

The Negro Doctrine— An Afterview

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ON JUNE 8, 1978, word of a revelation to President Spencer W. Kimball and the ruling councils abruptly removed one of Mormonism's more uncomfortable teachings and relegated it to the archives. As we bade farewell to this difficult doctrine, I couldn't help but wonder why blacks had been denied priesthood rites in the first place.

Did other church members share my uncertainty? What did they think or know about the history of our beliefs? Was the doctrine born of revelation or did it derive from the social and political problems of the early Church? In the absence of any published, "scientific" surveys, I sought out twelve "representative" Latter-day Saints, including five in bishoprics, and posed three fundamental questions to them. The following extracts are from their spontaneous answers.

When and how did the Negro Doctrine begin?

I believe there is evidence in Joseph Smith's seven volume *History of the Church* that he withheld the priesthood from blacks, although I don't know where. There was no initial revelation.

There is no evidence that Joseph Smith withheld the priesthood from blacks. He did sign Elijah Abel's certificate of ordination; the question remains whether this was an exception to an existing doctrine.

The doctrine did come by revelation, which is recorded in the Book of Abraham.

The practice probably goes back to Joseph Smith's time, although I don't know of any evidence contemporary with Joseph Smith that he withheld the priesthood from blacks. In fact, there were priesthood ordinations of blacks at the time of Brigham Young.

I never heard of any unrecorded or unpublished revelation initiating the practice. John Taylor's 1879 inquiry seems consistent with the absence of a revelation. I don't think that the Book of Abraham purports to be the revelation that introduced the doctrine.

The restriction began with Joseph Smith and a revelation, although it may not

have been written down. The Book of Abraham passage could have been that revelation, or no revelation was needed.

I'm not aware of any evidence that Joseph Smith applied this doctrine; he was aware of it from translating Abraham. A restrictive attitude toward blacks was common in the 1800s.

It goes back to Joseph Smith, probably a revelation, but unpublished, maybe no revelation. I'm not aware of any evidence contemporary with Joseph Smith that he withheld the priesthood from Negroes.

The practice began partly because of the slavery issue. When they went to Missouri, Church members had no slaves and the Missourians killed off the Mormons. So the position was partly to relieve this persecution.

The doctrine began with Joseph Smith; I don't know of any revelation. I don't know if the practice is contemporary with Joseph Smith—I just assumed so.

The practice just evolved from circumstances, maybe combined with individual guidance of Church leaders. Maybe the Book of Abraham explains the doctrine somewhat.

I am quite certain that there was no recorded revelation. Someone reading the scriptures could have come to an inspired conclusion.

I can't find any evidence that Joseph Smith denied the priesthood to blacks, but people later said he did.

Brigham Young articulated many of the prejudices of his own culture. There was a lot of ambiguity which led President John Taylor to an honest inquiry in 1879.

Joseph Smith understood it as doctrine and told it to others. There was no revelation, at least not recorded. People repeated what Joseph Smith had said; later they assumed it was revelation. I'm not sure where it is, but I believe there is evidence that Joseph Smith denied the priesthood to Negroes.

It became a policy that developed without specific written instructions; it evolved partly because of conditions, but had doctrinal status since it originated with Joseph Smith.

John Taylor's 1879 inquiry proves that there was not a recorded revelation, but I believe there was a clear practice. Joseph Smith told others and they really helped formulate the doctrine.

The doctrine derives from historical tradition rather than scripture. Abraham is not definitive on the curse of Cain, but the doctrine became a tradition.

Why were the Negroes denied the priesthood?

It's hard to say what the Church thinks. They don't take positions on some things. The Church takes a position on the restriction, but not why. The restriction might have come from a rejection of the priesthood in the pre-existence. Not a lot of doctrinal things are explained. The Church membership just has faith in the prophets and knows that they are good men.

The pre-existent sin doctrine has its origin in the Pearl of Great Price, but was

defined by interpretation of the presidents of the Church. See McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine*.

Exclusion of blacks was a tradition that gained doctrinal status. I find no explanatory chapter and verse in any scripture. I've heard the phrases "cursed as to the priesthood" and "descendants of Ham", but who are these people? I don't know of any support for the "descendants of Cain" idea; perhaps there is some claim for the "pre-existent sin" idea. These people weren't neutral, but lukewarm. Have we now run out of all fence-sitters?

