

**Forty Years After 126 Years:  
Reflections from an Aging  
Black Man in Zion<sup>1</sup>**  
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About five months ago I attended a satellite broadcast for religious educators at the historic Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. As I looked around the congregation, about

3,000 in number, I could not avoid noticing that I was the only Black person in the audience. Sure, there was another Black man, a member of the 350-voices choir, but he seemed rather young, and so it looked like I was the only Black person in that audience who had lived through almost 46 years of the recent history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

So there I was, one black face in a sea of white faces. Some in that audience were colleagues, who greeted me cordially and respectfully. A few who had served missions in Brazil or in Hawaii greeted me with friendly hugs. One of them, Brother Burnell Hunt, an elderly gentleman who years ago served as a senior missionary with his wife in Laie, was now confined to a wheelchair but insisted on receiving my embrace, saying: "I want a hug from you!"

As I pondered on this experience on the long flight back to Hawaii, I reflected on the kinds of experiences I have had in my almost 46 years of membership in the Church, and what insights I have gained about race relations in a religious environment shaped by extraordinary claims of heavenly ministrations and divine guidance.

Most of my experiences about race as a member of the Church have been good and inspirational, but unfortunately, not all of them were positive, and many speakers in this conference have and will still remind us of that, showing one of the challenges that still confront us as a people.

**Experiences with Race in Society and in the Church**

My experiences with race relations in society go back almost 60 years, as I grew up in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the 1960s and 1970s. Either in my neighborhood or at school, there were always a few other children, classmates, and teachers who treated me with different levels of disdain and disrespect.

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks presented at the "Black, White, and Mormon II": A Conference on Race in the LDS Church Since the 1978 Revelation," organized by the University of Utah's Tanner Humanities Center, in Salt Lake City, on June 30, 2018. This version contains a few minor edits compared with the video on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/M5c88p7tCyg>

Fortunately, it seems that in Brazil class status can supersede racial status, up to a certain point. Since my father was an executive in the national oil company, we were insulated from worse treatment experienced by many others. This is where my experiences as a Black man in Brazil differed significantly from my African-American counterparts. I was insulated from the worst expressions of racism—but not from all of them. Perhaps what my father told me when I was still a boy might be emblematic of this point. Sometime in the mid-1960s, after a festivity with fellow executives, one of his associates, intoxicated, told him: “*Helvécio, you are a n-----, but you smell good.*”

Joining the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in July of 1972 brought my parents and I into a new and rather unique situation.



We were very well received in the Church. I recall that even during the two months in which we were attending meetings as investigators, members of our branch—including the youth—would come to greet us warmly when we arrived at our meetinghouse. Yet, behind that genuine warm friendliness, hung the specter of what I call the “pseudo-doctrines” used to explain the existence of the priesthood ban.

Looking in retrospect I would say that the ban itself was not a major problem for me. It didn’t bother me that much that I could not receive the priesthood. Although only 13 years old, I soon received a testimony that the message and doctrines of the

restoration taught by the full-time missionaries were true, and I decided to be baptized even before my parents had made up their minds. And I had strong faith that if I kept the commandments, God someday would reward me with a good place in heaven.

What did bother me somewhat back in those days were those “pseudo-doctrines” used to justify the ban. I had grown up in a very religious family. I loved God, and always revered him. And so it didn’t make sense to me that someone who was so God-fearing on earth, would have been less than completely faithful, or “less valiant” in God’s presence in the pre-mortal realm. Yet, that’s what all the members of the Church had been taught to believe as truth, and I joined them in that belief.

However, those “pseudo-doctrines” had a major impact in our religious life. They opened the door for all kinds of ideas that today may sound terrible.

For example, when my wife, Mirian, and I started dating in 1976, my stake president expressed the concern that, without the prospect of being married in the temple I had no chance of receiving exaltation, and by marrying me Mirian would lose hers. When she finished her full-time mission in 1978, in the final interview her mission



president expressed his concern that by marrying me she would become less active in the Church.

