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Estranged No More: Covenant and a Reclaimed Identity of the Lamanites

John E. Cochran II

Abstract: *This article reexamines Lamanite identity in the Book of Mormon, arguing that in addition to referencing a specific branch of Lehi's posterity, even more importantly, the term Lamanite can also function as a covenantal designation describing those estranged from God yet remembered through divine mercy. Drawing on Jacob 1:13–14 and related passages that define Nephite and Lamanite identity by covenant allegiance, this study situates the term within a redemptive pattern of estrangement and return. Read in hindsight, this framework can be applied to reframe the 1830 mission to the Lamanites with an interpretive lens that reveals the limits of merely lineage-based expectations of covenant belonging. Integrating scripture with early Restoration history and theological reflection, the article shows how covenant identity transcends ancestry while preserving cultural particularity. The result is a vision of Lamanite identity that is both ancient and expansive, bearing witness to a God who gathers those who respond to covenantal grace.*

This study adopts a covenantal reading of Book of Mormon identity categories, treating *Nephite* and *Lamanite* not only as genealogical markers but also as covenantal designations. They are narrative and theological labels applied within the record to indicate a people's relationship to God's covenant over time. Such designations are descriptive rather than prescriptive. They do not erase lineage or mandate social reclassification but function editorially to assess covenant fidelity, estrangement, and readiness for restoration.

This approach does not deny the historical reality of lineage or the

covenant promises made to Lehi concerning his posterity. Rather, it proceeds from the observation that the text itself repeatedly complicates any attempt to treat ancestry as the final arbiter of covenant standing. Throughout the record, narrators and prophetic figures employ inherited names relationally, sometimes reaffirming ancestral identity, sometimes overriding it, and, often, holding the two in tension. In moments of covenant rupture, repentance, and restoration, identity is portrayed as unfolding over time through response to revelation rather than being fixed solely by pedigree. Read in this way, instances of naming, renaming, and identity compression function as theological signals rather than narrative inconsistencies.

The term *Lamanite* in the Book of Mormon has long been read as an ethnic designation, referring to the descendants of Laman and Lemuel and later associated with Indigenous peoples of the Americas. This lineage-based reading is grounded both in the text itself and in the covenant promises made to Lehi concerning his posterity. At the same time, the record repeatedly complicates any attempt to treat Lamanite identity as purely genealogical.

Jarom explains that the plates were preserved “for the intent and benefit of our brethren, the Lamanites” (Jarom 1:2), framing the purpose of the record as an act of covenant remembrance oriented toward restoration and return. This statement presupposes more than generalized reconciliation; it also reflects specific covenant promises made to Lehi concerning his seed. From the beginning, Lehi was assured that although his posterity might experience seasons of estrangement, the Lord would remember them and would not suffer them to be “utterly destroyed” (2 Nephi 4:9). The preservation of the plates functions not only as theological abstraction but as fidelity to a concrete ancestral promise. The record is kept because God has pledged himself to remember a particular people.

Enos makes this covenant orientation unmistakable. After receiving assurance of his own redemption, his concern immediately turns outward toward “my brethren, the Lamanites” (Enos 1:11). His prayer is not abstractly universal but directed toward a specific people who, right then “swore in their wrath” to destroy both the Nephites and their records (v. 14). Recognizing the fragility of his own society, Enos anticipates a future in which the Nephites may fall and the Lamanites endure. His petition, therefore, centers on preservation: “that the Lord God would preserve a record of my people . . . that it might be brought

forth at some future day unto the Lamanites, that, perhaps, they might be brought unto salvation" (v. 13).

The Lord responds not merely with reassurance but with covenantal commitment: "I will grant unto thee according to thy desires" (v. 12). Thus, Enos knew that "he would bring them forth unto the Lamanites in his own due time" (v. 16). He explicitly interprets this promise as covenantal fulfillment: "I, Enos, knew it would be according to the covenant which he had made; wherefore my soul did rest" (v. 17). The preservation of the record is thus anchored in divine fidelity to promises made concerning Lehi's seed. The future return of the Lamanites is not speculative hope but covenant expectation.

The sons of Mosiah intensify this covenant orientation in lived form. Their desire to preach among the Lamanites is framed explicitly in terms of kinship: they seek permission "that they might impart the word of God to their brethren, the Lamanites" (Mosiah 28:1). Their aim is not conquest but reconciliation: "that perhaps they might bring them to the knowledge of the Lord their God, and . . . cure them of their hatred . . . that there should be no more contentions in all the land" (v. 2). The language is familial and covenantal. The Lamanites are not treated as outsiders to be absorbed but as estranged brethren to be restored.

Yet Mormon's narration immediately widens the frame. The sons of Mosiah are described as "desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature" (v. 3). Their covenant longing for their brethren becomes the seedbed of universal compassion. Significantly, this expansion does not displace the promises made to Lehi's posterity; rather, it grows organically from them. Their grief for the Lamanites coexists with an unwillingness to see any soul perish. Covenant fidelity and universal invitation are not competing impulses but mutually reinforcing ones.

Their own history further illuminates the pattern. Once described as "the very vilest of sinners" who feared being "cast off forever" (v. 4), they had themselves stood at the brink of covenant exclusion. Their missionary resolve emerges from having experienced mercy within estrangement. In this way, their mission embodies the very logic that undergirds the preservation of the record: those who have been reclaimed seek the reclamation of others. Promise to posterity and repentance through response remain inseparable.

If Jarom, Enos, and the sons of Mosiah demonstrate prophetic longing for the return of Lehi's seed, Jacob's editorial clarification shows how covenant standing is evaluated within that very promise.

