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A Brief History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints with Emphasis on the  
Charismatic Roots of the Race-Based Priesthood Denial

A Dissertation Submitted

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### **Abstract**

This dissertation provides an overview of the history of race relations and the evolution of authority in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). It traces the early charismatic leadership of Joseph Smith and his liberal racial views, which increased tension between the LDS church and broader American society. After Smith's death, Brigham Young instituted racist policies like slavery in Utah and a priesthood ban for black members to reduce tensions. In the Progressive Era, LDS scholars theologically entrenched the priesthood ban despite their progressive leanings. A push towards correlation and centralized control of doctrine in the twentieth century led to whitewashing of problematic racial history in church curriculum. The dissertation examines the tensions that ultimately forced church leaders to lift the priesthood ban in 1978 as an assimilation effort, though correlated church materials continued to avoid transparent discussions of the topic. Overall, it argues declining charismatic authority and increased bureaucratization in the LDS church hierarchical structure dictated the proliferation of the priesthood ban for 126 years.

## Acknowledgments

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## **Abbreviations**

CDBY - The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young, edited by Richard van Wagoner

CHC - Comprehensive History of the Church, by BH Roberts

HC - History of the Church, edited by BH Roberts

JD - Journals of Discourses

JSP - The Joseph Smith Papers

LOC - Library of Congress

MHC - Manuscript History of the Church by Joseph Smith

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In New York City in 2011, the Broadway play “The Book of Mormon” was introduced to the public. Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, typically associated with the animated show *South Park*, took on the issue of Mormonism. The directors produced a play that dealt with the intricate, often overlooked doctrines of Mormonism. These doctrines have often been the reason for Mormonism’s ostracization within American Christianity. In one of the songs entitled “I Believe,” the lead actor playing a traditional Mormon missionary named “Elder Price” proclaims, “I believe, that in 1978 God changed his mind about black people...I am a Mormon, and a Mormon just believes.”<sup>1</sup>

What did the playwrights mean with the line, “I believe, that in 1978 God changed his mind about black people?” What about “I am a Mormon, and a Mormon just believes?” These two lines came together in a manner that has influenced the aim of this dissertation. In 1978, Spencer W. Kimball, prophet, seer, and revelator of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, announced that men of African ancestry could receive the priesthood in Mormonism.<sup>2</sup> This reversed a prior doctrine revealed in 1852 by the second President of the church, Brigham Young. The reversal of the previous doctrine was not without a struggle.

The church's struggle to overturn its doctrine that denied the priesthood to people of African descent is analogous to the second line of the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. The development of the Mormon church was a seemingly endless series of revelations from Joseph Smith Jr. He received visions, the ability to translate foreign and long-forgotten

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<sup>1</sup> Trey Parker, Robert Lopez & Matt Stone, *The Book of Mormon*, (2011).

<sup>2</sup> A note on terminology: This research will use the terms “Mormonism” in reference to the religious movement created by Joseph Smith Jr. in 1830. The research will use the term “Mormon” in order to refer to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or those that have joined churches affiliated with the religious movement began by Joseph Smith Jr.

languages, and the gift of revelation for the church and others. As the church's prophet, he went through several steps, missteps, and corrective steps. His ability and willingness to speak as a prophet of God allowed him to present universally accepted doctrines at odds with contemporary Christianity. What allowed him to stand in the face of persecution and make changes that often cost him some of his closest followers, seemingly without restraint or fear of seeing the fledgling religion crumble in its infancy? What happened between 1830 and 1978 when Mormon leaders were less willing to make significant changes?

The core of the issue of change in the church mentioned above is the possession of charismatic authority, as defined by Max Weber.<sup>3</sup> He defined charisma as “[A] certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.”<sup>4</sup> The sociologist defined authority as “[P]ower legitimized on the basis of a leader's exceptional personal qualities or the demonstration of extraordinary insight and accomplishment, which inspire loyalty and obedience from followers.”<sup>5</sup>

The charismatic authority that Mormon church leaders once possessed has been replaced by a bureaucratic structure much more akin to a Fortune 500 company than a religion. These

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<sup>3</sup> Max Weber (1864-1920) was a German sociologist and political economist who profoundly influenced social theory and social research. Weber is best known for his ideas on bureaucracy as well as his thesis on the "Protestant work ethic." He saw the development of modern capitalism in Western Europe as a combination of religious, political and economic factors. His concept of bureaucratic rationalization emphasized the importance of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control in modern institutions and organizations. He remains a seminal thinker in the fields of sociology, politics, and economics

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2012), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Kendall, Jane Lothian Murray, and Rick Linden, *Sociology in Our Time*, 2nd ed. (Scarborough, ON: Nelson, 2000), 438-439.



changes have required the church to shift its direction. Top-down revelation and doctrinal developments have been replaced by policies inserted into a handbook with directions to be read by lay leadership in suits on Sundays. The office of prophet has been relegated to that of Chairman of the Board of Directors for a multi-billion dollar corporation. Although these changes are noticeable even to casual observers, they are most evident in how the church has taught its history.

This research seeks to provide a brief history of Mormonism by tracing a transformative journey marked by significant shifts in leadership dynamics. It progresses from an era of charismatic leaders who assert divine inspiration to a more routinized model characterized by human leadership within a bureaucratic framework.

The narrative also unfolds the church's evolving perspectives on African Americans, traversing a spectrum from egalitarian ideals to exclusive sentiments and eventually returning to a more inclusive stance. Additionally, the research delves into the complex trajectory of polygamy within Mormon doctrine, ascending from a perceived divine ordinance to ultimately being acknowledged as a mistake, thereby experiencing a notable rise and fall throughout the course of Mormon history. The exploration of both the priesthood ban and plural marriage serves as examples of high-profile teachings that characterize the loss of charismatic authority in the church.

Weber's sociology of religion introduced the concept of the routinization of charisma, which described how authority and its exercise by a leader changed as an organization evolved. He identified three forms of authority: Charismatic, Traditional, and Rational/Legal.<sup>6</sup> The opening chapters highlight the stark transformation of LDS leadership over 158 years, from a

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<sup>6</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*.

confident prophet able to joke about his role to a president unable to clarify doctrines established through revelation by his predecessors.

This dissertation will show the significance of the routinization of charisma in Mormon history. It will utilize the available primary sources to trace the change over time. It will analyze how the church developed from a fledgling movement to a large corporate structure and how that change corresponded with decreased charisma among leaders. It will reveal how the decline in charisma correlated with less willingness to engage in troubling historical issues in the church, such as the black priesthood ban.

The dissertation will identify Smith and Young as charismatic leaders, therefore identifying the death of Young as the moment in which the routinization of charisma began in the church through the creation of a more legalistic bureaucratic structure. It will show how the lack of charisma from leaders made the development of new doctrinal teachings challenging. It will reveal how policy changes impacted the church educational system. It will analyze how church leaders traded out charismatic revelation for manuals published with the oversight of church leaders. It will address the question of what role the changing authority of the church played in developing the church curriculum in place of prophetic revelation.

Mormon Studies is a niche field of history. Therefore, particular examples of terminology will be used repeatedly and require a definition for readers not of the Mormon faith.

### **Definitions and Terminology**

Throughout the dissertation, “the church” represents The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

**Mormon** - This term refers to adherents to the religious movement founded by Joseph Smith Jr. in 1830.

**Priesthood** - This term refers to the ecclesiastical authority structure in the church. There are two priesthoods recognized within the movement. The Aaronic Priesthood is given to males twelve and older. The higher priesthood, the Melchizedek Priesthood, is given to worthy males over eighteen (Those who have paid tithing, attend church services, and adhere to the teachings of modern-day prophets).

**Priesthood Ban** - This term refers to the doctrine expounded by Brigham Young on February 4, 1852. Brigham Young declared it doctrine that individuals with black ancestry could not hold the priesthood in the church. This doctrine remained in place until 1978 when Spencer W. Kimball reversed it.

**Doctrine** - In Mormonism, doctrine refers to truths revealed to be true via God and Jesus Christ. Doctrine can be revealed through the scriptures (Old Testament, New Testament, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, or The Pearl of Great Price). Likewise, due to the nature of the Priesthood, doctrine continues to be revealed on earth through the existence of a prophet. Prophets serve as the mouthpiece of God and work to expose his eternal truths. Doctrines are foundational, eternal truths from God that never change.

**Policies/Practices/Procedures** - Policies, Practices, and Procedures are formalized processes included in the General Instructional Handbook, used for Priesthood leadership to run the

church. These formalized processes ensure that the church runs similarly at every branch or ward. These are not doctrines and go through periods of revision over time.<sup>7</sup>

**Correlation** - The term refers to the process of identifying the role of each part of the church, placing each in its proper relationship to the others, and ensuring that each functions appropriately. The parts include doctrines and ordinances, organizations and agencies, programs, activities, meetings, and printed and audiovisual materials. They should function and operate in harmony with one another.<sup>8</sup>

**First Presidency** - The First Presidency is the highest-ranking governing body of the church. The quorum consists of the President of the church and two counselors.<sup>9</sup>

**Quorum of the Twelve Apostles** - The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is the second-highest governing body of the church. The group consists of twelve men, all holding the Melchizedek Priesthood, who look over the temporal and spiritual needs of the church.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Definitions of Doctrine and Policy are necessary for the research. Policies are an aspect of bureaucratic, legalistic structures. They also allow for revision, removing the responsibility for unpopular opinions from the organization. They obfuscate the role of the organization in exchange for blame of individual opinion for the development of policy. The church has discussed the difference between doctrine and policy and used this as a way to explain unpopular occurrences in church history. Therefore, definitions are necessary in order to read through the excess apologetic material that exists surrounding issues such as the priesthood ban.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel H Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York, NY: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1999), 323.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 512.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1182

**Seventy-** Seventy refers to an office of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Individuals called as members of the Seventy are tasked with assisting the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in tending to the temporal and spiritual needs of the church.<sup>11</sup>

**Plan of Salvation** - Latter-Day Saints believe that Heavenly Father developed a plan for the redemption of the dead. He created the plan during a period known as the premortal existence. During this period, individuals knew God and lived in His presence. All individuals were literal spirit children of God and a Heavenly Mother. Spirits could not progress beyond this point because they lacked physical bodies. Christ, God's first son, developed a plan to redeem souls that included them being tested in physical bodies. Satan also developed a plan; however, it removed agency from man. Ultimately, a war in heaven ensued. Those who chose Christ's plan received physical bodies. The war was known as the Council of Heaven. The creation allowed men and women to progress as they were given physical bodies. Christ atoned for Adam's sin and the sin of all men in the Garden of Gethsemane. Upon death, men and women enter into a state of general salvation. They achieve a status of either spirit paradise or prison. Those in prison were those who did not accept the fullness of the gospel in their mortal life. They have an opportunity to accept it in the afterlife through temple work.<sup>12</sup> After the second coming, those in spirit paradise will receive their resurrection. At this point, their spirit will be linked with their physical body, and they will be assigned to a kingdom of glory, the Telestial, Terrestrial, or Celestial.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1300.

<sup>12</sup> Mormonism defines the gospel as including the Old and New Testament, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1088-1089.

**Celestial Kingdom** - The highest degree of salvation in Mormonism is the achieving of exaltation into the Celestial Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> This degree of recognition is reserved for those who have “received the testimony of Jesus, and believed on His name and were baptized after the manner of His burial...and who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the holy spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true.” The kingdom is separated into gradients. The highest level of the celestial kingdom, exalted beings, had to have received all of the LDS temple ordinances. These individuals are believed to have all of the powers of God, being gods over their realms.<sup>15</sup>

**Terrestrial Kingdom** - The terrestrial kingdom is the second highest degree of glory.<sup>16</sup> Individuals receiving this level of salvation are those who lived honorable lives but were led away from the teachings of Christ. The kingdom also includes those who had an opportunity to accept Christ’s teachings but did not during their mortal life.<sup>17</sup>

**Telestial Kingdom** - The telestial kingdom presents the true universalism of Mormonism. It is a kingdom of glory for those who willfully rejected the message of Christ.<sup>18</sup> It is also a place for those who lived sinful lives.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Individuals who live in the Celestial Kingdom are taught that they will live in the presence of both God and Jesus Christ.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 259-260.

<sup>16</sup> Those in the Terrestrial Kingdom are taught they will live in the presence of Christ. They will not be in the presence of God.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1470.

<sup>18</sup> Despite rejecting Christ in their mortal lives, individuals in the Telestial Kingdom are taught that they will reside with access to the Holy Ghost.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1443.

**Temple** - A place for worthy members to perform holy ordinances for themselves and to serve as proxies for the dead. Ordinances received in the temple include baptisms for the dead, washing and anointing, the endowment, and sealing ceremonies.<sup>20</sup>

Official church-sponsored Mormon history has been at the center of criticism for a long time. This often comes through theological attacks and non-empirical, emotion-driven dissent. However, this research seeks to place this criticism within the lens of empirical historical research. As sources have become more available, there is the need to analyze the church's messaging, whether it be history or propaganda.

An uneducated farmboy created Mormonism in 1830 in the small New York town of Palmyra. In the 192 years since the foundation of the denomination, the charismatic religious movement that irked many to the point of legal extermination orders has become an administrative bureaucracy that would be unrecognizable to Joseph Smith and other foundational members. Accounts surrounding the movement have ranged from ill-spirited critiques relying on false narratives to well-researched works that have redefined the way that academics have viewed portions of Mormon history. Despite an extensive focus on Mormon history, there are holes in the historiographical discussion of the sect that have not been filled through empirical analysis. One area ripe for research is the reason for the church's inconsistent teachings regarding those of African ancestry.

The twenty-first century brought with it the need to analyze Mormonism through many different lenses. Patrick Q. Mason, the Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University edited a compilation series called *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (2016). In the volume, essays covered areas that deserved

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1447.

further attention in Mormonism in the decades to come. Three essays from this work came to inform the direction of this dissertation. Matthew Bowman, the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies and Associate Professor of History and Religion at Claremont Graduate University, submitted a chapter entitled “Zion.” Bowman claimed that correlation, the centralization of church curriculum by the Quorum of the Twelve as a means of leading people to a state of “one heart and one mind,” is an area deserving of more study by historians.<sup>21</sup>

The compilation included an essay on the importance of studying authority in Mormonism. Michael McBride, a Professor of Economics at the University of California-Irvine authored a piece applying the economic principle of rational choice theory. He used this theory to analyze the role of authority in Mormonism. His essay asserted that authority is essential for Mormonism’s survival. From its earliest roots, Mormonism and authority had been deeply intertwined. According to his research, church membership would have dwindled without a source of authority. Therefore, maintaining membership required strong centralized messaging.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the compilation included an essay from Richard Bushman. He is an American historian and Gouverneur Morris Professor Emeritus of History at Columbia University who redefined Mormonism with his book *Rough Stone Rolling*. The book viewed Joseph Smith in his entirety, not simply from a lens of critique or apologetics. It was the first empirical study of Joseph Smith from a faithful Latter-Day Saint who focused on the entirety of Smith, flaws and all.<sup>23</sup> With Bushman’s legacy in Mormon Studies, his contribution carried heavy weight. His

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew Bowman, “Zion,” in *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Patrick Q Mason (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2016) 15-34.

<sup>22</sup> Michael McBride, “ Authority in Mormonism: A Rational Choice Analysis,” in *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Patrick Q Mason (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2016), 179-203.

<sup>23</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, ed. Jed Woodworth (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2007).



essay, “Theory and Interpretation in Mormon Studies,” asserted that theory needed to make its way into the field of Mormon Studies. Theory should not replace empiricism, but theory provided a manner in which to analyze areas of the church that were once thought “covered.” Ideological approaches breathed new life into Mormon Studies as the church had come to release documents from their once-sealed archives.<sup>24</sup>

The following research drew upon historiographic entries that had covered areas such as biographical accounts of church leaders, Mormonism’s relationship with race, and the ever-changing role of authority in Mormonism. These areas were rich in academic studies. In terms of establishing the charismatic nature of early Mormon leadership, the findings drew on accounts of the life of Joseph Smith Jr. An early entry into the historiographical discussion was Fawn Brodie’s *No Man Knows My History* (1945). Brodie, an American biographer, developed an account of the early Mormon church under the leadership of Joseph Smith. Brodie’s work served as an *expose* of sorts, focusing heavily on the aspects of polygamy and the negative portions of Smith’s personality and early life.<sup>25</sup> Her biography concluded that Smith was a pious fraud.

A more balanced approach came in the form of Bushman’s *Rough Stone Rolling* (2005). Bushman addressed the founding of the Mormon church and analyzed the rise of Joseph Smith. He relied heavily on the then-newly published *Joseph Smith Papers Project*, allowing for insight into Smith that was previously unavailable.<sup>26</sup> Access to the *Joseph Smith Papers* has allowed other historians to follow the empirical foundation laid by Bushman. Accounts relying on the

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, “Theory and Interpretation in Mormon Studies,” in *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Patrick Q Mason (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2016), 223-234.

<sup>25</sup> Fawn McKay Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, ix.

project have included Benjamin Park's *Kingdom of Nauvoo* (2021). Park, a Professor of American History at Sam Houston State, focused on Joseph Smith's leadership in Nauvoo, Illinois. During this period, the church developed many of its modern teachings. Likewise, Smith died during the Saints' time in Nauvoo. Park focused on Smith's charismatic leadership in developing a fledgling religion into an economically thriving settlement on the Mississippi River.<sup>27</sup> Furthering the academic discussion of Smith's charismatic leadership was Professor Spencer McBride with his book *Joseph Smith For President* (2021). McBride addressed how Smith utilized his leadership of the church to run for president before being murdered. The account focused on his charismatic leadership and how that charisma attracted supporters from different backgrounds to his religious teachings and political platform.<sup>28</sup> The combination of these accounts and others led to the Smith period being well documented.

Following Smith, Brigham Young assumed leadership of the church. He relocated the church from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the Great Salt Lake Valley. Many historical studies have concentrated on Young. One of the earliest accounts regarding him came from John D. Lee in his book *Mormonism Unveiled* (1877). Lee held the position of Presiding Bishop in the Utah church and was ultimately found guilty of involvement in the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Before his execution, he recounted his life story and Brigham Young's life story. This work exposed Brigham Young's involvement in planning the Mountain Meadows Massacre.<sup>29</sup> More recent accounts of Young have focused on his leadership of a new territory and his theological

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin E. Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Spencer W. McBride, *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled: Including the Remarkable Life and Confessions of the Late Mormon Bishop, John D. Lee, and a Complete Life of Brigham Young ... Also the True History of the Horrible Butchery Known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Albuquerque, NM: Tierra Blanca Publications, 2001).

developments as the church's prophet. On account was Leonard Arrington's *Brigham Young: American Moses* (1985), which took a more apologetic perspective on Young's leadership.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, John G. Turner's book *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (2012), provided a comprehensive portrayal of Young, akin to Bushman's account of Smith. Both of these works covered Young's entire life.<sup>31</sup>

Despite the abundance of academic work surrounding the early leaders of the Mormon movement, there has been a notable absence of literature and research that compares the leadership of Smith and Young. In his essay "The Nature of Charismatic Authority and its Routinization," Max Weber focused on the transformation of authority, progressing from an ethereal charismatic leadership to a more conventional or bureaucratic legal leadership style.<sup>32</sup> Smith exemplified the characteristics of a charismatic leader, enabling him to address issues openly and candidly. However, this was not the case in the late nineteenth and twentieth century Mormonism, as the church shifted away from its charismatic roots and transitioned into a more legalistic form of authority due to the centralization of power.

While Weber is considered the seminal thinker in examining the routinization of charisma in religion, numerous historians, sociologists, and theologians have extended his theory of charismatic authority to various religious movements. His work played a pivotal role in comprehending the triumph or downfall of New Religious Movements (NRMs). This paper will classify Mormonism as a New Religious Movement, subjecting it to the same theoretical standards applied to the assessment of other NRMs.

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<sup>30</sup> Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2012).

<sup>31</sup> John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2012).

Eileen Barker initially applied Weber's theories to the study of NRMs. Barker's early work focused on the Unification Church, often called the "Moonies."<sup>33</sup> She developed a set of characteristics of NRMs, one of which is the existence of a charismatic leader.<sup>34</sup> She received criticism for her work but remained the leading voice regarding the emergence and life of NRMs.<sup>35</sup> Most criticisms of her focused on her unwillingness to classify NRMs as cults.<sup>36</sup> Her work largely dismissed this classification, seeing it as derogatory and minimizing the theological complexity of NRMs.

Outside of Barker, George Chryssides and James Holt are both influential researchers who have focused on establishing an understanding of what makes an NRM. Both Chryssides and Holt have developed working definitions of a NRM in their research that is more developed than Barker's, having the luxury of assessing her findings before introducing it to the historiography. Both are essential to this dissertation as they have aided in the classification of Mormonism as an NRM.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>34</sup> Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Bernan Press, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> For more research on New Religious Movements from Eileen Barker, see Eileen Barker, ed., *Of Gods and Men: New Religious Movements in the West* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983); Eileen Barker, "New Religions, a Special Issue of Thought (Vol. 61; No. 241)," *Sociological Analysis* 49, no. 2 (1988): 185-186; Eileen Barker, "Crossing the Boundary: New Challenges to Religious Authority and Control as a Consequence of Access to the Internet: Eileen Barker," *Religion and Cyberspace*, 2005, 72-90.

<sup>36</sup> "Cult" is a term with various meanings, often describing a social group with distinctive beliefs and practices, typically led by a charismatic figure who has supreme control over group members. However, the use of this term is subjective and can carry negative connotations. The LDS church is an established religious organization with millions of members, and it does not fit the negative connotations associated with the term "cult." The LDS Church operates openly, has a hierarchical structure, and is integrated into mainstream society, making it more accurately described as a religious tradition or denomination.

<sup>37</sup> For more from George Chryssides and James Holt on New Religious Movements, see James D. Holt "Do New Religious Movements Have a Place in the Secondary R.E. Classroom?," Thesis. n.d.; George D. Chryssides, *The Study of Religion. an Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

An area open to further research involves the examination of Mormonism as a New Religious Movement (NRM) and an analysis of how changes in church authority influenced the faith, particularly the process by which this transformation occurred and its impact on doctrinal issues such as the priesthood ban. D. Michael Quinn sought to address this research gap with his book *The Mormon Hierarchy*. Quinn, a historian specializing in Mormon Studies, faced excommunication from the church due to his open homosexuality. However, he remained devoted to his faith while using his role as a researcher to uncover the authentic history of the church. In *The Mormon Hierarchy* (1994), the emphasis was on the bureaucratization of the church during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>38</sup> Quinn's historical work laid the foundation for future investigations into the bureaucratization of the church and its influence on the church's actions.<sup>39</sup> It remained a study that stood on its own for a decade but also left room for research on the more considerable impact of the changes in church authority.<sup>40</sup>

This period and the changing method of authority have been analyzed through the lens of specific leaders of the church who were both influential in the process. Two accounts included

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<sup>38</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> D. Michael Quinn continued his research on Mormon Authority through the development of a series related to *The Mormon Hierarchy*. Subsequent entries in the series include, D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1997); D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Wealth and Corporate Power* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> For more research on Mormonism and Authority, see Omri Elisha, "Sustaining Charisma Mormon Sectarian Culture and the Struggle for Plural Marriage, 1852–1890," *Nova Religio* 6, no. 1 (January 2002): 45-63; Lawrence Foster, "The Psychology of Prophetic Charisma: New Approaches to Understanding Joseph Smith and the Development of Charismatic Leadership," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 4 (2003): 1-14; Christopher James Blythe, "Would to God, Brethren, I Could Tell You Who I Am!," *Nova Religio* 18, no. 2 (2014): 5-27; Eric W. Schoon and A. Joseph West, "From Prophecy to Practice: Mutual Selection Cycles in the Routinization of Charismatic Authority," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 4 (2017): 781-797; Claudia Jetter, "Continuing Revelation and Institutionalization: Joseph Smith, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charismatic Leadership in Antebellum America," *Studies in Church History* 57 (2021): 233-253.

Newell Bringhurst's *Harold B. Lee: Life and Thought* (2021) and Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright's *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (2005). Bringhurst, Professor Emeritus of History and Political Science at College of the Sequoias in Visalia, California, focused his writing on Mormon history. His account highlighted the efforts of Harold B. Lee to modernize Mormonism through his leadership of the church.<sup>41</sup> Prince and Wright's account analyzed the role that David O. McKay, former President of the church, played in the ending of the priesthood ban in 1978.<sup>42</sup>

While this research has concentrated on how the bureaucratically structured church restricted access to information regarding its troubled racial history, it is imperative to have a good understanding of the historiographic discourse regarding the church's racial past. Nevertheless, it is crucial to contextualize this topic within the broader discourse on religion and race. Mormonism was not unique in its complex relationship with individuals of African descent. Similarly, the historical discourse on race and religion has been far from lacking in theoretical frameworks over the past century. Hence, a comprehensive exploration of the historiography related to religion and race, in a broader context, necessitates an examination of the theories related to race.

Within broader Christianity, a specific genre of historiography has focused on defining sin and exploring American Christianity as a realm of white supremacy, rather than racial equality in the eyes of Christ. This trend was initiated by a legal paper authored by scholar Thomas Ross, which applied critical race theory to the concept of innocence. Ross argued that classifying innocence becomes impossible when the majority race controls the criteria for

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<sup>41</sup> Newell G. Bringhurst, *Harold B. Lee: Life and Thought* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2021).

<sup>42</sup> Gregory A. Prince and Wm Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2014).

determining innocence.<sup>43</sup> This concept of the dominant majority wielding the authority to define morality further stimulated discussions concerning the intersection of race and religion.<sup>44</sup>

Drawing from commonly held Old Testament biblical beliefs, black skin was seen as a physical symbol of sin, serving as a collective reminder of the generational repercussions of the sins committed by biblical forebears.<sup>45</sup>

Opinions rooted in critical race theory often contradicted the prevailing historical research on race and American Christianity. Historians like Jane Dailey regarded Christianity as the lynchpin of the civil rights movement. Civil rights leaders viewed segregation as unchristian, and consequently, they believed that Christianity would provide a solution to the prevailing issues.<sup>46</sup> Paul Harvey, in the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion, contended that the success of the civil rights movement depended on the support of religious traditions, particularly Evangelical Christian denominations. Harvey substantiated this argument by recognizing that, although substantial, only a minority of churches and clergy actively participated in the movement.<sup>47</sup> The overall absence of support for the civil rights movement within substantial

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<sup>43</sup> Thomas Ross, “Innocence and Affirmative Action,” *Vanderbilt Law Review* 43, no. 297 (1990): 297-315.

<sup>44</sup> For more on a Critical View of Race and Innocence, see Neil Gotanda, “Reflections on Korematsu, Brown and White Innocence,” *Temple Political and Civil Rights Law Review* 13 (2003): 673-674; K.D. Gutierrez, “White Innocence,” *International Journal of Learning* 12, no. 10 (2005): 223-229; Kathleen Sullivan, “Sins of Discrimination,” *Harvard Law Review* 100 (1986): 78; Barbara Applebaum, *Being White, Being Good: White Complicity, White Moral Responsibility, and Social Justice Pedagogy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Wongi Park, “The Blessing of Whiteness in the Curse of Ham: Reading Gen 9:18–29 in the Antebellum South,” *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12110928>.

<sup>46</sup> Jane Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred after Brown,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (January 2004): 119-144

<sup>47</sup> Paul Harvey, “Civil Rights Movement and Religion in America,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016)

segments of American Christianity became a focal point in numerous historiographical discussions concerning its relationship with the black community.<sup>48</sup>

White evangelical churches, distinct from black-led evangelical churches, predominantly adhered to conservative views and resisted integration efforts, thereby aligning with the principles of the Jim Crow South. In his 2004 book *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, David Chappell examined the social perspectives of white evangelical churches in the South throughout much of the civil rights movement. Chappell perceived evangelical churches as maintaining the Jim Crow system and intentionally prolonging the persistence of segregation. In support of this argument, he highlighted the case of Billy Graham, who provided counsel to numerous presidents on matters related to race. Graham held significant influence within American Christianity, and his teachings frequently urged congregants to refrain from engaging in race-related social issues.<sup>49</sup>

James B. Bennett challenged Chappell's perspective in his 2016 book, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans*. In his research, he examined the most populous cities in the South in the years leading up to the civil rights movement. Based on personal accounts, he reached the conclusion that the acceptance of segregation in Protestant and Catholic churches was not prevalent. He identified the church as a space where segregation could be contested by forming a community united by their Christian identity. Churches offered respite from the challenges of segregation and racism.<sup>50</sup> Jemar Tisby echoed these sentiments in his 2020 account of race and American Christianity, *Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American*

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<sup>48</sup>For more on how the civil rights movement was fueled by a large contingent of churches and pastors across several denominations, see Thomas Upchurch, *Race Relations in the United States: 1960-1980* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008).

<sup>49</sup>David L. Chappell, *Stone of Hope - Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University Of North Carolina University Press, 2005).

<sup>50</sup>James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).



*Church's Complicity in Racism*. He argued that, despite the prevailing perception of American Christian churches as promoters of racism, religion served as the only sphere where black individuals could seek support in their struggles against oppression.<sup>51</sup>

In the twenty-first century, the historiographical discussion of American Christianity and blacks transitioned from an emphasis on empirical research to reliance on theoretical frameworks.<sup>52</sup> Introducing race and whiteness studies into the field of religion was essential as blacks remained minorities in many Christian denominations in America.<sup>53</sup> The 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted by the Pew Research Center, broke down the religious landscape in the United States based on race. The survey found the following in terms of Christianity in the United States. Evangelical Protestants were 76% white and 6% black. Mainline Protestants

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<sup>51</sup> Jemar Tisby, *Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020).

<sup>52</sup> For more on Critical Race Theory Interpretations on the relationship between American Christianity and Blacks, see Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001); J. Russell Hawkins, *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion after Divided by Faith* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014); Michael O. Emerson, Christian Smith, and David Sikkink, "Equal in Christ, but Not in the World: White Conservative Protestants and Explanations of Black-White Inequality," *Social Problems* 46, no. 3 (1999):398-417; Victor J. Hinojosa and Jerry Z. Park, "Religion and the Paradox of Racial Inequality Attitudes," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 2 (2004): 229-238; Brian Laythe et al., "Religious Fundamentalism as a Predictor of Prejudice: A Two-Component Model," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (2002): 623-635; Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann, "Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical 'Race Problem': Extending Emerson and Smith's 'Divided by Faith,'" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008): 341-359.

<sup>53</sup> There are and have been many majority black christian denominations in America. For more on Black Christianity, see Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio, *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Christopher Cameron, *To Plead Our Own Cause African Americans in Massachusetts and the Making of the Antislavery Movement* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2014); James H. Cone and Cornel West, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018); James H. Cone, Peter J. Paris, and Kelly Brown Douglas, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020); Mathews Mary Beth Swetnam, *Doctrine and Race: African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism between the Wars* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2018).

were 86% white and 3% black. Orthodox Christians were 81% white and 8% black. Smaller sects of Christianity, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, were also surveyed. Jehovah's Witnesses were 36% white and 27% black. Meanwhile, Mormonism was 85% white and 1% black.<sup>54</sup>

Minority representation led to many studies regarding whiteness in American Christianity. Much of this analysis focused on Southern Christianity.<sup>55</sup> These studies centered on the development of black churches and the segregation of the religious experience. While these discussions took place around mainline and evangelical Protestantism, there was a lack of discussion surrounding that issue in Mormonism until the 1960s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, academic works surrounding the Mormon church and its relationship with blacks entered the historiographic discussion of church history. The venture into Mormon Studies and race began with Dennis Lythgoe's article "Negro Slavery and Mormon Doctrine" (1968). This was a new area of research, and Lythgoe, then a Ph.D. candidate, looked at the relationship between the doctrine of Mormonism and the church's legalization of slavery in the Utah Territory. He found that the doctrine of the church, albeit egalitarian, supported the institution of slavery.<sup>56</sup> Lester E. Bush expanded the discussion of race and the church with his

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<sup>54</sup> Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study: Racial and Ethnic Composition," 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/>, last accessed November 25, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> For more on Blacks and Christianity, see Gary T. Marx, "Religion: Opiate or Inspiration of Civil Rights Militancy among Negroes?," *American Sociological Review* 32, no. 1 (1967): 64-72; Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003); Dwight N. Hopkins, *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Davis W. Houck, *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement: 1954-1965* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014); Gin Kathryn Lum and Paul Harvey, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Race in American History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Dennis Lythgoe, "Negro Slavery and Mormon Doctrine," *Western Humanities Review* 21, no. 4 (1968): 327-338.

article “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine” (1973). In the article, Bush laid out the current state of blacks in the Mormon faith. He traced the priesthood ban back to the period of Brigham Young. He argued against theories that the ban existed before Young’s leadership. With this, Bush asserted that the ban originated with Young and was doctrine, not simply policy.<sup>57</sup> This study opened the floodgates for other historians to enter the field.

Following Official Declaration 2 in 1978, more individuals moved into the field of Mormon Studies and specifically looked at the policy of the racial priesthood ban. One of the first in this group of historians was Newell Bringhurst, mentioned previously in the historiographical discussion of Mormon history. He published his research *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People Within Mormonism* (1981) which analyzed the church’s history of racial relations and examined the church’s teachings regarding slavery and the priesthood ban.<sup>58</sup> Sociologist Armand Mauss added to the historiography and joined Bringhurst and Bush with the release of a compilation of work called *Neither White nor Black: Mormon Scholars Encounter the Race Issue in a Universal Church* (1984). This work was a compilation from 1967 to 1977 in which historians sought to make sense of the reasons behind the priesthood ban.<sup>59</sup> This text opened the door for the current strain of Mormon Studies concerning race and the priesthood. Historians sought to answer the question, “Why was the priesthood ban enacted?”

Mauss tried to answer this question with his text *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (2003). His text focused on how the view of race

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<sup>57</sup>Lester E. Bush, “Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue*, April 1, 1973, 1-58.

<sup>58</sup>Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2018).

<sup>59</sup>Lester E. Bush and Armand L. Mauss, eds., *Neither White nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church* (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1984).

changed with the evolution of Mormonism. This text identified issues such as Old Testament curses as the reasons for the priesthood ban.<sup>60</sup> W. Paul Reeve was the most recent to enter into this field of thought with his book *Religion of a Different Color* (2017). Reeve's text examined a sociological explanation for Mormonism's treatment of minority groups, specifically individuals of color, including African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans. Reeve asserted that Mormonism's willingness to subject individuals of color to statuses lesser than whites was due to the view of the broader American public that Mormons were too accepting of non-white individuals. Mormons assimilated by becoming less accepting of those who were not white. This theory led to the development of systems of prejudice within the religion.<sup>61</sup>

Twenty-first century Mormon historians changed their focus to the impact of the priesthood ban on individuals of black ancestry. Newell Bringhurst and Darron Smith compiled essays regarding the experience of black individuals throughout the history of Mormonism in their work *Blacks and Mormon*. Joanna Brooks, a social historian specializing in the relationship between race and religion, entered the field of Mormon Studies with her book *Mormonism and White Supremacy* (2020). Her work focused on how the church's bureaucracy relied on the notions of powerful white individuals at the expense of black individuals. Brooks utilized a form of critical race theory in her assessment of white supremacism in the church.<sup>62</sup>

Reasons for the priesthood ban have occupied most of the historiography of Mormonism and race. Left behind and hidden in the primary source record is a narrative of how the church has downplayed or attempted to whitewash its history through the erasure of the priesthood ban

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<sup>60</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

<sup>61</sup> W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>62</sup> Joanna Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

and its impact on members. Recent changes in church leadership, along with the availability of many primary sources from the early church, made it possible to provide a cohesive historical narrative. Access to new documents showed how church leaders have obscured the true history behind the church's racial teachings from its members. The loss of charismatic leadership led to increased bureaucratization of church historical instruction, resulting in a centralized, filtered teaching of that history. This issue will be at the heart of this study.

The research calls upon early leaders in order to develop a groundwork for the charismatic roots of Mormonism. This leads to a basis for identifying change in the church. Finally, the shift in charisma highlights the representation and rhetoric of leadership regarding highly controversial topics, such as polygamy and the priesthood ban.

Chapter 2 of the dissertation will focus on Joseph Smith and his early influences. Specifically, the chapter will examine Smith and his relationship to the occult and folk magic. While the apologetic position of church historians has forever sought to distance Smith from the magical worldview, later twentieth and early twenty-first century scholarship has made this approach nearly impossible. Therefore, this chapter will challenge the correlated version of Mormon history and place Smith as a practitioner of the occult. The influence of folk magic on Smith and early Mormonism is established in scholarship, but the role that magic played in the trust for Smith is not. This chapter will establish a baseline level of confidence in Smith by early followers. This trust was based on Smith's magical experiences and trustworthiness as a treasure seeker.

The chapter will focus on the correlation between the teachings of magic treasure-seeking lore and the acquisition of the Golden Plates, which became the Book of Mormon. This section will address how the correlation between treasure-seeking and finding the Book of Mormon was

necessary for establishing Smith's credibility amongst those in the treasure-seeking field. It will rely on the primary source records focused on Smith's retrieval of the Golden Plates, drawing a connection between magic and the origins of early Mormonism. Since many were familiar with magic, it served as the context in which Mormonism felt comfortable and understandable for individuals in the Burned-Over District.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, the correlation between magic and the mystical story of Golden Plates and a new book of scripture became less far-fetched and served the purpose of giving Joseph Smith legitimacy in the eyes of many of his contemporaries.

Chapter 3 will look at Smith and the foundation of the church. It will focus on the tension between the church and broader American society. Smith's doctrines were at the center of this tension. He created new doctrines as the sole revelator of the movement. With this power, Smith defined a unique view of the afterlife, a new idea regarding the baptism of infants, and formalized a repudiation of the trinitarian view of God. While these were widely known doctrines used by missionaries to educate new converts, Smith received many secret revelations that contributed to his eventual martyrdom. Polygamy was the most well-known doctrine introduced by Smith. This doctrine was associated with a great deal of unrest. However, often overlooked by historians of Mormonism are Smith's liberal views regarding blacks.

New charismatic movements led by compelling figures often flourished by creating tension between the broader society's status quo and the movement's unconventionality. This tension enabled religious groups to distinguish themselves from the mainstream and challenge what had been permanently established in the dominant culture. If the pressure was too low, assimilation happened, and the movement lost what had made it special. Suppose the stress was

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<sup>63</sup> The Burned-Over District refers to a region in western New York during the early 19th century. It gained this name due to the intense religious revivals and fervent social movements that swept through the area, leaving a metaphorical "burning" of traditional beliefs and practices. The district experienced a high level of religious activity, with various denominations competing for followers.

too elevated for acceptance by the outside majority. In that case, the group became a victim of discrimination, even violence, and the possibility existed of being extinguished by outside forces. As the level of tension rose higher, the charismatic leader felt more pressure to diminish the fire and find a healthy level again.<sup>64</sup>

This chapter will explore how Smith's progressive stance toward blacks escalated tension between the LDS Church and the broader American society, ultimately leading to violence, both against Mormons and perpetrated by them. It will also discuss the significance of Smith's death.

Chapter 4 will examine the role of the Quorum of the Twelve as the body that produced future church leaders. It will also explore Young's efforts to alleviate the heightened tensions that afflicted the church and led to considerable adversity. As a prophet, he founded a church that was both unconventional and modern, setting it apart as 'peculiar' while still reflecting the spirit of the era. This section will examine the presence of slavery in Utah and the eventual introduction of the priesthood ban. Young instituted the priesthood ban to reduce tension between the church and American society. He drew a lesson from the church's persecution in Missouri. Taking a more 'conciliatory' stance toward blacks allowed the church to operate more harmoniously with the United States and be less at odds with the prevailing norms and sentiments of the country's citizens.

Young used his position as a prophet to generate sufficient tension between Mormons and society, causing his followers to perceive a threat from the United States government. While much of this tension was justifiable, the leader expressed a significant portion of it through his naturally confrontational approach when dealing with the U.S. government. Although the implementation of a ban on black priesthood aligned Young more closely with racial thinkers

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<sup>64</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), ix.

and theorists of his era, he exploited the tension between the church and the state by emphasizing his teachings on polygamy, which he sought to reinforce during his time as a prophet. In his view, polygamy was the path to genuine celestial glory. This held true for the church until 1890.

Chapter 5 will explore the church during the Progressive Era. By this point, the church had endured half a century of persecution. Having settled in the Great Basin region, the church finally had a chance to 'rest.' This chapter delves into the church's efforts to establish a unified theology.

During this period, the church relied on its educated apostles and seventies, such as B.H. Roberts, John Widtsoe, and James Talmage, who had received formal training at respected universities. These progressive thinkers rendered Mormonism more acceptable to mainstream society. This involved reinterpreting past doctrines, which had a heavy focus on polygamy, into more favorable public relations principles.

Empowered to reshape the church's theology, these thinkers reinforced the belief that blacks were unworthy of the priesthood. They solidified this belief as a foundational element of Mormon theology by utilizing a combination of scientific, sociological, and theological explanations for the ban. Their writings defined the trajectory of the church's educational system for the next fifty years. As a result, their endorsement of the priesthood ban made its reversal significantly more challenging.

Chapter 6 will address the leadership's responses to attempts to modernize the church. The effort to transform Mormonism and render it more appealing to the general public proved to be an overwhelming success. Nevertheless, given that tension is fundamental for an NRM to maintain its appeal to potential converts, modernization was viewed as a risky endeavor.



As scholars transformed Mormonism into something more palatable, conservative Mormons vocally opposed their teachings. As individuals embraced scientific ideas like evolution, the conservative faction of Mormon leadership began to openly reject their teachings, resulting in significant discord among the leadership.

During this time, the concept of the priesthood ban became a topic of discussion among progressive thinkers. Roberts, Widtsoe, and Talmage all wrote about reconsidering the belief in the priesthood ban. They advocated for racial equality. They supported their argument with scientific evidence and the progressive ideas of the time. Unfortunately, this progressive discourse came too late. This occurred as the leadership of Mormonism became increasingly conservative. Leaders like Joseph Fielding Smith, Ezra Taft Benson, and Bruce R. McConkie focused on teaching the doctrines of Young. They relied on scripture to explain doctrines and often used the prevalence of Old Testament curses to support controversial teachings. These individuals rose to leadership positions during a time when a shift in thinking could have occurred more easily.

Chapter 6 will also explore the trustworthiness of church scholarship and history created by the Church Educational System. Starting in the early 1900s, the church faced a messaging problem. Relying on a lay clergy, the majority of whom had little to no theological training, resulted in inconsistent messaging from one ward to another. Due to the absence of agreed-upon definitions of doctrinal beliefs, a considerable amount of misinformation spread throughout the church. Classes within the church, operated by auxiliary organizations, possessed budgets and had unrestricted authority to teach the gospel as they deemed appropriate. As a result, the organization became highly decentralized, often with teachings that contradicted the official beliefs of the church.

In response to this issue, the church conceived a plan to centralize control over church teachings. This responsibility was entrusted to the priesthood of the church. In 1908, the church established the Priesthood Correlation Committee. The committee defined the mission of church educational programs. They also decided what constituted doctrine and what did not.

The initial earnest effort to correlate church materials took place from 1913 to 1920. During this time, President Joseph F. Smith appointed David O. McKay to lead the Priesthood Correlation Committee. Leaders of the church's auxiliary organizations joined him. The group convened to propose a definition for the purpose of church education and to work toward creating a mutually agreed-upon curriculum. In the end, the church dismissed the committee's findings and recommendations due to their perceived 'radical' nature.

While the Correlation Committee continued, it did not assume a significant role until the 1960s. During this time, McKay was the President of the church. Having a background in the correlation movement from earlier in the century, he oversaw the start of the most renowned period of correlation in church history.

Harold B. Lee led the church correlation committee to bring the unruly auxiliaries under control. The committee oversaw the development of a church curriculum, a standardized Sunday schedule, and educational manuals for the church. These church manuals prescribed the educational process for the church. The final authority on what should be included in the church curriculum rested with the First Presidency. The Church Education System evolved into a bureaucratic entity responsible for implementing top-down education mandates.

Chapter 7 will focus on the events that led to the lifting of the priesthood ban. These events included the church's expansion into regions like Africa and South America. Similarly, the church lagged behind much of the country in terms of civil rights. As new membership

groups emerged and external pressures mounted, the church found itself in a situation similar to its earlier struggles with the federal government and polygamy. The practice of polygamy within the church was viewed as barbaric and placed the church at risk of federal intervention.

Similarly, the fear of repercussions from failing to assimilate in the context of civil rights created another source of tension for the church. The religion faced the choice of assimilating into society or preserving a doctrine that had endured for over 100 years and was theologically linked to the faith's early founders.

Mormonism, which tried to keep a hold on its early doctrines, including the legitimacy of the priesthood ban, was forced into a situation where changing the practice had to be seriously considered. Not only was it weighed, but it was done. The end of the ban stands out as the most prominent attempt by the church in recent memory to assimilate into broader society. While their doctrine differed from Protestant sects, they have essentially moved to normalize their existence in American life.

The dissertation traces the complex historical evolution of Mormonism through key themes, examining the foundational influences of Joseph Smith, the development of doctrines, and the church's interactions with broader American society. It explores the intersection of magical and religious elements in the early history, challenges apologetic narratives, and reveals Smith's role as a practitioner of the occult. The narrative unfolds tensions arising from doctrinal innovations, including the priesthood ban and polygamy, and their impact on the relationship between the church and American society. The dissertation examines attempts at modernization within the church, highlighting the influence of scholarly leaders. It culminates in the lifting of the priesthood ban, a significant move reflecting the church's negotiation between preserving

traditional doctrines and assimilating into broader societal norms, encapsulating the dynamic evolution of Mormonism over time

## Chapter 2

### Magic Breeds Charisma

Joseph Smith Sr., the son of Asael and Mary Duty Smith, was born on July 12, 1771. He received his start in life from a family of subsistence farmers who experienced the American dream of homeownership through hard work. In 1796, Smith wed Lucy Mack, daughter of Solomon and Lydia Gates Mack. Both sets of parents shared similar backgrounds. Being farmers, Mack's family had enough wealth to provide a dowry for her marriage to Smith. This enabled the newlywed Smith family to acquire a modest home in the farming town of Tunbridge and later in Randolph, Vermont. Smith Sr. believed that settling in Randolph would offer more opportunities for his family, which now included two young children.<sup>1</sup>

For the Smiths, providing for their family was ignoble. Business transactions were conducted without the expectation of cash; instead, they often involved the exchange of favors, typically in the form of produce or services. The barter economy was prevalent in New England during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, economic norms underwent a transformation at the turn of the century. The United States increasingly depended on paper money. Fearing falling behind, Smith formulated plans to enter the emerging capitalist market.

