

A Work in Progress

The Latter-day Saint Struggle with Blacks and the Priesthood

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Introduction

In a prior essay, I discussed the theological underpinnings of the Mormon community's attempt to establish itself as an extension and continuation of biblical Israel. Absent from that analysis was consideration of the cultural, sociological and "real-world" implications of this theology – particularly, LDS cultural understanding and conception of prophecy and the nature of the prophetic calling.¹ Mormons view both current and past Church leadership in the same way that they view biblical prophets and apostles – as men who literally commune with God, receive and understand His will, and direct the Church accordingly. Mormons maintain that God will not allow modern prophets to "lead the church astray or to commit any wrong of so serious a character as to endanger its progress or perpetuity."² Consequently, LDS culture often fails to recognize its own struggles – especially those borne out of theological assumption and non-canonical, yet pervasive beliefs. Often, LDS culture assumes that if a modern prophet or apostle teaches a particular doctrine or sets in place a specific practice that such doctrines or practices must be God-sanctioned because they fell from the lips of one whom Mormons believe, holds a prophetic calling. This is especially true in the case of past LDS Church policies towards those of African descent. From 1852 to 1978, blacks could not be ordained to priesthood office within the LDS Church due to a practice instituted by Brigham Young and later buoyed up by an LDS culture unsure of how to respond to teachings of a past prophet in light of changing circumstances. These cultural struggles may be borne out of faulty Mormon assumptions about the nature of prophecy and the

¹ I specify cultural understanding here because there are significant differences between LDS theological and canonical conceptions of prophets and prophecy, and the LDS cultural dynamic.

² Cannon, George Q, *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, ed. Jerrald L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987) 183

prophetic calling in both ancient in modern times. By examining both the history of Mormonism's struggle with blacks and priesthood authority, as well as similar struggles found in biblical accounts of the Apostles, we can understand the fluid and somewhat jagged nature of prophecy, and gain a better understanding of how modern LDS culture can best interact with its own prophetic tradition. This essay will focus on race relations in LDS culture -- an issue which has been profoundly affected by how Mormons interpret both the authority of their own history and also, the authority of their prophetic leaders both past and present.

The Priesthood Ban

Joseph Smith, as well as most early converts to Mormonism were from New England and therefore, held mostly abolitionist or anti-slavery views.³ These views caused significant problems for the Church in Missouri as allegations were made that the new Mormon settlers were “tampering” with slaves. Clay County Missouri residents feared that “Mormons planned to introduce free blacks into the county” and insisted that the Church would be “happiest living alone in unsettled frontier regions.”⁴ In response, editorials appeared in Church-run newspapers which were openly critical of blanket abolitionism and generally acknowledged and mirrored the racist and prejudiced attitudes common during this period.⁵

It has been well-established that Joseph Smith never implemented a priesthood ban on blacks. In fact, “the exclusion of black men from the priesthood was publicly

³ Bush, Lester E Jr., *Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview*, in “Neither White Nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church”, ed. Lester E. Bush Jr. and Armand L. Mauss (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1984) 55-56

⁴ Bushman, Richard L, *Rough Stone Rolling*, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2005) 327-328

⁵ Bush, 57

stated only after his death.”⁶ Joseph Smith allowed blacks full access to both the Kirtland, Ohio and Nauvoo, Illinois temples, the Church’s most sacred buildings. In fact, “nothing was done during Joseph’s lifetime to withhold priesthood from black members” and Joseph was aware of, and seemingly approved of Elijah Abel, an early black convert, being ordained to the office of Seventy in the Melchizedek Priesthood.⁷ Accordingly the “egalitarian motif generally found in early Mormonism originally applied to priesthood access as well.”⁸

With the exception of the essays published under his name in 1836, at the height of fears of abolitionism and the need for pragmatism in Missouri, Joseph Smith was consistently in favor of measured emancipation and relative equality. Included in his platform when running for President in 1844, were calls for “compensated emancipation” wherein the Federal government would pay slaveowners for the release of their slaves.⁹ The years immediately following the murder of Joseph Smith produced significant changes in the way Mormons came to view the lineage of blacks and the impact this lineage had on black Mormon access to priesthood ordination.

