

# David O. McKay and Blacks: Building the Foundation for the 1978 Revelation<sup>1</sup>

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"IF THERE WAS EVER A PERSON, in terms of social justice in our society, for fairness, it would have been David O. McKay. Had it been up to him, alone, he would have given the Black the priesthood that quick!"<sup>2</sup> So spoke one general authority recently, who was called to his position by President McKay and who discussed with him the issue of ordination of Blacks.

In one sense, there is no surprise ending to the story of David O. McKay's relationship with Blacks, for the policy of not extending the priesthood to black males was not changed until eight years after his death. However, to look upon that relationship only in terms of whether or not the policy was changed is to overlook the deep concern felt by President McKay toward Blacks throughout his tenure as church president, and the administrative changes he enacted which moved in the direction of full inclusion, signaled by the 1978 revelation.

The question of ordination of Blacks was often on McKay's mind, and on several important occasions during the nineteen years of his presidency it became a front-burner issue for the First Presidency and others of McKay's inner circle. Most notably, the weeks preceding McKay's death saw a furious exchange of actions and reactions by the two dominant general authorities, Hugh B. Brown and Harold B. Lee, as one sought to change the policy while the other sought to block his initiative,

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1. First presented as a paper at the Mormon History Association Annual Meeting, Ogden, Utah May 22, 1999.

2. Paul H. Dunn, interview by the author, 18 February 1995.

neither of them appreciating that their efforts were irrelevant to the question at hand.

In a letter written in 1947 when he was second counselor to President George Albert Smith, McKay outlined his own views of the basis of church policy denying priesthood to blacks.<sup>3</sup> He cited one scriptural precedent for the policy, the well-known verse in the Book of Abraham, but stated that the complete rationale lay in the pre-existence. Declaring that God does not act unjustly, he postulated that conditions in that pre-mortal existence were linked to birth through black African lineage. He did not, however, invoke a "less valiant in the War in Heaven" argument, or a curse relating to Cain, and thus differentiated his position from that of his more conservative colleagues. In a further departure, he allowed for the eventual reversal of the policy without restricting it to a post-mortal period.

In essence, McKay's 1947 position on the basis of the policy remained intact through the rest of his life, perhaps softening in one respect: He may have rejected his earlier speculation about a link to the pre-existence. This was suggested in a 1961 news conference in England where, when asked by a reporter about the policy, he replied that it rested solely on the Book of Abraham. "That is the only reason," he said. "It is founded on that."<sup>4</sup>

Upon becoming church president in 1951, McKay became increasingly concerned, not about the validity of the policy, but with the fairness with which it was being applied. He was particularly focused on South Africa where existing policy required male members desiring ordination to demonstrate first that all their ancestry was non-African. In other words, "guilty unless proven innocent." The inability or unwillingness of white members in the South African Mission to undergo such an ordeal had resulted in a critical shortage of priesthood, to the point of compromising regular church function.

In 1954, McKay traveled to South Africa "to observe conditions as they are." Seeing the ambiguity—and harm—caused by the policy, he changed it on the spot, stating: "Unless there is evidence of Negro blood you need not compel a man to prove that he has none in his veins." (In other words, "innocent unless proven guilty.") He continued, "I should much rather make a mistake in one case and if it be found out afterwards suspend his activity in the priesthood than to deprive 10 worthy men of

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3. David O. McKay (hereafter DOM) letter dated 3 November 1947. Published in Llewelyn R. McKay, *Home Memories of President David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 226-31.

