

# JOSEPH FIELDING SMITH'S EVOLVING VIEWS ON RACE: THE ODYSSEY OF A MORMON APOSTLE-PRESIDENT<sup>1</sup>

Matthew L. Harris

In 1963, Joseph Henderson, a non-Mormon from New York, wrote a pointed letter to LDS Church apostle Joseph Fielding Smith asking him about the racial teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>2</sup> The letter triggered a sharp response from Smith, who informed his interrogator that he was “getting a little fed up on the idea that so many people think I am responsible for the Negro not holding the priesthood.”<sup>3</sup> It is easy to see why Henderson held Smith responsible for the Mormon priesthood ban, which also restricted Black people from temple access. The apostle had authored several books defending the ban and he was the Church’s most aggressive leader condemning Mormon intellectuals who criticized it. Smith saw himself as the guardian of Mormon orthodoxy, not just on matters of race and lineage but

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2. This article uses Latter-day Saint, LDS, and Mormon interchangeably. All denote members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

3. Smith to Henderson, Apr. 10, 1963, Matthew Harris files. We can glean the contents of Henderson’s letter from Smith’s response.

also on issues like evolution and doctrinal exegesis.<sup>4</sup> Yet over the course of Smith's long ministry, and especially during the last decade of his life, he began to envision a more inclusive LDS Church for persons of African ancestry. He took dramatic steps to both convert and retain Black Latter-day Saints. It was less a change in how Smith read scripture and more about the turbulent times in which he lived. The civil rights movement—and more critically Smith's own awareness of how the priesthood and temple ban affected Black members—convinced him to reimagine a place for them within the Church.



Born in 1876 in what was then the Utah Territory, Joseph Fielding Smith came from royal Mormon stock. He was the grandnephew of Mormon founder Joseph Smith, grandson of high-ranking Church leader Hyrum Smith, son of apostle and Church president Joseph F. Smith, and cousin, brother, or relative to several other apostles, including leaders in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (today the Community of Christ). He was unique in that he spent virtually all of his adult life in the highest councils of the LDS Church. Though he lacked formal training in higher education, Joseph Fielding Smith was one of the Church's most prolific writers in the twentieth century, authoring scores of books and articles that, as two recent writers

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4. For more on Smith condemning Mormon intellectuals for expressing unorthodox views, see Thomas Simpson, *American Universities and the Birth of Modern Mormonism, 1867–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 115–17; Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of Latter-day Saints in American Religion*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 136–41, 156–57, 170; and Richard Sherlock and Jeffrey E. Keller, “The B. H. Roberts, Joseph Fielding Smith, and James E. Talmage Affair,” in *The Search for Harmony: Essays on Science and Mormonism*, edited by Gene A. Sessions and Craig J. Oberg (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), chap. 6. Smith's most important book advancing his position on science and religion, particularly as it relates to evolution, is *Man, His Origin and Destiny* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954).

explained, “helped educate generations of Latter-day Saints about the history and doctrine of the Church.”<sup>5</sup>

Called as an apostle in 1910 at the age of thirty-four, Smith served in a number of capacities in the Church, including Assistant Church Historian, Church Historian, president of the Genealogical Society, president of the Salt Lake Temple, president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, First Presidency counselor, and Church president.<sup>6</sup> Like many Latter-day Saints, Smith received a patriarchal blessing—a special bestowment by an LDS Church patriarch—that guided his life and shaped his ministry.<sup>7</sup> He received the blessing in 1913 at the age

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5. Reid L. Neilson and Scott D. Marianno, “True and Faithful: Joseph Fielding Smith as Mormon Historian and Theologian,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 7. See also “New Volume of ‘Answers’” in the *Church News*, published in the *Deseret News*, Nov. 26, 1966, in which the editor stated that Joseph Fielding Smith “is known Church-wide as an authority on Church doctrine. It has been said of him: ‘In the Church he is a scriptioner without peer. . . It would be difficult to find a subject of Church doctrine or history that President Smith has not written extensively upon in magazine articles, pamphlets and books.” Matthew Bowman notes that Smith was one of “Mormonism’s most respected religious thinker[s]” in the decades after World War II. In Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of An American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 200.

6. For three hagiographic accounts of Smith, see Joseph F. McConkie, *True and Faithful: The Life Story of Joseph Fielding Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971); Joseph Fielding Smith Jr. and John J. Stewart, *The Life of Joseph Fielding Smith, Tenth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972); and Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph Fielding Smith: Gospel Scholar, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

7. An LDS Church patriarch is an ordained position within the LDS lay priesthood. Patriarchs give special blessings to the Mormon faithful, providing them with comfort, guidance, and caution. Patriarchs also declare lineage in these blessings. For more on LDS patriarchal blessings, see Irene M. Bates, “Patriarchal Blessings and the Routinization of Charisma,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 11–29; Matthew L. Harris, “Mormons and Lineage: The Complicated History of Blacks and Patriarchal Blessings, 1830–2018,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 83–129; and Irene M. Bates and E. Gary Smith, *Lost Legacy: The Mormon Office of Presiding Patriarch*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

of thirty-seven, three years after he was ordained to the Council of the Twelve Apostles, the second-highest governing body in the LDS Church next to the First Presidency. The patriarch promised him that he would “always be in possession of the spirit of revelation” and that his “counsels will be considered conservative and wise.”<sup>8</sup> The blessing proved prophetic, for Smith’s vigorous defense of the priesthood and temple ban during his sixty-two years as a Church officer marked both his commitment to conservative Mormon teachings and his willingness to defend the ban as revelatory and divine.

Although Smith first discussed the ban in a 1924 article published in the Church’s magazine, the *Improvement Era*, his most spirited defense of it occurred in 1931 when he published *The Way to Perfection*.<sup>9</sup> It was one of his most successful publishing ventures, second only to his *Essentials in Church History* (1922) and perhaps the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (1938).<sup>10</sup> *The Way to Perfection* went

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8. Blessing of Joseph Fielding Smith by Patriarch Joseph D. Smith of Fillmore, Utah, May 11, 1913, box 3, folder 9, Irene Bates Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter JWML).

9. Joseph Fielding Smith, “The Negro and the Priesthood,” *Improvement Era* 27 (Apr. 1924): 564–65; Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection: Short Discourses on Gospel Themes*, 5th ed. (1931; repr., Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1945).

10. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1922); Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith: Taken from His Sermons and Writings as They Are Found in the Documentary History and Other Publications of the Church and Written or Published in the Days of the Prophet’s Ministry* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938). Mormon rare books dealer Curt Bench estimates that these two books were among the most influential Mormon books ever published. See Curt Bench, “Fifty Important Mormon Books,” *Sunstone* 14 (Oct. 1990): 55–57; and Neilson and Marianno, “True and Faithful,” 9–10. Gregory A. Prince, *Leonard Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 185, notes that *Essentials of Church History* “sold about ten thousand copies a year.”

through eighteen reprint editions and sold tens of thousands of copies, amassing royalties even after his death in 1972. Published in English, German, Dutch, French, Portuguese, Danish, Finish, and Japanese, it did not go out of print until Church authorities removed the hard copy from publication in 1990 and the Amazon Kindle edition in 2018.<sup>11</sup> The book served as the manual for a Sunday School course in genealogy, reflective of Smith's close association with the Genealogical Society of Utah. The First Presidency approved it, and the book quickly became an authoritative statement on LDS racial teachings.<sup>12</sup>

Smith published *The Way to Perfection* at a time when Mormon racial teachings were unsettled and when Americans in general struggled to define race.<sup>13</sup> Although Smith and early Church leaders had taught for years that Black people bore the mark of a divine curse—that they merited a black skin for their sinful conduct in a premortal life—these teachings raised more questions than answers. Since the Church's founding in 1830, leaders offered a variety of conflicting statements about Black people, undoubtedly influenced by the culture of slavery in

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11. For the popularity of *The Way to Perfection*, see Gibbons, *Joseph Fielding Smith*, 311, 370; and Smith Jr. and Stewart, *Life of Joseph Fielding Smith*, 210–11. For the publishing history of *The Way to Perfection*, see Stirling Adams's video, "Race, Lineage, and the 1920s–1940s Genealogical Society of Utah," *Dialogue-Journal.com*, Mar. 27, 2019, <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/2019/03/race-lineage-and-the-1920s-1940s-genealogical-society-of-utah/>.

12. *Topical Outlines to the Way to Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1936), 1.

13. In the early twentieth century, laws defining racial groups varied from state to state. Some states defined "negroes" as anyone with one-eighth African ancestry, some with one-sixteenth, while others "one drop" or one-quarter. The best studies of the construction of race in the United States include Ariela J. Gross, *What Blood Won't Tell: A History of Race on Trial in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Peter Wallenstein, *Race, Sex, and the Freedom to Marry: Loving v. Virginia* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014).

which they lived. As recent scholarship attests, early LDS leaders could not determine to what degree Black people should be able to participate in the Church's rituals.<sup>14</sup> Mormon founder Joseph Smith produced three books of scripture that, along with the Bible, later became canonized as the standard works, yet these scriptures were largely silent on the spiritual destiny of African descendants. Correspondingly, the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants—two essential books of Mormon scripture (the other the Pearl of Great Price)—had much to say about Lamanites or American Indians, privileging them for “redemption and whiteness.”<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the Bible—specifically Genesis chapter 4—discussed a “mark” God had placed on Cain, which LDS apostles equated with dark skin, designating Black people unfit to hold the priesthood. The other proof text was Abraham chapter 3 from the Pearl of Great Price, which the Church hierarchy interpreted to mean that Black members were disqualified from the Church's sacred rituals because they had committed some alleged misdeed or sin before they were born.<sup>16</sup>

Church leaders arrived at these conclusions gradually over the course of the nineteenth century. There is no evidence that Joseph

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14. W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); and Jonathan A. Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

15. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 56. For Native Americans' privileged standing in Mormon theology, see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 97–99; Matthew Garrett, *Making Lamanites: Mormons, Native Americans, and the Indian Student Placement Program, 1947–2000* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016); and Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball, Working Draft* (Salt Lake City: Benchmark Books, 2009), chap. 30.

