



2018

Race and Making of the Mormon People

Matthew L. Harris

Colorado State University-Pueblo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harris, Matthew L. (2018) "Race and Making of the Mormon People," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 57 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol57/iss3/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Max Perry Mueller. *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*.
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Matthew L. Harris

In recent years, the topic of Mormonism and race has attracted the attention of many Mormon scholars. In 2015, W. Paul Reeve's *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* was published, in which he argues that the development of Mormon racial theology is best understood as a reaction to larger trends in nineteenth-century America. The Protestant majority privileged "whiteness," Reeve argues, and Mormons sought to appease them by embracing a whiteness theology.¹ The year 2015 also saw the publication of a special edition of the *Journal of Mormon History* featuring race and Mormonism.² Advocating a "new history of race and Mormonism,"³ the essayists examined "the constitution of a white colonial hegemony in Mormonism," moving beyond the typical medium of the priesthood and temple ban to explore Mormon racial teachings.⁴ Clearly, scholars are paying close attention to the Mormon racial experience and trying to understand how race affected Mormon doctrine and practice.

1. W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Hokulani K. Aikau, *A Chosen People, a Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai'i* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Matthew Garret, *Making Lamanites: Mormons, Native Americans, and the Indian Student Placement Program, 1947–2000* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016).

2. See *Journal of Mormon History* 41 (July 2015).

3. Max Perry Mueller, "Introduction: Beyond 'Race and the Priesthood' toward a New History of Race and Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 41 (July 2015): 1.

4. Gina Colvin, "Theorizing Mormon Race Scholarship," *Journal of Mormon History* 41 (July 2015): 15.

New in the mix of this scholarship is Max Mueller's *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, which is a provocative account of the construction of race in Mormon history. Mueller's study, produced initially as his PhD dissertation at Harvard, demonstrates how "whiteness" was built into the foundation of Mormonism. Drawing from, but not limiting his evidence to, the Book of Mormon, he asserts that the Mormon founder, Joseph Smith Jr., promoted a "restoration of all things" that would return the "human family" to its "original, white form" (62). He discusses the fracture of the human family, focusing on Gentiles in Europe, Semitic peoples in Asia and the Holy Land, and the Hamitic peoples of Africa (62).

Part of this fracture resulted from God's placing a curse of dark skin on some members of the human family. In the Bible, Cain and his descendants were cursed for their grievous sins. The curse was carried on through Ham—Noah's son—and his descendants. Likewise, in the Book of Mormon, God cursed the Lamanites (considered in the past to be Native Americans), signifying his displeasure with their "iniquities" (2 Ne. 5:21–22). Mueller argues that Mormonism's fixation on curses of people of color was not unique to Mormons. Indeed, various Christian denominations and even so-called enlightened peoples believed that dark skin made blacks and Native Americans spiritually inferior to white people.

What was unique about Mormonism, Mueller claims, is that Joseph Smith offered a new "restorative" theology that sought to solve the "race problem" in the United States (127). In his universalist vision to restore humanity to its original skin color—what Mueller calls "a metaphorical and literal whitening of nonwhites"—the Mormon prophet embraced a progressive view of race distinct from Protestant Christians (20). Neither an abolitionist nor a promoter of slavery, Smith's vision of racial inclusion sought to solve "racial schisms" that plagued nineteenth-century America (3). Eschewing science and the Enlightenment, Smith appealed to Mormon scripture to justify his vision of restoring the human family to its precursed state. Mueller argues that the Book of Mormon offered a blueprint for this racial regeneration. In the Book of Mormon, Nephite prophets taught that the sinful Lamanites could experience a profound transfiguration that would cleanse their souls and lighten their skins, signifying that they could become coequals with whites in the body of Christ. Through righteous living, moral probity, and conversion to Mormonism, these cursed peoples could literally and figuratively shed their curse and become white again. Although Mueller notes that the Book of Mormon does not

discuss black people, he argues that the promise of racial regeneration also applied to them. Mormonism would set these cursed individuals onto a path of discovery and enlightenment, cleansing them from their sinful past. Thus, this theological transformation would allow black- and brown-skinned Latter-day Saints to not only overcome their cursed lineage but also “be adopted into the Israelite covenant,” becoming full participants of the “Abrahamic lineage” (107, 118).

