

God Changed His Mind About Black People

Race and Priesthood Authority in Mormonism

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Abstract

This study attempts to analyze Mormon justifications for the religion's policy of denying priesthood authority to black men from both before and after the policy's removal in 1978. Through a close reading of primary sources released by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, this study attempts to understand how this paradigm shift is understood in the context of Mormon faith traditions. It is revealed that many official statements from the Church contradict one another to such a degree that a simple or coherent explanation is practically impossible.

Keywords: Religion; Mormonism; Prophets (Mormon theology); Race relations; Race relations — Religious aspects.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Background.....	5
Methodology and Theoretical Approach.....	9
Previous research	14
Chronological Presentation of Truth Claims	20
Joseph Smith and The Book of Mormon.....	20
Book of Abraham	25
The sermon of Brigham Young.....	26
The Intervening Years: 1852-1978.....	29
1978 and “Official Declaration 2”	35
Post-1978	41
2013 and “Race and the Priesthood”	42
Analysis and Conclusions	45
Summary.....	50
Bibliography	51

Introduction

I believe that in 1978 God changed his mind about Black People!
You can be a Mormon!
A Mormon who just believes!

– “I Believe”¹

Despite the best efforts of uniformly dressed pairs of Mormons everywhere, the theological beliefs of Mormons and members of the largest Mormon Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (sometimes abbreviated as LDS), are often poorly understood. The lyric quoted above, for example, is how many people understand the change in policy effected by the LDS church in June of 1978 when they declared that, “All worthy male members of the Church may be ordained to the priesthood without regard for race or color.” This announcement made it possible for black men and their families to fully participate in the Mormon religion, but to say that “God changed his mind about black people” is a statement that devout Mormons cannot consent to without incurring the wrath of cognitive dissonance or their spiritual leaders: LDS church members cannot claim to both believe in an eternal, perfect, and unchanging God while simultaneously claiming that he has “changed his mind” about whether he will racially discriminate. What, then, do Mormons and LDS church members believe about the theology of this event? This is the question I intend to answer in this thesis. It is the goal of this dissertation to ascertain and assess, within the parameters of belief that the LDS church has established for itself, what conclusion Mormons should come to about their God’s will as it relates to race and the authority to teach his will.

¹ Trey Parker, Robert Lopez & Matt Stone (2011), *The Book of Mormon*.

Background

Truth resists simplicity and the notion that “God changed his mind about black people” does, as stated above, not accurately reflect the beliefs of Mormons or the official doctrines of the LDS church. By delving into this topic, it becomes rapidly clear that the truth is much stranger and more nuanced than a simple fiction and Mormon theology has many and varied things to say on the matter.

Not all of these claims are pertinent, however. The terms *Latter-Day Saint* and *Mormon* are often used interchangeably (including within this piece itself, for the sake of readability), although the terms are not exact synonyms. While the definition of who is and is not Mormon is broad and somewhat difficult to precisely define, the term has generally been used to apply to the organization now called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and its members.² For this reason, this essay will focus only on beliefs and statements which can be attributed to the LDS church and its leadership.

The key event in this narrative does, as indicated by the lyric above, occur in June of 1978 in Salt Lake City, Utah. There, in the capital of Mormondom, the leadership of the LDS church made an announcement that would later be canonized into their scriptures under the title “Official Declaration 2”:

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.³

² This conflation of terms has become so engrained in common parlance that the LDS church themselves recognize it. See the article “Mormon” on their official website at <https://www.lds.org/topics/mormons>

³The Book of Mormon is, according to Mormon beliefs, the history of ancient Hebrew peoples living in America. According to Joseph Smith, the religion’s founder, he discovered this history written on golden plates and translated them by supernatural means. As it is considered scripture, there will be no foot note references for quotations from this text, but rather in-line citations.

This Declaration would effectively remove one of Mormonism's longest standing policies: For one hundred and thirty years (between approximately 1852 to June of 1978) the LDS church maintained a policy which did not permit men of African descent to participate in their priesthood⁴. The weight of this restriction is almost impossible to overstate.

Within the context of the LDS church, the role of priesthood authority is an important and faith-defining practice. The list of privileges and responsibilities as a member of the Latter-Day Saint priesthood given in Official Declaration 2 is not chosen at random. Temple blessings, to be the bearer of divine authority, and a faith which affects not only the individual but his or her loved ones are some of the most important and deeply treasured aspects of their faith for many Mormons and only afforded to those who receive the priesthood and their families. Although black people were still technically permitted to become members of the LDS church even before the 1978 revelation, this restriction severely limited their ability to participate in it.

Black men were shut out of mission assignments, an important rite of passage for aspiring LDS lads, much less leadership posts at the local, regional, national, and international levels later on. Moreover, in Mormon belief the office carries eternal consequences. Priesthood is the necessary condition for men receiving temple endowments and eternal sealings of marriage that admit its holders to the highest tier in heaven and potential godhood.⁵

This restriction was thus, in the context of Mormon belief, a barrier to advancement in both this life and the next.

Young boys in Mormonism are first eligible to receive the Aaronic Priesthood, the first level of authority available to them, when they are twelve years old, and they commonly receive it at this age⁶. For this reason, the ceremony could be compared to the Jewish

⁴ This restriction did not apply to black women. However, this is only because the LDS Church has never permitted women of any race to enter their priesthood. See Richard N. Ostling & Joan K. Ostling (1999), *Mormon America*, 95.

⁵ Ostling & Ostling, 95.

⁶ Ostling & Ostling, 95.

ceremony of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah. To be a Mormon who is not permitted into the temple or to receive the priesthood is in some ways similar to being Jewish and being denied a Jewish wedding, a Catholic who is denied communion, or a Muslim who is not permitted to enter Mecca. These comparisons are not strictly analogous, nor are they intended to be, but they can be helpful in gaining an understanding about the degree to which this policy of denying priesthood authority based on race restricted the ability for black people to fully participate in Mormonism. For this reason, the announcement that black men were eligible to receive the Aaronic priesthood was a great divergence from previous doctrine.

The presentation of “Official Declaration 2” as divine revelation by the LDS church was a landmark event, but in order to best understand it in its proper context one must consider the other doctrines and declarations which came both before and after. The doctrines, theological discourses, and official statements from the LDS church surrounding this issue have varied greatly throughout the history of this young and uniquely American religion. The important question, then, becomes for both those inside the religion and those attempting to learn more about it: Within the parameters of belief that the LDS church has established for itself, what conclusion should Mormons come to about their God’s will as it relates to race and the authority to teach his will?

The epistemic foundations of Mormon theology can be complex, but one of the core concepts which must be understood in order to grasp how Mormons conceptualize what is to be believed lies in their understanding of authority. Within LDS churches, members are given well defined roles and positions of authority. The LDS church is, fundamentally,

an authoritative institution, with clear levels of hierarchical authority and closely guarded boundaries of power. Although almost all adult members and many youth in any given congregation have ‘callings’ that confer recognized privileges

and responsibilities upon them, there is no confusion about how those callings are organized or who, in any given gathering of members, is in charge.⁷

All LDS members are answerable to someone else within the church. As the organizational hierarchy extends upwards it comes finally to the fifteen highest ranking members which the church refers to as apostles. Among these fifteen men – and church doctrine requires that they always be men – the one who has held the title of apostle longest is the church president, and he retains this position until his death. The church president then selects two other apostles to act as first and second counselors and together the three form a triumvirate known as the first presidency. The other remaining twelve make up what is referred to as ‘the quorum of the twelve’. The first presidency is unique within the church as they are referred to by the titles of ‘prophets, seers, and revelators’. That is, they have inherited the divine authority to receive revelation from God in a direct line of succession from the church’s founder, Joseph Smith. The first president is effectively answerable in the church only to God himself and has the authority to set the church’s doctrine and publicly speak about the will of God due to their status as ‘special witnesses of Jesus Christ’.⁸

This notion of divine authority and church hierarchy is so crucial to the LDS church that two of Mormonism’s thirteen articles of faith are devoted to explaining it:

5. We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.

6. We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth.⁹

Mormons believe their church to be a restoration to the original and untainted Christianity of the early church — where other churches have lost the authority of God, it is only Mormons

⁷Darron T. Smith (2004), “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion”, 153.

⁸ See the LDS church’s own definition of the first presidency on their official website at <https://www.lds.org/church/leaders/first-presidency>

⁹ The Mormon articles of faith can be found in their scriptural text The Doctrine & Covenants.

and LDS church members who have the divine authority to act on God's behalf in this world and to pass that authority on to others. Within Mormon terminology, it is only they that "have the priesthood of God¹⁰". Priesthood authority means many things for Mormons, but the elements most salient to this topic are the authority to speak to others and lead them on behalf of God.

