

SAINTS, SLAVES, & BLACKS

**THE CHANGING PLACE OF BLACK
PEOPLE WITHIN MORMONISM**

*Second Edition, with an additional foreword and postscripts by
Edward J. Blum, W. Paul Reeve, and Darron T. Smith*

NEWELL G. BRINGHURST

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GREG KOFFORD BOOKS
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Foreword to the Second Edition

By Edward J. Blum

S*aints, Slaves, and Blacks* is a book to mind and to mine. Many of the overall arguments fit nicely into United States history survey courses, especially the antislavery and anti-abolitionist position of many early Mormons, a perspective shared by hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of white Americans before the Civil War. Many of the book's points should be standard fare in discussions of American religious history, including the reality that all religions in the United States have had to contend with slavery, race, and racism in some way, shape, or form. And many of the primary source quotations within the book are historical gems, such as Joseph Smith's terse response to the question of whether Mormons were abolitionists: "No . . . we do not believe in setting the Negroes free." Albeit hard to swallow, Smith's candor sounds admirable compared to the misdirection of most religious and political leaders in American history.

I first read Bringhurst's book during the 1990s after the scholarly innovations of critical race theory. Unlike its initial readers who primarily viewed it in terms of the 1978 ending of the priesthood ban on black men, I approached Bringhurst's book with thoughts of "whiteness studies," "comparative racialization," and the dynamic co-constitutions of race and religion. Scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated that both "race" and "religion" were complicated categories and that the harder one attempted to define or determine them, the more slippery they got.¹ Armed with those intellectual tools, I found Bringhurst's book instantly fascinating and to be far more than a study of Mormonism, slavery, and African Americans. In fact, after my fourth or fifth reading of Bringhurst's book in the early 2000s, I concluded it was simply ahead of its time. If

1. AnnLouise Keating, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' (De)Constructing 'Race,'" *College English* 57, no. 8 (December 1995): 901–18; Smith, J. Z., "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

researched, written, and published in the early 2000s, it probably would have merited attention in the *New York Times* and newspapers in Utah would have had no choice but to review and discuss it.

I have never been Mormon (at least not yet). Growing up in suburban New Jersey in the 1980s, I knew as many African Americans as I did Mormons. Both were outsiders in my world. While I expected stereotypically that black men and women around me would be excellent athletes, I assumed that Mormons were good natured but brainwashed pseudo-Christians who needed to convert to true Christianity (my evangelical Christianity) if they were to get to the real heaven. When I pursued a career in history as a means to comprehend what my faith community failed to provide, I turned my attention to African Americans but not to Mormons.

My interest in Mormonism and race grew with the presidential campaign of Mitt Romney in 2008. I had long studied Protestants and their perspectives on race in United States history. For the most part, I left Mormonism to scholars in that niche. I had no idea what I was missing: the tragedy, the comedy, the humanity, the barbarity. I returned to *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*. It became one of my favorite books, one that I was continually suggesting to graduate students and colleagues (and by “suggesting”, I mean obnoxiously demanding that they read it). Oftentimes scholars look for Mormonism’s similarities to other variants and branches of Christianity, and certainly when it comes to race those elements are there in abundance. I found more fascinating in Bringham’s book the disturbing racial inventiveness of early Mormon leaders and their willingness to speak forthrightly about their cosmic perceptions of embodied and fleshy realities. For me, Bringham’s research and analysis opened the door to consider far more robustly how people make sense of and create racialized concepts in terms of genuine religious faith and conviction.

Bringham accomplished so much in *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*. He dealt with comparative racialization and religion. He juggled what was so difficult for early Mormons. They were part of and distinct from American Protestants; they engaged with various Native American groups and free and enslaved African Americans. The racial category of Mormons themselves was vexing. Decades before J. Spencer Fluhman interrogated the many meanings of early Mormonism in its historical moment, Bringham tried to situate them in their religious and racial complexity.² In fact, Bringham went steps

2. J. Spencer Fluhman, *Peculiar People: Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

beyond that. He sought to understand these complicated items in terms of political realities (party struggles), geographical contestations (how will the West be part of the United States), and official church practices (ordination and missionary work). Bringhurst also anticipated by more than fifteen years scholarly emphasis on the links between religion and whiteness. Just as Edmund Morgan hinted at notions of the construction of whiteness in his pathbreaking *American Slavery, American Freedom*, Bringhurst did similarly with this volume. Early Mormon considerations of blacks, blackness, and slavery certainly emanated from their own complicated outsider and insider status in the United States. For all of that and more, we can praise Newell Bringhurst and his *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*.