Jacob's explanation of Nephite and Lamanite identity makes this covenant logic explicit. He writes the following:

Now the people which were not Lamanites were Nephites; nevertheless, they were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites. But I, Jacob, shall not hereafter distinguish them by these names, but I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi, according to the reigns of the kings. (Jacob 1:13–14)

At a minimum, this passage reflects the simplification of social categories during a time of conflict, distinguishing those aligned with Nephi's people from those opposed to them. Further, it also opens a broader interpretive horizon in which ancestral labels give way to relational ones. Names once tied primarily to lineage are applied according to covenant allegiance. Read in this way, Jacob reframes identity so that covenant loyalty becomes the primary determinant, even as ancestry remains part of the narrative background. This reading does not deny that *Lamanite* also functions historically as a lineage designation; instead, it argues that the Book of Mormon persistently refuses to let lineage serve as the final arbiter of covenantal standing.

This pattern recurs throughout the record. At times, individuals and communities designated as Lamanites are depicted as living in covenant fidelity (Helaman 6:1–3), while Nephite societies descend into pride and estrangement. In some cases, conversion results in renaming, such as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (Alma 23:17), but, in other instances, the inherited designation persists even as covenant standing shifts. Mormon continues to speak of Lamanites whose righteousness exceeds that of the Nephites (Moroni 9:20; cf. Jacob 3:5–7). These episodes demonstrate that inherited names and covenant acceptance do not always coincide. Identity unfolds through covenant response rather than through the mere persistence or abandonment of ancestral labels.

The Book of Mormon at times employs *Lamanite* not only as a genealogical designation but also as a covenantal marker within a recurring pattern of estrangement and return. Those who bear the name may stand at a distance from covenant fidelity while remaining within the reach of divine remembrance. At the same time, the record demonstrates that the designation does not disappear immediately

upon repentance. Samuel the Lamanite prophesies with full covenant authority while retaining his inherited title, and the converted people of Ammon continue to be identified by their Lamanite ancestry even as their covenantal standing is transformed. These examples indicate that lineage and covenant condition are related but not mechanically identical. Identity unfolds through response over time.¹

Nephi articulates the governing principle succinctly: "as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off" (2 Nephi 30:2). Ancestry alone does not secure covenant belonging, nor does estrangement permanently foreclose it. The Lord "covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son" (2 Nephi 30:2). Read in this light, the 1830 mission to the Lamanites may be understood not merely as outreach to presumed descendants but as a moment in which early Saints encountered the same covenant logic embedded in the Book of Mormon itself. Promises to posterity remain binding and meaningful yet covenant identity is ultimately realized through repentance and faith in Christ.

Tracing this movement from lineage to covenant places early missionary history and modern questions of belonging within a single redemptive pattern grounded in God's ongoing work of gathering His children. In this light, the Book of Mormon functions as a theology of

1. For complementary scholarly treatments of the Book of Mormon's address to the Lamanites and the relationship between covenant restoration and cultural context, see Gary P. Gillum, "Written to the Lamanites: Understanding the Book of Mormon through Native Culture and Religion," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 6 (2013): 31–48, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/written-to-the-lamanites-understanding-the-book-of-mormon-through-native-culture-and-religion; and Matthew L. Bowen, "That They May Once Again Be a Delightful People: The Concept of Again Becoming the Seed of Joseph (Words of Mormon 1:8 and Mormon 7:4–5)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 61 (2024): 165–90, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/that-they-may-once-again-be-a-delightful-people-the-concept-of-again-becoming-the-seed-of-joseph-words-of-mormon-18-and-mormon-74-5. Gillum explores how the Book of Mormon can be read across multiple cultural frameworks without reducing Lamanite identity to a single geographic or ethnic referent, while Bowen demonstrates that Mormon's language of restoration ("once again") draws on covenantal and literary patterns rooted in the Joseph narrative rather than biological descent alone. Together, these studies support a reading of Lamanite identity in which covenantal orientation and redemptive purpose are primary interpretive lenses, even as genealogical descent remains part of the Book of Mormon's narrative framework.

reconciliation whose claims can extend beyond ancient divisions and into the present.

The 1830 Mission to the Lamanites

A possible early Restoration context for covenant identity appears in the 1830 mission to the Lamanites, one of the first organized missionary efforts of the newly established Church of Christ. Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Whitmer Jr., and Ziba Peterson were called to “go unto the Lamanites” (Doctrine and Covenants 28:8, 30:5–8, 32:2), carrying with them the Book of Mormon as a witness that the Lord had “remembered his covenant” (Psalm 105:8) with the house of Israel. The charge given in Doctrine and Covenants 28 situates the mission within a covenantal framework in which response to revealed scripture marks the way God gathers His people. From the outset, the mission reflected an expectation of covenant renewal expressed through inherited language of ancestry.

Early Saints understood this calling in literal, genealogical terms. Joseph Smith later described the Book of Mormon as “a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians,” identifying them as descendants of Joseph in Egypt and viewing America as their covenant land.² The missionaries, therefore, saw themselves as participants in prophecy, engaged in the anticipated gathering of Israel and specifically the descendants of Lehi.

They departed from Fayette, New York, in October 1830, walking more than 1,500 miles through the onset of winter. Their route passed through Mentor and Kirtland, Ohio, before continuing toward the western border of Missouri. The revelation directing the mission provided no map or itinerary. Instead, it promised divine presence and protection: “I myself will go with them and be in their midst; and I am their advocate with the Father, and nothing shall prevail against them” (Doctrine and Covenants 32:3).

