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The Priesthood Ban and the Book of Abraham

The Book of Abraham preserves an account of the founding of Egypt (Abr. 1:23–27) and mentions the origins of a “curse in the land” (v. 24) pertaining to the priesthood among the descendants of Ham. “The land of Egypt,” the text says, was “first discovered by a woman, who was the daughter of Ham, and the daughter of Egyptus” (v. 23). According to this account, “when this woman discovered the land it was under water, who afterward settled her sons in it; and thus, from Ham, sprang that race which preserved the curse in the land” (v. 24). Before the text can clarify what exactly this curse might be, it goes on to explain how the effects of this curse were transmitted by the descendants of this Egyptus. “Now the 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” (v. 25), the account continues. Although Pharaoh was “a righteous man” who “established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days” and who sought “earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations,” he was nevertheless “cursed” as “pertaining to the Priesthood” (v. 26), since he was “of that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain claim it from Noah, through Ham” (v. 27). This claim, Abraham explains in his account, is why his “father was led away by their idolatry” (v. 27).

This account expands on some of the details found in Genesis 9:18–29, one of the most enigmatic passages of scripture. In the biblical story, Ham, the son of Noah, saw his father “drunken and . . . uncovered within his tent” (v. 21). When Ham informed his brothers Shem and Japheth of their father’s condition, the latter two “took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their

father's nakedness" (v. 23). Upon awaking, Noah "knew what his younger son had done" (v. 24) and so, in language similar to the Book of Abraham, "cursed" his grandson Canaan, the son of Ham, to be "a servant of servants . . . unto his brethren" (v. 25). Precisely what Ham had done that warranted Noah's reprimand is unclear in the text. It is also unclear why in the biblical account only Canaan was cursed among Ham's children.¹

The true significance and meaning of this account continues to be debated among biblical exegetes, although a common reading of this passage sees it as an etiology that "provide[s] a biblical justification for the subsequent dispossession and oppression of the indigenous Canaanite population in Palestine by the people of Israel."² Even though the Prophet Joseph Smith is known to have commented on this passage on at least one occasion, nothing preserved in available records offers much clarification.³

What is clear is that the curse of Ham in Genesis 9—along with details about the descendants of Ham in the so-called Table of Nations in Genesis 10:6–20—has historically been (mis)read to justify the enslavement of people of African descent.⁴ By Joseph Smith's day, this racialized reading of Genesis 9—which had circulated and evolved among Jews,

1. The Book of Abraham, as seen above, suggests that others among Ham's descendants were also cursed, a detail missing from the biblical version.

2. Gale A. Yee, Hugh R. Page Jr., and Matthew J. M. Coomber, eds., *The Pentateuch: Fortress Commentary on the Bible, Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 101. Compare E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 62, who notices the puzzling gaps in this story but ultimately sees it as attempting to "stigmatize distasteful practices on the part of the older inhabitants of the land" of Palestine (that is, the Canaanites).

3. Wilford Woodruff recorded that in a discourse delivered on November 7, 1841, Joseph Smith "spoke of the curse of ham for laughing at Noah while in his wine but doing no harm." Woodruff, unfortunately, did not note the particulars of what the Prophet meant with these remarks. See "Discourse, 7 November 1841, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff," [109], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7november-1841-as-reported-by-wilford-woodruff/1>.

4. Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003); David M. Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2009); David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017). Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Africa and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 19–33, summarizes much of this scholarship but provides a selective and somewhat garbled accounting of the Book of Abraham and the priesthood ban.

Christians, and Muslims for several centuries—had become commonplace. At one point, the Prophet himself appeared to accept this reasoning for the enslavement of Blacks in the United States,⁵ although it is not clear how much this reflected his personal belief as much as it was a pragmatic attempt to distance Latter-day Saints from abolitionism, which was still a radical political ideology in the early nineteenth century.⁶ In any case, Joseph’s views on slavery would ultimately develop into a position of gradual emancipation. This stance was even made a plank of his 1844 presidential platform.⁷

Whatever Joseph Smith believed about slavery or its justification in light of Genesis 9, there is “no contemporary evidence” that he appealed to the Book of Abraham for his racial ideas.⁸ This included his thinking on the ordination of Black men to the priesthood. As one scholar put it plainly, “even though Joseph Smith produced the Book of Abraham, he never used it to justify a priesthood restriction.”⁹ As has been abundantly documented, at least two Black men were ordained to the priesthood in Joseph Smith’s lifetime.¹⁰ Current historical evidence seems to indicate that it was only after the Prophet’s death that a ban on ordaining Black men to the priesthood and allowing Black men and women to receive temple ordinances was imposed by Brigham Young.¹¹ Despite

5. Joseph Smith, “For the Messenger and Advocate,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 7 (April 1836): 289.

