

# LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD: “MORMONISM’S NEGRO DOCTRINE” FORTY-FIVE YEARS LATER<sup>1</sup>

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It has been forty-five years since *Dialogue* published my essay entitled “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview”<sup>2</sup> and forty years since Official Declaration 2 ended the priesthood/temple ban. It seems like a good time to take stock of where we are: what has changed, what has stayed the same, what changes still need to happen, and what steps need to occur to bring about those changes.

## What’s New

The first task—what has changed—is in some ways the easiest, and certainly the most uplifting. Almost everything has changed, and all for the good, beginning with the “priesthood revelation” of 1978. The obvious milestones, aside from the revelation itself, are:

- the immediate ordination of Blacks to the priesthood, soon including the office of high priest, and the resumption of temple ordinances
- just twelve years after the revelation, the first Black General Authority was called; recently, two more were called

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1. A version of these remarks was originally given as the Sterling M. McMurrin Lecture on Religion and Culture at the University of Utah on October 8, 2015.

2. Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68.

- an inner city proselyting effort began
- African American stake presidents were called in the Deep South
- the growth of the Black membership from perhaps a few thousand to somewhere over half a million

Africa deserves special mention.

- in 1980 the Church permanently entered Black Africa through a mission to Nigeria
- there now are 26 African missions, not counting three in South Africa
- LDS stakes have been established in at least five African countries other than South Africa
- LDS temples are operating under African leadership or are under construction in four African countries
- Africans from Zimbabwe and Kenya have been called as General Authorities

Those developments, individually and collectively, far exceed what I thought possible in 1973 (see appendix). The most conspicuous shortfall is that after thirty-seven years there still is no African American General Authority.

Furthermore, the historical work surrounding the issue has been made easier and has become more sophisticated. The Church has made available a truly unprecedented amount of primary source material—well beyond what was available even during Leonard Arrington's tenure as Church Historian. As one who faced major obstacles to research during the Joseph Fielding Smith era, I'm now amazed that material that was totally inaccessible not that long ago is now readily available, even via the internet. I'm thinking here of the Joseph Smith Papers and the general church minutes from 1839–1877. And before that but well after my research and the priesthood revelation, Signature Books published the journals of Wilford Woodruff and the journals of other important

Church leaders. And (indirectly) the diaries of David O. McKay have become available.<sup>3</sup>

Most early Church periodicals are now in searchable formats online, so I can do what previously was laborious on-site research from the comfort of my own study—and even download what I find directly into word processing software. (In the early 1970s I was thankful that I had an electric typewriter—even without a correcting capability.) Beyond this, there are now scores of scholarly studies online, all illuminating aspects of the history of Blacks in the Church.

These are transformative developments. For better or worse the internet has made it impossible for history to recede invisibly into the past. Unlike the case seventy-five or more years ago, our previous record now lives on and is often just a few clicks away.

In terms of new understanding, over the past four decades a near avalanche of insightful books and articles has been published. I once assembled a selected bibliography on Blacks and the priesthood, which included ninety-seven items published between 1900 and 1973. Over 90 percent of that material had appeared in the twenty-three years since

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3. "Historian's Office General Church Minutes, 1839–1877," CR 100 318, LDS Church History Library, <https://eadview.lds.org/resource/public/collection/pdf/172>. Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898*, 10 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988). Other potentially relevant published diaries include those of apostles Abraham H. Cannon (Edward Leo Lyman, ed., *Candid Insights of a Mormon Apostle: The Diaries of Abraham H. Cannon, 1889–1895* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2010]), Anthony W. Ivins (Elizabeth O. Anderson, ed., *Cowboy Apostle: The Diaries of Anthony W. Ivins, 1875–1932* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013]), Anthon H. Lund (John P. Hatch, ed., *Danish Apostle: The Diaries of Anthon H. Lund, 1890–1921* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005]), Reed Smoot (Harvard S. Heath, ed., *In the World: The Diaries of Reed Smoot* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997]), B. H. Roberts (John Sillito, ed., *History's Apprentice: The Diaries of B. H. Roberts, 1880–1898* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004]), and L. John Nuttall (Jedediah S. Rogers, ed., *In the President's Office: The Diaries of L. John Nuttall, 1879–1892* [Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007]).

1950, and two-thirds in just the eight years since 1965. If anything, since 1973 this attention has intensified. Between 1978 and 1980, for example, there were eighteen comparable publications; thirty in the 1980s; twenty-four in the 1990s; and another thirty-six since 2000. Altogether, 118 notable books and articles since 1973.<sup>4</sup> And some of the most important scholarship is just now being published.

In retrospect, it has turned out that back in 1973 I had enough information to correctly work out the basic outline of the history of the priesthood ban. But publications since then have cast new light on the early history, in addition to highlighting the lives of contemporary Black Mormons and detailing the Church's entry into Africa. Some of this new information was published soon after 1973,<sup>5</sup> but important material has continued to appear—particularly during this past decade.

The remarkable faith of Black Mormons Samuel D. Chambers<sup>6</sup> and Jane James<sup>7</sup> and the problematic behavior of William McCary in Winter

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4. These totals reflect conservative selections. Chester Hawkins's much more inclusive survey, which included some newspaper articles, more publications from LDS periodicals, dissertations and theses, and several unpublished works, identified 370 just between 1900 and 1990. Similar to my review, he found that 86% appeared after 1950. See Chester Lee Hawkins, comp., "Selective Bibliography on African-Americans and Mormons 1830–1990," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1992): 113–31.

