

A COMMENTARY ON STEPHEN G. TAGGART'S  
*MORMONISM'S NEGRO POLICY: SOCIAL  
AND HISTORICAL ORIGINS*

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*Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins.* By Stephen G. Taggart. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press. xiv + 82 pp., \$4.00. Lester Bush, who is now serving as a Lieutenant in the U. S. Navy, has done extensive research, perhaps more than anyone in the Church, in the Library of Congress and all the university and Church collections in Utah on Mormonism and the Negro and the history of the Negro in the L.D.S. Church.

Stephen Taggart has attempted in *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins* to show that the present Mormon Negro policy is "a historical anachronism—an unfortunate and embarrassing survival of a once expedient institutional practice" which emerged in response to stress encountered in Missouri. With this demonstration that "the action of social forces explains the present Mormon posture toward Negroes," it becomes apparent that "the Church would need only declare its disposition for a change to occur." Since other authors have previously "demonstrated" the socio-historical origin of this practice without noticeable effect on the Church,<sup>1</sup> one expects this to be an especially ironclad case—tightly reasoned, well documented, and presumably with some new references, perhaps even contemporary with the period.

The essay does indeed appear more comprehensive than previous treatments, and it cites some uncommon, though seemingly very relevant, references. One has the impression that a very good case is being made. If the Mormons in Missouri were so clearly swayed by their environment with regard to the Negro, why not the whole Church doctrine? Problems are evident which question the validity of Taggart's conclusions. After a generally accurate and well documented rehearsal of the Jackson County period of the Church, one finds an increasing incidence of speculative statements and secondary sources, and a sprinkling of factual errors. More distressingly, one finds a number of relevant points omitted from Mormon history and doctrine and the general setting in which they arose.

We are informed, initially, that after the founding of the Church, Mormons with "abolitionist attitudes" went to Missouri, an area to which they became attached through "both economic and ideological forces." Facing,

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<sup>1</sup>Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (New York, 1945) is probably widest known; most convincingly documented is Naomi F. Woodbury's "A Legacy of Intolerance: Nineteenth Century Pro-slavery Propaganda and the Mormon Church Today" (master's thesis, University of California at Los Angeles, 1966). Other current works include Jerald Tanner's *The Negro in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City, 1963); Jerald and Sandra Tanner's *Joseph Smith's Curse upon the Negro* (Salt Lake City, 1965); and sections of general treatments of Mormonism, e.g., William J. Whalen, *The Latter-day Saints in the Modern World* (New York, 1964), and Wallace Turner, *The Mormon Establishment* (Boston, 1966). See also Jan Shipp, "Second Class Saints," *Colorado Quarterly* 11 (1962): 183 and Dennis Lythgoe, "Negro Slavery and Mormon Doctrine," *Western Humanities Review* 21 (1967): 327.

among other problems, hostile proslavery sentiment in the old settlers, the Mormons were willing to attempt "to reduce the conflict which threatened to drive them from the state by abandoning their initial abolitionist tendencies and adopting some form of proslavery posture."

Unquestionably the Mormons were viewed as a threat to slavery in Missouri. They were not slaveholders and had come from the home of the growing "antislavery impulse"; furthermore, their path—New York to Ohio to Missouri—paralleled in time and route the movement of abolitionist sentiment into the West.<sup>2</sup> Yet one is disappointed that essentially no effort has been made to document the claim that the early Mormons were, in fact, abolitionists.<sup>3</sup> The only evidence cited to defend this point is taken from an article in *The Evening and the Morning Star* which was an emphatic denial of any interference with the slaves.<sup>4</sup> Warren Jennings, to whom Taggart acknowledges a considerable debt for insight into the Jackson County period, deals with this question and concludes, "there is no concrete evidence that the Mormons ever incited, conspired, or tampered with the slaves . . . ."<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, as is correctly observed, the Missourian perception of the Mormon position was important, and not the actual Mormon practice.

In 1833, Taggart proceeds, a crisis developed when "the Mormon press in Missouri" issued a cautionary note on immigration of free Negroes into Missouri. The article was misunderstood by the Missourians as an invitation to free Negro Mormons to come to Missouri. In response to the vigorous anti-Mormon activity which ensued, the Church within one month's time changed its stated position from having "no special rule" with regard to Negroes to a desire "to prevent them from being admitted as members of the Church."

This history is well substantiated. If one ignores the unnecessary speculative statements Taggart now inserts periodically,<sup>6</sup> the significant points are undeniable. The "Mormon press" (i.e., W. W. Phelps) responded most remarkably to the winds of environmental stress. One small point should be made; Elijah Abel was not the first free Negro convert to the Church, as

<sup>2</sup>Many abolitionists were associated, additionally, with religious evangelism and the temperance movement.

<sup>3</sup>For the most part, Taggart has made rather casual usage of the term "abolitionist," employing it interchangeably with passive opposition to slavery, and failing to distinguish among the broad spectrum of views held by abolitionists (gradualists to immediatists); these distinctions become more important in the Nauvoo period. He also ignores the anti-Negro, anti-abolitionist sentiment in the Northeast, which shortly resulted in widespread disorder, including riots in Palmyra, New York, in 1834 and 1837. See John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3d ed. (New York 1969), p. 235.

<sup>4</sup>*The Evening and the Morning Star* 2:122 (January 1834): 122.

<sup>5</sup>Warren A. Jennings, "Factors in the Destruction of the Mormon Press in Missouri, 1833," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 35 (1967): 67. This excellent work adds to many of Taggart's primary references for this period several other seemingly relevant testimonies concerning early Mormon views toward slavery.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., "a few converts . . . who *probably* subscribed to the slave system . . ."; "it is *reasonable to expect* that the Mormons would have . . ."; "the threat . . . *may have been* aggravated by a revelation . . ."; and, "to the extent that . . . , it would have been construed as an attempt . . ." (my italics).

is suggested. At least one other, known variously as Black Pete and Black Tom, had joined in Kirtland within a year of the organization of the Church.<sup>7</sup> It is not clear that either Pete or Abel was known to Phelps, or that either had the necessary citizenship papers to go to Missouri. Pete's parents were slaves; and though Abel was born in Maryland, his family was later from Canada, raising the question of his having made use of the underground railroad.<sup>8</sup> In any event, there is no indication that Abel planned ("Abel . . . may have intended . . .") a trip to hostile Missouri. In fact, he originally went to Kirtland, not Nauvoo.

Taggart next relates that shortly after the expulsion of the Saints from Jackson County, Joseph Smith, upon obtaining a "clear impression of the explosiveness of the slavery issue" and "in the context of his recent firsthand experience in Missouri," reached the decision "to exclude Negroes from the priesthood"; however, he "advised only members who approached him on the subject, and who were concerned with the southern Church" (this in 1834). The following year reportedly brought "the first official declaration of policy regarding Negroes made by the Church," declaring "Formally . . . support of the legal institution of slavery . . ."

