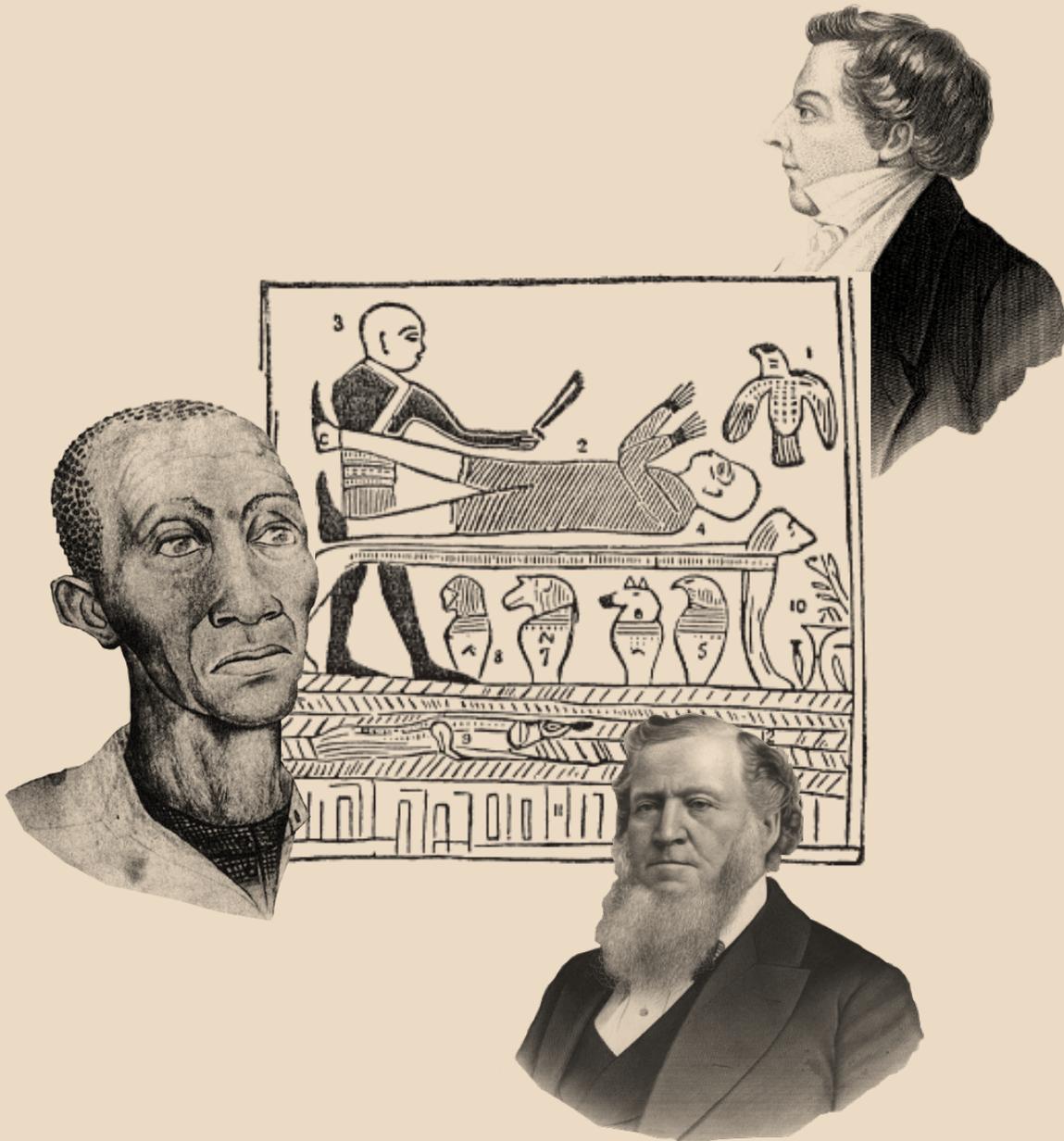


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Curse of Cain?