Smith Sr. completed his research. While working as a merchant in Randolph, he discovered the economic potential of harvesting and selling ginseng to China. His wife believed that China was an ideal market for ginseng. Moreover, the herb was believed to be a potential cure for the plague, which had been widespread in China. As a result, there was a pressing demand for the product.

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Smith was the second-born child. A child was born in 1797 but died shortly after his birth. Hyrum Smith was the third-born child.

Having no reason to doubt the economic potential of entering the ginseng market, the elder Smith wholeheartedly invested. His wife stated he “...consequently made an investment of all the means which he commanded...”<sup>2</sup> His investment in ginseng and the crystallization process amounted to approximately \$4,500 when he began searching for a shipper. During his search, he encountered a Mr. Stevens. Research conducted by Mark L. Staker and Donald L. Ender confirmed the man's identity as Elkanah Stevens. He was a Revolutionary War veteran whose family had settled in Vermont. He was active in the trading of ginseng during the same time that Smith Sr. entered the market. Smith's newfound acquaintance offered him \$3,000 for his harvest. He rejected the offer because he believed that his harvest was worth considerably more.<sup>3</sup>

After harvesting his ginseng, Smith journeyed to New York City to arrange for its shipment. Upon learning of his plans, Stevens arrived in New York. He intended to ship his ginseng together with Smith's. Stevens dispatched his son on the ship to China to supervise the transactions.<sup>4</sup> Staker and Ender identified his son as Jesse Stevens. He resided in the same region as his family. The son was the most probable candidate to assist his father in business dealings. Both anticipated a substantial profit from their harvest due to the high price of ginseng in China.

Upon the ship's return, Smith was bewildered. What he received in return was Chinese tea. Stevens' son conveyed to him that the journey had been a complete failure. Instead of receiving payment, he accepted the tea.

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<sup>2</sup>Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and his Progenitors for Many Generations*, 1853 M 270.2 SM 642, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Provo, UT, 49.

<sup>3</sup> Mark L. Staker, Donald L. Enders; Joseph Smith Sr.'s China Adventure. *Journal of Mormon History*, 1 April 2022; 48 (2): 80.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 82.

Shortly after the ginseng venture, Stevens' son employed a relative of the Smith family. One late night, after consuming some alcoholic beverage, the employee inquired with his boss about his previous journey. He pondered the amount Smith had gained from the expedition. The question was rhetorical, as he was already aware that Smith had received nothing. Impaired judgment, partly influenced by alcohol, prompted Stevens to guide Mack to a chest. Upon opening it, he unveiled a collection of silver and gold coins, and then he commented, "There, sir, are the proceeds of Mr. Smith's ginseng!"<sup>5</sup>

The Smith family found themselves overwhelmed by bad debts incurred from their merchandising business. Failing to settle their debts, the family had to sell off the farm. This marked their introduction to a new era where the market held sway over American society. The days of gentlemen's agreements had vanished, replaced by the hustle and bustle of contemporary capitalism. Smith's initial foray into the market left him nearly bankrupt, necessitating a move with his family from Vermont to central New York by 1813. Joseph Smith Jr. was born in 1805 during a period of economic hardship for his family. Regrettably, Smith Jr. never enjoyed the financial success that his father did. Instead, he witnessed his father's struggles persist throughout his entire adult life.

While Smith Sr.'s story is a single account, it is not necessarily anecdotal. His experience was representative of many yeomen farmers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As previously mentioned, the agrarian society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries underwent a significant transformation during a new revolution, known as the Market Revolution. By the end of the Revolutionary War, the majority of the 3.9 million Americans earned their livelihood through agriculture. Fast forward to the outbreak of the Civil War, and 32

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<sup>5</sup> Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 50.

million Americans were employed in non-agricultural sectors.<sup>6</sup> The United States of America entered the global marketplace and evolved into a nation dependent on capitalism.

Historians' understandings of the Market Revolution have differed, but there is no doubt that a shift in social, political, and economic thinking took place.<sup>7</sup> “Before the Market Revolution, there were markets, to be sure: Profits were taken, greed exhibited, goods produced and exchanged. But greed was not normative...After the market revolution, ‘hard-headed’ economic logic sought to dominate the process of evaluating all things.”<sup>8</sup> Smith Sr. entered the market during a significant transformation in America. It was an era when greed became the norm, and frequently, the humble farmer was left behind. Smith's experience in the market determined his path for the remainder of his life and played a significant role in his son's eventual establishment of Mormonism.

As cities expanded and capital flowed into regions studded with factories, the harsh reality was that a significant portion of the country, particularly its rural areas, fell behind in achieving the economic growth promised by the advancement of capitalism. This resulted in the emergence of two parallel societies within a single country. The prosperous cities thrived economically due to their commitment to the market. However, concurrently, the yeoman

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<sup>6</sup> John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution in America: Liberty, Ambition, and the Eclipse of the Common Good* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>7</sup> For differing perspectives on the Market Revolution, see also Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815-1846* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009). Charles Sellers argued that post-war boom following the War of 1812 led to the Market Revolution. The period between 1815 - 1846 saw America become more reliant on the capitalist market. It saw changes in class structure and social norms. While the Market Revolution and reliance on capitalism brought some of the most significant gains in American history, it also left many individuals behind in its wake. Daniel Walker Howe avoided adhering to the notion that the Market Revolution was a big deal. Howe asserted that capitalism and reliance on the marketplace was a practice that can be traced back to American history before the Jacksonian Era. He downplayed the importance of capitalism in the changes of nineteenth century America.

<sup>8</sup> John Lauritz Larson, *The Market Revolution*, 9.



farmers in the countryside wrestled with their agrarian lifestyle, endeavoring to preserve the traditional way of life passed down by their ancestors.

The Smiths were agrarian people who aimed to earn a living from the land. However, Smith Sr. existed in his 'own' economy, labeled as 'Supernatural' by historian Alan Taylor. The threat posed to the traditional way of life for farmers and impoverished rural residents led to the emergence of a new lifestyle, one that ran counter to the burgeoning capitalist economy of the nation.

The 'Supernatural' economy, as described by Taylor, had its foundation in the act of treasure-seeking and an ultimate dependence on occult practices to gain insight into the world.

“Treasure-seeking's proliferation was symptomatic of the early Republic's rapid population growth, geographic expansion, cultural volatility, and economic transition to capitalism in the hinterlands. Treasure-seeking lay at the murky intersection of material aspiration and religious desire; it possessed a dual nature: functioning at once as a supernatural economy (an alternative to a disappointing natural economy) and as a materialistic faith (an alternative to unsatisfactory abstract religion). Treasure-seeking met the needs of some people who felt troubled by their culture's increasing premium on possessive individualism and religious voluntarism, by promising both quick wealth and a sense of power over the supernatural world.”<sup>9</sup>

This "Supernatural" economy was the way agrarian Americans endeavored to distinguish themselves from urban dwellers. It constituted a unique culture shaped by its response to the market forces that disrupted the lives of many during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

This chapter aims to position Smith Jr. as an active participant in the ‘Supernatural’ economy. It will establish a link between him and the folk magic traditions of his era. While previous historians have made this connection in their research, this section goes a step further to address the issue of charisma. Folk magic, treasure-seeking, and his involvement in the ‘Supernatural’ economy were not merely pastimes. Instead, his engagement in these activities

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Taylor, “The Early Republic’s Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780-1830,” *American Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1986): 8.

laid the groundwork for establishing his reputation as a seer, rendering his assertions of Golden Plates and celestial visitors plausible and tangible for Mormonism's potential followers.

In a society like that in which Smith Jr. grew up, the practices of a father played a significant role in the actions of his offspring. Hence, to understand the routines that led to the Book of Mormon and the birth of Mormonism in 1830, we must first delve into his father's traditions.

Smith Sr. was a victim of the marketplace. It was not surprising that he found himself involved in antebellum America's "Supernatural" economy. Historian D. Michael Quinn did a great deal to make a connection between Smith Sr. and magical practices. Working as a BYU professor of history, Quinn researched during a time of unprecedented access to church archives. The church has since restricted access, but he benefited from the more lenient declassification processes of the 1990s. His research on Mormonism and the influence of folk magic drew much criticism from apologists. His work initially focused a great deal of attention on Smith Sr.

The communities in which Smith Sr. resided had identified him as a skilled rodsman. A rodsman was an individual who used a mineral rod, usually witch hazel, to locate treasure, lost items, and underground flows of water. Alan Taylor had identified this practice as common during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and by the eighteenth century, the practitioners of the divining methods had developed a higher profile. In the developing culture counter to capitalism, the diviners were highly esteemed amongst other believers.<sup>10</sup>

Smith Sr. achieved notoriety as a diviner. In the same year his ginseng business failed, Smith Sr. joined an unusual group of rodsmen in Middlebury, Vermont.<sup>11</sup> An account published in the *Vermont American* on May 7, 1828, documented the existence of a group of rodsmen who

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor, "Supernatural Economy", 14,15.

<sup>11</sup> Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 34-35.

held radical beliefs about the impending end times. Ovid Miner, the newspaper editor, wrote, “About 1800 one or two families in Rutland county, who had been considered respectable citizens...have been informed by the Almighty...the way for which was to be providentially prepared by the destruction of their fellow-townsmen.”<sup>12</sup> Miner stated that the group comprised a handful of rodsmen who claimed to cure diseases and locate lost objects. These individuals were not entirely out of the ordinary; however, their eventual theological teachings disrupted the tranquility of the Vermont town.

The group's leaders prophesied that an earthquake was to occur on January 14, 1802. The group interpreted the earthquake as a sign of the destroying angel's arrival. They believed that God would spare the worthy, and this apocalyptic outlook caused widespread panic. As the day approached, Vermont called the military to ensure nothing occurred. As the day wore on, anticipation remained low until nightfall. During the evening, the militia opened fire on the approaching rodsmen, who were clad in their outlandish attire. Shots echoed through the night. When dawn broke, and the world remained unchanged, it became clear that the prophecy had failed. Despite their embarrassment, the leaders of the rodsmen fraternity clung to their theological convictions and departed Vermont, seeking refuge in upstate New York.<sup>13</sup>

While scant in detail, the previous account placed the rodsmen in Middlebury, Vermont. The account also provided insight into how this was not simply a group of treasure-seekers but a cast surrounding a charismatic leader who predicted the end times. A later account from Barnes Frisbie, editor of the *Poultney Bulletin* and the *Poultney Journal*, connected this event to the forefather of Mormonism, Smith Sr.<sup>14</sup> Frisbie based his writing regarding the event on the

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<sup>12</sup> Ovid Miner. “Middlebury.” *Vermont American*. May 7, 1828.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Dan Vogel included the Barnes Frisbie account in his collection *Early Mormon Documents*. As noted by Vogel the Barnes Frisbie account of the Wood Scrape is attractive to many historians of Mormonism because the account is the only one to place Joseph Smith Sr.

information gathered from “...more than thirty old men and women who were living here [Middlebury] in 1800...”<sup>15</sup> From these accounts, he gathered information about the Wood Scrape event. He identified the leader of the movement as Nathaniel Wood. After being excommunicated from the Congregational church, Wood sought to create his church, the New Israelites. Under his leadership, the church believed in the practice of unorthodox supernatural gifts in contrast to the belief of the Congregational church that he once attended.<sup>16</sup>

Justus Winchell brought the practice of using divining rods and treasure-seeking to Wood’s religion.<sup>17</sup> Divining rods were a defining feature of the group. Winchell stayed with William Cowdery while in Vermont.<sup>18</sup> Frisbie identified Cowdery as giving Winchell a place to stay hidden from authorities. Likewise, he claimed that Cowdery began digging for money with Winchell.<sup>19</sup> Later in his account, Frisbie stated that not only William Cowdery was present at the time of the Wood Scrape, but Smith Sr. was also there.<sup>20</sup> Frisbie believed that both men’s experiences with the Wood group influenced the birth of Mormonism. Regarding this, he stated,

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and Oliver Cowdery, both fathers of founding members of Mormonism at the event. The article has been accepted by some historians such as D. Michael Quinn, while others like Richard Anderson have chosen to discredit it as mere speculation. While later accounts of the elder Smith’s magical practices are well documented, this early document stands on its own. As with any source that cannot be corroborated, it should be looked at cautiously.

<sup>15</sup> Barnes Frisbie, *The History of Middletown, Vermont* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle and Co., 1867), 43-64 in *Early Mormon Documents Vol 1.*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1996) 599.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 602.

<sup>17</sup> Frisbie’s source simply identifies the individual as “Winchell” however D. Michael Quinn came to understand that “Winchell” was actually Justus Winchell. According to Dan Vogel, Winchell was in Middlebury, Vermont in 1802, the time of the Wood Scrape event, and was warned out of town, only to settle in Upstate New York.

<sup>18</sup> William Cowdery is the father of Oliver Cowdery. Oliver Cowdery became one of the scribes for Joseph Smith Jr. during his translation of the Book of Mormon. Oliver Cowdery was also present for the restoration of the priesthood. Cowdery came to play a large role in the foundational years of Mormonism.

<sup>19</sup> Barnes Frisbie Account, *Early Mormon Documents Vol 1*, 603.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 619-620.

“...it is my honest belief that this Wood movement here in Middletown was one source, if not the main source, from which came this monster—Mormonism.”<sup>21</sup>

Accounts like that of Frisbie and Miner linked Mormonism to the world of folk magic before the denomination's birth. The changing American society created an environment ripe for new religious movements. The “restoration,” a term used by the LDS church to refer to the birth of Mormonism and link it to the ancient church of Christ, occurred during the Second Great Awakening in the Burnt-Over District.

Between 1825 and 1835, evangelical Protestantism swept through the region, led by preachers like Charles Grandison Finney. This resulted in mass revivals and conversions. However, by the end of the 1830s, the area had been so thoroughly evangelized that few potential converts remained, leaving the ground metaphorically “burnt over” and unable to ignite further religious fervor. The Burnt-Over District included areas of western New York such as the Finger Lakes region, Rochester, Buffalo, and Utica, which saw intense revivalism and conversion efforts during the Second Great Awakening.<sup>22</sup>

The Second Great Awakening coincided with the Market Revolution. Charles Sellers identified the importance of Unitarianism during the Second Great Awakening. The God of Unitarianism endowed people with “enough rationality and prudential morality to win for themselves - if they tried - the salvation of earthly happiness.”<sup>23</sup> According to Reverend John T. Kirkland, the Unitarian God “secures the rich from rapacity, no less than the poor from oppression; the high from envy, no less than the low from contempt.”<sup>24</sup> The popular

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 621.

<sup>22</sup> Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Sellers, *The Market Revolution*, 202.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

denomination of the day aligned with the new market system proliferating in the young country. This God asserted that some would have and some would not. This God also espoused the belief that everyone could make it if they tried.

While this message of unfettered opportunity might have been appealing, echoing the can-do spirit of the American Dream, it also served as an affront to those who had attempted to enter the market and failed, whether due to their limitations or the unscrupulous actions of others. In this emerging dog-eat-dog world, not everyone was comfortable or capable of engaging as significant players in the market. This was the world in which a young Smith Jr. came of age. He embraced his father's worldview, which stood in stark contrast to the market surrounding him.

Upon settling in Palmyra, the Smiths sought to counter the market pressures by embracing their familial bonds. Through this strategy, the family survived by taking on odd jobs in the area for other landowners. They engaged in seasonal work across Central New York while also offering their expertise in treasure hunting as hired hands.<sup>25</sup> The tradition of treasure hunting, which had flourished in Vermont, did not end as individuals from the East migrated to Central New York.

Upon arriving in Palmyra, Smith Sr. carried with him his expertise in divining. Peter Ingersoll, a Palmyra native, addressed the Smiths' experience in central New York in his 1833 Affidavit. "I, Peter Ingersoll, first became acquainted with the family of Joseph Smith, Sen. in the year of our Lord, 1822. -- I lived in the neighborhood of said family, until about 1830; during which time the following facts came under my observation. The general employment of the family, was digging for money."<sup>26</sup> Ingersoll identified the Smith family as money-diggers. He

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Ingersoll, Affidavit, 1833, paragraph 1, 2.

asserted that this was their primary employment. The affidavit detailed how most of the household participated in the practice. “I was once ploughing near the house of Joseph Smith, Sen. about noon, he requested me to walk with him a short distance from his house, for the purpose of seeing whether a mineral rod would work in my hand, saying at the same time he was confident it would...I accepted the invitation.”<sup>27</sup> Smith Sr. then instructed Ingersoll on how to use the rod. The instructions included words to say while divining.

As Smith Sr. provided instructions on using a diving rod, Ingersoll, uninterested in the process, picked up a stone. Not wanting to seem impolite, he listened attentively, albeit while idly tossing the stone back and forth in his hands. Smith Sr. noticed the stone and inquired enthusiastically about Ingersoll's intentions. Ingersoll, unfamiliar with dowsing, innocently replied that he simply planned to “...Throw it at the birds.”<sup>28</sup> The elder Smith replied, “No... it is of great worth...” He placed the stone in his hat and covered his face. Emerging from the hat, he declared, "If you knew what I had seen, you would believe." Following his father's demonstration, Smith's eldest son eagerly took the stone and hat and replicated the act. He was equally astonished by the outcome.

Ingersoll asserted in his affidavit that treasure hunting had evolved from Smith Sr.'s venture into a family enterprise. Smith’s wife did not contest this assertion. Instead, she stated, “...that we stopt [*sic*] our labor and went at trying to win the faculty of Abrac drawing magic circles or sooth saying to the neglect of all kinds of buisness we never during our lives suffered one important interest to swallow up every other obligation but whilst we worked with our hands we endeavored to remember the service of & welfare of our souls.”<sup>29</sup> In this narrative, the matriarch of the Smith family addressed multiple concerns. Firstly, she vehemently denied the

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 2.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844-1845, Bk. 3, 10. *Joseph Smith Papers*.

accusation that her family was negligent in their business endeavors. She asserted that her family never allowed any pursuit, including magic and treasure hunting, to interfere with their primary duty of tending to the family farm. Secondly, she acknowledged their involvement in activities categorized as magic and treasure-seeking. Lastly, she affirmed her family's pursuit of spiritual salvation. This acknowledgment linked the practice of magic within the Smith family to a pursuit that went beyond material gain; it was a means of attaining the knowledge necessary for salvation. The fusion of the magical worldview and religion became the central aspiration of Smith Jr. as he matured into his role as a seer, revelator, and prophet, rising from his humble beginnings as a farm boy, day laborer, and seeker of the supernatural.

A significant portion of the official LDS church records omit Joseph Smith Jr.'s involvement in his father's magical worldview. Instead, the records portray Smith as a diligent young man who, through his spiritual quest for truth, attained the ability to see through obedience to God.<sup>30</sup> However, the narrative surrounding Joseph Smith's origins was far more complex and intertwined with magic.

While as early as 1822, Ingersoll identified Alvin Smith as a magic practitioner, Joseph Jr. was involved in his own magical practices. The spiritual journey of Smith Jr. began in 1820. During the spring season, he made his way to the wooded section of his family's property. Overwhelmed by the religious fervor throughout the central New York region along the Erie Canal, he was racked with pain and sought to know what church to join. Feelings of uncertainty regarding religion were not uncommon during the Second Great Awakening as itinerant

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<sup>30</sup> For official LDS Accounts of the life of Joseph Smith Jr. see, *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2018), B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1930), and Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1932).



preachers were ever present in public squares, holding revivals day in and day out to save the souls of rural farmers in the Finger Lakes region. Many individuals felt pressured to find a church and secure their salvation through baptism. Smith sought the same guidance. Nevertheless, his 1820 experience, not fully disclosed until 1832, planted the seeds of Mormonism.

There were nine recorded accounts of the First Vision, four of which were firsthand versions from the eventual prophet. Each remembrance of the event was slightly different. As time progressed, the newer accounts became more developed and detailed. Despite these variations, the core message of each written account endures. The 1832 description was the most personal recollection. It was written in the prophet's own handwriting and came across as the most basic. In this document, he recalled the historical event he identified as the foundational moment of the church. He recounted his birth and his family's move from Vermont to New York. Smith described his family with the adjective "indigent," recalling the need for the entire family to do manual labor to get by. He also mentioned how his poor upbringing impacted his education. He received only the basics of reading and math.<sup>31</sup>

The church designated the Smith family property as a historical landmark in Palmyra, New York. This designation encompassed the wooded area behind the Smith family farm, where the prophet, seeking guidance in finding the true church, chose to pray.<sup>32</sup> Winding paths traverse the wooded area, but no specific location marks where he knelt in prayer. His initial account of the incident failed to mention his journey to the property's wooded section, now known as the

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph Smith History, circa 1832, *Joseph Smith Papers*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Sacred Grove.<sup>33</sup> Smith's encounter, arguably the cornerstone of the First Vision, underwent modifications in his subsequent accounts.

Smith's initial journal entry regarding the experience recounted the Lord's response to his prayer. However, later accounts portrayed him as embroiled in a struggle between good and evil. The original 1832 account seamlessly transitioned from Smith's prayer to his being in God's presence.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, his subsequent 1835 and 1839 accounts introduced significant details that preceded his encounter with heavenly visitors.

In the 1835 account, Smith described an experience of being unable to pray due to his tongue swelling.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, he heard noises that seemed as if a force surrounded him in the woods, preventing him from praying. The 1839 account detailed this malicious source in even more detail. Upon retiring to pray in the woods, Smith recalled:

I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God, I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was siezed [*sic*] upon by some power which entirely overcame me and had such astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. But exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had siezed [*sic*] upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction, not to an imaginary ruin but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world who had such a marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being.<sup>36</sup>

Following his prayer, Smith asserted his place among notable historical figures. He aligned himself with Old Testament prophets such as Abraham, Moses, Jacob, and Isaiah.<sup>37</sup> His narration disclosed that his prayer was not merely answered through a heavenly messenger;

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<sup>33</sup> Smith's 1830 account, the best-known account due to its canonization in the official works of the LDS church, identified the wooded area as the setting as Smith simply states that he "...retired to the woods to make the attempt."

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Smith History, circa 1832, *JSP*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> JS, Journals, 9-11 Nov. 1835, *JSP*, 23-24.

<sup>36</sup> JS History, 1838 - 1841, draft copy, *JSP*, 2-4.

<sup>37</sup> For accounts of individuals that claimed to see God, see Genesis 18:12, Genesis 19:27, Genesis 32:30, Exodus 33:23, and Isaiah 6:1.

instead, he recalled encountering God face-to-face in the woods. The details of Smith's vision following his prayer varied across his accounts.

In his original 1832 account, Smith remembered seeing “a pillar [*sic*] of [fire] light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the spirit of god and the Lord opened the heavens upon me and I saw the Lord.”<sup>38</sup>

In his 1835 journal account, he stated that: “...a pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon me, and filled me with joy unspeakable, a personage appeared [*sic*] in the midst, of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, another personage soon appeared [*sic*] like unto the first, he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee, he testified [*sic*] unto me that Jesus Christ is the son of God; and I saw many angels in this vision...”<sup>39</sup>

His 1838 account went further and identified the personages. He stated, “When the light rested upon me I saw two personages (whose brightness and glory defy all description) standing above me in the air. One of <them> spake unto me calling me by name and said (pointing to the other) “This is my beloved Son, Hear him.”<sup>40</sup>

The *Times and Seasons* reported another version of his story in 1842 that he “saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite the inconsistencies in his evolving accounts, one fact remained constant: he had encountered a figure he perceived as God. This belief formed the cornerstone of the faith for members of the church. Regarding confirmation, the preceding statement refers to an assertion

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<sup>38</sup> JS History, Summer 1832, *JSP*, 1-3.

<sup>39</sup> JS, Journals, 9-11 Nov. 1835, *JSP*, 23-24.

<sup>40</sup> JS History, 1838 - 1841, draft copy, *JSP*, 2-4.

<sup>41</sup> JS, Church History, *Times and Seasons*, 1 Mar. 1842, 3: 706-707.

embraced by those adhering to the church's doctrines. Beyond the statements of Smith and those documenting his experience in the Sacred Grove, these affirmations remained unverified. The statement aligned with the notion that the claims underlying Mormonism's foundation were valid. With this encounter, he positioned himself among individuals recognized for a profound connection with God, a relationship unseen and known for millennia.

Despite his encounter with God, no evidence suggests that Smith Jr. ever discussed the First Vision before his initial written account in 1832, two years after the founding of the original church. Therefore, the question remains: how did he transform from a fourteen-year-old boy claiming to have seen God into the leader of a new religious movement within twelve years? His religious experiences did not cease in 1820; instead, they became increasingly ingrained within the norms of the Smith family. His narrative is inextricably intertwined with the cultural practice of treasure-seeking.

After his First Vision, Smith Jr. became steadily more involved in the world of folk magic. In the early 1820s, he practiced treasure-seeking using a divining rod. In a collection of affidavits compiled in the text *Naked Truths About Mormonism*, Mrs. S.F. Anderick claimed that the prophet stated that “he could tell where lost or hidden things and treasures were buried or located with a forked witch hazel.”<sup>42</sup> Though Smith engaged in folk magic using a divining rod, this was not the source of his fame. Instead, the divining rod served as a gateway into the treasure-seeking realm. His true renown stemmed from his abilities as a seer.

The idea of a seer predated the folk magic practices of the antebellum northeast United States diviners. D. Michael Quinn traced the idea of a seer back to John Dee. The mathematician relied on an occult practitioner, Edward Kelley, who was supposedly able to talk with spirits via

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<sup>42</sup> H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P. Walters, *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record* (San Francisco, CA: Smith Research Associates, 1998), 65.

a small black pebble.<sup>43</sup> Other occultists associated seeing through an object with biblical figures such as Adam and Abraham. These individuals are said to have possessed “Angellicall [*sic*] Stones,” which allowed them to convene with God and other spirits to make decisions for their people.<sup>44</sup> These occult traditions became essential to the folk magic beliefs of America. The tradition of linking magic and the occult to Judeo-Christian history allowed for practices such as using a peep stone to be considered religious experiences. Those with supernatural gifts were endowed with those powers by God.

With this background, the Northeast’s yeomanry held seers in high regard. Smith was infatuated with the idea of seers. In the Palmyra area, a Methodist woman named Sally Chase was widely regarded as a seer. She possessed a glass stone that enabled her to locate lost objects. At age fifteen, Smith reportedly asked his parents for permission to visit this renowned seer. According to historian Richard VanWagoner, his parents initially declined his request but eventually permitted him.<sup>45</sup>

Chase allowed Smith to use her stone. He placed the stone in a hat, as she had, and put his face in the hat. Upon doing this, he received a precise vision. Chase’s stone allowed him to see a vision of another seer stone specifically made for him. This stone shined brighter than anything else in the image. Smith came away from the vision with the knowledge that the stone he saw was on the shoreline of a tributary to Lake Erie. Chase's stone drew him back for multiple visits, each time providing visions that led him to 'his' stone and narrowed his search.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 40.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>45</sup> Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1805-1830* (Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016), 138.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-140.

For Smith Jr., this stone was a prophecy come true. From a young age, his father spoke of a stone that his son could use to “see all over the world.”<sup>47</sup> An anonymous newspaper clipping mentioned young Smith walking through the countryside for weeks, searching for the stone he saw in Chase's magical glass. At some point, probably in 1821 or 1822, he located the mouth of the creek he had seen in the peepstone. Locating the stone marked Smith’s initiation as a visionary.<sup>48</sup> Historical documentation from Chenango County in 1877 verified the existence of the item. William D. Purple, a physician, was present at the 1826 trial of Joseph Smith Jr. During this trial, the court asked Smith to produce his stone for examination. Purple described it as “...about the size of a small hen’s egg, in the shape of a high instepped shoe. It was composed of layers of different colors passing diagonally through it. It was very hard and smooth, perhaps by being carried in the pocket.”<sup>49</sup> This stone is currently in the hands of the church for safekeeping in the Church Historical Archives in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Smith continued to expand his collection of seer stones. In 1822, Willard Chase, older brother of the town seer Sally Chase, hired Smith Jr. to come to his property and dig a well. In 1833, Willard Chase recounted the experience of Smith finding his second seer stone on Chase’s property.

In the year 1822, I was engaged in digging a well. I employed Alvin and Joseph Smith to assist me; the latter of whom is now known as the Mormon prophet. After digging about twenty feet below the surface of the earth, we discovered a singularly appearing stone, which excited my curiosity. I brought it to the top of the well, and as we were examining it, Joseph put it into his hat...The next morning , he came to me and wished to obtain the stone alledging that he could

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<sup>47</sup> Green Mountain Boys to Thomas C. Sharp, 15 February 1844, Thomas C. Sharp and Allied Anti-Mormon Papers, in *Early Mormon Documents Vol 1.*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1996) 597.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Van Wagoner, *Natural Born Seer*, 140.

<sup>49</sup> William. D. Purple, “Joseph Smith, the Originator of Mormonism. Historical Reminiscences of the Town of Afton,” *Chenango Union* (Norwich, New York) 30 (3 May 1877), in *Early Mormon Documents Vol 4.*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1996) 127-137.

see in it; but I told him I did not wish to part with it on account of it being a curiosity, but would lend it...He had it in his possession for about two years...some time in 1825 Hiram Smith came to me and wished to borrow the same stone...In the fall of 1826...on going to Smith's, and asking him for the stone, he said "you cannot have it;"...he faced me with a malignant look and said, "I don't care who in the Devil it belongs to, you shall not have it."<sup>50</sup>

Chase's affidavit confirmed that Smith acquired his second seer stone via trickery and theft. Not only this, but Smith involved his family in the process of gaining possession of the stone. At this point, the seer, with fancy stones in tow, transformed from a young trickster into a charismatic treasure-seeker.

Smith's ability to convince others of his abilities as a seer improved with practice. Between 1822 and 1827, Smith was active in the treasure-seeking community. He worked both as a digger and a seer for many treasure hunts. Before 1971, Mormon historians disputed his participation in the treasure-seeking activities of his father. However, the discovery of a bill of cost from Justice Albert Neely in central New York changed the historiography. The document referenced an 1826 trial in which Smith faced charges related to treasure-seeking. In the document, he confessed to using a stone, which allowed him to see things that were not visible to the naked eye.<sup>51</sup> A document included in the *Joseph Smith Papers* included an original look at the fee bill. In the document, the case listed "The people [same] vs. Joseph Smith The Glass Looker."<sup>52</sup> The discovery of the document in 1971 shifted the discussion surrounding Smith and his pre-Book of Mormon activities.

With the revelation of new documentary evidence of his life as a treasure-seeker, the apologetic nature of BYU academics changed in the years immediately following the new

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<sup>50</sup> Willard Chase Affidavit, 1833, in *Mormonism Unveiled*, E.D. Howe (Painesville, OH: Howe, 1834) 240-248.

<sup>51</sup> "A Document Discovered," *Utah Christian Advocate* (Salt Lake City), Jan. 1886.

<sup>52</sup> Fee Bill, circa 9 November 1826 [State of New York v. JS-A], p. 1, *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

documents. Historians sought to get ahead of the curve and discount the works of others as either biased or historically flawed, all to develop a master narrative that did not detract from the faith.<sup>53</sup> However, more individuals began to discuss the prophet's treasure-seeking as new documents emerged.

The most extensive account of the prophet's work as a treasure-seeker is from historian Dan Vogel. Vogel addressed eighteen recorded instances of his involvement in treasure digs between 1822 and 1827. His first reported dig occurred between 1822 and 1825. This was a recurring dig activity on his father's farm where the diggers searched for kegs and chests of gold and silver supposedly buried on the property. Smith aided in four other documented digs during the same time frame. Joshua Stafford hired him to assist in a search for money on his farmland. Clark Chase hired him to help search for a treasure on his farm. Benjamin Tabor employed Smith as a search team member who looked for an alleged set of golden furniture buried on his property. Randall Robinson likewise employed him to search for gold plates on his property.<sup>54</sup>

Between 1825 and 1827, Smith participated in thirteen more digs. Joseph McKune Jr. hired the seer to search for a gold or silver mine at Hill Cumorah, a drumlin in Manchester, New York, where Smith eventually procured the plates that became the Book of Mormon. Smith assisted Deacon Attleton in searching for a gold mine. In the same year, he helped Abraham Cornell search for a silver mine on his property. In the following years, he worked for Josiah Stowell, Joseph Knight Sr., Bostwick Badger, and Joseph Capron, and participated in six other

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<sup>53</sup> For examples of apologetic histories surrounding Joseph Smith and Treasure-Seeking, see, Richard Lloyd Anderson, "The Mature Joseph Smith and Treasure Searching," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1984): 489–560, Marvin S Hill, "Money-Digging Folklore and the Beginnings of Mormonism: An Interpretive Suggestion," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1984): 473–88 and 1. Ronald Walker, "The Persisting Idea of American Treasure Hunting," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1984): 429–59.

<sup>54</sup> Dan Vogel, "The Locations of Joseph Smith's Early Treasure Quests," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (1994): 230.



searches with unnamed participants.<sup>55</sup> To the knowledge of historians, Smith never succeeded in unearthing any treasure he sought.

Despite repeated failures as a treasure hunter, employers continued to hire him, considering him a respectable seer. Similarly, the lore of treasure-seeking benefited him. The magic worldview relied on belief in specificity. One wrong step on a treasure hunt meant the guaranteed non-fulfillment of the hunt. Therefore, an unsuccessful dig did not merely fall on the shoulders of the treasure-seeker. The magic worldview required specific words, possible sacrifices, purity of heart in some cases, and stories of "slippery treasure" that appeared to move underground to evade seekers' efforts.<sup>56</sup> The numerous explanations for failure bolstered Smith's credibility.

In 1826, a year before Smith stopped treasure-seeking, he faced a lawsuit. Oliver Cowdery, who would later become the prophet's scribe, wrote that Smith faced accusations of being a 'disorderly person.'<sup>57</sup> Others accused Smith of "sponging his living from their [the public's] earnings...", "being a "vagrant, without visible means of livelihood..." and being "a "disorderly person and an imposter."<sup>58</sup> In this instance, he faced accusations of defrauding his employer, Josiah Stowell. The case originated from a complaint made by Stowell's nephew. The relative alleged that Smith exploited his uncle by claiming he could see through a stone and find treasure, thereby draining him of his money.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>56</sup> Gerard T. Hurley, "Buried Treasure Tales in America," *Western Folklore* 10, no. 3 (1951): 203.

<sup>57</sup> Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VIII to W. W. Phelps," *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (October 1835): 201.

<sup>58</sup> Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: The Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing Co., 1959), 2:360, 364, 467.

<sup>59</sup> C[harles] M[arshall], "The Original Prophet," *Fraser's Magazine* 7 (February 1873): 225–35.

At this moment, Smith might have been perceived as a fraud. He did not discover the treasure he had asserted was on Stowell's property. He was compensated for his services. Consequently, his destiny depended on the testimony of his employer, who was believed to have been defrauded. The interrogation of Stowell proceeded as follows:

Q— Did not the prisoner Joseph Smith have a horse of you?

Ansr [*sic*] Yes.

Q— Did not he go to you and tell you, that an angel had appeared unto him, and authorised [*sic*] him to get the horse from you?

Ansr [*sic*] No, he told me no such story.

Q— Well; How did had he the horse of you?

Ansr [*sic*] He bought him of me, as another <any other> man would do.

Q— Have you had your pay?

Ansr [*sic*] That is not your business.

*The question being again put*

witness replied, “I hold his note for the price of the horse, which I consider as good as the pay— for I am well acquainted with Joseph Smith Jr, and know him to be an honest man; and if he wishes I am ready to let him have another horse on the same terms.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the concerns expressed by his family members, Smith's employer recognized the young man as honest and trustworthy. Stowell, who embraced the practices of folk magic, hired Smith, who was also a practitioner of folk magic. Therefore, the rational and enlightened perspective may not accurately represent the reality as experienced by those deeply involved in folk magic. The seer surrounded himself with individuals who shared his belief system, seeking comfort among those unafraid to openly embrace a magical worldview.

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<sup>60</sup> History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], 44- 45, *The Joseph Smith Papers*.

Smith's associates played a crucial role in preparing him for the future task of translating an ancient record, as the narrative he presented drew heavily from concepts directly derived from the realm of folk magic. In 2018, the church initiated an official historical account in a four-part series titled *Saints*. The first volume presented the official narrative of Smith's encounter with the Golden Plates, which later became The Book of Mormon.

As Joseph prayed, a light appeared beside his bed and grew brighter until it filled the entire loft. Joseph looked up and saw an angel standing in the air. The angel wore a seamless white robe that came down to his wrists and ankles. Light radiated from him, and his face shone like lightning...

The angel called him by name and introduced himself as Moroni. He said God had forgiven Joseph of his sins and now had a work for him to do...

Moroni spoke of gold plates buried in a nearby hill. On the plates was etched the record of an ancient people who once lived in the Americas. The record told of their origins and gave an account of Jesus Christ visiting them and teaching the fullness of His gospel. Buried with the plates, Moroni said, were two seer stones...

Before departing, the angel commanded Joseph to take care of the plates and show them to no one unless otherwise instructed.<sup>61</sup>

The church embraced and disseminated this narrative, which recounted a spirit's visitation revealing the location of a buried record in a nearby hill. The narrative further elaborated on a divine plan that included a set of seer stones, which enabled Smith to translate the record from its ancient language into a contemporary form suitable for the masses. This meticulously crafted narrative contains elements that directly aligned with Smith's money-digging activities.

The narrative of Moroni and his buried treasure resonated with the prevalent fascination for hidden riches in central New York, exemplified by the legend of Captain Kidd. Ronald Huggins, a professor of Theological and Historical Studies at Salt Lake Theological Seminary, suggested that the allure of Captain Kidd's treasure likely influenced the development of the

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<sup>61</sup> *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 22-23.

story surrounding Smith's heavenly visitor.<sup>62</sup> Other historians have supported this intriguing perspective. Although the church's official account identified Moroni as an angelic figure, some historians, including D. Michael Quinn and H. Michael Marquardt, have reinterpreted this claim based on available evidence. They suggest that Moroni's role more closely resembled that of a 'treasure guardian,' a designation supported by primary source records.<sup>63</sup> Before acquiring the Golden Plates, the prophet's descriptions of his interactions with Moroni mirrored the language used by treasure hunters when recounting their encounters with treasure guardians.

Joseph and Hiel Lewis, cousins of Smith's wife Emma, recounted their understanding of Moroni. "In all this narrative, there was not one word about "visions of God," or of angels, or heavenly revelations. All his information was by that dream, and that bleeding ghost. The heavenly visions and messages of angels, etc., contained in Mormon books, were after-thoughts, revised to order."<sup>64</sup> The phrase "bleeding ghost" used in the account is further explained by Smith Sr.'s words. When he shared the story told to him by his son, the elder Smith stated, "...in his dream, a very large and tall man appeared to him, dressed in an ancient suit of clothes, and the clothes were bloody."<sup>65</sup> The emphasis on a bloodstained figure guiding the prophet aligned with the prevalent trope in the realm of magic, where the spirit of a deceased individual guarded

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<sup>62</sup> Ronald V. Huggins, "From Captain Kidd's Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni: Changing Dramatis Personae in Early Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 4 (2003): 17–20. Captain Kidd's treasure legend originates from the late 17th-century piracy era. Kidd, initially a privateer turned pirate, was executed in 1698. The story suggests he buried a significant fortune before his capture, sparking numerous treasure hunt legends. Despite extensive searches, the actual existence and location of Kidd's treasure remain unconfirmed, adding a historical mystery to the legacy of this notorious pirate.

<sup>63</sup> See D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* and H. Michael Marquardt's *Inventing Mormonism: Tradition and the Historical Record*.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph and Hiel Lewis, "Mormon History. A New Chapter, About to Be Published," *Amboy [Illinois] Journal* 24 (30 April 1879): 1 in *Early Mormon Documents Vol 4.*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1996) 305.

<sup>65</sup> H. Michael Marquardt Papers, 1800-2017, ACCN 0900, Box 147, Folder 10, University of Utah Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

a treasure. This notion gained credence as the Book of Mormon identified Moroni as the one who buried the record for later discovery, ultimately perishing in the conflict between the Nephites and Lamanites.<sup>66</sup>

Smith made his first visit to the hill on November 22, 1823. He failed to obtain the plates. During one of his visits, Moroni informed him that he could not obtain the plates at that time. Instead, he had to return the following year on the same date with the right companion. The angel identified Joseph's older brother as the one required to obtain the plates. However, his brother passed away before the appointed date arrived.

Confounded by his inability to follow the treasure guardian's instructions, Smith feared he would never obtain the plates. In 1824, he returned without his brother, only to be turned away by the spirit once more. The idea that the deceased brother was crucial for retrieving the plates sparked concern in the central New York community, with some fearing that Joseph Smith might attempt to exhume his brother's body to appease the spirit. However, this did not happen.<sup>67</sup> In 1825, Smith sought guidance from another seer, but it was to no avail. During his visit in 1826, the spirit instructed him to 'do right by the Lord...', which Smith interpreted as a call to marry. As a result, Smith married Emma Hale, and in 1827, he brought her along, finally succeeding in retrieving the plates.<sup>68</sup> With the plates, the seer stones, a breastplate, and other items in his possession, Smith now faced the daunting task of translating an ancient record. The success of this task once again relied on his experience as a seer.

Having the record in his possession, Smith began the translation process. In Mormonism, 'translation' refers to the revelation of an account from the ancient record, which ultimately

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<sup>66</sup> The Nephites and Lamanites are central figures in the religious narrative presented in the Book of Mormon. According to the text, these groups were descendants of a family that migrated from Jerusalem to the Americas around 600 BCE.

<sup>67</sup> Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 160-161.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 163,165.

resulted in the Book of Mormon. Traditional translation involves the reader examining the original work and either reciting the findings to a scribe or recording them personally. The presence of the source material is essential for the act of translation. What makes his translation intriguing is that the source materials, the Golden Plates, were not used at all during the process.<sup>69</sup> David Whitmer stated,

“Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus, the Book of Mormon was translated by God's gift and power, not by any power of man.”<sup>70</sup>

Emma Smith claimed to have, “...frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.”<sup>71</sup>

Edward Stevenson recalled the words of Martin Harris when he stated, “By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the prophet and written by Martin and when finished he would say ‘Written,’ and if correctly written that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected, so that the translation was just as it was engraven on the plates, precisely in the language then used.”<sup>72</sup>

Combining these accounts reveals the actual process and how it deviated from conventional translation practices. The Golden Plates remained hidden under a sheet or in a box

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<sup>69</sup> Three accounts explain the translation process. These accounts come from individuals who worked as scribes for Joseph Smith during the process of translation.

<sup>70</sup> David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO, 1887).

<sup>71</sup> “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald*, October 1, 1879, 26 edition, 189.

<sup>72</sup> “One of the Three Witnesses,” *Millennial Star*, February 6, 1882, 44 edition, 86-87.

near the fireplace mantle, completely absent from the translation process. Instead, the experience more closely resembled the practices of magic and treasure-seeking, in stark contrast to the enlightened rationalism commonly associated with record translation.

As mysterious elements were at play in the translation process, people questioned Smith's work. Consequently, he sought verification of his work to substantiate his claims as a seer and translator. He produced a manuscript that contained the original symbols from the plates along with their corresponding translations. The prophet assigned Martin Harris, a crucial supporter of the translation process, the task of bringing the manuscript for verification.<sup>73</sup> What happened between Harris and Charles Anthon is debated. Nevertheless, Harris left with the conviction that the translations were genuine.<sup>74</sup>

Bushman's account of the incident concerning the Anthon Transcript is the most comprehensive. He discussed the inconsistencies in Anthon's statements when describing his accounts of the meeting. In 1834, Anthon claimed that he saw through the hoax being carried out by Smith immediately and warned Harris to protect his wealth. He also claimed to have refused to provide a written opinion about the manuscript. In 1844, when questioned about the meeting, Anthon contradicted himself by introducing a detail that was absent from his earlier account. He claimed to have provided a written opinion 'without any hesitation' in an effort to expose the fraudulent activities of Joseph Smith. Bushman argued that Anthon's statements do not align with Harris's actions. In both of Anthon's accounts, he identified the manuscript as a hoax. If this were the case, Smith's assistant should have left with doubts. However, his account claimed that Anthon authenticated the manuscript and only denied the authentication when

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<sup>73</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, ed. Jed Woodworth (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2007), 64-65. Martin Harris made multiple stops to have the manuscript verified. Ultimately, he was referred to an individual at Columbia College known to be a master of classical literature, including the translation of some Egyptian hieroglyphs.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

Harris relayed that the symbols were from a book found by Smith. Regardless of what transpired, Harris left the meeting 'more convinced than before.'<sup>75</sup>

Joseph Smith claimed that the characters on the plates were in the form of 'reformed Egyptian.' It was an unknown language. Hence, his ability to translate it added credibility to his claims of divine power. An unknown language was translated into a book that presented a 'historical' retelling of an ancient American society. The story was implausible, yet Smith had believers.

As the translation process progressed, the work evolved into a religious narrative. It became the tale of an ancient civilization that journeyed from the Middle East to the Americas. A family established a civilization and witnessed periods of prosperity and failure. The people claimed to have seen Jesus after his crucifixion. The story incorporated specific words from Old Testament prophets and wove them into the narrative of a society previously unknown to the world. The seer intertwined the realms of magic and religion.

The intertwining of religion and magic played a crucial role in Smith's life. He existed in two distinct worlds. The narrative of a spirit guiding him to a long-lost record is deeply rooted in traditional tales of treasure-seeking. Likewise, when the record was in his possession, and the translation process began, Smith turned to magic to produce the work that eventually became the Book of Mormon. Using seer stones in a hat to have words illuminated in the darkness of the top hat was an action unsupported by the rational world of the Enlightenment. It stood in direct contrast to reason.

The discovery of a treasure captivated people from Smith's past. His reputation as a seer, attested to by individuals who sought his services in treasure hunting, added credibility to his claims as a visionary. Hence, the narrative about the origins of Mormonism should emphasize the

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66.



immense significance of the magical worldview. Without this context, the story of the Golden Plates might be dismissed as a mere fabrication. Yet, the prevalence of the magical worldview gave the narrative plausibility.

The creation of the Book of Mormon represented a merging of magic and religion. Magic facilitated the discovery of the treasure, and the treasure ultimately led to Jesus Christ. As Smith began the translation process, he distanced himself from money-digging, finding his treasure in the words that eventually became the Book of Mormon. He shifted his focus from magical pursuits to spiritual ones. Richard Bushman's observation aptly captures this transition: "The gold plates and angels scandalized rational Christians, while the religious impulse confused the money-diggers."<sup>76</sup> Smith merged religion and magic into something new.

