"Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing"

New Context for "Skin of Blackness" in the Book of Mormon

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For many readers of the Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 5 can prove rather challenging. Not only does this chapter contain the actualization of a curse and the apparent genesis of an outgroup, but it also states that "the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon" this group because of their iniquity (2 Ne. 5:21). Given the prevalence of racial thought in society today, this passage has been interpreted as a hurtful reference to a phenotypic change in skin color brought on by a divine curse, leading many researchers to propose alternatives to a purely racialized understanding of the text.[1] In support of this approach, senior leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have rejected any racialized reading of the passage but at the same time have given no formal interpretation.[2] In this paper, I will present a new context with which to interpret the phrase "skin of blackness" that builds on apparent intertextuality between Nephi's writings, those attributed to Moses,

1. This is reflected in the varied interpretations this phrase has received over the years. For a review, see David M. Belnap, "The Inclusive, Anti-discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 195–370.

2. "Race and the Priesthood," Gospel Topics Essay, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed September 18, 2023, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood. For an indication that this essay represents an official Church position (that is, "these essays, which have been approved by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles"), see "Gospel Topics Essays," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed September 18, 2023, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/essays.

and an example of a similar curse found in a prominent treaty from the ancient Near East.

Contextualizing 2 Nephi Chapter 5

The Book of Mormon begins with an epic wilderness journey of a small group of Israelites. It describes their passing over a great body of water before obtaining the land the Lord prepared for them. Sometime after they arrived in this new land, a separation took place within the group. Those who followed Nephi, the first author of the Book of Mormon, had recognized their need to leave Jerusalem and accepted Nephi's prophetic message of the coming of the Messiah.[3] According to Nephi, "All those who would go with me were those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God; wherefore, they did hearken unto my words. And we did take our tents and whatsoever things were possible for us, and did journey in the wilderness" (2 Ne. 5:6–7). Nephi would write further that "we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses" (2 Ne. 5:10).[4]

In many ways, Nephi seems to relate the record of his family's journey to Moses guiding the Israelites.[5] When Nephi references those who "hearken[ed]" to his word and who "ke[pt] the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord," he mirrors language found in Moses's request to the Israelites before they entered the land the Lord had prepared for them:

> If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the

3. See Noel B. Reynolds, "Nephi's Political Testament," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation of Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991), 220–29.

4. See also Leviticus 26:14–15; Deuteronomy 4:5; 6:1; 7:11–12; 8:11; 26:17; 1 Kings 2:3, 8:53; Nehemiah 1:7; 9:13; 10:29; and Malachi 4:4. In 1 Kings 2 and 8; Nehemiah 1, 9, and 10; and Malachi 4, the admonition to keep the judgments, statutes, and commandments is credited to Moses. In 1 Nephi 17:22, Nephi's brothers also credit Moses with this admonition, as does Samuel the Lamanite in Helaman 15:5.

5. The following observation by Noel B. Reynolds is informative in relation to this point: "Lehi may have compared himself to Moses as a rhetorical device to help his children see the divine direction behind his actions. In his final words to his children, Lehi invokes Moses' farewell address to the Israelites [found in Deuteronomy]. In so doing, Lehi casts himself in a role similar to that of Moses. Nephi portrays himself in similar terms on the small plates, apparently following the pattern set by his father." Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi as Moses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): abstract.

> law, and if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, . . . I have set before thee this day life and good,[6] and death and evil; in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it. . . . I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live. (Deut. 30:10, 15–16, 19)

According to this passage in Deuteronomy, blessings come from "hearken[ing]" to the voice of the Lord and obeying his commandments "in the land whither [one goes] to possess." Thus, if Nephi's prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the Messiah were indeed the word of the Lord, then (a) blessings should have followed those who hearkened to Nephi's words, and (b) curses should have followed those who did not.[7] In 2 Nephi 5, we get Nephi's description of the fulfillment of this promise. In many respects, this chapter reflects the pattern for covenant renewal that is found within the books of Moses and was common to the ancient Near East.[8] Jan Martin suggests that

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6. Some Latter-day Saint scholars believe that Nephi's name comes from the Egyptian *nfr,* which means good, fair, or beautiful. Therefore, those that choose to follow Nephi are in fact choosing "life and good." See John Gee, "A Note on the Name *Nephi,*" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 189–91; John Gee, "Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name *Nephi,*" in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon,* ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 1–5. Others such as Hugh Nibley and Robert F. Smith have maintained that the best etymology of Nephi is from the ancient Egyptian *nfy,* meaning "captain." Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; the World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites,* ed. John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 5 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988), 27; Robert F. Smith, "Some 'Neologisms' from the Mormon Canon," 1973 Conference on the Language of the Mormons, May 31, 1973 (Provo, Utah: BYU Language Research Center, 1973), 65.

7. "The view that divine beings played a role in political history through blessings and curses was pervasive in the ancient Near East. It shaped and shoved foreign relations to the extent that it reinforced the normative principle that promises should be kept." Lucas Grassi Freire, "Foreign Relations in the Ancient Near East: Oaths, Curses, Kingship and Prophecy," *Journal for Semitics* 26, no. 2 (February 2018): 664.