Racism in the Mormon Church



By Jerald and Sandra Tanner

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Jerald and Sandra Tanner

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Book of Mormon

“... wherefore, as they were white and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them (2 Nephi 5:21).”

Book of Moses (Pearl of Great Price)

“... there was a blackness came upon all the children of Canaan, that they were despised among all people ... Moses 7:8).”

“And ... they were a mixture of all the seed of Adam save it was the seed of Cain, for the seed of Cain were black, and had not place among them (Moses 7:22).”

Book of Abraham (Pearl of Great Price)

“... from Ham, sprang that race which preserved the curse in the land (Abraham 1:24).”

“Now the first government of Egypt was established by Pharaoh, the eldest son of Egyptus, the daughter of Ham, ... Noah, his father, who blessed him with the blessings of the earth, ... but cursed him as pertaining to the Priesthood.

“Now, Pharaoh being of the lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood, ... (Abraham 1:26-27).”

Twenty-six years ago, in June of 1978, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced the end of its priesthood restrictions regarding African blacks. Since the LDS Church has a lay priesthood, the ban had kept blacks from any leadership positions. One of the foundations of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the claim that priesthood is essential to act in God's behalf. In the LDS manual *Gospel Principles* we read:

We must have [LDS] priesthood authority to act in the name of God when performing the sacred ordinances of the gospel, such as baptism, confirmation, administration of the sacrament, and temple marriage. If a man does not have the priesthood, even though he may be sincere, the Lord will not recognize ordinances he performs. (*Gospel Principles*, published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995 edition, p. 81)

In addition to this, Mormonism teaches that a person must be married in the temple in order to achieve the highest level of heaven, or eternal life. In *Gospel Principles* we read:

Those who inherit the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, who become gods, must also have been married for eternity in the temple. (p. 297)

However, the priesthood ban on blacks meant that they could not have a temple marriage, thus keeping them from achieving the highest form of eternal life, known as exaltation or godhood. This ban was only enforced on blacks of African ancestry. Such groups as Maori and Fiji Islanders were allowed to hold the LDS priesthood.

While the ban has been lifted the church has yet to clarify its theological view on race or why the ban was ever instituted.

Mormonism began in upstate New York, where whites predominated and blacks were free. Joseph Smith seems to have accepted the common view of his community that dark skinned people were inferior to whites, while rejecting slavery. Although the LDS Church allowed people of various races to join, there was an underlying belief in the superiority of the white race. Indians and blacks were seen as “cursed” by God with a dark skin, but given the hope that in the hereafter they could become white. At first blacks could be baptized and ordained in the LDS Church. But as the Mormons moved from New York to Ohio, Missouri and Illinois and finally to the Utah territory, they developed stronger negative teachings on race and restricted priesthood ordination for blacks.

Brigham Young University professor Eugene England observed:

. . . Mormon publications equivocated and became racist when the Church came under threat of violence for being “abolitionist” in Missouri in the early 1830’s. Many Mormon converts from the South kept their slaves and indeed took them West with them (where Utah became the only western territory that allowed slavery). At least by 1852, Blacks were specifically denied the priesthood and temple blessing. (“Becoming a World Religion: Blacks, the Poor—All of Us,” by Eugene England, *Sunstone*, June 1998, pp. 54-55)

This policy did not change until 1978 when President Spencer W. Kimball announced God had revealed to him that priesthood could now be extended to all men, regardless of race.

This study outlines the development of racial teachings in the LDS Church from its founding in 1830 to the present.

Racism in the Book of Mormon

In the early 1800s many people viewed Native Americans as a remnant of the lost ten tribes of Israel. Sociologist Armand Mauss explains:

While early Mormons differed somewhat from other Americans in their conceptions and policies toward Indians, they also shared in the general political ambivalence and selective romanticism of most other Americans. In the early nineteenth century, as Joseph Smith was reaching maturity and starting his ministry, theories and rumors about the so-called Indians abounded, . . . According best with the popular millenarianism of the period were those theories that defined the Indians as constituting one or more of the lost ten tribes. (*All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage*, by Armand L. Mauss, University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 48)

This attitude is reflected in Joseph Smith’s first literary work, the *Book of Mormon*. Joseph Smith claimed that in 1827, on a hill in upstate New York, a heavenly being delivered into his hands a long hidden record of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas. Over the next three years Smith worked

on his translation of the record, assisted by various scribes and then returned the ancient plates to the messenger (see *History of the Church*, vol. 1, by Joseph Smith, Deseret Book, 1978, pp. 18-19).

