**Understanding the Priesthood Ban through Multiple Lenses**

Apart from the early days of Joseph Smith, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints restricted those of black African descent from holding the priesthood or participating in the temple endowment and sealing ceremonies until 1978. Many faithful church members believe that this ban was divinely inspired of God for reasons unknown. Others believe that this ban was rooted in the prevalent early American racism, but that we should not condemn the prophets who perpetuated it because prophets aren’t perfect. Coming into this research project I thought the only feasible explanation of the priesthood ban was that it was divinely sanctioned, but now I’m beginning to understand why people would believe otherwise. In either case, whether it was a divinely appointed ban or the result of racial prejudice, we can still sustain our church leaders as prophets, seers, and revelators, and have confidence in God’s universal love. In my readings I learned that many of our early general authorities taught that blacks were cursed because they were the seed of Cain, or that blacks were banned from the Priesthood because they were less valiant in the pre-earth life. Some even spoke of blacks as an inferior race who were to be eternal servants. Today, the church disavows all theories pertaining to the priesthood ban and gives no official reason for it, but hearing the views on race of these past prophets and apostles makes one wonder if this ban was really inspired, or whether it stemmed from racism. If it wasn’t inspired, we can make sense of it by realizing that although prophets would never lead us astray as far as saving truths go, they are humans influenced by their time, and are subject to implementing policies that may not be the Lord’s will. On the other hand, Brigham Young himself said the ban came directly from God, and it’s possible that all the things old prophets said about blacks were speculations to make sense of the ban in the context of the culture of the time. Some of the confusion surrounding this subject is the result of misinterpreting passages in the Book of Mormon. When the text states that the Lamanites were cursed with skin of blackness, it’s possible that the phrase is a Hebrew idiom meaning that God withdrew his spirit from the Lamanites and made them a gloomy people because of their sins. It’s possible that God has never actually shown disfavor by turning a people’s skin black, and it is just a metaphor. Overall I found both my primary and secondary sources to give similar information. One difference I found though was that in Brigham Young’s 1852 speech where the priesthood ban was publicly announced, he emphasizes that the reason for the priesthood ban is God’s eternal laws and that he cannot violate them. He then goes on to say that the reason blacks can’t have the priesthood is because they are the seed of Cain and are therefore cursed. However, despite this justification which was later disavowed by the church, the main emphasis on the reason for the ban is because of God’s will. Later, prophets found new ways to justify the ban by saying that it was the result of blacks being less valiant in the pre-earth life, but Brigham Young never made that claim, and he was there when the ban originated. This just goes to show that even Brigham Young, being a primary source, was wrong about some things and later prophets and apostles got even further away from the truth with their theories. Secondary sources will almost always have more discrepancies than the primary ones. This topic is relevant to the course because it is a controversial topic in church history. Church history matters because it like the skeleton that supports our church doctrine. Some people’s testimonies have been shaken after learning about the priesthood ban and all the reasons past prophets and apostles justified it. It is crucial that members of the church research this topic diligently for their own understanding, as well as to teach others about it who are uninformed or misinformed. I believe that when one better understands this topic, it strengthens testimony and creates the proper expectations of prophet’s abilities.

***Brigham Young, Speeches Before the Utah Territorial Legislature,***[***Jan. 23***](http://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE2343323)***and***[***Feb. 5, 1852***](https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE4530989&pds_handle=21020148512617724584716481153489)***, George D. Watt Papers, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, transcribed from Pitman shorthand by LaJean Purcell Carruth; “To the Saints,” Deseret News, April 3, 1852, 42.***

This primary source is a speech given by Brigham Young in a joint session of the Legislature on February 5th 1852. The purpose of the speech was to give his views on slavery. He begins by saying that because of the fall of Adam and Eve we are all slaves to some extent. He then discusses the Lord’s curse he put on Cain for killing Abel, and how that curse was perpetuated to all his seed through dark skin. He says that all Africans descend from Cain, and that that none of them will be able to receive the Priesthood until all the rest of Adam’s posterity receives it. President Young then goes deeper into the topic by explaining that the true reason that blacks can’t hold the priesthood is because of eternal principals that the Lord has ordained. The Lord can give and rescind restrictions at his pleasure. He then discusses his belief that all people of all races are citizens that should be treated with kindness and respect. However, he does say that he thinks blacks should not hold leadership positions in the church or the state. This is a significant primary source because it’s the first public announcement of the priesthood ban. The church references this source in the gospel topics “Race and the Priesthood” essay so it can be deemed a reliable primary source. Brigham Young says some things that in today’s culture seems offensive and wrong, but for his day and age his stance may have been progressive. The key thing to remember about this source is that Brigham Young says the priesthood ban comes from God. The other things he says about the reason for the ban may have just been speculation on his part. One weakness of this source is that it wasn’t written by Brigham himself, but was penned by a scribe while he spoke, so it may be subject to minor errors.