8. Stephen D. Ricks, "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin's Address (Mosiah 1–6)," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 2 (1984): 151–62; Taylor Halverson, "The Origin and Purpose of the Book of Mormon Phrase 'If Ye Keep My Commandments Ye Shall Prosper in the Land,'" *Interpreter* 46 (2021): 201–8; Jan Martin, "The Prophet Nephi and the Covenantal Nature of *Cut Off, Cursed, Skin of Blackness,* and *Loathsome,*" in *They Shall*

"Lehi may have wanted to formally reaffirm 'the continuity of the Mosaic covenant in a New world setting' by holding a covenant-renewal ceremony similar to the one Moses held for the Israelites as they prepared to enter and establish themselves in the promised land of Canaan (see Deuteronomy 1–30). Nephi may have honored this important transition in the family's life by commencing a new book, 2 Nephi, and by recording activities that reflect Moses' behavior in Deuteronomy."[9]

Stephen Ricks first showed how the ancient Near East practice of covenant renewal was being used in the Book of Mormon in his analysis of King Benjamin's address. He pointed out that "the formal structure of the Benjamin pericope has equally striking parallels to the covenant passages in the Hebrew Bible and to the treaty literature of the ancient Near East."[10] The parallels that Ricks identified in King Benjamin's address are from the formulaic structure of the suzerain-vassal treaty (or covenant).[11] There also seem to be striking parallels to the formal structure of the suzerain-vassal treaty in what Nephi wrote in 2 Nephi 5 (see table 1).[12]

Taylor Halverson points out that "the core purpose of the suzerain-vassal covenant was to secure prosperity in the land if one was faithful to the commands of God or the king."[13] This idea seems to be central to what Nephi wrote in 2 Nephi 5, which begins with a quote from Nephi's brothers who said, "For behold, we will not have [Nephi] to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people" (2 Ne. 5:3). However, Nephi's brothers had been admonished earlier by their father, Lehi, to "rebel no more against your brother [Nephi]" (2 Ne. 1:24). Lehi also said that if they "will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish. And if ye will hearken unto him I leave unto you a blessing" (2 Ne. 1:28).

In accordance with the suzerain-vassal covenant formula, Nephi affirmed his divine appointment to rule in 2 Nephi 5 by describing the blessings that came to those who followed him and mentioning a curse

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Grow Together: The Bible in the Book of Mormon, ed. Chales Swift and Nicholas J. Frederick (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2022), 107–41.

9. Martin, "Prophet Nephi and the Covenantal Nature," 111.

10. Ricks, "Treaty/Covenant Pattern," 153–54.

11. To learn more about the suzerain-vassal treaty, see Halverson, "Origin and Purpose."

12. Jan Martin expanded the elements out to the beginning of 2 Nephi 1. Martin, "Prophet Nephi and the Covenantal Nature," 111–13.

13. Halverson, "Origin and Purpose," 203.

Table 1. Comparison of the Suzerain-Vassal Covenant Formula with the Nephites' Covenant

Formal Structure	2 Nephi 5
Introduction: The great king or God identifies himself (see Ex. 20:2).	Nephi introduces himself as the appointed king (2 Ne. 5:1–8).
Historical review: The great king or God reviews his past relationship with the vassal (subjects), while emphasizing his blessings to evoke loyalty and allegiance (see Ex. 20:2).	Nephi provides a historical review of the blessings received by those who followed Nephi (2 Ne. 5:11–18).
Stipulations: The great king or God promises security in a promised land insofar as the vassal demonstrates total fidelity and loyalty by keeping the covenant stipulations (see Ex. 20:3–17).	Nephi stipulates the need to keep the judgments, statutes, and commandments of the Lord (2 Ne. 5:10).
Recording and depositing the text: The covenant is recorded and deposited in a secure or lasting location, such as at a temple (see Ex. 25:21).	Nephi records and later deposits the text with his brother Jacob, whom he ordained as a priest (2 Ne. 5:26, 30–33; Jacob 1:1–3).
List of witnesses: God and angels serve as witnesses, though people can as well (see Ex. 24:3).	The people witness that they will follow Nephi (2 Ne. 5:9).
Curses and blessings: Consequences are stipulated for obeying or violating the terms of the covenant (see Deut. 27–28).	Nephi identifies the consequences of violating the terms of the covenant (2 Ne. 5:20–25).

Taken from Halverson, "Origin and Purpose," 202.

that came upon those who did not.[14] In this chapter, Nephi seems to take great care to show that those who hearkened to the Lord and followed him received the promised blessings that brought prosperity and life.[15] When evaluating these blessings, what stands out is how closely they seem to match the blessings promised to the Israelites when they "hearken unto the voice of the Lord" (Deut. 30:10) during a time of covenant renewal described in Deuteronomy (see table 2).

14. Exodus 15:26 also alludes to the need to hearken and keep the statutes and commandments of God. In this verse, the Lord further promises that "I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians."

15. After arriving in the promised land Nephi would say that "we were blessed in abundance" (1 Ne. 18:24). In that instance he would also list some of the very same blessings he chronicles after separating from his brothers Laman and Lemuel (1 Ne. 18:24–25).

Table 2. Comparison of Nephite and Israelite Blessings

2 Nephi 5	Deuteronomy 28	Leviticus 26*
"We did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance." (2 Ne. 5:11)	"Blessed shalt thou be in the field." (Deut. 28:3)	"The land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit." (Lev. 26:4)
"We began to raise flocks, and herds, and animals of every kind." (2 Ne. 5:11)	"of thy cattle, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep" (Deut. 28:4)	
"and to multiply in the land" (2 Ne. 5:13)	"Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body." (Deut. 28:4)	"make you fruitful, and multiply you" (Lev. 26:9)
"did make many swords" (2 Ne. 5:14)		"Enemies shall fall before you by the sword." (Lev. 26:8)
"build buildings" (2 Ne. 5:15)	"Blessed shalt thou be in the city." (Deut. 28:3)	
"all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance" (2 Ne. 5:15)	"Thou shalt lend unto many nations, and thou shalt not borrow." (Deut. 28:12)	
"did build a temple" (2 Ne. 5:16)		"I will set my tabernacle among you." (Lev. 26:11)
"did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands" (2 Ne. 5:17)	"to bless all the work of thine hand" (Deut. 28:12)	

* **Like Deuteronomy 28, Leviticus 26 also contains a list of blessings and curses.** For further similarities between Nephi's writings and Leviticus 26, see Kerry Muhlestein, "Prospering in the Land: A Comparison of Covenant Promises in Leviticus and First Nephi 2," *Interpreter* 32 (2019): 287–96.

