

## Religion and Race

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# Rejecting Racism in Any Form: Latter-day Saint Rhetoric, Religion, and Repatriation

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**Abstract:** The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued an online statement in February 2012 rejecting all racism, in any form. The statement followed nearly two centuries of tortured struggles with racism promulgated by church leaders, instituted in everyday practices, and integrated into Latter-day Saint scriptures. While rhetoric renouncing racism from the LDS Church is a welcome step, religions need to compliment language undoing racism with concrete actions. This article examines ways that the LDS Church may work towards actually ending various forms of racism. It focuses attention on the role of settler colonial grave robbery, the loot from which was used in the production of Mormon scriptures advocating white privilege. These acts of violence against Native people continue into the present, as illustrated by the recent occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge by Mormon militiamen, extensive trade networks in antiquities in Mormon communities, unethical uses of Native American DNA, and ongoing efforts by Utah legislators to undermine tribal sovereignty. Current rhetoric condemning racism appears to serve as a mask for the continued imbalance of power in a land-rich institution in which the highest positions of authority remain exclusively in the hands of white men. Reciprocal acts of repatriation, initiated but never finished by early LDS Church leaders, need to be re-activated if Mormons are to effectively repudiate racism in its many forms.

**Keywords:** Book of Mormon, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, racism

## Introduction

In February 2012 during the heat of Mitt Romney’s campaign for President of the United States of America, the *Washington Post* published excerpts from an interview with Rodney Bott, the most popular religion professor at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Bott sought to explain the reasons for a ban that, until 1978, prevented people of African descent from participating in the lay priesthood or temple ceremonies in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Bott pointed to the Book of Abraham, a sacred text that Joseph Smith had claimed to translate from an Egyptian papyrus he had acquired in 1835. The descendants of Cain, Bott explained, “were black.” One of Cain’s descendants married Ham, the son of Noah. As descendants of Cain and Ham, Blacks, Bott contended, were cursed and thus justifiably excluded from the priesthood by a discriminatory God. Although not accompanied by a priesthood ban, a similar belief that God cursed the ancestors of American Indians with a dark skin, the article noted, appeared in the Book of Mormon, a scriptural account that Joseph Smith claimed to translate from golden plates he said he found in what was traditional Seneca territory.<sup>1</sup> The publication in a national newspaper of these racist ideas, while

<sup>1</sup> Horowitz, “The Genesis.”

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commonplace in nineteenth and twentieth century Mormonism, would bring a quick denunciation of Bott's perspective from the LDS Church news room in the twenty-first century.

The public airing of racist teachings threatened to undermine the candidacy of a prominent Mormon for the U.S. Presidency. Rather than defend or try to explain these teachings, as Professor Bott had done, the LDS Newsroom issued a statement the following day declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone. The news release quoted affirmatively the Book of Mormon's statement, "black and white, bond and free, male and female; ... all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33) and declared emphatically, "The Church condemns racism, including any and all past racism by individuals both inside and outside the Church."<sup>2</sup> Within a month the popular professor's son acknowledged to the media Bott's plans to retire from BYU and serve an LDS mission.<sup>3</sup> The quick response and denunciation calmed the news cycle's focus on Mormon racial doctrines at a critical stage in Romney's campaign.

The problem for the LDS Church, though, is bigger than a news cycle. Since the emergence of the Internet, LDS Church growth has slowed considerably. Scholars have called for a denunciation of racist teachings and a disavowal of the idea that a dark skin is a curse from God.<sup>4</sup> Members are leaving the faith nearly as fast as they are joining.<sup>5</sup> Reasons for leaving are many and complex, but concerns about the Book of Mormon, Book of Abraham, racism, sexism, and homophobia appear prominently in ex-Mormon narratives.<sup>6</sup> To slow this profusion of disaffiliation in an "age of the Internet," the LDS Church has issued a series of essays dealing with controversial topics in the Gospel Topics section of its website.<sup>7</sup> An essay on "Race and the Priesthood" repeats its denunciation of all variations of racism.

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 premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.<sup>8</sup>

Additional essays in this series address and try to contextualize problems with the translation and historicity of the Book of Mormon and Book of Abraham as well as new DNA evidence undermining the historical claims about Native Americans emanating from the Book of Mormon.<sup>9</sup>

While the denunciation of racism in all its forms is an important and positive step, these statements appear more as responses to crises than as significant changes in practice. Racism exists not simply in the realm of ideas. Denunciations need to be accompanied by changes in praxis. This article draws from an Indigenous paradigm and decolonizing methodology to suggest actions that should accompany a rhetorical rejection of racism.<sup>10</sup> Sharing Indigenous and Mormon heritage, the authors have experienced both the racism and the religion first-hand and would like to bring to the forefront the depth and complexity of the problem of truly repudiating racism from within Mormonism. This essay draws, in part, from their experiences growing up Mormon in Idaho, Utah, New Mexico, and Washington with Mohawk, Navajo, and Hopi heritage.

The intersections between religion and race are complex, especially in Latter-day Saint history and theology. The official church essay defined neither race nor racism. Sociologist Armand Mauss prefers the term "racialism" over "racism" to describe Mormon views and emphasizes their development over time. While he argues "the full-fledged racialist framework of modern Mormonism arose primarily during the

<sup>2</sup> "Race and the Church."

<sup>3</sup> "BYU Religion Prof."

<sup>4</sup> Baca, *In Laman's Terms*; Murphy, "Sin, Skin, and Seed," "Lamanite Genesis," "Imagining Lamanites;" Mauss, *Shifting Borders*; Young and Gray, "Mormons and Race."

<sup>5</sup> Henderson and Cooke, "Special Report;" *America's Changing Religious Landscape*.

<sup>6</sup> Payne, "Purposeful Strangers", 31; Dehlin, "A Comprehensive List."

<sup>7</sup> "Church Provides Context."

<sup>8</sup> "Race and the Priesthood."

<sup>9</sup> "Book of Mormon Translation;" "Book of Mormon and DNA Studies;" "Translation and Historicity."

<sup>10</sup> Miller, "Native America;" Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*; Brooks and Colvin, *Decolonizing Mormonism*; Brett, *Decolonizing God*; Joy and Duggan, *Decolonizing the Body of Christ*; Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel*.

century after the arrival of the Saints in Utah,” he concedes that early Mormon views might reasonably be considered “proto-racialist.”<sup>11</sup> Historian Max Mueller notes that early Mormons viewed race as mutable, emphasizing the transcendence of racial conflict through the “whitening” of all peoples. Mueller acknowledges that this view was not one of racial pluralism and that later leaders came to view race as fixed when the church failed to achieve its aspirations of racial redemption.<sup>12</sup> The idea of the mutability of skin color, in particular, is evident in the Book of Mormon’s promise that dark-skinned Lamanites might become “white and delightsome.”<sup>13</sup> In the family narratives of one of the authors he was taught that his “Lamanite” ancestors had indeed become “white and delightsome” through multiple generations of intermarriage.<sup>14</sup> Historian Paul Reeve has recounted the ways that early Mormon openness to American Indian and African conversions provoked hostility and contributed to the way that even Mormons of European heritage had to struggle to establish their own whiteness, absorbing more explicitly racist ideas in the process.<sup>15</sup> Our previous scholarship likewise illustrates the ways that Mormon uses of the ethnonym Lamanite to refer to American Indians have evolved over time and varied across cultures.<sup>16</sup> Mormon engagement with concepts of race are indeed complex.

The far-reaching theology of the LDS Church’s statement rejecting “all racism, past and present, in any form” appears to be a recognition of the history of its various expressions of racism. This approach would seem to imply a refutation of racialism, racial redemption through becoming white, as well as expressions of race as a fixed and/or inferior condition. Understandings of racism in the United States more generally have historically encompassed “prejudice, discrimination, and institutional inequality.”<sup>17</sup> Each of these various forms of racism would likewise seem to be included in the LDS rejection. Race, as employed in this essay, “is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.” Racism “creates or reproduces structures of domination” based upon racial categories.<sup>18</sup> We recognize that concepts of race and racism are socially formed. Mormon concepts of race have evolved over time and in dialogue with non-Mormons both nationally and internationally.

A fundamental problem for the Latter-day Saint aspiration to move beyond all forms of racism is that the foundational events of this new world faith began with the looting of Indigenous artifacts and graves and were made possible through the theft of Indigenous lands. Racism, as experienced by Indigenous peoples under colonialism, has often included differential standards in the treatment of the dead and the artifacts they left behind as well as religious justifications for the usurpation of lands.<sup>19</sup> Mormon scriptures produced in part through the desecration of graves continue to denigrate American Indians and Africans as cursed by God with a dark skin, while paradoxically claiming that God is “no respecter of persons.”<sup>20</sup> For nearly two centuries these sacred texts have been central to the acquisition of wealth and power in the LDS Church, much of it gained at the expense of Indigenous peoples. If racism is truly to be rejected in all of its forms then the LDS Church needs to consider repatriation of Indigenous body parts, burial goods, sacred artifacts, and stolen lands as an active way to change the current structures of domination and realize its egalitarian aspirations.

A clear theological challenge for the LDS Church is that a genuine repudiation of racism would raise fundamental questions about the historical validity of scriptural texts, both in their means of production and message. When rhetoric is not followed by appropriate action then it would appear to serve primarily the function of protecting the status quo. In today’s LDS Church the highest positions of power remain

<sup>11</sup> Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 4, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Mueller, “Black, White, and Red.”

<sup>13</sup> 2 Ne. 30:6. Joseph Smith would modify that passage to “pure and delightsome” in a subsequent edition of the scripture but that change would be lost for nearly a century and a half before being restored in 1981. See Campbell, “‘White’ or ‘Pure’;” Murphy, “Imagining Lamanites,” 92-94.

