

The Place of David O. McKay in Mormon Culture

By Eugene England

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WHEN CHARLOTTE AND I were called as missionaries to Samoa in the spring of 1954, at the age of twenty, we had no specific sense of the important changes David O. McKay was already making in the LDS church or the unique cultural legacy he would create. But when he visited Samoa in January 1955 as part of his third major tour abroad since becoming Church president in 1951, we met him for the first time and experienced first-hand his unusual combination of charismatic qualities. Right after he arrived, we saw that he remembered Samoan phrases and protocol from his first visit, thirty-five years before. He participated with impressive self-assurance and graciousness in the *fesilafa'iga fa'atupu*, a formal “kava” ceremony originally designed for visiting kings, at which he was welcomed by Samoan royalty and church leaders, Methodist and Catholic as well as Mormon.

The Samoan kava ceremony is both stately and sacred, a combination of parliamentary welcome and high mass, with long, poetic orations by “talking chiefs”—orators appointed and trained in the “respect language” of formal diplomacy and in the traditional mythic allusions, followed by the highly ritualistic drinking of a tangy, slightly anesthetic potion made from the root of the ‘*ova* plant. As this ceremony unfolded, eighty-one-year-old President McKay sat cross-legged for hours on woven mats in the magnificently decorated, open-sided chiefs’ *fale* near the mission home, with us missionaries gathered around the outside, listening raptly. He responded to the speeches by admiring the chiefs’ ornate costumes and praising their traditions, including the stylized speeches reflecting their royal rank. He then reminded them there was one thing greater—their shared Christian faith and various callings in that faith. When the kava cup was passed to him, he deftly performed the ceremonial flourish of first dribbling a few drops on the ground and drank the mouth-numbing drink right down. We missionaries were mildly shocked, but impressed, by that and also when he drank the Samoan “cocoa” at a later feast. Even though we drank both these liquids to be polite, we had speculated that they might violate the Word of

Wisdom's prohibition of alcohol and caffeine-laden "hot drinks"—and would be avoided by the prophet.

During the next three days of conferences and testimony meetings, President and Sister McKay often strolled around the mission home grounds, talking with the Saints and missionaries. At one point, he took Charlotte and me aside and asked us pointed questions about our experiences and our opinions concerning how the work was going, how Samoans were responding and were being treated. Then at the huge, farewell gift-giving ceremony, President McKay spontaneously displayed the combination of charismatic and humane, traditional and innovative qualities that are his legacy. He and Sister McKay sat with the mission president and Samoan Church leaders while the members of each Church congregation paraded across a large lawn their variety of gifts, most prominently the huge, precious, finely woven and decorated mats called *'ietoga* and bolts of colorfully dyed bark cloth, and then piled them at his feet before breaking into a farewell song.

When all had come forward and the huge group had been seated on the ground before him. President McKay arose and picked up two of the gifts, a carved six-foot staff and a large fly whisk, woven of coconut husk string, both of which he had seen the orators use as they spoke in the kava ceremony. He stood forth, taller than the staff and with those waves of white hair curling back above his ears and shining in the tropical sun, held the staff before him, and swung the whisk over his left shoulder in the precise ceremonial fashion. Then he proceeded to bless the people and prophesy their future, including a temple to be built near them. A new place was carved out in my soul by that combination of generous respect for the Samoans' traditions and devout attention to the LDS orthodox ideas and experiences that would bring them salvation.

A SEARCHING, DILIGENT YOUTH

David O. McKay's testimony came not miraculously, but as a "natural sequence to the performance of duty."

NEARLY FIFTEEN YEARS later, when he was ninety-five, President McKay touched me with that same combination of generous spiritual charisma and openness with unwavering orthodox confession and insight that I had seen in Samoa. In a speech at the October 1968 general conference read by his son David, he told how he had struggled in vain all through his teenage years to get God to declare to him the truth of His revelation to Joseph Smith. He had often ridden his horse out into the sagebrush hills around Huntsville, got on his knees, and prayed, "fervently and sincerely," but "no spiritual manifestation had come to me." That admission surprised—but also reassured—many of us who had been conditioned to expect that anyone who asks sincerely will receive a divine confirmation of truth, yet who knew in our hearts that it was not always that easy.

