

# A Skin of Blackness

An Analysis of 19th-Century Doctrine  
vs. Modern Revisionism

# The New Narrative: Reinterpreting ‘Skin of Blackness’



**“It is not at all what you think it is.”**

– Assertion that modern assumptions of race are being incorrectly applied to the text.

- **Claim 1: Symbolic Metaphor.** The “skin of blackness” represents a spiritual death or being cut off from God, not a physical skin color change. It is compared to language in the Bible's book of Lamentations.
- **Claim 2: Artificial Markings.** The “skin” could refer to things the Lamanites placed on themselves, such as tattoos, paint, or animal furs.

“...later Joseph Smith clarified this passage in the 1842 edition of the Book of Mormon to read a ‘pure and delightful people’ to make **crystal clear** that this is talking about **spiritual purity** not skin color.”

– Jasmine Rappleye

## Why This Revision Matters

“To create a new narrative around the meaning of the words ‘skin of blackness’ is to deny the decades of racism within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the lived experiences of hundreds of Native Americans.”

— *Mormon Stories Podcast, LDS Discussions Ep. 56*

# The Foundational Text (1830)

The *Book of Mormon*, as published in 1830, describes a curse causing a “skin of blackness” to come upon the Lamanites for their wickedness.

And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. (2 Nephi 5:21)

The text explicitly links dark skin to a divine curse meant to create a physical and social separation between the Nephites and Lamanites.

# Doctrine in Action: The 1830 Mission to the Lamanites

Immediately after the Book of Mormon's publication, Joseph Smith sent Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, and others on a mission to preach to the "Lamanites".

The missionaries were sent to preach to specific, named Native American nations, including:

- Seneca
- Onandaga
- Wyandot
- Shawnee
- Delaware

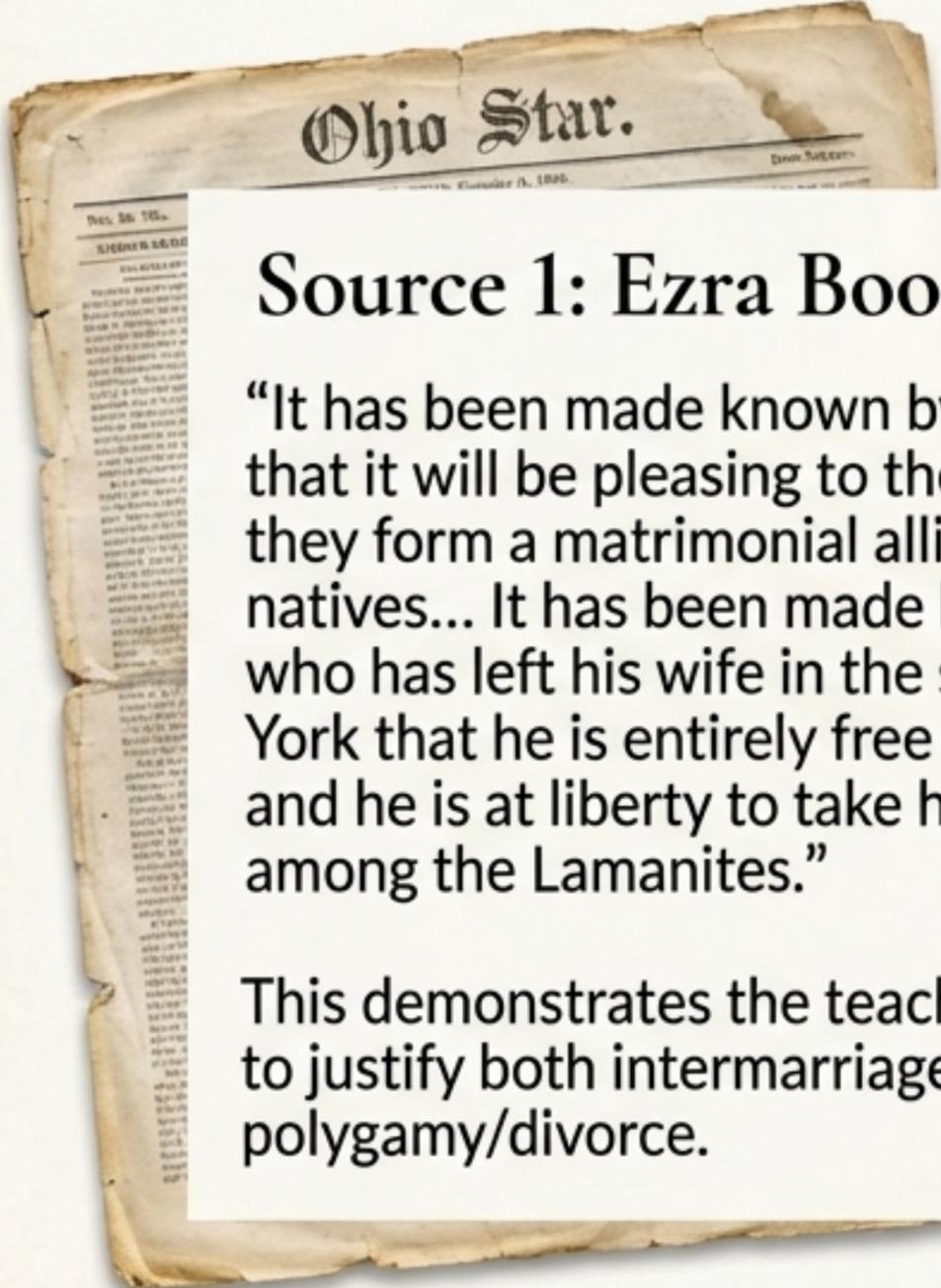


Prophetic Revelation on Race and Righteousness (1831)

“Verily, I say unto you, that it is my will, that in time ye should take unto you wives of the Lamanites and Nephites, that their posterity may become **white and delightsome** and just, for even now their females are **more virtuous than the Gentiles.**”

Attributed to an 1831 revelation from Joseph Smith, as recorded in a letter from W.W. Phelps to Brigham Young.