For this reason, "Official Declaration 2" is a defining moment in the history of the LDS church as it both illustrated and redefined Mormon beliefs about who has the authority to teach God's will.

Methodology and Theoretical Approach

It would be all too easy to adopt an entirely cynical approach to this matter and conclude that the policy of racial exclusion is grounded entirely in racism and that its reversal in 1978 was due to pressure from the civil rights movement and a desire for the church to maintain its tax-exempt status as American legislation began to criminalize discrimination based on race¹¹. All discussions after "Official Declaration 2", following this reasoning, are simply an attempt for a corrupt organization to sweep its racist past under the rug. Public relations and economic factors are the true movers in this tale and to look further is to waste one's time. Although this explanation of events may be attractive to some because of its simplicity, it ignores one crucial element of the story: Mormons appear to genuinely believe in their religion and the doctrines of their church.

To understand the history of racial discrimination in Mormonism as being simply an economic or historic matter may be easy, but I wish to argue that this leaves us with

¹⁰ Hugh B. Brown & Eldon D. Tanner (1969), "Statement of the First Presidency 15 December 1969".

¹¹ These claims are purely speculative and unverifiable by nature. However, for more on the shifting tax status of institutions which opposed racial desegregation during this period of American history, see the U.S. Supreme Court case: "Bob Jones University V. United States" and the cases leading up to it.

conclusions that are unproductive. To view it instead as the struggle for a people with deeply held religious beliefs to come to terms with their own theology, scripture, and revelation in a way that is logically coherent is much more rewarding. Thus, I am approaching the topic from a theological perspective. This is due, at least in part, to the failure of sociological theory to consistently yield conclusive results when studying Mormonism as will be discussed below.

In order to ensure that my primary sources provide an accurate representation of the LDS church's beliefs and doctrines, my primary sources will be statements that have been made public by the church's highest authorities, their scriptural canon, and one essay which is publicly available on the church's official website. Because this study focuses on statements officially endorsed by the LDS church itself, this essay deals only with the theological beliefs which can most accurately be described to be the official stance of the LDS church and, following that logic, what could be expected to be the beliefs of its members.

From these official statements the question this dissertation intends to answer is thus: What is rational for Mormons to believe about Mormon LDS racial doctrines? This is not solely a question of what the church's stance on the matter is, but what it rationally ought to be according to the doctrine of their church. Thus, the research question of this dissertation is:

- within the parameters of belief that the LDS church has established for itself, what conclusion should Mormons come to about their God's will as it relates to race and the authority to teach his will?

In order to answer this question, I will employ the simplest tool available from theology and philosophy. Where previous research has attempted to understand this policy and its removal from sociological perspectives as I will discuss further in the previous research section, I intend to understand it based entirely on the truth claims made by the leadership and

scriptures of the faith tradition. In the interest of this, it is not necessary to philosophically assess all of the truth claims that those in the faith tradition make, but it is sufficient to inquire as to whether all of these claims are consistent with one another. This method is effectively a use of the Socratic method of asking questions and requiring the answers to be consistent with one another. Essentially, this is the application of the law of non-contradiction as defined by Aristotle that: “The opinion that opposite assertions are not simultaneously true is the firmest of all.”¹²

Or, in the theological terms:

The fact that reasoning to conclusions that go beyond the mere statements of Scripture is appropriate and even necessary for studying Scripture, and the fact that Scripture itself is the ultimate standard of truth, combine to indicate to us that *we are free to use our reasoning abilities to draw deductions from any passage of Scripture so long as these deductions do not contradict the clear teaching of some other passage of Scripture.*¹³

This theological assertion will be assumed as true throughout this study. It will be assumed throughout that a full contradiction between two theological claims is unacceptable. Or, to continue the thought outlined above in Wayne Grudem’s “Systematic Theology” that:

We can tolerate a paradox (such as “God is three persons and one God”) because we have confidence that ultimately God knows fully the truth about himself and about the nature of reality, and that in his understanding the different elements of a paradox are fully reconciled [...] But a true contradiction (such as, “God is three persons and God is not three persons”) would imply ultimate contradiction in God’s own understanding of himself or of reality, and this cannot be.¹⁴

¹² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1011b13-14 quoted in Laurence R. Horn (2010), “Contradiction”.

¹³ Wayne Grudem (1994), *Systematic Theology*, 34.

¹⁴ Grudem, 35.

In short, paradoxes which put God in contradiction with himself are theologically unacceptable. This is why the conclusion that “God changed his mind about black people” is unacceptable. It is assumed within the theory of this study that LDS theology ought to be in keeping with this theological assertion.

Applying this theory is beneficial as it effectively sidesteps all philosophical questions as to whether or not Mormonism is true. I thereby avoid the philosophical discussions related to the Law of the Excluded middle described by Bertrand Russell thusly:

By the law of the excluded middle, either ‘A is B’ or ‘A is not B’ must be true. Hence either ‘the present king of France is bald’ or ‘the present king of France is not bald’ must be true. Yet if we enumerated the things that are bald and the things that are not bald, we should not find the king of France on either list.¹⁵

Whether the proposition “God changed his mind about black people” and all truth claims presented by Mormon faith traditions are true by virtue of having actually occurred is irrelevant. I will make no attempt to assess or engage with the supersensible claims made by Mormon faith traditions that there is a perfect and omnipotent God who takes an active role in communicating his will to humanity in general and those who hold priesthood authority in particular or the claim that The Book of Mormon is divinely inspired scripture. These claims will be considered only for their consistency with other claims made. I will be attempting to assess whether the claims LDS leadership has made on the topic of black men receiving the priesthood in the LDS church are logically consistent with one another. That is, that no mutually exclusive truth claims are involved in either.

It is thus the intention of this essay to apply the logical principle of non-contradiction to the theological claims made by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints about its

¹⁵ Bertrand Russell (1905), “On Descriptions”, 485.

policy of racial exclusion and change in 1978. In order to do so I will engage in a chronological and slightly historical overview of the major statements and arguments made by the LDS church while attempting to see how whether these claims could be construed as logically coherent with one another.

In order to do this, I will outline chronologically all of the truth claims which are directly relevant to the issue of race and the priesthood in Mormon scripture and revelation. These truth claims will then be assessed and judged based on their consistency with other, similar, truth claims. This study is, thus, qualitative and theological in nature. Its theory is that all claims to divinely inspired truth which inhabit the same doctrinal system must be consistent with one another. Its method is to outline and assess these truth claims based on these criteria. In effect, the method used here is thus basic theology in an attempt to test the coherence of LDS racial doctrine.

Previous Research

Previous research on Mormonism in general and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in particular has often been performed by believers in the faith and the members of the church themselves. Many of these studies lie outside the scope of this thesis as they focus heavily on historical analyses. In many ways, the study of Mormons and their religion by individuals not involved in the religion was begun by sociologist and catholic Thomas F. O’Dea with his 1957 book, *The Mormons*.

Fully aware of his own capacity for bias, O’Dea began his book by declaring himself to have, “Striven throughout to combine intellectual objectivity with intelligent human sympathy.”¹⁶ In this attempt he can be said to have attained success. *The Mormons* is still considered to be a landmark work in many respects¹⁷. Although he covered many different historical and cultural factors pertinent to Mormonism and painted an engaging portrait of the Mormon worldview and how it came to be, O’Dea did not write on the issue of race and Mormonism in *The Mormons*. This can easily be explained. He was, after all, writing over twenty years before the declaration in 1978 which would redefine the role of race in Mormon life. His commentary on the potential for conflict between church leadership and the church’s intellectuals can be seen as near-prophetic, however. A fact I will more thoroughly address below.

Thomas O’Dea’s study of Mormonism from a sociological perspective has inspired further research from other social scientists. An example which is notable to this study as it shares precisely the same subject is the Mormon academic Mary Lou McNamara’s article “Secularization or Sacralization: The Change in LDS Church Policy on Blacks”. In this work,

¹⁶ Thomas O’Dea (1957), *The Mormons*, vii.

¹⁷ For more on this, see Cardell K. Jacobson, John P. Hoffmann & Tim B. Heaton (eds., 2008), *Revisiting Thomas F. O’Dea’s The Mormons*.