5. Two particularly informative articles were published by Newell Bringhurst: "An Ambiguous Decision: The Implementation of Mormon Priesthood Denial for the Black Man—A Reexamination," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 45–64; and "Elijah Abel and the Changing Status of Blacks Within Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 22–26.

6. William G. Hartley, "Samuel D. Chambers," *New Era*, June 1974, <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1974/06/samuel-d-chambers?lang=eng>; and "Saint Without Priesthood: The Collected Testimonies of Ex-Slave Samuel D. Chambers," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 13–21.

7. Henry J. Wolfinger, "A Test of Faith: Jane Elizabeth James and the Origins of the Utah Black Community," in *Social Accommodation in Utah*, edited by Clark

Quarters were first illuminated in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> And there were studies on early Black priesthood holders Elijah Abel and Walker Lewis.<sup>9</sup> The 1980s and 1990s were dominated by publications on the Church in Africa and contemporary Black Latter-day Saints. But then, the most comprehensive priesthood-related studies to date have appeared just within the past decade. These include studies on Walker Lewis,<sup>10</sup> another early Black priesthood holder named Joseph T. Ball,<sup>11</sup> several lengthy works on Elijah Abel,<sup>12</sup> and some studies looking at notable race-related parallels

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S. Knowlton (Salt Lake City: American West Center, 1975), 126–72; soon followed by Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, "Jane Manning James: Black Saint, 1847," *Ensign*, Aug. 1979, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1979/08/jane-manning-james-black-saint-1847-pioneer?lang=eng>.

8. Bringhurst, "An Ambiguous Decision." Bringhurst also discusses Elijah Abel and Walker Lewis.

9. Bringhurst, "Elijah Abel and the Changing Status of Blacks." As noted, some of this had been anticipated in his 1978 *Utah Historical Quarterly* essay "An Ambiguous Decision."

10. Connell O'Donovan, "The Mormon Priesthood Ban and Elder Q. Walker Lewis: 'An Example for his More Whiter Brethren to Follow,'" *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006): 48–100.

11. Connell O'Donovan, "Joseph T. Ball, the First African American High Priest in the LDS Church" (paper presented at the John Whitmer Historical Association Annual Conference, Independence, Mo., Sept. 2009).

12. Russell W. Stevenson, "'A Negro Preacher': The Worlds of Elijah Ables," *Journal of Mormon History* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 165–254; Russell Stevenson, *Black Mormon: The Story of Elijah Ables* (Afton, Wyo.: PrintStar, 2013); W. Kesler Jackson, *Elijah Abel: The Life and Times of a Black Priesthood Holder* (Springville, Utah: CFI, 2013).

between Mormon policy and that of Freemasonry.<sup>13</sup> Even now the first book-length studies of Church policy since 1981 are being published.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to what I once thought of as the “modern era,” the late 1960s, when I did some of my most intense research, was a period of relative openness within the Church. Those years spawned *Dialogue*, the Mormon History Association, and ultimately the calling of Leonard Arrington as Church Historian.

I remember reading an article in the Church’s *Instructor* magazine just as this era was beginning that discussed Tracy Y. Cannon, who for twenty-three years was chairman of the Church’s General Music Committee. According to the article, Cannon faced recurring problems because some Church policies “did not result in the highest artistic result in Church music.” However, whenever he became discouraged and was inclined to give up, the impression would come to him that he had died and was standing before the Lord answering for “his lack of

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13. E.g., Michael W. Homer, “Why Then Introduce Them into Our Inner Temple?: The Masonic Influence on Mormon Denial of Priesthood Ordination to African American Men,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006): 234–59; and Michael W. Homer, *Joseph’s Temples: The Dynamic Relationship Between Freemasonry and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014). See especially chap. 5, “Pharaoh’s Curse” (113–37) and chap. 14, “Legends and Folklore” (360–92).

14. These include: Russell W. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830–2013* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2014); W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds., *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); and W. Paul Reeve, Christopher B. Rich, Jr., and LaJean Purcell Carruth, “*Enough to Cause the Angels in Heaven to Blush*”: *Race, Servitude, and Priesthood at the 1852 Utah Legislature* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, forthcoming). Prior to this outpouring of scholarship on race, the previous scholarly book was Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981).

action." When he explained that "I was following the policy set by those in authority," the Lord always responded, "But, Tracy, *you knew better*."<sup>15</sup>

To be clear, in 1973 I didn't believe I "knew better" regarding the subject of Blacks and the priesthood. I did think I knew the history better than what had been published to that point, both by those supporting the Church and its policies and by those who opposed them. That didn't mean I thought my 1973 article would end the priesthood ban. Rather, I thought it would lead to the Church History Department's being tasked to develop the story more fully. It was disappointing to learn from discussions with Elder Packer at that time that this was not going to happen, and only later did I learn that the History Department had been barred from working on the priesthood question. More positively, I soon heard that many of the General Authorities had read my article, and I was not surprised that there was a very mixed response. I was told by one General Authority that it had "stirred the pot" and made an impact that would not be acknowledged. Only recently did I learn that at some point President Kimball had studied it carefully and marked it up extensively. But it wasn't until decades later that Church historians and their consultants finally did study the history of Blacks and the priesthood in some detail.

