THE OLD AND THE MODERN LAMANITE

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by

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Some time ago I heard a conversation between two university students. One of them was from Latin America, and, as he spoke to his friend, his voice manifested some concern. "I wish they would not call me Lamanite" said the Latin American student. "I have very little Indian blood in me, and anyway I don't see why even the American Indians have to be called Lamanites."

The other student, apparently caught by surprise by the statement, appeared unable to answer, and, as they both passed beyond me, I could tell he really didn't have an answer. As I considered the question in my mind, the word Lamanite acquired new significance. I then asked myself other questions:

Who is a Lamanite?
How many human groups in the world now have Lamanite blood?
Are all Lamanites from the same blood group?
Is it really correct to speak of blood groups when we talk about Lamanites?
Have there always been and will there always be Lamanites?

I decided to look for the answers to these questions, so I turned to the scriptures. I was pleased to find again that the scriptures do clarify our questions when we search them diligently. The word Lamanite is used extensively in the Book of Mormon, and it is also mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants. It is a word used by the prophets and by the Lord himself, and so it should have special significance for us. The most perfect book on this earth has been "written to the Lamanites who are a remnant of the House of Israel." Therefore, the world should know for sure who these Lamanites are.

After carefully considering the historical aspect of the Book of Mormon in relation to the geographical distribution of the
Lamanites, it appears sure that a Lamanite is anyone who has any degree of traditional connection with the ancient inhabitants of the American continent, whose origin is described in the Book of Mormon. Lamanites, therefore, include descendants of Laman, Lemuel, Ishmael, and most likely Nephi, Jacob, Joseph, and even Mulek. For even though these various groups were for certain purposes sometimes differentiated, at other times they were not. In one place, for example, the record says,

"Now the Lamanites and the Lemuelites and the Ishmaelites were called Lamanites, and the two parties were Nephites and Lamanites." (Mormon 1:9).

This suggests that Lamanites, rather than a blood group, are a people of a tradition, and the name includes many who did not directly descend from Laman, the son of Lehi.

Furthermore, among the Lamanites there are many who represent also the line of Ephraim. These technically would be the descendants of Ishmael and his sons who came with Lehi to the new world. But for identification purposes the record also calls them Lamanites.

"And Ammon went to the land of Ishmael, the land being called after the sons of Ishmael, who also became Lamanites." (Alma 17:19)

In modern times, therefore, all those who have any degree of relationship to the people who came at the time of Lehi, whether they are from North, Central, or South America, or from the islands of the Pacific, can legitimately be called Lamanites.

The American Indians, then, are not the only Lamanites. Sometimes they are more readily identified as descendants of the ancient people of this continent, but there are many others from North and South America who are also direct descendants of the ancient people. This is true also for some of the people of the islands of the Pacific. All these people have a legitimate claim to the name Lamanite. Thus Lamanite is a name under which a variety of modern human groups can be included. These could include Eskimos, North American Indian tribes,
Mexican-Americans, most of the Central and South Americans, many Hawaiians, many Samoans, and perhaps other people of the Pacific.

The word Lamanite is a legitimate label for these groups in much the same way as the words Chinese, Greek, French, Jew, Roman, etc., are labels that have been given to, or taken by, these populations because of their relationship to specific places (Rome, for example) or important leaders (Judah, for example) or some other important aspect in the history of the various groups or societies in the world. The same is true with the words American, Spanish, German, etc. All of these are labels that refer to human groups. From this point of view the word Lamanite is nothing more.

From another point of view, however, anybody who has a legitimate claim to the label Lamanite should rejoice in the fact that he belongs to a people who are no longer lost. For there are millions of people in this world who, in terms of identification concerning their ancestry, are literally lost. That is, they do not know who their forefathers were. Some of these groups cannot trace their ancestry to any known group with a sufficient degree of certainty. The Basque people of northern Spain, for example, or the Ainu, a white group in Japan, or the Chinese and the Hindus, and many other groups, for that matter. At the present these peoples do not know who their ancestors are.

On the other hand, all the Lamanites can be certain that they are from the House of Israel; that they are the people of the promise; that they come from those who wrote the Book of Mormon and built great civilizations and had great learning and whose complete history was kept, which one day shall be known. And that is why every modern Lamanite has a deep, unexplained conviction that he and his people are something special. If he knows nothing about the Book of Mormon, he does not know why he has this feeling. But when he gets to know the ancient book of his people, he knows the reason for that special feeling.

And yet, some people object to the name Lamanite. They think the name identifies them with those people whom the Book of Mormon describes as loathsome, idle, dirty, wicked. They now question the use of that name particularly because some of them, as modern Lamanites, hold the Priesthood and don’t believe in the wrong traditions of the old Lamanites. If
they have accepted the gospel, they ask, why should they still be called Lamanites?

This question has bothered some people to the point that sometimes they try to avoid being identified as Lamanites. However, searching the scriptures we find that the name Lamanite does not necessarily have a negative connotation. A number of prophets in the Book of Mormon and some Latter-day prophets, and the Lord, Jesus Christ himself, have repeatedly used the name Lamanite with a positive connotation, and sometimes simply to identify a remnant of the House of Israel.

Of course at the present time the label Lamanite does not have much prestige in the world. This is simply because most of the people who bore that label in the past behaved in such a way that the name acquired a bad or negative reputation. However, when the Lamanites lived a righteous, honorable, and productive life, their name acquired the prestige of their deeds. It is a known fact that the names of nations or other human groups acquire high or low prestige depending on the behavior of the people. In the historical record we find that the name Lamanite itself has been up and down in prestige because at different times the Lamanite people have given the name honor and dishonor. This was also true of the label Nephite. That name had great prestige at one time and yet the book says that the corruption of the people was such that as a group they finally were completely destroyed (Helaman 15:17 – Mormon 8:2).