I don't know why blacks were singled out for discrimination, but it was a doctrine. Joseph Smith didn't say too much about it, but Brigham Young was more specific. The issue didn't really surface until David O. McKay, because of the civil rights activity at the time.

I regard this doctrine as a touchstone for orthodoxy. If you supported the brethren on this unpopular issue and were at peace and still able to live within the Church, I would have considered you a good member.

The Book of Abraham partly explains the doctrine, which was two-fold: (1) Cain slew Abel; he was the first to realize that you could kill and get gain; his black skin protected him from those who would slay Cain and his lineage, Canaan; (2) Ham saw Noah naked, which may have been a Hebrew allegory of lack of respect for Noah's priesthood.

The doctrine goes back to the pre-existence when one-third were neutral, they didn't accept or reject Christ. Also, Cain killed Abel and the lineage from Cain was cursed.

Blacks may have been singled out because they were not valiant in the war in heaven—I'm not sure of the source. Also, it may be related to tradition and the evolution of circumstances.

The priesthood restriction for Negroes is related to the missionary system which first seeks out remnants of the House of Israel, God's favored people. The blacks are heathen, the worst of heathen, the descendants of Cain who killed Abel. This sin of murder not only snuffed out one life, but the whole kingdom of the first-born. For this, the blacks must wait until everyone else has a shot at church blessings. Perhaps now, all have been given a reasonable chance.

There is no evidence for the pre-existent sin idea, although one can make general inferences from scriptures such as Acts 17:26: "God . . . hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation."

The "descendants of Cain" idea must be discounted; it was a popular myth that society in general used to justify slavery. The "lineage of Ham" was denied the priesthood but we don't know what Ham's sin was. The Book of Abraham is not at all clear in explaining the doctrine; everyone has been cursed in some sense since man left the presence of God.

In a practical sense, if the Church had opened its doors to blacks, because of its emotional, spiritual and mystical appeal, it would have become a predominantly black church and therefore would have been ineffective in proselyting the gentile nations.

What changes, if any, brought about the end of the Negro Doctrine?

The doctrine, at first, looks like a mistake. But if the Church leaders receive continuous revelation, which I believe, a mistake could not continue. Since the practice did continue, even with David O. McKay, a brotherhood-oriented person, it could not have been a mistake.

The change was in the worthiness of the Church, not of the blacks. Times have changed; we are in the last days.

I have a traditional feeling about the restriction of priesthood rites for the Negro. I believe in revelation.

I believe that the Church position is that the priesthood ban was not a mistake, but that the rescission is a concession which removes the curse as to the priesthood, while the blackness remains until the Millennium.

Something changed, but I'm not sure what. I feel that the First Presidency and the Twelve continuously supplicated the Lord in favor of the black race on this question.

The validity of the "descendants of Cain" and "pre-existent sin" rationales are less certain since the Abraham papyri have been translated as ordinary funerary scrolls.

I prefer to think of it as a restriction, rather than a curse. In the eternal economy of things there is no such thing as a curse. It was a restriction that was no longer necessary.

Whether a mistake or a change, or if the Church now rejects the "curse of Ham" argument, I don't know. President Kimball and the Church leaders have prayed about it for a long time, and now the Church is near to dedicating a temple at Sao Paolo where there have been problems in distinguishing race. The general authorities meet regularly and are close to the Lord. They receive guidance each Thursday. We're pretty safe in following them without asking too many questions.

Was it necessary to have a revelation in 1978 if there were none bringing forth the doctrine in the 1830s? I don't know. But circumstances have changed: the development of the Negro, and the problem of temple work in Brazil. All the prophets said the Negro would have the priesthood someday. Not all blacks, however! They have to be worthy. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve had a consensus about what should be done because of the needs of the times.

I regard the change as a result of change in people: better blacks, just as there are better whites now; more choice spirits reserved for the last days. The doctrinal change is an indication that we are in the last days.

The time has come; perhaps the early Church couldn't have stood it. If it was just a social phenomenon, the change would have occurred in the 1950s or 1960s during the civil rights pressure.

Spencer Kimball is a Church leader committed enough to take positive steps to initiate the revelation, if that can be done. He was aggressive in seeking a change.

A revelation was required to change a practice of this importance. I would like to know whether this revelation was written down.

The change in white attitudes is more important than any change in blacks.