The Curse of the Covenant: The Deuteronomic Curses in the Book of Mormon

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Introduction

The ancient Near East had a rich and well-developed covenant tradition that helped to define the relationships between covenant parties. Much like modern contracts, which tend to follow a conventional construction, there is within the ancient Near East tradition a prominent covenant construction known as the suzerain-vassal treaty.¹ Covenant treaties of this type stipulated the conditions of loyalty between a lord or suzerain to the vassal or subject. A major feature of this type of treaty was the promise of blessings as well as the threat of curses. The blessings and curses ensured covenant fidelity and maintained the social and political relationships between covenant parties.² It is this covenant type that seems to underlie the covenant God made with Israel under Moses’s

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². “The view that divine beings played a role in political history through blessings and curses was pervasive in the ancient Near East. It shaped and shoved foreign relations to the extent that it reinforced the normative principle that promises should be kept.” Lucas Grassi Freire, “Foreign Relations in the Ancient Near East: Oaths, Curses, Kingship and Prophecy,” *Journal for Semitics* 26, no. 2 (2017): 664.
leadership (see Ex. 20–24). This is exemplified in the utterance, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life” (Deut. 30:19).

Many of the blessings and curses associated with God’s covenant with Israel are found in Deuteronomy 28. The power that these blessings and curses had on the hearts and minds of the Israelites is perhaps reflected in the fact that Deuteronomy 28 is one of the longest chapters in the Bible. It is telling that roughly four-fifths of the chapter lists prescribed curses for those who prove unfaithful, possibly underscoring the force that an impending curse had on the imagination of those in ancient Near East. Not surprisingly then, the threat of cursing also appears as a prominent feature of the Book of Mormon and can be best understood in relation to the Deuteronomy covenant text.

Scholars have posited over the years the importance of the book of Deuteronomy to our understanding of the Book of Mormon. For example, Noel B. Reynolds pointed out that in Lehi’s final appeal to Laman and Lemuel, Lehi evidently “feels he might touch [them] by making a rhetorical appeal to Moses as a second witness to Lehi’s own prophetic viewpoint. He especially knows that his rebellious older sons, who specifically rejected his visions, calling him ‘a visionary man’ (1 Ne. 2:11), will not respond to his teaching alone. And so he phrases his message in terms that repeatedly remind his hearers of Moses’ similar message delivered on a similar occasion . . . [Lehi] thus made Deuteronomy a powerful, though unmentioned, foundation for his own message.”

3. Leviticus 26 also contains an extensive list of blessings and curses.
4. There is a good example of this in the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, which tried to ensure covenant loyalty by an elaborate list of potential curses involving disease. In this example more than 150 of the 670 lines of the treaty deal with curses.
It seems that Nephi did a similar thing when he documented his history. Nephi recorded that the Lord said unto him, “Inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren. For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed” (1 Ne. 2:22–23). The next time cursing is mentioned in the record, Nephi clearly ties his understanding of being cursed to the covenant God had made with Israel through Moses. Speaking to his brothers, Nephi said, “Do ye suppose that [the Israelites] would have been led out of bondage, if the Lord had not commanded Moses that he should lead them?” (1 Ne. 17:24). Nephi added that the Israelites “had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity; and the fulness of the wrath of God was upon them; and the Lord did curse the land against them, and bless it unto our fathers; yea, he did curse it against them unto their destruction, and he did bless it unto our fathers unto their obtaining power over it” (1 Ne. 17:35). Lehi used similar rhetoric when speaking to Laman and Lemuel: “I have feared, lest for the hardness of your hearts the Lord your God should come out in the fulness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed forever; Or, that a cursing should come upon you. . . . That ye may not be cursed with a sore cursing; and also, that ye may not incur the displeasure of a just God upon you, unto the destruction, yea, the eternal destruction of both soul and body” (2 Ne. 1:17–18, 22). For example, when Lehi then confirmed the message Nephi received from the Lord saying, “If ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish” (2 Ne. 1:28).8

These examples echo a similar promise in the book of Deuteronomy 28, which warned the Israelites that “if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God . . . all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee” (Deut. 28:15),9 and it is written that the Lord would “send upon

7. Much like we see with the focus of the suzerain-vassal treaty and God’s covenant with Israel, the first mention of a curse in the Book of Mormon seems to be inextricably tied to an appropriate understanding of divinely appointed power between Nephi and his brothers.

8. Noel B. Reynolds makes an important observation related to this point that again ties Nephi’s writings to Deuteronomy. “It is in the speeches in Deuteronomy that Moses declares Joshua as his successor (see Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:28; 31:3, 7, 14, 23). . . . Lehi similarly seizes on the occasion of his pending demise to appoint Nephi as his successor, though in a somewhat indirect way. Recognizing the unlikelihood that Nephi will enjoy the same support that the early Israelites gave Joshua, Lehi promises and warns his sons that ‘if ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish’ (2 Ne. 1:28).” Reynolds, “Lehi as Moses,” 29.

