Quincey Epley

Dr. Susana Geliga

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Native American and Mormon Relations

Mormons and Native Americans have a complicated history. The Book of Mormon supposedly tells the story of Indigenous Americans and how they got here, which is entirely contradictory to any and all Native creation stories. The erasure of indigenous culture and peoples contributed to the church’s doctrine about Native peoples, and their policy followed the same ideas of erasure and “Americanization.” The way indigenous peoples are brought up in the church is designed to make them feel shame about where they came from and guilt the members into staying dedicated to the church.

In the book *Messianic Fulfillments*,[[1]](#footnote-1) Mauro gives background into the Mormons’ westward expansion into, at the time, Indian Territory. The book also details the beginnings of the church and the reasoning behind missionary work with the Lamanite people, and how the attitudes of the time influenced the Mormon Church. More modern policy, both federal and Mormon, are touched on as well as the caricature of the American Indian and how that influenced expansion.

The journal article “The Lamanite Dilemma: Mormonism and Indigeneity” written by Monica Brown Crowfoot[[2]](#footnote-2) describes her experience as a Navajo growing up in the Mormon church. She tells of the racial segregation and hierarchy she experienced as a nonwhite Mormon, and the hypocrisy and shame that is foundational to church culture. When she left the reservation to go to college at Brigham Young University, she realized the importance of indigenous culture and community. When she got married and had children of her own, she wanted to instill a sense of indigenous pride within them. When distancing herself from the Mormon church, she started to find more of the quintessential “Mormon” teachings in the outside world. She found love, harmony, happiness, comfort, and service by going back to her Navajo roots with her children.

The next source utilized is a talk given by Spencer W. Kimball, an elder in the church who would later become the prophet, at General Conference in October 1960.[[3]](#footnote-3) At the time the talk was given, he was the head of the Lamanite program, which dealt with missionary work on Native American Reservations. He describes a group of twenty ‘Lamanite’ missionaries who were becoming increasingly “white and delightsome.” He goes on to talk about their righteousness changing the physical color of their skin, because the Lamanite curse was being lifted before their eyes.

*The Book of Mormon* was also utilized. Specific verses are used to demonstrate official church doctrine being taught about “historic” America and the people who lived there.

The article titled, “Assimilation Tool or a Blessing? Inside the Mormon Indian Student Placement Program,”[[4]](#footnote-4) tells the story of Cal Nez who was in the Indian Student Placement Program during his high school years. The article also gives some historical background on the program as well as the supposed connection between the *Book of Mormon* and Native Americans.

The next few sources come from a blog called *Lamanite Truth*, where author Sarah Newcomb[[5]](#footnote-5) analyzes church policy, teachings, and news while sharing her experience as an indigenous person in the church. She acknowledges contradictions in doctrine and tries to make sense of the church’s answer dodging. She illustrates how damaging church culture and policy are to individuals and calls for change.

The book *All Abraham’s Children[[6]](#footnote-6)* discusses the Lamanite identity, and how it fits into the teachings of the church. It explains the Lamanite curse and how whiteness is equated with righteousness and spirituality, and how the idea of predestination influenced the Mormon pioneers’ view of the west being their ‘promised land.’

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints believes The *Book of Mormon* to be the word of God (Article of Faith 8) transcribed from the Golden Plates Joseph Smith dug up after physically seeing both God and Jesus Christ in the woods and being instructed where they were by the Angel Moroni who visited Smith in his sleep. The book is like the bible in the sense that it is a collection of stories written by various holy men, but it is set in the ancient Americas. The book starts with the voyage across the Atlantic that brought people from Old Jerusalem to New Jerusalem (The Americas) to escape the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. Lehi, who led the people to the ‘promised land,’ had three sons: Laman, Lemuel, and Nephi. Nephi was faithful to God and always did what was asked of him, but his brothers were wicked. Because of their ‘hardened hearts,’ God cursed Laman and all of his descendants with “a skin of blackness.”[[7]](#footnote-7) These people, referred to as “Lamanites,” were considered literal ancestors of Indigenous Americans. *The Book of Mormon* refers to Lamanites as “a dark, a filthy and a loathsome people […] because of their unbelief and idolatry.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Whereas the righteous Nephites were described as “white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome,”[[9]](#footnote-9) and it was taught that if Lamanites returned their faith in God and softened their hearts, the curse would be lifted, and they would become ‘white and delightsome’ once again.

When the *Book of Mormon* was published, it was the same year the Indian Removal Act was passed. In the book *Messianic Fulfillments,* Mauro writes, “Like other religious Americans of the time, Mormons tended to interpret national and world developments in the light of scriptural prophecy. Thus, Mormons saw the hand of Providence in the Indian Relocation policies of the U.S. government.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Many Mormons believed that the ‘Lamanites’ caused their own destruction and genocide by turning away from God when they had the chance, so to them, it was not surprising to that God would be punishing the Natives again.

