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## **Written to the Lamanites: Understanding the Book of Mormon through Native Culture and Religion**

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# WRITTEN TO THE LAMANITES: UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF MORMON THROUGH NATIVE CULTURE AND RELIGION

*Gary P. Gillum*

*Abstract: Latter-day Saints have always been encouraged to seek the truth wherever it can be found. With the Book of Mormon being written especially to the Lamanites, we can assume that the more we know about Lamanite and Native American culture, the more we can understand, appreciate and gain insights as we read that inspired scripture. In this article the writer has compared examples from Native American culture and history to what we read in the Book of Mormon and experience as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Most importantly, as we read through the eyes of a Native American, we can appreciate the divinity and authenticity of the Book of Mormon, since Joseph Smith could not have known Native American culture and history in the way it is described herein.*

THE BOOK OF MORMON  
AN ACCOUNT WRITTEN BY  
THE fHAND OF MORMON  
UPON PLATES

TAKEN FROM THE PLATES OF NEPHI

Wherefore, it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites—**Written to the Lamanites**, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile—

Ever since my conversion in 1969 I have been intrigued by the title page of The Book of Mormon. While it proclaims to be a record both of the Nephites and the Lamanites, why was it written specifically for the Lamanites? The question as to why the Nephites were not included in the readership of this great scripture cannot be answered here, unless the Nephites are included under the rubrics “Jew” or “Gentile.” My purpose here is to show that a greater knowledge of the culture, history and religion of the Lamanites can be very fruitful for readers of the Book of Mormon as they seek to further their knowledge, wisdom and understanding of what they are reading.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks spoke of the restoration of religious knowledge and many other truths that were lost in the Apostasy, which occurred both in the eastern and western hemispheres. In my mind I have read between the lines of his talk and have projected some of his thoughts more directly to Native American history, culture and religion than what he intended. I have also assumed that “American Indians” are included as part of the Lamanites. Here are his thoughts from the April 1994 General Conference:

On some matters the general knowledge of mankind regresses as some important truths are distorted or ignored and eventually forgotten. For example, the American Indians were in many respects more successful at living in harmony with nature than our modern society ... We would be wiser if we could restore the knowledge of some important things that have been distorted, ignored, or forgotten. This also applies to religious knowledge. It explains the need for the gospel restoration we proclaim.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign* (May 1995), 84. Obviously there have been exceptions to the rule. It has recently been shown, for example, that the ancient Anasazi had so severely deforested the land that they had to move on to other areas of the southwest. In defense of our own

I would like to illuminate some of those distorted, ignored and forgotten "truths" as well as give further insights. As a "missionary of the mind" (my favorite definition for librarian), I will simply open some doors to possible studies of Native history and culture regarding the Book of Mormon and Mormonism, leaving the deeper explorations behind those doors to historians, theologians, anthropologists and other specialists. These experts, in turn, need to take heed of an important challenge issued by historian Roger Launius, in *Dialogue*:

Many "New Mormon Historians" have for too long approached their studies backwards. The focus has too often been on how the religious institution has affected society ... when it seems more appropriate that it should be on how society has affected Mormonism.<sup>2</sup>

There are many ... racial and ethnic groups that require concerted study in Mormon history. One of the most important of these has been Mormon relations with native Americans.<sup>3</sup>

Before I open some doors, however, we need to agree on some semantic, ethnic, and historiographic difficulties, most of which we can agree on just by accepting a more pluralistic and tolerant view.

1) Our understanding of the Lamanites, and therefore the Native Americans, all too often comes simply by reading the Book of Mormon. Let's try the reverse: after all, the Book

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culture, on the other hand, major portions of the northeastern United States have recently been reforested to an extent greater than that of 200 years ago. (see Bill McKibben, "An Explosion of Green," *Atlantic Monthly*, Apr. 1995, 61.)

2 Roger D. Launius, "The 'New Social History' and the 'New Mormon History': Reflections on Recent Trends," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27:1 (Spring 1994), 114.

3 Launius, "New Social," 116.

of Mormon unambiguously states on the title page that it was “Written to the Lamanites.” Moroni and other editors primarily had the Lamanites in mind, followed by the Jews and Gentiles. Technically, then, Native Americans should be able to understand the Book of Mormon much more easily than those of us of European stock.