Make no mistake ... these were good men, and as leaders they were doing the best they could with the limited information available to them—oftentimes, hearsay. But one

**One can say that the leaders who acted in those ways were acting in good faith—and I would say that it was good faith in bad doctrine<sup>2</sup>.**

may still ask, how can one say those things to a 17-year-old or to a 21-year-old who are faithful members of the Church? To put this in good terms, one can say that the leaders who acted in those ways were acting in good faith—and I would say that it was good faith in bad doctrine<sup>2</sup>.

I confess that my feelings are still unsettled about this. Here and there we hear testimonies of people who heard this-or-that apostle state, back in the early 1970s, that there had been no “less valiant” people in

the pre-mortal realm, etc. To which I ask: “*Why weren’t those statements published to the entire Church?*” I suppose some may have argued that we weren’t ready to hear those things at that time. But that supposition is flawed, because it essentially states that we were ready to hear racist views disguised as doctrine, but not ready to hear the pure doctrine.

I am glad that finally those “pseudo-doctrines” were declared to be—at best—merely the result of uninspired speculation mixed with prevailing social prejudices. But then, I also ask “*Why did it take 35 years after the 1978 Revelation for such declaration to be made public?*”

In my opinion those old “pseudo-doctrines” or rationales for the priesthood ban were far more harmful than the ban itself. Their powerful influence still lingers decades after the end of the ban. They provided a clear conduit through which prevailing social prejudices could creep into and pollute the culture of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

The priesthood ban and its associated pseudo-doctrines effectively disavowed the scriptures.

Scriptures & Beliefs	The Ban’s Denials
“The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son.” <sup>3</sup>	Blacks Africans inherit the “Curse of Cain”
“The worth of souls is great in the sight of God ...” <sup>4</sup>	Some are cursed

<sup>2</sup> Even though those ideas were not true doctrines, I used the term “doctrine” here because they were widely considered as such, to the point that they were included in the seventh lesson taught by full-time missionaries prior to 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 18:20

<sup>4</sup> Doctrine & Covenants 18:10

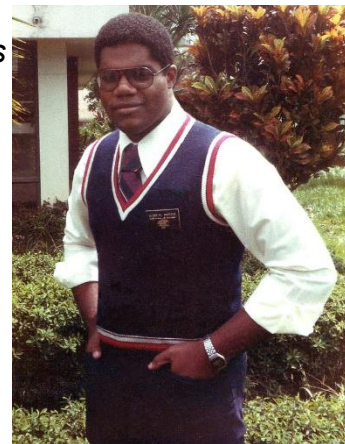
"[Bear] testimony of my name and to send it abroad among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people. <sup>5</sup> "	Not <u>all</u> nations
"They shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations. <sup>6</sup> "	Not <u>all</u> nations
"He inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none ... black and white ... and all are alike unto God ... <sup>7</sup> "	Not entirely ...
The veil prevents us from remembering events from the pre-mortal existence, and prophets have taught little about it.	We're sure that Blacks messed up in the pre-mortal realm

The following vignettes illustrate how the influence of those “pseudo-doctrines” allowed prejudices to creep into our religious practice, at times in violation of basic principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And, by the way, these stories represent a very small number of rare negative experiences I have had in my life, and I don’t bring them up to complain, but rather to exemplify how the intersection of racism and religion can easily perpetuate stereotypes and negative behaviors, despite people’s lofty desires for righteousness.

Vignette #1 - Dehumanization

Like most Latter-day Saints, my parents and I also rejoiced with the announcement of the 1978 Revelation on the Priesthood. I expected that I would be considered “equal” to my peers in Church in every way. Sadly, a few months later I discovered that the lasting influence of those pseudo-doctrines would be hard to eliminate.

