

I didn't know it at the time but Taggart died of cancer that summer (1969). He had revised his essay somewhat, and added the McMurrin letter with its claims about the 1954 conversation with President McKay. He also added a statement from McKay's son, Llewelyn--to whom Taggart had written--in which Llewelyn confirmed the accuracy of McMurrin's account based on a recent [apparently Spring 1968] conversation with his father. *Some twenty years later I learned that a copy of this revised version of Taggart's essay was mailed to Hugh B. Brown³⁰ about the first of September [1969], and that Brown in turn had given a copy to McKay's son Lawrence, suggesting he take the matter up with his father. He did this, in company with his brother Llewelyn and Alvin R. Dyer³¹ on September 10th. As recorded by Dyer in McKay's Journal Record [daily office journal] of that date,*

We sat in the President's office, the President seeming quite alert and roused for the discussion to follow. Lawrence explained that on the basis of his father's statement to Sterling McMurrin some time ago, that the withholding of the Priesthood from the Negro by the Church was a practice and not a doctrine. [sic] An article had been written for "Dialogue Magazine" by a Brother Taggart, who is the son of the president of Utah State University, which had received more or less an endorsement by Llewelyn based upon the reported interview which President McKay had had with Sterling McMurrin.

This article seemed, in Lawrence McKay's mind, to bring the whole Negro question regarding the right to hold the Priesthood into focus, and that if this truly was a practice and not a doctrine, as Sterling McMurrin had inferred from President McKay's statement to him, then why was this not the time to drop the practice.

He asked his father if this was not perhaps the time to announce that the Negro could be given the Priesthood, which he alone could announce, and to do so now voluntarily rather than to be pressured into it later.

³⁰ Hugh B. Brown had become first counselor to McKay in October 1963. Since at least that year he had been well-known as a champion of civil rights, and an advocate of some accommodation on the priesthood question.

³¹ Alvin R. Dyer was added as an "extra" Counselor in the First Presidency about a year and a half earlier, in April 1968. Previously Dyer had been an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve (1958-1967), and for the six months before joining the First Presidency was an ordained apostle, though not a member of the Quorum. The First Presidency was expanded from its usual three member composition to five in 1965, with the addition of senior apostle Joseph Fielding Smith and Thorpe B. Isaacson (the latter formerly an Assistant to the Twelve and for years a member of the Presiding Bishopric). Following Isaacson's incapacitation from a major stroke (CVA), Dyer was added as a sixth member of the Presidency. At age 66, Dyer was the youngest member of the Presidency by five years (to N. Eldon Tanner), and twenty to thirty years younger than McKay, Brown, and Smith.

Lawrence asked the question, "What proof do we have that Negroes are descendants of Cain?"

I [i.e., Dyer] felt it my responsibility to make some comments concerning this vital matter... [at which time he enumerated many of the traditional, generally proof-text arguments in support of priesthood denial, but also included the report of a 1961 conversation with McKay in which McKay said that the priesthood denial could only be changed by revelation.]

[Dyer then asked if he could obtain a copy of Taggart's article, saying that he] would be pleased to study it and make a report to the President. President McKay asked that I do this.

Lawrence then stood up and said, "Perhaps, father, we had better leave this with you and you can think about it." I [Dyer] suggested that perhaps it could be brought up at a meeting of the First Presidency at a later appropriate time. The President asked that this be done.

[Dyer concluded this account: "I have covered this incident in considerably more detail than is usually devoted to the Journal Record, but I feel that it is highly significant. After having glanced through the article, I am convinced that it has many erroneous statements and concepts in it concerning the relationship of conditions that withhold the Priesthood from the Negro at the present time."]

According to McKay's Journal Record, a week later, September 17, Dyer reported to McKay "that he had read the article prepared for 'Dialogue' by Brother Steven Taggart, now deceased, and considered it one of the most vicious, untrue articles that has ever been written about the Church. He said it is filled with untruths and villifications." Additionally, "President [Nathan L.] Tanner³² said that Eugene England, one of the editors of 'Dialogue' had called on him and was very serious about his connection with 'Dialogue' and said he wanted to retire from the project. President Tanner said he told him that there was one thing he had to do and that was protect his name and he did not see how he could do that with the kind of stuff that is going into the magazine. President Tanner said Brother England wants to do what the Church wants him to do."

Two weeks later, on September 30, Dyer reported to the Presidency (excepting McKay)³³ that "he had prepared an article in answer to Brother Steven Taggart concerning

³² Tanner, who was Second Counselor in the First Presidency, was away during the previously quoted discussions. He became an Assistant to the Twelve in 1960, an Apostle in 1962, and Second Counselor in the Presidency in October 1963. He continued on as Second Counselor after McKay's death, under President Smith (January 1970), and then was First Counselor to both Harold B. Lee (July 1972) and Lee's successor Spencer W. Kimball (December 1973).

