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## Prophets Concerns & Questions

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# PROPHETS

## *Concerns & Questions*

*“...The Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as President of the Church to lead you astray. It is not in the program. It is not in the mind of God. If I were to attempt that, the Lord would remove me out of my place.”*

– PRESIDENT WILFORD WOODRUFF , *WILFORD WOODRUFF: HISTORY OF HIS LIFE AND LABORS* , P.57 2

*“Keep the eyes of the mission on the leaders of the Church...We will not and...cannot lead [you] astray.”*

– ELDER M. RUSSELL BALLARD , *STAY IN THE BOAT AND HOLD ON!* , OCTOBER 2014 CONFERENCE

*“Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life...”*

– *2013 RACE AND THE PRIESTHOOD* ESSAY, LDS.ORG

(2013 “Prophets, Seers, and Revelators” throwing yesterday’s “Prophets, Seers, and Revelators” under the bus over yesterday’s racist revelations and doctrines)

(Jeremy, you provide no evidence of a racist revelation, and your understanding of what constitutes doctrine is deeply flawed.)

*“And, to be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine.*

*“I suppose the Church would be perfect only if it were run by perfect beings. God is perfect, and His doctrine is pure. But He works through us—His imperfect children—and imperfect people make mistakes.”*

– PRESIDENT DIETER F. UCHTDORF, *COME, JOIN WITH US*, OCTOBER 2013

*“We don’t believe in infallibility of our leaders.”*

– PRESIDENT DALLIN H. OAKS, *PRESS CONFERENCE*, JANUARY 15, 2018

## SHORT ANSWER:

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**The Lord will never interfere with human agency, and agency and infallibility are wholly incompatible. At no point is agency extracted from the leaders of the Church, so even prophets are entirely capable of making mistakes.**

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### 1. ADAM-GOD

President Brigham Young taught what is now known as “Adam–God theory.” He taught that Adam is “our Father and our God, and the only God with whom we have to do.” Brigham not only taught this doctrine over the pulpit in conferences in 1852 and 1854 but he also introduced this doctrine as the Lecture at the Veil in the endowment ceremony of the Temple.

Yeah, Adam-God is wacky. It makes no sense, even in context. I can’t find any evidence that it penetrated the culture of the Church, which leaves open the possibility that the early saints understood Brigham in a way that eludes modern interpretation. (That’s also the case with blood atonement, which we’ll get to later.) There doesn’t seem to be any attempt by church members to apply Adam-God in practice, which, if this were binding doctrine, would likely have had a greater impact than a handful of confusing sermons. Fundamentalist splinter groups now teach this, but they didn’t start doing so until long after Brigham was dead.



**PICTURED: Adam AND God, not Adam AS God**  
*Michelangelo had it right*

Stephen Robinson, a BYU professor who sadly passed away in June of 2018, had the best take on this in his book *Are Mormons Christians?*, the relevant excerpt of which [can be found online](#). His opinion is reflective of my own on this subject:

Yet another way in which anti-Mormon critics often misrepresent LDS doctrine is in the presentation of anomalies as though they were the doctrine of the Church. Anomalies occur in every field of human endeavor, even in science. An anomaly is something unexpected that cannot be explained by the existing laws or theories, but which does not constitute evidence for changing the laws and theories. An anomaly is a glitch.

For example, if a chemist combines two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen a hundred times in a row, and ninety-nine times she gets water but on the hundredth time she gets alcohol, this does not mean that one percent of the time the laws of chemistry are different. It simply means that something was wrong with the hundredth experiment, even though the experimenter may not know what it was. Beakers may have been mislabelled; grad students may have been playing a practical joke; instruments might have given incorrect readings; secretaries might have typed the wrong information. If the anomaly could be reproduced experimentally, then it would be significant and would demand a change in the theories. But if it can't be reproduced, it is simply ignored—as an anomaly. It is assumed that some unknown factor was different in the case of the anomalous results, and the experiment yielding those results is therefore invalid. Moreover, to ignore such anomalies is not considered dishonesty, but represents sound scientific method...

A classic example of an anomaly in the LDS tradition is the so-called “Adam-God theory.” During the latter half of the nineteenth century Brigham Young made some remarks about the relationship between Adam and God that the Latter-day Saints have never been able to understand. The reported statements conflict with LDS teachings before and after Brigham Young, as well as with statements of President Young himself during the same period of time. So how do Latter-day Saints deal with the phenomenon? We don't; we simply set it aside. It is an anomaly. On occasion my colleagues and I at Brigham Young University have tried to figure out what Brigham Young might have actually said and what it might have meant, but the attempts have always failed. The reported statements simply do not compute—we cannot make sense out of them. This is not a matter of believing it or disbelieving it; we simply don't know what “it” is. If Brigham Young were here we could ask him what he actually said and what he meant by it, but he is not here, and even expert students of his thought are left to wonder whether he was misquoted, whether he meant to say one thing and actually said another, whether he was somehow joking with or testing the Saints, or whether some vital element that would make sense out of the reports has been omitted.

For the Latter-day Saints, however, the point is moot, since whatever Brigham Young said, true or false, was never presented to the Church for a sustaining vote. It was not then and is not now a doctrine of the Church, and—like the chemist who can neither explain nor reproduce her results—the Church has merely set the phenomenon aside as an anomaly.

Brigham also published this doctrine in the *Deseret News* on June 18, 1873 :

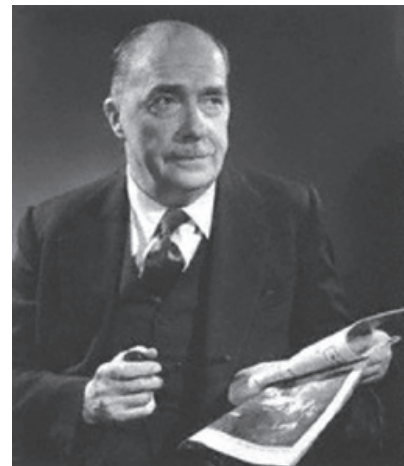
*“How much unbelief exists in the minds of the Latter-day Saints in regard to one particular **doctrine which I revealed to them, and which God revealed to me – namely that Adam is our father and God – I do not know, I do not inquire, I care nothing about it. Our Father Adam helped to make this earth, it was created expressly for him, and after it was made he and his companions came here. He brought one of his wives with him, and she was called Eve, because she was the first woman upon the earth. Our Father Adam is the man who stands at the gate and holds the keys of everlasting life and salvation to all his children who have or who ever will come upon the earth. I have been found fault with by the ministers of religion because I have said that they were ignorant. But I could not find any man on the earth who could tell me this, although it is one of the simplest things in the world, until I met and talked with Joseph Smith.**”*

That’s actually quite helpful in understanding Brigham’s context here. The Church, particularly in the temple, continues to teach much of this today. We still believe that Adam helped to make the earth, and that it was created expressly for him. We also believe that Father Adam is the Ancient of Days, and he was the first to hold all the keys of the priesthood and at some future date, he “shall come to visit his people, or the Ancient of Days shall sit, as spoken of by Daniel the prophet.” (D&C 116:1)

We keep coming back to the problem of presentism in your historical analysis of early Latter-day Saint life, so it might be helpful to review what that term actually means.

British author L.P. Hartley famously said that “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” He was right. How people saw themselves and the world around them was not necessarily the same as we see it. Presentism is the fallacious view that modern interpretations of words and events were common to our ancestors, and that they saw things the same way we do.

But for the most part, that’s nonsense. In the first place, the ancients didn’t see themselves as ancient, and it didn’t occur to them that they weren’t acting according to “modern” standards. After all, they were as modern as it got up to that point in history, and we are likely to look just as benighted and ignorant to generations yet to come.



**L.P. Hartley**  
Novelist and Non-presentist

Similarly, Latter-day Saints in the 19th Century were living in a time of different norms and mores. They also thought they were right on the edge of the Millennium, and it didn’t occur to them that they were “early” Saints, or that their lives would become our history lessons. They also had their own vernacular and slang, their own fashions, and their own understanding of science and the world around them. When reviewing their lives, therefore, it’s essential to try to understand their words and their actions as they would have understood them, not as we would.

