

When Harold B. Lee succeeded Joseph Fielding Smith in July 1972, in his first press conference he took the position on the priesthood ban articulated in the 1969 statement he had drafted: “For those who don’t believe in modern revelation there is no adequate explanation. Those who do understand revelation stand by and wait until the Lord speaks.”<sup>103</sup> A few months later at another media interview, he gave a more positive response: “It’s only a matter of time before the black achieves full status in the Church. We must believe in the justice of God. The black will achieve full status, we’re just waiting for that time.” He proposed no time schedule and reiterated that change would have to come through revelation.<sup>104</sup>

The issue unquestionably occupied President Lee’s mind.<sup>105</sup> For example, he asked Marion D. Hanks to describe what answer he gave as president of the Temple Square Mission and elsewhere when asked about the Church policy on race and priesthood.<sup>106</sup> Like the presidents before him, President Lee responded to specific issues as they arose. He approved a general policy that black children could be sealed to nonblack adoptive parents. President McKay had previously approved such sealings on an individual basis.<sup>107</sup>

Doctrine aside, practical problems persisted—how to respond to letters arriving from Nigeria and Ghana year after year pleading for missionaries, how to deal with the widespread charge of racial bigotry, and how to respond to investigators.

In December 1973, President Lee died unexpectedly. The thorny issue of black restriction passed on to his successor, Spencer W. Kimball.

## Spiritual Premonitions of Others

After the revelation a number of people identified unusual experiences that in retrospect signaled the change to come. In a 1973 patriarchal blessing, Oscar L. McFarland, patriarch of the stake in Covina, California, promised Theadore Britton, a black Sunday School superintendent, that if he remained faithful he would one day enjoy all the blessings of the priesthood. It was clear from context that by “one day” he meant in mortality. Frightened by what he had said, the

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Kimball Papers, Bonneville, March 27, 1980; Young and Gray, *The Last Mile*, 371-72, 381.

102. Darius Gray, interview by author, October 9, 1996; Darius Gray to author, June 16, 2000. He was counselor to Bridgeforth. The date would be 1971. Young and Gray, *The Last Mile*, 408;.

103. Goates, *Harold B. Lee*, 465

104. Goates, *Harold B. Lee*, 506, quoting UPI interview published November 16, 1972. AP religion specialist George W. Cornell, “Remembering a Brother,” in *He Changed My Life*, ed. and arr. L. Brent Goates (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 216, quoted Elder Lee as saying on the issue, that “it was going to change when God willed it. He always attached that qualification.” Repeatedly he added that “the barrier would be removed.” Bruce R. McConkie, the one new Apostle President Lee called, had articulated in strongest terms the traditional view in successive editions of his book *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 476; 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 108, 114, 343, 526, 616.

105. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* and Arrington to author, February 10 and June 15, 1998, assert that President Lee, shortly before his death, sought the Lord’s will on the question of blacks and priesthood during “three days and nights [of] fasting in the upper room of the temple, . . . but the only answer he received was ‘not yet.’” Arrington relied on an unidentified person close to President Lee, but President Lee’s son-in-law and biographer found no record of such an incident and thought it doubtful. L. Brent Goates, interview by author, February 9, 1998.

106. Marion D. Hanks to author, January 30, 1997. President Lee did not comment on Elder Hanks’s response, which was that change awaited whites’ coming “to a condition of spiritual maturity” and would come “when the President of the Church felt the strength of the Lord to direct him.” Marion D. Hanks to author.

107. Bush, “History of My Research,” 135, quoting Hartman Rector. However, the policy seems not to have been fully settled because President Kimball also approved such sealings individually. Spencer W. Kimball, *Journal*, November 30, 1976 and June 2, 1977.

patriarch called his stake president, who told him, “Send me a copy. I’ll send it on to President Kimball.” The blessing transcript later came back with a red question mark by the passage in question but no annotation. The cover note from President Kimball said only, “A fine blessing.”<sup>108</sup>

A number of other blessings received by black male members indicated that they would have opportunities not presently available to them—promises that included priesthood, missions, or temple blessings. People generally accepted these promises as things that would occur in the next life or in the millennium, not a prophecy of imminent change.<sup>109</sup>

In 1973, Helvécio and Rudá Martins and their son Marcus received extraordinary patriarchal blessings that promised things that seemed impossible. The patriarch told Helvécio and Rudá that they would be privileged to live on the earth in the joy of an eternal covenant. He also promised their son Marcus that he would preach the gospel, and the language the patriarch used suggested to them a full-time mission. Despite uncertainty about the blessing, the Martinses opened a mission savings account for Marcus.<sup>110</sup>

Shortly before construction began on the São Paulo Brazil Temple, Helvécio Martins was called as public communications director for northern Brazil. His responsibilities included publicity about the coming temple dedication. One day after a committee meeting, Helvécio and Rudá toured the construction site of the temple they expected never to enter, even though they both contributed financially to it. (Sister Martins even sold her jewelry and donated the proceeds.) At a place that they learned later would be the celestial room, a powerful feeling touched their hearts. They lingered, weeping in each others’ arms, not really understanding why.<sup>111</sup>

Black college student Mary Frances Sturlaugson, shortly after her baptism in 1975, received a blessing from a seminary teacher in South Dakota that asserted she would serve a mission. He said afterward he didn’t know how it would happen. When she received her patriarchal blessing in 1977, patriarch Rodney Kimball (the son of Spencer’s cousin), said, “I feel strongly impressed to tell you that if there is something you greatly desire that is not said at this time in this blessing, write it on the back of your blessing and it will become binding, depending on your faithfulness.” She wrote down that she wanted to serve a mission. Another blessing told her, “the desire of your heart will be granted unto you.”<sup>112</sup> She became the first black woman missionary.