The narrative in this chapter is far from comprehensive; there is much more to explore regarding Joseph Smith and the origins of Mormonism. Its aim has been to delve into Smith's evolution over time. The prophetic significance of the Book of Mormon goes beyond its reliance on the magical worldview that influenced Smith's upbringing. It marks the beginning of a magical believer's journey to acquire the tools necessary to become a prophet. Weber defined a prophet as a "purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment."<sup>77</sup> This contrasted with a priest or magician who possessed divine powers but lacked the authority to lead a hierarchical religious order.<sup>78</sup> Smith demonstrated divine powers that resonated with those around him.

He possessed the gift of seeing in the realm of magic, which manifested in his ability to locate an ancient treasure. This treasure transformed into a religious text. However, this singular

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>77</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 46.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

achievement did not elevate Smith to the status of a prophet. Despite finding a treasure, using seer stones to translate an ancient text, and producing a quasi-religious narrative from the translation process, he remained a magician in terms of his religious authority. This distinction was crucial. Smith's abilities allowed him to create a product that found a target audience. The deliberate choice was to intertwine the origins of Mormonism with magic. Without this connection, there would be no audience. A magician thrives on the audience's attention. Nevertheless, the magician often nurtures aspirations to become something more significant.

For Smith, that role would be one of a prophet. Other seers existed, including Chase. Others crafted narratives about ancient American civilizations, similar to Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, the prophet had to distinguish himself from these other magicians. This could only be accomplished by transitioning from the free-flowing aspect of magic into the ritualized world of religion. Smith transformed himself from a magician into a builder of a Christian denomination.

The following chapter will explore Smith's evolution from a magician to a prophet and how his brief time in this role shaped Mormonism and its belief system, setting the stage for its later complexities regarding race.

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<sup>79</sup> Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews: 1825 2nd Edition* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1996). The book was a nineteenth century work that explored the theory of Native American origins being linked to the lost tribes of Israel, proposing parallels between Native American cultures and ancient Hebrew traditions. Smith suggested that these similarities supported the idea of a shared ancestry, presenting a speculative historical and religious connection between indigenous peoples in America and the ancient Israelites

### Chapter 3

#### Charisma, Doctrine, and Tension

In April 1844, the future mayor of Boston, Josiah Quincy, along with Charles Francis Adams, son of John Quincy Adams, traveled up the Mississippi River to the flourishing city of Nauvoo, Illinois. This visit occurred two months before a mob killed Joseph Smith and his brother at a jail in Carthage, Illinois. Quincy's book *Figures of the Past*, published posthumously in 1883, contained his account of his encounter with the Mormon leader.<sup>1</sup> His historical account provided valuable insights into what Joseph Smith had evolved into, which marked a significant departure from his earlier years in central New York. Quincy introduced the account of his experience with Smith with the following passage:

It is by no means improbable that some future text-book, for the use of generations yet unborn, will contain a question something like this: What historical American of the nineteenth century has exerted the most powerful influence upon the destinies of his countrymen? And it is by no means impossible that the answer to that interrogatory may be thus written: Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet. And the reply, absurd as it doubtless seems to most men now living, may be an obvious commonplace to their descendants. History deals in surprises and paradoxes quite as startling as this. The man who established a religion in this age of free debate, who was and is to-day accepted by hundreds of thousands as a direct emissary from the Most High, — such a rare human being is not to be disposed of by pelting his memory with unsavory epithets. Fanatic, impostor, charlatan, he may have been; but these hard names furnish no solution to the problem he presents to us. Fanatics and impostors are living and dying every day, and their memory is buried with them; but the wonderful influence

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<sup>1</sup> Josiah Quincy, *Figures from the Past: From the Leaves of Old Journals* (Boston, MA: Roberts Brothers, 1883). Josiah Quincy's book *Figures of the Past* was published posthumously in 1883. It is a collection of essays and reminiscences about people Quincy had met or known during his lifetime. Quincy's purpose in writing the book was to record his personal observations of these people and to share his insights into their character and their contributions to American society. He also wanted to provide a record of his own experiences and observations of the political and social changes that had taken place during his lifetime. The book has been useful for historians due to the unique perspective on important people of the nineteenth century such as Joseph Smith, Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, and other prominent figures in American history.

which this founder of a religion exerted and still exerts throws him into relief before us, not as a rogue to be criminated, but as a phenomenon to be explained.<sup>2</sup>

The account contained significant praise for an individual born into the lower class and involved in the mystic practices of the uneducated. Quincy, a highly esteemed individual, regarded Joseph Smith as a figure that others struggled to comprehend. The prophet could not be easily dismissed as a charlatan, nor could he be definitively labeled as an impostor. Quincy reached these conclusions after witnessing precisely what Smith had established along the banks of the Mississippi River.

Quincy's account created the impression that Smith took himself quite seriously and regarded himself as significant. This message was conveyed during the tour of Nauvoo, led by the prophet himself, that Quincy undertook. Quincy reported, "Intelligence of our arrival had in some mysterious manner reached General Smith, and the prophet's own chariot, a comfortable carryall, drawn by two horses, soon made its appearance. It is probable that we owed the alacrity with which we were served to an odd blunder which had combined our names and personalities and set forth that no less a man than ex-President John Quincy Adams had arrived to visit Mr. Joseph Smith."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps due to an erroneous assumption about the visitors' identities, Smith held his own renown in such high regard that he believed a visit was imminent from John Quincy Adams, the former president and father of Quincy's companion.

Quincy described Smith's authority in the city. He was the Lieutenant General of an armed militia, which was one of a kind for a city. When Quincy asked Smith about the militia, he replied, "I decided that the commander of my troops ought to be a lieutenant-general, and I was, of course, chosen to that position. I sent my certificate of election to Governor Ford, and

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 376-377.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

received in return a commission of lieutenant-general of the Nauvoo Legion and of the militia of the State of Illinois.”<sup>4</sup>

Quincy further explored how Nauvoo showcased Smith's authority, though it allowed him to be a respected leader among his followers. When Quincy questioned the prophet about religious freedom, Smith assured him that preachers of any religion could come to Nauvoo. However, they had to be willing to interact with other faiths while in the city.<sup>5</sup> The prophet took pride in what he had built in Nauvoo, thanks to the hard work of those who followed him and his message.

In addressing Mormonism’s adherents, Quincy's companion, Charles Francis Adams, recorded in his journal that Nauvoo’s residents were not just simple farm people from where the Smith family originated. While those individuals were indeed present in the city, it was evident that the message of Mormonism and, more importantly, the prophet’s leadership, had attracted followers from distant places.<sup>6</sup> Mormonism was no longer just a movement for the yeoman farmer immersed in the magical worldview. Instead, it evolved into something much more extensive and diverse.

Before departing from Nauvoo, Quincy and the prophet engaged in a fascinating conversation that delved into the Smith’s psychological state and the sociological aspects of Mormonism. This conversation provided valuable insights into what the leader had evolved into and how he felt about his role.

I should not say quite all that struck me about Smith if I did not mention that he seemed to have a keen sense of the humorous aspects of his position. “It seems to me, General,” I said, as he was driving us to the river, about sunset, “that you have

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 390-392.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Francis Adams, *Diary*, May 14, 1844, as quoted in Henry Adams, “Charles Francis Adams visits the Mormons in 1844”, in Reprint of the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 68 (1944-47): 20.

too much power to be safely trusted to one man.” “In your hands or that of any other person,” was the reply, “so much power would, no doubt, be dangerous. I am the only man in the world whom it would be safe to trust with it. Remember, I am a prophet !” The last five words were spoken in a rich, comical aside, as if in hearty recognition of the ridiculous sound they might have in the ears of a Gentile.<sup>7</sup>

Smith undoubtedly evolved from the time when he was a farmboy questioning his worthiness as the translator of God's work into a man who felt at ease joking about the seemingly impossible nature of his role as the prophet.

By 1830, Smith published the Book of Mormon and established a church. The Church of Christ, the original name of what is now The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, was founded on April 6, 1830. While it is remarkable that Joseph Smith, a young man with limited formal education who had dabbled in folk magic, rose to become the leader of a new Christian denomination; even greater challenges lay ahead for him. From 1830 to 1844, the seer led a busy life. He was not only restoring the 'true church' to the Earth after millennia of apostasy but also evolving into a prophet.

This chapter explores Joseph Smith's transformation from a young farmer who dabbled in magic into the prophet of a thriving Christian denomination. It also delves into how the prophet leveraged his role as a charismatic leader to introduce teachings that put Mormonism in opposition to prevailing antebellum American values, including, but not limited to, the denomination's official views on race.

Martha Bradley-Evans undertook the task of writing the final volume in a three-part biographical series about Smith. The concluding book, *Glorious in Persecution: Joseph Smith, American Prophet 1839-1844*, centered on narrating Joseph Smith's life in the five years

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<sup>7</sup> Quincy, *Figures From the Past*, 397.

preceding his untimely death. The book's outset featured a captivating account of what it means to be a 'sustainable hero.'

A sustainable hero...possesses a specific type of staying power, weathering tremendous storms or conflicts while maintaining the devotion of followers over time and across space. While inconsistency can disqualify a conventional hero...a degree of inconsistency is one of the essential qualifications of a sustainable hero...this kind of inconsistent heroism is resilient, credible, possible, and reachable.<sup>8</sup>

This opening section appeared to encapsulate the foundation of Smith's rise. He evolved into a sustainable hero, to the extent that Mormonism thrived and expanded, unlike many other religious movements born in the Second Great Awakening, which dwindled after their original leader's demise. The success of Mormonism can be attributed to the efforts of the prophet during the period between 1830 and 1844.

The expansion of Mormonism in central New York necessitated Smith's transition from a seer and translator to a full-fledged prophet and revelator. Before publishing the Book of Mormon in 1830, he assumed the role of a revelator, and his early revelations focused on the ongoing development of the church. Two years prior to the arrival of the Book of Mormon, Smith received a revelation in 1828 asserting that there was no requirement for an organized church. The revelation said, "Behold this is my doctrine-whosoever repenteth and come unto me, the same is my church."<sup>9</sup> D. Michael Quinn, in his documentary history of the development of the Mormon authority, claimed that this revelation expressed the belief that no ordinances were required to enter God's church. This implied that activities like baptism were unnecessary.<sup>10</sup> The subsequent line in the revelation, which later became canonized scripture in

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<sup>8</sup> Martha Bradley-Evans, *Glorious in Persecution: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1839-1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016), 11.

<sup>9</sup> D&C, 10:67.

<sup>10</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1994), 5-6.

the church's Doctrine and Covenants, declared, “Whomsoever declareth more or less than this, the same is not of me, but is against me, therefore he is not of my church.”<sup>11</sup>

The universalistic nature of this revelation did little to aid in the organization of the new church. During the translation of the Book of Mormon, Smith and his scribe, Cowdery, encountered a commandment for followers of Christ to undergo baptism.<sup>12</sup> In 1829, they baptized each other. This practice became the new norm for the church and the first official ordinance, even though the earlier revelation stated that no specific action was necessary to enter God's church. In 1830, the prophet formally established the Church of Christ, and started organizing communities of believers into geographical groups known as branches and wards.<sup>13</sup>

While Smith and Cowdery baptized each other, this event was not devoid of a mystical experience. While attempting to complete the ordinance, the prophet received confirmation that he did not possess the authority to do so. The commonly accepted account of this event states that both men went to the Susquehanna River with the intention of baptizing each other. At this location, they were visited by a heavenly figure identified as John the Baptist, who bestowed the priesthood upon both men, and they dunked each other into the cold waters. The angel conferred the priesthood onto the two men, and they baptized one another. The Aaronic priesthood, as it was known, granted individuals the authority to baptize souls into the church.<sup>14</sup> This priesthood became one of the initial divisions of authority within the church. The revelation that only those

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<sup>11</sup> D&C, 10:68.

<sup>12</sup> Mosiah, 18: 12-13.

<sup>13</sup> Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, 6-7. The Church of Christ has no relation to modern day Churches of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> The narrative of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood occurs in many early documents. The Joseph Smith Papers Project has digitized many documents referencing the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood. For documents see, History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], p. 17, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, Account of Meetings, Revelation, and Blessing, 5–6 December 1834, p. 17, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, Appendix 5, Document 6. Blessing to Oliver Cowdery, 2 October 1835, p. 12, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, and History, circa Summer 1832, p. 1, *The Joseph Smith Papers*.



with the Aaronic priesthood could perform baptisms marked the commencement of a hierarchical structure in the church.

While there is a specific date for the restoration of the Aaronic priesthood, the conferral of the Melchizedek priesthood does not have a fixed date. However, after the visitation of John the Baptist, Smith and Cowdery were also visited by Peter, James, and John.<sup>15</sup> The new priesthood granted individuals the authority to lead the church. This priesthood was believed to be the same authority held by Jesus Christ himself. However, to avoid repetitive use of Christ's name, it was referred to as the Melchizedek priesthood.<sup>16</sup> The church regarded this priesthood as higher than the Aaronic, so those who received the Melchizedek priesthood held leadership positions. Individuals with the Aaronic priesthood could occupy positions of authority, but they could never hold a role higher than that of a member of the Melchizedek priesthood.

The division of the priesthood functioned as an early organizational tool for Smith. Next on the leader's agenda was to distinguish himself from others in the faith. The position of prophet, seer, and revelator had to be transformed into something that only one person on Earth could attain. The prior emphasis on magic and egalitarianism attracted numerous individuals to the denomination who sought to personally possess spiritual gifts. Although Smith originated from a culture where many people could supposedly locate lost objects using seer stones, that magical worldview had to be confined within the boundaries of acceptable Christianity.

Up to this stage in the development of Mormonism, Smith maintained an egalitarian perspective on spiritual and magical gifts; however, this perspective would soon evolve. On

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<sup>15</sup> Editors of the *Joseph Smith Papers Project* note that accounts surrounding the reception of the Melchizedek Priesthood are often less specific and more complex. The story about this incident vary from account to account.

<sup>16</sup> For accounts regarding the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood see, *JSP*, Documents, vol 4., 408-412, Cowdery, Oliver, 1806-1850. Oliver Cowdery letter, Tiffin, Ohio to Phinehas H. Young, Nauvoo, Illinois, Reuben Miller journals, 1848-1849; Journal, 1848; Church History Library, 17.

April 6, 1830, the same day the church was formally established, Cowdery, who held both priesthoods, proceeded to ordain the leader of the church to a new office. He ordained Smith as “Prophet, Seer, and Revelator.”<sup>17</sup> D. Michael Quinn noted a critical detail. In the initial account, Smith is designated as 'a prophet' rather than 'the prophet.'<sup>18</sup>

In 1830, later that year, Hiram Page, one of the original witnesses of the Book of Mormon, asserted that he possessed the ability to receive revelations using a seer stone, similar to Smith. Page traveled and employed his seer stone to provide revelations to members of the church. The prophet recounted the event in the first official history of the church:

To our great grief, however, we soon found that Satan had been lying in wait to deceive, and seeking whom he might devour. Brother Hiram Page had in his possession [sic] a certain stone, by which he had obtained certain “revelations” concerning the upbuilding of Zion, the order of the Church, etc., all of which were entirely at variance with the order of God’s house, as laid down in the New Testament, as well as in our late revelations. As a conference meeting had been appointed for the 26th day of September, I thought it wisdom not to do much more than to converse with the brethren on the subject, until the conference should meet. Finding, however, that many, especially the Whitmer family and Oliver Cowdery, were believing much in the things set forth by this stone, we thought best to inquire of the Lord concerning so important a matter...<sup>19</sup>

Smith experienced a problem at this moment. His magical practices, which others in the movement also employed, served as practical means of communicating with God. So, if Smith, just a magical treasure-seeker, could receive revelations through his tools of the trade, why could someone else not possess the same gifts? This line of thinking prompted key members of the movement to consider the possibility of having more than one prophet, seer, and revelator. Due to his background as a visionary individual, Page resembled Smith in many ways. Therefore the

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<sup>17</sup> David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Richmond, MO, 1887), 32.

<sup>18</sup> Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Co., 1932), 1:109-110.

movement's ordained leader had to separate himself. He achieved setting himself apart by receiving revelations intended for his closest followers.

The prophet left little room for Cowdery to interpret true messaging from God in his revelation for Cowdery:

1. Behold, I say unto thee, Oliver, that it shall be given unto thee, that thou shalt be heard by the church in all things whatsoever thou shalt teach them by the Comforter, concerning the revelations and commandments which I have given.
2. But, behold, verily, verily, I say unto thee, no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in the Church excepting my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., for he receiveth them even as Moses.
3. And thou shalt be obedient unto the things which I shall give unto him, even as Aaron, do declare faithfully the commandments and the revelations, with power and authority unto the Church.<sup>20</sup>

The revelations directed toward the Whitmer family followed a similar pattern:

1. Behold, I say unto you, David, that you have feared man and have not relied on me for strength as you ought.
2. But your mind has been on the things of the earth more than on the things of me, your Maker, and the ministry whereunto you have been called; and you have not given heed unto my Spirit, and those who were set over you, but have been persuaded by those whom I have not commanded.<sup>21</sup>

Both revelations occurred during a conference on September 26, 1830. The purpose of the meeting was to guide individuals toward the proper authority within the church in response to the news of Page's spurious revelations. In his account, Smith wrote, "At length our conference assembled. The subject of the stone previously mentioned was discussed, and after considerable investigation, Brother Page, as well as the whole church who were present, renounced the said stone, and all things connected therewith, much to our mutual satisfaction and happiness."<sup>22</sup> The meeting and the revelations had the purpose of consolidating the power of revelation and church

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:110-11

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:116.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:115.

leadership exclusively in Smith's hands. The prophet had previously conveyed revelations for the church, but this was the first instance in which his revelation from God distinguished him as the sole recipient of information concerning the direction of His restored church.

In the first year of the church, Smith sent missionaries into the Ohio region to find converts among the Lamanites.<sup>23</sup> This mission brought a multitude of converts, many of whom were members of congregations led by Sidney Rigdon.<sup>24</sup>

Rigdon held a ministerial license. He initiated his professional career as a minister in Ohio. He later took charge of a church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 1826, he departed from Pittsburgh and returned to Bainbridge, Ohio, and managed a small congregation. While in Ohio for the second time, he crossed paths with Mormon missionary, Parley P. Pratt. In 1830, the missionary offered him a copy of the Book of Mormon. Rigdon permitted Pratt to preach the gospel of the church in his church buildings.

This provided the Mormons with entry to the town of Kirtland, an area where Rigdon wielded significant influence as the town's minister. These individuals adopted a communitarian lifestyle, similar to that of Mormonism. As a result, the missionaries achieved remarkable success in their efforts to preach to these people. Rigdon and his wife converted to Mormonism and leveraged their esteemed positions to extend the influence of Mormonism within the Kirtland community. His gift for preaching rapidly propelled him up Mormonism's hierarchy, establishing him as one of Smith's most trusted confidants.

With his growing prominence within the church, it did not take long for his influence to become evident. On December 30, 1830, Smith received a revelation about the relocation of the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Biography of Sidney Rigdon, MSS 1274, Folder 1, Papers of John Wickliffe Rigdon, 1830-1912, 19th Century Western & Mormon Manuscripts; L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library; Smith, *History of the Church*, 120-125.

Latter-Day Saints while in Rigdon's company. "A Commandment to Sidney & Joseph saying Behold I say unto ye that it is not Expedient in me that ye should Translate any more until ye shall go to the Ohio."<sup>25</sup> The prophet's revelation instructed church members to relocate to Ohio, particularly the Kirtland region, where Rigdon and others had made numerous conversions, and to establish a 'New Jerusalem' among the Lamanite people.

With the presence of seasoned religious leader Rigdon and other intelligent individuals like Parley Pratt, Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, and more, Kirtland witnessed Smith's transformation into an even more charismatic leader. Here, he initiated the construction of a more extensive church hierarchy that endures to this day. In 1835, following some time in Kirtland, the prophet established an additional layer of church leadership. He created the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on February 14. Minutes from the meeting identify the following twelve members as being ordained to the office of apostle: Thomas B. Marsh, David W. Patten, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Orson Hyde, William E. McLellin, Parley P. Pratt, Luke Johnson, William Smith, Orson Pratt, John F. Boynton, and Lyman E. Johnson.<sup>26</sup>

In May, Smith expounded upon the goals of this new body. "The president (Joseph Smith) then stated that the Twelve will have no right to go into Zion or any of its stakes and there undertake to regulate the affairs thereof where there is a standing High Council. But it is their duty to go abroad and regulate all matters relative to the different branches of the Church."<sup>27</sup> Similar to his actions during the Page episode in New York, Smith once again employed his role as a prophet to curtail the authority of other figures within the church. The minutes stated the Quorum of the Twelve held no jurisdiction in areas with a council of leaders. Therefore, the

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<sup>25</sup> Revelation, 30 December 1830. (*JSP*, Documents 1: 226-227).

<sup>26</sup> Record of the Twelve, 14 February–28 August 1835. (*JSP*, Orson Hyde Supplementary Materials)

<sup>27</sup> Minutes and Discourse, 2 May 1835. (*JSP*, Documents 5, 302).

Quorum's goal was to serve as a select group of missionaries. While today the Twelve serve as church leaders alongside the First Presidency, this was not the group's position Smith laid out.<sup>28</sup>

Just fourteen days after organizing the Quorum of the Twelve, the prophet further developed the church hierarchy, positioning himself at the top. On February 28, 1835, he received a revelation that instructed him to establish a new organization within the church. The Seventy followed the guidance of the Quorum of the Twelve. Furthermore, the revelation restricted their authority to areas where a member of the Twelve was absent.<sup>29</sup> Essentially, the Quorum of the Seventy was a support system for the Twelve Apostles. With the organization of both groups, the church developed a massive missionary program to spread the gospel and Smith's knowledge.

The journey from a lost record to the Book of Mormon, the formation of a formal church, and the establishment of a hierarchy based on the Old and New Testaments solidified the prophet's legacy as a church builder. However, Smith's charismatic tendencies did not end with his denomination. He was on his way to becoming a city builder, specifically the founder of what he termed *Zion*. As with anything, the hefty task came with success and failure. However, the mark of a charismatic leader is the ability to maintain control despite apparent shortcomings. The Saints' time in Kirtland afforded him the opportunity to earn his place as a sustainable hero.

Smith and his confidants focused on establishing the city of *Zion*. With this goal in mind, he maintained constant contact with missionaries dispatched across the United States and abroad. One area that became vital to Mormon history was that of Missouri. The prophet directed

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<sup>28</sup> The stated position of the Quorum of the Twelve is extremely important in the next chapter. As Brigham Young takes control of the church, it is necessary to note that he was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. There are not plans for succession that call for the Quorum or more specifically a single member of the Quorum to take control of the church.

<sup>29</sup> Minutes, Feb. 28-Mar. 1, 1835 (*JSP*, Documents 4: 255-286) and Minutes, Mar. 1, 1835 (*JSP*, Documents 4: 259-261)

ministers to Missouri to spread the gospel to Native Americans.<sup>30</sup> One of the missionaries was Cowdery, who corresponded with Smith about the challenges they faced in preaching to the indigenous people. To share the gospel, they needed a state-issued permit, which, unfortunately, was not granted. Therefore, the group focused on proselytizing the white men in the region.<sup>31</sup>

With success in proselytizing Missourians, the state became much more than a simple ground for converts. It was the subject of a meaningful revelation by Joseph Smith. The search for Zion concluded with words directly from God that identified Independence, Missouri, as the location of the gathering place of the Saints. The prophecy stated, “Missorie [*sic*]...is the Land which I, have appointed & consecrated for the gathring [*sic*] of the Saints. Wherefore, this is the land of promise & the place for the City of Zion...Behold the place which is now called Independence is the centre place, & the spot for the Temple is lying westward upon a lot which is not far from the court-house.”<sup>32</sup> Not only did Smith claim a new home for the Mormons, but he also predicted a temple erected at a specific location.

The prophet doubled down on his prediction on August 3, 1831, when he dedicated the ground on which the temple would be built. His first counselor, Sidney Rigdon, declared the city a holy land while Smith placed a stone to commemorate the temple location.<sup>33</sup> With the land dedicated and a temple lot procured, the Saints considered the land safe to populate. An influx of Mormons flooded into Jackson County, Missouri. At this point, the church had established settlements in Kirtland, Ohio, and Jackson County, Missouri.

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<sup>30</sup> For Joseph Smith, Native Americans were the descendants of the Lamanites. Lamanites were a group of individuals represented in the Book of Mormon, marked with “dark skin” as to differentiate themselves from the Nephites. The Lamanites rebelled against the word of God while the Nephites originally accepted the message.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver Cowdery, Letter to Newel K. Whitney and Others, Mat 7, 1831. (*JSP*, Documents 1: 294-297).

<sup>32</sup> Revelation, July 20, 1831. (*JSP*, Documents 2: 7-8).

<sup>33</sup> Whitmer History 32 (*JSP*, History 2: 45).

In the two years following Zion's location in Missouri, Smith continued to work towards establishing his authority amongst his people.<sup>34</sup> He controlled both settlements despite being in Kirtland for most of the time. He sent high priests back and forth between Kirtland and Missouri to deliver his revelations. These teachings served as the basis for law and order amongst Mormon settlements in Missouri. Meanwhile, the prophet was still busy building a religious empire in Ohio. In December 1832, Smith received a revelation in which the Lord instructed him to construct a temple. “Ye have sinned against me a very grievous sin in that ye have not considered the great commandment in all things that I have given unto you concerning the building of mine house for the preparation wherewith I deign to prepare mine Apostles to prune my vineyard for the last time.”<sup>35</sup> By 1836, the Saints completed the construction of the first LDS temple.<sup>36</sup>

A new translation of the Bible, a new temple, and a location for Zion served as proof of Joseph Smith's being a true prophet. These successes were not longstanding. The Book of Mormon seemed prophetic in its description of Zion. The book detailed a civilization subject to cycles of prosperity and hardship.<sup>37</sup> The Saints appeared to be living this exact story.

With Mormons being viewed as outsiders, it was natural that a sudden increase in the Mormon population in Missouri would have caused some concern. However, some beliefs held

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<sup>34</sup> Fred C. Collier and William S. Harwell, eds., *Kirtland Council Minute Book* (Salt Lake City, UT: Collier's Pub. Co., 2002), 7. The entry by Frederick G. Williams in the council minutes confirms that he and Joseph Smith concluded their process of translating the Bible. Years prior, Smith worked on his own translation of the New Testament. The process sought to correct what Joseph Smith saw as omissions in the Bible that were lost since Christ's time on earth. Smith worked with Sidney Rigdon and Williams on the process of translating the Old Testament as well. These works, completed in 1833, now serve as what is known as the Inspired Translation of the Holy Bible.

<sup>35</sup> Revelation, June 1, 1833 (*JSP*, Documents 3: 106).

<sup>36</sup> Journal, March 27, 1836. (*JSP*, Journals 1: 172-185).

<sup>37</sup> 4 Nephi 1.



by the Saints led to the beginning of a brutal period for them. This period fed the persecution complex that fueled the Mormons' eventual exodus to the Utah territory.

Admitted into the union in 1820, Missouri entered the country as a slave state as part of the Missouri Compromise. Antebellum America experienced a great deal of tension between slave and free states. Therefore, the encroachment of a group holding liberal views regarding slavery in a territory admitted as a slave state was doomed from the beginning. While pro-slaveryites outnumbered abolitionists, the Mormons' history of bloc-voting offered a threat to inhabitants. A newspaper article served as the event that sparked a lasting conflict between Missourians and Mormons.

W.W. Phelps, publisher of *The Evening and Morning Star*, wrote an article entitled "Free People of Color" in the July 1833 edition. The paper invited free blacks to come to Missouri and join the Saints in Zion. The article expounded upon the slave laws of Missouri and sought to warn black Saints to be careful if they planned to join the Mormons in Jackson County.<sup>38</sup> The Latter-Day Saints, seen as Yankees by many in the South due to their roots in the North, led to the article being taken as an attack on southern ways of life.<sup>39</sup> Smith's first major setback stemmed from his church's stance on race and religion. An official church publication conveyed the Mormon church's stance on the spiritual equality of black individuals.

The Mormons and locals were unofficially at war with mobs raised by the Missourians. The initial mob gathered at the courthouse and made the following declaration, "We do hereby most solemnly declare that no Mormon shall in future move to or settle in this [Jackson] county that those now here, who shall give a definite pledge of their intention within a reasonable time

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<sup>38</sup> "Free People of Color," *The Evening and Morning Star*, July 1833, 109.

<sup>39</sup> Dan Vogel, *Charisma Under Pressure: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1831-1839* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2023), 244-246.

to remove out of the county, shall be allowed to remain unmolested...<sup>40</sup> Mobs promised to force the Mormons out of town. This group violence lacked legal backing, and therefore the Saints were not likely to remove themselves from their homes in Missouri. However, the legal process of eliminating church members from Missouri followed soon after. Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs enacted the Mormon Extermination Order. In a message to the general of the Missouri militia, he declared,

The case is now a very plain one-the “Mormons” must be subdued; and peace restored to the community; you will therefore proceed without delay to execute the former orders. Full confidence is reposed in your ability to do so; your force will be amply sufficient to accomplish the object. Should you need the aid of artillery, I would suggest you may need. You are authorized to request the loan of in the name of the state of Missouri. The ringleaders of this rebellion should be made an example of; and if it should become necessary for the public peace, the “Mormons” should be exterminated, or expelled from the state.<sup>41</sup>

The Saints were now official targets of the Missouri government, and a legal license to kill had been issued.

Persecutors targeted the Mormons in Missouri due to their views on race, rather than their religious beliefs. Having its origins in New York, the denomination introduced many northern ideas, including support for abolition, which became evident in Smith's later presidential campaign.

Joseph Smith's *History of the Church* included copies of letters sent to federal officials seeking aid for the Saints in Missouri. The first one was a petition to the President of the United States. One hundred and fourteen individuals, including Edward Partridge (Presiding Bishop), John Corrill, John Whitmer, Isaac Morly, and W.W. Phelps, signed this first petition. A second letter to the president accompanied the first. This letter, composed by Algernon S. Gilbert, W.W.

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<sup>40</sup> B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1930), 1: 331.

<sup>41</sup> Extermination Order": Lilburn Boggs, Governor of Missouri, Executive Order 44, October 27, 1838.

Phelps, and Edward Partridge, addressed the violation of their property rights by the Missouri government. A final letter sent by W.W. Phelps to US Senator Thomas Hart Benton requested the senator's assistance in seeking protection for the Mormons in Missouri from the President of the United States.<sup>42</sup>

The government provided no assistance to the Saints, which resulted in their expulsion from the state. Dan Vogel, in his book *Charisma Under Pressure*, discussed how the Mormons attempted to resist in Missouri. This involved the formation of a paramilitary force known as the Danites. The Danites engaged in a pseudo-war against the Missourians to prevent the extermination of the Mormons by the Missouri forces. The actions of this illegal militia group, operating under Smith's leadership, eventually resulted in his arrest. Although they made efforts to resist and requested federal assistance based on claims of religious persecution, the Missourians eventually expelled the Saints.<sup>43</sup>

From 1833 to 1838, the Mormons were in constant conflict with the Missourians. On October 31, 1838, Missouri troops attacked the Mormon settlement of Far West. Thousands of soldiers were poised to assault the Saints and annihilate them. Faced with this situation, Smith surrendered himself. Missouri brought Smith to trial, with one of the charges being treason, stemming from his use of a personal militia to wage war against the state.<sup>44</sup> After the charges were filed, Justice King sent Smith and a few other Mormon leaders to prison, where they awaited their trial.<sup>45</sup> The trial never took place, as the LDS leaders managed to escape on April 22, 1839.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *HC*, 1: 483-487.

<sup>43</sup> Dan Vogel, *Charisma under Pressure: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1831-1839* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2023), 237-390.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 788.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 834.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 877. On April 22, 1839,

Smith escaped from a jail in Gallatin, Missouri, in a daring midnight plot. That evening, his friend Cyrus Wheelock visited him in jail, secretly providing him with a pepperbox pistol. Around midnight, as the jailor entered Smith's cell to bring him water, the prophet seized the jailor, pressing the gun to his chest and threatening to kill him if he made any noise. The inmate took the jailor's keys and locked him in the cell, then quickly freed his fellow inmates Caleb Baldwin and Alexander McRae. The three men rushed out of the jail into the yard, mounted horses waiting for them, and galloped northwards. They rode vigorously for about 20 miles until they reached a group of nearby camped Mormons. From there, they continued their escape, eventually arriving in Illinois, where they reunited with the main body of Mormons who had been expelled from Missouri. This dramatic jailbreak enabled the prophet to evade arrest and rejoin his followers.<sup>47</sup> After their escape, the vigilantes journeyed to Commerce, Illinois, soon renamed Nauvoo, which became the central hub of Mormonism.

In 1835, amid ongoing conflicts in Missouri, Smith acquired ancient Egyptian papyri, which he asserted contained writings attributed to the biblical figure Abraham. He subsequently produced a translation of these papyri, which he published in 1842 as the Book of Abraham. Verses in the book alluded to curses upon Pharaoh's descendants and the exclusion of Canaanites from the priesthood due to the 'curse of the black skin.' Although Smith never explicitly declared these teachings as doctrine, the church canonized the work after his death. Subsequent leaders employed the chosen verses to justify the priesthood ban. Considering that the events in Missouri were transpiring concurrently with the purchase of the papyri, the racist ideas presented in the text align with an individual who may have sought to protect his people from further violence.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 877.

Smith's critics often cite the translation of the Book of Abraham as evidence that the priesthood ban originated with the prophet in 1835. However, when considering the content of the book, it is essential to take into account the experiences in Missouri as vital context. The state of Missouri aimed to eradicate Mormons due to the perceived threat they posed to the state's racial norms. Hence, anything from Smith in the immediate aftermath of this time period should be understood in this context.

Nauvoo marked the final chapter in the life of the prophet. It is difficult to imagine that a man who had founded a Christian denomination, relocated an entire movement to another state, waged a proxy war using an illegal militia, and constructed a temple where he and others claimed to have seen heavenly messengers had any more room to enhance his charismatic authority. Nevertheless, Nauvoo emerged as the place where Joseph Smith's charisma shone more brightly than anywhere else. The failure in Missouri dealt him a significant blow. As mentioned earlier, resilient leaders may stumble, but they must rise stronger than before to maintain their authority. This was his mission in Nauvoo.

Missouri and Kirtland served as learning experiences for Smith. Challenged by the economic repercussions of losing both settlements, Smith's plans of constructing a new Zion for the Saints proved to be an uphill battle. The financial constraints made it evident that the prophet had to depend on the Saints to establish Zion. It could not be a top-down effort. Therefore, Smith, already a skilled orator, employed his persuasive language to rally the Mormons behind the cause of Zion. The story of Nauvoo transformed into an all-hands-on-deck adventure. When discussing the necessity for Zion's people to assist, he declared,

...united our energies for the upbuilding of the kingdom...The work which has to be accomplished in the last days is one of vast importance, and will call into action the energy, skill, talent, and ability of the Saints so that they may roll forth with that glory and majesty described by the prophet; and will consequently

require the concentration of the Saints, to accomplish works of such magnitude and grandeur.<sup>48</sup>

The prophet issued a call to action. He expected individuals to dedicate all their resources, including finances, skills, and labor, to gather in Zion. The Saints were tasked with relocating to Nauvoo and contributing to the development of the Mormon kingdom. The gathering of believers became a central theme in Smith's preaching in the newly established city. He delivered speeches welcoming 'polished Europeans,' the 'Degraded Hottentot,' and individuals 'of every color.'<sup>49</sup> In Nauvoo, everyone was considered equal in the Lord's eyes. Similarly, everyone had something to contribute to Zion's construction.

Swiftly, the Mormons transformed Nauvoo from a malaria-infested swamp into a bustling city along the Mississippi River.<sup>50</sup> The expansion of Nauvoo reaffirmed Smith's role as a city builder. However, even more significant for Smith's charismatic leadership was his capacity to enact crucial doctrinal changes in the movement. The revelation of polygamy characterized the Nauvoo period. He spoke about these matters while aiming to restore the ways of the prophets of old. In 1841, the prophet publicly discussed the practice of polygamy. In one of his initial addresses on the topic, he stated,

Suppose we send one of our Elders to Turkey or India...where they practiced polygamy and he would say to them, "Your laws are not good, you should put away your plural wives; what would they do to him?" They would [ask]..."Elder, is there not a land of Zion, a place where the saints should gather to?" The Elder should not lie to him. He shall say, "Yes, Brother, there is a land of Zion where saints of God are required to gather to...the laws of Zion are such that you can

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<sup>48</sup> *History of the Church*, 4:171.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:213

<sup>50</sup> For more on the economic and political aspects of Nauvoo, see Benjamin E. Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021).

bring your wives and enjoy them here as well as there,” the Elder shall say to that Brother.<sup>51</sup>

Although this marked the first public discussion of polygamy for many, Smith's assistant, William Clayton, recalled the prophet teaching about the importance of the practice many years prior.<sup>52</sup>

The significance of polygamy in Smith's story is closely tied to his extraordinary power. The prophet established a denomination in which the hierarchical structure distinguished him as the sole figure capable of receiving direct revelation from God. As these revelations were transcribed, they formed the foundation for the beliefs and practices of the church. The prophet's power and authority reached such a level during this period that he managed to introduce a system of relationships that challenged the traditional values of Christian marriage. By referencing its presence in the Old Testament, he asserted divine guidance as the rationale for the practice.

Polygamy served as a means for Smith to neutralize potential threats to his power. He achieved this through two distinct methods. First, he imparted the doctrine of plural marriage to other leaders. It evolved into a rite of passage for individuals seeking the highest levels of salvation in Mormon theology. As men attained a level of trust from the prophet, they were permitted to enter the exclusive group that had knowledge of and permission to practice polygamy. This gave rise to what appeared to be an aristocratic class in Mormonism, a kind of 'royalty' who had the privilege to practice a sacred sacrament reserved for the worthy.

Second, Smith started to construct an extended family tree. He married many women from all walks of life in Mormonism. He aimed to diminish the influence of potential threats by

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<sup>51</sup> Joseph Lee Robinson, Journal, typescript, 41-42, quoted in Martha Bradley-Evans, *Glorious in Persecution: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1839-1844* (Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> William Clayton, Affidavit, Feb 16, 1874, MS 3423, Box 1, Folder 6.

establishing closer familial ties through marriage. For instance, the prophet attempted to enter into a plural marriage with Nancy Rigdon, the daughter of his first counselor. Although she was unwilling to marry, Smith persisted in testing his influence. After an unsuccessful proposal, he dictated what later became known as the 'Happiness Letter.' The letter followed a pattern of manipulation in which the prophet talked about how sometimes what is right in God's eyes is not always what is right in man's eyes.<sup>53</sup> If one were to examine the letter in isolation, without considering the context of Nauvoo and polygamy, it might seem like just another letter addressing the will of God, much like others composed and delivered by Smith. However, when placed in the context of a failed proposal to enter into a secret plural marriage, it served as a clear example of a charismatic leader attempting to leverage his power to influence the actions of others through their social currency.

The issue of polygamy has remained a subject of intense debate in Mormon Studies. Apologists like Brian Hales have attempted to portray Smith as reluctantly embracing plural marriage as a doctrine, despite his personal reservations. He has been a prominent advocate in this ideological perspective. In his article 'Joseph Smith's Personal Polygamy,' he evaluated Smith's motivations and actions in introducing polygamy among his followers in the early 1840s. It challenged the perspective that Smith was solely motivated by lust or power; instead it argued that he reluctantly took plural wives due to an angelic threat if he did not comply. The article explored the prophet's deliberate interactions with potential plural brides, his refusal of certain potential relationships, his tolerance for rejected proposals without retaliation, his self-perception as a sincere husband to his wives, and potential motivations such as dynastic connections and premortal promises. The analysis suggested that Smith viewed polygamy as a challenging commandment and sincerely attempted to follow it, despite facing external opposition and inner

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<sup>53</sup> Letter to Nancy Rigdon, circa Mid-April 1842. (*JSP*, Documents 9:413-418).



turmoil. The analysis presented Smith as an imperfect yet earnest prophet striving to establish a practice he believed to be divinely mandated.<sup>54</sup>

Historian David Whittaker took a different approach. In his article “Early Mormon Polygamy Defenses,” he analyzed writings by early Mormon missionaries in the 1850s who defended the controversial practice of polygamy, which the church publicly announced in 1852. Mormon authors felt compelled to defend the principle against criticism, relying extensively on Orson Pratt's theological arguments based on scripture and nature. Pamphlets by Belinda Pratt and Orson Spencer presented arguments based on natural law and reformist perspectives. Mormon writers often referenced non-Mormon proponents of polygamy, such as Martin Luther and John Milton. These arguments mirrored the southern defenses of slavery, illustrating the Mormons' ideological dedication to polygamy as an alternative to a deteriorating social order, despite eventually abandoning the practice.<sup>55</sup>

Both articles addressed early Mormon defenses of polygamy in the nineteenth century. However, Hales' article specifically focused on analyzing Joseph Smith's personal behaviors and motivations in taking plural wives in the 1840s. It aimed to provide a balanced view countering critics who accused Smith of being solely driven by lust or power. In contrast, the Whittaker article examined public writings and pamphlets by Mormon missionaries. While Hales' article sought to understand Smith's private perspective, the Whittaker article analyzed the public discourse used to defend polygamy to outsiders. Both revealed nineteenth century Mormons' deep ideological commitment to polygamy despite the difficulties and opposition they faced.

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<sup>54</sup> Brian C. Hales, “Joseph Smith’s Personal Polygamy,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 2 (2012): 163–228.

<sup>55</sup> David J Whittaker, “Early Mormon Polygamy Defenses,” *Journal of Mormon History* 11 (1984): 43–63.

Polygamy clearly disturbed many individuals.. By this point, Mormonism had converts from mainline Protestant sects that considered practices such as plural marriage signs of barbarism. Although not the main focus of this dissertation, polygamy was one aspect that increased tension surrounding the existence of the Mormons in Nauvoo.

Joseph Smith was also not backing down from issues that haunted him in Missouri. As previously mentioned, the egalitarian views of race by early Latter-Day Saints caused a great deal of stress in American society. Smith's leadership turned the Mormons into a unified voting bloc. The Mormon vote directly reflected the prophet's words. In the eyes of many, the most dangerous aspect of this were Mormonism's views on race. Antebellum America, entrenched in a battle over slavery, took notice of the bloc of LDS voters in Nauvoo. Therefore, the prophet's views on slavery, and more importantly, on race, became subjects that heightened the tension between his denomination and the larger society.

Smith's views on slavery were clear. Historian Martha Bradley-Evans made a strange statement in *Glorious in Persecution: Joseph Smith, American Prophet, 1839-1844*. Her book relied on the narrative that the prophet pushed a history of persecution to maintain his status as an unquestioned leader. While in-depth, the author of this ideological narrative lost sight of the facts. She insisted, "Joseph tended not to articulate clearly his position on race, and we are left to tease meaning from the way he engaged in dialogue over the issues of slavery and abolitionism."<sup>56</sup> Bradley-Evans then restated a series of specific views of the prophet regarding the two topics.

Shortly after settling groups of Saints in Missouri, Smith stated, "...it is not right that any man should be in bondage to another."<sup>57</sup> He appeared to tone down his abolitionist rhetoric three

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<sup>56</sup> Bradley-Evans, *Glorious in Persecution*, 451.

<sup>57</sup> *History of the Church*, 1:463 This revelation took place on December 16, 1833. Contextualizing this document requires placing it in relation to the previously mentioned

years after this statement; in 1836, two noteworthy comments did not align with his earlier racial statements. On January 14, 1836, Smith's history recorded his views of preaching to enslaved people. Instead of focusing his message on slavery, he addressed the issue through the lens of property rights. The prophet stated that it is "unlawful and unjust, and dangerous to the peace...to interfere with bond-servants, neither preach the gospel to, nor baptize them contrary to the will and wish of their masters..."<sup>58</sup>

In a second account from April 1836, a letter from Smith to Oliver Cowdery addressed the prophet's views of abolitionist efforts. Smith stated,

No one will pretend to say, that the people of the free states are capable of knowing the evils of slavery as those who hold them. If slavery is an evil, who, could we expect, would first learn it? Would the people of the free states, or would the slave states? All must readily admit, that the latter would first learn this fact. If the fact was learned first by those immediately concerned, who would be more capable than they of prescribing a remedy?

And besides, are not those who hold slaves, persons of ability, discernment and candor? Do they not expect to give an account at the bar of God for their conduct in this life? It may, no doubt, with propriety be said, that many who hold slaves live without the fear of God before their eyes, and, the same may be said of many in the free states. Then who is the judge of this matter?

I do not believe that the people of the North have any more right to say that the South shall not hold slaves, than the South have to say the North shall...<sup>59</sup>

The prophet was aware of how individuals would use the document to disparage him as pro-slavery and anti-equality.<sup>60</sup> These two documents, although markedly different and more restrained than his earlier 1833 statement, require proper contextualization to understand. The

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newspaper article *Free People of Color*. The article by W.W. Phelps ran in the July 1833 edition of the church paper. Months later, before violence has broken out, Smith is doubling down on this view.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:249.

<sup>59</sup> Joseph Smith's Discourse on Abolitionism and Slavery as published in the *Latter-Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, April 1836, quoted in Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 21-25.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

earlier statements from Smith and Phelps represented a less restrained view of the Saints. Speaking openly, they were unsure of the reaction to come. As of 1836, the Mormons and Missourians engaged in full-scale war.<sup>61</sup>

Natives of the Show-Me-State forced the settlers in Zion off of their property. Their rights were violated, and as a result, they petitioned the federal government for assistance. Presenting Smith as a charismatic leader and hence a sustainable hero, he could seemingly “read the room.” His messaging reflected this. The church leaders petitioned the federal government for help in protecting their rights, primarily their property and religious rights. Therefore, if the messaging of the prophet and the wider church had continued to disrespect the “property rights” of enslavers, it would have weakened their plea for help. Contextualizing Smith’s 1836 messaging within the realm of his seeking to benefit his movement can clarify the out-of-place comments.

This explanation primarily highlighted Smith's pursuit of sustaining his power and the viability of the religious movement, illustrating why the messaging shifted after the prophet's escape from the dangers of Missouri to Nauvoo, Illinois. While the church supervised the construction of a new city, introduced new doctrines, justified polygamy, and developed a protective city charter, Smith felt a sense of security that allowed him to address issues with greater precision and directness.<sup>62</sup>

The Nauvoo Charter organized the city of Nauvoo, Illinois. It allowed for the creation of a city government, including a city council and municipal court. The court had reserved many

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<sup>61</sup>T. Adams Upchurch, *Abolition Movement* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2011), 36. Elijah Lovejoy, a fervent abolitionist, faced conflict with a pro-slavery mob in Illinois during the mid-1830s. In 1837, while defending his anti-slavery stance and his printing press, Lovejoy was killed by the pro-slavery group, becoming a martyr for the abolitionist cause.