I say this as preface to Adam/God because it seems clear that 19th Century Saints interpreted Brigham's lessons on this differently than we would. How do I know that? Because if they really believed that Adam was the father of Jesus and our Heavenly Father, their ceremonies in the temple and the teachings they passed down to their children would reflect a radical doctrinal shift. Or, absent that, there would be some kind of shift and then a shift back as people rejected Adam/God, so we would have some kind of paper trail of a controversy where Latter-day Saints decided to defy their prophet.

We have none of that. What we have are a handful of anomalous sermons that don't seem to have made any impact on how anyone viewed God or Adam or anything else. All practice of "Adam/God-ism," if you will, has come from splinter groups who adopted the idea long after Brigham Young was dead. The logical conclusion is that properly understanding Adam/God the way Brigham's contemporaries did requires further information we simply don't have.

Contrary to the teachings of Brigham Young, subsequent prophets and apostles have since renounced the Adam-God theory as false doctrine.

That's probably because it is a false doctrine, at least as it's understood by modern sensibilities. It seems likely that Brigham meant something different to those who heard him firsthand than those who read his words in the 21st Century. Since the Church made no effort to incorporate the Adam-God idea, as we understand it, into practice, that seems the most likely conclusion to draw.

President Spencer W. Kimball renounced the Adam-God theory in the October 1976 General Conference:

*"We warn you against the dissemination of doctrines which are not according to the scriptures and which are alleged to have been taught by some of the General Authorities of past generations. Such, for instance, is the Adam-God theory. We denounce that theory and hope that everyone will be cautioned against this and other kinds of false doctrine."*

*– Our Own Liahona*

And amen to President Kimball for that.

*Along with President Spencer W. Kimball and similar statements from others, Elder Bruce R. McConkie made the following statement:*

*"The devil keeps this heresy [Adam-God theory] alive as a means of obtaining converts to cultism. It is contrary to the whole plan of salvation set forth in the scriptures, and anyone who has read the Book of Moses, and anyone who has received the temple endowment, has no excuse whatever for being led astray by it. Those who are so ensnared reject the living prophet and close their ears to the apostles of their day." – The Seven Deadly Heresies*



I'm not a fan of the Seven Deadly Heresies, but that's another discussion. Your point, however, is that prophets and apostles after Brigham have vigorously disavowed modern practice Adam-God as false doctrine, and you are entirely correct, just as they were correct to disavow it.

**Ironically, Elder McConkie's June 1980 condemnation asks you to trust him and President Kimball as today's living prophet.**

I don't see how that's ironic at all. Wasn't President Kimball the living prophet in 1980?

**Further, McConkie is pointing to the endowment ceremony as a source of factual information.**

Meaning what? The "factual information" Elder McConkie is citing is that the endowment ceremony makes it very clear that Adam is the archangel Michael, not God the Father. Given that Brigham Young wrote the endowment ceremony when they got to Salt Lake based on his memory of Nauvoo, Brigham clearly knew that Adam was Michael, not Heavenly Father, which make these anomalous forays into Adam God-ism more confusing.

**What about the Saints of Brigham's day who were following their living prophet?**

What about them? The records of the day suggest that they saw no need to incorporate our interpretation of Adam-God into Latter-day Saint theology, so they obviously understood Brigham's point in a way that we don't.

**And what about the endowment ceremony of their day where Adam-God was being taught at the veil?**

That's actually a question that undermines your point. If they were taught this at the veil and they interpreted it in the same way you do, then why didn't this doctrine survive? Why do we see no evidence of it filtering into Church theology or practice? The answer seems to be that we are approaching Brigham's words with historical presentism that is causing us to misinterpret what he was trying to say.

**Yesterday's doctrine is today's false doctrine and yesterday's prophet is today's heretic.**

I don't think you've thought through the implications of your assumption here. For no prophet to ever say something that isn't later shown to be wrong by revelation, then you have to believe that the entirety of information on every subject would have to be given to them from heaven. At what point did you assume that took place? Did Joseph get it all before he died? Even if he did – which he didn't – up until the point where the download was complete, doesn't that make him yesterday's heretic for most of his life?

Consider that this can be true not just from prophet to prophet, but even within any given prophet's tenure as a prophet. Latter-day Saints, including Joseph and Oliver, believed in a traditional Christian heaven and hell when the Church was organized in 1830. Then in 1832, Joseph and Sidney Rigdon had the vision of the Three Degrees of Glory, and it blew the

traditional Christian theology to smithereens. So Joseph himself believed yesterday's false doctrine and was yesterday's heretic. Of course, no one is under condemnation for being mistaken in the absence of revelation, as we're all judged on the level of light and knowledge we receive.

Latter-day Saint theology is diametrically opposed to that kind of thinking. We believe the Lord teaches his people the way he always has – “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.” (2 Nephi 28:30) If that's the process, then surely it means that the Church is going to move away from positions of error when it receives greater light. If your assumption were correct, that would also negate the Ninth Article of Faith, which states that “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and **we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.**” [Emphasis added]

If he's going to reveal many great and important things tomorrow, won't that make all of us yesterday's heretics? The fact is that this has always been the Lord's method throughout all generations of time. It has always been the case that people who reject living prophets almost always do so by professing fealty to dead ones. Those who rejected Christ did so in the name of Abraham, just as those who most vigorously fight against Joseph Smith do so in the name of Christ.

## 2. BLOOD ATONEMENT

Along with Adam-God, Brigham taught a doctrine known as “Blood Atonement ” where a person's blood had to be shed to atone for their own sins as it was beyond the atonement of Jesus Christ.

You put this in quotes as if this is what Brigham himself called it. He didn't. This is another example of presentism on your part. You're describing Blood Atonement as a codified, sustained revelation that represented the doctrine of the Church, when, in fact, it was a bit of overheated rhetoric on Brigham's part that was designed to scare the Saints into recommitting to the gospel during a period historians call the “Mormon Reformation” of 1856 and 1857.

*“There are sins that men commit for which they cannot receive forgiveness in this world, or in that which is to come, and if they had their eyes open to see their true condition, they would be perfectly willing to have their blood spilt upon the ground, that the smoke thereof might ascend to heaven as an offering for their sins; and the smoking incense would atone for their sins, whereas, if such is not the case, they will stick to them and remain upon them in the spirit world.*

*I know, when you hear my brethren telling about cutting people off from the earth, that you consider it is strong doctrine; but it is to save them, not to destroy them...*

*And furthermore, I know that there are transgressors, who, if they knew themselves, and the only condition upon which they can obtain forgiveness, would beg of their brethren to shed their blood, that the smoke thereof might ascend to God as an offering to appease the wrath that is kindled against them, and that the law might have its course. I will say further;*



*I have had men come to me and offer their lives to atone for their sins. It is true that the blood of the Son of God was shed for sins through the fall and those committed by men, yet men can commit sins which it can never remit...There are sins that can be atoned for by an offering upon an altar, as in ancient days; and there are sins that the blood of a lamb, or a calf, or of turtle dove, cannot remit, but they must be atoned for by the blood of the man.”*

– *Journal of Discourses 4:53-54*

Basically, we’re looking at a big heaping mess of 19th Century rhetorical excess right here. This was part and parcel with the Mormon “reformation,” where Brigham felt it necessary to scare the hell out of everyone in order to get them to recommit to living the gospel. People were rebaptized, and Brigham was essentially playing the part of Billy Graham, laying it on as thick as he possibly could – and, clearly, going too far on this particular occasion.

How do we know this was heated rhetoric that wasn’t taken very seriously? Because while we have this intemperate sermon, we don’t actually have any documented practice of blood atonement. (The Church, in the footnotes to *their essay on 19th Century violence*, says that there was “at least one instance” where someone took action based on this, but I don’t know what that would be.) Brigham knew his audience, and he knew they would understand how much of this was just bluster. The problem would be if people actually started killing themselves or other people, but that’s not what happened.

There is, however, scriptural precedent for this kind of spiritual “scared-straight” approach.

Check out D&C 19, where God states that endless punishment isn’t really endless, and eternal punishment isn’t really eternal. The Lord acknowledges that describing punishment this way is “more express than other scriptures, that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men, altogether for my name’s glory.”

In other words, God is literally trying to scare the hell out of people. Brigham is taking that approach here, I think, and, in my estimation, not doing a very good job at it.

We keep circling back to the idea of prophetic infallibility – you believed in it, and you were crushed when it turned out not to be true. But it isn’t true, and that’s a good thing. An infallible prophet no longer has agency, and the one thing the Lord will never do is mess with agency, even for the guys in the First Presidency.