In 1976, Bishop Fujio Abe, a high councilor in Greensboro North Carolina Stake, heard a knock late one evening. He found black member Joseph Freeman and his wife, Isapella, standing

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108. Oscar L. McFarland, interview by author, Provo, Utah, January 12, 1994; Catherine Britton Hoffman to Oscar L. McFarland, March 11, 1994. McFarland did not designate lineage in this case.

109. There is no way of knowing whether the frequency of such promises increased in the time just before the revelation or whether the promises were merely reported more often in light of their quick fulfillment. In a solemn assembly in December 1975, President Kimball instructed: “One of our patriarchs in a blessing promised a Black man the priesthood. The patriarch made a mistake. The man should be treated with full respect, but he cannot have the priesthood.” Kyle Probst, interview by author, February 21, 2002. In the Spencer W. Kimball Papers there is an undated sheet with a list of subjects to be mentioned in a solemn assembly. Among the subjects is “Patriarch Black.”

110. Helvécio Martins with Mark Grover, *The Autobiography of Elder Helvécio Martins* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1994), 56–57; John L. Hart, “Eager to Serve on Lord’s Timetable,” *Church News*, May 26, 1990, 6, 12; “Elder Helvécio Martins of the Seventy,” *Ensign* 30 (May 1990): 106.

111. Martins, *Autobiography*, 39, 56–57; Hart, “Eager to Serve,” 6, 12; “Elder Helvécio Martins of the Seventy,” 106.

112. Mary Frances Sturlaugson, *A Soul So Rebellious* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 65–68.

on his doorstep, carrying their one-year-old son, Alexander, who had a high fever that would not respond to medicine. While Brother Freeman held the child, Bishop Abe administered a blessing. Halfway through he felt impressed to say that the child would one day hold the priesthood and serve a mission for the Church. Both men felt the fever leave the child as the blessing was pronounced. His temperature dropped to normal.

The bishop had scarcely said, “Amen,” before Sister Freeman asked, “Do you realize what you just said?”

“Yes,” Brother Abe replied, “I do. Those were not my words. I suggest that it be something private and sacred, between us. Others would not understand.”<sup>113</sup>

In March 1978, Jae Ballif, president of the New England Mission, interviewed a black woman and her young son for baptism. They knew the racial restrictions, and she confided, “After I was told of it, my son and I wept and prayed. Then as I prayed alone a voice came to me that said, ‘Just leave it alone.’”<sup>114</sup> They both sought baptism, trying to prepare themselves emotionally for a lifetime, if need be, without some of the blessings of the priesthood. On May 27, 1978, in confirming a black nurse who had just been baptized, Ballif felt inspired to promise her things not possible under current church policy.<sup>115</sup>

In the spring of 1978, shortly before the revelation announcement, F. Briton McConkie was in Manila by assignment giving patriarchal blessings. To a woman of African descent, he promised she would receive the blessings of the temple. To Alonzo Harris, a black man, he promised that he would receive the priesthood and the blessings of the temple in his lifetime. Upon his return to Utah, Briton told his brother Bruce McConkie about the unusual blessings, and Bruce responded noncommittally, “I am glad to know you have given those blessings.”<sup>116</sup>

In only a few days, these otherwise mystifying events would be seen as part of a foreshadowing.

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113. Fujio Abe to author, April 21, 1991; Freeman, *In the Lord's Due Time*, 96–97. In 1978, Joseph Freeman was believed to be the first Black man to be ordained to the priesthood after the announcement of the revelation. Edward L. Kimball, *Journal*, April 21, 1979, reporting Joseph Freeman talk in Provo Temple. In March 1987, Alexander became a deacon, and the same day his father was set apart as a counselor in the elders' quorum presidency in Denver. Isapella Freeman to Fujio Abe, March 16, 1987, photocopy in Kimball Papers.

114. Jae R. Ballif, *Journal*, March 3, 1978, copy in Kimball Papers.

115. Ballif, *Journal*, May 27, 1978. As a stake president at BYU he had twice been turned down in his plea to allow Mary Frances Sturlaugson to serve a mission. Sturlaugson, *Soul So Rebellious*, 62–64. On May 28, 1978, just days before the revelation, she made a third request and was again told no. Sturlaugson, *Soul So Rebellious*, 65.

116. In conversation after the blessing, the patriarch also predicted that Brother Harris would be called upon to ordain a member of the patriarch's family to office in the Melchizedek Priesthood. In about 1982 Daniel McConkie, nephew of patriarch McConkie, was attending law school and received a calling to be stake mission president. Rather than personally ordain Daniel a seventy, the stake president felt impressed to ask Alonzo Harris to ordain him. Elder Harris was noticeably moved emotionally as he performed the ordinance. Afterward he related the prophecy made by Daniel's uncle four or more years earlier. Oscar W. McConkie Jr., interview by author, July 16 and 24, 1998. This interview confirms earlier reports of the unusual patriarchal blessings in Manila. Phillip A. Abbott recorded on June 26, 1978, that on the previous day Joseph McConkie had told of the incident, with the added assertion that the patriarch did not realize until later what promises he had made and that his brother Bruce said, “Don't worry about it, there will be a revelation.” A memo by David Buerger, “Events Surrounding the 1978 Negro Revelation,” June 1978, in possession of author, cites Bill Pope, brother-in-law of Briton McConkie, and Joseph McConkie as relating the incidents, with the added facts that the blessings were given in the first week of June and that Briton asked, “What should I do? What is the reason for this?” Bruce told him to be patient and he would soon understand. These latter sources are more contemporaneous, but another step removed from the personal experience. Elder Harris later became temple president in Manila and then himself a patriarch.