With these claims come the first serious questions as to the adequacy of the research, as well as to the validity of the conclusions drawn. The remarkable "documentation" for the origin of the practice of denying the Negro the priesthood is the testimony of Zebedee Coltrin, and to a lesser extent the testimony of Abraham O. Smoot, given May 31, 1879.<sup>9</sup> These are the only references cited at any time in the article to support the claim that Joseph Smith taught denial of the priesthood to the Negro.<sup>10</sup> But the source needs further evaluation. Granting that "Coltrin's statement was recorded forty-five years after the fact" and that it therefore "would be unwise to accept its detail without question," Taggart still assumes "as generally correct the report" that Joseph Smith decided not to give the Negro the priesthood "in mid-1834."<sup>11</sup> This is indeed a commendable memory, especially in

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<sup>7</sup>He is spoken of as being a member of the Mormon Church in early February 1831 (*Ashtabula Journal* of February 5, 1831, Stanley S. Ivins Collection, Utah State Historical Society, Notebook 2, p. 221). There are a number of later references to Pete, who was one of two Negro Mormons to claim to have received revelation.

<sup>8</sup>Abel's mother reportedly was originally a slave in South Carolina. With slave parcentage, neither could have obtained citizenship papers very easily.

<sup>9</sup>Taggart's footnote cites a secondary source (William E. Berrett, *The Church and the Negroid People* [Orem, Utah, 1960]) which in turn refers to a *Journal History* entry of May 31, 1879. Actually, the *Journal History* contains no such entry near that date (if at all) and the correct source was actually John Nuttall's journal for that day. The quote, however, is accurately reported.

<sup>10</sup>See *Journal of John Nuttall*, I (1876-1884): 290-93, from a typewritten copy at the Brigham Young University Library. A copy is also preserved in the manuscripts section of the Church Historian's Library-Archives.

<sup>11</sup>"Generally correct" comes to mean that after a forty-five-year time lapse, the dating is adequately precise to be used in specific reference to other events, e.g., Coltrin's visit took place "just after Joseph Smith returned to Kirtland"; "More than eighteen months after Joseph Smith was approached by Greene and Coltrin . . ."; "Thus, one year after meeting with Greene and Coltrin, Joseph Smith evidently . . ."; and, "during mid-1842 . . . more than eight years after the practice was begun."

view of Taggart's stated belief that part of Coltrin's testimony is in error ("events show this tone in his testimony to be an artifact"). Of more serious concern is the absence of any attempt to evaluate the reliability of the sources. Nowhere is it mentioned that Coltrin's own account reflects prejudice to the subject;<sup>12</sup> nor that Coltrin, himself, two years after the reported conversation with Joseph Smith *ordained Elijah Abel* to the priesthood office of a Seventy<sup>13</sup> (to the Third Quorum, not the Second as Coltrin recalls in 1879);<sup>14</sup> nor is evidence given of Coltrin's later criticisms of Abel in a Seventies meeting.<sup>15</sup>

The testimony of Abraham O. Smoot is not emphasized because Smoot was unable to date the origin of the practice as early as 1834. Even so, it would have been worthwhile to point out that Smoot came from a line of slaveholders, and reportedly owned a slave himself while in Utah<sup>16</sup> (this slave described by him in later years as "one of the 'whitest Negroes' living");<sup>17</sup> or one might expect mention of Smoot's refusal, in 1844, under Southern pressuring to distribute Joseph Smith's presidential views which were critical of slavery.<sup>18</sup> More substantial documentation than the testimonies of Smoot and Coltrin seems indicated.

The first "official" Church position on *slavery* (there is no reference to *Negroes* in the 1835 statement referred to by Taggart) may not have come in 1835, but rather two years prior, immediately after the expulsion of the Saints from Missouri. And this would not have been in the form of a policy statement of support for slavery, but rather as a divine condemnation of it: "It is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another . . ."<sup>19</sup> This

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<sup>12</sup>Coltrin speaks of a "warm" argument even prior to his talk with Joseph Smith, in which he advocated denying Negroes the priesthood; moreover, he reports that in administering to Abel, he had "such unpleasant feelings" that he vowed he "never would again Anoint another person who had Negro blood in him. [sic] unless I was commanded by the Prophet to do so" (*Journal of John Nuttall*, 1:290, or Berrett, *The Church and the Negroid People*). In later years Coltrin is tied circumstantially to a practical joke carried out against an elderly Negro in Utah (see Kate B. Carter, *The Negro Pioneer* [Salt Lake City, 1965], p. 24).

<sup>13</sup>*Minutes of the Seventies Journal*, kept by Hazen Aldrich, then a president of the Seventies; entry for December 20, 1836. Manuscripts collection, Church Historian's Library-Archives.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*; Aldrich, Coltrin, and J. Young were then presidents of the Third Quorum, and all were present.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, entry for June 1, 1839. This reference suggests that Abel was out of favor with a number of the brethren in the quorum "because of some of his teachings." It is of interest that Abel was clearly in possession of his priesthood, a fact obviously known to Joseph Smith, who was at this meeting. Yet Smith is not recorded as having made any comment.

<sup>16</sup>Carter, *The Negro Pioneer*, p. 24; also, C. Elliot Berlin, "Abraham Owen Smoot, Pioneer Mormon Leader" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1955), for Smoot's family background.

<sup>17</sup>In a letter written in 1897 by Smoot to Spencer Clawson, quoted in entirety in Carter, *The Negro Pioneer*, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup>Berlin, "Abraham Owen Smoot," p. 33. This study was largely taken from Smoot's personal journal. Abraham Smoot is also the source in later years (under President Joseph F. Smith) of the account attributed to David Patten in 1835 in which Cain appears to Patten (in the South) as a large "very dark" person, "covered with hair," and wearing "no clothing"; see Lycurgus Wilson, *Life of David Patten, the First Apostolic Martyr* (Salt Lake City, 1904), pp. 45-47.

<sup>19</sup>Doctrine and Covenants 101:79, given December 16, 1833.

statement, traditionally interpreted as meaning economic bondage by reference to a later revelation,<sup>20</sup> is never mentioned in early Mormon discourses on slavery. It is not entirely clear from the context that such a restriction is justified.

Careful reading of the policy statement passed in 1835 reflects that it was not so much an endorsement of legal slavery as it was a statement of support for legal institutions in general, which would include slavery where it was legal.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the statement was shortly thereafter amplified by Joseph Smith in a letter to the "elders abroad," in which he made it clear that the obligation to teach slaves the gospel had not been removed.<sup>22</sup> The elders were simply instructed to consult the masters first.<sup>23</sup> The Mormons had preached to Negroes from the earliest days of the Church. Black Pete was a member in February 1831; the *Journal History* speaks of preaching to Negroes in the summer of 1831; and Abel joined in 1832. The "Rules and Regulations to be Observed in the House of the Lord in Kirtland" drafted by Joseph Smith and others in 1836 provided for "black or white" (as well as "believer or unbeliever").<sup>24</sup> As late as 1840, the First Presidency issued a statement anticipating that "we may soon expect to see flocking to this place [Nauvoo], people of every land and from every nation . . . [including] the degraded Hottentot . . . who shall with us worship the Lord of Hosts in His holy temple and offer up their orisons in His sanctuary."<sup>25</sup>

To return to Taggart's narrative, we are informed that because of a continuing "minority of verbal abolitionists within the Church," the "leadership" was forced "to develop a theological justification for its proslavery statements." This was "essential for the safety of the membership in Missouri, for the attainment of the land of Zion, and for the success of the Southern missionary effort . . ." "The required argument had already been documented for him—complete with scriptural proof texts—by Southern churches . . ." and was utilized by Joseph Smith and others in the *Messenger and Advocate* (October 1836).