Perhaps what I hold most dear about *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks* is that it inspired one of my prize graduate students, Jennifer Lindell. She was deeply interested in race, religion, and the West, and for her master's thesis on Mormon considerations and interactions with Native Americans, she modeled it upon Bringhurst's book. Ms. Lindell's tremendous research and intellectual ingenuity resulted in her receiving fellowship offers from the University of Pennsylvania (where she wished to go) and everywhere else she applied. Ms. Lindell suffered from cystic fibrosis, so her dream of a doctoral dissertation perished with her on March 2011. I miss Jen frequently. I take joy and comfort in the fact that of the many things we shared was a mutual admiration for *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*. One night, in a pizzeria in San Diego, as my first infant son lay sleeping, Jen and I raved about what an amazing book it is. That is a memory I plan to cherish for the rest of my earthly days.

Saints, Slaves, and Blacks is a treasure. It touches on pivotal topics in American history. It is American religious history at its finest. And it dealt with complex issues of faith, religion, church, race, politics, and social standing that still impact most of us.

Edward J. Blum
San Diego State University

Preface to the Second Edition

Why a reissue of *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism*? At first glance, this pointed question might seem pertinent given that the original edition appeared some thirty-five years ago and has been out of print for three decades. Over this same period, a corps of outstanding scholars have produced a steady stream of significant works dealing with Mormonism's historically evolving relationship with race.¹

A second edition of *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks* is timely for several reasons. When initially published in 1981, it was the first in-depth, book-length study to trace the changing place of blacks within the LDS Church from its founding in 1830 to 1981.² Despite this, when the volume first

1. Among the most important are Lester E. Bush, Jr. and Armand L. Mauss, eds, *Neither White Nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue* (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1984); Jessie L. Embry, *Black Saints in a White Church: Contemporary African-Americans* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994); Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Russell W. Stevenson, ed., *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830–2013* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014); W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). In addition, this writer, along with two other scholars, has co-edited two volumes: Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith, eds., *Black and Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); and Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds., *The Mormon Church & Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

2. Although by this time several significant shorter works dealing with this topic had been published. The most important were Armand L. Mauss, "Mormonism and the Negro: Faith Folklore, and Civil Rights," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 19–39; Stephen G. Taggart, *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1970), Lester E. Bush, "A Commentary on Stephen G. Taggart's Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social

appeared, it attracted limited notice both within and outside the Mormon community. The Mormon Church's owned and operated *Deseret News* ignored it, as did the myriad of other official LDS publications, including the academically oriented *BYU Studies*.

Saints, Slaves, and Blacks found itself the victim of bad timing, appearing just three years following the LDS Church's 1978 Black Revelation. Mormons of all stripes anxious to move on focused on embracing their black brethren and sisters as ecclesiastical equals while ignoring the Church's recently abandoned practice of black priesthood denial and prohibition on African-American entry into the temple. A climate of institutional amnesia prevailed, wherein Latter-day Saints chose to forget this now embarrassing practice, previously promoted as essential doctrine.

Securing publication of *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks* proved most challenging. Five different presses rejected the manuscript. Ultimately, Greenwood Press—a small academic press based in Westport Connecticut—accepted it. Once in print the volume garnered minimal exposure due in part to limited promotion. Outrageously overpriced, the book's primary market was university and public libraries. When its limited print run sold out, the volume went out of print—this occurring a mere five years following publication.

Reissue of *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks* in a relatively inexpensive paperback edition is intended to make it available to a wider audience. Such a reprint is also timely in that 2018 marks the fortieth anniversary of the lifting of the priesthood and temple ban.

The volume deserves republication for an even more important reason. When first published, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks* provided a unique, albeit controversial, perspective relative to the origins of black priesthood denial. Its central thesis that the ban emerged largely as the byproduct of Mormon ethnic whiteness initially articulated in the Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price was provocative. Building on these scriptural proof-texts, nineteenth century Latter-day Saints viewed themselves as a divinely "chosen"

and Historical Origins," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 86–103; Lester E. Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," *Dialogue: Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–63. Prior to this time, two other scholars produced scholarly studies chronicling the status of blacks within Mormonism: Jan B. Shippo, "Second Class Saints," *Colorado Quarterly* 11 (1962–63): 83–90; Dennis L. Lythgoe penned "Negro Slavery in Utah (master's thesis, University of Utah, 1966), followed by two articles, "Negro Slavery and Mormon Doctrine," *Western Humanities Review* 21 (1967): 327–38; and "Negro Slavery in Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* (Winter 1971): 40–54.

lineage—the literal descendants of the House of Israel. They considered their “whiteness” emblematic, indeed proof, of their status as the Lord’s “favored people.” Conversely, Mormons utilized these same scriptures, along with the Old Testament, to prove that black people were members of a divinely cursed race, given their alleged descent from two accursed Biblical counter-figures—Ham, the misbehaving son of Noah, and Cain, humankind’s alleged first murderer. Physical proof of African-Americans accursed status was their black skin. Further affirming such concepts of black inferiority was a steady stream of authoritative statements by LDS leaders and spokesmen brought forth from the 1830s to the early 1970s.³ Such controversial assertions notwithstanding, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*’ major aspects of this thesis has since been incorporated, all or in part, by subsequent scholars in their own studies of Mormonism and race.⁴