President McKay told how he nevertheless continued to seek truth and to serve others in the Church. He went on a mission to Scotland mainly because he trusted his parents that it would be a good thing to do. There, late in his mission, he finally received the witness he had sought. In his general conference description and analy-

sis of the experience, which is much more fully detailed than in his modest journal entry—for 29 May 1899, he notes that his witness came indirectly, through being in the right place, humbly serving, rather than through direct pleading with God;

The spiritual manifestation for which I had prayed as a boy in my teens came as a natural sequence to the performance of duty. For, as the apostle John declared, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

Following a series of meetings at the conference held in Glasgow, Scotland, was a most remarkable priesthood meeting. I remember, as if it were yesterday, the intensity of the inspiration of that occasion. Everybody felt the rich outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord. All present were truly of one heart and one mind. Never before had I experienced such an emotion. It was a manifestation for which as a doubting youth I had secretly prayed most earnestly. . . .

During the progress of the meeting, an elder on his own initiative arose and said, “Brethren, there are angels in this room.” Strange as it may seem, the announcement was not startling; indeed, it seemed wholly proper, though it had not occurred to me [that] there were divine beings present. I only knew that I was overflowing with gratitude for the presence of the Holy Spirit.¹

This “confession” by President McKay, which I later learned he had recounted in earlier talks, struck me as a crucial testament at the end of his life, and it profoundly influenced the development of my testimony. I realized that my own spiritual manifestations had come, not by direct seeking, but indeed “as a natural sequence to the performance of duty.” I was reassured that such divine affirmations were possible, though they might be seldom and slow in coming—and that they would most likely come as a byproduct of my efforts to serve, to know, even to love very different people from myself. I was beginning to understand why the Church, through the context it provided of learning to love unconditionally through lay service, was as true as the Gospel.

AN AFFABLE, GRACIOUS PROPHET

President McKay’s hallmarks were conservative devotion, orthodox spirituality, liberal perspective, and courage.

THE PLACE OF David O. McKay in Mormon culture can be measured by the unprecedented growth in both size and positive reputation of the Church during his nearly twenty years as president. From 1951 to 1970, membership increased from nine hundred thousand to nearly three million, but even more dramatic was the change in the public-perception of Mormonism—from small, “peculiar,” and somewhat paranoid Utah sect to respected, genuinely Christian, world-wide religion, with temples reaching out to New Zealand and Switzerland and presiding over the skylines of Los Angeles and Oakland, with a world-traveling president who was

praised and sought out for counsel by people as diverse as self-help author Dale Carnegie, movie mogul Cecil B. De Mille, labor leader Walter Reuther, and U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson.

President McKay physically embodied that new image— caught perfectly in the Alvin Gittins’s portrait, at ease in formal evening wear but still very much the prophet with his flowing mane of white hair and gracious, penetrating eyes. He was very tall, even imposing, known to be a rugged outdoorsman who continued as president to work on his family ranch in Huntsville, Utah, and to ride his beloved horse Sonny Boy into his nineties—and to enjoy tooling around the Wasatch Front in his big Cadillac. He was witty, literate, and urbane, the most directly attractive Mormon prophet since Joseph Smith. By 1968, in a U.S. Gallup Poll, he ranked as second only to Cardinal Cushing among the world’s “most admired men” in religion.

In order to explore this important change in image and its legacy in Mormon culture, in this essay I look inward—into my heart and those of people like me who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s and still consider David O. McKay “our” president; into the Church I am devoutly part of and the culture I love and criticize; and also into his Scottish missionary diaries, recently published by the University of Utah, which reveal with remarkable clarity the developing qualities of an extraordinary young man.² In that missionary experience, I will explore what shapes and reveals the future prophet and what he continues to mean to us.

My central and crucial purpose is that “moderate,” even “liberal,” be seen as good words to describe the great range of President McKay’s ideas and the unique qualities of his character, not as limiting labels. Certainly, he was a “conservative.” He was, in Webster’s definitions, “disposed to maintain existing views, conditions, or institutions” and inclined to “traditional norms of taste, elegance, style, and manners.”³ Yet he was also a classical liberal—and clearly the most liberal of any LDS prophet in the twentieth century. His brand of liberality contradicts the current derogatory definition of “liberal” (as dangerously unorthodox, even immoral) that has made the term one of the unfortunate casualties in the culture wars of the past fifteen years—in both American and Mormon culture President McKay was a “liberal” because (again using Webster’s definitions) he was both “marked by generosity and open-handedness” and inclined toward “belief in progress, the essential goodness of man, and the autonomy of the individual [and] protection of political and civil liberties.”