Mueller uses two case studies to advance his point. The first deals with a dynamic and energetic Mormon convert named Jane Manning (later Jane Manning James). Manning, a freed black woman from Connecticut, joined the Church in 1842 and migrated to Nauvoo, Illinois, where the Mormon prophet befriended her and took her in as a servant. There, within the intimate confines of the prophet’s home, she saw the new Mormon religion unfold. She witnessed Joseph Smith embrace the doctrine of plural marriage; she hefted the Urim and Thummim, used by Joseph to translate sacred scripture; and she developed a close relationship with the prophet’s wife Emma. In 1844, Manning received her patriarchal blessing from Hyrum Smith, the prophet’s older brother, who was the Church Patriarch at the time. Hyrum proclaimed that her lineage derived through “Cainaan the Son of Ham.” Most remarkable, he averred that if Manning lived worthy, God would lift the curse and “stamp . . . his own lineage [*sic*]” upon her (146–48). For Mueller, this suggests that in the blessing, God pledged to make her “whole” again—to restore her to purity and whiteness.

The second case study derives from another black convert, named Elijah Abel. Available evidence suggests that Abel was the first black Latter-day Saint to receive a patriarchal blessing and most likely the first to be ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood, serving in the Third Quorum of the Seventy. Abel, like Jane Manning, was a devoted and faithful Latter-day Saint. Mueller notes that in Abel’s patriarchal blessing, Joseph Smith Sr., the first Church Patriarch, promised him that he would be “made equal to [his] brethren, and [his] soul [would] be white in eternity and [his] robes glittering.” This racial trope, Mueller argues, had echoes of racial sanctification as foretold in the Book of Mormon. More instructive, Smith’s blessing promised that Abel could overcome “his blackness in the hereafter” (108).

Mueller notes, however, that the prophet had “ambivalent views” on race (116). While he allowed priesthood ordinations for black Latter-day Saints during his tenure as Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith did not permit Abel and Manning to experience the full blessings of Mormon

liturgical rites. Smith forbade them from worshipping in temples, and he did not permit them to marry white Latter-day Saints. The prophet, moreover, asserted that black people derived from the “seed of Cain.” He produced scripture—the book of Moses and the book of Abraham—that contained unfavorable views of black people and their cursed progeny. Still, the prophet allowed a handful of blacks to be ordained to the priesthood, and he welcomed a black woman—Jane Manning—into his home, where he nurtured her love of Mormonism.

If Joseph Smith envisioned a “*raceless . . . Mormon people*,” his successors in the Mormon hierarchy obfuscated that vision (20, emphasis in original). In 1852, Brigham Young, as Church President, implemented a priesthood and temple ban that denied black people sacred priestly rites. Other Church Presidents added flesh and muscle to the ban when they denied both Elijah Abel and Jane Manning James their temple blessings. Joseph F. Smith, the nephew of the Prophet Joseph Smith, for example, denied James the right to be sealed to the prophet’s family as an “adopted daughter”—a rite, she claimed, the prophet had offered to help her escape “her cursed ancestral lineage” (136). Joseph F. Smith also questioned the priesthood ordination of Abel.

Native Americans, by contrast, had a much different experience in Mormonism after Joseph Smith died in 1844. Unlike black people, whom missionaries largely ignored, Church leaders aggressively sought to convert Lamanites, offering them the opportunity to shed their curse. This proselytizing occurred well into the twentieth century under the energetic leadership of Church President Spencer W. Kimball, who supported the creation of an Indian Student Placement Program, in which white LDS families would take in young Native Americans and facilitate the process of racial regeneration by introducing them to Mormonism.

Mueller’s account is both arresting and insightful. His understanding of Mormon scripture—particularly the Book of Mormon—is thorough and comprehensive. And his contextualization of Mormon racial teachings vis-à-vis broader currents in nineteenth-century America helps readers discern what was unique about Mormon racial teachings. His argument requires fuller elaboration, though. Without question, Mueller is at his best when he locates the Lamanite experience within Mormonism’s restorationist theology. Indeed, Mueller tells this story well. With black Latter-day Saints, however, the evidence is not as compelling. Elijah Abel’s experience in the Church was not the experience of other black Latter-day Saint men; Jane Manning James’s experience in Mormonism was also unique compared to other black Latter-day Saint

women. Thus, we need to know more about the lived experiences of early black Latter-day Saints in general before making determined judgments about where they fit into Joseph Smith's universalist vision of redemption and salvation.

This criticism notwithstanding, Mueller is to be praised for producing a richly argued and nuanced account of Mormon racial history. This provocative book deserves a careful reading from students and scholars of the Mormon past.

Matthew L. Harris is Professor of History at Colorado State University–Pueblo. He is the coauthor and coeditor of *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (University of Illinois Press, 2015) and the author and editor of two books on Ezra Taft Benson: *Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics* (University of Illinois Press, forthcoming) and “*Watchman on the Tower*”: *Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (University of Utah Press, forthcoming). He is currently at work on a book entitled “*The Long-Awaited Day*”: *Mormons, Blacks, and the Lifting of the Priesthood and Temple Ban, 1945–2018*.