An incident took place during my service as a full-time missionary in the Brazil São Paulo North Mission, on December 16, 1978. My mission zone was enjoying an early Christmas lunch with our mission president and his wife in a city in southwest Brazil. As part of the program we had a “secret friend” activity, in which we brought gifts to another missionary whom we had been assigned by casting a lot. And we would disclose the identity of our “secret friend” by imitating him or her. A few minutes into the activity one of the Elders, a southern Brazilian, stood up, picked up a banana, peeled it, and started eating it imitating a monkey. All the Elders and Sisters in the room immediately laughed and shouted: “Elder Martins! That’s Elder Martins!” I bowed my head, looking at my plate for a moment, and I murmured, “That’s not me ...,” but one of the Elders sitting across the table from me, another southern Brazilian, stated: “Of course it’s you! Go get your gift.” I paused for another couple of seconds, and then slowly stood up and made my way to the front of the room. What was I supposed to do? Beat up the guy? Spit on his face? No ... The “show” had to go on, and instinctively I knew that it would be bad to validate the stereotype of the “angry Black man,” so I just went, accepted the gift, and called my own “secret friend” without making an imitation.



<sup>5</sup> Doctrine & Covenants 112:1

<sup>6</sup> Abraham 2:9

<sup>7</sup> 2 Nephi 26:33

The actual thoughts in my mind at that moment 40 years ago have long been forgotten. Surprisingly, I did not even record this incident in my journal. Maybe the pain prevented me from writing it. But I came out of that incident with two insights that sadly exemplify the nature and typical aftermath of such incidents in the lives of Black Latter-day Saints. First, my fellow members of the Church in that group were not considering me as their “equal”, despite the recent revelation and my subsequent ordination as an Elder. Secondly, I could not count on my priesthood leader, in that case my mission president, to change that state of affairs. At that luncheon he said nothing. I expected him to say something in my defense, but he didn’t. He and his wife just sat there in silence. And, oh, the supreme irony ...! Thirty-three years later, out of that group of missionaries, I would be the one called to be among his successors as president of that mission.

But the thought remains. Could that event in December of 1978 be a sign of things to come? How long would it take for members of the Church in general to cast aside the remnants of racial prejudice—especially when for a century those remnants had been widely accepted as inspired teachings?

### Vignette #2 - Prejudice

On one occasion, around 1995, while I was a part-time lecturer at a Church university, one administrator suggested to me (indirectly and discreetly at a chance encounter on campus) that I could not be a full-time professor there because my wife was white.

What ...? Teaching at that great university for a few mortal and imperfect years would cost me my precious sealing to that angel who God placed in my life to refine me, perfect me, and one day glorify me eternally? I didn't even blink before I knew the answer.

Please, don’t misunderstand me. I am not complaining, nor exposing grievances. My intent is to demonstrate how prejudices that prevail in society can easily find their way into our religious life, and how the long-lasting influence of the pseudo-doctrines that supported the priesthood ban function as a “welcome mat” to such prejudices.

As we recall experiences like these, we see three types of responses to race issues, and these responses are not unique to Latter-day Saints:

- First, we see those who, consciously or not, hold on to centuries-old racist attitudes and beliefs.
- Secondly, those who see racist actions and simply dismiss them as innocuous—merely funny or accidental actions or remarks that are not meant to hurt, and that the people targeted should “put it behind them.”
- Thirdly, we see those who are the intended targets of disparaging remarks and disrespectful actions, who keep saying: “*How am I supposed to put this garbage behind me, while people keep throwing it in my face over and over again?*”

Today, I don’t cast blame on anyone. I have a forgiving heart that resists holding grudges. Still, I recognize significant events whenever they happen. And that’s why



when Brother Burnell Hunt asked me to hug him in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, I immediately thought: “*This is a big deal!*”

But regardless of the nature of my personal experiences, the 1978 Revelation on the Priesthood demands that we recognize two unavoidable aspects of life in any religious tradition on earth: the humanity of the people and the humanity of the prophets.

### **The Humanity of the People**

In the Book of Mormon we read an angel’s declaration that “... the natural man is ... and will be, forever and ever ... an enemy to God ... unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit<sup>8</sup>”.