Nephi's repetition of blessings found in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26 further suggests that Nephi is using the suzerain-vassal covenant as a framework.[16] Therefore, when Nephi says next that the Lord "had

16. Starting with Josiah's reforms, there seems to have been an increased emphasis on the book of Deuteronomy, or the "book of law," which led to what is often called the Deuteronomist reform. Because of this renewed emphasis on Moses's writings, it is reasonable to expect that Nephi's approach to his theological agenda would reflect the social context surrounding the Deuteronomist reforms. See Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon

caused the cursing to come upon [his brothers], yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity" (2 Ne. 5:21), the Deuteronomic formula of "life and death, blessing and cursing" (Deut. 30:19) would suggest that death would follow.[17] If this is the case, it is possible that when Nephi says next that "the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon" those that refused to accept his rule (2 Ne. 5:21), the "skin of blackness" might not be an explicit reference to the curse itself—that is, what is often interpreted as a change in phenotypic skin color or some other physical mark—but rather a reference to the possibility of death for those cursed as Moses warned.[18] Strikingly, we find support for this interpretation of the "skin of blackness" in a Neo-Assyrian treaty that contains a similar curse. This example would have been contemporary to Nephi's writings[19] and to date apparently has not been explored. The significance of this example in relation to the Book of Mormon phrase "skin of blackness" cannot be understated, given how troubling this expression has been historically to many who read the Book of Mormon.[20]

Neo-Assyrian Skin of Blackness

The Neo-Assyrian empire is considered by many to be the first true empire in the ancient Near East. It reached its zenith just prior to Lehi

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Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001): 9–11; William J. Hamblin, "Vindicating Josiah," *Interpreter* 4 (2013): 165–76; and Neal Rappleye, "The Deuteronomist Reforms and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter* 16 (2015): 87–99.

17. As to whether or not Nephi is using the book of Deuteronomy in his writings, David Seely writes, "Considering the fact that Josiah's reforms and the discovery of this book [Deuteronomy] occurred two decades before Lehi left Jerusalem, it seems logical to search for evidence in the text of the Book of Mormon that reflects a knowledge and use of Deuteronomy." David Seely, "The Rhetoric of Self-Reference in Deuteronomy and the Book of Mormon," in Swift and Frederick, *They Shall Grow Together,* 29–47.

18. In the book of Jeremiah, we find a rhetorical argument that should give pause when attempting to interpret what Nephi said as a change in skin color: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?" (Jer. 13:23). "Jeremiah's rhetorical question implying nothing more than immutability has its parallel in an ancient Egyptian wisdom saying, 'There is no Nubian who leaves his skin,' as well as in the Greek proverb, 'It's like trying to wash an Ethiopian white.'" David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 38.

19. Old Persian cuneiform was deciphered around 1830. The writing system of the Assyrians (cuneiform) was not deciphered until about 1850. Therefore any potential parallels between Neo-Assyrian records and the Book of Mormon have to be by chance or because they share a common milieu.

20. See Belnap, "Inclusive, Anti-discrimination Message," 195–370.

and Nephi's time and was responsible for the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and Lehi's ancestral homeland.[21] The threat of destruction by cursing was an important part of the suzerain-vassal treaties between a sovereign, such as the Neo-Assyrian empire, and a vassal state, such as Israel and Judah. Curses were used in these treaties as a linguistic tool for elucidating the threat of destruction. One notable example of this type of treaty from the ancient Near East is the Neo-Assyrian Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon (713–669 BC), which has one of the most extensive sections of curses ever found.

In order to ensure a safe transfer of power following his death, the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon drafted a succession treaty that appointed his son Aššurbanipal the crown prince of Assyria, despite the fact that, like Nephi, Aššurbanipal was not the eldest son.[22] Significantly, Esarhaddon's treaty is believed to be one of the most widely distributed and widely known treaties in the ancient Near East.[23] Because Judah was a vassal state to the Neo-Assyrian empire, it is a real possibility that a copy of the treaty, written in both Akkadian and Aramaic, would have been on display within the royal court of the temple in Jerusalem.[24] Many scholars believe that the widespread distribution of this treaty contributed to other record keepers and scribes—including biblical ones—adopting or alluding to motifs found within the treaty.[25] Therefore, Nephi's language

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21. There are some potentially intriguing parallels in Nephi's writings with Neo-Assyrian motifs, rhetoric, and iconography, which would suggest that he was familiar with the Neo-Assyrian tradition. See Todd Uriona, "Assyria and the 'Great Church' of Nephi's Vision," *Interpreter* 55 (2023): 1–30.

22. Noel B. Reynolds makes an important observation related to this point that again ties Nephi's writings to Moses's record. "It is in the speeches in Deuteronomy that Moses declares Joshua as his successor (see Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:28; 31:3, 7, 14, 23). . . . Lehi similarly seizes on the occasion of his pending demise to appoint Nephi as his successor, though in a somewhat indirect way. Recognizing the unlikelihood that Nephi will enjoy the same support that the early Israelites gave Joshua, Lehi promises and warns his sons that 'if ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish' (2 Nephi 1:28)." Reynolds, "Lehi as Moses," 29.

23. Jacob Lauinger, "Neo-Assyrian Scribes, 'Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty,' and the Dynamics of Textual Mass Production," in *Texts and Contexts: The Circulation and Transmission of Cuneiform Texts in Social Space,* ed. Paul Delnero and Jacob Lauinger (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 285–314.