Since 1978, the progression of President Kimball's thinking on the priesthood ban has received some attention, though without his own firsthand account the story is still conjectural. His son Edward included then Elder Kimball's 1963 comments in a letter to Edward in *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, published in 1982.<sup>16</sup> In it, the elder Kimball observed that "[t]he prophets for 133 years of the church have maintained the position of the prophet of the Restoration that the Negro could not hold the Priesthood nor have the temple ordinances which are prepara-

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15. Clawson Y. Cannon, Jr., "His Lifetime Mission," *Instructor*, Dec. 1965, 472–73.

16. Edward L. Kimball, ed., *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball: Twelfth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 448–49.

tory for exaltation.” Then he added, “I know the Lord could change his policy and release the ban and forgive the possible error, which brought about the deprivation.” While this suggests an unexpected degree of flexibility on Kimball’s part, had I known of it I would have believed it more likely that he was simply reflecting back language contained in a question posed by his son Edward.

In August 1970, when I spoke with President Kimball, who then was the Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve, he seemed quite confident about the legitimacy of the priesthood ban and quoted the book of Abraham as the basis. (Kimball’s son Edward said that even within the family, Kimball “always responded to questions about policy and doctrine with traditional, orthodox explanations.”<sup>17</sup>) Then, in December 1973, soon after becoming the twelfth president of the Church, Kimball responded to a reporter’s question on Blacks and the priesthood: “I am not sure that there will be a change, although there could be. We are under the dictates of our Heavenly Father, and this is not my policy or the Church’s policy. It is the policy of the Lord who has established it, and I know of no change, although we are subject to revelations of the Lord in case he should ever wish to make a change.”<sup>18</sup> He responded very similarly just over two months later in an interview on NBC’s *Today Show*: he did “not anticipate [a change in the racial policy]. If it should be done the Lord will reveal it.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite those conservative responses, it is clear from what little has become public that President Kimball soon was intensely focused on the priesthood ban. In 1975 he distributed to his counselors in the First

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17. Edward L. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 40.

18. As reported in “President Spencer W. Kimball Ordained Twelfth President of the Church,” *Ensign*, Feb. 1974, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1974/02/president-spencer-w-kimball-ordained-twelfth-president-of-the-church?lang=eng>; also in *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, 449.

19. Interview on *The Today Show*, Mar. 12, 1974.



Presidency a collection of statements on the subject by early Church leaders and asked for their reactions. He later did the same thing with the Quorum of the Twelve. In June 1977, he asked at least three General Authorities to give him papers on the subject, including two of the ban's strongest supporters—apostles Bruce R. McConkie and Boyd K. Packer.

Apostle Dallin H. Oaks, who was then president of Brigham Young University, also recalls being asked by Kimball for his views about that time and says Kimball talked to dozens of people. One of these was Jack Carlson, a trusted advisor, with whom Kimball spoke several times in the fall of 1977. Although Kimball appeared still to be searching for an answer, he did ask Carlson, "What do you think would happen if we changed the policy [of denying Blacks the priesthood]?" On another visit with Carlson, Kimball said, "I don't know that I should be the one doing this, but if I don't my successor [Ezra Taft Benson] won't."<sup>20</sup>

During early 1978, Kimball repeatedly talked with the Quorum of the Twelve about the question. His wife, Camilla, recalled Kimball as thinking, "I had a great deal to fight . . . 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 . . . fight[ing] for it and defend[ing] it as it was."<sup>21</sup> This notwithstanding, on March 23, after a night of reflection, he told his counselors that his "impression" was that the priesthood ban should be ended. After his counselors said they would support this decision, Kimball set to work to gain the concurrence of the Quorum of the Twelve.

On June 1, 1978, Kimball met with his counselors and the Twelve and again brought up the possibility of conferring the priesthood upon worthy men of all races. A two-hour discussion followed around

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20. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," 42–43. The fuller account of this conversation is in an interview with Carlson's wife, Renee, by Gregory Prince, June 2, 1994. Renee was present for at least one of the conversations.

21. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," 48.

Kimball's belief that the priesthood ban should be ended. This later was characterized by Elder McConkie as an "outpouring of unity, oneness, and agreement."<sup>22</sup> Kimball then prayed on behalf of the group. "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."<sup>23</sup> But the revelatory experience that followed confirmed Kimball's belief that the ban should be ended.

Whether Kimball's actions were prompted by his own long-standing concerns—in 1976 he told someone he had been praying about the subject for fifteen years without an answer<sup>24</sup>—or by the prospects of a temple in Brazil, or by some awkward legal entanglement, is not known. Personally, I think it was the growth of the Church in Brazil, perhaps facilitated by a increased understanding of the history of the priesthood ban—an understanding that afforded him greater latitude to act. Clearly, he felt a greater urgency to act than had any of his predecessors. I also think Kimball's son Edward was correct to emphasize an early Kimball observation that "revelations will probably never come unless they are desired. . . . I believe most revelations will come when a man is on his tip toes, reaching as high as he can for something which he knows that he needs."<sup>25</sup>

### What's Ongoing

In keeping with a long tradition of offering little or no explanation for apparent changes in policy and doctrine, there was no official discussion of the priesthood ban's origins, either in 1978 or later. As I wrote in 1984, "a revelatory experience was alluded to, the priesthood made available

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22. 22. Spencer Kimball, *Church News* interview, Dec. 1978.

23. Spencer Kimball, *Church News* interview, Dec. 1978.

24. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," 42.