Throughout the history of the world, racism and prejudice have been powerful and pervasive forces. At times racial prejudice came to be accepted as a normal and integral part of the human experience. And it may very well continue to exist for as long as there are racist ideologies to justify and reinforce such base feelings of racial pride and superiority, and national leaders who use them for self-serving purposes.

Racism is absurd. Recalling the time of her childhood, celebrated author Maya Angelou jokingly said that racism was so prevalent in her home town that “a Negro couldn’t buy vanilla ice cream<sup>9</sup>”. Up to the 1960s an elderly Black man might still be called “boy” even by adolescent white men.

Racism is very likely to continue to exist until Millennial conditions elevate humanity to a more refined “terrestrial” or “paradisiacal” state, where the knowledge of the Lord will permeate the world and bring an end to all enmity<sup>10</sup>. All I can do is my part in aspiring and striving to anticipate that condition in my own mind.

During the years of the priesthood ban, people lived in an environment marked by a perennial denial of respect and worth toward Blacks, and it would have taken a miracle for someone to suddenly believe in full equality. The pseudo-doctrines created to justify the priesthood ban, and the way they were widely accepted as heavenly truths, were just as long-lasting as racism itself.

In the Latter-day Saint scriptures, we learn that God commanded people in all ages “... that they should love one another, and that they should choose [him], their Father ...” but rejecting divine truths they became “... without affection, and they [hated] their own blood<sup>11</sup>” and as a result prejudice, racism, and slavery have been present in the world almost from the beginning.

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<sup>8</sup> Mosiah 3:19; altered

<sup>9</sup> Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 11:9; Doctrine and Covenants 101:26 – According to latter-day saint scriptures and beliefs, after the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ the earth will enjoy this more refined “terrestrial” or “paradisiacal” state for 1,000 years (Articles of Faith 1:10).

<sup>11</sup> Moses 7:33; brackets added

Because of these conditions, for millennia entire races—black, white and others—experienced a certain measure of some of the tribulations that the Lord Jesus Christ himself would suffer in greater magnitude during his mortal ministry, and those races were “... despised and rejected of men; [becoming people] of sorrows and acquainted with grief ...<sup>12</sup>”.

Indeed, a parallel can be established between the epithets used against the Savior and the modern-day expressions used to refer to Black Latter-day Saints:

<b>Blacks</b>	<b>The Savior</b>
Less Valiant; Cursed	Sinner <sup>13</sup>
Descendant of Cain	Partner of Beelzebub <sup>14</sup>

Under this light, I rejoice in the fact that, like many other early Black Latter-day Saints, I was also given the honor of following Christ’s footsteps in much smaller, but still similar, experiences. And as the divine word in modern revelation stated: “The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?<sup>15</sup>”

### **The Humanity of the Prophets**

The humanity of the prophets is a topic we rarely take into consideration. But the 126-year history of the priesthood ban in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the associated belief in a millennia-old curse of Cain befalling people with Black African ancestry, forces us to consider that humanity of the prophets at the beginning of the 21st century.

I honor and testify of the divine calling of all the prophets of this latter-day dispensation. But I must also acknowledge the humanity of those prophets. Prophets are regular people, although by virtue of their calling often we tend to look at them as being “supra-human” or above and beyond the reach of social forces.

Why do we expect that they would be any different from the rest of us? How could they be exempt from their own humanity? They lived and breathed the social environment around them. In moments of divinely-inspired lucidity, they could, like the Apostle Peter enter the house of a Gentile to preach and baptize, after being led to do so by a heavenly manifestation. But that did not prevent him from avoiding socializing with Gentiles when he was in the presence of other Jews—an attitude that led the Apostle Paul to criticize Peter<sup>16</sup>.

How could I expect Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith—white men from the nineteenth century, who once

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<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 53:3; brackets added

<sup>13</sup> John 9:24

<sup>14</sup> Mark 3:22

<sup>15</sup> Doctrine & Covenants 122:8

<sup>16</sup> Galatians 2:11-13

saw slavery as the law of the land, suddenly and magically develop the same social consciousness of a civil rights activist from the late twentieth century? We cannot judge the actions and decisions of those leaders from the nineteenth century using the social standards of the twenty-first century. I believe they acted in good faith—even though, as I mentioned earlier, it was good faith in bad doctrine.