16. Genesis, 4:15; Abraham, 3:22–28; see also 1:27. For context to race and lineage in the Pearl of Great Price, see Terryl Givens and Brian M. Hauglid, *The Pearl of Greatest Price: Mormonism's Most Controversial Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 134–37.

Smith restricted Black people from the priesthood or disqualified them from the Church's temple rituals. In fact, early records indicate that at least a handful of Black men had been ordained to the LDS priesthood during Smith's tenure as founding prophet.<sup>17</sup> Some even received their patriarchal blessings, which pronounced their lineage and provided a roadmap to their eternal salvation, and some participated in important temple rituals, served church missions, and presided over church congregations. Black Latter-day Saint women enjoyed special privileges too. They received patriarchal blessings and participated in some temple rituals.<sup>18</sup>

However, the status of Black Latter-day Saints changed dramatically after Joseph Smith's death in 1844. In the ensuing years, Smith's successors developed a theology of race that marginalized Black people. In 1845, apostle Orson Hyde was the first Mormon leader to link black skin with moral impurity, declaring that Black people had been neutral in a premortal "war in heaven," which prompted God to place them "in the accursed lineage of Canaan; and hence the negro or African race."

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17. Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 36–38, 90–98; Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*; 107–14, 128–34; Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 87–89, 95, 97–98, 106–08, 146–49; Russell W. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830–2013* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2014), 10, 13–15; Lester E. Bush Jr., "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68; Connell O'Donovan, "The Mormon Priesthood Ban and Elder Q. Walker Lewis: 'An Example for His More Whiter Brethren to Follow,'" *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006): 48–100; Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds., *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), chaps. 2–3.

18. Quincy D. Newell, *Your Sister in the Gospel: The Life of Jane Manning James, A Nineteenth-Century Black Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 105–06; Tonya Reiter, "Black Saviors on Mount Zion: Proxy Baptisms and Latter-day Saints of African Descent," *Journal of Mormon History* 43, no. 4 (Oct. 2017): 100–23; Harris, "Mormons and Lineage," 87–93.

In 1847, apostle Parley P. Pratt advanced the argument further, insisting that their cursed lineage had disqualified them from the priesthood.<sup>19</sup> In 1852, after Latter-day Saints migrated west to the Great Basin, territorial governor and Mormon prophet Brigham Young reversed Black priesthood ordination and instituted a ban barring Black people from full access to temple rituals. Young announced a “one-drop” rule to determine African heritage, but he provided no guidelines on how to do it.<sup>20</sup>

This rudderless policy left Young’s successors in a lurch, for he never specified how Church leaders could detect one drop of African blood. At the time, there were no ways to detect bloodlines or reliable ways to discern lineage. Light-skinned and biracial people with African ancestry were the most difficult to identify. Their mixed-race

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19. Orson Hyde, *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde delivered before the High Priests Quorum in Nauvoo, April 27, 1845 . . .* (Liverpool: James and Woodburn, 1845), 30; Pratt, sermon transcript, General Meeting Minutes, Apr. 25, 1847, in *Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by Richard E. Turley, 2 vols., DVD, 1:18, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter CHL).

20. Brigham Young, quoted in Wilford Woodruff journal, Jan. 16, 1852, Wilford Woodruff Journals and Papers, CHL, available at <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a5c827b5-938d-4a08-b80e-71570704e323/0/361>. According to Joseph F. Smith, Brigham Young also applied the “one-drop” rule to whites or “Ephraimites”—meaning that they couldn’t have any “negro blood” in them to be considered “pure whites.” In Council of Twelve Minutes, Jan. 2, 1902, *Minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency, 1900–1909*, 3:181. See also Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks*, 145; John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 226. The “one-drop” rule was a racial definition designed by white Southerners to prevent Black men from having intimate relationships with white women. For this point, see Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 157, 199–200. In 1930, the US Census Bureau adopted the “one-drop” rule to classify all persons with mixed-race ancestry “negroes.” The Bureau established this rule despite some state laws designating racial distinctions that conflicted with the “one-drop” rule. See Michael Wayne, *Imagining Black America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), chap. 4.



status presented additional challenges for LDS Church leaders as they grappled with the uncertainty of not knowing who had Black ancestry.<sup>21</sup>

The “one-drop” rule, moreover, posed another significant challenge for leaders: It negated years of African, European, and Native American cohabitation in colonial North America. These multiracial peoples had shared the continent for hundreds of years, mixing and marrying, which complicated racial policing and made it all but certain that no one truly had a “pure race.” From the convergence of these free and unfree peoples on the North American continent arose new racial identities resulting in “mulattoes,” “mestizos,” “mustees,” and other “mixed bloods.”<sup>22</sup> Determining a cursed lineage was therefore difficult to discern because mixed-race peoples were ubiquitous in early America.



Given the inadequate tools to police racial boundaries, LDS Church leaders like Joseph Fielding Smith struggled to define precisely where Black and light-skinned Latter-day Saints fit into the Church’s conception of soteriology. In 1907, as the Assistant Church Historian, Smith called the rationales of the ban “tradition” and “the opinion” of earlier leaders.<sup>23</sup> Here he echoed the view of Church president Lorenzo Snow, who

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21. Not until the 1980s did scientists discover new tools to trace race and lineage. See David Reich, *Who We Are and How We Got Here: Ancient DNA and the New Science of the Human Past* (New York: Pantheon, 2018); and Bryan Sykes, *DNA USA: A Genetic Portrait of America* (New York: Liveright, 2012).

22. A. B. Wilkinson, *Blurring the Lines of Race and Freedom: Mulattoes and Mixed Bloods in English Colonial America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

23. Joseph Fielding Smith to Alfred M. Nelson, Jan. 31, 1907, MS 14591, reel 1, CHL.

noted in 1900 that he did not know whether the curse of Cain teaching originated with Joseph Smith or Brigham Young. He could not determine if this teaching was the product of revelation or whether Young “was giving his own personal views of what had been told to him by the Prophet Joseph.” Likewise, in 1912, Church president Joseph F. Smith and his counselors Anthon H. Lund and Charles W. Penrose confessed that they did not know of any “revelation, ancient or modern” supporting the teaching that “negroes” were “neutral in heaven,” which was clearly at odds with apostle Orson Hyde’s teachings some sixty years earlier.<sup>24</sup>

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Church leaders continued to express unease over how the Church had justified its teachings about race. In 1918, apostle Orson F. Whitney wrote that “Ham’s sin, which brought the curse upon Canaan . . . may not be fully known; but even if it were,” he cautioned, “there would still remain the unsolved problem of the punishment of a whole race for an offense committed by one of its ancestors.” In contrast, while Whitney found the Church’s teachings about the premortal existence “unsolved,” apostle Melvin J. Ballard sermonized in 1922 that “it is alleged that the Prophet Joseph said—and I have no reason to dispute it—that it is because of some act committed by them before they came into this life.”<sup>25</sup>

In any event, Joseph Fielding Smith’s labeling Mormon racial teachings “the opinion” of earlier leaders was hardly reassuring to Latter-day

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24. Council of the Twelve minutes, Mar. 11, 1900, in *Minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency, 1900–1909*, 3:35; First Presidency (Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, Charles W. Penrose) to Milton H. Knudson, Jan. 13, 1912, in *Minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency, 1910–1951*, 4:107.

25. Whitney, “Saturday Night Thoughts” (1918–1919), reprinted in *Cowley and Whitney on Doctrine*, compiled by Forace Green (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 224–25; Melvin J. Ballard, “Three Degrees of Glory,” a discourse delivered in the Ogden Tabernacle, Sept. 22, 1922, 22, CHL. For different perspectives among LDS leaders on the “war in heaven,” see Boyd Jay Petersen, “‘One Soul Shall Not Be Lost’: The War in Heaven in Mormon Thought,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 1–50.

Saints who wanted definitive answers about why Black members were barred from the priesthood and temple. When he published *The Way to Perfection* in 1931, he knew that Mormon racial teachings were in flux, functioning more as speculative theology than as revealed doctrine. At the same time, Smith also knew that the Church lacked a clear-cut revelation affirming the ban, which prompted apostle Ballard to assert that “it is alleged” that it began with Joseph Smith. Joseph Fielding Smith’s father, acting in his capacity as Church president, was even more frank in admitting that “there is no written revelation” to “show why the negroes are ineligible to hold the priesthood.” Nevertheless, he opined that it began with “the Prophet Joseph Smith.”<sup>26</sup>

The uncertainty about the ban’s origins troubled Joseph Fielding Smith throughout his ministry, particularly questions dealing with the fate of Cain and Abel’s posterity. In a letter to a concerned Latter-day Saint, Smith noted that “Abel was cut-off without posterity but according to the doctrine of the Church, he will have posterity in eternity because he is worthy of all the blessings.” Smith further claimed that “until he does, the seed of Cain are barred from holding the priesthood.” When the interrogator expressed skepticism about Smith’s answer, the apostle exasperatingly noted that this issue “comes back to me constantly as a plague.”<sup>27</sup> In another revealing letter, a concerned Church member asked Smith to explain “why the negro has a black skin and why he cannot hold the priesthood. I have heard many different reasons but I would like to know where I can find the true one.” Smith could not answer the question satisfactorily and admitted in the reply letter that the “information we have regarding the Negro is limited.”<sup>28</sup>

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26. First Presidency (Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, Charles W. Penrose) to Milton H. Knudson, Jan. 13, 1912.

