

## An Essential Conversation

Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds. *The Mormon Church & Blacks: A Documentary History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 217 pp. Paper: \$25.00. ISBN: 9780039744.

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to deal with its past racial teachings. For 126 years, African American men were denied priesthood ordination, while both men and woman of African descent were barred from receiving temple ordinances. Scholarly examinations of these controversial Mormon policies began nearly a half century ago with Armand L. Mauss, Stephen G. Taggart, and Lester E. Bush Jr., and have continued to this day with award-winning assessments by Russell W. Stevenson and W. Paul Reeve. The present volume, edited by Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, examines a variety of primary documents that tell the evolution of Mormon ideas on race—from canonized teachings on racial degeneration to a full disavowal of racist views in the twenty-first century.

This is a documentary history that unfolds by telling an important story. The commentary gives it the flavor and flow of a narrative history while at the same time providing a treasure trove of rich primary documents. The volume is divided into seven chapters, each encompassing a transitional period regarding Mormons and Blacks that allows the reader to distinguish each stage of development, how each contained elements of earlier teachings, and the disconnect that occurred that left most Mormons unaware of the real history of the priesthood and temple policies. The chapters include an overview of canonical teachings about race, an examination of race during the Joseph Smith and Brigham Young eras, a look at how the priesthood

ban and racial doctrines were taught from the death of Brigham Young until the mid-twentieth century, the priesthood and temple policies during the post-WWII period, the coming of the 1978 revelation, and Mormonism in the aftermath of that revelation. Each chapter is accompanied by introductory essays that provide important, although often disturbing backstories about the documents. Dozens of documents are included and annotated, but the book benefits by the fact that it does not contain every statement mentioned by every Church leader on the subject. The documents chosen and the historical background provided are more than enough to make the case for the editors to demonstrate how each era was affected by the teachings under review. This wise selection makes the volume accessible. As such, it should be read by everyone who wants an essential grasp on the topic and to understand it sufficiently.

The book opens by reviewing passages from the LDS canon, most notably the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price, which help distinguish what ideas grew from these texts and how Church leaders used them to formulate their ideas on race. Racial degeneration is clearly taught in 2 Nephi 5:21–23, in that black skin is a curse placed upon the Lamanites for unrighteous behavior. Those who mix their seed with the Lamanites bring the curse upon themselves. Although these passages have been interpreted to apply specifically to Native Americans, they perpetuate racial stereotypes already in place in antebellum America; considering that, Blacks would hardly fare better in Mormonism. Conversely, 2 Nephi 30:5–6 and 3 Nephi 2:14–16 teach that racial regeneration is possible through repentance. Mormons can distance themselves from the comments made by generations of General Authorities based on their own interpretations of these passages, but the verses remain a part of the canon, making a reinterpretation essential.

As the editors point out, racist interpretations of scripture were not controversial at the time and fall in line with theories advanced by racial theorists in Joseph Smith's day (7). The books of Moses and Abraham

speaking directly to Blacks in advancing the biblical idea of a curse on Cain and his descendants and the continuation of that curse through Noah's son Ham. Pharaoh was of the lineage that was denied the priesthood. Even though this scripture came from Joseph Smith, he never applied it in the way his successors in Church leadership did. In other words, Joseph Smith shaped the canon, but the canon did not totally shape him.

Some were prone to reading more into the scriptures than what the texts say, setting in motion teachings that would take more than one generation to shake off. Abraham 3:22–23 talks of two premortal beings, Jesus and Lucifer, who were willing to come to earth and carry out the work of God. Lucifer became angered when his plan was rejected, and he took a third of the hosts of heaven with him. Orson Hyde theorized that those spirits who sided with Lucifer were born into mortality with the curse of a black skin (14). It is well known to students of Mormonism that this idea took root and was advanced unapologetically until the priesthood ban was restricted in 1978 and even thereafter. This is clear nearly a century later with the apostolic committee assigned to study Bruce R. McConkie's book *Mormon Doctrine* to determine its accuracy. The book's entries on Blacks echoed Hyde's teachings from the mid-nineteenth century but nowhere in the list of errors found by the committee was any mention of McConkie's teachings on Blacks (71–72).