McNamara attempts to apply secularization models to the 1978 shift in policy on blacks by the LDS Church which is the subject of this study. Her results were not particularly conclusively, and she concludes by stating that with regards to whether this shift represents secularization or sacralization (defined by her as the simple opposite of secularization) that there exists justification for both interpretations and thus both explanations alone are inadequate. There have been moments in the history of this event which can be construed as movement towards sacralization and vice versa. To see the faith tradition's experience of the policy shift as unilaterally moving in either direction is to fail to give the entire picture. In this way, McNamara considers the shortcomings of explaining Mormonism through sociological theory. However, she does present the rather interesting conclusion about the difficulties a religion which changes its doctrine must face. That is, that;

The doctrine must be deprived of its sacral character before it can be changed; however, for the institution to retain its legitimacy, it must couch the change in sacral terms. Change can therefore occur most effectively if dual processes engaging both sacral and secular forces work together. Within their church, if not among historians and sociologists, Mormon leaders were extremely effective in establishing the policy change on blacks as a manifestation of the sacral rather than the secular.¹⁸

This is an important point as, regardless of whether sociologists would categorize the shift in 1978 as desacralization or not, the LDS church and its followers have enshrined the event as a sacred one. This is as much as to say that, within the context of the LDS church movement, the event is defined as a sacred and divine one with an authority derived directly from God.

The individual who has done the most sociological study on this event is undoubtedly Armand Mauss. A professor emeritus of religious studies and sociology and an active member of the LDS church, Mauss's work represents both a continuation of the tradition of Mormons studying themselves as well as the academic tradition begun by O'Dea of

¹⁸Mary Lou McNamara (2001), "Secularization or Sacralization: The Change in LDS Church Policy on Blacks, 322.

approaching Mormonism from a sociological perspective. It is difficult to overstate Mauss's impact on the study of race in Mormonism. One could say that he 'wrote the book' on the subject with his monograph *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (2003). However, this would fail to give him due credit for editing, contributing to, or being quoted in the vast majority of other academic works relating to the subject. For this reason, no attempt will be made at summarizing the entirety of his work on Mormon perspectives on race as to do so would require more space than is available. Instead I will focus on one of his essays of particular pertinence to this thesis.

In "Casting off 'The Curse of Cain': The Extent and Limits of Progress Since 1978", published 2004, Mauss presents a thorough history of Mormon racial doctrines as they relate to black people.¹⁹Mauss frames the issue as the attempts of a church and its followers to rid itself of the 'vestigial' theological explanations for the LDS policy banning blacks from entering the priesthood. Thus, the title references the previously espoused Mormon belief that black people are descended from the biblical figure Cain. In this article, Mauss concludes that:

As President Hinckley, in his interviews and public statements, appeals to all of us to leave the racist legacy of the church in the past and look to the future, most members will be able to do that at no cost to their own identities or self-esteem. Many black members, however, reading recurring passages from that very legacy in recently reprinted church books, will find it difficult to see themselves or their identities in those passages and correspondingly difficult to remain identified with the church. It is in that sense that the ancient "curse of Cain," until it is completely cast off, will continue to be a burden for the church itself, and its mission, as well as for its black members as individuals.²⁰

How, precisely, this can be done from a theological perspective on the part of the LDS church is not specifically outlined. However, Mauss does convincingly argue that the racial

¹⁹This work has been published twice. Once under the heading listed above in the collection *Black and Mormon* as well as a later version which more delves deeper into the history of the issue in his book *All Abraham's Children*. The references in this study will use the former of these two texts.

²⁰Mauss, Armand L. (2004), "Casting off the 'Curse of Cain' : The Extent and Limits of Progress since 1978", 108

policies and their justifications for them have had a real and negative impact on the people of colour who have seen their lives become connected to the organization.²¹

In many ways, Mauss's argument that a failure to 'cast off the curse of Cain' by the LDS church would create a difficult burden for its black members is proven true by the work of Darron T. Smith. As both an African-American man and a member of the LDS Church, Smith's work includes observations and anecdotes from his own personal experiences. This lends a great emotional weight to his arguments for the necessity of church leadership to pivot in the way it chooses to treat its previously espoused doctrines²².

It is important to note that the vast majority of the research done on the policy change by the LDS church in 1978 has been done by members of the LDS church. The result of this is that much of the work has been done by people with a conflict of interest which has, in my opinion, led to a certain reticence to criticize the church and its leadership. Returning to O'Dea's near-prophetic writings, he considers in *The Mormons* the relationship between Mormon intellectuals and the more fundamentalist theology that their church often chooses to espouse. These intellectuals found themselves, even in the 1950s, in the difficult position of feeling forced to choose between intellectual integrity and a great sense of loyalty to their faith tradition.

Their group loyalty is strong; their pride in the accomplishments of their people, great; but they are unable to accept an orthodox literal theology which for most of their fellow churchmen is the basis of all the other cherished values. Perhaps a long-term drift toward liberalism may solve their problems for them.²³

²¹ Mauss, 105-108.

²²For more on this, see Darron T. Smith (2005) "These House Negros Still think We're Cursed" and Darron T. Smith (2004), "Unpacking Whiteness in Zion".

²³ O'Dea, 240.

O’Dea also questions whether the strain between these forces may lead to some form of rebellion by Mormon intellectuals.²⁴ There has been no liberal drift, but there has definitely been a rebellion of sorts.

Another work on Mormonism by non-Mormons is Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling’s work, *Mormon America*. Their goal in this work is to write a book which provides, as they describe it, “a candid, but nonpolemical overview written for non-Mormons and Mormons alike, focusing on what is distinctive and culturally significant about this growing American movement.”²⁵ More journalism than social science, the book nevertheless provides, in my opinion, an excellent and non-partial overview of Mormonism’s place in American society and history. As well, it provides many matter-of-fact explanations of basic elements of Mormonism and is for this reason used often as a reference in this work.

A number of Mormon intellectuals have criticized a number of the LDS church’s doctrines and leadership. Paul Toscano is one noteworthy example of someone who criticized the church’s very core. In August of 1993 he gave a presentation titled “All is not well in Zion: False Teachings of the True Church” at the Sunstone Theological Symposium. In it, he criticized the church’s theology as well as the church’s leadership for a number of mistakes. He softened this critique, however, by stating that:

In spite of my harsh recital of their errors, I do not fault our leaders for these mistakes. We all err. We all fall short of our callings. No one is infallible. What I fault is the pretense that our leaders do not or cannot err on important questions.²⁶

Paul Toscano was excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in September of 1993, largely for this presentation. He, along with five other Mormon intellectuals and feminists who were similarly disciplined during the same month, would

²⁴ O’Dea, 239.

²⁵ Ostling & Ostling, ix.

²⁶ Paul Toscano (1994), *The Sanctity of Dissent*, 165.

come to be called 'The September Six' in newspapers.²⁷ Paul Toscano is of interest in this section for two reasons. Firstly, his and The September Six's excommunication shows that O'Dea's suggestion that there may be an intellectual rebellion had merit, although the status quo quashed it. Secondly, Toscano is noteworthy in that he questions the Church's infallibility. The importance of this will become apparent further on.

There is, thus, a conflict of interest for many of the authors who have written on this subject.

²⁷See Peggy Fletcher Stack (2013), "Healthy or hurtful? Twenty years later, Mormon 'purge' still debated".

Chronological Presentation of Truth Claims

This section intends to present the primary sources used in this study. Through a chronological presentation of these sources it will become clear how the Mormon discourse has changed over time in its discussion of race and its justifications for the denial of priesthood authority to black men. The intention is, thus, to show both the current status of LDS doctrine as it applies to race currently, as well as the way in which this doctrine formed over time and the truth claims made by LDS leadership to justify the policy.

Joseph Smith and The Book of Mormon

Any worthwhile historical overview of almost any element of Mormonism must necessarily begin in the same place: Joseph Smith and The Book of Mormon. Starting there, it is self-evident that the proper authority to communicate the will of God is a key concept and doctrine for Mormonism from the very moment of its inception:

18 My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join.

19 I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.” (Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith – History 1:18-19)

The passage quoted above is, according to the current LDS canonical scripture, Joseph Smith’s account of his first direct revelation from God in which he is instructed that none of the religions or denominations existing at the time are true and that he ought to join none of them. The reasoning for this is apparently that their teachings are ‘commandments of men’ which have none of the power of God. As can be seen in this passage, Joseph Smith taught

that the authority to teach on behalf of God left the world centuries ago and was only restored in the 19th century to Smith himself.

Within the Mormon faith, Joseph Smith is a divinely appointed prophet who brought restoration and new scripture to the world. He achieved this primarily by translating the history of ancient Hebrew people in the Americas from a set of golden plates shown to him by the Angel Moroni. Smith's translated text became The Book of Mormon – a book which gave the religion's followers their commonly used nickname 'Mormons' – which Joseph Smith's followers consider to be a piece of scripture analogous to the old or new testament. In Mormon terminology the Book of Mormon is subtitled as “Another Testament of Jesus Christ”.

