

Zedekiah, at least, is feeling something. Whether Riley is lost or saved is only a question of the moment, for this moment too will move inexorably into the distant past and we will again have to find comfort in the simplicity of Church or seek more complex answers in the uncertainty of speaking directly with God.

Ultimately, *Dream House on Golan Drive* suggests that life may have meaning, but it hesitates to take a stand as to what that meaning might be. This hesitation comes off not as a pleasing ambiguity or a compelling question but as a kind of wariness against taking a stance. The cluttering of the final pages with weighty symbols and obscured emotions, then, is the literary version of having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof.



[More than a Different Color](#)

W. Paul Reeve. *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 352 pp. Hardcover: \$34.95. ISBN: 9780199754076.

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Three decades after the LDS Church lifted the priesthood ban on African Americans, scholars are offering readers a host of new studies that address the legacy of racial thought and practice in the LDS Church. One of the latest and finest is Paul Reeve's *Religion of a Different Color*, a work that traces Mormon understandings of race as they developed in the nineteenth century. What sets this book apart is that Reeve is not simply concerned with how Mormons thought about other races, although that plays a role here. Nor is he focused simply on how

Mormons incorporated racial minorities into their midst. Instead, he uses the lens of whiteness studies to explore the concomitant Mormon desire to be categorized as “white” and the strivings of other Americans to label them as less than equal racial partners (“non-white”). In other words, he reveals the mechanisms through which Mormons simultaneously sought acceptance into a mainstream or “white” culture and differentiated themselves from Indians, African Americans, and others that they deemed their inferiors.

If this sounds complicated, it is, but no more so than the intermixture of racial understandings articulated by early Mormon leaders. Reeve employs an intricate narrative structure to illuminate the tangled, contradictory skein of racial thinking and practice that characterized the first decades of Church growth. He details the birth of Mormonism within a new nation obsessed with the specter of cultural and physical decline. Virtuous citizens, inspired by classical republican ideals, assiduously policed racial borders, and with the opening of western territories and increasing sectional strife over slavery, their fears of moral declension caused by “race-mixing” increased dramatically. Mormons, meanwhile, moved the other way, incorporating American Indians into their sacred worldview and leaving room for racial others in a cosmological hierarchy. Such beliefs had dramatic social consequences. As Reeve explains it, reports of early Mormon willingness to “ingratiate” themselves with American Indians and even African Americans through strategic alliances, including sexual ones, only confirmed for outsiders that the Saints were “beyond the pale” of civilization. Whether such accounts were true was beside the point (although Reeve provides evidence that some probably were true, as in the case of tolerating or even promoting interracial marriage); what mattered was the appearance of openness to boundary-crossing that many other whites found abhorrent.

The meatiest section of the book provides an outstanding narrative of shifting and divergent views within the Mormon community about African Americans and their legal and theological status within

the community. Digging through multiple layers of Church history, using accounts that often recorded events that had occurred years earlier, Reeve does an outstanding job of untangling the combinations of scriptural justification, historical interpolation, and speculation threaded throughout Church leaders' speeches in the 1840s and 1850s. In 1852, in a series of three speeches, Brigham Young clarified the second-class status of Utah's African Americans before the territorial legislature, effectively implementing both a "servant code" (a form of indenture that applied to white debtors as well) and the priesthood ban. While the US Congress would nullify the servant code within ten years, the priesthood ban within the Church lasted over a century, becoming the *de facto* position on race. Indeed, by the mid-twentieth century a process of willful forgetting would wipe clean the memory of early battles.

While clarity with regard to the Mormon embrace of white racist attitudes may have been resolved, aligning the LDS Church more closely with its segregationist critics, the story of external condemnation did not end there. The nearly simultaneous public announcement of polygamy only affirmed Mormon barbarism in the eyes of outsiders and encouraged mainstream Americans to "racialize" Mormons as non-white (despite their physical appearance). Just as the institutional Church, then, fell in line with prevalent white racial views, the full exposure of plural marriage moved the bar yet again, distancing the Saints from the assimilation they sought. The final chapters of Reeve's book focus attention on "Oriental" others and the eventual acceptance of Mormons in the twentieth century into the status of being suitably white—although ironically, their ultimate acceptance, in a post-Civil Rights Movement nation, would later be seen as evidence of their backwardness. By the time Mitt Romney was labeled by one prominent critic as "the whitest white man to run for president in recent memory" (271–72), the play on words was no longer a term of endearment.