At the same time, his teachings focused (as all his sermons and writings amply show⁴) on the core of the Mormon orthodoxy established by Joseph Smith and Brigham Young: (1) the literal, physical existence of a God in whose image all humans are made and whose essential qualities all humans can emulate; (2) a divine savior, Jesus Christ, who both lived to give us an example of the ideal life and suffered and died to provide means for us to overcome sin and live eternally; (3) the family as the model for earthly happiness and literal heavenly existence; and (4) the responsibility of all Saints to share with their neighbors these divine and essential truths. Phrases he used that express such central orthodox ideas have become Mormon adages, such as “Whate’er thou art, act well thy part,” “No success can

compensate for failure in the home,” and “Every member a missionary.”

In the past fifteen years in the United States, both “conservatives” and “liberals” have misused those terms to attack each other rather than merely to describe tendencies or approaches in our political and cultural life—different approaches that, traditionally, through dialogue and compromise, have helped our system be stable and progressive. Liberals have used “conservative” to imply racist, sexist, and ignorant. Conservatives have used “liberal” to mean thoughtless revolutionaries bent on destroying morality and government responsibility. This demonizing has crept into Mormon culture, where both groups have let “conservative” mean devout (even self-righteous) and “liberal” mean rebellious (even libertine). For me, President McKay’s unique place in twentieth-century Mormon culture was that he demonstrated, especially during his twenty-year presidency, that a person could be both conservative and liberal—and all the while entirely faithful and orthodox. His greatest legacy could be to help us return to that traditional understanding, to end the culture wars in a genuinely united and diverse Mormonism, made stronger by an inclusive interaction between believing, equally orthodox and mutually accepting, liberals and conservatives.

Conservative rightly describes President McKay’s emphasis on the then-fifty-year-old doctrine that converts, rather than “gathering to Zion” in Utah, should stay in their home countries and “build Zion” in the growing new stakes there. But liberal describes how he reinvigorated that received tradition—not simply by telling the Saints to remain at home but by personally building and dedicating, on his world tours, fine new chapels throughout Europe and Asia, beginning, appropriately, with a chapel in Glasgow, Scotland, where he had served in 1898–99. Liberal is also the right word for his less visible influence on Church policy and statements that prepared Mormons to accept civil rights for all and eventually equal religious rights for Blacks and that allowed Mormons to see sexuality as contributing positively to marriage, beyond having children, and even to practice birth control.⁵ Conservative is the best word for his constant emphasis on a stable, self-sacrificing marriage and a self-disciplined, personal morality as the foundation of a good society; liberal is best for his remarkable resistance to dogmatism about such things as evolution and his willingness to break a rule rather than break a heart.

From the first, non-Mormons identified President McKay as representing a change from the more “conservative,” even “dogmatic,” image of the Church and its leadership. On his appointment in April 1951, *Newsweek* noted that some expected President McKay would “keep the church clear of politics, gradually withdraw it from the business field, and concentrate on converts.”⁶ Catholic sociologist Thomas O’Dea wrote in *The Mormons*, in 1957, that “while a man genuinely respected by all groups within the church, [he] is not unfriendly to the liberals . . . [and seems] to have introduced a degree of flexibility in religious thought into the sphere of official acceptability.”⁷ In 1970, at his death, *Time* noted his “gentleness and good humor . . . an affable new image of Mormonism. . . . He was perhaps the first Mormon president to treat non-Mormons as generously as members of his own faith.”⁸

However, Richard N. Armstrong, a communications professor at the Wichita State University, argues that the dramatic-growth in numbers and favorable public

image of Mormonism in the 1950s and 1960s was a direct result of President McKay's personal charisma and the powerful influence of his effectively expressed ideas *upon Mormons themselves*, rather than upon others. In *The Rhetoric of David O. McKay*, Armstrong claims this influence "resulted in his own followers becoming more committed to the Church and, therefore, more willing to share their faith with nonmember friends."⁹ Armstrong shows convincingly that both the ideas and the elements of that charismatic influence were highly orthodox. Through an analysis of the 107 General Conference talks President McKay delivered, Armstrong demonstrates the central themes were, in order, (1) reviewing the progress of the Church, commending the members, and giving thanks for divine guidance; (2) bearing witness of God's existence and corporeal nature, the dual physical and spiritual nature of humans, with both a conservative emphasis on the dangers of worldly influences and bodily appetites and a liberal emphasis on human perfectibility and the joy of the abundant life Christ came to give us all; (3) the crucial importance of chastity, marital fidelity, and attention to the hard work and self-discipline required by both partners in building an ideal home life, (4) the unqualified centrality of a divine Savior and his atonement to the LDS faith; and (5) the universal responsibility of Latter-day Saints to carry that faith to others. Armstrong notes that the rhetorical force of these ideas derived from their being ideas that were already firmly believed by Mormons and also shared by many other Christians. Finally, he argues that President McKay's remarkable impact was enhanced by the unique power of his calm, literate, but personal, even homespun, style and especially by an accumulating charisma that derived from both folklore about him and his own modestly described but clearly divine experiences. These included his being told on his mission that someday he would "sit in the leading councils of the Church,"¹⁰ his bringing a dead boy to life on his first visit to Samoa in 1921, his "prayer under a pepper tree" in Hawaii on that same apostolic tour that produced dramatic spiritual manifestations for others,¹¹ and his direct witness in 1968 that "my testimony of the risen Lord is just as real as Thomas'. . . I have heard his voice, and I have received his guidance in matters pertaining to his kingdom here on earth."¹²