The Joseph Smith and Brigham Young eras understandably each receive their own focus in this volume because these two men set the stage for the actions of their successors, who then spent decades advancing ideas they felt echoed or smoothed them out. Mormons are generally aware now that a few Blacks held the priesthood in Smith's day with his knowledge and consent, knowledge made common thanks to revisions in introductory material in the *Doctrine and Covenants* and the publication and dissemination of the officially sanctioned Gospel Topics essay, both released in 2013. The documents make clear that not only did Young start the racial ban, he also explained why he did so, teachings the modern Church recently denounced in its essay. Said Young,

“Now I will tell you what I know; when the mark was put upon Cain, Abels children was in all probability young; the Lord told Cain that he should not receive the blessings of the preisthood nor his see[d], until the last of the posterity of Able had received the priesthood, until the redemption of the earth. If there never was a prophet, or apostle of Jesus Christ spoke it before, I tell you, this people that are commonly called negroes are the children of Cain” (38). As uncomfortable as his teachings make us feel, we cannot deal with the ban without acknowledging Young’s thinking and analyzing where it came from. Harris and Bringhurst, throughout the entire book, not only provide the reader with the doctrines and ideas taught but include the sources that explain them. For example, three sections in the Doctrine and Covenants—87, 101, and 134—address slavery, the latter noting in verse twelve that “we do not believe it right to interfere with bond servants, neither preach the gospel to, nor baptize them, contrary to the will and wish of their masters, nor to meddle with or influence them in the least, to cause them to be dissatisfied with their situations in this life.” This statement was meant to distance Mormons from the abolitionist movement of which Ohio was a “hotbed” (17). Context is vitally important here and the editors do a fine job of illuminating it.

Instances of priesthood ordination among Black men in early Mormonism have been celebrated by modern scholars to show a degree of inclusiveness within the early Church that was lost for over 120 years. The downside of the ban on a personal level often gets overlooked. Nowhere is that clearer than in the case of Jane Manning James. Faithful to the end, James wanted nothing more than to receive her endowment and be sealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith as part of his family. After much pleading, Church leaders came up with a compromise that allowed her to be sealed eternally to Smith as a servant (50–55). Because eternity is a long time, one wonders if these leaders saw a situation in which her status would ever change. James’s letters to her leaders are included in this book in their entirety.

In the post-WWII period, Church leaders began to be confronted about the racial issue by sociologists within the Church, and by the existence of the fledgling civil rights movement, which they could not altogether ignore. Two of the most notable scholars questioning accepted LDS teachings were Lowery Nelson and later Lester Bush, and their effect on Church leadership cannot be underestimated. When Nelson was not ignored he was chastised, but the questions he raised were important and would not go away (64–65). Most of the leadership paid little attention to Bush's work either, but the more astute and sensitive among them, Spencer W. Kimball, paid attention (94–96). It was another five years before the revelation came, but scholarship had set the wheels in motion.

An examination of the aftermath of the 1978 revelation is perhaps the most important part of the book because it helps us understand how far we have come. In 1998, to quell desires for an apology or disavowal of its past, the Church announced that the revelation spoke for itself (123). Clearly, such statements only deal with a fraction of what needs to be dealt with regarding this issue. McConkie is a case in point. Shortly after the revelation he counseled members to “forget what I said” about the racial doctrine prior to June 1978. Although he altered his entry on Blacks in the next edition of *Mormon Doctrine* in light of the revelation, under the heading “Races of Men,” he held to the idea that nonwhite people are of the race they are because of some transgression in the premortal existence. Removing racial restrictions from Black men and women but failing to deal with the reasons why they did it in the first place became a controversy in and of itself. On top of that, keeping 1950s and 60s books by popular Church leaders in print that perpetuated racial myths only led to confusion. Further clarification was mandatory, but it took decades.

Clearly, LDS leaders were uncomfortable revisiting this issue for a variety of reasons. As prophets, seers, and revelators, what are the implications when evidence indicates that they were ever wrong on a policy, doctrine, or teaching, either collectively or individually? What are the

implications when culture, popular belief, and perpetuating harmful myths become intertwined with doctrine? A 1949 statement, signed by the First Presidency, carried enormous weight, and cited scripture to back up the claim that Blacks were cursed through their actions in the premortal existence. Calling Church practices concerning Blacks “not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord,” it quoted Brigham Young that people of African descent were “cursed with a skin of blackness” (66). By examining this and the other documents included here, the editors provide information on an important subject and forces the need for solid answers to legitimate questions. Whether they come or not is another matter altogether. Nevertheless, Mormonism has matured to the point where it should welcome a book like this that lays everything out on the table regarding its racial past.

My only real quibble with the volume is the annotation format. The notes are informative and shed light on the documents, but they are included as endnotes, something not at all convenient in documentary histories where the notes are nearly as important as the text. This is a book that cannot be properly perused and understood fully without reading the notes.

The existence of this volume provides the best response to President Dallin H. Oaks’s admonition from June 1, 2018, that we should now look forward and not backward regarding the Church’s former racial practices. Oaks is right that moving forward is essential to maintain a healthy, happy, and diverse Church membership. However, this volume provides all the legitimate reasons to look back because many questions need to be answered. The conversation this book seeks to begin is an essential step in that process.