24. Hans U. Steymans, "Deuteronomy 28 and Tell Tayinat," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34, no. 2 (2013): 1–13.

25. Shawn Zelig Aster, *Reflections of Empire in Isaiah 1–39: Responses to Assyrian Ideology* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017); Jacob Lauinger, "Neo-Assyrian Scribes," 285–314; Hans Ulrich Steymans, "Review: C. L. Crouch, *Israel and the Assyrians: Deuteronomy, the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, and the Nature of Subversion,*" *Society of Biblical Literature*

when speaking of his brothers being cursed could reasonably reflect this historical reality.

Within the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, there is a malediction pronounced on those who are not faithful to the treaty, which in many respects is similar to what we find in Nephi's record. This example reads, "May they [the gods] make your skin and the skin of your women, your sons and your daughters—dark. May they be as black as pitch and crude oil."[26]

In his work looking at parallels between Neo-Assyrian writings and the book of Nahum in the Bible, Gordon Johnston points out that changing the color of the skin as an "expression of judgment is without parallel in the Old Testament, and its only ancient Near Eastern parallel appears in the Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon."[27] In Esarhaddon's succession treaty, this curse was linked to a failure to safely transfer power to Esarhaddon's younger son, Aššurbanipal. Similarly, Nephi's mention of a "skin of blackness" was in the context of the legitimate transfer of power to Nephi in spite of the fact that he was a younger brother to Laman and Lemuel. Given these similarities in context, along with Nephi's training as a scribe[28] and the historical significance of Esarhaddon's treaty, it would not be surprising for Nephi's record to contain a likely parallel to the Neo-Assyrian "skin of blackness" curse. If we acknowledge that such a parallel might exist, then Esarhaddon's treaty provides us with more clues to better interpret the meaning of Nephi's "skin of blackness"

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2 (2016): 1–7; Gordon H. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions to Neo-Assyrian Treaty Curses," *Biblioteca Sacra* 158 (2001): 415–36.

26. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions," 432. In another translation, the curse reads, "(Ditto, ditto;) may they make your flesh and the flesh of your women, your brothers, your sons and your daughters as black as [*bitu*]*men,* pitch and naphtha." "Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty," in *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths,* ed. Simo Parpola and Kasuko Watanabe, State Archives of Assyria, vol. 2 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988), 54 (no. 6, row 585). Johnston's translation of this verse differs from the State Archives of Assyria translation in translating the word šīru as "skin" instead of "flesh." However, a few verses after this verse, it says, "May your flesh and the flesh of your women, your brothers, your sons and your daughters be wasted like the chameleon, . . . just as the honeycomb is pierced with holes, so may they pierce your flesh." "Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty," 54–55 (no. 6, rows 591–94). These verses would suggest that the semantics of "flesh" are not unreasonably understood as "skin," as we get in Johnston's translation.

27. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions," 432.

28. Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes," *Interpreter* 50 (2022): 161–216; Brant A. Gardner, "Nephi as Scribe," *Mormon Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 45–55.

because the treaty connects blackness to pitch and bitumen: "May they be as black as pitch and crude oil."[29]

Skin Black as Pitch

Shiyanthis Thavapalan suggests in her work looking at the meaning of color in Mesopotamia that "the meaning of a color could be based on convention, wherein the relation between it and the object or phenomenon it is ascribed to is arbitrary and must be learned. The association of blackness with death, in particular with the words *salmu* and *tarku* in Mesopotamian divinatory writings is a good example of this."[30] Interestingly, when we look at divination practices involving the sick, we find that the color association between blackness and death is in fact ascribed to pitch or bitumen. Leiden Stol describes this relationship in this way: "At the entrance of a house two divine guardians, fighting with each other, made of gypsum and [bitumen], were drawn on the walls or set up as puppets. The door of the room of a sick person was smeared with gypsum and [bitumen] and an ancient commentary identifies gypsum with Ninurta and [bitumen] with the demon Asakku and explains: 'Ninurta chases Asakku.'"[31]

Therefore, the meaning ascribed to the blackness of bitumen in Mesopotamian divination practices is that of death.[32] It is likely then that in the curse found in the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon (where pitch and bitumen are used to ascribe some meaning to the blackness of the skin), the meaning of blackness is also death. We find further support for this suggestion in an apocalyptic vision of Aššurbanipal, the appointed king in the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon.[33] That vision describes a demon from the underworld that had the face of

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29. Steymans, "Deuteronomy 28 and Tell Tayinat," 13. Bitumen is a form of petroleum now commonly referred to as asphalt. The Akkadian word for bitumen can also be translated as "pitch."

30. Shiyanthi Thavapalan, "Speaking of Colours," in *Mesopotamian Sculpture in Colour,* ed. A. Nunn and H. Piening (Gladbeck, Ger.: PeWe-Verlag, 2020), 197.

31. Leiden M. Stol, "Bitumen in Ancient Mesopotamia. The Textual Evidence," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 69, no. 1/2 (2012): 59.

32. R. J. Forbes says that "perhaps the connection always made by medieval writers between pitch and bitumen and the devils and other dark creatures is a survival of a much older tradition contrasting black and white magic and assigning to each its specific ingredients." R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology,* vol. 1 (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1955), 96.

33. The Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon was written to ensure that Aššurbanipal became king following Esarhaddon's death.

