

### Introduction

This is a very delicate subject and we will only be able to give a bird's eye view tonight. It is one that has a tendency to offend and polarize feelings. My hope in our discussion is that only thoughts and comments to foster the Spirit will be shared. I cannot answer many questions, but with much available on the subject, I would encourage you to look at the constructive sources included in this paper and beyond. We will look at scriptural and historical data on blacks and the priesthood and finish with what the scriptures say about racism.

### Acquiring God's Priesthood in Scriptural History

Since the time of Adam, scriptural accounts show God calling a select few to serve Him as priesthood holders. They covenant to serve Him and God gives them revelations filled with truths and keys to perform saving ordinances. Sometimes those "few" were first born sons, other times a more righteous brother, or the descendants of Levi, or Aaron. It was most often a select few chosen who sought and obeyed God. These few were to bless by serving and uplifting their fellow humans. This is the first time in the history of the world that the priesthood has been given to all worthy and willing males.

1. **Genesis 4:12** Cain coveted Abel's flocks and the praise he received from God when Abel followed God's command to sacrifice a lamb after the similitude of His Son. Satan tempted Cain, and he killed Abel. Afterwards God punished him: "when thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth." As a farmer who wanted more, God's curse was a natural consequence. He cursed Cain's lands and separated Himself from Cain. (For more see scriptures when the *ground* is cursed in Genesis 5:29, 8:21; Moses 7:8; 8:4; 1 Nephi 17:35; Enos 1:10; Alma 37:28; Helaman 13:17; Ether 14:1; etc.). We have no scriptural evidence that Cain or his children's skin was changed.
  - *Mistaken Interpretation:* Cain's curse would be pass to his descendants and it was black skin
  - *My Interpretation:* God curses the land, and a curse of separation from Him. We have scriptural accounts of God cursing anyone by adding pigment to the skin of their posterity.
2. **Genesis 4:15; Moses 5:39-40**—God "set a mark upon Cain" to protect him from being killed. The mark was a distinction. We have no mention of Cain's skin color, but six generations afterward a group *became* black (Moses 7:8, 22). Their name, the Canaanites, is tricky as it was used for different groups of good and bad people in the Bible. Many see pigmentation as a blessing from God. We have no evidence that this group of Canaanites were descended from Cain. They were also all destroyed in Noah's flood (Abraham 7:12), with the exception of one righteous woman—the devote wife of Ham (Abraham 1:21–22).
3. **Gen 25:31-32; 27:36; 1 Chronicles 5:1**—"Reuben the firstborn of Israel . . . defiled his father's bed, [so] his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph" Priesthood was often given to most righteous son, not the first born of the "queen" wife. Often these were not the first out of the womb (including Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Ephraim, etc).
  - *Mistaken Interpretation:* First born son of the patriarch was "most righteous"
4. **Abraham 1:4**—"I sought for mine appointment unto the Priesthood . . . it came down from the fathers, from the beginning of time" Priesthood was handed down from the time of Adam to those who sought it.
5. **Abraham 1:27** "Pharaoh being of that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood" The priesthood was given to Shem "the great high priest" and his descendants, not Ham (D&C 138:41).
  - *Mistaken Interpretation:* Thus denial of priesthood is independent of righteousness in mortality and must derive from a premortal cause.
6. **Abraham 3:22**—"among all these there were many of the noble and great ones." Some premortal spirits were noble and great, and all who came to earth honored their first estate and chose to follow Christ.

- *Mistaken Interpretation: Some premortal spirits were less than noble and great. These lesser spirits were sent to earth through the lineage of Cain to experience mortality, but without priesthood.*
  - *My Interpretation: All who came to earth were valiant and chose to follow our Heavenly Parent's plan and accept Christ as our Leader (Abraham 3:21-26). Also all are judged by their own desires as Article of Faith #2 says: "Man will be punished for his own sins..."*
7. **Abraham 7:12** "Enoch continued to call upon all the people, save it were the people of Canaan, to repent."
8. **2 Nephi 5:20-25**—"Inasmuch as they will not harken unto thy words they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And behold, they were cut off from his presence. And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity" (2 Nephi 4:6; Alma 17:15, etc.). God placed a "mark" or changed skin color on Laman's followers to separate them or to avoid further apostasy). We have no scripture that says Laman and Lemuel's skin was changed. God cursed them by separating them from His presence. His posterity may have intermarried with those already there with darker skin:
- *Mistaken Interpretation—The "mark" was a darker skin color and the Lamanites' curse*
  - *My Interpretation—God often separates his people to discourage apostasy (i.e. Tower of Babel). But the L+L curse was their apostasy which separated them from God (Alma 3:14-17).*