4. Press conference held in the Hyde Park Chapel, London, 24 February 1961. Transcript in David O. McKay Office Journal (hereafter DOMOJ), entry for 25 February 1961.

the priesthood."<sup>5</sup> He notified his counselors and the Quorum of the Twelve of this change after the fact, and received their unanimous endorsement.<sup>6</sup>

This willingness to make a mistake in the name of mercy characterized his attitude throughout the remainder of his life. Deciding on a case in 1963, in which a boy of possible but unproven black ancestry was ordained, he said, "We shall face the Savior and tell what our decision is with a clear conscience."<sup>7</sup>

Within weeks of his return from South Africa, McKay met privately with Sterling McMurrin. In the course of their conversation, and to McMurrin's surprise, McKay told him that the church position on ordination of blacks was "policy," not "doctrine," and that the practice would someday be changed.<sup>8</sup> The distinction between "policy" and "doctrine" in McKay's mind was crucial, yet was misunderstood at the time by McMurrin, and much later by Hugh B. Brown, Harold B. Lee, and others in McKay's inner circle, resulting in a crisis shortly before McKay's death.

McMurrin considered the conversation personal, and did not make it public knowledge until the final year of McKay's life. Although McKay reiterated the message a decade later to newly sustained General Authority Paul Dunn,<sup>9</sup> he apparently never made a point of it to his counselors or to members of the Quorum of the Twelve, as evidenced by their reaction to first learning of it in 1969. McMurrin's and Dunn's accounts were unquestionably accurate, for McKay's son, Llewelyn, verified the story with his father in 1968.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, an examination of McKay's own record on the subject verifies that he used "policy" and not "doctrine" in referring to it.

McKay chose his words carefully, and it is clear in retrospect that his use of the word "policy" did *not* mean the practice of priesthood denial could be reversed merely by administrative decision. Indeed, he always affirmed, both in public and in private, that it would take a revelation for such to occur. However, he also affirmed that such a revelation *could*

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5. "Minutes of a Special Meeting by President David O. McKay, 17 January, 1954," in DOMOJ, 19 January 1954.

6. DOM letter to Presidents Stephen L Richards and J. Reuben Clark, Jr., Capetown, South Africa, 19 January 1954, in DOMOJ; also "Report of President David O. McKay's 32,500-mile-journey to Missions of the Church," a report given to the Council of the Twelve, 25 February 1954, in DOMOJ.

7. Account of meeting of Presiding Bishopric and First Presidency, 1 November 1963, in DOMOJ.

8. Untitled account of the meeting, written by Sterling M. McMurrin on 6 March 1979. Photocopy in author's possession.

9. Paul H. Dunn, interview by author, 21 May 1996.

10. McMurrin, Untitled Account.

occur, and therein lay the distinction in his own mind. To him, a policy could be changed, albeit in this case only upon receipt of a revelation, whereas a doctrine could not be changed. The subtlety of that difference was not appreciated by his colleagues.

McKay clearly did not receive such a revelation. What is less clear, however, is that he sought such divine intervention unsuccessfully. One general authority recalled his saying privately that he had prayed and pleaded with the Lord, but "I haven't had an answer."<sup>11</sup>

The question of reversing the policy next arose in the context of a multi-year effort to open a mission in Nigeria where thousands who had obtained LDS literature had requested baptism. In discussing the matter with his counselors in January 1962, McKay said the decision to open Nigeria was as crucial to the modern church as the decision to proselytize to the Gentiles had been to the ancient church.<sup>12</sup>

Aware of the logistical problems of trying to administer a Nigerian church without local priesthood, Hugh B. Brown suggested, "I wonder if the time is coming when we will give the Lesser Priesthood to them." Although declining to accept Brown's suggestion, McKay acknowledged, "You can't deal with this in a proper way unless you [change the policy]."<sup>13</sup>

Nine months later, the First Presidency again discussed the possibility of extending the Aaronic Priesthood to Nigerians, this time with McKay broaching the subject:

If we could just give them the Aaronic Priesthood. I suppose there is no way to differentiate. The Lord will have to do it. The Lord did that after the priesthood was taken away from the ancient prophets. That law was added as a school master to bring them to Christ. And that is all they had for hundreds of years.<sup>14</sup>

To this, Brown replied, "I secretly hoped that the time would come when we could give them the Aaronic Priesthood." The discussion ended with McKay concluding, as he always would, "Only the Lord can change it."<sup>15</sup>

The final chapter of this saga occurred in 1969. A college student by the name of Stephen Taggart wrote a monograph of the history of the church's policy toward Blacks, and in researching the topic became aware of the contents of McMurrin's 1954 conversation with McKay, as

11. Marion D. Hanks, interview by the author, 27 May 1994.

12. Transcript of First Presidency Meeting, 9 January 1962, in DOMOJ.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Transcript of First Presidency Meeting, 11 October 1962, in DOMOJ.