With these ideas, the article is briefly on firm ground again. The three discourses referred to embody virtually all the proslavery arguments then prevalent, and represent the most extensive treatment of slavery found during the first decade of the Church.<sup>26</sup> Though the notion that Canaan, slavery,

<sup>20</sup>D&C 104:16–18, 83, 84, given April 23, 1834. Both revelations, as well as the statement issued in 1835 appeared in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.

<sup>21</sup>D&C 134.

<sup>22</sup>*Messenger and Advocate* 1:180; 2:210–11 (September and November 1835).

<sup>23</sup>If permission was denied by the masters, "the responsibility be upon the head of the master of that house, and the consequence thereof . . ." (ibid.).

<sup>24</sup>See Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, B. H. Roberts, ed. (Salt Lake City, 1902), 1:75.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 4:213. The temple ordinances presently denied to Negroes were not announced until 1841 (sealing) and 1842 (endowments), and were not performed in the temple until 1846 and 1845, respectively.

<sup>26</sup>A well documented discussion of the similarity of antebellum proslavery arguments and Mormon teachings is found in Woodbury, *A Legacy of Intolerance*; a broader treatment without reference to the Mormons is J. Oliver Buswell's *Slavery, Segregation, and Scripture*

and the Negro were somehow related gained wide acceptance in the nineteenth-century South, it was not new. This belief had been relatively common in seventeenth-century America as one of the justifications for enslaving Negroes, but had fallen into disuse until the biblical attacks of evangelical abolitionists (slave-holding became a "sin") in the nineteenth century forced its recall. Previously this connection had been found in sixteenth-century England at the time of the English "discovery" of Africans; and the concept can be traced to Hebraic literature of at least 200 to 600 A.D.<sup>27</sup> There is evidence that Joseph Smith believed this tradition, for he mentions parenthetically that Negroes were "descendants of Ham" as early as June 1831, well prior to any difficulty within the Church over the slavery issue.<sup>28</sup>

As Taggart notes, the statements in the *Messenger and Advocate* represented a personal (rather than "official") response to the growing frustration in the Church over the slavery issue. The suggestion, however, that this was primarily directed at Missouri difficulties, and in particular at abolitionists within the Church, lacks evidence. The Mormons long had been saddled with the charge of being abolitionists. Though the charge was repeatedly denied, it persisted and continued to plague them wherever slavery was "tolerated." Because of the growth of the Church in the South generally, the embarrassment of an abolitionist's visit to Kirtland was sufficient to trigger the extensive discourses found in the *Advocate*.<sup>29</sup>

During this same period (about 1836), Taggart proposes, a "theological justification" for the practice of denying the priesthood to the Negro was "evidently contemplated." "For some reason, however, [Joseph Smith] did not make his efforts public until 1842," when this justification "was published as part of *The Book of Abraham*." "Consequently, ordinations of Negroes continued . . . until as late as 1841."<sup>30</sup>

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(Grand Rapids, 1964); see also Caroline Shanks, "The Biblical Anti-slavery Argument of the Decade 1830-1840," *Journal of Negro History* 15 (1931): 132.

<sup>27</sup>Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812* (Baltimore, 1968), p. 36, and Part I in general.

<sup>28</sup>Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:75. The earliest published version of the account (*Times and Seasons* 5 [1844]: 448) deletes this expression; however, it is present in the original handwritten entry of the *Manuscript History of the Church* (Church Historian's Library Archives) following the date June 19, 1831.

<sup>29</sup>This, by Joseph Smith's own testimony. "I am prompted to this course, in consequence, in one respect, of many elders having gone into the Southern States, besides, there now being many in that country who have already embraced the fulness of the gospel . . . Thinking, perhaps, that the sound might go out, that 'an abolitionist' had held forth several times to this community, and that the public feeling was not aroused to create mobs or disturbances, leaving the impression that all he said was concurred in . . ." (*Messenger and Advocate* 2:289); and, shortly thereafter, "[Y]ou can easily see it was put forth for no other reason than to correct the public mind generally without a reference or expectation of any excitement of the nature of the one now in your county [in Missouri] . . ." (*Messenger and Advocate* 2:354). There is no evidence that abolitionists within the Church played any substantial role at this time. The "many who profess to preach the gospel [who] complain against their brethren of the same faith, who reside in the south . . ." refers to the evangelical abolitionists in general.

<sup>30</sup>Elijah Abel, to whom Taggart's source refers, was in reality ordained a Seventy in 1836. There have been numerous subsequent cases of men of Negro ancestry reportedly receiving the priesthood. The most commonly cited include a "colored" Elder in Batavia,

These are significant claims—if they have been justified. However, in looking for evidence to support the position, one is again disappointed to find a group of inferences and semi-relevant quotations. As with many of the other proposals, they may be correct, or they may not; unfortunately little light is shed on resolving the question. Several assumptions have been made. Basic is the unquestioned acceptance of the 1879 interview with Coltrin and Smoot. This allows Taggart to ignore his own observation that the Book of Abraham “is vague and cannot by itself be said to justify denying the priesthood to Negroes,” because “in the presence of an eight-year-old informal practice of denying the priesthood to Negroes” it becomes “sufficient” justification.

This ignores a lack of evidence that Joseph Smith ever used the Book of Abraham to justify priesthood denial (nor apparently did any other Church leader, until the Utah period); neither is there any mention that Joseph Smith’s “brief reversal” of opinion on slavery *preceded* the publication of the Book of Abraham (which is difficult to reconcile with even the claim of its corroborating divine sanction of slavery by supporting Southern proslavery traditions).<sup>31</sup>

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N.Y., ordained by “Wm. Smith” at an unknown date (*Journal History*, June 2, 1847); Samuel Chambers, a prominent Salt Lake Negro reportedly active in the Eighth Ward Deacon’s Quorum in 1873–74 (noted in *Manuscripts History* card reference); two unnamed Negro Elders reported in South Carolina (*Journal History*, August 18, 1900); Eduard Legroan, a “deacon” in Salt Lake City’s Ninth Ward (reported in Carter, *The Negro Pioneer*, p. 51); and several of Elijah Abel’s descendants, e.g., his son Enoch and grandson Elijah, both reportedly Elders (Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith’s Curse upon the Negro*, pp. 8–12). Some of Abel’s children, themselves with light complexions, married into “white” families, and the descendants of these marriages have largely “passed over” from Negro to white. The problem of what policy to follow in cases such as this, where a priesthood holder finds unexpected Negro ancestry, has not been resolved consistently by the Church. Though Brigham Young is said to have excluded anyone with as much as “one drop of the seed of Cain” in his blood, occasional exceptions are reported more recently, particularly if the individual was assigned a lineage other than Cain, Ham or Canaan in his patriarchal blessing.