For Mormons, The Book of Mormon and the revelations given to Joseph Smith and other prophets by God, which are collected in the Mormon scripture The Doctrine and Covenants, have the highest authority in determining the truth of God's will. Although Mormons are similar to many Christians in that they believe that the Christian Bible is canonical scripture, they believe that only The Book of Mormon has been divinely translated and is ultimately the more trustworthy source of knowledge. Within Mormonism's thirteen articles of faith, the eighth elucidates this belief clearly as it states: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.” Mormons believe the Christian Bible to be scripture, but they also believe that its message has been distorted through years of poor translation.

Ascertaining Joseph Smith's personal beliefs about whether black men should have the opportunity to receive the priesthood is a surprisingly difficult task. During Joseph Smith's lifetime a number of black men received the priesthood and this was something

Smith was aware of. However, the discussions following his death gave no clear consensus among his followers as to what the prophet's actual opinion on the matter was.²⁸

As one cannot learn about Smith's perspective from his public teachings one may turn to the passages which are commonly believed to be relevant to the issue of race from The Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon takes many narrative cues from the Christian Bible. It is written in language reminiscent of what is found the King James Bible and focuses mainly on the story of two people groups, the Lamanites and the Nephites, both of whom Mormons believe to be descended from Hebrew peoples who crossed the ocean to the Americas. The Native Americans that still inhabited the region when Mormonism was founded are believed by Mormons to be the remnants of the Lamanites. The Book of Mormon's narrative focuses generally on the interaction of these two peoples in which the Nephites are usually good and righteous while the Lamanites are scheming and prone to wickedness. The motif of light and dark is used commonly throughout the book. However, it is my opinion that there appears to be quite a bit more than the usual metaphorical battle between good and evil within this motif.²⁹

Evidence for this assertion can be found in what might be one of the most important passages in The Book of Mormon relating to the discussion of race in Mormonism, namely 2 Nephi 5:21-24.

21 And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.

²⁸For more on the discussions which occurred after Smith's death regarding race and the priesthood and the difficulty of ascertaining his views on the matter, see Newell G. Bringhurst (2004), "The 'Missouri Thesis' Revisited".

²⁹Newell G. Bringhurst also discusses this, stating that "within the Book of Mormon itself, blackness assumed clearly negative connotations[.]" (26).

22 And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquities.

23 And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was done.

24 And because of their cursing which was upon them they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey.

It is not difficult to argue that this passage implies that to have black skin is to be cursed by God. More than this, it ascribes to those who are cursed with dark skin a number of negative stereotypes often associated with black people: that they are lazy, mischievous, and ugly. Additionally, it is quite explicit in its condemnation of interracial relationships as it claims that whatever children result from such relationships will also be cursed.

Mormon apologists vehemently refute this line of thinking, claiming that the true curse was that the Lamanites were cut off from God, the mark they received was a symbolic indicator of God's displeasure. The darkening of their skin was not the curse itself but simply an easy way for the righteous to recognize and avoid those who had been separated from God. In so doing the righteous would be able to avoid those who might lead them astray with false beliefs, traditions, behaviours, or cursed lineages.³⁰

The passage which is most commonly referred to in order to defend this interpretation³¹ comes just sixteen chapters later in the same section of The Book of Mormon. To be sure, 2 Nephi 26:33 does much to inform the Mormon understanding of how God views racial differences:

33 For none of these iniquities come of the Lord; for he doeth that which is good among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and

³⁰ Apologetics of this nature can be found in the "Book of Mormon Student Manual" (2009), 58. published by the LDS church.

³¹ Two relevant examples of reference to this passage are in the preamble to "Official Declaration 2" as it appears in the LDS scriptural text "The Doctrine and Covenants" and in the first paragraph of the LDS church's essay "Race and the Priesthood".

free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.

Whereas the previous passage suggested that those with dark skin are marked as being cut off from God this passage explicitly says that ‘he [God] inviteth them all to come unto him’. This begs the question as to which of these passages expresses the guiding truth of Mormon doctrine: Are those cursed with dark skin cut off from God or are they fully welcomed into his presence? If one reads the Book of Mormon literally, it appears to espouse both positions. That is, those with dark skin have a mark which symbolizes their being cut off from God but which does not prevent them from repenting and becoming one of his followers.

As previously mentioned, the dichotomy between dark and light (particularly as it relates to skin colour) is a continuing motif within The Book of Mormon. Because of this, the best method for interpreting these two passages comes from further study of other passages which relate to this topic. They must be put into context. Looking further into The Book of Mormon for passages related to race and cursing, it becomes quickly apparent that it contains many verses related to both topics. One notable passage can be found in 2 Nephi 30:6 where it says:

And then shall they rejoice; for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a pure and a delightsome people.

This is how this passage reads in the Book of Mormon currently. However, it has not always done so. “In 1981 the Kimball administration rewrote II Nephi 30:6 to say that righteous Indians would again become ‘pure’ and delightsome, rather than ‘white’.”³²

Spencer Kimball, who was the author of Official Declaration 2 which gave black Mormons the opportunity to receive priesthood authority, would understandably have a

³² Richard N. Ostling & Joan K. Ostling (1999), *Mormon America*, 99.

vested interest in the interpretation that the curse on the Lamanites was spiritual one rather than a literal change in their skin colour. This attempt at clarification did not, however, extend to a number of other verses which make similar claims. For instance, 3 Nephi 2:14-16 explicitly states that Lamanites who intermarried with Nephites were no longer ‘marked’ “and their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like the Nephites.”

If one were to read The Book of Mormon literally they would gain the understanding that black skin as a curse which symbolizes the bearer’s separation from God. This does not necessarily mean they will be eternally separated from God, as they can still be invited into his presence. In so doing they will become pure both inwardly and outwardly and their skin will lighten as they draw closer to God and progress through the process of sanctification.³³

Book of Abraham

The idea that some lineages are ineligible to receive the priesthood or other blessings from God does have a scriptural basis in Mormonism. In the Book of Abraham, which is not part of the Book of Mormon but in of another portion of Mormon scriptural canon, The Pearl of Great Price, the lineage of Ham is singled out as being one which may not receive priesthood authority:

Pharaoh, being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father, who blessed him with the blessing of the earth, and with the blessing of wisdom, but cursed him as pertaining the priesthood. Now, Pharaoh being of that lineage by which he could not have the right of the priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain

³³ This is how this doctrine was apparently understood by Spencer Kimball as he wrote in 1960 about a community of American Indians that: “The day of the Lamanites is nigh. For years they have been growing delightful, and they are now becoming white and delightful, as they were promised (2 Ne. 30:6). In this picture of the twenty Lamanite missionaries, fifteen of the twenty were as light as *Anglos*; five were darker but equally delightful. The children in the home placement program in Utah are often lighter than their brothers and sisters in the hogans on the reservation.” Spencer Kimball (1960), “The Day of the Lamanites”, 34.

claim it from Noah, through Ham, therefore my father was led away by their idolatry. (Abraham 1:26-27)

This passage speaks of a Pharaoh who is cursed in regards to the priesthood because he is a descendant of one of Noah's sons, Ham. This passage is the root in Mormonism for a doctrine known as the 'Mark of Ham'. What is often referred to as the 'Mark of Ham' is something of a misnomer as it actually refers to a curse put on Ham's son, Canaan, by Noah in Genesis 9:20-27. Noah curses Canaan after Ham sees him in a state of drunken nakedness and declares that, "a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren." (Genesis 9:25, KJV)

This verse in the Book of Abraham has historically been used to justify the denial of priesthood to black men.³⁴ According to this line of thinking, black people – like the Pharaoh of Mormon scripture – are descendants of Ham's son, Canaan, and are thus of a cursed lineage which is ineligible to hold priesthood authority. Abraham 1:26-27 is the only portion of Mormon scripture which places a link between a cursing and the priesthood. Although the Book of Abraham was not made a portion of the LDS church canon until 1880, it became a tool for many to establish that there was a scriptural precedent in Mormonism for denying priesthood authority based on lineage.

The sermon of Brigham Young

The doctrine that black people are cursed has been adopted by many Mormons throughout the religion's history. Most notably it was preached by Brigham Young, the leader and president of Mormonism following the death of Joseph Smith. Young publicly endorsed the belief that the curse of blackness was comparable to the mark of Cain from the book of Genesis. From passages that have been preserved from some of Young's public teaching, Young can be seen to espouse several doctrines which would later become cemented into

³⁴Issues such as this are discussed in the essay "Race and the Priesthood" which is examined more closely below.

