

# THE LAMANITE DILEMMA: MORMONISM AND INDIGENEITY

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Many times throughout my childhood, I heard various church members or my parents tell me that we had to choose between being Navajo and being Mormon. Our family went to church, prayed, and had family home evening regularly. Church was our culture. I remember talks referencing the Book of Mormon scripture: “For there are many promises which are extended to the Lamanites; for it is because of the traditions of their fathers that caused them to remain in their state of ignorance. . . . And at some period of time they will be brought to believe in his word; and to know the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers; and many of them will be saved for the Lord will be merciful unto all who call on his name.”<sup>1</sup>

We continually receive lessons on love and acceptance at church, and yet racial segregation, racial hierarchy, and plain old racism are still prevalent amongst the whisperings in corners of the chapel bathrooms and at private gatherings, and it slips into Sunday School teachers’ mouths. Maybe it isn’t the “Lamanite” who needs to forsake the incorrect traditions of our forefathers. Maybe it’s the belief in racial hierarchy that we need to forsake. Maybe it’s the idea and labels of “-ites” that we need to abolish.

In 2006, President Gordon B. Hinckley gave a general conference talk condemning racial hatred.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, President Hinckley’s

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1. Alma 9:16–17.

2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Need for Greater Kindness,” Apr. 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2006/04/the-need-for-greater-kindness>.

words have not penetrated the hard hearts of members who persist in spreading destructive racial divide within their social circles. Perhaps these people find it comfortable to sit in the privilege of their ancestor's stories—stories and ideologies that give them a sense of power over other people.

I've weathered their slurs: their drunken Indian jokes, their poor Indian jokes, their dirty Indian jokes. I've weathered their judgment that the strength of my faith depends on the lightness of my skin. And in all of these situations, I wonder if the "incorrect teachings of our forefathers" didn't pertain to a particular race but the divide we cause ourselves when we enact, perpetuate, and encourage racist ideas and actions.

While many Americans were dancing to '50s and '60s jigs, twirling poodle skirts and boasting perfectly styled coifs, hanging out at the local malt joint, my parents were being torn away from their families by government officials. They were forced into boarding schools at around the age of four and five. Their beautiful long hair was shaved off and butchered. They were issued "civilized" clothing resembling prison wear. They were beaten if they spoke their native language.

I grew up on the Navajo Reservation in Window Rock and St. Michaels, Arizona. At home, my parents, who were bilingual and fluent in Navajo, spoke strictly English to my six siblings and me. It was at school that I learned about my Navajo culture and heritage. I dressed up in traditional Navajo attire on few occasions during Traditional Days at school. Other than that, our household, like many others on the reservation who were LDS, didn't practice cultural Navajo beliefs. I never had a Kinaalda (Navajo puberty ceremony), prayed with corn pollen, or learned or attended cultural dances unless they were part of the Navajo Nation Fair. I strived to be different than the rest of my Navajo peers. Somehow, not speaking Navajo or having an accent gave me a sense of pride. I pored over Book of Mormon scriptures referencing Nephites and Lamanites and memorized the stories of Lehi, Abinadi, and Moroni, casting off the Navajo creation stories because I believed that they were incorrect traditions.

I was four years old standing with my friends singing “Book of Mormon Stories” in Primary class, one stubby arm held behind my head with two fingers in bunny-ear position to represent the Lamanites’ feathers. I don’t know if, at the age of four, I knew that Lamanites and Native Americans were the same thing. But I do remember knowing that I was considered a Lamanite.

I was twelve when I took my first temple trip to the Mesa Temple with the youth group. It was a six-hour drive and we had stopped at a park halfway through for a picnic. My Young Women leader rubbed her arms and said to the Young Men leader, “I’m going to miss my brown skin when we get to the celestial kingdom.” I stood aghast, realizing for the first time that this had always been the message and the goal. We were all working so tirelessly to be righteous so that one day our skin would become lighter and lighter until we no longer were cursed, wicked Lamanites. It suddenly became clear why my mother continually reminded us to keep out of the sun so the brown of our skin wouldn’t grow darker.

It wasn’t until I left the Navajo Reservation that I began to realize what Indigeneity meant. I noticed the rest of my Indigenous peers at Brigham Young University convene in their respective multicultural clubs, though everyone wanted to be part of the Polynesian clubs. It was there at the various gatherings where I learned traditional dances and songs. It was there where I decided to take two semesters of Navajo language. I had often longed to escape the barren deserts of the Navajo Reservation, and now that I lived along the Wasatch Front, I missed the red rocks and sandstone. I missed the sound of my language. The company of fellow Indigenous peers consoled me in the absence of dewy aromatic sagebrush back home. Home, where I didn’t have to wear turquoise necklaces to demonstrate how Navajo I was. Home, where my ancestors had lived for thousands of years before me.

I sat in my Book of Mormon 101 class on the first day feeling jittery. I was the only brown person there out of more than one hundred students. The professor began with a discussion on Nephites. “How do you think

they looked?” he asked. He made a big sweeping motion with his arms, “They looked like all of us. Fair complexions, blonde hair, and blue eyes. They were beautiful people like all of us.” I shrank in my seat, hoping no one would detect the “wicked” dark-skinned Lamanite that I was.

I often brushed aside the racism I came in contact with on the BYU campus. I never spoke out when two guys walked past exclaiming loudly so I could hear, “How did Indians even get admitted to BYU? Don’t they need a passport? It doesn’t matter, it’s not like they’ll graduate anyhow.” And I just smiled when the old lady at church came over to pat me on the shoulder and say sweetly, “It’s so nice to see Lamanites at church. We used to have a Lamanite stay with us for a time.”