The mission unfolded amid a period of significant national upheaval. In 1830 (the same year the elders departed), the United States Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, authorizing the forced relocation of eastern Native nations west of the Mississippi River. At the same time, federal regulations administered through the Office of

2. “Letter from Joseph Smith to N. C. Saxton, 4 January 1833,” in *Personal Writing of Joseph Smith*, ed. and comp. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 297.

Indian Affairs required formal licenses for missionary activity among Native peoples, requirements largely unknown to the newly organized Church. The elders' journey thus collided with the defining paradox of their age: a government that sought to remove the very peoples a new scripture had promised to restore.

The missionaries were denied official permission after encountering resistance from Richard Cummins, the Indian agent at Fort Leavenworth, who reported their activities to William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Cummins wrote the following:

A few days agoe three Men all Strangers to me went among the Indians Shawanees & Delawares, they say for the purpose of preaching to and Instructing them in Religious Matters, they say they are sent by God and must proceed, they have a new Revelation with them, as there Guide in teaching the Indians, which they say was shown to one of their Sects in a Miraculous way, and that an Angela from Heaven appeared to one of their Men and tow others of their Sect, and shewed them that the work was from God, and much more & c.

I have refused to let them stay or, go among the Indians unless they first obtain permission from you or, some of the officers of the Genl. Government who I am bound to obey.³

Cowdery petitioned Clark for authorization to preach and establish schools, but no reply came, and the elders were ordered to withdraw from the territory.⁴ Before reaching the border, they shared their message with several nations, including the Seneca, Shawnee, and Wyandot. Parley P. Pratt's memoir offers little detail about these encounters, suggesting that their impact was limited and uneven.⁵

Among the Delaware nation, led by Chief William Anderson, they found a moment of hearing. Anderson received them courteously as

3. "Richard Cummins to William Clark, February 1831," quoted in Kaleb C. Miner, "O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man': Indian Removal and the Lamanite Mission of 1830–31" (master's thesis, Missouri State University, 2018), 24, bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/3295.

4. "Letter from Oliver Cowdery to William Clark, 14 February 1831," quoted in Leland H. Gentry, "Light on the 'Mission to the Lamanites,'" *BYU Studies* 36, no. 2 (1996–97): 233, byustudies.byu.edu/article/light-on-the-mission-to-the-lamanites.

5. Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Chicago: Law, King & Law, 1888), 49–55, archive.org/details/autobiographyofp00prat/page/48/mode/2up.

Cowdery presented the Book of Mormon as a record of their ancestors and a testimony that they were a covenant people remembered by God.⁶ Though no conversions followed, the exchange stood in quiet contrast to the prevailing Christian sentiment that viewed native peoples as lost or cursed.⁷ It was a brief encounter of listening and dignity. God's remembrance became visible in hindsight in ways the missionaries did not yet fully grasp.

As Leland H. Gentry's archival study demonstrates, the missionaries' subsequent removal from Indian Territory reflected federal enforcement of the 1802 Trade and Intercourse Act and the expanding authority of Indian agents, rather than rejection by native communities. Government regulations required special licenses for missionary activity among Indian nations, and the elders, unaware of these requirements, were expelled by Indian agents acting under federal authority.⁸ The mission's abrupt end thus resulted from political exclusion, not theological refusal or lack of receptivity. Read in this light, the 1830 mission does not signify covenant failure but covenant interruption. It was an initial encounter whose fulfillment would be deferred rather than denied.

The Perceived Failure

By early 1831, the missionaries had returned East, and the mission was widely regarded as unfinished. No formal branch had been established among native nations, and federal agents had restricted their access to Indian Territory. Parley P. Pratt's own account of the journey east captured the venture's modest results. In Cincinnati, he recalled, the elders "preached to many of the people, but without much success."⁹

6. For a detailed historical analysis of the 1830–1831 Lamanite Mission, including the impact of Indian Removal on the Seneca, Wyandot, Shawnee, and Delaware, and additional primary sources beyond Pratt's account, see Miner, "O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man: Indian Removal and the Lamanite Mission of 1830–31." Miner's work provides nuanced context for Native American responses, particularly the Delaware's receptivity, though it focuses on socio-political rather than theological dimensions.

7. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 60.

8. Gentry, "Light on the 'Mission to the Lamanites,'" which documents the missionaries' expulsion from Indian Territory under federal regulation and explains the historical context of the 1830–31 mission.

9. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 54.

Judged by immediate and visible outcomes, the mission appeared inconclusive.¹⁰

For many years, the 1830 mission has been read in straightforward terms: the elders reached the Delaware and Shawnee, presented the Book of Mormon to tribal leaders, and were then turned back by law and suspicion. Measured by institutional outcomes, the effort appeared unsuccessful. Still, a closer reading situates the mission within a revelatory moment that clarified how covenant identity operates in the Book of Mormon. Rather than functioning as a failed outreach, the journey exposed the limits of lineage-based expectations that shaped early Restoration thought. The elders went west anticipating the visible fulfillment of promises to Lehi's descendants. However, the Book of Mormon often teaches that covenant belonging is not secured by lineage alone but is realized through repentance and belief in Christ. In this light, the mission reveals the tension between promise to posterity and the necessity of covenant response. Rather than seeing failure, we can understand that this episode thus revealed an unresolved tension in early Restoration theology concerning how sacred identity is recognized and enacted.