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, “Decolonization;” Murphy, Murphy, & Murphy, “Indian Princess.”

<sup>15</sup> Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*.

<sup>16</sup> Baca, *In Laman’s Terms*; Murphy, “Imagining Lamanites,” “From Racist Stereotype to Ethnic Identity.”

<sup>17</sup> Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 55, 71.

<sup>19</sup> Deloria, *God is Red*; Weaver, “Indian Presence;” Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 10:34.

almost exclusively in the hands of white men who continue to send missionaries to American Indians and Africans and present as scripture racist texts derived from raiding the graves of our ancestors.<sup>21</sup> These institutional structures and practices suggest that much work is to be done if the LDS Church is to actually reject racism in any form.

## Grave-Robbery

Treasure digging is essentially a form of grave-robbing, a sacrilege against the dead.

*Samuel Morris Brown.*<sup>22</sup>

Although there is a gram of merit in the argument decrying *ex post facto* judgements, what is lost in the fracas is that, in their grave robbing if not in their racist theorizing, the original “collectors” most absolutely did *not* abide by the Christian European standards of their time but demonstrably outraged them. Grave robbing, not to mention murder and theft, have always been against Christian European law.

*Barbara Alice Mann (Seneca Descent)*<sup>23</sup>

Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of Mormonism, began his career in the money-digging business in up-state New York in the early nineteenth century. Smith’s early employment included digging for treasure, aided by the use of seer stones, at least some of which were Native artifacts.<sup>24</sup> He was one of many such collectors and looters whose digging activities left large holes visible from the newly created Erie Canal connecting Smith’s community of Palmyra with the eastern seaboard of the new United States.<sup>25</sup> Smith would assume a prophetic mantle and the leadership of what would become the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after he claimed to find and translate a set of gold plates buried in a hillside near Palmyra, New York. After publishing this translation as the Book of Mormon and building a small following and relocating to Kirtland, Ohio, Smith would also acquire and translate some Egyptian papyri. This translation would become known as the Book of Abraham. Both of these texts remain integral parts of today’s Latter-day Saint scriptural canon.

The Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham both owe their origins to the practice of grave-robbing, an offense not just today but also at the time of their production. Joseph Smith and other European treasure seekers in the nineteenth century did not accord the graves of American Indians and Egyptians the same amount of respect they expected for those of their own relatives. During Joseph Smith’s early employment as a treasure seeker, he would conjure the dead who appeared to him in the form of treasure guardians and angels.<sup>26</sup> He recorded his own struggles with temptations from “the adversary” to use a set of gold plates he found for “riches.” He also engaged in much of this work under the cover of darkness, so as to hide it from others.<sup>27</sup> Even if he did not recognize his disturbances of the remains and treasures of the dead as wrong, he clearly identified gaining wealth from those items taken from graves as immoral and was concerned about how others might respond if they observed his actions.<sup>28</sup>

Joseph Smith’s treasure quests took place primarily in land taken by European Americans from the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy under dubious circumstances. Coercion, fraud, bribery, betrayals, and violent invasions marked the circumstances that led to the loss of Haudenosaunee land.<sup>29</sup> The Seneca were the easternmost of the Six Nations of the Iroquois and the community of Palmyra where the Mormon seer claimed to find gold plates was located in the vicinity of the site of the Seneca village of Ganagweh.<sup>30</sup> For

<sup>21</sup> Reiss, “Mormon Church;” “General Authorities.”

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *In Heaven*, 71.

<sup>23</sup> Mann, *Native Americans*, 9.

<sup>24</sup> Vogel, *Joseph Smith*; Bushman, *Joseph Smith*; Ashurst-McGee, “A Pathway.”

<sup>25</sup> Clinton, “Private Canal Journal”, 392.

<sup>26</sup> Quinn, *Early Mormonism*; Brown, *In Heaven*; Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire*; Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni.”

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *History*, 5; Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni.”

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Mormon 8:14.

<sup>29</sup> Jackson, *Sketch of the Manners*; Taylor, *The Divided Ground*; Graymont, *The Iroquois*.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, “Telling Stories”, 332.

the Seneca land where Joseph Smith would claim to find gold plates, the displaced Indigenous inhabitants each received what the Seneca orator Red Jacket remembered bitterly as “but the price of a few hogsheds of tobacco.”<sup>31</sup> This colonial conquest created institutional structures that would benefit Americans of European heritage at the expense of the Indigenous peoples they had helped displace.

## Racial Justifications of Holocaust

From an Indigenous perspective the colonial invasion and displacement of the Haudenosaunee constituted a holocaust or genocide. Seneca descendant Arthur C. Parker, writing in 1926, would describe the military campaigns against the Haudenosaunee as a “holocaust.”<sup>32</sup> This term would subsequently be applied to the ethnic cleansing of Jews by German Nazis during World War II. If we retrospectively evaluate the violent displacement of the Seneca by the standards set by the United Nations in 1948, the American patriots had likewise engaged in a genocidal campaign against the Iroquois. This campaign is one that involved actions such as killing Indians, causing serious bodily and mental harm, inflicting “conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part” that were “committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group.”<sup>33</sup> While the predominant historical point of view in the United States may remain a denial of this holocaust, when viewed from an Indigenous perspective, “US history, as well as inherited Indigenous trauma, cannot be understood without dealing with the genocide that the United States committed against Indigenous peoples.”<sup>34</sup> While this viewpoint may be hard for some readers who continue to benefit from this atrocity to accept, there is no doubt that the coercion, bribery, fraud, and betrayals the Seneca experienced violated even the standards of their time and place.<sup>35</sup>

The treasure hunting methods that the Mormon prophet engaged in as part of his production of scripture were part of a larger cultural phenomenon through which settler colonists raided the newly acquired ruins and graves of the Haudenosaunee and then invented narratives that credited the impressive earth works and other evidences of civilization to peoples other than the Natives they had displaced. “Settlers,” as the Seneca descendant Barbara Alice Mann observed, “had an enormous stake in denying any cultural credit to Native Americans, inspiring Euroamericans to dream up a doomed, and by the time the myth was done, *white* race of Mound Builders in ancient America.” “The myth,” she continues, “was the only way, psychologically, to reconcile their ongoing genocide and land seizure—openly justified by the ‘savage’ state of Native America—with the undeniable evidence of ‘civilization’ presented by the math, astronomy, and artistry of the mounds.”<sup>36</sup> Not only would Joseph Smith claim he took gold plates from what was the traditional land of the Seneca, his translation of the plates would repeat the popular myth of the day, that an ancient white civilization had itself once been annihilated by the purportedly savage ancestors of the American Indians, themselves recent immigrants to this land.

## Civilization and Savagery

Prior to the betrayals in the aftermath of the American Revolution by both the British and the Americans, the Haudenosaunee had created an agriculturally based, democratic society that had thrived for centuries in what is now known as New York. When the archaeological record is evaluated in combination with oral tradition then the evidence indicates that the Haudenosaunee, along with the Shawnee, Cherokee, and Lenâpé, were responsible for the building of the earthworks and mounds that had inspired the imagination

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, *The Divided Ground*, 177-79.

<sup>32</sup> Parker, *An Analytical History*, 126.

<sup>33</sup> Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People’s History*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Jackson, *Sketch of the Manners*; Mann, “Goschochking Genocide.”

<sup>36</sup> Mann, *Native Americans*, 53.

and admiration of white settlers.<sup>37</sup> Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon, though, would credit ancient American civilization to Jewish immigrants who had split into a light-skinned and civilized (Nephite) and dark-skinned and savage (Lamanite) faction soon after their arrival in the Americas about 600 BCE. By about 400 CE the Lamanites, originally claimed to be the ancestors of American Indians, had purportedly annihilated the civilized Nephites after a millennium of nearly constant warfare. When we interviewed G. Peter Jemison (Heron Clan, Seneca), Ganondagan State Historic Site Manager, about the plausibility of the slaughter of an ancient white civilization by his ancestors, he found the story recounted in the Book of Mormon to be preposterous, lacking both archaeological and cultural support.<sup>38</sup> While Mormons were only a small part of a larger cultural and military assault on Native America, the Book of Mormon sought to supplant Seneca traditions with a narrative that credited Indigenous civilization to an ancient white race of Mound Builders instead of the people who actually built the Iroquois Confederacy and its contemporaries.

The Book of Mormon lent frontier myths the theological status of the word of God while denying the cultural accomplishments of the Shawnee, Cherokee, Haudenosaunee, and Lenâpé. The ideas that a more civilized race, now vanished, were responsible for "fortified works" destroyed by the ancestors of American Indians were "widely shared notions" developed over multiple generations and "ingrained by the 1830s, and constantly confirmed through the most common of activities: digging and collecting, touching and telling." Looking back at that past today, these social constructions are "rather transparent justifications for violent land-grabbing ('after all, it wasn't theirs in the first place'), and the contemporaneity of such myth-making with the tragic removal of eastern tribes certainly underscores the interpretation."<sup>39</sup> While lending these racist justifications for genocide a sacred credibility, Joseph Smith would draw from his own money-digging experiences to construct an image of a Nephite civilization that was technologically, ecologically, and culturally distinct from that of American Indians.

