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Amerindian Identity, the *Book of Mormon*, and the American Dream

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In 1829 William Apess (1798-1839) published his autobiography, *Son of the Forest*, in which he foresaw Native Americans flocking to accept Christianity and "occupy[ing] seats in the kingdom" before his white readers would (O'Connell 51). The following year—but without any knowledge of Apess' work — Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805-44) published the *Book of Mormon*, in which he foresaw the same, and indeed went further. As well as anticipating their conversion, Smith envisioned Native Americans both building an American New Jerusalem and acting as God's scourge, executing divine judgment on an apostate United States (Stott "New Jerusalem" 75-76). Unlike those of his generation whose valuation of Indianness "went hand in hand with the dispossession and conquest of actual Indian people" (Deloria 182), Smith foresaw the dispossession and conquest of the whites. The work's radicalism should not be exaggerated: it would mix eighteenth-century environmentalism with the covenant theology of the Old Testament, and Smith would have no qualms in reporting that the dark coloration of Native Americans was evidence of a curse. Nevertheless, that he made no attempt in his early thought to follow precedent and appropriate the Abrahamic myth for European Americans, but instead saw God working through the American Indian, is remarkable. It is fully understandable that Apess, a Pequot brought up by white families and converted to Methodism, would talk of Christianity as a means to the redemption of his people;[1] less so that Smith would argue that the future of white America depended on the continent's native population. In what follows I begin with the curse and move to the eschatology in order to explain Smith's reasons for thinking so, and for believing — only fifty years after the Revolution — that the American Dream was morally bankrupt.[2]

The Lamanite Curse

> *And the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them because of their transgression and their rebellion against their brethren – Alma 1:104*

Smith claimed that the *Book of Mormon* was a translation of a pre-Columbian history; a work that told how the ancestors of the Indian had been led to the New World from Jerusalem, and had at one time been Christian. It was structured as a series of narratives of cultural conflict between two peoples — the Nephites and the Lamanites. Originally these were kinship groups (with a common descent from the Israelite tribe of Manasseh), but in time religious faith became more important than birth as a determinant of group identity, and within the *Book of Mormon* narrative that of the Nephites is actively sustained in two ways — by an ongoing revivalism that seeks to reclaim backsliders, and by a general refusal to intermarry with others unless members of those groups accept Nephite religious and cultural values. Both tactics would have made sense to Smith's first readers (in 1830 evangelists like Charles Grandison Finney were trying to create a redeemed nation by calling America to the mourner's bench, and, as Rogers M. Smith has shown, ethnocentric definitions of national identity were becoming the norm); and so would the idea, returned to again and again in Nephite history, that a curse will come upon those who fall away (Smith 145).

The curse itself was spiritual death, and thus at root self-inflicted; a hardening of the heart beyond the point where one could yield to God's Spirit (Mormon 2:45; cf. Nettleton 30-39). However, the influence of covenant theology on Smith's thought was such that spiritual states were presumed to have physical consequences. As in Leviticus 26, where the land will be blessed with prosperity, security and peace if the people embrace the Lord's commandments, but cursed if they reject them, so in the *Book of Mormon*: separation from God was manifested physically. "[B]ecause of the hardness of their hearts, the land was cursed for their sake," we read of the Nephites in their final decline (Mormon 1:18),[3] while, in the case of the Lamanites, the loss of God's spirit and an alienation from his purposes was written on their bodies in a "mark" that made them "loathsome" to their kin, and providentially inhibited out-marriage on the Nephites' part.

Three explanations of the mark are given. The simplest sees the curse made evident in the adoption of what was — to the Nephites — the alien

practice of body painting. Inverting the symbolism found in John Heckewelder's account of Moravian missionary work, in which Christian Indians "were well known by their dress which was plain and decent, [with] no sign of paint to be seen on their skin or Cloaths" (423), Lamanite warriors physically mark themselves as outside the household of God (Alma 1:111). A second interpretation of the mark sees it as a "skin of blackness," given by divine *fiat* (2 Nephi 4:35-38). The phrasing seems intended to call to mind the mark on Cain, which in popular understandings was one of a black skin (Blackburn 64–76), but what the *Book of Mormon* owes to the myth of Cain is not a binding of identity and color, but a witness to God's power.[4] Possibly because of his apprenticeship in magic lore,[5] Smith had no trouble believing that God could and did miraculously change the physical nature of things (Brooke 160).