9. In another example it reads, “All these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not unto the voice of the Lord” (Deut. 28:45).
thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest thine hand unto for to do, until thou be destroyed, and until thou perish quickly; because of the wickedness of thy doings” (Deut. 28:20).\(^{10}\) Summing up these ideas, we read later that “all these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not . . . And they shall be unto thee for a sign” (Deut. 28:45–46). Importantly, both Nephi and Lehi used the same phrasal verb found in Deuteronomy in conjunction with the curse they warned would “come upon” Laman and Lemuel for failure to “hearken.” Furthermore, the word for *sign* comes from the Hebrew ʾôth, which can also be translated as “mark.”\(^{11}\) This is consistent with what the Lord had said to Nephi that “the Lamanites have I cursed, and I will set a mark on them” (Alma 3:14). These textual clues, along with their underlying context, point the reader to the book of Deuteronomy for a key to understanding how the Book of Mormon people perceived what it meant to be cursed.\(^{12}\)

### The Metonymical Curse

The way Nephi speaks of curses provides further support for connecting the Book of Mormon to the book of Deuteronomy. In the writings of Jeremiah, a contemporary to Lehi and Nephi, the Deuteronomic curses were used to explain Jerusalem’s destruction.\(^{13}\) Jeffrey Anderson states, “It is widely recognized that the book of Jeremiah was influenced substantially by Deuteronomistic theology. . . . In Deuteronomic fashion, the book of Jeremiah portrays the fall of Jerusalem as a result of the fulfillment of the covenant curse (Deuteronomy 27–28). The prophet Jeremiah shares the heritage of prophets who sought unsuccessfully to warn the people of God against breaking the covenant.”\(^{14}\) Lehi and Nephi share this same prophetic heritage.

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10. See Deuteronomy 28:15–68 and Leviticus 26:14–39, which together catalog the consequences of being cursed because of failing to hearken unto the Lord.


According to Anderson, “the curse is extended in the book of Jeremiah in a unique way, by means of the rhetorical principle of metonymy.”\(^\text{15}\) He adds that a metonym can “be employed when a cause is substituted for effect or effect for cause.”\(^\text{16}\) Then building on Josef Scharbert’s work, Anderson indicates that “it is this substitution of cause for effect that is important in understanding the curse in Jeremiah. Josef Scharbert has argued that curse terminology in the Hebrew Bible can sometimes be used metonymically as ‘a noun for persons on whom the curses pronounced come as devastating calamities.’ This, in effect, is a metonymical substitution of effect for cause. If, therefore, one wanted to curse someone else, he/she might refer to the dubious fate of that person who had been placed in such a dreadful situation that his/her whole existence could be considered cursed.”\(^\text{17}\)

Thus, when Nephi writes that the curse “came upon” his brothers, this can be understood as a metonymical substitution of effect for cause.\(^\text{18}\) In the case of Nephi’s brothers, Nephi could be relating the cause to the curses in the book of Deuteronomy. If this is the case, then according to Anderson, the curse “is not an invocation of misfortune but the actual embodiment of that misfortune. Thus, the object of this formula becomes an example of calamity and a proverb of disaster. Ironically, in dialectical fashion, this metonymical curse can then again become a derogatory speech act uttered against someone else by referring to that individual or group as a curse.”\(^\text{19}\) Therefore, to say that someone is cursed is to also enact a division. In relation to the social function curses played in the Bible, Anderson adds that

Curses in the [Bible] ordinarily imply two basic threats: the threat of devastating calamity, and the threat of exclusion from the community. These threats are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Threat of calamity is often expressed in what anthropologists deem as an “ecological” framework. Curse threats primarily target the fertility of humans, animals, and land. Pestilence, disease, consumption, and a general lack of

\(^\text{15}\) Anderson, “Metonymical Curse as Propaganda in Jeremiah,” 3. Anderson defines \textit{metonym} as “a trope or figure of speech in which there is a substitution of the name of one thing for that of another with which it is associated.” Anderson, “Metonymical Curse as Propaganda in Jeremiah,” 3–4.


productivity are usually cited in these threats (Deut 27–29). While the relentless power of the curse to pursue violators and bring malevolent force to bear on them is frightening, one also must not underestimate the power that threat of expulsion from the community can wield. The “contagious” nature of some curses to infect a whole family, tribe, or nation, created an incredibly strong taboo against one who would be perceived as “cursed.”

This presents the intriguing possibility that Laman and Lemuel and perhaps those that stayed with them were “loathsome” (2 Ne. 5:22) and “might not be enticing unto” (2 Ne. 5:21) the Nephites because they perceived that the Lord had caused to “come upon” the Lamanites some of the curses found in Deuteronomy.

The Stereotypic Deuteronomic Curse

We find additional threads in Lehi’s message to his sons Laman and Lemuel that connect to a common triad of curses found in Deuteronomy. After warning them of the curse, Lehi elaborates by saying that they would be “visited by sword, and by famine, and [be] hated” (2 Ne. 1:18). Not surprisingly, Jeremiah also seems to make extensive use of this triad within his prophecies. For example, in Jeremiah it reads, “I have punished Jerusalem, by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence” (Jer. 44:13). According to Nathan Mastnjak, the destruction due to a curse involving famine, the sword, and being hated because of disease is a stereotypical triad for “the enacted curses of the covenant” found in

21. See also Numbers 1:51; 3:10, 38 where the “stranger” that comes near the tabernacle “shall be put to death.” The word “stranger” comes from the Hebrew zûwr (Strong, Concordance, H2114) and implies that anyone unfit, loathsome, or adulterous is to be turned aside. Jacob seems to build on this idea when describing the Nephites’ sexual sins in relation to the Lamanites’ loathsome condition in Jacob 2–3.
22. In the book of Job, we are presented with a narrative that seems to challenge the Deuteronomic narrative related to being blessed or cursed. Significantly, in Job 7:5, Job is described as being “loathsome.” This description of Job can opens the door to a more nuanced reading of the Lamanite curse and Nephi referring to the Lamanites as “loathsome.”
24. Nathan Mastnjak, Deuteronomy and the Emergence of Textual Authority in Jeremiah (Tübingen, Ger.: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 120.
Deuteronomy. That Lehi alludes to all three further connects Lehi’s message to what we find in Deuteronomy.