<sup>31</sup>See the letters exchanged by John C. Bennett, C. V. Dyer (active in the abolition movement in Chicago) and Joseph Smith in January and March of 1842 (*Times and Seasons* 3:723–25). The Prophet continued to distinguish between his position (a friend of “equal rights and privileges to all men”) and being an abolitionist (*Times and Seasons* 3:806–8), a distinction made very explicit in his presidential platform of 1844. Joseph Smith’s stand when more fully expounded was very similar to the more gradual school of emancipationists of the 1830’s, an approach largely superceded in the 1840’s by advocates of immediate emancipation. As noted earlier, Taggart makes little reference to the historical setting in any other place than Missouri. He dispenses with the seven years in Ohio with the observation that there “the membership had been largely exempt from the slavery conflict,” notwithstanding that Ohio had been the headquarters of most abolitionist activity in the West during the 1830’s. Rather he prefers to emphasize the one year during which the Church headquarters had moved to Missouri (1838)—which “meant that the tone of normative-Mormonism was now being set . . . where the membership was directly exposed to the conflicts forcing the Church away from abolitionism . . .” And he makes no reference to the growth of the abolitionist movement in Illinois in the 1840’s. Relevant to his observation on the effect of being in Missouri was Brigham Young’s statement “If I could have been influenced by private injury to choose one side in preference to the other, I should certainly be against the pro-slavery side of the question, for it was pro-slavery men that pointed the bayonet at me and my brethren in Missouri . . .” *Journal of Discourses*, 10:110–11.

What of the claimed "contemplation" in 1835? The Egyptian alphabet and grammar now available has not yet been dated.<sup>32</sup> The specific references made by Joseph Smith in 1835 to the actual content of the grammar and alphabet (or to the Book of Abraham) refer only to astronomy, not to the flood story.<sup>33</sup> In view of this, how can Taggart's conclusions be drawn? Simply: "The Egyptian alphabet and grammar . . . *appears* to have been the product of Joseph Smith's effort . . . [in] 1835 . . . . It *appears* that the passage in *The Book of Abraham* concerning the curse of Canaan was written during the most intensive period of conflict<sup>34</sup> . . . . Thus, *one year after his meeting with Greene and Coltrin, Joseph Smith evidently contemplated* the development of a theological justification for the practice of denying the priesthood to Negroes . . ." (q.e.d.) (my italics)

One must admit that in spite of the inadequacies of the above position, the parallels between Mormon Scripture and the contemporary proslavery arguments are striking.<sup>35</sup> In the early 1840's the Mormon leadership could argue using only direct quotes from what were to become Church Scriptures: "the seed of Cain were black" (Moses 7:22); "a blackness came upon all the children of Canaan" (Moses 7:8); "[the] king of Egypt was a descendant from the loins of Ham, and was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by birth" (Abraham 1:21); "and thus the blood of the Canaanites was preserved in the land" (Abraham 1:22); "and . . . from Ham, sprang the race which preserved the curse in the land" (Abraham 1:24); "[Pharaoh was] cursed . . . as pertaining to the Priesthood" (Abraham 1:26); and Ham's son, Canaan, was cursed to be a "servant of servants" (Genesis 9:25). Those familiar with the "Inspired translation" of the Bible (dating from 1831) could have added that Canaan had "a veil of darkness . . . cover him, that he shall be known among all men" (Genesis 9:50, Inspired Version).<sup>36</sup> Thus, Joseph Smith had armed the Church with evidence that clearly vindicated holding Negroes as slaves, as well as denying them the priesthood. Or maybe it is not so clear. Why would he so extensively justify a position on slavery he had rejected?<sup>37</sup> Why

<sup>32</sup>Joseph Smith's *Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar* (Salt Lake City, Modern Microfilm Co., 1966).

<sup>33</sup>These comments were made on October 1, and December 16, 1835. Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:286, 2:334. At least nine other 1835 references to the papyri included by Roberts say nothing more than "Egyptian records" or "grammar" about the content (July; October 7, 19; November 17, 19, 20, 24, 25, 26).

<sup>34</sup>The year 1835 saw a relative lull in the Missouri difficulties.

<sup>35</sup>Most impressive, perhaps, is the letter by W. W. Phelps, referred to by Taggart in a footnote, in which Phelps proposes several months *before* the papyri were even in the possession of the Church that Cain and his children were forever "cursed" with a black skin, that Ham married a Canaanite woman, preserving some of the "black seed" through the flood, and that Canaan, Ham's son, "inherited three curses: one from Cain for killing Abel; one from Ham for marrying a black wife, and one from Noah . . ." (*Messenger and Advocate* 1:82). Phelps has added to the traditional chronology that Ham's wife was a Canaanite, immediately reminiscent of the Book of Abraham's "this king [the Pharaoh] . . . was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by birth" (Abraham 1:21). More likely the idea was drawn from the already extant Book of Moses reference to an antediluvian people of Canaan who became black (Moses 7:8).

<sup>36</sup>Joseph Smith, Jr., *The Holy Scriptures* (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1944).

<sup>37</sup>Joseph Smith criticized slavery over at least the three years from 1842 to 1844. Con-



does no Mormon publication utilize this "obvious" argument for slavery during Joseph Smith's lifetime?<sup>38</sup> Why does no one for many years tie these Scriptures to the denial of the priesthood to the Negro?

These are perplexing questions. To assume without evidence that subsequent interpretations of Scripture were necessarily those initially used is no more justified than the assumption that they were created for the purpose for which they later came to be used. A careful reading of the Mormon Scriptures reveals a most confused picture—Cain's descendants, who "were black," are never again identified after Moses 7:22 (an antediluvian time); nor are Cain's brethren who were shut out with him (Genesis 5:26, Inspired Version).<sup>39</sup> The antediluvian people of Canaan were apparently not black until they fought with the people of Shum (thus are questionably, if at all, connected with Cain) (Moses 7:8); and the Inspired Version renders Canaan as *Cainan*, and gives the impression that these were the prophet Enoch's own people (Genesis 7:6–10; for Enoch's background, Genesis 6:43–44, both Inspired Version). Nowhere is it stated that Ham married a descendant of the antediluvian people of Canaan. The closest suggestion of this is through reference to Pharaoh, a descendant of Ham and also a descendant of the "Canaanites" (Abraham 1:21), yet the other references in the Book of Abraham to Canaanites refer to the descendants of Ham's son, Canaan, to whom the Pharaoh could have been related also. All that is said of Ham's wife

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trary to the impression gained from Taggart's article ("brief reversal"), there are probably as many different published statements in condemnation of slavery by Joseph Smith late in his career as there were supportive statements earlier.

<sup>38</sup>The earliest reference cited in previous treatments of this subject was an article by B. H. Roberts in 1885. Even at this late date the argument was still tentative, even speculative, in nature:

"Others there were, who may not have rebelled against God, and yet were so indifferent in their support of the righteous cause of our Redeemer, that they forfeited certain privileges and powers granted to those who were more valiant for God and correct principle. We have, I think, a demonstration of this in the seed of Ham. The first Pharaoh—patriarch-king of Egypt—was a grandson of Ham: . . . [Noah] *cursed him as pertaining to the Priesthood . . .*

"Now, why is it that the seed of Ham was cursed as pertaining to the Priesthood? Why is it that his seed 'could not have right to the Priesthood?' Ham's wife was named 'Egyptus, which in the Chaldaic signifies Egypt, which signifies that which is forbidden; and thus from Ham sprang that race which preserved the curse in the land.' . . . Was the wife of Ham, as her name signifies, of a race with which those who held the Priesthood were forbidden to intermarry? Was she a descendant of Cain, who was cursed for murdering his brother? And was it by Ham marrying her, and she being saved from the flood in the ark, that 'the race which preserved the curse in the land' was perpetuated? If so, then I believe that race is the one through which it is ordained those spirits that were not valiant in the great rebellion in heaven should come; who, through their indifference or lack of integrity to righteousness, rendered themselves unworthy of the Priesthood and its powers, and hence it is withheld from them to this day" (*The Contributor* 6:296–97) (Roberts' italics).