Jacob's rebuke locates moral evaluation and prophetic indictment in lived fidelity rather than inherited status. He does not claim that the Lamanites have already entered Nephite covenant life. Instead, he uses their obedience in a specific commandment to expose Nephite covenant failure and to warn that privilege does not protect a people from judgment. Jacob's language is explicit:

Behold, the Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins, are more righteous than you; for they have not forgotten the commandment of the Lord, which was given unto our father—that they should have save it were one wife, and concubines they should have none, and there should not be whoredoms committed among them.

10. See Byron R. Merrill, "Joseph Smith and the Lamanites," in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, the Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 201–202, rsc.byu.edu/joseph-smith-prophet-man/joseph-smith-lamanites, where Merrill notes that "from the very beginning, the concept of conversion of the Lamanites was closely connected to the establishment of the city Zion," citing Oliver Cowdery's affidavit describing his mission both "to preach the fulness of the gospel to the Lamanites" and "to rear up a pillar as a witness where the temple of God shall be built, in the glorious new Jerusalem."

And now, this commandment they observe to keep; wherefore, because of this observance, in keeping this commandment, the Lord God will not destroy them, but will be merciful unto them; and one day they shall become a blessed people.

Behold, their husbands love their wives, and their wives love their husbands; and their husbands and their wives love their children; and their unbelief and their hatred towards you is because of the iniquity of their fathers; wherefore, how much better are you than they, in the sight of your great Creator? (Jacob 3:5–7)

As Matthew Bowen has argued, Jacob’s question “how much better are you than they” carries rhetorical force precisely because the name *Nephi* is associated with the idea of goodness or fairness. In this light, Jacob’s rebuke does not imply that the Lamanites have become Nephites by covenant status. Rather, it suggests that the Nephites have ceased to be Nephite in any morally meaningful sense. Bowen’s onomastic insight sharpens the force of the indictment: Jacob’s “how much better” can be heard as “how much good,” puncturing Nephite self-congratulation and destabilizing any assumption that inherited identity guarantees covenant superiority.¹¹ The prophetic logic therefore preserves lineage while denying it final authority, and it frames mercy as a future-oriented covenant trajectory rather than an immediate reclassification.

King Benjamin’s covenant sermon provides the theological foundation for this reconfiguration of identity. In Mosiah 5, the people enter an individual covenant to “take upon” themselves the name of Christ, becoming “children of Christ” and heirs of His kingdom. This covenant operates at a level deeper than tribal designation. It is extended not only to the descendants of Lehi but also to the people of Zarahemla who did not participate lineally in Lehi’s covenant. Covenant belonging is thus articulated in personal and relational terms rather than in inherited ones.

Against this backdrop, Alma 23 reflects the lived consequences

11. Matthew L. Bowen, “‘Inspired by a Better Cause’: The Function of Alma 43:44–45 in Mormon’s Account of the Monarchic Wars against the Nephites,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 68 (2026): 17–18, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/inspired-by-a-better-cause-the-function-of-alma-4344-45-in-mormons-account-of-the-monarchic-wars-against-the-nephites.

of that covenant logic. Having laid down their weapons, the Lamanite converts were transformed first at the level of action: "For they became a righteous people; they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion, that they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren" (Alma 23:7). This transformation did not remain private, but it evolved into renewed social relations. As the text goes on to record, "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).

The transformation described here is framed in covenantal rather than genealogical language. The curse is presented as divine disfavor withdrawn in response to repentance and not as a permanent ethnic marker. Yet the narrative does not erase ancestry; the converted remain identified by their Lamanite heritage even as their covenant standing is transformed. Instead, the text emphasizes a decisive covenantal reorientation, dramatized through the deliberate adoption of the name Anti-Nephi-Lehi. This renaming signals that covenant realignment in the Book of Mormon is frequently marked through naming-practices, a narrative pattern Mormon employs elsewhere to indicate theological transformation. Identity, thus, emerges through enacted faithfulness, and belonging is sustained through repentance and covenant loyalty rather than bloodline alone.¹²

As Richard Cowan has shown, the Book of Mormon repeatedly depicts Nephites and Lamanites as exchanging moral and covenantal roles, culminating in moments in which these identities are defined explicitly by either acceptance or rejection of the gospel rather than by pedigree alone.¹³ Samuel the Lamanite warns that the Nephites (not the Lamanites) stand in imminent danger of destruction because

12. Nathan J. Arp, "Nameless to New Name: Namelessness in the Narrative of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 66 (2025): 197–218, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nameless-to-new-name-namelessness-in-the-narrative-of-the-anti-nephi-lehies-or-the-people-of-ammon.

13. Richard O. Cowan, "The Lamanites—A More Accurate Image," in *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi Through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1995), archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/cowan/2015-12-09/16_richard_o._cowan_the_lamanites_1992.pdf, esp. discussion of Helaman 6 and 4 Nephi 1:20–38, where "Nephites" and "Lamanites" are distinguished by covenantal allegiance rather than genealogy.

of their rejection of prophetic counsel (Helaman 15:5–10). In Fourth Nephi, following Christ’s ministry, the people are unified with no “manner of -ites” among them (4 Nephi 1:17). Sadly, division reemerges later along lines determined by acceptance or rejection of the gospel (4 Nephi 1:36–38). In these climactic movements, lineage remains acknowledged, but covenant allegiance, rather than ancestry, defines who stands within or outside the community of the faithful.

This covenantal vision extends across the canon in a dynamic and sometimes unstable form. The Book of Mormon consistently holds two realities together. Named peoples persist as historical and social identities, while covenant standing remains spiritually contingent and evaluative. Thus 2 Nephi 26:33 proclaims the universal reach of God’s invitation:

For none of these iniquities come of the Lord; for he doeth that which is good among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.