These appeals to custom and miracle are, however, unelaborated in Smith's text; it was instead a third interpretation of the mark that more consistently engaged his attention, and primarily concerns us here. This third explanation also refers to color, but this time does so consciously, for it links the mark to the way in which, over time, the Lamanites become dark while the Nephites remain white. Today it is almost impossible for a reader not to see this as a racialist definition of difference, but it must be stressed that such a reading is anachronistic. "Indian color [was] not natural" but "merely accidental," James Adair had argued (3), reversing the logic of those who like David Hume (1:252) linked capacity and color; it proceeded "entirely from their custom and method of living, and not from any inherent spring of nature." The *Book of Mormon* reported the same (Alma 1:104). As Buffon had suggested, more than half a century before the work's publication, a white skin is a consequence of civilization, not its cause. Were two nations to inhabit the same territory, the naturalist had explained, the one civilized, its citizens "protected from the fear and oppression of misery," the other "savage and careless" — a nation in which each individual, "deriving no assistance from society, is obliged to provide for his own subsistence, to sustain alternately the excesses of hunger and the effects of unwholesome food [and] to be alternately exhausted with labor and lassitude" — then "there can be no doubt but that the savage people would be more ugly [and] tawny [....] than those enjoying civilized society" (4:269). In the *Book of Mormon*, the mark on the Lamanites instantiates just such a process, albeit on an accelerated time-scale;[6] what was salient was culture not race.[7]

The Nephite Ideal

> *And it came to pass in the thirty and sixth year, the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another – 4 Nephi 1:3*

The culture valorized by the *Book of Mormon* was not one that Native Americans would have recognized: it was mythic rather than historical. However, unlike others who sought to fit Indian history within a biblical framework, Smith did not categorize the Indians as those still in their cultural infancy (cf. Ferguson 75). Neither did he seek to disassociate them with the remains of their past. In an 1811 address to the New York Historical Society, Governor De Witt Clinton had offered the reflection that without the aid of agriculture, "without the use of iron and copper; and without a perseverance, labor, and design which demonstrates considerable advances in civilization," neither the Indians nor their ancestors were capable of building the "antient fortresses" seen in western New York State (60, 61; cf. McCulloh 208; Tocqueville 35). Nineteen years later, Smith disagreed — reporting that the ancestors of the contemporary Indian did know agriculture, and did use copper and iron (2 Nephi 4:15-16, 21); indeed they had constructed a civilization that in its concern for others put those of Europe and America to shame. Nephite society at its best had set the needs of the poor above the comfort of those whose basic needs have already been met, and there had been "no respect to persons as to those who stood in need" (Mosiah 2:24, 32, 40-1; 9:60-62; Alma 1:46; cf. Smith, *Holy Scriptures*, Genesis 7:23, James 2:1, 9; Marquardt 99-100). Over a thousand years of history, those who respond to religious renewal had done so with a concern for social and economic justice and a resistance to the idea of possessive individualism, while in periods of religious decline the disasters that come upon the Nephites had been a consequence of "their oppression to the poor" — their "withholding their food from the hungry, withholding their clothing from the naked, and smiting their humble brethren upon the cheek" (Helaman 2:45).

As a result, although the alterity of the Lamanites is important to Nephite self-definition, this difference does not structure the work as a whole. It is Nephite concern for social justice, not Lamanite savagery, which is contrasted with the European-American social norms — and although Nephite virtue ultimately failed in the face of a resurgent capitalism, even the story of the destruction of their society serves as an exemplum. Nephite history provided a example of what Anthony D. Smith has called a "myth of

decline": a story of how a people "lost [their] anchor in a living tradition, how the old values became ossified and meaningless, and how, as a result, common sentiments and beliefs faded to give way to rampant individualism"(Smith 67).