### **Historical Treatment of Black Americans in the Church and Priesthood**

Christ restored His Gospel to the earth in 1830 through the Prophet Joseph Smith. Theology was new to the young Prophet Joseph, but God tutored through numerous visitations and revelations regarding implementation and administration of the ordinances of Christ's Church. For at least eleven years Joseph ordained African Americans to the Priesthood.

#### ***The Prophet Joseph Smith***

The prophet was consistently opposed to slavery, and even open to blacks living among whites (which was a radical at that time). When he ran for US President, he presented his plan to free the slaves and reimburse the slave owners for their financial investments by using the profits from the sale of public lands (which then could also be used as pay for hired help in the future).

#### ***Missouri Neighbors***

Those that were trying to raise up a city and people of Zion in Missouri, ironically made statements that were anything but God's ideal "of one heart and one mind." Before W.W. Phelps left the church for a season, he and others tried to be politically correct at the time to not offend their neighbors. We have documentation from Missouri that sound prejudice to our ears. In that difficult antebellum environment, for political safety, they printed things using their best judgment, but we see things differently now. Trying to understand the very different cultural times, we are in no place to throw stones at them.

The problem was twofold. First, as a slave state at that time, there were legal issues for free African Americans inhibiting normal life in Missouri. But most saints felt differently. W.W. Phelps even printed an article entitled: "Free People of Color," in the Jackson County newspaper: *Evening and Morning Star*. The article dealt with the challenge of immigrating saints pouring into Missouri—some of whom included African American converts. The editorial addressed their immigration and said: "So long as we have no special rule in the church as to people of color, let prudence guide."

Secondly, the Missourians had hard feelings against most Native Americans and wanted their lands. On the other hand, the saints honored them as long-lost diluted ancestors of the Lord's people—from Lehi and Sariah, Ishmael and his wife, the Mulekites, and Jaredites. The Book of Mormon was written to them and they honored them as descendants of Israelites.

Both of these issues angered the slave holding populations of Independence, MO, and they organized a "Secret Constitution" to run the Mormons out of town. The mob claimed that the saints: "Invite free Negroes and mulattos from other states to become 'Mormons,' and removed and settle among us." In response, the saints published an "extra" or handbill that was filled with untruths and racism. Portions were wrong and unauthorized.

Our brethren will find an extract of the law of this state, relative to free people of color, on another page of this paper. Great care should be taken on this point. The Saints must shun every appearance of evil. As to slaves, we have nothing to say; in connection with the wonderful events of this age much is doing towards abolishing slavery, and colonizing the blacks in Africa . . . To be short, we are opposed to having free people of color admitted into the state; and we say, that none will be admitted into the Church; for we are determined to obey the laws.

The statement had no ecclesiastical authorization nor was Joseph aware of it for some time. It appears that a few people, over stepped their bounds and made a poor decision. This affected the future of the church. Meanwhile, up in Kirtland Joseph continued baptizing and ordaining free African Americans. Most of you know the story of Joseph selling his horse for a slave to buy his freedom.

### ***Priesthood Ordination of Elijah Able***

In 1832 Elijah Able, a free African American joined the church in full fellowship. Elijah lived with Joseph and Emma for a period. The same year that the Kirtland Temple was dedicated, his Melchizedek priesthood ordination papers were signed referring to him as an elder on March 3, 1836. That same year on December 20, 1836, Elijah received his patriarchal blessing from Joseph Sr. On April 4, 1841, Zebedee Coltrin ordained him a Seventy. After he traveled with the saints to Utah he continued to serve in the 3<sup>rd</sup> quorum of the 70 (*Encyclopedia of Mormonism*). He also served three missions for the Church.

