



7-1-1979

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### Recommended Citation

Esplin, Ronald K. (1979) "Brigham Young and Priesthood Denial to the Blacks: An Alternate View," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 19 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol19/iss3/12>

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## BRIGHAM YOUNG AND PRIESTHOOD DENIAL TO THE BLACKS: AN ALTERNATE VIEW

Ronald K. Esplin

Historical commentary about the origin of priesthood denial to the Blacks continues to be flawed by misconceptions and a lack of evidence. Unable to link the teaching directly to Joseph Smith or even to Nauvoo, historians of the question have usually turned to Brigham Young as the author and have imputed purely personal or historical motivation rather than revelatory. Even if that be true—and I here suggest an alternative—it is clear that the practice developed at a different time and place than historians have assumed.

A statement Brigham Young made to the Quorum of the Twelve in February 1849 has assumed an unwarranted importance in the historical evidence on the question. Some have seen it as the earliest clear-cut documentation of a policy of priesthood denial to the Blacks; it is not. Nor is it correct to represent the statement as an official declaration of some kind while ignoring its real implications: it clearly points to an earlier settled policy or doctrine. It was not a pronouncement or decision. It was not a result of debate or lengthy discussion at that time. In 1849 President Young merely responded to a question with an offhand recital of understood fact. There is reason to believe that Apostle

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Lorenzo Snow, who asked the question, knew of the policy but that he did not know the doctrinal *reasons* for it. So on 13 February 1849, the day after he was brought into the Quorum of the Twelve, he took advantage of the prebusiness chitchat to ask. According to the minutes, "conversation turned upon mesmerism until Elder Lorenzo Snow presented the case of the Affricans wishing to know the chance of their redemption."<sup>1</sup> It was then that President Young "replied with much clearness," stating the *reason* for the curse. It seems all present already believed that there was a reason. Lorenzo Snow's own reminiscence of this meeting, recorded 1 October 1890, emphasizes even more strongly than the brief minutes of 1849 that the point at issue was the reason for the practice and whether or not it would be a lasting condition.<sup>2</sup> This, then, was not the meeting where priesthood denial to the Blacks was either officially announced or finally decided. For that, one must look to another time and place.

On 25 April 1847, ten days after Brigham Young and other pioneers left the Missouri River for the Great Basin, Apostle Parley P. Pratt addressed the Saints at Winter Quarters. He had met with President Young and other Church leaders for only a handful of days between his own return from England and their departure. It is conceivable that they discussed priesthood and the Blacks, though extensive minutes and diaries covering the week give no hint of such an intrusion into their frenetic traveling preparations. Nonetheless, in counseling the Saints about the necessity of moving West as early as possible, Elder Pratt offhandedly referred to priesthood denial to the Blacks. The faithful will go west, he emphasized, and if others "want to follow Strang go it," or even "want to follow this Black man who has got the blood of Ham in him which lineage was cursed as regards the Priesthood," well, that was all right, too.<sup>3</sup> It appears that Elder Pratt, a long-time intimate of meetings of the Twelve, understood the policy clearly. And had the remark the ring of "new doctrines" to his audience, we might have expected someone to have so noted in the extant diaries and minutes. Apparently we must

<sup>1</sup>Quorum of Twelve Notebook, 1849-1869, 13 February 1849, Church Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; hereafter cited as Church Archives. For this meeting historians have generally cited the less complete account in Journal History or Manuscript History of the Church. The original minutes show even more conclusively the informal nature of the discussion.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, the diary of Abraham H. Cannon, Church Archives.

<sup>3</sup>Minutes for 15 April 1847, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives.

look to yet another place and an earlier time for the origin of the policy.

Unless Brigham Young taught the principle to Parley P. Pratt between 8 and 14 April 1847, the origin for the teaching is pushed back to at least mid-1846, before Elder Pratt left for England. Given the exigencies of 1846, that strongly suggests a Nauvoo origin, a possibility historians have failed to embrace. I feel that two related misconceptions help explain why that alternative has not been pursued more vigorously. The first has to do with the nature of Brigham Young's leadership, the second with Joseph Smith's teachings.