15. *Ibid.*

well as Llewelyn McKay's report that President McKay had confirmed its authenticity. With the permission of McMurrin and Llewelyn McKay, he included this information in his monograph.<sup>16</sup>

A copy of the manuscript passed from Hugh B. Brown, First Counselor in the First Presidency, to Lawrence McKay, oldest of President McKay's children. On September 10, 1969, Lawrence and his brother Llewelyn, along with Alvin R. Dyer of the First Presidency, met with President McKay on the matter. This was the first that Dyer had known of McKay's considering the matter one of "policy" rather than "doctrine." The concept was apparently new to Brown, and to Lawrence McKay, who asked his father "if this was not the time to announce that the Negro could be given the Priesthood," and "to do so now voluntarily rather than to be pressured into it later."<sup>17</sup>

Shocked at the apparent prospect of ordination of Blacks, to which he was vehemently opposed, Dyer later wrote, "I felt it my responsibility to make some comments concerning this vital matter." He thereupon launched into a lengthy and forceful rehearsal of all of the traditional arguments in favor of the ban on ordination, including one held by some of his conservative colleagues but never embraced by President McKay: the so-called "curse of Cain."<sup>18</sup>

The immediate effect of Dyer's counteroffensive was to cause Lawrence McKay to abandon the topic. Said Lawrence, "Perhaps, father, we had better leave this with you and you can think about it."<sup>19</sup> However, Dyer—threatened by the prospect of a change in policy—scrutinized Taggart's manuscript throughout the subsequent days. One week later, in a First Presidency meeting on September 17, 1969, Dyer pronounced Taggart's article "one of the most vicious, untrue articles that has ever been written about the Church."<sup>20</sup> President McKay, in failing health only four months prior to his death, was not in attendance at this meeting.

The events which unfolded over the subsequent weeks pitted two strong-willed leaders, Hugh B. Brown, First Counselor in the First Presidency, and Harold B. Lee, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve, against each other. Viewed through the retrospective of three decades, we are able to see that this tragic confrontation between two great men

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16. The information is found in McMurrin, *Untitled Account*. Taggart's monograph was later published as *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1970).

17. "Minutes by President Alvin R. Dyer on the visit of Roy A. Cheville, and the Negro Question," 10 September 1969, in DOMOJ.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. Minutes of First Presidency meeting, 17 September 1969, in DOMOJ.

was unnecessary, and that it occurred because both men, as well as Alvin R. Dyer (who appears to have borne the message to Lee), misunderstood the connotation of McKay's use of the term "policy," which always assumed a mandatory linkage to new revelation if change were to occur. By contrast, both Brown and Lee interpreted the information in Taggart's article to mean that change could come through simple administrative action, in the absence of revelation.

Brown had felt, as early as the 1930s that Blacks should hold the priesthood,<sup>21</sup> and in a 1963 interview with *New York Times* reporter Wallace Turner, he appeared to push in that direction when he said, "We are in the midst of a survey looking toward the possibility of admitting Negroes."<sup>22</sup> McKay was displeased with Brown's comment and privately chastised him when Turner's article was published.<sup>23</sup>

Given the hitherto unknown information in Taggart's article, Brown renewed his effort to have the ban reversed. One month after Dyer's first knowledge of the article, he and Brown met privately. Brown strongly advocated to Dyer that "we should give the Negro the priesthood, that we had only one scripture in Abraham that suggested otherwise." Dyer strongly disagreed, later noting with disapproval that Brown "had tried twice of late to get President McKay to withdraw the withholding of the Priesthood from the Negro, but President McKay had refused to move on it."<sup>24</sup> In retrospect, of course, it is clear why McKay had refused to move on it: Only a revelation could move him to do so, and he had received none. Brown misunderstood the crucial fact that absent such a revelation, not even his first counselor could nudge McKay into changing the policy.