There is another compelling example of this stereotypic triad in the account of David’s punishment for conducting a census in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21. In this account, the prophet Gad is told, “Go and say unto David, Thus saith the Lord, I offer thee three things: choose thee one of them, that I may do it unto thee” (2 Sam. 24:12). David is then given the choice between “three years’ famine,” “three months to be destroyed before thy foes, while that the sword of thine enemies overtaketh thee,” or three days of “pestilence, in the land” (1 Chr. 21:12). David would choose three days of pestilence, and “the Lord sent pestilence upon Israel: and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men” (1 Chr. 21:14). In this example, we once again read that a curse would come upon the Israelites, and the curse is explicitly identified as a “pestilence” that led to the death of seventy thousand men.25 This example can help explain why Lehi would cry, “O my sons, that these things might not come upon you” (2 Ne. 1:19). Lehi is in essence pleading for his sons to choose blessing and life rather than cursing and death due to the sword, famine, and pestilence.

The Book of Mormon contains many examples that support their belief in an enacted curse following a broken covenant. The prophet Abinadi would say to an unrighteous king “[the Lord] will smite this [his] people with sore afflictions, yea, with famine and with pestilence” (Mosiah 12:4). In contrast to Abinadi’s message to the unrighteous Nephites, the prophet Alma would later say that the righteous Nephites were blessed by the Lord in that they were “saved from famine, and from sickness, and all manner of diseases of every kind; and they having waxed strong in battle, that they might not be destroyed” (Alma 9:22). One of Alma’s converts and traveling companions, Amulek, would warn the Nephites that if they did not repent, they would “be visited with utter destruction; yet it would not be by flood, as were the people in the days of Noah, but it would be by famine, and by pestilence, and the sword” (Alma 10:22). Additionally, Alma would prophesy to his son Helaman that the Nephites would ultimately be destroyed, saying, “Then shall they see wars and pestilences, yea, famines and bloodshed, even until the people of Nephi shall become extinct” (Alma 45:11).

25. The destruction led David and the elders of Israel to clothe themselves in sack-cloth in mourning for the dead. See 1 Chronicles 21:16.
Later in the Book of Mormon, another prophet named Nephi would plead with the Lord that his people would not “be destroyed by the sword; but O Lord, rather let there be a famine in the land, to stir them up in remembrance of the Lord” (Hel. 11:4). In answer to his prayer, he writes that the “work of destruction did cease by the sword but became sore by famine” (Hel. 11:5).26 Samuel, a Lamanite prophet, would make a similar prophecy concerning the Nephites, saying, “They shall be smitten; yea [the Lord] will visit them with the sword and with famine and with pestilence” unto their “utter destruction” (Hel. 13:9–10). Editorializing on these ideas, Mormon wrote that “thus we see that except the Lord doth chasten his people with many afflictions, yea, except he doth visit them with death and with terror, and with famine and with all manner of pestilence, they will not remember him” (Hel. 12:3). All these examples echo the offer Gad made to David and strongly suggest that the enacted curse of the covenant, found in Deuteronomy, underlies how Book of Mormon prophets understood what it meant to be cursed.27

Before mentioning that his brothers had been cursed, Nephi highlighted the advantage he believed the sword brought to the Nephites in their conflicts with the Lamanites. He stated that he “did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us” (2 Ne. 5:14). Nephi’s brother Jacob would later reinforce this point when he said that Nephi had “been a great protector for them, having wielded the sword of Laban in their defence” (Jacob 1:10; see also Omni 1:2, 10 and W of M 1:13–14). Furthermore, not only did the Lamanites fall by the Nephites’ swords but Nephi also wrote that “because of their cursing which was upon [the Lamanites] they did . . . seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Ne. 5:24), an activity which attests to a desperate want of food, given that eating beasts of prey is prohibited by the law of Moses.28 Additionally, Alma would mention that the Nephites had been spared from “all manner of disease” (Alma 9:22), which suggests

26. This is consistent with the covenant curse formula and Nephi’s use of the “sore” in relation to being cursed.
27. See also 2 Nephi 10:6, 15.
28. Later, Nephi’s nephew Enos would say that the Lamanites were “full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey,” adding further that “many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat” (Enos 1:20). The eating of “beasts of prey,” which Israelites were forbidden to do, would have made them ritually impure or filthy (see Lev. 11). In addition, it could have led to further filthiness given that they were eating the meat raw. By not cooking the meat they ate, the Lamanites stood a higher probability of transmitting
that the same might not be true for the Lamanites. These comments all seem to lend support to the perceived fulfillment of Lehi’s warning of the triad curse involving the sword, famine, and being hated due to disease.