Prior to the publication of *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, just one other book-length study dealt in a scholarly fashion with the historical origins of the black priesthood ban: Stephen G. Taggart’s brief monograph *Mormonism’s Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins*.⁵ In his slender volume published in 1970, Taggart, a PhD student in sociology at Cornell University and lifelong Mormon, postulated that Joseph Smith imple-

3. For a discussion of this process, see Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church & Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

4. See in particular Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*; W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*; and Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*.

5. Although two book length studies written on behalf of the LDS Church defended and justified the priesthood ban, asserting that the practice, divinely-sanctioned, was inaugurated by Joseph Smith during the 1830s. The pair are John J. Stewart, *Mormonism and the Negro* (Orem, UT: Community Press, 1960); and John Lewis Lund, *The Church and the Negro: A Discussion of Mormonism, Negroes, and the Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Paramount Publishers, 1967). Both of these volumes essentially repeated Church-sanctioned arguments previously postulated by a parade of Mormon leaders and spokesmen, most especially Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie. See most especially Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1931): 97–111; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958): 102–08, 314, 476–77.

mented black priesthood denial in response to difficulties in the slave state of Missouri during the Mormon sojourn there in the 1830s.⁶

Taggart's book promoting the so-called "Missouri Thesis" was immediately challenged by a second scholar—Lester E. Bush Jr., an active, practicing Latter-day Saint, who had conducted his own extensive research into the historical origins of the priesthood ban. Bush arrived at a very different set of conclusions, rejecting Taggart's central argument that Joseph Smith initiated black priesthood denial. Bush asserted that Brigham Young, Smith's successor, implemented the ban in 1849, some five years following the Mormon founder's death. Moreover, Smith had authorized the ordination of at least two black Mormon males. Bush presented his findings in two seminal essays, published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, the first appearing in 1969 and the second in 1973. In his 1969 essay "A Commentary on Steven G. Taggart's *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins*," Bush excoriated Taggart for his limited, incomplete research.⁷ Bush systematically dismantled Taggart's central thesis that Joseph Smith initiated black priesthood denial in re-

6. Taggart was not the first writer to affirm the so-called "Missouri Thesis." Fawn M. Brodie was the first to do so in her seminal 1945 biography of Joseph Smith: *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith The Mormon Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 131–33, 173–5. Other scholars prior to Taggart who postulated the Missouri Thesis included L. H. Kirkpatrick "The Negro and the LDS Church," *Pen* (1954): 12–13, 29; Jan Shippis, "Second Class Saints," *Colorado Quarterly* 11 (1962–63): 183–90; and Dennis L. Lythgoe, "Negro Slavery and Mormon Doctrine," *Western Humanities Review* 21 (1967): 327–38. For an exposition on this topic, see Newell G. Bringhurst, "The 'Missouri Thesis' Revisited: Early Mormonism, Slavery and the Status of Black People" in *Black and Mormon*, Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 13–33.

7. Lester E. Bush, Jr., "A Commentary on Stephen G. Taggart's *Mormonism's Negro Policy*," 86–103. It should be noted that Taggart's volume was not published until after the author's untimely death. Taggart's widow, Pamela, confessed in a Forward that she wrote that her husband "had not completed all that he thought was necessary for the manuscript, but we had discussed it so extensively that I knew what he wanted done. Several people came forth with suggestions for refinements of the work, but after serious consideration it was decided to leave the [manuscript] as Steve had written it, adding only those modifications which he had unquestionably wanted." Taggart, *Mormonism's Negro Policy*, xiii.

sponse to Latter-day Saint difficulties in Missouri. Bush supported his refutation with extensive documentation.⁸

Bush further developed his arguments in a second in-depth *Dialogue* article entitled “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview” published in 1973. His fifty-seven page essay containing some 219 footnotes constituted by far the most comprehensive examination of Mormon racial policy up to that time.⁹ Bush’s essay drew heavily from a four hundred page compendium of primary and secondary documents compiled over some ten years. Covering the period from the 1830s to the 1970s, Bush’s “Compilation on the Negro in Mormonism” contains First Presidency minutes, Quorum of the Twelve meeting minutes, and other General Authority interviews and writings.¹⁰ Bush’s carefully written text found minimal evidence to support the LDS Church’s official position that the priesthood ban resulted from divine revelation—thus contradicting a major justification for its existence. Seeking to undermine its legitimacy and thus prod the Church toward change, Bush summarily dismissed the ban as the unfortunate product of socio-historical forces present in the larger nineteenth century American society.