It was generally accepted during this time in American history that black slaves were ancestors of the biblical Cain and therefore carried his “curse.” This “curse of Cain” was used to justify and explain the enslavement of Africans.¹⁰ It is no surprise that both Joseph Smith and his successor Brigham Young,:

⁶ Bushman, 289

⁷ Mauss, Armand L., *All Abraham’s Children, Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003) 213

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Bushman, 289

¹⁰ Bush, 59

“like their contemporary Abraham Lincoln, would be considered ‘racists’ by today’s norms because they all believed in the natural and inherent inferiority of Africans and their descendants and because they favored public policies that would ratify such belief in more or less benign ways.”¹¹

Joseph Smith “attributed black social and intellectual deficits largely to environmental influences, whereas Young found such deficits mainly in the divine curse placed on the entire ‘lineage of Cain.’”¹²

The Curse of Cain

In 1852, Brigham Young officially instituted the policy that “any man having one drop of the seed of [Cain]... in him cannot hold the priesthood” and “did so on his own authority, without reference to any known precedent from Joseph Smith or anyone else.”¹³ In the years following, doctrinal and scriptural explanations were developed to fit the policy of priesthood denial to blacks. Some claimed authority for the practice by stating that Joseph Smith had taught the doctrine.¹⁴ The biggest problem with this assertion was that Elijah Abel had been ordained as a Seventy during Joseph Smith’s lifetime and all indications are that the Prophet was fully aware of his priesthood status. Ultimately, Church leadership concluded that Elijah Abel had been “ordained before the word of the Lord was fully understood.”¹⁵

Others claimed that canonical support for the priesthood ban could be found in the Pearl of Great Price’s *Book of Abraham*, where descendants of Ham are said to have been denied priesthood authority because they descended from Cain. Notably, “Joseph

¹¹ Mauss, 214

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid, 215

¹⁴ Bush, 76-77

¹⁵ Bush, 77 – quoting Minutes of the Council of the Twelve 4 June 1879 from the Bennion Papers

[Smith] never commented on the Abraham text or implied it denied priesthood to blacks.”¹⁶ Yet, this idea persisted and became the generally accepted canonical rationale for the priesthood ban.¹⁷ By the early 1900’s, several Apostles began writing extensively on this subject and explained the policy in these doctrinal terms. Some LDS scholars have provided insightful commentary on the logical problems with this particular reading of the *Book of Abraham*.¹⁸

The question of blacks and priesthood authority was very much settled from 1915 to the 1950’s. During this period, the priesthood ban was very consistent with American biases against blacks in general. The rise of the Civil Rights movement as well as the significant growth of the Church in areas such as Brazil however, forced Church

¹⁶ Bushman, 289

¹⁷ As a corollary to this interpretation, some in the Mormon hierarchy, most notably B.H. Roberts began to explain this seeming inequity in terms of what Mormons refer to as the “preexistence” or pre-mortal world. See Abraham 3. In essence, those who were born under the “Curse of Cain” were those spirits who had been less-valiant in the pre-mortal world and thus, were not entitled to the privileges of the priesthood.

¹⁸ Bush, 81 “When fully developed, the Pearl of Great Price argument went as follows: Cain became black after murdering his brother Abel; among his descendants were the people of Canaan who warred on their neighbors, and were all identified as black. Ham, Noah’s son, married Egyptus, a descendant of the Cain-Canaan lineage; Cain’s descendants had been denied the priesthood, and thus Ham’s descendants were also denied the priesthood. This was confirmed in the case of Pharaoh, a descendant of Ham and Egyptus, and of the Canaanites, and who was denied the priesthood; the modern Negro was of this Cain-Ham-lineage, and therefore was not eligible for the priesthood.

Actually a careful reading of the Pearl of Great Price reveals that the books of Moses and Abraham fall far short of so explicit an account. Negroes, for instance, are never mentioned. Though Cain’s descendants are identified as black at one point before the Flood, they are never again identified. The people of Canaan are not originally black and are thus unlikely candidates for Cain’s ‘seed.’ There is no explicit statement that Ham’s wife was ‘Egyptus’; rather the account reads that there was a woman ‘who was the daughter of Ham, and the daughter of Egyptus.’ In patriarchal accounts this would not necessarily imply a literal daughter, as individuals are not infrequently referred to as sons or daughters of their grandparents or even more remote ancestors. Within Abraham’s own account an ‘Egyptus’ is later referred to as the ‘daughter of Ham,’ and the Pharaoh who has been identified as ‘Egyptus’ eldest son’ is elsewhere seemingly the son of Noah. Moreover, the book of Moses records that Ham was a man of God prior to the Flood, and that the daughters of the sons of Noah were “fair.” The effort to relate Pharaoh to the antediluvian people of Canaan is especially strained, for in characterizing Pharaoh as a descendant of Egyptus and the ‘Canaanites’ there is no suggestion that this latter group was any other than the people of Canaan descended from Ham’s son, Canaan (who also had been cursed.)”

leadership to seriously reevaluate the Church's position on denying priesthood ordination to blacks.