It appears that the items Joseph Smith would have encountered while digging up Haudenosaunee burial mounds colored his interpretation of the archaeological record. He appears to have projected evidence of colonial conflict and European trade goods back into the ancient past. His Book of Mormon presented ancient white Nephite civilizations as riding horses and raising cattle, sheep, goats, wheat, barley, and oats while using technologies such as steel, brass, glass, plows, and wheels. These European animals, plants, and technologies were not actually present in the Americas during the times of the Book of Mormon but had more recently been incorporated into Haudenosaunee culture over more than two centuries of trade and interaction with European colonists. In fact, the Haudenosaunee had begun preferentially burying European trade goods with the dead beginning with the colonial trade in the sixteenth century precisely because these items were new.<sup>40</sup> At least some of Joseph Smith's money digging took place in well-known Haudenosaunee "earth works" where encounters with items of European origin would have been likely.<sup>41</sup> Today the portrayal of European plants, animals, and technology in the Book of Mormon is easily recognizable as anachronistic but it is also prejudicial.<sup>42</sup> It rests on the assumption that the plants, animals, and technology of Europe served as markers of both civilization and whiteness. The Mormon prophet's encounters with European animals, plants, and technology in burial mounds that had been preferentially buried with the dead over a couple of centuries appear to have played an important part in how he imagined ancient America through the medium of a seer stone.

## Morality and Skin Color

The Book of Mormon is not only prejudicial in its implication that American Indians were not capable of creating civilizations without inspiration from the cultures of the Old World, it makes explicitly

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<sup>37</sup> Mann, *Native Americans*.

<sup>38</sup> Baca, *In Laman's Terms*.

<sup>39</sup> Hinsley, "Digging for Identity."

<sup>40</sup> Snow, *The Iroquois*, 90; Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, 62; Graymont, *The Iroquois*, 147, 219; Murphy, et al., "Indian Princess."

<sup>41</sup> Vogel, "The Locations," *Early Mormon Documents* v. 5, 287.

<sup>42</sup> Murphy, "Imagining Lamanites," "Simply Implausible."

racist associations between morality and skin color. The scripture's ancient white narrator, Nephi, while reportedly writing in Reformed Egyptian, declares that God punished the Lamanites, purported ancestors of American Indians, with a dark skin for their wickedness: "wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people, therefore the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them."<sup>43</sup> Nephi then cited the curse as an antecedent of other denigrating characteristics: "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."<sup>44</sup> According to Nephi's descendants Lamanites "loved murder, and would drink the blood of beasts" and were cut off from the presence of the Lord for not keeping his written commandments.<sup>45</sup> In this account the Mormon prophet gave the frontier prejudice of settler colonists the cover of scriptural passages that would tie culture and morality to skin color.

A community that today rejects racism in all its forms cannot continue to present the Book of Mormon as a record of the ancestors of American Indians. The gold plates that Joseph Smith says he found would not have been his to take even by the ethical standards of his own time and place. If they actually existed, then they would rightfully have belonged to the Seneca from whose graves or ruins they were taken. The anachronisms in the Book of Mormon suggest that ancient gold plates may never have existed at all.<sup>46</sup> Some evidence, though, suggests Joseph Smith may have "constructed a set of plates to be felt through a cloth."<sup>47</sup> The ambiguity associated with the actual existence of the plates would surely complicate efforts by the LDS Church to repudiate racism through repatriation of actual objects. Yet, not confronting these issues forthrightly leaves the story of the Book of Mormon's unearthing as a convenient justification for the legitimacy of continued theft and desecration of antiquities, a practice continuing into the present in Mormon communities.

The Mormon prophet must have been haunted by the recent annihilation and removal of American Indians that had made his colonial society possible. As he tried to come to terms with these injustices he appears to have drawn from the racist theology in the surrounding culture to produce a sacred text that gave those ideas the veneer of scripture. While the book he produced is complex and has countervailing teachings of racial mutability and aspirations toward equality, it nonetheless reified prejudices denying cultural accomplishments of Native Americans and attributed skin color to a curse from God for wickedness. Rhetoric rejecting racism does not by itself undo these injustices.

## Seer Stones

In its recent efforts to be more transparent about its own history, the LDS Church posted an essay about "Book of Mormon Translation" on its website in 2013 and published a photo of one of Joseph Smith's seer stones as part of the Joseph Smith Papers Project in 2015. The essay acknowledged Joseph Smith's use of seer stones in the translation process he used to produce scripture and his references to them using the biblical terms Urim and Thummim. Smith reported finding the interpreters that he called the Urim and Thummim with the plates and using them for part of the work. The small oval stone that he used for most of the translation process he claims to have found years before buried in the ground. The Mormon prophet would typically place the seer stone in a hat into which he would bury his face to block out light and dictate the narrative that would become the Book of Mormon.<sup>48</sup> Joseph Smith claimed that he returned the gold plates and Urim and Thummim to the "messenger" from the dead but the seer stone used for most of the translation and others like it would eventually end up in the possession of the LDS Church. In October, 2015 the Joseph Smith Papers Project published a photo of

<sup>43</sup> 2 Ne. 5:21.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Ne. 5:24.

<sup>45</sup> Jarom 1:6, Alma 9:14.

<sup>46</sup> Murphy, "Simply Implausible," "Imagining Lamanites;" Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*.

<sup>47</sup> Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 98-99; Taves, "History and the Claims."

<sup>48</sup> "Book of Mormon Translation."

one of the stones that the Mormon seer had used in the translation process along with a weathered leather bag.<sup>49</sup>

While the official LDS Church publications emphasized similarities with biblical traditions of seers and seer stones, Joseph Smith acquired the stones much closer to home.<sup>50</sup> The Iroquois valued “exotic stones” and “people carried such items with them during life as amulets and articles of personal adornment and often took them to their graves, presumably to aid them in their voyage to the next world.”<sup>51</sup> The Cherokee, another Iroquoian speaking descendant population of the Mound Builders, used stones known as *Ulûñsû’tĩ* that were also associated with leather casing, medicine bags, and communicative powers. Lt. Henry Timberlake who visited the Cherokee in 1762 reported that these stones “are of great value.” The Cherokee resisted “many attempts” by traders to acquire them; “as they use them in their conjuring ceremonies, they believe their parting with them or bringing them from home, would prejudice their health or affairs.”<sup>52</sup> Seneca descendant Barbara Alice Mann has outlined broad traditions of *Ulûñsû’tĩ* among descendant populations of Mound Builders and the possible depiction of an oval stone in the head of the Great Serpent Mound in Adams County, Ohio. She notes that the “community medicine bags” containing the stones “were generally well-guarded” and were “highly prized and very sacred.”<sup>53</sup> The resemblance between the *Ulûñsû’tĩ* and the photos of the seer stone published by the LDS Church raise ethical questions about the propriety of Joseph Smith’s acquisition of such a powerful medium and to whom it should properly belong today.

The seer stone now made public is but one of many acquired and used by Joseph Smith and his contemporaries. At least two other stones used by Smith are held in the First Presidency’s vault of the LDS Church and another is held in the Wilford Wood museum in Bountiful, Utah along with a large collection of other Native artifacts. Some of the stones are likely artifacts called spindle whorls and gorgets by archaeologists. The sandy colored artifact in the Wood museum has a hole bored through the middle and indentations worked in a circular style around the hole. This artifact matches the description of one found by Smith in Nauvoo, Illinois along the Mississippi River where “mound dappled ‘bluffs of the Mississippi’ meet the river.” It resembles spindle whorls found in other sites in western Illinois. A stone found by Elias Pulsipher in a burial site near Kirtland, Ohio is probably a “trapezoidal gorget.” Stones used by David and Jacob Whitmer show evidence of shaping and symmetrical boring of two holes by human hands; the David Whitmer stone resembles a “convex sided rectangular gorget” similar to others found in archaeological sites in New York. The John Whitmer family seer stone appears to be a “concave-sided rectangular gorget,” also called a “reel-shaped gorget,” resembling those found in New York, Delaware, and Ohio. The Whitmer stones appear to be held today by the Community of Christ in Independence, Missouri.<sup>54</sup> The likely connection between Mormon seer stones and Native artifacts raises ethical questions about their acquisition without the consent of descendant populations and provides an opportunity for the LDS Church and the Community of Christ to seek reconciliation through repatriation.

Joseph Smith’s ownership of one of his seer stones would be called into question during his lifetime, provoking a strong reaction. The stone in question was a dark brown stone, described as “about the size of a hen’s egg, and shaped like a baby’s shoe.” A neighbor, Willard Chase, had actually found the stone in 1822 while digging a well and lent it to Smith for his use. Smith subsequently built a reputation using this stone for scrying and had even returned the stone to Chase for about a year. When his neighbor asked for the stone back in 1826, after some notoriety had come his way, Smith refused, insisting “you cannot have it.” Smith proclaimed, “I don’t care who in the Devil it belongs to, *you* shall not have it.”<sup>55</sup> Historical descriptions resemble one of the stones that Grant Palmer observed in 1965 in the vault of the First Presidency of the LDS

<sup>49</sup> Lloyd, “Book of Mormon;” Stack, “Mormon Church;” Turley, et al., “Joseph the Seer.”

<sup>50</sup> Esoteric traditions using stones for seeing can also be found in Europe. See Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire*.

<sup>51</sup> Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 28.

<sup>52</sup> Timberlake, *Memoirs*, 48. Archaic spelling in the original.

<sup>53</sup> Mann, *Native Americans*, 233-38; Ashurst-McGee, “A Pathway,” 163-69. The leather bag containing the stone Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon appears to have been made by his wife, Emma. See: Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 242-55.

<sup>54</sup> Ashurst-McGee, “Pathway,” 163-69; Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 242-55; Moorehead, *Stone Ornaments*, 52-55, 201-12, 364; Alt, “Spindle Whorls.”

<sup>55</sup> Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 38-9, 88; Chase, “Willard Chase Statement.”



Church.<sup>56</sup> No Mormon scholars seem to have asked, then or now, if this or other artifacts that the Mormon prophet obtained while treasure digging, or used in his scriptural productions, might have rightly belonged to the Indigenous inhabitants of the land from which they were taken.