<sup>62</sup> An Act to Incorporate the City of Nauvoo [16 Dec. 1840], *Laws of the State of Illinois* [1840–1841], *JSP*, Documents 7:472-478.

powers that were important for Joseph Smith and the legal troubles that continued to plague him. The court reserved the right to issue writs of habeas corpus. The charter included a provision for the city to produce a local militia, the Nauvoo Legion, which he served as Lieutenant General. Smith used the charter to protect himself and others from charges in states like Missouri. After his death, the state repealed the charter.

Historian John Dinger examined Smith's use of the Nauvoo City Council to enact extensive habeas corpus acts between 1841 and 1844. These acts granted unprecedented powers to Nauvoo's municipal court, enabling it to invalidate writs and examine the underlying charges, bypassing other jurisdictions. The State of Illinois granted these powers to the Mormons during Nauvoo's incorporation. This outraged non-Mormons in Illinois, fueling hostility against the Mormons. It also held significance in the development of habeas corpus law. These acts showcased the Mormons' innovative use of the law as a minority group. However, the unintended consequences had a lasting impact on Mormonism.<sup>63</sup>

The safety of Nauvoo enabled Mormonism to reveal its true teachings and, consequently, the accepted views of the church on race. In the same year as his controversial anti-abolitionist views, Smith was portraying a different spiritual perspective. By establishing a hierarchy in the church, he stratified Mormon society by imposing restrictions on the priesthood. While women didn't receive the priesthood during the original prophet's lifetime, blacks did. They received both levels of the priesthood, and achieved spiritual equality with white members. Elijah Abel, an African-American Saint, was baptized into the church in 1832. In 1836, he received a patriarchal blessing from Smith Sr., which entailed numerous promises from the Lord. He maintained good standing, and received the priesthood. Reports offered insight into Abel's role in

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<sup>63</sup> John S. Dinger, "Joseph Smith and the Development of Habeas Corpus in Nauvoo, 1841—44," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 3 (2010): 135–171.

the church. Documents from their time in Nauvoo revealed a close relationship between Abel and Smith, suggesting that the prophet was aware of the ordination of black men to the priesthood.<sup>64</sup>

As the prophet's tenure in Nauvoo advanced, he became the target of numerous lawsuits arising from his extralegal activities in Missouri and Illinois.<sup>65</sup> The extensive legal efforts to bring him down resulted in even greater charismatic output from the prophet. Smith, who had previously aimed to make Mormonism more acceptable to mainstream Christians by distancing it from its magical origins, had now reached a point in his leadership where he was ready to distinguish the Saints as something significantly unique. On April 7, 1844, while addressing the passing of a devoted follower, King Follett, Smith spoke to the congregation. He introduced numerous theological developments that differentiated Mormonism from mainstream Christian denominations.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 25-27.

<sup>65</sup> "Arrest of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet --the Governor, &c.," *The Quincy Whig*, June, 12, 1841. The newspaper article addresses the attempt by the Missouri government to apprehend Joseph Smith in Nauvoo in order to hold him accountable for his actions in Missouri, including his escape from imprisonment. The charge was squashed by Illinois judge, Stephen A. Douglas.

Reflections and Blessings, 16 and 23 August 1842 (*JSP*, Documents 10:414-425). The journal account, transcribed by William Clayton, addressed the arrest warrants for Porter Rockwell and Joseph Smith Jr. for their suspected roles in the attempted murder of former Missouri governor Lilburn Boggs.

Trial Report, 8–26 July 1843, as Published in Nauvoo Neighbor. *JSP*. Docket Entry, 1–circa 6 July 1843 [Extradition of JS for Treason], p. 55, *JSP*. and Habeas Corpus, 30 June 1843, Copy [Extradition of JS for Treason], p. 1, *JSP*. The series of documents address the arrest of Joseph Smith in Illinois on charges of treason during his time in Missouri. The Municipal Court of Nauvoo then issued a writ of habeas corpus, allowing them to review the arrest warrant for Smith. Upon receiving the warrant, they quashed the warrant and therefore freed Smith from threats of extradition to face charges in Missouri.

<sup>66</sup> Discourse, 7 April 1844, *Times and Seasons*; Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Willard Richards, p. 67, *JSP*; Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff, p. 133, *JSP*; Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Thomas Bullock, p. 14, *JSP*; and Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton, p. 11, *JSP*.

During the King Follett Sermon, Smith taught that God was once a man, like humans, who progressed to godhood through righteous living. He also emphasized that humans have the potential to achieve exaltation as gods through theosis or deification. He also asserted that God possessed a physically resurrected body of flesh and bones, rather than being an immaterial spirit. He further emphasized that many gods have attained exaltation, not just one Heavenly Father. The sermon also elaborated on ideas regarding the pre-existence of human souls as entities before birth. These radical teachings deviated from traditional Christianity and played a pivotal role in shaping core Mormon doctrines related to eternal progression, the concept of God as an exalted man, the existence of multiple gods, the potential for humans to achieve deification, and the pre-earth existence of spirits.

In 1844, the prophet expanded his charismatic presence into the political arena. While already holding the position of mayor in Nauvoo, along with several other official roles in the city, Smith decided to elevate his political involvement. He declared his candidacy for the United States presidency and initiated a campaign. Spencer W. McBride, the Associate Managing Director of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, has provided the most comprehensive examination of Smith's presidential candidacy. His book, *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom*, examined Joseph Smith's 1844 presidential campaign as an independent third-party candidate. During a period of increasing religious intolerance, Smith championed religious freedom and minority rights. His campaign platform was progressive. It advocated for the abolition of slavery, prison reform, and a more humane treatment of Native Americans. The book explored Smith's motivations for running, including his pursuit of redress for Mormon grievances, such as the forcible expulsion from Missouri. However, his candidacy exacerbated anti-Mormon sentiment. In June 1844, a

newspaper labeled Smith a false prophet and a threat to society. This set off a series of events that culminated in the murder of the prophet and his brother by a mob in Carthage, Illinois.

The book framed these events within the context of antebellum religious fervor and the rising tyranny of the majority over minority groups. Smith's death undermined religious freedom and set precedents that continued America's religious intolerance. His presidential campaign made him a martyr for the cause of minority rights and religious liberty. The book provided insight into both Smith's imperfections and the broader significance of his fight against religious persecution. Overall, it painted a nuanced portrait of Smith within the complex dynamics of nineteenth century American religion, politics, and law.<sup>67</sup>

Missionaries, previously tasked with spreading the gospel, now presented the Nauvoo elite as a viable candidate to run the country. The third-party candidate's platform was progressive. For this dissertation, the plank that stood out as most vital was Smith's plan for enslaved individuals. The May 15, 1844 edition of the church publication, *Times and Seasons*, included an account of his plans to address the issue of slavery:

...the Declaration of Independence "holds these truths be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" but at the same time some two of three millions of people are held as slaves for life, because the spirit in them is covered with a darker skin than ours.

...A hireling pseudo priesthood will plausibly push abolition doctrines and doings, and "human rights," into Congress and into every other place where conquest smells of fame, or opposition swells to popularity....

Petition, also, ye goodly inhabitants of the slave states, your legislators to abolish slavery by the year 1850, or now, and save the abolitionist from reproach and ruin, infamy and shame...Break off the shackles from the poor black man, and hire him to labor like other human beings...

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<sup>67</sup> Spencer W. McBride, *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021).



Wherefore, if I were president of the United States, by the voice of a virtuous people, I would honor the old paths of the venerated fathers of freedom; I would walk in the tracks of the illustrious patriots, who carried the ark of the government upon their shoulders with an eye single to the glory of the people and when that people petitioned to abolish slavery in the slave states, I would use all honorable means to have their prayers granted; and give liberty to the captive; by paying the southern gentleman a reasonable equivalent for his property, that the whole nation might be free indeed!<sup>68</sup>

Smith's campaign message on slavery was clear. He joined others with a plan to eliminate slavery by using the federal government to purchase the freedom of enslaved people from their owners.<sup>69</sup> His plan did not violate property rights, per his earlier statements. In an effort to highlight the progressive nature of the prophet's anti-slavery views, Lester E. Bush examined the opinions of contemporaries and other prominent thinkers on the issue of slavery and race relations during that era.

Bush was an amateur historian whose 1973 article "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview" critically examined the origins and history of the priesthood ban that prevented men of African descent from being ordained in the LDS church prior to 1978. Smith was not the originator of the ban. Instead, Bush's thorough research revealed that it was rooted in the prevailing Protestant racial theology of the nineteenth century. His conclusions were controversial but led to broader discussion and re-evaluation of the policy. He actively campaigned for the removal of the priesthood ban, and his meticulous scholarly research is widely believed to have influenced President Kimball's decision to lift the ban in 1978.

Bush's research on Smith's contemporaries identified how the prophet was not in lockstep with many American thinkers. A great deal of his research tried to contrast the prophet

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<sup>68</sup> Joseph Smith's Anti-Slavery Views, as contained in his 1844 Presidential Campaign Platform, quoted in Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 27-29.

<sup>69</sup> Upchurch, *Abolition Movement*, xix, xxii, xxxv. Connecticut clergyman Levi Hart, former U.S. President James Madison, and Abraham Lincoln all endorsed a plan for compensated emancipation.

with other thinkers of his time in order to identify Smith's liberal views regarding race relations. His thought process regarding blacks put him and Mormonism in immediate conflict with many intellectual trends in America.

Thomas Jefferson, the third U.S. president and voice for rural Americans in Washington, made the following statement about blacks in his 1794 *Notes on the State of Virginia*. "...whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind..."

Being one of the Founding Fathers, Jefferson made significant contributions to the fledgling American republic. He held the positions of Virginia's governor, ambassador to France, secretary of state, vice president, and president. Jefferson supported decentralizing government, was skeptical of federal power, and championed states' rights and individual freedoms. His vision played a pivotal role in shaping American democracy. However, Jefferson was a figure of contradictions. Although he championed the natural rights of man in the Declaration of Independence, he claimed to despise slavery, despite holding over 600 slaves during his lifetime.

The contradiction regarding slavery has become a significant aspect of Jefferson's intricate legacy. He voiced certain antislavery sentiments and referred to slavery as a 'moral depravity,' but he also defended slavery based on racist beliefs about African Americans. Despite his reservations about slavery, Jefferson never emancipated most of his slaves. His selective interpretation of liberty and his failure to harmonize his principles with the harsh realities of American slavery constituted a prominent moral failing in an otherwise influential early American political thinker and leader.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> "Notes on Race" included in Lester E. Bush Papers 1809-1999, MS 0685, Box 9, Folder 2, 1-3, University of Utah Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

In 1824, Jared Sparks, the eventual president of Harvard, concluded, "...we cannot help considering them and treating them as our inferiors." Sparks (1789-1866) was a nineteenth century American historian, educator, and Unitarian minister who was best known for his research and writings on the American Revolution and Founding Fathers.

After he graduated from Harvard, Sparks tutored, worked as a minister, and edited the *Unitarian Miscellany* before becoming a professor of history at his alma mater in 1839. He was later appointed McLean Professor of Ancient and Modern History in 1842. Sparks made major contributions to early American scholarship through his research and published collections of Founding Fathers' correspondence and papers, including his 12-volume *The Writings of George Washington* (1834-1837). In 1849, Sparks became president of Harvard, overseeing significant growth and expansion. Through his historical scholarship, teaching, and leadership in higher education, he had a profound influence on establishing history as an academic discipline and helped shape early American intellectualism in the antebellum era.<sup>71</sup>

Thomas Dew, former professor and president of William and Mary, stated that blacks were "...mostly inferior in the scale of civilization..." Dew authored a pamphlet titled "Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832" that rebutted abolitionist arguments and provided economic and political justifications for slavery. His ideas helped develop the "Virginia School" of pro-slavery thought and advocated the theory that slavery was a positive good for society.<sup>72</sup> Dew's writings contended that slavery benefited both masters and slaves, criticized the poverty of northern industrial capitalism compared to the purported paternalism of southern slavery, and promoted racist sociological theories to defend the institution. His

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 6.

<sup>72</sup> John C. Calhoun. "Slavery a Positive Good". Speech, February 06, 1837. Dew influenced the thoughts of individuals such as John C. Calhoun with his arguments against all plans for emancipation. Calhoun made the "Virginia School" of thought infamous with his Farewell Address in 1837.

pro-slavery works proved highly influential in Virginia and across the South, providing moral and ideological support for slavery that persisted even after his death. His ideas helped justify secession and the Confederacy. Though a prominent academic, Dew's legacy is indelibly tied to his vigorous intellectual defenses of slavery in the antebellum era.<sup>73</sup>

In 1837, Julien Virey, a notable naturalist, asserted blacks were “a distinct species closer to the apes.” Virey was a French naturalist and pharmacist who made significant contributions to early nineteenth century zoology, comparative anatomy, and anthropology. After training as a pharmacist, Virey served as chair of pharmacy and natural history at the Athenée de Paris from 1802 to 1806. He went on to hold academic positions at the Faculté de Médecine and Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle while producing influential scholarly works in natural history like the *Nouveau Dictionnaire d'Histoire Naturelle (1816-1819)*. Virey's comparative anatomical studies pioneered ideas of homology between animals long before Darwin.<sup>74</sup>

These accounts represented the intellectual currents of the day from a wide range of individuals. They painted a picture of the norms of many of those holding authority in the United States. They also served as a juxtaposition to the views that Smith advocated in his multitude of statements regarding the equality of blacks in society.<sup>75</sup> The new theological teachings also included an idea of a spiritual pre-existence. Those possessing a physical body, all of those living on Earth, are noted to have chosen the plan of Jesus, not Satan. Therefore, despite biblical claims of a curse, these things were not present in the goals of the prophet.

Individuals on earth chose good over evil; thus, all spirits were equally valuable in the eyes of

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 10.

<sup>75</sup> Smith was not alone in his abolitionist views. Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison shared common ground in their advocacy for immediate emancipation and the moral imperative to end slavery. Both men, despite their different backgrounds, played influential roles in the abolitionist movement, emphasizing the importance of education, civil rights, and a steadfast commitment to social and political change

God. This stood in stark contrast to a great deal of the racial opinions of leading thinkers of America.

Considering how controversial his views on polygamy, abolition, and unorthodox theology were, Smith brought a great deal of tension upon himself and Mormonism. Armand Mauss addressed the balance between assimilation and peculiarity in his sociological analysis of the LDS church. A movement or religion's goal was to create the optimal balance of both, which allowed them to exist in society without fear of attack from the outside.

Mauss wrote, "...a movement is grappling with either of two predicaments: If it has survived for some time as a 'peculiar people'...rejecting the surrounding society and flexing the muscles of militancy, then it will begin to face the predicament of disrepute, which invites repression and threatens not only the movement's success but its very existence."<sup>76</sup> War, extermination orders, arrests, legal cases, and continuing to serve as a counterculture in antebellum America was a recipe for extreme persecution and the possible elimination of Mormonism. Smith reached a point of crisis, both personally and for the Latter-day Saint movement as a whole.

Mormonism reached a violent apex on June 27, 1844, when a mob murdered Smith and his brother in Carthage, Illinois. Only a month earlier, he had announced his candidacy for president on a platform of compensated emancipation, hoping to end the moral blight of slavery that divided the nation. But Smith's life and progressive vision were brutally cut short by enemies who had hounded the Mormon community from New York to Ohio, Missouri, and now Illinois. The prophet was dead at age 38, leaving his fledgling faith without its dynamic leader. It seemed to many that Mormonism would shrivel and fade with the loss of its founder.

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<sup>76</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 5.

Yet the church not only survived Smith's murder but thrived -- a testament to the power of the religious movement he had fostered. While the prophet was gone, the distinctive Mormon ideology he developed endured. His followers remained a biblically self-identified "peculiar people," forged in the fires of persecution. Led by Brigham Young, Smith's successor, the displaced Mormons made an arduous trek from Illinois to the frontier lands of the American West. There they flourished, rapidly growing in numbers and establishing thriving settlements in the mountains of present-day Utah. From this new headquarters in Salt Lake City, Mormonism continued to expand further around the globe. The church that emerged from Smith's martyrdom transformed from its humble origins into a major modern faith.

The period following Smith's death saw both continuity and change in Mormonism. The original prophet began the routinization of church practices. While magic allowed him to found the new denomination, it did not serve the purpose of growing a religious movement seeking to appeal to individuals from all walks of life. Therefore, he transformed himself from a mere seer into a prophet of God. In doing this, he received revelation, wrote scripture, and protected the Saints from the encroachments of outsiders. In fourteen years, he built an empire on the Mississippi. He accomplished all of this due to his personal charisma which he utilized to inspire the masses who followed him. His death left a hole in Mormonism, one seemingly impossible to fill and that would have major ramifications for the church's doctrine regarding African American membership and ordination going forward, as the next chapters will detail.

## Chapter 4

### Succession, Bureaucracy, and People of their Time

Stories and myths hold immense power in shaping religious movements. Mythmaking allows new faiths to embed charismatic claims within compelling narrative frameworks that inspire adherents. These stories construct symbolic worlds that provide meaning, establish authority, and consolidate community identity. While introducing fiction, myths profoundly impact how religious histories are told and understood.

New religious movements often rely heavily on mythic tales and the marvelous. Stories of mystical visions, miraculous healings, and divine interventions serve vital functions. First, myths cloak the leader and movement with spiritual legitimacy. The founder's association with the supernatural, through prophecies, magical feats, and mystic revelations, establish them as a divine conduit. These myths fuel charisma by creating an aura of holy mystery.<sup>1</sup>

Second, stories allow faiths to mark new beginnings and epochs. Mythic tales of transfigurations, reincarnations, and speaking with divine personages portray transitions as spiritually ordained events rather than human power grabs. Myths rewrite history as part of a sacred drama. Even exaggerated or fabricated stories promote ideological aims.<sup>2</sup>

Third, myths build community identity. Stories bind followers together through shared narratives that explain the group's unique place in the cosmos. Mythic narratives allow members to imagine themselves as part of an elect history and divine plan. This tightens group cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Segal, "The Function of 'Religion' and 'Myth': A Response to Russell McCutcheon," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 1 (2005): 209–13

<sup>2</sup> David Bidney, "Myth, Symbolism, and Truth," *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 379–92; Robert Luyster, "The Study of Myth: Two Approaches," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 34, no. 3 (1966): 235–43.

<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Segal, "The Myth-Ritualist Theory of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 19, no. 2 (1980): 173–85.

However, this reliance on myth brings profound implications. Fabricated tales pose ethical risks, privileging desired myths over facts. Charismatic individuals may intentionally embellish or mislead through strategic mythmaking, and exaggerated stories foster insularity by inflating the community's sense of chosenness and persecution. Mythic narratives emphasize distinctiveness rather than human commonality.

Nonetheless, myths are inescapable in religious movements. Humans require stories. As scholar Yuval Harari has stated, "If you stick to unalloyed reality, few people will follow you."<sup>4</sup> Mythmaking and storytelling generate the necessary emotional resonance and shared imagination. Without compelling myths, movements fail to launch or rapidly disintegrate.

Religious myths have played a crucial role in shaping the way believers understand their history and shared identity. These mythical narratives take chaotic events and weave them into cohesive stories about the origins and destiny of their faith. Despite being factually questionable, myths bestow the community with a cosmic purpose and a sacred character. While not rooted in strict historical accuracy, these myths offer the ideological unity and inspiration necessary for the resilience and expansion of emerging religious movements. In fact, dynamic faiths often flourish based on imaginative myths rather than rigid historical accuracy.<sup>5</sup>

In Mormonism, many fantastical claims surrounded the discovery of Golden Plates, visitations from heavenly messengers, and the use of a seer stone to translate a record with a language unknown to man. However, these experiences did not constitute the most crucial myth

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<sup>4</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, "Are We Living in a Post-Truth Era? Yes, but That's Because We're a Post-Truth Species.," *ideas.ted.com*, September 7, 2018, <https://ideas.ted.com/are-we-living-in-a-post-truth-era-yes-but-thats-because-were-a-post-truth-species/>.

<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R Trask (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1963); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R Trask (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987).



in Mormon history. The most remarkable story came in the months following Joseph Smith's death.

This chapter will address the 1844 succession crisis of the church, which led to the ascension of Brigham Young to the role of president and prophet of the church. In addition, it will analyze the ways in which Young's teachings regarding race diverged from Smith's. Mormonism's evolution under Young followed two paths, both moving in opposite directions. The first was the church's view of African Americans. The second was the church's teachings on polygamy. While the former is the main focus of this dissertation, to understand the reasons for the changing views of blacks amongst the Mormons, a discussion surrounding Young's support of polygamy plays a role in how mainstream American society viewed Mormonism. Therefore, the remainder of this chapter will examine the church's positions and policies pertaining to polygamy and racism under the leadership of the second prophet.

Six weeks after the martyrdom, a meeting ensued in which potential church leaders addressed the Saints with their claims to be Smith's successor. Sidney Rigdon, notably recovering from a bout of depression and malaria, presented his claim to be the next leader.

Rigdon had been sent to Pennsylvania by Smith just before the prophet's murder in 1844, likely to protect him from potential danger. Upon learning of Smith's shocking death, he hurriedly returned to Nauvoo, determined to claim leadership of the church as Smith's First Counselor. When addressing the grieving Saints, he related a vision showing that the fallen prophet had ascended to heaven and that no one could fully take his place. However, he claimed in the dream he was to act as Smith's spokesman on earth due to his role as First Counselor. The fallen prophet's close confidant passionately proclaimed that the Lord wished for him to be made the new 'guardian' of the church.

Despite his dramatic vision and passionate preaching, Rigdon's bid to be Smith's sole successor ultimately failed. He spoke at a tense special conference on August 8th to decide the leadership question, pleading his case and revelation. However, when Brigham Young rose to offer his address, he swayed the congregation with his bold presence and forceful oratory. The assembly voted unanimously to sustain Young and the Twelve Apostles as the new leaders, soundly rejecting the counselor's claims to preeminence. Rigdon persisted in challenging the Twelve's authority for a time but could not overcome Young's momentum. Ultimately, the Mormons disregarded his claim to be the prophet's successor.<sup>6</sup>

The choice of Young over Rigdon set the tone for the Mormon experience. However, it was not a simple speech that won the church members over. Instead, the historical account of the Latter-Day Saints included the tale of a miraculous event, maybe even the true miracle of Mormonism. As individuals recounted the meeting, they observed that Young underwent a transformation, resembling Smith. Some say he looked like the prophet, while others say that the fallen prophet spoke through his eventual successor. This event testified to the truth that Young was the true church leader.

Lynne Watkins Jorgenson, a genealogist and researcher at the Family History Department of the church, developed the apologetic narrative surrounding the transition.. Her article "The Mantle of the Prophet Passes to Brother Brigham: One Hundred Twenty-Nine Testimonies of a Collective Spiritual Witness" aggregated several accounts of those who confirmed Young's transfiguration. The article presented and analyzed 129 firsthand and secondhand statements of a spiritual experience among members of the church in Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1844, following Smith's martyrdom. The event involved many members of the congregation at a meeting on

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<sup>6</sup> Richard S. Van Wagoner, "The Making of a Mormon Myth: The 1844 Transfiguration of Brigham Young," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 1-2 (2001):159-169.

August 8, 1844, testifying that they witnessed Young speaking with the voice and appearance of Smith, indicating that the the former prophet's authority passed on to Young.

The article's purpose was to defend and provide evidence for the validity of this spiritual claim, known as the 'mantle of the prophet' experience, against critics who had challenged or dismissed it. The author presented the accounts as faithful testimonies and argued they demonstrated that a spiritual manifestation occurred. The detailed documentation of the accounts, analysis of their origins, and attempts to respond to skeptical interpretations (such as claims the accounts were fabricated later) represented an effort to use historical and analytical tools to provide an apologetic defense of the experience as authentic. Overall, the article sought to affirm the mantle experience as a genuine divine witness of Brigham Young's calling that strengthened early Latter-Day Saints' faith.

The author failed to acknowledge that Young and his followers edited volumes of *History of the Church*. Other historians recognized this and even addressed the changes. Likewise, the author cited vague accounts of contemporary evidence that do not explicitly mention the process of transfiguration. One would think that witnessing a miracle would include recording the miracle in a journal. However, all contemporary accounts failed to report evidence of Young's transfiguration.<sup>7</sup>

D. Michael Quinn included the transfiguration story in his book *The Mormon Authority*. He addressed the contemporary accounts of the transfiguration stating, "There were contemporary references to Young's 'transfiguration.' *Times and Seasons* reported that just before the sustaining vote at the afternoon session of the August meeting, 'every saint could see that Elijah's mantle had truly fallen upon the 'Twelve.'" Although the church newspaper did not

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<sup>7</sup> Lynne Watkins Jorgenson, "The Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Passes to Brother Brigham: One Hundred Twenty-Nine Testimonies of a Collective Spiritual Witness," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 4 (1997): 125–204.

refer to Young specifically for this “mantle” experience, on November 15, 1844, Henry and Catharine Brooke wrote from Nauvoo that Young “favours [*sic*] Br Joseph, both in person, & manner of speaking more ore [*sic*] than any person ever you saw, looks like another.” Five days later, Azra Hinckley said, “...Brigham Young on [w]hom the mantle of the prophet Joseph had fallen.” The May 1845 diary of William Burton (who died in 1851) explicitly referenced succession and Young’s transfiguration. “But their [Joseph and Hyrum Smith’s] places were filled by others much better than I once supposed they could have been.” Burton wrote. He immediately added, “the spirit of Joseph appeared to rest upon Brigham.”<sup>8</sup>

Assessing these accounts, one can see their vague nature eventually allowed a myth to be developed. Mentions of Smith’s spirit were not representations of an actual physical change in Young’s appearance as discussed and perpetuated in official church history accounts.

If this had been an accurate story backed by contemporary accounts, there would have been no argument over what direction the church should take. However, there were no materials to corroborate that the event even occurred. Likewise, should the event have occurred, it would have been unlikely that any congregation members would vote against Young and the Twelve as the successors of Smith. However, between fifteen and twenty individuals cast their lot in favor of Sidney Rigdon.<sup>9</sup> With the information, the most likely reality was that upon hearing both individuals speak, the congregants found Young’s claim for authority more convincing than Rigdon’s.

Young’s transfiguration story was created by those who stood to benefit from the Quorum of the Twelve having power.<sup>10</sup> As founder and president of the LDS church, Smith did not

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<sup>8</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1994), 166-167.

<sup>9</sup> Van Wagoner, “The Making of a Mormon Myth,” 170.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

explicitly establish a method of presidential succession before he died in 1844. As previously discussed, he erected a hierarchical structure with himself at the top. The lack of succession plans coupled with his untimely death caused chaos.

Quinn identified the following options for the church in 1844. The first option called for Smith's first counselor to succeed the president. This option pointed to Rigdon as the rightful heir to the Mormon church. Quinn asserted this option existed because the prophet did not outwardly deny it. While this option made sense, the dissension that occurred between Smith and Rigdon upon their arrival in Nauvoo left many Mormons dissatisfied. At one point, the prophet pushed to remove his counselor from his post in the church, even threatening him with excommunication. Eventually, they put aside their differences so much that the former preacher aided in Smith's presidential run as his vice-presidential candidate. However, the fact that, at one point, the men were not friendly with one another was enough for many members to harbor ill feelings toward Rigdon.<sup>11</sup>

The official history of the church also supported this model— Smith's *History of the Church*, edited by B.H. Roberts, gave credibility to Rigdon's belief that he should take over as church leader. He stated, "the twelve are not subject to any other than the first presidency..." With this statement, the prophet claimed that the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was subject to rule by the president's counselors.<sup>12</sup>

The second option asserted that Smith might have appointed a successor in a secret meeting or discussion. Those claiming to be ordained the new leader by the fallen prophet should have had their claims heard by members and allowed the congregation to choose whom to follow. Quinn argued that succession by secret appointment was a plausible method after the

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<sup>11</sup> D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1976): 188-193.

<sup>12</sup> *HC*, 2:251.

prophet's death, even though it violated the principle of common consent. This was because Smith had established precedent by ordaining leaders like Whitmer and Cowdery to be his successors privately, without public knowledge. After Smith's death, James Strang, Lyman Wight, and Alpheus Cutler claimed succession rights based on similar secret ordinations or appointments by Smith. Although these specific claims were questionable, the author contended the precedent the prophet set meant claims of succession by confidential appointment could not be definitively dismissed in the crisis following his death.<sup>13</sup>

This method of succession was also supported by primary source material, mainly the existence of a letter regarding Strang's control of Mormonism. The letter from Lorenzo Hickey discussed Strang's efforts to establish control over the church. Hickey challenged the belief that Strang had received a "Letter of Appointment" from Smith, designating him as the new prophet of the church upon Smith's demise. Strang was the most charismatic claimant of prophetic succession. He brought thousands of members to his settlement in Beaver Creek, Wisconsin.<sup>14</sup>

The third option called for the associate president as the next possible position to yield a new leader. Cowdery held this position. Quinn argued that when Smith ordained Cowdery as Assistant President in 1834, this office had the automatic right of succession. The ordination minutes showed he was made an assistant whose role was superior to the first and second counselors. In Smith's absence, Cowdery presided over church affairs. The author stated that recent LDS historians agreed Cowdery's position gave him the undisputed right to the presidency if the prophet died or was deposed. Although Smith's assistant was later demoted for

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<sup>13</sup> Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," 193-199.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Lorenzo D. Hickey, Coldwater, Michigan, to Charles J. Strang, Lansing, Michigan, August 29, 1877. Box 1, Folder 9, James J. Strang papers, 1836-1944. Degolyer Library, Dallas, TX.

transgression in 1837, he made no schismatic claims of succession after Smith's death, accepting the Twelve.<sup>15</sup>

Once again, this claim was supported by church historical sources. Smith recorded the following on December 5, 1834. "I laid my hands on brother Oliver Cowdery, and ordained him an assistant president saying these words: In the name of Jesus Christ who was crucified for the sins of the world, I lay my hands upon thee, and ordain thee an assistant president to the high and holy priesthood in the church of the Latter Day Saints." As assistant president, Cowdery was tasked with maintaining order in the church in the absence of the prophet.<sup>16</sup>

The fourth option identified the patriarch as another position with a possible claim of authority. The prophet's brother, William Smith was the church patriarch. Joseph Smith Sr. served as the church's first patriarch. Upon his death, Hyrum Smith became the new patriarch. William Smith continued the tradition of having a family member fill the role of patriarch following his brother's death.<sup>17</sup>

The fifth possibility included a belief that the Council of Fifty possessed succession rights. Smith made a statement in 1844 that alluded to the authority of the council. According to Benjamin F. Johnson, Smith stated, "the Lord accepted his sacrifices and he now placed the kingdom's responsibilities on the council and, shook the dust from his feet." The author stated that after the prophet's death, the apostles referenced this statement to affirm their right to lead the church. However, since the Council of Fifty oversaw the political kingdom, some members,

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<sup>15</sup> Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," 199-201.

<sup>16</sup> *Manuscript History of the Church*, 1–5 December 1834, B-1, 562; *History of the Church*, 2:176.

<sup>17</sup> Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," 201-206.

like Lyman Wight, believed it should reorganize the church and appoint a new leader after Smith's death.<sup>18</sup>

By 1844, Smith had conferred extensive authority and responsibility on the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, making them the second governing body of the church. This led to the sixth possibility for succession. The Twelve oversaw immigration, settlement, finances, baptisms for the dead, the endowment, and plans to move west. They directed the church's secret developments and knew the prophet's intended directions. A revelation in 1835 seemingly established their equal authority to the First Presidency. Though succession was not explicit if the First Presidency was dissolved, the Twelve were the known, trusted, and seasoned body on which the Saints could depend amid crisis.<sup>19</sup>

The *Times and Seasons* addressed the succession crisis. The article used Smith's address to the Council of the Fifty to make an argument for the succession rights of the Quorum of the Twelve. In doing this, the speech's historical context was misrepresented to support the Twelve's claims for authority. The article quoted Smith as saying,

“...now if they kill me you have got all the keys, and all the ordinances and you can confer them upon others, and the hosts of Satan will not be able to tear down the kingdom, as fast as you will be able to build it up; and now says he on your shoulders will the responsibility of leading this people [to] rest, for the Lord is going to let me rest a while.’ Now why did he say to the Twelve on your shoulders will this responsibility rest, why did he not mention Brother Hyrum? The spirit knew that Hyrum would be taken with him, and hence he did not mention his name; Elder Rigdon’s name was not mentioned, although he was here all the time, but he did not attend our councils.”<sup>20</sup>

The article paraphrased Smith in a manner in which the speech setting was completely missing.

It seemed as if Smith was solely talking about the Twelve, despite his talking to the entire

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-209; Benjamin F. Johnson, “My Lifes Review,” Independence, Missouri, Zion Printing & Publishing Co., 1947, 99 quoted in D. Michael Quinn, “The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1976): 207.

<sup>19</sup> Quinn, “The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844,” 209-212.

<sup>20</sup> *Times and Seasons*, vol. 5, 651.



Council of Fifty. Likewise, the speech built up Young's claims at Rigdon's expense. Again, at this point, Rigdon could not be there as he served as Smith's vice president and was campaigning in another state.

Using the same revelation the Twelve saw as supporting their authority, two other priesthood auxiliaries, the Presiding Stake Presidents and the Quorum of the Seventy, claimed the same authority given to the apostles. An 1835 revelation established a balance of power between the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and the First Quorum of Seventy. The standing high councils were also designated as equal authority to the First Presidency for their jurisdictions. With the First Presidency dissolved upon Smith's death, Quinn argued this had created a potential for succession by the Quorum of Twelve, the First Quorum of Seventy, or the central high council in Nauvoo.<sup>21</sup> These possibilities marked the seventh possible succession plan.

Finally, some claimed succession should follow the family line of the prophet, falling onto one of his sons, mainly Joseph Smith III. Quinn explained that Smith intended for his family to have prominence in the church's leadership, as shown by his appointing several relatives to high positions. Some sources indicated that Smith may have ordained or designated his son Joseph Smith III as his successor. Emma and William Smith made claims supporting the rights of the prophet's sons. The author stated that Young acknowledged the prophet's family would have a future role and expressed hope that Smith III or one of his brothers would eventually lead the Utah church. However, tension arose as Smith's sons rejected doctrines like polygamy and refused to join the Utah Mormons. The sons became leaders of the Reorganization, which denied these controversial doctrines originated with their father. The

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<sup>21</sup> Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," 212-215.

author argued that the descendants forfeited their lineal succession rights by rejecting their father's complete teachings and church.<sup>22</sup>

A stark contrast existed in their messages regarding authority and the church during the debate over church leadership between the two most likely options, Rigdon and Young. Rigdon believed he could serve as the messenger for the slain prophet, considering that Smith's authority had died with him. No person could take up the mantle of the former. Being close to Smith, he believed he could complete his work. Young approached his discourses differently. He asserted that no difference existed between the Quorum of the Twelve and the prophet. Smith's priesthood keys passed down to the Quorum. Therefore, with the priesthood came the authority to serve the church in the same capacity as the slain founder had.

Ultimately, the church placed authority in the hands of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. As control of the church fell into the hands of the body that Young led, the transfiguration stories assumed a more significant role. Due to the church lacking a proper succession plan and the aggressive tactics used by the Twelve to seize authority, many became confused and, as a result, separated from the Saints of Nauvoo to join various splinter groups. Those who remained in the city on the Mississippi accepted the legitimacy of the new leaders. The transfiguration story functioned as a faith-promoting tale employed to support Young's authority. The faithful in Nauvoo and abroad all accepted Smith as a prophet, seer, and revelator. Therefore, Young appearing in the form of the slain prophet served as a spiritual confirmation for a people who believed in the power of the Holy Ghost to confirm truth in miraculous ways.

The transfiguration story became necessary to validate Young's rise to power. Max Weber addressed the idea of a miracle being essential to validate the claims of a charismatic leader.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-232.

It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma. This is freely given and guaranteed by what is held to be a 'sign' or proof, originally always a miracle, and consists in devotion to the corresponding revelation here worship, or absolute trust in the leader. But where charisma is genuine, it is not this which is the basis of the claim to legitimacy. This basis lies rather in the conception that it is the duty of those who have been called to the charismatic mission to recognize its quality and to act accordingly. Psychologically this 'recognition' is a matter of complete personal devotion to the possessor of the quality, arising out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope.<sup>23</sup>

The production of accounts years later legitimized the the new leadership. Creating a miracle served to reshape what many perceived as the usurpation of authority. It also functioned as a rallying cry for those who might have left for different branches. Incorporating Smith into the story, the accounts of an event that likely never happened played off the enthusiasm individuals had for the charismatic leadership of Smith while also exploiting the emotions, mainly despair, following the martyrdom. It provided the perfect narrative to disguise a hostile takeover as a peaceful transition of power directed by God.

While still in Nauvoo discussing the problems of the Saints, Young stated, "The nation has severed us from them in every respect," he told his listeners, "and made us a distinct nation just as much as the Lamanites, and it is my prayer that we may soon find a place where we can have a home and live in peace according to the Law of God."<sup>24</sup> This thought process formed the basis of his plans to depart from Illinois.

Before leaving Nauvoo, he sought to further solidify his authority. He achieved this by focusing on the temple. Construction of the Nauvoo temple began prior to Smith's death but remained incomplete at his passing. The temple served as the location for the endowment

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<sup>23</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 359.

<sup>24</sup> "25 February 1845" included in Brigham Young, *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. Richard S. Van Wagoner, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2009), 1:71.

ceremony, an ordinance regarded by Saints as the ritual where Mormons receive the keys to salvation and exaltation.

Addressing the Nauvoo Saints at the church's General Conference on April 6, 1845, Young stated,

We are building a house at present unto the Lord in the which we expect to attend to the fulfillment of this doctrine: you all believe that this is a doctrine revealed by God to his servant Joseph. Admitting this to be the fact, that he has revealed through him a plan by which we may bring to life the dead, and bless them with a great and glorious exaltation in the presence of the Almighty with ourselves; still we want to know how to do these things right; to do them in a manner that shall be acceptable to the Almighty, if otherwise he will say unto us at the last day, 'ye have not known me right, because of your slothfulness and your wickedness depart from me for I know you not.' O ye Latter-day Saints! I don't want one of you to be caught in that snare, but that you may do things right and thus be enabled to make your calling and election sure.<sup>25</sup>

At the conference, Young focused his address on the temple. For Mormons, the ordinances in the temple distinguish between what mainstream Christians would consider salvation and what Latter-Day Saints refer to as exaltation.<sup>26</sup> In the lecture, Young claimed to know the process necessary for eternal progression, which Smith had not yet taught the Nauvoo Saints. He stated,

"Joseph in his life time did not receive every thing connected with the doctrine of redemption, but he has left the key with those who understand how to obtain and teach to this great people all that is necessary for their salvation and exaltation in the celestial kingdom of our God. We have got to learn how to be faithful with the few things, you know the promise is, if we are faithful in a few things we shall be made rulers over many things. If we improve upon the small things, greater will be given unto us."<sup>27</sup>

To elevate his authority, Young taught that he possessed vital knowledge essential for salvation. He asserted that if the Saints desired the highest degree of glory in the afterlife, they should adhere to his teachings. His extravagant claims prompted church members to align themselves and volunteer their money and labor to complete the Nauvoo temple. In May of the same year,

<sup>25</sup> "6 Apr 1845, Nauvoo, Illinois, Morning Conference." (*CDBY*, 1:76).

<sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:40–42; Doctrine and Covenants 76:96–98

<sup>27</sup> "6 Apr 1845, Nauvoo, Illinois, Morning Conference." (*CDBY*, 1:78).

the volunteers finished the construction of the temple. Six months later, he dedicated the attic portion of the building to the Lord and declared it suitable for the endowment ceremony.<sup>28</sup>

Believing that the new leader had restored a heavenly truth necessary for the afterlife, over 5,000 Mormons participated in the endowment between November 1845 and February 1846.<sup>29</sup>

The thousands of Mormons heading into the sessions for three months participated in a ritual that Young promoted. Therefore, those who entered the temple attic for the ceremony sent a stark message that they believed his words. The practice of these individuals validated his position in Mormonism as the new prophet. On February 8, 1846, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gathered in the attic of the temple. The head of the quorum led the group in prayer, primarily a prayer to bless the Mormons as they commenced their movement westward. They were to leave behind their newly constructed Temple. He also prayed that the building would remain safe in the Saints' absence in Nauvoo.<sup>30</sup> The following day witnessed a fire in the temple, although it caused minimal damage.<sup>31</sup> Within the next week, the new prophet and his fellow leaders embarked on the trail westward.<sup>32</sup>

Nauvoo adopted the name ‘The City of Joseph.’ Therefore, during Young's time as the leader in the city, he remained in lockstep with his predecessor. However, both men were two different individuals. The new leader was less comfortable at the pulpit than the original prophet. He was an organizer, whereas Smith had been a charismatic firebrand willing to make changes on a dime. Therefore, it was only natural that the church underwent changes at some point under the leadership of its second president.

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<sup>28</sup> “30 November 1845, Nauvoo, Illinois” (CDBY, 1: 110).

<sup>29</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, *Nauvoo Temple Endowment Register: 10 December 1845 to 8 February 1846*, 1974.

<sup>30</sup> “8 February 1846, Nauvoo, Illinois” (CDBY, 1:124).

<sup>31</sup> “9 February 1846, Nauvoo, Illinois” (CDBY, 1:125)

<sup>32</sup> “17 February 1846, Sugar Creek, Iowa” (CDBY, 1:125).

Young did not commence his reign as the prophet by attempting to overturn the universal nature of Mormonism, particularly the faith's openness to embrace individuals of all colors. The early primary source record from 1847 suggests that his views on race were similar to his predecessor. However, at the same time, it presented another fact, mainly that those around him could influence his thoughts.

In 1847, William McCary, an early African American convert to the church, met with Young while the prophet and other leaders established themselves in Winter Quarters, Nebraska, en route to the Utah territory. He was a biracial Mormon who gained notoriety in the late 1840s for his charismatic preaching that attracted many black followers. His interracial marriage and continued claims of prophetic authority posed a threat to church leaders seeking conformity. After being excommunicated in 1849, he started his own polygamous sect welcoming blacks, which he led away from Utah around 1853. His African ancestry, unorthodox practices, and challenge to racial hierarchies represented an unacceptable schism to Mormon authorities.<sup>33</sup>

McCary requested to meet with Young. He addressed some concerns regarding his relationships with the Saints in the meeting. He felt mistreated due to the color of his skin and asked the prophet to protect him from the Mormons. When confronted with the fact that McCary experienced racism amongst the Latter-Day Saints, Young responded, "...its nothing to do with the blood for of one blood has God made all flesh, we have to repent & regain what we have lost—we have one of the best Elders an African in Lowell—a barber."<sup>34</sup> He asserted that there was nothing different between blacks and whites as they are both God's creation. He reiterated

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<sup>33</sup> Newell G. Bringhurst, *Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Meeting Minutes, March 26, 1847, CR 100 318, Church History Library.

this assertion later in the conversation. McCary again addressed concerns about racism, to which he replied, “We don’t care about the color.”<sup>35</sup>

The church leaders excommunicated McCary after finding out that he had married himself to multiple women in makeshift polygamous sealing ceremonies. He then sought to recruit Mormons to his own splinter group.

Apostle Parley P. Pratt recorded his thoughts on the African-American “prophet.” He wrote, “We want the pure in heart to go with us over the mountains. if people want to follow Strang go [for] it. [If they] want to follow this Black man who had[sic] got the blood of Ham in him which lineage [sic] was cursed as regards [to] the Priesthood [do it]. [If they] want to follow a new thing, hatch it up.”<sup>36</sup> The apostle’s statement regarding the “blood of Ham” reflected teachings from the Book of Abraham.<sup>37</sup> While not the mainstream view of Mormonism, this comment became a window into the faith’s future racial teachings.

In just two years, Brigham Young’s beliefs regarding racial teachings changed to match Pratt’s. At a council meeting on February 13, 1849 a discussion took place regarding the role of blacks in the church. Apostle Lorenzo Snow sought to make a case for the equality of the souls. Young rebuked him, stating, “...the curse remains on them \_bec\_[sic] Cain cut off the lives of Abel to hedge up his way & take the lead but the L[ord] has given them blackness, so as to give the children of Abel an opportunity to keep his place with his desc[endants] in the et[erna]l worlds.”<sup>38</sup> The universalism spoken of by the prophet to McCary disappeared in just a few years. The church's prophet had completely adopted a perspective wherein black skin was seen as a physical manifestation of an Old Testament curse.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Meeting Minutes, April 25, 1847, CR 100 318, Church History Library.

<sup>37</sup> Abraham 1:24

<sup>38</sup> Meeting Minutes, February 13, 1849, CR 100 318, Church History Library.

In 1849, the church had no policy denying any rites of passage to members of any race. Elijah Able and Q. Walker Lewis, both black individuals, held the priesthood, enabling them to partake in all the blessings of the church. The racial thoughts of the Mormon leaders had not yet influenced the church's practices.

Between 1849 and 1852, the church initiated policies regarding blacks in Utah. Young, after crossing the plains and settling in the Salt Lake Valley, served in two roles. Initially, he functioned as the prophet of the church, and subsequently, he assumed the role of the political leader of the Mormons in the Utah Territory. Juggling these dual responsibilities compelled him to engage in discussions about racial policy, given its significance in America. Despite attempts by Mormon apologists to separate his political policies from his church teachings, it is impractical to divorce one from the other. The Utah Territory, or Deseret, operated much like a typical theocracy, making the separation untenable. To classify Young's words into separate categories would be to avoid genuine discussions regarding the racial policies of the Latter-Day Saints as shaped by their leader.

Apostle Orson Hyde published an account of the Utah Territory's slave laws, or lack thereof, which stated,

There is no law in Utah to authorize slavery, neither any to prohibit it. If the slave is disposed to leave his master, no power exists there, either legal or moral, that will prevent him. But if the slave chooses to remain with his master, none are allowed to interfere between the master and the slave. All the slaves that are there appear to be perfectly contented and satisfied. When a man in the Southern states embraces our faith, the Church says to him, if your slaves wish to remain with you, and to go with you, put them not away; but if they choose to leave you, or are not satisfied to remain with you, it is for you to sell them, or let them go free, as your own conscience may direct you. The Church, on this point, assumes not the responsibility to direct. The laws of the land recognize slavery,—we do not wish to oppose the laws of the country.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Orson Hyde, "Slavery Among the Saints," *Frontier Guardian*, December 15, 1850.



