

WRESTLING WITH THE RACISM OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

Margaret Olsen Hemming and
Fatimah S. Salleh

My talk today is about how to wrestle with passages of scripture that may test our faith. There are many sections of scriptures that I find troubling, including the sanction of genocide in the Old Testament, Paul's calls for women to be silent in the New Testament, and the explanation of polygamy in the Doctrine and Covenants. I am about to read one of the sections of scriptures I have wrestled with the most in my life. We don't talk about these verses often, but my talk is about why we should and how we can do so productively. But I also know that these words are very painful for some people in this room, so I want to apologize in advance for reading them and ask for your patience as I explain my wrestle with them.

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.

This sermon was given by Margaret Olsen Hemming in the Chapel Hill First Ward, Durham Stake in North Carolina on February 10, 2019. The narrative and structure of the article are hers but the theology and exegesis comes from a forthcoming book authored by Rev. Dr. Fatimah S. Salleh in collaboration with Margaret Olsen Hemming. The book, a social justice commentary of the Book of Mormon, hopes to provide readers with tools to read LDS scripture in new ways.

And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquities.

And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was done.

And because of their cursing which was upon them they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey.

And the Lord God said unto me: They shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in remembrance of me; and inasmuch as they will not remember me, and hearken unto my words, they shall scourge them even unto destruction. (2 Nephi 5:21–25)

I clearly remember the first time I read these verses and had them truly sink in. I had gotten my own set of scriptures for my twelfth birthday, and I was reading through the Book of Mormon on my own for the first time. I read these verses, froze, read them again, and felt a wave of confusion and fear wash over me. For me, the crux of the problem these scriptures present is that Nephi, a prophet, uses words and ideas that are contrary to how I understand God—a God that is no respecter of persons and who is deeply offended by any ideas of white supremacy. Where do I go with that?

When I was twelve, I went to my parents and asked them about it. They had two different answers. My father said that he thought Nephi's words were meant to be metaphorical. He said that when Book of Mormon prophets write about people having hard hearts and stiff necks, we don't take them literally, thinking that someone's neck actually became difficult to move or that their heart became like concrete. We understand that these are words invoke the body but are meant to describe the spirit. He believed that it was our cultural obsession with race, our society that categorizes people by the color of their skin before anything else, that led to us reading this passage as if it is actually about skin color. I'll admit that I was skeptical then, and I'm skeptical now

of that answer. But I think it's certainly an interesting explanation to consider, and it may work for some people in this room.

My mother had a different answer. As a convert to the church, she had many unanswered questions about doctrine and policies. She frankly told me that she didn't have an explanation for these verses, although she found them as upsetting as I did. She reminded me that we learn "line upon line, precept upon precept" (2 Nephi 28:30), and that we should not expect to have all the answers during our lifetimes. It is okay to sit with some discomfort and some lack of knowledge. She described it, metaphorically, as having shelves in our brains in which we can set down some issues and let them rest until we have some inspiration or greater knowledge that can help us progress on that issue.

For the next ten years, I used these two explanations. When I read the Book of Mormon, I skipped over these verses that I found so troubling. I didn't have an answer, and I didn't feel any direction to help me find an answer, so I put the question on my mental shelf to think about later. Then, in my early twenties, I moved to inner-city Baltimore. I don't have the right words to describe how much I loved that ward. It was the closest thing I'd ever experienced to church being, as Elder Uchtdorf described in a 2015 talk, a service station instead of an automobile showroom. People were honest and open about their struggles and shortcomings, which gave the community opportunities to speak about how the Atonement was an ongoing force in their lives. The vulnerability that people shared led to me loving my fellow ward members in a deeper way than I had previously experienced. It was a time of intense spiritual growth for me as I confronted what I truly believed and grew to be grateful for the diversity of spiritual journeys—a multiplicity of paths that all led back to God.

The ward was about forty percent people of color, including a large number of refugees, immigrants, and African Americans. In my work in the Primary and Relief Society presidencies, as well as a visiting teacher, I went into many women's homes all over the city. On more than one

of these visits, I had the experience of an African American woman confronting me with these verses from 2 Nephi. In one case, I gave her the answer that my mother had given me: it's okay to not have answers; sometimes we just need to sit with things. I will never forget her response. She told me that her husband was white and her children biracial. She asked me if I thought, in their family scripture study, that they should read these verses together. "I don't have the luxury of simply not thinking about these words," she said. "They are about me and my family."