## Picking up skulls and bones

After the publication of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith continued to disturb and collect bones and artifacts from Indigenous graves and encouraged his followers' engagement in similar practices. In early June 1834 an aspiring Mormon militia was en route from Kirtland, Ohio to Clay County, Missouri in what has become known as Zion's Camp. In a letter to his wife, Joseph Smith described "wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasional[l]y the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as a proof of its divine authenticity."<sup>57</sup> Accounts from members of Zion's Camp describe unearthing a skeleton, bringing it to their prophet, and then Joseph Smith receiving a vision while examining the bones. Smith declared the man to be "Zelph," a Lamanite from whom the curse of a dark skin had been partially removed, whose thigh had been injured and healed, and who had been killed by an arrow in the last great battle between the Nephites and Lamanites. Wilford Woodruff claimed to have taken the skeleton's thigh bone with him to Missouri where he was "anxious" to rebury it.<sup>58</sup> Heber C. Kimball described having "very peculiar feelings, to see the bones of our fellow creatures scattered in this matter" and recorded that "Elder B. Young has yet the arrow in his possession."<sup>59</sup> The Mormon prophet continued to desecrate graves with the purpose of validating his scriptural accounts. Key followers, both of whom would later become Church Presidents, kept bones and other grave goods as souvenirs; at least one of which may yet be in the possession of the LDS Church.

## Egyptian Papyri

Another online essay posted in 2014 by the LDS Church focuses on the Book of Abraham, a scriptural text also emerging from the disturbance of ancient Egyptian graves. The focus of the essay, though, is not about the ethical circumstances surrounding the acquisition of Egyptian papyri from which Joseph Smith claimed to translate the scriptural narrative. Rather, the essay attempts to provide plausible explanations for the disconcerting fact that the Egyptian papyri, currently in the possession of the LDS Church, are identified by scholars "as parts of standard funerary texts that were deposited with mummified bodies" and date to many centuries after the life of Abraham. The essay suggests that the translations may have come from missing parts of the papyri or, alternatively, invites readers to consider "a broader definition of the words *translator* and *translation*." In this perspective, "Joseph's translation was not a literal rendering of the papyri as a conventional translation would be. Rather the physical artifacts provided an occasion for meditation, reflection, and revelation." The papyri the essay suggests may have simply been a catalyst for "a process whereby God gave to Joseph Smith a revelation about the life of Abraham."<sup>60</sup> While the essay devotes considerable attention to the ethical quandary of a mismatch between modern translations of the papyri and that of the Mormon prophet, very little consideration is given to the dubious circumstances underlying the acquisition of the papyri. The essay devotes no attention at all to the racist teachings in the Book of Abraham or to the important social role that the funerary text would have played for the deceased.

The anonymously authored essay masks with euphemism the violence, plunder, and grave robbery in the acquisition of the papyri. The essay describes Michael Chandler, the dealer who sold the mummies, as "an entrepreneur." The essay credits the "exploits of the French emperor Napoleon" and "the antiquities

<sup>56</sup> Kimball, "Seer Stone;" Palmer, "My Ah-Ha Moments."

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Letter to Emma*; Metcalfe, "Reinventing Lamanite Identity," 22.

<sup>58</sup> Woodruff, *Leaves from My Journal*, 6, "Autobiography;" Cannon, "Zelph Revisited;" Metcalfe, "A Documentary Analysis."

<sup>59</sup> "Extracts from H.C. Kimball's Journal;" Cannon, "Zelph Revisited."

<sup>60</sup> "Translation and Historicity."

unearthed in the catacombs of Egypt” with creating “a fascination across the Western world.” Rather than addressing forthrightly the looting of Egyptian graves, the authors suggest, “These artifacts had been uncovered by Antonio Lebolo, a former cavalryman in the Italian army ... who oversaw some of the excavations for the consul general of France.”<sup>61</sup> A critical reader might readily begin to ask what credentials a cavalryman might have for overseeing archaeological excavations or how he personally came into possession of the antiquities, but the article simply glosses over these atrocities as if they were routine and devotes no attention to the ethical quandary that such actions might pose for the LDS Church. It also seems to imply that the papyri were acquired in Lebolo’s official capacity, which does not appear to have been what actually happened.

While the questionable ethics in the acquisition of the mummies and papyri are largely ignored in the Church’s essay, an LDS tour guide and scholar have struggled with them. Bruce H. Porter, a tour guide with JustLDS.com, acknowledges but then minimizes the unethical nature of Antonio Lebolo’s collections of antiquities in Egypt. “Among the early collectors of Egyptian antiquities, few had more colorful – or more controversial – careers than Antonio Lebolo.” He quotes W. D. van Wijngaarden’s observation that Lebolo’s collections are masked in obscurity, “The excavations in Egypt in those days were generally of the nature of robbing and plundering the places where antiquities were found.” Not content to let that statement stand on its own merits, Porter offers a counterpoint by quoting James Baikie’s claim that “archaeologists,” a term even he uses with hesitation, like Lebolo “are specimens, not of the worst, but of the best work that was being done in Egypt in 1818.”<sup>62</sup> Brigham Young University’s H. Donl Peterson acknowledged that Napoleon’s invasion introduced Europe “to the exotic land of Nile, with its myriad pyramids, temples, tombs, obelisks, and mummies waiting to be explored, savored, and, sadly, plundered.” At that time, Peterson notes, “Egypt had the spirit and the morals of a gold rush, for the sale of antiquities was a lucrative and competitive business.” “Both the natives,” he claimed, “and their European counterparts were unscrupulous in their dealings.” These supposedly unscrupulous Egyptians, he also notes, “were hired for one piaster per diem to uncover the buried treasures.” Peterson traveled to Turin, Italy searching for evidence “that Lebolo was anything more than a grave robber.” The best he uncovered were some letters from other colonists attesting to Lebolo’s hospitality, his contributions to other European collections of Egyptian antiquities, and his involvement in the sale of “exotic animals.”<sup>63</sup> One is left wondering why the LDS Church’s essay placed so much emphasis on the historicity of the Book of Abraham and so little on the ethics of its acquisition and the prejudice in its message.

The racist theology exuding from the Book of Abraham is palpable. In this “translation” of Egyptian papyri Joseph Smith would give nineteenth century folkloric justifications for the enslavement of Africans, the veneration of scripture.<sup>64</sup> The text claims an Egyptian pharaoh “was a descendant from the loins of Ham, and was a partaker of the blood of Canaanites by birth. From this descent sprang all the Egyptians, and thus the blood of the Canaanites was preserved in the land. The land of Egypt being first discovered by a woman, who was the daughter of Ham ... When this woman discovered the land it was under water, who afterward settled her sons in it; and thus, from Ham, spring that race which preserved the curse in the land ... being of that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood.”<sup>65</sup> While there were a few ordinations of black men to the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s lifetime, these scriptural passages would serve his subsequent followers as a justification for legalization of slavery in Utah and for the exclusion, until 1978, of Africans and those of African descent from the priesthood and temples.<sup>66</sup>

A contemporary observer recorded the disrespect with which Joseph Smith had treated the Egyptian dead in his quest for written manuscripts. During a visit to Nauvoo in 1842 Lucy Mack Smith, the prophet’s mother, treated the Englishman Rev. Henry Caswell to a tour of the chamber above her home.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Porter, “Antonio Lebolo.”

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Murphy, “Sin, Skin, and Seed;” Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*; Haynes, *Noah’s Curse*; Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham*.

<sup>65</sup> Abraham 1:21-27.

<sup>66</sup> Young and Gray, “Mormons and Race;” Stevenson, *Black Mormon*; Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*; Jones, *The Trial*; Jackson, *Elijah Abel*; Hudson, *Real Native Genius*.

She shewed me a wretched cabinet, in which were four naked mummies frightfully disfigured, and in fact, most disgusting relics of mortality. ... She accounted for the disfigured condition of the mummies by a circumstance rather illustrative of the back-woods. Some difficulty having been found in unrolling the papyrus which enveloped them, an axe was applied, by which the unfortunate mummies were literally chopped open.<sup>67</sup>

Joseph Smith's treatment of Egyptian dead was recognized as problematic even during his lifetime yet little discussion of the ethical issues of chopping open mummies is apparent among Latter-day Saint scholars today.

The value placed on the written word in this mistreatment of the dead is reminiscent of the Book of Mormon character Nephi's violent murder of Laban, a record-keeper in Jerusalem around 600 BCE. In this story Nephi's older brother Laman, the purported progenitor of American Indians, first attempted to acquire a set of brass plates, anachronistically containing the five books of Moses. After his failure the brothers attempted to purchase the plates, but failed when Laban stole their wealth. In order to ensure that his descendants in the Americas would have access to the written word of God, Nephi returned a third time, alone, and decapitated a drunken Laban with his own sword and then stole both the sword and the plates.<sup>68</sup> The Spirit that had ordered Nephi, despite his reluctance, to murder the record keeper, informed him "the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purpose. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle in unbelief."<sup>69</sup> There, in a nutshell, is the kernel of settler colonial theology and the textually based birth of Orientalism.<sup>70</sup> Murder followed by the robbing and disfigurement of the dead are each justified by the pursuit of logos. A theology that justifies the chopping open of mummies would set the tone for Latter-day settler colonists who continue to desecrate the dead on the battlefield, in cemeteries, and ruins well into the twenty-first century.

