

## Joseph F. Smith to David O. McKay

During Joseph F. Smith's tenure, the question also came up of what exactly defined a descendant of Cain if someone was predominantly white. That's when they started referring back to Brigham's misrecorded statement about one drop of Negro blood preventing someone from obtaining the Priesthood. That became another widespread justification for denying people ordination for the Priesthood, and he never even said it.

LaJean Purcell Carruth, the woman who transcribed all of the shorthand transcripts for Brigham Young and others, [said the following](#):

*Wilford Woodruff recorded Brigham Young's speech in his journal at the beginning of 1852, notes only, partial notes. They are undated and in my opinion copied from elsewhere. Wilford Woodruff recorded Brigham Young as saying that any man with one drop of African blood could not hold the priesthood. This document was known. It was the cited document. It was used in ecclesiastical judgments. This document was the one known source for what Brigham Young had actually said. Unfortunately, Wilford Woodruff took the social construct of one drop that was used to legally determine who was African in the Southern states. If you had one drop of African blood, as long as it came through the maternal line, you were considered an African. Somehow, his memory put this into Brigham Young's sermon.*

*George D. Watt's notes of Brigham Young's speech do not contain the words "one drop." I have searched my shorthand records and Van Wagoner's compilation of all published manuscript accounts of Brigham Young's speeches. This phrase is not there. Brigham Young did not say it, but the record we had included it. The clarification of Brigham Young's words are of vast importance to us.*

So, decades after their deaths, the origin of the Priesthood restriction had been misattributed to Joseph Smith, and the "one drop" phrase supposedly by Brigham Young that was used repeatedly to justify banning biracial men from Priesthood ordination was never said by him. But people at the time didn't know that. They believed they were passing along correct information. It wasn't done out of malice, it was done out of a mistaken belief that they were right. I'm sure we've all shared information that we thought was true until we learned otherwise. That's what happened here.

When missionaries reached South Africa in the early 1900s, they were told not to proselytize to black people, just white people. If black people wanted to join, they could be baptized, but the missionaries shouldn't seek them out. They did, however, begin allowing black people to do baptisms for the dead.

In 1912, despite Brigham Young's earlier statement that nobody was neutral in the War in Heaven, it had again gained widespread popularity as a justification that black people *had* been

neutral and the Priesthood restriction was their punishment. The First Presidency wrote in response to an inquiry about it that “there is no revelation, ancient or modern, neither is there any authoritative statement by any of the authorities of the Church ... [in support of the idea] that the negroes are those who were neutral in heaven at the time of the great conflict or war, which resulted in the casting out of Lucifer and those who were led by him. ...” This did not stop the rumors from circulating, however.

Skipping ahead to 1931, Joseph Fielding Smith published a book called [\*The Way to Perfection\*](#) which went through everything the Twelve believed they knew about the ban, the history and the policies and the scriptural basis for it and all of that. This was considered for a long time to be the definitive source on the topic.

The biggest innovation in that book was his ability to seemingly reconcile the position of Brigham Young and Joseph F. Smith with that of those who believed in the “neutrality in the War in Heaven” theory. He very carefully outlined the difference between neutrality and those who simply “did not stand valiantly,” who “were almost persuaded, were indifferent, and who sympathized with Lucifer, but did not follow him.” The “sin” “was not one that merited the extreme punishment which was inflicted on the devil and his angels. They were not denied the privilege of receiving a second estate, but were permitted to come to the earth-life with some restrictions placed upon them. That the negro race, for instance, have been placed under restrictions because of their attitude in the world of spirits, few will doubt. ...” He went on to say, “It cannot be looked upon as just that they should be deprived of the power of the Priesthood without it being a punishment for some act, or acts, performed before they were born.”

If that sounds pretty much exactly like the same thing as the neutrality argument to you, you’re in good company. There doesn’t appear to be much, if any, difference between the two ideas. It seems clear that he believed that theory but didn’t want to openly contradict his father or Brigham. He did comment on Brigham’s statement about pure spirits, however: “They come innocent before God so far as mortal existence is concerned.”

This book and the ideas it supported were so popular, his remarks formed the backbone of [the 1949 statement from the First Presidency](#) on the topic. This statement said that the ban was the result of a direct commandment from the Lord and dated from the very organization of the Church, that black people would eventually hold every blessing white people then held, and that the conduct of the spirits in the pre-existence had some bearing on where they ended up in this life.

As missionary work expanded, especially into Hawaii and Brazil, it became harder and harder to tell who had African blood and who did not. The situation was growing increasingly complicated, and the Church leadership didn’t have any real answers. The advice typically amounted to, “Just do the best you can and if a problem arises, we’ll sort it out later.”