Brigham Young was first a great disciple and student of Joseph Smith and only secondly a great leader in his own right. He saw himself as the master-builder—not the architect—of the Kingdom and of Zion. And while he taught the necessity of revelation to carry out the program, and claimed revelation himself, he felt it was Joseph Smith's special calling to have given the patterns and to have taught all the necessary principles of priesthood and government. The responsibility of Brigham Young and the Twelve, then, was to erect, on the foundation of Joseph, the building Joseph had envisioned. This was stressed time and again by President Young and his associates. For example, in 1866 he explained that "on the things of God, on the building up of His Kingdom, or the doctrines Joseph taught, or on anything that pertains to the priesthood," his memory of what he had learned at Joseph's feet was of primary importance.

An angel never watched him closer than I did, and that is what has given me the knowledge I have to day. I treasure it up, and ask the Father, in the name of Jesus, to help my memory when information is wanted and I have never been at a loss to know what to do concerning the kingdom of God.

Again in 1868:

No matter how great my poverty—if I had to borrow meal to feed my wife and children, I never let an opportunity pass of hearing what the Prophet had to impart. This is the secret of the success of your humble servant.

In a postscript to President Young's 1866 address above, Church Historian George A. Smith added his

testimony that the work that has been carried out by president Young and his brethren has been in accordance with the plans, and

designs, and Spirit, and instructions of Joseph Smith, as the Lord lives.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout his lifetime, then, but especially during this early period, Brigham Young saw himself as charged by Joseph to carry out a specific program. Finishing the Nauvoo Temple, removing to the West, beginning a literal Zion—these he saw as essential parts of his stewardship. He reminded the Twelve in February 1849 that he was accountable not only to the Lord, but also to Joseph, adding:

I av to walk [as if] Joseph is ri[gh]t with me all the time—all I do to build up the K[ingdom] is just as if Jos[ep]h was looking me ri[gh]t in the eye—& our hearts & feelings r one—he wo[ul]d say thats ri[gh]t my boys—& I av not done a thing without knowing that—all I ask is for my Fa[the]r to give me grace that I may go right along.<sup>5</sup>

To summarize, both the substance and style of Brigham Young's leadership and the demands of the arduous Iowa trek of 1846—the most difficult months of President Young's life—argue against his having formulated fundamental policy about temple or priesthood during that period. Nor is there any evidence that he did.

Yet the problem in attributing the priesthood policy to Joseph Smith remains: so far as presently known documentation is concerned, one cannot point to a specific date or place where Joseph Smith taught the principle. It should be remembered, however, that argument from negative evidence is never conclusive. The absence of evidence may narrow possibility but does not rule it out. Unless something can be positively ruled out for other reasons, there always remains a possibility that it occurred even though it is not noted in the documentation at hand. It is clearly too early to conclude that Joseph Smith did not teach of priesthood denial to the Blacks. In fact, in this case the circumstantial evidence increases rather than narrows the probability that he did.

Before suggesting some of that evidence, we must look at an assumption that most students of the question seem to make: that all Joseph Smith's important doctrinal teachings were adequately recorded. That is not so. In fact, only a small portion of his *public* teachings and very little of his extensive *private* teachings were recorded. Dean Jessee, research historian with the LDS Historical

<sup>4</sup>The 1866 quotations of Brigham Young and Joseph Smith from 8 October 1866 discourse are in Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives. The 1868 quotation is from *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–1886), 12:270.

<sup>5</sup>Minutes for 12 February 1849, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives.

Department, has shown that of approximately 250 public sermons mentioned in diaries and minutes (and surely Joseph gave others), we have a fairly adequate account (notes, not verbatim reports) of only 54 of them, not to mention the numerous private sessions held with the Twelve and others, especially during 1843–1844. The latter were not recorded nor meant to be recorded. Rather, they were the proper forum for the teaching of the “mysteries of the kingdom,” those temple-related teachings that were not to be taught abroad and could not go to the broader membership of the Church until after completion of the Temple and the removal of the Church to the relative isolation of the West.

Brigham Young and the Twelve, then, had access to a much larger corpus of Joseph Smith’s teachings than we presently enjoy in written form. This becomes highly significant and relevant to the present question when Apostle Orson Hyde in 1845 characterized a discussion of the curse upon Blacks specifically as “among the mysteries of the kingdom” and said that he mentioned it at that time “not by constraint, or by commandment, but by permission.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, he was party to teachings about the Blacks which had not been explained publicly—and which would not be until Brigham Young himself did so in January and February of 1852. This same private understanding, it would appear, prompted Parley P. Pratt’s cursory statement in 1847, Brigham Young’s explanation to Lorenzo Snow in 1849, and President Young’s detailed public explanation in 1852.

