

A Black Man in Zion: Personal Reflections on Race and the Restored Gospel¹

Few human traits throughout history have been used more persistently as a justification for so much hatred, brutality, inhumanity, and pain, than race.

Since its beginnings in the 1830's the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has also been affected by the issue of race. Managed largely by a lay clergy—in many cases around the world a clergy composed of relatively recent converts—the Church of Jesus Christ is not entirely immune to the predicaments found in the societies in which members of the Church live.

I am a Black man of mixed African & European ancestry, and I have been a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since 1972. I was the first member of my race to serve a full-time mission after the revelation² that extended the priesthood to worthy men with Black African ancestry in 1978. I was also among the first to be ordained a high priest in 1981 and quite possibly—at least outside of Africa—among the first to be ordained a bishop in 1987. Since 1994 I have been the first of my race (or mixed race, whatever) to work as a religion professor in the Church's universities.

¹ Presented at the third annual conference of FAIR-Foundation for Apologetic Information & Research, on August 3, 2006. Portions of this essay were presented at a LDSSA fireside at Stanford University on January 18, 2004.

² Brother Elijah Able, a Seventy, was the first member with Black African ancestry to serve full-time missions to the Church in the 19th century.

As a researcher I may have read every official or semi-official statement available to the public about the priesthood ban. Unfortunately, truth must be told, after reading such documents any reasonable person will agree that Latter-day Saints with some measure of Black African ancestry have carried a heavy burden in addition to whatever they may have had to deal in society. Since I joined the Church in 1972 terms such as: cursed; less valiant; fence-sitter; Cain's lineage; and others too impolite to be repeated, have been used from time to time by fellow Latter-day Saints to refer to me or those who share my racial background.

Back in 1995 President Gordon B. Hinckley stated to CBS reporter Mike Wallace that such things are "behind us." One cannot help but wonder how far behind have Latter-day Saints as a people put this shameful tradition? Could it be that some in our midst have been carrying these ideas on their backs, instead of truly leaving them "behind"? As for me, I am sure that the Board of Trustees of Brigham Young University—which includes members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve—would not have approved my appointment as chair of the department of religious education at Brigham Young University-Hawaii if they believed that I was cursed, less valiant or whatever.

I decided a number of years ago to leave these matters to the judgment of Him who knows all things. There is enough war, needless contention, and tragic destruction in this world. I certainly don't want to add to any of those. Therefore, I have focused my attention on teaching the gospel of the Prince of Peace, the Savior Jesus Christ, according to the dictates of our conscience, and bring people to faith, repentance, pure Christ-like love, and obedience to the commandments of God--the only way to peace and happiness in this life.

Still, every year I receive a number of e-mails and phone calls from people around the world asking me questions—most of the time politely—about race and the priesthood ban. A young African American sister once asked me whether it was "abnormal" to feel annoyed by the priesthood ban. I

told her that all human beings have feelings, and we cannot fully stifle this important part of our humanity. My only suggestion—and I have done this myself—is to not allow this issue to importune our children and grandchildren. Whether we like it or not, the priesthood ban is part of the history of the Church of Jesus Christ in this dispensation. But just like the Mountain Meadows massacre and other unfortunate episodes, the ban may be remembered as an undeniable fact in history—but never as a significant factor to the present.

Therefore, for the benefit of those who never contacted me, I will share a few of my own insights on the priesthood ban based on my current understanding of the scriptures and doctrines of the Church.

In my mind the priesthood ban was never part of the everlasting gospel, and I have found peace in the idea that the Lord allowed the ban to remain in his Church in order to fulfill his inscrutable purposes. That belief leads me to conclude that the ban never jeopardized my eternal salvation. There were a few significant privileges of membership in the Church that I could not enjoy before June of 1978; a few very significant things, but not very many. I was able to receive the ordinance of baptism, I received the Holy Ghost, I could pay my tithing, I could read the scriptures, I could pray, I could partake of the sacrament, I could hold many callings, and also keep the commandments of the Lord and be blessed for doing so. None of these privileges of membership was denied me. I simply could not officiate in priesthood ordinances like my peers, nor enter a temple and receive my own endowment, nor be sealed to my parents, but other than that all other privileges of membership were available to me.

Actually, I would argue that the ban afforded me and other Black Latter-day Saints an still ongoing opportunity to display the depth of our commitment to the Lord and his kingdom in a specific way that our fellow Latter-day Saints of other races will never be able to experience.