6. Richard Lyman Bushman with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 289; Russell W. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness: A Global History of Blacks and Mormonism, 1830–2013* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 212; W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 123–25; Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 96–97.

7. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 289; Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness*, 9; Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 107; Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 127; Spencer W. McBride, *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 98–100, 127–28.

8. Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst, eds., *The Mormon Church and Blacks: A Documentary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 12–13, emphasis in original. Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 116, likewise affirms, “There is no evidence that during his lifetime Smith or any of his followers cited the book of Abraham to deny black Mormon men the priesthood.”

9. W. Paul Reeve, “Race, the Priesthood, and Temples,” in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 160.

10. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness*, 10, 210–12, 229–31; Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 109, 131, 295 n. 16; Reeve, “Race, the Priesthood, and Temples,” 160.

11. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness*, 13–35.

this, however, “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.”¹² This is significant, since if the Book of Abraham was simply the product of the racist environment and thinking of Joseph Smith and his contemporaries, as some have alleged,¹³ then it is deeply curious why neither he nor his immediate successor ever appeared to use it to justify their positions on slavery (either pro or con) or the priesthood and temple ban. The “concern in the first chapter” of the Book of Abraham, Joseph Smith’s premier biographer has observed, “was with civilizations and lineage more than race. Pharaoh, Ham, and Egyptus figure in one lineage and Abraham in another. The implications for modern race relations interested Joseph less than the configuration of family lines and the descent of authority.”¹⁴

If neither Joseph Smith nor Brigham Young ever invoked the Book of Abraham to address questions about slavery or the ordination of Blacks to the priesthood, then whence did this practice arise? “Very simply,” wrote scholar Lester Bush in a pioneering study, “the basic belief that a lineage could be traced from Cain through the wife of Ham to the modern [Black person] had long been accepted by the Church, independently of the Pearl of Great Price.”¹⁵ By 1847, Brigham Young and other Church leaders began formulating and implementing their views on why Blacks could not hold the priesthood.¹⁶ Apostle Parley P. Pratt, for example, echoed the language of (but did not explicitly cite) the Book of Abraham in an April 1847 discourse when he spoke of Blacks being “cursed as regards [to] the priesthood.”¹⁷ His brother and fellow Apostle Orson Pratt followed suit in 1853.¹⁸

12. Lester E. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 31.

13. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 172–173; Ryan Stuart Bingham, “Curses and Marks: Racial Dispensations and Dispensations of Race in Joseph Smith’s Bible Revision and the Book of Abraham,” *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 3 (July 2015): 22–57.

14. Bushman, *Joseph Smith*, 289.

15. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 35.

16. Stevenson, *For the Cause of Righteousness*, 13–36; Reeve, “Race, the Priesthood, and Temples,” 164–67.

17. Parley P. Pratt, “Sunday Meeting Minutes, Winter Quarters,” April 25, 1847, [3], CR 100 318, Church History Catalog, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ba16277a-77b9-4784-a788-68ac368cof18/o/2>.

18. Orson Pratt, “The Pre-existence of Man (Continued),” *The Seer* 1, no. 4 (April 1853): 56.

Available evidence suggests that it was not until the 1880s with the canonization of the Pearl of Great Price that Latter-day Saints began explicitly using the Book of Abraham as the “scriptural linchpin of black exclusion from the priesthood and the temple” under the misinterpretation that Black people were Ham’s cursed seed.¹⁹ Although earlier expounders certainly may have had the Book of Abraham in mind with some of their racial thinking,²⁰ it would not be until some decades later with influential writers such as John Taylor and B. H. Roberts that this reading was made overt.²¹ By the turn of the century, this reading had become the de facto “official” understanding.²² As Lester Bush explained,

When fully developed the Pearl of Great Price argument went as follows: Cain became black after murdering his brother Abel; among his descendants were a people of Canaan who warred on their neighbors, and were also identified as black. Ham, Noah’s son, married Egyptus, a descendant of this Cain-Canaan lineage; Cain’s descendants had been denied the priesthood, and thus Ham’s descendants were also denied the priesthood; this was confirmed in the case of Pharaoh, a descendant of Ham and Egyptus, and of the Canaanites, and who was denied the priesthood; the modern [person of African descent] was of this Cain-Ham lineage, and therefore was not eligible for the priesthood.²³

Although the Book of Abraham would later be used to justify this narrative, as scholars have paid closer attention to the text it has become clearer that this reading is deeply problematic.²⁴ In fact, despite what

19. Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 117.