The Winds of Change

David O. McKay served as President of the Church from 1951 to 1970 and oversaw significant changes to both the priesthood ban policy as well as the theological justifications for maintaining it. McKay was genuinely troubled by the priesthood ban but sincerely believed that the practice had been revealed to his predecessors by the Lord. However, during his presidency, the Church significantly altered both its public and private positions on the matter. For example, in 1949, an official statement on the priesthood ban reiterated the Pearl of Great Price interpretation and used it as justification but by 1969, however, official statements indicated that the policy was to remain in place “for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man.” Under McKay, the Church slowly shifted from dogmatically accepting the priesthood ban practice to a state of relative agnosticism regarding its origins. It seems that church leadership (with notable exceptions discussed below) accepted the ban as revelation while at the same time rejecting the canonical interpretations previously used to support it. By 1970, the First Presidency claimed no canonical basis for denying priesthood ordination to blacks. Rather, it relied on the precedents established by previous church presidents and viewed the practice as being revealed by God. Significantly during the period, certain bureaucratic mechanics of the ban were loosened or removed by David O. McKay as he significantly relaxed priesthood restrictions on those who “may” have had the blood of Cain and even allowed the ordination of a

“young man of know Negro ancestry ... after receiving a patriarchal blessing which did not assign him to a ‘cursed’ lineage.”¹⁹

Some have observed that “the 1950s and 1960s saw a rising wave of criticism against the LDS Church, not only for its racial restrictions on priesthood but also for its seeming reluctance (so the charges went) to back the entire civil rights agenda that was gradually becoming the national orthodoxy.” In response, the Church made several public statements offering its support of the civil right’s movement but continued to be dismayed at the continued criticism of its priesthood restrictions, which it considered to be an “internal” matter. The priesthood ban continued to be very difficult during the 1960s and 1970s as the “church faced an increasingly hostile public relations environment, which was not helpful to its missionary work.”²⁰

During this time, there was serious internal debate regarding the priesthood ban as many, “agreeing with the official church stance that revelation was the only legitimate vehicle for change, still questioned the historical basis for the priesthood ban against blacks, and especially the folklore that had traditionally been marshaled to support it.”²¹ One such critic was Hugh B. Brown, an Apostle and First Councilor in the Church’s most significant governing body, the First Presidency. Brown had been on record since 1963 in favor of removing the priesthood ban. In 1969 shortly after Stanford University refused to participate with BYU in athletic competition due to its racial policies, Brown wrote in his personal journal:

¹⁹ Bush,

²⁰ Mauss, 218

²¹ Mauss, Armand L. *The Fading of Pharaoh’s Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban Against Blacks in the Mormon Church*, in “Neither White Nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1984) 154

“Personally I doubt if we can maintain or sustain ourselves in the position which we seem to have adopted but which has *no justification as far as the scriptures are concerned* so far as I know. I think we are going to have to change our decision on that. The President says that it can come only by revelation. If that be true, then it will come in due course. I think it is one of the most serious problems confronting us because of course it affects the millions of colored people.”²² (emphasis added)

Other Apostles shared Brown’s sentiments and in November 1969, “Brown was able to get a proposal allowing full priesthood for blacks approved by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.”²³ Harold B. Lee, a senior member of the Quorum who was out of town and absent from this approval process, “rejected the decision on his return” and later “convinced the [the Quorum] to rescind its vote.” Reluctantly, Brown agreed to “sign a [First Presidency] statement [authored by Lee] which reaffirmed the priesthood restriction on blacks.”²⁴

Following the release of this statement, Brown “told a San Francisco newspaper reporter that the Church’s priesthood ban against blacks ‘will change in the not too distant future.’”²⁵ Relatively speaking, Brown turned out to be correct.

The 1978 Revelation

Upon David O. McKay’s death in 1970, Joseph Fielding Smith, a conservative, became Church president and reaffirmed the priesthood ban. Upon Smith’s death, Harold B. Lee, also a relative conservative, took the helm and also reaffirmed the policy. When Spencer W. Kimball, a longtime member of the Quorum of the Twelve and an apostle

²² Quinn, D. Michael, *The Mormon Hierarchy Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books 1997)

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²³ Quinn, 14

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Quinn, 15

very sympathetic to the Hugh B. Brown line of thinking, became president however, the Church began to rapidly move towards complete removal of the priesthood restrictions.