Let me illustrate what I mean by the expression “ongoing opportunity.” During the three

years it took me to complete my Ph.D. at Brigham Young University, I was a part-time lecturer for both the Sociology and the Church History & Doctrine Departments. I remember that every semester at least one African American student would come to my office with a major question because of he or she would have heard somebody saying that since they were from the “cursed lineage” they would not enter the celestial kingdom. Often I would respond half-jokingly that this was a very well-known false doctrine because it could not be found in the scriptures and had never been accepted officially by the Church. And then I would ask those students: Why were you baptized? What do we call baptism? Invariably they would respond that baptism is the gate to the celestial kingdom, to which I would reply, if baptism is the gate to the celestial kingdom how come after living faithfully your whole life you would not be allowed to go there? And those students would see that that idea was inconsistent with the doctrines of the restored gospel.

Although they had been baptized long after the priesthood ban had disappeared, these young people still had to exercise the same faith as the early (i.e. pre-1978) Black converts in order to remain active in the Church. That’s what I meant by an ongoing opportunity to display the depth of one’s commitment to the restored gospel.

In my mind, the priesthood ban and its associated rationales were never part of the restored gospel. I would argue that they constituted educated responses to the social environment in which the Church existed in the late 19th and most of the 20th century. Let me try to expand this insight by resorting to a typology of laws that I conceived a few years ago.

A Typology of Laws

While attempting to categorize different laws we are subject to, I envisioned different “levels” which would begin with the eternal the law of the celestial kingdom, and then after that the law of the kingdom of God on the earth. The next level would come from an expression used by Lord himself in the Doctrine & Covenants, moral agency. Growing out of our moral agency we have several mortal laws and customs, including cultural traits and social norms.

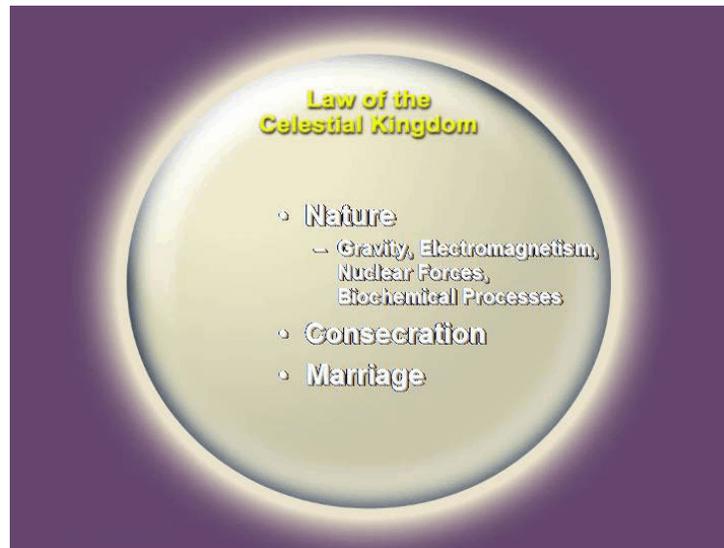


Of course this diagram, this model if you will, would be incomplete if we did not account for the opposite, that is, evil. So I added evil, outside of the diagram, meaning something that does not come from God. And for the lack of a better term I called it wicked laws and customs.

We begin with the law of the Celestial Kingdom. Here we find the so-called “laws of nature.” Elder James E. Talmage proposed that the Holy Ghost, as the third member of the Godhead, controls the forces of nature—gravity, sound, heat, electricity, etc.³ We may assume that electromagnetism and perhaps even the weak and strong nuclear forces might also be controlled by the Holy Ghost.

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Articles of Faith, pp.160-161



Therefore, I call “laws of nature” those laws that govern the creation or organization of worlds and the maintenance of these planets, solar systems, and galaxies and so on. At that level I also envision the Law of Consecration, which is the law of the celestial kingdom as the Lord stated in a revelation contained in section 78 of the Doctrine & Covenants. Next we find the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, as contained in sections 131 and 132 of the Doctrine & Covenants. These are laws that people everywhere, regardless of religious affiliation, aspire to live, even if their religious denominations do not officially subscribe to such beliefs. Some may call it instinct. Call it whatever it is, these eternal laws are inescapable, overwhelming, and deeply ingrained in us.

Many devout men and women around the world respond to this innate desire to consecrate themselves to the glory of God by dedicating their lives to religious or humanitarian service. Some have chosen to become preachers and evangelists, while others have focused on different roles in assisting the poor and needy. Among those without the light of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ we find some who practice celibacy and other forms of physical self-denial as a means to demonstrate the depth of their commitment. Even without current revelations coming through

living prophets to guide them, these individuals try to do the best they can, and they will be rewarded by their good works.