27. Alfred J. Burdett to Smith, June 27, 1956, and Smith’s reply, Jan. 28, 1957, both in box 39, folder 9, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL.

28. Mrs. R. E. Smith to Joseph Fielding Smith, Oct. 24, 1951, and Smith’s reply, Oct. 29, 1951, both in box 28, folder 1, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL.

Particularly challenging were questions Smith entertained when he visited LDS Church missions. When a missionary in Brazil asked him point-blank, “Where is the revelation denying the Priesthood to the seed of Cain?” Smith stumbled.<sup>29</sup> He couldn’t answer the missionary because neither he nor his colleagues had ever found one. These questions presented a challenge for other Church leaders, too. In 1921, then-apostle David O. McKay embarked on a mission tour to the South Pacific and encountered a “worthy man” with a cursed lineage. McKay promptly wrote Church president Heber J. Grant asking if he could ordain the man to the priesthood, but the Church president said no. “David, I am as sympathetic as you are, but until the Lord gives us a revelation regarding the matter, we shall have to maintain the policy of the church.”<sup>30</sup> Other apostles experienced similar challenges, as did lower-level Mormon leaders. In the early 1970s, Lester Bush, a Latter-day Saint medical doctor, compiled an exhaustive documentary record on Mormon racial teachings, which included dozens of letters from local LDS leaders in which they asked the First Presidency difficult doctrinal questions about Black members, lineage, and the priesthood and temple restriction. Many of them date to the 1910s and 1920s as the Church expanded in the United States and abroad.<sup>31</sup>

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29. Brazilian Mission president William Grant Bangerter recorded this question in his diary, recounting a question a missionary asked Joseph Fielding Smith when he visited the mission. See Nov. 3, 1960 entry, William Grant Bangerter diary, 1958–1963, CHL. For questions to Smith about Mormon racial teachings, see box 23, folder 8, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers; and Smith, “Negro and the Priesthood,” 564.

30. “Minutes of Special Meeting by President McKay,” McKay diary, Jan. 17, 1954, box 32, folder 3, David O. McKay Papers, JWML. For a recent account of McKay’s visit to the South Pacific, see Reid L. Neilson and Carson V. Teuscher, eds., *Pacific Apostle: The 1920–21 Diary of David O. McKay in the Latter-day Saint Island Missions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

31. A copy of Lester Bush’s “Compilation of the Negro” is located at the LDS Church History Library, the Harold B. Lee Library at BYU, and the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah.

This uncertainty and ambiguity prompted Smith to write *The Way to Perfection*. He sought to quell doubts about the origins of the ban but, more importantly, he wanted to create a theological framework for Black priesthood denial. Among Smith's most controversial chapters include 15 ("The Seed of Cain") and 16 ("The Seed of Cain After the Flood"). There the apostle outlined a hierarchy of race based on his interpretation of Mormon scripture, his study of the racial theories of early LDS Church leaders, and his embrace of two secular theories—British Israelism and eugenics—prominent during his lifetime.<sup>32</sup>

During the first quarter of the twentieth century, Mormon leaders were immersed in British Israelism ideology—a Protestant teaching that privileged Anglo-Saxons as God's "favored lineage." For Latter-day Saints, these "lost tribes of Israel" had "believing blood," meaning they were more likely to convert to the LDS Church than groups or races outside of the house of Israel. Mormon Sunday School manuals and other Church publications echoed these views. Such theories reflected similar concepts expressed by Joseph Smith and Brigham Young half a century earlier.<sup>33</sup> Church publications, moreover, informed Latter-day

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32. Smith's influence on British Israelism is best explained in Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 29–31; Armand L. Mauss, "In Search of Ephraim: Traditional Mormon Conceptions of Lineage and Race," *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 131–73; and Arnold H. Green, "Gathering and Election: Israelite Descent and Universalism in Mormon Discourse," *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 195–228.

33. "Our Lineage," lessons 1 to 10 of the *Course for First Year Senior Genealogical Classes* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1934); "Children of the Covenant," *A Lesson Book for Second Year Junior Genealogical Classes* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1937); "Youth and its Culture," *Manual for the Gleaner Department of the Y.W.M.I.A.* (Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society of Utah, 1938); and "Birthright Blessings: Genealogical Training Class," *Sunday School Lessons for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Board, 1942). For Joseph Smith and Brigham Young's views on race and lineage, see Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, chap. 4; and Turner, *Brigham Young*, chap. 8.

Saints of their chosen status. Unlike persons of African lineage, who were deemed cursed and therefore excluded from the Abrahamic covenant, white people derived their ancestry from Anglo-Saxons and were considered the “covenant race.” To that end, many Latter-day Saints believed that because of their chosen lineage, they had to preserve and protect their “racial purity” lest miscegenation taint their bloodlines.<sup>34</sup>

Smith and his fellow apostles imbibed these ideas, but they also looked to eugenics to privilege hierarchies of race. In the early twentieth century, Latter-day Saints, like many Americans, embraced eugenics—the faddish (and erroneous) idea that science could improve the human race by breeding, good hygiene, and good morals.<sup>35</sup> “A very great deal is expected of this movement,” General Authority B. H. Roberts stated in 1916.<sup>36</sup> Mormon leaders opined that Latter-day Saints were uniquely qualified to improve the human race. As polygamists and virtuous Christians, Mormons would preserve their status as God’s covenant people through child-rearing and righteous living. This required them to shun birth control and embrace proper parenting and child-rearing practices consistent with Latter-day Saint teachings about families. If Latter-day Saints failed in this sacred obligation, Joseph Fielding Smith

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34. James H. Anderson, *God’s Covenant Race: From Patriarchal Times to the Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1946), 93 (my thanks to Stirling Adams for alerting me to this book).

35. The literature on eugenics is vast. See Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Adam Cohen, *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck* (New York: Penguin, 2016); and Daniel Okrent, *The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics, and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America* (New York: Scribner, 2019).

36. B. H. Roberts, “A Great Responsibility,” *Young Women’s Journal* 27 (Sept. 1916): 524–26 (quotation at 524). See also John A. Widtsoe, “Our Interest in Eugenics,” *Young Women’s Journal* 24 (Feb. 1913): 81–83; and Amy B. Eaton, “Eugenics and Parenthood,” *Young Women’s Journal* 24 (Jan. 1913): 13–17.

reasoned, the “more worthy race” would be overwhelmed by “lower classes” of European immigrants then flocking into the United States following the American Civil War. The failure of the “covenant race” to reproduce would lead to “race suicide” putting “themselves and their kind out of this mortal existence.”<sup>37</sup>

All of these ideas culminated in *The Way to Perfection*, which affirmed Smith’s belief that God privileged racial hierarchies. He insisted that because God had placed a curse upon “negroes,” they were a “less favored lineage,” which barred them from the “holy priesthood.” Furthermore, he argued that because of their “less valiance” in a pre-mortal life, the blessings of the house of Israel did not apply to them like it did the descendants of Ephraim and other “favored lineages.” Only “choice spirits” from a “better grade of nations” could enjoy the full privileges of the Church’s liturgical rites. But Smith did not stop there: He claimed that Black people were an “inferior race,” forever doomed as eternal servants to God’s covenant people. Less dramatic but no less significant, Smith posited that the priesthood restriction began with Joseph Smith, despite the absence of a definitive revelation and despite the fact that Black men had been ordained to the priesthood during his great uncle’s tenure as founding prophet.<sup>38</sup>

*The Way to Perfection* proved a seminal work. It was the first time that an LDS leader had ever systemized Mormon racial teachings. Several of Smith’s colleagues, impressed by his thoroughness and clear,

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37. Joseph Fielding Smith, “Birth Control,” *Relief Society Magazine* 3 (July 1916): 368; Okrent, *Guarded Gate*, 85–86, 95 (“race suicide”), 114, 168. For deeper context to Mormon eugenics, see Joseph R. Stuart, “Our Religion Is Not Hostile to Real Science’: Evolution, Eugenics, and Race/Religion-Making in Mormonism’s First Century” and Cassandra L. Clark, “No True Religion without True Science’: Science and the Construction of Mormon Whiteness,” both in *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 1 (Jan. 2016): 1–43 and 44–72; and Miranda Wilcox, “Sacralizing the Secular in Latter-day Saint Salvation Histories (1890–1930),” *Journal of Mormon History* 46, no. 3 (July 2020): 23–59 (esp. 47–52).