After convincing a neighbor to help finance the printing, Smith published his work in 1830, titled the *Book of Mormon*.

This record tells the story of a group of Israelites who fled Jerusalem about 600 B.C. and came to America. They soon divided into two groups, the righteous Nephites, who were “white,” and the wicked Lamanites, who were cursed with “a skin of blackness.” Part of the rationale for God making the wicked “dark” was to insure that they were less “enticing” to the righteous “white” people:

And it came to pass that 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. (*Book of Mormon*, 1 Nephi 12:23)

And he had caused the **cursing** to come upon them, yea, even a sore **cursing** . . . wherefore, as they were **white**, and exceedingly **fair** and delightful, **that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness** to come upon them. (*Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 5:21)

Behold the Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the **cursing** which hath come upon their **skins** . . . (*Book of Mormon*, Jacob 3:5)

O my brethren, I fear that unless ye shall repent of your sins that **their skins** will be **whiter** than yours, when ye shall be brought before the throne of God. (*Book of Mormon*, Jacob 3:8)

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, . . . who were just and holy men . . . and the **Lord God** set a mark upon them, yea, upon Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael, and Ishmaelitish women.

And this was done that **their seed** might be **distinguished** from the seed of their brethren, that

thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, **that they might not mix** and believe in incorrect traditions . . . (*Book of Mormon*, Alma 3:6)

Towards the end of the *Book of Mormon* one of the righteous leaders, Mormon, declares that in the last days the gospel will again be taken to the Lamanites

that the seed of this people may more fully believe his gospel, which shall go forth unto them from the Gentiles; for this people shall be scattered, and shall become **a dark, a filthy, and a loathsome people**, beyond the description of that which ever hath been amongst us, yea, even that which hath been among the Lamanites, and this because of their unbelief and idolatry. (*Book of Mormon*, Mormon 5:15)

The Lamanites purportedly destroyed all of the Nephites in battle approximately A.D. 400, thus leaving only the dark skinned people in the land.

While the *Book of Mormon* states that God “denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free” (2 Nephi 26:33), it still embraces a racist concept that dark skin is a curse from God.

Who are the Lamanites?

The Introduction to the current *Book of Mormon* maintains that the Lamanites “are the principal ancestors of the American Indians.”

Although the LDS Church uses the term “Lamanite” sparingly these days, thirty years ago any native of North and South America, Polynesia, Hawaii, or Tonga was considered a descendent of the *Book of Mormon* people.

In the July 1971 *Ensign*, the official magazine for the LDS Church, is an article by Apostle Spencer W. Kimball, who later became president of the church. In this article titled “Of Royal Blood,” Kimball declared:

With pride I tell those who come to my office that a **Lamanite** is a descendant of one **Lehi who left Jerusalem** six hundred years before Christ . . . and landed in America. And Lehi and his family became **the ancestors of all the Indian and Mestizo tribes in North and South and Central America and in the islands of the sea**, . . . Now the Lamanites number about sixty million; they are

in all the states of America from Tierra del Fuego all the way up to Point Barrows, and they are in nearly all the islands of the sea from Hawaii south to southern New Zealand. (*Ensign*, July 1971, p. 7)

An early LDS magazine, the *Juvenile Instructor*, seemed uncertain about the natives of New Zealand being descended from the *Book of Mormon* people, but still considered them under a curse:

We are asked if the natives of New Zealand and of the Samoan, Society and Sandwich Islands are descendants of the Nephites or of the Lamanites. If of the former, how can their **dark color** be accounted for? . . . if they are descendants of Nephi, how came they to be **dark as the Lamanites**?

