

AN UNINTENDED AND DIFFICULT ODYSSEY

By Newell G. Bringhurst

FOR MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS, I HAVE HAD A strong scholarly interest in the history of race relations within Mormonism, especially involving people of black African ancestry. This interest is most evident in my 1981, book-length study, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism*.¹ This work was derived from my doctoral dissertation written at the University of California, Davis, during the late 1960s and early 1970s. But my journey with this issue is essentially the story of an unintended, difficult odyssey. Initially, I had no intention of examining Mormon-black relations and absolutely no interest in the larger field of Mormon studies.

In my early childhood experiences, moreover, I was about as far removed from Black America as one could possibly be. I was not even aware of people of African-American descent until I was eight or nine years old, though I grew up in Midvale, Utah, a small, ethnically diverse community some twelve miles south of Salt Lake City. Midvale, a mining and smelting center, boasted a rich variety of ethnic groups—Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Italian-Americans, Greek-Americans, Slavic-Americans, and even a sprinkling of Native Americans—but it had no African-Americans. I vaguely recall my first encounter with black persons. As a small boy, I saw two or three blacks walking along the streets of downtown Salt Lake. I asked my mother, whom I had accompanied to the “big city” on one of her shopping excursions, about these distinctive, very different-looking people.

Finally aware of the existence of black Americans but perplexed by their absence in my hometown, I asked my uncle, the town mayor, why no blacks lived in Midvale. He told me a long-standing community ordinance prohibited blacks from living within the city boundaries. The need for this prohibition was due to Midvale’s significant Hispanic population. It was a “well-known fact,” he stated, that Hispanics and blacks were

naturally antagonistic toward each other. Thus, if blacks were allowed to live in our community, there would be no end of conflict and turmoil.

My next encounter with blacks occurred during the summer of 1957 when as a Boy Scout, I traveled to a national Boy Scout Jamboree at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. My interactions with the few black Boy Scouts at this gathering were brief and superficial. One humorous incident did occur en route to the Jamboree, during a brief stopover in Detroit. Shortly after arriving in the Michigan city, our adult scout leader, alluding to local racial tensions, admonished us to be sensitive to “the issue of race,” as he termed it. Being both young and clueless, I initially did not know what he meant. Given Detroit’s designation as the “Motor City,” I assumed that in using the term “race” he was referring to motor sports.

When I entered high school in the fall of 1957, I became acutely aware on two contrasting levels of issues involving black Americans. On one level, I observed and followed with fascination the fledgling civil rights movement just picking up momentum in the late 1950s. I had been interested in the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott that had ended just the year before, and I had paid close attention to the television coverage of the efforts to desegregate Little Rock Central High School, in Arkansas. I felt scorn and contempt for those white Southerners who opposed desegregation through despicable tactics of violence and the implied threat of violence. I viewed these individuals as ignorant, narrow-minded, and bigoted white “crackers.” By contrast, I developed strong admiration for those brave blacks and their white allies in the forefront of the quest for equal rights, especially the courageous, charismatic Martin Luther King, Jr.

Meanwhile, closer to home, I encountered a vastly different, alas, highly negative image of blacks as presented by spokesmen within the Latter-day Saint community. In my local LDS ward and high school seminary class, I became acutely aware of the inferior status assigned blacks within Mormonism—in particular, justification for denying them the priesthood and barring them from the temple. Black Mormons were clearly considered “second-class Saints”—a term sagaciously articulated by Jan Shipps. Black inferiority, as understood by Mormons then, was a consequence of certain, alleged



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transgressions that these blacks or their ancestors had committed. According to Mormon “racist folklore” widely embraced at the time, blacks were “cursed” as a consequence of their “less-than-valiant” behavior during pre-mortality—specifically, as I was told by more than one faithful Latter-day Saint, their failure to take sides during the War in Heaven between the forces of righteousness led by Jesus and the forces of evil led by Lucifer. In addition, I was taught as “historical fact” that blacks were descended from Cain, Ham, or Canaan and thereby “cursed” with a skin of blackness, this being analogous to the dark skin assigned in the Book of Mormon to the Lamanites (understood as the ancestors of Native Americans).