Elijah worked as a carpenter. In Nauvoo, Joseph Smith appointed him “to the calling of an undertaker” (“Minutes of First Council of Seventy, 1859-1863,” 5 Mar. 1879, p. 494, LDS Church Archives). There Able also participated in Baptisms for the Dead (See "Elijah Abel bapt for John F. Lancaster a friend," as contained in Nauvoo Temple Records Book A100, LDS Church Archives). He was present at the bedside when Joseph Sr. died. He attempted to rescue the prophet when arrested in Nauvoo for Missouri difficulties (*History of the Church*, 4:365).

### ***Priesthood Ordination of Walker Lewis***

Although the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states that “there is no evidence that Joseph Smith authorized new ordinations in the 1840s.” We still have examples of his brother, Apostle William Smith, ordaining a convert of African descent while he served on a mission in Lowell, MA. The convert Walker Lewis, was ordained an elder. Walker remained in the church until at least 1852 when after he visited Utah, he returned to Massachusetts.

### ***1842-1852***

Most southern Americans felt that Africans were cursed by God. In the church, we don’t know when, or why, but somewhere a restriction began against ordaining our saints with African ancestors. Some speculate it happened after the publication of Abraham 1:27, “that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood.” But that was a misunderstanding, because we see many descendants of Ham who held the priesthood including—Ephraim!

There is no known revelation instructing the withholding to begin. Brigham Young began making formal statements on priesthood exclusion from those of African descent in 1849. In 1852, Brigham Young also said that the “time will come when they will have the privilege of all we have the privilege of and more” (*Brigham Young Papers*, Church Archives, 2-5-1852).

Up until 1862, the Utah Territory allowed slavery. A few southern Mormon converts brought their slaves to Utah. (I do not know that the number, that would be helpful to understand.) On December 3, 1854, Brigham said that the curse of Cain’s posterity would be removed after the first resurrection (*Journal of Discourses*, 2:143). The same teachings were understood by many Christians in the USA.

### **Further Study—Scripture Chain**

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|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|
| • Samuel 16:7      | • 2 Nephi 26:33   | • D&C 9:7                 |
| • John 8:7         | • 2 Nephi 30:5-6  | • D&C 29:41               |
| • John 9:2-3       | • Alma 3:9-10     | • D&C 38:27               |
| • John 17:21-22    | • Alma 3:14       | • D&C 98:11-12            |
| • 1 Nephi 2:19-24  | • Alma 3:18-19    | • D&C 104:14-18           |
| • 1 Nephi 13:24-29 | • Alma 17:15      | • D&C 108:7               |
| • 1 Nephi 17:35-38 | • Alma 23:16-18   | • Abraham 1:26-27         |
| • 2 Nephi 4:5-6    | • 3 Nephi 2:15-16 | • Abraham 3:22-28         |
| • 2 Nephi 4:34     | • 3 Nephi 13:24   | • Moses 5:36              |
| • 2 Nephi 5:20-23  | • Mormon 9:6      | • Second Article of Faith |

## What Do the Scriptures Say about Racism?

We cannot condone or tolerate racism in any form. The Book of Mormon denounces bigotry: “Wherefore, a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skins . . . but ye shall remember your own filthiness” (Jacob 3:9, see 1-10). God commands His disciples to strive for a society without -isms and -ites, a society without rich and poor, a society in which “black and white, bond and free . . . [are all] alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33; Alma 11:44; 4 Nephi 1:15-17).

You may ask, “Why then do we find discriminatory comments about skin color in scripture?” This question has been addressed thoroughly by other colleagues (see “Sources” below). Suffice it to say that scripturally, skin color is not a curse.

Sometimes in scripture God curses the ground (Genesis 5:29, 8:21; Jacob 3:5; Helaman 13:17; Ether 14:1; etc.). More often, God’s curse is the loss of His presence: “Inasmuch as they will not hearken unto thy words they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And behold, they were cut off from his presence. And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity” (2 Nephi 5:20-25; 4:6; Alma 17:15, etc.).

This is one of the themes of the Book of Mormon: when we are disobedient, we are removed from God’s presence. If the wicked repent, the curse of separation from God is removed, and they are welcomed back into God’s presence (Alma 23:18). However, sometime after God’s initial curse we find the voices in the scripture homogenizing skin color and curse.

Unfortunately, this interpretation and societal misunderstandings, led to many church statements in amongst the Latter-day Saints, that are laced with cultural racism. For these and all prejudiced views, we need to acknowledge the error and repent until we can love as Jesus does.