Personally, I try to imagine their successors in the twentieth century as they grappled with this issue. As prophets, no doubt deep inside the spark of divine inspiration must have given them some measure of doubt about the ban and its associated pseudo-doctrines. But ending that policy without disavowing seemingly ironclad and widespread old social traditions, and without criticizing leaders from the past, may have proven to be too great a challenge.

**[The 1978 Revelation] provided a powerful hidden lesson for the future:**

And so, on June 1, 1978, according to some of their testimonies, the heavens were opened, and divine power broke the chains and burned the sludge of prevailing prejudices mixed with scriptures. That revelation provided a powerful hidden lesson for the future: One cannot pay respects to the past using as currency the dignity of others in the present.

**One cannot pay respects to the past using as currency the dignity of others in the present.**

### **Coping with Faith and the Power of the Doctrine**

What would be some of the other lessons for future generations after the end of the priesthood ban? First and foremost, would be the importance of conviction, or the possession of a testimony, and reliance on a firm faith in God.

But I would also add the need for greater attention to doctrinal accuracy, so personal faith can be strengthened. At the thirtieth anniversary of the revelation I offered a few thoughts about this, some of which I repeat<sup>17</sup> here:

#### **Concern with Doctrinal Accuracy**

One of the consequences of the 1978 Revelation has been an enhanced emphasis on doctrinal accuracy. This is one of the challenges for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the early 21st century. The Church—or anyone for that matter—has no control over the flow of information in cyberspace. Anyone can become an “informal public affairs officer” by creating web pages and blogs, without any supervision from the Church.

We now understand more than ever the responsibility each member of the Church has to study carefully the scriptures and the words of the currently living prophets, so we can make accurate statements about our beliefs. And notice my emphasis on the “words of the currently living prophets.” It is easy to use online tools to find quotations

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<sup>17</sup> The next two sections include excerpts from Thirty Years After the ‘Long-Promised Day’: Reflections and Expectations - Lecture at the Orem Utah Institute of Religion - 29 February 2008 - Available online at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yur\\_O6usjPQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yur_O6usjPQ)



from the past. But we must check those words against the teachings of the present. It doesn't matter what Brigham Young, John Taylor, or any other 19th century prophet thought about this or that racial group or nationality. We must ask: "Would any of the prophets and apostles of today speak these same words I found online?" For us what matters most is what the currently living prophets and apostles teach about our status and worth as children of God.

For those involved in producing curriculum materials, a new challenge exists—giving Latter-day Saints the tools to study the doctrine wisely, to minimize the probability of local misinterpretations around the world. This is particularly significant and necessary in an era in which we see once again the rise of extremism in the world, often fueled by misconstrued religious beliefs.

### *The Power of the Doctrine in Strengthening Faith*

The vitality of Mormonism stems from its extraordinary doctrines, ordinances, and the blessings, privileges and promises contained in the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Underestimating any of those could compromise the life of the Church. Figuratively speaking, it is the sacred grove that attracts lifelong converts, not the pioneer handcart. While the handcart is the symbol of an exodus based on faith, that faith started as result of the heavenly visitation that took place in the sacred grove.

**Even with restrictions, the pure doctrine still attracts and sustains the faith of those who love God and seek his eternal blessings.**

Calling someone "cursed" is not a demonstration of love, and those who joined the Church and remained active did so out of their faith in and love for God, and their hope that the pure doctrine of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, included the promise of a heavenly place in store for them. The experiences of those Black pioneers show the remarkable and enduring power of the doctrines of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Even

with restrictions, the pure doctrine still attracts and sustains the faith of those who love God and seek his eternal blessings.

The great Revelation on the Priesthood received on June 1, 1978, attest that at its heart, the religion we profess is primarily a religion of blessings, not curses. A religion not based on prejudice and segregation, but one of principles of righteousness, ordinances and covenants available to all humankind.