Finally, if priesthood denial to the Blacks were taught in Nauvoo councils during 1843–1844, and consequently came to the Church (and in 1852 to the public) through Brigham Young and the Twelve, it would hardly be a new or unknown phenomenon. Many of the teachings and practices formalized during Brigham Young’s administration can be traced to private councils where Joseph Smith taught the Twelve in detail about the affairs of the Kingdom. In fact, it seems far more compelling to accept that possibility, one in harmony with what we know of Brigham Young, and of Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, than to continue to be-

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<sup>6</sup>Orson Hyde, “Speech of Elder Orson Hyde, Delivered before the High Priests Quorum, in Nauvoo, April 27th, 1845, upon the course and conduct of Mr. Sydney Rigdon, and upon the merits of his claims to the Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints” (Liverpool, 1845), p. 30. Andrew F. Ehat, researcher with the Religious Studies Center, BYU, called this passage to my attention. Unfortunately Orson Hyde did not specify the priesthood liability associated with the curse but stressed instead the relationship of lineage to the right to govern. This was one of Governor Young’s concerns in 1852 when he discussed the matter before the Utah Legislature—the first such public discussion (see fns. 7 and 8).

lieve—in the absence of documentation—that Brigham Young made a fundamental innovation of his own during those tumultuous years of succession, temple building, and exodus, especially in view of the fact that the private meetings where Joseph Smith taught the full pattern of temple ordinances (and related doctrines) would have provided the ideal forum and the motivation for discussing it. We know the early brethren were concerned about priesthood lineage and about who would have access to temple ordinances. Even if Joseph did not raise the question himself, it is not difficult to envision someone asking about the Blacks and Joseph providing the answer. It is my feeling that the doctrine was introduced in Nauvoo and consistently applied in practice at least by 1843, although it would require additional documentation to raise the possibility from the realm of the probable to the certain.

No matter who taught of priesthood denial to the Blacks, or when, the question of inspired (or human) origin remains. Ultimately, of course, that is a question of faith, not history. But since historians have suggested, in the absence of any claimed revelation on the matter, that it might well be a historically determined policy, it is relevant to examine Brigham Young's own comments. The best evidence is a speech he gave before the Utah Territorial Legislature in February of 1852. Lester Bush, the most careful student so far of the question of priesthood and the Blacks, concluded from a partial report of the 1852 address that, while "one hesitates to attribute theological significance to a legislative address, were this account to be unequivocally authenticated it would present a substantial challenge to the faithful Mormon who does not accept an inspired origin for Church priesthood policy."<sup>7</sup> Locating additional evidence of the address was complicated by a problem in dating. The speech was given 5 February 1852, rather than in January as Bush concluded. On the fourth of February, Governor Young laid the groundwork for a theological address to the legislature by reminding the members "not to forget that they are Elders in Israel" who should enjoy the Spirit of the Lord and should remember eternal principles even as they debated legal technicalities.

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<sup>7</sup>Lester E. Bush, Jr., "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: an Historical Overview," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Spring 1973):26. Bush is apparently quoting from the undated Wilford Woodruff diary account. Governor Young did give an address about Blacks to the legislature as early as 23 January 1852, and the diary context for Elder Woodruff's version suggests a January dating, but it was delivered 5 February 1852.

The reason that the 5 February 1852 sermon is of such importance in the matter is that President Young went to great lengths to deny in the most unequivocal language that he was the author of the practice of priesthood denial to the Blacks and to assert that the Lord was. Why could not Blacks hold the priesthood?

Because [these] are the true eternal principles the Lord Almighty has ordained, and who can help it. Men cannot, the angels cannot, and all the powers of earth and hell cannot take it off, but thus saith the Eternal I am, what I am, I take it off at my pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

The matter was, he said, beyond his personal control; that is, it was divinely determined, not historically or personally. It is interesting to speculate that if he had felt it was within his jurisdiction to change the policy, he would have conferred the priesthood upon selected Blacks in his own lifetime. For example, speaking of one of his longtime Black employees, Brigham Young said in 1861 that “he would confer any blessing to him he could, believing him to deserve it.”<sup>9</sup>

Independent of one’s conclusions about the origins of priesthood denial to the Blacks, the dramatic change of June 1978 is almost uniformly seen as a rebuttal of Brigham Young’s teachings on the matter. Again I suggest that the evidence requires no such wholesale rejection. Brigham Young did say in the strongest possible terms that he had no power to change the doctrine, that if he tried he could only bring God’s curse upon himself and his own priesthood. But that is part of his passage explaining that God, not man, was the author, and he neither states nor implies that therefore Blacks could never have the Priesthood.<sup>10</sup> On the

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<sup>8</sup>Discourse 5 February 1852, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives. This account is in the hand of Willmer Benson, whose hand also appears in some Historian’s Office journals and in the Heber C. Kimball Journal.