This universal summons coexists with persistent historical lineage distinctions. Mormon can still speak of “both of the Nephites and of the Lamanites” whose hearts were hardened together (Mormon 4:11) or distinguish them as separate peoples even when neither is faithful (Mormon 8:2). Likewise, Moroni can declare that Nephite “wickedness doth exceed that of the Lamanites” (Moroni 9:20), preserving the labels while reversing their moral valuation. Such passages do not undermine Jacob’s framework; rather, they illustrate how social identity endures even as covenant standing collapses or is reassessed.

It is precisely this instability that makes figures like Samuel the Lamanite so disruptive. Samuel bears the inherited name of *Lamanite*, yet he speaks with covenantal authority to a Nephite society that has forfeited its moral claim to that identity. The text thus refuses to let inherited identity secure covenant standing. Labels endure, but their meaning is continually tested by response to Christ.

Within this framework, justice and law serve a redemptive end. Alma insists that justice is upheld “that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15) while Lehi grounds the entire

narrative arc in Christ-centered purpose: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25). Estrangement functions as a covenant threshold rather than a terminal state, a space in which repentance becomes possible and joy is offered. Yet that joy is not automatic. The Book of Mormon consistently defines the "good news" as the way by which individuals come unto Christ: faith in him, repentance of sins, baptism in his name, reception of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end (2 Nephi 31; 3 Nephi 11; 27). As Noel Reynolds has shown, this pattern constitutes the Nephite understanding of the gospel from the earliest prophets to the final editors.¹⁴ Joy is realized not merely through lineage or hopeful inclusion but through choosing Christ, entering his covenant, and remaining faithful within it. This is the form of good news the Book of Mormon proclaims to the world.

What the early missionaries could not yet articulate, scripture had already taught: covenant identity is established through allegiance. The mission's perceived failure, therefore, reflects a deeper disclosure already embedded in the Book of Mormon's theology. God's work of gathering Israel unfolds wherever hearts awaken to covenant; it is not secured by lineage alone.

Reframing the Curse: Covenant Identity and Sacred Invitation

The Book of Mormon employs *Lamanite* and *Nephite* both as genealogical identifiers and as covenantal descriptors, preserving lineage while repeatedly refusing to let ancestry determine righteousness or belonging. The record acknowledges descent from Lehi and Sariah, and individuals frequently assert Nephite or Lamanite identity through lineage. At the same time, the narrative evaluates belonging through repentance, faith, and fidelity to God, placing moral and spiritual identity within an ongoing covenant relationship rather than ancestry alone.

Within the Book of Mormon, *Lamanite* can be seen as functioning not only as a genealogical designation but as a theological position within a recurring covenant drama, marking those who stand at a distance from God and yet who remain persistently addressed by promise. To bear the name is to inhabit the tension between estrangement and belonging, judgment and remembrance. The designation does

14. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 3 (1991): 31–50, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-gospel-of-jesus-christ-as-taught-by-the-nephite-prophets.

not erase descent, but, within the narrative, it often signals a people whose covenant relationship is in jeopardy but not beyond restoration.

When the Lord speaks of the Lamanites, the emphasis often falls on covenant address rather than external alteration. Lehi, in blessing the children of Laman, does not describe an irreversible transformation of nature but promises that the Lord will remember them and that they will not be destroyed (2 Nephi 4:9). Jarom preserves the plates “for the intent of the benefit of our brethren the Lamanites,” anticipating their future restoration (Jarom 1:2). Enos secures a covenant promise that the record will one day be brought forth unto them: “that, perhaps, they might be brought unto salvation” (Enos 1:13–17). Across these early witnesses, the Lamanites are addressed as a people under promise and not as a people beyond reach.

Within this covenant framework, the term *curse* functions not as an irreversible biological inheritance but as a condition of divine disfavor tied to rebellion and capable of withdrawal through repentance.¹⁵ Alma’s account of the converted Lamanites states that “the curse of God did no more follow them” (Alma 23:18), language that portrays the curse as relational rather than essential. Similarly, Jacob affirms that the Lord “will not destroy them” and that “one day they shall become a blessed people” (Jacob 3:6), framing estrangement as temporary and future-oriented. In these and other passages, the curse marks distance from covenant fidelity, not exclusion from covenant possibility.

Lehi articulates that pattern in his final discourse. His words are unmistakably a warning—a warning spoken inside a blessing. His charge to awake, arise from the dust, and to “shake of the chains with which ye are bound” (2 Nephi 1:23) does not soften judgment; it announces urgency. But Lehi then places a promise at the center of that urgency: “If ye are cursed,” he tells his grandchildren, “behold, I leave my blessing upon you” (2 Nephi 4:6). That *if* marks the hinge of covenant theology: distance is frequently paired with promise conditioned upon faithfulness. “The Lord God will not suffer that ye shall perish . . . he will be merciful unto you and unto your seed forever” (2 Nephi 4:7).

This covenant pattern extends beyond the Book of Mormon. Simeon prophesied that Christ would be “set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34), indicating that encounter with

15. T. J. Uriona, “Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing: Covenant Context for the ‘Skin of Blackness’ in 2 Nephi 5,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2023): 122–27, byustudies.byu.edu/article/life-and-death-blessing-and-cursing.

the Messiah would expose allegiance and produce division according to response. Paul likewise rejects the idea that Israel's stumbling was final: "Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid" (Romans 11:11). Though branches are "broken off" because of unbelief (v. 20), Paul anticipates a future "fulness" and even "life from the dead" in those broken-off branches receiving, again, full inclusion (vv. 12, 15). In both passages, separation is real and consequential, yet it remains within a covenant structure in which faith restores what unbelief disrupts. The Book of Mormon participates in this same logic, portraying being "cut off" as distance tied to rebellion while consistently holding open the possibility of renewed belonging through repentance and allegiance to Christ.