Today in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints we still have the law of consecration, in the sense that we give of our time and talents, but we don't have the stewardship portion and the United Order, which was the organizational structure that managed the law of consecration. The only remnants of the United Order that we have among us today are the elements of the welfare system of the Church which provides temporary assistance to the poor and needy.

The next component of the law of the celestial kingdom is eternal marriage. From the time we were little children we yearn for the type of close association provided by family life. Little girls, for example, play "house," and "mother" with their dolls. Everyone –I have faith in and a testimony of this–will have at some point a fair opportunity to find a good person who will be pleasing to him or her, someone whom that person will love with all of his or her heart, and who believe it or not will in return love that individual with all his or her heart as well. Many of them will have a chance to go to the House of the Lord still in this life and enter into an eternal covenant, while others who leave this life without this blessing will no doubt be an opportunity in the future.

These laws I just mentioned–the laws of nature, consecration, and marriage, constitute the category that I called the law of the celestial kingdom.

Next we arrive at what I called the law of the kingdom of God on the earth. And this is where we would find the law of obedience, the law of sacrifice and associated with sacrifice we have repentance because in order to repent we need to sacrifice something–some appetite, some passion, some pleasure, in order to conform ourselves to the laws of God that we accepted and covenanted to obey.



In this level we would find baptism, prayer, chastity, tithing and offerings, the law of the Sabbath, and the Word of Wisdom.



Next we arrive at moral agency. This characteristic, if you will, is another universal human trait. By nature—regardless of nationality, culture, religion, or philosophy of life—every human being has a natural disposition to respect and revere life, liberty, limb, property and virtue. Everybody has that naturally, although some may fight that influence until they no longer feel its effects.

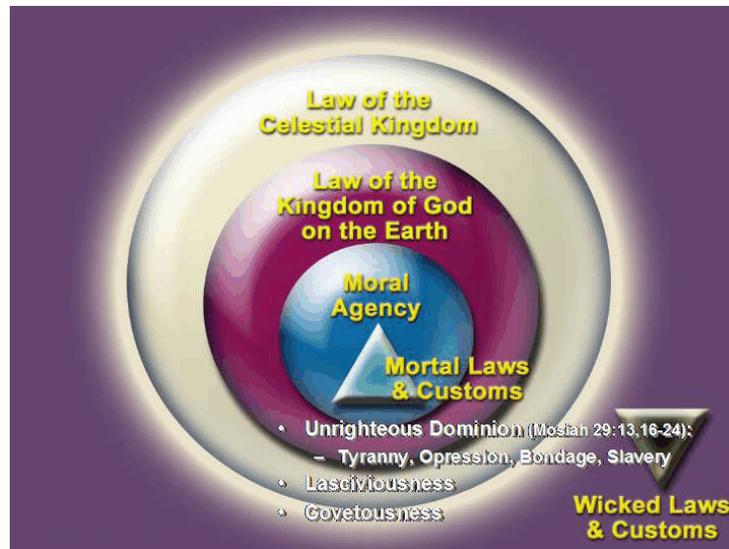
Then, growing out of that moral agency we have established our political, economic, legal,

and social systems. These are human developments made in response to circumstances around us under the influence of the moral agency that the Lord gave us.



In this level we would include constitutions of nations, contracts, associations and civil marriages. We have eternal marriage in the law of the celestial kingdom, and here under mortal laws we have civil marriages for time only, or “til death do you part”.

In this level of the diagram we would also find social and cultural norms, or what is considered right and wrong, appropriate or inappropriate, in specific social contexts, and in social interactions.



As I mentioned earlier, I also had to include wicked laws and wicked customs in this typology. Here we would find unrighteous dominion in all its forms—including tyranny and any form of oppression, and also bondage and slavery. We should realize that there are many types of bondage. Bondage is not limited only to slavery itself, but there are also those who are in bondage to chemical dependency due to substance abuse, including drugs, perhaps even food. We also find people in financial bondage because of excessive debt.

Enjoying the Gospel Despite the Priesthood Ban

Considering our lack of additional information on the origins of the priesthood ban, I have used my typology to categorize the ban as a mortal law, or in other words, a rule or regulation established as an educated response to the social environment in which the Church existed in the late 19th and most of the 20th century. This would have been what those Church leaders of 150-or-so years ago felt was the best approach at the time, and they used the keys of the priesthood in their possession to enforce it. And because of his inscrutable purposes, the Lord remained silent about the issue until June 1, 1978. This categorization and hypothesis will be sufficient to me personally until evidence is presented of the existence of a revelation dated in the 19th century establishing the

ban.

