

The literature on Mormon priesthood denial to blacks is extensive, ranging in perspective from militant defense to angry attack. Some of it is popular, some scholarly. But almost all of it is analytical or historical, giving us the view from the top, that is, only providing the vision of either the Church leaders or the scholars.¹ But what of the average Mormon, the "folk", if you will? How did people like you and me or the family across the street feel about their church's attitude towards blacks? And more important, how did they feel about blacks in general?

dark form, a dark cloud or mist, or an overpowering blackness. Frequently the evil spirit of the devil is clothed in black, and in some stories he is black himself.⁵ President John Taylor once said that the black race was preserved through the flood "because it was necessary that the devil should have a representation upon the earth as well as God. . . ."⁶ Given statements like these, it is not surprising to find in Mormon folklore stories like the following:

I had a friend in the Army who had fallen away from the church and was doing things he shouldn't have. One

The Curse of Cain and other Stories: BLACKS IN MORMON FOLKLORE

William A. Wilson
Richard C. Poulsen

Mormon anti-black sentiments are revealed through legends and jokes we tell.

Folklore, that body of legends and anecdotes which people tell about things most important to them, can give us "a people's own unselfconscious picture of themselves."² The problem with using Mormon folklore, however, is that it has been collected with care only during the last few decades. It surely existed in earlier times but unless it made its way into diaries or popular literature, it was mostly lost. Therefore, we will mainly be concerned with Mormon attitudes reflected in folklore in the last twenty years. We shall look principally at two kinds of lore: legends, those stories which the teller generally regards to be true, and jokes, stories not considered true but deriving nevertheless from deeply felt needs.

Legends are important, anthropologists tell us, not just because they reflect a society's dominant concerns and values, but also because they serve as a charter, or warrant, or justification for belief and as a historical precedent for action. From them we learn what we should believe and how we should behave.

For example, many Mormons believe that a black skin is the result of a curse placed on Cain and his descendants. Black is thus associated with evil, an association strengthened by our legends. One of the stories current among nineteenth-century Mormons was that when people apostasized from the Church their skin color darkened.³ Inversely, today some tales tell us that when blacks join the Church their skin lightens.⁴ The many stories circulating in the Church about experiences with evil spirits or the devil further strengthen the association of black with evil. These stories speak of a dark power, a

night while he was in the barracks (he slept on the bottom bunk) he felt the presence of something evil. Inside the barracks was pitch black, blacker than inside a cave, real black. This sensation of his was great and he opened his eyes. Right there in the midst of blackness he could see plainer than day an even blacker form in the image of a man nearing his bunk. He began to pray and when he opened his eyes again from prayer the thing was gone.

There was a missionary who wanted a manifestation of . . . Christ, to strengthen his testimony. He thought the easiest way to get this would be through the Devil—because if there is a Devil then there has to be a Christ. He prayed for several hours to the Devil for a sign. His companion who was down the hall heard his screams, and when he went to see what was the matter he found his companion dead on the floor—white as a ghost obviously dead from shock. He ran to the window to see what had caused this and saw a black figure riding off on a black horse and laughing hysterically.

Some stories tell not of the devil, but of Cain, who also appears as a black man. As early as 1835, Apostle David Patten claimed to have encountered Cain while on a mission in Tennessee.⁷ Today Cain stories still circulate. In a typical example, missionaries tracting a white section of a town in Georgia were surprised when "a huge black Negro came to the door and hurled obscenities at them. His mein was hideous, and the missionaries left, much frightened." Their mission president later told them that the man had been Cain, that the town was very wicked, and that they should no longer labor there.

We are not arguing that Mormons have considered all

blacks to be evil, but we are suggesting that one who hears and believes stories like these cannot help having his attitude toward blacks shaped by them—just as a child who, innocently enough, goes “nigger fishing,” leaps in the swimming pool crying, “Last one in is a nigger baby,” hears his father say, “There’s a nigger in the woodpile,” and with his friends chants, “Eenie, meenie,

Did you hear about the kids who were on their way to California and got jumped by some blacks as they stopped for something to eat? I think it was in Nevada somewhere. Anyway, they were going alone—two guys and two girls—and decided to get something to eat. They stopped and were jumped by some blacks who happened to see their BYU sticker on their car. They messed up the car and drove it off the road and then beat up the guys and

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minie, moe; catch a nigger by the toe” cannot help developing negative mental images about blacks. The stories clearly link blacks with the fallen angel, Lucifer, and the brother-murderer, Cain, and have consequently helped justify the priesthood denial.