20. Besides the Pratts, as cited above, Orson Hyde, in an 1845 speech, spoke of “the negro or African race” being “the accursed lineage of Canaan.” But Hyde did not cite the Book of Abraham in this speech, nor did he identify Blacks as being barred from priesthood office. Furthermore, he couched his comments in the context of the supposed lack of valiance among Blacks in the pre-existence. Orson Hyde, *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde: Delivered before the High Priests Quorum in Nauvoo, April 27th, 1845* (Nauvoo, Ill.: John Taylor, 1845), 30. That Hyde derived his ideas on the behavior of Blacks in the pre-existence from the Book of Abraham, which contains the most explicit details in Latter-day Saint scripture on this topic (Abr. 3:22–28), seems likely but remains an assumption.

21. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 21:370 (August 8, 1880); B. H. Roberts, “To the Youth of Israel,” *Contributor* 6, no. 8 (May 1885): 296–97.

22. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 35–39.

23. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 35.

24. Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 35; Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 2nd ed., ed. Gary P. Gillum, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 14 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham

some Latter-day Saints (and some critics of Joseph Smith) have assumed, the Book of Abraham does not support the traditional (mis)reading of Genesis 9 as condemning Blacks to perpetual slavery. Nor does it justify their being denied the priesthood. The most glaringly obvious problem is that *nowhere* in the text are the descendants of Ham said to have dark skin. Neither, for that matter, are the descendants of Ham said to be descendants of Cain; nor are they prophesied to be inheritors of this curse after Abraham's day.²⁵

In short, "the Book of Abraham [simply] does not discuss race and curses no one with slavery."²⁶ Although some Latter-day Saints attempted to use the Book of Abraham as a proof text for their misconstrued understanding of the "curse of Ham" in Genesis 9 and as a rationale for Brigham Young's priesthood and temple ban, "nowhere does the text of the Book of Abraham support that interpretation."²⁷ It is true that the Book of Abraham speaks of a "race which preserved the curse in the land" descending from Ham and that this curse "pertain[ed] to the Priesthood" (Abr. 1:24, 26). But "race" in this passage need not necessarily be read as describing those with specific skin color, and indeed, the text never makes this correlation.

Furthermore, as both Hugh Nibley and W. Paul Reeve have observed, the main issue at hand is not the skin color of Ham or his descendants, which is left unmentioned in the Book of Abraham, but rather a question of priesthood lineage and patriarchal versus matriarchal succession (Abr 1:25, 31). "Pharaoh's claim to the priesthood," wrote Nibley, "was invalid because he insisted with great force that it was the patriarchal priesthood of Noah, received through the line of Ham (Abraham 1:25–27).

Young University, 2000), 557–607; Alma Allred, "The Traditions of Their Fathers: Myth versus Reality in LDS Scriptural Writings," in *Black and Mormon*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 34–49; Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 256–57; John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 164; Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 206–7; Givens, *Pearl of Greatest Price*, 134–37; John S. Thompson, "‘Being of That Lineage’: Generational Curses and Inheritance in the Book of Abraham," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 54 (2022): 97–146.

25. On the contrary, Abraham 2:9 depicts God instructing Abraham that his future seed would "bear this ministry and Priesthood *unto all nations*" (emphasis added). See further Thompson, "‘Being of That Lineage,'" 97–146, on the nature and function of hereditary "curses" in the ancient world.

26. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 164.