Another who misunderstood was Harold B. Lee, who sided with Dyer in strongly opposing a change in the policy. Indeed, on more than one occasion he indicated that McMurrin had apparently misunderstood McKay, that McKay "would not have made a statement of this kind."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, in earlier years he had said privately that Blacks would not hold the priesthood as long as he was alive, a statement which ultimately proved true.<sup>26</sup> The Taggart article, combined with Brown's renewed efforts to persuade McKay to change the policy, presented him with what he interpreted as a real threat of the ban on ordination being lifted. Had

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21. Edwin Firmage (grandson of Hugh B. Brown), interview by the author, 10 October 1996.

22. Wallace Turner, "Mormons Weigh Stand on Negroes," *New York Times*, 7 June 1963, 1.

23. DOMOJ, 7 June 1963.

24. "Minutes by President Alvin R. Dyer," 8 October 1969, in DOMOJ.

25. McMurrin, Untitled Account.

26. John T. Bernhard, interview by the author, 5 December 1998.

he understood McKay's usage of the word "policy," he would not have reacted as he did.

Convinced that the threat of change was both real and imminent, Lee moved to block such an eventuality. In an October conversation with N. Eldon Tanner of the First Presidency, he adamantly stated he "would not consent to any change of policy as respects the Negro problem."<sup>27</sup> In the ensuing weeks, he worked with the Quorum of the Twelve to draft a policy statement blocking Brown's initiative by reconfirming the church's ban on ordination of Blacks.<sup>28</sup> In its final version, the document began by implicitly acknowledging differences of opinion as to the current status of the ban:

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.

The document then set a backdrop for its central message:

We believe that this work is directed by God and that the conferring of the priesthood must await His revelation.<sup>29</sup>

The intent of the document was, thus, to close the door on the possibility of reversing the ban through administrative action as Brown had been attempting to do. The statement was highly unusual in that it appeared over the signatures of two members of the First Presidency, but was written by the Quorum of the Twelve. McMurrin noted that the letter "was produced by leaders among the Twelve in response to my report set forth in the letters to the McKay brothers."<sup>30</sup> Dyer also reported that "Elder Lee had been the one who had prompted and directed the preparation of the policy article,"<sup>31</sup> which, while based on President McKay's prior writings and statements on the subject, contained no contemporaneous contribution from him. (It is worth noting that McKay was 96 years old, in rapidly failing health, and the statement was dated only one month prior to his death.) Also unusual was the fact that the statement was released for distribution to church leaders by Harold B. Lee and not by action of the First Presidency.<sup>32</sup>

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27. Ernest L. Wilkinson diary, 27 October 1969.

28. Alvin R. Dyer, minutes of a meeting with David O. McKay, 26 December 1969, in DOMOJ.

29. First Presidency Circular Letter (signed by Hugh B. Brown and N. Eldon Tanner), 15 December 1969.

30. Sterling M. McMurrin to the author, 30 October 1994.

31. Alvin R. Dyer minutes, 26 December 1969 meeting with McKay.

32. "Church Policy on Negroes Told in Wards," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 1 January 1970.