The reference to "indifference" in pre-earthly life was not new. Orson Hyde expressed similar views in 1844 without reference to the priesthood ("lent an influence to the devil, thinking he had a little the best right to govern"); Joseph Smith Hyde, *Orson Hyde* (Salt Lake City, 1933), p. 56, cf. Orson Pratt in 1853 ("not valiant in the war"), *The Seer* 1:54–56. Hyde's remarks may be relevant to the otherwise unexplained statements of John Taylor that Cain's lineage was preserved through the flood that "the devil should have a representation here upon the earth . . ." (*Journal of Discourses* 22:304, 23:336).

<sup>39</sup>Joseph Smith, Jr., *The Holy Scriptures*.

is that her name was "Egyptus, which in the Chaldean signifies that which is forbidden" (Abraham 1:23);<sup>40</sup> yet we are told that Ham, shortly before the flood, was of such high standing that he had "walked with God" (Moses 8:27). The Pharaoh and his lineage, the only persons identified as being denied the priesthood (Abraham 1:26-27), are minimally identified—as descendants of Ham and Egyptus. Only with the Pharaoh is any connection between the descendants of Ham through Egyptus, and those through Canaan, even suggested, yet the Pharaoh was hardly a "servant of servants"; moreover, the Pharaoh is depicted as "white" in Facsimile number 3 in the Book of Abraham, in obvious contrast to a "black slave belonging to the prince." Finally, no reference is made to any son of Ham other than Canaan being cursed with servitude, nor any lineage of Ham other than that of Pharaoh being denied the priesthood. The cause of the priesthood denial is not given (one wonders about idolatry), nor is there any continuous lineage of "black people" apparent in any of the Scriptures. The "blackness" which overcomes individuals or groups periodically seems to represent the same divine displeasure found in Book of Mormon references to "blackness" overcoming the clearly non-Negro Lamanites.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, "curses" are adequately plentiful to make nonspecific allusions to "preserving" previous curses almost impossible to trace back to their origins with certainty.

The question of the historicity of the Books of Abraham and Moses needs further analysis, especially as it pertains to the Negro and the priesthood.<sup>42</sup> The connection in English tradition, as noted earlier, of the Negro with Ham and Cain dates to at least the rediscovery of Africa by the English in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; the association with Ham is found in much older Hebraic writings.<sup>43</sup> Winthrop Jordan states that initially these beliefs were not associated with a justification for enslaving Negroes,<sup>44</sup> which reminds one of Joseph Smith condemning slavery at the very time he was claiming, in effect, validity for the tradition that Ham and Cain were associated with dark people. There is also a need for an adequate treatment of the biblical references used on the priesthood-slavery issue.<sup>45</sup>

Taggart has ended his historical survey with a disappointingly brief

<sup>40</sup>It is not totally evident that Egyptus is being portrayed as the literal wife of Ham, for in the patriarchal order individuals separated by several generations are often spoken of as daughters or sons of one another. In Abraham 1:25, an "Egyptus" is described as "the daughter of Ham."

<sup>42</sup>Nephi 5:21. The belief that a "black skin . . . has ever been the curse that has followed an apostate of the holy priesthood" is no longer considered grounds for priesthood denial based solely on darkness of skin color. The implications of this early belief for present practice need further study.

<sup>43</sup>Hugh Nibley has entered this field with his current *Improvement Era* series, "A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price" (January 1968 to present), but has only minimally discussed the priesthood question.

<sup>44</sup>Jordan, *White Over Black*, discusses the implications of these views for the institution of American slavery. His study was not designed primarily to trace these ideas to their origin; see also David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966).

<sup>45</sup>Jordan, *White Over Black*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>46</sup>Obviously relevant, for instance, are the numerous intermarriages reported between the House of Israel and the Canaanites, Egyptians, and Ethiopians.

treatment of the period from the death of Joseph Smith until the end of the Brigham Young era—disappointing because it is in this period, and later, that most of the available contemporary source material is found. The first known documentation of the policy of priesthood denial comes in 1849.<sup>46</sup> By 1852, reports of this practice had become almost commonplace.<sup>47</sup> Notably these statements are without reference to Joseph Smith. One wonders just how early the documentation is for Joseph Smith having initiated the practice of denying the priesthood to Negroes. In spite of the many instances under Brigham Young in which this practice was reiterated, none of the quotations in general use refers to Joseph Smith as the originator<sup>48</sup> (although Brigham Young does say that Joseph taught that Negroes were not “neutral in Heaven”).<sup>49</sup> One might infer from the 1879 interview that there was some question in the minds of John Taylor and Brigham Young, Jr., as to Joseph Smith’s views on the subject.<sup>50</sup> And Lorenzo Snow, when president of the Church in 1900, is unsure whether Church teachings on the Negro originated with Brigham Young or Joseph Smith.<sup>51</sup> There are a few who attribute these teachings to Joseph Smith. Their written testimonies, as in the cases of Coltrin and Smoot, come many years after the fact, and coincidentally after decades of actual priesthood discrimination.<sup>52</sup> Among those who could have heard it from Joseph Smith, two were of note in Church leadership. George Q. Cannon reported in 1895, and again in 1900, that Joseph Smith originated the practice because of a connection of the Negro

<sup>46</sup>*Journal History*, February 13, 1849. Lorenzo Snow had asked about the “chance of redemption for the Africans,” and Brigham Young replied that “the Lord had cursed Cain’s seed with blackness and prohibited them the Priesthood . . . .”

<sup>47</sup>Lieutenant J. W. Gunnison mentions “blacks being ineligible to the priesthood” in his *The Mormons, or Latter-Day Saints, in the Valley of The Great Salt Lake, etc.* (Philadelphia, 1853), p. 143. This work, prefaced in July 1852, was written after a “year and one half among them.” The practice of priesthood discrimination is also mentioned in a *Deseret News* article, “To the Saints,” April 3, 1852. Wilford Woodruff later reports that Brigham Young taught this idea in a speech to the legislature that year; however Young’s January address states only that Negroes must always be servants to their superiors, without explicit reference to the priesthood (Matthias Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff* [Salt Lake City, 1909], p. 351; and “Governor’s Message to the Legislative Assembly of Utah Territory, January 5, 1852,” or *Deseret News* of January 10, 1852).

<sup>48</sup>In addition to the references cited in notes 46 and 47 above, see: *The Seer* 1 (1853): 54–56; *Journal of Discourses* 2 (1854): 142–43; *Journal of Discourses* 2:184 and 8:29, both 1855; *Journal of Discourses* 7 (1859): 291; *Journal of Discourses* 11 (1866): 272; and *Juvenile Instructor* 3 (1868): 173.