The 1978 Revelation also reaffirmed the truth spoken by the Apostle Peter that: "... God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him."<sup>18</sup> That revelation powerfully implies

**[The 1978 Revelation] attest that ... [our] religion ... is primarily a religion of blessings, not curses ... [and based on] principles of righteousness, ordinances and covenants available to all humankind.**

<sup>18</sup> Acts 10:34-35

that those who insist in holding on to prejudices against others of a different race are, like the ancient Lamanites prior to their conversion, "... in darkness, yea, even in the darkest abyss ...<sup>19</sup>" but yet they can, once enlightened by the Spirit of the Lord, "... lay down ... their hatred and the tradition of their fathers."<sup>20</sup>

### **From the Past Into the Future**

As I ponder about the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1978 Revelation on the Priesthood, another memory that frequently comes to my mind is of my last visit over 30 years ago with Brother Lourival Freire, a former bishop in Rio de Janeiro. We had become acquainted a decade earlier, when as a 15-year-old I had been a guest speaker in his ward. Just a few days before he passed away, I visited Brother Freire at a hospital. It was a Sunday afternoon, and many brethren from his stake were in that room visiting him. He could no longer speak, and was communicating with us only in writing. All of us were high priests, but before I left he asked me—then a 26-year-old—to lay my hands on his head and pronounce a priesthood blessing. About a decade earlier he had met me as a teenager without the priesthood. Now, bidding farewell to me as a fellow high priest, he granted me the honor of pronouncing one of the last priesthood blessings he would receive in mortality. It was a touching moment, in which both of us were teary-eyed.

I find in the two events I mentioned here—Brother Hunt's embrace in the Tabernacle filled with white faces, and Brother Freire's blessing in a room full of other white faces—my hope for the future as a Black man in Zion: That not long from now those two good experiences I had will become emblematic of the Black Mormon experience as a whole: Black Latter-day Saints whose presence refines and blesses White Latter-day Saints' discipleship in Christ.



Looking in retrospect, I could interpret my call to preside that same mission in which at one point my dignity was not defended, as a message from the Lord to me, saying: "Thou art my Son ... [I have] begotten thee<sup>21</sup> [in realms of glory]" and "I, the Lord, ... delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth ...<sup>22</sup>" If a few of my peers<sup>23</sup> denied me their respect, over the years the Lord compensated me amply for that.

So, after being considered cursed and "less valiant", and after four decades since the tacit denial of the curse, I'm still a Black man and a Mormon. And I'm

glad—and proud—to be both.

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<sup>19</sup> Alma 26:3

<sup>20</sup> Helaman 5:51

<sup>21</sup> Psalms 2:7; altered

<sup>22</sup> Doctrine & Covenants 76:5

<sup>23</sup> Thankfully, only a relatively small group of them.

I conclude with the words from a great missionary and prophet from the Book of Mormon, Amon, who was able to preach the gospel with a love that transcended racial differences. As we celebrate the 1978 Revelation on the Priesthood, I recall and make mine Amon's words, as they perfectly describe the feelings I have in my heart:

"Now ... we see that God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people, and his bowels of mercy are over all the earth. ...

"Now have we not reason to rejoice? Yea, I say unto you, there never were men [and women] that had so great reason to rejoice as we ... and my joy is carried away, even unto boasting in my God; for he has all power, all wisdom, and all understanding; he comprehendeth all things, and he is a merciful Being, even unto salvation, to those who will repent and believe on his name.

"Now if this is boasting, even so will I boast; for this is my life and my light, my joy and my salvation, and my redemption from everlasting wo.

"Yea, blessed is the name of my God, who has been mindful of this people, who are [now restored as] a branch of the tree of Israel ... yea, I say, blessed be the name of my God, who has been mindful of us ... Now this is my joy, and my great thanksgiving; yea, and I will give thanks unto my God forever.<sup>24</sup>"

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<sup>24</sup> Alma 26:35-37; brackets added