MISSIONARY EXPERIENCES

*Surprising actions and reflections mark Elder McKay's
spiritual and intellectual growth.*

THE MISSIONARY DIARIES give us a concentrated look at the young man who left his rural home in 1897 without the testimony he had yearned for, still quite rough in manners and provincial in attitudes, and returned two years later to move adeptly into challenging leadership callings in the Weber Stake, then as principal of Weber Stake Academy (the future Weber State University) in 1902, and only seven years after his mission, an apostle. President McKay came, as my parents and I did, from a Mormon village, like most Northern and Western American towns, that down into the 1950s was totally without experience of other races—and where there was commonly expressed racial fear and prejudice. Nevertheless, with my strong sense of his later generous openness to racial diversity, I was somewhat

surprised to find an early entry in the diary, as he leaves Ogden to begin his mission, that describes, in unflattering terms, his discomfort in a train car crowded with Blacks and Italians. But then as I read on, I could see the maturing and liberalizing changes that his missionary experiences in service to a great variety of people were bringing him. For instance, in Stirling, Scotland, not long after arriving, he went to hear a Black choir, Loudin's Original Fisk Jubilee Singers, and recognized them as a group that had been with him on the Atlantic crossing the previous August: "The audience was small, but the singing was nonetheless excellent. At the close, I stepped to the front and shook hands with them. They seemed pleased to see me, and I am sure I was glad to see them. Although I do not care much for a Negro, still I have a warm spot for these beautiful singers."

There are other surprises for us from the actions and reflections of this young elder in a less rule-bound mission culture than we know today—some of which contradict the folklore about him. For instance, the famous story of his spending a morning exploring Stirling Castle: on the way back, he came across the carving over a doorway, "Whate'er Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part" (which isn't mentioned in the diary but was recalled later), was moved to regret the time spent away from his missionary duties, and vowed to do better.¹³ That story had always suggested to me he didn't ever again go sightseeing or indulge in mere recreation. But he did. He took companions—and mission leaders—back to Stirling Castle (wonderful account on 30 May 1899) and to other places of note, especially the birthplace of Robert Burns and other monuments to the poet. In fact, especially after being chosen to preside over the Scottish Conference in June 1898 and permanently settling in Glasgow, he often went to the theatre. That, too, brought some moments of doubt: "I enjoyed the play while it lasted; but somehow there is something that seems to prick one's conscience after having attended a theatre, when perhaps he could have been doing missionary work—the feeling experienced after the play is over is not the one, by any means, that follows the performance of duty; and yet should not a missionary *not* participate in such recreation?" (10 October 1898). We know that Elder McKay's answer to his own nervously convoluted question was that a missionary *should*, because he went the very next Friday (14 October) with a visiting missionary to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, with "Sir Henry Irving as Shylock, and Miss Ellen Terry as Portia. . . . Irving did not appear. It was all very good; but we were a little disappointed." He even becomes something of a (rather liberal) theater critic: "Brother Eccles and I . . . went to the Theatre Royal to see Mr. Wilson Barrett in 'The Manxman.' It was excellent. The play teaches moral lessons and right conduct by showing the opposite of these" (6 May 1899).

What Elder McKay's missionary journal documents, much like that of Lowell Bennion in Germany thirty years later, is the steady maturation of a very bright, observant, devout, and intellectually expansive, witty young man. The maturation is evident in his critical appreciation of world culture in general, his love of a specific place and people, his liberal understanding and clear testimony of the gospel, and his increasingly intelligent, pragmatic, and able leadership in the Church. He goes to musicals and operas as well as plays; reads and comments on the newspaper (such as accounts of the outbreak of the Spanish American War in April 1898); visits and

comments on social conditions in the almshouses, mines, asylums, and red light districts; and describes, records, and makes clever (never condescending) comments on Scottish customs and rhetoric. He is obviously a tender and poetic young man: After visiting Alva Glen, he and a companion become convinced “that beautiful scenes are found *outside* of Utah. [We] went near the top, covered with misty clouds, and there sang hymns” (10 May 1898). After reporting an interview with a young man who has “transgressed and burdened himself for life” and “made another unhappy, also,” he writes a little poem in his journal about the man (17 December 1898).