As I grew older, I found such “racist folklore” not just distasteful but abhorrent. It contributed to my alienation from Mormonism in general. By the time I graduated from high school and entered the University of Utah, I had limited involvement with the Church. A most dramatic manifestation

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of my personal estrangement occurred when I joined the U.S. Army in 1963. Upon reporting for basic training at Fort Ord, California, I was asked a series of questions necessary for completion of my service personnel record. Among the questions asked by the black noncommissioned officer was my “religious preference”—essential information for soldier identification or “dog tags.” Impulsively, I told him that I had “no religious preference”—too embarrassed to tell him that I belonged to a church that discriminated against members of his race.

After completing six months of active military duty, I returned to Utah as a member of the Utah National Guard, obligated to complete five and a half more years of reserve duty. I also resumed my education at the University of Utah, earning a bachelor’s degree in 1965, and a master’s in 1967, both in history. For the required master’s thesis, I looked to Utah history—given the ready access to essential primary sources—but not Mormon history. I chose to write on George H. Dern, a successful Great Basin mining entrepreneur, Utah governor,

and, later, Secretary of War under Franklin Roosevelt. Dern was not a Mormon—one important reason I selected him. A relatively obscure figure, Dern is perhaps most known today as the grandfather of actor Bruce Dern and great-grandfather of actress Laura Dern.

All during my college years, controversy over the place of blacks within Mormonism intensified. With enactment of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, immediately followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the national movement for equal rights for blacks was in full swing. In contrast, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continued to defend its policy of denying blacks the priesthood, causing the Church to appear out-of-step with U.S. society.

Attempting to rectify this situation, concerned individuals both within and outside the Church called for the repeal of the policy, calling it unjust and indefensible. Initially low-keyed and generally limited to the printed word, such protests ultimately escalated into street marches and boycotts. Several occurred on college campuses, including Stanford and San Jose State University. These schools boycotted all forms of athletic competition with LDS-run Brigham Young University.

Church headquarters in Salt Lake City also became a target for civil rights protesters, who took to the streets of Salt Lake City in the mid-1960s. As if this were not enough, rumors spread throughout the state that an armed contingent of the radical Black Panther Party from Oakland, California, was on its way to Utah to “set matters right” relative to Mormon-black relations. In response to a combination of fact and rumor, state officials called the Utah National Guard to active duty, including the unit to which I belonged. I vividly recall marching through the streets of downtown Salt Lake City, armed and with a bayonet fixed in place, as a demonstration of force designed to deter those threatening the Church from within and without. In performing this task, I harbored conflicted feelings. On the one hand, I felt an obligation to defend both the Church and community from this outside threat. But at the same time, I felt disillusioned, even disgusted, with the Church for upholding and defending the obnoxious policy that had precipitated this crisis.

In 1967, I began Ph.D. studies in history at the University of California, Davis. Although I left the Great Basin for good, to return only for occasional visits with family and friends, I could not escape the continuing controversy over the status of blacks within Mormonism. I was pulled towards this issue by my close friend, cousin-in-law, and fellow graduate student, Lawrence J. “Larry” Nielsen, an active, practicing Latter-day Saint. Larry shared stories with me about how as an LDS missionary in Brazil, he had found this issue a major obstacle to efforts to spread the gospel of Mormonism.

Following his mission, Larry’s interest in the issue of blacks and Mormon priesthood denial continued through his involvement in a local, informal Latter-day Saint study group he helped organize. This group rejected public demonstrations,

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using instead informal “cottage meetings” as a means of educating Mormons in the Davis-Sacramento area concerning the inherit contradictions in the Church’s restrictive policy. They were a quiet but consistent lobby for change. I attended several of their meetings. And there I had my first encounter with a black Latter-day Saint, Melanie (I have long since forgotten her last name), a student at University of California, Berkeley. A convert to the Church, she bore her strong testimony concerning the essential truths of Mormonism but at the same time, expressed her adamant disagreement with the Church’s ban on black priesthood ordination. Melanie’s seemingly contradictory actions and behavior perplexed me.

Another leading member of this study group was Eugene Shoemaker, a university professor and bishop of a local ward. I was impressed with his courage, this person in a position of authority within the Church who nevertheless had the confidence to speak up against Mormonism’s priesthood policy.

