallas Burnett, "Lamanites and the Church," *Ensign*, July 1971, 13.
55. Mario Valencia, interview by Esmeralda Meraz, Provo, UT, 17 April 1991, MSS OH 1240, Perry Special Collections.
56. Brown, "What Is a Lamanite?," 62.
57. Francisco Guajardo, interview by Andrea Van Wagnen, Provo, UT, 17 November 1991, MSS OH 1877, Perry Special Collections.
58. Brown, "What Is a Lamanite?," 63.
59. Ivan Sanchez, interview by Katuska Serrano, Provo, UT, 1 October 1991, MSS OH 1873, Perry Special Collections.
60. Tina T. Serrano Ruiz, interview by Katuska Serrano, Provo, UT, 18 September 1991, MSS OH 1245, Perry Special Collections.
61. Stella Maris Abraham, interview by Andrea Van Wagnen, Los Angeles, 22 September 1991, MSS OH 1245, Perry Special Collections.
62. Stella Maris Abraham, interview by Andrea Van Wagnen.
63. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 155.

64. Naomi Ward Randall, "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns*, no. 301; "Young Women Theme," <https://www.lds.org/young-women/personal-progress/young-women-theme?lang=eng>
65. García, *Chicano While Mormon*, 163.
66. Pilar Herrera, interview by Jessie L. Embry, Provo, UT, 23 November 1991, MSS OH 1502, Perry Special Collections.
67. *La raza* is a nationalistic term used by Chicanos that identifies Mexicans as belonging to the same ethnic heritage.
68. Esmeralda Meraz, interview by Jessie L. Embry, Provo, UT, 7 March 1991, MSS OH 1277, Perry Special Collections.
69. Mario Valencia, interview by Esmeralda Meraz.
70. Teresa Andrade, interview by Katuska Serrano, Pacoima, CA, 21 August 1991, MSS OH 1246, Perry Special Collections.
71. Imelda Lom, interview by Andrea Van Wagnen, Provo, UT, 5 February 1992, MSS OH 1625, Perry Special Collections.
72. Duffy, "Use of 'Lamanite' in Official LDS Discourse," 151–52; see also Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 276.