2) Who are the Lamanites? Dark-skinned people? Polynesians? Brazilians? This issue has been discussed elsewhere. For the sake of simplicity in this paper, I am defining Lamanites as native or indigenous peoples whose understanding of life is based more on oral tradition, tribal rituals, nature, family, and revelation rather than on written records, sophistication, machines, society, and Western-style logic. (If you want to imagine a specific nation or tribe, like the Sioux or the Navajo, my task would be even easier.) Technically, however, we don’t precisely know who the Lamanites of the Book of Mormon are today.

3) Even though we usually identify ourselves with the Nephites, they are not necessarily our forebears. Nephites were much closer to the Lamanites in their culture than they would be to Europeans and Americans today. They are simply our spiritual forebears—and some people would argue with that. I will show, for instance, how the Lamanites are just as much our spiritual forebears as the Nephites.

4) The distinction of historical and primal is a difficult one because it is based on our concept of time. Historical religions, including all of the respected world religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam, are merely in their infancy, compared to the “religion” of primal peoples. (Note that I prefer to use the term “primal,” not primitive. “Primitive” is a 19th century prejudice that “later means better.” As the religious historian Huston Smith indicates, that view holds

true for technology but not for religion.<sup>4</sup> “Primitive” is all too often a judgmental and derogatory term like “myth”: terms we use for beliefs and religions outside of our own to make ours seem more valid or truthful. Hugh Nibley would insist that it is also true for language.)

5) Historians and anthropologists often speak of East and West and the differences between the two: the ionian monism of Classical civilization versus the dionysian dualism of Near Eastern civilization. But where do the primal cultures fit? We simply do not take their culture or cosmology seriously enough, and therefore dismiss them as not having anything important to contribute to life. I maintain that there is much we can learn<sup>5</sup> from primal cultures, and I agree with the thoughts of John Collier, one time United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs:

They had what the world has lost: the ancient, lost reverence and passion for human personality joined with the ancient, lost reverence and passion for the earth and its web of life. Since before the Stone Age they have tended that passion as a central, sacred fire. It should be our long hope to renew it in us all.<sup>5</sup>

As an example of this alternative perspective, or *Weltanschauung*, one of the most captivating and engaging conversations I have ever had was with Lorenzo Teasyat, a medicine man I met in 1989 in Dinébito Wash, a tiny Navajo village (population 27) southeast of Tuba City, Navajo Nation. As I talked to this man who had had very little Western formal education, I felt like I was being taught by a more advanced extra-terrestrial being (or Abrahamic figure) who had access to much more than books, laboratories, and the principles of Greek astronomy. I was amazed by his expert knowledge of

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4      Huston Smith, *The Illustrated World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), 232.

5      John Collier, in Smith, *Illustrated*, 243.

“astronomy,” the Sacred Four principles and religion, which to the Native Americans is “medicine.”<sup>6</sup>

6) Finally, we need to briefly look at the dualism of the natural and supernatural, or even to what some Asian religions refer to as Yin and Yang. To primal peoples there is no distinction between the two. To them, every *thing* and every *place* is holy or sacred. There are no miracles or magic, for with God, or the Great Spirit, “all things are possible” and life in all its totality is therefore their religion. It is the “mantic” point-of-view, or vertical tradition that Hugh Nibley and H. Curtis Wright spoke so often about. All members of a given tribe or nation share in the holy at all times by their attitude of spirit and by proper preparation: for example, by fasting, prayer, dancing, the sacrifice of self, and the vision quest. Much has been written about Joseph Smith’s money digging and magic. From the primal worldview this could have been a sacred activity helped along by the “Stone people,” what we commonly refer to as rocks, boulders, and stones. (Before we make light of this comment, remember that the cosmologist Orson Pratt stated that all things have intelligence or spirit in them. Primal peoples even insist that stones “speak” through the process of what we would call revelation, which further suggests our own tradition of seer stones and Urim and Thummim.) Please keep in mind that I respect the sensitivity Native peoples have for their sacred rituals. We will be on the holy ground of another culture.

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If I have now instilled in you a separate worldview than what you are used to—at least temporarily—I will proceed to some examples in the Book of Mormon.