This marked a significant departure from Smith's perspectives on the subject. During his presidential campaign, he presented a concrete plan for the emancipation of enslaved people. However, LDS leaders had shifted so far in the opposite direction that they asserted enslaved individuals were content in their situation. Hyde, though not speaking directly on his behalf, echoed Young's views. In a conversation with Wilford Woodruff, the second prophet expressed,

The master of slaves will be damned if they abuse their slaves. Yet the seed of Ham will be servants until God takes the curse off from them...I have two Blacks and they are as free as I am. Shall we lay a foundation for Negro slavery? No. God forbid, and I forbid it. I say let us be free. We will be rich but we must be rich in faith first or we shall be rich in no other way.<sup>40</sup>

The prophet acknowledged the terrible nature of slavery, yet he advocated for the continued servitude of blacks. He justified this stance by asserting that his slaves were free and content despite being in a state of forced service.

Within the subsequent year, the Utah territorial government took a step towards legalizing slavery, retracting its previous stance that servitude should not be legislated. “An Act in Relation to Service” read as follows.

Sec. 1. ... any person or persons coming to this Territory, and bringing with them servants justly bound to them, arising from special contract or otherwise, said person or persons be entitled to such service or labor by the laws of loin territory...

Sec. 2. ... no contract shall bind the heirs of the servant or servants to service for a longer period than will satisfy the debt due his, her, or their master or masters.

Sec. 3. ... any person bringing a servant or servants... shall place in the office of the probate court the certificate of any... they are entitled lawfully to the service of such servant or servants...

Sec. 4. That is any master or mistress shall have sexual or carnal intercourse with his or her servant or servants of the African race, he or she shall forfeit all claim to said servant or servants to the commonwealth...they shall be subject...to a fine

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<sup>40</sup> Wilford Woodruff, Journal, June 1, 1851, MS 1352, Church History Library.

of not exceeding one thousand dollars...and imprisonment not exceeding three years.

Sec. 5. It shall be the duty of masters or mistresses to provide for his, her, or their servants comfortable habitations, clothing, bedding, sufficient food, and recreation...

Sec. 6. It shall be the duty of the master to correct and punish his servant...guided by prudence and humanity...

Sec. 7. That servants may be transferred from one master of mistress to another ... no transfer shall be made without the consent of the servant...

Sec 8. Any person transferring a servant or servants contrary to the provisions of this act...shall be...subject to a fine...

Sec. 9. It shall further be the duty of all masters or mistresses to send their servant or servants to school...<sup>41</sup>

Contextualizing this document it is clear that Utah's slave laws were extremely liberal compared to other slave states.<sup>42</sup> The territorial slave laws included provisions for emancipation, preventing slavery from becoming a generational practice. These laws also guaranteed the right to education for enslaved individuals. Examining the document might have led many to perceive Mormons as enlightened in their approach to slavery. However, the above document did not encompass the entirety of Mormon racial teachings. On February 5, 1852, Young introduced a restrictive policy which marked the moment when Mormonism defined its relationship with those of African descent for the next 126 years.

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<sup>41</sup> "An Act in Relation to Service," February 4, 1852, in Utah Territory, Legislative Assembly, *Acts Resolutions and Memorials* (Salt Lake City 1852), 160-162.

<sup>42</sup> "Title 13, Chapters 3, 4," in Arthur P. Bagby, et al., eds., *The Code of Alabama* (Montgomery, AL: Brittain and De Wold, 1852), 234-42; Stephen Middleton, "Repressive Legislation: Slave Codes, Northern Black Laws, and Southern Black Codes," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.634>.

As Young concluded the conference on the 4th, he was inspired to convene a special session the following day. The prophet stood to address the joint session of the legislature on the morning of February 5th and stated,

That slavery will continue, untill [*sic*] there is a people raised up upon the face of the earth who will contend for righteous principles, who will not only beleive[*sic*] in but operate, with every power and faculty given to them to help to establish the kingdom of God, to overcome the devil, and drive him from the earth, then will this curse be removed... Through the faith and obedience of Able to his Heavenly Father, Cain became jealous of him, and he laid a plan to obtain all his flocks... consequently he took it in his heart to put able of his mortal existence[*sic*]. After the dead was done, the Lord enquired to able, and made Caine own what he had done with him. Now says the grand father I will not distroy the seed of michal and his wife; and cain I will not kill you, nor suffer any one to kill you, but I will put a mark upon you. What is the mark? You will see it on the countenance of every African you ever did see upon the face of the earth, or ever will see...

Now then in the kingdom of God on the earth, a man who has has the Affrican [*sic*] blood in him cannot hold one jot nor tittle of preisthood[*sic*]; Why? because they are the true eternal principals the Lord Almighty has ordained...

Therefore I will not consent for one moment to have an african dictate me or any Bren. with regard to Church or State Government... If the Affricans [*sic*] cannot bear rule in the Church of God, what buisness[*sic*] have they to bear rule in the State and Government affairs of this Territory or any others?...

But say some, is there any thing of this kind in the Constitution, the U.S. has given us? If you will allow me the privilege telling right out, it is none of their damned buisness[*sic*] what we do or say here...<sup>43</sup>

Understanding the importance of these two addresses requires an understanding of Mormon theology. The goal of Mormonism was to live a life worthy of attaining the highest level of salvation, known as exaltation. In getting to this state, man could become the same as God. To do this, a member had to live a worthy life. However, the ordinances available in the LDS church differentiated those who have simply led a good life and those worthy of exaltation. The steps required for exaltation include baptism, receiving the Holy Ghost, being ordained to

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<sup>43</sup> Brigham Young, "Speech in Joint Session of the Legislature," February 5, 1852, Box 1, Folder 17, Brigham Young Papers, Church History Library.

the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, and receiving temple ordinances, including the initiatory and endowment. Finally, one had to be married in the temple for time and eternity, known in church doctrine as a sealing ceremony.<sup>44</sup>

While the slave codes of Utah were progressive and appeared to be much more forgiving than those of many other slave states, Young's follow-up address went further than slave codes could. Young took away the ability of individuals of African descent to receive an opportunity at exaltation. By denying the priesthood and outlawing miscegenation, he accomplished the eternal inequality of blacks in the eyes of Mormons. Likewise, by limiting African-American women to marrying black men, these women could not have a priesthood holder to participate in the temple ceremonies with them. This combination did more for developing a social structure based on racial oppression than any slave laws could.

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<sup>44</sup> The following ordinances are laid out in LDS scriptures as follows.

Baptism: 2 Nephi 9:23-24, 2 Nephi 31, 3 Nephi 11:20-40, D&C 84:74, Moses 6:52-60, Matthew 3:15, Mark 1:9, Luke 7:30, John 3:5, and Acts 2:38.

Receiving the Holy Ghost: 1 Nephi 10:17, 1 Nephi 13:37, 2 Nephi 31:12, Jacob 6:8, Alma 9:21, D&C 20:26, D&C 33:15, D&C 35:6, D&C 39:23, D&C 68:25, D&C 84:64, D&C 121:26, D&C 138:33, Moses 5:58, Luke 1:15, John 7:39, John 20:22, Acts 2:38, Acts 5:32, Acts 9:17, Acts 10:45.

Receiving the Aaronic Priesthood: Num. 3:9 (8:5–26; 18:1–8), Num. 16:9, Num. 25:13, Josh. 18:7, 2 Chr. 29:11, Neh. 13:29, Mal. 3:3, Heb. 5:4, Heb. 7:5, Heb. 7:11, Heb. 7:21, D&C 13, D&C 27:8, D&C 68:16, D&C 84:26, D&C 84:27, D&C 107:1, D&C 107:6, D&C 107:13, D&C 107:20, D&C 132:59.

Receiving the Melchizedek Priesthood: Gen. 14:18, Ex. 18:1, Num. 16:10, Ps. 110:4, Heb. 8:6, 2 Nephi 6:2, 3 Nephi 18:37, D&C 27:12, D&C 65:2, D&C 76:57, D&C 84:17, D&C 84:19, D&C 84:25, D&C 84:40, D&C 86:10, D&C 107:2, D&C 107:17, D&C 107:22, D&C 107:33, D&C 107:65, D&C 107:69, D&C 107:79, D&C 113:6, D&C 121:21, D&C 124:28, D&C 127:8, D&C 128:20, D&C 131:2, D&C 138:41, Moses 6:7, Abr. 1:2, Abr. 2:11.

Receiving the endowment: Luke 24:49, 1 John 2:20, 1 John 2:27, D&C 38:32, D&C 95:8, D&C 105:12, D&C 105:33, D&C 110:9, D&C 124:39, D&C 132:59.

Participating in the sealing ceremony: Isaiah 22:22, Matthew 16:19, John 6:27, 2 Corinthians 1:22, Ephesians 1:13, Ephesians 4:30, Mosiah 5:15, Alma 34:35, D&C 1:8, D&C 68:12, D&C 77:8, D&C 110:16, D&C 124:124, D&C 128:14, D&C 131:5.

With the Mormons standing in such stark contrast to Smith's teaching just eight years after his death, the question remains as to why this shift in thinking, mainly from a universal faith to an exclusive denomination, occurred. Historians have addressed the question from across the spectrum. However, accounts typically fall into one of two types, critical or apologetic—the question of why is still open for debate due to authors having relied on oversimplified arguments classifying Brigham Young as a racist make up the critical side, while tales of the prophet balancing two roles of a government official and a religious leader make up the other.

The current narrative surrounding the origination of the priesthood ban has been shaped by the work of W. Paul Reeve, director of Mormon Studies at the University of Utah. Reeve's book *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* won the Mormon History Association's Best Book Award, the John Whitmer Historical Association's Smith-Pettit Best Book Award, and the Utah State Historical Society's Francis Armstrong Madsen Best History Book Award.

Reeve contended that early Mormonism under Joseph Smith was racially inclusive, welcoming black converts and even ordaining some African Americans to the priesthood. However, those who persecuted Mormons in the 1830s-40s did so because they saw the church as a dangerous religious and racial minority and led Mormons to emphasize their own whiteness and adopt anti-black stances to gain mainstream approval. Over time, Mormon leaders infused racist ideas into theology and associated blackness with inferiority while banning blacks from priesthood and temple rites. Reeve argued this trajectory toward whiteness and racism developed not from revelation but rather the context of white supremacy in nineteenth century America, as Mormon authorities sought to be racially redefined as white and thus distance themselves from

persecution as alleged abolitionists or supporters of racial equality. In essence, he traced how early Mormon universalism was transformed into discriminatory policies and beliefs due to assimilationist pressures and a quest for societal acceptance.<sup>45</sup>

While the book has been widely acclaimed in the Mormon Studies world, it presented a flaw in the current academic treatment of the denomination. While Reeve's works were not a wolf in sheep's clothing, they were simply apologetics wearing the mask of scholarship. With his book, he engaged in the faith-promoting narrative that the priesthood ban was not a result of revelation but a mere policy. Sterling McMurrin accomplished this work decades prior.<sup>46</sup> However, Reeve capitalized on this by claiming further that the policy was for the protection of Mormonism, once again falling for another Mormon archetype, that of a persecution complex.

If only considering the changing role of race in the church, the persecution narrative would have made complete sense. However, to have made sense, it would have had to come at the exclusion of all other contemporary church addresses and teachings. Reeve claimed that the Mormons tried to fit into American society and not be seen as outsiders. This was a difficult task in the antebellum period as the United States was essentially two different countries in terms of its views of the system of slavery. The regressive views on those of African descent allowed the Latter-Day Saints to fit into southern culture while also holding onto aspects of the northern culture from which the denomination was born.

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<sup>45</sup> W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> As a critical Mormon thinker, Sterling McMurrin contended the ban prohibiting black men from holding the priesthood, instituted under Brigham Young in 1852, was never actually grounded in scriptural revelation or eternal doctrine. He challenged the revelatory basis for the ban in an effort to open theological space for its repudiation and the discarding of the racist apologetic folklore used to defend it over the years. McMurrin aimed to leverage recasting the ban as policy to allow its ethical reversal. McMurrin's archival records will be a primary source in the later chapters of this dissertation.

Young did not want to fit into America. His speech clearly stated that the United States government had no business in the Utah Territory. It should not have interfered with Mormon affairs. The tone of the speech was one of confrontation, not of one that sought peace with the country. To seek acceptance in American society, the Mormons were expected to assimilate. Slavery in physical and spiritual forms did little to assert that the Saints sought to fit in. Slavery was the most divisive institution in the United States. Therefore, to make the Utah Territory a safe haven for slavery, Young placed himself in an ideological conflict with half of the country. However, one should not pick out-of-context quotes to make this argument. Instead, the sources make the point for the historians.

Under Smith's leadership, polygamy remained a secret amongst the high-ranking individuals in the faith. The practice of plural marriage proved to be a significant factor in his death. Individuals who had apostatized from the church printed a single-issue newspaper, *The Nauvoo Expositor* which sought to expose the prophet as a pious fraud and enlighten the public about the secret practice of polygamy.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the Saints in Nauvoo destroyed the printing press, which led to the charges that sent Smith to the Carthage jail in which he was martyred.<sup>48</sup> The Mormons' encounter with polygamy was marked by destruction and death. Therefore, in seeking to find peaceful existence in society, the typical thought process would be to keep the practice a secret or eliminate it. However, under Young, the opposite was true.

On July 28, 1852, just six months following the priesthood revelation, Young and his counselors called a special meeting. The first day of the conference focused on the importance

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<sup>47</sup> *Nauvoo Expositor*, 7 June 1844 (JSP).

<sup>48</sup> Warrant, 11 June 1844, William Clayton Copy [*State of Illinois v. JS for Riot on Habeas Corpus and State of Illinois v. H. Smith et al. on Habeas Corpus*] (JSP).

of missionary work, but the second day offered a bombshell. Apostle Orson Pratt was the first to address the crowd. He stated,

It is quite unexpected to me brethren and sisters, to be called upon to address you this forenoon; and still mere so, to address you on the principle which has been named, namely, a plurality of wives...

... the Latter-Day Saints have embraced the doctrine of a plurality of wives, as part of their religious faith...

...I think, if I am not mistaken, that the constitution gives the privilege to all the inhabitants of this country, of the free exercise of their religious notions, and the freedom of their faith, and the practice of it...if...the Latter-Day Saints have actually embraced, as a part and portion of their religion, the doctrine of a plurality of wives, it is constitutional...

...plurality should exist among the Latter-Day Saints...Do we not believe, as the scriptures have told us, that the wicked nations of the earth are doomed to destruction? Yes, we believe it. Do we not also believe, as the prophets have foretold, concerning the last days, as well as what the new revelations have said upon the subject, that darkness prevails upon the earth...

...the Lord should say unto his faithful and chosen servants, that has proved themselves before him all the day long-- that had been ready and willing to do whatsoever his will required them to perform--take unto yourselves more wives...

Now let us enquire, what will become of those individuals who have this law taught to them in plainness, if they reject it? I will tell you, they will be damned, saith the Lord God Almighty, in the revelation he has given...<sup>49</sup>

An argument consisting of the Mormons seeking assimilation simply could not hold water when the priesthood revelation of February 1852 was coupled with the plural marriage announcement in August 1852. With a great deal of the American people against the practice of polygamy, Pratt's words all but declared these individuals would be destroyed by God.<sup>50</sup> This

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<sup>49</sup> Minutes of conference : a special conference of the elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints assembled in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, August 28th, 1852, 10 o'clock, a.m., pursuant to public notice, *Nineteenth Century Mormon Publications 1847 to 1877*, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

<sup>50</sup> 1856 Republican Convention," in "Republican National Political Conventions 1856-2008," Library of Congress. The Republican Platform in 1856 made it a point to address two societal evils, polygamy and slavery. The Republicans targeted both issues as needing to be



type of rhetoric was antagonistic. If the priesthood ban was not an attempt to avoid conflict with the American government, then the question of why Young changed the church's policy on blacks remains.

The issue of authority was the main culprit behind Young's adjustment of Mormonism's racial teachings. His tumultuous path to leadership, the existence of dissident groups, and the question of whether he was indeed a prophet and not merely a president and leader of the church weakened the claims of authority for the new leader. The priesthood revelation gave the new prophet an attempt to declare doctrine. When addressing the role of a prophet, Max Weber stated, "...the prophet, like the magician, exerts his power simply by virtue of his personal gifts. Unlike the magician, however, the prophet claims definite revelations, and the core of his mission is doctrine or commandment, not magic."<sup>51</sup>

To this point, Young operated as a leader of a church in which another man with charismatic gifts aplenty had created. Smith had found golden plates, translated an unknown language, designed an entire religious sect, built multiple cities, restored an ancient priesthood order, and even healed the sick. Young could not compete with these accomplishments. Therefore, he needed to bring forth new doctrine in order to be seen as a true prophet.

Young needed revelation from God to establish himself as a true spiritual leader. With this fact, the purpose of the priesthood ban became more apparent. As addressed in the previous chapter, Smith held liberal views of race relations. He believed and taught that Mormonism was a universal faith, open to all. He even saw multiple black individuals ordained to the priesthood of the church. However, in Missouri, his racial views got many Mormons killed. It led them

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eliminated from society. Considering the Mormons practiced both in the Utah Territory, they would have been public enemy number one for Republicans in the federal government.

<sup>51</sup> Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 47.

into a war with the state and forced them to give up what they believed was the Garden of Eden in Jackson County. Smith's progressive views were a catalyst for troubles that the Saints faced.

With this reality and the Utah Mormon population consisting of many individuals who experienced the tragedy and loss associated with the Mormon Extermination Order, Young had the perfect opportunity to develop a doctrine that could help correct Smith's mistake. The church believed and still believes prophets are fallible individuals. Therefore, they could make mistakes. This doctrine permitted lenient judgment of past church leaders, offering an excuse for any shortcomings attributed to the inherent nature of being a man striving to fulfill his responsibilities to the best of his abilities. Smith's personal feelings regarding slavery and race relations may have gotten in his way of hearing the Lord and what he sought to teach about blacks and the church.

Historians such as Reeve have correctly claimed that the priesthood ban was created to help the Mormons feel safe. However, the order of revelations was essential. Had the announcement of polygamy not been made and the practice remained secret, there would be no question about what Young was trying to do by changing the church's views on race and the priesthood. However, by announcing the revelations in order as they were, assimilation had to be thrown out of the realm of possibilities. The February statement on race served to comfort the people of Mormonism. Young's announcement of the reversal of the policy on blacks was seen as providing safety and security, one of the most basic needs according to psychologist, Abraham Maslow.<sup>52</sup> The Mormons would not have to worry about being attacked by outsiders for their views on blacks, as they adopted a picture much more in line with southern antebellum thinkers.

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<sup>52</sup> Pichère, Pierre, and Anne-Christine Cadiat. 2015. *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*. Namur, Belgium: Lemaitre. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a psychological theory that arranges human needs in a pyramid, starting with basic physiological requirements and progressing through safety, social, esteem, and ultimately, self-actualization needs.

Alignment with the South made logical sense for the Saints, protecting them from pro-slaveryites.

Mormons grew to trust Smith during his time as prophet. Young initially had lacked that trust, considering the scandalous manner in which he became church president. Therefore, he needed a way to establish himself as Smith's 'true' successor. While the original prophet created the church, it was the manner in which he received doctrine via revelation that set him apart as a prophet. Revelation served to be the proving ground for prophets. Weber defined charisma as a form of authority dependent upon the recognition of others.<sup>53</sup> Smith's revelations had led individuals to view him as an authority figure. Young needed to receive revelation for the church in order to sustain his claim to power.

This was the model in which the priesthood ban should be viewed. While the decision to limit fellowship of black members seemed to be a form of assimilation for Mormonism with one half of the country, that fact was simply a side effect of the true cause of the revelation. The revelation was safe. It was not outlandish. It did not challenge the widely held views of race in broader American society. Instead, it was a simple change to the doctrine of the church that allowed Young to claim his place at the head of the church with revelation in the form of the priesthood ban.

When analyzing the importance of polygamy for Young and his confidants, it was easy to see that the priesthood ban and the feeling of safety it instilled in the Saints were simply bargaining chips for formalizing the practice of plural marriage. The presentation of one new doctrine via revelation and the trust in Young opened the door for more revelation to morph Mormonism into something more to his liking.

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<sup>53</sup> Douglas F. Barnes, "Charisma and Religious Leadership: An Historical Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17, no. 1 (1978): 1.

Young continued to rely on the safety narrative, and the impending Civil War provided a perfect opportunity for him to prove that his revelation was correct. He did this by attacking the entire idea of abolitionism. He saw the fight to abolish slavery as the antecedent for war, conflict, and eventual death. In a March 8, 1863 speech, Young stated, “The rank, rabid abolitionists, whom I call black-hearted Republicans, have set the whole national fabric on fire. Do you know this, Democrats? They have kindled the fire that is raging now from the north to the south, and from the south to the north. I am no abolitionist...”<sup>54</sup> The prophet blamed the North’s abolitionist efforts for the ongoing Civil War. He did not see slavery as the issue; instead, he saw the push to end the system as the catalyst for the conflict.

In the same speech, Young made another critical point. Mainly, he compared the government’s treatment of enslaved people to its views on polygamy. He stated, “If the government of the United States, in Congress assembled, had the right to pass an anti-polygamy bill, they also had the right to pass a law that slaves should not be abused as they have been; they also had a right to make a law that negroes would be used like human beings, and not worse than dumb brutes.”<sup>55</sup> To add context to the statement, the federal government passed the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act in 1862, which criminalized bigamy and ultimately reversed the incorporation of the church due to their practice of polygamy.<sup>56</sup> The church was under attack by the federal government, and Young faced it head-on, not willing to back down or change the church’s policies. With such a directed legislative bombardment by the United States, and the church’s having embraced such an offense with an equal defense, it was clear that peace and safety were

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<sup>54</sup> Brigham Young Speech, March 8, 1863. *Journal of Discourses*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, March 8, 1863.

<sup>56</sup> Statutes at Large, 37th Congress, 2nd Session, page 501. A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: US Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774 - 1875. *The Library of Congress*.

not Young's focuses with his earlier revelation on the priesthood since his actions following the ban immediately removed any promise of peace and safety for the Saints.

The stand-off between the Mormons and the federal government ultimately continued until 1890. By this point, Young had long since passed away. The prophet spent the remainder of his life defending the church from the federal government. He was willing to enter a war against the United States to protect the church's freedom to practice polygamy and live how they chose. Upon his death, the church was still openly practicing plural marriage. Therefore, he died with his revelations intact and was remembered as the individual who led the Mormons to their new refuge.<sup>57</sup> Until the day of his passing, Young proclaimed what he felt was best for the Saints, and he did it with vigor, carving himself a place on the proverbial Mount Rushmore of Mormonism next to Smith.

John Taylor succeeded Young. Taylor's time as the prophet was primarily anti-climactic. He served in the role from 1880 to 1887.<sup>58</sup> He spent the final two years of his presidency in hiding from the U.S. government, as he was a possible target of federal authorities for his practicing of polygamy.<sup>59</sup> He died in hiding due to congestive heart failure, having neglected to address the Saints in person for over two years. Taylor's embarrassing death left a mark on the leadership of the Saints. It was not befitting that a prophet of God should die in hiding instead of standing his ground as Young had done. Taylor's death portrayed weakness at the top of the church and led Mormons to question their practice of polygamy in the following decade.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> For more detailed accounts of Young's life, see John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2014); Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2012).

<sup>58</sup> The Quorum of the Twelve apostles oversaw the church during the three years between Brigham Young's death and the sustaining of Taylor as new church president.

<sup>59</sup> George Q. Cannon to Franklin S. Richards, April 1887, MS 0050, box 1b, folder 33, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

<sup>60</sup> Edmunds-Tucker Act, March 3, 1887, ch. 397, 24 statute 635, *LOC*.

In the forty-three years following Smith's death, polygamy became the world's talking point regarding the church. The priesthood revelation of 1852 became a mostly-ignored secondary issue. After Brigham Young's death, the topic became obscure in church history and appeared to be gradually de-emphasized in favor of giving more attention to the practice of plural marriage. However, the following chapter will address how the church sought to make racist teachings seem reasonable and justified during the Progressive Era.

## Chapter 5

### The “Progressive” Mormons

Brigham Young instituted the African priesthood ban in 1852. It is unclear whether he did this in the name of church doctrine or as a policy influenced by the thinking of the period. However, this ambiguity did little to advance the historiography outside of apologetics for the LDS church. Young's decision influenced the denomination's practices for the next 126 years. After Young's death, Mormonism elevated the practice to a central position and embedded it as a Mormon tradition.

The issue that Mormonism faced with its teachings on blacks was the difficulty in consistently enforcing the ban. It is worth noting that prior to the announcement of the racial priesthood doctrine, African Americans were actually ordained to the priesthood. Elijah Able was a particularly well-documented elder in this regard, and his story was often referenced in church historical research due to the challenges it posed for ecclesiastical leaders after Young's tenure.

Not only did the church face a problem enforcing the priesthood policy, but it was likewise afflicted with weakening leadership, because for the first time the prophet appeared weak and subject to the rule of the land. He no longer promoted God's law over America's law. These factors required the development of a new theology or at least the refreshing of theological teachings from past prophets.

This chapter addresses the routinization of charismatic authority in Mormonism and how the loss of charisma amongst church leaders led to the entrenchment of racist teachings in its theology.

During Brigham Young's tenure as the prophet, he delivered impassioned sermons, positioning himself and the church in opposition to Gentile law. A division emerged between the Mormons in Utah and the United States government under his leadership. Young, deemed an adversary of the state, presented a challenge for the government, which lacked a comprehensive approach to address his theocratic Kingdom of Deseret. The practices of polygamy and slavery made the Mormons a target for various American groups. However, due to the considerable distance of Utah from Washington D.C., the ongoing sectionalism issue, and the eventual outbreak of the Civil War, Young governed as a religious tyrant with minimal oversight on his authority.

The Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act, enacted by Congress and the Lincoln administration in 1862, aimed at eradicating Mormons from the West by criminalizing polygamy. In their work *Zion in the Courts: A Legal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1830-1900*, Edwin Brown Firmage and Richard Collin Mangrum quoted Lincoln's perspective after signing the Morrill Act. According to the president, the Mormon church was akin to a log he encountered as a farmer— "too hard to split, too wet to burn, and too heavy to move, so we plow around it. That's what I intend to do with the Mormons. You go back and tell Brigham Young that if he will let me alone, I will let him alone."<sup>1</sup> This statement highlighted the prophet's ability to govern without restraint. By doing so, he positioned the Saints as adversaries of the state, leading to legal repercussions once the Civil War concluded.

Although the Morrill Act was enacted in 1862, Lincoln opted not to address the Mormon question during the Civil War, refraining from pressuring Young to align the Saints with the cause of the Confederacy. The *Reynolds vs. United States* case contested the Morrill Act,

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin Brown Firmage and Richard Collin Mangrum, *Zion in the Courts: A Legal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1830-1900* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 139.



asserting that it violated the First Amendment's guarantee of the free practice of religion. Despite the church's belief in a strong legal argument, Reynolds was convicted of practicing polygamy and received a two year prison sentence.<sup>2</sup> While not the initial conviction of a Mormon for polygamy, it marked the first conviction of a high-ranking church official, establishing a precedent that the Latter-Day Saints were subject to the law. This marked a significant departure from the church's earlier experience under Young and provided insight into the denomination's future in relation to the government and its practice of polygamy.

The trajectory of plural marriage continued in a downward trend in the years following the Reynolds case. The enactment of the Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act of 1882 reinforced the principles of the Morrill Act of 1862. This 1882 statute elevated the practice of polygamy to a felony in all United States territories. Alongside criminalizing the practice, it disqualified proponents of the principle from voting, holding public office, or serving on juries in federal territories. The legislation also facilitated the enforcement of the 1862 law by introducing a section on unlawful cohabitation.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the law no longer required proof an LDS marriage ceremony, and prosecution became viable for anyone living with more than one partner.

Pressure from the federal government reached a new level with the amendment of the Edmunds Act of 1882, resulting in the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887. The revised and more stringent statute aimed to achieve the following:

- It required spouses to testify against one another in a court of law. This allowed for wives to be used as witnesses against their husbands, simplifying the conviction of polygamists.

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<sup>2</sup> *Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 145 (1878), *Library of Congress*.

<sup>3</sup> United States Utah Commission, and United States. *The Edmunds act*. Salt Lake City, Utah, Tribune printing and publishing company, 1883, *LOC*.

- The act redefined adultery in a manner explicitly aimed at polygamous Mormons. Engaging in adulterous affairs became punishable by up to three years in federal prison, with both the male and plural wives subject to conviction for the crime.
- Incest was defined as individuals marrying relatives connected up to four degrees. In such cases, both parties involved in the incestuous relationship were subject to three to fifteen years in federal prison.
- Sex outside a legal marriage resulted in up to six months in jail.
- The act declared Utah laws regarding relationships null and void, preventing the state from skirting federal mandates.
- The legislation removed church leaders from posts in the government positions.
- All marriages required a civil license. This measure aimed to reduce the occurrence of informal sealing ceremonies conducted by the church, particularly in conjunction with the new cohabitation and adultery laws..
- The statute altered Utah's inheritance laws, excluding property rights for illegitimate children, defined as those born outside of the original marriage. This provision aimed to prevent polygamous wives and their children from inheriting from their husbands, thereby attempting to de-incentivize the practice of plural marriage.
- Section 13 of the law sanctioned the seizure of church property determined to be used in support of the practice of plural marriage.
- The act also rendered it illegal for the church to acquire property exceeding \$50,000. Additionally, the production of materials or media aimed at promoting the practice of polygamy was prohibited.

- The legislation forced the church to discontinue its Perpetual Immigration Fund, which had been utilized to finance the migration of individuals from countries outside the United States to Utah after their conversion to Mormonism.
- Arguably, the most detrimental impact of the Edmunds-Tucker Act was the compelled disincorporation of the church.<sup>4</sup>

Polygamy and the lifestyle of the Saints faced relentless scrutiny from the federal government. This had been the prevailing reality for years, and yielding to Young's determination, national authorities frequently allowed Mormons their freedoms even if they strayed into extralegal territory. Nevertheless, the Latter-Day Saints found themselves in a markedly different position without the leadership of the Lion of the Lord

After Young's passing, the Latter-Day Saints found themselves without a charismatic leader, and John Taylor was selected as the new prophet. Taylor, a close confidant of Joseph Smith, had been present at the former prophet's martyrdom. He offered a firsthand and intimate account of the event, recounting how he narrowly escaped death thanks to a bullet hitting his pocket watch.<sup>5</sup> Before assuming the role of prophet, Taylor aligned himself with Young's teachings on race, delivering speeches that espoused the perceived evils of abolition.<sup>6</sup> He justified the priesthood ban, asserting that it was warranted due to what he considered negative characteristics of blacks.<sup>7</sup>

Following the death of the second prophet in 1877, Taylor assumed the role of the church's president in 1880.<sup>8</sup> The three-year gap in leadership can be attributed to the absence of

<sup>4</sup> *Edmunds-Tucker Act*, US Code Title 48 & 1461, full text as 24 Stat. 635 (1887), *LOC*.

<sup>5</sup> John Taylor, *Martyrdom Account*, Aug. 21, 1856, p. 49-69, (*JSP*).

<sup>6</sup> John Taylor, "Ignorance and Low Condition of the World—Past Experience, Present Position, and Future Prospects of the Saints," *Journal of Discourses*, 5:157; *Idem*, 11:52.

<sup>7</sup> *Idem*, 19:77.

<sup>8</sup> B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1930), 5:524, 594.

a succession plan within the Mormon hierarchy. Upon becoming the prophet, Taylor made minimal changes, seemingly continuing in the direction set by his predecessor. A significant portion of his leadership focused on advocating for the importance of polygamy among the Saints. In an 1885 entry in the Latter-Day Saints' publication, the *Millennial Star*, the prophet, along with his counselor George Q. Cannon, linked the practice of plural marriage with the attainment of eternal glory.<sup>9</sup> According to their perspective, exaltation was unattainable without the practice of polygamy. In 1886, Taylor took a step further, asserting that the principle was intended to endure within the church indefinitely. Apologists and LDS historians have engaged in debates surrounding the revelation that purportedly dictated the permanence of polygamy. The letter Taylor wrote while evading federal prosecutors read as follows:

(1) My son John. you have asked me concerning the new & everlasting covenant & how far it is binding upon my people

(2) Thus saith the Lord all commandments that I give must be obeyed by those calling themselves by my name unless they are revoked by my [*sic*] or by my authority, and

(3) how can I revoke an everlasting covenant;

(4) for I the Lord am everlasting & my everlasting covenants cannot be abrogated nor done away with; but they stand for ever...

(7) Nevertheless I the Lord do not change & my word and my covenants & my law do not.

(8) & as I have heretofore said by my servant Joseph all those who would enter into my glory must & shall obey my law...

(10) I have not revoked this law nor will I for it is everlasting & those who will enter into my glory must obey the conditions thereof, even so amen.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Taylor and George Q. Cannon, "An Epistle from the First Presidency", *Millennial Star* 45, November 9, 1885, 711.

<sup>10</sup>Fred C. Collier, ed., *Unpublished Revelations of the Prophets and Presidents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1981), 1:145–46.

Taylor used his position as president to offer revelation, much like Smith and Young had done before him. By beginning the letter with “Thus saith the Lord...” the prophet differentiated this address from mere instruction or advice -- it was presented as a direct message from God. What was transcribed on the paper was intended to be regarded as doctrine for the church, akin to many of Smith's revelations that eventually found a place in the Book of Commandments, later named the Doctrine and Covenants. However, the challenge with this particular revelation is that it never became widely known among the general Mormon membership.

The official histories of the church, particularly the *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* authored by B.H. Roberts and released in 1930, as well as the more recent publication *Saints: No Unhallowed Hand 1846-1893*, did not acknowledge the revelation. Consequently, they omit any discussion of its contents. It is worth noting that these official histories extensively covered events leading up to 1890 but did not address the specific revelation.

In the years following Taylor's death, Wilford Woodruff assumed the position of the fourth president of the church. Before his role as prophet, he had served as the president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Additionally, Woodruff held the position of church historian and recorder until his ordination as the faith's leader.<sup>11</sup> Despite leading the church for only nine years, he achieved significant milestones in formalizing its processes, many of which endured as standard practices today.

Edward Leo Lyman, a history professor at Dixie State University, delved into one of the most impactful changes in LDS church policy initiated by Woodruff. In his article, Lyman

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<sup>11</sup> Wilford Woodruff Journal, 1886 January-1892 December, MS 3152, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, 213; Andrew Jenson, *Latter-Day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Koffard Books, 2012), 1:24.

outlined the evolution of LDS prophetic succession processes. Following Taylor's death, Woodruff advocated for a system where the longest-serving member of the Quorum of the Twelve was ordained as the prophet of the church. The newly appointed prophet would then organize his counselors, and both the prophet and his counselors would collaborate with the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in decision-making for the church, with the First Presidency holding the final say.<sup>12</sup> This organizational structure continued to be employed by the Saints after his death, aiming to eliminate contentious transfers of power by establishing a routinized bureaucratic hierarchy that subordinated charismatic claims for authority.

Woodruff's most significant impact on the church occurred in 1890. By this time, the Saints had been contending with persistent federal attacks on the territory, aimed at locating and convicting known polygamists. In response, the church decided to challenge the Edmunds-Tucker Act, asserting that their First Amendment rights to the free practice of religion were being violated. The case, *The Late Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints v. United States*, from January 16 to 18, 1890, with the Supreme Court delivering its decision on May 19, 1890. The court ruled the Edmunds-Tucker Act constitutional, affirming that the federal government possessed absolute authority over territories in the United States. This paved the way for the United States to claim properties of the church as its own.

In the majority decision, Justice Joseph P. Bradley labeled polygamy a "barbarous practice," deemed it "contrary to the spirit of Christianity and of the civilization which Christianity has produced," and characterized it as "a nefarious system and practice." Therefore,

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Leo Lyman, "Succession by Seniority: The Development of Procedural Precedents, in the LDS Church," *Journal of Mormon History* 40, no. 2 (2014): 92–158.

Congress was considered to have the right to dissolve it.<sup>13</sup> This decision placed the Latter-Day Saints in a challenging position. On one hand, the church considered polygamy necessary for salvation. On the other hand, they faced the potential loss of all their property, including sacred temples, due to the continued practice of polygamy. Woodruff, the new prophet, confronted an enormous question: What should the church do about plural marriage?

Polygamy remained a doctrinal aspect of the church, much like how members perceived the priesthood ban as a doctrine stemming from Young's teachings. Therefore, any action the church took concerning polygamy could potentially set a precedent for addressing the priesthood ban. The underlying implication was that if one doctrine could be reconsidered and changed, the same could be possible for the other.

On October 6, 1890, the prophet offered a response to the question, although not without external prompting. The official history of the church, as presented in *Saints*, stated:

...the First presidency...received news that Henry Lawrence, the new federal official appointed to seize Church property under the Edmunds-Tucker Act, was now threatening to confiscate the temples in Logan, Manti, and St. George.

A former member of the Church, Henry had been a bitter opponent of the Saints for more than two decades...

Henry knew the Edmunds-Tucker Act protected buildings used “exclusively for purposes of the worship of God,” but he intended to show that the temples were used for other purposes and could therefore be seized with other properties.

...the Utah Commission... had just sent its annual report to the federal government... the report falsely claimed that Church leaders were still publicly encouraging and sanctioning plural marriage...

In order to stamp out plural marriage once and for all, the commission recommended that Congress pass even harsher laws against the Church.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *The Late Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints v. United States*, 1890, 136 U.S. 1 (1890), *LOC*.

<sup>14</sup> *Saints*, volume 2., 586-598.

The history produced by the church portrayed it in a no-win situation. With its back against the wall, Mormonism found salvation through a revelation. In an excerpt from an address concerning the emergence of the 1890 revelation, Woodruff stated:

...The Lord has told me to ask the Latter-day Saints a question...

The question is this: Which is the wisest course for the Latter-day Saints to pursue—to continue to attempt to practice plural marriage, with the laws of the nation against it and the opposition of sixty millions of people, and at the cost of the confiscation and loss of all the Temples, and the stopping of all the ordinances therein, both for the living and the dead, and the imprisonment of the First Presidency and Twelve and the heads of families in the Church, and the confiscation of personal property of the people ...

The Lord showed me by vision and revelation exactly what would take place if we did not stop this practice. If we had not stopped it, you would have had no use for ... any of the men in this temple at Logan; for all ordinances would be stopped throughout the land of Zion. ... Now, the question is, whether it should be stopped in this manner, or in the way the Lord has manifested to us... This is the question I lay before the Latter-day Saints. ...

... I saw exactly what would come to pass if there was not something done. I have had this spirit upon me for a long time. But I want to say this: I should have let all the temples go out of our hands; I should have gone to prison myself, and let every other man go there, had not the God of heaven commanded me to do what I did do; and when the hour came that I was commanded to do that, it was all clear to me. I went before the Lord, and I wrote what the Lord told me to write. ...<sup>15</sup>

Most likely purposefully vague, Woodruff provided few details on what prompted his revelation.

The visions of the temples aimed to evoke strong emotions among Mormons in Utah. These buildings were considered the sole locations on earth where the saving ordinances, unique to Mormonism, could take place. The temples were marked with the words “Holiness to the Lord, The House of the Lord.” These buildings held a central place in LDS theology. Hence, a revelation depicting these buildings in jeopardy served as an effective rhetorical device to address the need for change.

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<sup>15</sup> *Official Declaration 1*, Doctrine and Covenants.



On October 6 the church witnessed the issuance of Official Declaration 1, commonly referred to as the 1890 manifesto, which declared the end of plural marriage. The declaration read as follows:

To Whom It May Concern:

Press dispatches having been sent for political purposes, from Salt Lake City, which have been widely published, to the effect that the Utah Commission, in their recent report to the Secretary of the Interior, allege that plural marriages are still being solemnized and that forty or more such marriages have been contracted in Utah since last June or during the past year, also that in public discourses the leaders of the Church have taught, encouraged and urged the continuance of the practice of polygamy—

I, therefore, as President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, do hereby, in the most solemn manner, declare that these charges are false. We are not teaching polygamy or plural marriage, nor permitting any person to enter into its practice, and I deny that either forty or any other number of plural marriages have during that period been solemnized in our Temples or in any other place in the Territory.

One case has been reported, in which the parties allege that the marriage was performed in the Endowment House, in Salt Lake City, in the Spring of 1889, but I have not been able to learn who performed the ceremony; whatever was done in this matter was without my knowledge. In consequence of this alleged occurrence the Endowment House was, by my instructions, taken down without delay.

Inasmuch as laws have been enacted by Congress forbidding plural marriages, which laws have been pronounced constitutional by the court of last resort, I hereby declare my intention to submit to those laws, and to use my influence with the members of the Church over which I preside to have them do likewise.

There is nothing in my teachings to the Church or in those of my associates, during the time specified, which can be reasonably construed to inculcate or encourage polygamy; and when any Elder of the Church has used language which appeared to convey any such teaching, he has been promptly reproved. And I now publicly declare that my advice to the Latter-day Saints is to refrain from contracting any marriage forbidden by the law of the land.

Wilford Woodruff  
President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Official Declaration 1*, Doctrine and Covenants.

The manifesto signified the termination of plural marriage among the Latter-Day Saints, marking a distinct departure from the teachings of Smith and Young. Both earlier leaders had resisted the United States government and held the conviction that the church could overcome any challenge. Their charismatic leadership, particularly their ability to rally support for their cause, kept the Saints feeling secure, believing that their leaders could manage any situation. However, under Woodruff's leadership, the direction of the church began to shift.

Interestingly enough, a second declaration became necessary. In 1904, the prophet Joseph F. Smith issued the second manifesto. Despite Woodruff's 1890 order, some individuals persisted in practicing polygamy, prompting Smith to take action to avoid additional condemnation from the United States government. The second declaration went beyond the first, not only prohibiting plural marriage but also specifying a consequence: excommunication from the church. The order read as follows:

Inasmuch as there are numerous reports in circulation that plural marriages have been entered into, contrary to the official declaration of President Woodruff of September 24, 1890, commonly called the manifesto, which was issued by President Woodruff, and adopted by the Church at its general conference, October 6, 1890, which forbade any marriages violative of the law of the land, I, Joseph F. Smith, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, hereby affirm and declare that no such marriages have been solemnized with the sanction, consent, or knowledge of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

And I hereby announce that all such marriages are prohibited, and if any officer or member of the Church shall assume to solemnize or enter into any such marriage, he will be deemed in transgression against the Church, and will be liable to be dealt with according to the rules and regulations thereof and excommunicated there from.

Joseph F. Smith,  
President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.<sup>17</sup>

The church, for the first time, initiated a process of assimilation into American society by relinquishing a sacred doctrine deemed necessary for salvation. Furthermore, Woodruff's actions

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<sup>17</sup> "Statement by President Joseph F. Smith", *Improvement Era* 7/7:545–546 (May 1904).

involved a direct contradiction of a revelation issued by his predecessor, particularly the assertion that polygamy would never be removed from the church. How does one reconcile the contradictory nature of Taylor's revelation with the introduction of the 1890 manifesto, which effectively brought an end to polygamy in the church?

The leaders of the Saints grappled with this very question, leading to the realization that revelation and the declaration of doctrine can be complex. Woodruff prioritized the temporal well-being and safety of the church, a dimension neither Smith nor Young had extensively addressed. This event marked the onset of the routinization of charisma within LDS leadership. It represented the precise moment when charismatic leadership took a back seat to reasoned analysis of situations and a focus on the present state of the church. The hierarchical structure that Smith and Young had established now transitioned into the hands of Woodruff and subsequent prophets. Its hierarchical system was instituted to maintain order after the early prophets' deaths left the church without a singular, strong leader.

The transition period from charismatic to bureaucratic authority is referred to as the 'progressive' period of Mormonism in this chapter and beyond. This period of Mormonism commenced in the late 1890s. With the sudden cessation of plural marriage and the challenge of explaining this change, the church needed a new approach to reframe and reinterpret its doctrine. The reinterpretation of its doctrine enabled leaders to rewrite history and systematize church teachings. They could reiterate certain doctrinal teachings while completely disregarding others.

The 'progressive' period of Mormonism marked a turn from theocratic geniuses and charismatic leaders creating doctrine on a whim to philosophical thinkers formalizing church teachings through the rational lenses of history, science, and social sciences. Prominent figures during this period included B.H. Roberts, John Widtsoe, and James Talmage. With polygamy

falling out of practice in mainstream Mormonism, the church relied on individuals to reframe the its public image. Likewise, all three individuals played a role in entrenching the racist teachings of the early prophets.

Brigham H. Roberts was a polygamist, who persisted in the practice of polygamy even after the 1890 manifesto. This resulted in his conviction for ‘unlawful cohabitation’ in 1900.<sup>18</sup> He also held a position in the Quorum of the Seventy. In the early twentieth century, the Twelve Apostles deliberated on having him write an official church history.<sup>19</sup> Although there was a dispute over compensation for the project, Roberts eventually initiated the work on producing the collection, albeit under the vigilant supervision of church historian Anton Lund.<sup>20</sup>

The editors of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* dedicated an entry to Roberts’ *Comprehensive History of the Church*, which read as follows:

Intended as a centennial history of the LDS church (1830-1930), Elder B.H. Roberts’s six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church* stands as a high point in the publication of Church history to that time...Although Roberts’s study was a kind of defense, he set a more even tone, a degree of uncommon objectivity...

...Roberts was pointing the way to a new approach; he wanted Church history to avoid apology and indiscriminating defense of the faith...

...willing to deal with sensitive topics...He was also willing to press his editors to get what he felt was fairness...In some ways Roberts’s *Comprehensive History* was an act of courage; certainly it was his magnum opus...

The *Comprehensive History* is the high-water mark of studies produced before academic scholars undertook the writing of Church history after 1950. Roberts shows a faithfulness to documentary sources and rules of evidence...<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Roberts Found Guilty,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 22, 1900, 8.

<sup>19</sup> George Q. Cannon, Wednesday, May 16, 1900, *The Journal of George Q. Cannon*, Church Historian’s Press.

<sup>20</sup> Cannon Journal, July 20, 1900.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel H Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York, NY: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1999), 303-304.

In terms of an official account of church history, Roberts stood alone. No other church-sponsored retellings offer as in-depth an analysis as his. Therefore, his significance to the progressive era of Mormonism lay in his production of the church's official narrative in its first 100 years. He was tasked with explaining the choices of early leaders and analyzing the reasons for each action, carrying significant responsibility in explaining the reasons behind issues like the racial priesthood ban. Although his six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church* did not address the concept of race or the ban, his contributions to other LDS publications played a role in developing a new narrative that became the prevailing story for much of the twentieth century, lasting until the ban was lifted in 1978.

