

In our wandering through the black-Mormon milieu, it becomes hard not to wonder when—or if—Mormon leaders in fact led the Mormon people. The conventional scholarship on the essence of leadership has, as Heifetz has observed, used influence as “the mark of leadership.” By this model, a “leader gets people to accept his vision, and . . . if something goes wrong, the fault lies with the leader.” This model of leadership is an oversimplification, Heifetz argues. It is the duty of the leader not merely to give directives to community—to which they respond with a rigid goose-step. Leadership requires “giving clarity and articulation to a community’s guiding values.”²⁹ And one need not hold the prophetic mantle to find success in this responsibility.

Leonard Arrington has warned Mormon historians to be aware of “the unanimity bias”—the “notion that Mormon society has, from the earliest years, been characterized by concert in thought and behavior, by cooperation, concord, and consensus.”³⁰ On racial issues, it took nearly a century before significant push-back against the consensus developed; the degree of unanimity in the Saints’ position is shocking. Until the mid-twentieth century, few Saints made the effort to dissent on racial issues. Factions and dissenters had mobilized based on the claims of visionaries, capitalists, and fundamentalists. A paltry few of these voices based their dissent on a desire for racial equality. Indeed, the most notable group to dissent based on racial issues expressed concerns that Church leaders had erred in granting blacks the priesthood in 1978.

This volume seeks to explore the story of blacks and Mormonism through an intimate lens, focusing not only on the experiences of Church leaders but also the ordinary Latter-day Saint: the day laborer nervous about his African ancestry, the West African woman establishing her own “Mormon” congregation, the Pat Boone-loving Mormon missionary in Africa, the death-defying explorer, John M. Goddard, ruminating on his affection for African dance, and the Black Panther musing on the Mormons’ wasted potential. Robert Orsi has argued that religion “comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with realities of everyday life.”³¹ This drama played in several theatres: West Africa, the United States, Brazil, and South Africa. This volume seeks to explore the story of blacks and Mormonism through an intimate lens in each of these locales. Race was both a spoken and lived experience. The Mormon people witnessed it, felt it, and absorbed it. But for the Mormon people, racism was also a conscious decision—and one that exacted a heavy toll during their epoch in the wilderness.

29. *Ibid.*, 23.

30. Leonard Arrington, “The Search for Truth and Meaning in Mormon History,” 7.

31. Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” 3–21.

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