**The Sacred Four.** My study of the Sacred Four has been a career-long amalgamation of multi-disciplinary research which

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6 For further reading, see Nancy C. Maryboy and David Begay, *Sharing the Skies: Navajo Astronomy* (Tucson: Rio Nuevo, 2010).



has included not only history and religion but anthropology, cosmology, and the physics of the earth itself. I continue to be amazed by what I discover. The Book of Mormon speaks of the four cardinal directions, as do native peoples.<sup>7</sup> But rather than being simply an abstraction, native cultures symbolize the “Sacred Four” in what they call the “Medicine Wheel.”

The Circle expresses the sense of wholeness, of harmony, unity and mutual interdependence that is at the heart of Native civilization. Within the Circle, the points of the spiritual compass indicate the four sacred directions of God’s creation. These directions represent the eternal balance of the harmony and goodness of the world. They can be illustrated by different colors, animals, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Black Elk gives a further example in the book *Black Elk Speaks*, which for Native Americans is a very spiritual document ranking in the same category as the Book of Mormon:

These four ribbons hanging here on the stem [of the sacred pipe] are the four quarters of the universe. The black one is for the west where the thunder beings live to send us rain; the white one for the north, whence comes the great white cleansing wind; the red one for the east, whence springs the light and where the morning star lives to give men wisdom; the yellow for

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7 The land is divided into four quarters: Mosiah 27:6; Alma 43:26; 52:10; 56:1; 58:30 (LDS). The earth is divided into four quadrants: 1 Nephi 19:16; 22:25; 2 Nephi 10:8; 21:12; 3 Nephi 5:24; 5:26; 16:5; Ether 13:11. For additional information, see Diane E. Wirth and Steven L. Olsen, “Four Quarters,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 145-147. See also D&C 33:6; 45:46.

8 *SourceBook for Earth’s Community of Religions*, ed. Joel Beversluis (Grand Rapids: Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions & The SourceBook Project, 1995), 30.

the south, whence comes the summer and the power to grow.<sup>9</sup>

Peta Yuha Mani, medicine man, in *Vision Quest*, reinforces Black Elk's vision:

To the traditional Lakota, every day is sacred to him. He looks at the world on this creation and knows that they are all interrelated. The trees and the grasses, the animal world, the flowing stream and the mountains. Everything he's related to, and he respects it.<sup>10</sup>

For scriptorians who are familiar with the apocryphal *Gospel of Philip*, a decidedly Gnostic-Jewish work, the words of Black Elk take on a resemblance which I think is much more than coincidental, no matter what its provenance:

A harvest is gathered into the barn only as a result of the natural action of water, earth, wind, and light. God's farming likewise has four elements—faith, hope, love, and knowledge. Faith is our earth, that in which we take root. Hope is the water through which we are nourished. Love is the wind through which we grow. Knowledge then is the light through which we ripen.<sup>11</sup>

**The Great Spirit.** Ammon (in Alma 18) exemplifies the ideal missionary who not only listens to the Spirit but is knowledgeable and tolerant of the beliefs of another, King Lamoni. Together King Lamoni and Ammon speak of the Great Spirit, who is God. Today the same expression is used

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9 John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 2.

10 Don Doll, *Vision Quest: Men, Women and Sacred Sites of the Sioux Nation* (New York: Crown, 1994), 24.

11 Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 147. Nearly every culture of the past, and some present, have similar notions; e.g., the Mayans.

by Native Americans in many areas of the North and South American continents. And for those of us who are confused by theological discussions in the Book of Mormon and John chapter 14 about the Father and the Son, know that native peoples refer to their Great Spirit as Grandfather and Father, who are one in purpose and who created all things. (And speaking of John and Creation, the first chapter of the book of John is as close to a Lamanite scripture as I have ever seen. “In the beginning was the word,” for example, is good Native “doctrine,” as spoken language is a creative act in every sense of the word.)