The previous explanation for the priesthood ban relied on the narrative of an ancient curse stemming from Cain.<sup>22</sup> It was widely believed among many Christians and was used to justify slavery in antebellum America. However, after the Civil War, with slavery ended and African Americans granted citizenship in the United States, the need for a new explanation arose. After all, how could individuals who were given the same rights as others be subject to a curse, making them inferior? While much of America implemented Jim Crow laws to limit the integration efforts of blacks in American society, the Mormons continued to present a theology in which those of African descent were limited in their divine potential.

B.H. Roberts played a role in ushering in the new explanation. In the LDS publication, *The Contributor*, he wrote an article aimed at addressing the Latter-Day Saints' doctrine of pre-existence, specifically the belief that all individuals existed as spirits with God before receiving a physical body.<sup>23</sup> According to this doctrine, individuals who chose Jesus' side in the

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<sup>22</sup> Pearl of Great Price, 28.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

“War in Heaven,” were gifted with a physical body.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, those accepting the Satan’s plan came to earth, albeit as demons and spirits without a physical body.<sup>25</sup>

Roberts explained the priesthood ban as follows:

Let those who doubt the pre-existence of spirits turn their eyes within - let them question themselves, saying, ‘Whence came I?’ and though the ‘secret something’ within may only reply, ‘You’re a stranger here,’ yet, from the revelations of God, you may learn that God is the Father of your spirits and that in your ‘first, primeval childhood you were nurtured near his side.’

Assuming that you will accept the foregoing as a correct principle, we move to another position ‘Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was...’ This passage not only sustains the doctrine of pre-existence of spirits, but also gives us to understand that some spirits in the spirit world developed more nobility of character than others, and doubtless possessed greater intelligence than their fellows...

Moreover, from many scriptures we may infer that spirits, before living in the flesh, had an opportunity of demonstrating their fidelity to God and His laws. The Apostle John informs us that ‘There was a war in heaven...’

...I believe that race is the one through which it is ordained those spirits that were not valiant in the great rebellions in heaven should come; who, through their indifference or lack of integrity to righteousness, rendered themselves unworthy of the Priesthood and its powers, and hence it is withheld from them to this day...<sup>26</sup>

Roberts introduced a new theory regarding the reason for the priesthood ban to the masses.

Primarily, this teaching asserted that individuals with black skin were not denied the priesthood due to the curse of Cain or Ham but instead received a darker complexion to distinguish them from others based on their unwillingness to support Jesus in the pre-existence. Although having a physical body implied that they came to support His plan, they were considered less willing than others. Therefore, blackness was seen as a symbol of individuals being fence-sitters in the war in heaven. They were not warriors for Christ but instead needed to be convinced as to why

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<sup>24</sup> Doctrine and Covenants, 76: 25-27.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 29: 36-37.

<sup>26</sup> B.H. Roberts, *The Contributor*, 6:296-297.

His plan was superior to Satan's. Interestingly enough, Roberts believed that this reflected the nature of valiance and intelligence. Those with dark skin apparently lacked these virtues in the pre-mortal life, and their pigmentation served as a reminder of it.

John A. Widtsoe, holding a PhD in biochemistry, served as the president of Utah Agricultural College from 1907 to 1916, after which he was appointed as the president of the University of Utah. Eventually, he received a calling to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. During his tenure as an apostle, he assumed the role of editor for the church publication, the *Improvement Era*. His writings, heavily infused with scientific language, served an apologetic purpose and were frequently employed in church settings as lesson manuals during the early twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

What Roberts did for Mormonism regarding respectability in the field of history, Widtsoe sought to do in the fields of religion and science. This period was marked by new thinkers attempting to assimilate LDS philosophy into the broader world, seeking acceptance in twentieth century American society. His most significant publication for the church was *Joseph Smith as Scientist*. The text was utilized as a church lesson manual in Sunday school to align Mormonism with the scientific thought of the day, legitimizing the revelations and teachings of Smith as prophetic and ahead of their time. Widtsoe wrote:

“In the life of every person, who receives a higher education, in or out of schools, there is a time when there seems to be opposition between science and religion; between man-made and God-made knowledge. The struggle for reconciliation between the contending forces is not an easy one... There are thousands of young people in the church today, and hundreds of thousands throughout the world, who are struggling to set themselves right with the God above and the world about them...

...there is no difference between science and religion. The great, fundamental laws of the Universe are foundation stones in religion as well as in science...

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<sup>27</sup> “Great Lives Remembered,” February 2010, *Liahona*.

‘Mormonism’ teaches and has taught from the beginning that all knowledge must be included in the true theology... The splendid conceptions of ‘Mormonism’ concerning man and nature, and man’s place in nature are among the strongest testimonies of the divine nature of the work founded by Joseph Smith, the Prophet.’<sup>28</sup>

The work served a similar purpose to that of B.H. Roberts. Essentially, both individuals employed their expertise to develop an organized system of apologetics for the church. While Roberts concentrated on the church's history, tracing its development from its inception to its state in 1930, Widtsoe focused on Smith, the theological mastermind behind Mormonism. Each publication supported the original leader’s prophetic claims, whether through a historical or scientific lens. Therefore, both individuals played a major role in systematizing Mormonism in the early twentieth century.

Interestingly, while formalizing LDS theology, Widtsoe also commented on the priesthood ban and its theological basis. In a 1944 volume of the *Improvement Era*, he wrote:

“The opinion is held by many members of the church that because the negro was neutral in the great council, held in heavens before the foundations of the earth were laid, he has been punished with a black skin. There is no evidence, as far as found, to justify this belief. On the other hand, there is ample evidence to support the church doctrine that all who have been permitted to come upon this earth and take upon themselves bodies, accepted the plan of salvation. Those who did not accept it were cast out and became the angels of the evil one.

The cause of the black skin of the negro is not known. A mark was placed upon Cain because of his sin. The negroes are supposed to be his descendants. Since these people, themselves, did not commit Cain’s sin, it is very probable that in some way, unknown to us, the distinction harks back to the pre-existent state.<sup>29</sup>

Rife with double-speak, the magazine entry alluded to the reason for the priesthood ban. It departed from the common narrative about the Curse of Cain but took a similar path to that of

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<sup>28</sup> John A Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist: A Contribution to Mormon Philosophy* (Salt Lake City, UT: The General Board Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association, 1908), 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> John A. Widstoe, "Were Negroes Neutrals in Heaven," *Improvement Era* (June 1944): 385.



B.H. Roberts. Widtsoe's article prompted readers to question what could have transpired before receiving their mortal bodies. The only theological teachings in Mormonism regarding this point in time focused on the "War in Heaven." Therefore, members seeking to answer why were left with the more forward explanations of individuals that directly linked blackness to commitment in the premortal state.

In building a theological system that could be palatable for other Christian denominations, no other human being was as crucial as James E. Talmage. His family had immigrated to the United States from England in 1879. He received an education in chemistry at Lehigh University and Johns Hopkins University. The church called Talmage to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1911, but his writings did much for developing an aura around Mormonism that disguised a great deal of the fluidity from its earlier years. Two works in particular served to bring Mormonism into the mainstream: *Articles of Faith* and *Jesus the Christ*.<sup>30</sup>

*Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* was printed in 1899. It served as a lesson manual for priesthood classes at church. This meant the book was assigned as the study material for all Latter-Day Saint men for a year. The book offered a theological approach to Mormonism, something many laymen were not accustomed to. It accomplished this through a series of lectures surrounding the Articles of Faith, a document put forth by Smith before his death.

Lectures included the following topics:

1. **God and the Godhead.** This lecture discussed how the LDS tradition differed from that of most Protestants. Mormons believed in a trinity, although their unique concept held that God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost were all separate beings, albeit unified in their goal.

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<sup>30</sup> "Great Lives Remembered," March 2010, *Ensign*.

God was the literal father of Jesus Christ. The Holy Ghost is a spirit that agreed to put aside his physical body to serve the Godhead.<sup>31</sup>

2. **Transgression and the Fall.** This section addressed how Mormons believed that all men had agency due to following the plan of Jesus in their premortal existence. Likewise, man was not punished for the original sin of Adam and Eve.<sup>32</sup>
3. **The Atonement and Salvation.** This lecture focused on how Jesus atoned for the sins of all humanity, not on the cross, but in the Garden of Gethsemane. Death on the cross was necessary for the resurrection of Christ to occur; however, the atoning sacrifice occurred in the garden. Likewise, Talmage explained the Mormon conception of salvation, mainly that it consisted of what is known as the Plan of Salvation. He outlined how general salvation was available to all. However, individual salvation, known as exaltation, was available to those who had accepted the gospel in its entirety.<sup>33</sup>
4. **Faith, Repentance, Baptism, and Receiving the Holy Ghost.** These lectures focused on the ordinances required to enter the Kingdom of God.<sup>34</sup>
5. **The Bible, the Book of Mormon, and Continuing Revelation.** These topics addressed why Mormons believed in an expansive canon. It addressed the concerns with the Bible, alongside a theological justification for the Book of Mormon. Likewise, Talmage discussed the LDS belief in continuing revelation as received by a prophet. This belief explained the existence of both the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> James E Talmage, *Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Deseret News, 1899), 27-53.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-75.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-97.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-174.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 240-325.

While there were many other lectures, these were some of the most important. Talmage hoped to develop a systematic theology in Mormonism. The church's first generation had been filled with tumult. Charismatic leaders had directed the church based on their cult of personality. However, as the church grew and expanded, long-term survival required the systematization of belief. He took this responsibility to heart and did just that.

While organizing and redefining the LDS belief system, Talmage revealed his thoughts about the priesthood ban. An article in the *Y News* summarized the apostle's view of the ban.

“Elder Talmage forcefully and clearly told of the ancient reverence had for the Priesthood. He related the incident where Aaron and Miriam gossiped about Moses and that she was stricken with leprosy. The Lord will not tolerate slight of his power. The speaker explained the curse upon the descendants of Cain and Ham and continued now in Negroes. ‘There is progressiveness to the work of God.’”<sup>36</sup>

With the power to reform Mormon doctrine and the expression of their beliefs, Talmage referred back to the aforementioned biblical curse of Cain. Views such as this served to entrench the priesthood ban into the progressive Mormon doctrine of the early twentieth century.

The trend of formalizing beliefs was a vital aspect of the routinization of charismatic authority in Mormonism. Weber wrote:

In its pure form charismatic authority has a character specifically foreign to everyday routine structures. The social relationships directly involved are strictly personal, based on the validity and practice of charismatic personal qualities. If this is not to remain a purely transitory phenomenon, but to take on the character of a permanent relationship forming a stable community of disciples or a band of followers or a party organization or any sort of political or hierocratic organization, it is necessary for the character of charismatic authority to become radically changed. Indeed, in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating. It cannot remain stable, but becomes either traditionalized or rationalized, or a combination of both.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> "Priesthood--James E. Talmage," *Y News* 1, no. 17 (January 25, 1922): 1.

<sup>37</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. M. Henderson (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2012), 363-364.

Charismatic leaders such as Smith did not prioritize formalizing theology because under his leadership, church doctrine was fluid and continuously evolving. He was the main character in Mormonism's origin story. Young was the benefactor of the Mormon exodus. His proclamations and changes to LDS beliefs were allowed because he, too, was the benefactor of a new origin story, that of the Saints in exile. This allowed the second prophet to stand up to the government and oppose outside forces because he held the trust of those willing to risk their lives in a trek across the Great Plains with mere handcarts.

After Young's death, the new leaders of the church faced a difficult decision. They could either destroy the church or try to limit the sweeping powers of its officials that had led to this crisis. The organization's survival outweighed the continuation of charismatic leadership. The manifesto to end polygamy was merely an act to fit in with American society following the Civil War. Likewise, the church's formalization of beliefs served to unify the Mormon practices and neuter any future charismatic claims. It became a place for routine instead of revelation.

Why did this happen? Weber helps to answer this question as well. He stated:

One of the decisive motives underlying all cases of the routinization of charisma is naturally the striving for security. This means legitimization, on the one hand, of positions of authority and social prestige, on the other hand, of the economic advantages enjoyed by the followers and sympathizers of the leader. Another important motive, however, lies in the objective necessity of adaptation of the patterns of order and of the organization of the administrative staff to the normal, everyday needs and conditions of carrying on administration. In this connexion [sic], in particular, there are always points at which traditions of administrative practice and of judicial decision can take hold; since these are needed both by the normal administrative staff and by those subject to its authority. It is further necessary that there should be some definite order introduced into the organization of the administrative staff itself...<sup>38</sup>

In essence, Weber argued that routinizing charisma provided security and stability. This was done by legitimizing authority and providing economic incentives to followers. In this instance,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 370-371.

economic incentives can be understood as the ability of Mormon adherents to practice their religious beliefs without molestation from outside forces such as the government. It also allowed for establishing standardized administrative practices and the orderly bureaucracy needed for day-to-day governance. The traditions and routines helped anchor the administration and provided continuity for the faith group. Leaders such as Roberts, Widtsoe, and Talmage undertook the task of systematizing the history, beliefs, and practices of Mormonism, thereby offering stability and sustainability for a denomination that had navigated the tumultuous waves of charisma for the last century.

While the three men were all apostles, they were not at the forefront of the sect. That position had always been reserved for the prophet. In 1901, Joseph F. Smith became the church president. He was the son of Hyrum Smith. Before his time as a prophet, he served in administrative roles, such as working in the Church Historian's Office and serving as a clerk at the Salt Lake Endowment House.

His rise to the highest role in the church was not without struggle. Stephen C. Taysom, a professor of philosophy and comparative religion at Cleveland State University, introduced the most recent and complete entry into the historiography of Joseph F. Smith. His book, *Like a Fiery Meteor: The Life of Joseph F. Smith*, addressed the eventual prophet's struggles as a child, teenager, and young adult, all stemming from losing his father during the martyrdom incident of 1844. Taysom documented Smith's traumatic life and the efforts made by church leaders to put him on a path to reach his potential.<sup>39</sup>

The tumultuous nature of his formative years did not translate into his time as a church leader. Smith oversaw the systematization of practices and teachings. Quite the opposite of

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<sup>39</sup> Stephen C. Taysom, *Like a Fiery Meteor: The Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2023).

chaos, his reign as a leader implemented a sense of routine in the once charismatic denomination. In his earliest years as a church leader, he played a significant role in contextualizing the racial priesthood ban before he became the prophet. He accomplished this over a period from 1890 to 1918.

On February 7, 1890, he received a letter from an African American member, Jane Manning James. At that time, Smith had been called to be the Second Counselor in Woodruff's First Presidency. The letter read:

Dear Brother.

Please excuse me taking the Liberty of Writing to you—but be a Brother—I am anxious for my Welfare for the future--and has [sic] I hope to be one Bye [sic] and Bye [sic], bearing the same name has yourself--I was requested to write to you—Hoping you will please show kindness to me—by answering my questions—Thereby satisfying my mind.

First Has [sic] Brother James has Left me 21 years—And a Coloured [sic] Brother, Brother Lewis wished me to be sealed to Him, He has been dead 35 or 36 years—Can I be sealed to him—Parley P. Pratt ordained Him an Elder. When or (how?) can I ever be sealed to him.

Second,—Can I obtain my endowments for my Dead. Also I had the privilege of being baptized for My Dead, in October Last.

Third, Can I also be adopted in Brother Joseph Smiths the prophet[']s family, I think you are somewhat Acquainted with me—I lived in the prophets family With Emma and others, about a year—and Emma Said Joseph told her to tell me--I could be adopted in their family, she ask me if I should like to. I Did not understand the Law of adoption then—but Understanding it now.

Can that be Accomplished and When--I have heard you attend to the prophets Business in those matters—And so have written to you for information

Hoping soon to hear from you in these matters

I remain Your Sister in the Gospel

Jane E James Elizabeth

## I Am Coulored<sup>40</sup>

This letter did not come out of the blue. As alluded to in the letter, James realized Smith most likely recognized her name. This was because she had roots in Mormonism back to the time of the original prophet. She had joined the church in the early 1840s and moved from Connecticut to Nauvoo, Illinois. Once in the Mormon Kingdom, she was taken in by the original prophet's family as a servant. Upon Smith's death and the exodus of the Mormons from Illinois to the Utah Territory, James was one of the first Latter-Day Saints to step foot in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. She traveled in the Vanguard Group amongst Brigham Young and other influential church leaders.<sup>41</sup>

The letter to Joseph F. Smith was not her first letter to a church leader. In 1884, James had written a letter to former LDS president John Taylor. It stated:

Dear Brother.

I cauled [sic] at your house last [T]hursday to have some conversation with you concerning my future salvation. I did not explain my feelings or wishes to you. I realize my race & color & cant expect my Endowments as others who are white.

My race was handed down through the flood & God promised Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the aerth [sic] should be blest [sic] & as this is the fullness of all dispensations. Is there no blessing for me?

I with my Fathers family came from Connecticut 42 years the 14th of last Oct. I am the only one of my Fathers family that kept the faith. You know my history & according to the best of my ability I have lived to all the requairments [sic] of the Gospel When we reached Nauvoo we were 9 in the family & had traveled 9 hundred miles on foot.

Bro Joseph Smith took us in & we staid [sic] with him & his family until a few day[s] of his death. Sister Emma came to me & asked me how I would like to be

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<sup>40</sup> Jane Manning James, Letter to Joseph F. Smith, February 7, 1890, Joseph F. Smith Papers, MS 1325, CHL.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 50-51.

adopted to them as a Child. I did not comprehend her & she came again. I was so green I did not give her a decided answer & Joseph died & [I] remain as I am.

If I could be adopted to him as a child my Soul would be satisfied. I had been in the Church one year when we left the East that was 42 years the 14 of last Oct.<sup>42</sup>

James referred to the law of adoption. She believed that the Smiths could spiritually adopt her much in the same way that the Abrahamic Covenant allowed all to be adopted unto the seed of Abraham. Should this have happened, she could have obtained the same glorification in the afterlife as the original prophet. She would have been sealed to him as family. She claimed that Emma Smith offered this option to her, meaning that members of the Smith family would have promised her salvation. Unfortunately, there was no letter in response to her request from Taylor. This makes sense since he spent the end of his life medically frail and in hiding.

In 1888, Jane Manning James received a letter granting her permission to attend the temple for the purpose of completing baptisms for the dead. The content of the letter allowed her to participate in this sacred practice. It read:

Salt Lake City

June 16, 1888

Mrs. Jane James,

I enclose you your recommend properly signed,—which will entitle you to enter the Temple to be baptized and confirmed for your dead kindred.

You must be content with this privelege [sic], awaiting further instructions from the Lord to his servants. I am your servant and brother in the Gospel.

Angus M. Cannon<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Jane Manning James, Letter to John Taylor, December 27, 1884, in Henry J. Wolfinger, "A test of faith: Jane Elizabeth James and the origins of the Utah black community," in *Social Accommodation in Utah*, M243.6 K73s 1975, CHL.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from Angus M. Cannon to Jane E. James, June 16, 1888, Angus M. Cannon Collection, 1854–1920, MS 1200, CHL.



Cannon's letter served as her recommendation to attend the temple. Likewise, it sought to temper James' expectations. He explicitly communicated that she should find contentment in the granted access to the temple. Additionally, he instilled hope in her by suggesting that more opportunities could unfold in the future. This reflected an unusual level of confidence from a church leader concerning the potential reversal of the priesthood ban.

By the time James wrote to Joseph F. Smith in 1890, she had already attended the temple. Believing that Smith, having addressed temple concerns with the then-prophet Woodruff, could serve as her advocate with leadership, she reached out to him. Despite the absence of a reply in the church history library, the minutes from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and other leaders in the subsequent months and years indicate awareness of the situation.

On January 15, 1894, Zina D.H. Young, president of the Relief Society, wrote a letter to Smith. The letter stated:

Jane E. James, says, Sister Emma Smith asked her if she would like to be adopted into Joseph Smiths family as a child, & not understanding her meaning said no. Jane was Born Wilton Fairfield, Co. Conn Jane also asked me to ask If Isaac James & her Brother could also be adopted.<sup>44</sup>

The Relief Society functioned as the philanthropic and educational arm of the church, committed to the welfare of women within the church. With the president of this group supporting James, it is clear that numerous discussions took place on the matter before it reached the attention of the church's General Authorities. The matter escalated to the extent that it found a place in the personal journal of the prophet. On October 16, 1894 the prophet wrote:

We had Meeting with several individuals among the rest Black Jane wanted to know if I would not let her have her Endowments in the Temple. This I Could not do as it was against the Law of God. As Cain killed Abel All the seed of Cain

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<sup>44</sup> Zina D. H. Young, Letter to Joseph F. Smith, January 15, 1894, M243.6 K73s 1975 [no. 6], CHL.

would have to wait for Redemption until all the seed that Abel would have had that may Come through other men Can be redeemed.<sup>45</sup>

The prophet upheld an old perspective on the ban, primarily the belief in an Old Testament curse. This viewpoint, predating the formalization of a new understanding of the ban, was not uncommon among LDS members. However, the discourse surrounding James persisted within the highest echelons of the church. Subsequent discussions reshaped the narrative of the priesthood ban and marked a notable shift in the prophet's charismatic authority. In the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles meeting on August 22, 1895, the First Counselor addressed James's queries to the prophet and Quorum members. The meeting's scribe documented the following:

At a regular meeting of the First Presidency and Apostles held in the Salt Lake Temple, August 22, 1895, the question of the Negro and the Priesthood came up for discussion and the following is taken from the minutes of that meeting:

President (George Q.) Cannon remarked that the Prophet taught this doctrine: That the seed of Cain could not receive the Priesthood nor act in any of the offices of the Priesthood until the seed of Abel should come forward and take precedence over Cain's offspring.<sup>46</sup>

The significance of the statement lies in one subtle detail. When Cannon referenced the prophet, he wasn't alluding to Woodruff. Instead, he was invoking the founder. In a single stroke, he re-wrote the narrative of the racial priesthood ban. By associating the ban with the original prophet, he accomplished the monumental task of legitimizing it. As Old Testament curses lost influence in the broader religious context, for Mormons, the original prophet's teachings remained the singular and unquestionable source of truth. By attributing the doctrine to Smith, many presumed that it originated directly from God, given the Mormons' perception of Smith as a true prophet.

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<sup>45</sup> Wilford Woodruff journal, October 16, 1894, MS 1352, CHL.

<sup>46</sup> Historical Department journal history of the Church, 1830-2008; 1890-1899; 1895 August; CHL, August 22, 1895, 182.

This also signaled a shift in the charismatic nature of the prophet. Smith, Young, Taylor, and even Woodruff had all received revelation at some point during their leadership. Doctrine did not necessarily have to be retroactively attributed to previous prophets. Church members believed in the continuous evolution of their faith, emphasizing the need for a living prophet. Presenting a church doctrine by constructing a new, inaccurate historical account indicated a diminished faith in the ability of contemporary leaders to receive direct communication from God. With the decline of its own charismatic abilities, the church had to rely on the past charisma of its original founder.

The revisionist approach to the history of the priesthood ban continued in the following years. On December 16, 1897, George Q. Cannon wrote:

The question also came up whether a white man who was married to a woman having negro blood in her veins could receive the Priesthood. I explained what President Taylor had taught me when I was a boy in Nauvoo concerning this matter; he had received it from the Prophet Joseph, who said that a man bearing the Priesthood who should marry or associate with a negress, or one of that seed, if the penalty of the law were executed upon him, he and her and the offspring would be killed; that it was contrary to the law of God for men bearing the Priesthood to have association with that seed. In this case submitted to us a white man had married a woman with negro blood in her ignorantly; yet if he were to receive the Priesthood and still continue his association with his wife the offspring of the marriage might make a claim or claims that would interfere with the purposes of the Lord and His curse upon the seed of Cain.<sup>47</sup>

A March 1, 1900 entry in his journal read:

A question came up as to persons having the blood of Cain in their veins, and whether there was not a time when it might become so diluted that they would be entitled to the priesthood.... President Young set forth the idea that spirits were classified in heaven before they came here, and that Cain stood at the head of a class of spirits who were willing to follow him and to come here and take black bodies...President John Taylor...told me what the Prophet Joseph had said ... that the seed of Cain could not hold the priesthood, and that they would be debarred from the priesthood until Abel should have seed who could come forward and receive the priesthood...<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> George Q. Cannon, Journal, December 16, 1897, Church Historian's Press.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, March 1, 1900.

A final journal entry on the topic from August 18, 1900, attempted to connect the priesthood ban to all of the prophets to date. It stated:

... I remarked that I had heard President Young express himself very positively on this question a number of times, as well as President Taylor. President Taylor had repeated to me a conversation he had had with the Prophet Joseph on this question, and one of the points of the conversation was that the negro could not hold the priesthood. ... President Young had stated positively that no negro had a right to hold the priesthood. I then read from the record of Abraham, in which Abraham speaks with the utmost plainness upon this point. I also read from the record concerning Enoch; that he had preached to all except the descendants of Cain...

... however white a man may be and though every trace of negro blood be lost in his appearance, still if he were a descendant of that race in any degree he could not legally hold the priesthood. President Taylor explained... that no descendant of Cain could obtain unto these blessings...<sup>49</sup>

In five months, George Q. Cannon successfully linked the priesthood ban to the foundation of the church. Once associating the doctrine with Smith, he then outlined the belief taught by the prophets who followed. Consequently, questions about the ‘why’ behind the ban were largely suppressed. Access to historical documents at that time was limited, and the church predominantly regarded the words of its leaders as gospel. Therefore, when an apostle presented a historical narrative concerning the priesthood ban, it left little room for individuals in the church to question.

Cannon’s rewriting of history also rendered the priesthood ban much more palatable for the church of the early twentieth century. The church appeared to be speaking from conflicting perspectives. On one hand, it preached a gospel open to all individuals, while on the other, it upheld a doctrine arguably more severe than the treatment of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Minutes from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1902 recorded Joseph F. Smith as

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, August 18, 1900.

saying, "... in all cases where the blood of Cain showed itself, however slight, the line should be drawn there; but where children of tainted parents were found to be pure Ephraimites, they might be admitted to the temple."<sup>50</sup> Cannon's behind-the-scenes work allowed Smith to be straightforward about the priesthood ban, asserting that individuals with 'one drop' of African blood were to be denied the priesthood and the saving ordinances of the temple.

Despite church leaders' direction, James did not stop seeking her temple blessings. In the same minutes in which Smith had declared the "one drop" policy, the top officials discussed the James issue.

After his death the wife of Isaac James (known as Aunt Jane) asked to receive her own endowments and to be sealed; but President Woodruff, Cannon, and Smith decided that this could not be done, but decided that she might be adopted into the family of the Prophet Joseph Smith as a servant, which was done, a special ceremony having been prepared for the purpose. But Aunt Jane was not satisfied with this, and as a mark of her dissatisfaction she applied again after this for sealing blessings, but of course in vain.<sup>51</sup>

She had been allowed to be spiritually adopted by the Smith family, albeit as a servant, destined to be in service to the family for all eternity according to church doctrine. However, as stated in the minutes, she was unhappy with this arrangement and reached out to leaders with a simple request.

President Joseph F. Smith

Dear Brother

I take this opportunity of writing to ask you if I can get my endowments and also finish the work I have begun for my dead. [A]nd Dear Brother I would like to see and talk with you about it, will you please write to me and tell me how soon, when and where i shall come and I will be there by doing so you will be conferring a great favour.

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<sup>50</sup> Meeting Minutes, January 2, 1902, George Albert Smith Family Papers (Box 78, Folder 7), University of Utah Marriott Library Special Collections.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, January 2, 1902.

Your sister in the Gospel.  
Jane E. James<sup>52</sup>

A direct response could not be found in the church archives. Unfortunately, James never received her endowments during her lifetime. She passed away on April 8, 1918. The *Deseret News* printed her obituary and painted her as a faithful church member and servant to the original prophet in the afterlife. The entry did not include any mention of her advocacy for her own salvation.<sup>53</sup> Ultimately James' death intensified the re-writing of history within the church.

At a quorum meeting on August 26, 1908, months after James' death, the conversation amongst church leaders was still very much on the topic of blacks and temple access. The minutes recorded the prophet as saying:

...people tainted with negro blood may be admitted to Church membership only. In this connection President Smith referred to Brother Abel, who was ordained a Seventy by Joseph Young, in the days of the Prophet Joseph, to whom Brother Young issued a Seventies' certificate; but this ordination was declared null and void by the Prophet himself... Brother Abel renewed his application to President Taylor with the same result, and still the same appeal was made to President Woodruff afterwards... Presidents Young, Taylor, and Woodruff all denied him the blessings of the House of the Lord.

The same efforts he said had been made by Aunt Jane to receive her endowments and be sealed to her husband and have her children sealed to their parents and her appeal was made to all the Presidents from President Young down to the present First Presidency. But President Cannon conceived the idea that, under the circumstances, it would be proper to permit her to go to the temple to be adopted to the Prophet Joseph Smith as his servant and this was done..

...the President added that where the priesthood may have been bestowed upon men tainted with this blood, in all such cases their ordinations must be regarded as invalid.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Henry J. Wolfinger, "A test of faith: Jane Elizabeth James and the origins of the Utah black community," in *Social Accommodation in Utah*, M243.6 K73s 1975 [no. 6], CHL.

<sup>53</sup> "Death of Jane Manning James," *Deseret Evening News*, April 16, 1908: 1.

<sup>54</sup> Meeting Minutes, August 26, 1908, George Albert Smith Family Papers, Box 78, fd. 7, University of Utah Marriott Library Special Collections.

Smith and the others in the room participated in the malicious re-writing of history, eliminating blacks from the priesthood lineage. As the generation of blacks that held the priesthood died off, it became possible to manipulate their story. The prophet did this by declaring that individuals like Elijah Abel, who had received the priesthood with the knowledge of Mormonism's founder, were unworthy of the ordination and had it declared null and void by the original prophet.

The death of a generation of African Americans who could testify of the universalism of Mormonism prior to Young's leadership allowed the progressive Mormons to entrench the priesthood ban in its beliefs. Gone were the outliers, and instead, religious uniformity occurred.

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was a time of realignment for Mormonism. Legal attacks by the federal government targeted LDS polygamy and forced the hand of leaders. Doctrine changed in order to avoid conflict with the Gentile world. This was a direct hit to the charisma of LDS leaders. Complying with the laws of a land that had continuously rejected their people left Mormon leaders dissatisfied and frustrated. While polygamy failed, the priesthood ban was the "success story" of the church.

The development of a formal theology by individuals such as Roberts, Widtsoe, and Talmage played an essential role in the evolution of Mormonism. While these individuals defined the formal beliefs and developed a long-lasting narrative for the church, they had the potential to address the realities of the priesthood ban. All of these individuals could have identified the curse as beginning with Young and being based on the racial ideologies of the time. Instead, they avoided the topic altogether. This allowed leaders such as Cannon and Joseph F. Smith to cement the priesthood ban as a foundational piece of Mormon history.

In the following decades, the priesthood ban became a controversial doctrine for which the church would be known. Instead of addressing the concerns of those on either side of the

controversy, leaders, lacking the charisma to offer new doctrine or change old doctrine, doubled down on their questionable beliefs. The following chapter addresses the entrenchment of the priesthood ban in Mormonism between 1920 and 1950.



## Chapter 6

### Centralization of Power, Streamlining of Doctrine, and Gaslighting of Dissidents

The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century witnessed an internal struggle in coping with alterations in Mormon doctrine. The cessation of polygamy prompted church members to question the validity of prophecies issued after Joseph Smith's demise. Shifting from a Christian denomination advocating the significance of plural marriage to one emphasizing the purity of monogamous relationships sparked the second wave of dissident movements. Fundamentalist Mormons, those who resisted abandoning polygamy, contended that the discontinuation of "the principle" suggested that God was no longer guiding the prophets at the helm of the denomination. This belief gave rise to new radical sects that adhered to antiquated Mormon teachings.

In the twentieth century, under the leadership of Joseph F. Smith, the church grappled with doctrinal questions. Apart from those departing for fundamentalism, Mormons adeptly addressed the issue of polygamy through a reinterpretation of Doctrine and Covenants 132. This revelation introduced the practice of polygamy while also attempting to persuade Joseph Smith's first wife to accept it. The revelation was remarkably ambiguous, providing church leaders with the latitude to interpret it as they deemed appropriate. Nevertheless, before the 1890 Manifesto terminated polygamy, the revelation's intent was unmistakable. Leaders utilized the scripture to assert that plural marriage was imperative for exaltation.

On July 7, 1878, Joseph F. Smith, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, gave his thoughts on the practice of plural marriage:

Some people have supposed that the doctrine of plural marriage was a sort of superfluity, or non-essential to the salvation or exaltation of mankind...I want here to enter my solemn protest against this idea, for I know it is

false...Therefore, whoever has imagined that he could obtain the fullness of the blessings pertaining to this celestial law, by complying with only a portion of its conditions, has deceived himself. He cannot do it.<sup>1</sup>

In the same speech, he furthered the church's understanding of polygamy's eternal importance:

I understand the law of celestial marriage to mean that every man in the Church, who has the ability to obey and practice it in righteousness and will not, shall be damned, I say I understand it to mean this and nothing less, and I testify in the name of Jesus that it does mean that...<sup>2</sup>

On the subject of polygamy and exaltation, former prophet Young had stated much of the same:

The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy.<sup>3</sup>

Heber C. Kimball, a fellow member of the Quorum of the Twelve, offered his thoughts on polygamy as well:

Some quietly listen to those who speak against the Lord's servants, against his anointed, against the plurality of wives, and against almost every principle that God has revealed. Such persons have half-a-dozen devils with them all the time. You might as well deny "Mormonism," and turn away from it, as to oppose the plurality of wives. Let the Presidency of this Church, and the Twelve Apostles, and all the authorities unite and say with one voice that they will oppose that doctrine, and the whole of them would be damned.<sup>4</sup>

Ten years later, Kimball went even further when he explained the necessity of polygamy:

I speak of plurality of wives as one of the most holy principles that God ever revealed to man, and all those who exercise an influence against it, unto whom it is taught, man or woman will be damned, and they and all who will be influenced by them, will suffer the buffetings of Satan in the flesh; for the curse of God will be upon them, and poverty, and distress, and vexation of spirit will be their portion; while those who honor this and every sacred institution of heaven will shine forth as the stars in the firmament of heaven, and of the increase of their kingdom and glory there shall be no end.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph F. Smith, July 7, 1878, 20:28-29. included in *Journal of Discourses*. Edited by George D. Watt, et al. 26 vols. Liverpool: F. D. Richards, et al., 1854-1886.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph F. Smith, July 7, 1878, *JD* 20:31.

<sup>3</sup> Brigham Young, August 19, 1866, *JD* 11:268-269.

<sup>4</sup> Heber C. Kimball, October 12, 1856, *JD* 5:204-205.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, April 4, 1866, *JD* 11:211.

Quorum member Orson Hyde agreed with his fellow leaders:

But one thing I will name, and that is in regard to plural marriage. A great many men say -- "Oh, well, I can get along, I can live, and I believe I shall only have one wife." Well, that is your privilege, nobody compels you to take more than one; but with the commandment of the Lord before us like a blaze of light, can we disregard it and serve him acceptable? If we can, then why not retain those laws and commandments in heaven, and not send them down here to earth? These commandments are sent for our good, for our salvation and exaltation.<sup>6</sup>

The third prophet, John Taylor corroborated the talks of earlier church leaders:

Now, in relation to the position that we occupy concerning plurality, or, as it is termed, polygamy it differs from that of others. I have noticed the usage of several nations regarding marriage; but, as I have said, we are not indebted to any of them for our religion, nor for our ideas of marriage, they came from God. Where did this commandment come from in relation to polygamy? It also came from God. It was a revelation given unto Joseph Smith from God, and was made binding upon His servants... When this commandment was given, it was so far religious, and so far binding upon the Elders of this Church that it was told them if they were not prepared to enter into it, and to stem the torrent of opposition that would come in consequences of it, the keys of the kingdom would be taken from them. When I see any of our people, men or women, opposing a principle of this kind, I have years ago set them down as on the high road to apostasy [sic], and I do to-day [sic]. I consider them apostates, and not interested in this Church and kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

The upper echelons of leadership in the church emphasized that polygamy was not merely a distinctive practice for the religious sect but rather a doctrine and ordinance indispensable for the highest level of salvation. This underscored the significance of plural marriage among Mormons. However, when confronted with external pressure from government forces, the leaders of the faith yielded to Gentile authorities and completely discontinued the practice.

The Mormon leadership seemed vulnerable when the U.S. government coerced the church into abandoning polygamy by wielding the threat of criminal prosecution. The decision of leaders to prioritize man's law over God's engendered resentment among the upper levels of

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<sup>6</sup> Orson Hyde, October 5, 1873, *JD* 16:236.

<sup>7</sup> John Taylor, April 7, 1866, *JD* 11:221.

the church, and they were determined not to let such an occurrence repeat. Moving beyond this embarrassment necessitated leadership to chart a course into the future and to forge ahead with doctrines that might be less acceptable to outsiders but were deemed essential within the denomination. This was precisely what unfolded with the priesthood ban.

The previous chapter addressed how leaders began to develop justifications for the priesthood ban behind closed doors. These attempts included re-writing history, mainly marking the ban as originating with Joseph Smith, despite the lack of resources saying any such thing. This chapter will address how Mormon authorities took the private discussions regarding the justifications of the priesthood ban to the public. It will examine how Mormonism focused more on “church education” issues and how educational materials sought to indoctrinate members with incorrect principles that ultimately justified the priesthood ban.

The early twentieth century witnessed a transformation in Mormonism as the church shifted its focus to the consolidation of messaging. The denomination's expansion led to the establishment of stakes across the United States and Europe.<sup>8</sup> Originally centered in Utah, the rapid growth, fueled by missionary endeavors, posed challenges in maintaining consistent teachings across different regions. This was mainly attributed to the Latter-Day Saint practice of appointing lay clergy to lead each ward, individuals who often lacked theological training.<sup>9</sup> Recognizing this, church leaders in Utah undertook efforts to formulate a plan ensuring that local churches imparted accurate doctrine.

As early as 1908, Joseph F. Smith initiated efforts to form a committee aimed at developing a unified religious curriculum for the priesthood meetings within the church. This

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<sup>8</sup> The term “stakes” refer to a collection of Latter-Day Saint congregations in a specific geographic area.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Nephi 26:29; Isaiah 54:12.

initial endeavor structured the priesthood into groups according to age. The minutes of the General Priesthood Committee from this period state as follows:

“...unless there are special reasons to the contrary they should be advanced in the priesthood from deacon to teacher and from teacher to priest there can be no set age when persons should be ordained to the various offices in the Aaronic priesthood but we suggest that as near as circumstances will permit boys to be ordained as follows deacons at twelve teachers at fifteen and priests at eighteen years of age.”<sup>10</sup>

These changes created tracts where men participated in scripture study with similar age groups.

The subsequent phase of organization for Mormonism involved the formalization of the church's curriculum, a goal pursued in 1912. Under Joseph F. Smith's guidance, the church established the Correlation Committee to achieve this objective. Despite numerous instances in the early twentieth century of the church endeavoring to harmonize messaging across local congregations, particular emphasis will be placed on the Correlation Committee of 1912-1920. Although eventually disbanded, this task force crafted the strategy by which the church continued to create, promote, and distribute materials aimed at indoctrinating the membership.

On April 15, 1913, the correlation leaders met and drafted a resolution to be sent to the members of the First Presidency. David O. McKay, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, presided over the task force. The resolution read as follows:

Be it resolved by the sub-committee on selection of times for holding of Stake Conferences of Auxiliary Associations that the following plan be recommended to the whole committee on correlation and unification of auxiliary work as a basis for the future operations of the committee and as a partial report thereof.

1st--That we do recommend to the presiding authorities of the Church that the annual stake conferences or conventions of the auxiliary organizations be held in connection with, and as a part of the quarterly stake conferences...

2nd-- That in the holding of their annual stake meetings, auxiliary organizations be combined...

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<sup>10</sup> General Priesthood Committee minutes, 5 December 1911.

3rd-- That the months of the year are apportioned among the auxiliary organizations for the holding of their annual stake conferences in connection with the Stake quarterly conferences...

5th-- ... Saturday evening to be reserved for such meetings, social or otherwise shall be planned by the stake or local authorities...<sup>11</sup>

The mentioned minutes delved into how the committee aimed to delineate the authority of auxiliary organizations to convene within the church. Although it might have seemed like a discussion centered on scheduling, for those well-versed in Mormon history, it signified a significant turning point. Noted historian Thomas G. Alexander, recognized for his research on Mormonism's transformations in the first half of the twentieth century, asserted that early correlation efforts were directed at curbing the autonomy of auxiliary organizations. These groups had operated with nearly complete sovereignty since the inception of the church, formulating their curriculum, conducting meetings, and addressing their social concerns.<sup>12</sup> Initiating control over scheduling at the top of the church was a strategic move to diminish the autonomy of these groups.

These early attempts by the committee to define a schedule for auxiliary organizations were merely the inception of the correlation efforts. The drive to strip away autonomy from these groups soon became markedly more apparent. The minutes from June 4, 1913, documented the official objective of the committee. It commenced with matters of scheduling, consistent with the earlier resolution. However, the latter half of the minutes on this day outlined the task force's much more precise aim.

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<sup>11</sup> *Minutes of the General Correlation Committee*, April 15, 1913, Correlation Committee Minutes, 1913-1920, CR 398 1, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-Day Saints, 1890-1930* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 134-135.

In 1914, the LDS Church endeavored to synchronize and standardize the curriculum of its auxiliary organizations such as Sunday School, Relief Society, and Priesthood quorums. The objective was to prevent duplication and channel members' efforts in a more systematic manner. The committee categorized the auxiliaries and outlined general areas of study for each. For instance, Primary and Mutuals concentrated on practical religion, ethics, economics, and athletics. Sunday School and Aaronic Priesthood delved into scripture and church history, starting with simpler content for children and progressing through high school. Relief Society and Melchizedek Priesthood centered on gospel principles.

The committee identified significant duplication between organizations, especially in Sunday School and Priesthood. They proposed a reorganization of all church-based courses and suggested altering terminology to eliminate conflicts. All courses of study for auxiliaries needed approval from the committee before adoption. Detailed statements delineated the 1914-1915 curriculum across the auxiliaries. The committee advocated for forthcoming courses to align with their recommendations for correlation.

This marked the commencement of a comprehensive endeavor to coordinate LDS curriculum. The correlation initiative aimed to concentrate member efforts, diminish redundancy, and instill a unified faith tradition. Over the subsequent decades, correlation expanded in scope and authority.<sup>13</sup>

What started as a committee evaluating the scheduling of church organizations rapidly transformed into a panel wielding the authority to redefine the goals of all auxiliary groups within the denomination. In a span of just two months, the Correlation Committee began dictating expectations for the curriculum. Prior to this, various branches of the church independently defined their goals, crafted lessons according to their discretion, and held

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<sup>13</sup> *MGCC*, June 4, 1913.

meetings at their convenience. However, the new panel of advisors aimed to curtail the freedom of these auxiliaries to operate as independent entities within the church. The establishment of a bureaucracy aligned seamlessly with the strategy of routinizing charisma.

The significance of the correlation efforts from 1912 to 1920 did not solely arise from the development of a standardized curriculum in the church but rather from how the task force adeptly utilized the entire church bureaucracy to disseminate information. While they pursued a specific goal for each auxiliary, the committee took an additional step, this time aiming to influence the education of church teachers. The minutes from October 10, 1918, revealed how the leaders championed a plan to craft a manual for those teaching correlated classes. This manual emphasized the role of individuals, utilizing their time as teachers to foster and promote faith.<sup>14</sup>

Within three months, the First Presidency endorsed the concept of a widely distributed teacher manual. Consequently, the correlation committee formulated a plan for the distribution of the text. The church possessed two publishing houses: The Deseret News Bookstore and the Deseret Sunday School Union Bookstore.<sup>15</sup> Both printers proposed plans for the production and dissemination of the text, along with suggested sales prices.<sup>16</sup>

By January 9, 1919, the Correlation Committee had formulated a plan to promote the training guide. The scheme involved presenting the book as mandatory material for all teachers in the church. The reading became a component of a class scheduled for a day of the week outside of regular church hours. The marketing project implemented a series of swift and efficient mobilization efforts. Initially, local Bishops received information about the class and the

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, October 10, 1918.

<sup>15</sup> Wendell J. Ashton, *Voice in the West: Biography of a Pioneer Newspaper* (New York, NY: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1950), 225-226.

<sup>16</sup> *MGCC*, January 5, 1919.



new book. Simultaneously, the committee dispatched a notice to all stake presidents and leaders of the auxiliary organizations.<sup>17</sup> In the LDS church, notices sent to stake presidents, bishops, and other leaders are read to the membership. In this situation, church members received the information thrice a month. The effort to market the class and book via internal messaging chains highlighted how the bureaucracy of Mormonism could be wielded as a tool. It also enabled church leaders to recognize that the administrative network of the church was remarkably cost-effective, with estimated expenses for sending letters to all churches in the United States amounting to \$63.50.<sup>18</sup>

In less than three months, the book, initially promoted solely at church meetings, completely sold out its original run of 1,000 and 2,000 copies from both printers, respectively. On March 16, 1919, the minutes included a letter from one of the printers. The letter indicated their intention to produce an additional 10,000 copies of the book and to double the price from ten to twenty cents.<sup>19</sup> The books, with minimal marketing efforts, generated such demand that the church found the need to produce more. The test run proved to be both popular and profitable for it. Similarly, the introduction of a class for teachers proved successful, prompting widespread adoption. In fact, by October 14, 1919, only fifteen wards in the United States had yet to offer the marketed teacher course.<sup>20</sup>

The success of the teaching handbook eventually led to the program evolving into a seminar offered by the church-sponsored college, Brigham Young University.<sup>21</sup> While the correlation committee lasted only eight years, it played a pivotal role in developing the church's

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, January 9, 1919.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, February 20, 1919.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, March 16, 1919.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, October 14, 1919. A ward is an individual church building within a geographic stake.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, May 4, 1920.

messaging apparatus and defined how LDS officials could use the church and its resources to disseminate information to members as they deemed appropriate. Little has been written about this early correlation effort, with many LDS historians focusing on the later correlation efforts of the 1960s. However, the early functions of the church proved essential in establishing more recent control over its history. The 1912 to 1920 task force laid the groundwork for its theological and historical messaging to the membership.

One significant takeaway from the success of the early correlation committee was that a centralized church government bureaucracy could maintain control in terms of uniformity over a rapidly expanding religious movement. Church leaders could disseminate approved messaging to the membership, prompt them to take action, and provide teachings that the First Presidency believed would yield favorable results. The church did not solely use this for teaching purposes; rather, they exploited it to disseminate altered versions of its history to members through official communication channels. Many individuals might not question a statement from a prophet or doctrinal teaching from an apostle. Therefore, this new apparatus reinforced the doctrinal basis of the racial priesthood ban.

