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Reviewed by Quincy D. Newell

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RUSSELL STEVENSON’S *For the Cause of Righteousness* and Matthew Harris and Newell Bringhurst’s *The Mormon Church and Blacks* each provide a history of the LDS Church’s dealings with people of African descent, both inside and outside the faith community. Stevenson provides a narrative history, followed by a selection of documents, while Harris and Bringhurst follow a more standard documentary reader format, with the focus on the primary sources and the editors’ interpretation provided in chapter introductions and document headnotes. Both books cover the period from 1830, when the church was founded, to 2013, the year the LDS Church issued a statement entitled “Race and the Priesthood.”

Scholars have established that in the nineteenth century an unknown number of African Americans joined the church and that during Joseph Smith’s lifetime at least a few black men were ordained to the LDS priesthood. At the same time, leaders of the church were actively working out the theological and social implications of race, drawing on scriptural texts; incorporating American and European ideas about racial origins and differences; and reacting to contemporary events and social pressures. As Paul Reeve has shown, Latter-day Saints worked through most of the nineteenth century to establish their own “white” racial identity—and part of this work was done in the way

they treated and talked about black people.¹ By 1852, Brigham Young had made clear that no more black men would be ordained, articulating what scholars now refer to as the “priesthood ban” or “priesthood restriction.” This state of affairs continued well into the twentieth century, even as the American racial climate changed dramatically. The LDS Church faced significant external social pressure to modify or end the priesthood restriction, but LDS leaders instead doubled down on it, making clear around the middle of the twentieth century that they considered the restriction to be doctrine (not just policy). At the same time, the church began complicating its own position by establishing missions in Latin America and Africa, where maintaining the “racial purity” of the priesthood was significantly more difficult. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, scholarly research on the priesthood restriction—notably Lester Bush’s 1973 article “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview”²—helped to unsettle the church’s position on ordination for black men, showing that the priesthood restriction did not originate with Joseph Smith. Finally, church leaders announced in June 1978 that a revelation had been received extending the priesthood to all worthy male members of the church. The lifting of the restriction provoked little overt resistance, but overcoming the racism that kept the restriction firmly in place for a century and a half has been a more difficult task. Most recently, the church has issued official statements condemning racism on the part of its members, acknowledging that the priesthood restriction did not exist under Joseph Smith, and discouraging church members from speculating about the causes of the restriction.

Both books include a variety of documents that are not well known, though only a relatively small number of them would be inaccessible to someone with an Internet connection and access to an academic library. By my count, seven documents (of a total fifty-nine) in *The Mormon*

1. W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

2. Lester E. Bush Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8/1 (1973): 11–68.

Church and Blacks and twelve (of a total sixty-two) in *For the Cause of Righteousness* are not readily available online or through interlibrary loan. However, even many readers with easy access to these resources will find it useful to have these sources drawn together in one place.

Harris and Bringhurst state that *The Mormon Church and Blacks* “offers an important new perspective of [*sic*] LDS racial history through the lens of authoritative documents” (p. 5), but what constitutes an “authoritative” document is less than clear. The selection of documents runs the gamut, ranging from verses from LDS scripture and statements by the LDS Church’s First Presidency to private letters from lay members to church leaders and newspaper articles about the church by nonmembers. If the range of documents is wide, the focus of the book is narrow: Harris and Bringhurst’s work aims to provide a documentary basis for understanding the genesis, evolution, abolition, and aftermath of the priesthood restriction. The overall story is one of halting progress with pitfalls, and the narrative arc is not fully resolved by the end of the book. This strikes me as about right: yes, the Latter-day Saints have made progress on racial issues, yet much remains to be done. The editors’ prose is clear and straightforward, and their documentary selection and editing choices are generally sound, although, as I will discuss, the focus on the priesthood restriction results in a far less diverse group of sources than one might wish. There is not much that is new here, except perhaps the editors’ coverage of the twenty-first-century developments in this story and the convenience of having these sources brought together in one place. Otherwise, this history is well known to scholars.

Harris and Bringhurst begin with a chapter devoted to the scriptural underpinnings of the priesthood restriction, as set forth in several excerpts from the Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price, and Doctrine and Covenants. These “documents” (some of which are only one verse long) are crucial pieces in Harris and Bringhurst’s story, but equally important is an understanding of how the Latter-day Saints’ readings of scripture changed over time, a piece that Harris and Bringhurst do not address directly. Diary entries, sermons, and other kinds of sources that might help readers understand how ordinary Mormons consumed

and interpreted these scriptures would make a welcome addition to this chapter.

Where Harris and Bringhurst focus narrowly on the priesthood restriction, Russell Stevenson aims to be much more comprehensive, announcing in his subtitle nothing less than “A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism.” Stevenson’s aspiration resonates with recent developments in scholarship—most notably, the emergence of the scholarly field known as “Africana Studies,” which seeks to understand the histories and cultures of Africa and the African diaspora, including those of black North Americans, in a global context; and the move in Mormon Studies to understand the LDS Church as a global religion rather than concentrating solely on the church’s US context.