**Rituals.** Rituals and rites of passage lead to repentance, or a change of heart and mind. Native peoples practice many rituals which seem very “pagan” to us, unless we carefully consider their very different worldview, which perhaps is not so different after all:

The goal of life for most Native Americans is to reach old age with wisdom and understanding, understanding of the connections possible between male and female, man and his fellowman, man and nature, and, finally, man and the cosmos—a cosmos with a divine center ... Ideally, the end of all our changing is to come to a stage in development where we can say, “I have created something divine out of the experiences of my life. I Am.”<sup>12</sup>

In fact, during the many years I have been studying and researching Native American religions, I have been convinced that one of the major weaknesses of Judeo-Christian religions today is the lack of rites of passage which help young people to

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12 Suzanne E. Lundquist, “Native American Rites of Passage: Implications for Latter-day Saints,” in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, vol. 1, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo: FARMS, 1990), 453-54.

face themselves and the world in a more meaningful way. The only ritual which I know of which even comes close to a Native American rite of passage is the Mormon missionary experience, a real “vision quest” for the young 18- or 19-year old who is facing the world and its problems on his own for the first time. Moreover, our society may seem very progressive in 2013, but we seem to have acquired an ignorance of the importance of a true, extended family. Otherwise we would treat our seniors in a much more “sacred” manner. While my wife and I served in the California Anaheim Mission in 2009 and 2010 we had the opportunity to contrast our own Western European culture with the “Lamanite” culture of Southern California. We were often called upon to attend baptisms of Spanish-speaking peoples. As in the Book of Mormon, we saw that they were overtly more family-oriented than the stereotypical “impatient procrastinators” among the fast-paced, money-focused, and freeway-driven society of Orange County.

**Visions and Vision Quests.** If a Mormon mission is a rite of passage as well as a “vision quest,” what are we to make of Moses’s, Abraham’s, Nephi’s, Enos’s or Joseph Smith’s “visions”? I can answer that best in the words of the Savior: “He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do” (John 14:12). Again, attitude of spirit and proper preparation makes it possible for any of us to share in the divine possibilities this cosmos holds in store for us (we sometimes call them “mysteries”). And doesn’t the passage in John ring true of primal peoples’ need to emulate heroic archetypes, of which Jesus Christ is the greatest? As you listen to Black Elk’s vision, then, think of Moses, Joseph Smith and others:

I was standing on the highest mountain of them all,  
and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of  
the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I

can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being.<sup>13</sup>

Next, compare the mature responsibilities of a very young Mormon or the aftermath of Joseph Smith's "First Vision" with that of Black Elk:

As I lay there thinking about the wonderful place where I had been and all that I had seen, I was very sad; for it seemed to me that everybody ought to know about it, but I was afraid to tell, because I knew that nobody would believe me, little as I was, for I was only nine years old. Also, as I lay there thinking of my vision, I could see it all again and feel the meaning with a part of me like a strange power glowing in my body; but when the part of me that talks would try to make words for the meaning, it would be like fog and get away from me.<sup>14</sup>

In yet another vision Black Elk was instructed by twelve men *and twelve women* as to how he should teach his nation. Many women in the world would probably envy those women who are part of a matrilineal or matriarchal society, such as the Navajo nation. A student employee of mine wrote her thesis on Native American Medicine Women. These Medicine Women are usually grandmothers and enjoy a respected station in many tribes.

Lehi's vision of the tree of life is not only the controlling vision in the Book of Mormon<sup>15</sup> but an example for all readers

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13     Neihardt, *Black Elk*, 43.

14     Neihardt, *Black Elk*, 48-49.

15     Bruce W. Jorgensen, "The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon," *Literature of Belief*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1981), 217-231.

of the Book of Mormon, especially for the Lamanites. Aren't we told by Luke in Acts – and in the Old Testament book of Joel, which Peter quotes – that “your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams”? (Acts 2:17).

**Nephi and His Brothers.** *The Sons of the Wind: The Sacred Stories of the Lakota* is essentially an archetypal story of Nephi and his brothers: different names, different culture, different tests. But the personalities of Nephi, Sam, Laman and Lemuel are all there. If we were to consider both stories archetypal, then we could transpose some of the typologies and know a little bit more about the elusive Sam and his personality! I will give you an example of one insightful passage:

Yata said, “We will go on our journey, and where the shadows at midday are the longest, I will fix my direction. We will call it the first direction. Let us hurry on our way.”

“We will not depart until we see a bird alight on this rock, and then I will tell you when to start on the journey,” said Eya.

