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Leveraging Doubt: The Impact of Lester E. Bush, Jr.'s "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: A Historical Overview" on Mormon Thought

Chad L. Nielsen

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> The most exciting single event of the years I [Leonard J. Arrington] was church historian occurred on June 9, 1978, when the First Presidency announced a divine revelation that all worthy males might be granted the priesthood….
>
> Just before noon my secretary, Nedra Yeates Pace, telephoned with remarkable news: Spencer W. Kimball had just announced a revelation that all worthy males, including those of African descent, might be ordained to the priesthood. Within five minutes, my son Carle Wayne telephoned from New York City to say he had heard the news. I was in the midst of sobbing with gratitude for this answer to our prayers and could hardly speak with him. I was thrilled and electrified…. For many days I talked with a host of friends and relatives on the telephone and in person. Everyone was elated—and sobered.[1]

These words describe how Leonard J. Arrington—who served as the LDS Church Historian until 1982—reacted to one of the most important moments in Mormon history—the June 1978 revelation that extended priesthood ordination to all worthy males in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Prior to the ban's lifting, this race-based denial of ordination was, in the words Leonard Arrington, "one of the biggest stumbling blocks for some of the liberals in the Church." Yet—as Dr. Gregory A. Prince observed at the 19th annual Leonard J. Arrington lecture—neither Arrington nor any other official Church historians researched or wrote about the background of the ban before the revelation.[2]

Rather than these heavyweight professional historians, it was an army physician who wrote what is, perhaps, the single most important article on the history of the priesthood ban—a

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[1] Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1998), 175.

[2] Gregory A. Prince, "Doubt and Faith as Partners in Mormon History" (Paper presented at the *Arrington Annual Lecture*, Logan, Utah, September 19, 2013).

man by the name of Lester E. Bush, Jr. In a 1973 article entitled "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Interview," published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, Bush offered the most thoroughly documented approach to the ban's history up to that date.[3]

In doing so, Dr. Bush demonstrated the ability scholars have to create a paradigm shift among the Mormon community. One of the basic theses of Dr. Gregory A. Prince's address at the nineteenth annual Leonard J. Arrington Mormon history lecture was that "scholars are uniquely qualified to leverage the inherent value of doubt. When they succeed, their articles and books don't just have breaks to existing paradigms—they change those paradigms."[4] In science and epistemology, a paradigm is a distinct concept or thought pattern and a paradigm shift is often spoken of as a change in the basic assumptions within the ruling theories of the day. Dr. Prince spoke of Lester Bush's article within the context of his lecture and left open the question: How extensively did Lester Bush's article create a paradigm shift within the Mormon community over the issue of the priesthood ban?

That is not an insignificant question. After all, Bush radically revised what was understood about the origins of the priesthood ban. Prior to Bush's research there were two primary theories for the origin of the priesthood ban. First, there was the approach that justified Church policy and explained that blacks were denied the priesthood because Joseph Smith had received a revelation on the subject and that the same restriction was present anciently. Second was the so-called "Missouri Thesis" which explained that Joseph Smith instituted the ban in the 1830s to prevent further persecution in Missouri after the Saints were driven out of Jackson

[3] See Lester E. Bush, Jr. "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Interview," in *Neither White Nor Black*, ed. Lester E. Bush, Jr. and Armand L. Mauss.

[4] Prince, "Doubt and Faith." See Appendix A.

County and it was perpetuated by his (sometimes racist) successors.[5] Both theories assumed that Joseph Smith initiated the policy. Lester Bush, in his research—published in part in a 1969 article and more fully in the 1973 article—found no contemporary evidence tying Joseph Smith to the priesthood ban, but found instead that most documentary evidence began to appear after 1849—during Brigham Young's presidency—and that no references to a revelation were ever made by contemporary leaders to support the policy. That revision has deep implications for how to view the policy and raised important questions concerning the validity of the ban.

To examine how deeply Bush's article has created a paradigm shift in Mormon thought, three different areas were analyzed: the LDS Church's official stances on the issue, discussions and depictions of the issue in scholarly works on Mormonism, and thoughts and beliefs held by Mormons today. To study the impact on the LDS Church's stance, official Church statements published before and after the article was printed were compared as well as presentations of the issue in official Church publications. Scholarly paradigms were studied by surveying articles and books that discuss the subject, with particular focus on five biographies of key figures in the priesthood ban that have been published within the last ten years. Finally, to examine the thoughts and beliefs of Mormons today, an online, anonymous survey that asked questions related to Bush's conclusions was conducted by the present author. A firm declaration of whether Dr. Bush's conclusions are correct is avoided, as discussion is aimed at what impact his work has had rather than its accuracy.