The statement, signed only by Brown and Tanner, was distributed to church leaders on December 15, 1969. No plans were made to publicize it until it became apparent that Wallace Turner of the *New York Times* had obtained a copy and planned to publish it, whereupon it was quickly published in the *Church News* on January 10, 1970.<sup>33</sup>

The story does not end there. On Christmas Day, 1969, an article written by Lester Kinsolving of the *San Francisco Chronicle* was published in the *Salt Lake Tribune*. The article read in part: "The Mormon Church's denial of its priesthood to Negroes of African lineage 'will change in the not too distant future,' according to Hugh B. Brown, one of the highest ranking officials of the Church." The article also disclosed that Brown had recently spoken to Willard Wyman, assistant to the President of Stanford University, stating, "The church is not prejudiced in any way but this one, but I think that will change."<sup>34</sup>

The day the article was published in the *Tribune*, Brown telephoned Sterling McMurrin and, McMurrin later said, "told me that he wanted me to know that he [had] signed this [First Presidency] document under great pressure."<sup>35</sup> Brown's statement to the reporter from the *Chronicle* thus appears to have emerged from his frustration at being obliged to sign a statement shutting the door on what he had strived to achieve.

The following day, December 26<sup>th</sup>, Dyer met with McKay to urge that the statement now be published, and that three other signatures of First Presidency members—David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, and himself—be added to those of Brown and Tanner. "By making such a release," Dyer wrote, "it would counteract the confusion and misunderstanding that had developed because of the statements made by President Hugh B. Brown as reported by Lester Kinsolving of the *San Francisco Chronicle*."<sup>36</sup>

Learning of Dyer's plan to publish the letter over five signatures, Harold B. Lee intervened and asked that the article not be published at that time, to "lessen the possibility of further breach in the impression that President Brown had given."<sup>37</sup> On his part, Brown had by this time qualified his statement by saying it was "his own opinion and not necessarily a policy statement of the Church," and Lee felt no further clarification was necessary.<sup>38</sup> Wallace Turner, however, forced his hand, and the statement was published, over only two signatures, on January 10, 1970.

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33. "Policy Statement of Presidency," 12.

34. "LDS Leader Says Curb on Priesthood to Ease," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 25 December 1969, 4D.

35. Sterling M. McMurrin to the author, 30 October 1994.

36. Alvin R. Dyer minutes, 26 December 1969 meeting with McKay.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*



One week later, David O. McKay died at the age of 96, and Joseph Fielding Smith became the tenth president of the church. For the first time since 1877, a counselor in the First Presidency was not retained by the succeeding president, as Hugh B. Brown was released and Harold B. Lee sustained in his place. The subject of the priesthood ban faded quickly from the front page as church members, and Americans in general, became more preoccupied with the Vietnam War and Watergate. It would not reappear until June 1978, when all the principals of the events of late 1969 were deceased.

For those who either knew David O. McKay personally or who were in the church during his lengthy and memorable presidency, there is no question that he possessed a Christ-like character rarely seen in our time. As stated at the beginning of this paper, it is the opinion of at least one general authority who knew him well that he would have moved quickly to change the policy if it had been merely up to him, but it wasn't up to him, and he knew this better than anyone else—even better than his closest advisors. In a temple meeting in the mid-1960s another general authority asked, "President McKay, will the time ever come, maybe in our lifetime, when the Blacks will hold the priesthood?" McKay replied: "The question sounds like *I* make the decision. When the Lord tells me, then we'll do it."<sup>39</sup>

While McKay did not change the policy on ordination of Blacks, there is no question that he always viewed all members of the church with compassion. In the case of Blacks, this came through in several of his policy decisions. First, as mentioned earlier in this paper, McKay relaxed the rule governing ordination of men whose black African ancestry may have been suspected but not proven, thereby opening the doors of the priesthood to thousands, particularly in South Africa and Brazil. Second, he allowed Blacks to be called to leadership positions in auxiliary organizations. Third, he allowed Blacks to enter temples to be baptized for the dead. Fourth, on occasion when white parents adopted children of black ancestry, he authorized those children to be sealed to their adopted parents.

Of course, we are left to ponder why the revelation he repeatedly sought did not occur until eight years after his death. It is a question none of us is able to answer.

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39. Paul H. Dunn interview, 18 February 1995.