

of African descent could be baptized in life, vicarious rites could be extended to deceased black men and women. In 1889, Wilford Woodruff responded to David H. Cannon: "Concerning the giving of endowments to persons of negro descent ... we feel you should not administer the ordinance of endowments to any in their behalf. Their relatives can be baptized for them and also confirmed; but beyond this we think nothing more should be done." In 1895, George Reynolds, a secretary to the First Presidency, wrote to Levi Savage: "The same rule holds good with regard to both living and dead. For those who have associated with any upon whom rest the curse of Cain[,] baptisms can be performed, but endowments cannot be received. The fact of them being dead does not make any difference in regard to this law."<sup>43</sup>

The question of allowing black members to enter the sacred space of a temple never seemed to be at issue. On November 10, 1910, the church's Quorum of the Twelve discussed South African Mission president B. A. Hendricks's question, "Is it possible for a promiscuously bred white and negro to be baptized for the dead?" President Joseph F. Smith remarked, "He saw no reason why a negro should not be permitted to have access to the baptismal font in the temple to be baptized for the dead, inasmuch as negroes are entitled to become members of the Church by baptism."<sup>44</sup> He also told Hendricks that he should not "encourage the Negro saints of South Africa to emigrate to Zion in order ... to do temple work in behalf of their dead."<sup>45</sup> In the absence of written policy or a scriptural mandate, when a question was posed about the propriety of black proxies doing baptisms for their kin, the topic was freshly debated or answered from inference from what was allowed for live black converts. From the Nauvoo period until at least 1910, when Smith answered Hendricks, it appears there were no restrictions barring black Latter-day Saints from participating in the rite, but the records of their ordinance work were kept separately from the general temple register, at least for work done in the Salt Lake temple.

43. As quoted in Anderson, *Development of Temple Worship*, 82, 101–02.

44. George A. Smith Family Papers, 1731–1969, MS 0038, box 78, fd. 7, Special Collections, Marriott Library.

45. Newell G. Bringhurst, "Mormonism in Black Africa: Changing Attitudes and Practices 1830–1981," *Sunstone*, May/June 1981, 15–21.

On February 6, 1912, one of the black Mormons who had participated in the 1875 visit to the Endowment House requested more baptisms to be done on his behalf. At "the instance of" or by request of Samuel Chambers, sixteen men and thirteen women received vicarious baptisms and confirmations. On this occasion, Samuel and his wife, Amanda, did not act as proxies. Instead, a Norwegian temple worker and his wife performed the ordinances in the Salt Lake temple.<sup>46</sup> The beneficiaries of these baptisms were more of Samuel's relatives and friends whom he knew in the South. There is a "Mr. Green" and a "Hedie Green" listed in the register, probably referring to Amanda's parents who had died by this time. Remarkably, Samuel wanted his white biological father and half-brother to receive baptismal rites, so a proxy acted for James Davidson and his son, David Patton Davidson. In a reversal of what has become a controversial LDS practice, Samuel also asked that members of his white slaveholding family receive vicarious baptisms. He had stayed in contact with his white owner's daughter after he had gained his freedom and left Mississippi.<sup>47</sup> He considered her to be his half-sister, and in 1912 requested that she and her deceased husband receive baptisms and confirmations. Her father, Maxfield Chambers, was also one of the beneficiaries Samuel named. He had been Samuel's owner since he was a young boy. James Davidson, Samuel's father and first owner, had sold or given him to Maxfield Chambers sometime in the late 1830s or early 1840s.

There are no records available to ascertain the reason Samuel and Amanda did not act as proxies in the Salt Lake temple in 1912, but beginning on October 14, 1924, and continuing until June 15, 1942, a register was made for "All Negro Blood Baptisms and Confirmations for the Dead" that were performed in the Salt Lake temple.<sup>48</sup> This ten-page record appears to be another separate document used specifically

46. "Baptisms for the Dead, 1893–1943, heir indexes, 1893–1960," Register Vol. 20, Oct. 24, 1911, microfilm no. 183450, FHL.

47. Minnie Lee Prince Haynes, Oral History, interviewed by William G. Hartley, Salt Lake City, Utah, Aug. 22 and Dec. 1, 1972, OH 5, CHL.