The official Church stance on this issue prior to Bush's article was:

[5] See Lester E. Bush, Jr., "Writing 'Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview' [1973]: Context and Reflections, 1998." *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (1999): 229.

> From the beginning of this dispensation, Joseph Smith and all succeeding Presidents of the Church have taught that Negroes… were not yet to receive the priesthood, for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which he has not made fully known to man.
>
> Our living prophet, President David O. McKay, has said, "The seeming discrimination by the Church toward the Negro is not something which originated with man; but goes back into the beginning with God….
>
> "Revelation assures us that this plan antedates man's mortal existence, extending back to man's preexistent state."[6]

Statements by the Church about the subject have been few and far between since 1969 when the First Presidency released the statement cited above. Statements by General Authorities indicate that Bush's article was weighed during the deliberations leading up the 1978 revelation that ended the ban, but even with the announcement that blacks could receive the priesthood, very little commentary was offered to the public by the Church.[7] Church-produced manuals on its on scriptures or history published since the revelation do not address the issue, briefly pointing to a scriptural precedent for the ban or stating that the policy had been around for many years before describing the 1978 revelation.[8] Between the years of 2011 and 2013, however,

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[6] "Letter of First Presidency Clarifies Church's Position on the Negro." *Improvement Era* February 1970, 70-71.

[7] Elder Hartman Rector told Lester Bush in 1973 that "he believe that many of the [General Authorities had read" the article and Elder Marion D. Hanks commented on multiple occasions that "[the] article had had far more influence than the Brethren would ever acknowledge. . . . It 'started to foment the pot.'" During the discussions that occurred in the days leading up to the revelation, Elder Mark E. Petersen "called President Kimball's attention to an article that proposed the priesthood policy had begun with Brigham young, not Joseph Smith, and he suggested that the President might wish to consider this factor," almost certainly a reference to Bush's 1973 article. See Bush, "Writing," 265-266; Edward L. Kimball "Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood." *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 54.

[8] *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manual*, (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 364-365; *Pearl of Great Price Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002), 32. *Our Heritage.* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 129-131; *Truth Restored* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 148-150; *Church History in the Fullness of Times* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 584-585; James B.

three statements on race were presented by the Church, including, significantly, an introduction to the Official Declaration 2 in the 2013 edition of the LDS scriptures. All three use similar language, admitting that, "Early in its history, Church leaders stopped conferring the priesthood on black males of African descent. Church records offer no clear insights into the origins of this practice."[9] Discussion of whether the ban was inspired or not and whether or not it could have changed without a revelation is left open to interpretation, since all that has been stated in the new introduction to the Official Declaration 2 is that, "Church leaders *believed* that a revelation from God was needed to alter this practice and prayerfully sought guidance."[10] All this seems to indicate that the Church recognized that Bush's work has at least some merit and softened the firm stance that the ban originated with Joseph Smith by inspiration.

While the LDS Church hierarchy has been slow to publically discuss the ideas presented in Bush's scholarship, the Mormon studies community began conversing about the article very quickly. Initial assessment by Gordon C. Thomasson indicated in *Dialogue* that while the article was "well written" and "by far the most comprehensive and responsible effort to date at giving an historical context within which the denial of priesthood can be understood… our historical picture is, even with the addition of Mr. Bush's excellent work, sketchy and incomplete,"[11] That incompleteness has allowed for ongoing debate, with some in the Mormon studies community

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Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints,* 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 633-639.

[9] Official Declaration 2 in *Doctrine and Covenants*; "Church Statement Regarding 'Washington Post' Article on Race and the Church," *Mormon Newsroom*, February 29, 2012, accessed November 21, 2013, http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/racial-remarks-in-washington-post-article; "Race and the Church: All Are Alike Unto God," *Mormon Newsroom*, accessed November 21, 2013, http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/race-church.

[10] Intro to Official Declaration 2, in *Doctrine and Covenants*, emphasis added by author.