**Sore Curse**

The book of Ezekiel has an additional example of enacted covenant curses that is worth exploring. 29 Typical of what we see in the Book of Mormon and Jeremiah, we read in Ezekiel, “Alas for all the evil abomina-tions of the house of Israel! for they shall fall by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence” (Ezek. 6:11). Building on the above example we later read, “For thus saith the Lord God; How much more when I send my four sore judgments upon Jerusalem, the sword, and the famine, and the noisome beast, and the pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast?” (Ezek. 14:21). 30 In this case, the addition of a noisome beast to the typical triad led to the qualifier “I will send my four sore judgments.” It is also significant to note that Ezekiel uses “sore judgements” and being “cut off,” which echoes what we find in Nephi’s record describing his brothers being cut off by a sore curse.31 This example can also provide a conceptual framework for how they perceived being cursed, where being cut off resulted in destruction by the Lord’s sore judgements, typified by the sword, famine, and pestilence (see Alma 9:11–12).

Lehi’s comments when he first mentioned a potential “sore cursing” for Laman and Lemuel reflect this understanding of a sore judgment. He wrote, “I have feared, lest for the hardness of your hearts the Lord your God should come out in the fulness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed”32 (2 Ne. 1:17)—a destruction that both Lehi...
and Ezekiel equate to the sword, famine, and pestilence typical of the covenant curse. This suggests that Nephi implies the same when he said of Laman and Lemuel, “they were cut off from [the Lord’s] presence. And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity” (2 Ne. 5:20–21). If we understand the “sore cursing” to be the same as Ezekiel’s “sore judgment,” then Lehi and Nephi’s references to a sore cursing could refer to the covenant curses described in Deuteronomy 28.33

Recognizing that the judgments of the Lord were to be “sore” might also inform our understanding of the curse that Lehi and Nephi reference. Nephi and Lehi were not the only writers in the standard works to use the phrase sore cursing, and a study of the phrase turns out to be significant for understanding the Deuteronomic promise of death and destruction due to cursing.34 Nephi’s younger brother Jacob uses the same phrase to warn the Nephites that if they do not hearken unto his counsel and repent of their wickedness, the Lord will “visit them with a sore curse, even unto destruction” (Jacob 2:33). Remember that Deuteronomy 28 reads, “All these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not” (Deut. 28:45). Therefore, the coupling of sore curse with destruction because of a failure to hearken suggests that when Nephi spoke of the sore curse that came upon his brothers, he is also referencing potential death or destruction.35

Outside of Nephi’s and Jacob’s records, the phrase sore curse is only found in the book of Moses.36 The first example reads, “And God cursed the earth with a sore curse, and was angry with the wicked. . . . For they

33. Joseph Smith records the angel Moroni informing him “of great judgments which were coming upon the earth, with great desolation by famine, sword, and pestilence; and that these grievous judgments would come on the earth” (JS–H 1:45). Here we have the intensifying adjectives “great” and “grievous” that, like “sore,” are tied to God’s “judgment” consisting of the stereotypic covenant curse of “famine, sword, and pestilence” found in Deuteronomy 28.

34. Sore here comes from the Hebrew word raʿ (Strong, Concordance, H7451) and means bad, evil, or painful (see also Job 2:7). In Deuteronomy 32:23, this same Hebrew word is translated as mischiefs, a word Nephi also used to describe his brothers in 2 Nephi 5:24.

35. See Uriona, “‘Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing’.”

36. It has been hypothesized that non-Biblical phrases found in the Book of Mormon, such as “sore curse,” are possibly connected to the book of Moses via material originating on the brass plates. See Jeff Lindsay and Noel B. Reynolds, “‘Strong Like unto Moses’: The Case for Ancient Roots in the Book of Moses Based on Book of Mormon Usage of Related Content Apparently from the Brass Plates,” Interpreter 44 (2021): 1–92, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/strong-like-unto-moses-the-case-for-ancient
would not hearken unto his voice” (Moses 5:56–57). The second example reads, “And there came forth a great famine into the land, and the Lord cursed the earth with a sore curse, and many of the inhabitants thereof died” (Moses 8:4). In the second example, it is explicitly clear that the effect of the *sore curse* was death. Both examples differ from the *sore curse* that Nephi and Jacob spoke of because it is the land instead of the people that are the subject of the curse. But clearly, writers believed that failure to hearken to God could lead to sore curses.

Further, in all these examples *sore* seems to act as an intensifier to signal possible death or destruction. For example, when Nephi speaks of a storm at sea that almost “swallowed” up their boat, he writes that the storm became “sore” (1 Ne. 18:14–15). Later, one of the twelve Nephite disciples tells of a “sore” war that threatened the Nephites with “utter destruction” (3 Ne. 2:13). With these examples in mind, by using *sore* to describe the curse that came upon his brothers, Nephi indicates his belief that Laman and Lemuel potentially faced death or destruction for failing to hearken to God.

As we saw in the book of Ezekiel, there are examples in the Bible where *sore* could be linked with curses. For example, in the book of Jeremiah we get a description of Jerusalem during the siege of the Babylonians which reads, “the famine was sore in the city” (Jer. 52:6). In Deuteronomy, we read that “the Lord shall smite thee in the knees, and in the legs, with a sore botch that cannot be healed” (Deut. 28:35), adding later that “the Lord will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, even great plagues, and of long continuance, and sore sicknesses . . . until thou be destroyed” (Deut. 28:59, 61).

37. See, for example, 2 Nephi 1:22; Mosiah 12:4–8; Helaman 11:5–6; Mormon 4:2; and Ether 14:4. It is not always the case that *sore* is used to indicate impending death or destruction. See Alma 37:28, 31.