Asakku (or Anzû), which in the divination for the sick was made of bitumen and was associated with death, and a body as "black as pitch."[34] The text of that vision states, "There was a man, his body black as pitch, his face resembling that of Anzû; he was clad in red armor. In his left hand he carried a bow, in his right hand he wielded a dagger, while he trampled on a snake with his left foot."[35] Commenting on this passage (and its relationship to Anzû described in the Epic of Gilgamesh[36]), Helge Kvanvig writes, "The dark face in the Death-Dream symbolized ill fortune, as does also the black color generally in Akkadian texts. The first part of the description of the man, which concerns his body, seems then to be formed on the basis of the Anzu-bird symbolism and the intention to present the man as 'a bringer of misfortune.'"[37]

In another commentary on this vision, Alexandre Loktionov explains, "In the context of a composition with other 'Egyptianising' elements, the presence of a pitch black man in the underworld could be seen as reminiscent of Osiris, who was regularly portrayed with black skin. Moreover, a face similar to Anzû would imply a bird-headed individual who is otherwise human: while this could conceivably be Mesopotamian, it

34. In Aššurbanipal's vision and the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, *salmu* is the word used to describe the blackness that was to cover the skin like pitch. Thavapalan indicates that the meaning for the Akkadian *salmu* is "'to grow dark, be dim, black' but also 'to be enveloped in mist, grow blind (said of eyes)' or 'be obscured'" and that the semitic equivalent to Akkadian *salmu* in Hebrew is "*selem* 'black or dark' and *salmawet* 'gloom, pitch, darkness.'" Shiyanthi Thavapalan, *The Meaning of Color in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2020), 154. Both the Akkadian and Hebrew roots are equivalent words: Ugaritic ṣlmt; Akkadian ṣalāmu, "be dark, black"; ṣalmu, "black, dark"; ṣulmu, "blackness" = Hebrew צלמות; ṣalmût, "darkness" (Ps. 107:10, 14; Job 24:17, 34:22). Hayim ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew: Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic* (Jersey City, N.J.: KTAV, 2009), 323–24.

35. "The Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Prince," in *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea,* ed. Alastair Livingstone, State Archives of Assyria, vol. 3 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989), 72 (no. 32, r. 10).

36. "There was a man, his expression was grim, / his face was like a ravening Anzû-bird." A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Text,* vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 301 (ll. 65–66). Commenting on this verse, A. R. George says, "The fact that the figure displays the face of the *Anzû*-bird confirms the identification, for according to a phrase quoted by a commentary on *Sakikku* V11, 'Death (has) the face of Anzû.'" George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic,* 306 n. 66.

37. Helge S. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic: The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and of the Son of Man* (Neukirchener-Vluyn, Ger.: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 411–12.

is also entirely typical of Egypt where bird-headed deities like Horus, Sokar, and Thoth all have important Underworld roles."[38] Both of these commentators seem to suggest that the black color of the demon's skin described in Aššurbanipal's dream is to be understood as a sign of misfortune, the underworld, or death.[39] Furthermore, like we saw in the Mesopotamian divinatory practices, the reference to pitch and bitumen helped in ascribing that meaning.[40]

Egyptian Skin of Blackness

The ascribed connection between the blackness of pitch (or bitumen) and death might be reflected in Egyptian mummification practices. Lucas notes that "from a study of the writings of the Egyptian, Arab, Greek and Latin authors, who treat the subject of mummies and mummification, there would seem to be no doubt whatever that either bitumen or pitch, or both, were extensively employed by the ancient Egyptian [*sic*] in the preservation of the dead."[41] Recent chemical analysis of mummies supports this observation for mummies dating after the New Kingdom (1250–1050 BC). A team of scientists recently found that "the use of bitumen in balms becomes more prevalent during the Third Intermediate Period, *ca* 750 BC and was extensively used during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods."[42] This change in the process of mummification correlates to the time period in which Neo-Assyrian literature begins to speak of skin being black as bitumen and pitch and to the time period in which Nephi used the expression "skin of blackness" as part of his record. We see then that during this time, according to Clark and his colleagues, "both practical and theological associations with bitumen are responsible for the increase in its use, and of dark coloured balms generally, in the latest periods of Egyptian history, as it democratized death and the transformation of the deceased into Osiris."[43]

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38. Alexandre Alexandrovich Loktionov, "An 'Egyptianising' Underworld Judging an Assyrian Prince? New Perspectives on VAT 10057," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 3, no. 1 (2016): 48–49.

39. Stol adds that "the Sumerians assumed that [bitumen] comes from the underworld, the *apsû*. A [Neo-Assyrian] vision of the underworld says that [bitumen] and dry [bitumen] come up from the deep." Stol, "Bitumen in Ancient Mesopotamia," 58.

40. Shiyanthi Thavapalan, "Speaking of Colours," 197.

41. A. Lucas, "The Question of the Use of Bitumen or Pitch by the Ancient Egyptians in Mummification," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 1, no. 4 (1914): 241.

42. K. A. Clark, S. Ikram, and R. P. Evershed, "The Significance of Petroleum Bitumen in Ancient Egyptian Mummies," *Philosophical Transactions A* 374 (2016): 12.

43. Clark, Ikram, and Evershed, "Significance of Petroleum Bitumen," 12.

The increased use of bitumen by the Egyptians does not seem to have gone unnoticed by the Israelites, who used bitumen to formally bury sacred records in caves and Genizahs. According to Hugh Nibley, this was accomplished "in specially-made earthen jars, wrapped in linen which was 'coated with wax or pitch or asphalt [bitumen] which proves that the scrolls were hidden in the cave for safe preservation, to be recovered and used later again.' . . . The peculiar method of storage also indicates very plainly that the documents were meant for a *long* seclusion. . . . [The Israelites laid] a roll away with the scrupulous care and after the very manner of entombing an Egyptian mummy."[44] This process of preserving records suggests that an association between the blackness of bitumen or pitch and death would have been well understood during the time that Nephi referred to a "skin of blackness." We find support for this in the Bible. For instance, the armies of Sodom and Gomorrah flee in the direction of the Dead Sea, where pits of bitumen or pitch are found. As it is told, in their retreat, some of the men "fell there" (presumably meaning the bitumen pits) and perished, whereas the rest "that remained" fled into the mountains (Gen. 14:10). This story provides yet another example in which being covered with bitumen or pitch, thus becoming black, is connected to death.