It is plain from the history which the Lord has given us in the Book of Mormon that this **dark skin** has been brought upon them by **transgression**. Whether this transgression occurred before they left this continent or afterwards, is not clear. (*Juvenile Instructor*, vol. 30, 1868, p. 129)

Dark and Loathsome?

Joseph Smith seems to have accepted the prevalent view of his day that darker skinned people were not as favored by God as white skinned people.

According to the *Book of Mormon*, the Lord promised that in the last days, when the Lamanites (Native Americans) converted to the gospel they would become a “white and delightsome” people:

And then shall they rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their **scales of darkness** shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a **white** and a **delightsome** people. (2 Nephi 30:6) [The word “white” was changed to “pure” in 1981.]

Preaching in 1854, Brigham Young looked forward to the day when the Lamanites would be made white:

Here are the **Lamanites** . . . Their **wickedness** was not so great as those [Jews] who slew the Son of God. Jesus revealed himself to them after he was slain, preached to them the Gospel. But in the fourth generation the Priesthood was driven from their midst, . . . Is their **curse** as great

as that of those in Palestine? No, it is light, in comparison. They began to thirst for each other's blood, and massacred each other, from generation to generation, until they sunk into **wickedness**, and evil principles the most degrading, and have become **loathsome and vile**. Still the **curse** will be removed from them before it will be removed from the children of Judah; and **they will become "a white and delightful people."** (Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 2, Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1855, p. 143)

Five years later, at October Conference in 1859, Brigham Young again taught that the *Book of Mormon* prophecy of the Lamanites becoming "white" would eventually be fulfilled:

You may inquire of the intelligent of the world whether they can tell why the **aborigines of this country** are **dark**, loathsome, ignorant, and sunken into the depths of degradation; and they cannot tell. I can tell you in a few words: They are the **seed of Joseph**, and belong to the household of God; and he will afflict them in this world, and save every one of them hereafter, even though they previously go into hell. When the Lord has a people, he makes covenants with them and gives unto them promises: then, if they transgress his law, change his ordinances, and break the covenants he has made with them, he will put a **mark upon them**, as in the case of the **Lamanites** and other portions of the house of Israel; but by-and-by they will become **a white and delightful people**. (*Journal of Discourses*, vol. 7, p. 336)

Writing in 1909 B. H. Roberts, famous LDS Church leader and author, stated that the fulfillment of the *Book of Mormon* prophecy that the Native Americans would become "white and delightful" would be a witness to the world of the truthfulness of the *Book of Mormon*:

I may say it is the universal opinion that the native American race is doomed to extinction; and, in fact, that it is now on the high way to that finality. Against such general opinion, however, the Book of Mormon utters the surprising declaration not only that the American race shall not become extinct, but that fallen as its fortunes are, and **degraded as it is, yet shall it become, and that before many generations pass away, "a white and delightful people!"** Than this declaration I can think of nothing more **boldly prophetic**, nor of

any **inspired** utterance which so squarely sets itself against all that is accepted as the probabilities in the case. But with **complete confidence** we await the time of the **fulfillment of God's decree**; of its signal triumph over the opinions of men. (*New Witnesses for God*, by B. H. Roberts, vol. 3, Deseret News, 1909, p. 291)

Evidently many of the current LDS leaders no longer share the views of Brigham Young and B. H. Roberts and are trying to dissolve the doctrine that the Native Americans will turn white after conversion. In 1981 a very important change was made in 2 Nephi 30:6. It now promises the Lamanites that they will become "a **pure** and delightful people."

This change is not the result of correcting a printing error, as the manuscript of the *Book of Mormon* reads "white" and the first two printed editions use "white" not "pure." The verse was changed to "pure" in the 1840 edition, but returned to "white" in editions after that date.

There is another passage in the *Book of Mormon* which demonstrates the term "white" is related to a change in skin color: "And their **curse** was taken from them, and their **skin** became **white** like unto the Nephites" (3 Nephi 2:15).