Mormon discourse. In a sermon delivered in 1852, Young utilized a polemical style and racial terminology which sounds particularly strident today:

The Lord said I will not kill Cain, but I will put a mark upon him and it is seen in the face of every Negro on the earth, and it is the decree of God that that mark shall remain upon the seed of Cain and the curse until all the seed of Abel should be redeemed and Cain will not receive the Priesthood or salvation until all the seed of Abel are redeemed. Any man having one drop of the seed of Cain in him cannot hold the Priesthood, and if no other prophet ever spake it before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ. I know it is true and others know it. The Negro cannot hold one part of Government. But the day will come when all the seed of Cain will be redeemed and have all the blessings we have now and a great deal more. But the seed of Abel will be ahead of the seed of Cain to all eternity. [...] And if any man mingle his seed with the seed of Cain, the only way he could get rid of it or have salvation would be to come forward and have his head cut off and spill his blood upon the ground. It would also take the life of his children.³⁵

In some sense, Young is restating beliefs that were likely to have already been present within Mormonism and which could be inferred from passages in *The Book of Mormon*: dark skin is a mark of a divine curse which broadcasts to anyone who sees it not to marry or procreate with this person. However, Young proceeds to take this doctrine several steps further. Not only will a white person's offspring be cursed if they choose to "mix their seed" with someone with dark skin but they themselves will be as well. Interracial relationships are expressly forbidden with the only satisfactory penalty being death of the perpetrator and their children.³⁶

This line of thinking conflicts with the narrative given in 3 Nephi 2:14-16 mentioned above. In the *Book of Mormon*, interracial marriage between the Lamanites and Nephites does not bring about any form of divine punishment. Instead of bringing God's displeasure and the curse of dark skin upon the Nephites involved, the Lamanites are blessed with the

³⁵Brigham Young (1852), "Untitled Address Dated January 1852", 57-58.

³⁶The suggestion that in order to properly do penance for an act the perpetrator must be killed is itself yet another controversial and now defunct doctrine from Mormon traditions: Blood Atonement.

removal of their dark skin. In this way, Young's condemnation of interracial marriages seems to be in conflict with what is said in the Book of Mormon.

Additionally, Brigham Young brings another theological argument to what could be argued to be its natural conclusion: The curse of black skin is no longer something applicable only Lamanites or Native Americans, but also to black people. Dark skin is no longer the mark with which God has chosen to identify wicked peoples in the ancient Americas, but worldwide and throughout history.

This mark, as Young appears to understand it, has been used by God throughout the history of the world dating all the way back to the creation story in Genesis. God cursed Cain and all his descendants with a 'mark' which is interpreted as being equated with 'blackness'.

Finally, Brigham Young makes explicit the policy which does not permit black men to receive the priesthood. Although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the policy of racial exclusion began, this passage serves as one of the earliest and most explicit official proclamations of it. What is also important to notice is that in addition to providing arguments which imply that that black people are divinely placed in a subservient position, Young justifies the policy by using his own status as a prophet. By first presenting the priesthood ban and thereafter declaring that "if no other prophet ever spake it before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ," he clearly places the ban as not merely his opinion but as the divine will of God which Young is uniquely able to reveal to the world as a prophet and Joseph Smith's successor.

The doctrine of authority is at the core of Brigham Young's position. Young uses the power of his position to ensure that no black person could gain a similar degree of power over white Mormons. It is both his own authority as the highest ranking member of the Mormon priesthood as well as the potentially dangerous authority that black people would gain if they were to receive the priesthood that is at stake. Later on in this sermon, Young

shifts from connecting this policy to his own authority to an argument stating that black people could not receive the priesthood because would give them authority over other – that is, white – people: “It has been urged here that many of the Jews were black. Whenever the seed of Judah mingled with the seed of Cain, they lost their Priesthood and all blessings.”³⁷ Interracial unions, Young claims, are a sufficiently grievous crime for God to remove his blessing from the entirety of the Hebrew people. If Mormons follow suit, they will surely lose the favor of God and become apostates. So great, Young argues, is the sin of disturbing the order of God’s racial hierarchy.

I would argue that Brigham Young’s argument is one which is to a great extent rooted in teleology. People and races, he argues, all have their own purpose or *telos* and it is the divinely given purpose of black people to live as servants to other races, to be denied certain privileges which they are not predestined for. This purpose can only be altered through the will of God. If the seed of Cain is meant to serve the seed of Abel, his argument goes, then how could it be permissible for a black man to ever have a position of authority over a white person? Brigham Young’s message is clear: The subjugation of one race to another is the way God has created the world to be until the end of the world comes. This is the divine and natural order of things and to upset this order will bring with it terrible consequences.

The Intervening Years: 1852-1978

Young’s statements on and justifications for the policy would come to be quoted and referenced by LDS leaders. The core of his argument became something of the ‘party line’ which justified the practice and to which first presidencies would refer to when questioned on

³⁷ Young, 58.

the policy of refusing the priesthood to black men³⁸. However, over the years the message evolved to fit the times and many portions of Young's statements would come to shift in how central they were to the overall discourse.

This can be seen in the public statement made by one of Brigham Young's successors, George Albert Smith, on August 17, 1949, ninety-seven years after the sermon by Brigham Young presented above was first preached. Smith also justifies the policy of priesthood denial as being God's divine will, saying that it "is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord".³⁹ This said, knowledge of this divine will comes not from his own authority as a living prophet and leader of the church, but from the statements of individuals who held the position prior to him. This appears to undermine his authority as a living prophet. He says nothing about having received this information from the heavens but instead pins the responsibility for the policy on his predecessor's authority.

Smith in fact went so far as to directly quote Young's position on the matter, stating the following:

"It comes in consequence of their fathers rejecting the power of the holy priesthood, and the law of God. They will go down to death. And when all the rest of the children have received their blessings in the holy priesthood, then that curse will be removed from the seed of Cain, and they will then come up and possess the priesthood, and receive all the blessings which we now are entitled to."

President Wilford Woodruff made the following statement: "The day will come when all that race will be redeemed and possess all the blessings which we now have."⁴⁰

Smith chooses quotations from Young and Woodruff that emphasize the temporal nature of the policy. He makes it absolutely clear that it will not stand forever and that there will come a time when black people will be permitted to receive the priesthood as well as every other

³⁸ See the public statement of LDS president George Albert Smith, quoted below.

³⁹ George Albert Smith (1949), "First Presidency Statement (17 August 1949)", 221.

⁴⁰ George Albert Smith, 221.

blessing which Mormons believe is necessary to attain the highest level of salvation. Unlike Brigham Young, however, he does not say that this will only occur after all white people have been saved nor does he say that it will only happen after the end times. It is also noteworthy that Smith does not choose to emphasize the idea that this divinely inspired policy is due to ‘the blood of Cain’. Instead, he provides a different theological explanation:

The position of the Church regarding the Negro may be understood when another doctrine of the Church is kept in mind, namely, that the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality and that while the details of this principle have not been made known, the mortality is a privilege that is given to those who maintain their first estate; and that the worth of the privilege is so great that spirits are willing to come to earth and take on bodies no matter what the handicap may be as to the kind of bodies they are to secure; and that among the handicaps, failure of the right to enjoy in mortality the blessings of the priesthood is a handicap which spirits are willing to assume in order that they might come to earth. Under this principle there is no injustice whatsoever involved in this deprivation as to the holding of the priesthood by the Negroes.⁴¹

Instead of an inherited ‘mark of Cain’ passed on through bloodlines like the one Brigham Young described, Smith focuses on ‘the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence’ to explain the station some races must come to accept as the teleological order of things in this world. According to this belief, humans exist in another spiritual realm before birth and our place in the natural order of this world is determined by our behaviours in this previous existence. It may be helpful to think of this belief as being similar to karma. However, there is a key difference in that a person’s station is not determined by their previous life in this world but in a different, spiritual realm.

George Albert Smith’s declaration attempted to shift the burden of responsibility for the policy of racial discrimination away from his position as LDS president and living prophet, as well as the Mormon Church as a whole. It is not the fault of him or the LDS

⁴¹George Albert Smith, 221.

Church, he seems to claim, that this policy exists. Rather it is because of the divine decree they have received and the sins committed by black people themselves in their previous, pre-mortal lives. In many ways, Smith's statement bears far more resemblance to apologetics than it does to systematic theology.

Even though George Albert Smith in large part further reiterates the position of Brigham Young for the world he found himself in almost one hundred years later, the leadership of 1969 and the LDS church in general existed in much different circumstances. The statement from the first presidency on December 15th, 1969 reflects not only a tonal shift in its dialogue, but an almost complete about-face in regards to how the church talked about what justified its policy of racial discrimination.

From the beginning of this dispensation, Joseph Smith and all succeeding presidents of the Church have taught that Negroes, while spirit children of a common Father, and the progeny of our earthly parents Adam and Eve, were not yet to receive the priesthood, for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man.

