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## A Pilgrim's Faith

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# A PILGRIM'S FAITH

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Jared Riddick

Review of Russell Stevenson, *Black Mormon: The Story of Elijah Ables*. (self-published, 2014), 140 pp., 14.95.

*Abstract: The history of the African-American community and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been a confused one since the Church's early days. Few blacks joined the fledgling group, and those that united with the Saints met with a mixed reception. This short biography by historian Russell Stevenson is the story of one of these pioneering souls, Elijah Ables, who was also the first black priesthood holder.*

Elijah Ables is a mystery for Latter-day Saints, from his life down to the spelling of his name.<sup>1</sup> His story largely disappeared from Mormon consciousness, at least until the last few years. In this short volume, Russell Stevenson has reconstructed the life of this “pilgrim.” And it is one that all members of the Church should be familiar with, not only because of Ables’s fascinating position in the early days of the Restoration but also for the attitudes and diligence that he exhibited in a church and culture that seemingly wished to reject him. Ables alters the narrative built around the Mormon priesthood ban, his existence defying both the historical and doctrinal theories that built up around it.

It should be noted that this book is self-published and that occasional spelling and grammatical errors are present throughout. These are minor and should not cast a negative pall on the quality of the author’s scholarship. Stevenson has presented information from truly fascinating primary sources, many of them unused until now, and as he points out,

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1 Several variants — *Abel*, *Able*, *Ables* — exist. Stevenson uses *Ables*, as do I for the sake of uniformity.

we cannot truly “understand ... Elijah Ables merely by cataloging a series of Joseph Smith or Brigham Young quotes. ... It takes a village to exclude a child” (p. ii).

To that end, the author has reconstructed Ables’s environment, both political and religious, in an effort to help us. In our quest, we must “seek to understand not only Elijah Ables the man but also the world he experienced” (p. iv).

Stevenson was able to provide much of what is available on the early life of Ables. There is little to be found here, through no fault of the author’s. Primary sources listing the names of African-Americans, except for slave transactions, were the exception rather than the rule. In addition, at this point in the nineteenth century, the federal census didn’t record the names of non-heads of households.<sup>2</sup> He was likely born a slave somewhere in western Maryland,<sup>3</sup> to a white father and a slave mother (pp. 1, 3).

The known textual record indicates that knowable history of Ables begins with his membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, when he was baptized by an early missionary in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1832 (p. 3). Stevenson does an excellent job of portraying early Mormonism’s struggle with how it would handle African-American converts and potential priesthood ordinations.

As Stevenson points out, “Joseph Smith’s Mormonism looks more like an awkwardly-formed coalition than a social movement” (p. 10). No collection of quotes can do justice to a uniquely Mormon position on race in the early days of the Church. No such position existed because of the various positions that Joseph Smith negotiated in order to preserve the fragile church and gospel that he preached. Stevenson summarized the conflict that the young prophet faced. “Revelation bound Joseph to ordain Ables with one hand; politics required that he defend slavery with the other” (p. 11). The political and racial tensions of the day forced a dichotomy. Abolitionists and anti-slavery advocates were assaulted and even murdered (pp. 12–14). Attempting to publicly hold a middle ground on slavery and rights for blacks became nigh impossible.

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2 As Stevenson points out, this changed in 1850; however, this is too late for the purposes of exploring Ables’s early days. While some local censuses would record the names of non-head of households, these exceptions were few and far between.

3 Stevenson tells us that Elijah was variously identified as both a quadroon and an octoroon, outmoded terms that refer to someone that was either of one-fourth or one-eighth black ancestry, respectively.

Stevenson summarizes many of the events that took place in the decade wherein Ables was baptized. The tensions of the 1830s were an unfortunate foreshadowing of the Civil War that would break out in fewer than thirty years. One of my criticisms of Stevenson's book comes with this limited summary, though it was relatively unavoidable, considering the scope of his volume is focused on Elijah Ables himself. The political, social, and economic tumult of the 1830s and 1840s are too complicated for a full picture of them to be possible in a short treatment.<sup>4</sup> That being said, the author does an admirable and generally effective job of communicating how they related to Ables directly.<sup>5</sup>

Ables emerged from this bubbling miasma of attitudes and beliefs. While he and Joseph Smith would become friends, that friendship wasn't enough to engender trust for him among all the leaders in the early church (p. 6).<sup>6</sup> While Elijah Ables's ordination took place, it did so despite the personal feelings of Zebedee Coltrin, who claimed to have ordained Ables. (pp. 6–7).

Elijah Ables would serve as a missionary three times, beginning in upstate New York and southern Ontario. Stevenson describes Ables's preaching as distinctive but unpolished and provides us a fascinating window into his early style through the testimony of one of Ables's converts: "[T]he Spirit rested upon him and he preached a most powerful sermon. It was such a Gospel sermon as I had never heard before, and I felt in my heart that he was one of God's chosen ministers" (p. 18).

Ables's missionary labors were perhaps his most distinguishing times. Stevenson begins his book by claiming that Ables's "was a pilgrim's faith. ... He represented his faith most poignantly when he was on his own." Stevenson reconstructs these times well, despite gaps in the documentary evidence. As Ables's missionary experiences are related, one gains a greater sense for the type of man than could be otherwise grasped. His three missions were by no means easy. There were harsh disagreements with his fellow missionaries, doctrinal misunderstandings, very real

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4 For an expanded look at the events of the 1830s and 1840s, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848*, The Oxford History of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

5 For more information on these political events and as to how they impacted African-American Latter-day Saints, see Russell W. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830–2013* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014).

6 Stevenson speculates that "[i]t is not improbable that Joseph [saw] a little of himself in the long, black wayfarer."

threats to his life, and apostasy and the formation of splinter groups during the Succession Crisis (pp. 18–27).

At the time of the Prophet Joseph's death in June 1844, Ables was serving his second mission, in Cincinnati, Ohio. Stevenson shows how Ables served as a true pillar to the church in a community that "became a microcosm for the troubles threatening to rip the Church apart" (p. 34). Strangism and Rigdonism were becoming prevalent among the members there, and Ables firmly supported the Twelve. As Stevenson points out, he even preferred charges against members disloyal to them. "Ever unyielding, Ables had little patience for people seeking to tear down church leadership" (p. 35).

It is unfortunate that, while Ables was serving in the east and helping to hold the church together there, a hardening of attitudes among the Twelve against black members would begin. This came largely because of the apostasy and actions of one man, William McCary, while in Winter Quarters (pp. 40–49). When Ables and his family joined the Saints in the Salt Lake Valley in late 1853, it was a different community than the one he had left (p. 51).

Stevenson does an excellent job in telling us about the balance of Ables's life. It would have been a frustrating period — indeed those feelings vibrantly emerge from the pages — undoubtedly difficult for a man who had served the church for many years. Ables would eventually pass away from illness while serving a third mission at an advanced age in December 1884 (p. 64).

The story of Elijah Ables is one that should be known by every Latter-day Saint. His loyalty and dedication in the face of adversity are an inspiration and example to those who find themselves feeling isolated and cut off today. In this short and highly recommended little volume, Stevenson has brought an admirable and neglected figure of early Church history alive for a modern audience.

**Jared Riddick** graduated from Brigham Young University-Idaho with a Bachelor of Arts in History Education, with an accompanying minor in English Education. He is currently the archivist for Book of Mormon Central, based in Springville, UT. His areas of academic interest include the Book of Mormon and the American Civil War.