In this light, the so-called curse operates within a covenant economy in which repentance and responsiveness open the way to restoration. When the Book of Mormon portrays Lamanites standing in moral or spiritual clarity, their transformation emerges through humility before God rather than external alteration. The Lamanite queen's faith prompts Ammon's astonishment: "there has not been such great faith among all the people of the Nephites" (Alma 19:10). In a moment of dramatic reversal, one marked by perceived estrangement becomes the exemplar of trust and receptivity.

A similar inversion appears in the Gospels. Samaritans, long regarded as religiously estranged descendants of Israel, are repeatedly depicted as models of covenant responsiveness. A Samaritan returns in gratitude when others do not (Luke 17:15–18), and a Samaritan proves neighborly compassion when covenant insiders fail (Luke 10:33–37). In each case, those viewed as distant from covenant privilege stand closest in humility, gratitude, and faith.

Those once associated with curse language or marginal status stand where Christ's beatitudes shine most brightly: among the meek and the poor in spirit (cf. 3 Nephi 12:3–5). The contrast is not between race or lineage but between response to divine invitation. Blessing follows allegiance.

As Margaret Hemming and Fatimah Salleh observe, "The Beatitudes are an abridged version of how God sees and loves those who are overlooked."¹⁶ The Book of Mormon never presents this posture as automatic or coerced; it arises only when agency is exercised

16. Margaret Olsen Hemming and Fatimah Salleh, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, Helaman–Moroni (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2023), 87.

in repentance and covenant fidelity. In that sense, the Lamanite condition — when marked by turning toward God — can mirror the pattern of discipleship itself, a posture freely chosen in response to divine invitation. In such lowliness, God reveals his highest law.

That vision reshapes the text's moral geography. When the converted Lamanites embraced the gospel, Mormon describes the change in relational and covenantal terms (Alma 23:7, 18). Transformation is framed as covenantal reorientation, marked by peace, restraint, and restored relationship, without reference to lineage or outward alteration. The name persists, but its covenant valence shifts.

This expansive logic is articulated most explicitly in Nephi's declaration that the Lord "inviteth them all to come unto him... and he denieth none that come unto him... and all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33). Within this covenant framework, the passage affirms that no boundary of birth or history lies beyond the reach of covenant belonging.

The restoration of the Lamanites thus reveals a universal principle embedded in the record: covenant belonging is realized through turning to Christ and being gathered into His people. In Nephi's early prophecy, the scattered are "gathered together again" as they "come to the knowledge of the true Messiah" (1 Nephi 10:14). Jacob develops the same doctrine in the allegory of the olive tree, where branches are grafted and nourished so that fruit may endure (Jacob 5). Those who bear a covenant name may yet break covenant while those long estranged may truly be gathered in.

Indigenous Latter-day Saint voices have articulated this covenantal vision in lived form. Their discipleship testifies that the Book of Mormon's promises engage real histories and real peoples, binding them to God while sustaining cultural integrity. Zion thus takes shape as gathered holiness, where distinct peoples are drawn into covenant without the loss of their God-given particularity. Unity in Christ consecrates difference rather than dissolving it, and covenant faithfulness sanctifies diverse ways of life through shared allegiance to Christ. In this way, the Book of Mormon enacts what President Russell M. Nelson has described: "The Lord uses the unlikely to accomplish the impossible."¹⁷ Those once regarded as outsiders become heirs, and

17. Russell M. Nelson, "The Lord Uses the Unlikely to Accomplish the Impossible" (devotional, Brigham Young University–Idaho, Rexburg, ID, 27 January 2015), byui.edu/speeches/russell-m-nelson/the-lord-uses-the-unlikely-to-accomplish-the-impossible.

divided peoples are gathered through faith in Christ and renewed covenant allegiance.

From Curse to Covenant

If the curse is understood within the Book of Mormon's covenant framework, it names a condition of separation that remains oriented toward return. Scriptural warnings of distance are frequently accompanied by promises that restoration is possible, though never automatic. Justice and mercy operate together, preserving accountability while keeping open a path of return through repentance and covenant faithfulness.

Lehi's promise reflects this balance. "If ye are cursed," he declares, "behold, I leave my blessing upon you" (2 Nephi 4:6). The blessing coexists with the warning, affirming that covenant access endures even in estrangement. Return remains contingent upon choice, but the covenant itself is not withdrawn from those willing to turn back to God.

This covenantal rhythm has increasingly been expressed with careful precision in Church materials. The introduction added to the Book of Mormon in 1981 stated that the Lamanites "are the principal ancestors of the American Indians"; the 2006 revision changed this to "among the ancestors," a wording that avoids overclaiming what the text itself does not specify.¹⁸ A 2014 Church essay on Book of Mormon and DNA studies reinforces this understanding, noting that the Book of Mormon does not claim its peoples were the predominant or exclusive inhabitants of the lands they occupied.¹⁹ These clarifications do not make the Book of Mormon's invitation to come to Christ more true; that invitation has always been central. Rather, they help prevent the covenant message from being reduced to a merely ethnographic census. The Book of Mormon can affirm God's covenant faithfulness to promised posterity while still insisting that covenant belonging is ultimately realized through faithful response to Christ's invitation.