Joseph Fielding Smith was among the first individuals to capitalize on this new bureaucratic messaging system. Born in 1876, he was the grandson of Hyrum Smith and the son of former prophet Joseph F. Smith. Appointed as an apostle by the First Presidency in 1910, he eventually assumed the role of prophet of the church in 1970.<sup>22</sup> However, during this later period, he primarily served as a figurehead, given his physical and mental incapacitation due to old age.

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<sup>22</sup> Matthew L. Harris, "Joseph Fielding Smith's Evolving Views on Race: The Odyssey of a Mormon Apostle-President," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 55, no. 3 (2022): 2-4.

His most influential role in the denomination was his tenure as the church historian, a position to which he was appointed in April 1921.<sup>23</sup>

Smith echoed many of his father's views regarding the reasons for the racial priesthood ban. As discussed in the previous chapter, Joseph F. Smith worked to reshape the origin story of the ban, with many of these discussions taking place behind closed doors in Quorum meetings during his tenure. However, Joseph Fielding Smith benefited from the newly established lines of communication that emerged from the experiment with correlation. He commenced his time as a church leader with the ability to disseminate these teachings and integrate them within the doctrinal beliefs of the Saints.

Smith made his racial opinions known to the broader church audience in 1924 by publishing an article in the magazine *Improvement Era*. This widely circulated magazine served as a means for leaders to disseminate messaging and doctrinal teachings to the broader church. In the article called “The Negro and the Priesthood,” he stated,

It is true that the negro race is barred from holding the Priesthood, and this has always been the case. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught this doctrine, and it was made known to him, although we know of no such statement in any revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants, Book of Mormon, or the Bible.

However, in the Pearl of Great Price, we find the following statement written by Abraham: ‘Now this first government of Egypt was established by Pharaoh, the eldest son of Egyptus, the daughter of Ham, and it was after the manner of the government of Ham, which was patriarchal. Pharaoh, being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father, who blessed him with the blessings of the earth, and with the blessings of wisdom, but cursed him as pertaining to the Priesthood.’

Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 1:25-26<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Heber J. Grant, "General Authorities of the Church Sustained," Conference Report (April 1921): 189.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, “The Negro and the Priesthood,” *Improvement Era*, April 1924, 565.

The magazine entry addressed two themes that earlier church leaders had discussed. First, it focused on the curse of Ham, which had been put forth as an explanation for the priesthood ban by earlier members, starting with Young. This belief remained popular among LDS theologians well into the twentieth century. The second belief outlined in Smith's writing is the origin of the priesthood ban. The church historian asserted that the doctrine did not commence with Young but rather with the its founder.

This belief began to gain traction in the early twentieth century, but the discussions remained confined to closed doors, documented in the minutes of individuals like Joseph F. Smith and George Q. Cannon. The dialogue among the general church membership was essentially novel. No one had previously cited records suggesting that the priesthood ban originated with Joseph Smith. The church historian pointed to the Book of Abraham as evidence.

A brief review of its history is in order here, which begins back in 1835 when a traveling salesman named Michael Chandler toured the United States with a set of Egyptian mummies.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, his mobile shop of wonders made its way to Ohio.<sup>26</sup> On July 3, 1835, Joseph Smith met Chandler and arranged a deal to purchase a set of mummies and papyri. The salesman sought out Smith when told the prophet could translate the hieroglyphics. Smith offered a rudimentary translation on the same day and received a certificate from the peddler, who claimed the translation was accurate.<sup>27</sup> Over a month, Smith worked diligently to translate the papyri, believing they were an ancient record that offered insight into the life of early biblical figures. W.W. Phelps addressed the completed translation, noting that it served as a "good witness for the

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<sup>25</sup> "A Rare Exhibition," *Cleveland Whig* 1, no. 30, March 25, 1835, *JSP*.

<sup>26</sup> "Egyptian Mummies," *Cleveland Daily Advertiser*, March 26, 1835, *JSP*; "Mummies," *Painesville Telegraph* 1, no. 40, March 27, 1835, *JSP*.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838], 596, *The Joseph Smith Papers*; Certificate from Michael Chandler, July 6, 1835, *JSP*.

Book of Mormon.”<sup>28</sup> The translated papyri became the Book of Abraham, which was canonized as official scripture in 1880.<sup>29</sup>

Claiming that Joseph Smith taught a racial priesthood ban through his translation of the Egyptian papyri, the church historian introduced a logical problem for Mormonism. If one believed that he translated the hieroglyphs on the scrolls, then it logically followed that he was essentially taking the hieroglyphic symbols and rendering them into English. Consequently, the words attributed to Smith and recorded were not his original ideas but rather the contents of the collection that accompanied the mummies.

To claim that Smith taught this to the Saints would mean that the Book of Abraham was not a translation, but instead, the ideas of Joseph Smith masked as a translation. This option implies that the prophet’s translation process was nothing but his words and beliefs couched in the rhetoric of a religious-sounding text with made-up historical context. If Smith did this with the Book of Abraham, who could say that the same was not done with the Book of Mormon?

Likewise, the first prophet did not heavily promote the translation of the Egyptian figures. If he had considered them to be scripture, the most logical thing to do would have been to canonize them himself. However, this was not done until much later, and coincidentally, it was not completed until the Book of Abraham had become a lynchpin for the priesthood ban. Scripture was made to justify the ban because no other material supported Young’s racist teachings. It would take decades for members to realize these contradictions.

Joseph Fielding Smith paid no attention to the problems created by his theories. Instead, he continued to utilize the bureaucratic framework to double down on his teachings. With

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<sup>28</sup> William W. Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, July 20, 1835, CR 100 137, Church History Library.

<sup>29</sup> "Fiftieth Semi-Annual Conference. Fifth Day," Salt Lake Herald-Republican, October 12, 1880, 3.

printing presses available to the church, Smith used his position as historian to publish multiple texts. Many of these texts served as lesson manuals for the Elders Quorum. This meant that every weekend, men met during an hour of church to study the historian's teachings. It was through this process, made possible by the work mentioned above of the correlation committee, that Smith and Mormon leadership sought to instill the racial teachings into the general membership.

One of Smith's earliest works, *The Way to Perfection: Short Discourses on Gospel Themes*, published by the church in 1931, stood out as among his most impactful. It comprised a collection of short essays on various gospel topics, such as the plan of salvation, the ordinances of the gospel, and the fruits of the gospel. In the text, Smith taught that the way to perfection was to follow Jesus Christ's teachings and live worthily. He explained that the plan of salvation was an eschatology of love and mercy, available to everyone. The Atonement of Jesus Christ was deemed essential for salvation, and the ordinances of the gospel were crucial for salvation, aiding in becoming more like Jesus Christ. The fruits of the gospel were considered necessary for spiritual growth and development. Smith concluded by teaching that the way to perfection was through obedience to the commandments of God and following the example of Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup> The text also delved into the topic of the priesthood ban.

In the LDS church, the purpose of the Elders Quorum and other auxiliary classes was to teach doctrine, as outlined in the Correlation Committee minutes between 1912 and 1920. Therefore, it is important to note that curricular materials approved by the church represented doctrine. Starting in 1947, *The Way to Perfection* became the official textbook of the Elders

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<sup>30</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection: Short Discourses on Gospel Themes* (Salt Lake City, UT: Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1931).

Quorum classes in the church. The book brought to light many of the unspoken ideas of his father. Speaking of the pre-existence, the author stated,

That the negro race, for instance, have been placed under restrictions because of their attitude in the world of spirits, few will doubt. It cannot be looked upon as just that they should be deprived of the power of the Priesthood without it being a punishment for some act, or acts, performed before they were born. Yet, like all other spirits who come into this world, they come innocent before God so far as mortal existence is concerned, and here, under certain restrictions, they may work out their second estate. If they prove faithful in this estate, without doubt, our Eternal Father, who is just and true, will reward them accordingly and there will be in store for them some blessings of exaltation.<sup>31</sup>

Smith opened up an avenue for future leaders to explain the reasons for the priesthood ban. LDS doctrine asserted, and still does, that all spirits existed before coming to earth. Those who arrived on Earth with physical bodies chose the plan of Christ, while those without physical bodies decided to follow Satan in the pre-existence. Despite individuals with black skin having physical bodies, according to this doctrine, they could not have possibly chosen Satan's plan. However, as addressed in the previous chapter, individuals like Joseph F. Smith asserted that black skin might very well be an indication that these spirits needed more convincing to follow Christ than those with white skin. He built upon this belief while quoting from Brigham Young in the textbook. He stated,

President Brigham Young, answering a question put to him By Elder Lorenzo D. Young in a meeting held December 25, 1869, in Salt Lake City, said that Joseph Smith had declared that the Negroes were not neutral in heaven, for all the spirits took sides, but 'the posterity of Cain are black because he (Cain) committed murder. He killed Abel and God set a mark upon his posterity.'<sup>32</sup>

Young's quote once again drew upon the theory of an ancient curse. However, it also asserted that the theory of neutrality in heaven was simply not possible due to what Mormons claimed to

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

know about the pre-existence. Smith continued to build on his explanation of the priesthood ban, furthering the discussion on the curse theory. He stated,

Not only was Cain called upon to suffer, but because of his wickedness he became the father of an inferior race. A curse was placed upon him and that curse has been continued through his lineage and must do so while time endures. Millions of souls have come into this world cursed with a black skin and have been denied the privilege of Priesthood and the fulness [sic] of the blessings of the Gospel. These are the descendants of Cain. Moreover, they have been made to feel their inferiority and have been separated from the rest of mankind from the beginning.<sup>33</sup>

While it may seem that Smith was simply regurgitating earlier teachings of Latter-Day Saint leaders, the thought was now made available to the general membership via the printing efforts of the church. These discussions regarding racial curses and pre-mortal valiance were no longer being held behind closed doors in the offices of Salt Lake City. Instead, they were now being held in LDS chapels across the world as the new lesson materials sought to teach the doctrine of the church to the congregants.

This section carried great weight and represented a major change in the religious sect. Mormonism had begun as a charismatic movement in a Yankee state. The church's founder advocated for both the spiritual and temporal equality of blacks. This led the sect into dangerous situations. His beliefs regarding racial equality got members killed. Despite this, he continued to advocate for equality, going as far as to offer a plan for the abolition of slavery in the country in a presidential campaign. In less than a century, that same movement taught about the inferiority of blacks. The original prophet's great-nephew offered teachings to the general church population in direct confrontation with the original foundational beliefs of Mormonism.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.



Joseph Fielding Smith's textbook rewrote the history of the faith for all members to read and take as an official record of the church. Continuing to talk about the origins of the ban, he wrote,

This doctrine did not originate with President Brigham Young but was taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith. At a meeting of the general authorities of the Church, held August 22, 1895, the question of the status of the negro in relation to the Priesthood was asked and the minutes of that meeting say: 'President George Q. Cannon remarked that the Prophet taught this doctrine: That the seed of Cain could not receive the Priesthood nor act in any of the offices of the Priesthood until the seed of Abel should come forward and take precedence over Cain's offspring'<sup>34</sup>

It was at this point that collective church history was officially fabricated. Joseph Fielding Smith disregarded the correct practices of a historian and instead became an individual focused on indoctrination. The previous chapter addressed the conversations between George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith. The quorum minutes regarding the priesthood ban originating with the first prophet were based on second-hand hearsay from John Taylor. Cannon never spoke about receiving confirmation of this information from the original prophet. Likewise, no source material connects Smith to the creation of the priesthood ban. Cannon and Smith developed a narrative that helped justify the ban when there was no justification other than the racism of the day. The then-church president sought to make hearsay into doctrine without any primary source material.

Smith's willingness to address the difficult aspects of the faith led other apostles to look to him as the expert on the theological explanations of issues regarding race and the priesthood ban.<sup>35</sup> He continued to publish teachings regarding the ban. Apostle Bruce R. McConkie worked during the 1950s to put together an authoritative work regarding the entirety of doctrine in the

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew L. Harris, "Joseph Fielding Smith's Evolving Views on Race: The Odyssey of a Mormon Apostle-President," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 55, no. 3 (2022): 17.

church. Smith's speeches and writings served as the source materials for these volumes.

McConkie compiled all of Smith's discourses and edited them into a compilation known as the *Doctrines of Salvation*. These pieces were the pinnacle of Mormon theology and represented the official views of the church from the highest levels of authority. The collection did not shy away from the issue of race. The compilation illustrated the evolution of thought regarding blacks and the church. When teaching about the reason for blackness, Smith wrote,

There is a reason why one man is born black and with other disadvantages, while another is born white with great advantages. The reason is that we once had an estate before we came here, and were obedient; more or less, to the laws that were given us there. Those who were faithful in all things there received greater blessings here, and those who were not faithful received less...

...There were no neutrals in the war in heaven. All took sides either with Christ or with Satan. Every man had his agency there, and men receive rewards here based upon their actions there, just as they will receive rewards hereafter for deeds done in the body. The Negro, evidently, is receiving the reward he merits...<sup>36</sup>

In the years since *The Way to Perfection*, Smith nailed down his explanation for the priesthood ban and blackness. It was not neutrality or an Old Testament curse. However, the explanation neatly fit into the Mormon concept of a pre-existence. There were differences between whites and blacks in the pre-existence. Neither of them chose Satan's plan or failed to act, but some were more obedient to the will of Christ. They served in the war more valiantly. Those with black skin received this mark as a reminder of their lack of obedience to the Savior in the pre-existence. Mormon theology believed all individuals had a "veil" drawn over them when they received a mortal body. This prevented them from recalling their time in heaven before their birth. However, the dark skin served as a physical reminder of spiritual disobedience. This became the official doctrine of the church.

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, compiled by Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954) 61-66.

Prior to this point, outside of Brigham Young, the church's racist teachings occurred quietly behind closed doors during private meetings. However, individuals like Joseph Fielding Smith brought them to the forefront. Therefore, he held an important place in Mormon history when discussing the survival and thriving of the priesthood ban into the twentieth century. His boldness and the lack of rebuke from members allowed other LDS leaders to develop confidence that they could finally speak outwardly about the ban.

The willingness to address the ban gave new spirit to the leaders in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The alleged inferiority of blacks, alluded to by Joseph Fielding Smith, came to dictate much of the discourse from the bureaucracy's top rungs. George F. Richards, an apostle in the church, received a call to speak during the its semi-annual General Conference. The event included ecclesiastical leaders making addresses throughout the weekend. These talks were used in church meetings until the next conference arrived. Members viewed these events as opportunities for seers, revelators, and prophets to share continuing revelations. Therefore, the general membership took many of these things as doctrine.

Richards' address came eight years after Smith wrote about the inferiority of those of African descent. During the conference, he stated,

The negro is an unfortunate man. He has been given a black skin. But that is as nothing compared with that greater handicap that he is not permitted to receive the Priesthood and the ordinances of the temple, necessary to prepare men and women to enter into and enjoy a fulness of glory in the celestial kingdom. What is the reason for this condition, we ask, and I find it to my satisfaction to think that as spirit children of our Eternal Father they were not valiant in the fight...I cannot conceive our Father consigning his children to a condition such as that of the negro race, if they had been valiant in the spirit world in that war in heaven...Somewhere along the line were these spirits, indifferent perhaps, and possibly neutral in the war...

To members of the Church I would ask, are any of us of that class today — lukewarm, indifferent and neutral — a lesson to be learned from the experiences of others who have gone before. I firmly believe that God had something to do

with the recording of these events, and having them preserved and handed down to us from generation to generation...<sup>37</sup>

While the quiet thing had already been said out loud in Smith's writings, the church's General Conference largely avoided the topic. However, Richards sought to bring the topic back into the spotlight. Possibly feeling encouraged by the works of the church's historian or the general Jim Crow attitude held by most of the country following the Civil War, the church made its feelings regarding blacks known to the public. For Mormonism's leadership, blacks were less valiant in the pre-existence, creating a state of inferiority in this mortal realm.

While a majority of the country was dealing with questions of segregation, the church had largely remained integrated. However, this began to change in the 1940s with the new theological teachings justifying the view that those with African descent were lesser than whites. Following the April 1939 General Conference, leadership took a more active role in alienating those of African descent from the church.

On January 25, 1940, apostle J. Reuben Clark, raised the question of the priesthood ban during a quorum meeting. Specifically, he wanted the First Presidency to make a statement regarding the priesthood ban. During the meeting, he asked the leaders to review sources on the doctrine and decide whether "one drop" of African blood disqualified a man from receiving the priesthood. The minutes read as follows:

Attention was called to a postscript on a letter from President Roscoe C. Cox of the Hawaiian Mission, calling attention to a recommendation he had received for ordination of two boys to the office of Deacon, the mother of these boys having some Negro blood in her veins.

President Clark explained that this matter has come up at various times in the past, that is the question of what should be done with those people who are faithful in the Church who are supposed to have some Negro blood in their veins.

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<sup>37</sup> George F. Richards, *Conference Report* (April 1939): 58-59

President Clark said at his request the clerk of the Council had copied from the old records of the Council discussions that have been had in the past on this subject. He said that he was positive that it was impossible with reference to the Brazilians to tell those who have Negro blood and those who have not, and we are baptizing these people into the Church. The question also arises pertaining to the people in South Africa where we are doing missionary work, and in the Southern States, also in the islands of the Pacific.

President Clark suggested that this matter be referred to the Twelve who might appoint a sub-committee to go into the matter with great care and make some ruling or re-affirm whatever ruling has been made on this question in the past as to whether or not one drop of negro blood deprives a man of the right to receive the priesthood.

Brother Widtsoe moved the adoption of President Clark's suggestion.

Notion seconded and unanimously approved.<sup>38</sup>

J. Reuben Clark was no friend of African Americans. However, he realized that the church's current practices needed to be streamlined. Was the priesthood ban applicable to those with dark skin or African heritage? The lack of clarification led to problems where race mixing was more prevalent, such as in South Africa, Hawaii, and the Pacific Islands. The church eventually settled on a "one drop" policy. This policy led to Clark advocating for the segregation of blood based on race due to the possibility of black blood being injected into whites. He simply wanted to "...protect the purity of the blood streams of the people of this Church."<sup>39</sup>

Acting on this fear of races mixing and mingling and the destruction of the purity of the blood in Mormonism, Clark proposed a system to separate church services based on race.

Because Mormons usually marry other Mormons, attending Sunday services together provided

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<sup>38</sup> Meeting Minutes of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, January 25, 1940, Archives West, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, George Albert Smith Family Papers 1731–1969, box 78, folder 7.

<sup>39</sup> Letter of J. Reuben Clark to G. Albin Matson, 12 April 1948, MSS 303, Box 378, Folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Provo, UT.

opportunities for meeting potential romantic partners. Therefore, to prevent miscegenation in the church, the apostle offered an answer to the problem. In a letter regarding segregation, he stated:

The Afrikan [*sic*] Branches of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ...The negro has a right to hear the Gospel and embrace it if he will and enjoy the blessings available to him... The Prophet Joseph is quoted as saying that "one drop of negro blood" disqualified its possessor from holding the priesthood...Therefor [*sic*] negroes may not hold the priesthood...persons only part negro cannot hold priesthood...intermarriage between whites and negroes is disapproved by the Church...The negro may receiv [*sic*] the administration of the Priesthood, such as the benefits of administering by the elders. They may, when duly authorized, preside and conduct meetings or other membership gatherings, where the Priesthood is not present. They may engage in all the activities of the auxiliaries, not involving Priesthood activities. They may preside ^over and conduct such auxiliary meetings...<sup>40</sup>

The church did not adopt a policy of segregation, but Clark evidently considered the option. The letter outlined how African Americans could conduct their own services, although under the priesthood administration of white brethren. White members could perform the ordinances requiring the priesthood. Everything else was left for blacks to manage themselves, enabling them to worship as they pleased.

Beyond the notion of segregating services, the letter tackled the primary justification for supporting a potential policy advocating the separation of races. Clark depended on faulty hearsay, aligning with others who asserted that the priesthood ban originated with Joseph Smith. Moreover, he articulated an established "one drop" policy. If this policy were accurate, permitting marriages and procreation between blacks and whites would threaten the existence of the church. It would "taint" the bloodline, preventing individuals from accessing the priesthood. This fear endured among Mormon leaders.

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<sup>40</sup> J. Reuben Clark, "The Afrikan Branches of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," Clarkana Papers of Joshua Ruben Clark, Jr., MSS 303, Box 207, Folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Provo, UT.

In a response to a letter from a stake president regarding the church's policy on blacks, the First Presidency replied with the following:

You doubtless are fully acquainted with the attitude of the Church regarding colored people. As you know, the Church has already drawn the line against the mixture of the colored with the white in marriage. [T]he colored people cannot hold the priesthood. . . No special effort has been made to proselytize among the Negro race, and social intercourse between the Whites and the Negroes should certainly not be encouraged beca[u]se of leading to intermarriage, which the Lord has forbidden.<sup>41</sup>

Clark's fears about miscegenation now seem to have driven the church's approach, wherein they avoided sharing the gospel with blacks. Implementing such policies exposed Mormonism to internal scrutiny, an experience they were unaccustomed to.

Up to this point, the church had encountered minimal questioning or resistance regarding the ban. However, in 1947, one of the first individuals to challenge the prophets, seers, and revelators comprising the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles emerged. Lowry Nelson, a Sociology professor at the University of Michigan, decided to scrutinize the teachings of the church. Nelson represented the educated Mormon who, despite being a member of the faith, was unaware of the priesthood ban's nature as a firm policy. He penned a letter to Heber Meeks, the President of the Southern States Mission of the church, overseeing missionary activities in the South and tasked with teaching missionaries how to attract new members.

Lowry's letter to Meeks read as follows:

...The attitude of the Church in regard to the Negro makes me very sad. Your letter is the first intimation I have had that there was a fixed doctrine on this point. I had always known that certain statements have been made by authorities regarding the status of the Negro but I had never assumed that they constituted an irrevocable doctrine...I do not believe that God is a racist...For us to go into a situation like that [Cuba] and preach a doctrine of 'white supremacy' would, it seems to me, be a tragic disservice...If world brotherhood and the universal God idea mean anything, it seems to me they mean equality of races. I fail to see how

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<sup>41</sup> First Presidency, Letter to Virgil H. Spongberg, May 5, 1947, Box 10, Folder 3, Lester Bush Papers, University of Utah Special Collections, J. Marriott Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

Mormonism or any other religion claiming to be more than a provincial church can take any other point of view...

... Our Church would provide them [Cubans] with something very sorely needed. It would develop leadership among them, provide them with hope and aspiration, give them a feeling of importance as individuals which they have never had...

...for what my opinion is worth, that it would be better for the Cubans if we did not enter their island - unless we are willing to revise our racial theory. To teach them the pernicious doctrine of segregation and inequalities among races where it does not exist, or to lend religious sanction to where it has raised its ugly head would...be tragic...<sup>42</sup>

Reflecting on his experience in the Caribbean Islands, Nelson pointed out how the church's current policies concerning those with "one drop" of African blood were nonsensical. The islands encompass generations of individuals with diverse ancestry, making it practically impossible to identify those with African roots. He viewed the policy as rooted in white supremacy and doubted its effectiveness in these geographic areas. Additionally, Nelson openly challenged the notion that the priesthood ban was a doctrine. As a well-studied individual, he couldn't find any mention of the prohibition in Joseph Smith's works, leading him to question the teaching as a whole.

In the typical style of the LDS bureaucracy, the letter to Meeks, criticizing the church's entire policy, undoubtedly found its way to Salt Lake City and the central authorities. This is evident from the absence of a reply to Nelson from Meeks. Instead, the professor received a response from members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The leaders' letter stated,

... We have carefully considered their contents, and are glad to advise you as follows:

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<sup>42</sup> Dr. Lowry Nelson, Letter to Heber Meeks, June 26, 1947, MSS 17, Box 4, Folder 2, Special Collections and Archives Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University Library, Ogden, UT.



...The basic element of your ideas and concepts seems to be that all God's children stand in equal positions before Him in all things.

...this is contrary to the very fundamentals of God's dealings with Israel... some of God's children were assigned to superior positions before the world was formed...

Your position seems to lose sight of the revelations of the Lord touching the pre-existence of our spirits, the rebellion in heaven, and the doctrines that our birth into this life and the advantages under which we may be born, have a relationship in the life heretofore.

From the days of the Prophet Joseph...it has been a doctrine...that the Negroes are not entitled to the full blessings of the Gospel...<sup>43</sup>

The response from leaders aligned with the prevailing thought process of the church. Relying on a false narrative, particularly that the priesthood ban originated with Joseph Smith, the First Presidency attempted to distance themselves from any potential accusations of racism or blame for the ban. They almost seemed to absolve themselves of responsibility for something that some might have found unpopular. However, the letter came across as a form of gaslighting. Nelson, a knowledgeable individual well-versed in the scriptures, was told that he didn't understand the gospel. With this, the leaders shifted the problem away from themselves and placed blame on anyone who questioned them. This pattern continued to be evident in the subsequent correspondence between the parties.

Nelson composed a reply to the First Presidency on October 8, 1947, in which he stated,

It seems strange to me...that I should have never before had to face up to this doctrine of the Church relative to the Negro. I remember that it was discussed... in Priesthood meetings...and...someone would say something about the Negroes "sitting on the fence" during the Council in Heaven...Somehow there was never any very strong conviction manifest regarding the doctrine, perhaps because the question was rather an academic one...

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<sup>43</sup> George Albert Smith, J. Reuben Clark, and David O. McKay, Letter to Lowry Nelson, July 17, 1947, Special Collections & Archives, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, MSS 17, Box 4, Folder 2, 5–6.

As one studies the history and characteristics of human societies, one soon comes to recognize certain basic principles. One of these is social change...

Another principle which stands out as one studies the development of cultures is the tendency of institutions to resist change....

...if one accepts the principle of cultural or social change...It seems to me that we still have much to learn about God, and some of our earlier notions of Him may yet undergo modification...Are we becoming so legalistic...that we cannot adjust our institutions to the changing needs of mankind? Are we, as some have charged, more Hebraic than Christian?<sup>44</sup>

This well-thought-out reply to church leaders garnered a relatively short response from the First Presidency, stating,

We feel very sure that you are aware of the doctrines of the Church. They are either true or not true. Our testimony is that they are true. Under these circumstances we may not permit ourselves to be too much impressed by the reasonings of men, however well founded they may seem to be. We should like to say this to you in all sincerity, that you are too fine a man to permit yourself to be led off from the principles of the Gospel by worldly learning. You have too much of a potentiality for doing good and we therefore prayerfully hope that you can re-orient your thinking and bring it in line with the revealed Word of God.<sup>45</sup>

Given a chance to explain the priesthood ban to a member with honest questions, the First Presidency failed to do so. Instead, leaders asserted their authority over Nelson. This had become the norm of the church hierarchy.

Sociologist Armand Mauss conducted extensive research on this period of the church, identifying it as one of retrenchment. By this, Mauss meant that this period was characterized by Mormon leadership seeking to become more unique and move away from assimilationist practices.<sup>46</sup> He analyzed General Conference talk themes over a series of decades, providing

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<sup>44</sup> Lowry Nelson, Letter to First Presidency, October 8, 1947, MSS 17, Box 4, Folder 2, Special Collections and Archives Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University Library, Ogden, UT.

<sup>45</sup> The First Presidency, Letter to Lowry Nelson, November 12, 1947, MSS 17, Box 4, Folder 2, Special Collections and Archives Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University Library, Ogden, UT.

<sup>46</sup> Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), x.

insights into the most important aims of the church at any given point in time. In doing this, Mauss separated each address into six categories, including Absolute Truth, Obedience to Authority, Disobedience/Rebellion, Prophets, Modern Revelation, and Priesthood.

Mauss identified five periods of time; however, the three most relevant in the section are 1890-1919, 1920-1949, and 1950-1979. From 1890 to 1949, there were few changes. However, when examining 1950, significant changes emerged. Conference talks began to reference disobedience and how it equated to rebellion against the church. The data showed that mentions of disobedience increased by over 200% between 1890 and 1950.<sup>47</sup> What was the cause of this increase?

The answer to this question lies within the First Presidency's reply to Lowry Nelson. Church leaders had largely been immune from criticism from within the church. They had become used to being rebuked by outsiders; this type of confrontation promoted the narrative of Mormons being persecuted, making them more insulated and entrenched in their teachings. Internal strife was unexpected; however, the assimilation of Mormons into the world, receiving education from "Gentile" universities, led to members not always being in lockstep with the prophets. This may be a natural symptom of a church that has reached a certain level of growth; despite this, the Latter-Day Saint leadership had prepared.

Correlation allowed the church to get messages to its membership. The messaging emphasized obedience and warned of the consequences of disobedience. This led to correlated teachings from church leaders about the racial priesthood ban. The inability to hold the priesthood was attributed to disobedience in the pre-existence. This teaching aimed to instill fear in the hearts of members while also reinforcing the authority of the prophets, seers, and revelators at the head of the bureaucracy.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

Authority became the new focus of the church. Questions were not welcome since they signified doubt. Leaders considered doubt an internal rebellion. Therefore, with a new focus on authority, the church was ready to reassert its ability to claim revelation. It did this in 1949 with an official statement regarding blacks and the priesthood. The statement read as follows,

The attitude of the Church with reference to negroes remains as it has always stood. It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord, on which is founded the doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization, to the effect that negroes may become members of the Church but that they are not entitled to the priesthood at the present time...

The position of the Church regarding the negro may be understood when another doctrine of the Church is kept in mind, namely, that the conduct of spirits in the premortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality, and that while the details of this principle have not been made known, the principle itself indicates that the coming to this earth and taking on mortality is a privilege that is given to those who maintain their first estate...Under this principle there is no injustice whatsoever involved in this deprivation as to the holding of the priesthood by the negroes.<sup>48</sup>

The announcement did little more than formalize the doctrine while building up the legitimacy of church leadership. It falsely connected the teaching to the denomination's origins and traced its continuance through its current administration. A racial policy seemed to be the only string connecting the early leaders with the new leaders in a message such as this. This speaks to the importance of the priesthood ban in Mormonism.

As of 1950, the racial priesthood ban was as entrenched in the LDS faith as it had ever been. Leaders had mobilized the church bureaucracy to promote readings that validated incorrect teachings, all in the name of obedience. However, a new generation of Mormons was coming into their own. They would be the educated generation of Latter-Day Saints. These individuals, like Lowry Nelson, sought to challenge ecclesiastical leaders to use reason and fact to explain

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<sup>48</sup> "LDS Church First Presidency Statement," August 17, 1949, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

their teachings. Ultimately, these individuals and the pressure they applied to the upper levels of Mormon leadership played a role in the end of the priesthood ban in 1978.

The following chapter will focus on this turning point. It will address the experience of black members in the church while also focusing on how the Latter-Day Saint leadership sought to hide the priesthood ban from probing members. Finally, the section will discuss internal and external pressures on Mormonism and how these led to change.

## Chapter 7

### The Long Awaited Day

In the mid-twentieth century, individuals with African heritage were denied access to the saving ordinances of the church. President Young had instituted the priesthood ban in 1852, and explanations for it varied among leaders over the years. However, the underlying ideology of "white supremacy" remained prevalent. Despite overtly racist notions expressed by church leaders, black individuals continued joining the church without any assurance of being regarded as equals in the eyes of God, according to Mormon authorities. In 1978, the church lifted its racial ban on priesthood ordinations. The process of overturning a 126-year-old practice unfolded over a span of twenty years.

This chapter addresses the coming forth of the 1978 revelation that ended the priesthood ban. It also analyzes the events leading to the end of the racist policy between 1950 and 1978. This section pays special attention to the manner in which the church sought to navigate external societal pressures related to their racial teachings.

The process of altering the church's teachings concerning blacks commenced with David O. McKay, who assumed leadership in 1951. Before becoming the prophet, he served in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and headed the 1912-1920 Correlation Committee. McKay offered a distinctive perspective compared to many other church leaders. During the General Conference of 1950, he articulated, "International rivalries, inter-racial animosities, and false political ideals threaten individual freedom. Unwise legislation, too often prompted by political expediency, is periodically being enacted that seductively undermines man's right to free agency, robs him of his rightful liberties, and makes him but a cog in the crushing wheel of regimentation

which, if persisted in, will end in dictatorship.”<sup>1</sup> Such a message rendered him a minority among his fellow church leaders.

Upon assuming the role of prophet, McKay promptly initiated reforms to the church's racial policies. Recognizing the impediment these teachings posed to the church's growth, particularly in regions like Africa, he authorized changes to address these deficiencies. The implementation of the "one-drop" policy required individuals seeking baptism and priesthood ordination to trace their genealogy out of Africa, obliging them to prove their whiteness and absence of black ancestry. This policy created challenges when the church expanded into South Africa, where many individuals appeared white. The requirement to demonstrate the absence of "black blood" hindered growth in the country.

Recognizing this challenge, McKay took steps to address the issue. During a conference in Cape Town, South Africa, on January 17, 1954, the prophet introduced a new policy. Leroy Duncan, the South African Mission President for the church, documented the changes in his journal:

Another day I hope I will always remember. Conference was in Cape Town. Everyone that attended the meetings said how thrilled they were to meet Pres. McKay. After morning session Pres. McKay called a special meeting of all the missionaries and announced a new policy regarding the ordination to the Priesthood. It will no longer be necessary to trace the ancestry out of Africa before they can be ordained. I felt that would be a great blessing to the mission. I believe the mission will grow faster because of this ruling. Pres. McKay told me that he felt the impressions he had received had come from the right source, and that he knew he had given us correct instruction. Many of the Saints told me after the evening meeting that Pres. McKay's visit was more than they ever expected and that they knew he was a Prophet.<sup>2</sup>

In his correspondence with Duncan after the modification, McKay expressed his satisfaction that the brethren of the church now had increased access to the priesthood. He also highlighted that

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<sup>1</sup> David O. McKay, *Conference Report* (April 1950): 35

<sup>2</sup> Leroy Duncan, Journal, January 17, 1954, MS 18062, CHL.

the Quorum of the Twelve had approved the change.<sup>3</sup> In his statement, McKay refrained from claiming ownership of the decision, despite holding the positions of prophet, seer, and revelator. Instead, he attributed the credit to the Quorum. This aspect of his rhetoric underscores a crucial aspect of Mormon decision-making in the twentieth century before 1978.

In his book *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, D. Michael Quinn delved into the evolution of decision-making within Mormonism. Quinn outlined how the early church relied on personal revelation, fostering a more direct connection with God to guide the lives of rank-and-file Mormons. Initially, church leaders proclaimed doctrine from the pulpit. However, this approach underwent a transformation over time. Doctrine was now declared only when a consensus was reached. Members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve convened to discuss issues, and changes were implemented only upon achieving unanimity.<sup>4</sup> This marked a departure from the charismatic origins of the movement, resembling more of a boardroom meeting than a prophetic counsel.

The anticipation of consensus posed challenges for numerous LDS leaders striving to amend the priesthood ban. However, had McKay grasped not just the literal wording but the underlying essence of unanimity, he would have been better positioned to effect change in the church. His comprehension of the decision-making process was rooted in interpreting a verse in the church's Doctrine and Covenants.

27 And every decision made by either of these quorums must be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member in each quorum must be agreed to its decisions, in order to make their decisions of the same power or validity one with the other-

28 A majority may form a quorum when circumstances render it impossible to be otherwise-

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<sup>3</sup> David O. McKay, Letter to Leroy Duncan, March 10, 1954, MS 18062, CHL.

<sup>4</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1997), 1-20.



29 Unless this is the case, their decisions are not entitled to the same blessings which the decisions of a quorum of three presidents were anciently, who were ordained after the order of Melchizedek, and were a righteous and holy men.<sup>5</sup>

The prophet's comprehension of church policies centered on the twenty-seventh verse of the scripture. Similarly, his interpretation was literal and overlooked the historical patterns set by past prophets and church leaders. Figures like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young had frequently made unpopular decisions that clashed with the views of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Gary James Bergera, managing director of the Smith-Petit Foundation and historian, unveiled these disagreements among church leaders in his book *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith*.

At the inception of polygamy, Orson Pratt, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, opposed the practice. Pratt's opposition stemmed from his wife's claim that Joseph Smith had made an unwarranted advance, purportedly attempting to kiss her.<sup>6</sup> Convinced of his wife's account, Pratt confronted Smith about this incident and expressed his disagreement with polygamy, believing it was not divinely ordained.<sup>7</sup> In response, Smith, recognizing the lack of unanimity in his quorum, leveraged his role as prophet, seer, and revelator to persuade Pratt. He commanded Pratt to fall in line, asserting that failure to do so would result in damnation for choosing his wife's account over the leader of Mormonism. This episode underscored that decisions on practicing polygamy as a church doctrine were made despite disagreements within the organization's decision-making bodies.

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<sup>5</sup> Doctrine and Covenants, 107:27-30.

<sup>6</sup> Gary James Bergera, *Conflict in the Quorum: Orson Pratt, Brigham Young, Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2002), 18-19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

Pratt's disagreements with prophets persisted into Brigham Young's leadership. The prophet introduced a now disavowed theory that he presented as doctrine, known as the Adam-God Doctrine. According to Young, "Adam was known as Michael in a pre-earth existence. As Michael, he helped to create the earth and fathered all human spirits, as well as the physical body of Jesus Christ. Michael/Adam is thus, as Young taught, both the father of all humankind and, in the pantheon of gods, its reigning deity."<sup>8</sup> Despite Pratt publishing a book in which he qualified certain teachings, including the Adam-God theory, as "not sound doctrine," and despite disagreements among the highest level of church leadership, Young persisted in advancing his theological teachings.<sup>9</sup> He presented them as doctrine, emphasizing their validity because they originated from the mouth of a prophet.

Instances like these demonstrate that the theological interpretation of Doctrine and Covenants 107:27 was intended to be understood quite differently from McKay's understanding. Quinn explored how the scripture was meant to guide decision-making in his book *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*. He highlighted that unanimity is often not achieved, and the minutes of church meetings may be manipulated to create the appearance of consensus among leaders.<sup>10</sup> Many times, Quorum members opted to abstain from voting instead of expressing dissenting opinions.<sup>11</sup> However, official minutes did not record this, instead noting the existence of unanimous votes. Personal journals have served as sources through which the decision-making process can be viewed realistically, rather than the idealized version presented to members.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>10</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1997), 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Quinn concluded his analysis of the behind-closed-door processes of church leaders with a quote from Hugh B. Brown, in which he stated,

When a question arises today, we work over the details and come up with an idea. It is submitted to the First Presidency and the Twelve, thrashed out, discussed and discussed until it seems right. Then, kneeling together in a circle in the temple, they seek divine guidance and the president says, “ I feel to say this is the will of the Lord.” That becomes a revelation. It is usually not thought necessary to publish or proclaim it as such, but this is the way it happens.<sup>12</sup>

This portrayal of the revelatory and amendment process in the church served as a compelling illustration of how authority became routinized over time. A church that had asserted a continuous presence of a prophet on the earth, claiming the ability to commune with God in the House of the Lord, now relied on the consensus of man to enact changes rather than the direct voice of Heavenly Father within the church. What was once a church seemingly guided by the spontaneous revelations of a charismatic prophet evolved to resemble the atmosphere of a Fortune 500 board meeting, albeit within an LDS temple. This decline in charismatic leadership played a role in prolonging the endurance of the racial priesthood ban beyond what might have occurred otherwise.

McKay fell victim to this bureaucratic thought process but should also be viewed as a perpetrator of the racial priesthood ban. With history on his side, particularly the precedent that prophets could make decisions for the church, there was no need for him to wait for consensus among his fellow counselors. He made his feelings evident regarding the ban in many statements. When asked about the doctrinal basis of the prohibition, McKay stated, “I knew of no scriptural basis for denying the Priesthood to Negroes other than one verse in the Book of Abraham (1:26).”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> John Lewis Lund, *The Church and the Negro: A Discussion of Mormons, Negroes and the Priesthood* (Salt Lake City, UT: Paramount Publishers, 1970), 91.

McKay privately shared his feelings regarding the priesthood ban with many; however, his private sentiments as the president of the church, despite being grounded in scholarship and prayerfulness, did not lead him to act in alignment with the guidance he claimed the Lord had given. In 1954, McKay met with Sterling McMurrin, a professor and graduate director from the University of Utah, known for researching the LDS church, specifically the priesthood ban. During this discussion, the two men conversed about the subject. McMurrin's archival materials include a journal entry regarding the meeting and the potential impact it could have had. He wrote,

In the Spring of 1954 I was engaged in a lengthy private conversation concerning orthodoxy and heresy with President David O. McKay in the Auerbach Room of the old Union Building of the University of Utah...I remarked to President McKay that I had told a group in my ward that I did not believe the common Mormon doctrine that the Negroes are under a divine curse, that I regarded this as a false and morally abhorrent doctrine... President McKay replied...that he was "glad" that I had taken this position because he also did not believe this teaching. He said, "There is not now, and there never has been a doctrine in this Church that the Negroes are under a divine curse." He insisted there is no doctrine in the Church of any kind pertaining to the Negro. "We believe," he said, "that we have scriptural precedent for withholding the priesthood from the Negro. It is a practice, not a doctrine, and the practice will one day be changed...He identified the "scriptural precedent" as the well-known passage in the Book of Abraham, 1:26-27...

...In the late 1960s it seemed rather obvious that President McKay would probably not make a public statement on this matter. I at least wanted his sons, with three of whom I was well-acquainted, to know of the conversation in which their father had expressed his views, and I felt that I should tell them of it while he was still living so they would have an opportunity to have him verify my account. Accordingly, I addressed a letter, dated August 26, 1968 to President McKay's son, Dr. Llewelyn R. McKay, sending copies to his other three sons, Lawrence, Edward, and Robert, in which I recounted the occasion of my meeting with President McKay and his statement to the effect that the idea that the Negroes are under a divine curse is not a doctrine of the Church and never was and that withholding the priesthood from them was a practice only, a practice that would someday be changed...<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Sterling M. McMurrin Papers collection, MS 0032, Box 220, Folder 1, Special Collection, J. Willard Marriott Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

McMurrin's claims in his account were authenticated by historian Stephen Taggart in the book *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins*. When writing his dissertation at Cornell University, Taggart corresponded with McMurrin, seeking feedback on his research. During this exchange, Taggart became aware of the interview with McKay and the existence of letters related to the interview.<sup>15</sup> After completing his dissertation and aiming to publish it as a book, Taggart sought confirmation of the letters from McKay's children. He corresponded with Llewelyn McKay, who verified the letter and the interview with his father.<sup>16</sup>

When discussing revelation and consensus among Mormon leaders, D. Michael Quinn explained that once an official had declared revelation, all individuals in the Quorum of the Twelve and the First Presidency remained silent about their personal opinions that might be contrary to the announced doctrine.<sup>17</sup> Even if they disagreed, they were expected to maintain the appearance of a united front to the church. Therefore, they should not discuss their thoughts surrounding a controversial subject. In this context, McKay was out of line. Hence, the reaction by individuals such as Harold B. Lee, who claimed that McKay would have never made such a statement, makes sense, considering the established norms of the LDS bureaucracy. The interview in McMurrin's archival work has significantly contributed to historians' understanding that the LDS church was not necessarily in lockstep with one another regarding the priesthood ban.

With McKay's views evident, fractures within leadership could be observed by examining the statements and publications of other church leaders during the period. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the early twentieth century produced a rudimentary version of

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, MS 0032, Box 220, Folder 7.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen G. Taggart, *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1976), 74.

<sup>17</sup> Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, 20.

Latter-Day Saint efforts to correlate materials. The initial version of the department saw the creation of a teacher's manual, a corresponding class, and the definition of what church auxiliary groups should teach. However, the edition of correlation that grew during the mid-twentieth century impacted the church much more noticeably. While continuously under construction since 1912, 1960 saw the official beginning of modern church correlation efforts. David O. McKay, now prophet and the early leader of the first correlation committee, spearheaded the modern movement under the leadership of then Apostle Harold B. Lee.<sup>18</sup>

This 1960s iteration of unifying church teachings served multiple purposes. The overall efforts solidified control of the church under the umbrella of the priesthood. It established the process of home teaching, family home evening, and it instituted priesthood training to help every branch of the church recognize its duty in building the kingdom.<sup>19</sup> The most considerable impact of the latest correlation committee was its focus on curriculum. Leaders of the auxiliary groups were allowed to develop their curriculum; however, church educational materials needed to be approved by the correlation committee before teaching anything.<sup>20</sup> Thus, all materials became unified as the group of priesthood holders overseeing the curriculum came to take a strong-handed approach and began to offer church-printed materials.

The committee aimed to ensure that church members taught doctrine during services. Therefore, the stamp of approval from the priesthood correlation committee meant that material was doctrine and not the teachings of men. This period of Mormonism was rife with members of

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<sup>18</sup> Michael A Goodman, "Correlation The Turning Point," essay, in *Salt Lake City: The Place Which God Prepared*, ed. Scott C. Esplin and Kenneth L. Alford (Provo, UT: The Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 263.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 265-274. Home teaching is the practice in which a member of the priesthood is assigned families to look over. This process often included stopping by homes, checking on a family's well-being, and sharing a spiritual message. Family home evening refers to an LDS practice where members set aside one night per week (typically Monday) for family gospel study. This is typically conducted by the priesthood-holding male in the home.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles entering the publishing field. The religious leaders wrote and published multiple books via the church-owned publishers Deseret Book and Bookcraft. In an era of correlation, upper-level church officials used their books to teach doctrine, thus providing the backbone of Mormon beliefs at the time.

One such book published by a General Authority of the church was *Mormon Doctrine*. The text served as a reference book for members seeking to understand “true doctrine.” Apostle Bruce R. McConkie wrote the text and Bookcraft published it in 1958. The original text of the book contained significant commentary on the church’s beliefs regarding the racial priesthood ban. A few entries in the reference book are of interest.

When searching for the term “Cain,” the following appeared:

**Cain.** See DEVIL, HAM, MASTER MAHAN, NEGROES, PERDITION, SONS OF PERDITION. Though he was a rebel and an associate of Lucifer in pre-existence and though he was a liar from the beginning whose name was Perdition, Cain managed to attain the privilege of mortal birth. Under Adam's tutelage, he began in this life to serve God. He understood the gospel and the plan of salvation, was baptized, received the priesthood, had a perfect knowledge of the position and perfection of God, and talked personally with Deity. Then he came out in open rebellion, fought God, worshiped Lucifer, and slew Abel.

Cain's sacrifice was rejected because it was offered at Satan's command, not the Lord's; it was not and could not be offered in faith for "he could have no faith, or could not exercise faith contrary to the plan of heaven." (Teachings, pp 58-59.)