UPDATE: The Church now confirms in its [Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints](#) essay that Blood Atonement was taught by the prophet Brigham Young.



**Brigham Young**

*A prophet prone to rhetorical excess*

I don't understand why this is an "update," as you provided a link to this essay in your last CES Letter version, too.

You're also incorrect. Here's what the essay says about Blood Atonement.

*This concept, which came to be known as blood atonement, was a stock component of anti-Mormon rhetoric in the 19th century. While many of the exaggerated claims that appeared in the popular press and anti-Mormon literature are easily disproven, it is likely that in at least one instance, a few Latter-day Saints acted on this rhetoric. Nevertheless, most Latter-day Saints seem to have recognized that the blood atonement sermons were, in the words of historian Paul Peterson, **“hyperbole or incendiary talk”** that were **“likely designed to frighten church members into conforming with Latter-day Saint principles.** To Saints with good intentions, they were calculated to cause alarm, introspection, and ultimately repentance. For those who refused to comply with Mormon standards, it was hoped such ominous threats would hasten their departure from the Territory.” (See Isaac C. Haight letter to Brigham Young, June 11, 1857, Brigham Young Office Files; Peterson, “Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857,” 67, 84n66; see also *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. [1992], “Blood Atonement,” 1:131.) [Emphasis added.]*

As with the Adam-God theory, the Blood Atonement doctrine was later declared false by subsequent prophets and apostles.

No. As with the Adam-God theory, blood atonement was never a doctrine to begin with.

This isn't just an opinion. D&C 26:2 requires that “[a]ll things shall be done by common consent in the church.” For a revelation or doctrine to be binding on the membership at large, it has to be brought before the Church as a whole and sustained as such. That has not been the case with either Adam/God or blood atonement. Neither is or ever has been an official doctrine of the Church.

Yesterday's doctrine is today's false doctrine. Yesterday's prophet is today's heretic.

Except when yesterday's doctrine isn't doctrine, and yesterday's prophet is viewed through a presentist lens. But we should always be happy to praise new light and knowledge when it enters the world rather than cling to error.

### 3. POLYGAMY

Brigham Young taught the doctrine that polygamy is required for exaltation:

*“The only men who become Gods, even the Sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy.” – Journal of Discourses 11:269*

You really need to read the rest of the sermon, where he insists that to receive eternal life “you will be polygamists **at least in your faith.**” [Emphasis added] He comes back to this idea two other times in the speech. In other words, his message was that the Saints of the time needed to accept the divine origins of the doctrine, not necessarily engage in the practice. (I

realize that would require you to read your own source, which is something you have repeatedly demonstrated an unwillingness to do.)

Several other prophets after Young, including Taylor, Woodruff, Snow, and Joseph F. Smith gave similar teachings that the New and Everlasting Covenant of plural marriage was doctrinal and essential for exaltation.

Nope. The New and Everlasting Covenant as defined in D&C is celestial marriage, which includes monogamous sealings. Even Brigham Young admitted to George Q. Cannon. that “there would be men in the Celestial Kingdom that had but one wife.”

It’s even in the scriptures. Doctrine & Covenants 132:4: “For behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned; for no one can reject this covenant and be permitted to enter into my glory.”

The new and everlasting covenant is celestial marriage, not plural marriage.

In a September 1998 Larry King Live interview (14:37), President Hinckley was asked about polygamy:

**Larry King:** You condemn it [polygamy]?

**Hinckley:** I condemn it. Yes, as a practice, because I think it is not doctrinal.

President Hinckley was correct. The doctrine is clear: monogamy is the standard; polygamy is the exception. Since that exception is not now authorized, it is not doctrinal to violate the monogamous standard.

Contrary to President Hinckley’s statement, we still have Doctrine & Covenants 132 in our canonized scriptures.

“Our?” Do you consider the Doctrine and Covenants to be scripture? My understanding is you resigned your membership in the Church, yes? How, then, is D&C still part of your scriptures?

In any case, it is not at all contrary to President Hinckley’s statement that D&C 132 remains scripture. The bulk of D&C 132 deals with the marriage covenant and the sealing power. Plurality of wives isn’t mentioned until verse 61 of a 66-verse revelation.

Much of the modern church’s most precious theology is inextricably tied to the principles in D&C 132. When primary children sing “Families Can Be Together Forever,” they’re referencing D&C 132. The concept of sealing families together, as well as the doctrine of theosis, trace their theological roots to this revelation.



*This is either a 19th Century anti-polygamy cartoon or a very early draft of the CES Letter with serious tone problems.*

We're also still practicing plural marriage in the Temples by permitting men to be sealed to more than one woman (so long as only one is living). Apostles Elder Oaks, Elder Perry, and Elder Nelson are modern examples of LDS polygamists in that they're sealed to multiple women.

Who's this "we?" You have chosen to separate yourself from the Church in no uncertain terms. Why do you keep referencing yourself as a member when that is no longer the case?

That's why I find it amusing that you're upset about sealings that you don't believe are valid. President Oaks, President Nelson, and Elder Perry, while sealed to multiple women, have never been married to more than one woman at a time. Unless you accept their sealing authority, which you don't, then your objection is baseless.

Polygamy is doctrinal. Polygamy is not doctrinal.

Correct. It is doctrinal when it is authorized; when unauthorized, it is not.

Yesterday's doctrine is today's false doctrine. Yesterday's prophets are today's heretics.

Amen! As it always has been, as it always will be. Precept on precept. If such were not the case, living prophets would never be necessary.

#### 4. BLACKS BAN

As you know, for close to 130 years blacks were not only banned from holding the priesthood but black individuals and black families were blocked from the saving ordinances of the Temple. Every single prophet from Brigham Young all the way to Harold B. Lee kept this ban in place.

Now we finally get to something I find genuinely troubling, too. Frankly, I'm not particularly enamored with the Church's record on the subject. I have spent a great deal of time defending the Church's exclusion of black members from leadership prior to 1978, and my arguments have fallen flat with others and, frankly, with me.

After the Church reversed its policy excluding black leaders a little over thirty years ago, several church leaders dusted off [2 Nephi 26:33](#) and made it the centerpiece of several very good sermons on the subject. I particularly like [Elder Bruce R. McConkie's sermon](#), which contained this startlingly candid admission of error:

“Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whomsoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.”

– Bruce R. McConkie, [“All Are Alike Unto God.”](#) August 18, 1978



Those who honestly and open-heartedly examine the life of Brigham Young will come to the conclusion that he was a mighty man called by God to lead the Church and do a great work. But as evidenced by some of the issues you raise, anyone who believes he was infallible is missing the boat.

Indeed, pretty much all of the racism that wormed its way into Church policy can be traced back to Brigham, who gave more credence to popular 19th century theories about the ancestry of the African people than he should have. It certainly doesn't come from Joseph Smith, who received the fundamental revelations that form the spiritual foundation for the Church as it existed then and today. That scripture quoted above from 2 Nephi, for instance, has been around for over 180 years. Joseph Smith himself ordained several black men to the priesthood. When asked about "the situation of the negro," as was the language of the time, here was Joseph Smith's reply:

"They came into the world slaves mentally and physically. Change their situation with the whites, and they would be like them. They have souls, and are subjects of salvation. Go into Cincinnati or any city, and find an educated negro, who rides in his carriage, and you will see a man who has risen by the powers of his own mind to his exalted state of respectability. The slaves in Washington are more refined than many in high places, and the black boys will take the shine of many of those they brush and wait on." – History of the Church, Volume 5, page 216.



*"I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races ... I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."*

*- Abraham Lincoln, September 18, 1858*

That's not to say that Joseph Smith was Martin Luther King, but the view expressed in the preceding paragraph is remarkably enlightened for that time period. I doubt even Abraham Lincoln, who firmly believed that blacks were inferior to whites, would have been nearly as egalitarian.

The idea that the African people descended from Cain and were a cursed race did not originate with the LDS Church. It was a popular 19th Century justification for slavery, and while Brigham Young certainly believed it, there is no scriptural justification for using that idea to exclude black members from Church leadership. Indeed, the idea was not codified as church policy until long after Brigham Young's death.

David O. McKay, president of the Church from 1950 to 1970, made this very clear when he stated:

"There is not now, and there never has been a doctrine in this church that the negroes are under a divine curse. There is no doctrine in the church of any kind pertaining to the negro. We believe that we have a scriptural precedent for withholding the priesthood from the negro. It is a practice, not a doctrine, and the practice someday will be changed. And that's all there is to it." - David O McKay, 1954

President McKay repeatedly stated that the priesthood ban was a policy, not a doctrine, although it would take a revelation to reverse it.