Other legends have justified other kinds of attitudes and actions. Consider the following story:

During the Watts riots of 1965, there was a report that the Negroes were going to attempt to break into the temple. The Mission President called in all the Elders from the surrounding area and met with them in the mission home, which is right behind the temple in Los Angeles.

When the missionaries arrived, the mission president called them to order and asked: “How many of you are willing to give your lives to protect the temple from the Negroes?”

The Negroes did not come, so of course the Elders disbanded, but it was a time of great soul searching anyway.

This narrative, collected in 1966, was a forerunner of the kind of story that would run rampant as civil rights actions directed against the Church intensified in the late sixties.⁸ The Apocryphal Horse Shoe Prophecy attributed to John Taylor was revived and spread rapidly through the Mormon West. According to the prophecy, President Taylor supposedly saw a day of great trouble when warfare would strike the Saints and blood would run like water through the gutters of Salt Lake. As versions of the prophecy multiplied, a new detail was added: blood would run in the gutters as a result of racial warfare.⁹ At the same time pressure brought to bear on the Church by the NAACP, by protesting black athletes at BYU ball games, and by a variety of civil rights and counter-culture groups increased. As a result, many Mormons became convinced that racial warfare was imminent.

Narratives that justified this belief spread like wildfire. A spate of stories circulated telling of bus loads of Black Panthers making their way to the state with guns, of plans by blacks to disrupt the coming April Conference, blow up Mountain Dell Reservoir, set off explosions on Temple Square, assassinate Church leaders, and poison the water supply. Other stories told that blacks had invaded a sacrament meeting and stopped the passing of sacrament, that assassination squads had been formed to go from neighborhood to neighborhood on the East Bench, eliminating the elite, and that black children would sell candy bars filled with broken glass.

One story, in particular, gained prominence:

did who knows what to the girls.

Other versions of this story told that it was not just cars with BYU stickers that were in danger but any cars driving out of state with Utah license plates or other markers identifying the occupants as Mormons.

This story is interesting because it parallels closely an account told widely outside Mormondom. In this non-Mormon story a young boy is attacked by thugs from a minority group, hauled into a restroom, and castrated. Known throughout the United States, the story varies only in the makeup of the offending minority group—Blacks, Jews, Indians, Mexicans, and sometimes Hippies.

What we seem to be dealing with here is what psychologists call “inversed projections,” which means that when we have feelings of hostility toward others, we project onto our antagonists emotions we really feel ourselves.¹⁰ For example, a boy who hates his father cannot say, “I hate my father,” because that would not be socially acceptable. So he says, “My father hates me.” This supposed hate of father for his son then justifies the son’s ill will toward him. During the height of the civil rights movement, it would not have been socially acceptable for Mormons to say, “We dislike blacks.” But it was perfectly all right to say, “Blacks do not like us,” and to add, “Indeed, they want to do us violence, to beat up our men and molest our women.” We could thus find cause for feelings of hostility toward them. And some could find in these supposed acts of blacks (really in our own projections) ample justification for continuing to deny them the priesthood. Speaking of this kind of story in general, Barre Toelken says, “It provides a succinct and usable traditional experience for any majority group that wants to rationalize and vivify its symbolic fears of the minority group.”¹¹

Whether or not this interpretation seems valid, the kinds of stories we have been discussing produced unfortunate results. For example, in the tense racial climate of the early 1970s an employee of Seminaries and Institutes stated

that it was common knowledge among teachers in the Church educational system that a confrontation with Black Panthers was going to take place . . . [and] that Blacks and hippies were arming themselves in the canyons east of the city.

Another individual stated:

John Taylor is supposed to have said that the Negroes

will . . . tear down the gates of the temple, ravage the women therein, and destroy and desecrate the temple. Then the Mormon boys will pick up their deer rifles and destroy the Negroes, and that's when the blood will run down the street.¹²

At this same time N.E.T.s, Neighborhood Emergency Teams, were set up in Salt Lake City by private action

mannered (he's the kind of guy that wanted to stay home and visit all the time instead of going out to do something) and he got up to give a spiritual Christmas thought at our branch's Christmas party up at Timp Lodge.

Really seriously he started off telling that when he was in the army he was an army intelligence officer. He said that now this particular event has been declassified and he can tell about it. When they launched Mariner 4, he

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groups to help meet the coming crisis and were disbanded only after Governor Rampton and the First Presidency took a strong stand against them and against vigilante action in general.¹³

The legends Mormons have told in the past about blacks, then, have both reflected and justified the attitudes of at least some Mormons toward them. The jokes Mormons tell, and have told, may not justify anything but, perhaps even better than legends, they express and help shape the attitudes of the tellers. Supposedly not to be taken seriously—what's the matter, can't you take a joke?—jokes allow their narrators to express fears, desires, and hostilities they would never dare verbalize directly. As a result, scholars from Freud to the present have found that one of the best ways to get at people's attitudes is to look at the jokes they tell.