38. See also Mosiah 1:17; 9:3; 12:4; and Helaman 11:5, where *sore* is used in relation to the curses Moses describes, particularly famine and pestilence.

39. Commenting on another time *sore* is used in the Bible, Van der Zwan writes, “This is one of the only two places (the other being Deut 28:35) in the Hebrew Bible where it [boil] is qualified by עָרֶק [sore]. It derives from the verb עָרֶק [to be hot, probably also to ‘be inflamed’ as in Arabic], an experience hinted at by [Job] 30:30 where blackness adds this same sense but now suggests being burnt from the outside. Alternatively, its heat could stem from the hunger inside him, as in Lamentation 5:10, or could be associated to his anger, but these possibilities are open and depend on the exact context.” Pieter van der Zwan, “Some Psychoanalytical Meanings of the Skin in the Book of Job,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 3.
The apparent mirroring of “sore” in Nephi’s record suggests that Nephi believed his brothers’ curse would have the same outcome of death or destruction brought on by the curse of the covenant.40 Significantly, when Nephi next mentions that a “skin of blackness” (2 Ne. 5:21) came upon his brothers he is perhaps using an ancient Near East motif suggestive of death.41 For example, in a prominent Neo-Assyrian treaty we find a curse that reads, “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.”42 In this example the “skin . . . black as pitch” seems to be implying that the curse would bring death.43 Therefore, Nephi’s reference to a “sore curse” and a “skin of blackness” may once again be an allusion to Deuteronomy and the promise of “life and death, blessing and cursing” (Deut. 30:19).44

Cursing and Death

The Book of Mormon provides a great example of this Deuteronomic link between cursing and death. Early in the book of Alma, we learn of a war that broke out between the Nephites and an apostate group named the Amlicites who had joined forces with the Lamanites. Despite the record indicating that the Amlicites and Lamanites “were so numerous that they could not be numbered . . . the Nephites did pursue them with their might, and did slay them” (Alma 2:35–36). Later, the record recounts what happened to the Amlicites and Lamanites: “And it came to pass that many died in the wilderness of their wounds, and were devoured by those beasts and also the vultures of the air” (Alma 2:38). This comment is reflective of a curse described in Deuteronomy 28 that

40. Interestingly, after Nephi stated that a skin of blackness came upon his brothers, he never mentioned Laman or Lemuel’s names again as part of his record. This creates the impression that after Nephi mentioned that his older brothers were cursed, it was as if he considered them as dead. Whether this was intentional or not, the effect fits nicely into the Deuteronomic framework of cursing and death.

41. Black or blackness is also used in the Bible to describe death and destruction more generally. This is especially true for the writing around the time Nephi wrote his record. See Isaiah 50:3; Micah 3:6; Jeremiah 8:21, 14:2; and Ezekiel 32:7–8. The two examples in Jeremiah use the Hebrew word qāḏar, which means to be dark and by implication to mourn in sackcloth or sordid garments. This same word is used in Job 5:11 and 30:28 and Psalms 35:14; 38:6; 42:9; and 43:2.


43. See Uriona, “‘Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing.’”

44. Significantly, we find no mention of a curse that unambiguously speaks of a phenotypic change in skin color in the biblical curses.
reads, “The Lord shall cause thee to be smitten . . . and thy carcase shall be meat unto all fowls of the air, and unto the beasts of the earth, and no man shall fray them away” (Deut. 28:25–26).

Interestingly, the record includes the death and destruction that also befell the Nephites: “Now many women and children had been slain with the sword, and also many of their flocks and their herds; and also many of their fields of grain were destroyed, for they were trodden down by the hosts of men” (Alma 3:2). This once again reflects Deuteronomy 28 that reads, “Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field. Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store. Cursed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep” (Deut. 28:16–18), adding further that “a nation of fierce countenance, which shall not regard the person of the old, nor shew favour to the young . . . which also shall not leave thee either corn, wine, or oil, or the increase of thy kine, or flocks of thy sheep, until he have destroyed thee” (Deut. 28:50–51).

Concerning the Nephites’ destruction and death, Alma commented that “the people were afflicted, yea, greatly afflicted for the loss of their brethren, and also for the loss of their flocks and herds, and also for the loss of their fields of grain, which were trodden under foot and destroyed by the Lamanites. And so great were their afflictions that every soul had cause to mourn; and they believed that it was the judgments of God sent upon them because of their wickedness and their abominations; therefore they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty” (Alma 4:2–3). Here the record indicates that the death of the Nephites by the swords of the Lamanites as well as the ensuing famine that followed the war were believed to be due to the “judgments of God” because of their “wickedness.” This understanding is reminiscent of Ezekiel’s reference to a sore judgment that typified the curse of the covenant.