Prophets, Seers, and Revelators of 2013 – in the Church’s December 2013 *Race and the Priesthood* essay – disavowed the “theories” of yesterday’s Prophets, Seers, and Revelators for their theological, institutional, and doctrinal racist teachings and “revelation.”

Your use of the word “revelation” – quotation marks yours – is interesting. Can you show me the revelation that banned blacks from the priesthood? You can’t, because none exists.

Yesterday’s racist doctrine and revelation is now today’s “disavowed theories.”

You haven’t demonstrated that the priesthood ban was either doctrine or revelation.

Additionally, the above-mentioned essay also withdraws “that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse” while ironically contradicting the Book of Mormon itself:

#### 2 NEPHI 5:21

*“And he had caused the cursing to come up on them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them.”*

Not a contradiction at all. This is in reference to the Lamanites, who are believed to be ancestors of Native Americans, not people of African descent. This verse does not have reference to the people denied priesthood and temple opportunities. No one has ever tried to use this passage or any other passage in the Book of Mormon to deny the priesthood or temple blessings to Native Americans.

This verse can’t be taken in isolation without considering The Book of Mormon’s larger racial complexity. By the time we get to 4th Nephi, there are no racial distinctions whatsoever, and some of the most righteous people in the narrative are those with darker skin. There are repeated condemnation of racism throughout the book and a broad statement that “he denieth none that come unto him, black and white... all are alike unto God.” (2 Nephi 26:33)

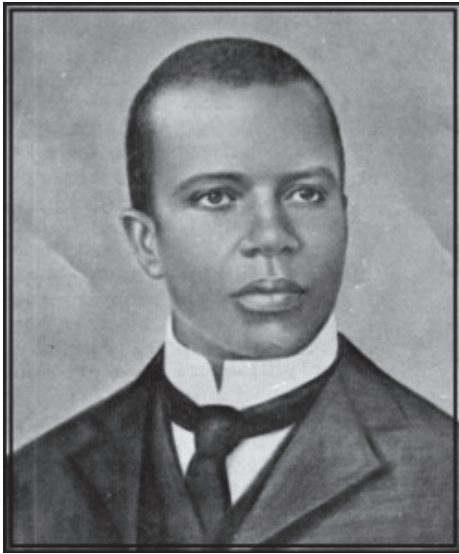
Church leaders, both then and now, consider Lamanites to be ancestors of modern Native Americans and to be part of the House of Israel and heirs to a magnificent destiny, not people under a curse.

Joseph Smith permitted the priesthood to at least two black men. Elijah Abel was one of them. Walker Lewis was another.

Correct. Brigham Young even referred to Walker Lewis as “one of the best Elders.” As the Church’s Race and the Priesthood essay makes clear, there is “no reliable evidence that any black men were denied the priesthood during Joseph Smith’s lifetime.”



Indeed, early critics of the Church insisted that the Church was far too accommodating to people of African descent. The Church has never segregated its congregations the way the vast majority of sects did up through the 20th Century, and the Church was accused of being far too abolitionist in its public statements. Joseph Smith opposed slavery when he was a candidate for the President of the United States.



**Quaku Walter Lewis**  
"One of our best elders"

So, Joseph Smith gives the priesthood to blacks. Brigham Young bans blacks. Each and every single one of the 10 prophets from Brigham Young to Harold B. Lee supported what Spencer W. Kimball referred to as a "possible error" (*Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, p.448-449 ).

A possible error, yes, because error is possible, due to the central nature of agency to Mormon theology.

Heavenly Father likes blacks enough to give them the priesthood under Joseph Smith but He decides they're not okay when Brigham Young shows up. And He still doesn't think they're okay for the next 130 years and the next 9 prophets until President Kimball decides to get a revelation.

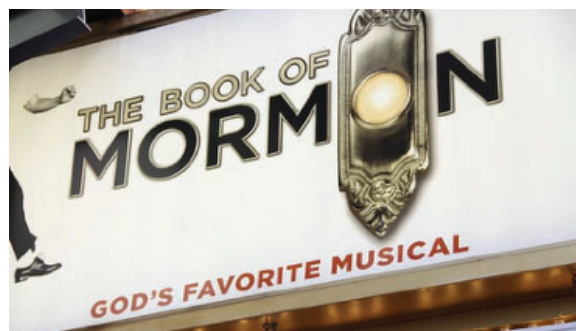
Heavenly Father's love for all people has been clear in the Book of Mormon since the founding of the Church. 2 Nephi 26:33 states that "[The Lord] denieth none that cometh unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; ... all are alike unto God." The fact that the Church didn't fully live up to that principle is the fault of man, not God.

The same God who "denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female" is the same God who denied blacks from the saving ordinances of the Temple for 130 years. Yet, He apparently changed His mind again in 1978 about black people.

Still quoting from the Book or Mormon musical, are we? I thought South Park theology might not make your "tone problem" cut.

Of course God didn't change his mind about black people. God instead had to wait for fallible white people to reject racism.

Since I first answered this question, the Church has celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Priesthood Revelation, and there's been a great deal of further discussion on the subject that merits a mention here.



*Includes the lyric "I believe that in 1978 God changed his mind about black people." So does the CES Letter. Both also mention elephants. Coincidence?*

Somewhere around the time of the “Be One” celebration, Daniel Peterson - I’m tired of repeating your obnoxious nickname for him, so I won’t - was asked on Facebook whether or not he thought the denial of priesthood and temple blessings was, indeed, a mistake. His response was that he was open to the idea that it could have been Brigham Young’s error at the outset, but he was much less open to the idea that the Lord would have allowed the mistake to endure over the course of roughly 125 years, give or take.

I’ve thought about that, and I’ve since discovered scriptural precedents, both ancient and modern, that may provide some more light on how something this awful could have been allowed to continue in the Church with at least the appearance of divine sanction.

In the Old Testament, the Israelites approached the prophet Samuel and demanded him to “make us a king to judge us like all the nations.” (1 Samuel 8:5) Samuel took the question to the Lord, who made it very clear that a king was a bad idea, and that the desire for a king in this instance was a rejection of the sovereignty of God. The Lord gave Samuel a lengthy list of all the terrible and oppressive things a king would do, and he predicted that the Israelites would eventually “cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not hear you in that day.” (I Samuel 8:18)



**King Saul**  
*Not one of our best kings*

It didn’t matter. “Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us.” (I Samuel 8:19)

Having made up their minds, the Lord, in verse 22, “said to Samuel, Harken unto their voice, and make them a king.”

Now if one were to read Verse 22 in isolation without the context of the previous verses, you would get the impression that a king for Israel was the Lord’s idea. And, in fact, when the king is chosen, the Lord becomes part of the process through anointing and prophetic counsel. Yet at the outset, the Lord was explicit that this is not what he wanted.

The issue, once again, is one of agency. The Lord did not want Israel to have a king, but Israel did. So, rather than force His will on a people determined to be defiant, God chose to use that defiance for His own purposes.

Those purposes become clearer in Jacob chapter 4 of the Book of Mormon, where Jacob talks about how ancient Israel “despised the words of plainness” of the prophets and, instead, “sought for things that they could not understand.”

Here’s the rest of verse 14:

Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand, because they desired it. And because they desired it *God hath done it, **that they may stumble.***  
[Emphasis added]

I read this as saying, "You don't like plain language, Israel? You want things you can't understand? You want to look beyond the mark? All right, your wish is granted. Now you get to see what happens when you decide to do things your way instead of God's."

This same principle comes into play when Joseph Smith petitions the Lord three times to allow Martin Harris to show the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon to his wife. The Lord says no twice. The third answer is different, but not because the Lord has changed his mind. Rather, it's because the Lord knew that Joseph was not willing to use his agency the way the Lord wanted, so the Lord turned that defiance into an opportunity to teach an important lesson. The stumbling taught Joseph obedience from that point forward.

Back to the issue at hand: we have no record of any revelation denying the priesthood to people of African descent. Instead, we have Brigham Young perpetuating the folk doctrine of the 19th Century which originated out of the Church that black people bear the curse of Cain. There's also evidence of a campaign to “otherize” early Mormons as a different, even sub-human, race.