<sup>49</sup>*Journal History*, December 25, 1869.

<sup>50</sup>Taylor was investigating a report that Joseph Smith taught *not* to discriminate which was alleged to have originated with Coltrin.

<sup>51</sup>This sentiment was expressed March 11, 1900, and is recorded in a letter by George Gibbs to John Whitaker, January 18, 1909, found in the Whitaker Collection at the University of Utah, as well as at the Church Historian’s Library-Archives. President Snow, while discussing the curse of Cain, is reported as saying he did not know “whether the President [Brigham Young] had had this revealed to him or not . . . or whether President Young was giving his own personal views, or whether he had been told this by the Prophet Joseph . . . .” The observation was of particular significance as Lorenzo Snow had asked Brigham Young about the practice as early as 1849.

<sup>52</sup>The “six” testimonies cited in Taggart’s work, by reference to the 1879 meeting, are of course only two testimonies—those of Smoot and Coltrin.

with Cain;<sup>53</sup> and Franklin D. Richards said essentially this in 1896.<sup>54</sup> However, by this time usage was being made of the Joseph Smith translation of the Book of Abraham in support of the priesthood policy.<sup>55</sup> One wonders if it has been only in the twentieth century that the idea that this practice originated with Joseph Smith has become widely accepted.<sup>56</sup>

By contrast there is no question but that Joseph Smith thought the Negro was descended from Ham; however, this belief when initially recorded was by no means in a revelatory context, and would appear to have been little more than the contemporary view. As mentioned earlier, the original statement was expressed in 1831, and only parenthetically. At an early meeting, the gospel was preached to "all the families of the earth . . . several of the Lamanites or Indians—representatives of Shem; quite a respectable number of Negroes—descendants of Ham; and the balance was made up of citizens of the surrounding country (from Japheth)."<sup>57</sup> In 1836, as Taggart notes, Joseph Smith extended this belief to a justification of slavery; by 1842, while he still referred to the Negroes as descendants of Ham, he no longer felt this was a justification for slavery.

There is also contemporary evidence, at least in the 1840's, to show that Joseph believed the Negro to be descended from Cain. Here again the preserved statements are parenthetical, and one wonders if this idea, too, was not merely the reflection of a prevalent belief. The reference cited in documentations of the Prophet holding this opinion was from 1842—"[[T]he Indians have greater cause to complain of the treatment of the whites, than the negroes, or sons of Cain."<sup>58</sup> If Joseph Smith did hold this belief, might not his statements on Cain be a source to link him to the idea that the Negroes

<sup>53</sup>*Journal History*, August 22, 1895; and the Whitaker letter cited above.

<sup>54</sup>*Journal History*, October 5, 1896.

<sup>55</sup>Although the earliest informal usage of the Cain-Egyptus-Ham-Pharaoh justification is probably lost, the generally available published sources utilizing this argument date from the post-Brigham Young period. As noted earlier, B. H. Roberts postulated this idea in 1885 (*The Contributor* 6:296-97); it was repeated in 1891 in "Editorial Thoughts" in the *Juvenile Instructor* of which George Q. Cannon was editor (26:635-36); and appeared again in 1908 in *Liahona, the Elder's Journal* (5:1164). More recently this argument has found wide circulation.

<sup>56</sup>Possibly through the influence of Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith who attributed the practice to Joseph Smith (*Improvement Era* 27:564-65, 1924 and later). Recently this idea has been reiterated in a letter from the First Presidency to Dr. Lowry Nelson in 1947 (quoted in John J. Stewart's *Mormonism and the Negro* [Orem, Utah, 1960], pp. 46-47). Nonetheless, the majority of treatments of this subject by the Church leadership (and all documented discussions) still refer only as far back as Brigham Young. Thus, Joseph F. Smith in 1908 when asked about the Negro policy deferred to "the rulings of President Brigham Young, Taylor, and Woodruff" without mention of Joseph Smith; and the First Presidency statements issued in 1949, and again in 1951, referred only to Brigham Young and Wilford Woodruff (see Berrett, *The Church and the Negroid People*, pp. 16-17), though the most recent (December, 1969) refers to "Joseph Smith and all succeeding presidents of the Church" as having taught that "Negroes . . . were not yet to receive the priesthood." (see appendix)

<sup>57</sup>As cited in note 28 above.

<sup>58</sup>*Manuscript History*, January 25, 1842; or Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:501. Recall that this idea was current in defense of slavery and had been used by W. W. Phelps eight years prior to this time.

should be denied the priesthood?<sup>59</sup> This is an area which has been largely ignored, perhaps because it has not been particularly fruitful.<sup>60</sup>

As interesting as the sudden availability of sources on the priesthood policy shortly after the Utah period begins are the numerous justifications of slavery cited by the brethren in the West based solely on the curse on Canaan, and contrary to Joseph Smith's recent position.<sup>61</sup> One wonders how Joseph would have reacted to slave-owning apostles,<sup>62</sup> or to the formal legalization of slavery in Utah in 1852.<sup>63</sup> The belief that the Negroes were descended from Cain was soon very widespread in Utah, being commonly mentioned in early publications, and was almost invariably the justification given for denial of the priesthood to Negroes.<sup>64</sup> And this remains the official belief to the present day.<sup>65</sup>

Taggart has concluded his essay with an "implication"—"Mormonism's practices regarding Negroes should be viewed as matters of policy rather than as points of doctrine," and therefore subject to non-revelatory change. Though his historical analysis is subject to serious question, he renders the

<sup>59</sup>This was the claim of those initially attributing the Negro doctrine to Joseph Smith, cited in notes 52 and 53.

<sup>60</sup>E.g., in 1840 Joseph stated that Cain's priesthood had proved a cursing to him because of his "unrighteousness." There was no obvious tie to the Negro, but at least the priesthood is connected in some way to Cain. The same day this statement was made, the First Presidency issued the message anticipating the "Hottentot" soon worshipping with them in the Nauvoo temple (Smith, *History of the Church*, 2:213 and 4:298). If Joseph was not concerned with the curse of Canaan in his criticisms of slavery, might he not have viewed a curse on Cain as equally irrelevant to the present situation?

<sup>61</sup>Not merely a justification of slavery, the belief became common that Negro slavery was divinely sanctioned, and that slaves could not be freed nationally in spite of the efforts of abolitionists or even a Civil War. For Brigham Young's views to this effect, see *Journal of Discourses* 2(1855):184; *Millennial Star* 21:608-11, and *Journal of Discourses* 7:290-91, both 1859; and *Journal of Discourses* 10(1863):250. This belief had been expressed in a *Times and Seasons* article as early as 1845 (*Times and Seasons* 6:857). The progress of the Civil War initially posed no threat to this idea, as it was widely believed that the United States as then constituted would not recover from the war, that shortly masses of down-trodden would be fleeing from all over the world to Utah, and that the time when the Saints would return to Jackson County and assume control of the government was virtually at hand (see *Millennial Star* 23:60, 300, 396, 401; 24:158; *Journal of Discourses* 11:38; *Deseret News*, July 10, 1861; and *Deseret News*, March 26, 1862, for sentiment to this effect). When war's end found the Saints still in Utah, little more was said; Orson Pratt did attempt an explanation in 1866 (*Millennial Star* 28:518).