Some of this picture of Nephite virtue would have seemed uncontroversial—even predictable — to those familiar with the age's tributes to Native American generosity. "[T]hey would share with those of their own tribe, the last part of their provisions even to a single ear of corn," Adair reported of the Cherokee. "An open generous temper is a standing virtue among them; to be narrow-hearted, especially to those in want, or to any of their own family, is accounted a great crime, and to reflect scandal on the rest of the tribe" (8). When the grain is fully ripe, William Bartram wrote of the Seminole, the whole town assembles for the harvest; and prior to each individual carrying off and storing the grain which is individually owned, each family carries and deposits in a communal granary "a certain quantity, according to his ability or inclination [...] to serve as a surplus to fly to for succor, to assist neighboring towns, whose crops may have failed, accommodate strangers, or travelers [...] and for all other exigencies of the state" (Waselkov and Braund 127). What would have been controversial was the presumption that Jacksonian America was under condemnation because of its failure to show a similar generosity in its treatment of the poor. "[I]f ye turn away the needy, and the naked, and visit not the sick and afflicted, and impart of your substance if ye have, to those who stand in need," one of the leaders of the Nephite church explained, " . . . ye are as dross, which the refiners do cast out, (it being of no worth,) and is trodden under foot of men" (Alma 16:223-25) — and just such a turning away was the basis of God's treading down upon the New Nation (3 Nephi 9:52).

Running through the *Book of Mormon* is a barely controlled anger that so many in the latter days denied any responsibility for others and pursued wealth without any intent to do good. Fundamental to its message was the conviction that those who prospered were to "clothe the naked, [...] feed the hungry, [...} liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted," so that all could be equally rich (Stott, "Economics of Sin" 71). For them not to show this concern for others was a sign of covetousness—was a sin that would provoke God's anger, and precipitate Christ's return (Mosiah 2:41), and it was in preparation for this return that the New Jerusalem would be built.

We cannot be sure exactly when Smith expected the end to come. An 1835 conjecture that the second coming might not be for another fifty-six years would have been influenced by the failure of Mormon missionary work

among the Delaware, and a growing need to distance himself from William Miller, who was already teaching that 1843 would be the year of Christ's return (Roberts 2:182; Stott, "New Jerusalem Abandoned," 78-82; Bliss 106). While working on the *Book of Mormon*, however, Smith clearly thought the destruction of the contemporary generation was immanent (Marquardt 27), and it was one of the purposes of the work to awaken America to its danger.[8]

The restoration of Israel

> *And there was no inequality among them, for the Lord did pour out his Spirit . . . that they might receive the word with joy, and as a branch be grafted into the true vine . . . might enter into the rest of the Lord – Alma 11:26-28*

It is easy for those unaffected by Smith's inspiration to be dismissive of his eschatology. In her study of "Dying Indian" speeches, Kristina Bross notes that the Puritans who authored them were uninterested in their putative Indian subjects: all that mattered was the symbolic value of the words they supposedly used (Bross 325). For Smith, it could be argued it was the same. If, as it has been suggested, the American "national metaphysics of Indian-hating" followed from a "collective refusal to conceive of Native Americans as persons" (Drinnon 463), Smith's work could be seen (because of its Hebraic representation of the Indian) as being party to that refusal. At the very least, Thomas W. Murphy observes, the *Book of Mormon* potentially enslaves Native Americans "to a sacred history not of their own creation" ("Laban's Ghost" 113).

