

INTRODUCTION

LESTER E. BUSH, JR.

Friday, June 9, 1978. A day not to be forgotten. Like the bombing of Pearl Harbor, or the assassination of President Kennedy, most Mormons will remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they first heard the news.

I was in a school meeting some ten miles away from my home when a secretary rushed into the room. "They just announced over the radio that President Kimball has had a revelation and the blacks will be given the Priesthood." We were stunned and jumped up to get to the radio. It was the kind of story that had to be shared, and within minutes five or six people had phoned.

I was too excited to continue the meeting and drove home as quickly as possible to watch the story unfold on television. It was the only thing being broadcast. My wife and I kissed and started to cry. In a rush of emotion, I ran downstairs, got our American flag, and proudly unfurled it in front of our home. Then I drove down to church headquarters to mingle with the crowd of reporters, tourists, and excited church members who were reacting to the news.

THUS WROTE REED WAHLQUIST of Salt Lake City, one of many who responded to *Dialogue's* invitation to contribute to a special issue celebrating the first anniversary of The Revelation. With minor variations, Reed has said it for many of us—the exhilaration, the phone calls and the tremendous weight lifted at last. "It must have been big news in heaven," someone else commented, and for most of us down below it will probably remain the most singular event in our church experience.

As we reflect on the developments since that dramatic day last June, the most remarkable realization is that there have been few if any remarkable developments. At the practical, day-to-day level, the mass exodus out of (or into) the Church foreseen by some failed to materialize. Black Mormons have begun to advance, with little fanfare, to positions of increasing leadership within the Church. Growing numbers of black converts are being incorporated smoothly into Mormon congregations in all areas of the United States. Given our collective record on this score in decades past, this is as astonishing as it is refreshing. The time, some would say, must have been "right."

On the more theoretical, doctrinal level, the past year has been more a non-event than seemed likely. Although many guessed before the revelation that any change in the Negro doctrine would be announced with a minimum of explanation, few also supposed that there would be no subsequent discussion whatever either

LESTER E. BUSH, JR., is associate editor of *Dialogue*. His "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview" (*Dialogue*, Spring 1973) won Mormon History Association and *Dialogue* "Best Article" prizes in 1973.

in General Conference or through the official publishing arms of the Church. Although such issues have always been at the heart of *Dialogue's* commitment to Mormon thought, it is still premature to attempt any "definitive" retrospective of the recent events. Much remains to be learned about our earlier history on this subject. Despite the plethora of books and articles addressing the Negro doctrine in the past fifty years—many heralded as "definitive"—poorly understood facets of the history remain readily identifiable. Consider the last few decades. We have yet to see a thoughtful analysis of the Church's attitudes and activities in the realm of civil rights or a study of the Nigerian mission. No one has assessed the refinement, during the McKay administration, of the definition of "black" or "Negro."¹ We have remarkably little insight into the views of President McKay and his counselors on the fundamental nature of the priesthood restriction—its basis, and the conditions under which it would be terminated.

The 1970's will be a challenge to historians for years to come: Black activist harassment of BYU; the Genesis Group; litigation with the Boy Scout movement; *Roots*-spurred interest in genealogy; heightened leadership awareness of the historical antecedents of current Mormon beliefs; and once again questions over the identification of the cursed lineage, this time with reverberations in both Brazil and the U. S. Congress.² Did any of these developments influence the events of 1978? A circumstantial case can be made that they did. But there is about as much evidence, (i.e., none) that they mattered not at all. Conclusions, then, must be a matter of faith and philosophy.

The greatest challenge to future historians, and that of most interest and importance, will be 1978 itself, about which very little can now be said with confidence. There are a few tantalizing hints. That the forthcoming dedication of the Brazilian temple figured conspicuously in the deliberations leading up to the revelation is clear from some published comments. LeGrand Richards, for example, is quoted as saying, "All those people with Negro blood in them have been raising the money to build the temple. Brother Kimball worried about it. He asked each one of us of the Twelve if we would pray—and we did—that the Lord would give him the inspiration to know what the will of the Lord was. . . ."³

Beyond this the story is hazy and intriguing. According to his son Edward, President Kimball was "exercised about the question" for "some months at least," during which time "he could not put it out of his mind."⁴ He solicited individual written and oral statements from the Twelve, conveying, to Apostle Richards, the impression that "he was thinking favorably toward giving the colored people the priesthood."⁵ That any such disposition followed a great internal struggle is evidenced by a statement from President Kimball himself, in an interview with the *Church News*: ". . . I had a great deal to fight, of course, myself largely, because I had grown up with this thought that Negroes should not have the priesthood and I was prepared to go all the rest of my life till my death and fight for it and defend it as it was."⁶ Indeed, according to son Edward, his father "could not comfortably debate things about which he felt deeply."⁷

Whatever the contributing factors, President Kimball apparently was persuaded even before the June first revelation—as Richards suggested—that a change in the priesthood policy was indicated. Again from the *Church News* interview:

