RESPONSES AND PERSPECTIVES:

Lester Bush's Historical Overview: Other Perspectives

GORDON C. THOMASSON

Lester Bush's well written, reasoned and researched article is by far the most comprehensive and responsible effort to date at giving an historical context within which the denial of the priesthood to Negroes can be understood. It has motivated me to re-examine my own ideas, and has therefore been of great personal value to me. I must admit that I am one of those who, however much *angst* is generated by the rational side of my being and however much compassion tears at my spirit with a desire for change, remains spiritually convinced and convicted of the fact that only the Prophet can change through revelation that which previous prophets insist was instituted by revelation. Like most of those who maintain such an almost schizoid-appearing set of attitudes, I am perhaps overly sensitive to the weaknesses of the arguments advanced by those on both extremes of the Mormon-black controversy. Mr. Bush's objective presentation supplies us with excellent data, which will no doubt be used by many to serve their respective purposes. What follows are some issues which I am sure Mr. Bush was unable to discuss due to constraints of time and space. I mention these items in hopes of insuring that no one draws unwarranted conclusions from the information available, closing his or her mind and thereby precluding further dialogue.

First, all of us can bear reminding that when we employ historical tools, we are equipped to deal only with historical evidence. As Mr. Bush is more than willing to concede, "revealed" data or spiritual experiences are unusable to those engaged in historical work. Thus, only one side of the question can be dealt with using historical methods.

Mr. Bush has indicated that the concept of priesthood denial to the Negro may have ample precedent in antiquity. Definitive studies in many areas have not been done. We know, for instance, that in pre-Christian and later Jewish sources the curse on Canaan (or Ham) was said to have resulted from Ham's castrating Noah while he was asleep, or his having attempted to steal the garment which Noah had inherited from Adam. Early Christian and assorted Gnostic sources supply other theories. The most common Islamic tradition holds that Ham and his descendants were cursed with blackness because Ham had sexual intercourse while aboard the Ark. In late Egyptian texts the usurper who

is ritually in contest with Pharaoh for his throne is often described as the son of the black Queen of the south. Until studies of such subjects are produced, Joseph Smith's "position" in the Book of Abraham cannot be categorized historically. If the practice of priesthood denial to blacks was an ancient, inspired practice, and if it was restored, no real conclusions can be drawn without looking at ancient documents. In fact, when 19th century pro-slavery biblical exegesis is compared to the apparent L.D.S. position (-s), the dissimilarities are more significant than the similarities. Furthermore, whether or how a particular doctrinal idea was utilized in early *apologetics* for a practice in no way determines the relationship between the doctrinal idea and the *origin* of the policy.

Mr. Bush's data raises some significant questions. It is well worth noting, for example, that Zebedee Coltrin and Abraham Smoot served missions in the South. It is extremely difficult to imagine either man inventing his oft-cited testimony, nor is it likely that the statements can be attributed totally to prejudice acquired or reinforced while serving as missionaries. Collusion is even more improbable. Coltrin and Smoot's statements, coupled with the *de facto* denial of the priesthood to southern Negroes to which Bush refers, suggest that Joseph Smith may have originated a policy of not ordaining *slaves* to the priesthood. That would fit in with his general policy of not "tampering" with slaves or setting up competing systems of authority. But that is not the issue. The critical questions would in any case be (1) whether Joseph Smith or Brigham Young was responsible for later extending the policy to all blacks, and (2) whether that denial was based on revelation. The data available are not sufficient to answer either question confidently from an historical point of view.

Other questions are raised which are more open to historical inquiry. For instance, was Joseph Smith an abolitionist? Here, the answer seems to be both "yes" and "no." Joseph was against abolition based on emancipation or expropriation, and with good reason. His abolitionism—"pay every man a reasonable price for his slaves out of the surplus revenue arising from the sale of public lands"—recognized *both* the sacredness of human rights and the sanctity of "property rights" within *that* context. His opposition to emancipation without recompense was entirely consistent with his condemnation of the seizure of the Church's Missouri lands and properties and his demands to Congress and others for reparations. By blurring the distinction between abolition based on purchase and abolition based on expropriation (or insurrection), as some have done, Joseph's views are made to appear inconsistent and an apparent discrepancy is created between Joseph's position and Brigham Young's outspoken condemnation of "black-hearted abolitionists" whom the latter predicted would rend the Union. But there was no inconsistency between the two men's position on this particular matter. Both opposed expropriation-abolition and mobocracy, based on bitter experience, and by the 1850s abolitionism and expropriation were effectively synonymous. When the radical abolitionists prevailed, eliminating the idea of compensation, to that degree they *insured* the South's rejection of their demands and probably war as well. (An ironic footnote to this involves Salvador Allende's citing Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves as more than precedent for his government's expropriation of multi-national corporate interests in Chile. If Allende had a Mormon advisor he might well have mentioned the U.S. government's escheatment of the assets of the L.D.S. Church in the