Skin Dark as Pitch and Death

While most references to "skin as black as pitch" within Neo-Assyrian literature seem easily interpretable as a motif for death, there is one example, presumably referring to a Nubian king of Egypt, that may be misconstrued—as Nephi's "skin of blackness" sometimes is—as a reference to skin color.[45] Like the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, this example describes the cursed fate of the defeated king that failed to honor Assyrian sovereignty. The interpretation of this particular example is complicated because it was applied to a Nubian king of Egypt who, as such, would have had what we identify today as "black skin." However, interpreting this example as literally referencing a person's skin color fails to recognize the fact that the description involving the Nubian

44. Hugh W. Nibley, quoted in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon,* ed. John W. Welch, 3rd ed., Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol. 6 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988), 174, emphasis original; see also "New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study," *Improvement Era* 57, no. 2 (February 1954): 89.

45. Thavapalan, *Meaning of Color in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 155.

king came *after* the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, in which the phrase "black as pitch" is applied without respect to a specific individual or group of people.[46] Furthermore, this fragmented example of the Nubian king is not isolated but rather comes as part of a greater narrative describing the destruction that came upon the king and his people after they failed to recognize Assyrian sovereignty: "into his plundered palace, . . . his wives, his sons and [his] daughters, . . . [who] like him, had skins as dark as pitch."[47] Just prior to these lines, the text describes how Aššurbanipal and the Neo-Assyrian army massacred the people of the city. Following the reference to "skin as dark as pitch," the text goes on to describe all the spoils Aššurbanipal took from the defeated king.[48] All this suggests that this reference to "skin dark as pitch" probably has more to do with a motif for death[49] than with phenotypic skin color, especially since the fate is not limited to the king but also affects his "wives, his sons and [his] daughters."[50]

One more Neo-Assyrian example worth considering describes the death of a rebellious king. It comes from a manuscript[51] that details the rebellion and subsequent death of Aššurbanipal's brother, the king of Babylon.[52] In this example, we again see how the blackness of pitch

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46. Johannes Bach, "A Transtextual View on the 'Underworld Vision of an Assyrian Prince,'" in *Mesopotamian Medicine and Magic: Studies in Honor of Markham J. Geller* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2018), 69–92.

47. Wilfred G. Lambert, "Booty from Egypt?," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982): 66.

48. Lambert, "Booty from Egypt?," 66.

49. Thavapalan supports the idea that the reference to "skin black as bitumen" in Esarhaddon's succession treaty is suggestive of death, despite not making that connection with the reference to the Nubian King. Concerning Esarhaddon's succession treaty, she says, "The blackening alludes to the idea of burning skin or flesh and death." Thavapalan, *Meaning of Color in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 155.

50. Nephi also indicates that the curse that came upon his brothers would afflict those they associated with (see 2 Ne. 5:21–23).

51. This manuscript is an Aramaic text in Demotic script. In describing the text, Richard Steiner says, "This largely poetic text is the liturgy of the New Year's festival of an Aramaic-speaking community in Upper Egypt, perhaps in Syene. It seems to have been dictated by a priest of the community, possibly at the beginning of the third century BCE, to an Egyptian scribe trained in the fourth century BCE." Richard C. Steiner, "The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script (1.99)," in *The Context of Scripture,* vol. 1, *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World,* ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 310.

52. "When Esarhaddon named his successors, he split the empire between two of his sons, with Aššurbanipal as king of Assyria and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as king of Babylonia. This arrangement functioned until 652 BCE, at which point a civil war began between the brothers. The war ended with Aššurbanipal's victory and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's death

is used to convey an association with death. According to Shana Zaia, the "cursed Babylonian king Sarmuge (Šamaš-šuma-ukīn) receiv[es] the advice of his frustrated sister that, if he does not return to Nineveh and make amends with his brother Sarbanabal (Aššurbanipal), he should build a room full of incense, perfumes, tar, and pitch so that he can set himself, his family, and his palace on fire when Babylon inevitably falls to Assyria."[53] It is telling that in this story the rebel brother is encouraged to cover himself and his family with pitch, in this case a type of pitched sepulcher, in anticipation of his impending death. Aššurbanipal's rebellious brother had been unfaithful to his father's treaty, and the phenomenon used to ascribe meaning to his subsequent cursing and death was being covered with the blackness of pitch.[54] This story, which seems to have been passed down for many years before it was recorded sometime after Nephi's lifetime, is strikingly similar to what we find in Nephi's record describing the cursing and skin of blackness that came upon his rebellious brothers.[55] Therefore, when understood as a motif for death, Nephi's use of the expression "skin of blackness" is not unprecedented for his time and place.[56]

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in 648 BCE." Shana Zaia, "My Brother's Keeper: Aššurbanipal versus Šamaš-šuma-ukīn," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 6, no. 1, (2019): abstract.

53. Zaia, "My Brother's Keeper," 23.

54. Forbes says that according to Assyrian law "for certain transgressions hot bitumen is poured over the head of the delinquent." Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology,* 96.

55. Nephi and Aššurbanipal were both appointed by their father to rule over their older brothers. They were both trained as scribes and were in control of the family records. The stories of their brothers being cursed appear to have been told as part of the liturgy of the New Year and both were recorded using an Egyptian script. Steiner, "The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script (1.99)," 309–27; John S. Thompson, "Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon,* ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 123–50.