*Life Magazine's 1904 "otherizing" anti-Mormon cartoon with offensive racial overtones.*



At the time, all the nations, even the oppressed ones, believed that races were part of a hierarchy of greater and lesser humans, and intermarriage was an unspeakable horror. How hard would it be to believe that on this issue, that the Church, in an echo of Israel of old, wanted to be “like all the nations?”

Not hard at all, it seems to me. Also not hard to believe that because they desired it, God hath done it, that we may stumble. And stumble we have. (Boy, have we ever.)

Why did it endure for 125 years? Sadly, because it likely didn't occur to anyone that there was anything wrong with it, as it was consistent with the racist mores of the time. I don't think any church leaders bothered to question it for at least a century. And by the time they did, it's not surprising that the answer was “the Lord will not hear you in that day,” the same as it was to ancient Israel. President McKay is the first on record to challenge it, but given that he was also a segregationist, it seems unlikely that he would be willing to accept an answer that would include an interracial couple being sealed in the temple. It wasn't until Spencer W. Kimball came along that the prayers were heard and answered, because he was willing to accept the answer without qualifications.

Also, keep in mind that while we had this egregious error as part of our theology for 125 years, Israel had a king for over 400 years, during which time the monarchy produced all kinds of disasters and eventually ended up in Israel's utter collapse. At no time will the Lord override agency, even after 400 years of a grievous error. So if it took 125 years before we were able to accept the Lord's will that “all are alike unto God,” that's our fault, not God's.

Of course, the revelation He gives to the Brethren in the Salt Lake Temple on June 1, 1978 has absolutely nothing to do with the [IRS potentially revoking BYU's tax-exempt status](#), [Stanford and other universities boycotting BYU athletics](#), [we can't figure out who's black or not in Brazil](#), (São Paulo Temple dedicated/opened just a few months after revelation), and that Post-Civil Rights societal trends were against the Church's racism.

On the contrary, I'm sure the revelation had a great deal to do with all of those things. Why would that be a problem? Revelations don't come in a vacuum and never have. Remember, the Word of Wisdom was received because Emma was tired of cleaning up the tobacco stains all over the floor in the School of the Prophets. Revelations come when we ask questions, and we ask questions when there are pressing circumstances that require an answer.

I would think Christ's one true Church would have led the Civil Rights movement; not be the last major church on the planet in 1978 to adopt it.

Indeed! That's probably why Church issued strong statements in support of the Civil Rights Movement well before the 1978 revelation. The following statement was read by a member of the First Presidency in the October 1963 General Conference:

During recent months, both in Salt Lake City and across the nation, considerable interest has been expressed in the position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the matter of civil rights. We would like it to be known that there is in this Church no doctrine, belief, or practice that is intended to deny the enjoyment of full civil rights by any person regardless of race, color, or creed.

We say again, as we have said many times before, that we believe that all men are the children of the same God, and that it is a moral evil for any person or group of persons to deny any human being the right to gainful employment, to full educational opportunity, and to every privilege of citizenship, just as it is a moral evil to deny him the right to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience.

On this one, the Church beat Congress to the punch. The landmark Civil Rights Act, which codified these ideas into law, didn't pass until 1964, an act which my Latter-day Saint grandfather, Senator Wallace F. Bennett, voted for and wholeheartedly supported.

How can we trust these “Prophets, Seers, and Revelators,” who have been so wrong about so many important things for so long while claiming to be receiving revelations from God?

For a number of reasons, including the fact that they have been right about far, far more than they have been wrong, and there has never been any revelation presented to the Church denying the priesthood or temple blessings to those of African descent.

You quoted Joseph Fielding McConkie before, so I'd like to quote him again. In his book *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions*, he addresses the following question on page 180 and 181: “If we can't trust the judgment of the prophet in everything, how can we trust it in anything?”

This chain of thought is used by fundamentalists who claim the Bible to be inherent and infallible. Their argument is that if the Bible is an error on the smallest thing, be it a matter of science, history, geography, or whatever, we cannot possibly trust it when it speaks of Christ or gospel principles. All manner of contortions are necessary to maintain this position. It makes of their theology a pious fraud and constantly requires its adherents to lie, as it were, for God.

What if we assume that a person who made a mistake on one matter could never be trusted on another matter? Because we have all made mistakes, there would not be a soul left upon the face of the earth we could trust. The irony of the argument of infallibility as it applies to the Bible is that those who make it cannot agree among themselves about what its various passages mean. Of what value is an infallible book among people whose interpretations of it are so terribly flawed?

The idea of infallibility simply doesn't work. Are children justified in rejecting the inspired counsel of their parents if they can show them some other things their parents erred? Can we set aside the counsel of the bishop if we know something of his own shortcomings? Can we disregard the instruction of the family physician if we discover he misdiagnosed an illness on some past occasion? Perfection is not requisite for trust, nor need we be perfect to enjoy the prompting of the Spirit or to share in the wisdom of heaven. Gratefully, that is the case, for were it not, none of us would be suitable for the Lord's service.

Yesterday's doctrine is today's false doctrine. Yesterday's 10 prophets are today's heretics.

Just as all of us will be tomorrow's heretics when new light and knowledge enters the world. If this were not the case, we'd all have nothing more to learn.

## 5. MARK HOFMANN

In the early to mid-1980s, the Church paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in expensive and valuable antiques and cash to Mark Hofmann – a con man and soon-to-be serial killer – to purchase and suppress bizarre and embarrassing documents into the Church vaults that undermined and threatened the Church's story of its origins. The documents were later proven to be forgeries.

I'm tempted to include a GIF of Luke Skywalker saying "Every word you just said is wrong," except I hate *The Last Jedi*. And it is true that Hofmann was both a con-man and serial killer, and that the documents were forgeries. But when it comes to your description of the actions of the Church, however, Luke Skywalker's message applies.



Three facts get in your way:

**1. The Church did not pay “hundreds of thousands of dollars in expensive and valuable antiques and cash to Mark Hofmann.”**

Cash was not a part of most of these transactions, and most of the documents were donated to the Church by individual members at no cost to the Church itself.



## **2. Seven out of ten of the fake documents supported the Church's narrative and were not at all "embarrassing," and only one of them could be described as "bizarre."**

The reason people were troubled by the possibly bizarre Salamander Letter when it surfaced is because Hofmann's forgeries were consistent with the Church's official story of its origins – most notably the fake Charles Anthon letter, which is the item that President Kimball is looking at in the above picture.

The Church [lists ten documents at the LDS.org website](#) that were referenced in official Church materials, seven of which are highly supportive of the Church's story. Hofmann was essentially "building the brand" by creating documents that would establish his credibility as a dealer. Had he simply been peddling bizarre, embarrassing nonsense, it is unlikely he would have been taken seriously.

## **3. The Church did nothing to suppress these documents and published them immediately.**

The forgery that most challenging to the Church's history was the Salamander Letter, which claimed that Moroni was a lizard. It was not purchased by the Church; it was donated to the Church, which "suppressed" the document by publishing the full text of it in the Church News not long after they secured it.

The other two documents that were embarrassing were the Joseph Smith III blessing, where Joseph Smith, Jr. supposedly selected his son as his successor, and the Josiah Stowell note, which confirmed that Joseph was a treasure seeker, which was already confirmed in Joseph's original history. Hofmann said in an interview that he was confident the Church would be eager to "buy the blessing on the spot and bury it," i.e. purchase and suppress. The Church did nothing of the kind and initially turned Hofmann away. Later, after negotiations with the RLDS Church to buy the JS III blessing fell through, the Church entered into a new round of discussions with Hofmann and agreed to a non-cash trade to secure the fake blessing, which they then offered at no cost to the Reorganized Church. The Church immediately made the content of the letter public.

That's a pretty lousy job of suppression.

- **The lack of discernment by the Brethren on such a grave threat to the Church is troubling.**

Another assumption of prophetic infallibility. I'm convinced that over 90% of all the objections you raise in the CES Letter would vanish on the wind if you recognized how wrong it is to assume that prophets that aren't perfect can't really be prophets.

But all right, let's pretend things had gone the way you assume they ought to have gone.

Imagine the apostles meeting in the upper rooms of the Salt Lake Temple the day after Hofmann approached them with his first forgery. Suddenly, the room is filled with light. Moroni appears to warn them of the fraud, maybe even quoting a scripture or two from the 1769 version of the KJV. Consequently, the Brethren cut off all negotiations with Hofmann

along and deliver a mighty rebuking to him for his evil ways. Perhaps they also excommunicate him to boot.