38. Smith, *Way to Perfection*, 42–48, 101, 103–07, 109–11.

conversational writing style, recommended chapters 15 and 16 of *The Way to Perfection* when Latter-day Saints asked about the priesthood ban; Smith himself recommended the same chapters when he fielded similar queries. In addition, the book was cited in LDS Church manuals, in the publications of Mormon prophets and apostles, and in sermons at the faith's semiannual general conference in Salt Lake City.<sup>39</sup> Most notably, the essential teachings of *The Way to Perfection* were incorporated into an adult Sunday School manual in 1935. Accompanying the manual was a fifty-three-page "Topical Outline," which included a section called "Study Thoughts." These study questions asked students to ponder a number of passages about Black people—in specific, "How do we know the negro is descended from Cain through Ham?" "Name any great leaders this race has produced." And most dramatic, "Discuss the truth of the statement in the text, p. 101, that Cain 'became the father of an inferior race.'"<sup>40</sup>

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39. Smith recommended these chapters in a number of letters. See, for example, letters to J. Reuben Clark, Apr. 3, 1939, box 17, folder 7, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL; to Ida E. Holmes, Feb. 9, 1949, box 27, folder 3, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL; letter to Eulis E. Hubbs, Mar. 5, 1958, box 9, folder 7, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL; Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 2:188; Smith to Sidney B. Sperry, Dec. 26, 1951, box 3, folder 3, William E. Berrett Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter HBLL). Smith's colleagues in the Church hierarchy also referred to chapters 15 and 16 of his work when asked about racial questions. See George Albert Smith, J. box 78, folder 7, George Albert Smith Papers, JWML; Spencer W. Kimball's notes, box 64, folder 5, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, CHL; J. Reuben Clark's "Negro and the Church" folder, box 210, J. Reuben Clark Papers, HBLL; Boyd K. Packer, "The Curse Upon Cain and Descendants," Jan. 3, 1951, box 63, folder 11, Leonard J. Arrington Papers, Special Collections, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah (hereafter MCL); Joseph F. Merrill to J.W. Monroe, Jan. 26, 1951, box 20, folder 2, Joseph F. Merrill Papers, HBLL; and Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 477.

40. *Topical Outlines to the Way to Perfection*, 15.



Perhaps most importantly, however, *The Way to Perfection* became the basis for a First Presidency statement in 1949, in which the Church hierarchy enshrined into doctrine the divine curse and the premortal existence hypothesis. The First Presidency cleared up any ambiguity about the provenance of the ban when they declared unequivocally that it was a “direct commandment from the Lord on which is founded the doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization.”<sup>41</sup> The First Presidency’s bold statement, however, ignored the fact that Black Mormon men were ordained to the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s tenure as founding prophet and that at least one of them participated in limited temple rituals and presided over a Mormon congregation.

Smith followed up *The Way to Perfection* with additional books that defined and reaffirmed Mormon racial teachings as essential Church doctrine. Along with *The Way to Perfection*, Smith’s *Doctrines of Salvation* (1954–1956) and *Answers to Gospel Questions* (1957–1966) established him as the Church’s foremost authority on the priesthood and temple ban.<sup>42</sup> Because of these definitive works, his fellow Church leaders turned to him to settle difficult questions involving race and lineage. In 1951, for example, Stephen L. Richards and J. Reuben Clark, Smith’s colleagues in the Church hierarchy, wanted to know if Smith could determine if “the inhabitants of the Melanesian and Micronesian Islands” were of “the seed of Cain.” After thoroughly researching the matter in the *Encyclopedia of Britannica*, Smith claimed he did not

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41. Apostle John A. Widtsoe wrote at the top of his copy of the First Presidency statement of August 17, 1949: “Church Doctrine Regarding Negroes.” In box 6, folder 5, John A. Widtsoe Papers, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter USHS); see also box 64, folder 6, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, CHL. For context to this statement, see Harris and Bringhurst, *Mormon Church and Blacks*, 64–66.

42. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, compiled by Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954–1956); Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957–1966).

know.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Brigham Young University president Ernest Wilkinson looked to Smith for guidance on whether a prospective student with “one-eighth negroid” ancestry could enroll at the Church-owned school. “What is your advice to me?” Wilkinson asked. “Should we try to discourage him from coming to Provo?” Just as importantly, when LDS Church patriarchs had questions about how to pronounce lineage for Black and biracial Latter-day Saints, they looked to Smith for guidance. He informed them that they had to declare the lineage of Cain.<sup>44</sup>

As Smith’s hardline views on race circulated throughout the Church, some teachers within the LDS Church Educational System challenged him. Lowell Bennion, a highly-regarded Mormon religion instructor at the University of Utah Institute of Religion, criticized him, as did others within the Church Educational System. During one memorable moment in 1954, Bennion “openly questioned” Smith’s racial teachings at a training session attended by dozens of Church seminary and institute teachers at Brigham Young University. Smith took offense at such criticisms, deciding that Bennion was not sufficiently orthodox and had to go. In 1962, Bennion and his colleague T. Edgar Lyon, another critic

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43. Stephen L. Richards and J. Reuben Clark to Joseph Fielding Smith, May 29, 1951 and Smith’s response, June 8, 1951, box 17, folder 13, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL. See also J. Reuben Clark diary, June 1, 1948, in which he noted that Latter-day Saints submitted questions about LDS doctrine in “the question and answer column in the Church News,” at which point they “were all submitted to Bro. Joseph Fielding Smith.” In box 15, folder 1, J. Reuben Clark Papers, HBLL.

44. Wilkinson to Smith, Aug. 15, 1952, box 3, folder 3, William E. Berrett Papers, HBLL. For Smith’s views on lineage and patriarchal blessings, see Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5:168; Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:172; and “Digest of the minutes of the meeting of patriarchs of the Church with the General Authorities held in Barratt Hall, Salt Lake City, Utah, Oct. 11, 1958, at 8:00 a.m. with President Joseph Fielding Smith, President of the Quorum of the Twelve,” box 64, folder 4, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, CHL. Harris, “Mormons and Lineage,” provides a richer context for Church leaders’ ambivalence about declaring lineage for persons of African lineage.

of the ban, were ousted in a well-publicized purge at the University of Utah Institute of Religion.<sup>45</sup> Smith, who had clashed with Church religion teachers and Mormon intellectuals repeatedly over the years, recorded the experience in his diary: “I received a number of letters of protest because of the release of Drs. Bennion and Lyon who have been at the Institute for a number of years. I have also interviewed some students who were taught by them and reached the conclusion that the change and release was in order.”<sup>46</sup>

Other Mormon intellectuals likewise incurred Smith’s wrath. Sterling McMurrin, a liberal Mormon philosopher at the University of Utah, emerged as Smith’s most vocal critic. The two had clashed since the 1950s, culminating in Church president David O. McKay’s

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45. T. Edgar Lyon Jr., *T. Edgar Lyon: A Teacher in Zion* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 188, 242, 253–57 (quote at 242); Mary Lythgoe Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion: Teacher, Counselor, Humanitarian* (Salt Lake City: Dialogue Foundation, 1995), 132–33, 154–75. For the publicity surrounding the change in leadership, see “New Director Named for the U. of U. Institute of Religion,” *Deseret News*, Aug. 11, 1962. Bennion expressed his views about Mormon racial teachings in at least two public venues. See his debate with BYU professor Chauncey Riddle titled “The Liberal and Conservative View of Mormonism,” 1962, transcript in box 30, folder 12, John W. Fitzgerald Papers, MCL; and “The Church and Negroes,” in *Religious Situation*, edited by Donald Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 547–54.

46. Joseph Fielding Smith diary, Aug. 2, 1962, box 4, folder 1, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL. LDS religion instructor George Boyd, who also came into Smith’s crosshairs, recalled that “Brother Joseph Fielding Smith seemed to be the most exercised over the liberal attitude of the Institute faculty on the Negro issue.” In David Whittaker interview with George Boyd, July 28, 1984, box 27, folder 19, George T. Boyd Papers, HBLL. For Smith clashing with liberal religion instructors and Mormon intellectuals, see Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 154; Simpson, *American Universities*, 115–16; Sterling M. McMurrin and L. Jackson Newell, eds., *Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 191–99; Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 96–97.

vow to protect McMurrin from Smith, who wanted to excommunicate the outspoken philosopher.<sup>47</sup> Smith's ire toward McMurrin reached an inflection point when, in 1968, McMurrin delivered a forceful speech to the Salt Lake City chapter of the NAACP in which he condemned LDS racial teachings as "crude," "superstitious," and "harmful to the church." He chided LDS leaders like Smith for maintaining a racist policy and predicted that if the Church did not lift the ban, members would leave. The speech received extended media coverage throughout the United States, causing embarrassment for the Church, already under fire for the priesthood and temple ban.<sup>48</sup> After reading McMurrin's address, an agitated Smith vowed to excommunicate him again.<sup>49</sup> He failed because of McMurrin's strong support from within the Mormon intellectual community. Not only was he a one-time United States Commissioner of Education in the John F. Kennedy administration, the grandson of

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47. McKay told McMurrin: "All I will say is that if they put you on trial for excommunication, I will be there as the first witness in your behalf." In McMurrin and Newell, *Matters of Conscience*, 199–200. See also Gregory A. Prince and William Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 55–56.

48. Sterling McMurrin, "Negroes Among the Mormons," June 21, 1968, box 289, folder 2, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, JWML. For media coverage of McMurrin's 1968 speech, see "Expert Says Racism Hurts Mormon Church," *Bridgeport Post* (Conn.), June 23, 1968; "Mormon Negro Policies Called Harmful to Church," *Middletown Journal* (Ohio), June 23, 1968; "Bias Will Drive Out Members, Mormon Warns," *Miami Herald*, June 23, 1968; "Mormon Says Church to Lose 'Thousands' over Negro Stand," *Palo Alto Times*, June 22, 1968; "Mormon Race Practices Criticized," *Phoenix Gazette*, June 22, 1968.