By this time, pressure from outside groups and institutions had tapered off significantly as “the Church was beginning to appear unassailable and impervious to all forms of outside pressure” in regard to the priesthood ban.²⁶ As early as 1974, Kimball began to focus on the issue after deciding to build a new temple in Brazil and recognizing that “it was a matter of grave concern to the mission presidents and regional representatives who had served recently in Brazil... that racial intermixing for hundreds of years in that country [made] the issue of priesthood eligibility an impossible tangle.”²⁷ By early 1978, Kimball began to persuade his colleagues in the First Presidency to reconsider the priesthood ban. After hours of prayer and meetings in the Salt Lake Temple, both the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles announced that the Lord “by revelation has confirmed that the promised day has come when every faithful, worthy man in the Church may receive the holy priesthood... without regard for race or color.”²⁸ Little known by the outside world or church membership in general:

“The new revelation was not as sudden a reversal of the status quo as it may have seemed. The stage had clearly been set. Many trends had merged into a common strain toward greater parsimony and ever greater limitation on the impact and implications of the traditional priesthood ban. These trends had the effect of preparing both the leaders and the membership of the Church for the new revelation.”²⁹

Some have asked “why didn’t the revelation come earlier, before all the public relations damage was done?” Church critics have claimed that the revelation came when

²⁶ Mauss, *Pharaoh’s Curse* 158

²⁷ *Ibid*, 168

²⁸ See Appendix A

²⁹ Mauss, *Pharaoh’s Curse*, 168

“the progressive forces of the outside world applied sufficient pressure.” This explanation, however, “betrays ignorance of the complex dynamics operating within the Church during the 1960s and 1970s and of certain crucial Mormon ecclesiastical imperatives.” Perhaps most importantly, “it ignores the several years’ respite from external pressure which the Church had generally enjoyed before 1978 and which, indeed, gave the new revelation much of its quality of surprise.”³⁰ Armand Mauss eloquently explains:

“Prophets in the Mormon tradition do not sit around waiting for revelations. Like Church leaders at all levels, they grapple pragmatically with the day-to-day demands and problems that go with their callings, presumably striving to stay as close as possible to the promptings of the Holy Spirit on a routine basis. They are not infallible, and they sometimes make mistakes. They carry the initiative in their communication with Deity, and when they need special guidance they are supposed to ask for it. Even this inquiry is often a petition for confirmation of a tentative decision already produced by much individual and collective deliberation (D&C 9:7-9). That means that prophets are left to do a lot on their own; it means, too, that receiving a special revelation may depend on previously identifying an appropriate solution.

All of this leads to the point that the timing of the new revelation on priesthood eligibility was dependent in large part on the initiative of President Kimball himself, who had to come to a realization that the Church had a serious problem; then he had to ‘study... out in his mind’ a proposed solution to the problem and only then petition the Lord for confirmation of the proposal. Bruce R. McConkie, a direct participant in the process of collective affirmation that followed President Kimball’s own solitary spiritual sojourn, described the president’s approach very much in these terms, strongly implying furthermore, that he was the first president of the Church to have taken the black problem that far. If so, we already have much of the explanation for the timing of the end of the [priesthood ban].”³¹

³⁰ Ibid, 171

³¹ Ibid

Implications

Nearly 30 years after the 1978 revelation which was expected to “bring an end to the most important controversy in Mormondom during the second half of the twentieth century” the current church president, Gordon B. Hinckley is still facing questions about the Church’s former policy which suggests “that the issue [is] not entirely dead.”³² The church still faces accusations of racial prejudice and although the “the policy itself has been overturned, the folklore for rationalizing it [has] lingered on at the grassroots, despite its manifest irrelevance to contemporary church life.” Especially troubling is that “the notion that blacks were descendants of Cain...has taken on a life of its own as a post hoc ‘explanation’ for the historical origin of the priesthood restriction.” In the absence of an official repudiation, these ideas are “still promulgated by local leaders and teachers, including some in the Church Education System and even on the BYU faculty.”³³

Unfortunately:

“Even if religious myths about premortal failings, descent from Cain, and the like, have diminished in the lore and collective memory of Mormons, any residue can be expected still to generate prejudicial and discriminatory outcomes in the thinking and behavior of white Mormons. Authoritative writings by earlier church leaders, as well as recurring anecdotes at the grassroots level, suggest that some of this residue remains and continues to rankle relationships *within* the church, even if its impact is minimal on the outside. It is for that reason that President Hinckley’s call for the issue simply to be relegated to the past, without some sort of explicit and official disavowal, seems unduly optimistic to many black members.”³⁴

While there has never been an “official” repudiation of doctrines taught by church leaders in the past, several Apostles and church presidents have made strong statements

³² Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 231

³³ *Ibid*, 241

³⁴ Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 261-262

encouraging church members to distance themselves from those past teachings. For example, in late 1978, following the priesthood ban policy change, Bruce R. McConkie encouraged church members to:

“Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that has now come into the world.”³⁵

In April 2006, President Gordon B. Hinckley stated:

“Racial strife still lifts its ugly head. I am advised that even right here among us there is some of this. I cannot understand how it can be. It seemed to me that we all rejoiced in the 1978 revelation given President Kimball. I was there in the temple at the time that that happened. There was no doubt in my mind or in the minds of my associates that what was revealed was the mind and the will of the Lord.