The main consequence of seeing the ban as a mortal law, and not part of the everlasting gospel is that in the things that matter most I was not losing anything. I could enjoy every blessing of the restored gospel—with the noted exception of the temple ordinances. But I could enjoy everything else. I could have a testimony through the power of the Holy Ghost, and indeed I received many testimonies of the truthfulness of the gospel and of the message of the restoration. Some individuals might claim that they were not so fortunate as I was, but for such cases, let me explain something about testimonies. In a revelation the Lord said something interesting about spiritual gifts. “To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world. To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful.”⁴

To some it is given to know; to others it is given to believe on the testimonies of those who know. But those who just believe but did not feel or see anything will also have eternal life. This is what I have called “the Nephi-Sam Continuum.” In the beginning of narrative of the Book of Mormon we find Nephi enjoying powerful manifestations and visions of the future and so on, while his older brother Sam apparently does not experience any of these miraculous events. He was not having the visions of eternity opened to him, but Nephi tells us: “I told all these things to my brother Sam and he believed me.”⁵ And leaving his last blessing, Lehi blessed Sam and his posterity and said that they were also going to be blessed⁶.

There are those among us who have very powerful spiritual experiences and come to the pulpit in testimony meetings already in tears. I believe they are really feeling something strong.

⁴ Doctrine and Covenants 46:13-14

⁵ 1 Nephi 2:17

⁶ 2 Nephi 4:11

The really important question for those among us who may not as yet have been blessed with such powerful manifestations is this: “Am I faithful, obedient, loyal to God?” Those among us who might claim to never have felt these miraculous spiritual manifestations don’t need to worry.

So, until 1978 there I was, without the priesthood but having the power of the Holy Ghost and the promise of eternal life. And the question is, wasn’t that enough already? Sure, it would have been wonderful to have enjoyed every available blessing prior to 1978, but we had solemn promises that one day we would enjoy every available blessing. That’s why I ask the question, “Wasn’t that enough?” Nobody lost anything by becoming a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints prior to 1978 without being able to hold the priesthood. A person could enjoy most of the blessings of membership in the Church. But here we are, and the good news is that that’s past, and today all of us can enjoy those blessings.

So that brings us the next question: “Where do we stand today?”

A Global Perspective on the 1978 Revelation

Reflecting on the long-term consequences of the revelation on the priesthood, President Gordon B. Hinckley stated that it created the conditions for the fulfilment of the scripture found in Doctrine & Covenants 1:20, which states: “... that every man might speak in the name of God the Lord, even the Savior of the world.”⁷

In the known history of the dispensations of the gospel, this revelation from 1978 stands next in importance with the revelation that extended the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles in the Meridian of Times. As the words spoken by President Hinckley suggest, the 1978 revelation represented an important step in the restoration of the fulness of the priesthood. The honors and privileges besought by ancient pharaohs and emperors are now available to all those who choose to

⁷

“Priesthood Restoration,” Ensign, October 1988, p.69

come unto Christ. This has opened the way for men and women on the entire planet to become one day priests and kings to the Most High⁸ by obeying the laws and ordinances of the restored gospel.

We just saw the end of the 20th century. The scriptures reveal that one thousand of our years is like one day for the Lord, so I don't suppose he would care that much about our calendar and changes of years, centuries, and so on. "... all these are one year with God, but not with man."⁹ But for us these things are important. We just saw the 20th century come to a close, and it has been a phenomenal century. We saw the best and the worst in humanity. Previously unimaginable heights and depths, world wars, violence and destruction beyond comprehension, horrors that we would not see even in our worst nightmares did in fact take place in many parts of the world. But when we consider also the achievements, the developments, the triumphs of the human spirit, and despite terrorism, drug trafficking, despite everything—when we see what looks like the beginning of a global renaissance, unprecedented, far-reaching, we have to exclaim, "What a wonderful time to be alive!"

Therefore, what befalls on us now is to perpetuate whatever is good, and improve it if possible. Teach the people the lessons from the past without reliving or reopening old wounds. That is what I have been trying to do.

I shared the personal perspective that I did not lose anything of eternal significance prior to 1978. The priesthood is the Lord's. The Church is the Lord's. He allows his priesthood to be bestowed upon whoever he wants. He may take away the priesthood whenever he wants. It's his

⁸ Revelation 1:6; 5:10

⁹ Doctrine and Covenants 88:44

church he can do whatever he wants, as far as I am concerned.