49. Smith's copy of the "Negroes Among the Mormons" is in box 14, folder 30, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL. The First Presidency minutes of July 16, 1968, state: "President Smith indicated that this man [McMurrin] should be excommunicated from the Church." In box 68, folder 1, David O. McKay Papers, JWML.

high-ranking LDS Church leader Joseph W. McMurrin, and author of two critically acclaimed books on Mormon theology, but he was close friends with then-Church president David O. McKay and his counselor Hugh B. Brown.<sup>50</sup>

More critically, Smith's passionate defense of the priesthood and temple ban affected his relationship with counselor Brown, who denounced the "curse of Cain" ideology as "a bunch of gobbly gook."<sup>51</sup> The two had clashed for years over the ban. Not only did Smith keep Brown out of the Quorum of the Twelve when Church president Heber J. Grant first proposed his name for ordination in 1931, but he vigorously protested Brown's repeated attempts to lift the ban. The first attempt occurred in 1961 just after McKay appointed Brown as a counselor in the First Presidency. Brown, deeply affected by letters coming into Church headquarters questioning the ban, supported granting Nigerians the Aaronic Priesthood when Church leaders proposed a mission there in the early 1960s. Smith and other hardliners scuttled the move, fearing that ordaining Black men to the lesser priesthood

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50. For background and context to McMurrin's life and writings, see L. Jackson Newell, "The Essential McMurrin: Formation of Character and Courage," Brian D. Birch, "The 'Old Orthodoxy': Sterling McMurrin and the Development of Mormon Thought," and J. Boyer Jarvis, "Fertile Ground, Fruitful Harvests: Sterling McMurrin in Arizona and Washington, D.C.," in *Conscience and Community: Sterling M. McMurrin, Obert C. Tanner, and Lowell L. Bennion*, edited by Robert Alan Goldberg, L. Jackson Newell, and Linda King Newell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018), chaps. 3–5. McMurrin's most prominent publications include *The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1959) and *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965).

51. Paul Dunn, oral history interview with Gregory A. Prince, June 5, 1995, Matthew Harris files (courtesy of Gregory A. Prince). See also McMurrin and Newell, *Matters of Conscience*, 200.

would prompt them to want the Melchizedek Priesthood, the so-called “higher priesthood.”<sup>52</sup>

Establishing the Church in Black Africa prompted heated discussions within the Quorum of the Twelve about ordaining Black men to the priesthood.<sup>53</sup> In 1962, Brown confided to a concerned Church member that the priesthood ban “is having [more] constant and serious attention by the First Presidency and the Twelve than at any time, I think, in the history of Church.”<sup>54</sup> Also that year, Brown informed Lowell Bennion that the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve had been discussing the issue intently. “Almost to a man,” Brown explained, the apostles agreed that “a change would have to take place. President McKay said a change must come, but he didn’t know when.” McKay further reiterated that the “Negro question was the greatest issue the church had faced since plural marriage.”<sup>55</sup>

The following year, Brown escalated the tension between himself and Smith when he violated an unspoken quorum rule by reaching out to the media to disclose sensitive deliberations the apostles had been having about lifting the priesthood ban. “We are in the midst of

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52. Heber J. Grant diary, May 21, 1931, Oct. 4, 1933, CHL (courtesy of Smith-Pettit Foundation). Edwin B. Firmage, oral history interview with Gregory A. Prince, Oct. 10, 1996, Matthew Harris files (courtesy of Gregory A. Prince). Also, Matthew Harris telephone conversation with Edwin B. Firmage, Jan. 27, 2016. Council of the Twelve minutes, Nov. 4, 1965, box 64, folder 8, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, CHL; First Presidency minutes, Jan. 9, 1962, box 49, folder 3, David O. McKay Papers, JWML.

53. Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 81–87; Harris and Bringhurst, *Mormon Church and Blacks*, 75. See also Dima Hurlbut, “The LDS Church and the Problem of Race: Mormonism in Nigeria, 1946–1978,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 51, no. 1 (2018): 1–16.

54. Hugh B. Brown to John W. Fitzgerald, Mar. 13, 1962, box 4, folder 10, John W. Fitzgerald Papers, MCL.

55. Bennion recounted his conversation with Pres. McKay to his colleague T. Edgar Lyon. See Lyon’s notes, Feb. 12, 1962, box 26, folder 1, T. Edgar Lyon Papers, CHL.

a survey [now] looking toward the possibility of admitting Negroes,” Brown explained to *New York Times* reporter Wallace Turner. The counselor’s frank admission prompted Turner to write that “The top leadership of the Mormon church is seriously considering the abandonment of its historic policy of discrimination against Negroes.”<sup>56</sup> Senior apostles, stunned by Brown’s private conversations with Turner, confronted him, demanding an explanation. Embarrassed, Brown said he had been “misquoted,” but a Church public relations employee who heard the interview confirmed the accuracy of Brown’s statement, as did Wallace Turner, who noted that the “quotes that appeared in the story were precisely the words spoken by Mr. Brown.”<sup>57</sup>

Blindsided by the *New York Times* story, Smith countered Brown. In a public interview, published in October 1963, just a few months after Brown’s interview with the *Times*, the senior apostle bluntly declared that “The Negro cannot achieve the Priesthood in the Mormon Church.” This was consistent with Smith’s position of the previous year when he

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56. Wallace Turner, “Mormons Weigh Stand on Negro,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1963; this story was also published as “Negro Issue is Considered by Mormons: Church May Abandon Its Discrimination” in the *Chicago Tribune*, July 9, 1963.

57. For McKay’s meeting with Brown over the statement he made “on the holding of the Priesthood by the Negro,” see First Presidency minutes, June 7, 1963, box 53, folder 5, David O. McKay Papers, JWML. Turner confirms that Brown had been quoted accurately in a letter to Stephen Holbrook, July 9, 1963, box 1, folder 23, Stephen Holbrook Papers, USHS. Brown also claimed he was “misquoted” in a letter to Stuart Udall, July 22, 1963, box 209, folder 3, Stewart L. Udall Papers, Special Collections, Hayden Library, University of Arizona and in an oral history interview with Richard Poll and Eugene Campbell that also included Edwin Firmage and Vera Hutchison (Brown’s secretary), Jan. 26, 1973, box 51, folder 23, Richard D. Poll Papers, JWML.

claimed that “No consideration is being given now to changing the doctrine of the Church to permit him to attain that status.”<sup>58</sup>



Meanwhile, as Smith tussled with First Presidency member Brown over the priesthood and temple ban, Smith also encountered push-back from some of his fellow apostles in the Quorum of the Twelve. The post–World War II years exposing racial injustices with the brutal murder of Emmett Till, the arrest of activist Rosa Parks, and the non-violent marches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his supporters brought civil rights issues in the United States under a laser-like focus.<sup>59</sup> Smith’s racial teachings, which were promoted unabashedly within the Mormon community in the 1930s and 1940s, were now spoken of in hushed whispers in the 1950s and 1960s as more Americans, including Latter-day Saints, became attuned to the injustices of Jim Crow America. In the mid-1960s, for instance, the First Presidency dropped chapters 15 and 16 from *The Way to Perfection* when they published

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58. Joseph Fielding Smith, quoted in Jeff Nye, “Memo from a Mormon,” *Look* (October 22, 1963): 78, in box 9, folder 6, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL. *Look* managing editor William B. Arthur interviewed Joseph Fielding Smith and recorded Smith’s views on the ban. Smith also reaffirmed the ban in a Church publication the preceding year. See “President Smith discusses vital issue,” *Church News*, July 14, 1962.

59. Among the most insightful treatments of racial injustices in postwar America include David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial, 1986); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ’Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).



the Portuguese edition of the controversial book.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, they denied permission for BYU religion professor James R. Clark to publish the 1949 First Presidency statement on race and priesthood in a multivolume edition of *The Messages of the First Presidency*, and they refused to print a controversial address dealing with race and lineage by Church patriarch Eldred G. Smith “because of the present turmoil over the Negro question.” And finally, they instructed Church leaders to refrain from speaking about Black people as cursed or less valiant in public expressions to the media. Our teachings about “negroes,” the First Presidency declared in 1968, must be “clear, positive, and brief.”<sup>61</sup>

Smith was certainly not immune to the changes swirling around him, the Church, or the broader American society. During the turbulent civil rights years, he began to rethink the status of Black people and their place within the Church. When dozens of Latter-day Saints petitioned him asking if the scriptures justified denying Black people

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60. I am grateful to retired BYU librarian Mark Grover, a specialist in Latin American studies, for this insight. I am also grateful to Stirling Adams for checking several Portuguese editions of *The Way to Perfection* at the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, HBLL.

61. Smith instructed Clark not to publish the 1949 First Presidency statement in a “Memorandum on a trip to see President Joseph Fielding Smith,” June 29, 1964, box 7, folder 9, James R. Clark Papers, HBLL. See James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–1975). David O. McKay, as Church president, refused to publish a controversial address by Eldred Smith in which he explained to BYU students that Black people would be servants to white people in the Resurrection. See McKay diary, Nov. 13, 1966, box 63, folder 7, David O. McKay Papers, JWML; and Ernest Wilkinson to Eldred Smith, Nov. 25, 1966, box 378, folder 3, Ernest L. Wilkinson Presidential Papers, HBLL. For Smith’s controversial address, see “A Patriarchal Blessing Defined,” Nov. 8, 1966, CHL; also in box 211, folder 6, Ernest L. Wilkinson Papers, HBLL. For the First Presidency’s instructions to tone down LDS racial teachings, see First Presidency minutes, Mar. 1, 1968, box 67, folder 3, David O. McKay Papers, JWML.

civil rights, Smith experienced a change of heart.<sup>62</sup> Sensitive to public criticism about *The Way to Perfection*, the aging apostle denied in the *LDS Church News* and in *Answers to Gospel Questions* that he ever taught that Black people were an “inferior race.” More instructively, he began to champion a qualified version of racial equality for persons of African lineage—this despite Mark E. Petersen, Ezra Taft Benson, and other apostles opposing civil rights at the time.<sup>63</sup> In *Answers to Gospel Questions*, Smith stated unequivocally that Black people should have equal access “to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,’” adding that they “should be equal in the matter of education” and that they “should be free to choose any kind of employment, to go into business in any field they may choose and to make their lives happy as it is possible without interference from white men, labor unions or from any other source.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Smith did not object to Hugh B. Brown’s land-

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62. Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 2:184–85, discusses “the flood of correspondence from all parts of the Church” asking about civil rights and LDS racial teachings. For a sampling of this correspondence, see box 23, folder 8, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL.