Now I am told that racial slurs and denigrating remarks are sometimes heard among us. I remind you that no man who makes disparaging remarks concerning those of another race can consider himself a true disciple of Christ. Nor can he consider himself to be in harmony with the teachings of the Church of Christ. How can any man holding the Melchizedek Priesthood arrogantly assume that he is eligible for the priesthood whereas another who lives a righteous life but whose skin is of a different color is ineligible?

Throughout my service as a member of the First Presidency, I have recognized and spoken a number of times on the diversity we see in our society. It is all about us, and we must make an effort to accommodate that diversity.

Let us all recognize that each of us is a son or daughter of our Father in Heaven, who loves all of His children.

Brethren, there is no basis for racial hatred among the priesthood of this Church. If any within the sound of my voice is inclined to indulge in this, then let him go before the Lord and ask for forgiveness and be no more involved in such.”³⁶

It must be noted that racial prejudice within the Mormon community is no more common than it is in other Christian communities of faith -- so to claim that past LDS teachings on the lineage of Africans leads to higher rates of racism or racist attitudes in

³⁵ McConkie, Bruce R., *All are Alike Unto God* quoted from: <http://www.zionsbest.com/alike.html>

³⁶ Hinckley, Gordon B. *The Need for Greater Kindness*, General Conference Priesthood Session April 2006 <http://www.lds.org/conference/talk/display/0,5232,49-1-602-20,00.html>

Mormonism would be false.³⁷ In fact, in some LDS communities throughout the United States, racism and prejudice is actually less-prevalent than in other Christian congregations in the same region. However, simply having the same or less racism and prejudice than others is irrelevant when trying to create a community centered on Christian teaching, as the Mormons are trying to do. Any racist attitude is unacceptable and therefore, LDS culture would do well to understand potential sources of prejudice and seek to minimize their impact.

Most members of the Church are unaware of the history recounted in the above pages as the Church does little to expose the leadership dynamics at its highest levels. Consequently, many within LDS culture see the General Authorities³⁸ as almost ethereal and fail to recognize that the same dynamics which operate at their local church level also function at the height of church governance. Mormons can completely understand and appreciate an honest disagreement between a Sunday School president and the local Bishop but fail to concede that such disagreements and *human* interactions exist amongst the General Authorities. The reasons for this are complicated and many. Mormon tradition is full of the dramatic visions and supernatural experiences of Joseph Smith and therefore, conceptions of these dramatic encounters with the supernatural are part of the collective Mormon consciousness. In reality, the vast majority of Smith's revelations occurred during the initial stages of his prophetic call and in his later years, Smith rarely spoke of dramatic visions and revelations as the source for authority in church governance.³⁹ Rather, Joseph Smith struggled through church administration very much

³⁷ Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*

³⁸ General Authorities is a term used to describe the First Presidency, Council of Twelve Apostles, and Quorums of the Seventy which preside at the top of the LDS Church hierarchical structure.

³⁹ Bushman, 321

as a human being seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Church presidents since Joseph Smith have rarely claimed direct revelation on church governance of the type Joseph Smith received early in his prophetic career. Still, many Mormons believe that this type of dramatic revelation comes to the current prophet as a matter of course as he, and the Council of the Twelve, administer the affairs of the Church. While such supernatural events are possible, and according to LDS history, have in fact occurred on many occasions, they are simply not part of church governance and policy as many Mormons assume. These types of assumptions lead to a view of the Church president as infallible and create a near apotheosis of the Mormon prophet in the minds of many Latter-day Saints. In this context, it is easy to understand how Latter-day Saints may struggle with the idea that their prophetic leadership may make “mistakes” or “misunderstand” doctrinal principles from time to time.

Therefore, an official repudiation of past teaching regarding the lineage of Africans may be difficult for some in the LDS Church (both leaders and members) to accept. As explained, LDS Church members generally do not conceive of revelation in the way in which Armand Mauss has explained it (see above). Additionally, many members are uncomfortable with the idea that the priesthood ban, as well as the doctrinal teachings developed to support it, may have been borne out of cultural and societal pressures and conditions, rather than from a direct revelation. Further, they may also assume that if the policy was not divinely inspired, the Lord would have made it clear through a revelation to the prophet and president of the Church well before 1978. Such thinking ignores the contrast between passivity and the proactive approach employed by President Kimball in receiving revelation on the priesthood ban. Also, this type of

thinking ignores the humanity of prophets and apostles in their struggle to first discover the will of God, and then teach it to people of the Church.

A New Testament Parallel

The New Testament provides us with some interesting parallels to the modern Mormon struggle with questions of race and lineage. The early church experienced similar questions in its formative years as the Apostles grappled with the question of Gentiles and their status as both potential and actual members of God's covenant community.