That the Nephites related these events to the curse of the covenant is reflected in the comment that “they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty.” Earlier in the record, we read the way that King Benjamin described Lehi’s journey to his son Mosiah: “As they were unfaithful they did not prosper nor progress in their journey, but were driven back, and incurred the displeasure of God upon them; and therefore they were smitten with famine and sore afflictions, to stir them up in remembrance of their duty” (Mosiah 1:17). Their duty was to their God, and because of their unfaithfulness we once again get a reference to the famine and sore afflictions typical of the covenant’s curse.45

45. See also Mosiah 13:30 where Abinadi says that the ten commandments were given “to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him.”
Mourning Practices and the Lamanite Mark

After Alma described the war’s death and destruction, he commented on the Lamanite curse. Before mentioning this curse, Alma described the appearance of the Amlicites and Lamanites: “the Amlicites were distinguished from the Nephites, for they had marked themselves with red in their foreheads after the manner of the Lamanites; nevertheless they had not shorn their heads like unto the Lamanites. Now the heads of the Lamanites were shorn; and they were naked, save it were skin which was girded about their loins” (Alma 3:4–5). Alma’s description of the Lamanites mimics earlier Nephite description of the Lamanites that came soon after Nephi indicated they were cursed (see Enos 1:20). Commenting on these verses, Ethan Sproat suggested the “possibility that ‘the skins of the Lamanites’ are to be understood as articles of clothing, the notable girdle of skin that these particular Lamanites wear to cover their nakedness.”

Further, it is important to note that Alma indicates that the Amlicites “marked themselves” and that their mark shared some relationship with the shaved head and loincloths of the Lamanites despite the fact that the Amlicites did not shave their heads. This peculiar distinction of the Lamanites can again find potential context in relation to the curse of the covenant. The practices of wearing a loincloth and the shaving of the head represent things that the Lamanites could have done as they mourned their impending death and destruction brought on by being cursed. For example, Jeremiah would say of the destruction of the Moabites that “every head shall be bald, and every beard clipped: upon all the hands shall be cuttings, and upon the loins sackcloth” (Jer. 48:37). Over time, mourning practices such as these might have become unique customs adopted by subsequent generations of Lamanites.


47. “The use of sackcloth as a symbol of mourning, and contemporaneous with the period when the custom of tearing off the garments had become specifically associated with mourning for a lost relative. The garb of mourning naturally becomes also the symbol of distress in general. . . . the putting on of sackcloth [was an] old established [custom], which had come to be specifically regarded as [a symbol] of mourning,” Morris Jastrow Jr., “The Tearing of Garments as a Symbol of Mourning, with Especial Reference to the Customs of the Ancient Hebrews,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 21 (1900): 35.

48. Nephi had grown up in the culture of the ancient Near East, far removed from the land of his inheritance. Nephi, as a first-generation immigrant, would most likely have a worldview shaped not by the new land he found himself in but by the old world he left. There is a real possibility then that Alma’s discussion of a mark, a curse, and skin
Robert Alter points out that during conditions of famine or plague, communities “adopted mourning practices such as the wearing of sackcloth and sprinkling ashes on the head. The underlying idea was that such practices of mortification would engage the compassion of the deity, and the disaster would end.”

49 In their study of the Old Testament practice of rending clothes, Jerome and Uroko state, “One of the outstanding actions that accompany tearing of garments is ‘to put on sackcloth.’ Sack (šak in Hebrew) is ‘a rough fabric woven of hair, dark in color, used among other purposes for grain bags.’ It is a poor-quality material of goat hair which is coarse in nature.”

50 Adding to our understanding of this practice, Morris Jastrow wrote, “Scholars are now generally agreed that the *saq* [sackcloth] was originally a loin-cloth made of coarse stuff and hanging down from the loins to cover these parts of the body which in the eyes of the Semites constitute one’s ‘nakedness.’”

51 Alma indicates that the Lamanites used the loincloth to cover their “nakedness” and further adds that the loincloth was “dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them” (Alma 3:6). If the Lamanites were experiencing disasters such as death by sword, famine, and plague, it is quite possible that their appearance reflected mourning practices such as wearing dark loincloths and shaved heads.

52 In the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel we find extensive examples of this type of a mark in response to the enactment of the covenant curse.

53 For example, in Ezekiel 7 after describing the stereotypic triad of sword, famine, and pestilence that was “upon all the multitude” (Ezek. 7:14–15) color might reflect a different worldview from Nephi’s, and thus, a different conceptual framework than what we find in Nephi’s record. Alma’s record was informed by almost five hundred years of elapsed time and a different cultural environment than that which Nephi experienced when he first spoke of his brothers being cursed.


52. See Isaiah 50:3 and 2 Nephi 7:3. There the heavens are clothed with “blackness” and “sackcloth.” The Hebrew word for blackness in this verse is *qadrûwth*, which comes from the root word *qâdar* (Strong, *Concordance*, H6940, H6937), meaning to be ashy or dark-colored. By implication, it means to mourn in sackcloth or sordid garments and is associated with death. Ash is further connected to boils breaking forth on the skin in the exodus story. See Exodus 9:8–11.

53. See also Jeremiah 4:8; 16:6; 47:5; Lamentations 2:10; Ezekiel 27:30–31; Amos 8:10; and Isaiah 3:24, which was quoted by Jacob after the curse came upon the Lamanites in 2 Nephi 13:24.
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of Israel, the record reads that those who escaped this fate “shall also gird themselves with sackcloth, and horror shall cover them; and shame shall be upon all faces, and baldness upon all their heads” (Ezek. 7:18). Marks of this type were self-inflicted and distinct from, but seen as related to, the death and destruction that came from being cursed.54 Marks of this type were seen as the result of being cursed but were not the curse itself.