Prior to 1981 LDS prophets and apostles repeatedly stated that the skin of Native Americans would one day become "white." Spencer W. Kimball, who became the twelfth president of the LDS Church, believed that those who converted to Mormonism were actually becoming lighter. In the LDS General Conference, October 1960, Kimball made these comments:

"I saw a striking contrast in the progress of the Indian people . . . they are fast becoming a **white and delightful people**. . . . For years they have been growing delightful, and they are **now becoming white** and delightful, as they were promised . . . The children in the home placement program in Utah are often **lighter** than their brothers and sisters in the hogans on the reservation.

"At one meeting a father and mother and their sixteen-year-old daughter were present, the little member girl—sixteen—sitting between the **dark father and mother**, and it was evident **she was several shades lighter** than her parents—on the same reservation, in the same hogan, subject to the same sun and wind and weather. . . . These young

members of the Church **are changing to whiteness** and to delightsomeness. (*Improvement Era*, December 1960, pp. 922-23)

Unfortunately, many Native American members were subjected to various condescending statements by well-meaning white Mormons. For example, Eduardo Pagan wrote the following letter to the editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*:

Being blessed with the mark of Laman, I have wrestled firsthand with the racist assumptions of the Latter-day Saints I grew up with. As a child I listened in sacrament meeting to fervent prayers on behalf of my people, then heard on Mondays these same members discourage their children from becoming close friends with me (“doors may be closed to them”). On the walls of my Sunday school class, I saw pictures of a white-looking Jesus holding blond children. My seminary teachers taught that the more righteous my ancestors were, **the whiter they became, and that someday I too would become “white and delightful.”** During my teenage years girlfriends told me that their parents were strongly encouraging them to date more “acceptable” boys. (Letter to the editor, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 23, no. 1, Spring 1990, p. 6)

Helen Candland Stark, in the same issue of *Dialogue*, commented:

After my husband retired, we moved to a small Utah town where many families were participating in the Indian Placement Program. One of the ward “pillars” and his foster son were evening sacrament meeting participants. It may have been for a priesthood advancement ceremony.

At any rate, the boy spoke first, adequately but quietly. Then his foster father rose to commend him. He concluded his remarks with these words: “If he continues to make progress, he may someday be **white and delightful.**”

Did any one in the congregation flinch? Is “red” not beautiful? (Letter to the editor, *Dialogue*, Spring 1990, pp. 7-8)

Up until the time of the new edition of the *Book of Mormon* in 1981, LDS teachings about the American Indian indicated a belief in a literal change in skin color in the last days.

Lamanites and DNA

The origin of Native Americans has been a matter of discussion since the days of Columbus. Mormonism has traditionally maintained that they descended from a group of Israelites who migrated from Jerusalem to the New World at approximately 600 B.C. While many people in Joseph Smith’s day speculated that the American Indians descended from the lost ten tribes of Israel, later scientists rejected that theory. The traditional scientific view has been that Native Americans descended from Asiatic people who crossed the Bering Strait thousands of years ago. Dan Egan, writing for the *Salt Lake Tribune*, observed:

Generations of Mormons grew up with the notion that American Indians are descended from a lost tribe from the House of Israel, offspring of a Book of Mormon figure named Lehi, who left Jerusalem and sailed to the Americas around 600 B.C.

For faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Lehi’s story is neither fable nor parable. It is truth. Historical fact. . . .

The problem is mainstream science has failed to back that story. Instead, archaeologists, linguists and genetic experts outside Mormon culture say all the evidence points to Asia as the place from which American Indians originated. . . . (“BYU Gene Data May Shed Light on Origin of Book of Mormon’s Lamanites,” by Dan Egan, *Salt Lake Tribune*, November 30, 2000, p. B1)

Over the last twenty years there has been great interest in DNA research, and especially in Mitochondrial DNA. Nancy Shute, writing for *U.S. News & World Report*, commented:

Mitochondrial DNA has proved a marvelous tool for tracing human history. Mothers pass it down to offspring almost intact—unlike nuclear DNA, the genetic material commonly used in criminal investigations. (“Haven’t Got a Clue? Maybe DNA Will Do,” *U.S. News & World Report*, July 24, 2000)

The problem for Mormonism is that Mitochondrial DNA supports the view that the principal ancestors of Native Americans were Asiatic people.