Jokes told among Mormons in the years preceding the priesthood revelation display, at least on the part of the joke-teller, an attitude of bigotry and hostility towards blacks.¹⁴ During the previous century Mormons in general, leaders and members alike, had shared the racist views of their countrymen, believing in particular that blacks were innately inferior and, in the words of Brigham Young, they lacked the "wisdom to do things as white man does" and were destined to be servants to their "superiors." Blacks, said Young, were "uncouth, uncomely, disagreeable in their habits, wild, and seemingly deprived of nearly all the blessings of the intelligence that is bestowed upon mankind."¹⁵ But over the years the official Church stand had mellowed until by the late 1960s Church leaders were arguing for "full civil equality for all of God's children."¹⁶ Unfortunately, many of us, as the anti-black jokes circulating at that time make clear, had failed to keep pace with our leaders and held instead to the intolerance of the past.

The worst of the jokes made fun of what the tellers assumed to be black character traits, that is, laziness, dirtiness, low intelligence, dishonesty, sexual promiscuity, and perversion. Originally, we had planned to give examples of these but many of them are so offensive we have elected not to. Most people will have heard them from time to time anyway. Some of the jokes do not play on the above characteristics but nonetheless show a callous disregard for the feelings and sensitivities of other human beings. To demonstrate this point at least one example is necessary. The following story was collected from a BYU branch president:

Frank, who was my second counselor and is really mild

was there watching in the control room and was close enough to hear what was going on. There was a general in charge and some lieutenant was at the launch button. Steve said that this was a rather special launch because for the first time one of the astronauts was black. Anyway, finally it got down to the last seconds before the launch and the final countdown began . . . 5, 4, 3, 2, 1—The lieutenant at the bottom got so excited he yelled, "Coon to the moon!" The general yelled, "Stop, stop! Hold everything!" and he glared at the lieutenant and the lieutenant said, "Sorry, sir." So the final countdown was begun again and it got down to the final second again when the lieutenant yelled out again, "Trigger the nigger!" The general yelled, "Wait! wait . . . hold everything!—Now Lieutenant, you've got to control yourself. Now let's try it again." So once again the countdown was started . . . 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 and the lieutenant said something again and the general said, "Stop!" but the lieutenant said, "It's too late, the jig's up."

More interesting than the telling of this joke itself was the response of the branch members. According to the branch president from whom it was collected, the first time the counselor "got to one of the punchlines, there was shocked silence with a few chuckles. The second time everybody burst out laughing, and by the time he finished with the story, everybody was just rolling on the floor."

In spite of unhappy occasions like this, one wonders just how widespread the telling of anti-black jokes has been among Church members in general. And though the presence of a few bigoted souls does not necessarily make a bigoted society—our feeling is that most Mormons have probably never told black jokes—we cannot overlook the fact that these jokes, or at least the attitudes they express, have been much more prevalent than we, in these post-priesthood revelation days, would like to admit or remember. This conclusion, we confess, is based in part on our own experiences growing up in thoroughly-Mormon southern Idaho and central Utah where we seldom heard blacks called anything but niggers, where blacks were often referred to in mocking and derisive tones, and where one of us (Wilson) and his teenage friend blackened their faces with cold cream and stove soot and, for the delight and edification of local Church members at ward socials, gave skits called "Blackouts," whose principal humor lay in the depiction of blacks as grinning witless fools.

In addition, significant support for this view comes from evidence accumulated in our universities' folklore

archives. Over the years Mormon students in our folklore classes, with no special prompting, have turned in a steady stream of anti-black jokes learned in Mormon social settings and we can safely presume there were many more in circulation. Folklorists know that items of folklore do not exist in isolation. For every item actually collected, dozens more are in oral circulation. Because

It then became: Knock, knock.
Who's there?
Isa.
Isa who?
Isa yo new home teacher.

The old riddle, "Why are crows black? Because they wouldn't eat crickets," became "Crows can now eat cric-

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folklore is kept alive by the spoken rather than the written word, it will not persist unless a reasonably large group of people keep passing it along.