Our living prophet, President David O. McKay, has said, "The seeming discrimination by the Church toward the Negro is not something which originated with man; but goes back into the beginning with God...."

"Revelation assures us that this plan antedates man's mortal existence, extending back to man's pre-existent state."

President McKay has also said, "Sometime in God's eternal plan, the Negro will be given the right to hold the priesthood."⁴²

This statement, like many that came before it, focuses on reaffirming the key points from the positions of previous leadership. It situates the policy of denying priesthood authority to black people as having been in effect for as long as the LDS church has been spreading its message and having been put in place by the founder Joseph Smith himself. However, as mentioned above, the evidence that Joseph Smith himself instituted or even supported such a policy is shaky at best⁴³. Moreover, from what we know of Brigham Young's statements on

⁴² Brown & Tanner, 223.

⁴³Ostling & Ostling, 99-100.

the matter it seems as though Young himself was keen to take credit for the policy when he said that: “[I]f no other prophet ever spake it before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ.” Regardless of whether it is strictly accurate that this policy has always been in place or enforced within Mormondom, the first presidency in 1969 did utilize the justification that it rested on the authority of previous leadership.

One aspect which is strange and unique in this statement, however, is the way in which it distances itself from previous arguments and justifications. Instead of singling out white or black people as being descendants of Cain or Abel, it makes a much more inclusive claim that everyone is descendant from the common parentage of Adam and Eve. The ideas of a ‘mark of Cain’ or ‘the blood of Cain’ have not been contradicted or jettisoned, but the tone of the text downgrades them significantly in importance. Where Brigham Young claimed that the sins of Cain caused all those who came after to bear his mark and be cursed, George Albert Smith’s statement claims that the denial of priesthood is in effect “for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which He has not made fully known to man.” This statement marks an almost revelatory shift in the LDS church’s justifications for its policy.

However, previous justifications for the ban are not fully jettisoned. In almost the same breath that this statement claims a lack of total understanding for why God has divinely mandated the priesthood’s racial segregation it goes on to provide an explanation for it. Not only is a justification provided but it is a justification which backed up as being one which comes from Mormonism’s living prophet. This statement explicitly names David O. McKay as being a living prophet – a title which he at that point held within Mormondom as the President of the LDS church –and then quotes McKay as saying that the doctrine of pre-mortal sins is one which is known through revelation. After first saying that God’s reasoning for the policy is not fully known to man, the statement provides reasoning for the policy from

a figure who, within Mormon belief, has the authority to receive revelation directly from God.

There is a lack of clarity as to where the authority to make this claim derives. It begs the question whether this statement claims that the policy is in place because God, in his inexorable wisdom and for reasons unknown to man, has commanded it to be held to or that black people cannot receive the priesthood and other blessings in this life because of sins they committed in a spiritual life before this one. It appears to argue both. One interpretation of these seemingly conflicting explanations is to assume that even though the doctrine of premortal sin is in still effect, it does not give a complete picture as to why God has placed limitations on black people's opportunities to receive blessings from him. This interpretation provides flexibility of belief in the future as it permits Mormons to either give an explanation for the policy which places the burden of responsibility on those discriminated against or simply plead ignorance as to full knowledge of God's divine will.

It is also worth noting that this statement adopts a much more political line of reasoning. Where the earlier primary sources focus almost entirely on theological arguments, here we find multiple references to rights provided by the US constitution. This continues the trend begun in the previous statement from the first presidency in 1949 of using the first presidency's public statements with regards to race and the priesthood as opportunities for apologetics. These statements are not designed to inform Mormons about their beliefs but to justify to non-Mormons why Mormons believe and act the way they do and should be allowed to continue doing so. Why? Because it is the LDS church's legal right to do so.

This position has no relevancy whatever to those who do not wish to join the Church. Those individuals, we suppose, do not believe in the divine origin and nature of the church, nor that we have the priesthood of God. Therefore, if they feel we have no priesthood, they should have no concern with any aspect of our

theology on priesthood so long as that theology does not deny any man his Constitutional privileges.⁴⁴

This argument has nothing to do with Mormonism or theology in general, and everything to do with American political ideals. It is an argument predicated on the notion of the separation between church and state. Because the policy of priesthood denial is based on religious beliefs and does not deny anyone the rights guaranteed them in the United States constitution, the argument goes, Mormons should be able to behave as they like without repercussions from the state. The intended audience in much of the statement is not Mormons, but the public and private groups who do not assent to Mormon doctrinal truth claims who may be critical of the church and its racial policies. In tailoring the message to an audience who does not believe in the LDS Church's ability to receive divine revelation, the entire issue of whether the policy of racial discrimination has been divinely inspired is sidestepped.

1978 and “Official Declaration 2”

The next major statement to come from the first presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is without doubt the most important document the LDS church has ever produced with regards to its policy of denying priesthood to black men. On September 30th, 1978, the first presidency presented a letter from its prophet, seer, and revelator Spencer W. Kimball. The letter was dated June 8th of that same year and was addressed to all priesthood holders in the LDS church throughout the world. Although it is lengthy, it is important enough to quote in full.

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.

⁴⁴ Brown & Tanner, 224.

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. (Official Declaration 2)

This declaration is markedly different from the sermon delivered by Brigham Young and the two first presidency statements that came before it. For one thing, it has been placed into official LDS scriptural canon where it is now known as Official Declaration 2. This declaration is now a portion of The Doctrine and Covenants, a Mormon scriptural text compiled of revelations delivered by their prophets on how Mormons are to live. To this day, Official Declaration 2 is the only addition to this text the LDS church has made since 1890.

Like the previously examined sources, Official Declaration 2 makes reference to the authority of past leaders. However, it reintroduces only one of previous doctrines – the prediction that one day every race would become eligible to receive all Mormon blessings without discrimination. The doctrines relating to bloodlines or premortal lives are not mentioned at all. The declaration focuses heavily on emphasizing its own revelatory nature, making it clear that this is a message for Mormons which comes directly from God. Notably, it does not emphasize the divine authority of the prophet Spencer Kimball and his unique

ability to receive revelation but instead claims this change as something many in the church have prayed for. The preamble as well as the conclusion which bookend the letter – shown above as printed in the Doctrine and Covenants – talk at great length about the message’s universal acceptance by church leadership.

Official Declaration 2 is unquestionably designed specifically to give black men the opportunity to hold priesthood authority in the LDS church, but at no point does it explicitly do so: it extends priesthood eligibility to black men without ever mentioning them directly. Instead, it states that “all worthy male members of the Church may be ordained to the priesthood without regard for race or color.” This is the only mention of race or skin colour whatsoever in Official Declaration 2, despite the fact that race is the core issue it is designed to address.

Furthermore, almost all of the key points which have been made and repeated by Kimball’s predecessors are nowhere to be found. Not only are justifications for the now defunct policy from ‘the mark of Cain’ or a pre-mortal existence absent, but the Declaration offers hardly any justification for the policy whatsoever. To read the Declaration in isolation from previous statements on the issue may give the reader the impression that this racially discriminatory policy was brought forth by God himself unto unwilling but obedient Mormons who patiently pleaded for its removal.

This declaration appears to place the earlier doctrines that justify the racial discrimination policy which were presented by previous church leaders as divinely inspired revelation in a strange state of limbo. Because the mark of Cain and the pre-mortal existence stay unchallenged by the declaration, they still retain their status as divinely inspired truths within Mormonism. However, the same is not true of Brigham Young’s claims that “Cain will not receive the Priesthood or salvation until all the seed of Abel are redeemed”. It is, quite simply, impossible to uncover an interpretation of Declaration 2 which does not put it

into direct conflict with a previous revelation or which does not permit the continued existence of ‘vestigial’ beliefs which were at one point used as justification for excluding black men from priesthood authority.

The LDS church seems to have been aware that questions of this kind would arise, and attempted to answer many potential questions through a speech delivered by Quorum of the Twelve (a position directly under the first presidency in the LDS hierarchy) member Bruce R. McConkie on August 18th, 1978. As can be noted, this speech was delivered less than one month before Kimball’s letter would be officially presented to all church officers for a vote of approval. In this speech, titled “All are Alike unto God”, McConkie attempts to reconcile statements from past leadership with the recent revelation:

There are statements in our literature by the early Brethren which we have interpreted to mean that the Negroes would not receive the priesthood in mortality. I have said the same things, and people write me letters and say, “You said such and such, and how is it now that we do such and such?” And all I can say to that is that it is time disbelieving people repented and got in line and believed in a living, modern prophet. Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.⁴⁵

McConkie is surprisingly blunt in his response to arguments that to permit priesthood authority to black people contradicts Brigham Young’s assertion that they would not receive it until the end times. He all but accuses those questioning this sudden shift in church policy of apostasy and unbelief, telling them to “get in line.” The irony here is that McConkie’s next piece of advice is to completely forget and ignore the statements which those who previously held the title of modern prophet. This is a surprising statement from a high ranking member of church leadership as it implies that the knowledge the church gains from God is not

⁴⁵ Bruce R. McConkie (1978), “All are Alike Unto God”.

cumulative and unchanging, but can be rewritten at any time. What is even more surprising is that he appears to contradict himself later on in the speech when he claims that “whatever the elders of the Church speak, when moved upon by the power of the Holy Ghost, shall be scripture, shall be the mind and will and voice of the Lord.”⁴⁶ However, Brigham Young certainly appeared to believe that he was being moved by the power of the Holy Ghost when he preached his sermon and declared that black men would never be able to receive the priesthood, citing his authority as a prophet as he did so.