<sup>62</sup>Charles C. Rich, and possibly Heber C. Kimball; see Jack Beller, "Negro Slaves in Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 2:122-26.

<sup>63</sup>"An Act in relation to service," passed and approved, February 4, 1852. This statute more nearly paralleled the practice of indentured slavery found in Illinois than it did Southern slave codes.

<sup>64</sup>This idea was particularly common in the discourses of Brigham Young. Occasionally both the curses on Canaan and Cain would be discussed jointly (e.g., *Journal of Discourses* 7:290-91). Negroes receiving patriarchal blessings in Utah were assigned to the lineage of Cain, Ham or Canaan as a rule. Elijah Abel, addressed as "Elder" and "orphan," was not assigned a lineage when given his blessing by Joseph Smith, Sr., in 1836.

<sup>65</sup>Modified at present, as it was on occasion in early references, to the extent that the "blood" of Cain merely designates those to be denied the priesthood, for some reason not fully understood; being a descendant of Cain, per se, is not considered a sufficient justification (see the First Presidency statement of 1951, Berrett, *The Church and the Negroid People*, pp. 16-17, and other sources).

objections somewhat academic with his final quotation. Almost as an afterthought he supports his conclusion with an excerpt from a letter sent by Sterling McMurrin in August 1968 to Llewelyn McKay regarding a 1954 conversation with President David O. McKay:

[President McKay] . . . said with considerable feeling that "there is not now, and there never has been, a doctrine in this Church that the Negroes are under a divine curse." He insisted that there is no doctrine of any kind pertaining to the Negro. "We believe," he said, "that we have scriptural precedent for withholding the priesthood from the Negro. It is a practice, not a doctrine, and the practice will some day be changed. And that's all there is to it."<sup>66</sup>

Taggart adds, in a note, that "Llewelyn R. McKay has informed the writer that when he received Dr. McMurrin's letter he read it to his father, David O. McKay, and he reports that President McKay told him that the letter accurately represents what he said to McMurrin in 1954." While the verification would have been more impressive had it come from President McKay,<sup>67</sup> this statement is obviously one for careful consideration. The fourteen-year time lapse<sup>68</sup> as well as McMurrin's acknowledged bias on this issue seem relevant, but the recent independent substantiation of the report largely neutralizes these objections.

One is struck by the contrast of the McMurrin quotation with other reports of the beliefs of President McKay. Though at least one well known letter may be partially reconcilable with this new quotation, most statements seem incompatible.<sup>69</sup> The First Presidency statement issued in August 1951, under President McKay, said:

The attitude of the Church with reference to Negroes remains as it has always stood. It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of a direct commandment from the Lord, on which is founded

<sup>66</sup>Stephen G. Taggart, *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1970), p. 79. The comment came after McMurrin had "introduced the subject of the common belief among the Church membership that Negroes are under a divine curse. I told him that I regarded this doctrine as both false and morally abhorrent and that some weeks earlier, in a class in my own Ward, I had made it clear that I did not accept the doctrine and that I wanted to be known as a dissenter to the class instructor's statements about 'our beliefs' in this matter.

"President McKay replied that he was 'glad' that I had taken this stand, as he also did not believe this teaching. He stated his position in this matter very forcefully and clearly and said . . ." (continued in text above).

<sup>67</sup>Copies of the letter were sent to all the McKay sons, and there have been unofficial and conflicting reports about others verifying the sentiment also.

<sup>68</sup>Though McMurrin made a "detailed record of the conversation . . . within several hours of the time it occurred," these notes are reportedly lost. There was no one else present.

<sup>69</sup>Although nearly everyone addressing the Mormon Negro policy quotes President McKay, virtually all references are taken from just two sources. One of these, a response to a reporter made at the dedication of the Oakland Temple in November 1964, states that the Negro will not be given the priesthood "in my lifetime, young man, nor yours" (quoted in John Lund, *The Church and the Negro*, 1967, p. 45; there are minor variations in other reports of this response).

The other source is a letter dated November 3, 1947, and written by President McKay (then Counselor in the First Presidency) as his explanation of "why the Negroid race cannot

the doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization, to the effect that Negroes . . . are not entitled to the Priesthood at the present time . . . ."<sup>70</sup>

Taggart cites no reference to President McKay other than the McMurrin quotation, and thus avoids the problem of reconciling various statements. Though every prophet from Brigham Young to the present has concurred in denying the priesthood to the Negro, none publicly has made specific claim to a revelation of this matter—all (except perhaps Brigham Young) have deferred to preceding prophets. Nor does the First Presidency statement of 1951 cite a specific revelation, but rather quotes a Brigham Young discourse on the curse of Cain. Therefore, the McMurrin quotation does not contradict any explicitly claimed revelation. Moreover, the Church's position on the Negro historically has shown enough variability to suggest the possibility of a "policy" interpretation. Theologically, however, such a change in stated position by the Church would reflect a need for clarification of where, on the spectrum from "revelation" to "personal opinion," are found such concepts as "doctrine," "policy," and "First Presidency statement."

While it is clear that Taggart has not proved that "Mormonism's practices regarding Negroes" are solely "matters of policy," he nonetheless has added a number of significant documents to an already substantial list.<sup>71</sup> The evidence of these documents, and others, would seem to require a more

hold the priesthood." Excerpts from this letter are commonly used to show President McKay's support for present Church practices. The recent "policy statement" signed by Presidents Brown and Tanner included the three most cited passages:

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.

Sometime in God's eternal plan, the Negro will be given the right to hold the priesthood.

Curiously, in context these quotations lack some of their finality, and "this plan" spoken of in the second quote is found to be the general "plan of salvation" rather than a specific reference to the Negro-priesthood practice. The tone of the letter seems more searching and tentative than revelatory or doctrinaire. Finding no solution in "abstract reasoning," and knowing of "no scriptural basis for denying the Priesthood to Negroes other than one verse in the Book of Abraham (1:26)," President McKay "believes" that "the real reason dates back to our pre-existent life . . ." Citing the case of Pharaoh as a precedent for priesthood denial (a denial that "may have been entirely in keeping with the eternal plan of salvation"), his ultimate answer to the problem is faith in a "God of Justice." The letter, read in its entirety, seems more a defense of men, individually, not receiving the priesthood than an explanation of group discrimination based on race. See Llewelyn R. McKay's *Home Memories of President David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City, 1956), pp. 226-31. No reference to Cain, Ham or Canaan is made in either of the above quotations.

<sup>70</sup>This statement, perhaps not drafted by President McKay, has been until now the only "official" Church statement cited in treatments of the Negro policy. Though generally dated August 17, 1951, President Henry D. Moyle stated that it was actually made in 1949, and was subsequently reaffirmed under President McKay (Henry D. Moyle "What of the Negro?," address delivered in Geneva, Switzerland, October 30, 1961). Similar views were expressed in the First Presidency letter of 1947 written to Dr. Lowry Nelson. In the future the December 15, 1969, statement will likely be referred to as most authoritative.