[11] Gordon C Thomasson, "Lester Bush's Historical Overview: Other perspectives," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (1973): 69, 72.

debating with Bush's conclusions and other scholars accepting and building upon Lester Bush's work in their analyses of the priesthood ban history. [12]

In order to understand the impact Bush's work has had on the scholarly community, five recently-published biographies that touch on the history of the ban were reviewed. Two biographies about Elijah Able—a black man who received the priesthood during Joseph Smith's time—and one biography about Spencer W. Kimball follow the essence of Bush's article, but shy away from a conclusive statement of the ban's origins. [13] For example, the Kimball biography states, "The origin of the priesthood policy was unclear…. No contemporary record exists indicating Joseph Smith said anything directly on the subject of blacks and the priesthood…. It appears then that the practice was likely instituted during Brigham Young's tenure as president."[14] Gregory A Prince and Wm. Robert Wright's biography of David O. McKay restated Bush's conclusions more firmly: "The origins of the policy are obscure, but postdate Joseph Smith, Mormonism's founding prophet."[15] John G. Turner, biographer of Brigham Young, was more careful in how he worded the issue, simply noting that the ban was in place during Young's presidency and that Young's rhetoric "contributed to the long-term

[12] For an overview of the historical discussion the first ten years after the article was published see Lester E. Bush, Jr. "Whence the Negro Doctrine? A Review of Ten Years of Answers," in *Neither Black nor White* ed. Lester E. Bush, Jr. and Armand L. Mauss (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1984): 193-220. For a study of how scholars have viewed the Missouri thesis before and after Bush's work, see Newell G. Bringhurst, "The 'Missouri Thesis' Revisited," in *Black and Mormon*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004): 13-33. For an example of an opposing point of view, see Ronald K Esplin. "Brigham Young and Priesthood Denial to the Blacks: An Alternate View." *BYU Studies* 19, no. 3 (1979): 394-402.

[13] See W. Kesler Jackson, *Elijah Able: The Life and Times of a Black Priesthood Holder* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, Inc., 2013); Russell W. Stevenson *Black Mormon: The Story of Elijah* Ables (Afton, WY: PrintStar, 2013).

[14] Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 196.

[15] Gregory A Prince, and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 73-74.

exclusion of black men from the Mormon priesthood."[16] Bush's influence has impacted the Mormon historical discussion, though room is left open for doubt and for dialogue.

The online survey indicated that the conclusions of "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine" are having some impact on the general thought of Mormons, but have not totally taken hold. One hundred and six Mormons responded to the survey. Since it was an anonymous survey, no effort was made to document age, race, or nationality of the respondents, however, the survey was advertised to a group primarily consisting of Mormons living in the western United States and ranging in age from teenagers to adults in their seventies. Since the survey covers a limited group, any trends or patterns can only be presented as suggestive of general Mormon thought rather than conclusive.

The mean answer to the question "On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=nothing and 10= a lot), how much have you read about this policy?" was 3.30 with a standard deviation of 1.18, indicating that most respondents felt they had done some basic reading on the issue, but not much more than that (Figure 1). Also, of the 106 Mormon respondents, 104 responded that they had not read "Mormonism's Negro Doctrine." This indicates that for the most part, any impact Dr. Bush's article has been through secondary or oral sources.

[16] John G Turner, *Brigham Young; Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 208, 222.

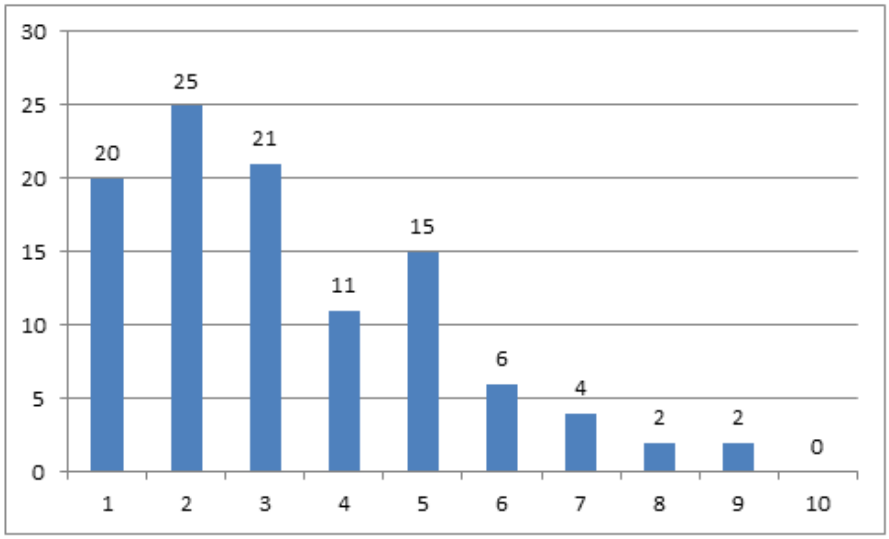

Figure 1. Responses to "On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=nothing and 10=a lot), how much have you read about this policy?" by number out of 106.