63. For Smith denying that he described Black people “as belonging to an ‘inferior race,’” see “President Smith discusses vital issue,” *Church News*, in *Deseret News*, July 14, 1962, and Smith *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 4:170. For the apostle’s conflicted views about civil rights, see Harris and Bringhurst, *Mormon Church and Blacks*, 67–71, 76–79; and Matthew L. Harris, “Martin Luther King, Civil Rights, and Perceptions of a ‘Communist Conspiracy,’” chap. 5 in *Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

64. Joseph Fielding Smith, “NON-SEGREGATION,” 1962, box 9, folder 7, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL. See also box 64, folder 8, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, CHL; and Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 2:184–85. Smith also approved an article by a librarian at the University of Utah in which the author stated: “There is actually official doctrine in favor of earthly rights for the Negro.” In L. H. Kirkpatrick, “The Negro and the L.D.S. Church,” *Pen Magazine* (Winter 1954): 12–13, 29. See also Sterling McMurrin to Lowry Nelson, Aug. 2, 1952, box 20, folder 5, Lowry Nelson Papers, JWML, who confirmed that Smith (and J. Reuben Clark) conveyed to Kirkpatrick their support for

mark 1963 statement in the LDS Church general conference when he proclaimed that “there is in this Church no doctrine, belief, or practice that is intended to deny the enjoyment of full civil rights by any person regardless of race, color, or creed.”<sup>65</sup>

Even so, racial equality had limits for Smith, as it did for many of his colleagues in Church leadership. He shared the fears of miscegenation common in the rest of the nation and he still referred to Black people as the “seed of Cain” in his sermons and writings and even called them “Darkies” during a well-publicized interview.<sup>66</sup> Just as troubling, he did not support specific civil rights bills, although he accepted civil rights as a general concept. When Catholics along with two of the South’s oldest and most prominent regional churches—the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)—supported integration and called for protections in jobs and housing, Smith remained conspicuously silent.<sup>67</sup>

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civil rights. McMurrin wrote that “Each insisted that the negro should have full civil rights” (ibid.).

65. Hugh B. Brown, *Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Oct. 1963, 91.

66. For LDS leaders’ views on miscegenation, see Harris and Bringhurst, *Mormon Church and Blacks*, 109–11; for background and context to miscegenation in Utah, see Patrick Q. Mason, “The Prohibition of Interracial Marriage in Utah, 1888–1963,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 108–31; and Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally*, 85, 93, 118, 240–41. For miscegenation in general after World War II, see Renee C. Romano, *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003). For Smith’s “darkies” comment, see William B. Arthur, interview with Smith, July 14, 1962, in Nye, “Memo from a Mormon,” 78.

67. David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 107–08; Mark A. Noll, *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 130–32; John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 147–49.

All the while, he was mindful of how housing and employment bills to prevent racial discrimination could complicate the Church's anti-miscegenation teachings. He feared that if Black and white people lived and worked among each other, it could potentially lead to dating and ultimately marriage. To an inquisitive Church member, the apostle said forcefully that "It would be a serious error for a white person to marry a Negro, for the Lord forbade it."<sup>68</sup>

But Smith's issues with Black people extended well beyond theology; Black music vexed him. He cautioned BYU president Ernest Wilkinson not to permit the "negro twist" at school-sanctioned dances, fearing that this popular dance, which involved a series of gyrations and stomps, would sully the morals of the predominantly white student body. He also demanded loyalty from BYU faculty on LDS racial teachings. He supported a survey, for example, asking two unorthodox religion professors a series of questions about fundamental LDS teachings. One question asked: "Is the Church wrong for not giving the priesthood to the Negro?"<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Smith expressed ambivalence about proselytizing among persons of African descent. Determining who had "negro blood" was a challenging and serious problem, especially as the Church accelerated its missionary efforts following the Second World War. Proselytizing in racially-mixed countries like Brazil and South Africa posed considerable challenges for Smith and his fellow apostles because missionaries could not determine who had "a cursed lineage." To avoid controversy, Smith instructed missionaries

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68. Joseph Fielding Smith to Morris L. Reynolds, May 9, 1966, Matthew Harris files. See also Smith, "NON-SEGREGATION."

69. Smith to Wilkinson, Sept. 10, 1963, box 269, folder 16, Ernest L. Wilkinson Presidential Papers, HBLL. For Smith demanding orthodoxy on LDS racial teachings, and the survey, see Ernest Wilkinson to Smith, Apr. 12, 1963, *ibid.*

that “whenever possible” they should avoid teaching persons of African ancestry “in view of the problems which generally arise.”<sup>70</sup>

Smith fumbled on questions regarding Black priesthood ordination as well. When a well-intentioned Latter-day Saint asked him about Elijah Abel, an early Black Latter-day Saint priesthood holder, Smith noted that the “story that Joseph Smith [had] ordained a Negro and sent him on a mission is not true.” On another occasion, he informed a concerned Church member that there were actually two Elijah Abels in Nauvoo in the 1840s—one Black and one white. The white Elijah Abel held the priesthood, he stubbornly insisted. Assistant Church Historian Andrew Jenson stoked the controversy when he published a four-volume book entitled *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, in which he acknowledged that early Church leaders had conferred priesthood ordination on Abel. Smith claimed, without evidence, that Jenson was mistaken, and the apostle huffed that admitting Abel’s ordination

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70. As Smith explained to missionaries in Brazil, Oct. 25, 1960, in William Grant Bangerter diary, 1958–1963, CHL. Smith, of course, was not the only LDS leader to discourage proselytizing among Black members. In 1947, the First Presidency (George Albert Smith, J. Reuben Clark Jr., and David O. McKay) wrote to a mission president and commented that “No special effort has ever been made to proselytize among the Negro race, and social intercourse between the Whites and the Negroes should certainly not be encouraged because of leading to intermarriage, which the Lord has forbidden.” First Presidency to Francis W. Brown (president of the Central States Mission), Jan. 13, 1947, Matthew Harris files (courtesy of Mark Grover of BYU).

had done “the Church a disservice that has turned out to plague us.”<sup>71</sup> To BYU and Church Educational System educators, however, Smith acknowledged Abel’s ordination, even conceding that “perhaps more than one negro” was ordained during the early days of the Church. But he quickly added that “when it came to the attention of the Prophet Joseph Smith, he said it was wrong.”<sup>72</sup>

Why did Smith offer conflicting accounts of Abel’s ordination? Simply put, he could not reconcile Black priesthood ordination with the narrative he created in *The Way to Perfection*.

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71. Smith to Eulis E. Hubbs, Mar. 5, 1958, box 9, folder 7, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL; Smith to Floren S. Preece, Jan. 18, 1955, box 24, folder 28, S. George Ellsworth Papers, MCL. Andrew Jenson, ed., *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Co., 1901–36), 3:577. When Jenson published the account acknowledging Abel’s priesthood ordination, it prompted a flurry of letters from the grassroots to LDS Church headquarters. Some LDS officials acknowledged Abel’s ordination, though they called it “exceptional” (Joseph Anderson [Secretary to First Presidency] to Dorothy Woods, Oct. 24, 1947, box 49, folder 19, Richard D. Poll Papers, JWML), while others asserted that when the ordination was discovered, it “was declared null and void by the Prophet himself and . . . by the next three presidents who succeeded the Prophet Joseph” (Harold B. Lee, “Doing the Right Things for the Right Reasons,” BYU devotional address, Apr. 19, 1961, *BYU Speeches of the Year* [Provo, Utah: BYU Extension Services, 1961], 7). First Presidency counselor J. Reuben Clark acknowledged that “[t]here was one and possible two colored men upon whom the priesthood was confirmed in the very early days of the Church before the Brethren understood the scriptures on the subject” (Clark, untitled general conference address, “Draft #3, Sept. 13, 1954, box 210, “Negro and the Church” folder, J. Reuben Clark Papers, HBLL). Likewise, LDS Church president David O. McKay noted that “in the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith one of Negro blood received the Priesthood. Another in the days of Brigham Young received it and went through the Temple. These are authenticated facts but exceptions” (David O. McKay diary, Jan. 17, 1954, box 32, folder 3, David O. McKay Papers, JWML).

72. Joseph Fielding Smith, “Discussion After Talk on Racial Prejudice,” Oct. 7, 1954, 34, box 4, folder 7, William E. Berrett Papers, HBLL.