Initially, I was merely an interested, relatively detached observer with regard to this issue. This all changed, however, when Larry suggested I carefully examine the history of Mormon-black relations as a dissertation topic. My cousin-in-law’s suggestion completely surprised me. I had, at best, minimal interest in Mormon studies and was then, as now, uninvolved in the Church, simply a “member of record.” Furthermore, I had selected a completely different topic—a comprehensive study of Western mining entrepreneurs, essentially an extension of my earlier study of George H. Dern. Thus, I rejected Larry’s proposal outright. I suggested he do it, being much more qualified, given his first-hand experiences in Brazil combined with his deep spiritual commitment to the Church.

Immediately, Larry countered that his “emotional” closeness, both to the issue and to the Church, would prevent him from examining the Mormon-black issue in an adequately open, detached manner. He argued I could explore it more effectively utilizing what he termed “the best of both worlds.” He suggested that because I had been brought up in the Church, I could view this issue with the understanding and empathy of an “insider.” But, given my non-activity, I could also view it with the objective detachment of an “outsider.” He said I also had another advantage in that my doctoral training was in history at U.C. Davis instead of at a Utah-based school. He insisted I could more effectively and objectively employ the skills and academic tools needed to research and analyze this highly controversial issue in a non-polemical (or at least a less polemical) manner than would be possible at a university in the Mormon-dominated Great Basin.

I gave in to my cousin-in-law’s arguments. In addition to his persuasive reasoning, I was also pushed in this direction when I learned, much to my dismay, that my chosen dissertation topic on mining had been preempted by a graduate student ahead of me in the program. Moreover, this individual had the blessing of Professor W. Turrentine Jackson, an eminent mining-business history scholar—my choice for a dissertation advisor and the reason I had chosen to study at Davis.

THUS, RELUCTANTLY AND with strong misgivings, I began examining the history of blacks and their changing place within Mormonism. The task was challenging at every turn. One initial obstacle was overcoming the skepticism of certain Latter-day Saints within and outside the academic community. Given the highly controversial nature of the topic and my own status as an inactive, non-practicing Latter-day Saint, these individuals doubted my ability to objectively examine this topic. Surely, I must have some sort of “hidden agenda” or be “out to get the Church.” These same worries extended even to certain members of my own family, most of whom were devout, practicing Latter-day Saints.

Another significant challenge was the research itself, which consumed most of my time and energy from 1970 to 1972. Often tedious, it involved gathering relevant primary information in bits and pieces from early Church newspapers and other publications. Very little had been written about the activities and status of blacks within the nineteenth century Church. This paucity of historical information stood in sharp contrast to the situation in the early 1970s—a time the status of blacks within the Mormonism attracted widespread, mostly negative attention in publications throughout the United States.

Such controversy notwithstanding, I was most fortunate in gaining access to crucial manuscript materials in the LDS Church Archives. For several unforgettable weeks during the summer of 1971, I had unrestricted access to the original letters and diaries of various LDS leaders, including Church presidents Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow.

But I must confess that I was not completely honest with archive officials about the precise nature of my topic. When asked the nature of my dissertation topic in my application interview and subsequent queries, I gave the vague and deliberately deceptive title: “Mormon Attitudes towards National Issues, 1830–1880.” My less-than-honest action was based on a deep-seated fear that if the Church Historical Department knew the true nature of my historical research, access to manuscript materials would be immediately revoked. Thus even as I pushed ahead with my research, I was haunted by constant anxiety, even strong feelings of fear and guilt.

In retrospect, my fears were undoubtedly exaggerated. The 1970s was a time of remarkable openness for virtually all scholars seeking access to the Church Archives. Leonard J. Arrington was just assuming his duties as LDS Church Historian and organizing a staff of academically trained historians—a major step in the professionalization of Mormon history. This period of open access, sometimes dubbed the “Arrington Spring” or Mormon history’s “Camelot” years, made it much easier for me to conduct my own research.

The actual writing, first of the dissertation and then of the book, proved even more difficult than the research. The dissertation took three years, consuming much of my time and energy from 1972 to 1975. This seemingly never-ending task tested both my patience and endurance. Several major obsta-

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cles slowed me down. First, I had assumed my first full-time teaching position at San Jose State University. The preparation of class materials and lecture notes for a four-class, twelve-hour teaching load consumed a great deal of my time and energy. Second, being married and the father of a very young daughter, Laura, born in January 1972, I had family responsibilities.