<sup>71</sup>The McMurrin quotation, Lorenzo Snow statement of 1900, and Phelps letter of 1835 are each remarkable references which, to my knowledge, have not been cited in previously published studies.

extensive response by the Church. There remains no period source to support the contention that Joseph Smith was the author of the present Church Negro position. Joseph Smith did express the then prevalent opinion that Negroes were descendants of Canaan and Cain; yet he did not relate this to the priesthood in any account now available. In contrast to others who believed the Cain-Canaan tradition, Joseph Smith came to teach that this did *not* justify Negro slavery, and spoke clearly against that institution. In fact, a Negro known to him was ordained to the priesthood in Kirtland and held the priesthood in Nauvoo. And, under Joseph Smith's direction, the First Presidency anticipated soon having other black African converts joining them in worship in the Nauvoo temple.

With the move West under the leadership of Brigham Young, this history, as presently understood, changed dramatically. The curse on Cain is found central to many discourses, and is seen to be the justification for priesthood denial to the Negro. The curse on Canaan is interpreted in a manner that not only justifies Negro slavery, but also places the institution beyond man's power to eliminate. Moreover, in contrast to Joseph Smith's high opinion of Negro potential,<sup>72</sup> Brigham Young expressed the view that Negroes were almost universally inferior to whites and had limited leadership potential.<sup>73</sup> Those succeeding Brigham Young have relied heavily on his discourses for documentation of early Mormon beliefs on the priesthood question (slavery was removed from discussion by the Civil War). Additionally, one begins to find common usage of the Book of Abraham as "scriptural support" of modern beliefs, as well as the claim that the Church's views on the Negro have not changed since being set forth by Joseph Smith.

Because of the limited circulation or inaccessibility of some Church records, the history of this subject remains tentative and incomplete. There is an obvious need for more research into the views of the Negro held in the formative years of the Church. Equally obvious is that careful reading of Taggart's article, as well as this commentary, will reveal that little has

<sup>72</sup>E.g., "[T]hey came into the world slaves, mentally and physically. Change their situation with the whites, and they would be like them . . ." "[F]ind an educated negro, who rides in his carriage, and you will see a man who has risen by the powers of his own mind to his exalted state of respectability. . ." *Millennial Star* 20:278.

<sup>73</sup>At one time Brigham Young described the Negro as "seemingly deprived of nearly all the blessings of the intelligence that is generally bestowed upon mankind" (*Journal of Discourses* 7:290-91), and in his governor's message of January 5, 1852, he stated that "[we should not] elevate them . . . to an equality with those whom Nature and Nature's God has indicated to be their masters."

A view of Negro inferiority was also developed extensively in an unsigned series of articles in the *Juvenile Instructor* in 1867-68 entitled "Man and His Varieties." In this, it was said that the "Negro race" was "the lowest in intelligence and the most barbarous of all the children of men," and that they "appear to be the least capable of improvement of all people" (*Juvenile Instructor* 3:141). As recently as 1907, evidence of Negro racial inferiority was cited in a priesthood manual (B. H. Roberts' *Seventy's Course in Theology*, Year Book I (Salt Lake City, 1907), pp. 165-66. This is a seemingly relevant area which has not been adequately treated as yet. A related area in need of investigation is the possibility of an initial distinction being made between free Negroes and slaves, particularly in view of the claims of Coltrin and Smoot, who were in the South, and the two earliest Negro priesthood holders, who were in the North.



been established in any absolute sense. Yet significant questions have been raised which subsequent study should attempt to clarify.

APPENDIX

December 15, 1969

"To General Authorities, Regional Representatives of the Twelve, Stake Presidents, Mission Presidents, and Bishops."

Dear Brethren:

In view of confusion that has arisen, it was decided at a meeting of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve to restate the position of the Church with regard to the Negro both in society and in the Church.

First, may we say that we know something of the sufferings of those who are discriminated against in a denial of their civil rights and Constitutional privileges. Our early history as a church is a tragic story of persecution and oppression. Our people repeatedly were denied the protection of the law. They were driven and plundered, robbed and murdered by mobs, who in many instances were aided and abetted by those sworn to uphold the law. We as a people have experienced the bitter fruits of civil discrimination and mob violence.

We believe that the Constitution of the United States was divinely inspired, that it was produced by "wise men" whom God raised up for this "very purpose," and that the principles embodied in the Constitution are so fundamental and important that, if possible, they should be extended "for the rights and protection" of all mankind.

In revelations received by the first prophet of the Church in this dispensation, Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the Lord made it clear that it is "not right that any man should be in bondage one to another." These words were spoken prior to the Civil War. From these and other revelations have sprung the Church's deep and historic concern with man's free agency and our commitment to the sacred principles of the Constitution.

It follows, therefore, that we believe the Negro, as well as those of other races, should have his full Constitutional privileges as a member of society, and we hope that members of the Church everywhere will do their part as citizens to see that these rights are held inviolate. Each citizen must have equal opportunities and protection under the law with reference to civil rights.

However, matters of faith, conscience, and theology are not within the purview of the civil law. The first amendment to the Constitution specifically provides that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints affecting those of the Negro race who choose to join the Church falls wholly within the category of religion. It has no bearing upon matters of civil rights. In no case or degree does it deny to the Negro his full privileges as a citizen of the nation.

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.

A word of explanation concerning the position of the Church.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints owes its origin, its existence, and its hope for the future to the principle of continuous revelation. "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we

believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."

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."

Until God reveals His will in this matter, to him whom we sustain as a prophet, we are bound by that same will. Priesthood, when it is conferred on any man comes as a blessing from God, not of men.

We feel nothing but love, compassion, and the deepest appreciation for the rich talents, endowments, and the earnest strivings of our Negro brothers and sisters. We are eager to share with men of all races the blessings of the Gospel. We have no racially-segregated congregations.

Were we the leaders of an enterprise created by ourselves and operated only according to our own earthly wisdom, it would be a simple thing to act according to popular will. But we believe that this work is directed by God and that the conferring of the priesthood must await His revelation. To do otherwise would be to deny the very premise on which the Church is established.

We recognize that those who do not accept the principle of modern revelation may oppose our point of view. We repeat that such would not wish for membership in the Church, and therefore the question of priesthood should hold no interest for them. Without prejudice they should grant us the privilege afforded under the Constitution to exercise our chosen form of religion just as we must grant all others a similar privilege. They must recognize that the question of bestowing or withholding priesthood in the Church is a matter of religion and not a matter of Constitutional right.

We extend the hand of friendship to men everywhere and the hand of fellowship to all who wish to join the Church and partake of the many rewarding opportunities to be found therein.

We join with those throughout the world who pray that all of the blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ may in due time of the Lord become available to men of faith everywhere. Until that time comes we must trust in God, in His wisdom and in His tender mercy.

Meanwhile we must strive harder to emulate His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose new commandment it was that we should love one another. In developing that love and concern for one another, while awaiting revelations yet to come, let us hope that with respect to these religious differences, we may gain reinforcement for understanding and appreciation for such differences. They challenge our common similarities, as children of one Father, to enlarge the out-reachings of our divine souls.

Faithfully your brethren,

THE FIRST PRESIDENCY

By Hugh B. Brown  
N. Eldon Tanner