25. *Ibid.*

to all 'worthy males,' and the subject quietly but firmly declared dead."<sup>26</sup> Of course, the subject wasn't dead, as the traditional understanding of the ban's origins continued to be perpetuated in influential Mormon publications—and in the minds of many members. The most important of these, of course, was Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine*, which continued in print another thirty-two years. But there eventually was a quiet, unannounced evolution in the leadership's thinking, or at least in how the history of the subject was presented. In 2006, an indication of this came when Elder Jeffrey R. Holland was interviewed by PBS and responded to questions about the Church's former teachings on Blacks. Elder Holland labeled the former explanations for the priesthood ban "folklore" and suggested that the origins of the ban were unknown: "[H] owever well intended the explanations were, I think almost all of them were inadequate and/or wrong. . . . [W]e simply do not know why that practice, that policy, that doctrine was in place."<sup>27</sup>

Another development came two years later, in 2008, when *BYU Studies* published Edward Kimball's forthright account of developments surrounding the priesthood revelation. Within this was a candid summary of the history of Church teachings on Blacks, drawn from the scholarly work on the subject.<sup>28</sup> I thought this notable because *BYU Studies* certainly first would have obtained the approval of the Church's General Authorities.

That the old beliefs nonetheless persisted gained national attention in February 2012, when the *Washington Post* published an article with an explanation of the origin of the priesthood ban by BYU religion

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26. Lester E. Bush, Jr., "Whence the Negro Doctrine?" 213.

27. PBS interview, Mar. 4, 2006.

28. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood." This informative account still needs to be read in conjunction with other summaries, e.g., Armand L. Mauss, "The Fading of the Pharaohs' Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban against Blacks in the Mormon Church," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1981): 10–45.

professor Randy Bott. Bott gave the reporter a reasonable summary of popular Church beliefs of the early 1970s, but his explanation sounded even more horrific in the twenty-first century than it would have in the twentieth:

According to Mormon scriptures, the descendants of Cain, who killed his brother, Abel, “were black.” One of Cain’s descendants was Egyptus, a woman Mormons believe was the namesake of Egypt. She married Ham, whose descendants were themselves cursed and, in the view of many Mormons, barred from the priesthood by his father, Noah. Bott points to the Mormon holy text the Book of Abraham as suggesting that all of the descendants of Ham and Egyptus were thus black and barred from the priesthood. . . .

As recently as 1949, church leaders suggested that the ban on blacks resulted from the consequences of the “conduct of spirits in the pre-mortal existence.” As a result, many Mormons believed that blacks were less valiant in the pre-Earth life, or fence sitters in the war between God and Satan. That view has fallen out of favor in recent decades. . . .

[Bott] quotes Mormon scripture that states that the Lord gives to people “all that he seeth fit.” Bott compares blacks with a young child prematurely asking for the keys to her father’s car, and explains that similarly until 1978, the Lord determined that blacks were not yet ready for the priesthood. . . . “So, in reality,” [Bott says], “the blacks not having the priesthood was the greatest blessing God could give them.”<sup>29</sup>

As appalling as this was to read, especially amidst the strides being made by the Church in Africa and elsewhere, I felt a little bad for Professor Bott. He really had only presented the authoritative views of past Church leaders, views which had yet to be authoritatively disavowed. What he said was not much different from what McConkie wrote in *Mormon Doctrine*, which had continued in print without official censure until

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29. Jason Horowitz, “The Genesis of a Church’s Stand on Race,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-genesis-of-a-churchs-stand-on-race/2012/02/22/gIQAQZXyfr\\_story.html?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.d88a36728856](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-genesis-of-a-churchs-stand-on-race/2012/02/22/gIQAQZXyfr_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d88a36728856).

2010, just two years earlier. *Mormon Doctrine* still would have been sold in 2012 had not a faithful African American member arranged to purchase the remaining 515 copies in 2010 to get them off the market.

While not feeling a need to correct these ideas for the benefit of Black Latter-day Saints, the media storm forced the Church's hand, and public affairs immediately issued a rebuttal, prompted, it said, by media inquiries following Bott's comments.<sup>30</sup> The statement read in part:

The positions attributed to BYU professor Randy Bott in a recent *Washington Post* article absolutely do not represent the teachings and doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. . . .

For a time in the Church there was a restriction on the priesthood for male members of African descent. It is not known precisely why, how, or when this restriction began in the Church but what is clear is that it ended decades ago. Some have attempted to explain the reason for this restriction, but these attempts should be viewed as speculation and opinion, not doctrine. The Church is not bound by speculation or opinions given with limited understanding.

We condemn racism, including any and all past racism by individuals both inside and outside the Church.

While a useful rebuttal, the statement was a little disingenuous in its observation that "it is not known precisely why, how, or when this restriction began" and in its dismissal of attempts to explain the restriction as "speculation and opinion, not doctrine."

In 2013, a new edition of the Doctrine and Covenants carried a new introduction to Official Declaration 2, the declaration that announced the priesthood revelation. It was a little more candid and acknowledged some of the history:

During Joseph Smith's lifetime, a few black male members of the Church were ordained to the priesthood. Early in its history, Church leaders

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30. "Church Statement Regarding 'Washington Post' Article on Race and the Church," *Newsroom*, Feb. 29, 2012, <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/racial-remarks-in-washington-post-article>.

stopped conferring the priesthood on black males of African descent. Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice. Church leaders believed that a revelation from God was needed to alter this practice and prayerfully sought guidance. The revelation came to Church President Spencer W. Kimball and was affirmed to other Church leaders in the Salt Lake Temple on June 1, 1978. The revelation removed all restrictions with regard to race that once applied to the priesthood.