During his ministry, Jesus seemingly instructed the Disciples to constrain their missionary efforts to “the lost sheep of Israel” and to avoid going “among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans.”⁴⁰ Some have interpreted the phrase “among the Gentiles” to mean a geographic and not an ethnic restriction, however, this reading becomes problematic when considering Jesus' interactions with Gentiles later in Matthew. For example, Jesus ignores a Canaanite woman following after him and the disciples as she shouts: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Jesus finally answers her saying “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” and that “it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”⁴¹ Yet, because of her faith, Jesus grants her request and her “daughter was healed instantly.”⁴²

⁴⁰ Matt 10:5-6

⁴¹ Matt 15:24-46

⁴² Matt 15:28

In another episode, a Roman centurion approached Jesus saying “Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.”⁴³ In response, Jesus offers to enter his home and cure the servant but is rebuffed by the centurion who states “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed.” In response Jesus proclaims that someday, “many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” thus indicating that the Gospel message and consequent salvation would, at some future point, be open to all. After extolling the faith of this Gentile, Jesus tells that centurion to “Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.” Jesus’ interaction and ministry also involved other Gentiles, most notably the Samaritan woman at the well to whom Jesus testifies of his role as divine Messiah.⁴⁴

From both Jesus’ actions and words in dealing with various Gentiles, it seems that restricting the Gospel to Jews only during his temporal ministry was the ideal but certainly not a rigid legalistic requirement. When circumstance and faith allowed, Jesus ministered to both Jew and Gentile alike.

Following his resurrection, Jesus commissioned the disciples to take the gospel to “all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”⁴⁵ Yet, despite this great commission and the fact that Peter and the rest of the twelve had seen Jesus personally minister to at least three Gentiles, the early church restricted its ministry and outreach to Jews only; a policy seemingly borne out of a misunderstanding of Jesus’ actions and words.

⁴³ Matt 8:5-13

⁴⁴ John 4

⁴⁵ Matt 28:19-20

In the book of Acts, we read of Cornelius, a “centurion of the Italian Cohort” who was “a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.”⁴⁶ As a result of Cornelius’ devotion, God sent an angel to Cornelius instructing him to “send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter.”⁴⁷ As these men journeyed to Joppa, Peter “saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners.” The sheet contained both “clean” and “unclean” animals as defined by Jewish law. Peter was commanded to “kill and eat” but he refused saying “I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” The Lord responded by instructing Peter “what God has made clean, you must not call profane.”⁴⁸ It is significant that Peter does not understand the full implication of this vision immediately and upon meeting Cornelius says “you know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”⁴⁹ At this point, it seems that Peter understands his initial vision merely as a “green light” for him to associate with Gentiles. Not until Cornelius relates the story of being commanded by an angel to send for Peter, does Peter understand the full meaning of God’s message. After hearing Cornelius’ story, Peter states “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”⁵⁰ Peter goes on to explain his epiphany: “all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” This insight is confirmed as the “Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” Some of Peter’s more

⁴⁶ Acts 10:1-3

⁴⁷ Acts 10:5

⁴⁸ Acts 10:11-15

⁴⁹ Acts 10:28

⁵⁰ Acts 10:34-35

conservative companions were “astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” and Peter then rhetorically asks in the climax of this story “can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” The answer of course, was a resounding no and thus, Peter “ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”⁵¹

This revelation to Peter should not be seen as a new policy meant to supplant a former practice. Rather, Cornelius’ conversion :

“... takes Peter by surprise but not because God decides at the last moment to save an uncircumcised Gentile. In fact, the universal embrace of divine love was promised to Abraham and prophesied by Scripture long before Cornelius was saved. Yet, for all his spiritual authority, Peter still did not ‘get it’; his religious parochialism prompted him to divide people into ‘clean’ (repentant Jews) and ‘unclean’ (uncircumcised Gentiles). God’s redemptive purpose for Gentiles could not be realized unless the apostle changed his mind.”⁵²

Similar sentiments are expressed by Spencer W. Kimball who explains that “the prejudices were in Peter and it took a vision from heaven to help him cast off his bias.”

By refusing to eat “unclean” animals, “Peter expressed his life-long habits and prejudices” but “under the power of a thrice repeated command... Peter’s long-sustained prejudices [finally] gave way.”⁵³

Was Peter any less of a prophet or Apostle because he initially misunderstood the universality of the gospel message? Certainly not. Peter’s sincerity in restricting the gospel message to Jews should not be questioned yet what is significant here is that upon learning, through both vision and reflection, that this policy was not in step with God’s

⁵¹ Acts 10:44-48

⁵² Wall, Robert W., “The Acts of the Apostles” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Vol X*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988) 171

⁵³ Kimball, Spencer W., *Conference Report*, April 1954, Fourth Day Morning Meeting, 104

will, Peter quickly moved to change the policy and invite Gentiles into fellowship within the Christian community.

