

Second-Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality

Matthew L. Harris

Oxford University Press (Jul 1, 2024)

Hardcover \$39.99 (488pp)

978-0-19-769571-5

Matthew L. Harris's exposé of one religion's role in US race relations, *Second-Class Saints* covers an ill-understood episode in Mormon history.

The book charts the history of Mormonism's infamous "priesthood ban," a prohibition that prevented Black members from achieving full parity with their peers until 1978, addressing its deep spiritual implications: it barred Black members from serving on missions, entering Mormon temples, and participating in the "sealing ritual" meant to bind families together in the afterlife. Harris details and critiques the disturbing religious justifications that generations of church leaders used to explain the ban, including the long-standing claim that "Black people bore a biblical curse," tying them to conservative Mormons' fears of interracial marriage and desegregation. At each stage of this fraught history, Harris champions the Mormons (both Black and white) who petitioned for justice, often risking excommunication to do so.

What could be a parochial subject is freshened by connections drawn between these events and recognizable social and cultural shifts. Mormonism's shifting relationship with the NAACP, the civil rights movement, and the long unraveling of segregationist policies across the US are covered alongside psychological profiles of distraught Mormon leaders on both sides of the priesthood question. In this book, otherwise obscure figures like Hugh B. Brown become moral and intellectual powerhouses.

The cyclical and halting nature of the events in question frustrates the book's progression at times. Indeed, the documentary record of the priesthood ban is replete with turnabouts, false promises, and anticlimactic moments; the book's middle section stagnates as a result. But a payoff comes with the story of how the church's biggest holdouts (apostles Bruce R. McConkie and Ezra Taft Benson) transformed into unlikely agents for reform.

Comprehensive and humane, *Second-Class Saints* is a history book in which American race and religion intersect.

ISAAC RANDEL (July / August 2024)

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