By far the most forthright statement came later that year. A December 2013 LDS.org essay titled “Race and the Priesthood,” cleared by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, said in part:

During the first two decades of the Church’s existence, a few black men were ordained to the priesthood. One of these men, Elijah Abel, also participated in temple ceremonies in Kirtland, Ohio, and was later baptized as proxy for deceased relatives in Nauvoo, Illinois. There is no reliable evidence that any black men were denied the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. . . .

In 1852, President Brigham Young publicly announced that men of black African descent could no longer be ordained to the priesthood. . . .

Over time, Church leaders and members advanced many theories to explain the priesthood and temple restrictions. None of these explanations is accepted today as the official doctrine of the Church. . . .

The justifications for this restriction echoed the widespread ideas about racial inferiority that had been used to argue for the legalization of black “servitude” in the Territory of Utah. According to one view, which had been promulgated in the United States from at least the 1730s, blacks descended from the same lineage as the biblical Cain, who slew his brother Abel. Those who accepted this view believed that God’s “curse” on Cain was the mark of a dark skin. Black servitude was sometimes viewed as a second curse placed upon Noah’s grandson Canaan as a result of Ham’s indiscretion toward his father. Although slavery was not a significant factor in Utah’s economy and was soon abolished, the restriction on priesthood ordinations remained. . . .

Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous

actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to 1973, for at least the past decade Mormon historians have been consulted internally about Church teachings on Blacks. Their contribution is implicit in the various statements recently issued, and explicit in the LDS.org essay on "Race and the Priesthood"—which also is the first on this subject to include footnotes and references to scholarly publications. Among these cited references have been detailed non-Mormon studies of the long-since abandoned beliefs about Black ancestry, the first to appear in a Church-issued statement. Less apparent was the contribution of another faithful African American member, who argued successfully for the explicit disavowal of the previous justifications of the priesthood ban.

### What Remains

Although recent Church statements continue to claim that the original reason for the priesthood ban is not known, I wonder if anyone has asked Brigham Young. He, after all, was the one who introduced it. If he ever is asked, he will be quite clear—as he repeatedly was during his presidency. It was because African Blacks were descendants of Cain.

Over the next century his successors said the same thing, including the First Presidency in 1949. Even the omission of this linkage from the 1969 First Presidency statement appears to have reflected a public relations decision rather than a change in leadership beliefs. Just the previous year, the First Presidency had concluded that the more they said about

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31. "Race and the Priesthood," *Gospel Topics*, Dec. 2013, <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

the basis of the priesthood ban, “the more we shall have to explain,” and that future statements “should be clear, positive, and brief.”<sup>32</sup>

There were, as Church spokesmen recently have claimed, some speculative after-the-fact attempts to explain the basis for the doctrine—these were not attempts to explain the priesthood ban per se but rather were speculations on why the *descendants of Cain* were denied the priesthood. As is well known, these primarily were hypothetical notions about the premortal existence.

So far as I know, no one, no matter how great, has ever been entirely free of the social and anthropological understanding of their age. It does not diminish their stature to know they believed the accepted wisdom of their day—notwithstanding that these beliefs were later discredited and abandoned. The historical record shows this to be true of early Mormon leaders, which personally I find to be a good thing. It’s not by their global knowledge that they are judged, but by their global accomplishments despite the limited understanding of their age. To me, it makes their accomplishments all the more remarkable.

There are many examples in Church history of ideas—even doctrines—being advanced that ultimately did not survive. Those “errors” occurred despite the fact that the organization led by these individuals thrived. A safe example may be that of apostle Orson Pratt, arguably one of the brightest of the early Mormon leaders, who was known for favoring the right of Blacks to vote and for opposing Brigham Young, both on the legalization of “servitude” and the notion that curses could extend across generations.<sup>33</sup>

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32. David O. McKay, journal entry, Mar. 1, 1968 ; see Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,’” *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (1999): 244.

33. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 150–51. Reeve considers Pratt to be “politically progressive, well ahead of Young, his fellow Saints, and the rest of the nation” (153).



Notwithstanding Pratt's progressive beliefs in some areas, he was still very much a product of his time. In 1845, for example, he combined his understanding of Mormon theology with contemporary science to determine how much older Christ, the first born in spirit, was than the youngest spirit. He did this by assuming that spiritual gestation was about a year—just as it is on earth—and calculating the total number of spirits born in the premortal existence. He believed that the earth would be inhabited for eight thousand years, with an average of five hundred million inhabitants every fifty years, and that in addition to the earth's inhabitants a third of the spirits were cast out of heaven in the premortal existence. Pratt also believed that our solar system had thirty other inhabitable planets and moons, with the same God and populated by the same heavenly family in proportion to the earth. Together, these assumptions yielded a spirit population of one quadrillion and twenty trillion, which therefore was in years the age differential between the first and last born. Hesitating at the magnitude of these numbers, Pratt recalculated on the assumption that spirits were born at a rate of one per minute, which only would have taken one billion and nine hundred million years, or at a rate of one per second—sort of an insect model—which yielded a figure of only thirty million years. In fact, though, Pratt thought a short gestation period “very improbable.”