I realized with shame then that I had let my mother's explanation of sometimes not having answers evolve into simply no longer searching for answers. I had grown lazy with the issue because wrestling with it made me uncomfortable. I felt like it was time to take these verses off my mental shelf and start working on them more actively again.

Although I read, pondered, and prayed quite a bit, I didn't find any answers for another ten years. Sometimes that's the way it is.

This past year, I spent three weeks working intently on just 2 Nephi chapter 5. I read it half a dozen times out loud. I pondered and prayed. I worked closely with Fatimah Salleh, a friend of mine who is a woman of color and who lives in our stake. I called on everything that I've read and studied about these verses for the last ten years. Here are the observations and conclusions Fatimah and I reached.

First, some of what Nephi writes here contradicts things that he has previously written in his own account. In verse 24, Nephi writes, "And *because* of their cursing which was upon them they did *become* an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety" (emphasis added). Nephi is stating that the dark skin came first, then the sin. He is saying that they became sinful *because* of the darkening of their skin. But Nephi's own narrative contradicts this. We know that Laman and Lemuel were idle and mischievous *before* their skin darkened, when they had white skin. Not only that, but from Nephi's account, we observe Laman and Lemuel engage in extreme violence, multiple attempts at murder, disobedience, and cruelty—all while inhabiting white skin. Nephi's claim that one

followed the other simply doesn't follow what we already know about this family. It's not coherent. So Nephi is not seeing completely clearly.

The second claim that doesn't ring true is that the Lamanites were idle. Nephi contrasts the Lamanites to his own people who were, as he writes, "industrious" (2 Nephi 5:17), as they built a complex society with cities, government, a military, and far-ranging communication. Yet we will read in the following pages of the Book of Mormon that the Lamanites will build a society that rivals that of the Nephites. The two groups of people are so evenly matched, in fact, that they will jostle for power for the next several hundred years. Out of the wilderness and starting from nothing, the Lamanites, like the Nephites, managed to construct a government, cities, a military, and a flourishing community with a booming population—a population that actually becomes much greater than the Nephites, as the Book of Mormon tells us repeatedly. Nephi's proof of his own people's industry also seems to apply to the Lamanites. So, without evidence of idleness, it's hard to maintain this claim.

The final claim here that is strange, given Nephi's own account, is his condemnation of the Lamanites for hunting in the wilderness for food. We know that Nephi used his bow to hunt for food and that God guided him in those efforts. Why is hunting for food suddenly a sign of immorality? It doesn't make sense.

It may seem at this point that I'm mired in details. But I believe that examining these details is crucial. These details help a careful reader understand what is lying beneath the surface of Nephi's angry accusations. It appears that Nephi continues to resent and fear his brothers and their families. This is understandable, as Nephi endured so much trauma at their hands. Nephi's brothers beat him terribly many times. They tried to kill him multiple times. They were emotionally, spiritually, and physically abusive. After enduring years of trauma, it is not surprising that Nephi would feel resentful or have hard feelings toward them. I do not believe that we can take Nephi's words out of the context of the years of violent abuse heaped on him.

What Nephi seems to be doing here is taking his lingering resentment and building a case against the Lamanites. He is reframing the narrative, attributing their behavior to skin color when his own account states otherwise, and pointing out every possible trait he can criticize. It's such a universal human reaction that I think everyone in this room can identify with what he's doing. Anyone who has looked up a former high school bully on Facebook and taken a small pleasure in finding a photo of him with stupid shoes and an ugly cat can relate in some way. Anger is often the manifestation of deeper feelings that are harder to confront. In Nephi's case, his anger reveals the grief he has never finished processing. He never had the chance—he has been fighting just for survival his entire life.

Everyone on this earth struggles with the limitations of human nature—including prophets. Of all people, Nephi is the most aware of his own failings. There are multiple times in his account that he writes about his own humanity, saying, "And now, if I do err, even did they err of old; not that I would excuse myself because of other men, but because of the weakness which is in me, according to the flesh, I would excuse myself" (1 Nephi 19:6). He's saying, "I am human. Please understand that as you read this text." As readers, I think we can reasonably give Nephi space for his feelings of resentment and residual anger. I believe that even God understands those feelings. If anything, reading these scriptures with that context of his life history and the emotions he has increases my sense of empathy for him. Like me, like you, like all of us here, he is a flawed person working his way back to the divine, doing his best with a limited understanding. That is beautiful to me.