How dare you challenge the command of your older brother!” said Yata. “I say we will go without delay.”

“My brother, it is the will of the Great Spirit, Skan, that I shall have the birthright of the first-born son,” replied Eya. “I did not wish it to be so, but all must obey his will. I would gladly give it back to you, if Skan will permit...

“I command you to obey me and come without delay,” said Yata....

Yata rushed forward in a rage as if to punish his brothers, but immediately Wazi appeared before him, and he stepped back and sat down.”<sup>16</sup>

The argument continues for at least another page before an answer comes from the Spirits:

They saw a swallow sitting on the rock. It spoke, saying, “The Sacred Beings have heard you and have directed Wakinyan, the Winged One, to decide for you. I am his messenger and this is the message he sends you. Skan has told his will to Wazi and no one can undo it. Wazi has dealt justly with you. It is the will of the Spirits that you obey Eya.”

Yata grasped a stone to throw at the swallow, but he became like ice and could not move. Wazi said, “Because you are mean and ill-tempered, you shall always be like ice. When you come, things that breathe shall fly from you and all that grows from the ground shall be as if dead.” Then Wazi vanished. Yata moved, but everything near him was cold.”<sup>17</sup>

**Opposition in all things.** Black Elk taught that “the world is happier after the terror of the storm.”<sup>18</sup> Nephi tells us, “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). With their closeness to the Earth, Native Americans feel that balance and harmony is always shifting, and their rituals help maintain the balance and perspective as well as provide a reminder that repentance is always essential.<sup>19</sup>

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16 D.M. Dooling, ed., *The Sons of the Wind: The Sacred Stories of the Lakota* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992); 74.

17 Dooling, *Sons*, 75.

18 Neihardt, *Black Elk*, 188.

19 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (NY: Penguin Books, 1977).

## Other Comparisons Outside of the Book of Mormon

**The Spirit World.** Black Elk claims that Crazy Horse dreamed and went into the world where there is nothing but the spirits of all things. That is the real world that is behind this one, and everything we see here is something like a shadow from that world.<sup>20</sup> Appropriately, the Kachina dolls of the Hopi tribe represent this spirit world and those who dwell in it.

**Place Names.** Throughout the Book of Mormon special places are named after members of Lehi's family. A reader need only read "the Valley of Lemuel" to recall what happened as Lehi and his family sojourned in that place. In Arizona the Western Apache tribe attaches important historical events to otherwise ordinary places, for example, "Juniper Tree Stands Alone." Smoothness, resilience and steadiness of mind (the processes of change or repentance) can be learned from the wisdom of stories recounted from places.<sup>21</sup>

**The Temple.** In the wonderful novel *Ceremony*, a medicine man teaches Native American rituals to a young man who had served his time in the military in the Pacific Theater of World War II:

At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in the world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong.<sup>22</sup>

One of the basic tenets of our belief is that of continuing revelation. The world is changing for us, too, and these changes always bring growth, repentance, and spiritual insight. In 1989,

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20 Neihardt, *Black Elk*, 260.

21 See Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

22 Silko, *Ceremony*, 126.



in the same village of Dinébetó as mentioned earlier, my wife and I were invited to participate in a sacred wedding ceremony for our Indian Placement “daughter” of several years. The intriguing parallels with my own experiences of sacred marriage did not escape my notice. First of all, the ceremony did not take place out-of-doors, in a sweat lodge, or in someone’s hogan. Rather, a large teepee was constructed, with its 32-foot support beams reaching skyward, as if it were the Navajo version of a temple. Secondly, my wife was honored as a *pro tem* mother with the lending of an exquisite squash blossom necklace to wear in the teepee, instead of special clothing. Finally, in a teepee filled mostly with Navajos, she was essentially asked to “bear her testimony” and give advice to the newlyweds.

