

Dispelling the Myth of the “Curse of Cain”

“It is time disbelieving people repented and got in line and believed in a living, modern prophet. Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young...or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation [on the priesthood given in 1978]. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.

“We get our truth and our light line upon line and precept upon precept. We have now had added a new flood of intelligence and light on this particular subject, and it erases all the darkness and all the views and all the thoughts of the past. They don’t matter any more.

“It doesn’t make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before the first day of June of this year [1978]. It is a new day and a new arrangement, and the Lord has now given the revelation that sheds light out into the world on this subject.”¹

Despite this statement by Elder Bruce R. McConkie in 1978, the doctrinal folklore that blacks are the descendants of Cain and Ham continues to be taught by well-meaning members of the Church. Ironically, the dubious “folk doctrine” in question is no longer even relevant, since it was created to explain a Church policy that was reversed nearly thirty years ago.

This theory was adopted by early Latter-day Saints from similar beliefs in early American Protestantism that were used to justify slavery. The Saints used it to explain the policy of denying priesthood ordination to those of African descent, a policy for which no revelation or prophetic explanation was ever given. The idea went something like this: In the premortal existence, certain spirits were set aside to come to Earth through a lineage that was cursed and marked, first by Cain’s murder of his brother and covenant with Satan, and then again later by Ham’s offense against his father Noah. The reasons *why* this lineage was set apart weren’t clear, but it was speculated they were somehow less valiant than their premortal brethren during the war in heaven. In this life, then, the holy priesthood was to be withheld from all who had had any trace of that lineage.

As neat and coherent as that scenario might seem, the scriptures typically cited in its support *cannot* logically be interpreted this way *unless one starts with the priesthood ban itself and then works backward*, looking for scriptures to support a predetermined belief.

This paper will set forth the problems with the “curse of Cain” theory.

Cain (Gen. 4:11–15; Moses 5:23–25, 36–40). Following Cain’s covenant with Satan and murder of Abel, the Lord cursed him that the earth would not yield its strength for him, and that he would be a fugitive and a vagabond. Nothing was said of priesthood. The Lord placed a mark upon him, not as part of the curse, but to protect him from others who would kill him. The

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¹ Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” address in the Second Annual CES Symposium, Salt Lake City, August 1978; available online at <http://www.zionsbest.com/alike.html>.

mark itself was not described, and there was no indication that it would be passed to his descendants.²

Six generations after Cain, Enoch saw a vision of an unspecified future time (Moses 7:4) in which “the seed of Cain were black” (7:22). There is no explanation for this blackness or where it came from; it is not even clear if we are to take it literally or figuratively.³

Canaan (Gen. 9:20–27). Ham’s son Canaan, for some unexplained reason, was cursed for his father’s offense against Noah. No change in skin color was mentioned,⁴ nor was there any statement on priesthood. According to the Bible, Canaan was the founder of the Canaanite nation (Gen. 10:15–19). The Canaanites were Caucasian, not black, and had no connection with sub-Saharan (black) Africans.⁵

The Hebrew words “Cain” (*qayin*) and “Canaan” (*kēna’an*) are not related; it is a coincidence that they sound alike in English.

Egyptus (Abr. 1:21–27). The Book of Abraham is the only place that any scriptures speak of the priesthood being withheld from *any* lineage. Even then it is only the *specific* lineage of a particular dynasty of Egyptian Pharaohs, and there is no explanation as to *why* that lineage could not have the priesthood, whether the proscription was temporary or permanent, or which other lineages, if any—especially in the *modern* world—would be covered by that proscription.⁶ According to the Bible, Egypt was founded by Mizraim, Canaan’s brother (which may be why Abr. 1:21 connects Egypt with the Canaanites). Ancient Egyptians were a mixture of various races and the ruling family in each dynasty could be of a different race than previous dynasties; for example, Dynasties 21–24 and 26 were depicted on Egyptian monuments as fair-skinned, blond-haired, blue-eyed people, while black Nubians ruled the 25th Dynasty.

Conclusion. The speculation that modern blacks are the descendants of Cain and Ham is unsupported from the scriptures. In reality we do not know why God allowed the denial of the priesthood to blacks for a time in this dispensation. All we do know is that policy has been reversed by a living prophet.

The “curse of Cain” folk doctrine may have been useful for our LDS ancestors, but it is neither helpful nor necessary today. The Church is for all God’s children, for “he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female...and all are alike unto God” (2 Ne. 26:33).

² See Alma 3:18, where the Amlicites “mark[ed] themselves in their foreheads,” as a sign of their rebellion against God.

³ In the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith changed the phrase “white and delightsome” in 2 Nephi 30:6 to read “pure and delightsome,” indicating that “white,” in at least this context, did not refer to literal skin color, but to righteousness.

⁴ Before the flood, there was a race of people called the Canaanites upon whom “a blackness came” (Moses 7:7–8). The text does not indicate if the “blackness” was physical or spiritual. The post-flood Canaanites mentioned in Genesis and Abraham lived in modern Palestine (Gen. 10:19; Abr. 2:15), so it’s unclear, and probably doubtful, that there is any connection between the two groups.

⁵ If anyone is a candidate for the ancestor of black Africans, it’s Cush, Canaan’s brother, whose people founded what is now known as Ethiopia (Gen. 10:6; see the reference to skin color in Jer. 13:23).

⁶ Hugh Nibley offered the explanation that the denial of the priesthood to the Pharaonic line had to do with the claim of the priesthood through the matriarchal line (through Egyptus) rather than the patriarchal. See *Abraham in Egypt* (Deseret Book, 2000 [2nd ed.], p. 360–61).