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Neither White Nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church

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During the turbulent 1960s and 1970s no issue so vexed the Mormon church and its members as the categorical denial of the priesthood to black males. This subservient status of blacks in Mormon life and thought became a matter of national attention and internal stress. Leaders and members who are troubled by this paradox in a religion that had suffered its share of discrimination, and was otherwise committed to Christian ethics, scrambled for their scriptures and histories to explain what had become an acutely painful reality. There were those who found justification in Old Testament passages and in the Pearl of great Price. Others, reading such Book of Mormon passages as II Nephi 26:33, found reason to believe-or hope-that the church's position was not rooted in doctrine. Those who searched the historical record found as many questions as answers. The denial of priesthood to blacks was easily traced to the era of Brigham Young, but evidence for the proscription in Joseph Smith's time was hardly convincing. In the ensuing years, some loyal members of the church urged leadership to reconsider the prevailing priesthood policy. At the same time, the Mormon community was the object of increasingly disdainful attacks from other sectors of the American community, as they too became more sensitive to the injustices of racial discrimination. A serious reassessment began. It was in this environment that Lester Bush, Armand Mauss, and Newell Bringhurst moved rationally to the center of the issue and sought, as scholars, to unravel the historical, theological, and sociological threads of the dilemma. Their articles, published in "Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought" from 1967 to 1981 are such an enduring interest that the editorial boards of "Dialogue" and Signature Books now deem them worthy of reprinting in this special collection, complemented by introductory and concluding chapters that are published here for the first time. These new essays give perspective to the au...

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