But all of this is now past history and somewhat academic. The 1978 revelation changed everything. According to Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton, the announcement of the priesthood revelation "was received, almost universally, with elation."¹⁷ We hope they are correct. Certainly their statement holds true for many of us. We think a careful sampling of Mormon folklore can help to gauge the degree of that elation. A new cycle of jokes which developed immediately following the announcement suggests that we should accept the Arrington/Bitton statement with some caution. These recent jokes seemed almost ubiquitous, at least along the Wasatch Front. Practically everywhere we turned we heard someone telling one. Even Latter-day Saints who do not normally engage in joke-telling seemed captivated by these jokes and shared them willingly.

Some of the jokes were simply reworkings of earlier forms. For example, a few years ago a popular question was:

Q: How do you know when the millennium is here?

A: When you open your door and hear, "Hi! Wees you new home teachers."



"... HOWEVER, DEEP DOWN INSIDE OF ME, I ALWAYS FELT THAT MARTIN LUTHER KING WAS NOT A COMMUNIST."

kets." But most of the items were new inventions. A few examples:

They've taken down the statue of Moroni from the temple.

Yeah, they're replacing it with one of Louis Armstrong.

Do you know why President Kimball received his revelation?

He was doing his genealogy and found an ancestor named Kunta Kinte Kimball.

Did you hear that Sidney Poitier is making a new movie, "Guess Who's Coming to Priesthood?"

They're putting a new song in the hymnbook: "Come, Come Ye Saints, Do-da, Do-da."

"Eeni, meeni, minie, moe, catch an 'elder' by the toe."

Jokes like these may have been relatively harmless, but there were others which had a much sharper bite. Some expressed bitterness:

Do you know how Kimball received his revelation?

In the form of a subpoena.

Many played to the old stereotypes mentioned above, ridiculing supposed black characteristics and showed once again the same old insensitivities to the feelings of other human beings. Here are some examples:

Have you heard of the new office in the Aaronic Priesthood?

There will be priests, teachers, deacons, and de coons.

Do you know what LDS stands for?

Love Dem Spooks.

Do you know why they let blacks into the priesthood?

Who else are we going to get to carry our bags to Missouri?

Did you know that since blacks have been given the priesthood, baptismal fonts have been filled with Clorox?

Did you hear they've raised tithing to 12 percent?

To pay for busing.

How many priest darkies does it take to bless the sacrament?

One to hum, and four to move his mouth up and down.

Have you heard they're digging up the rose bushes at the temple grounds?

They're replanting the area with watermelons.

Have you heard that they are changing the sacrament?

They're going to start using bread and watermelon.

Did you hear that the St. George temple is being remodeled again?

They're adding chicken coops.

Did you hear the state bird is being changed?
From a seagull to a chicken.

And on and on they go. They do not seem, in our judgment, to express the elation Arrington and Bitton mention. On the other hand, we're not quite sure what they *do* (or *did*) express. Possibly they were a means of giving voice to the anxiety that always accompanies a change

who surveyed Mormon attitudes in 1966 and discovered that, in spite of the priesthood doctrine, Mormons were no *more* prejudiced than their fellow Americans.¹⁹ We find little comfort in this conclusion. To be no *more* guilty of racist sentiments than other Americans is little cause for rejoicing. Instead of asking if their priesthood doctrine had made them any worse than their fellowmen,

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from familiar to unfamiliar ground. Perhaps for those who were not much cheered by the thought of bringing into the fold people they had always regarded as inferior, the stories provided a means of expressing their anger and confusion. For such people the jokes were a sort of last hurrah for the old order. For us they suggest that many Mormons were still gripped by the bigotry of the past and were still having trouble keeping pace with their leaders. A person willing to accept blacks into full fellowship simply would not tell this kind of joke.

The best thing we can say about these jokes is that they evidently no longer exist. We have heard almost none of them in well over a year. The point we have tried to make in this paper is that the record of Mormon racial attitudes, at least as those attitudes are revealed in folklore, is not a very distinguished one. Before 1978, the proportion of anti-black jokes turned in by Mormon students in our folklore classes was similar to those submitted by non-Mormon students at other universities.¹⁸ This fact supports the findings of sociologist Armand Mauss,

Mauss might have asked if their commitment to a gospel preaching the *literal* brotherhood of man had made them any better. What of the prophet, Nephi's words: "and he inviteth them all to come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female"?²⁰

But perhaps the disappearance of these jokes indicates a change in old attitudes, a change made easier because it is based on revelation. Today there is a new cycle of legends testifying to the validity and supernatural nature of the revelation, e.g. the rush of air in the room as the apostles sat pondering President Kimball's words. Also there have been numerous stories telling of the witness of the Spirit to individuals concerning the revelation. Just as earlier legends justified priesthood denial to blacks, the new legends substantiate granting it to them. Perhaps as this conviction grows stronger our folklore, our "own unselfconscious picture" of ourselves, will one day show that we have come finally to realize what the Apostle Peter learned so long ago: that God really is no respecter of persons.