The young missionary must also deal increasingly with difficult, even tragic, situations. On 18 October 1898, he learns that a new missionary, Elder Muir, is very sick, and two days later, receives a telegram that he has died. He arranges with the mission president to send temple clothes and come for a funeral, helps dress the body and stays overnight with it, and conducts the funeral and burial, all the while grieving (“the saddest affair that ever I have experienced”). More than three months later, on 30 January 1899, he is told the new president of the Church, Lorenzo Snow, wants the missionary’s body exhumed and taken home (“a task I almost dread”). He seeks legal counsel and finds this will be “a difficult, as well as an expensive undertaking,” and so it turns out to be, taking much of his time and ingenuity and emotional energy for two months, at the end of which he must actually open the coffin to confirm the identity—“a ghastly sight! I shall not attempt to describe it” (1 April 1899).

A constant trial—and test of his maturing skills as an administrator and a spiritual counselor—is the constant bickering over position in the local Glasgow branch. He works ferociously, for months, with two brethren who seem particularly proud and intractable and confides his impatience only to his journal: “O, it’s disgusting they act like children! And yet they mean to do what is right” (18 March 1899). Finally, he has to release both and take over as branch president himself with them as counselors—but only after the young elder has a heated meeting with them, spends a sleepless night, and holds a special priesthood meeting the next day where finally a “good spirit” is manifest and all sustained (“The hand-dealing of the Lord was manifested in this action and even in the disturbance last night” [18 June 1899]).

But we see as well the unique and irrepressible spirit of a young man developing himself into the man who would be an unusually liberal apostle and Church president. He can laugh at himself: “Open-air meeting at night on Cathedral Square. . . . Our singing (?) failed to bring any one around; in fact, it drove them away. We had two men, a lamppost, and the wind as an audience!” (23 September 1898). He can take his mission president and companions on a sightseeing trip through Stirling and then on a twenty-mile hike along the shores of Loch Vennacher and Loch Katrine, trading his shoes for the president’s tight-fitting ones and getting severe blisters, and then write a long, wittily nationalistic, mock heroic poem “to scots in spirit and endurance” memorializing the trip (8–12 June 1899). He can tell of going for a walk with that president while waiting for a train and being greatly moved when the president, in tears, tells of meeting and marrying his wife and the guidance of God in his life (23 May 1899).

As Elder McKay's mission comes to an end, he has the remarkable spiritual experience he retold in general conference in 1968, where he finally received divine confirmation of the truth of the gospel "as a natural sequence to the performance of duty." He only gradually came to understand and articulate the full import of missionary experiences like this one as their consequences worked themselves out in his life. It seems to me characteristic of this man that he does not mention in his diary the experience at the end of that conference that later became famous in the Church. That was when he was told by his beloved President McMurrin, "Satan has desired you that he may sift you as wheat, but God is mindful of you, and if you will keep the faith, you will yet sit in the leading councils of the Church." When he first related that story, in 1934, his focus was on it being "more of a caution" than a prediction of glory: "At that moment there flashed into my mind temptations that had beset my path, . . . with the resolve then and there to keep the faith, there was born a desire to be of service to my fellowmen."¹⁴

STERLING MCMURRIN & LOWELL BENNION

President McKay was magnanimous to Mormonism's most visible liberals when other Church leaders were not.

DAVID O. MCKAY'S careful honesty here and his openness about struggles and complexity and his consequent respect for diversity is increasingly clear in his diaries and throughout his life. I believe those qualities profoundly affected many Mormons indirectly, although they were perhaps not as obvious in his public statements and actions as in private interviews and behind the scenes. Two persons who were privileged to see clearly, even experience directly, those less obvious qualities were themselves the two most well-known and influential twentieth-century Mormon liberals outside the Church hierarchy, Sterling M. McMurrin and Lowell L. Bennion. Both became acquainted with President McKay, who knew their fathers well, when they were young men (he performed the marriages of each in the Salt Lake Temple). They continued that friendship as they developed careers as teachers (both at first for the LDS Institute system and eventually at the University of Utah) and as writers of some of the most profound and enduring books on Mormon thought.