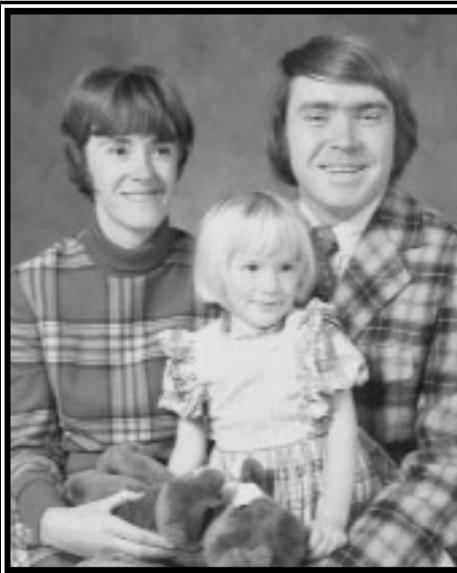
Third was my limited writing experience, a problem certainly not unique to me and, indeed, one faced by any author struggling with her or his first major book-length study. I wrote and rewrote four different drafts! Blessedly, my ever-patient wife Mary Ann carefully read and critiqued every longhand chapter. Given my own limited typing skills, Mary Ann also typed all of the chapters on our ancient manual typewriter. Each chapter was then sent to the three professors on my doctoral dissertation committee. They carefully read what I had written, offered suggestions for further revision, and “signed off” on what I had completed to their satisfaction. Throughout this long process, our daughter Laura was learning to walk and talk. Among her first words was “dissertation” or “tation” as she pronounced it. And the question she repeatedly asked was: “When is daddy going to finish the ‘tation’?”

Compounding all this was a fourth obstacle—the subject matter itself. I struggled continually with how to organize and interpret the rise and fall of the practice, or “policy,” or “doctrine”—depending on one’s interpretation—of Mormon-black priesthood denial. The issue proved much more complex than I had originally conceived, by no means lending itself to a simple either/or, black/white explanation (no pun intended).

A fifth problem confronted me when, in the midst of my writing, I was faced with the ultimate nightmare of discovering that another scholar was researching and writing on the very same topic! My dismay came in the form of Lester Bush’s two definitive articles on the Mormon-black issue. Both appeared in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*—the first, “A Commentary on Stephen G. Taggart’s Mormonism’s Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins” appeared in 1970, and the second, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview” appeared in 1973. Both essays, particularly the second one, were thoroughly researched and precisely written, presenting a detailed description of the evolution of black priesthood denial. I despaired: What more could be said about the Mormon-black issue? I was dismayed, disheartened, and depressed. I feared all of the research and writing that I had done up to this point was for naught.

But after carefully examining and evaluating Bush’s work, I

determined much more could be explored concerning this issue. Specifically, I felt Bush had left unanswered much about the fundamental question of why black priesthood denial had begun in the first place. He ignored the influence of the Book of Mormon and downplayed the critical role of Joseph Smith and his colleagues in the initial formation of attitudes and influences adversely affecting blacks. Equally important, Bush had left unanswered the basic question of why the practice or “doctrine” (as he termed it) of black priesthood denial had evolved the way it had over the subsequent decades. Thus I pushed ahead, examining these issues and making them the central focus of my own study. In the long run, the difficult writing process proved a positive experience, installing in me tolerance for the complexities and ambiguities of this controversial issue. In 1975, I finally completed my dissertation: “*A Servant of Servants . . . Cursed as Pertaining to the Priesthood: Mormon Attitudes toward*



Mary Ann, Laura, and Newell Bringhurst, 1974

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Slavery and the Black Man, 1830–1930.

As for Lester Bush, I quickly acknowledge that I benefitted from his influence and help as I revised my dissertation for publication as a book. His two “groundbreaking” articles “on the Mormon-black issue provided a basic framework and a high standard against which to measure my own work”—a fact I acknowledged in the introduction of my *Saints, Slaves and Blacks* (xv-xii). Even more important, Bush unselfishly shared with me his own research materials and carefully read and critiqued my book-length manuscript prior to publication.