**Lamanite Hearkening Leads to Blessing and Life**

The tension between the Nephites and the Lamanites persisted for many years following Alma’s discussion of the Lamanite mark. However, in the first example of a group of Lamanites who joined with the Nephites, there is potential to once again understand this event in terms of the Deuteronomistic promise. According to the promise found in Deuteronomy, blessings and life come when one hearkens to the Lord. It is therefore telling that the first group of Lamanites to accept the words of God and the need to repent were from the land of Ishmael. Matthew Bowen points out that the name Ishmael means “‘May El hear [him],’ ‘May El hearken,’ or ‘El Has Hearkened’—[which] derives from the Semitic (and later Hebrew) verb šāmaʿ (to ‘hear,’ ‘hearken,’ or ‘obey’).”55 This meaning suggests that those first converted Lamanites were in a land prepared by God to “hearken.” Playing on this understanding of the name Ishmael and the conditional nature of the curse as it relates to hearkening, Ammon, the Nephite who taught these Lamanites, prefaced his teachings by first asking the king of that land, “Wilt thou hearken unto my words?” (Alma 18:22).

It is fitting, therefore, that the Lamanites would accept the gospel first in the land of “hearkening” and come to Christ by hearkening to the words of the Nephite missionaries. Lehi had promised Laman and

54. A mourning practice that was common in the ancient Near East but forbidden by the law was that of tattooing (Deut. 14:1). Jan Martin presents the intriguing possibility that the Lamanites marked themselves with tattoos and that this “might help explain at least part of the procedure for how someone, like a Nephite dissenter, became recognized as a Lamanite.” Martin, “Prophet Nephi and the Covenantal Nature,” 125. Covering in ash is also associated with mourning rituals. This might have implications related to Gerrit Steenblik’s work looking at body paint in the culture of the Maya and the Lamanite curse. See Gerrit M. Steenblik, “Demythicizing the Lamanites’ ‘Skin of Blackness,’” *Interpreter* 49 (2021): 167–258.

Lemuel that if they would “hearken” to Nephi, they would receive his “first blessing” (2 Ne. 1:28–29). In what seems to be a delayed realization of this blessing, we learn that those Lamanites who hearkened to the word of God were given land among the Nephites. The land they received was called Jershon, a name that is probably derived from the Hebrew root y-r-š, meaning “inheritance.” Here again the name of the land appears to be suggestive. It suggests that these Lamanites received the blessings promised to Laman and Lemuel that were contingent on their hearkening: they had inherited a land among the Nephites as Lehi had desired. 

Lehi’s concern for Laman and Lemuel and their posterity reflects his understanding that if cursed, they might perish. The story of Ammon and the Lamanites who hearkened to the Nephite missionaries seem to validate the Lord’s words: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life” (Deut. 30:19). It also works as a narrative foil in contrast to Lehi’s warning to Laman and Lemuel that if they would not hearken, they would be cursed. Mormon would draw out this contrast more explicitly when he wrote, speaking of the Lamanites who joined with the Nephites, “they began to be a very industrious people; yea, and they were friendly with the Nephites; therefore, they did open a correspondence with them, and the curse of God did no more follow them” (Alma 23:18). It appears that once the Lamanites began to hearken to the Lord’s teachings, “the curse of God did no more follow them” and they were no longer “cut off” and were blessed with life rather than death. In a dramatic realization of this promise, we read that the children of these converted Lamanites were so blessed in battle that they provide the only example within the Book of Mormon where all were


57. The death of the righteous Lamanites who hearkened to God is prefaced by the following words: “And the great God has had mercy on us, and made these things known unto us that we might not perish” (Alma 24:14). They were later described as “saved” (Alma 24:26). In this way, their deaths fit into the Deuteronomic framework of life and blessings.

58. When Ammon and his brethren go to preach to the Lamanites, “the main differences that the missionaries find during their fourteen-year mission are cultural, not racial. . . . These distinctions between the Nephites and Lamanites suggest that the boundary between the two groups is defined by moral values, not genetics, and that the curse of the covenant is manifest primarily in spiritual and behavioral, not physical, terms.” Steven L. Olsen, “The Covenant of the Chosen People: The Spiritual Foundations of Ethnic Identity in the Book of Mormon,” Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture 21, no. 2 (2012): 26.
protected from death in battle.\(^{59}\) This once again validates the Nephite belief in the promise of life and blessing for those who hearken.\(^{60}\)

**Nephite Failure to Hearken Leads to Cursing and Death**

Nephi had seen in vision that the Lamanites would once again be reconciled with their God. Yet, in that same vision, he also saw that his own people would eventually be destroyed (see 1 Ne. 12–14).\(^{61}\) If we understand Nephi’s vision in light of the Deuteronomic promise of “life and death, blessing and cursing,” we are better able to see how the failure of the Nephites to hearken to God led to their ultimate destruction. For example, the Nephite prophet Abinadi said to a group of Nephites, who were no longer hearkening to the word of the Lord, that they would be “driven by men” and “slain; and the vultures of the air, and the dogs, yea and the wild beasts, shall devour their flesh” (Mosiah 12:2). Abinadi further added that they will be “afflicted with all manner of diseases because of [their] iniquities,” “smitten on every hand,” “driven and scattered to and fro, even as a wild flock is driven by wild and ferocious beasts,” “hunted,” and “taken by the hand of [their] enemies” (Mosiah 17:16–18; see also Alma 2:35–38; 16:9–11; 25:12; and Hel. 7:18–19).