56. The use of blackness and whiteness is evident in some other biblical texts: Daniel 12:10, "Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried"; Psalm 51:2, 7, "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow"; Song of Solomon 1:5–6, "I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me"; Acts 9:18, "And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith"; and 2 Nephi 30:6, "Their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a pure [white] and delightsome people." Compare 2 Nephi 5:21–22; Jacob 1:12–14; 3:8; Alma 5:21, 24, 27; 13:12; 32:42; and Mormon 5:15.

Biblical Examples of a "Skin of Blackness"

The phrase "black skin" is also used as a motif for death and destruction in the Bible.[57] One of the earliest examples is in the book of Job: "For I know that thou wilt bring me to death. . . . My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat" (Job 30:23, 30). In these verses, Job describes the deathly appearance of his diseased body by indicating that his "skin is black." In another example, the prophet Nahum foretells the fate of the Neo-Assyrian empire, describing the people of Nineveh: "the heart melteth, and the knees smite together, and much pain is in all loins, and the face of them all gather blackness" (Nahum 2:10). This particular example can be understood to be a subversive reversal of the "skin . . . black as pitch" curse found in Esarhaddon's treaty. According to Johnston, Nahum uses the language of Esarhaddon's Treaty to describe how the faces of the Ninevites went "dark at death."[58] In another example, the Israelites in Jerusalem would suffer a similar fate to that of the people of Nineveh at the hands of the Babylonians. Around the same time Nephi made his record, the book of Lamentations describes a devastating famine that came as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem: "Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities. . . . Our skin was black like an oven because of the terrible famine" (Lam. 5:7, 10). All these examples depict the approach of death—from disease, war, or terrible famine—as a "skin of blackness." This sampling from the Bible helps provide context for Nephi's statement that a "skin of blackness" came upon his brothers and suggests that Nephi was using a well-documented motif for death in the ancient Near East, rather than referring to phenotypic skin color.[59]

In the book of Lamentations, we find another example where being "black" is once again used to describe the appearance of suffering individuals and an impending death. This example comes at a time when the prophet Jeremiah had warned of a "curse" that would come to the inhabitants of Jerusalem if they, like Nephi's brothers, failed to hearken

57. This is especially true for writings around the time Nephi wrote his record. See Isaiah 50:3; Jeremiah 8:21; 14:2; Ezekiel 32:7–8; and Micah 3:6. The two examples in Jeremiah use the Hebrew word *qadar,* which means to be dark and, by implication, to mourn in sackcloth or sordid garments. This same word is used for the second meaning in Job 5:11; 30:28; and Psalm 35:14; 38:6; 42:9; 43:2.

58. Johnston, "Nahum's Rhetorical Allusions," 432.

59. Song of Solomon 1:5–6 also refers to being "black" and can likewise be understood in relation to a distressed state.

to the Lord.[60] We read in Jeremiah 6:19, "Hear, O earth: behold, I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not hearkened unto my words, nor to my law, but rejected it" (see also Jer. 6:10, 17; 7:24, 26–27; 17:27; 25:3–7; 26:3–6; 36:31; 37:2). This evil that came upon those who remained in Jerusalem is later described in Lamentations in a similar way to the cursing of Nephi's brothers. Lamentations describes how failure to hearken led to a cursing where the "white" appearance of the inhabitants of Jerusalem is contrasted with a "black" one following their destruction: "Her Nazarites were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk. . . . [But after their destruction] their visage is blacker than a coal; they are not known in the streets: their skin cleaveth to their bones; it is withered, it is become like a stick. They that be slain with the sword are better than they that be slain with hunger: for these pine away, stricken through for want of the fruits of the field" (Lam. 4:7–9). According to Kotze,

> the "darker than soot" appearance of the [Nazarite] in Lam. 4:8 has been variously understood by modern readers. To name only three examples, scholars have taken it as a symptom of the undernourishment of the [Nazarite], as the result of sunburn, or as an indication of how dirty the [Nazarite] became when they rummaged through the refuse heaps looking for food. The expression [darker than soot], however, does not have to be interpreted literally and may rather be another literary image that associates the [Nazarite] with the realm of the dead. Comparable images appear in Mesopotamian texts of different genres.[61]

Similar ideas have been put forward for how to interpret the "skin of blackness" in the Book of Mormon that are likewise based on a literal reading.[62] However, like the "blacker than a coal" example in Lamentations, the "skin of blackness" in the Book of Mormon need not be interpreted literally and might better be understood as an association with death.

Kotze further compares Jeremiah's words, "their visage is blacker than a coal," to Aššurbanipal's vision of the underworld, which, as we saw earlier, describes "a man, his body black as pitch." Kotze says, "Given that death and the netherworld were associated with gloom, including darkened bodies, . . . in Lam[entation] 4's larger cultural and intellectual

60. Jeremiah 26:6. Nephi indicates that he has at least some of the writings of Jeremiah. See 1 Nephi 5:13.

61. Gideon Kotze, *Images and Ideas of Debated Readings in the Book of Lamentations* (Tübingen, Ger.: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 83.

62. See Belnap, "Inclusive, Anti-discrimination Message," 195–370.

environment, it is possible that the sentence ["their visage is blacker than a coal"] in v. 8 is an expression of this association that depicts the [Nazarites] as 'dead men walking.'"[63] Given that Jeremiah and Nephi shared the same "cultural and intellectual environment," such a reading should be considered when interpreting Nephi's reference to a "skin of blackness." If we apply Kotze's logic to Nephi's words, Nephi's reference to a "skin of blackness" does not have to be interpreted literally and might instead be saying that his brothers have become "dead men walking"[64] because of their failure to hearken to the voice of the Lord. After all, Laman and Lemuel were once "white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome," but then God caused a "skin of blackness to come upon them" (2 Ne. 5:21), a contrast which is strikingly similar to how the book of Lamentations contrasts the once-pure and "whiter than milk" inhabitants of Jerusalem to a "blacker than a coal" appearance after their failure to hearken (Lam. 4:7–8).