It must be remembered that the national or group names we bear in this life are a temporary means of identification. Their significance ends with mortality. The time will come when all men will know their true origin—when all men will know that they are the sons of God. When they realize this and become truly the children of Christ by adopting his name and His gospel, then no earthly names or labels will be necessary any more. At that time it is probable that the names of nations will disappear.

It is interesting to note, in this respect, that at least at one time that actually happened. It was when the people of Lehi learned to live with one another in such a way that in their society
“...there were no envyings, nor striifes, nor tumults nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God.

“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.” (4 Nephi 1:16-17)

But we also learn from the record that when iniquity again became common among the people, labels of Nephite and Lamanite and others developed again. (4 Nephi 1:20)

So the word Lamanite has been used at one time or another to designate literal descendants of one man and of several men, people of a nation, people of a religious persuasion, people of certain attitudes and/or certain traditions. But the word Lamanite has also been used to identify righteous people. At one time in the history of the people of Lehi the division between Nephites and Lamanites was no longer the “blood” division between those who descended from Nephi and Laman respectively. At that time the people had interacted freely and Lamanites and Nephites each had important positions among the people. We find that the label Lamanite was often used by prophets of God to identify a fellow prophet. And feeling sure that a prophet of God would not call a fellow prophet by a name without honor, we must conclude that when Mormon calls Samuel a Lamanite, in Mormon’s mind the word had a good connotation.

“And it came to pass that in this year there was one Samuel, a Lamanite, came into the land of Zarahemla, and began to preach unto the people. And it came to pass that he did preach, many days, repentance unto the people...” (Helaman 13:2)

At the time it seems the name Nephite had acquired low prestige because the Nephites had become very corrupt. The events of the time suggest that the name Lamanite was a symbol for faithfulness, for good, and for righteousness. And the prophet Mormon is telling us that—a prophet of God—a
Lamanite—that is, a man from that group of righteous people, had brought a message of repentance to the corrupt people of Nephi. (Helaman 15:3-10)

Furthermore, no one could imagine that Jesus Christ himself would use the name Lamanite to refer to one of his prophets if to him the name had a connotation of dishonor. The scripture says that the Lord used the label Lamanite and that he used it with approval. That was the time when Jesus was reminding the Nephites—those who had survived the terrible destruction at the time of his crucifixion and before whom he appeared personally—that his prophet, Samuel the Lamanite, had prophesied important events. The Lord even asked the Nephites about those prophesies and when he discovered that the people had not recorded Samuel’s prophesies, he commanded them to do so. The scriptures say that the Lord asked for the records.

“And when Nephi had brought forth the records, and laid them before him, he cast his eyes upon them and said:

“Verily I say unto you, I commanded my servant SAMUEL, THE LAMANITE, that he should testify unto his people, that at the day that the Father should glorify his name in me that there were many saints who should arise from the dead, and should appear unto many, and should minister unto them. And he said unto them: Was it not so?

“And his disciples answered him and said: Yea, Lord, Samuel did prophesy according to thy words, and they were all fulfilled.” (3 Nephi 23:8-10)

In the lips of the Savior the word Lamanite, as referring to one of his prophets, was a name of great honor; and in that particular case, as in many others, the name was used to identify a people who were known to be heirs of a great promise. Again, this can only mean that a name takes honor or dishonor according to the behavior of the people who bear that name.

In our own dispensation we have an illustration of this principle. The first saints in this dispensation were called Mormons by people who intended ridicule. It was only one of
several attempts to label the early saints with names that would bring shame to them. *But the behavior of the saints made the difference.* Knowing full well the tremendous historical value of that name—for they knew it was the name of a great prophet—the early Saints of this dispensation behaved in a way that brought honor and prestige to the word *Mormon.* And it is because of the behavior of the early saints that we are now as proud to be called Mormons as we are of the name Latter-day Saints.

Another good example is the label *American.* As we know, the name came from the Italian geographer who made the first map of this continent after it was discovered by the Spaniards. The great prestige and the low prestige of the label American at the present time is the result of what people have done with it. Names acquire high or low prestige depending on the behavior of the people who bear them.

If the word and label *Lamanite* is sometimes resented by some people, it is because they associate it only with a fallen people. But in the future this need not be. *Lamanite,* as a label, will acquire the fame and meaning that the descendants of Lehi will give it now that they know the gospel and bear the Priesthood. The challenge to every Lamanite now is really a great and marvelous challenge. For we must overcome the consequences of what wrong traditions have done to the people of Lehi. For example, among the Lamanites of North and South America and the South Pacific who have not yet accepted the gospel, there are many customs, ideas, ceremonies and other traditions that must be abandoned. When these wrong cultural traditions are abandoned, and in their place Mormon culture, or the pure culture of the gospel is adopted, then the new Lamanites will blossom and the world will speak their name with respect and admiration.

Among the Lamanites of today there are representatives of all those who came with Lehi; and now, as the name is used by those who accept the Book of Mormon, it must and will acquire the same meaning and prestige which Moroni, Mormon, and the Savior himself gave the name when they used it.

Can we imagine what would happen if the Lamanite people of today accept the challenge of the restoration and through discipline, hard work, learning, and faith conform to the expectations of the gospel? There is no doubt that they will
develop scientists, teachers, statesmen, merchants—individuals of notable achievement and contribution in the nations of the world and the kingdom of God. Then the label *Lamanite* will acquire the honor needed to motivate people to even greater accomplishments. The prestige of the label *Lamanite* depends on the modern Lamanites.