This transition was not without problems. Certain people within the Jerusalem Christian community known by Paul as the “circumcision faction” were uncomfortable with Gentiles being brought into full fellowship within the church and were teaching that “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”⁵⁴ This faction raised concerns about Gentile converts not being circumcised and not following “the law.” Consequently, a conference was held in Jerusalem to discuss the specific issue of Gentile circumcision and the broader issue of Gentile adherence to the Law of Moses. During this conference, Peter explains that he:

“should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers” and that “God, who knows the human heart, testified to them [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us and by cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.”⁵⁵

According to Peter, the “circumcision faction” was “placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear.” Ultimately, Peter proves to be persuasive and the conference concludes that Gentile converts are not required to be circumcised but rather, “were required to observe those prohibitions of the holiness code that apply to aliens residing in Israel.”⁵⁶ This policy change, while moving the Gentiles closer to full fellowship within the church, still identified them as outsiders and “aliens” to the Jerusalem community.

⁵⁴ Wall, 203 and Acts 15:1

⁵⁵ Acts 15:6-9

⁵⁶ Hays, Richard B., “The Letter to the Galatians”, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Volume XI*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 225-226

This type of legal requirement, for both Jews and Gentiles, was absolutely unacceptable to Paul. In fact, Paul spends considerable time in his various letters distancing himself from the Jerusalem church and establishing his own authority as having come directly from the revelation of Jesus Christ and not from the Jerusalem leadership.⁵⁷ In his letter to the Galatians, Paul openly criticizes the hypocrisy of Cephas (Peter) for refusing to eat at the same table as Gentiles. We read that Paul “opposed him to his face, because [Peter] stood self-condemned.”⁵⁸ Yet, despite their very public disagreements, Paul still recognized Peter’s apostolic calling and authority and did not seek to establish a new church separate from Peter and the Jerusalem leadership. Rather, he engaged in dialogue which eventually brought the various factions into harmony and ultimately strengthened the church.

This struggle over the place of Gentiles within the church illustrates the overwhelming humanity of the apostolic leadership of the New Testament. The New Testament record is almost painfully honest about the leadership dynamics that existed in the early church and we read in both Acts and in the letters of Paul, of the very public and volatile discourse that surrounded important issues in the early church. We see how both Paul and Peter brought their individual personalities, biases and pre-dispositions into theological debates and controversies. We also see how these disparate ideas and their inclusion in the public discourse, eventually led to a church more committed to the universality of God’s love and the message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

⁵⁷ Hays, 224-225

⁵⁸ Galatians 2:11

Conclusion

The same could be said of the modern Mormon Church and its struggle to understand the place of blacks within its priesthood organization. Just like Peter, early Mormon leadership implemented policies which they sincerely believed reflected the will of God. Such policies were based on both the doctrinal and cultural understanding of the day. Over time, as the Church began to encounter difficulties with its policies on priesthood ordination, it engaged in discourse which eventually led to a more complete understanding of God's will through an outpouring and revelation of the Holy Spirit to Spencer W. Kimball. Unfortunately, unlike the New Testament record, the details of this discourse have been all too private. Consequently, ideas that have been long-since abandoned by the church still circulate and surface throughout the general church membership causing concern and consternation. Individual Mormons struggle with how to reconcile seemingly contradictory positions held by modern leadership and past Apostles and Prophets. Rather than view disparate views as contradictions however, Mormons should see these expressions as part of a larger dialogue intended to bring the LDS church closer to God's will for a covenant people. Disagreement, discourse, and humanity do not invalidate prophetic call or in any way devalue the words of an individual prophet. As we can see from both the New Testament and modern Mormon struggles, prophets and prophecy are very much works-in-progress.

Appendix A - Personal Reflections

In this essay I have tried to avoid making definitive statements regarding the divine origin of the LDS Church's priesthood ban as implemented by Brigham Young. I do believe that Brigham Young was a prophet of God but find it unlikely, in light of the historical evidence presented here, that the Lord specifically revealed a priesthood prohibition to him in 1852. It seems much more plausible that Brigham Young was simply caught up in the cultural influences of his day and brought these influences to bear on church policy. However, to be definitive on this matter is impossible. I must concede that the Lord may have initially revealed this policy to Brigham Young and then later rescinded it through Spencer W. Kimball for reasons unknown.

The origins of the priesthood ban, however, are really beside the point of this essay. I write about these cultural struggles because I have experienced them as my own conceptions of LDS doctrine and history have evolved. I remain a believing Latter-day Saint and yet, am completely comfortable with fallible leadership, cultural influence on theological interpretations, occasional missteps and doctrinal misunderstandings. In other words, I have discarded pieces of LDS cultural dogma while keeping my own faith in tact.