# Corroborating the Revelation: A Widely Understood Doctrine

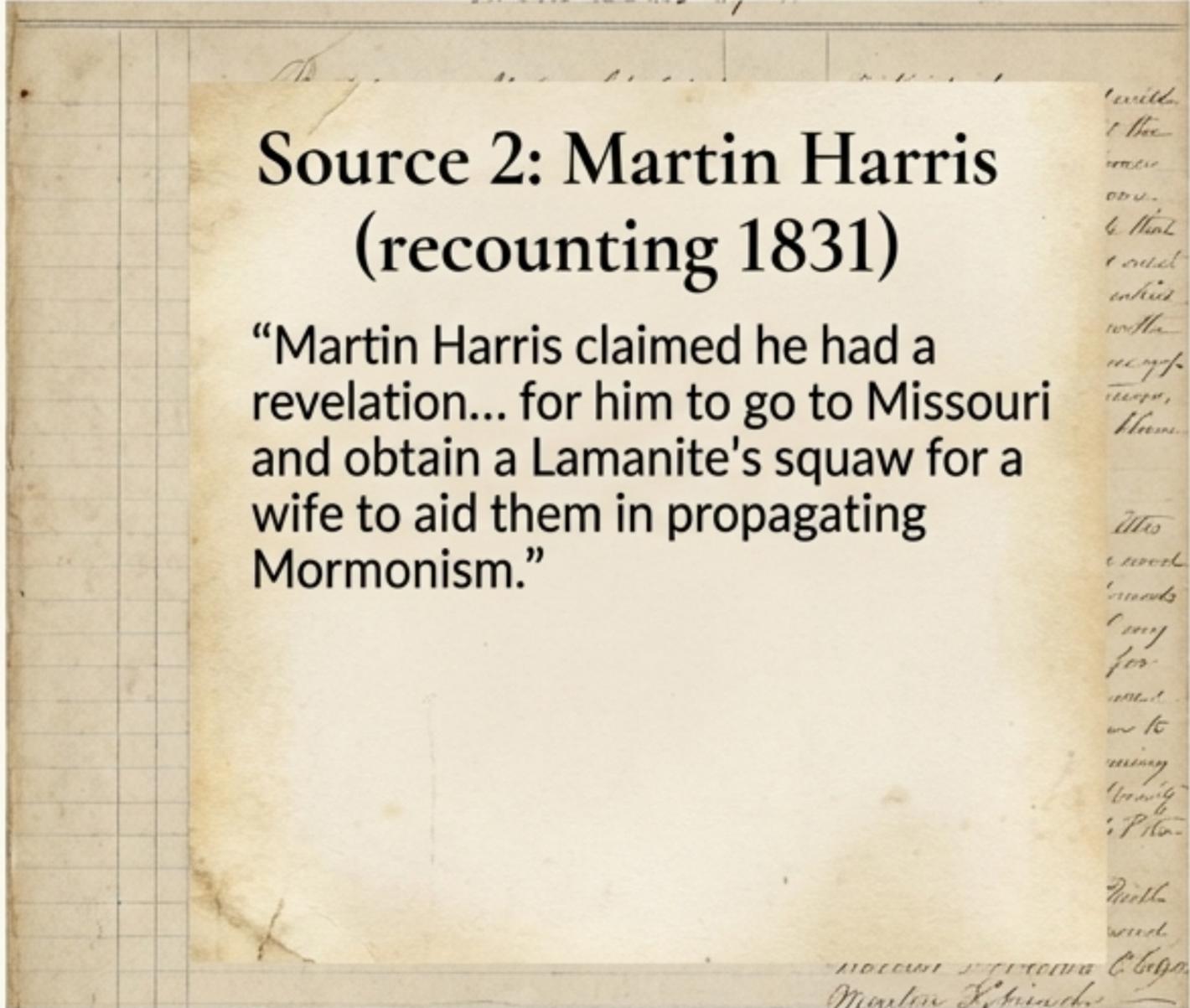


Ohio Star.

## Source 1: Ezra Booth (1831)

“It has been made known by revelation that it will be pleasing to the Lord should they form a matrimonial alliance with the natives... It has been made known to one who has left his wife in the state of New York that he is entirely free from his wife, and he is at liberty to take him a wife from among the Lamanites.”

This demonstrates the teaching was used to justify both intermarriage and polygamy/divorce.



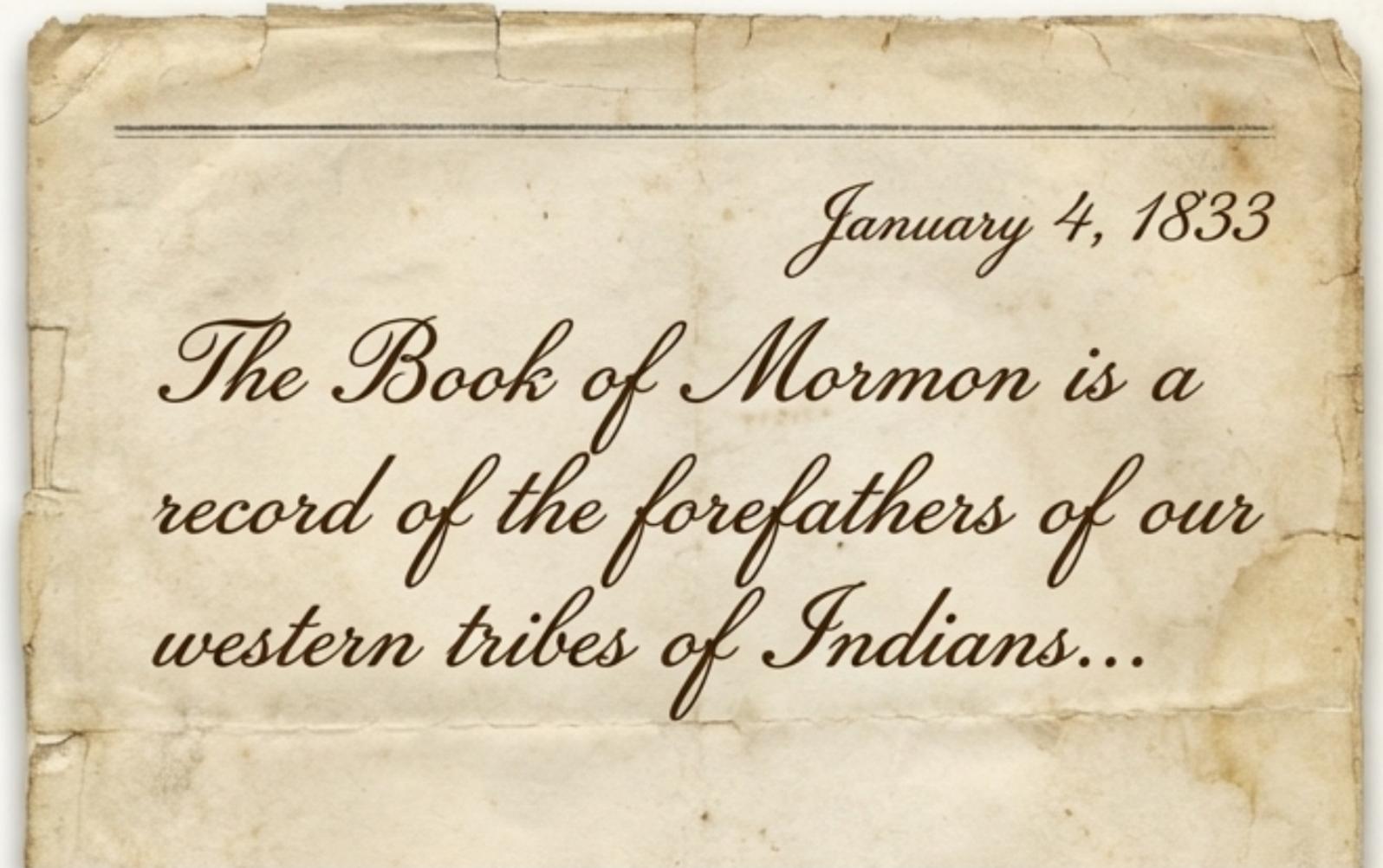
## Source 2: Martin Harris (recounting 1831)