Nevertheless, Smith insisted that Black people had a place in the Church. In *The Way to Perfection*, he commented that “these unfortunate people” could be baptized into the Church but that was the extent of their involvement. In *Doctrines of Salvation* and *Answers to Gospel Questions*, he offered more details, outlining the basic functions of the Church in which Black members could participate. They could be baptized, have their children blessed, participate in the sacrament, receive their patriarchal blessings, and even qualify for the “celestial kingdom” if they “remained faithful and true to the teachings of the church.”<sup>73</sup> In that context, Smith declared that “the Church does and can do more for the Negro pertaining to his salvation than any other Church in existence.”<sup>74</sup>

In 1955, at about the same time that Church leaders began to de-emphasize *The Way to Perfection*, Smith showed another side of himself when, as president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he proposed a program to the First Presidency to better meet the needs of Black Latter-day Saints in the Salt Lake Valley. He recommended that “all the Negro members in the [Salt Lake] area be organized into a unit and made a part of one of the stakes of Zion.” He envisioned that it would act as “an independent unit which would function somewhat the same as the Deaf Branch or the Spanish-American Branch.” Of the “144 Negroes in this area,” Smith explained, “very few of them are active, undoubtedly because the church has not met their needs.”<sup>75</sup> The following year, he instructed apostle Mark E. Petersen to hold “Cottage Meetings in Negro homes for the purpose of finding out why so few Negroes belonged to the Mormon Church.” On instructions from

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73. Smith, *The Way to Perfection*, 111; Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 4:170–72 (quote at 171); and Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:55.

74. Joseph Fielding Smith diary, Feb. 22, 1962, box 4, folder 1, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, CHL.

75. Joseph Fielding Smith to First Presidency, Mar. 30, 1955, box 64, folder 6, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, CHL.

Smith, his file leader, Petersen promised Black Latter-day Saints that the Church “would build them a chapel of their own where they could worship themselves” if they remained loyal to the Church.<sup>76</sup>

Smith’s proposal did not come to fruition at the time. The First Presidency rejected the proposal because they feared that a segregated unit within the Church would bring unwanted national publicity, especially during the turbulent civil rights years when civil rights activists condemned Protestant churches for segregating their pews.<sup>77</sup> The public, in other words, would assume that the Church wanted to segregate Black and white church attendees when this was not Smith’s intent. He wanted to reactivate Black Latter-day Saints, create a community for them, and provide a hospitable place for them to worship. Years later, his efforts culminated in the founding of the Genesis Group, the LDS Church’s first Black support group.<sup>78</sup>

During the later years of his ministry, Smith also dampened expectations for Latter-day Saints who expressed anguish over Mormon racial teachings. When he was president of the Quorum of the Twelve, he met with a concerned Church member who agonized over the notion

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76. Mark E. Petersen, as quoted in David H. Oliver, *A Negro on Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: self-pub., 1963), 12. Oliver held a cottage meeting in his home with apostle Petersen.

77. J. Reuben Clark, “Negro” statement, n.d., box 64, folder 6, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, CHL; First Presidency minutes, Jan. 14, 1964, box 56, folder 1, David O. McKay Papers, JWML. Martin Luther King often said that “the church is the most segregated major institution in America.” In Martin Luther King Jr., “The Case Against “Tokenism” (1962), in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington (New York: HarperOne, 1986), 107; and Martin Luther King Jr., “An Address Before the National Press Club” (1962), in *A Testament of Hope*, 101. For biblical justifications of segregation, see Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*, 112–21; and Fay Botham, *Almighty God Created the Races: Christianity, Interracial Marriage, and American Law* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 97–98.

78. For discussion of the Genesis Group, see below.



that Black people were “less valiant” in a premortal life. As the two searched the scriptures together during one intensely revealing meeting, Smith assured the troubled Latter-day Saint that he did not have to believe in the Church’s racial teachings to stay in its good graces. As the man recounted years later: “President Smith patiently went through the sources with me, particularly the Pearl of Great Price, and then he said something quite remarkable: ‘No, you do not have to believe that Negroes are denied the priesthood because of the pre-existence.’” Smith told his interrogator that he had not received a “revelation on the matter.” The Church member, a liberal BYU professor named Eugene England, was overjoyed at Smith’s frankness and his willingness to make himself vulnerable on a subject that seemed so firm and so entrenched in his sermons and writings.<sup>79</sup>



In addition to advocating for civil rights and stand-alone worship services for Black people, Smith began to internalize the consequences of the priesthood and temple ban when Latter-day Saints discovered they had a cursed lineage. He was aware, for example, of the pain that such disclosures caused Latter-day Saint families, for he had interviewed dozens of Latter-day Saints of African lineage. He knew of examples in the Church when branch presidents and bishops discovered their African ancestry, only to be released from their church callings amid embarrassing and painful humiliation. He also knew of instances in heavily-populated Mormon communities when white members refused

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79. Eugene England, “Are All Alike unto God?: Prejudice against Blacks and Women in Popular Mormon Theology,” *Sunstone* 14, no. 2 (Apr. 1990): 20. For a scholarly appraisal of England’s influence within the Mormon intellectual community, see Terryl L. Givens, *Stretching the Heavens: The Life of Eugene England and the Crisis of Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); and Kristine L. Haglund, *Eugene England: A Mormon Liberal* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

to patronize businesses after learning that the store owners, many of whom were faithful Latter-day Saints, had “negro blood.”<sup>80</sup>

After hearing about these troubling episodes, and indeed lamenting over them, Smith became more sensitive to Mormon racial teachings toward the end of his life. In the early 1960s, for instance, when Smith was the presiding authority at a Church priesthood meeting, a teacher in the LDS Church Educational System informed him about a young man with a cursed lineage. The young man had been active in the Church, served a church mission, and was scheduled to be married in an LDS temple. His family was also active. His brothers had served in several positions within the priesthood: an older brother served as a stake president, another as a high councilor, and the other in a bishopric. And now the problem: despite having “blond hair and blue eyes,” the young man discovered that he was “128th negro.” His “great-grandfather had apparently gone to the West Indies and married a native woman who was half Negro and half Indian.”<sup>81</sup>

As Smith listened to the story, he was at first impervious to the young man’s plight. Without hesitation, he told the religion teacher that

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80. Joseph Fielding Smith’s diaries (at the LDS Church History Library) and David O. McKay’s diaries (at the University of Utah) make it abundantly clear that Smith was a part of these discussions. For details about Smith and other General Authorities’ familiarity with mixed-race lineages in the Church, including bishops and mission presidents, see Jeremy Talmage and Clinton D. Christensen, “Black, White, or Brown?: Racial Perceptions and Priesthood Policy in Latin America,” *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 1 (Jan. 2018): 119–45; Robert Greenwell, “One Devout Mormon Family’s Struggle with Racism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 155–80; Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion*, 165; and Lowell L. Bennion, oral history interview with Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, Mar. 9, 1985, James H. Moyle Oral History Program, CHL.

81. LDS religion instructor T. Edgar Lyon recounted this story to Church historian Leonard Arrington, in Leonard J. Arrington diary, July 17, 1962, box 57, folder 6, Leonard J. Arrington Papers, MCL. See also T. Edgar Lyon, “Negro Problem,” box 26, folder 1, T. Edgar Lyon Papers, CHL.

he should instruct the young man to tell his fiancée about his cursed lineage, which meant, of course, that there would be no temple wedding. “Our doctrine is very clear on that,” Smith intoned. But as he pondered the situation further, Smith had a change of heart. At the close of the meeting, he whispered to the religion teacher to see him in private. There, the aging Mormon leader—the man who once said that Black people were inferior—did something dramatic and uncharacteristic for this dogmatic and seemingly unyielding man: He told the religion teacher to tell the boy to keep the matter to himself. Smith explained that if the boy disclosed his ancestry, it would harm himself and his brothers. “All of these [men] have been married in the temple and have participated in Church ordinances,” Smith noted. This disclosure “would ruin their lives.” Smith further instructed the religion teacher to inform the boy not to explain his circumstance to either his fiancée or his bishop. “This is something between him and the Lord, and if the Lord ratifies the sealing in the Temple, who are we to question it?”<sup>82</sup>

Such episodes revealed the increasing difficulty that LDS Church leaders encountered in policing racial boundaries. Indeed, the “one-drop” rule meant that the man noted above could pass as white even though his Church leaders had deemed him Black after learning of his African ancestry. LDS apostles, keenly aware of this reality, lamented that it was “impossible” to determine “those who have Negro blood and those who have not.”<sup>83</sup> During Smith’s lifetime, there were no scientific means to test bloodlines or reliable ways to trace lineage. Thus, Smith and his colleagues knew that they were baptizing and conferring

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82. Leonard J. Arrington diary, July 17, 1962; Lyon, “Negro Problem.”

83. J. Reuben Clark, as quoted in “Manuscripts of Council of the Twelve Minutes and First Presidency statements on the Negro,” Jan. 25, 1940, box 64, folder 5, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, CHL. See also Church leader David O. McKay, who explained to a mission president in Brazil that determining African ancestry in South America “is not an easy problem to handle.” David O. McKay to Rulon S. Howells, June 29, 1935, Dorothy H. Ipsen Collection of Rulon S. Howells Missionary Papers, 1934–1949, CHL.

priesthood ordination on persons of African descent, yet they felt powerless to stop it because racial identification had eluded them, much as it did Americans in general throughout the twentieth century.<sup>84</sup> When asked about the “practical problems” of dealing with members who have “one-eighth Negro blood or something of that kind,” Smith’s colleague N. Eldon Tanner candidly stated, “We just deal with them as they come.”<sup>85</sup>

It is impossible to determine how many Latter-day Saints of African lineage flouted the Church’s racial marker and crossed the color line. Scholars are only now beginning to uncover the extent to which these individuals passed as white.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, as questions of race and lineage vexed the Church hierarchy, Smith’s belief that the Church should do more to help Mormons of African descent was reinforced. During his brief tenure as Church president, Smith authorized his counselors, Harold B. Lee and N. Eldon Tanner, to form the Genesis Group,

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84. There is a growing body of literature on “racial passing” in the United States. See Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014); Gayle Wald, *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); Scott L. Malcomson, *One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

85. N. Eldon Tanner, oral history interview with Davis Bitton, Nov. 10, 1972, 50, James H. Moyle Oral History Program, CHL.

