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Elijah Abel: The Life and Times of a Black Priesthood Holder

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W. Kesler Jackson. *Elijah Abel: The Life and Times of a Black Priesthood Holder*.
Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2013.

Reviewed by Matthew L. Harris

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its relationship to black people continues to be a relevant topic in the Church today. Indeed, the Church recently released a document disavowing as official doctrine previous rationales for the priesthood ban while reaffirming that “all are alike unto God.”¹ Along with the Church’s voice are a spate of recent scholarly books that recently appeared evaluating the origins of the priesthood ban, the lifting of the ban, and the legacy of the ban. These include Russell W. Stevenson’s *For the Cause of Righteousness*, W. Paul Reeve’s *Religion of a Different Color*, and Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst’s *Blacks and Mormons: A Documentary History*.²

Now added to the list is W. Kesler Jackson’s *Elijah Abel: The Life and Times of a Black Priesthood Holder*, which is a solid account of this early pioneer’s experience in the Church. In this effort, Jackson stands on the shoulders of two pioneers in LDS race relations—Lester E. Bush Jr. and Newell G. Bringhurst—whose pathbreaking studies elucidated Abel’s priesthood status within the Church.³

1. See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Race and Priesthood,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

2. Russell W. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014); W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, *Blacks and Mormons: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, November 2015). See also J. B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), which contains a trenchant discussion on the effect of the priesthood ban on the Church’s “public image.”

3. In particular, see Lester E. Bush Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Spring 1973):

Though Jackson's book is succinct, it traces Abel's early life, his baptism into the Church, his priesthood ordination and temple ordinances, his missionary service, and his migration west with the Saints to the Great Basin. Jackson provides a crisp, compelling account of his life and times and, more importantly, situates this iconic Mormon figure within the broader context of Mormon history. It is a commendable accomplishment, considering the fragmentary sources Jackson has to work with and the gaps in the record that surround key events of Abel's life.

For instance, we have no direct record stating whether Abel was a slave—though Jackson clearly thinks he was. In recreating Abel's early life, Jackson draws on the *Autobiography of Frederick Douglass*, who, like Abel, lived in Maryland during his adolescent years. Jackson makes liberal use of Douglass's life to draw comparisons about what slave life may have been like for Abel—a point he acknowledges “can only be speculated” (15). He also draws on Margaret Blair Young and Darius Gray's fictional account of Abel's life, freely conjecturing that “he may have been a woodworker rather than a simple field hand” (16) and further asserting that Abel was likely a carpenter in his later life. Jackson also offers the idea that Abel, because he was born in Maryland, a major hub of the underground railroad, may have escaped slavery using that network.

These speculations notwithstanding, the strength of the book lies in Jackson's treatment of Abel's conversion and participation as a black man in the Mormon Church. Jackson writes that he was baptized in 1832 by Mormon missionary Ezekiel Roberts, who, during his missionary service, may have met Abel in Canada. Thereafter, Abel migrated to Kirkland, Ohio, where he received his priesthood and temple ordinances in the late 1830s. Jackson does not identify how these events transpired, and available details are limited. Abel lived in antebellum America during a time when blacks were associated with Cain and Ham, biblical counterfigures that early Europeans appealed to when justifying slavery. It is notable, Jackson opines, that Abel received his priesthood ordination and temple ordinances despite this racial uncertainty, and despite the Church's apparent ambivalence toward blacks in its early days.

The most intriguing part of the story for me, and one for which there is a clear documentary record, is Abel's patriarchal blessing. In 1836, Patriarch to the Church Joseph Smith Sr., the Prophet's father, pronounced a blessing upon Abel's head declaring that he would “be made

11–68; Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981).

equal to thy brethren,” affirming that his “soul shall be white in eternity” and his “robes glittering” (56). Such words can be taken as a hopeful and prescient look at the future or, on the other hand, as words with stark racial overtones. Jackson insinuates the latter, asserting that “Abel’s skin color was considered something less than blessed, something that required changing,” and it was “despite his blackness . . . that Abel was to achieve eventual glory” (56–57). Smith’s tantalizing language undoubtedly had roots in the Book of Mormon, where discussions of whiteness abound. But here Jackson misses an opportunity to elucidate this important theme by putting it into a larger theological context within Mormon racial teachings. For instance, scripture upholds the idea that those with white skin must still be “made white” in the blood of the Lamb, along with all other people (1 Ne. 12:11; Alma 5:21).

Jackson also omits other key episodes in the Elijah Abel story, specifically when Abel’s son and grandson were also ordained to the priesthood—something that LDS scholar Lester Bush writes about in an authoritative article, averring that “several of Elijah Abel’s descendants,” including “his son Enoch and grandson Elijah,” both were “reportedly elders.”⁴ Jackson acknowledges that Abel’s son was “ordained an elder in 1900” (84), yet he does not provide any context or details about the ordination, nor does he discuss at all his grandson’s ordination. Jackson’s narration is well done, but these omissions are missed opportunities, for the story of Abel’s descendants is a remarkable one, a story of faith and perseverance, of exclusion and hardship.

The final part of the book examines Abel’s migration west with the Saints after Joseph Smith’s untimely death in 1844. Here Jackson is at his best, discussing Abel’s missionary service to Canada, his duties in the Quorums of the Seventy, and his leadership in the Church. Unusually, he includes a “personal note” (105), in which he ruminates on race and the accusations of Church critics, who assert that the priesthood ban was both racist and wrong. He characterizes these claims as serious, and he acknowledges that “if we define ‘racism’ as the belief that a group of people should be treated differently, at least policywise, based on that group’s ‘race,’ then the LDS Church—at least for a period—certainly

4. See Lester E. Bush, “A Commentary on Stephen G. Taggart’s Mormonism’s Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins,” in *Neither Black nor White: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church*, ed. Lester E. Bush Jr. and Armand L. Mauss (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984), 44–45 n. 30.

did uphold a racist policy” (106). It would have provided balance here if Jackson had distinguished between race and lineage, as many blacks not of African descent have been ordained to the priesthood throughout the Church’s history. In his personal reflection, Jackson seems nervous about criticizing the Church he loves, yet sympathetic with critics who believe that the ban was neither kind nor fair. Some of this discussion seems less urgent now, considering the Church’s recent statement suggesting, among other things, that the priesthood policy echoed the social, cultural, and racial milieu of the nineteenth century. Still, Jackson’s discussion is a timely one. Not only does he restore Elijah Abel as a seminal figure in early Mormon history, but he also reminds us that our perspectives on racism have evolved—and will continue to evolve.

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