Also helpful were other scholars who, like Bush, preceded me in writing on various aspects of the Mormon-black issue—Fawn McKay Brodie, Jan Shipps, Armand Mauss, Dennis L. Lythgoe, and Stephen L. Taggart. Their writings provided an invaluable foundation of basic knowledge. Of particular help were Armand Mauss and Fawn Brodie, who, like Bush, carefully read my complete manuscript and helped as I revised it for publication.

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As I struggled to find a publisher for my revised manuscript, Mario De Pillis and Brodie approached several companies and wrote letters on my behalf. Indeed, finding the right publisher proved much more difficult than expected. My manuscript was rejected by five publishers before it was finally accepted by Greenwood Press, a small academic press in Westport, Connecticut, which finally published it in late 1981.

AS I MOVED forward through this long, difficult process, I was gratified to see that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was willing to change and reform its own practices and policies relative to people of black African descent. The most momentous change was, of course, the 1978 revelation extending priesthood privileges to all worthy males, thereby affirming the arrival of what the Church termed “the long-promised day.”

Like many other Latter-day Saints, I remember precisely where and how I first heard the news. I was teaching at Indiana University in Kokomo, Indiana, when on that memorable Friday, 9 June 1978, I received a long-distance telephone call from my friend and fellow scholar, M. Michael Marquardt. Initially, I did not quite believe him, suspecting that he was “pulling my leg.” So, I immediately called James Kimball at the Church offices, who read over the telephone the Church’s official statement. Since that time, much to its credit, the Church has implemented various other important changes and has proactively sought to reach out more effectively to blacks both within the United States and abroad.²

But as I see it, the Church still faces two significant challenges. First, the Church officially needs to unequivocally renounce all the “racist folklore” previously used to justify black priesthood denial and the inferior place of blacks within Mormonism. The perpetuation of such folklore within “grass-roots” Mormonism is not only unacceptable but is also absolutely toxic in preventing the Church from attracting and retaining significant numbers of black Latter-day Saints.

A second crucial challenge stems from the lack of ethnic diversity at the highest levels of Church leadership. Perhaps those in the highest positions of authority will be inspired to include in the various Quorums of Seventy qualified leaders of black descent, along with more Latin Americans and more Asians. There is currently no black General Authority—a void since the 1995 release of Brazilian Helvecio Martins from the Second Quorum of Seventy. Such diversity in the Church’s top leadership would, perhaps, engender greater sensitivity to the needs and problems of an increasingly ethnically diverse Church membership. A more ethnically diverse Church leadership will perhaps inspire a higher rate of membership retention, particularly outside the United States.

At the very least, a greater number of General Authorities from Asian, Latin American, and black African backgrounds would more accurately reflect the reality of an increasingly international Church where an ever-increasing majority of Latter-day Saints reside outside the United States. As an ultimate scenario, it is perhaps not too much to hope for “the

long-promised day” when the Quorum of the Twelve itself will consist of one or more persons of black African descent, along with individuals from Latin America and Asia. 

NOTES

1. *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1981).

2. In particular, the Church has encouraged group volunteer efforts within various black communities designed to improve social, cultural, and economic conditions, often working with other faiths. Also noteworthy was the 2001 Freedman Bank record project. Outside the United States., the Church in response to famine conditions in sub-Saharan Africa has worked with non-LDS agencies in providing food and other relief.

**AIMING FOR FLAGSTAFF,
WILDERNESS CONFERENCE 2001**

For Edward Abbey

Driving the Utah corner
Dropping down to the Colorado:
Brief high desert twilight
And the black mesa a stack of books
That shut down the last tawdry town.

Silent Lion across the starry west,
And I tried steering on the Swan awhile—
But downy softness was never you.
So pointed my wheels where Aquila rose,
A vision of your hooked ferocious nose.

Then I turned south
And there it was, Mars,
To mark the crossing into Arizona
Smoldering red like your cigar
Above that dam you hated.

The planet's back, and just as bright
As in that final summer of your life.
Yep. It's war, Ed.
And we're still here.
Joy, sheepmate. Joy!

—RICHARD ARNOLD