

Newell G. Bringhurst and
Darron T. Smith, eds. *Black and Mormon*.
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Reviewed by Emmanuel A. Kissi

The subject of this publication is blacks and the priesthood, specifically the former priesthood ban by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This compilation contains eight articles that “explore the varied issues affecting African Americans in the LDS Church, focusing on the period since 1978 and revolving around three fundamental issues: progress, continuing problems, and prospects for the future” (9).

A primary focus in *Black and Mormon* is that the nineteenth-century Church was influenced by the cultural traditions of their day. Outside the Church, slave traders and slave owners claimed that black Africans descended from Cain and Ham as a justification for enslavement. Others thought blacks were an inferior race with limited intellectual capabilities. As a result, some Latter-day Saints ignorantly incorporated such folklore as doctrine.

Despite these external social forces, one African American Latter-day Saint received the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. Elijah Able was ordained “to the priesthood office of Seventy in December 1836” and his “ministerial license . . . was renewed several times during Joseph Smith’s lifetime, for the last time in Nauvoo in 1841” (38). Abel served two missions under Joseph Smith and a third one in 1883. This case is especially noteworthy when compared to many other nineteenth-century African American Mormons who did not receive the priesthood.

Throughout Mormon history, theories to justify denying blacks the priesthood were interpreted as being doctrine. The first recorded statement about the priesthood ban was by Parley P. Pratt on April 25, 1847 (20). The first documentation of the Church’s priesthood denial policy came from Brigham Young on February 13, 1849 (19). Furthermore, “Before the Mormons moved west, the church had already specified that slaves were not to be ordained to the priesthood. In a hierarchical church, the possibility

of slaves presiding over others—particularly their masters—would have been a terrible circumstance” (39).

In the twentieth century, various Church leaders continued to offer possible reasons why a race of people was prohibited from holding the priesthood. One explanation, carried over from the previous century, stated that blacks were descendants of Cain, the first murderer, and therefore were denied the priesthood because of lineage. Another theory held that blacks were less valiant in the premortal existence and therefore had certain spiritual restrictions placed upon them during mortality (132). Priesthood denial was perceived to be one of these spiritual restrictions. But by mid-century, President David O. McKay stated, “There is not now, and there never has been, a doctrine in this Church that the negroes are under a divine curse. . . . It is a practice, not a doctrine, and the practice will some day be changed” (37). In June 1978, Church President Spencer W. Kimball announced a long-awaited revelation that changed the policy on the issue of blacks holding the priesthood. Black Church members rejoiced at the change in policy, which confirmed what most of them understood—that folklore and racism instituted by the natural man are temporal and earthly while religious identity is eternal.

The book begins with Newell G. Bringhurst’s essay, “The ‘Missouri Thesis’ Revisited: Early Mormonism, Slavery, and the Status of Black People.” Social tensions in Missouri influenced the way the Church integrated its small number of black members. Many Latter-day Saints had come from the North and generally were against slavery. Because Missouri’s population largely adhered to the institution of slavery, the citizens perceived the Mormons to be a threat to their way of life. Missourians “accused the Latter-day Saints ‘tampering with our slaves, and endeavoring to sow dissensions [*sic*] and raise sedition among them,’ and of ‘inviting free negroes and mulattoes from other states to become ‘Mormons’’ and settle in Missouri.” Missourians believed “The ‘introduction of such a caste [of free blacks] amongst us would corrupt our blacks and instigate them to bloodshed’” (14). Following this social tension the Mormons in Missouri “abandon[ed] their northern attitudes in favor of an anti-Negro posture” (15).

In the next essay, “The Traditions of Their Fathers: Myth versus Reality in LDS Scriptural Writings,” Alma Allred boldly tackles two persistent LDS misconceptions “that blacks are descendants of Cain,” and that there is “a *doctrine* that Ham married a descendant of Cain.” She explains that over the years, these types of “extracanonical theories” have been incorrectly elevated “to the status of church doctrine” (34).

Ronald G. Coleman and Darius A. Gray recount the stories of Jane Elizabeth Manning James and Len Hope Sr., two African American

Mormons. Baptized into the Church in 1842, James lived in the home of Joseph and Emma Smith, and traveled to Utah with the Saints. She asked Church presidents from Brigham Young to Wilford Woodruff if she could receive her temple endowment, but was continually denied. Len Hope Sr. joined the Church in 1919, and he and his family eventually settled in Utah. Though he could not hold the priesthood, Hope “attended high-priest group meetings although he could not fully participate” (56). Hope looked forward to the day when this policy would change.

In “Spanning the Priesthood Revelation (1978): Two Multigenerational Case Studies,” Jessie L. Embry examines two black Mormon families and their experiences. Even though they have encountered some stumbling blocks, “their faith gives them an emotional and spiritual resilience that enables them to overlook the puzzling history of Mormonism’s exclusion of African American men from priesthood ordination and also to shrug off the hurtful incidents of insensitivity and prejudice on the part of white Mormons” (78).

Armand L. Mauss, in “Casting Off the ‘Curse of Cain’: The Extent and Limits of Progress since 1978,” points to Church President Gordon B. Hinckley’s statement that the 1978 revelation “continues to speak for itself. . . . I don’t see anything further that we need to do” (82). Mauss wonders what impact President Hinckley’s statement will have on the Church as it continues to grapple with the previous priesthood ban. Mauss observes “a conscientious outreach by the church toward black people everywhere” at the “operational level” while “at the ideological level there is a less clear strategy for coping with the doctrinal residue of a discarded racial policy” (82).

In “African American Latter-day Saints: A Sociological Perspective,” Cardell K. Jacobson looks at “some of the changes in attitudes and racial composition that have occurred” in the Church “since the priesthood revelation of 1978” (116). Because of this previous priesthood ban, he reasons that “to some observers it might seem ironic” that Mormon missionaries now actively seek to proselytize blacks worldwide. “A further irony may be that many African Americans join and that, overall, those who stay feel quite comfortable much of the time” (130). Those who are baptized do experience struggles, often from white members who may be ignorant or insensitive. Nevertheless, most black members “just want to feel accepted and to succeed in their chosen church” (131). Several benefits from Church programs and teachings offset negative feelings about the former priesthood ban. Interestingly, studies show that black Mormons “are upwardly mobile both in terms of their education and their occupational status” (125).

Ken Driggs’s essay, “How Do Things Look on the Ground?: The LDS African American Community in Atlanta, Georgia,” examines the

Church in Atlanta, Georgia, which has a large population of urban blacks, university students and professors, military personal, and foreign immigrants. On any given Sunday, “usually about half of the group [in Driggs’s ward] is black and half is white” (133). Driggs shows how Church leaders from both races have consciously worked to help all members feel included.

Darron T. Smith, in “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion: Some Personal Reflections and General Observations,” highlights two tenets of whiteness theory: “Avoidance of race talk and color blindness” (151). As a black Latter-day Saint, Smith theorizes that these two issues continue to marginalize black Church members.

Black and Mormon eloquently demonstrates how external social events influenced the Church’s policy of denying blacks the priesthood for more than a century. While many theories can be offered about why that policy was adopted and changed, I am simply grateful that our loving, longsuffering, and merciful God stepped into the course of human history in 1978, as he did in correcting Nathan’s counsel to King David (1 Chr. 17: 2–4) and as he has done at other crucial junctures to direct the ongoing progress of his covenant people.

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