Read through this covenantal lens, the Book of Mormon invites more than historical identification; it summons readers to locate

18. "Introduction," in *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), v; compare the revised 2006 edition.

19. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Book of Mormon and DNA Studies," *Gospel Topic Essays*, 2014, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-and-dna-studies.

themselves within its covenant drama. *Come, Follow Me* provides a natural setting for this expansion, placing historical questions about Nephites and Lamanites alongside the lived question of what it means to be restored through covenant.

Passages such as 3 Nephi 21:22–26 envision Lamanites, Gentiles, and Jews gathered in and through the work of Zion, a future unity that remains aspirational rather than achieved. Within this frame, historical divisions become diagnostic rather than determinative, revealing spiritual condition without fixing the boundaries of belonging. In classrooms and congregations, teachers can therefore invite learners to engage the text as participants in an ongoing work of reconciliation and covenant renewal that extends to all who are willing to come unto Christ.

Missionary work likewise comes into sharper focus. It reflects God's work of gathering rather than a project of categorization. D. Todd Christofferson reminds us that "we do not strive for conversion to the Church but to Christ and His gospel."²⁰ Through that lens, missionary labor mirrors the Shepherd's search in Luke 15: the ninety-and-nine remain safe while the estranged one is sought as kin rather than as an outsider.

Seeing Lamanite identity through covenant also clarifies the nature of discipleship. Helaman 5 portrays Nephi's and Lehi's ministering among the Lamanites through shared vulnerability and covenant presence. Their imprisonment, deliverance, and the encircling fire of divine protection dramatize how covenant relationship overcomes social and spiritual boundaries. Discipleship in this frame unfolds through proximity, humility, and trust in God's power to redeem from within. The Restoration's call similarly invites participation and persistence, offering covenant belonging to all those willing to enter and remain.

This covenant reframing does more than reinterpret the text; it clarifies how covenant identity is meant to be lived. The Restoration affirms covenant order and continuity across generations, while locating moral standing within faithfulness in addition to descent.

20. D. Todd Christofferson, "Why the Church," *Ensign*, November 2015, 108, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2015/11/sunday-afternoon-session/why-the-church.

Read this way, the Book of Mormon calls disciples to exercise covenant responsibility (especially toward those named as outsiders) recognizing that covenant privilege always carries moral obligation.

Mormon himself models this posture. Writing of "my brethren," the descendants of Lehi, he prays "that they may once again come to the knowledge of God, yea, the redemption of Christ; that they may once again be a delightsome people" (Words of Mormon 1:8). His concern centers on covenantal restoration rooted in faith and redemption. That prayer, while grounded in literal posterity, opens outward to all who receive the Book of Mormon's witness of Christ, inviting reconciliation with God through covenant response. Read this way, the record serves as a guide to belonging within God's ordered covenant family, shaping identity through repentance, discipleship, and enduring relationship rather than through inherited distinction.

A Failed Mission or a Found Legacy

As noted earlier, the 1830 mission to the Lamanites was widely regarded as unsuccessful. The elders were expelled from Indian Territory, and no lasting institutional presence followed. Read through the covenantal lens developed here, judgment reflects the limits of measuring covenant work by immediacy or institutional permanence. Covenant history often discloses meaning over time rather than at the moment of action.

The missionaries carried with them both zeal and a historically inherited expectation that the remnant would be located primarily through lineage. Their journey west became, in retrospect, a moment of unexpected reconfiguration. Though they reached the Delaware and Shawnee and presented the Book of Mormon to tribal leaders, federal agents viewed them with suspicion and forced them back. The interruption redirected the mission rather than terminating its purpose.

On their route west, the missionaries paused briefly in Kirtland, Ohio, preaching among Campbellite congregations. There, more than a hundred converts entered the waters of baptism, including Sidney Rigdon, Isaac Morley, and Newel K. Whitney, along with women such as Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner who embraced the gospel and

helped shape the early community.²¹ Although the elders had set out seeking the literal descendants of Lehi, they instead encountered a different fulfillment of covenant promise: Gentile hearers whose hearts were already prepared to receive the gospel. Those who gathered recognized the gospel's call and entered covenant through faith and baptism.

In that unexpected gathering, the breadth of the Lord's covenantal reach became visible. Those who formed the early nucleus of the Church were gathered into Israel through response rather than descent, embodying the principle that Nephi would articulate with clarity: "as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord" (2 Nephi 30:2). God's remembrance operates through covenant invitation received, not through ancestry alone.

That encounter marked a quiet but significant clarification in early Restoration experience. While lineage and promised posterity remain integral to the record, covenant belonging is consistently portrayed as something enacted through readiness, repentance, and response to divine invitation. The Kirtland conversions embody this logic in lived form, anticipating themes the Book of Mormon itself develops narratively and doctrinally.

The Restoration would later articulate this principle with increasing clarity, as scripture and teaching placed covenant faithfulness and adoption into Israel alongside lineage promises rather than beneath them. In that sense, the Book of Mormon's declaration that "all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33) operates not as an abstract ideal but as a prophetic compression of how covenant identity functions. Across the text and within Restoration history, it comprises what has elsewhere been called the *covenant threshold*.²² It is the point at which a people become capable of receiving and sustaining divine relationship. Anciently, that threshold required not only faith but the social and

21. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner was baptized into the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, in October 1830 at approximately age twelve, shortly after the missionaries' visit and before a branch was formally organized there. Her early conversion and testimony are documented in *Church History Biographical Database*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, history.churchofjesuschrist.org/chd/individual/mary-elizabeth-rollins-1818.