<sup>9</sup>Office Journal, 25 September 1861, Brigham Young Papers, Church Archives.

<sup>10</sup>This address has been used to show that Brigham Young taught that giving the priesthood to Negroes would be *prima facie* evidence of apostasy. The passage usually referred to has an entirely different meaning; it does not refer at all to giving the Blacks the priesthood, but to intermarriage with them *while they were under the curse of God*:

The day they consented to mingle their seed with Cannan, the priesthood was taken away from Judah. . . . Let this Church . . . the first presidency, the twelve, . . . and all the elders of Israel here declare that it is right to mingle our seed, with the black race of Cain, that they shall come in with us and be partakers with us of all the blessings God has given to us. On that very day, and hour we should do so, the priesthood is taken from this Church and kingdom and God leaves us to our fate. The moment we consent to mingle with the seed of Cain the Church must go to destruction, . . . and never more be numbered with the children of Adam who are heirs to the priesthood untill that curse be removed.

Once that curse was removed there would be no such liability, but of course President Young was again stressing that only God, not earthly priesthood authority, could remove the curse.



contrary, Brigham Young personally believed that the day *would* come when the Blacks would have the priesthood. For example, the significant 1852 statement quoted above continued with a promise of future blessings:

Men cannot [remove the curse], angels cannot . . . but thus saith the Eternal I am, what I am, I take it off at my pleasure, and not one partical of power can that posterity of Cain have, until the time comes. . . . That time will come when they will have the privilege of all we have the privilege of and more.

The question, then, was when, not if. Brigham Young believed that the then-current priesthood denial came from God, and from that "given" and the reasons for it as far as he understood them, he attempted to deduce a timetable for change. Never, however, did he claim divine confirmation of the timetable as he did for the practice itself, though he frequently expressed his opinion that such a change was a long way off.

Brigham Young saw one essential precondition to Blacks' receiving the priesthood, a precondition that logically flowed from his understanding of the reason for the curse. Since he understood the curse to have been related to Cain and his posterity's seeking ascendancy over Abel and his posterity, who held the birthright, it seemed clear to him that Cain's descendants could not have the priesthood until after the descendants of Abel received priesthood responsibility and had their birthright assured. His oft-used style of exaggeration to make a point led him on occasion to suggest that *none* of the sons of Cain could have the priesthood until *all* of the sons of Abel received it—something that he and his audience, as well as we, understood to be hyperbole, for at no time will *all* the sons of Abel accept priesthood blessings and responsibilities. But the main thrust of his comments was always the same: Abel and his posterity must be assured their birthright before Cain's posterity could receive the priesthood. Although Brigham Young did not know when that would be, he did suggest it might be associated with the millennium (one side or another of that Great Event) and that its happening would be a sign the end times were near. Who of us has the wisdom to say that in 130+ years the condition that President Young talked about has not been fulfilled sufficiently to bless the Blacks and the Church with this change? His own teachings suggest that President Young would not demur in embracing it.

But perhaps this misses the point. For what Brigham Young taught as strongly as any other President in our history is the im-

portance of living prophets and continuous revelation and of their superiority over "dead texts." What he claimed to know by revelation was that the Blacks could not have priesthood "except at his [the Lord's] pleasure," which pleasure the Lord would reveal to a prophet long after his own day. Reminiscing about the 1849 statement of President Young to the Twelve, Apostle Lorenzo Snow remembered feeling thankful "that there was no statement that the Negro should never hold the Priesthood and that there would never be a day of redemption for him," and he recognized that "there would always be a man at the head of the Church that would have the keys and who could and would give us the light as he would get the mind of the Lord."<sup>11</sup> For Brigham Young, as for Lorenzo Snow, it was a matter of considerable importance and the Lord would not ignore it. But until the Lord again intervened, President Young was certain that the position of the Church, his position, was the only proper one: Blacks were denied the priesthood not by personal whim or historical accident, but by heavenly decree, and until God's purposes had been fulfilled no earthly power could change it.