This is a time for activity, not for activism. I consider myself and I hope to be worthy of the title of being a humble follower of Jesus Christ, and the honor of being a minister of his gospel. All I want is to serve in his kingdom—to teach, to testify. And that is what I've been doing most of my life as a member of this Church. Because of where my wife and I come from, we have had many opportunities to serve in many capacities in the Church. We don't aspire to positions. We only aspire to be saved in the presence of the Father with our family and loved ones. But the Lord found me at least sufficiently worthy to receive this priesthood, and he granted me and my wife the blessing of being sealed in the house of the Lord for time and all eternity.

There is a lot of violence and war in this world. All over the world there are those who seem unable to let go of the hatreds and prejudices of the past, and others who cannot stop reliving the pains of the past. My response to both groups today is still the same I have been giving for years.

For those who may still be unwilling or unprepared to leave the past behind, I only suggest that while they feel so they follow the Apostle Paul's admonition to be "... an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity."¹⁰ People can over time prove through works—which will have a more powerful and permanent effect than any lingering prejudice—that they are indeed choice spirits kept in reserve for this era to testify to the world through deeds that "God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him."¹¹

¹⁰ 1 Timothy 4:12

¹¹ Acts 10:34-35

Looking Forward with Faith

The first temple in West Africa was dedicated in Accra, Ghana, in January of 2004. The Aba Nigeria Temple followed in August of 2005. There is a great significance in having these temples operating in our days. Their presence in Equatorial Africa seem to expand the meaning and applicability of the beautiful prophecy included in a solemn proclamation to the world written by then-Elder Wilford Woodruff and endorsed by the Twelve Apostles in 1845:

“The despised and degraded son of the forest, who has wandered in dejection and sorrow, and suffered reproach, shall then drop his disguise and stand forth in manly dignity, and exclaim to the Gentiles who have envied and sold him—‘I am Joseph; does my father yet live?’ Or, in other words, I am a descendant of that Joseph who was sold into Egypt. You have hated me, and sold me, and thought I was dead; but lo! I live and am heir to the inheritance, titles, honors, priesthood, scepter, crown, throne, and eternal life and dignity of my fathers, who live for evermore.

“He shall then be ordained, washed, anointed with holy oil, and arrayed in fine linen, even in the glorious and beautiful garments and royal robes of the high priesthood, which is after the order of the Son of God; and shall enter into the Holy of Holies, there to be crowned with authority and power which shall never end.

“The spirit of the Lord shall then descend upon him like the dew upon the mountains of Hermon, and like refreshing showers of rain upon the flowers of Paradise. His heart shall expand with knowledge, wide as eternity, and his mind shall comprehend the vast creations of his God, and his eternal purpose of redemption, glory, and exaltation, which was devised in heaven before the worlds were organized; but made manifest in these last days, for the fullness of the Gentiles, and for the exaltation of Israel. He shall also behold his Redeemer,

and be filled with His presence, while the cloud of His glory shall be seen in His temple.”¹²

For many years I had a somber thought in my mind. My existence and all the blessings and privileges I enjoy today were the result of some of my ancestors being brought from somewhere in Africa as slaves to a life of horrible suffering and abuse by the hands of others of my ancestors. But then one day I remembered that our father Joseph was also sold as a slave. My recent ancestors were no different than Joseph. Joseph also suffered horribly when he was sold to the Midianites and later to the Egyptians. My father Joseph knows what it means to be a slave. But because of the blessings of God, and because of his faithfulness, the Lord placed him as the second in command in Egypt.

I don't have any such expectations, of course, since I'm not running for political office or anything. But if I am faithful, I'll have those thrones, principalities, dominions and exaltations promised to me and my wife when we were sealed in the temple almost three decades ago. If my children and all of us do our part and live faithfully we will have those blessings as well. And together we will be able to stand and ask "I am Joseph, does my father yet live?" And then we will claim all our blessings, all the honors, all the prerogatives and privileges of the holy priesthood in the kingdom of heaven. Blessings we can't fully understand at this time, but enough for all of us and billions and billions of our brothers and sisters.

I don't know if my words will make a whole lot of sense to some; I wish I had far more eloquence. But I can tell you this much, that I know that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

12

Proclamation of the Twelve Apostles to the World, April 6, 1845 in James R. Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 1:260

Saints is the only true and living church on the face of the earth, that it is led by living prophets, that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. There are many things we don't understand, and some may be hard to bear, but this is the place.

There are many good churches in the world, many great philosophies that provide varying measures of intellectual or spiritual satisfaction to billions of people. But in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints we have the power of the priesthood, the oracles of the Lord, his living prophets, the ordinances that can prepare us to once again enter the presence of God, clothed in immortality and eternal life to live forever with our fathers Adam and Abraham and Joseph. I testify that these things are true and that this is part of the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

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