McMurrin lost his faith in the divine claims of the Church and left the Church Education System to become a professor of philosophy and dean of the graduate school at the University of Utah and eventually U.S. Commissioner of Education under President John F. Kennedy. But he remained fully identified with his Mormon people, and, in his increasingly prominent public life, he was often a loyal and articulate defender of the Church and its leaders. He arranged for the famous visit of the distinguished labor leader Walter Reuther in 1955 with President McKay, of whom Reuther said privately to McMurrin and then in public addresses, "I have met with major leaders all over the world, including kings and presidents; but I have never in my life met a person who made such an impression on me as this man has."¹⁵ In 1958, McMurrin was asked by the Church to be its representative to speak at a special conference at Ohio State University and presented the material that

became his landmark monograph, *The Philosophical Foundations of the Mormon Religion*.¹⁶ In the early 1960s, he became a liaison between the Church and the NAACP when it was pressuring the Church to more actively pursue the civil rights cause in Utah, and as a result, he wrote a statement strongly affirming civil rights for all, which was approved by President McKay and read by President Hugh B. Brown in the fall 1964 general conference.¹⁷

McMurrin continued to attend church in the 1940s and early '50s and was given occasional teaching assignments and asked to give talks at Church on special occasions. But in 1954, a new bishop in his ward told him, "I'm supposed to investigate you to see if you should be put on trial." McMurrin, in his account, speculates that word of this got to President McKay through Obert C. Tanner, his office mate at the University of Utah, who was a good friend of Apostle Adam S. Bennion. A few days later, McMurrin got a call from President McKay, who insisted on seeing him at once, drove to the university, and spent the afternoon with him. McMurrin reports three statements from that conversation that may be somewhat surprising but are consistent with President McKay's actions and other conversations. He asked McMurrin, "Just what is it that a person is not permitted to believe without being asked to leave this church? . . . Is it evolution? I hope not, because I believe in evolution."¹⁸ When McMurrin suggested he may have brought on his trouble himself, by saying in his Sunday School class that he didn't believe the teachers claim that "Negroes are under a divine curse," President McKay said, "I'm glad you said that because I don't believe it either. As far as I'm concerned, it is not now nor has it ever been a doctrine of this church that the Negroes are under a divine curse. . . . withholding the priesthood from Negroes. . . is not a matter of doctrine. It is simply a practice and it is going to change."¹⁹

About the threatened Church court, McMurrin reports that President McKay was very angry and said, "They can't do this to you. . . . They *cannot* do this to you!" and after a pause, added, "All I will say is that if they put you on trial for excommunication, I will be there as the first witness in your behalf." McMurrin says he had never felt such "warm support," and the trial never occurred.

Lowell Bennion remained an active and devoutly believing member all his life. Despite being denigrated as "unorthodox" and a "liberal" by some Mormons, he also felt personally the warm support of President McKay. This was apparent from the time President McKay called Bennion in for an interview at the start of his career as an Institute teacher in 1935, and it continued through a number of conversations about difficult issues that arose as he tried to teach students with both faith and honesty. That support was manifest publicly when President McKay twice asked Bennion to speak in general conference (1958 and 1968), the only lay member so honored, and called Bennion as a member of the Church Correlation Committee for Youth, on which he served from 1962 to 1972.

Bennion remembers that meeting in 1935 with President McKay, then second counselor to President Heber J. Grant, as crucial to his self-confidence and direction as a beginning teacher of religion and as "a guide throughout his career." He reports that President McKay sounded him out on a number of difficult issues and then offered only this advice: "I don't care what you do or what you draw upon, but be

true to yourself and loyal to the cause.”²⁰ Later, when Bennion arranged interviews with President McKay on controversial questions such as evolution and family planning, asking what he should teach in those areas, he was again invited to express his own ideas and beliefs, which the prophet “supported and amplified. . . . He gave me the feeling that we were thinking together, that he was incorporating my reflections into his own.”²¹ Bennion was particularly impressed by their discussion of *Man: His Origin and Destiny*, the book by Joseph Fielding Smith, president of the Quorum of the Twelve, which some were pushing as the Church’s official position on evolution and the age of the earth but which Bennion’s students had raised questions about. President McKay made clear both his gracious respect for and his emphatic disagreement with President Smith’s views. He said, “The Church has taken no official stand on this question. Each one of us gives his own opinion and my friend has a right to his even as you and I have a right to our own.” Again, in a meeting with Bennion and other institute teachers in November 1953, President McKay was “very understanding” of President Smith but stated that he himself “felt that the earth is very old and evolutionary ideas have much to commend them.” As for President Smith’s book, he said “very emphatically” that it had not been “authorized or approved” and “did not represent the position of the church.”²²

BLACKS AND THE PRIESTHOOD

President McKay prepared the Church to receive the 1978 revelation.