Mormon defenders have maintained that only a small percent of American Indians would be

descendants of the Lamanites, which would explain why they don't show up in the DNA samples that have been taken. However, the Introduction to their own *Book of Mormon* claims that "the Lamanites . . . are the **principal** ancestors of the American Indians," not an insignificant group.

Even President of the LDS Church, Gordon B. Hinckley, endorsed the claim that the American Indians are mainly descended from the Lamanites. Dan Egan reported:

. . . Mormons believe American Indians have a special place in their church. It is a constant theme for their missionary efforts in South American and the Pacific Islands, and Mormon President **Gordon B. Hinckley** even uses the story of Lehi to inspire converts at temple dedications abroad.

"It has been a very interesting thing to see the **descendants of Father Lehi** in the congregations that have gathered in the temple," Hinckley said at an August 1999 temple dedication in **Ecuador**. "So very many of these people have **the blood of Lehi in their veins**, and it is just an intriguing thing to see their tremendous response and their tremendous interest."

But most scientists outside LDS culture argue that if a band of Israelites did come to America 2,600 years ago, they left neither a linguistic nor an archaeological trace.

"I don't think there is one iota of evidence that suggests a lost tribe from Israel made it all the way to the New World. It is a great story, slain by ugly fact," says Michael Crawford, a University of Kansas professor of biological anthropology and author of *Origins of Native Americans*, published by Cambridge University Press. . . .

Author Crawford said all the evidence gathered so far so powerfully demonstrates the Asian-American Indian connection that it is as close to a "truth" as science can get. (*Salt Lake Tribune*, November 30, 2000, p. B1)

LDS scientist Thomas W. Murphy, chair of the Department of Anthropology at Edmonds Community College in Washington, wrote:

Now that quantitative scientific methods can indeed test for an Israelite genetic presence in ancient America, we learn instead that virtually all Native Americans can trace their lineages to the

Asian migrations between 7,000 and 50,000 years ago. While molecular anthropologists have the technological capability to identify descendants of ancient Hebrews, no traces of such DNA markers have appeared in Central America or elsewhere among Native Americans. . . .

From a scientific perspective, the Book of Mormon's origin is best situated in early nineteenth-century America, . . . The Book of Mormon emerged from an antebellum perspective, out of a frontier American people's struggle with their god, and not from an authentic American Indian perspective. As Mormons, we have a moral and ethical obligation to discontinue this view of Native American origins and publicly disavow the offensive teaching that a dark skin is a physical trait of God's malediction. ("Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," by Thomas W. Murphy, in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, Signature Books, 2002, p. 68)

Writing in *Anthropology News*, Thomas Murphy and Simon Southerton, another LDS scientist who became disillusioned after studying DNA, observed:

Genetic research into Native American and Polynesian origins is sending shock waves through Mormon communities around the world. The Book of Mormon, claimed as scripture by 11 million members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), purports to tell of three migrations from the ancient middle East to the Americas. The title page claims that the descendants of the migrants from Jerusalem "are the principal ancestors of the American Indians." Mormon folklore, likewise, postulates a Middle Eastern heritage for Polynesians.

Southerton has completed a book-length manuscript on the subject. [*Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church*, by Simon Southerton, Signature Books, 2004.] Simon Southerton, a plant geneticist, . . . resigned his position as bishop and withdrew his church membership. In Mar 2000, he published the story of his disillusionment on the Internet. [www.exmormon.org/why1ft125.htm] He "failed to find anything that supported migration of Jewish people before Columbus" and found "no reliable scientific evidence supporting migrations from the Middle East to the New World."

End of sample pages.
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