## Latter-day Colonialism

From the founding of the faith in the 1830s through the assassination of Joseph Smith in 1844, Mormons would frequently be accused of collusion with Indians by surrounding white settlers. Viewed suspiciously for their scriptural accounts proclaiming a chosen status for American Indians, accused of intermarrying and sullyng the white race, and suspected of "tampering" with Indian tribes against the interests of the federal government, Mormons drew from their neighbors similar mistreatment to that otherwise reserved for Indigenous peoples. Mormons experienced a series of removals, from Kirtland, Ohio, and then from Jackson County, Missouri to a "reserve" in Clay County, and then later in Caldwell, County. After conflict with neighbors resulted in an extermination order issued by the governor of Missouri, Mormons would flee to Nauvoo, Illinois. While prosperous for a time in Nauvoo, Mormons would once again draw the enmity of their white neighbors and, after the murder of their prophet, would flee west in 1846-47 to the Great Basin, initially part of Mexico, under the leadership of Brigham Young.<sup>71</sup>

During the migration west Young demonstrated the ability to set aside evangelization efforts to facilitate mutually agreeable arrangements for Mormon passage and trade with Potawatomi and Omaha. He discouraged reprisals for alleged thefts, pointing to cultural differences to minimize their significance.<sup>72</sup> Young, however, did not view Indigenous peoples of the Great Basin as having a prior claim on land Mormons would settle, ignored protestations to the contrary, discouraged making payments for the land, and insisted "the land belongs to our Father in Heaven, and we calculate to plow and plant it and no man will have power to sell his inheritance for he cannot remove it; it belongs to the Lord."<sup>73</sup> Despite this policy the first few years in the less populated Salt Lake Valley saw little conflict, but things would change for

<sup>67</sup> Caswell, *The City of Mormons*, 28-9.

<sup>68</sup> Murphy, "Laban's Ghost."

<sup>69</sup> 1 Ne. 4:13.

<sup>70</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 80-2; Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People's History*.

<sup>71</sup> Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*.

<sup>72</sup> Arrington, *Brigham Young*, 210-212.

<sup>73</sup> Clayton, *William Clayton's Journal*, 335.

the worse as Mormons moved south into the more heavily populated Utah Valley. Sparked after Mormons murdered a Ute man by the name of Old Bishop, a resulting conflict would include an order from Young for the Nauvoo Legion to exterminate all “hostile” Indians and result in the “bloodiest week of Indian killing in Utah history.” This violence was capped off by the grisly decapitation of approximately forty to fifty dead Indians whose heads were sent by Army surgeon, Dr. James Blake, to a medical institution in Washington, D.C. By the end of the conflict, one Mormon and approximately 102 Utes had lost their lives. Mormon families then took in the widows and children as servants or slaves, in an effort to “make white people out of them.”<sup>74</sup>

Young’s policies would continue to vacillate over time. By November 1850 he was advocating for the removal of Indians by the federal government. By mid-1851 he recommended feeding the Indians conceding “it is cheaper by far, yes by hundreds and thousands of dollars cheaper to pay such losses, than raise an expedition to fight Indians.”<sup>75</sup> The Walker War in the summer of 1853 again witnessed temporary armed conflict followed by a policy of patience and forbearance. By 1866, in the midst of Utah’s Black Hawk War, Young would reconsider his earlier views, welcome the return of Indians to live among Mormons, and acknowledge the validity of their right to occupy the land where they lived, hunted, and buried their fathers. He did not, however, advocate Mormon departure from most of that Indian land. Rather, he encouraged Mormons to stay, raise enough grain to feed the Indians and to treat them kindly.<sup>76</sup>

Nineteenth century settler colonialism would set the tone for politics in the following centuries. The theological legacy of grave-robbery intersects with Mormon tendencies to designate American Indians as Lamanites from the Book of Mormon. The violence today is more subtle and systemic. Mormon members might not recognize some of their everyday behaviors as racist or the ways that the political systems they support continue to deprive American Indians of basic human rights. The majority of small Utah towns are conservative and Mormon dominated spaces resulting in an infrastructure that functions from a settler colonial cultural perspective.<sup>77</sup> Most social institutions, from schools, jails, businesses, law enforcement, to Boy Scouts operate in a manner anchored by LDS religious perspectives. Unrecognized biases in these spaces emanate from this structural and systemic framework, ignoring present-day Native American perspectives, beliefs, and cultural practices. Charles Wilkinson describes the colonial domination in southern Utah in the 1960s in ways that echo the experiences of the authors in the region during subsequent decades. “The church exerted sweeping political power. Virtually every public official in San Juan County and across southern Utah was Mormon. Mormons controlled state government. Mormons ran the schools, the county commission, the courts, the police, the welfare agencies, everything.”<sup>78</sup> The racial violence that created this discrepancy in power may seem distant in EuroAmerican minds but it was only a few generations ago. Memories of this violent history are passed down in the oral tradition from Native American elders and bestowed upon children in Indigenous communities in Utah and neighboring states.<sup>79</sup> The inequities in today’s world illustrate a layered narrative of a community still divided between Mormons and Indians and underpinned by often unseen conflicts, discrimination, and racism.

## Operation Cerberus Action

Three recent examples should bring the implications of this legacy to bear upon readers for consideration and to the LDS Church for more serious action. First, Operation Cerberus Action, “the nation’s largest investigation of archaeological and cultural artifact thefts,” took place in the southeastern region of Utah in the small town of Blanding during the first decade of the twentieth-first century. The town, its businesses, and politics are mostly dominated by white Mormons. In its outskirts live Native American communities

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<sup>74</sup> Peterson, *Utah’s Black Hawk War*, 56-57; Farmer, *On Zion’s Mount*, 76; Gunnison, *The Mormons*, 147.

<sup>75</sup> Arrington, *Brigham Young*, 214. See also: Christy, “Open Hand;” Coates, “Brigham Young.”

<sup>76</sup> Arrington, *Brigham Young*; Peterson, *Utah’s Black Hawk War*; Farmer, *On Zion’s Mount*.

<sup>77</sup> Fox, *Latter-day Political Views; America’s Changing Religious Landscape*; Reeve, *Making Space*; Cuch, *A History*.

<sup>78</sup> Wilkinson, *Fire on the Plateau*, 35-36.

<sup>79</sup> Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land*, 287-293. See also Cuch, *Utah’s American Indians*; Zacharias, *Into America*.

and families who have been in the area since before the settler colonial outsiders came to the region. Local tribes in the area, namely the Navajo (Diné) and Ute, regularly observe the looting of ancient Anasazi ruins and sites with many of the stolen artifacts being traded and sold. It had become so commonplace that it was considered to be a harmless everyday activity by non-Native residents of the region. A sting operation led by the Bureau of Land Management and the Justice Department to bring down the illegal artifact network resulted in the arrest of twenty-five residents of mostly Mormon Blanding. These Mormon settler colonists, who expressed spiritual ties to American Indians through the stories of the Book of Mormon, did not recognize as criminal their continuation of the long-standing tradition of grave-robbery from which the Mormon scripture had originated. The bust would bring considerable turmoil to the community, resulting in nineteen guilty pleas, and three suicides but, ultimately, no one was sentenced to prison. The agencies “maintain that the operation was successful and sent a message that looting archaeological sites will not be tolerated.”<sup>80</sup> Yet, for Native people the lenient pleas and the lack of sentencing took the sting out of the operation and failed to stop looting. By extension, the disrespect of Native American remains and the theft of artifacts are not just a violation of past cultures but an assault on living descendants and other tribal people whose cemeteries still do not receive the same respect that contemporary white Mormon residents give to the burial places of their own ancestors.

## Bears Ears Coalition

A second example is the Bears Ears Coalition. Originally starting as Diné Bikéyah, the region’s tribes began negotiations with local officials, the state of Utah, and U.S. Congressional Representative Rob Bishop, to formulate a plan to protect the ecologically delicate and archaeologically rich land area of some 1.9 million acres in some of the most remote and rugged Utah lands. Ute tribal member Malcom Lehi explains, “We can still hear the songs and prayers of our ancestors on every mesa and in every canyon.” Yet despite these collaborative efforts, Bishop and others have not taken the desires of the Bears Ears Coalition seriously and have actively worked against the interest of the tribes. Bishop, for example, drafted a land-use bill with an unprecedented “gag rule” stipulating that federal agencies “cannot consider or take into account any tribal recommendation that has not been endorsed in advance by either the state of Utah or a local county commission.”<sup>81</sup> This bill appears to be an effort to subordinate tribal interests to those of local politicians, predominantly Mormon and white, once again depriving Indigenous people of basic human rights.

The Bears Ears Coalition represents the Navajo, Hopi, Ute, and Zuni nations, a united group of tribes asserting their sovereignty together and acting in the interest of preserving cultural heritage. After seeing the effort subverted by Bishop despite their five years of negotiation, the coalition has now moved ahead with plans to ask President Barack Obama to designate the federal lands in the area as a national monument, an effort documented by one of the authors in a new auto-ethnographic film.<sup>82</sup> An executive order would protect sacred sites, places of prayer, and ancestral burials, artifacts, and animal relatives in the area from continued resource extraction and destruction by the general public.<sup>83</sup> The affront towards the tribes over their claims forced them to assert their collective sovereignty as Indigenous nations and reconsider their “courtesy” of attempting to negotiate with local politicians in the Mormon dominated state of Utah. Reaching an impasse they moved towards the federal government for nation-to-nation negotiations instead. The failure of local leaders of Utah Mormon communities to take the requests of tribes seriously illustrates the spiritual and religious disconnect Mormons continue to have with Native American communities over the sacred nature of this particular landscape. The LDS Church leadership could seize this opportunity to support and back up an impressive coalition of nations. If these diverse Indigenous nations that have rarely sat down together for a common purpose in their tumultuous history can come together for the protection of these sacred lands then surely there is a place for reconciliation with Mormons too. Such an alliance

<sup>80</sup> Mozingo “A Sting in the Desert.”

<sup>81</sup> Babbit, “It’s Time;” Bitsóí, “The Land.”

<sup>82</sup> Baca, *Shásh Jaa’*.

<sup>83</sup> Babbit, “It’s Time;” Bitsóí, “The Land.”

could protect a landscape and its cultural resources for everyone to benefit from the land's healing nature for generations to come.