Pratt returned to this question in 1853, not to dismiss it but rather to revise his assumptions. This time he limited the earth's functional life to seven thousand years, and—consistent with the latest scientific thinking—disregarded any other potentially inhabited spheres. So, only one hundred billion spirits were needed. With polygamy now public, he assumed these spirits were the offspring of one hundred polygamous wives—so only a billion years of annual childbearing was needed. Now that was a creative mind!<sup>34</sup>

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34. In the mid-nineteenth century, when Pratt was writing, the universe was believed to be eternal, so his initial timeline—which is some 140,000 times longer than the current estimates for the age of the universe—was not a prob-

Obviously, Pratt's efforts—however serious—were not intended to establish doctrine. One has to wonder if even he found it a little preposterous. My point is that it doesn't detract from his overall brilliance to read this speculative analysis from a vantage point of 160 years later. And he was far from alone. At least on the question of whether the other planets were inhabited, he could name many learned men in agreement, with the first significant challenge to this idea coming in 1853. Pratt was hardly unique in his "scientific" speculations—others among his fellow apostles, for example, worried about the physical growth of spirits and their elastic properties.

An important question, perhaps only for internal leadership deliberation, is what sustained the priesthood ban for so many decades after science had discredited the popular nineteenth-century notions that gave rise to the ban in the first place. In the hundred years prior to the priesthood revelation, Church leaders repeatedly revisited the question of Blacks and the priesthood. Just between 1879 and the early 1950s, there were at least twenty-three First Presidency or combined First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve meetings during which some aspect of the subject was discussed. Many of these involved questions about cases with some distant African ancestry, and infrequently at least one participant argued unsuccessfully for flexibility in applying the "any African ancestry" exclusion. Failure to relax the so-called "one-drop" rule stemmed both from precedent and from another lingering bit of nineteenth-century pseudoscience. This was the non-genetic notion that racial identity could be thought of as "blood," along with the belief that this blood could continue to be passed down through many generations and then somehow reconstitute the long-forgotten racial type of some

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lem. He probably would have believed that his revised calculation of a billion years was very consistent with current estimates of the age of the earth, which is about five billion years.

remote ancestor. Brigham Young believed this, and so did his counselor and eventual successor as Church president Joseph F. Smith.<sup>35</sup>

Never entering the discussion, of course, was the more recent scientific demonstration that ultimately all human ancestry can be traced back to Africa. It's not likely that this would have changed the earlier decisions, of course, because the modern scientific timeline is hundreds of thousands of years of human life, while the Church leadership was following a seven thousand-year biblical model.

On several occasions the senior leadership decided that there should be a collection of previous rulings to help with future discussions.<sup>36</sup> One notable insight from these collections should have been the narrow focus of the discussions. The methodology was always the same: reliance on the statements and discussions of revered predecessors, often the First Presidency, though sometimes just the opinion of an influential apostle.<sup>37</sup> Given the stature of these respected forebears, it made sense that later reviews would prayerfully consider earlier decisions. In hindsight, however, it is apparent that no effort was made to verify the earlier claims (which could have revealed poor memories), nor to identify beliefs simply imported from the conventional wisdom of an earlier era. These earlier beliefs and the decisions they supported simply passed unchanged through successive generations of leaders.<sup>38</sup>

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35. "President Smith . . . referred to the doctrine by President Brigham Young which he (the speaker) said he believed in himself" (council minutes, Jan. 2, 1902).

36. E.g., 1908 (just a few entries), 1940, 1947, 1953, and perhaps 1963.

37. Notwithstanding his erroneous memory, George Q. Cannon, a counselor in the First Presidency, dominated discussions at the turn of the century, and in the mid-twentieth century even the First Presidency referred inquirers to apostle Joseph Fielding Smith's *The Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1931) for a fuller explanation of Mormon beliefs on Blacks.

38. An explicit acknowledgement of this fact was made during a 1908 council discussion of Church policy, when President Joseph F. Smith observed that "he did not know that we could do anything more in such cases than refer to the

Given the extent to which indefensible nineteenth-century beliefs had spawned and continued to justify the priesthood ban, this approach seems to me to be unfair to both the institution and to those whose dated beliefs continued to be perpetuated. How fair would it be to judge our current opinions by what is known 150 years in the future? So why should we judge nineteenth-century Church leaders by their dated views?

Not until the 1960s did any Church leader argue to end the priesthood ban. During that decade, Hugh B. Brown twice proposed this. The first time, in 1963, was an unsuccessful proposal to allow the conferral of the Aaronic Priesthood in conjunction with a plan to open a mission in Africa. In some ways this was a curious idea, which I thought of as Brown's thinly disguised attempt at a first step. Brown's second effort, in 1969, was an attempt to end the ban altogether, which I think may have reflected a mistaken belief by Brown that President McKay did not think the ban was of divine origin.

The good news here, in my view, is that over the past decade, and especially the past few years, Church statements finally reflect the involvement of historians in developing statements about Church history. On the specific issue of Blacks and the priesthood, what I had hoped would happen in 1973 finally has happened.

Of course, acknowledging a doctrinal mistake does run into the issue of infallibility, which many probably think is more important than providing an honest explanation. When I was doing my research, it was apparent that the leading General Authorities did not believe even their most confident colleagues were infallible, even on doctrine. The evolution of doctrine—including abandonment of some once-central beliefs—surely supports that notion, and the greater availability of early Church records now makes this fact undeniable. President Dallin H. Oaks has made this point quite clearly: “Every student of church his-

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rulings of Presidents Young, Taylor, Woodruff and other Presidencies on this question” (council minutes, Aug. 26, 1908).

tory knows that there have been differences of opinion among church leaders since the Church was organized.”<sup>39</sup>

The Church leadership periodically has acknowledged that its predecessors have speculated on doctrinal subjects or simply been wrong. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, then a member of the First Presidency, made this observation in the October 2013 general conference: “And, to be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine. I suppose the Church would be perfect only if it were run by perfect beings. God is perfect, and His doctrine is pure. But He works through us—His imperfect children—and imperfect people make mistakes.”<sup>40</sup> J. Reuben Clark, of an earlier First Presidency, made a similar observation sixty years before Elder Uchtdorf when he spoke of doctrines “where a subsequent President of the Church and the people themselves have felt that in declaring the doctrine, the announcer was not moved upon by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the clearest such statement came from B. H. Roberts of the First Quorum of the Seventy. An intellectual, albeit with his own indisputable race bias, he wrote in 1908 of the possibility of a

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39. Dallin H. Oaks, *The Lord's Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 200.

40. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join With Us,” Oct. 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>.

41. From an address to seminary and institute teachers at Brigham Young University on “When are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?,” delivered July 7, 1954, and published in the *Church News*, July 31, 1954. Somewhat more recently this talk was reprinted in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 68–81. Clark offered several criteria for deciding that something was *not* Church doctrine. Basically, this was any statement by someone other than the Church president that asserted “as the settled doctrine of the Church,” something that was “in dispute” or which modified or proclaimed new doctrine or a revelation. The practical problem is that, at least since 1970, disagreements among Church leaders almost never become public.

Church leader “speaking sometimes under the influence of prejudice and preconceived notions.”<sup>42</sup>

What limits the usefulness of these acknowledgements is that they are non-specific and often relatively limited, e.g., “a statement made by a Church leader decades ago”<sup>43</sup> or a statement “of a highly speculative character.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, some important early Church leaders deemed substantial errors to be impossible. Orson Hyde, president of the Quorum of the Twelve, observed in 1860 that “to acknowledge that this is the Kingdom of God, and that there is a presiding power, and to admit that he can advance incorrect doctrine, is to lay the ax at the foot of the tree. Will [God] suffer His mouthpiece to go into error? No. He would remove him, and place another there.”<sup>45</sup> Brigham Young held the same view: “you may go home and sleep as sweetly as a babe in its mother’s arms, as to any danger of your leaders leading you astray, for if they should do so the Lord would quickly sweep them from the earth.”<sup>46</sup> Even the candid B. H. Roberts wrote that “absolute certainty, except as to fundamental things, the great things that concern a man’s salvation, may not be expected. . . . [I]n things fundamental, we have the right to expect solid rock, not shifting sands, and God gives that certainty.”<sup>47</sup> Roberts’s perspective requires a strong and consistent official record on “things fundamental.” No longer much talked about, this notion

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42. B. H. Roberts, “Answer to Ministerial Association Review,” *Improvement Era* 10, no. 9 (July 1907): 692.

43. Neil L. Andersen, “Trial of Your Faith,” Oct. 2012, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/trial-of-your-faith?lang=eng>.

44. Clark, “When Are the Teachings.”

45. See Gary Bergera, “The Orson Pratt–Brigham Young Controversies: Conflict Within the Quorums, 1853 to 1868,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 7–49, quote from p. 29.

46. Brigham Young, Feb. 23, 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:289.

47. B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1930), 1:166.

presently would force an unseemly argument that the priesthood ban was not a thing fundamental—when it was and still is fundamental to many people.

### What's Left

To recapitulate, in the final analysis, this subject comes down to at least three fundamental questions, all of which usefully could be answered officially. First, and most importantly, what was the original basis for the priesthood ban? As I've said, to my way of thinking, the simplest way to answer this question is to ask Brigham Young, who said that those of African descent were descendants of Cain and thereby ineligible for the priesthood.

Closely related to this first question is why assumptions about lineage carried the case for Young but not for Joseph Smith, who seemed to hold the same popular assumptions about Black ancestry. This may be a task for historians, though they may not get closer to a definitive answer than already has been offered: that differing personal beliefs about Black potential, coinciding with concerns about interracial marriage, fears about what has been termed "interracial sexual excesses," and restrictions put in place by Masons on African American membership led Brigham Young to reach a new conclusion.<sup>48</sup>

The third question of why the ban persisted even after science discredited the old assumptions about lineage, genetics, and heredity seems to be within the purview of the Church's senior councils. As an outsider, the most obvious thing is that the many reviews that were undertaken of the subject were, until very recently, limited to what early leaders had said, with no apparent effort to use broader resources to identify potentially imported opinions. A secondary factor was that late in the history, another speculative indirect explanation for the ban had emerged

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48. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 107; and Homer, *Joseph's Temples*, chaps. 5 and 13.

invoking the premortal experience. In fact, however, the Cain connection remained the foundation of the discriminatory policy, while the new secondary view only provided a more comfortable pretext for Church policy than invoking the increasingly anachronistic Cain justification.

There is little question in my mind where all this is heading. The historical record is clear, and is now widely available, that Brigham Young allowed his nineteenth-century beliefs about Cain and nineteenth-century concerns about racial purity to drive a decision to bar Blacks from the Mormon priesthood and temple ordinances. Young said as much repeatedly, with no uncertainty as to why he was acting. He may well have felt inspired in so doing, but viewed from the more fully informed perspective of another century, he was wrong about lineage and its implications. This doesn't lessen Young's substantial accomplishment in establishing the Mormon kingdom in the American West, nor of successfully leading the Church through some of its greatest challenges. It is still appropriate to acknowledge that, on this particular question, he made a mistake.