48. "All Negro Blood: Baptisms and Confirmations for the Dead," Salt Lake Temple F 183511, photocopied register of ordinance work done from Oct. 14, 1924–June 15, 1942, John D. Fretwell Collection, held by his son, John L. Fretwell in Smithfield, Utah; copy in my possession.

for listing vicarious work done for people of color. In it, the names of proxies, officiators, those for whom the baptisms were performed, and the person who requested the work to be done are all recorded. The register lists 163 baptismal recipients for the eighteen years it was kept. It is similar to the 1875 "Seed of Cain" record, except white proxies served for deceased black men and women, even when the person requesting the baptism was a black Latter-day Saint.

One of the baptisms recorded in this document is for a young boy, Paul Howell. His father, Abner Howell, was a prominent African American LDS convert who joined the church on February 26, 1921, just nine days after the death of his eight-year-old son, Paul. Paul's vicarious baptism was done in 1938 in the Salt Lake temple, but Abner did not serve as the proxy for his son, even though he was living in Salt Lake City at that time. He and his wife were sent to the South as unofficial LDS ambassadors in the 1950s, and he enjoyed presenting firesides as one of very few active LDS black men in Utah and later in California.<sup>49</sup> He is known as a devout Mormon who would have done the work for his son if he had been allowed to do it.<sup>50</sup> There may have been reasons unrelated to race that prevented Abner from serving as proxy for his son, but he is not the only black member whose family was represented in the temple by white proxies.

In 1875, black Mormons had acted for their relatives and friends. Fifty years later, white members were evidently substituted for black members and the record of the ordinances was still segregated from the general register. The listing of Jane James's proxy baptism in the regular Logan temple register is the exception to the rule for Utah temple records.

The apparent policy change to substitute white proxies for black relatives corresponds to the tenure of Apostle George F. Richards as Salt Lake temple president, but that could be coincidental. His view on the status of African Americans is in line with other early LDS leaders: "The Negro is an unfortunate man. He has been given a black skin. But that is as nothing compared with that greater handicap that he is not

49. Margaret Blair Young, "Abner Leonard Howell: Honorary High Priest," unpublished paper, copy in my possession.

50. Kate B. Carter, *The Story of the Negro Pioneer* (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1965), 55–60.

permitted to receive the Priesthood and the ordinances of the temple, necessary to prepare men and women to enter into and enjoy a fullness of glory in the celestial kingdom."<sup>51</sup> Richards is almost certainly referring to the LDS temple endowment, not baptisms, when he speaks of temple ordinances, but his message is clear: black members were not entitled to the same blessings as white Latter-day Saints.

What may only be hinted at by the "All Negro Blood" register became written policy in 1964. President David O. McKay's diary recorded for February 14, "Temples—Book of Decisions for Presidents ... Presidents [Hugh B.] Brown and [N. Eldon] Tanner [McKay's counselors in the First Presidency] reported to me [David O. McKay] that they had gone through the manuscript of the proposed book of decisions ... and had marked those items which they felt needed decision by me. ... I approved as follows: (6) It was suggested that the ordinance of baptism for members of the negro race be performed by others than negroes if this can be accomplished without offense."<sup>52</sup> McKay may have simply acquiesced to a de facto policy that was in place during the first half of the twentieth century.

Throughout the 1960s, McKay made rulings on allowing or disallowing temple ordinances for a variety of situations where race came into play. Although none of these involved baptisms for the dead, they show that race policy was not always clear, especially when it involved mixed-race individuals or mixed-race families. These had posed the thornier issues for McKay's predecessors' decisions as well. In 1965, McKay did not permit a white mother to have her biracial children sealed to her and her new white husband. In 1966, McKay reaffirmed older rulings, and in a First Presidency letter forbade members from doing temple ordinances for deceased persons with any known "Negro blood." A month later, he authorized the sealing of two children with "Negroid blood" to white adoptive parents. He encouraged local leaders to discourage white couples from adopting black children in 1967,

51. George F. Richards, sermon in *One Hundred Ninth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 1939* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), 58. This was an object lesson offered to show the penalty for being lukewarm towards church service and commitment.

52. As quoted in Anderson, *Development of Temple Worship*, 341–42.

**THE  
ANCIENT ORDER  
OF THINGS**

**ESSAYS ON THE MORMON TEMPLE**

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