The scholarly studies of Stephen Taggart and especially Lester E. Bush, Jr. greatly influenced my own work, which commenced as a PhD dissertation at the University of California, Davis.¹¹ After carefully weighing the contrasting arguments of Taggart and Bush, I determined that Bush made by far the more convincing case—specifically his central thesis that the priesthood ban resulted from socio-economic prejudices endemic in American society at large. Such anti-black attitudes as embraced by Brigham Young were incorporated as policy, which evolved into doctrine—all of which occurred following the death of Joseph Smith.¹²

8. Bush, “A Commentary on Stephen G. Taggart’s Mormonism’s Negro Policy,” 86–103.

9. Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973) 11–68.

10. Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Compilation on the Negro in Mormonism” documentary sourcebook, 1972, Harold B. Lee Library Special Collections, Brigham Young University, and in LDS Church History Library.

11. Newell G. Bringhurst, “A Servant of Servants . . . Cursed as Pertaining to the Priesthood: Mormon Attitudes toward Slavery and the Black Man, 1830–1880,” (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 1975).

12. As Bush noted in his “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: A Historical Overview,” 25, where he cites February 13, 1849 as the date of “a Church

Striking was the breadth of Bush's historical narrative tracing the evolution of Mormon anti-black attitudes and related practices from the 1830s to the 1970s. Impressive was the array of primary documents Bush marshaled in support of his arguments. By contrast, Taggart's relatively limited work proved wanting in its overly simplistic "Missouri Thesis" that Joseph Smith had impulsively implemented the priesthood ban in a futile effort to alleviate Mormon difficulties in that slave state.

The thoroughness of Bush's findings notwithstanding, I determined that Bush had not adequately dealt with the origins of the ban as it involved Joseph Smith. Specifically, I became convinced that Smith himself held certain racist, anti-black attitudes which, in turn, were given scriptural legitimacy through his canonical writings, specifically the Book of Mormon and The Pearl of Great Price. Bush, moreover, failed to acknowledge the crucial role played by the emergence of Mormon ethnic whiteness affirming the Saints' self-perceived status as a divinely favored race. Conversely, Mormons viewed blacks as a marginalized race, the accursed descendants of Cain, Ham, and Caanan. Further validating African-American's accursed status was their dark skin.

My own study benefited from Bush's pioneering work, in particular his carefully-crafted chronological framework tracing evolving Mormon racial attitudes and practices from the 1830s down to the 1970s. Bush's essay also provided a high standard against which to measure my own research and writing.

My own work over an eleven-year period from 1970 to 1981 evolved through a two-phase process: an unpublished PhD dissertation was completed in 1975, followed by the book, published in late 1981. The latter work, while based on the dissertation, ended up quite different, both in its narrative style and in certain of its conclusions, some the result of the 1978 lifting of the Church's black ban.

The PhD dissertation "A Servant of Servants...Cursed as Pertaining to the Priesthood': Mormon Attitudes toward Slavery and the Black Man, 1830-1880" utilized information gathered from a variety of primary sources, most especially contemporary Mormon and non-Mormon newspapers, journals, and pamphlets published from the 1830s to the 1880s.

decision to deny the priesthood to Negroes," basing this on a conversation between Brigham Young and Lorenzo Snow.

The dissertation also incorporated historical data from the unpublished letters, journals, and diaries of various nineteenth-century LDS leaders, most notably, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, and Wilford Woodruff—such materials made available by the LDS Church Historical Department. Also utilized was information drawn from secondary sources dealing with black slavery and racial topics in other religious denominations and in the larger American society. Such information provided a

One final note: the text of *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks* is reprinted as originally published in 1981, the text unchanged except for repagination to accommodate a cleaner typeset, updated style formatting, corrections of misspellings and typos that inadvertently appeared in the original printing, and an update to the bibliographic essay to include new publications on this important topic. My rationale for leaving the text as originally written is the fact that my basic thesis relative to the role of “Mormon whiteness” as the major factor in both the origins and perpetuation of Mormonism black priesthood and temple ban has been validated in the work of subsequent scholars. Finally, I applaud these same scholars for their willingness to tackle the fascinating yet controversial topic of race within Mormonism as I was so foolishly compelled to do some forty years ago.

Initial Latter-day Saint Racist and Antislavery Attitudes, 1820–1830

And he . . . caused . . . a sore cursing . . . to come upon them because of their iniquity . . . the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.

Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 5:21

It is against the law of our brethren . . . that there should be any slaves among them.