“Martin Harris claimed he had a revelation... for him to go to Missouri and obtain a Lamanite's squaw for a wife to aid them in propagating Mormonism.”

# The Prophet Defines “Lamanite” (1833)

The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians...

Source: A letter from Joseph Smith to N.C. Saxton, January 4, 1833.



---

Takeaway: The founder of the church explicitly and directly connected the Book of Mormon people to the Native Americans of his day.

# A Case Study in Doctrine: Zelph, the “White Lamanite” (1834)



## The Story

During the Zion's Camp expedition, Joseph Smith discovered a skeleton and received a revelation about its identity.

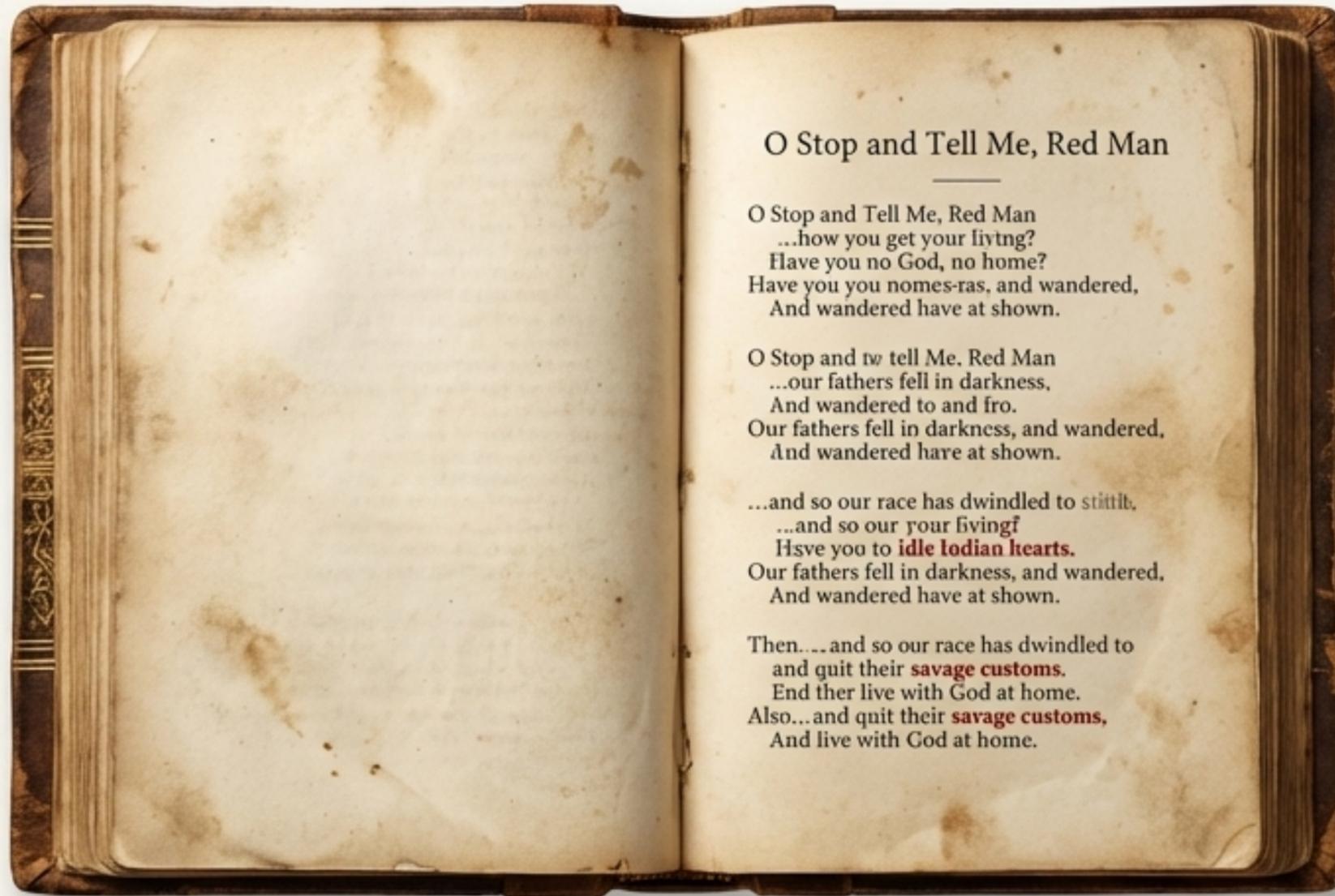
## Joseph Smith's Revelation (as recorded in *History of the Church*)