What happens then?

Well, if I'm Hofmann, I go to the press. Hofmann appeared to be a meek, unassuming kind of guy, and he would have been able to generate tremendous media sympathy if the big, bad Brethren had been so mean to him. The same historical experts who validated the documents in the real turn of events would no doubt validate them in this fantasy world we're imagining, so suddenly the media narrative is that the Church is burying its head in the sand about its own history.

Soon, the Salt Lake Tribune is on the front door of the Church Office Building, demanding to know why they refuse to accept reality. Out comes Dallin Oaks or Gordon Hinckley to say – what? That Moroni told them it was a fraud? Suddenly the Church comes across as an ignorant bully, and Hofmann looks like the guileless innocent speaking truth to power.

This would have been a far graver threat to the integrity of the Church than the way it really happened.

- Speeches by [Elder Dallin H. Oaks](#) and [President Gordon B. Hinckley](#) offered apologetic explanations for troubling documents ([Salamander Letter](#) and [Joseph Smith III Blessing](#)) that later ended up, unbeknownst to Elder Oaks and President Hinckley at the time of their apologetic talks, being proven complete fakes and forgeries.

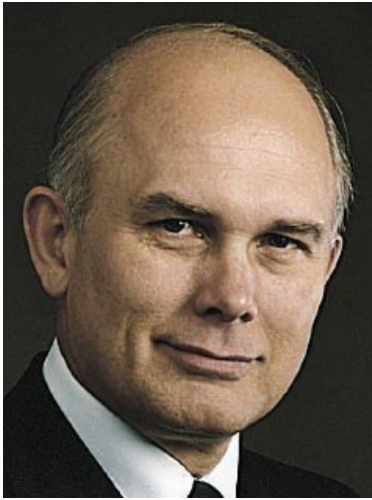
They were far more beknownst than you imply. Elder Oaks's talk to which you link, and which you likely have not read, is entirely focused on treating such documents with considerable skepticism. President Hinckley's talk is a recounting of the line of authority from Joseph Smith to Spencer Kimball, with the document serving as a catalyst for the discussion rather than as the object of it. It is only directly referenced at the beginning and end of the talk.

THE FOLLOWING IS ELDER OAKS' 1985 [DEFENSE OF THE FAKE SALAMANDER LETTER](#) (WHICH OAKS EVIDENTLY THOUGHT WAS REAL AND LEGITIMATE AT THE TIME):

“Evidently?” What rubbish. The evidence suggests precisely the opposite conclusion. The talk makes it clear Elder Oaks was, at the time, deeply skeptical of the Salamander Letter.

In section 1, Elder Oaks lays the groundwork for skepticism. “Some recent news stories about developments in Church history rest on scientific assumptions or assertions, such as the authenticity of a letter,” he says at the outset. “Whether experts or amateurs, most of us have a tendency to be quite dogmatic about so-called scientific facts. Since news writers are not immune from this tendency, news stories based on scientific assumptions should be read or viewed with some skepticism.”

In case you miss the point, he concludes Section 1 as follows:



**Dallin H. Oaks, circa 1985**  
Apostle and Hofmann Skeptic

“As a result, the news media are particularly susceptible to conveying erroneous information about facts, including historical developments that are based on what I have called scientific uncertainties. This susceptibility obviously applies to newly discovered documents whose authenticity turns on an evaluation of handwriting, paper, ink, and so on. As readers **we should be skeptical about the authenticity of such documents**, especially when we are unsure where they were found or who had custody of them for 150 years. Newly found, historically important documents can be extremely valuable, so there is a powerful incentive for those who own them to advocate and support their authenticity. The recent spectacular fraud involving the so-called Hitler diaries reminds us of this and should convince us to be cautious.” [Emphasis added]

Do these sound like the words of someone who “evidently” thought the Salamander Letter “was real and legitimate at the time?” Certainly not to me. It sounds like he is warning Church instructors that these documents could well be forgeries.

The whole talk is structured a love letter to skepticism. The sections are labeled “1. Scientific Uncertainties,” “2. Lack of Context,” “3. Truths and Half-Truths,” “4. Bias,” “5. Balance,” and “6. Evaluation.” These are bright neon signs screaming for skepticism. Once again, you have cherry-picked the relatively brief section you like and ignored the blaring sirens against authenticity that constitute the main body of the talk. Which, once again, suggests you haven’t bothered to read your own source.

Let’s look, however, at the part you’ve cherry-picked for us:

*“Another source of differences in the accounts of different witnesses is the different meanings that different persons attach to words. We have a vivid illustration of this in the recent media excitement about the word salamander in a letter Martin Harris is supposed to have sent to W. W. Phelps over 150 years ago. All of the scores of media stories on that subject apparently assume that the author of that letter used the word salamander in the modern sense of a ‘tailed amphibian.’*

*One wonders why so many writers neglected to reveal to their readers that there is another meaning of salamander, which may even have been the primary meaning in this context in the 1820s. That meaning, which is listed second in a current edition of Webster’s New World Dictionary, is ‘a spirit supposed to live in fire’ (2d College ed. 1982, s.v. ‘salamander’). Modern and ancient literature contain many examples of this usage.*

*A spirit that is able to live in fire is a good approximation of the description Joseph Smith gave of the angel Moroni: a personage in the midst of a light, whose countenance was ‘truly like lightning’ and whose overall appearance ‘was glorious*

*beyond description' (Joseph Smith-History 1:32). As Joseph Smith wrote later, 'The first sight [of this personage] was as though the house was filled with consuming fire' (History of the Church, 4:536). Since the letter purports only to be Martin Harris's interpretation of what he had heard about Joseph's experience, the use of the words white salamander and old spirit seem understandable.*

*In view of all this, and as a matter of intellectual evaluation, why all the excitement in the media, and why the apparent hand-wringing among those who profess friendship with or membership in the Church? The media should make more complete disclosures, but Latter-day Saint readers should also be more sophisticated in their evaluation of what they read."*

Even in this section, where Elder Oaks addresses the possibility that the Salamander Letter might be genuine, he uses a skeptic's vocabulary. It's "a letter Martin Harris *is supposed to have sent* to W. W. Phelps over 150 years ago." [Emphasis added] Earlier in this talk that you haven't bothered to read, under the section "Bias," Elder Oaks reviews different ways historians can recount historical events, each one revealing different biases of the writer.

1. *Reporting the event as having happened.*
2. *Relating the event in the witness's own words while disclosing the author's belief that the witness's account is truthful.*
3. *Stating that the person who reported the event believed that it happened.*
4. *Relating the event but implying that it probably did not happen.*
- 5–6. *Ignoring the event, or distorting it, or stating that it did not happen.*

If Elder Oaks believed the letter was genuine, he would have reported its delivery under the parameters of Section 1 - reporting this event as having happened. It would therefore be "a letter Martin Harris sent to W.W. Phelps." But it was, instead, a letter "Martin Harris is supposed to have sent." This, at best, falls into category 4. The best that can be said is that Elder Oaks was open to the possibility that the Salamander Letter could have been genuine, but his bias, as defined within the talk, was firmly against authenticity.

Back to Joseph Fielding McConkie, who directly answered this question in *Answers*, on page 179. responding to the query "How can prophets be deceived, as in the case of Mark Hoffman?"

This question is simply another way of asking why prophets aren't infallible. It is doubtful that those asking the question suppose themselves obligated to be faultless. Why, then, do they suppose other must be? We do not believe in the infallibility of missionaries, or Sunday School teachers, or even bishops or stake presidents. At what point do we suppose infallibility must begin?

He also goes on to quote a revelation where Joseph Smith was warned that one of his failings would be a tendency to trust the untrustworthy:

In a revelation dealing with the lost one hundred and sixteen pages of the Book of Mormon the Lord told Joseph Smith: "But as you cannot always judge the righteous, or as you cannot always tell the wicked from the righteous, therefore I say unto,

hold your peace until I shall see fit to make all things known unto the world concerning the matter” (D&C 10:37)

So it seems Joseph Smith was warned, by revelation, that he could not “always tell the wicked from the righteous.” Why should it be surprising that his successors were equally willing to accept people in good faith?

So, what just happened?

What happened was that Elder Oaks warned church historians to be deeply skeptical of the Salamander Letter for a number of reasons, although he addressed the possibility that, despite his own doubts, it could be genuine.