PERHAPS THE MOST surprising and impressive evidence of President McKay’s generous elevation of people above rules came in response to a plea from Bennion concerning a freshman student who had come to him in tears about the youth’s continuing yearning to pass the sacrament—even though he had been denied the priesthood because people in his Utah town believed his grandmother was Black. He also later reported to Bennion that his sister was being denied the privilege of being married in the Salt Lake Temple. Bennion went to President Brown, who set up a meeting with President McKay. After hearing Bennion out, he mused, “When problems like this come to me, I say to myself, ‘Sometime I shall meet my Father in Heaven, and what will he say?’” Bennion responded, “He’ll forgive you if you err on the side of mercy,” and President McKay smiled and said, “Leave it to me.” A few days later, Bennion heard from the student that his sister would have a temple marriage—and a few months later, the student asked Bennion to ordain him an elder in preparation for a mission call.²³

David O. McKay made a number of such quiet but crucial decisions in preparing the Church for Blacks to receive the priesthood. Given the importance of that eventual change in 1978 for the Church’s becoming a mature world religion, those quiet decisions may turn out to be the most important element in his liberal legacy. In 1954, he discontinued the practice of requiring converts in South Africa and South America to trace their genealogy back to Europe to prove their non-Black “purity” before receiving the priesthood. The practical consequence was that a number of people throughout the world who actually had black ancestry were given the priesthood or temple blessings. If, as sometimes happened, people doing genealogy

discovered Black ancestry, their priesthood and temple ordinances were not revoked; they were simply asked not to use the priesthood nor go to the temple for the time being. In 1963, clearly with his support, his even more liberal counselor, Hugh B. Brown, was close to arranging the change of policy he believed was all that was necessary for blacks to receive the priesthood, but at the last moment, at least one apostle objected and the plan failed.²⁴ He approved the strong statement on civil rights written by McMurrin and read by President Brown in the 1964 October Conference. Finally, he approved, though he didn't write, the official Church statement on Blacks and the priesthood issued in 1969 that reaffirmed the policy but jettisoned all the folklore of doctrinal justifications (the reasons are "known only to God") and included the remarkable statement, "We join with those throughout the world who pray that all of the blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ may in due time of the Lord become available to men of faith everywhere"²⁵—which could be read as a plea for Mormons to pray for Blacks to receive the priesthood.

Some have hypothesized that it was, ironically, President McKay's conviction that Blacks receiving the priesthood was not a matter of doctrine, that is of changing basic beliefs about the nature of Blacks, that actually kept the change from being implemented. Because he believed it required only an administrative decision to change the policy, he did not seek or receive the revelation that was apparently necessary to convince some of the Twelve. President Kimball did seek such a revelation, received it in June 1978, and shared it with the Twelve in a remarkable spiritual experience that convinced them the change was the Lord's will.²⁶ But I think McMurrin is right that President McKay's liberal spirit, his generous decisions and expressions, prepared the ground for the general Church's acceptance of that revelation: "Without [him] in leadership over a long period of time, the change of policy that came under President Kimball could not have had the immediate transforming effect which it had on the Mormon people."²⁷

A UNIQUE LEGACY

Learning from young David O. McKay, how can we widen our perspectives on the gospel, the Church, and the world?

AS I READ the final entries in President McKay's missionary diaries, I thought of that remarkable legacy that combined conservative devotion, orthodox spirituality, and liberal perspective and courage. He has the remarkable spiritual experience where he finally received confirmation of the truth of the gospel "as a natural sequence to the performance of duty." He celebrates the Fourth of July in Edinburgh, noting the irony that the city is festooned with red, white, and blue bunting and full of patriotic songs—not "to celebrate America's natal day" but for a visit of the Prince of Wales, about whom he quotes Carlyle's claim that "society is founded on hero worship" and quotes a local newspaper account that the Prince has no claim on society's adulation except that "he is the son of his mother!" (6 July 1899).

He is sent as Church representative to Cardiff for the Welsh National Eisteddfod, the world-class musical competition, meets and is hosted by the presiding officer,

Dr. Parry, through a letter of introduction from Evan Stephens. While there, with what he considers providential help, he finds his mother's birthplace and some relatives at nearby Merthyr Tydfil (18–20 July 1899). Finally he leaves for home on 26 August 1899—and five days out experiences a collision with an iceberg that could well have ended like that of the *Titanic* thirteen years later save for the prompt action of the captain in reversing engines just before the collision (“It is at such critical moments as these that one fully appreciates the comforting prophetic assurance, ‘You shall go in peace, and return in safety,’ spoken by a servant of God [in my setting apart]”).