**Covenants.** Our sacred ordinances often consist of covenants we make with deity. While they are not often spoken of by other religious groups, some Native American tribes consider covenants extremely important, whether made with the Great Spirit, with Mother Earth, or with each other. This became very evident with the Hopi tribe in their important publication to the world.<sup>23</sup> This exhaustive tome of 577 pages contains many thoughts, prophecies and insights that would gladden the hearts of many Latter-day Saints and show again how the Lamanites and Nephites (in this case, the Hopi) are our spiritual ancestors. It also gives credence that Hugh Nibley was onto something very important when he often visited the Hopis and was accepted by them because of his similar beliefs. In the October General Conference of 2012, Elder Larry Echo Hawk (from the Pawnee tribe) spoke for all of the remnants of the House of Israel when he quoted Nephi: “And at that day shall the remnant of our seed know that they are of the house of Israel, and that they are the covenant people of the

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23 Thomas E. Mails and Dan Evehema, *Hotevilla: Hopi Shrine of the Covenant, Microcosm of the World* (New York: Marlowe & Co. and the Touch the Earth Foundation, 1995).

Lord; and then shall they know and come to the knowledge of their forefathers, and also to the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer, which was ministered unto their fathers by him; wherefore, they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved” (I Nephi 15:14).

**Priesthood.** My closing example has to do with the priesthood and is another moving example from the life of Black Elk:

Many I cured with the power that came through me. Of course it was not I who cured. It was the power from the outer world, and visions and ceremonies had only made me like a hole through which the power could come to the two-leggeds. If I thought that I was doing it myself, the hole would close up and no power would come through. Then everything I could do would be foolish.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

I hope that these brief glimpses behind some opened doors have excited your hearts and minds to the possibilities of studies that need to be made concerning Mormonism and the effects Native American culture has made on it. If I were to make any conclusions, it would be these four:

1) Native American religion and culture, along with many obvious typologies from the Middle East, authenticate the Book of Mormon in a major way. Joseph Smith could not have known most of these Native American teachings. So far the only major gulf I see between what Native Americans teach and the Book of Mormon is a belief in Jesus Christ. While they do believe in Father and Grandfather, there is no explicit talk of an atonement for sin. Perhaps the Sun Dance ceremony is a partial answer to this lacuna, for in the Sun Dance a young male volunteer sacrifices himself to pain and suffering tied by two ropes to a tree so that the tribe may be blessed. (Two ropes are anchored in the pectoral muscles of

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24 Neihardt, *Black Elk*, 204-205.

his chest, and he dances around the tree until the stakes and ropes are literally torn from his flesh.) In addition, the young man undergoing this rite of passage, in which the whole tribe is involved, begins to understand the pain both of childbirth and of Mother Earth, causing a major increase in empathy.

2) Julian Burger, in his book, *The Gaia Atlas of First Peoples: A Future for the Indigenous World*, insists that:

By understanding how they organize their societies, the wider society may learn to recognize that they are not at some primitive stage of development, but are thoughtful and skillful partners of the natural world, who can help all people reflect on the way humanity treats the environment and our fellow creatures.<sup>25</sup>

I don't think anyone reading this would doubt that Native Americans could survive a major calamity much more easily than those of us of European stock could, simply because of their closer attachment to creation. We can learn much from them concerning survivorship.

3) First and foremost we are all Citizens of Earth. Therefore, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, social status, worldview and every other principle which may separate us from one another is secondary in importance. Huston Smith concludes his wonderful book, *The Illustrated History of the World's Religions*, with the following optimistic observation about the unity of religion in the world:

Things are more integrated than they seem, they are better than they seem, and they are more mysterious than they seem.<sup>26</sup>

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25 Julian Burger, *The Gaia Atlas of First Peoples: A Future for the Indigenous World* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 15.

26 Smith, *Illustrated*, 248.

4) Finally, in the words of my friend and colleague at BYU, Dr. Roger Keller:

For me the study of world religions has deepened the tapestry of my own faith, moving me beyond superficial commandments to the profundity of the theology that is inherent in the religious experience found in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>27</sup>

I, too, have studied many of the religions of the world, and while I recognize many strengths and weaknesses in each one, the greatest strength of the Mormon belief system is that it opens so many doors and windows and stairways to the truths of life and living, both here and in the hereafter. The door I have tried to open to Native American culture is only one of many possible doors. As we empathize with and try to walk in the moccasins of the Lamanite culture, our own personal faith, beliefs and traditions can become all the richer and more meaningful.

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27 Roger R. Keller, "Loss of Self: The Only Way to Truth," *The Seventh Alice Louise Reynolds Lecture*, March 8, 1995, (Provo: Brigham Young University), 6.