Such criticisms can be granted; but they leave too much unsaid. They focus too closely on Smith's claims to have revealed what God had done in pre-Columbian America, and ignore the book's warnings to the United States. To be sure, those who do not believe in the historicity of Smith's work cannot help but see the *Book of Mormon* as a misappropriation of Amerindian history — but this does not legitimize the European-American conquest. Likewise, although the destiny Smith envisaged for American Indians was not an indigenous one, or even one that many of them would have welcomed, it was also not the rationale for white hegemony (cultural or political) that Murphy and others find in the *Book of Mormon* text.[9] For all of the work's negative account of the Lamanites, God's quarrel was not with their descendants, but with the European-Americans who had settled the land of promise. And finally, although Smith could well be accused of denying validity to non-Christian religious traditions and non-agricultural

economies, Indian adoption of European-American cultural and religious values was not seen as legitimating white rule, but an event preliminary to its overthrow. Taking inspiration not just from the common belief that the Indians had an Israelite ancestry (Alma 8:3), but also the Biblical affirmation that "the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises" belonged to the Israelites (Romans 9:4), Smith did not rest content with fitting Native Americans into Biblical history. He presumed that God's eschatological purposes for the New World would be fulfilled through the American Indian (Ether 6:8-12). The Lamanites would be the builders of the New Jerusalem and the source of true Christianity in the latter days. Following their conversion, the tide of conquest would change.

Others had anticipated a Christian Indian gathering in the American West. Eleazer Williams, for example, planned to resettle Native Americans from New York and Canada in the area of Green Bay, Wisconsin, and there form a Christian commonwealth. As Smith might have known, some 150 Oneida had made the move from Oneida Castle (east of Utica) to Green Bay in 1823 (Hall 15). Where Smith was unique was in supposing that an American New Jerusalem would bring together Native American and European American, that it would be the Indians rather than the whites that would be culturally dominant in the amalgam—and that the Lamanites who would build the New Jerusalem would also be the vehicle of God's judgment on the United States (3 Nephi 9:51-52; Pratt 15). Rather than assuming, as would William Gilmore Simms, that the Indian had merely "a pioneer mission, to prepare the wild for the superior race" (*The Cassique of Kiawah* [1859], qtd. Barnett 96), Smith believed that it was the mission of the whites to prepare North America for Native American leadership. And unlike those of earlier generations who had seen Indian warfare as God's warning to America (Baumgartner 131), Smith did not think of the Lamanites as merely temporary instruments of the divine will. God's scourges, rods in his hands to execute judgment on a wicked world, were traditionally thought to be broken and burned when he had done (Bellamy 30), but this was not to be the fate of the Native Americans in Smith's eschatology. "This remnant of Joseph, who are now degraded, will then be filled with the wisdom of God; and by that wisdom they will build [the New Jerusalem]," Mormon apostle Orson Pratt would explain; in that day the [white] church would "have the privilege of being numbered with them, instead of their being numbered with us" (179).

Some of this was arguably the logic of philo-semitism, a logic that would make subordination to God's "ancient people" a conventional feature of mid-

century millenarian thought. The Jews, one could read in the *American Millenarian and Prophetic Review* for 1 January 1844, "shall be restored to their own land, converted, and become the center of unity of the visible church of Christ; the *chief* of the nations of the earth, during the millennial reign." Smith, however, denied his readers the self-indulgence of an oriental romanticism (see Whalen for this), and brought the apocalypse close to home. Native Americans would be the ones converted, restored to their own land, and the center of a church characterized by a radical equality. "[A]ll are alike unto God," Nephi affirmed; "[...] he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female" (2 Nephi 11:114-15, echoing Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11).

The idea that all were equal before God was, of course, a commonplace in Christian thinking. As Anthony Benezet had explained in his justification for Indian evangelism: "

> It is not the colour of our skins, outward circumstances or profession, but the state and temper of the mind and will, which makes us Jews or Gentiles; Christians or Heathens; Elect or Reprobate, in the sight of God" (Benezet 36).

However, though it was readily accepted that God does not make race, sex or social status the basis of acceptance, this did not mean that social relations were not marked by such variables (McLoughlin 41; Stott, "New Jerusalem Abandoned," 74). Whatever they believed in theory, in practice missionaries presumed that converts would be, culturally and spiritually, the clients of the whites. Smith did not, because he thought that the *Book of Mormon* (not the Bible) would be the center of the latter-day missionary message, and there was therefore no opportunity for a cultural clientage legitimated by greater white familiarity with the message to be taught. Native Americans challenged by Biblical Christianity had to trust that "the Spirit of their 'Great Father' would enable those who earnestly asked him, to know and feel that [missionary] preaching was true" (*Christian Advocate and Journal and Zion's Herald*, 12 June 1829); when confronted with the Nephite record, we read in a passage Smith would have dictated that same June, both Gentiles and Lamanites had to do the same (Moroni 10:4-5).