- “I discovered that the person whose skeleton was before us... was a **white Lamanite**, a large thick-set man, and a man of God.”
- “His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and chieftain...”
- “**The curse was taken from him...**”

## Analysis

This story serves as a perfect microcosm of the early church's literal belief system: dark skin was the curse, and righteousness could make a Lamanite physically “white”.

# Doctrine in Worship: The 1835 Hymnal



Excerpted Racist & Colonialist Language:

**...how you get your living?** Have you no God, no home?

our fathers fell in darkness, and wandered to and fro.

...and so our race has dwindled to **idle Indian hearts**.

...and quit their **savage customs** to live with God at home.

**Context:** This hymn, included in Emma Smith's first collection of "sacred hymns," was sung as an act of worship for nearly 90 years, embedding the Mound Builder myth and racist stereotypes into the church's devotional practice.

# A Consistent Vision to the End: Nauvoo, 1841



## Event

Joseph Smith met with the Sauk and Fox chief Keokuk and his followers in front of the Nauvoo temple.

## Joseph Smith's Speech

He “depicted in glowing colors... the wonders of the great temple, the mysteries of the *Book of Mormon*, and the **glorious times** that they [the Saints and the Lamanites] will have together in these latter days.”

## Significance

This demonstrates an unwavering belief from 1830 to the 1840s that Native Americans were the Lamanites destined to join with the Saints and inherit a promised land.

# The Unambiguous 19th-Century Consensus

From scripture and prophetic revelation to missions, hymns, and personal accounts, the historical record of the Joseph Smith era reveals a single, consistent, and literal interpretation.

---

- The “Curse” was a **literal change in skin color**.
- **“Lamanites”** were unequivocally identified as **Native Americans**.
- The purpose of the dark skin was to make them physically **“unenticing.”**
- Righteousness and intermarriage with white members could lead to becoming physically **“white and delightful.”**

# Then vs. Now: A Doctrine Transformed

## 19th-Century Doctrine

- **Nature of "Skin":** **Literal**, physical skin color.
- **Cause:** A divine curse for wickedness.
- **Identity of Lamanites:** All **Native American** peoples.
- **Path to Righteousness:** Become **physically** "white and delightsome" through intermarriage and belief.

## 21st-Century Apologetics

- **Nature of "Skin":** A **symbolic metaphor** for spiritual state, OR artificial coverings (paint, furs, tattoos).
- **Cause:** A motif for death and destruction, not a literal curse.
- **Identity of Lamanites:** An ancient group with no clear modern descendants.
- **Path to Righteousness:** Become **spiritually** "pure and delightsome" (based on an 1842 text change).

# The Apologist's Gauntlet

A faithful history requires reconciling modern interpretations with the foundational words and actions of the church's founding prophet.

---

The historical record is not symbolic.

*How can the modern arguments be reconciled with Joseph Smith's revelation about Zelph the 'White Lamanite,' the mission to the Delaware, and the call for intermarriage to make posterity 'white and delightsome'?*

# Source & Further Study

This analysis is based on the research and discussion presented in:

- Podcast: “Mormon Stories Podcast”
- Series: “LDS Discussions”
- Episode: “#56, ‘Book of Mormon Racism & Skin of Blackness’”

Watch the full episode for a comprehensive analysis of the historical sources.