Book of Mormon, Alma 27:9

Fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith, like so many other residents of the “burned-over district” of New York State, was caught up in the religious excitement of the Second Great Awakening during the early 1820s.¹ Young Smith, according to his own recollections, was concerned about the salvation of his soul and confused as to the correct source of religious authority among the various local denominations competing for his allegiance. In search of answers to these problems, Smith, on a spring day in 1820, retired to pray in a grove near the family farm house at Palmyra, New York. The alleged result of Smith’s fervent praying was the visit of two supernatural personages—God the Father and his son Jesus Christ. According to Smith, these two divine visitors assured the young farm boy that his sins were forgiven and told him that none of the existing denominations represented the correct source of divine authority. Finally, Smith was told to await further instructions concerning this matter. Three years later, he was allegedly visited by another supernatural being—this time an angel by the name of Moroni, who revealed to Smith the existence of a

1. The circumstances surrounding Joseph Smith’s alleged early visions and indeed all of his youthful activities have generated a great deal of historical controversy. For two rather different accounts, see Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1971), 1–82; and Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 32–97.

2 *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*

set of gold plates located in a hillside near his home. Under divine guidance, Smith took possession of the plates in 1827. These plates, according to Mormon belief, contained the sacred writings of an ancient American civilization. With the aid of a set of seer stones known as the Urim and Thummin, Smith allegedly “translated” these ancient writings into the Book of Mormon, a task completed in 1830. In that same year, this book was published and canonized as holy scripture by Smith's followers after the establishment of the Mormon church in 1830.²

Joseph Smith's book detailed the rise and fall of an ancient American civilization descended from a group of Israelites who migrated from the Holy Land to the New World about 600 BC. Initially led by a man named Nephi, these “Nephites,” as they came to be known, built up a flourishing civilization on the North and South American continents, which lasted until AD 400.

Smith's account of these ancient Americans incorporated racist concepts of nonwhite racial inferiority as contrasted with white racial superiority. Mormon racism was particularly evident in those Book of Mormon passages outlining the conflicts and divisions plaguing the Nephite nation. These people, under the wise leadership of Nephi, built up a complex, urban society as God's chosen people. But Nephi's two brothers Laman and Lemuel challenged Nephi's authority. In a brief skirmish, the two disobedient brothers were defeated. Undaunted, they led a group of dissident Nephites into the wilderness, where they became a nomadic people (Alma 22:28). These rebels rejected correct Nephite religious principles and so were “cut off from the presence of the Lord” (2 Ne. 5: 20). Moreover, Laman, Lemuel, and their followers were cursed with a “skin of blackness” by “the Lord God” (2 Nephi 5: 21–24). Thereafter they were known as Lamanites, “a dark, and loathsome, and filthy people full of idleness and all manner of abomination” (1 Ne. 12:23). Smith also described another group of dissidents who clashed with the Nephites: the Amlicites. As a sign of their rebellion, they painted red marks on their foreheads. In time the Amlicites apparently became a dark-skinned people like the Lamanites (Alma 3:13–19). A third group, the Zoramites, as the Lamanites and Amlicites, opposed the Nephites and lived apart from them. They eventually became a dark-skinned people and were absorbed by the Lamanite nation (Alma 31:2). These three nations, along with other tribes and individuals who from time to time dissented from the Nephites, were

2. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 34–61; Hill, *Joseph Smith*, 70–89.

collectively known as Lamanites (Alma 42:13; Hel. 11:24). On various occasions, these dark-skinned opponents attacked and fought against the righteous Nephites. The Nephites usually prevailed over their evil, dark-skinned foes.

In time, however, even the light-skinned, civilized Nephites became unrighteous. A portion of these Nephites mixed with the Lamanites, “becoming wicked, wild and ferocious, yea, even becoming Lamanites,” and presumably acquired a dark skin emblematic of their wickedness and evil (Hel. 3:16, 11:24). The rest of the Nephite nation also became unrighteous and were ultimately wiped out in a series of bloody wars fought among themselves and with their dark-skinned neighbors. Smith maintained that a significant portion of the degenerate, dark-skinned Lamanites survived this warfare, becoming in time, according to Mosiah 5:15,

a dark, filthy, and a loathsome people, beyond the description of that which ever hath been amongst us, yea, even that which hath been among the Lamanites and this because of their unbelief and idolatry.

According to Mormon theology, the present-day Indians are considered the descendants of these dark-skinned survivors (1 Ne. 12:23).

Joseph Smith’s racist ideas appear to have been the product of an alienated boyhood, in which he was exposed to the unsettled conditions of a lower-middle-class environment.³ The Smith family in the years prior to Joseph’s birth in 1805 and during his formative years led a “nomadic existence.” By the time Joseph Jr. was eleven, the Smiths had lived in nine different communities.⁴ These numerous moves resulted from the efforts of Joseph Smith Sr., to provide for his family. After repeatedly failing to eke out a living as a farmer in various parts of New England and failing as a merchant, the elder Smith in 1816 moved his family to Palmyra, New York. Here, he again turned to farming and was somewhat more successful. But even in Palmyra, members of the Smith family, including young Joseph, had to work outside the home to supplement the family’s meager income. This situation seems to have created anxiety in the minds of young Joseph and his mother Lucy Mack about the family’s social status. This anxiety was further intensified by the social ostracism experienced by the Smith family at the hands of their more affluent neighbors. The Smiths were

3. For a discussion of the relationship between Mormon lower-middle-class social origins and the tendencies to accept racist ideas, see Appendix B of this study.