I went to the temple alone, and especially on Sundays and Saturdays . . . when I could have it alone. It went on for some time as I was searching for this, because I wanted to be sure . . . [“Gradually, most of his doubts and questions faded away,” writes Edward.⁹ Then, on June 1, in a special prayer circle with the Apostles,] . . . I offered the final prayer and I told the Lord if it wasn’t right, if He didn’t want this change to come in the Church that I would be true to it all the rest of my life, and I’d fight the world against it if that’s what he wanted . . .⁹

The “revelation and assurance came to me so clearly,” Kimball later said, “that there was no question about it.” The revelation thus appears to have been a spiritual manifestation in *confirmation* of a decision made after a period of lengthy and profound study and prayer. This “spiritual witness” was reportedly experienced by all present at that time as well as a week later when the First Presidency presented their official statement to the Twelve.¹⁰ Commenting on the factors responsible for the revelation coming at this time, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie later is said to have stated, “It was a matter of faith and righteousness and seeking on the one hand, and it was a matter of the divine timetable on the other hand.” In a thought-provoking analogy of the Apostles in Jerusalem, who might have learned about the Nephites, “[b]ut they didn’t ask, and they didn’t manifest the faith; and they didn’t get an answer,” Elder McConkie reportedly added, “One reason for what happened to us is that the Brethren asked in faith; they petitioned and desired and wanted an answer—President Kimball in particular.”¹¹

If accurately reported, Elder McConkie’s comments at a meeting of Seminary and Institute personnel at BYU two months after the revelation also give a glimpse into the implications of the revelation—both for past and present. Coming from one so closely associated with the traditional Mormon position on blacks, his views seem worthy of note. Referring to many Book of Mormon passages on universality of the gospel message, he observed that “these words have now taken on a new meaning. We have caught a new vision of their true significance . . . Many of us never imagined or supposed that [these and a number of other passages] had the extensive and broad meaning that they do have. . . .” And, later,

We have read these passages and their associated passages for many years. We have seen what the words say and have said to ourselves, “Yes, it says that, but we must read out of it the taking of the gospel and the blessings of the temple to the negro people, because they are denied certain things.” There are statements in our literature by the early brethren which we have interpreted to mean that the negroes would not receive the priesthood in mortality. I have said the same things, and people write me letters and say, “You said such and such, and how is it now that we do such and such?” . . . Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world. . . .”

Thus—and very happily—the events of the past year may have rendered moot some of the painful doctrinal questions of the twentieth century. New and significant questions have been raised, however. While perhaps not so fertile a field as polygamy, Mormonism’s late Negro doctrine deserves to receive insightful

scholarly attention for some time to come. *Dialogue* is therefore pleased to contribute articles, notes, and personal reflections toward a broader understanding of an era which is now at an end.

NOTES

¹ Directed principally at resolving the "lineage" of such groups as the West Irians and Papuans of New Guinea. Difficulties are well illustrated by the Fijians, whom the Church considered to have "negro blood" prior to 1935, but not to be of "negro descent" from 1935 until 1953 when they were again termed "negroid in origin" by the First Presidency. The question finally was put to rest in 1955 when, after a visit to the South Pacific, President McKay declared Fijians to be "a branch of the house of Israel." See Normal Douglas, "Mormon Missionaries and the Fijian: Caution, Confusion and Compromise," unpublished manuscript, Historical Department of the Church.

² The latter resulting ultimately in the First Presidency statement of February 22, 1978—just weeks before the revelation—transferring back to stake and mission leaders the determination of "whether or not one does have negro blood." This chapter apparently began with Black Caucus objections to Mormon use of Federal records for the purposes of priesthood or temple discrimination.

³ Wesley P. Walters, "Interview with Mormon Apostle LeGrand Richards Concerning 1978 Negro Revelation," 16 August 1978, published as a tract by Ex-Mormons for Jesus (Phoenix, Ariz.: 1978), pp. 1-2.

⁴ Edward L. Kimball, "'I Sustain Him as a Prophet, I Love Him as an Affectionate Father,'" *Dialogue* XI (4):61 (Winter 1978).

⁵ Walters, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

⁶ "'News' Interviews Prophet," *Church News*, January 6, 1979, p. 4.

⁷ Kimball, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁹ *Church News*, January 6, 1979, p. 4.

¹⁰ Bruce R. McConkie, "All Are Alike Unto God," talk delivered to Seminary & Institute of Religion personnel, Brigham Young University, August 18, 1978, printed copies of which have been circulated informally. (Regarding the *Time* report that rumors were current that the Lord or Joseph Smith had delivered the revelation in person: "... these things did not happen.") A similar scenario has been assembled from various accounts emanating from the families of General Authorities, in the form of a notarized (!) typescript by David John Buerger, "Events Surrounding the 1978 Negro Revelation," (23 July 1978). See also Kimball, *op.cit.*, p. 61.

¹¹ McConkie, *op.cit.*