Failure to acknowledge this error leaves the impression that the Church still believes the ban might have been of divine origin even if the explanations were not. That's a pretty heavy message for the Black Mormon community. Back while the priesthood ban was still in effect, I used to speak to small groups, some with a few or even many African American (and some African) members. I walked pretty carefully through the history, thinking I didn't want to bruise anyone's testimony. What I quickly learned was that it was the white members, not the Blacks, who had problems, if any, with the history. The Black view tended to be, "Oh, so it was just a white guy thing. What a relief." That made sense to them because they assumed racial bias was pretty much everywhere. What they were worried about was that God—not white guys—thought they were less worthy.

A second important cost of failing to acknowledge the error is that this silence undercuts the repeated denunciation of racism made by



Church leaders since the priesthood revelation.<sup>49</sup> Those members who seek some theological justification for their personal bias still can tell themselves that God is on their side.<sup>50</sup>

Church leaders will eventually acknowledge these points, perhaps even within the next decade. The groundwork certainly has been laid through the various statements published in the past few years. Given the Church's acknowledgement that the ban began with Brigham Young and its rejection of the explanations previously given for the ban, it is a relatively short additional step to admit that it was Young's belief in this "folklore" that gave rise to the ban in the first place. I believe that a substantial proportion of the Church membership, including at least some General Authorities, already believe this.

Back in 1973 I ended my historical overview with three provisional conclusions, presented in question form:

- First, do we really have any evidence that Joseph Smith initiated a policy of priesthood denial to Negroes?
- Second, to what extent did nineteenth-century perspectives on race influence Brigham Young's teachings on the Negro and, through him, the teachings of the modern Church?
- Third, is there any historical basis from ancient texts for interpreting the Pearl of Great Price as directly relevant to the black-priesthood question, or are these interpretations dependent upon more recent (e.g., nineteenth-century) assumptions?<sup>51</sup>

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49. E.g., *First Presidency* (1988), John Carmack of the First Quorum of the Seventy (1993), President Gordon B. Hinckley (2006), LDS.org (2013).

50. Anecdotally, at least, Blacks within the Church report periodic encounters with racist comments, and according to an informal 2014 survey even the important 2013 LDS.org essay on race and priesthood was known to only about 20 percent of Church members—and that figure only in the United States. A hope that the essence of this statement would be included in a general conference talk has not been realized, nor has a Church website for the discussion of race planned in 2012 ever been implemented.

51. Bush, "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine," 49.

Forty-five years later, the answer to all three questions is clear. The demarcation between the policies of Smith and Young has been strongly reaffirmed, no evidence has emerged that Young's decisions were derived from anything other than his belief in the Cain connection, and even the iconic Hugh Nibley has written against any Pearl of Great Price-based justification.<sup>52</sup>

Paradoxically, the Church has yet to acknowledge the easiest of these questions: What evidence is there that Brigham's views were independent of his nineteenth-century environment? As a cursory review of his discourses will quickly reveal, there is none. Awkward as it may be to admit this, it is past time that this acknowledgement be made. Had it been done forty years ago, the story now would be old history. Hopefully, forty years from now, it finally will indeed be old history.

## Appendix

In more detail:

1978 – First ordination to Melchizedek Priesthood since Joseph Smith (William Cannon [Guam], Joseph Freeman Jr. [Utah])

1978 – First temple ordinances since Joseph Smith (Joseph Freeman Jr. [Utah])

1978 – First post-revelation Black missionary (Marcus Martins [Brazil])

1978 – First Black high priest (Ruffin Bridgeforth [Utah])

1978 – First missionaries to Black Africa (Nigeria and Ghana)

Early 1980s – First Black bishop (Helvécio Martins); first branch president 1979 (Robert Lang), 1980-Accra (Emanuel Kissi)

1980 – First mission to Black Africa (Africa West, in Nigeria [1980], followed by Ghana [1985] and Congo [1987]). There are now twenty-six missions open in Africa, not counting the three in South Africa.

1985 – Johannesburg South Africa Temple opened with Black temple workers; Black majority of Church members in South Africa by 1988

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52. Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 134.

1987 – First Black mission president (Helvécio Martins [Brazil Fortaleza Mission]); later, Joseph Sitati was called as president of the Nigeria Uyo Mission [2007] and Edward Dube as president of the Zimbabwe Harare Mission [2009])

1988 – First entirely Black African stake (Nigeria)

1988 – First Black stake president (David Eka [Nigeria]; later, Edward Dube served as stake president in Zimbabwe [1999], Joseph Sitati in Kenya [2001], and Jackson T. Mkhabela in Soweto, South Africa [2005])

1990 – First Black General Authority (Helvécio Martins [Brazil], Second Quorum of the Seventy)

1991 – Two stakes organized in Ghana

2003 – First African member of the Relief Society general board (Florence Chukwurah [Nigeria])

2004 – Accra Ghana Temple opened

2005 – Aba Nigeria Temple opened

2009 – First African General Authority (Joseph Sitati [Kenya], First Quorum of the Seventy)

2010 – First African temple president (Alexander Odume [Nigeria])

2011 – Kinshasa Democratic Republic of the Congo and Durban South Africa Temples announced

2012 – First Ghanaian temple president (George Afful)

2012 – First Black president of Atlanta Stake (Jermaine Sullivan)

2013 – Second African General Authority (Edward Dube [Zimbabwe])

2013 – First Black stake president in Alabama (Peter Johnson [Bessemer Alabama Stake])

2014 – First African member of the Young Women general board (Dorah Mkhabela [Soweto, South Africa])

2015 – Abidjan Ivory Coast Temple construction announced

TBD – First Black apostle



Hildebrando de Melo  
Eye of God III (2018)  
30" x 23"  
mixed media on paper