So I don't believe that Nephi's feelings are wrong. I do believe that he makes a terrible error when he attempts to enlist God in cosigning on those feelings. When he writes that God caused a skin of blackness, when he writes that God sees people as loathsome, when he writes that God has cursed them, he is doing something very disturbing and problematic: he is couching his anger in theology. Seeing God's punish-

ments in other people's struggles is a very dicey thing to do, and humans are not particularly good at getting it right. It would, after all, be easy for an outside observer of Lehi's family to see years wandering in the wilderness, living in tents, and eating raw meat as evidence of God's displeasure toward Lehi. And yet, we know that's not the case—Lehi's family's suffering was the result of obedience, not disobedience, to God's commandments. The scriptures are full of righteous people suffering. We know from the New Testament that lepers were considered cursed and that Jesus Christ upended that cultural idea. The same thing is true for the woman with the issue of blood and the man who was blind and deaf. Humans are simply not good at correctly identifying the objects of God's wrath, so we probably shouldn't try.

Nephi's effort to have God endorse the lingering effects of his own trauma is deeply destructive. Nephi chooses not to limit his pain to his personal journey. The moment he takes his disgust and deep hurt and decides to stamp God's name on it, he does theological damage. Serious harm can come from not being able to separate personal bias and feelings from the divine. Those who follow God need to strive to recognize their own prejudices, their own human inclination to exclude people or withhold compassion. It's our own natural faultiness as humans. But *do not* ask God to endorse our taking our hurt, disappointment, and fear, and weaponizing it against another human being.

So where do we go from here? I believe that Nephi's words present readers with two important challenges: to offer empathy for his humanness, and to refuse to elevate his words to doctrinal status. I'll discuss the second one first.

For much of history, readers of the Book of Mormon took Nephi's words seriously. The Nephites certainly did, and I wonder if perhaps that prejudice added to the centuries of violent conflict between the two peoples. I suspect that it influenced the Nephites' disregard of the words of Samuel the Lamanite—they would not hearken to or record the words of someone who they believed was inferior to them. In more modern

times, members of the Church, including Church leaders, believed and taught these ugly words as God's truth. This was unequivocally wrong. It harmed people. It continues to harm people. Recently, Church leaders have frankly acknowledged that those teachings were wrong. In the Church-published essay "Race and the Priesthood" (which I strongly encourage you to read if you haven't yet), we read, "Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a pre-mortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form." And yet, in my experience, because Nephi's words make us uncomfortable, we tend to simply try to ignore them. I agree that they are painful to read. Yet we need to be very careful to not just pass these verses by, but to pause and say, "No. That is not what we believe. These words are wrong. We're sorry for anyone who was or is hurt by them."

This brings me to the second challenge of these verses: to stretch the bounds of our human compassion and offer Nephi understanding for his mistakes. In this process, we learn to offer one another a small part of the grace that God offers us. This experience of wrestling with these verses has changed how I think of Nephi. I no longer think of him as the muscle-bound hero of an Arnold Friberg painting. But I think I understand him better. I see his humanity, and I see the way God took an imperfect person and performed miracles through him. I see how his own path toward God was sometimes indirect but that he was always trying to be better. Just like the people in our ward in Baltimore whom I loved so much, it is when I saw Nephi's vulnerability that I came to truly love him, not just admire him.

I want to make it clear that I'm not saying that I have *the* answer to understanding these scriptures. I believe that there are many possible answers to every hard theological question and that different times of our lives will yield different meanings. The only claim I am making is

that we ought to dig into our holy texts in a sustained effort to understand more than is what is on the surface. Read boldly; the scriptures can take anything we throw at them.

Finally, I want to note that Nephi's story also reminds us that people can change. We can repair past mistakes. We can draw closer to God. We can do better. After all, it was Nephi, the same man who wrote these troubling verses, who also wrote, closer to the end of his life, "For none of these iniquities come of the Lord; for he doeth that which is good among 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 *all are alike unto God*, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Nephi 26:33, emphasis added). And to that I can only add: amen and amen.