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Last Laborer: Thoughts and Reflections of a Black Mormon

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Conversations with Mormon Historians, edited by Alexander L. Baugh and Reid L. Neilson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015)

“For a boy growing up on a small farm in northern Utah, it would be quite amazing if I am remembered at all. I’ve had an exciting life. In lots of ways, it’s a life I did not fully dream of when I was thinning sugar beets—better than I could have hoped, I think,” (274) writes Kenneth W. Godfrey in *Conversations with Mormon Historians* about his experience being a career historian. For the historians who work hard to ensure that people of the past are remembered, *Conversations with Mormon Historians* works hard to ensure that the historians themselves are remembered also.

This book is a compilation of interviews with some of the eminent past-generation Latter-day Saint historians—interviewed by some of the eminent LDS historians of this generation. Because both the interviewers and the interviewees have a deep adoration for Mormon history, the comradery between the scholars is palpable upon the book’s pages. The list of distinguished historians interviewed includes Thomas G. Alexander, James B. Allen, Richard Lloyd Anderson, Milton V. Backman, LaMar C. Berrett, Claudia L. Bushman, Richard L. Bushman, Kenneth W. Godfrey, Dean C. Jessee, Stanley B. Kimball, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Robert J. Matthews, Max H. Parkin, Charles S. Peterson, Larry C. Porter, and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. Each historian brings different interests, ideas, personalities, and experiences to the book—and each makes the book an enjoyable and enlightening read.

Each chapter focuses on a different historian and includes questions about the historian’s childhood, family,

education, and career. The interviewed historians have a talent for taking the reader back in time through their stories. Milton V. Backman states, “I believe that history is fascinating because it is a series of stories. It is something more than just dates. It is life experiences. It’s unfolding the past. It’s reconstructing patterns of living” (124). These historians have lived long and full lives, and their personal narratives deeply and richly unfold the past through the pages of the book. It is appropriate to acknowledge that these historians—who have spent their lives studying the histories of others—have, in turn, made history themselves. The book is filled with funny anecdotes, impressive accomplishments, and spiritual moments. Overall, *Conversations with Mormon Historians* is an informative and light-hearted read for anyone personally interested in any aspect of history.

—Allyson Jones

Last Laborer: Thoughts and Reflections of a Black Mormon by Keith N. Hamilton (Salt Lake City: Ammon Works, 2011)

Somewhere between memoir and testimonial lies a category of work where an accomplished person attempts to explore the particulars of their own experience in a way that is both useful and interesting to others. Keith N. Hamilton’s *Last Laborer: Thoughts and Reflections of a Black Mormon* explores his personal history in the context of being a black convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints soon after the revelation on the priesthood was announced. The narrative neither accuses nor defends, choosing instead to simply explore how he has integrated his often difficult experience with a strong sense of identity and a hopeful faith in a clear, direct, and very readable personal voice.

The author coins the term “doctrinomial” to describe the work, underpinning its peculiar nature as a combination memoir, doctrinal explication, and personal interpretation—a model mirrored in the book’s three sections. The first section is a memoir that explores key experiences growing up in traditional African-American culture in and around the Jim Crow South. Those challenges prepared him to hear and accept the gospel as a student at North Carolina State University—and deal with the social and cultural backlash that he felt both as he finished his undergraduate degree at NC State and as he went on (after serving an LDS mission) to the somewhat alien environment of Brigham Young University, being the first black student accepted at the J. Reuben Clark Law School. Hamilton is clear and direct about the dissonance he often felt as he tried to reconcile a gospel of peace and unity with a culture that had not yet learned to comfortably accommodate an accomplished black Mormon, particularly one with a peculiar sense of humor.

The second section lays out the commonly understood understanding of doctrine on blacks and the priesthood, then supplements it with his own hard-won understanding of that same doctrine. This section is a bit unusual in that it works to explain rather than attack or condone, and shows a remarkable charity even while exploring the mismatches between practice and preaching. Hamilton explores the historical context leading up to the revelation on the priesthood, the process of obtaining that revelation, and the sometimes harsh responses to it both inside and outside the Church. This is also where he presents and explicates the parable of the laborer as a thematic and metaphorical frame for integrating the three sections and directly addressing the ongoing challenges still faced by the Church.

The third section then goes on to show Hamilton’s personal understanding and testimony of hope, as well as his calling on the Church to embrace the challenge of building a more perfect faith with a perfect brightness of hope—difficult history and personal experience notwithstanding. His emphasis on understanding, without either condemning or condoning, reveals a strong testimony of both the gospel of Jesus Christ and its (ongoing) restoration.

Last Laborer is a powerful exploration of racial issues offered with admirable clarity, incisive wit, and a deep and abiding charity that speaks eloquently to the challenge and promise of a constant and hopeful effort to draw nearer to the truth.

—Scott R. Parkin

The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism, edited by Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)

The *Oxford Handbook* series publishes academic essays in particular fields within the humanities and social sciences. This volume focuses on a growing subgenre of religious studies—Mormonism. Terryl Givens and Philip Barlow have brought their considerable experience and expertise to the task of assembling and editing this collection of essays on topics about Mormon history, theology, and lived religion. Givens is a professor of literature and religion at the University of Richmond and the author of several books, including *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity*. Barlow is a professor of Mormon history and culture at Utah State University and the author of *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion*. The other