The final entries reveal both the increased devotion and the widening perspective that two years of missionary service have brought. It is not hard to imagine David O. McKay returning home and, in just a few years, as a member of the Weber Stake superintendence revolutionizing the training of Sunday School teachers, then, as the new principal of Weber Stake Academy, expanding the physical facilities (by leading the faculty in raising forty-thousand dollars for a new building) and improving the public outreach (with a distinguished lecture series), and finally being called as an apostle at the age of thirty-two. One hundred years later, we can enjoy this remarkably full and frank account of a complex and attractive young man's coming of age, but we can also reflect on the unique combination of his experience and his maturing response to it that went into the making of the most liberal and influential Mormon prophet of that century. We can try to imagine how we can continue that legacy in our own mature response to it.

NOTES

1. *The Improvement Era*, Dec. 1968, 85. Note that, with characteristic restraint, he does not, in the diary entry nor the later elaboration, claim to have seen the angels himself—only that he felt the Holy Spirit in a way that finally met his need for confirmation.

2. *What E'er Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part: The Missionary Diaries of David O McKay*, ed. Stan Larson and Patricia Larson (Salt Lake City: Blue Ribbon Books, 1999).

3. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam, 1975).

4. See especially *Gospel Ideals* (1953), *Pathways to Happiness* (1957), *Secrets of a Happy Life* (1960), *Treasures of Life* (1962), *True to the Faith* (1966), *Man May Know for Himself* (1967), *Stepping Stones to an Abundant Life* (1971), and *Choose You This Day* (1971).

5. For a summary of this liberalization of attitudes towards sex in marriage and birth control under President McKay's influence, see Eric G Swedin, “One Flesh’: A Historical Overview of Latter-day Saint Sexuality and Psychology,” in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31:4 (winter 1998), 1–4.

6. *Newsweek*, 16 Apr. 1951, 92.

7. Thomas F O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1957), 231.

8. *Time*, 2 Feb. 1970, 49–50.

9. Richard N. Armstrong, *The Rhetoric of David O. McKay, Mormon Prophet* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 2.

10. *Deseret News Church Section*, 27 Oct 1934, reprinted in *Cherished Experiences from the Writings of President David O. McKay*, comp. Clare Middlemiss (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 5–6.

11. See Lavina Fielding Anderson, “Prayer under a Pepper Tree: Sixteen Accounts of a Spiritual Manifestation,” *BYU Studies* 33:1 (1993): 55–78.

12. Armstrong, 114–15.
13. See Francis M. Gibbons, *David O. McKay: Apostle to the World, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 44–45.
14. Quoted in Gibbons, 50.
15. Sterling M. McMurrin and L Jackson Newell, *Matters of Conscience: Conversations with Sterling M. McMurrin on Philosophy, Education, and Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 86. Elder Marion D Hanks also reports this comment in “The Soul of a Prophet,” *The Improvement Era*, Sept. 1968, 5.
16. McMurrin and Newell, 206.
17. McMurrin and Newell, 200–201.
18. McMurrin and Newell, 198.
19. McMurrin and Newell, 198–200.
20. Mary Lythgoe Bradford, *Lowell L. Bennion: Teacher, Counselor, Humanitarian* (Salt Lake City: Dialogue Foundation, 1995), 65.
21. Bradford, 92.
22. Bradford, 136.
23. Bradford, 165–66.
24. See “Mormons Weigh Stand on Negro,” *New York Times*, 7 June 1963, and Armand Mauss’s account of First Presidency meetings at the time, from notes taken by Eugene Campbell, in *Neither White Nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church*, ed Lester E. Bush Jr. and Armand L. Mauss (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984), 156. For a description of President Brown’s efforts, see “Hugh B. Brown In His Final Years” by Edwin B. Firmage, *Sunstone*, Nov. 1987, 7–11, also as “Afterword” in *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown* (Salt Lake City Signature Books, 1988): 142.
25. First Presidency statement, 15 Dec. 1969; reprinted in *Dialogue* 4 (winter 1969), 102–103.
- 26 See Bruce R McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” speech delivered 18 Aug. 1978, published in *Charge to Religious Educators* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 152, and chapter 7, “The Long-Promised Day,” in *Adventures of a Church Historian* by Leonard Arrington (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 175–185.
27. McMurrin and Newell, 202.

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