86. W. Paul Reeve and his colleagues at the Century of Black Mormons digital history database have done painstaking work identifying mixed-race Latter-day Saints who passed as white. This ongoing project is the most definitive and comprehensive account to date detailing the lives and lived experiences of persons of African lineage within the LDS Church. The project focuses on the first century of the Church, from 1830 to 1930. For examples of mixed-race Latter-day Saints passing as white, see the entries for Nelson Holder Richie, Olive Ellen Ritchie Cleverly, Elsie Virginia Ritchie Olson Langston, Johanna Dorothea Louisa Langeveld Provis, and Norma Rachel Ables Dana, in *Century of Black Mormons*, <http://centuryofblackmormons.org>. My thanks to Paul Reeve for these references.

the Church's first Black support group.<sup>87</sup> Formed in 1971, a year after Smith became the Church president, the First Presidency instructed the Genesis Group to hold monthly sacrament services for families, weekly Relief Society meetings for women, and weekly Primary meetings for children. Following Smith's instructions to the First Presidency in 1955, Genesis members were tasked with reactivating some 250 Black members in the Salt Lake Valley who had drifted away from church activity. At the same time, the elderly Mormon leader wanted to create a spiritual home for Black Latter-day Saints where they could "identify with each other," as Genesis member James Sinquefield remembered.<sup>88</sup> Today, the Genesis Group spans congregations in nearly a dozen cities in the United States, comprised of hundreds of Black Latter-day Saints who serve in a variety of leadership positions within the Church.<sup>89</sup> Smith's official biography is silent on this aspect of his Church ministry,

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87. For background and context to the creation of the Genesis Group, see Harris and Bringhurst, *Blacks and Mormons*, 84–85; Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 323; and Peggy Olsen, "Ruffin Bridgeforth: Leader and Father to Mormon Blacks," *This People* (Winter 1980): 11–17.

88. In 1971, Eugene Orr, a charter member of the Genesis Group, noted that there were "about 250 baptized members of the Church who are Black" and that "of these 40 are active." Orr further noted that one of the primary purposes of the Genesis Group was to reactivate Black Latter-day Saints. In Eugene Orr interview with Michael Marquardt, Nov. 7, 1971, box 6, folder 3, H. Michael Marquardt Papers, JWML. See also Wallace Turner, "Mormons Operating a Special Meeting Unit for Blacks," *New York Times*, Apr. 6, 1972. James Sinquefield, oral history interview with Alan Cherry, Mar. 30, 1985, 12, LDS Afro-American Oral History Project, Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, HBLL.

89. For Genesis Group congregations throughout the United States, see Jessie L. Embry, "Separate but Equal? Black Branches, Genesis Groups, or Integrated Wards?," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (1990): 11–36; and Jessie L. Embry, *Black Saints in a White Church: Contemporary African American Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 181–91.

yet it marks an important episode in his maturing views toward persons of African lineage.<sup>90</sup>



Joseph Fielding Smith, Mormonism's most important theologian of race in the twentieth century, died in 1972 after having taught for nearly six decades that Black people were cursed. But as his support for the blond-haired, blue-eyed boy suggests and as he became more attuned to the racial injustices faced by Black people, another side of him emerged that was nearly lost on the Church body. His views about Black people had evolved. He was no longer the hard-crueted, doctrinaire theologian as he appeared in *The Way to Perfection*. Times had changed—and Smith had too. True enough, he *still* defended the priesthood and temple ban as divine, but he also recognized that persons of African lineage had suffered because of it.

In 1978, Smith's teachings on race and lineage became moot when LDS Church president Spencer W. Kimball lifted the 126-year-old priesthood and temple ban, some six years after Smith's death.<sup>91</sup> Kimball's revelation announcing the end of the ban led to new racial doctrine, for it prompted Mormon apostles to challenge Smith's most fundamental claims in *The Way to Perfection*. None other than Smith's son-in-law, apostle Bruce R. McConkie, himself a controversial figure within the Mormon community, played a critical role in this endeavor—this

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90. Gibbons, *Joseph Fielding Smith: Gospel Scholar* does not discuss the Genesis Group.

91. See Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood," *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 5–85; Harris and Bringhurst, *Mormon Church and Blacks*, 105–09.

despite his own anti-Black teachings in his seminal book *Mormon Doctrine*.<sup>92</sup>

In an important memo to President Kimball, just weeks before the priesthood revelation, McConkie collapsed the theological scaffolding for Black priesthood denial when he insisted that Black people could be “adopted” into the house of Israel by virtue of their priesthood ordination. He averred that “Negro blood” would be purged from their bodies when they converted to Mormonism, thereby making them heirs of the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>93</sup> Following the priesthood revelation, McConkie continued to finesse his late father-in-law’s teachings. He proclaimed that God favored all groups and lineages equally, doing so in a prominent address called “All Are Alike Unto God.” McConkie likewise asserted that God had lifted “the ancient curse” on Black people, making their past misdeeds in a premortal life both obsolete and irrelevant.<sup>94</sup>

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92. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 102–03, 107–08, 476–77, 553–54; Joseph Fielding McConkie, *The Bruce R. McConkie Story: Reflections of a Son* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 373–79; Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” 46–47. For McConkie’s influence on the contemporary LDS Church, see Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 201–02; and David John Buerger, “Speaking with Authority: The Theological Influence of Elder Bruce R. McConkie,” *Sunstone* 10, no. 2 (Mar. 1985): 8–13.

93. Bruce R. McConkie, memo to Spencer W. Kimball, “Doctrinal Basis for Conferring the Melchizedek Priesthood Upon the Negroes,” Mar. 1978, box 64, folder 3, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, CHL. McConkie wrote this memo at Kimball’s request, as the Church president felt that he needed a theological rationale to grant priesthood ordination to Black Latter-day Saints.

94. Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike Unto God” (address given at a Book of Mormon symposium for [LDS] Seminary and Institute Instructors at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Aug. 18, 1978), transcript at the CHL, available online at <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/alike-unto-god/>. For the notion that God had lifted the curse, see Bruce R. McConkie, “The Blessings of the Priesthood,” in *Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 128.

As the twenty-first century approached, Church authorities continued to slice away at Smith's racial theology. In 1978, less than two months after the priesthood revelation, Spencer W. Kimball asked the apostles not to teach that Black people lacked moral impurity in a premortal life. Neither did he want them to sermonize on the "curse of Cain," which further distanced the Church from Smith's embattled teachings. "We just don't know what the reason was" for the priesthood and temple ban, Kimball concluded.<sup>95</sup>

In 2013, the Mormon hierarchy eclipsed the last vestiges of Smith's racial teachings when it publicly repudiated them. In an important document entitled "Race and the Priesthood," posted on the LDS Church website, high Church leaders condemned "the theories . . . that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse" and the notion that the priesthood and temple restriction reflected the "unrighteous actions [of Black people] in a premortal life." At the same time, the essay acknowledges that Black men held the priesthood during Joseph Smith's tenure as founding prophet and, just as importantly, that Brigham Young had implemented the ban. And finally, the Church hierarchy denounced the idea that Black people "or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else," unambiguously repudiating Smith's most controversial claim.<sup>96</sup> In these stunning admissions, the Church hierarchy demonstrated just how far it was willing to go to confront and condemn Smith's racial teachings. What is most remarkable, though,

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95. Spencer W. Kimball, quoted in LeGrand Richards interview with Wesley P. Walters and Chris Vlachos, Aug. 16, 1978, transcript at the CHL. See also Richard N. Ostling, "Mormonism Enters a New Era," *Time*, Aug. 7, 1978, 55.

96. "Race and the Priesthood," *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>. For an appraisal of this important document, see Matthew L. Harris, "Whiteness Theology and the Evolution of Mormon Racial Teachings," in *The LDS Gospel Topics Series: A Scholarly Engagement*, edited by Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020), chap. 10.



is that the “Race and the Priesthood” essay places Latter-day Saints among the ranks of the penitent: Latter-day Saints had now joined Presbyterians, Southern Baptists, and Pentecostals in expressing regret for their anti-Black teachings.<sup>97</sup>

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97. See Pentecostal “Racial Reconciliation Manifesto” (1994), in *The Columbia Documentary History of Religion in America Since 1945*, edited by Paul Harvey and Philip Goff (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 387. For the Southern Baptist Convention Apology, see Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 218; and Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Presbyterian Church in America Apologizes for Old and New Racism,” *Christianity Today*, June 24, 2016. My thanks to Paul Harvey for these references.

MATTHEW L. HARRIS {matt.harris@csupueblo.edu} is a professor of history at Colorado State University-Pueblo, where he teaches and researches on race and religion, civil rights, and legal history. He is the author and/or editor of numerous books and articles, including *Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (University of Utah Press, 2020) and *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (University of Illinois Press, 2015). He is currently writing a book on Black people and Mormons since World War II in which he explores the backstory to how the priesthood and temple ban was lifted.