22. John E. Cochran II and Joseph D. Cochran, "From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold: Land, Literacy, and Religious Readiness in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 67 (2025): 401–24, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/from-wilderness-to-covenant-threshold-land-literacy-and-religious-readiness-in-the-book-of-mormon.

spiritual readiness to preserve covenant life: literacy, shared memory, surplus, and unity. The 1830 mission likewise demonstrates that covenant readiness, not genealogy, determines who fulfills the promise. The missionaries' search for a fixed lineage nearly obscured the very fulfillment unfolding before them in Kirtland. The gospel could take root only where covenant soil had been prepared.

For modern Saints, this legacy endures. It teaches that estrangement is never final and that covenant belonging is not secured by culture or ancestry as a moral entitlement. Covenant does not erase identity; it reorders it. As Melissa Inouye reminds us, "The Church that is true is a Church that is real... It embodies contradictions and contrasts."²³ The Restoration's reality is precisely this. It is imperfect people, bound by covenant, striving toward Zion.

As Farina King has shown, Indigenous Latter-day Saint experience gives concrete form to this covenant logic. Native Saints testify that covenant faithfulness does not require the abandonment of cultural memory or peoplehood but situates those identities within a redeemed order in which no heritage confers superiority and no history places a people beyond God's remembrance. Their discipleship extends the same pattern that began on that winter road west, where what appeared to be failure became, over time, a quiet witness of covenant fulfillment.

Conclusion: Grafted and Remembered

The Book of Mormon's closing witness is not one of division but one of divine pursuit. Jacob 5 reveals a Lord of the vineyard who labors patiently, nourishing and grafting with care, never abandoning what he has planted. "Go to, and labor in the vineyard, with your might," he commands, "for behold, this is the last time that I shall nourish my vineyard" (Jacob 5:71). His work persists because his remembrance does. No branch lies beyond his reach. Covenant belonging is ultimately secured not by ancestry but by grace, grounded not in worthiness proven but in a God who refuses to forget.

Elder Patrick Kearon captured that divine pursuit with remarkable clarity:

My friends, my fellow disciples on the road of mortal life,
our Father's beautiful plan — even His 'fabulous' plan — is

23. Melissa Inouye, "A Church That Is Real: Walking the Path of Most Resistance," *Wayfare*, 7 January 2025, www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/a-church-that-is-real.

designed to bring you home, not to keep you out. No one has built a roadblock and stationed someone there to turn you around and send you away. In fact, it is the exact opposite. God is in relentless pursuit of you. He wants all of His children to choose to return to Him, and He employs every possible measure to bring you back.

He did not refuse the penitent—no matter their sin. And He will not refuse you or those you love when you bring to Him your broken hearts and contrite spirits. That is *not* His intent or His design, nor His plan, purpose, wish, or hope.²⁴

Elder Kearon's words describe not only divine intent but lived experience. Historian Farina King, a Navajo scholar, observes that native readers of the Book of Mormon have "appropriated and adapted the very terms once imposed upon them." They interpret its promises as affirmations of covenant dignity rather than instruments of cultural erasure.²⁵ Such readings situate Indigenous identity within the covenant without requiring the abandonment of memory, land, or peoplehood. In this light, Zion is best understood as a form of holiness that gathers distinct lives into communion, not by erasure, but through grace.

For those once called Lamanite by lineage, this promise carries particular significance. What was named as distance becomes the site of divine pursuit, and what was marked as "cut off" becomes a sign of mercy. God's covenant faithfulness turns ancestral designation into an invitation to return, revealing that no history or heritage places a people beyond his reach.

Melissa Inouye expresses this covenant tenderness in unforgettable terms: "He who called Himself the Good Shepherd also knew what it was like to be a Lost Sheep."²⁶ In that recognition lies the heart of covenant compassion. The Redeemer gathers not from a distance but from within, descending into the wilderness to carry his people home.

To see through covenant eyes, then, is to recognize that *Lamanite*

24. Patrick Kearon, "God's Intent Is to Bring You Home," *Liahona*, May 2024, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2024/04/45kearon.

25. Farina King, "Aloha in Diné Bikéyah: Mormon Hawaiians and Navajos," in *Essays on American Indian and Mormon History*, ed. P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019), 161–82, doi.org/10.2307/jj.33676728.

26. Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, "A Lost Sheep," *Wayfare*, 8 November 2023, www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/a-lost-sheep.

names more than an ancient people; it can also function as a scriptural category for those who stand at a distance from God yet remain the object of His pursuit. Throughout the Book of Mormon, this pattern appears concretely both among the converted Lamanites of Alma 23, in Samuel’s prophetic authority over a covenant-failing Nephite society, and in the Lord’s persistent labor in Jacob 5 to reclaim branches long thought lost. In each case, estrangement is not the end of the story but the condition in which remembrance becomes visible. The covenant narrative moves not toward separation but toward gathering as God continues his work until reconciliation is possible and fruit is restored.

This reading also dignifies the global Church. As the Restoration continues to unfold among Pacific Islanders, Indigenous peoples, Latin Americans, Africans, and others long situated at the margins of Euro-American religious narratives, covenant belonging reframes participation itself. These communities are not peripheral recipients of a completed story; they enter the covenant through the same pattern the Book of Mormon repeatedly narrates: remembrance following estrangement, gathering following distance. The text’s repeated insistence that God works through those once overlooked reorients the meaning of *restoration* from cultural transmission to covenant response. In this sense, the Book of Mormon does not merely accommodate global discipleship. Instead, it anticipates it, bearing witness that divine remembrance extends to every people and every tongue who respond in faith.



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