4. Pearson H. Corbett, *Hiram Smith Patriarch* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1963), 9.

looked down upon because of their lower-middle-class status and were thus isolated socially.⁵ In addition, the family was internally divided by conflicting religious views. Lucy Mack, along with two sons and one daughter, joined the Presbyterian Church. Other family members held back, including young Joseph and his father. The elder Smith, in fact, clung tenaciously to his mystical Universalist beliefs.⁶ These family difficulties and conflicts bothered young Joseph and helped to make him “an alienated youth the product of an alienated family.”⁷ Smith’s alienation was further exacerbated by the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening in which a number of denominations competed for Smith’s allegiance.⁸

It was this confusion and conflict that apparently caused Smith to seek divine guidance and to write the Book of Mormon, completed in 1830. According to Smith, this work contained answers to those questions that had troubled him during the early 1820s, along with the correct religious principles to be followed by his Mormon community of true believers.

Smith’s book also outlined several concepts emphasizing his role as a religious leader. Smith claimed to be a member of the “chosen race” by virtue of his “descent” from the ancient Tribe of Joseph—one of the Chosen Tribes of Israel. He also claimed powers as a “Prophet, Seer, and Revelator” (2 Ne. 3:11). By assuming such religious authority, Smith was able to cope with anxieties and self-doubts resulting from his lower-middle class socioeconomic background.

The Book of Mormon also reflected the racial attitudes of a larger nineteenth-century American society that discriminated against non-white groups. Contemporary Americans were particularly interested in the Indians, the primary group considered in Smith’s book. Although the Indian issue had involved white Americans since colonial times, it took on new meaning during the 1820s. For the first time, the federal government dealt with the “Indian problem” in a comprehensive fashion, establishing the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which implemented Andrew Jackson’s vigorous Indian removal policy during the late 1820s. Interest in the Indian was particularly evident in Joseph Smith’s upstate New York environment. Tales describing the ancestors of the contemporary Indian

5. Hill, *Joseph Smith*, 32, 42, 45–46.

6. Hill, 48.

7. Robert B. Flanders, “To Transform History: Early Mormon Culture and the Concept of Space and Time,” *Church History* 40 (1971): 110.

8. See Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (Ithaca, NY, 1950), for the best description of the religious enthusiasm affecting this region.

were especially popular, in part because of the close proximity of numerous Indian burial grounds.⁹ Residents were fascinated by stories concerning the racial-ethnic origins of the American Indian. A number of authors, the most prominent being Ethan Smith, suggested that the Indians were descended from the Israelites—a concept embraced by Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon.¹⁰

Through his book, Smith also mirrored contemporary American anxieties over the impending Millennium. Nineteenth-century Americans expected an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of good and evil as a prelude to the Millennium and Second Coming.¹¹ In his book, Joseph Smith painted this Millenarian struggle in contrasting racial images of black and white.¹² The Lamanites, Amlicites, and Zoramites as dark-skinned “eschatological enemies” stood in sharp contrast to the righteous light-skinned Nephites. The latter group served as an example of those who were awaiting the Millennium. The wicked Lamanites, on the other hand, symbolized the corrupt society to be avoided in preparing for the Millennium. As the path of this Millennium was long, narrow, and hazardous, the curse of a dark skin, like that placed upon the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Zoramites, stood as a potent Millennial warning for those who might waver. Those Nephites who misbehaved were threatened with the curse of a dark skin. Such people would retrogress racially—becoming even darker than the Lamanites—if they persisted in their wicked ways (Jacob 3:8). Others who fought against God’s chosen people were also threatened with a “mark” or a “dark skin” (Alma 3:16). Finally, Joseph Smith issued the ultimate Millennial threat: that those who rejected the true faith, as had the Nephites, could be exterminated if they persisted in their unrighteous behavior (Jacob 3:3).¹³ The Millenarian symbol was inescapable. Evil as represented by a dark skin

9. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 34–37.

10. Klaus J. Hansen, “The Millennium, the West, and Race in the Antebellum American Mind,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 3 (October 1972): 380.

11. For two discussions of American millennialism during the nineteenth century, see Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation* (Chicago, 1968); and Ernest R. Santee, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millennialism* (Chicago, 1971).

12. See Hansen, “The Millennium, the West, and Race,” for a good discussion of the close relationship between race and millennialism.