The most charitable way to reconcile these seemingly conflicting notions is to assume that McConkie is suggesting that the previous statements were not in fact revelations from God inspired by the Holy Ghost. However, it has already been shown above that doctrines such as the premortal existence were explicitly presented as revelation by church elders. McConkie might be in disagreement about whether the failure of black people to be valiant in the premortal life ought to be considered a revelation, given the manner in which he speaks about such doctrines later on in his speech:

There was about a quarter of a century, then, in New Testament times, when there were extreme difficulties among the Saints. [...] Could all men come to him on an equal basis with the seed of Abraham?

There have been these problems, and the Lord has permitted them to arise. There isn't any question about that. We do not envision the whole reason and purpose behind all of it; we can only suppose and reason that it is on the basis of our premortal devotion and faith.⁴⁷

McConkie compares the Mormon practice of denying priesthood to blacks with the early Christian church's discussion on whether the teachings of Jesus Christ were to be spread to other ethnic groups or whether it would remain a Jewish religion. He seems to suggest that there is a precedent for the Christian God waiting to bring his truth to certain ethnic groups until the time is right. He is essentially comparing a discussion which took place in the years

⁴⁶McConkie (1978).

⁴⁷McConkie (1978).

following Jesus death to a one hundred and thirty yearlong policy which was explicitly justified and supported by the LDS church's highest ranking leadership. To properly assess whether these two historical events are comparable would require a historical discussion of the early church which lies outside of the scope of this study. For this reason, it is enough to point out that this comparison may lack the explanatory strength McConkie's argument relies upon.

McConkie, unlike Official Declaration 2, follows the trend of earlier statements from church leadership by engaging with earlier justifications for the policy. He reintroduces the concepts of a pre-mortal life and the ineffability of God's decision to deny priesthood to black people. The latter of these is re-emphasized as being a valuable explanation but the former McConkie attempts to downplay the importance of. It is argued that black people's failure to be sufficiently valiant in the premortal life is not revelation but merely a supposition employed to provide an explanation for the ultimately unknowable plan of God for the world.

McConkie's core argument, then, is that Mormons must now see things through the lens of the most recent revelation. Previous explanations for the policy are to be ignored as mere theory. In the light of the newest prophecy it is the duty of every believing Mormon to accept the new order of things and ignore the false doctrines which came before it.

As has been shown above, this presents a problem for the Mormon who genuinely believes in the ability and authority of LDS leaders to provide direct revelation from God. Even if they wholeheartedly embrace the new revelation, that does not necessarily mean that the previously presented revelations are wholly jettisoned or null and void. This difficulty in reconciling previous revelation with current leads to the current difficulty in finding a theological explanation for these events which does not suggest that "God changed his mind

about black people.” Or, to restate the methodology used in this study, the interpretation of events given by McConkie is in direct violation of the law of non-contradiction.

Post-1978

It is hardly surprising that the doctrines of Cain’s lineage and a system of pre-mortal valiance did not simply disappear from Mormonism with the release of Official Declaration 2 in 1978. Twenty years after the publication of Official Declaration 2 in 1978, the new president of the LDS church, Gordon B. Hinckley, began to face pressure from within the church to issue a formal statement to publicly renounce its more racially charged doctrinal statements. No such apology was forthcoming. Instead, Hinckley was reported by the Los Angeles Times on September 12, 1998 as having said that: “I don’t hear any complaint from our black brethren and sisters. I hear only appreciation and gratitude wherever we go. [...] I don’t see anything further that we need to do.”⁴⁸ Hinckley seemed to believe that the 1978 revelation was all that was needed to discredit the doctrines previously used to justify the church’s racial discrimination.⁴⁹

One reason for this is the fact that, even after the 1978 revelation, the LDS church continued to provide access to books which espoused the aforementioned doctrines through church libraries and book stores.⁵⁰ These books continued to be read and accepted by many within the LDS church. This, as explained by Armand L. Mauss, led to a difficult moment of reckoning for many black converts to the Mormon faith.

When the black converts would understandably raise questions about these doctrines in church settings, they would be met, as often as not, with matter-of

⁴⁸Larry B. Stammer (1998), “Mormon Leader Defends Race Relations”.

⁴⁹ Mauss, 90-92.

⁵⁰ One of the most likely candidates for such books is *Mormon Doctrine*, ironically authored by Bruce R. McConkie. See also Mauss, 90-91.

fact affirmations of the doctrines by local Mormon leaders, who themselves tended to accept whatever they had read in ‘church books’.⁵¹

Thus, black converts were faced with two opposing views on their role within the Church – one which welcomes them and one which excludes them. Although McConkie and Hinckley may have believed that the revelation of 1978 was enough to do away with more than a century of attempts by Mormon leadership to explain its policy of discrimination through racist doctrine, but this clearly did not filter down to all of the ‘rank and file’ of the LDS church. This is to be expected given not only the LDS church’s decision to continue providing access to books which espoused these doctrines but the vagueness contained in official statements made by previous church leadership.

2013 and “Race and the Priesthood”

It was not until after Thomas S. Monson became the LDS church president, following Gordon B. Hinckley’s death, that the LDS church would finally make an earnest effort to address the issues which Official Declaration 2 left lingering. In 2013 the LDS Church published an essay on their official website titled “Race and the Priesthood”.

Moving back to the style of apologetics employed in several of the previous statements discussed, this essay focuses mainly on placing the policy of excluding black men from the priesthood into its historical context:

The Church was established in 1830, during an era of great racial division in the United States. At the time, many people of African descent lived in slavery, and racial distinctions and prejudice were not just common but customary among white Americans. Those realities, though unfamiliar and disturbing today, influenced all aspects of people’s lives, including their religion.⁵²

This historical argument is often referred to as ‘The Missouri Thesis’ and is at its core the notion that black priesthood denial came about as a reaction by Mormons to the culture of

⁵¹Mauss, 91.

⁵² “Race and the Priesthood” (2013).

racism and pro-slavery ideas that they encountered during their time in Jackson, Missouri. This thesis lacks the explanatory power is defenders claim. For one, the policy was not put in place in 1830 when the church was founded. Instead, it emerged later on, as shown in the 1852 Brigham Young sermon quoted above.

Even scholars who do not believe the policy of black priesthood denial began in 1852 contest this thesis. Newell G. Bringhurst also refutes the claim, despite the fact that he places the implementation of the policy in the year 1847:

[M]ormon black priesthood denial did *not* emerge during the 1830's[...] Thus, the central tenet of the Missouri thesis lacks historical credibility. In fact, the practice of Mormon black priesthood denial was not implemented until 1847, three years after the death of Joseph Smith.⁵³

The suggestion that Mormon doctrines of black priesthood denial originated from cultural factors outside the religion during its time in Missouri quite simply does not hold water. In 1852, when the policy began to be espoused publicly by Mormonism's prophet and highest ranking member, the Mormon religion had already relocated to Utah where it was largely isolated from the rest of American society. Ultimately, the attempt to blame Mormonism's racist policies on outside cultural factors does nothing to explain why so many racist doctrines were introduced to explain the policy, nor does it explain why the policy was in place until 1978 and required a revelation in order to be reversed.

The 2013 essay attempts to remove racist doctrines used to justify the policy by relegating such doctrines to mere theories:

Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.⁵⁴

⁵³Bringhurst,29. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁴ "Race and the Priesthood".

This is in effect a restating of McConkie's claim that Mormons ought to forget whatever came before the 1978 revelation and relegate such justifications to mere theory. The problem with this that these racially charged doctrines were not presented to Mormons as theories, but as revelations themselves. The speech delivered by McConkie and the 2013 essay clearly argue that doctrines previously put forward as divinely inspired revelation ought to now be downgraded in importance to being theories. However, the basis for discarding these doctrines which were presented by LDS church leadership as revelation is a new doctrine presented by LDS church leadership as revelation.

