

The literature on Mormon priesthood denial to blacks is extensive, ranging in perspective from militant defense to angry attack. Some of it is popular, some scholarly. But almost all of it is analytical or historical, giving us the view from the top, that is, only providing the vision of either the Church leaders or the scholars.¹ But what of the average Mormon, the "folk", if you will? How did people like you and me or the family across the street feel about their church's attitude towards blacks? And more important, how did they feel about blacks in general?

dark form, a dark cloud or mist, or an overpowering blackness. Frequently the evil spirit of the devil is clothed in black, and in some stories he is black himself.⁵ President John Taylor once said that the black race was preserved through the flood "because it was necessary that the devil should have a representation upon the earth as well as God. . . ."⁶ Given statements like these, it is not surprising to find in Mormon folklore stories like the following:

I had a friend in the Army who had fallen away from the church and was doing things he shouldn't have. One

The Curse of Cain and other Stories: BLACKS IN MORMON FOLKLORE

William A. Wilson
Richard C. Poulsen

Mormon anti-black sentiments are revealed through legends and jokes we tell.

Folklore, that body of legends and anecdotes which people tell about things most important to them, can give us "a people's own unselfconscious picture of themselves."² The problem with using Mormon folklore, however, is that it has been collected with care only during the last few decades. It surely existed in earlier times but unless it made its way into diaries or popular literature, it was mostly lost. Therefore, we will mainly be concerned with Mormon attitudes reflected in folklore in the last twenty years. We shall look principally at two kinds of lore: legends, those stories which the teller generally regards to be true, and jokes, stories not considered true but deriving nevertheless from deeply felt needs.

Legends are important, anthropologists tell us, not just because they reflect a society's dominant concerns and values, but also because they serve as a charter, or warrant, or justification for belief and as a historical precedent for action. From them we learn what we should believe and how we should behave.

For example, many Mormons believe that a black skin is the result of a curse placed on Cain and his descendants. Black is thus associated with evil, an association strengthened by our legends. One of the stories current among nineteenth-century Mormons was that when people apostasized from the Church their skin color darkened.³ Inversely, today some tales tell us that when blacks join the Church their skin lightens.⁴ The many stories circulating in the Church about experiences with evil spirits or the devil further strengthen the association of black with evil. These stories speak of a dark power, a

night while he was in the barracks (he slept on the bottom bunk) he felt the presence of something evil. Inside the barracks was pitch black, blacker than inside a cave, real black. This sensation of his was great and he opened his eyes. Right there in the midst of blackness he could see plainer than day an even blacker form in the image of a man nearing his bunk. He began to pray and when he opened his eyes again from prayer the thing was gone.

There was a missionary who wanted a manifestation of . . . Christ, to strengthen his testimony. He thought the easiest way to get this would be through the Devil—because if there is a Devil then there has to be a Christ. He prayed for several hours to the Devil for a sign. His companion who was down the hall heard his screams, and when he went to see what was the matter he found his companion dead on the floor—white as a ghost obviously dead from shock. He ran to the window to see what had caused this and saw a black figure riding off on a black horse and laughing hysterically.

Some stories tell not of the devil, but of Cain, who also appears as a black man. As early as 1835, Apostle David Patten claimed to have encountered Cain while on a mission in Tennessee.⁷ Today Cain stories still circulate. In a typical example, missionaries tracting a white section of a town in Georgia were surprised when "a huge black Negro came to the door and hurled obscenities at them. His mein was hideous, and the missionaries left, much frightened." Their mission president later told them that the man had been Cain, that the town was very wicked, and that they should no longer labor there.

We are not arguing that Mormons have considered all