If we understand Nephi's reference to a "skin of blackness" as a motif for death, related to the effect of being cursed (that is, they became "as dead men walking") rather than the curse itself, we are better able to see how Nephi is using Moses's promise of "life and death, blessing and cursing" to frame the narrative related to his brothers' rebellious failure to hearken. Given the way in which Nephi's record seems to allude to Moses's warning in Deuteronomy, a failure to hearken would have brought upon Laman and Lemuel the curse and death.[65] When the "skin of blackness" is understood as a motif for death, this expression fits well within the broader culture of the ancient Near East and once again shows that the Book of Mormon can profitably be studied in that light.

Conclusion

The phrase "skin of blackness" is only used once in the Book of Mormon as part of Nephi's unabridged account of his life and prophecies. This makes the phrase, as Gerrit Steenblik has pointed out, "unusual"[66]

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63. Kotze, *Images and Ideas of Debated Readings,* 84.

64. Kotze supports this claim by specifically referencing the "flesh . . . black as pitch" phrasing found in the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon. Kotze, *Images and Ideas of Debated Readings,* 83.

65. Nephi says that Laman and Lemuel were "cut off" (2 Ne. 5:20) because of their failure to hearken to God's words. Alma equates being "cut off from the presence of the Lord" to "spiritual death as well as a temporal [death]" (Alma 42:9).

66. Gerrit M. Steenblik, "Demythicizing the Lamanites' 'Skin of Blackness,'" *Interpreter* 49 (2021): 175.

and suggests it might be unique to the ancient Near East culture that Nephi was familiar with. Support for this suggestion comes from the fact that in a prominent treaty dating to around Nephi's time we also find something similar to Nephi's phrase "skin of blackness." In the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, "skin black as pitch" seems to be used as a motif for death in relation to being cursed. Understood in this way, the phrase "skin of blackness" brings to mind the promise found in Deuteronomy of "life and death, blessing and cursing" (Deut. 30:19) and the need to hearken to the Lord and his appointed representative. This understanding is consistent with Lehi's plea to choose life and not death (2 Ne. 2:27–29) and avoid being cursed by trusting in Nephi's leadership (2 Ne. 1:21).

Just before his death, Lehi charged his sons "that ye may not be cursed with a sore cursing; and also, that ye may not incur the displeasure of a just God upon you, unto the destruction, yea, the eternal destruction of both soul and body. Awake, my sons, . . . rebel no more against [Nephi]" (2 Ne. 1:22–24). Lehi's remarks confirm the possibility of a curse and death if his sons were to rebel against Nephi. In this way, Lehi's remarks also seem to echo Moses's remarks to the Israelites just before his death. On that occasion, Moses also instructed the Israelites to enact a covenant-renewal ceremony after entering the promised land.[67] It is significant, therefore, that 2 Nephi 5 seems to be patterned after the standard suzerain-vassal covenant formula used during times of covenant renewal. Prominent to the covenant formula is the enactment of the curse that Lehi feared would come upon Laman and Lemuel and lead to the "destruction of both soul and body" (2 Ne. 1:22). Nephi's account of his brothers' cursing speaks to this reality and points the reader to see the phrase "skin of blackness" as the ancient Near East motif for death.

Understanding Nephi's "skin of blackness" as a motif for death does not eliminate additional nuance to its meaning. The fact that Nephi used this unusual phrase, rather than specifically referencing death, to

67. The recently discovered Hebrew text found on Mount Ebal potentially speaks to the importance of that event and the salient message that cursing brings death. According to Noel Reynolds, "The inscription has been translated into 23 English words as a curse text that corresponds to the instruction in Deuteronomy 27:9–26 that the curses should be read from Mount Ebal." The text reads: "Cursed, cursed, cursed Cursed by the God YWHW You will die Cursed Cursed You will surely die Cursed by YWHW Cursed, cursed, cursed." This discovery highlights once again the importance of covenant renewal and matches Nephi's message in 2 Nephi 5 if we understand the skin of blackness to be a motif for death. Noel B. Reynolds, "Modern Near East Archaeology and the Brass Plates" *Interpreter* 52 (2022): 126.

allude to Moses's promise of cursing and death suggests that additional nuance was intended. It is therefore possible that the phrase speaks to other realities that defined the separation that took place between the Nephites and the Lamanites. To this point, Lehi seems to have alluded to these potential realities when he warned Laman and Lemuel that "the Lord your God should come out in the fullness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed forever; or that a cursing should come upon you for the space of many generations; and ye are visited by sword, and by famine, and are hated" (2 Ne. 1:17–18). It is therefore possible that this phrase might speak to conditions such as Job's diseased skin or the starved bodies described in Lamentations. Others have suggested that the Lamanites may have worn a dark skin garment,[68] painted their bodies,[69] or even tattooed their bodies.[70] Whatever additional meaning may have been implied in Nephi's use of the phrase "skin of blackness," the phrase also works as a powerful reminder of Moses's and Lehi's admonitions to choose life and the consequences of failing to hearken to the Lord and those appointed by the Lord. Furthermore, this reading offers an alternative to a purely racialized reading of the text of the Book of Mormon that is grounded in examples from the ancient Near East and helps illuminate the greater narrative within the Book of Mormon—that all are invited to come unto Christ (compare 2 Ne. 26:33).[71]

T. J. Uriona works as a biologist and received a BA and PhD from the University of Utah. He is grateful for all the help he received in preparing this manuscript.

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68. Ethan Sproat, "Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015) 138–65.

69. Steenblik, "Demythicizing the Lamanites' 'Skin of Blackness,'" 167–258.

70. Martin, "Prophet Nephi and the Covenantal Nature," 122–25.

71. Belnap, "Inclusive, Anti-discrimination Message," 195–370.