Notes

1. Representing the spectrum, there is, on the one hand, the apologetic point of view of John J. Stewart's *Mormonism and the Negro* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1978), and, on the other hand, the anti-Mormon diatribe of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormons and Negroes* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., 1970). In his excellent survey article, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," (*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (1973):11-68) Lester E. Bush does talk about Mormon attitudes but almost exclusively attitudes of Church leaders not the common folk. We come closest to these in an article by Armand L. Mauss, "Mormonism and Secular Attitudes toward Negroes," *Pacific Sociological Review* 9 (1966):91-99. See also Mauss's "Mormonism and the Negro: Faith, Folklore, and Civil Rights," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2 (1967):19-39. The trouble with Mauss's articles is that his charts and diagrams convey little of the emotional intensity of the feelings they attempt to survey.

2. Alan Dundes, *Analytic Essays in Folklore* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1975), p. xi.

3. Bush, p. 28.

4. Unless otherwise noted, all items of folklore discussed in this paper, as well as comments of informants, are located in the Brigham Young University Folklore Archives and Utah State University Folklore Archives.

5. This belief has "ancient antecedents" not, of course, limited to Mormon attitudes. The Puritans, for example, virtually always spoke of the devil as black. See Cotton Mather's apology in *Wonders of the Invisible World* (London: John Russell Smith, 1862), p. 126: "... They [spectators who watched the evil machinations of George Burroughs, the only Puritan minister to be convicted of witchcraft] supposed, The Black Man, (as the Witches called the Devil; and they generally say he resembles an Indian) might give him [Burroughs] that assistance." Here blackness is associated with the Indians since the savages were the embodiment of evil to the Puritans.

6. *Journal of Discourses*, 22:304.

7. See Bush, n. 28, pp. 51-52.

8. First Presidency Statement of 15 December 1969, in "Church Section, *Deseret News*, 10 January 1970.

9. For a fuller treatment of the Horseshoe Prophecy, see William A. Wilson, "The Paradox of

Mormon Folklore," *Brigham Young University Studies* 17 (1976):44-45.

10. See Gardner Lindzey, *Projective Techniques and Cross Cultural Research* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1961), p. 29. For a discussion of the "castrated boy" story, see Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), pp. 176-179, 272-273.

11. Toelken, p. 178.

12. Two interesting studies of folklore and the racial conflicts during this time are Wayne Turley's "Mormon Folklore" (1970) and Reynold E. Bowman's "The Invasion of 1970: The Mormon Conspiratorial Mind" (1972), Brigham Young University Folklore Archives.

13. See "Support Police, Shun Vigilantes, Church Advises," *Deseret News*, 3 March 1970, and "Utah 'Can Cope' with Disorder," *Deseret News*, 6 March 1970.

14. In an interesting essay, "The Mormon Cross," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (1973):76-78, Eugene England rejected the standard, though not official, explanations of Mormon Negro policy—the curse of Cain and unvaliant action in the pre-existence—and argued eloquently that God had not granted blacks the priesthood because Church members in general were not yet capable of living a higher law. This view put the burden for denial of the priesthood not on the shoulders of blacks, not on their descending from Cain nor on their supposed mediocre performance in the pre-existence, but rather on us, on our racism and our lack of love.

15. *Journal of Discourses*, 7:290-291.

16. Hugh B. Brown, General Conference Address, 6 October 1963, in *Conference Report* (October 1963), p. 91.

17. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 324.

18. This statement is based in part on Wilson's experiences teaching folklore at Indiana University, University of California at Los Angeles, Brigham Young University, and Utah State University.

19. Mauss, "Mormonism and Secular Attitudes toward Negroes."

20. Nephi 26:33.

RICHARD POULSEN is an associate professor of English at BYU where he is the resident folklorist. He received his PhD in American studies at the University of Utah. Describing himself as a long-distance runner and committed gardener, Poulsen lives on a two-acre farm in Springville with his wife, Janet Priday, and his four daughters.

WILLIAM O. WILSON is presently the director of the folklore program at Utah State University and editor of *Western Folklore*. He received his PhD in folklore from Indiana University and has taught at Indiana, UCLA and BYU. He is the father of four children including a daughter who is serving an LDS mission.