13. The Indians apparently also received a promise that America would be “the land of their inheritance” and that “the Lord God will not suffer that the Gentiles [whites] will utterly destroy the mixture of thy seed, which are among thy brethren.” See 1 Nephi 13:30.

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stood as the racial counter image to be avoided by God's chosen people as they prepared for the Millennium.¹⁴

Yet, despite its Millenarian racist concepts, Joseph Smith's work held out hope for its dark-skinned counterfigures. The process of racial degeneration could be reversed, given the right conditions. The curse of a dark skin and savage behavior was lifted from those Lamanites who accepted the true faith and allowed themselves to be inspired by the righteous example of the fair-skinned Nephites (Alma 24:17–18; 1 Ne. 3:15–16). Joseph Smith promised contemporary American Indians that if they became “civilized” and adopted the true faith, they would lose “their scales of darkness” and become “a white and delightsome people” (2 Ne. 30:6).

Moreover, the Book of Mormon, like the New Testament, promoted universal Christian salvation for all mankind, without regard to race, color, or bondage. The Atonement of Christ was “infinite for all mankind,” with Christ making himself manifest “unto every nation, kindred, tongue and people” (2 Ne. 9:5–22, 25:16, 26:13). In one of its most famous passages, the Book of Mormon declared that the Lord “denieth none that came unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female, and he remembereth the heathen: and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Ne. 26:25, 26:33). According to Mormon scripture, the Nephites made a special effort to preach to all, “both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female” (Alma 1:30). Alma, a Nephite missionary and one of the principal heroes in this work, tried to carry the true gospel “unto every soul” (Alma 5:49, 29:2). Other Nephite missionaries preached among the dark Lamanites explaining that “All men are privileged . . . and none are forbidden from receiving the True Gospel” (Alma 17:8, 23:4–18; Hel. 5:18–19, 48–52; 3 Ne. 2:12–16; 2 Ne. 26:28).

Even though Book of Mormon racial concepts occupied a special place in Latter-day Saint thought because of the book's scriptural status, these concepts were not unique to Mormonism. Thus, environmentalism—that is, the belief that a particular social situation or a certain geographic setting promoted the evolution of particular races and ethnic groups—was widely held by racial theorists during the early nineteenth century.¹⁵ Like Joseph Smith, other thinkers believed that racial changes took place with-

14. Hansen, “The Millennium, the West, and Race,” 379.

15. Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), 25–26, 58; William Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 9–11.

in a relatively short chronological span.¹⁶ Smith's suggestion that certain fair-complexioned peoples had retrogressed into a wild, savage, idolatrous, dark-skinned state mirrored a widespread belief that all contemporary, primitive, dark-skinned peoples had degenerated from ancestors who had previously enjoyed an "advanced culture."¹⁷ His optimistic belief that the process of racial degeneration could be reversed echoed the theories of non-Mormon writers who maintained that contemporary dark-skinned peoples had the capacity to regain the "original perfection" of a light skin, and a "civilized" state that they had once possessed.¹⁸ Finally, Smith's descriptions of a golden age, when all peoples were "exceedingly fair and delightful" with no "Lamanites nor any manner of ites" reflected a general racial belief that all mankind, given identical, "optimum" cultural-geographic conditions, might overcome all distinctions of race and become one white universal race (4 Ne. 1:10–20).¹⁹ This dovetailed with a general American Millenarian belief, and to some extent an earlier Enlightenment optimism, that all mankind had the capacity to "return" to a pristine, pure white racial state like that occupied by the inhabitants of the Garden of Eden prior to the fall of Adam.²⁰

In addition to, and somewhat in contrast to, its emphasis on nonwhite racial inferiority, Joseph Smith's book expressed antislavery attitudes. Smith's willingness to address the slavery issue reflected general American concern over this question during the 1820s. Thoughtful Americans like Thomas Jefferson labeled the controversy over slavery during the Missouri crisis as a "fire bell in the night."²¹ Throughout the 1820s, efforts by the American Colonization Society to abolish slavery through compensated emancipation

16. Harris, *Rise of Anthropological Theory*, 86. According to Harris, some American racial theorists believed that racial change could take place within a single lifetime.

17. Harris, 54; Hansen, "The Millennium, the West, and Race," 381.

18. Harris, *Rise of Anthropological Theory*, 84.

19. Besides being of one universal race, all the people "had all things common among them; therefore there are not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of heavenly gifts" (4 Nephi 3). Compare this with Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), 243; and George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 43.

20. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 53, 78.