Abinadi’s words echo what we find in Deuteronomy 28 (Deut. 28:25–26; see also Lev. 26:25). Much like Nephi did when he listed the blessings that came to the Nephites because they hearkened to God, Abinadi alludes to Deuteronomic curses that would come upon the Nephites if they failed to hearken. These similarities support the idea that the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy provide the context for understanding Nephi’s references to his older brothers’ cursing and the greater cursing that came upon the Nephites, which ultimately led to their destruction. In this way, the Book of Mormon authors reaffirm the idea that failing to

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\(^{59}\) See Alma 56–57 for the story of this event. Alma 57:26 says of this miracle, “And we do justly ascribe it to the miraculous power of God, because of their exceeding faith in that which they had been taught to believe—that there was a just God, and whosoever did not doubt, that they should be preserved by his marvelous power.”

\(^{60}\) It should be noted that many Lamanites were killed soon after their conversion. However, the record indicates that their death led to many being “brought to the knowledge of the truth; thus we see that the Lord worketh in many ways to the salvation of his people” (Alma 24:27). This commentary helps to reframe the death of the faithful Lamanites in relation to “salvation” or life. A similar reframing takes place in the narrative of the death of those who believed Alma and Amulek’s preachings. See for example Alma 14:9–11. It is significant to note that following this incident the city of Ammonihah was destroyed (see Alma 16:9–11), according to what is described in Deuteronomy 13:12–18.

\(^{61}\) Unlike the children of Laman and Lemuel, the Nephites were not given the blessing by Father Lehi that if they were to be cursed, they would not be destroyed.
hearken to the Lord would bring cursing and death. Just as the Israelites believed that they perished because they failed to hearken, so did the Nephites.

The Nephites may not have provided the first example of being cursed within the Book of Mormon, but they provide the final example of a curse found in the book of Deuteronomy for those unfaithful to God’s covenant (see also Alma 10:22–23 and Hel. 12:1–6). Mormon describes the change that eventually comes over the Nephites before their destruction in a letter he wrote to his son during the final battles between the Nephites and the Lamanites. Mormon wrote, “And now I write somewhat concerning the sufferings of [the Nephites]. For according to the knowledge which I have received from Amoron, behold, the Lamanites have many prisoners, which they took from the tower of Sherrizah; and there were men, women, and children. And the husbands and fathers of those women and children they have slain; and they feed the women upon the flesh of their husbands, and the children upon the flesh of their fathers; and no water, save a little, do they give unto them” (Moro. 9:7–8).

We find a similar gruesome picture in one of the curses found in Deuteronomy 28, which reads, “And thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and of thy daughters, which the Lord thy God hath given thee, in the siege, and in the straitness, wherewith thine enemies shall distress thee” (Deut. 28:53; also 28:32). Mormon’s description of the destruction that befell the Nephites echoes the curses found in Deuteronomy 28 for those who did not hearken to God. Because the Nephites rejected the Lord’s teachings, thousands were “hewn down in open rebellion against their God, and heaped up as dung upon the face of the land” (Morm. 2:15). Mormon recorded that after the Nephites turned away from their covenants, “they did curse God, and wish to die” (Morm. 2:14), once again confirming how they viewed the promise of cursing and death found in Deuteronomy.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, we learn from the larger narrative arc of the Book of Mormon that it was the Nephites who were destroyed for failing to hearken to the word of the Lord. In wording that reflects the Deuteronomic framework of “life and death, blessing and cursing” (Deut. 30:19), Mormon, editorializing on the state of the Nephites, wrote, “And thus we see that except the Lord doth chasten his people with many afflictions, yea, except he doth visit them with death and with terror, and with famine and with all manner of pestilence, they will not remember him . . . [but] blessed are they who will repent and hearken unto the voice of the
Lord their God; for these are they that shall be saved” (Hel. 12:3, 23). Like Mormon, Nephi saw the unfortunate destruction of the Nephites. Nephi described that vision in language matching almost exactly the language he used to describe those that followed his brothers at the time of their cursing. Nephi laments, “I beheld, after they had dwindled in unbelief they became a dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people, full of idleness and all manner of abominations” (1 Ne. 12:23).62 Tellingly, when describing these scenes that Nephi saw in vision, Mormon used language that parallels the curse of the covenant as it is described in Deuteronomy 28.

This would suggest, along with the other examples provided in this paper, that when trying to understand the exact nature of the Lamanite curse, Deuteronomy 28 can act as a guide. The curses found there seem to be typified by the sword, famine, and pestilence we often find described in the Book of Mormon. Importantly, the book of Deuteronomy never describes a malediction involving a phenotypic change in skin color. Therefore, to understand the Nephi’s reference to a curse and his subsequent reference to a skin of blackness as relating to a changing of the pigment in the Lamanites’ skin does damage to the narrative of the Book of Mormon and imposes upon it nineteenth-century sensibilities. However, when the curse and the skin of blackness are viewed from an ancient Near Eastern perspective with an eye to the Deuteronomic curse tradition we are better equipped to evaluate curse traditions within the greater narrative of the Book of Mormon. It is this framework that seems to underlie the life and death struggles that both the Nephites and Lamanites experience in the Book of Mormon. In failing to choose “life and good” (Deut. 30:15), the Nephites’ eventual destruction at the end of the record becomes the final witness to this didactic message.63

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62. Mormon uses some of these same descriptors in some of his final words prior to the destruction of the Nephites. See Mormon 5:15.