Elder Oaks defended and rationalized a completely fake and made up document that Mark Hofmann created...

No. You only think that’s what just happened because you didn’t bother to read your own source.

... while telling “Latter-day Saint readers” to be “more sophisticated in their evaluation of what they read.”

This “sophisticated” thing really seems to bother you, as you bring it up again several more times down the road. I read “sophisticated” as being synonymous with or at least similar to “skeptical.” A “sophisticated” reader would be likely to evaluate historical documents without presentism - hence the reference to 1820 definitions of “salamander” - and with appropriate skepticism as to their authenticity. Under those standards, the CES Letter could do with a lot more sophistication.

- There was significant dishonesty by President Hinckley on his relationship with Hofmann, his meetings, and which documents that the Church had and didn’t have.

This is a baseless charge for which you have no evidence.

Your link calls up a footnote in a Wikipedia article that says “At seventy-two, Hinckley had begun filling the role that would increasingly dominate his life, his role as de facto president of the church.” Nothing at all about “significant dishonesty” as promised by the hyperlink. At some point, it really would help if you read your own references.

- Just hours following the bombings on the morning of October 15, 1985, murderer Mark Hofmann met with Elder Dallin H. Oaks in the Church Office Building:

“He’s just killed two people. And what does he do? He goes down to the church office building and meets with Dallin Oaks. I can’t even imagine the rush, given Hofmann’s frame of reference, that this would have given him. To be there standing in front of one of God’s appointed apostles, after murdering two people, and this person doesn’t hear any words from God, doesn’t intuit a thing. For Hofmann that must have been an absolute rush. He had pulled off the ultimate spoof against God.”



– *The Poet and the Murderer: A True Story of Literary Crime and the Art of Forgery*, p.232

Lots of mind-reading in this passage. Neither you nor this author have the first idea what Elder Oaks was thinking or feeling at this moment, let alone that he “doesn’t intuit a thing.” Even if God were screaming in his ear, what should he have done? Performed a citizen’s arrest? Tackled him? Struck him down with a lightning bolt?

The more I read Elder Oaks’s contemporaneous accounts of dealing with Hofmann, the more convinced I become that he was skeptical from day one. The fact that Hofmann is rotting behind bars demonstrates that justice was served, and that outcome may well have been thwarted if an apostle had unceremoniously pounced on Hofmann without any evidence than the “words from God” ringing in his head.

Elder Oaks had a serial murderer right in front of him in his office just hours after Hofmann killed two people ([Oaks later admits this meeting](#)).

In the talk, Oaks reiterates that he had admitted to the meeting in a previous public statement. Once again, have you even read the talk to which you’re linking?

What does this say about the discernment of the Brethren when they can’t discern a murderer and con man, hell-bent on destroying Mormonism, right under their noses?

How do you know there was no discernment? I still don’t understand what you expected Elder Oaks to do in those ten minutes in 1985. Tai Kwon Do, perhaps?



**Oaks v. Hofmann, 1985**

*(Dramatization. May not have happened. Be sophisticated in evaluating this image.)*



Discernment doesn't deputize apostles to strike down evil-doers with their bare hands. As to "what does this say" about all the issues you raise, it says that you haven't read Elder Oaks's answer to that very question in the link to the talk you provide. From your link:

As everyone now knows, Hofmann succeeded in deceiving many: experienced Church historians, sophisticated collectors, businessmen-investors, national experts who administered a lie detector test to Hofmann, and professional document examiners, including the expert credited with breaking the Hitler diary forgery. But why, some still ask, were his deceits not detected by the several Church leaders with whom he met?

In order to perform their personal ministries, Church leaders cannot be suspicious and questioning of each of the hundreds of people they meet each year. Ministers of the gospel function best in an atmosphere of trust and love. In that kind of atmosphere, they fail to detect a few deceivers, but that is the price they pay to increase their effectiveness in counseling, comforting, and blessing the hundreds of honest and sincere people they see. It is better for a Church leader to be occasionally disappointed than to be constantly suspicious.

You continue to presume that Elder Oaks was not at all skeptical of Hofmann when, in fact, the links you provide are dripping with Oaks's skepticism. All of this was right under your nose the whole time, and it didn't even require revelation to see it. All it required was for you to read your own sources, which, again and again, you never bother to do.

• [Ultimately, the Church was forced to admit it had, in the First Presidency Vault, documents \(McLellin Collection\) that the Church previously denied it had.](#)

I'm not sure I understand the accusation here, and I'm sure you do not.

Your source is accusing the Church of suppressing the McLellin Collection they knew they owned by attempting to buy the McLellin Collection from Hofmann, which doesn't make a lick of sense.

Such a scenario would require them to know that Hofmann was a fraud, yes? So wouldn't that imply discernment on their part? Otherwise, why are they buying these documents to suppress them because they already have them? Honestly, how is this supposed to work?

There's also zero evidence that the Church was "forced to admit" anything. Your breathless source's liberal use of exclamation points and ALL CAPS notwithstanding, Richard Turley announced the McLellin documents as soon as he found them. Your source treats this as if it were some kind of unforced error - Turley's "BOMBSHELL!" But the information was released without any prompting and with no opposition from Church leaders. Turley is now the head of the Church PR Department and one of the writers of the new Church history book *Saints*. It would be highly unlikely he would hold such a position if he had violated some secret suppression directive back in the 80s.

Your source - and you - speak of the “McLellin Collection” as if it were some kind of prepackaged product with a handy-dandy label identifying it as such, like everything in the old Adam West *Batman* series.



Reality is seldom that tidy or well-marked. The things which go by the name of the “McLellin Collection” are a number of journals and letters attributed to William McLellin. The fact that the Church had some items written by McLellin does not negate the possibility of additional documents or confirm the existence of a self-contained “collection.” If authentic new McLellin-related documents surface, that will not be evidence of suppression of existing McLellin documents.

Although if they are, surely Batman will be on the case.



The McLellin documents were critical for the investigation of the Hofmann murders.

No, they weren't. The investigation of the Hofmann murders hinged on handwriting and ink analysis of the forgeries, and the authentic McLellin documents weren't part of the investigation at all. Not even a little bit.

- While these “Prophets, Seers, and Revelators” were being duped and conned by Mark Hofmann’s forgeries over a four-year period (1981-1985), the Tanners – considered some of the biggest critics of the Church – actually came out and said that the Salamander Letter was a fake.

Well done, Tanners.

Even when the Salamander Letter proved very useful in discrediting the Church, the Tanners had better discernment than the Brethren did.

What do you mean by “discernment?” You have repeatedly used that word to describe your expectations of magical powers you thought Church leaders possessed that would allow them to spot all liars. Are you therefore suggesting that the Tanners knew the Salamander Letter was fake by supernatural means?

It should also be said that even when the Salamander Letter proved very useful in discrediting the Church, the Church made no effort to hide its existence or content from Church members or the public at large.

While the Tanners publicly rejected the Salamander Letter, the Church continued buying fakes from Hofmann...

No, they didn't. The letter was donated to the Church on April 18, 1985. After that, the Church procured a single additional item from Hofmann in October of 1985 shortly before the murders - a copy of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, likely authentic, which they obtained by means of a trade estimated to be worth \$700.

... and Elder Oaks continued telling Latter-day Saints to be more sophisticated.

No, he didn't. He used this phrase precisely once in August of 1985, so he couldn't very well have “continued telling” people something he had only said a single time. It's also important to note that he said this in a talk where he expressed considerable skepticism of the Salamander Letter - a talk you apparently haven't read. You are also misreading his intent in using the word “sophisticated.” He was encouraging skepticism, not acceptance.

I'm told that prophets are just men who are only prophets when acting as such (whatever that means).

I'm not sure what it means, either, at least in the way you describe it. Are you suggesting that when they are acting as prophets, they cease to be men? Are they possessed a la Linda Blair and have their bodies taken over by the Spirit so they can no longer act on their own volition? The assumption of infallibility is so problematic that I don't understand how anyone could

possibly think it compatible with the Restored Gospel. It's remarkable to me that in the five years since you first published your letter, you haven't ever thought to challenge your basic assumptions.

You act as if it's self-evident that a true prophet acting as a prophet and not acting as a man would never do anything wrong, even though the scriptures are replete with prophets who make a number of errors, sometimes very serious ones. Yet it doesn't seem to have occurred to you that it's your own mistaken assumptions that are the problem, not prophetic mistakes.