³³ Hugh B. Brown, N. Eldon Tanner, Joseph Fielding Smith, Alvin R. Dyer.

the origin of the priesthood in the Mormon Church. President Dyer gave the original article he had prepared to [McKay's secretary] and a copy to President Brown. President Dyer commented that it would not be well to publish this material because it amplifies the scriptures and the revelations that have been received concerning the curse of Cain.³⁴ President Brown stated that the 'Dialogue' magazine had decided not to publish Brother Taggart's article.³⁵

The following week, October 8, another exchange between Dyer and Brown is recorded in McKay's Journal Record, and again written by Dyer. It is the last entry on the subject:

I [Dyer] mentioned to President Brown that I had prepared a supplement to my analysis report on the Taggart Article which purported to show the synonymous condition of the family order (Patriarchal) and the priesthood, that the Lord used these two conditions synonymously. This is what Cain rebelled against and Seth did not. (See Moses, Chapter 6.)

President Brown said that that is another matter. We should give the Negro the Priesthood, that we had only one scripture in Abraham that suggested otherwise.

I asked him if he had read the article which I had prepared and given to him, (which obviously he had not), which stipulates a number of passages in the Book of Moses, or the Inspired Translation of Genesis, by the Prophet which gives greater clarity to the reasons for our positions with regard to the Negro, more so than the passage in Abraham.

He then stated that George Albert Smith stated that withholding of the Priesthood from the Negro was a practice. "Yes," I [Dyer] replied, "but a practice based upon principles that have been revealed from the Lord."³⁶

³⁴ Dyer's piece, entitled "An Article," was ten pages in length, more philosophical than substantive, and supported by only four or five references. Ultimately it was a restatement of the familiar argument that priesthood denial related to the pre-existence. In many ways the arguments he made off the top of his head in the September 10th meeting were more robust. This subject was not new to Dyer, however, as he had addressed it at length as early as 1961 in a talk entitled "For What Purpose?" which received wide circulation in later years. He should be credited for (perhaps unintended) candor in this September 30 meeting in describing his effort as "amplify[ing] the scriptures and the revelations," which his arguments went well beyond.

³⁵ This recent decision actually was that of the Taggart family, as Gene England explained to me three months later, in a December letter.

³⁶ George Albert Smith preceded David O. McKay as President of the Church. He was ordained an Apostle in 1893, and became Church President in 1945, at the age of 75. He served six years until his death in 1951, at the age of 81. Hugh B. Brown's comments may derive from a discussion just two weeks

President Brown then said, "We will wait and see what the next President of the Church will do."

(He had tried twice of late to get President McKay to withdraw the withholding of the Priesthood from the Negro, but President McKay had refused to move on it.³⁷)

No further explanation is given for the reference to Brown having "tried twice of late" to get McKay to end the priesthood restriction. Though Brown had been quoted in the press in 1963 as saying, "We are in the midst of a survey looking toward the possibility of admitting Negroes" (quoted earlier), it would seem that Dyer referred to relatively recent events. Brown reportedly later told his grandson, Edwin Firmage, that at one point just prior to the issuance of the December 15 First Presidency statement he had persuaded a majority of the Twelve to support a change in the priesthood policy, but that this attempt had been blocked by Harold B. Lee, who was out of town during Brown's efforts.³⁸ Curiously, two months after Dyer's October 8, 1968 entry, and just a week and a half after the First Presidency statement Brown again was quoted in the press as saying the priesthood restriction "will change in the not too distant future."³⁹ Dyer's apparent anger at Brown over these moves would seem justified. Brown unquestionably was aware that McKay more than once had said such change could only come by revelation, so these "administrative" efforts clearly were to some extent disingenuous on Brown's part, and undoubtedly exploited the failing memory of the frail and elderly McKay.

Following McKay's January 1970 death the next president was 93-year-old Joseph

earlier. McKay's *Journal Record* for September 24, 1969--amidst the Taggart initiated exchanges--states that President Tanner reported receiving a letter from a man who "mentions that in conversing with President George Albert Smith's son recently he stated that President Smith had said that categorically the Church's position on the negro question was one of custom and not of revelation. President Joseph Fielding Smith [at this September meeting] said: 'He is wrong on that.' President Smith further stated that the Pearl of Great Price is clear on the matter and that it has been accepted as scripture. The brethren asked me if I [McKay] wanted to make any ruling on the matter and I answered that I did not want to make any statement on the question this morning."

³⁷ There was no "close parens" in the original. It should be noted that all the parens included in these quotations are in the original. My supplied additions are always in brackets.

³⁸ Edwin Firmage interview by Gregory Prince, October 10, 1996. Firmage actually said that Brown claimed that the Quorum, minus the absent Lee, had been unanimous in their agreement to end the ban. This seems very unlikely, given the presence--for example--of Mark E. Petersen (or even, at this time, Spencer W. Kimball). Of course, there also were the objections of Joseph Fielding Smith and Alvin R. Dyer, in the First Presidency. Earlier Firmage said Brown had identified Gordon B. Hinckley as having been aligned with him. (Armand Mauss to Lester Bush, August 7, 1981.)

³⁹ Salt Lake *Tribune*, December 25, 1969.