It was within the BYU’s Tribe of Many Feathers Club and the Pacific Islanders choir, One Heart, where I felt most at ease. A sense of belonging stirred up inside me when I was around these new friends. There was a newfound appreciation that began to build as I watched fellow students perform the jingle dance, fancy dance, grass dance, and hoop dance. I had taken these parts of my culture for granted, seeing only savagery, until I witnessed their healing beauty and felt the drumbeat in time with the pounding of my own heart.

I married my BYU alum husband, who is from the Blackfoot tribe in Canada. We have four children. I wanted to believe that Happy Valley could be happy for my brown-skinned family and me. We’ve moved from Utah to Switzerland to Wisconsin to Hopi land to the searing Phoenix desert to the Pueblo of Zuni, and now we find ourselves making a home in Canada. It wasn’t until I had my four children that I pushed back on old racist notions and became active in learning and teaching my children about their Navajo, Blackfoot, Oneida, and Mohawk heritage. We visited with our newfound Oneida relatives when we lived in Wisconsin. Our Oneida grandmothers held my children close as they talked of basket weaving, Turtle Island, and clanships. There was a rich love and tenderness toward our culture that I hadn’t fully developed myself. And now as I came face to face with it, watching

the Tiny Tots at summer Pow Wows dressed in their regalia, it finally hit me how precious this knowledge and connection was.

Even if I wasn't raised to cherish my Indigenous culture, I'd make sure my children would. My children's heritage blended like spice into a flavorful pot of corn stew paired with piping hot bannock fresh out of the oven. It was beautiful and fragrant and nothing to be ashamed of.



Shame.

I grew up ashamed of who I was. This dark skin, I was told, was a curse. My black eyes and thick black hair were not the idealized beauty of blue and wispy yellow. There was shame in dancing because it was beastly and wrong. There was shame in traditional dwellings because they were dirty and too archaic. In everything that was my culture there was shame. Consciously or subconsciously, I was made to feel it, and perhaps others with small minds hoped that I would spread this shame and finally extinguish whatever pride our people once had.

There was a constant battle going on in my head. On the one hand, Mormonism and its doctrines of eternal families and life after death brought me extraordinary comfort. My brother died when he was fourteen and I was fifteen. Believing that I could see him again and forever be sealed to him kept me going on the days I wanted to end it. It was a thousand times more when I looked in each of my babies' black glassy eyes that I knew some of these teachings were good. On the other hand, the most racist situations I've ever experienced were with well-meaning Mormons.

Church members taught that Black and Indigenous people were "less valiant" in the premortal existence. They taught that Black and Indigenous people lacked faith and knowledge and, in some instances, even intelligence. These same teachings were passed down from generation to generation—in subtle and not-so-subtle manners—so much so that there are white nationalist subgroups of Latter-day Saints.

My fourteen-year-old son came to me after church one day and said that his white peer in his Young Men class had told him he asks too many questions. He continued saying, “I know why you ask too many questions. It’s because you lack faith, and you lack faith because you have the curse of Laman.”

There are many good pieces of doctrine, doctrine that uplifts and brings God’s children together in love, harmony, and equality. This doctrine is easy to accept and teach and talk about. Unfortunately, there are also outdated opinions of racial hierarchy masked as doctrine still being taught in Sunday School classes today. But rarely do church members talk about racial hierarchy and why it could be detrimental to God’s children. Rarely will anyone oppose and correct the Sunday School teacher and tell them that it is wrong to spread inappropriate ideologies passed down from their forefathers. However, having brown-skinned babies and a wider view of the world from all the moves we made over the years, I knew I could not be silently complacent during lessons that caused divide or spread prejudice instead of love.

Maybe it isn’t only the parables of the Book of Mormon that I should learn. Maybe it’s the stories of the Oneida and their willingness to serve others, or the Blackfoot and their tales of endurance and survival, or the Navajo and their counsel for continual education that I need to hold most dear to my heart. The teachings from our Indigenous elders in combination with all that is good and love-centered doctrine is the harmony I’d been searching for.

I’d learned to cherish my culture and to pass that love of heritage down to my children. They are happy in their skin. They are happy in their brightly colored regalia and their shiny jingles that sway in time with the melodic prayers they send up to the Creator. They find a peaceful calm as the drum beats in time with their hearts. They comfort those in need of comfort. They grieve with those who grieve. They lose themselves in the service of their fellow beings. They love one another.

My Indigenous husband graduated from the University of Wisconsin Law School. He's a licensed attorney who has been a prosecutor and a judge. A wide array of criminals have passed through his courts. Wickedness is not exclusive to a shade of skin pigmentation. Criminals exist in every culture, in every race, in every shade of human. The world does not exist in categories of righteous races and wicked ones.

And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people.

There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God.<sup>3</sup>

If God has proclaimed there are no more manner of “-ites,” we should believe him. Let us do away with divisive language. I am not a Lamanite. My husband is not a Lamanite. My children are not Lamanites. The uneducated notion that two stubby fingers held behind my head can portray all Indigenous people is ultimately false. We are descendants of chiefs, warriors, and peacemakers. Our ancestors were basket makers, agriculturalists, shepherders, hunters, rug weavers, artists, and canoe makers. We are Diné, Oneida, Siksika, Akwesasne, and Anishinaabe, with our own stories and histories passed down from the tender and powerful voices of our elders. We are the Indigenous peoples of North and South America. We are of the land, living the best we can in harmony with all of God's creations. We live in harmony with our cultural teachings interwoven with our spiritual teachings. We are children of God. We are Indigenous and we are unashamed.

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3. 4 Nephi 1:15, 17.

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