As a result of his rebellion, Cain was cursed and told that "the earth" would not thereafter yield him its abundance as previously. In addition he became the first mortal to be cursed as a son of perdition. As a result of his mortal birth he is assured of a tangible body of flesh and bones in eternity, a fact which will enable him to rule over Satan. The Lord placed on Cain a mark of a dark skin, and he became the ancestor of the black race. (Moses 5; Gen. 4; Teachings, p. 169.)<sup>21</sup>

The entry for the term “caste system” explained:

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<sup>21</sup> Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* 1st ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1958), 102.

**Caste System.** See BONDAGE, PRE-EXISTENCE, SLAVERY, TRIBES OF ISRAEL. In one sense of the word, caste systems—that is, the formation of hereditary classes within the social organization...

...caste systems have their root and origin in the gospel itself, and when they operate according to the divine decree, the resultant restrictions and segregation are right and proper and have the approval of the Lord. To illustrate: Cain, Ham, and the whole negro race have been cursed with a black skin, the mark of Cain, so they can be identified as a caste apart, a people with whom the other descendants of Adam should not intermarry. (Gen. 4; Moses 5.)...

All this is not to say that any race, creed, or caste should be denied any inalienable rights. But it is to say that Deity in his infinite wisdom, to carry out his inscrutable purposes, has a caste system of his own, a system of segregation of races and peoples. The justice of such a system is evident when life is considered in its true eternal perspective. It is only by a knowledge of pre-existence that it can be known why some persons are born in one race or caste and some in another.<sup>22</sup>

The term “Ham” in the book stated:

**Ham.** See CAIN, EGYPTUS, NEGROES, PRE-EXISTENCE, PRIESTHOOD.

Through Ham (a name meaning black) "the blood of the Canaanites was preserved" through the flood, he having married Egyptus, a descendant of Cain. (Abra. 1:20-27.) Ham was cursed, apparently for marrying into the forbidden lineage. "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren" (Gen. 9:25), said Noah of Ham's descendants. These descendants cannot hold the priesthood.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, McConkie included an entry regarding the word “negroes,” which stated:

**Negroes.** See CAIN, HAM, PRE-EXISTENCE, PRIESTHOOD, RACES OF MEN. In the pre-existent eternity various degrees of valiance and devotion to the truth were exhibited by different groups of our Father's spirit offspring. One-third of the spirit hosts of heaven came out in open rebellion and were cast out without bodies, becoming the devil and his angels. (D&C. 29:36-41; Rev. 12:3-9.) The other two thirds stood affirmatively for Christ; there were no neutrals...

Those who were less valiant in preexistence and who thereby had certain spiritual restrictions imposed upon them during mortality are known to us as the negroes. Such spirits are sent to earth through the lineage of Cain, the mark put upon him for his rebellion against God and his murder of Abel being a black skin...

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 314.



Negroes in this life are denied the priesthood; under no circumstances can they hold this delegation of authority from the Almighty (Abra. 1 :20-27.)...

The present status of the negro rests purely and simply on the foundation of pre-existence...

The negroes are not equal with other races where the receipt of certain spiritual blessings are concerned, particularly the priesthood and the temple blessings that flow therefrom, but this inequality is not of man's origin. It is the Lord's doing, is based on his eternal laws of justice, and grows out of the lack of spiritual valiance of those concerned in their first estate..<sup>24</sup>

While a single book may not seem a big deal, *Mormon Doctrine* became the definitive guide for church members to learn the general theological beliefs of the church. The manual claimed to be “the first major attempt to digest, explain, and analyze all of the important doctrines in the kingdom.”<sup>25</sup> When addressing the importance of the text in Mormon circles, historian Matthew Harris noted that it “is one of the most widely read LDS books ever published. It sold thousands of copies and went through seven reprint editions...The volume established McConkie as a premier doctrinal authority...Rank and file members of the church quoted from *Mormon Doctrine* for years, utilizing its teachings in general church meetings.”<sup>26</sup>

The popularity and overall tone of the text raised concerns from the prophet. He worried that McConkie had assumed too much authority with his authoritative prose. After all, he was a mere apostle, not the prophet. Due to this, McKay convened a meeting to discuss the book. He brought together Elders Mark E. Petersen and Marion G. Romney, both members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, to review the book and offer a report on it. On January 7, 1960, both

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 476-477.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 71.

men issued a statement to McKay. “Elder Petersen stated that the extent of the corrections which he had marked in his copy of the book (1067) affected most of the 776 pages of the book.”<sup>27</sup>

Determining how to address the wealth of inaccuracies in the text, McKay decided to take a gentle approach to avoid drawing attention to the problems. In his journal, he wrote, “It was agreed that the necessary corrections are so numerous that to republish a corrected edition of the book would be such an extensive repudiation of the original as to destroy the credit of the author; that the republication of the book should be forbidden and that the book should be repudiated in such a way to save the career of the author as one of the General Authorities of the Church.”<sup>28</sup> McKay went on to list the concerning sections in the book. Interestingly enough, McConkie’s discussion of blacks and Old Testament curses was not included. Instead, the prophet listed the following:

A. [Discourteous] references to churches and other groups who do not accept “Mormon Doctrine.”

1. “Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints” who sometimes refer to themselves as “Josephites.”
2. “Christian Churches” generally.
3. “Catholic Church.”
4. Communists and Catholics.
5. Evolution and Evolutionists.

B. Declaration as to “Mormon Doctrine” on controversial issues.

1. “Pre-Adamites.”
2. Status of Animals and Plants in the Garden of Eden.
3. Meaning of the various accounts of Creation.
4. Dispensation of Abraham.
5. Moses as a translated being.
6. Origin of Individuality.
7. Defiling the priesthood.
8. Manner in which Jesus was Begotten.

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<sup>27</sup> David O. McKay, *Confidence amid Change: The Presidential Diaries of David O. McKay, 1951-1970*, ed. Harvard S. Heath (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2019), 301.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 301.

9. Written sermons.
10. Resurrection of stillborn children.

C. Miscellaneous [speculative] Interpretations.

1. Frequency of Administrations.
2. Baptism in the “molten sea.”
3. II Peter 1:19
4. Paul married.
5. Status of those “with Christ in His Resurrection.”
6. Consecration of oil.
7. Councils and schools among the Gods.
8. Limitations on Deity.
9. Sunday not a proper day for family reunions.
10. Geological changes at the time of the deluge.
11. The Holy Ghost a spirit man,
12. Facing East in temples when giving the Hosanna Shout.
13. Details on family prayer and asking the blessing on food.
14. Women to be gods.
15. Interpretation of Doctrine and Covenants 93:1
16. Interpretation of “Every spirit of man was innocent in the beginning.”
17. Resumption of schools of the prophets.
18. Time of beginning of seasons.
19. Interpretation of III Nephi 21:20.

D. Repeated use of the word “apostate” and related terms in a way which to many seems discourteous and to others gives offense.<sup>29</sup>

Following this report, the First Presidency met with Elder McConkie and informed him that “*Mormon Doctrine* recently published by Bookcraft Company must not be re-published, as it is full of errors and misstatements, and it is most unfortunate that it has received such wide circulation.”<sup>30</sup> The men proceeded to address the issue, albeit indirectly. Elder Mark E. Petersen drafted an editorial for the church magazine, the *Improvement Era*. McKay’s recalled the discussion surrounding the article in his journal, writing “After consideration it was decided

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 302-303.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

that the general statement, without the reference to “Mormon Doctrine”...would be a suitable editorial on the subject of selecting good books.”<sup>31</sup>

McKay sought to avoid condemning McConkie's writing to the broader church. This lack of charismatic authority remaining in the office of the president of the LDS church became evident. While Joseph Smith directly addressed rogue individuals, many of whom he included in the Doctrine and Covenants, the modern leaders took a very different approach, mainly handling things behind closed doors, albeit allowing false doctrine to spread through the church. McKay could not bring himself to repudiate McConkie. His January 27, 1960, journal entry shows his weakness as the prophet to control those under him. He recounted a discussion with Joseph Fielding Smith:

At the request of the First Presidency, I called President Joseph Fielding Smith, and told...him that we are a unit in disapproving of Brother Bruce R. McConkie's book “,Mormon Doctrine,” as an authoritative exposition of the principles of the gospel.

I then said: “Now, Brother Smith, he is a General Authority, and we do not want to give him a public rebuke that would be embarrassing to him and lessen his influence with members of the Church, so we shall speak to the Twelve at our meeting in the Temple tomorrow, and tell them that Brother McConkie's book is not approved as an authoritative book, and that it should not be republished, even if the errors (some 1,067 of them) are corrected.”

Brother Smith agreed with this suggestion to report to the Twelve, and said, “That is the best thing to do.”

I then said that Brother McConkie is advocating by letter some of the principles as printed in his book in answer to letters he receives. Brother Smith said, “I will speak to him about that.” I then mentioned that he is also speaking on these subjects, and Brother Smith said, “I will speak to him about that also.”

I also said that the First Presidency had decided that General Authorities of the Church should not publish books without submitting them to some member of the General Authorities, and President Smith agreed to this as being wise.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 305-306.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

This journal entry did a great deal to illustrate the weaknesses of David O. McKay as both a prophet and organization leader. Holding the priesthood keys to discipline any individual in the church, he passed the issue on to Joseph Fielding Smith. McConkie was Smith's son-in-law. With this, McKay's talk with Smith sought to accomplish two things. First, by discussing the issue with the apostle beforehand, he smoothed over any problems that might have further fractured the Quorum due to family allegiances. Second, he utilized Smith's position as a patriarch in his family to bring his son-in-law under control. But, by outsourcing power to his Quorum, he weakened his grasp on power.

*Mormon Doctrine* was only one issue McKay and his First Presidency faced. An ideologically severed Quorum marred his time as prophet. The fragmentation became particularly evident as its members expressed varied teachings on race and the ongoing Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. While McKay remained silent about racial issues, one of his counselors, Hugh B. Brown, took a different approach. Matthew Harris noted that Brown did not conform to the archetype of a Mormon General Authority. He was born in Utah but came of age in Canada. He advocated for racial equality and sought to find a way to end the racial priesthood ban.<sup>33</sup> In 1963, he used his position as a church leader to address the issue of inequality at the church's semi-annual General Conference:

During recent months, both in Salt Lake City and across the nation, considerable interest has been expressed in the position of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints on the matter of civil rights. We would like it to be known that there is in this Church no doctrine, belief, or practice, that is intended to deny the enjoyment of full civil rights of any person regardless of race, color, or creed. We say again, as we have said many times before, that we believe that all men are the children of the same God, and that it is a moral evil for any person or group of persons to deny any human being the right to gainful employment, to full education opportunity, and to every privilege of citizenship, just as it is a moral evil to deny him the right to worship according to the dictates of his own

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<sup>33</sup> Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 74

conscience... We call upon all men, everywhere, both within and outside the church, to commit themselves to the establishment of full civil equality for all of God's children. Anything less than this defeats our high ideal of the brotherhood of man.<sup>34</sup>

Brown said what most church leaders were hesitant to express. He was not alone in believing that the church should use its influence to support equality instead of upholding inequality. Most voices willing to speak up regarding the issue came from academia and politics. Those inside the church hierarchy took a different approach. With Brown serving as the voice of reason and equality, his character foil within church leadership was Ezra Taft Benson.

The attitudes within Mormonism were not unique. Christian churches played a complex role in the civil rights movement in the United States. On one hand, Christian teachings and institutions, like the black church, laid the philosophical and organizational foundation for civil rights efforts, framing the movement as a moral and religious struggle for racial justice. Major civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Andrew Young, were Christian ministers who actively utilized biblical themes of equality and liberation in their advocacy. The black church functioned as a central meeting and organizing space for civil rights activists.

White Christian churches, leaders, and institutions often found themselves divided on civil rights, with many outright opposing reform. White church leaders frequently avoided reform and were late in supporting civil rights. The defense of segregation by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, and figures like Strom Thurmond, utilized Christian language and symbols.<sup>35</sup> However, progressive white Christians and clergy eventually aligned with black churches,

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<sup>34</sup> Hugh B. Brown General Conference address, October 4-6, 1963, in *Conference Report* (Salt Lake City: Published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1963), 91.

<sup>35</sup> Strom Thurmond was a prominent American politician who served as a United States Senator from South Carolina for a record-breaking 48 years. Initially a segregationist, Thurmond later shifted his stance, becoming a Republican and advocating for conservative principles during his lengthy political career.

providing crucial support for civil rights campaigns, such as the 1963 March on Washington. This alignment reflected a growing momentum toward racial integration among mainstream Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church in the post-World War II era. Thus, Christianity, as an institution, played a complex role in the fight for equal rights, both inspiring and obstructing American social reform.<sup>36</sup>

Benson served as the Secretary of Agriculture under Dwight D. Eisenhower. During his tenure in government, he emerged as an outspoken critic of government interference in the lives of everyday Americans. Simultaneously, he played a significant role in promoting the second "Red Scare" and endorsing the belief that communists had infiltrated the United States government.<sup>37</sup> These perspectives extended into the highest offices of Mormonism when he assumed leadership.

In 1965, potentially in response to Hugh B. Brown's 1963 address, Benson also endeavored to address the civil rights issue at the General Conference. During this time, he articulated,

For our day President David O. McKay has called communism the greatest threat to the Church - and it is certainly the greatest moral threat this country has ever faced. What are you doing to fight it? Before I left for Europe I warned how the communists were using the Civil Rights movement to promote revolution and eventual take-over of this country. When are we going to wake up? What do you

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<sup>36</sup> Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, *Rhetoric, Religion & the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014); T. Adams Upchurch, *Race Relations in the United States: 1960-1980* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008); Curtis J. Evans, "White Evangelical Protestant Responses to the Civil Rights Movement," *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (2009): 245–73; Michael O. Emerson, Christian Smith, and David Sikkink, "Equal in Christ, but Not in the World: White Conservative Protestants and Explanations of Black-White Inequality," *Social Problems* 46, no. 3 (1999): 398–417.

<sup>37</sup> For more on Ezra Taft Benson see; 1. Matthew L Harris, "Mormonism's Problematic Racial Past and the Evolution of the Divine-Curse Doctrine," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 33, no. 1 (2013): 90–114, Matthew L. Harris, *Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019), and Matthew L. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (Salt Lake City, UT: The University of Utah Press, 2020).

know about the dangerous Civil Rights Agitation in Mississippi? Do you fear the destruction of all vestiges of state government?

Now brethren, the Lord has never promised there would not be traitors in the Church. We have the ignorant, the sleepy and the deceived who provide temptations and avenues of apostasy for the unwary and the unfaithful. But we have a prophet at our head and he had spoken. Now what are we going to do about it...?<sup>38</sup>

This division within the Quorum posed significant challenges for an aging McKay. Benson emerged as a prominent figure associated with the John Birch Movement, an ultra-conservative, right-wing organization founded in 1958 by Robert Welch and named after John Birch, an American missionary and intelligence officer killed by Chinese communists in 1945. The Society, led by Welch and other founders, propagated the belief that the civil rights movement and the United States' government, were manipulated and controlled by a communist conspiracy.

Opposing liberal policies such as integration and the civil rights movement, the John Birch Society organized campaigns and accused activists like Martin Luther King Jr. of being pawns of communism. The group advocated for limited government, opposed international organizations like the United Nations, and called for the impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren over his support for civil rights. Although the Society gained some notoriety, it remained on the fringe, promoting conspiracy theories about communist infiltration of the U.S. government and various institutions. While experiencing its peak in membership and influence during the 1960s, the organization continued to operate, championing similar ultra-conservative causes until the 1990s.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ezra Taft Benson General Conference address, "Not Commanded in All Things," October 6, 1965, in David O. McKays Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah. The official church version of this address has been edited to remove much of the language linking communism and the Civil Rights movement.

<sup>39</sup> D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism and the Cold War* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).



Benson's evident connection with the church intensified the strain on McKay, who, as a prophet, bore the responsibility of upholding the church's public image. In 1960, the journal of the church president was replete with entries detailing the challenges arising from Ezra Taft Benson and his affiliation with Birchism. Sixty individually dated passages specifically addressed concerns about the perceived association between the LDS church and the John Birch Society.<sup>40</sup>

An entry on February 1, 1966, underscored McKay's efforts to disassociate Benson from the church's image. Describing one of Benson's speaking engagements, McKay noted,

President Tanner called attention to newspaper notices that had been received regarding a talk to be given by Elder Ezra Taft Benson, reading as follows: "The Honorable Ezra Taft Benson will be the keynote speaker by express permission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, David O. McKay."

...I said that I feel Brother Benson should not be advertising that permission had been given to him, and that in the future, should he write for such permission, I shall tell him that he is accepting the appointment on his own responsibility.<sup>41</sup>

Animosity permeated the Quorum, with McKay, the church's leader, perceiving that Benson was utilizing the church to legitimize his political beliefs. This perception sharply contrasted with McKay's privately expressed sentiments about individuals like Sterling McMurrin. The Quorum's internal strife and division, coupled with McKay's belief in the necessity of consensus for any changes to church doctrine or policy, indicated that a change would not likely occur during David O. McKay's tenure.

In 1969, the year preceding McKay's death, the church issued an official statement regarding the priesthood ban. This announcement emerged in response to a new form of pressure

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<sup>40</sup> David O. McKay, *Confidence amid Change: The Presidential Diaries of David O. McKay, 1951-1970*, ed. Harvard S. Heath (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 2019), 635-679.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 635.

on the church, shifting from internal discord within Quorum meetings to external pressures. The proclamation read as follows:

In view of confusion that has arisen, it was decided at a meeting of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve to restate the position of the Church with regard to the Negro both in society and in the Church...

...we believe the Negro, as well as those of other races, should have his full Constitutional privileges as a member of society...

From the beginning of this dispensation, Joseph Smith and all succeeding presidents of the Church have taught that Negroes...were not yet to receive the priesthood...

...President David O. McKay, has said, "The seeming discrimination by the Church toward the Negro is not something which originated with man; but goes back into the beginning with God..."<sup>42</sup>

McKay, the prophet at the time, was in a fragile state nearing the end of his life and did not attend the reading of the statement in 1969. His passing occurred in 1970, with the priesthood ban still in effect. Despite his well-intentioned efforts, McKay could not overcome the influential voices around him. However, external opinions, particularly those from outside the church, gradually became more pronounced, reaching a critical juncture where change became imperative for the survival of the church.

Similar to the end of polygamy in preceding years, the cessation of a closely held church practice resulted from the endeavors of external actors. While the discontinuation of plural marriage was prompted by pressures from the federal government, the priesthood ban concluded due to the efforts of politicians, scholars, and numerous threats of economic repercussions.

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<sup>42</sup> A Statement from the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, December 15, 1969, Compiled Information concerning African Americans, BYU, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1963–1972, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, MSS SC 2969, 7–9.

Although criticism of the policy had been voiced in previous years, the 1960s and 1970s brought heightened attention to the ban.

In 1961, Stewart Udall, John F. Kennedy's Secretary of the Interior and a member of the church, initiated correspondence with its leaders regarding the racial ban. In his initial letter, he stated,

Dear President Moyle and President Brown:

I am deeply concerned over the growing criticism of our Church with regard to the issues of racial equality and the rights of minority groups. My immediate concern has been elicited by such things as the three letters which I am enclosing and the casual comments, but of greater importance have been the inquiries and comments which from time to time have been directed to me personally by leaders who occupy positions of prominence in the Nation's Capital.

Unquestionably, the sensitivity of the American people on this question is deepening. It is my judgment that unless something is done to clarify the official position of the Church the sentiments will become more intense and vocal, and sooner or later I fear they will become the subject of widespread public comment and controversy.

Under the circumstances--and in a spirit of humility--I felt that I should convey my concern to you. I strongly feel that this matter deserves your wise attention, and I stand ready to give assistance if such should be in order.

Sincerely,

Stewart L. Udall  
Secretary of the Interior<sup>43</sup>

Udall, as a government official, highlighted a highly relevant factor. He conveyed a warning to the First Presidency, indicating that the church had become a significant talking point in the nation's capital. This piece of information facilitated the drawing of parallels between the church's current situation and its historical interactions with the federal government. Historically, when confronted by the government over polygamy, the church had been compelled into

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<sup>43</sup> Stewart L. Udall, Letter to Pres. Henry D. Moyle and Hugh B. Brown, 18 September 1961, Box 209, fd. 3, Udall Collection.

submission, ultimately rewriting its doctrine through revelation. Udall cautioned that a similar scenario might unfold once again.

The Secretary of the Interior did receive a reply from Moyle and Brown, which included the church's 1949 statement on the doctrinal basis of the ban. Both counselors expressed that they too perceived this as a concern for the church but one that was beyond their control.<sup>44</sup> However, Udall found this explanation insufficient. Subsequently, he adopted an uncommon approach. Instead of persisting in private correspondence with the church, he chose a public route, making his dissatisfaction with the church's policy widely known. The Secretary crafted a letter to the editor of the Mormon scholarly journal *Dialogue*, and the letter read as follows:

...It is inevitable that national attention would be focused on what critics have allied the "anti-Negro doctrine" of our Church. As the Church becomes increasingly an object of national interest, this attention is certain to intensify, for the divine curse concept which is so commonly held among our people runs counter to the great stream of modern religious and social thought...

...Mormons cannot escape persistent, painful inquiries into the sources and grounds of this belief...

...It must be resolved not because we desire to conform, or because we want to atone for an affront to a whole race. It must be resolved because we are wrong...

My fear is that the very character of Mormonism is being distorted and crippled by adherence to a belief and practice that denies...dignity of our Negro brothers...

...It is well known that Joseph Smith held high ideals of universal brotherhood and had strong pro-Negro leanings that were, in a sense, prophetic. And it is well known that in the beginning the Church accepted Negroes into full fellowship until the practice offended its anti-Negro neighbors. It then settled for a compromise with its own ideals based on a borrowed superstition that the Negroes are under a divine curse...<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Presidents Hugh Brown and Henry Moyle, to Stewart L. Udall, 27 September 1961, Box 209, fd. 3, Udall Collection.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart L. Udall, Manuscript of Letter to Editor, 24 February 1967, Box 209, fd. 3, Udall Collection.

The letter brought the issue to a head. Published in the magazine in the 1967 Summer Edition, newspapers across the country extensively covered the problem.<sup>46</sup> Major papers, including the *New York Times*, the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the *Arizona Republic*, the *Arizona Daily Star*, and the *LA Times*, discussed the letter and its contents.<sup>47</sup> What had initially been an insulated topic swiftly transformed into a public relations nightmare for the church, necessitating a response and addressing the concerns raised in the public discourse.

Similarly, this event illuminated the declining authority of church leaders. Joseph Smith had initially set a precedent for the church in dealing with individuals who challenged the power or teachings of the denomination, often receiving revelations condemning such individuals. However, in this instance, Udall faced no penalties. He was allowed to speak up against the church hierarchy without facing disfellowshipment or excommunication. Some might view this shift as positive, interpreting it as a more people-centered approach. However, Udall's lack of discipline was not necessarily indicative of a progressive stance; rather, it was because the church had not yet revoked the priesthood ban. This delay was largely attributed to the diminished credibility of the prophets and their counselors in the eyes of the parishioners.

Udall was not the sole voice in critiquing the church's racist policies. Rather, the Secretary of the Interior appeared to have a prophetic insight when he predicted that significant attention would be drawn to the issue. Throughout the history of the church, authorities had become accustomed to facing criticism from those outside the faith. However, what they were unaccustomed to was encountering pushback against the church hierarchy from within its own

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<sup>46</sup> Stewart L. Udall, Letter to the editor, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2 (Summer 1967): 5-7.

<sup>47</sup> "Udall Entreats Mormons of Race," May 19, 1967, *New York Times*; "Udall Asks LDS To Reexamine Negro Doctrine," May 19, 1967, *Salt Lake Tribune*; "LDS Meet Points to Change," June 24, 1967, *Arizona Republic*; "Stewart Udall and the Mormon Church," May 20, 1967, *Arizona Daily Star*; "Udall Urges Mromons to End Negro Bias," May 20, 1967, *LA Times*.

ranks. This internal dissent added a new dimension to the challenges faced by the church leadership.

In the 1970s, Mormon academics delved into scholarship that challenged the established explanations for the priesthood ban. Building on the earlier efforts of professors like Sterling McMurrin, a new generation of historians emerged, adopting a strategy akin to McMurrin's. While they were not necessarily engaging in direct social advocacy for change, their scholarly work aimed to weaken the foundation of the ban. Academics pursued this by seeking to demonstrate that the ban was not doctrinal, and therefore, it could be altered without necessitating a revelation.

One such historian was Stephen G. Taggart, who earned his Ph. D. in Sociology at Cornell University. He adapted his dissertation into his inaugural full-length book, *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins*, published in 1970. Taggart argued that the ban originated with Joseph Smith as a policy developed in response to the southern way of life. Essentially, the prophet implemented the policy to ensure the church's growth in the South. According to Taggart, had Smith adhered to his northern upbringing, the church would have struggled to succeed in half of the country. Taggart justified this interpretation based on the founder's translation of the Book of Abraham and his incorporation of the curse of Ham. His book stated,

When the early Saints were called to move to Missouri, they were being called to Zion; an everlasting inheritance was to be purchased. Consequently, when persecution at the hands of Missouri's mobs was imminent, the Saints were threatened with more than just the loss of homes and property. They were threatened with the loss of Zion.

The strength of the Mormon desire to remain in Missouri allows the inference of a willingness on the part of the Church to alleviate, where possible, the conflicts with the old settlers which were threatening to drive the Church from the state.

This inference raises two questions: (1) What were the sources of the conflict? And (2) What could the Church do to [a]meliorate them?...

Joseph Smith, concerned for the safety of the Southern membership, appears to have begun informally advising individuals in about 1834 not to ordain Negroes to the priesthood. He appears from all recorded instances to have advised only members who approached him on the subject and who were concerned with the Southern Church...

This conclusion--that the action of social forces explains the present Mormon posture toward Negroes--suggests that Mormonism's practices regarding Negroes should be viewed as matters of policy rather than as points of doctrine...

The weight of the evidence suggests that God did not place a curse upon the Negro--that his white children did. The evidence also suggests that the time for correcting the situation is long past due.<sup>48</sup>

Taggart's historical accuracy has faced criticism, with his approach appearing more rooted in apologetics. This inclination may be attributed to the potential professional consequences that questioning the teachings of individuals like Joseph Fielding Smith could bring to his father, who held the position of president at Utah State University. Despite the shortcomings in addressing the historical realities of the ban, the significance of Taggart's writing lies in his conclusion that the priesthood ban was merely a policy stemming from social forces surrounding Joseph Smith and his nascent church. Much like Udall, Taggart asserted that it was overdue for the church to change its policy, effectively advocating for the ordination of black individuals to the priesthood.

In 1971, Lester E. Bush, a medical doctor and Mormon, presented what would become one of the most impactful historical analyses of the priesthood ban. Bush had a longstanding interest in the origins of the ban. Historian Matthew L. Harris noted that Bush was highly critical of Stephen Taggart's work, finding it insufficient and superficial in addressing the issue. Bush

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21, 25, 39, 48.

“...dismissed Taggart’s central argument that Joseph Smith initiated black priesthood denial during the Missouri period...”<sup>49</sup>

Contrary to Taggart, Bush concluded that the ban originated with Young. However, like Taggart, he also deduced that the denial of priesthood to black individuals was a policy rather than a doctrine. According to his work, this policy stemmed from social forces during the antebellum period. In his analysis, he stated,

...After the Prophet’s death, most of his philosophy and teachings were effectively canonized. There was one significant subject on which this does not appear to have been the case--the status of the Negro. A measure of the influence of Joseph Smith’s personal presence in shaping early Mormon attitudes on this subject can be obtained by contrasting the Church’s position prior to his death with the developments which followed...

...Though Brigham Young clearly rejected Joseph Smith’s manifest belief that the curse on Ham did not justify Negro slavery, possibly an even greater difference of opinion is reflected in the importance Young ascribed to the alleged connection with Cain. “The seed of Ham, which is the seed of Cain descending through Ham, will, according to the curse put upon him, serve his brethren, and be a ‘servant of servants’ to his fellow creatures, until God removes the curse, and no power can hinder it...”

...Through three decades of discourses, Brigham Young never attributed the policy of priesthood denial to Joseph Smith, nor did he cite the Prophet’s translation of the Book of Abraham in support of this doctrine. Neither, of course, had he invoked Joseph Smith on the slavery issue. Nor had any other Church leader cited the Prophet in defense of slavery or priesthood denial...<sup>50</sup>

Bush’s work was founded on meticulous archival research, allowing him to address inaccuracies in previous studies. He not only pinpointed the creation of the practice but also identified it as a policy that should have been relatively easy to change. His thorough scholarship served as the pinnacle of efforts to pressure Mormon leaders to reevaluate their practices and consider changes

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<sup>49</sup> Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 94.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 25, 34-35, 39.



through prayer. Bush's work became a significant catalyst in the ongoing discussion and reevaluation of the priesthood ban within the Mormon community.

Despite internal social forces pressing on the church, the policy did not undergo a change. While Taggart's thesis, suggesting that Smith developed the ban to protect church growth, was ultimately incorrect, it held a certain prescience regarding the factors that eventually led to the end of the ban. In the twentieth century, the church expanded into African and South American regions, including Brazil.<sup>51</sup>

In 1975, President Spencer W. Kimball announced plans to build a temple in Sao Paulo. However, this posed a dilemma for the church. Brazil had a long history of interracial marriage, resulting in a significant portion of the population having African ancestry. According to the "one-drop" policy held by Mormonism, a majority of the country's population would be unable to access the temple. This presented a challenge, especially considering that the temple was intended to symbolize the church's growth in South America.<sup>52</sup>

The situation posed a significant challenge for Mormonism. How could the denomination thrive in a place where family trees were intricately intermingled with multiple races? At this juncture, the priesthood ban emerged as a hindrance to church growth. Consequently, when a policy no longer served to benefit the church's expansion, the leadership sought to take action. Despite the potential benefits of ending the priesthood ban, the process proved to be challenging. With the temple announced in 1975 and the dedication planned for 1978, there was a pressing need to expedite the necessary changes swiftly.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Mark L. Grover, "The Mormon Priesthood Revelation and the São Paulo, Brazil Temple," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (1990): 41.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>53</sup> Dedication refers to the official opening of a temple. The temple is blessed by a General Authority of the church which allows it to be used as a "House of the Lord" to conduct holy ordinances.

Spencer W. Kimball assumed the role of prophet for the church in December 1973. Eventually, in 1978, he would overturn the 126-year policy that had banned blacks from the priesthood. This transformative change did not happen abruptly. According to Edward Kimball, the son of the prophet, Spencer W. Kimball had consistently prayed about the ban for fifteen years leading up to 1978. This revelation emerged during interviews with a church lawyer. Describing the account, Kimball stated,

In about 1976 a lawsuit initiated in Costa Rica by a black lawyer seeking to disenfranchise the Church in that country for violating laws prohibiting racial discrimination in its proselyting. The man was offended by the missionaries' use of a "genealogical survey" as a technique for ascertaining whether contacts had Negroid ancestry. President Kimball sent attorney F. Burton Howard, a future member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, to deal with the situation. When Howard returned to report a successful conclusion to the lawsuit, Spencer confided "his concern for giving the priesthood to all men and said that he had been praying about it for fifteen years without an answer, . . . but I am going to keep praying about it."<sup>54</sup>

The prophet's prayer persisted. Starting in 1978, he began sharing his ongoing prayer efforts with the members of the Quorum of the Twelve. Upon informing his fellow leaders of his intention to pray about the ban, his counselors were "...prepared to sustain him if that were his decision..." Despite this, Kimball aimed to reach a consensus among the leadership.

"Francis Gibbons, secretary to the First Presidency, had the impression that President Kimball had already come to know God's will and was now struggling with how to resolve the matter in a way that the entire leadership would stand behind."<sup>55</sup> This notion is substantiated by

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<sup>54</sup> Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005), Working Draft provided on digital media, ch. 21, 7.

The church withholds presidential papers for eighty years when they receive donations from families. Before donating a great deal of the papers to the church, Edward Kimball used them in his research for the book *Lengthen Your Stride*. It is the individual volume that had access to the entirety of the Spencer W. Kimball Papers. Therefore, it serves as the authoritative record of the presidency of Spencer W. Kimball.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 22, 5-6.

an extemporaneous speech he delivered while visiting Latter-Day Saints in South Africa. In this speech, he stated,

I remember very vividly the day after day that I walked over to the temple and ascended up to the fourth floor where we have our solemn assemblies, where we have our meetings of the Twelve and the Presidency. And after everybody had gone out of the temple, I knelt and prayed. And I prayed with such a fervency, I tell you! I knew that something was before us that was extremely important to many of the children of God. And I knew that we could receive the revelations of the Lord only by being worthy and ready for them and ready to accept them and to put them into place. Day after day I went and with great solemnity and seriousness, alone in the upper rooms of the Temple, and there I offered my soul and offered our efforts to go forward with the program and we wanted to do what he wanted. As we talked about it to him, we said, "Lord, we want only what is right. We're not making any plans to be spectacularly moving. We want only the thing that thou dost want and we want it when you want it and not until."<sup>56</sup>

He consistently hinted at his efforts to implement a change that he deemed correct. However, the presence of individuals around him hindered this process. Despite the prophet having received what he believed to be divine guidance for the church, the fact that he waited for others to change their minds directly challenges the charismatic authority that traditionally belonged to the office of prophet, seer, and revelator.

In the typical theological framework, where the will of Heavenly Father is paramount, this delay in decision-making raises questions. While Kimball believed he had received divine guidance, the deference to the opinions of other men before making a decision represents a departure from the notion that divine revelations are decisive and immediate.

Kimball, despite the challenges, was not entirely passive. He actively worked on persuading the rest of the quorum, recognizing that those who were resistant to overturning the ban presented obstacles. Delbert Stapely, Ezra Taft Benson, Mark E. Petersen, and Bruce R. McConkie were holdouts in the quorum, standing in the way of achieving a consensus on the

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 22, 6.

issue. Each of these apostles had expressed views on the doctrinal basis of the ban at various points during their leadership roles in the church. Consequently, Kimball recognized the importance of engaging with these individuals. The process of ending the ban seemed more akin to common corporate tactics than a purely divine experience.

McConkie played a pivotal role in the success of Kimball's efforts. In June 1977, the prophet called three apostles to his office: Bruce R. McConkie, Thomas S. Monson, and Boyd K. Packer. Kimball assigned these three men the task of researching the doctrinal basis of the ban, and they were to report their findings back to Kimball for consideration. In the ensuing months, McConkie, renowned as the scriptural expert of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and noted for his previous work *Mormon Doctrine*, submitted a report stating that there was no scriptural basis for the priesthood ban.<sup>57</sup>

This was a significant development, as McConkie had built his life's work on teaching accurate scriptures. Moreover, being one of the oldest members of the Quorum, he held widespread respect among his fellow apostles. Kimball recognized the apostle's influence and aimed to leverage it to convince those who might otherwise dismiss the prophet's stance.

Shortly after receiving the memo from McConkie, Kimball requested a private key to the Salt Lake Temple. He dedicated his nights to prayer, seeking divine guidance about the priesthood ban. During this period, God answered his prayers, prompting him to draft a statement calling for the end of the priesthood ban. Kimball shared this revelation with his counselors on May 30, 1978. Two days later, on June 1, the prophet summoned his First Presidency and ten out of twelve apostles to the temple to discuss the revelation.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005), 216.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-221.

With two of the dissenting voices absent from the meeting and Bruce R. McConkie having produced a report indicating that the ban had no scriptural basis, the primary challenge was to convince Ezra Taft Benson to accept the proposed plan.<sup>59</sup>

Kimball conducted the meeting with strategic precision. Edward Kimball, utilizing the minutes from his father's secretary, reconstructed the event. During the meeting, the prophet made a specific request of the church leaders as he stated,

Brethren, I have canceled lunch for today. Would you be willing to remain in the temple with us? I would like you to continue to fast with me. I have been going to the temple almost daily for many weeks now, sometimes for hours, entreating the Lord for a clear answer. I have not been determined in advance what the answer should be. And I will be satisfied with a simple Yes or No, but I want to know. Whatever the Lord's decision is, I will defend it to the limits of my strength, even to death.<sup>60</sup>

Kimball did not explicitly state that he had already received a revelation. Instead, he tactically allowed the Quorum of the Twelve members to feel a sense of ownership of the decision, fostering the perception that they were active participants rather than mere spectators. The meeting in the temple commenced with Bruce R. McConkie and Boyd K. Packer presenting their research on the scriptural basis of the ban. Following this, the prophet led the group in prayer.

After the prayer, the men in attendance collectively agreed to accept the prophet's statement, effectively bringing an end to the policy. An interesting addition to the record came from apostle LeGrand Richards, who reported having seen Wilford Woodruff in the room during the meeting. This addition draws intriguing parallels between the conclusion of polygamy and the termination of the priesthood denial for blacks.

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<sup>59</sup> Elder Delbert L. Stapley was in the hospital and Elder Mark E. Petersen had been assigned to travel to South America.

<sup>60</sup> Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City, UT: Benchmark Books, 2009), Working Draft provided on digital media, ch. 22, 8.

A week later, church leaders presented Official Declaration 2, the revelation ending the 126-year denial of full fellowship to members of African descent.<sup>61</sup> While the reporting of the events emphasized the revelatory process involved in the change, the events of the days and months leading up to the decision tell a much different story. They tell a story of a church under pressure to make a change. Without choosing to move on from the previous teaching, the growth of the church would be hampered in areas ripe for missionary work. Understanding the external pressure presented to church leaders, the "revelation" appears less divine and more businesslike. The denial of full fellowship to black members had been used as a bargaining chip over time to appeal to those holding on to the Lost Cause of the South, and it was maintained until it no longer served the interests of the church.<sup>62</sup>

The influence of social forces in the decision-making process is underscored in an interview with apostle LeGrand Richards on August 16, 1978. During this interview with Chris Vlacho, a Christian missionary, and Wesley P. Walters, a Christian minister, Richards discussed the reasons behind the termination of the 1852 policy:

WALTERS: You know, on this revelation of the priesthood to the Negro, I heard all kinds of stories: I've heard that Christ appeared to the Apostles. I've heard that Joseph Smith appeared. And then I heard another story that Spencer Kimball had had a concern about this for some time and simply shared it with the apostles, and they decided that this was the right time to move in that direction. Now are any of those stories true? Or are they all . . . ?

RICHARDS: Well, the last one is pretty true. And I might tell you what provoked it in a way.

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<sup>61</sup> Official Declaration 2, Doctrine and Covenants, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

<sup>62</sup> Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010). The Lost Cause was an ideological movement that sought to portray the Confederate cause in the Civil War as heroic and framed the antebellum South as an idealic society. It depicted the war as a struggle for the Southern way of life against Northern aggression and emphasized Southern honor and virtue. The Lost Cause myth also downplayed the role of slavery in causing the Civil War.

WALTERS: All right.

RICHARDS: Down in Brazil, there's so much Negro blood in the population there that it's hard to get leaders . . .

WALTERS: Uh-huh.

RICHARDS: . . . that don't have Negro blood in them.

WALTERS: I see.

RICHARDS: And we just built a temple down there. It's going to be dedicated in October.

WALTERS; Oh!

RICHARDS: All those people with Negro blood in them have been raising the money to build that temple. And then, if we don't change, then they can't even use it.

WALTERS: Oh, yeah. Right.

RICHARDS: So Brother Kimball worried about it, and he prayed a lot about it. And he asked each one of us of the Twelve if we would pray--and we did--that the Lord would give him inspiration to know what the will of the Lord was. And then he invited each one of us in his office--individually, because you know when you are in a group, you can't always express everything that's in your heart...<sup>63</sup>

The apprehension about potential adverse public relations in Brazil deeply concerned Spencer W. Kimball, prompting his swift actions to instigate a change. Consequently, the lifting of the ban was driven by a desire to protect the church rather than a demonstration of empathy towards those who had been negatively impacted by racist policies for over a century. On October 30, 1978, the Sao Paulo temple was dedicated and opened for use.<sup>64</sup>

For 126 years, the church denied the priesthood and access to ordinances necessary for exaltation. While individuals questioned the ban, until the years immediately preceding the

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<sup>63</sup>Legrand Richards Papers collection, MS 0429, Box 1, Folder 1, Special Collection, J. Willard Marriott Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

<sup>64</sup>Spencer W. Kimball, "Dedicatory Prayer - São Paulo Brazil Temple, " October 30, 1978, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

reversal of the policy, there had been no proper discussion to end the practice. The decision to ordain black males in 1978 was rather unmiraculous. There were no reports of God speaking directly to a prophet. Instead, the documents paint a picture resembling the happenings of a closed-door boardroom meeting, fully inclusive of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering in many business decisions. Spencer W. Kimball did not speak for God as a prophet should. Instead, he spoke for a group of octogenarians in a room that had finally decided to change their minds about their explicit racism because it threatened the bottom line of the corporation of the church.

This final chapter of the priesthood ban in church history fully exposed the manner in which charismatic leadership had been vanquished from Mormonism. The failure of a prophet to act as such for 126 years allowed a large portion of the population to be seen as not deserving of exaltation, a gift from a loving God, due to an inherent ideology of white supremacy. For more than a century, the church cast blacks as inferior in God's eyes. The church's unwillingness to address its own insecurities led to the spiritual subjugation of blacks. The religious movement Joseph Smith created in 1830 had transformed into something unrecognizable by 1978.



## Conclusion

Max Weber defined charisma as “[A] certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.” Joseph Smith fit the archetype of a charismatic authority. Due to his background as a treasure digger and seer, he surrounded himself with individuals who shared the same worldview as him and his family. Therefore, to claim that a treasure lay buried in a hill in central New York, was not unbelievable. To those who saw magic as lunacy, the claims of Smith fell upon deaf ears. However, to those who had searched for treasure and failed for whatever reason, Smith’s “success” in the hunt validated everything they had spent their lives on.

The charismatic elements of the magical worldview gave birth to Mormonism. There could not be one without the other. However, growth required change. While magical elements remained, the new religious movement began to cloak itself in the guise of Christianity. Smith was able to navigate these changes due to his charismatic personality. The movement's evolution was not seen as problematic, given the belief that he was a true prophet receiving divine guidance on how to lead the church.

Smith’s death initiated the end of charismatic authority. Therefore, Mormonism began a process of assimilation into society, albeit not all at once, but step by step. The church found it challenging to withstand broader societal pressures without a charismatic leader. This marked the beginning of the routinization of charisma, as Mormonism transformed from a truly unique movement into a Christian denomination that adapted to changes based on external social forces.

The routinizing of charisma explains why Brigham Young implemented slavery and the priesthood ban. As Mormonism navigated the delicate balance between distinctiveness and assimilation into mainstream society, it relinquished many aspects, particularly the ability to claim revelation from God for making changes. The theological innovation and alteration prevalent under Smith's leadership became nearly impossible unless external pressure mandated decisions crucial for survival. In such instances, revelation miraculously arrived, just in time to rescue the Mormons. However, beyond these critical junctures, Mormonism did not claim to receive divine guidance.

This was the reason why the church practiced a policy rooted in racism for 126 years. Society's views of blacks from the antebellum to the Jim Crow era remained largely unchanged in much of the country, considering blacks as second-class citizens. Implementing the priesthood ban in American culture allowed Mormon leadership to encounter little to no resistance from the majority of society. Therefore, there was no perceived need for change, as the faith maintained a sense of peace within its ranks.

Providing additional context to when Spencer W. Kimball lifted the ban helps illustrate the extent to which the church's leadership had declined in terms of its charismatic authority. A group of octogenarians, isolated from the world in Salt Lake City, led a church that enforced a racist policy they grew up believing to be based in scripture. However, when faced with the smallest amount of pushback from within and outside of the church, these men, supposed keepers of the word of God, sought to receive a new word from God — a revelation declaring the ban null and void. Was this due to their goodness, or was it simply self-preservation for a church that had fallen behind in time? That question should be left for other researchers to decide. However, the issue of authority remains a significant concern for Mormonism.

Arguably, had Smith's charismatic authority remained in the church following his death, the priesthood ban might likely have never become a practice. He was willing to stand up to the social forces of his day, a quality not shared by those who succeeded him..

Beyond 1978, the church rarely addressed the priesthood ban, almost as if it had never existed. The inability to confront past mistakes is a tell-tale sign of the loss of all charismatic authority. Leaders should be capable of admitting faulty thinking and offering reasons as to why something so wrong was perpetuated for so long. The church was unable to do this, leaving many in a state of uncertainty. Institutional repentance is crucial for the healing of those within the institution. If members are expected to repent for their wrongdoings, should not the church and its leaders do the same?

Many still awaited this institutional reckoning. In 2013, thirty-five years after the revocation of the racial priesthood ban, the church published an essay on its website. It might be the closest the church has come to a form of repentance. The essay addressed its history of denying blacks the priesthood:

In theology and practice, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints embraces the universal human family. Latter-day Saint scripture and teachings affirm that God loves all of His children and makes salvation available to all. God created the many diverse races and ethnicities and esteems them all equally. As the Book of Mormon puts it, “all are alike unto God...”

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

In 1852, President Brigham Young publicly announced that men of black African descent could no longer be ordained to the priesthood, though thereafter blacks continued to join the Church through baptism and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost. Following the death of Brigham Young, subsequent Church presidents restricted blacks from receiving the temple endowment or being married in the temple. Over time, Church leaders and members advanced many theories to

explain the priesthood and temple restrictions. None of these explanations is accepted today as the official doctrine of the Church...

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was restored amidst a highly contentious racial culture in which whites were afforded great privilege...

In 1850, the U.S. Congress created Utah Territory, and the U.S. president appointed Brigham Young to the position of territorial governor. Southerners who had converted to the Church and migrated to Utah with their slaves raised the question of slavery's legal status in the territory. In two speeches delivered before the Utah territorial legislature in January and February 1852, Brigham Young announced a policy restricting men of black African descent from priesthood ordination. At the same time, President Young said that at some future day, black Church members would "have [all] the privilege and more" enjoyed by other members...

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

Nevertheless, given the long history of withholding the priesthood from men of black African descent, Church leaders believed that a revelation from God was needed to alter the policy...

Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.<sup>1</sup>

Denouncing past teachings long after those who perpetuated those teachings are dead reveals much. First, the church could not bring itself to condemn those who believed and taught these things while they were still alive. Second, the church realized that its history had been based on false doctrine concerning the priesthood ban.

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<sup>1</sup> "Race and the Priesthood," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

The essay, not heavily promoted within the church, is another example of how authority in the denomination has reached a level that Joseph Smith would not recognize. The Mormon Church has become a bureaucratic organization, rife with doctrinal issues, many of its own making, stemming from its inability to simply correct the mistakes of those leading the church at any given point. While organizations are adapting to social forces in the twenty-first century, Mormonism is doing much of the same, attempting to atone for past sins.

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