I'm told that, like all prophets, Brigham Young was a man of his time.

Of course he was. I would think the beard alone would give that away. He's either a man of the 19th Century or a 20th Century member of ZZ Top.

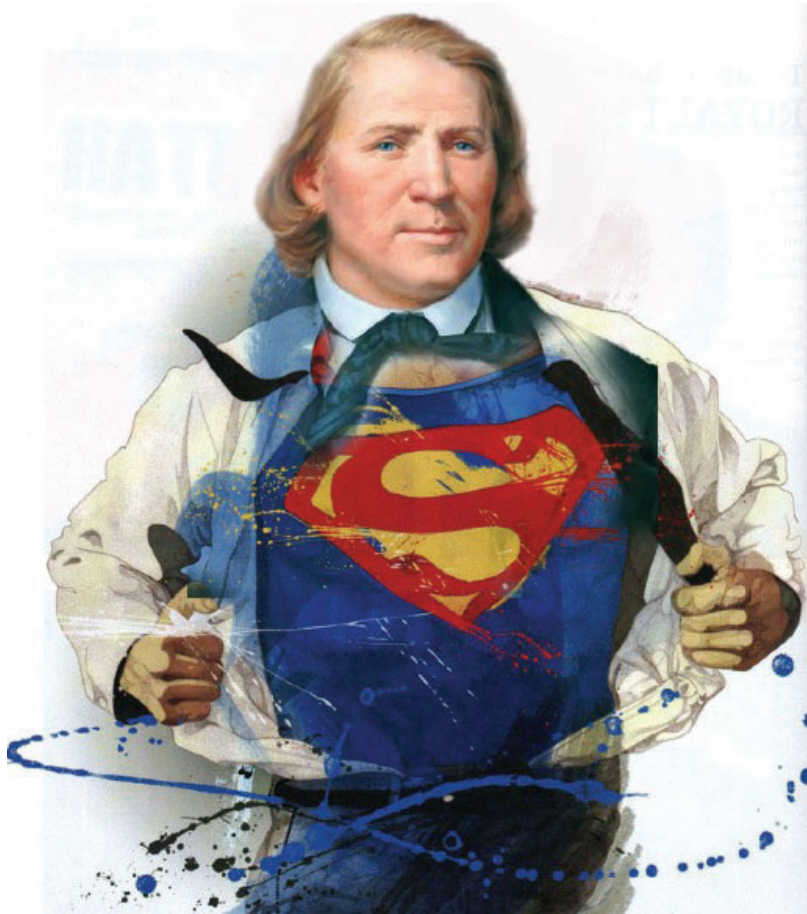
What, did you assume he was a man out of his time? That he was somehow able to live in mortality without functioning in the era in which he lived? Was he the Doctor from Doctor Who, able to skip in and out of any moment at will?



**Brigham Who**  
*Man Not Of His Time*

As I'm answering you this second time around, I'm noticing more and more how strange some of your basic assumptions are. I've been a member of the Church for all 50 years of my middle-aged life, and it never occurred to me that Brigham Young or anyone other prophets could be anything other than men of their times. I sincerely don't understand why you expected it to be otherwise.





**Look! Up in the sky!**  
*It's a man! It's a prophet! It's - SUPER-BRIGHAM!*

For example, I was told that Brigham Young was acting as a man when he taught that “God revealed to [him]” that “Adam is our father and God” and the “only God with whom we have to do.”

Was he not? Do prophets cease to be men when they act as prophets? How does that work?

I’m getting this image of Clark Kent tearing open his shirt to reveal the Superman crest so there’s a clearly delineated marker in the transformation from fallible and infallible.

These are not super-beings or robots. Every prophet the Lord has ever called has been a man with agency and the freedom and capacity to make mistakes.

Never mind that Brigham taught this over the pulpit in not one but

two conferences and never mind that he introduced this theology into the endowment ceremony in the Temples.

On the contrary, that’s of critical importance, especially the fact that this was taught in the temple. The temple ceremony, as you may recall, involves Adam’s participation quite extensively, and it is made crystal clear that Adam is not Heavenly Father. Brigham Young personally wrote that temple ceremony based on what he remembered from Nauvoo, so he somehow saw no conflict between what he was teaching at the veil and what temple-goers had just been taught seconds earlier in the endowment ceremony itself. This suggests that we are missing some key piece of information that would allow us to interpret this the way the 19th Century Saints would have interpreted it.

For what it’s worth, my very smart, law professor brother-in-law, an unofficial theologian if there ever was one, views this as Brigham’s emphasis on the fact that Adam stands at the head of the human family. The Book of Abraham talks about “the Gods” who created the world, and the temple makes it clear that one of those was Michael, later named Adam. Brigham may have been saying that of those three, Adam is *our* father and the only “god” from whom we are physically descended.

I’m not sure I buy that, personally, but I appreciate the attempt to figure out some kind of context in which Brigham’s teaching might have been accepted by those who heard it.



Since Adam's status in the temple endowment has remained unchanged from Brigham's time to this, and since Brigham himself is the one who wrote that ceremony, it's safe to assume that nobody who taught or heard the Adam/God language thought it inconsistent with the principles you learned when you received your endowment.

Never mind that Brigham Young made it clear that he was speaking as a prophet:

*"I have never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call scripture."*

– *Journal of Discourses 13:95*

Should we also never mind that you didn't even bother to read the *very next sentence* after this cherry-picked phrase? "Let me have the privilege of correcting a sermon." If he's infallible, why would he have to correct his sermons? That's an admission that someone feigning infallibility would never make. In addition, since when do we believe in infallible scriptures? "If there be errors, they are the mistakes of men" applies to both the written and spoken word.

Also, why are you quoting this in the context of Adam-God? The sermon you're quoting here says absolutely nothing about that subject. You would know that if you had read it. Which you obviously haven't.

Why would I want my kids chanting "Follow the Prophet" with such a ridiculous and inconsistent 187-year track record?

"Ridiculous 187-year track record?" You think Adam-God, Mark Hofmann, and other anomalous quirks constitute the entirety of the legacy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? The track record of the Church is one of lives blessed by service freely given to members and non-members alike. The amount of good that prophets have done vastly outweighs the human errors they have made.

Although I also don't much like the song "Follow the Prophet." It sounds too much like the "Stonecutters Song" from the Simpsons.



**Who controls the British crown? Who keeps the metric system down?  
We do! We do!**

### What credibility do the Brethren have?

A great deal, actually. They've been wrong on occasion, but they've also been very, very right the vast majority of the time.

### Why would I want them following the prophet when a prophet is just a man of his time teaching his "theories" that will likely be disavowed by future "Prophets, Seers, and Revelators"?

You're looking at the teachings of the prophets through a fun-house mirror. It's a gross distortion to say that prophets primarily teach "theories" that are later disavowed. What percentage of Brigham Young's entirety of teachings is no longer consistent with what the church currently teaches? There's no way to definitively quantify it, but objectively speaking, it's a pretty small percentage. What's the likelihood that, say, baptism by immersion will become passé under the next church president? Are we going to abandon the Book of Mormon? Ditch the Sabbath Day? When should we expect a repudiation of the Sermon on the Mount?

By fixating on anomalous episodes in history that are inconsistent with how the church currently operates, you're overlooking the fact that, on the whole, the Church has been remarkably consistent in its doctrines and practices for nearly two centuries.

### If his moral blueprint is not much better than that of their Sunday School teachers?

Sure! Why should his moral blueprint be any better than those of Sunday School teachers? Shouldn't Sunday School teachers be teaching good doctrine, too?

This is where your argument falls apart. If the Lord can create infallible prophets, then why should he stop with prophets? Why not extend infallibility all the way to Sunday School teachers and scoutmasters and nursery leaders? Either agency is essential, and everyone from prophets to Sunday School teachers has it, or it's irrelevant, and we should all be robots that are never allowed to veer off course to any degree.

### If, historically speaking, the doctrine he teaches today will likely be tomorrow's false doctrine?

Not likely at all, but certainly possible when new light and knowledge is revealed, as we have been promised it will be.

Perhaps you are content with learning nothing more about God than you were taught by fallible Sunday School teachers, but there is a flood of knowledge waiting to be revealed, and "[a]s well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course, or to turn it up stream, as to hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints." (D&C 121:33)

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