As we strive to become a Zion society—a society where we are “of one heart and one mind, and [dwell] in righteousness; and there [is] no poor among [us]” (Moses 7:18)—we find unity. When the Lord’s church is ready to live in righteousness, then our Savior will come to rule and reign (Rev 19:7)

### Additional Sources:

- \*<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>
- \*“Revelation: ‘A Continuous Melody and a Thunderous Appeal,’” *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball*, chp 22.
- \*<https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/alike-unto-god/> “Forget everything that I [Elder McConkie] have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.”
- \*<https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2015/rethinking-the-mormon-racial-story>
- \*<https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2003/the-lds-church-and-the-race-issue-a-study-in-misplaced-apologetics>
- \*<https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2003/the-charge-of-racism-in-the-book-of-mormon>
- \*[https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Mormonism\\_and\\_racial\\_issues/Blacks\\_and\\_the\\_priesthood/Repudiated\\_ideas#Mormonism\\_and\\_the\\_22curse\\_of\\_Cain.22](https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Mormonism_and_racial_issues/Blacks_and_the_priesthood/Repudiated_ideas#Mormonism_and_the_22curse_of_Cain.22)
- \*[https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Mormonism\\_and\\_racial\\_issues/Blacks\\_and\\_the\\_priesthood#The\\_priesthood\\_ban](https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Mormonism_and_racial_issues/Blacks_and_the_priesthood#The_priesthood_ban)
- \*[https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Mormonism\\_and\\_racial\\_issues/Blacks\\_and\\_the\\_priesthood/Repudiated\\_ideas#Mormonism\\_and\\_the\\_concept\\_that\\_some\\_were\\_22neutral.22\\_in\\_the\\_22war\\_in\\_heaven.22](https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Mormonism_and_racial_issues/Blacks_and_the_priesthood/Repudiated_ideas#Mormonism_and_the_concept_that_some_were_22neutral.22_in_the_22war_in_heaven.22)
- *Revelations on the Priesthood*, published by BYU Studies;  
<https://byustudies.byu.edu/showTitle.aspx?title=8861> (complete text available online.) “This collection of writings explores the revelatory nature of authority in the Church, beginning with the restoration of priesthood authority and keys through the ministering of angels and including the 1978 revelation on priesthood. . . . The middle portion of the book addresses the 1978 revelation on priesthood in great detail. Ronald K. Esplin gives circumstantial historical evidence that the priesthood denial to members of black African descent did not originate with Brigham Young, but likely had its roots in Nauvoo prior to Joseph

Smith's death. Edward L. Kimball presents a fascinating history of the revelation received by his father, President Spencer W. Kimball, and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, which made priesthood blessings available to all worthy male members of the Church. Kimball's account traces the roots of the priesthood ban, examines doctrinal implications of the policy, suggests various influences that impelled his father to make this a matter of long study and prayer, presents a marvelous narrative of the revelation itself, and, finally, describes the aftermath of the revelation. Marcus H. Martins, Emmanuel Abu Kissi, and Tessa Meyer Santiago offer perspectives on how the 1978 revelation affected Church members in Brazil, Africa, and South Africa. Finally, as extra content, reviews of seven books give a glimpse of issues related to the 1978 priesthood revelation: race and slavery in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; Mormon conceptions of race and lineage; social and historical origins of the Church's pre-1978 priesthood policy; the first official LDS missionaries in Africa; and the personal experiences of Church members with black African ancestry.”

These following articles can be found separately here:

- Ronald K. Esplin, “*Brigham Young and Priesthood Denial to the Blacks: An Alternate View*,” Brigham Young and Priesthood Denial to the Blacks: An Alternate View.  
<http://byustudies.byu.edu/PDFLibrary/19.3EsplinBrigham-a3c09d49-f5d0-4d0e-ab9e-ce5e59d3c3e1.pdf>
- Edward Kimball: “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood, ”  
<http://byustudies.byu.edu/PDFLibrary/47.2KimballSpencerb0a083df-b26b-430b-9ce2-3efec584dcd9.pdf>;
- Armand L. Mauss, “In Search of Ephraim: Traditional Mormon Conceptions of Lineage and Race,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25 (Spring 1999): 131–73, especially 163–71.
- Ronald G. Coleman, “African Americans in Utah,” in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, ed. Allen Kent Powell (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 2.