21. Glover Moor, *The Missouri Controversy, 1819–1821* (Lexington, KY, 1953). See also Richard H. Brown, "The Missouri Crisis: Slavery and the Politics of Jacksonianism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 65 (Winter 1966): 55–72.

and the colonization of freed blacks abroad attracted notoriety.²² In Virginia and South Carolina, slavery contributed to underlying social tensions evident during the 1820s. These tensions came to the surface in Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion and in the nullification crisis of 1831–32.²³

In Joseph Smith's home state of New York there was lively debate over slavery and the status of free blacks. Even though a statute had been adopted in 1799 providing for the gradual manumission of all New York slaves born after this date, black servitude continued to exist and remained an issue for the next thirty years.²⁴ The status of New York's free blacks also generated controversy. In 1821 and again in 1824, the state constitution was amended to limit black participation in the electoral process.²⁵ The expression of intense anti-black sentiments in Rockland County before 1830, the emergence after this date of strong antislavery feeling in the "burned-over district," and prominent anti-abolitionist feelings in Utica and New York City indicate great interest by New Yorkers in slavery and the status of blacks during the 1820s.²⁶

In this environment, the Book of Mormon registered its opposition to slavery. It was "against [Nephite] law" to hold slaves (Alma 27:9; Mosiah 2:13). Thus in contrast to Old Testament peoples, the Nephites refused to enslave those less favored than themselves—namely, the dark Lamanites. "Neither do we desire to bring anyone to the yoke of bondage" (Alma 44:2).²⁷ In fact, the idolatrous Lamanites were the ones who practiced

22. P. J. Staudenraus, *The African Colonization Movement 1816–65* (New York, 1961), 1–142.

23. Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); William W. Freeling, *Prelude to Civil War* (New York, 1965).

24. Edgar J. McManus, *A History of Negro Slavery in New York* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 174–79; Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 303.

25. McManus, *History of Negro Slavery*, 187; Benson, *Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 8, 10, 303, 315, 318.

26. Benson, *Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 301–3; Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 76, 81; McManus, *History of Negro Slavery*, 186; Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

27. See also Mosiah 2:13; Alma 27:9. It is interesting to compare such Book of Mormon prohibitions with those portions of the Old Testament condoning the holding of slaves by God's chosen people and the rules to be followed in such slaveholding. See Genesis 14:14, 24:34, 30:43; Exodus 20:17, 21:2–32; Leviticus 25:39–55; 2 Samuel 8:2, 6, 14; 1 Chronicles 18:2, 6, 13; Proverbs 29–30.

slavery and made repeated efforts to enslave the “civilized” Nephites (Mosiah 7:15; Alma 43:29). Lamanite slaveholding was cited as additional proof of this people’s ferocious and wicked nature (Alma 50:22). At the same time Nephite resistance to these dark-skinned slaveholders was described as a struggle for freedom from “bondage” and “slavery” (Alma 42:45–49, 48:10–11, 53:17). While such antislavery attitudes stood in sharp contrast to those Old Testament teachings that approved or at least tolerated slaveholding among certain “chosen peoples,” they conformed to the prevailing antislavery attitudes in Joseph Smith’s upstate New York environment during the 1820s.²⁸

As for the role and place of blacks generally, Joseph Smith’s book did not directly address this issue but seemed to allude to it. Smith’s using the term “black” interchangeably with “red” to describe various dark-skinned peoples indicates a possible dislike of contemporary blacks.²⁹ At one point Smith discussed the unrighteous behavior of Cain, a Biblical counterfigure, labeled both by certain Latter-day Saints and by some non-Mormon Americans as the direct ancestor of black people (Hel. 6:27; Ether 8:15).³⁰ In addition, Joseph Smith’s interest in blacks was apparently reflected in his Book of Mormon description of a people known as the Jaredites.³¹ According to Smith this people migrated to the Western Hemisphere and built up a civilization, but like the Nephites, they died out because of their unrighteousness. The rise and fall of this nation occurred before the later arrival of the first Nephites. Whereas Joseph Smith carefully described the Hebraic ethnic background of Nephi and those who had arrived later, he was vague in describing the racial origins of the Jaredites. He did, however, point out that the Jaredites had originally lived in a region near the Tower

28. Cross, *The Burned-Over District*, 217–26.

29. Compare Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 5:21, with Alma 3:13. However, this same work also uses the terms “dark” or “darkness” on four occasions: 1 Nephi 12:23; Jacob 3:9; Alma 3:6; Mormon 5:15; and the term “filthiness” three times: Jacob 3:5, 9, 10 to describe these same people.

30. According to Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), a few Americans during the colonial and early national period attempted to link Cain to contemporary blacks. But such efforts were not so prominent as attempts to link the contemporary blacks to Ham, the son of Noah. See Jordan, 242, 416, as compared with 17–18, 35–37, 41–43, 200–201.

31. This discussion was a digression from the main text. The Book of Mormon narrative was primarily concerned with the activities of the Nephites and Lamanites. See Ether 1–5.

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of Babel and later in the Valley of Nimrod (Ether 1:3, 5, 33, 2:1). These areas were identified in at least one later Mormon account as regions inhabited by ancestors of the contemporary black.³²

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