[***Official Declaration 2***](http://scriptures.lds.org/en/od/2)***,***[***Doctrine and Covenants***](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctrine_and_Covenants)***, a***[***standard work***](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standard_works)***of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints***

This primary source is a letter written by Spencer W. Kimball which was read at the Fall 1978 General Conference by President N. Eldon Tanner. It is the official announcement to the world that all worthy males could now be ordained to the priesthood, regardless of race. President Kimball acknowledges that because of the church’s world wide expansion it became necessary to extend the priesthood to all. He also references promises made by previous prophets and apostles that one day blacks would be able to receive the priesthood and goes on to say that the long promised day has now come. He mentions that they didn’t go ahead with this new policy without receiving the Lord’s approval, and that they pleaded with the Lord for hours in the temple before it was revealed to them what they should do. This is a reliable primary source because it is straight from the first presidency. It’s significant because this source is the reason that blacks can receive the priesthood today. It teaches us that when Brigham Young said that blacks wouldn’t receive the priesthood until the millennium it was just his opinion. This source shows us that in general prophets are correct, but we shouldn’t take every single word they say as doctrine because they are human too. I see no weaknesses in this account because it was a carefully crafted statement by the prophet himself.

***Perkins, M. (2018). Blacks and the Priesthood - FairMormon. [online] FairMormon. Available at: https://www.fairmormon.org/archive/publications/blacks-and-the-priesthood***

This secondary source is a commentary given my Marvin Perkins regarding the origins to the priesthood ban and God’s universal love. He explains that he believes the priesthood ban didn’t originate with God, but originated out of the early American racist culture. He acknowledges that all prophets are prophets of their day and says we should not fault them for their imperfections. Brother Perkins goes on to explain that all humans are 99.99% alike and that some people have darker skin than others based on the climate of where their ancestors came from. People with dark skin came from hotter climates and that dark skin acts as natural sunscreen. He then references passages in the Book of Mormon that he feels are misunderstood. All these references are scriptures where it talks about God cursing the Lamanites with dark skin. Many people read this and tend to think that black skin is a sign of God’s disfavor, but in reality Brother Perkins says that these verses use Hebrew idioms that actually mean God separated his spirit from the Lamanites, and made them a gloomy people because of their sins. The footnotes of our King James Bible support this, and there are many Bible verses where black skin is also mentioned metaphorically. This is an important source because it gives an alternate perspective of the scriptures and it shows that God doesn’t punish anyone because of color, but only because of sin. I’ve never heard a general authority of the church express these same scriptural interpretations as Brother Perkins, so there is some questionability to the accuracy of the source and it shouldn’t be treated as doctrine. Overall though, it uses enough logic and scriptural evidence to deserve study.

***John J. Oirya, “Restriction of Gospel Blessings in Every Dispensation,” in Selections from the Religious Education Student Symposium, 2004 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 143–158***

In this secondary source, the author is talking to an audience who is uncomfortable with the priesthood ban. He poses the question, “Why would a God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever restrict gospel blessings to a group of people for a time?” He then goes on to explain all the parallels between the priesthood ban and the Lord’s restriction of only preaching the gospel to the Jews in the new testament times. Jesus himself said that his ministry was not to go to the Gentiles, and he even initially rejected a gentile woman who petitioned him for healing, though later he conceded. The author argues that the fact that the Lord restricted the priesthood in this dispensation is evidence that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever because he has done the same type of thing in every dispensation. Ultimately God’s ways are not man’s ways, and He does all things in his own order. In both dispensations, the Lord first targeted one group of people, and when they built up strong enough testimonies he sent them to the rest of the world to teach others. This is a good source because there isn’t a lot of speculation as all the arguments are rooted in the scripture. The author does a good job at making the priesthood ban relate to the Bible so that Christians can have something to compare it to. The only weakness I see in this source is that the author dodges some of the more challenging aspects of the topic, such as some of the controversial statements made about blacks by general authorities before the ban was lifted.

***Lds.org. (2013). Race and the Priesthood. [online] Available at: https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng [Accessed 7 Nov. 2018].***

This secondary source is the church’s own commentary on the priesthood ban. The essay provides a transparent view of the subject. It mentions that the ban was first publicly announced by Brigham Young in 1852. The essay discusses how racial prejudice was customary during those days, even in religious life, but that the church never denied membership to blacks, or had segregated congregations. As the church began expanding world-wide there began to be tension with the ban, especially with a newly completed temple in Brazil that many members wouldn’t be able to use. The essay says that church leaders were moved with compassion towards the negros because of these external factors, but that they didn’t remove the ban until they felt like they had received a revelation from the Lord, which came in 1978. The essay discusses all the theories general authorities made about the origin of the ban, such as blacks being cursed because they were the seed of Cain, or blacks being less valiant in the pre-earth life. Ultimately however, the church now disavows all these theories and maintains that God does not disfavor those of dark skin color for any reason. This source does a good job of not hiding any of the details of the priesthood ban, and putting it forth in a way that makes us realize that although church leaders aren’t perfect, they are still guided by revelation. One weakness I found in the source though was that it says that “there are no clear insights to the origin of the ban.” While this statement is not necessarily incorrect, In Brigham Young’s 1852 address he specifically says that the ban is in place as a curse to the descendants of Cain. So in my opinion, we do have clear insights to the origin of the ban from Brigham Young, but the church has since disavowed those insights.