1880s as even more to the point.) Joseph Smith's position was one whereby everyone's rights would be respected.

Brigham Young's anti-abolitionism must also be put in its historical context. With the Compromise of 1850 (which not accidentally denied Deseret/Utah statehood and set the stage for both the Utah War and the Civil War) anyone, to say nothing of the politically astute Brigham Young, could see how sectionalism was dividing the country. As early as 1850 the growing coalition of anti-Mormons and expropriation-abolitionists which would become the Republican Party was in partial control of Congress. Brigham Young was an effective practical politician. From the 1840s he maintained and relied on an intelligence system which forwarded information leaks to him from Washington, from within Johnston's Army, from wherever the Church was threatened. He recognized the need to influence public opinion and win allies in political conflicts—his use of non-violent ("take no life") tactics in the Utah War, his gift of salt to the snowbound Union troops, the "Sebastopol" plan for burning Salt Lake, and his manipulation of Judge McKean's overeagerness to prosecute the Ann Eliza Webb Young divorce case all demonstrate a highly sophisticated ability to turn the media and the public against government policies.

I find nothing disturbing in the idea that a prophet might adopt (or be inspired to adopt) a policy based on expediency rather than strict principle. Jeremiah's eloquent argument for the expediency of a political alliance with Babylon is a case in point (Jeremiah 27). Brigham Young's anti-abolitionist statements of the 1850s can be partially considered as an attempt to court and forge a working coalition or alliance with Southerners against the political machinations of emerging Republicanism, whose party platform of 1856 pledged the elimination of "those twin relics of barbarism—polygamy and slavery." Brigham Young did win southern support for the Mormon position. From pre-Civil War days until long after the Woodruff Manifesto, Congressmen from the South were the main opponents of the excesses and unconstitutional oppressions of the anti-Mormon crusade. Senator Wilkinson Call of Florida, for instance, opposed the Edmunds-Tucker Bill in debate as follows: "It proposes to revive the practices of the Dark Ages and substitute for the freedom of the press, for the power of religious thought, for the teachings of the Gospel the sword of civil justice, the power of the secular arm, the force of the criminal law to punish thought and create opinions by law." More graphic than southern support, however, was Republican antagonism. As soon as the Union was divided and the southerners out of Congress, the Republicans pushed through the Morrill Act of 1862, which was the foundation of all subsequent anti-Mormon persecutions. Moreover, Lincoln's comparing the Mormons to a stump around which he would plow was *not* a sign of his love for the Mormons. The field he was plowing was the Civil War, and rather than create a war on two fronts he chose not to enforce the Morrill Act. But implicit in his remark was the promise that once the field was plowed he would turn his attention to the stump, and the practice in those pre-dynamite days was to let a stump dry and then burn it out—hardly a sign of benevolence. Prior to the Civil War, Brigham Young sought to find allies and build defenses for the Saints against the obviously coming persecutions. He was to some degree successful. Often the interrelationship of these and many other issues has been ignored, and

conclusions have been drawn from data out of context and thereby distorted.

The foregoing remarks hopefully serve to illustrate that our historical picture is, even with the addition of Mr. Bush's excellent work, sketchy and incomplete. There are many other areas which are unexplored, and based on the evidence in hand, final judgments on the priesthood issue are premature at best, and indefensible from a strictly intellectual point of view. Regardless of that fact, of course, we are morally bound to work for freedom and equality for all men, and I hope we will pray and sustain the Brethren in their responsibilities, just as I pray to see the day when the Lord says yes to the desires of my heart for my brothers, both black and white.