Since one of the most basic conclusions of Bush's work was the question of who initiated the policy, respondents were asked, "Which president of the LDS church do you think introduced the priesthood ban policy?" (Table 1). The responses seem to indicate that more than anything else, there is a large amount of uncertainty on the origins of the priesthood and that a large portion of Latter-day Saints do believe that Joseph Smith instituted the ban. At the same time, however, an almost equal amount of respondents do believe, as did Lester E. Bush, that Brigham Young instituted the ban.

Table 1.

Question	Answers (%)			
	Joseph Smith	Brigham Young	Other	Unsure
Which president of the LDS church do you think introduced the priesthood ban policy?	27.3585	23.5849	8.4905	40.566

Since Bush's articles disputed the basis for the Missouri thesis, respondents were asked, "Do you think that the ban was initially introduced to prevent further persecution against Mormons in Missouri?" (Table 2). Responses seem to indicate that there is still some—though not overwhelming—openness to the basic ideas of the Missouri thesis, but that there are

uncertainties on the specifics involved. For example, statistical analysis indicates that there was no significant difference in answers to this question between respondents who stated that they thought Brigham Young or Joseph Smith instituted the policy. Only six respondents answered that they believed that Joseph Smith had instituted the policy and that it was introduced to prevent persecution in Missouri. This would seem to indicate some unfamiliarity with the chronology of Mormon history, since Brigham Young did not assume leadership until several years after the general body of Saints left Missouri. Overall, however, it seems the Missouri thesis is no longer favored by most Mormons as an explanation for the Priesthood ban.

Table 2. Responses to the question, "Do you think the ban was initially introduced to prevent further persecution against Mormons in Missouri?" sorted by responses to the question, "Which president of the LDS church do you think introduced the priesthood ban policy?"

Response	Answers (%)		
	Yes	No	Unsure
Overall	16.9811	42.4528	40.566
Joseph Smith	20.6897	51.7241	27.5862
Brigham Young	20	48	32

To see whether respondents believed the origins of the ban were inspired rather than a result of a series of circumstances, as Dr. Bush proposed, they were asked, "Do you believe the priesthood ban was introduced by revelation?" (Table 4). Those who felt that the ban was not initiated by revelation were a minority. Those who believed Joseph Smith instituted the ban were slightly (though not significantly) more likely to believe that the policy was revealed by revelation, while those who believed Brigham Young instituted the restriction were less likely to feel it was inspired. Admittedly, this question could have been misinterpreted, since "revelation" could be understood as a specific documented revelation, such as those found in the Doctrine and

Covenants (which does not exist for the priesthood ban), or as divine inspiration guiding a Church leader in setting a policy.

Table 3. Responses to the question, "Do you believe that the priesthood ban was introduced by revelation?" sorted by responses to the question, "Which president of the LDS church do you think introduced the priesthood ban policy?"

Response	Answers (%)		
	Yes	No	Unsure
General	59.0476	16.1905	24.7619
Joseph Smith	72.4138	10.3448	17.2414
Brigham Young	45.8333	20.8333	33.3333

To further investigate feelings about the inspiration of the policy, the question, "Do you believe that the LDS leaders could have changed the policy without a revelation?" was asked (Table 5). Responses indicate that a majority of Mormons feel that the ban needed a revelation to bring it to a close. Those who felt Joseph Smith instituted the policy were significantly more inclined to feel that the ban could not be altered without revelation and those who felt Brigham Young instituted the policy were more likely to feel that it could be changed without a revelation.

Table 4. Responses to the question, "Do you believe that he LDS leaders could have changed the policy without a revelation?" sorted by responses to the question, "Which president of the LDS church do you think introduced the priesthood ban policy?"

Response	Answers (%)		
	Yes	No	Unsure
General	16.9811	70.7547	12.2642
Joseph Smith	10.3448	86.2069	3.4483
Brigham Young	24	60	16

It is difficult to compare these results with the beliefs held by Mormons prior to Bush's research being published. We find expressions of disbelief in the official Church position by a few individuals, such as sociologist Armand Mauss, who reminisced that during the 1960s, "We

had not yet gotten the benefit of Lester Bush's research on the dubious origins of the church's race policies, so I was as mystified as anyone about those origins."[17] It also seems that the Missouri thesis had some resonance among the Mormons as an alternative to the traditional explanations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including such notable individuals as David O. McKay's son Llewelyn McKay told Lester Bush in 1968 that "he personally believed the Negro doctrine to be a historical accident, stemming indirectly from the slavery controversy in Missouri,"[18] and President Hugh B. Brown, who expressed similar thoughts to his grandson in 1970.[19] It seems likely, however, that those who believed in the Missouri thesis and those who acknowledged the lack of clarity in the origins of the policy were a vocal minority in a culture dominated by the official Church stance on the issue. During the 1960s, Armand Mauss began to comment on the pseudo-doctrinal beliefs that supported the ban and later recalled that his efforts, "Convinced but few of my LDS friends or leaders and infuriated others" and that most Mormon commentators on a California radio show repeated what they had read or heard from influential authors and Church leaders.[20] Similarly, BYU professor Eugene England spoke of being told by other members of the Church in 1963 that, "I could not be a Mormon in good standing without accepting" the ban and the beliefs that underpinned it.[21]