While Stevenson’s global ambitions are admirable, they require much more organizational discipline and narrative skill than he musters. The narrative history sprawls through the first half of the book, often becoming confused and confusing. For example, after about two pages on South Africa (pp. 163–64), Stevenson has a paragraph on Mormons in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). The next paragraph begins by discussing “the 1981 election” (p. 165) without specifying which nation was choosing a leader; only at the end of the paragraph does it become clear to the reader that Stevenson has turned his attention back to South Africa. With organizational lapses like this throughout the book, readers unfamiliar with the history Stevenson is discussing will struggle to follow his narration. In addition to improving the organization of the text, a stronger editorial hand might have toned down Stevenson’s penchant for florid prose. For example, at the beginning of his second chapter, Stevenson informs the reader that after Joseph Smith’s death “the Mormon community lay vulnerable to the ghosts of racism then brooding in the land” (p. 13) and, a page later, that those vying to be Smith’s successor “left behind Joseph Smith’s racial innovations in the blood spattered on the floors of the Prophet’s Carthage jail cell.” *For the Cause of Righteousness* reads like a book that was rushed into print: in addition to editorial failures like those I just described, the text suffers from numerous errors of fact, typography, and formatting.

Given his ambition to write a “global history,” one might expect Stevenson to delve into questions of colonialism and globalization, exploring the connections and disjunctions between the expansion of the LDS Church into Latin America and Africa, on the one hand, and the United States’ quest for economic and political power around the world, on the other. However, despite his wider perspective, the story Stevenson tells is not significantly different in scope or structure from that of Harris and Bringhurst. The cast of characters is larger, and the settings include more varied locales—but ultimately the narrative focuses on the United States and follows the priesthood restriction from its imposition through its aftermath. If anything, Stevenson’s is a slightly rosier version of this story, emphasizing at its conclusion the sincere efforts on the part of church leadership to move beyond the church’s racist past and paying somewhat less attention to the continuation of racist folklore among lay members of the church.

It seems that Stevenson wants to define the term *Mormonism* loosely, so as to include faith communities not officially connected with the Utah-based LDS Church. It is curious, then, that the Community of Christ—formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS)—makes no appearance in his narrative. It is also absent from *The Mormon Church and Blacks*, though that volume’s stated scope makes this editorial decision somewhat more understandable. The leader of the RLDS Church, Joseph Smith III, received a revelation in 1865 directing the church to “ordain priests . . . of every race,” including people of African descent.³ In part because of this revelation, the Community of Christ’s history on racial issues has been very different from that of the LDS Church, and the comparison is quite instructive. Its omission from both books is therefore unfortunate.

By now, it is well known among scholars that the vast majority of scholarship on race in the LDS Church has focused on church doctrine

3. Book of Doctrine and Covenants (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1970), section 116, quoted in Roger D. Launius, *Invisible Saints: A History of Black Americans in the Reorganized Church* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1988), 127.

and policy. In the case of scholarship on Mormonism and black people, that work has focused specifically on the priesthood restriction. Although these books provide readers access to the primary sources informing that scholarship, they do nothing to move the conversation in new directions. Focusing on priesthood obscures the experiences of women, who cannot hold the LDS priesthood. Likewise, focusing on doctrine and policy shines the spotlight on the people who promulgate doctrine and determine policy. In the history of the LDS Church, these have been white American men almost exclusively. A survey of the primary sources included in each book reveals these biases clearly: by my count, of the fifty-nine documents in Harris and Bringhurst's collection, only six documents (10 percent) represent the voices of women, and only eight documents (14 percent) represent the voices of African Americans. (All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.) Of thirty-five individual and corporate authors, only three (9 percent) are female and five (14 percent) are black. Stevenson's collection is very similar: of the sixty-two documents in his book, only five (8 percent) represent the voices of women and only ten (16 percent) represent the voices of people of African descent. Of forty-five individual and corporate authors, only three (7 percent) are female and seven (16 percent) are black. Jane Elizabeth Manning James is the only black woman to appear in Stevenson's collection of documents, and the same holds true for Harris and Bringhurst's book. It is also important to note that Stevenson's "global history" includes only two documents produced by non-Americans (one Ghanaian and one Nigerian), while Harris and Bringhurst include one document—a "lineage lesson"—from Brazil. It is appalling that fewer than one in five of the documents in each of these collections, which purport to represent the history of blacks and Mormonism, was created by a black person. In fact, these books would be more accurately described as documentary histories of white Latter-day Saints' thought about people of African descent.

Perhaps most troubling is that a simplistic understanding of blackness as uniform throughout space and time prevails in both of these books, even though scholars have long accepted that race is a social

construct. That is, societies categorize people based on a somewhat arbitrary set of physical characteristics like skin color, hair texture, and so on. They call these categories “races” (or its non-English translation). They then ascribe to these categories meaning that has little to do with the determining characteristics. The categories—what counts as “white,” “black,” “Moorish,” “Indian,” “Asian,” and so on—are not given in nature, but rather are decided *by the society*, so that “white” in one culture, at one point in history, means something very different than “white” in another culture, at another point in history. To be sure, Stevenson frequently addresses LDS attempts to “solidify” their “white Mormon identity” (p. 17), showing that he is familiar with this concept. However, he does not attend to the construction of blackness in any explicit way, and the idea that the social meaning of various skin tones (and other physical features) might be different in other societies never arises.

The book on blacks and Mormonism that I keep waiting for analyzes not only the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but also many other kinds of Mormonism, including the Community of Christ and other faith communities that trace their founding to Joseph Smith. It carefully considers the ways in which a history of American colonialism shaped LDS Church decisions to expand into countries with significant black populations. It pays close attention to the myriad ways in which societies around the world construct race and the ways those different constructions play out in contact with Mormonism. And finally, it employs an intersectional analysis to understand the ways race and gender mutually constitute one another for both white and black Mormons. Unfortunately, that book has not yet been written.

Quincy D. Newell is associate professor of religious studies at Hamilton College, where she researches and teaches about American religious history. She has published widely on religion in the American West and is currently working on two books about nineteenth-century African American and Native American Mormons.