27. Gee, *Introduction to the Book of Abraham*, 164.

[Pharaoh's] earthly rule was blessed (Abraham 1:26), but he could not, of course, claim patriarchal *lineage* through his mother.”²⁸ Abraham himself noted that, thanks to records at his disposal (v. 31), he could trace that the priesthood had been passed from Noah through his ancestor Shem (compare Gen. 9:21–32; 11:10–32), and therefore he retained a right to priesthood.²⁹ In short, in the Book of Abraham “there is no exclusive equation between Ham and Pharaoh, or between Ham and the Egyptians, or between the Egyptians and the blacks, or between any of the above and any particular curse. What was denied was recognition of patriarchal right to the priesthood made by a claim of matriarchal succession.”³⁰

As for past attempts to use the Book of Abraham's teachings about the premortal existence to justify the priesthood and temple ban,³¹ suffice it to say the text provides no such rationale. While it is true that the text speaks of the gradation of premortal “intelligences,” some of which were “noble and great” and made “rulers” (Abr. 3:18–19, 21–23), it says positively nothing about any of these intelligences being “neutral” in the conflict with the one who “kept not his first estate” and drew many others to follow after him (v. 28), much less that being neutral resulted in them having been “cursed” with black skin in mortality and thus being denied the priesthood or temple blessings in mortality.³² Attempts to

28. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 528, emphasis in original.

29. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*, 206; Givens, *Pearl of Greatest Price*, 136.

30. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 587.

31. See, for example, Hyde, *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde*, 30; Pratt, “Pre-existence of Man (Continued),” 56; Roberts, “To the Youth of Israel,” 296–97; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 5:163–64.

32. In a report to the Council of Fifty in March 1845, Orson Hyde related his belief that “when Cain murdered his brother Able on the earth[,] the Almighty cursed him and put a mark on him, or rather turned him black to give the black spirits a chance to come and take bodies like themselves, and the black spirits taking the black bodies made the negroes.” “Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846; Volume 2, 1 March–6 May 1845,” [209], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/council-of-fifty-minutes-march-1844-january-1846-volume-2-1-march-6-may-1845/212>. Hyde made a similar comment two months later in April 1845. Hyde, *Speech of Elder Orson Hyde*, 30. At the same time, however, Brigham Young rejected this idea, affirming in April 1845 that “the Spirits of the Chil[dren] of Men are pure & holy without transgress[io]n or any curse upon them—& the diff[erences] that you see around you is on acc[oun]t. of the circumstances that surround them . . . some have taught that bec[ause] persons are poor that it is on acc[oun]t. of transgress[io]n it is false doctrine—from beginning to end.” “Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846; Volume 2,” [208] n. 305. Young made a similar denial in December 1869. As recorded in Wilford Woodruff's journal, on Christmas Day of that year the question was

justify the priesthood and temple ban with the Book of Abraham's teachings on premortality are, accordingly, fallacious and unfounded.

In any case, leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today have officially disavowed racialized readings of these passages from Genesis and the Book of Abraham: "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 unrighteous 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."³³ President Russell M. Nelson reaffirmed this in the October 2020 general conference. "I assure you that your standing before God is not determined by the color of your skin," he taught. "Favor or disfavor with God is dependent upon your devotion to God and His commandments and not the color of your skin."³⁴

As W. Paul Reeve has bluntly (and correctly) put it, "there is no need to defend past statements on race when this generation of leaders has disavowed them."³⁵ There is likewise no need to defend faulty interpretation of scripture that does a disservice to the text and hinders our understanding. The Book of Abraham's teachings about race, lineage, and priesthood are more complex than was previously recognized by readers primed by specific cultural conditions to read the text in a certain way. Nothing should stop us from probing this text with the best available current exegetical tools and methodologies.

posed in the School of the Prophets whether "the Spirits of Negroes were Nutral [neutral] in Heaven," a teaching some were attributing to Joseph Smith. "President Young said No they were not there was No Nutral spirits in Heaven at the time of the Rebellion all took sides. He said if any one said that He Herd the Prophet Joseph Saiy that the spirits of the Blacks were Nutral in Heaven He would not Believe them for He herd Joseph say to the contrary all spirits are pure that come from the presence of God" (compare Doctrine and Covenants 93:38). Brigham would then go on to give his view that Blacks were the offspring of Cain and therefore cursed, but that all the children of Adam would have an opportunity for receiving redemption and salvation except for the Sons of Perdition. "Journal (October 22, 1865–December 31, 1872," December 25, 1869, 221–22, Wilford Woodruff Papers, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/documents/39f9b320-5b5a-4100-9d62-ca5507976bfi/page/71bea87d-ed9a-4c67-9f18-ca99596677f3>.

33. "Race and the Priesthood," Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed January 11, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

34. Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," *Liahona* 50, no. 11 (November 2020): 94.

35. W. Paul Reeve and Thomas A. Wayment, "Discussing Difficult Topics: Race and the Priesthood," *Religious Educator* 17, no. 3 (2016): 143.

Further Reading

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