As far as the procedure for changing the policy, it seems that there was a vocal minority pushing the Church leadership to make the change with or without a revelation, most notably, President Hugh B. Brown.[22] The majority, however, probably felt similarly to Spencer W. Kimball, who wrote in 1962 that, "These smart members who would force the issue… cheapen

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[17] Armand L Mauss, *Shifting Borders and a Tattered Passport* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012), 97.

[18] Bush "Writing," 236.

[19] See Hugh B. Brown, *An Abundant Life,* 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999): 129-130.

[20] Mauss, *Shifting Boarders,* 97.

[21] Eugene England, "The Mormon Cross," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (1973): 83.

[22] See Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 98-103

the issue and certainly bring into contempt the sacred principle of revelation and divine authority."[23] Notably, there were even some who felt that the ban could not be changed at all and who left the Church when the ban was lifted.[24]

Overall, the data indicate that Bush's article has had an impact on Mormon thought. The effect seems to have been most dramatic and immediate on the Mormon studies community, with a gradual (and somewhat tacit) acknowledgement coming from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Finally, the general Mormon community has slowly been feeling an impact from the study, but Bush's thoughts have not entirely sunk in for the time being. Dr. Gregory A. Prince has suggested:

> Many of the most important doctrinal and historical issues within the Church are unfinished business. Choose one of the most important ones, research it deeply, and then speak and write of it in such an interesting way that it becomes integrated into Mormon thought and practice. And it *is* possible."[25]

Dr. Lester E. Bush, Jr. has demonstrated what Gregory Prince has said is true: it *is* possible for amateur historians to research an important topic and cause a paradigm shift in Mormon thought. There is a need for more Lester Bushes today to address the issues that former Church historian and emeritus general authority Marlin K. Jensen acknowledged are causing a period of apostasy that is greater than any time since the Kirtland era of the Church.[26] Certainly, the field of doubt and historic inquiry is particularly white, already to harvest.

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[23] Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 448-449.

[24] See Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride*, 233-234.

[25] Gregory A. Prince and John Dehlin, *Greg Prince on "Big Tent Mormonism"—Mormon Stories Podcast 295*, podcast audio, Mormon Stories, MP3, accessed 22 October 2013, http://mormonstories.org/295-297-2011-washington-d-c-conference-with-greg-prince/.

[26] See Marlin K. Jensen, "Elder Jensen Q & A" (Discussion hosted by the Johan A. Widtsoe Association for Mormon Studies at Utah State University, Logan, Utah, 11 November 2011).

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Appendix A: Summary of the 19th Annual Arrington Lecture.

"The question that Leonard [J. Arrington]'s career poses to us is not whether to doubt, but which doubts to engage,"[27] stated Dr. Gregory A. Prince in the concluding remarks of the 19th annual Leonard J. Arrington Lecture. In the lecture Dr. Prince shared some important insights into the value of having doubts and facing fears in developing a new and deeper understanding of Mormon history and Mormon faith—insights that he has gained through preparing to write a biography of Mormon historian Leonard J. Arrington.

Dr. Prince spoke of Arrington's intellectual development during his early college years, service in World War II and time spent in graduate school in the eastern United States that led him to a more liberal line of thought than many Mormons from the Great Basin. The ability to doubt the ideas of his conservative co-religionists while clinging to the core of his faith allowed Arrington to approach Mormon history in a new way—asking new questions and synthesizing the raw data into new perspectives on his people's past.

Two important works that Leonard J. Arrington produced along these lines were *The Great Basin Kingdom* and his work on the history of the Word of Wisdom, placing the economic and health movements of the early Latter-day Saints into the context of their time and environment. Leonard received mixed responses to these efforts, including opposition from some members of the highest councils of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Arrington did not engage every doubt possible—he notably avoided the issue of blacks and the priesthood and the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Nevertheless, Leonard J. Arrington continued to insist throughout his life that doubts are not the wedge to a failure of faith, but a path to deeper faith and belief.

[27] Gregory A. Prince, "Doubt and Faith as Partners in Mormon History" (Paper presented at the *Arrington Annual Lecture*, Logan, Utah, September 19, 2013).