One of the main teachings of the church is explained in Article of Faith 10: We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the ten tribes; that Zion (New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent; that Christ will reign personally upon the Earth; and that the Earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory.” This article, commonly taught to kids aged 3-12, describes Zion, the promised land in America. Early Mormons were led out to the western part of the official United States in order to build Zion, where they felt they were entitled to settle. When travelling to Utah, Mormon travelers were expecting the land to be “cleared by God for Celestial Gathering,”[[11]](#footnote-11) but the territory was inhabited by Ute and Paiute tribes. At first, the Native Peoples helped the Mormons get acclimated to the area, but then the Mormons allied with the Paiutes, took the fertile land which left the Utes with less food, so they would raid the Paiutes, and then the Mormons would protect them. Ultimately, the Mormon population grew

Missionaries made some attempts to enter reservations and convert Native Americans, but they were more focused on the effects of relocation to humor another religion. Many Mormons had conflicting feelings about Indigenous peoples:

“On the one hand, the Lamanites were remnants of Israel, God’s chosen people, to be redeemed and gathered in preparation for the Lord’s return, and the Mormons were the nurturing and saving agents assigned the responsibility for this redemption. On the other hand, the Lamanites were a fallen people, degraded by centuries of spiritual apostacy and cultural corruption.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Mormon church leaders taught that members of the church had a duty to save the Lamanites. Brigham Young, the second prophet of the restored church, said in order for an individual to be redeemed, the Lamanite curse would have to be lifted by Mormons “instilling cleanliness, industry, morality, and other virtues prerequisite to redemption.”[[13]](#footnote-13) In order to do this, missionaries were sent onto reservations to teach Natives their ‘real’ history.

The biggest Lamanite program was the Indian Student Placement Program. The program started off as a seminary program at boarding schools. In Mormonism, seminary is a before-school program for high schoolers, where church scripture is taught and analyzed. However, the Indian Seminary Program was taught starting in grade school. Because of the Urban Indian migration, the church adapted a seminary specifically for them.[[14]](#footnote-14) The curriculum emphasized structure, organization, punctuality and other attributes the church thought Natives were lacking. When Helen John, a 16-year-old Navajo girl wanted to stay with the Mormon family whose farm her migrant-working father worked at, this started the Indian Student Placement Program.[[15]](#footnote-15) The program was designed to take Indigenous children off of their reservations and place them into Mormon ‘foster’ homes during the school year. Over its lifetime, the program had over 50,000 Indian Students in placement, and over half of the students were from the Navajo nation. The kids who participated in the program often had long bus rides, medical exams, and strict rules to adhere to. Baptism was a requirement for admission into the program, and participating in any Native ceremonies or traditions was forbidden. The program created a ‘conveyor belt’ for students who entered as a young child. They would move from the Indian Student Placement Program to Brigham Young University where they had entire Lamanite Wards and a new Indian Studies program. Students who graduated from this program are either grateful for their experience and stayed in the church, or are hurt by the narrative that was pushed onto them.

The program was designed to distance native children from their culture, and “Americanize” and “Mormonize” the Lamanites. What it did instead was make students feel shame about their ancestry and culture. Sarah Newcomb of the Tsimshian First Nation said about the label of Lamanite, “I internalized all the pain—because I trusted. I trusted the Prophet Joseph Smith, I trusted the living prophet, I trusted the generations of Mormons in my family line, and I trusted the truth claims as my parents did.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The shame prevalent in the Mormon church weighs heavy on people and is perpetuated in each ward. In her article, “The Lamanite Dilemma: Mormonism and Indigeneity,” Monika Brown Crowfoot recounts church members telling her and her parents that they had to choose between being Mormon and being Navajo, so she chose Mormonism.[[17]](#footnote-17) The problem with that is she doesn’t stop being Navajo, and people would continue to whisper about her wicked lineage. These harmful notions are cemented during the children’s song “Book of Mormon Stories,” where one of the hand motions is holding up two fingers behind the head to demonstrate “the Lamanites from ancient history.” Crowfoot goes on to explain: “Consciously or subconsciously, I was made to feel it [shame], and perhaps others with small minds hoped that I would spread this shame and finally extinguish whatever pride our people once had.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Indigenous members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints are supposed to be ashamed of their heritage, but proud of it at the same time. How they are viewed largely depends on the lightness of their complexion.

Sarah Newcomb states, “Stories have power, and these stories are not yours. Stop trying to tell them. These are real cultures with a beautiful heritage that you are messing with. Stop.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The way the Mormon church has taken the history of indigenous peoples and rewritten it for their own benefit is extremely harmful to native members of the church. The treatment is intentional and harmful, but it is deeply rooted in their faith and hard to untangle.

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1. (Mauro 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Crowfoot 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Kimball 1960) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Landry 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Newcomb, Lamanite Mark 2017)

   (Newcomb, The Indian Placement Program with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints 2018)

   (Newcomb, The Lamanite Lie is not done in Ignorance 2017)

   (Newcomb, Who is Responsible for Lamanite Truth? Part 2 of 3 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Mauss 2003) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 2 Nephi 5:21, Book of Mormon [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mormon 5:15, Book of Mormon [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 2 Nephi 5:21, Book of Mormon. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Mauro 2019) 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. (Mauss 2003) 163 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. (Mauro 2019) 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. (Mauro 2019) 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. (Newcomb, The Indian Placement Program with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. (Landry 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. (Newcomb, Lamanite Mark 2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. (Crowfoot 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. (Crowfoot 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. (Newcomb, The Indian Placement Program with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)