## Malheur Wildlife Refuge

The implications of the perpetuation of racism in Mormon settler colonial thought reached a public crescendo in a third example occurring during January 2016. A group of armed men under the leadership of Mormons Ammon and Ryan Bundy and LaVoy Finicum began an occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge near Burns, Oregon as a protest against federal land policies and the incarceration of the ranchers Dwight and Steve Hammond on arson charges, given stronger teeth under antiterrorism legislation. Among the protestors was a man who called himself “Captain Moroni” after a white Nephite freedom fighter in the Book of Mormon.<sup>84</sup> Ryan Bundy claimed protestors had no interest in the antiquities on site, but the Bundy family previously rode ATVs through Native American archaeological sites in Utah as part of a protest in 2014 and took a bulldozer through sensitive areas at Malheur during the occupation. Bundy implicitly invoked the theology of white supremacy from the Book of Mormon, when he claimed, “We also recognize that the Native Americans had the claim to the land, but they lost that claim. There are things to learn from the past, but the current culture is the most important.”<sup>85</sup> In contrast of fact, provisions in the 1848 “Act to establish the Territorial Government of Oregon” and the failure of the U.S. Senate to ratify a treaty suggest that the Northern Paiutes still have legitimate claim to Malheur Wildlife Refuge, certainly more so than out-of-state ranchers.<sup>86</sup> The statement also implies that Native cultures are only to be found in the past. Mormon teachings that ancestors of the American Indians had lost their claim to the land likely underpinned Bundy’s statement and the militants’ disregard for Indigenous cultures. In this respect, they echoed similar views of Brigham Young from a century and a half ago.

The settler colonialism exemplified in the denigration of American Indians as Lamanites of the Book of Mormon, denial of Indigenous rights to the land, decapitation of Indian bodies killed in a lopsided battle, and the enslavement of Indian women and children are only a few generations in the past. Racism against Native Americans today takes on more subtle forms. It can be seen in the systemic structures of power that continue to enable the desecration of Indian graves by prominent Mormons who receive little more than light punishments when caught by federal authorities. Operation Cerberus Action, Bears Ears Coalition, and the occupation of Malheur Wildlife Refuge illustrate that Mormon desecration of Indian cemeteries and sacred sites was not just a distant offense. To its credit, the LDS Church did issue a press release denouncing the occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge.<sup>87</sup> Yet, it took no public action to defuse this situation or the similar ones described here. It has missed opportunities to be a moral and political leader in protecting Native sacred sites on public lands while simultaneously claiming to reject racism in any form. Despite its egalitarian online rhetoric, the LDS Church would play a key role in a revival of efforts in the twenty-first century to use DNA from Native bodies, once again taken without appropriate permission, in an ill-fated endeavor to validate Book of Mormon narratives.

## Latter-day Racial Science

My people wonder, what is really going on here? To us, any part of ourselves is sacred. Scientists say it's just DNA. For an Indian, it is not just DNA, it is part of a person, it is sacred, with deep religious significance. It is part of the essence of a person.

*Frank Dukepoo, Hopi*<sup>88</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Sepulvado, “Explainer;” Silk, “Mormon Messianism;” Dwyer, “Of Ranchers.”

<sup>85</sup> Boone, “4,000 Artifacts;” Keeler, “Oregon Militia.”

<sup>86</sup> Newcomb, “Malheur Wildlife Refuge.”

<sup>87</sup> “Church Responds.”

<sup>88</sup> Petit, “Trying to Study.”

The raiding of American Indian and Egyptian graves early in the nineteenth century fueled the rise of particularly virulent forms of scientific racism that thrived well into the twentieth century. A primary justification given for taking the bodies of the dead, either in burial mounds or on the battlefield, was the emerging practices of physiometrics, phrenology, and physiognomy that disguised racism as science by conducting measurements on human skulls, faces, and bodies and using purported differences to justify racial hierarchies. The skulls of Utes decapitated on the battlefield in the Utah Valley likely became a part of these efforts to measure cranial capacity as a way of suggesting the inferiority of American Indians. The racial hierarchies produced through this abuse of the dead inevitably placed white Europeans at the highest levels and Africans and American Indians at or near the bottom. The data behind these claims were problematic from the beginning, ranging from forged to conveniently selective.<sup>89</sup> The Dakota anthropologist Kim Tallbear warns “that ideas about racial science, which informed white definitions of tribes in the nineteenth century, are being revived again in twenty-first century laboratories.”<sup>90</sup> With keen interests in Native America and genealogy many Mormons are at the heart of this revival of racial science, but in some complex ways.

A new strain of racial science focused on DNA has gained a popular following among some Mormons. The LDS Church’s 2014 essay on “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies” appears to allude, very carefully and without approval, to the more offensive aspects of this practice. In addition to trying to offer plausible explanations for the lack of genetic support for the migrations from the ancient Near East to the Americas described in the Book of Mormon, the essay asks “for a more careful approach to the data” even from “some defenders of the Book of Mormon” who are making “speculative” arguments.<sup>91</sup> It is likely that this caution is directed towards the popular Mormon author Rod L. Meldrum, and others like him, who have misused genetic science, combined with nineteenth-century Mormon ideas about Mound Builders, to falsely proclaim the DNA of some American Indians validates the historical claims of the Book of Mormon.<sup>92</sup> Meldrum’s website, [www.bookofmormonevidence.org](http://www.bookofmormonevidence.org), along with support from the American television personality and prominent Mormon Glenn Beck, are keeping the old Mound Builder myths alive in Mormon and popular American imagination.<sup>93</sup>

Meldrum, though, was not the first Mormon scholar or scientist to turn to DNA with controversial hopes of vindicating Mormon claims that American Indian ancestors came from Israel and the ancient Near East. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, Brigham Young University, whose scholars had expressed initial optimism about genetic evidence providing support for the Book of Mormon’s historical claims, acquired one of the largest collections of American Indian and Indigenous DNA samples in the world. They acquired this collection despite ethical objections raised by review boards in New Zealand, the Indigenous Environmental Network, and Native Heritage Project.<sup>94</sup> Among the ethical concerns has been the circumvention of local review by collecting samples at LDS congregations across the country and around the world, a particularly important issue if the LDS Church and its universities respect the sovereignty of tribal governments and other nations whose institutional review boards should have approved the research before collection of bodily substances began.

The Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation behind most of this work lost its affiliation with BYU in 2003 following significant publicity about the failure of DNA data to support the Book of Mormon. Whether or not that fallout with BYU was related to ethics, the results of the research, or other reasons is unclear. GeneTree, a company identified as a collaborator with Sorenson Molecular Genealogy Foundation, became a source of Direct-to-Consumer genetic-genealogy research tools and would be acquired by Ancestry in 2012. In the various moves between the Foundation, these companies and another Sorenson affiliate, Relative

<sup>89</sup> Mann, *Native Americans*; Thomas, *Skull Wars*.

<sup>90</sup> Tallbear, *Native American DNA*, back cover.

<sup>91</sup> “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies.”

<sup>92</sup> Meldrum, *Rediscovering*.

<sup>93</sup> “Glenn Beck;” Stout, *The Lost Civilizations*.

<sup>94</sup> Murphy, “Lamanite Genesis”, 67, “Sin, Skin, and Seed”, 49; Mazur, “Mormons;” Johnston, “Mormons Trigger;” Larsen, “BYU Molecular Genealogy;” Jestes, “Is History Repeating;” Murphy and Southerton, “Genetic Research;” Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe*, 181; Tallbear, *Native American DNA*, 80-82.

Genetics, data from individual DNA samples, if not the bodily substances themselves, have allegedly passed hands unless contributors opted out, a poorly announced and difficult process according to customers. A more ethical approach would have secured additional informed consent of contributors before transferring these bodily samples or data derived from them.<sup>95</sup>

Anthropologist Kim Tallbear outlines some ethical concerns about Mormon ties to GeneTree, and invites more research on the topic.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has historically taken a special interest not only in the conversion of Native Americans to Mormonism but also more recently in Native American genetic history. Church doctrine asserts that Native Americans are the descendants of Lamanites, a supposed lost tribe of Israel, and are sinners marked by God with dark skin. (Those who were good remained white, “fair and beautiful.”) Genetic research into Native American origins has been an important part of the genetics work done within and funded by Mormon-affiliated institutions. That GeneTree’s commercial decisions have been in some way shaped by that set of beliefs is a reasonable hypothesis. But I will leave it to other researchers more directly concerned with the relationships between Western religion and science to investigate connections between GeneTree and Mormon religious preoccupation.<sup>96</sup>

The focus of Tallbear’s evaluation is on the industry of Direct-to-Consumer genetic ancestry testing. Our focus is on the LDS Church’s long history of using Indigenous artifacts, grave goods, and bodies to further a theological agenda tightly connected to race and settler colonialism. The long history of abuse outlined here raises questions about whether or not the LDS Church, its affiliated universities, and the companies and foundations with prominent Mormon leadership are acting responsibly and ethically with Native American and other Indigenous DNA they have acquired. We are suggesting that collecting DNA samples from Indigenous peoples at LDS Churches, while circumventing the ethical review processes of tribal and international governments in the twenty-first century, is akin to stealing Indian skeletons and grave goods from burial mounds in the nineteenth. Transporting those bodily substances and their signifiers between universities, foundations, and companies without further permission from donors and governments is likewise akin to trafficking in and profiting from human body parts. These activities should not be taking place in institutions that reject racism in all its forms.