The change in policy was successfully couched in sacred terms. However, the previous statements were not, in my opinion, sufficiently deprived of their sacral character. The result of this is that two proposition are simultaneously claimed to be true in defiance of the law of non-contradiction.

Analysis and Conclusions

The notion of teaching under the authority of God's power is a core concept for Mormonism. It is at the core of what it means to have priesthood authority as well as what it means to be a 'prophet, seer, and revelator' within the church. As their scriptural canon describes the notion in The Doctrine and Covenants in section 128, verse eleven: "[F]or him to whom these keys are given there is no difficulty in obtaining a knowledge of facts in relation to the salvation of the children of men[.]" Mormons believe that the priesthood authority to teach and act as a prophet who is capable of determining the truth in how to achieve salvation have been passed down in an unbroken line from Joseph Smith to their current leadership. It is unsurprising, then, that its leadership does not accept criticisms of its authority to teach and determine doctrine warmly.

Understanding this concept is especially useful in grasping the twists and turns that the LDS church's discourse on race has taken over the years. The statements of previous prophets have always been used by the next generation in order to understand the existence of the church's policies. As well, all of the statements made which have been examined in this study appear to go to great pains to avoid claiming any revelation which conflicts with previous revelations. When Bruce R. McConkie insisted that his listeners ought to "forget everything I have ever said", he did not argue that the new revelation of 1978 invalidated previous revelations pertaining to a pre-mortal existence or a cursed lineage. Rather, he stated that those doctrines previously put forth were theories not facts. A revelation from God cannot be contradicted by a later revelation, but a theory can easily be done away with.

The problem, as was stated above, is that none of the theological justifications for the church's policy of denying priesthood authority to black members were presented as theories. When Brigham Young taught the policy from the pulpit in 1852 he did so while declaring

that, “[I]f no other prophet ever spake it before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ.” Theories are not taught from the pulpit ‘in the name of Jesus Christ’. When George Albert Smith justified the policy he described the policy as being one which “may be understood when another doctrine of the Church is kept in mind, namely, that [of] the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence[...].” This explanation is presented as a clear explanation to those who do not consent to the majority of distinctly Mormon truth claims as a form of apologetics, not as a theory. Even Bruce R. McConkie himself presented the doctrine of premortal valiance in no uncertain terms when he wrote in his book “Mormon Doctrine” that:

Those who were less valiant in pre-existence and who thereby had certain spiritual restrictions imposed upon them during mortality are known to us as the negroes. Such spirits are sent to earth through the lineage of Cain, the mark put upon him for his rebellion against God and his murder of Abel being a black skin. [...] The present status of the negro rests purely and simply on the foundation of pre-existence. Along with all races and peoples he is receiving here what he merits as a result of the long pre-mortal probation in the presence of the Lord.⁵⁵

Longstanding policies are not by any means well justified when they rest ‘purely and simply’ on the foundation of mere theories and suppositions.

I have shown that many of the statements made by LDS leadership make conflicting revelatory claims. However, it is my opinion that the truth claims made by LDS church leadership stand in direct conflict with Mormon scriptures and Mormons appear to be breaking the law of non-contradiction by asserting that both are true. More specifically, the second of the thirteen articles of faith which states that: “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins, and not for Adam’s transgression.” This passage is included in The Doctrine and Covenants and is considered one of Mormonism’s cornerstone beliefs. Despite the blatant rejection within Mormon scripture of the idea that people ought to be judged for the sins of their ancestors, Mormon leadership nevertheless promoted the doctrine

⁵⁵ Bruce R. McConkie (1966), *Mormon Doctrine*, 526-527.

that black people were being punished for the sins of Cain. The third article of faith states that, “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.” Despite this, the LDS church clung to a policy which denied a large portion of mankind the chance to participate in ‘the ordinances of the Gospel’, ordinances which Mormons believe to be a requirement to attain a level of salvation which permits one into the highest level of heaven. Thus, the leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has contradicted itself on multiple occasions about issues of race according to standards which the church itself has established. This is an important conclusion to recognize because many Mormons still believe their church and its leadership to be infallible.

Because the LDS church’s highest authority are seen as ‘prophets, seers, and revelators’ who lead their church through the divine authority of God, many Mormons vehemently reject the idea that such individuals could adopt or endorse any policy or doctrine which is racist. This belief in the infallibility of those in leadership positions can lead to a culture within Mormonism in which it is considered unacceptable to question the policies and doctrines of the past. Darron T. Smith has written about this phenomenon, describing it thusly:

Being converted to Mormonism, for many people of whatever nationality, often appears to mean that they agree to follow the teachings of Church leaders regardless of how wrongheaded those teachings may be. Even though some Church leaders are quick to point out the need for Church members to think carefully and critically about their teachings, many remain resolute that when church leaders speak authoritatively, they speak for the Lord and personal thinking stops at what these Brethren say. In other words, until official spokesmen for the LDS Church break their silence on racist folklore, denouncing and strongly discouraging the use of such ideas as a source of ‘truth’, prejudice against blacks and other people of color will continue in the Church and in my classroom.⁵⁶

⁵⁶Darron T. Smith (2005), 451.

These words were published in 2006, prior to the release of the previously discussed essay, “Race and the Priesthood”, which officially rejected many of the doctrines deemed unacceptable. However, it is not enough for the Church to state that such ‘theories’ are no longer valid. The doctrines of valiance in the pre-mortal life, the lineage of Cain, a claim to following God’s will regardless of whether there is an understandable reason, and the rejection of doctrines which are now considered mere theories all have one thing in common. All of these justifications for the existence of Mormonism’s policy denying the priesthood to black men shift the burden of responsibility away from the LDS church. There has still not been any public and official acknowledgment of wrongdoing on the LDS church’s part. Until the church assumes responsibility for its failures, I do not believe that this issue of the church’s racist past can ever truly be said to be resolved.

The LDS church must admit that its leadership is clearly fallible in its ability to establish doctrine for the church and has been utterly wrong multiple times when it presented revelation to its followers. If it does not, it will continue to alienate people of colour, promote racist beliefs (intentionally or no), and created painful cognitive dissonance for it followers who are earnestly attempting to understand the will of God. These problems will only be exacerbated as time progresses and the internet makes information on the Church’s racist past more easily available. However, Mormon theology is utterly reliant upon its doctrines of authority. The entirety of Mormondom is built upon the notion that it is the one true and restored church whose leadership has the divine mandate to do God’s will. To admit that the church’s leadership has been wrong on such important issues would be considered by many to be tantamount to admitting that LDS leadership has failed to teach God’s will and plan for salvation but their own ideas instead. This would literally stand in opposition to Joseph Smith’s first revelation that he had been told by God that none of the churches or denominations on earth were the true religion and that he ought to join none of them for,

“they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.”

Because of this doctrine that it is only the LDS Church which has truly been restored to full accordance with God’s favor, it is unacceptable in Mormon theology to say that LDS church leadership taught doctrines which were based only on their own opinions and were not inspired by God. Furthermore, because Mormons believe in a God who is eternal and perfect, the suggestion that God has provided revelations to his followers that contradict one another is equally unacceptable. Many LDS members would likely still consider an admission of fault and responsibility for espousing racist doctrines to undermine everything their religion is founded upon. For this reason, it is unlikely that the LDS church will ever officially espouse a doctrine which openly admits to any form of contradiction.

This will and has led to cognitive dissonance for the church’s membership as well as difficulties in attracting new members who are socially conscious or people of colour.

Summary

In this essay I have examined the history of racial discourse and doctrine within the context of Mormonism, primarily by examining the various justifications provided for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints policy of refusing priesthood authority to black men. My research question was phrased as follows:

- Within the parameters of belief that the LDS church has established for itself, what conclusion should Mormons come to about their God's will as it relates to race?

The way this was studied was by engaging in a close reading of the official statements made by the LDS church's highest level of leadership, the first presidency, the Mormon scriptures, and one essay made available on the LDS church's website.

I concluded that many of these sources conflicted with one another about God's plan for people of colour. It would be impossible for a Mormon to combine all of the statements which have been presented as revelation into a coherent set of beliefs that could be held with intellectual integrity. As an attempt to resolve these conflicts, Mormon theology has re-categorized the doctrine that black people were insufficiently valiant in their pre-mortal lives as well as the doctrine that black people are of a cursed lineage to theories. This was done despite the fact that these doctrines were presented by LDS church leadership at the time as truths known through revelation. This conflict between sources that Mormons consider to be divinely inspired has far-reaching implications for how fallible Mormons may have to consider their leadership to be. Fundamentally, unless The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints admits to having taught false doctrine, the only reasonable conclusion to come to is that their doctrine suggests that God did, in fact, change his mind about black people in 1978.

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