There is much to praise here. *Religion of a Different Color* traverses an admirable array of historical fields, including US western history,

Mormon studies, and race theory. It demonstrates, to masterful effect, the author's abundant scholarly strengths: careful reading and consideration of archival sources (including some that have, to my knowledge, never been examined this closely before); clear exposition of major themes; graceful and imaginative historical writing; and an attention to the ethical dimensions of his subject matter that injects the work with humility and generosity. Equally valuable is the skill with which he parses the various elements of racist practice: racism was never a unitary concept, his story explains. There were multiple iterations and gradations of racial thought to which Mormons subscribed, from anti-slavery, on the one hand, to Brigham Young's advocacy of "Utah slavery" (what he called "good wholesome servitude," a form closer to the gradual emancipation laws of northern states that Young insisted was more humane than southern chattel slavery), to the question of the relevance of legal and economic status, to sacred standing within the Mormon priesthood. Reeve is exceptionally careful in outlining the precise role played by Brigham Young in the priesthood ban on African Americans, but he does not shy away from making clear the leader's culpability in setting the ban into place. This careful contextualization raises intriguing questions: Would racial restrictions eventually have been imposed if sectional hostilities in Missouri had not blunted anti-slavery sentiments within the Church? At what point did Brigham Young's thinking about race shift, and why? Was there any viable alternative to the collective forgetting of an earlier era of relative racial equality within the Church, or are such lapses in communal memory necessary components of historical change?

The use of whiteness studies has clear benefits. It allows Reeve to keep discussion of Mormon racism and Mormon persecution in the same narrative frame. Mormons were simultaneously oppressors and oppressed, caught, alongside other Americans, in a complex web of racial significations. "Becoming white," for Mormons, meant crossing a line to a status of religious acceptance, patriotism, and class belonging. In less deft hands, calling all of these various identities "white" risks flattening

out the significance of race itself, enfolding all into a vague longing for acceptance into an undefined “mainstream” that has less to do with the realities of legal, social, and biological components of race. It can also overplay the similarities among different kinds of discrimination, especially those based on class or religion.

For the most part, Reeve does a terrific job avoiding those confluences. But occasionally the reference to “whiteness” obscures more than it reveals, as in the claim that Brigham Young announced a race-based priesthood restriction as a purposeful move toward “whiteness” for the community through racial purification. While this is true in a biological sense, it is also the case that Mormons retained a sense of their own superiority to mainstream American society and thus didn’t want to be “white” at all—if being white meant religious assimilation. In other words, the agency of Mormons in creating a “non-white” identity is more dialectical than the focus on whiteness allows, obscuring the role of Mormons in creating their own distinctiveness. White Americans did not simply “raise the specter” of racial amalgamation and “project it onto the Mormons” (120); Mormons raised it, too, inasmuch as they still *wanted* to be different. The Saints were complicit in sustaining their identity as a “peculiar people.”

Part of the challenge, of course, is that Mormons have never agreed among themselves about how peculiar they want to be. Although the author concludes that the Saints were unable to “escape the consequences” of a fluid racial culture (262), this phrasing underplays the extent to which Mormons helped create that culture and have always demonstrated some ambivalence about their own participation in it. In other cases, most notably in the decades-long embrace of plural marriage, LDS leaders actively chose to swim against the much stronger currents of monogamy. So it is abundantly clear that they were capable of exercising choices that bucked cultural norms. That they did not do so in the case of race-based discrimination is not a condemnation of their weaknesses as much as an acknowledgment of their continued

power of self-determination and refusal to fit their worldview neatly into received racial or religious categories. Reeve's fine account and prodigious research reveal a dynamic that cannot be contained by the binaries of race or theories of whiteness. That he lets messy and fractious languages of early LDS leaders speak to that complexity is laudable. The Mormon religion was more than a different color: like the world seen through a kaleidoscope, it contained hues that entirely subverted the color spectrum.