Such openness would not last: Smith's eschatology would change over the years, and so would the position of the Lamanite in Mormon thought (Mauss 58-70). That, however, calls for study in its own right. What concerns us here is not the history of *Book of Mormon* usage, but its condemnation of what has been called (Sellers 202) the "calculating egotism" of the day. Although we do not need the *Book of Mormon* to learn that not everyone welcomed the individualism of Jacksonian America,[10] Smith's work did more

than protest the way society was changing. The Nephites' oppositional culture provided hope for the future, as well as corroboration that the contemporary drive for self-aggrandizement was wrong. And in doing so, it challenged the status quo at its heart. White Americans, Toni Morrison has suggested, have been gripped by a fear "of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness" (37). The *Book of Mormon* turned those drivers of the American Dream into apocalyptic messengers, and anticipated their realization as God brought America under condemnation.

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Notes

[1] Bernd Peyers sees Apess as primarily making a "creative accommodation to social change" (1, 19). However, even if this is accepted, Apess's use of Christianity can be seen as logical. Smith's linkage of the future of Christianity in America with the Native American is more problematic.

[2] In this context, "the American Dream" refers to the conviction that economic success lies within the grasp of all, and the retention of individual gain is legitimate; in Tocqueville's phrase, it is a belief in the "feverish . . . pursuit of prosperity" (623).

[3] Following a golden age in which the *Book of Mormon* peoples were "in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God" (4 Nephi 1:20), those who reject a communalistic ethic assume the name of Lamanites and those who for a while remain faithful call themselves Nephites. The Nephites, too, decline and are almost completely destroyed by the Lamanites in a final fratricidal struggle in the fifth century CE.

[4] As the mark was set upon Cain "lest any finding him should kill him" (Genesis 4:15, AV), the mark had to have been immediately visible to achieve its purpose.

[5] Quinn offers the standard account of Smith's involvement with magic.

[6] Though it is noted that those who marry into the Lamanites bring the curse "upon [their] seed" (Alma 1:107), the mechanism is Lamarckian, with parents passing on acquired characteristics, not one involving a change in genetic inheritance.

[7] It would be naïve to imagine that Smith could be free from the racial prejudice of his day: although there were just 46 free blacks in a population 3,724 in the nearby town of Palmyra in 1824 (Spafford 400-401), the colored population was far from invisible, and Smith would known, for example, that reports of local merchant Isaac Durfee's being seen with a mulatto were used in an 1828 smear campaign (*The Palmyra Freeman*, 28 November 1828; the Durfee family owned the land the Smith's were working at the time: Bushman 67-68). However, Smith's failure to question this association of civilization and whiteness should not be seen as racist. "Race," Henry Louis Gates has noted, is "a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference" (5), and defined as such its discourse is alien to the *Book of Mormon*. The curse is reversible (2 Nephi 12: 81-84), as those familiar with environmentalism would have expected (Buffon 8:34-35).

[8] In that respect, it failed. The first Mormon missionaries testified of the Book's miraculous origin, rather than its content (Underwood 59), and few converts did more than dip into the book—perhaps because of the challenge provided by a 500-page text (Lightner 194). Smith, who might be thought to have a concern for his message to be understood, would find himself forced to rethink his eschatology when a mission to the Delaware failed (Stott, "New Jerusalem Abandoned," 78-82).

[9] For Native American disinterest in white cultural values, note how the Pawnee chief Petalesharo told President Munroe in 1822, "the Great Spirit made us all—he made my skin red, and yours white; he placed us on earth and intended that we should live differently from each other (Buchanan 39).

[10] See Howe for a measured review of the attitudes of the churches of the day.