A battle over interpretations of Native American DNA is brewing within Mormonism and continues the Latter-day focus on Indigenous bodies. In addition to its new essay acknowledging the lack of DNA support for the Book of Mormon, the LDS Church has modified the introduction and chapter headings in the Book of Mormon to make the scriptural interpretations less explicitly racist and more compatible with DNA research indicating an Asian origin of American Indians.<sup>97</sup> To their credit, Scott Woodward and Ugo Perego, Mormon scientists associated with the Sorenson projects and companies, have acknowledged the lack of support from DNA for Israelite origins of Native Americans, have modified GeneTree’s representation of Native Americans after Scott Woodward sat on a panel with Kim Tallbear, and have been critical of the way that popular Mormon authors like Rodney Meldrum play loosely with the science.<sup>98</sup> Ugo Perego’s work is addressed approvingly in the LDS Church’s essay on genetics and he may have played a role in its construction.<sup>99</sup> The seeming capitulation of the Church to the latest science and its public moves away from its racist past has met with some backlash from Mormons attached to older interpretations of the Book of Mormon, as illustrated by Rodney Meldrum, the most prominent spokesperson advocating more explicitly racist interpretations of the Book of Mormon.

Rodney Meldrum’s abuses echo the physiometrics of nineteenth-century racial science. Meldrum makes it clear to his readers that he preferences scripture over science and writes from a creationist perspective. He makes assertions that a good scientist clearly would not support. He falsely claims, “the primary races

<sup>95</sup> Jestes, “Is History Repeating;” Murphy, “Sin, Skin, and Seed;” “Lamanite Genesis;” Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe*; Tallbear, *Native American DNA*.

<sup>96</sup> Tallbear, *Native American DNA*, 79-80.

<sup>97</sup> Stack, “Single Word.”

<sup>98</sup> Tallbear, *Native American DNA*; Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe*; Murphy, “Sin, Skin, and Seed;” Givens, et al., “Science & Foundations;” Southerton, “Response;” “Reviews of DNA;” Perego, “The Book of Mormon.”

<sup>99</sup> “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies.”



of the earth, Asian (Oriental), African (Negroid) and European (Caucasian) are easily distinguished from each other through specific DNA markers or ‘signatures’ that delineate their ancestry.” He asserts that as “Semitic” the people of the Book of Mormon “would be classified by today’s genetic terminology as ‘European,’ rather than ‘Asian.’” He affiliates these races with three sons of Noah, Japheth, Ham, and Shem, and uses passages from the Book of Abraham to perpetuate the idea that descendants of Ham are cursed with a dark skin. He attributes the Book of Mormon’s curse of a dark skin on Lamanites as punishment for iniquity and intermarriage with members of the Asian race who he claims had also immigrated to the Americas. After a textual analysis demonstrating that an historically accurate Book of Mormon would require genetic descendants among American Indians, he points to mtDNA haplogroup X as the missing link connecting ancient Israel (included in his European race) to North American Indians. To add insult to injury, he disparages the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act as creating confusion and blames the holocausts of both American Indians and Jews on “the consequences of turning away from the God of Heaven which brings upon them His judgements.”<sup>100</sup> Meldrum’s identification of specific races, association of these races with purportedly unique genetic markers and descent from the sons of Noah, supposed links between morality and skin color, and claims that X is a European genetic marker are simply not supported by the science, despite his claims to the contrary.<sup>101</sup> Yet, here we have a revival, in a frightening form of “racial science,” combined with religious fundamentalism that blames the American Indian and Jewish holocausts on the wickedness of the victims of the violence.

While press releases, essays on its website, and changes to the Book of Mormon would make it appear the LDS Church is taking steps towards rejecting racism, its disciplinary actions speak louder than its rhetoric. When the accumulation of DNA evidence first made it clear that there was no apparent linkage between ancient America and Israel within the time frame of the Book of Mormon, the Church initiated and then suspended disciplinary action against anthropologist Thomas Murphy, one of the authors. The Church also excommunicated geneticist and former LDS Bishop Simon Southerton. Murphy and Southerton, who were using findings from genetics to challenge Mormon racism, experienced official retaliation.<sup>102</sup> Yet, the LDS Church responds much more cautiously, using carefully worded news releases but no apparent church discipline, to the actions of Mormons like Meldrum who abuse DNA science to defend Book of Mormon racism or Mormon militiamen who employ the settler colonial rhetoric from Mormon scripture as justification for seizing federal lands at gunpoint and desecrating Native archaeological sites.<sup>103</sup> These actions, when contrasted with its public rhetoric, make it appear as if the LDS Church actually condones the racist ideologies and their colonial underpinnings. If an institution is genuinely repudiating racism in any form then one is left wondering why it disciplines those challenging racism while only mildly rebuking those who are openly racist.

## Repatriation

There is a fundamental problem underlying the theology of Mormonism. The gold plates and papyri from which Joseph Smith claimed to translate scripture and the seer stones that he used for this purpose would not have rightfully belonged to him in the first place. These items appear to have been stolen from the graves of the dead, left exposed and unprotected by settler colonial forces that violently and illegitimately overran and usurped the authority of Indigenous peoples. The violation of the dead must have haunted the Mormon seer’s dreams and visions and, consequently, the narratives he produced included racist justifications for genocidal violence against Indigenous people. Joseph Smith continued throughout his career to disturb the graves of more Indigenous peoples, seeking from the bones and burial goods validation for his scriptural productions. The scriptural narratives continued to serve Mormons as justification for the theft of more

<sup>100</sup> Meldrum, *Rediscovering*.

<sup>101</sup> Murphy, “Sin, Skin, and Seed;” Southerton, “Response;” “Reviews of DNA.”

<sup>102</sup> Lobdell and Stammer, “Mormon Scientist;” Murphy and Southerton, “Genetic Research;” Dobner, “LDS Author;” Murphy, “Inventing Galileo.”

<sup>103</sup> “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies;” Bowman, “The Bundys;” Stack, “Mormon Leaders;” Staff, “ATV Protest;” Kennedy, “Native American Tribe;” “Church Responds;” Steinhauer, “Oregon Occupiers.”

Indigenous land in the Great Basin and the displacement of its rightful owners.<sup>104</sup> More recently, members of Mormon communities continue to desecrate Native cemeteries and steal artifacts from Indigenous graves. Latter-day Saint legislators obstruct efforts by tribes to protect cultural resources and propose legislation that would undermine tribal sovereignty. Meanwhile, Brigham Young University and Mormon-owned foundations and companies have disregarded ethical guidelines and the sovereignty of Indigenous and international nations in the collection and use of Indigenous DNA in a failed attempt to provide genetic validation for racist scriptural narratives. Despite this history, the LDS Church is proclaiming on its website and in press releases that it repudiates racism in any form.

## NAGPRA

Mormons are not unique in their participation in the abuse of human rights. Settler colonists more generally spun myths and “rather transparent justifications for violent land-grabbing.” Like other settler colonists Mormons “absorbed their predecessors – mysterious moundbuilders, savage Indians – into their own identities and into the civilized future they foresaw for their America.”<sup>105</sup> What sets Mormons apart, though, from the rest of Christianity in this regard is that Latter-day Saints gave their myths the veneer of scripture, presenting them as the very “word of God.” Extracting themselves from this intricate embrace of a theology of racism is going to be a difficult and painful process that cannot be accomplished only through small edits to the introduction and chapter headings of the Book of Mormon, essays on its website, or press releases denouncing racism.<sup>106</sup> Mormons need to look at the struggles the federal government has gone through as it has attempted the process of righting the wrong of centuries of desecrating graves in the pursuit of racial science. The Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), while far from perfect, does set minimal ethical standards which the LDS Church could embrace if it is genuine in its desire to repudiate racism.

“NAGPRA is, first and foremost, human rights legislation” enacted by the United States in 1990. Repatriation is inextricably linked to religious freedom, especially when sacred objects and the bodies of the dead and living people are involved. The “refusal to return stolen or improperly acquired sacred material has [adverse impacts] upon the First Amendment rights of tribal religious practitioners, and upon basic property rights.” While its application is currently limited in scope, primarily impacting federal agencies and public lands, “NAGPRA establishes a national standard and procedure for the return of [stolen] property to Native owners.” NAGPRA outlines a process of inventory and consultation for the return of human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and cultural patrimony to tribal governments. Jack F. Trope and Walter R. Echo-Hawk summarize the problem and its impact upon religious freedom.

NAGPRA is part of a larger historical tragedy: the failure of the United States Government and other institutions, to understand and respect the spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices of Native people. Governmental policies that threaten Native American religions are not merely historical anachronisms but continue to have devastating impact upon contemporary Native Americans.<sup>107</sup>

## UN-DRIPS

Repatriation is not just a national issue in the United States, it is an international one as well. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DRIPS) is a landmark statement and also one that the LDS Church can look to for ethical guidance. Article 11 articulates Indigenous people’s right “to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as

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**104** Murphy, “From Racist Stereotype,” “Imagining Lamanites;” Farmer, *Zion’s Mount*.

**105** Hinsley, “Digging”, 41, 52.

**106** For comparative examples of combatting a legacy of racism in Christianity more broadly see: Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*; Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*; Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*; Treat, *Native and Christian*; Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel*.

**107** Trope and Echohawk, “The Native American Graves”, 129, 139.

archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.” It also declares, “States shall provide redress through effective mechanisms, which may include restitution, developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples, with respect to their cultural, intellectual, religious, and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.” Article 12 declares “the right to the use and control of their ceremonial objects; and the right to the repatriation of human remains.” It obligates states “to enable the access and/or repatriation of ceremonial objects and human remains in their possession through fair, transparent and effective mechanisms developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples concerned.”<sup>108</sup> While written for states, the LDS Church and the Community of Christ could be international leaders in adopting these ethical standards and applying them in their own practices.

Churches with an international reach should recognize the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples around the world. Indigenous people still face many obstacles in exercising sovereignty and remain dependent, in many respects, on the actions of nation-states. Honor Keeler, citizen of the Cherokee Nation and Chair of the Association on American Indian Affairs Working Group on International Repatriation, states, “Indigenous peoples themselves have come to be accepted as international political entities. However, they still do not have the voting power or political status of nation-states in the international nation-state legal structure.”<sup>109</sup> James Anaya, former UN Special Rapporteur emphasizes, “While international norms concerning indigenous peoples are to be implemented by state actors through mostly local decision making, international institutions monitor and promote that implementation through a series of specific procedures.”<sup>110</sup> Not only is it important for churches to recognize Indigenous peoples as sovereign nations, such actions illustrate the best practices in repatriation efforts as institutions work to heal Indigenous communities around the world recovering from traumas of settler colonialism.