It is true that some in the Mormon hierarchy are quite conservative and feel threatened by any perceived threats to orthodoxy. Naturally, they have often reacted defensively to scholars and critics whose conclusions are at odds with "official" church positions. Critics claim that such reactions are proof that Mormonism seeks to repress opposing ideas and "silence" critics. This is simply not the case.

In the few cases where the LDS church has excommunicated internal scholars and critics, it has been less about the ideas they espouse, and more about how they went about espousing them. D. Michael Quinn, for example, wrote his surveys of Mormon history in such a way as to directly contradict official Mormon history; seemingly for the sake of contradiction and not in the spirit of seeking mutual benefit. This is unfortunate because Quinn's work is excellent and in many respects, faith-promoting if read in the proper context. Richard Bushman, in his magnum opus *Rough Stone Rolling, a Cultural Biography of Joseph Smith*, discusses some of the very same events that Quinn does and also contradicts official church history but does so in a spirit of understanding and not with the intention of embarrassing the church or criticizing long-held, but perhaps incorrect, dogmatic beliefs. The reception of these two scholars within the church has been quite striking. On the one hand, Quinn is no longer a member of the church and is his widely seen as heretical (although I find this conclusion misguided at best). Bushman on the other hand, is lauded within Mormon culture and *Rough Stone Rolling* is even distributed and sold at LDS church-owned Deseret Book stores throughout the United States. These scholars often tell the same story but seemingly with very different intentions.

I asked Richard Bushman what the difference was between himself and Michael Quinn. He responded that "it is a matter of attitude." He explained that church leaders have never criticized his work and have always given him access to the vast church historical records. Bushman also told me that church culture towards scholarship is changing for the better. When he started writing for the Church-published Improvement Era in the 1960s, he was required to correct all typos and grammatical errors when

quoting Joseph Smith. In contrast, today, the LDS church is sponsoring the Joseph Smith Papers project which will produce 25-30 volumes of original documents available to researchers.

As both an adherent, and aspiring scholar, I hope to see increased dialogue and openness within the LDS community regarding Mormonism's many complexities, intricacies and idiosyncrasies. As the New Testament so brilliantly illustrates, it is through this discussion that the Church will become both stronger, and better able to extend the hand of full fellowship to all people.

Appendix B – Official Declaration 2 from *The Pearl of Great Price*

OFFICIAL DECLARATION—2

To Whom It May Concern:

On September 30, 1978, at the 148th Semiannual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the following was presented by President N. Eldon Tanner, First Counselor in the First Presidency of the Church:

In early June of this year, the First Presidency announced that a revelation had been received by President Spencer W. Kimball extending priesthood and temple blessings to all worthy male members of the Church. President Kimball has asked that I advise the conference that after he had received this revelation, which came to him after extended meditation and prayer in the sacred rooms of the holy temple, he presented it to his counselors, who accepted it and approved it. It was then presented to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who unanimously approved it, and was subsequently presented to all other General Authorities, who likewise approved it unanimously.

President Kimball has asked that I now read this letter:

June 8, 1978

To all general and local priesthood officers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints throughout the world:

Dear Brethren:

As we have witnessed the expansion of the work of the Lord over the earth, we have been grateful that people of many nations have responded to the message of the restored gospel, and have joined the Church in ever-increasing numbers. This, in turn, has inspired us with a desire to extend to every worthy member of the Church all of the privileges and blessings which the gospel affords.

Aware of the promises made by the prophets and presidents of the Church who have preceded us that at some time, in God's eternal plan, all of our brethren who are worthy may receive the priesthood, and witnessing the faithfulness of those from whom the priesthood has been withheld, we have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance.

He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come when every faithful, worthy man in the Church may receive the holy priesthood, with power to exercise its divine authority, and enjoy with his loved ones every blessing that flows therefrom, including the blessings of the temple. Accordingly, all worthy male members of the Church may be ordained to the priesthood without regard for race or color. Priesthood leaders are instructed to follow the policy of carefully interviewing all

candidates for ordination to either the Aaronic or the Melchizedek Priesthood to insure that they meet the established standards for worthiness.

We declare with soberness that the Lord has now made known his will for the blessing of all his children throughout the earth who will hearken to the voice of his authorized servants, and prepare themselves to receive every blessing of the gospel.

Sincerely yours,

SPENCER W. KIMBALL
N. ELDON TANNER
MARION G. ROMNEY

The First Presidency

Recognizing Spencer W. Kimball as the prophet, seer, and revelator, and president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is proposed that we as a constituent assembly accept this revelation as the word and will of the Lord. All in favor please signify by raising your right hand. Any opposed by the same sign.

The vote to sustain the foregoing motion was unanimous in the affirmative.

Salt Lake City, Utah, September 30, 1978.