In this article we assert that Mormon scriptures and the historical and contemporary efforts to validate them originated with items taken from Indigenous people without proper consent. While NAGPRA and the UN DRIPS may be useful models for the LDS Church to approach in a process of repatriation, we are advocating a moral rather than a legal argument. An ethical response will go beyond these statutory models applying their standards and processes to a religious institution and, very importantly, supporting the sovereignty of tribal and international governments to determine which items ought to be returned and how that process should take place. It would also apply similar standards to items taken from other countries, including a proactive response to Egypt’s efforts to recover stolen antiquities and discussions with ethical review boards of tribal and international governments about the appropriate treatment of bodily substances previously collected at LDS Churches without appropriate community-level approval.<sup>111</sup> The LDS Church could begin to actually repudiate racism in all its forms by setting a standard by which religious institutions could take a more active part in repatriation processes.

## Historical Precedents for Repatriation

Many readers may be as surprised by this request for repatriation of stolen materials related to Mormon scriptural productions as the residents of Blanding were at their arrests. Perhaps, more intriguing, would be the realization that Joseph Smith, himself, engaged in a symbolic act of repatriation in 1845. The founding Mormon prophet, perhaps in a moment of remorse, an attempt to calm his hauntings, and/or an act of diplomacy, set a standard that his contemporary followers could emulate. In the 1840s Smith made the gift of a portion of Egyptian papyrus to the Potawatomi Indians visiting him in Nauvoo. As Samuel Morris Brown explains it, he seems “to have believed that the gift brought the papyri full circle, returning hieroglyphic relics to their rightful heirs, the Book of Mormon peoples.”<sup>112</sup> While from today’s perspective

<sup>108</sup> United Nations, *United Nations Declaration*.

<sup>109</sup> Keeler, “Indigenous International Repatriation,” 767.

<sup>110</sup> Anaya, *Indigenous Peoples*, 9.

<sup>111</sup> Hussein, “Egypt Conducts;” Johnston, “Mormons Trigger.”

<sup>112</sup> Brown, *In Heaven*, 85. See also Todd, “Background;” Richards, *Journal*, July 11, 1846.

we might expect the papyri to return to Egypt and the seer stones to Native Americans, one can still see in Joseph Smith's actions a small but important gesture of repatriation. Wilford Woodruff also appears similarly to have recognized the impropriety of taking the thigh bone of the Zelph skeleton and responded by reburying it in Clay County, Missouri.<sup>113</sup> Brigham Young's softening, over time, of his initial view of an absence of Indigenous right to land also sets an example for change. These various actions of prominent early Mormons make it clear that a call for repatriation is not the application of a modern moral standard to an historical injustice. The injustice was apparent when the infractions began and the primary perpetrators initiated acts of attrition that have yet to be completed. In fact, the continuing assault on Native burials and inappropriate uses of bodily substances illustrate the theological necessity of completing the repatriation process begun by early church leaders if Mormon racism is ever to be eradicated.

Despite its integration of frontier racial myths, the Book of Mormon paradoxically advocates equality and charges its EuroAmerican readers with helping restore political authority and rightful inheritance to American Indians.<sup>114</sup> If Mormons were to embrace such a role they could be powerful allies to Indigenous nations undergoing decolonization. Imagine what could be accomplished if white Mormon ranchers protested nonviolently in partnership with American Indian tribes, demanding protection of cultural resources and even the return of some public land to its Indigenous occupants. Recent statements by Pawnee and LDS Seventy, Larry J. Echo Hawk, about a diplomatic visit of church authorities with Navajo (Diné) Nation President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez offer some hope. Echohawk claimed "we were there to listen and learn ... and to see what more we could be doing."<sup>115</sup> Under Echohawk's influence, it appears that Mormons may now be seeking to strengthen their relationships with tribes by supporting needs identified by Indigenous peoples. If so, the requests put forth here may meet a positive response. In the same article, though, LDS Apostle Neil L. Anderson refers paternalistically to the Navajo as "children of Lehi" who embrace "the teachings of the Book of Mormon." The contradictory teachings about Mormon relationships with American Indians are still very much in play. Recent efforts to consult with tribal leaders, though, indicate that the remorse that may have contributed to Joseph Smith's past act of repatriation and Wilford Woodruff's reburial of a stolen femur may again be resurfacing among church leadership.

## Conclusion

Mormon followers have a long history of disrespecting Native peoples and failing to cooperate with laws from the federal government supporting Indigenous sovereignty. Such cultural mindsets undermine and threaten the legal and ethical frameworks of NAGPRA and UN DRIP. If the LDS Church or Community of Christ authorities were to lead by example in approaching Indigenous sovereign nations in a good way then Mormon communities could become allies to Indigenous peoples in setting the highest standards of ethical behavior. Imagine if these churches and others were to surpass and exceed the United States and the rest of the world's countries in the implementation of the best practices of collaboration in the project of Indigenous repatriation. In effect, the Mormon theological legacy could be restorative to Indigenous communities if they would set a higher moral standard for their members and other churches to follow.

The issues raised here are going to be difficult for Mormons to recognize, let alone address. Few Mormons have likely contemplated that the golden plates that Joseph Smith said he found may never have rightfully belonged to him. The apparent *Ulûñsû'ti*, spindle whorls, gorgets, and papyri that Joseph Smith and other Mormons have used in the production of scripture and other spiritual practices appear to have been stolen from the dead and, by implication, from their living descendants. The graves that past and contemporary Mormons have raided for treasure house the ancestors of the authors of this paper and those of many other living people who care deeply about how our grandparents are treated. Raised in Mormon

<sup>113</sup> Woodruff, *Leaves from My Journal*, 6, "Autobiography," June 3, 1834; Cannon, "Zelph Revisited;" Metcalfe, "A Documentary Analysis."

<sup>114</sup> Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 61; Hickman, "The Book of Mormon;" Murphy, "From Racist Stereotype;" Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 94-99.

<sup>115</sup> Swenson, "Church Strengthens Ties."

communities we have witnessed the desecration of cemeteries and the basic lack of understanding and compassion from those who would call us brothers. We have raised previous concerns about unethical uses of Native American DNA, but our ethical critiques have mostly been ignored while Mormons continue to turn to the graves of our ancestors and the bodies of our living relatives as they search feverishly, but fruitlessly, for any evidence that might back up the historical claims of the Book of Mormon. The white readers of this essay should ask themselves how they would feel if Native Americans were to dig up the cemeteries that hold their grandparents and then use the objects and bones that they found to buttress stories claiming that white skin was a curse from God and that white people, through their atrocities, had lost the right to the land on which they live. Then, after taking that land forcefully from you, Native people would proclaim to the world that they were not racist in any manner whatsoever.

Both the tradition of grave robbery and that of repatriation can be traced back to the founding Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith. Requesting repatriation today is not only a process of attempting to correct an historical wrong. No amount of reconciliation can conceivably be enough to undo entirely the damage of a settler colonial structure that remains deeply embedded in our institutions, land tenure, and simply accepted as normal in much of mainstream American culture. An embrace of Indigenous ownership of sacred objects, cemeteries, and bodily substances can be an inclusive and collaborative gesture that might change the trajectory from one of abuse to one of healing. Respect for the dead is a value shared by almost all cultures.<sup>116</sup> The kind of healing that could come from such initiative would be intergenerational, intercultural, and would encompass more holistically the historical traumas of the past as Mormons and Indigenous peoples attempt to build a better future together. Mormons today need to decide if they are going to continue the abuses of the past or if they are going to follow the alternative examples of their early leaders and finish the process of healing and repatriation they began.

Undoing centuries of racism cannot be accomplished by public relations alone. As welcome as recent overtures by the LDS Church are, they are insufficient to right the wrongs of the past, particularly when offenses are continuing in the present. In the absence of concrete actions to rectify damage already done, the statements of the LDS Church denouncing racism ring hollow. Affirmative action can be taken to ensure that general authorities within the church leadership better match the demographics of the membership. Political alliances that help restore access to lands and protection of cultural resources can still be built with Indigenous peoples. Diplomatic relations recognizing and upholding the sovereignty of Indigenous nations can be strengthened. In an act of good faith the LDS Church and the Community of Christ can create an inventory of human remains, DNA samples, grave goods, and sacred artifacts that each has in its possession. That inventory and a desire to correct past wrongs should then be shared with all nations potentially impacted, including their Indigenous neighbors, Egypt, New Zealand, and those descended from the mound builders: Cherokee, Haundenosaunee, Lenâpé, and Shawnee.

More proactive efforts to halt ongoing desecration of native burial grounds by church members, dispel current uses of racial science by LDS scholars, and to end settler colonial land seizures by militant Mormons are direly needed. Public acknowledgement that Joseph Smith produced the Book of Mormon in the nineteenth-century through a misguided effort to learn American Indian history from the dead rather than the living might help slow its use for racist purposes. An end to presentations of the Book of Mormon as a history of ancient America is long overdue. Reciprocal dialogue with living Indigenous peoples and their sovereign governments can replace efforts to evangelize American Indians with a history not of our own making. Together, Mormons and American Indians can support each other's religious freedom by supplementing rhetoric of undoing racism with genuine acts of reciprocity and repatriation. When the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has taken these actions, then, and only then, can it legitimately claim to repudiate racism in its many and varied forms.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Chari and Lavalley, *Accomplishing NAGPRA*.

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