

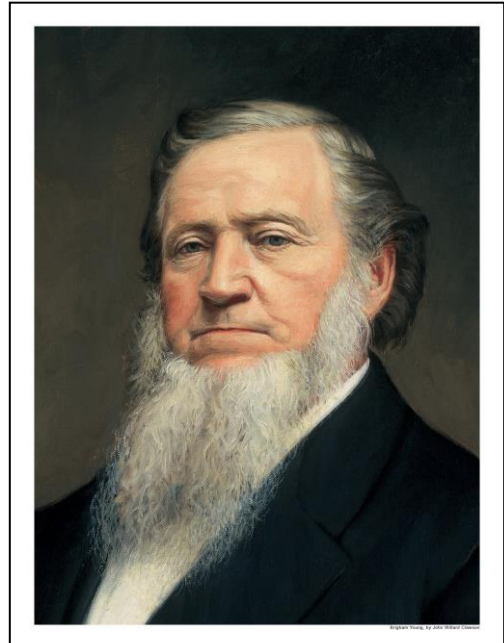
# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Was Brigham Young a “Jerk”?

ERIC JOHNSON

Brad R. Wilcox, a BYU professor and the second counselor in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Young Men general presidency, gave a fireside talk on Sunday, February 6, 2022 to church congregations in Alpine, UT. He claims that members have complained to him about how Mormonism's authoritative priesthood was not given to males with African heritage until 1978, effectively barring them from the top level of the [celestial kingdom](#) and future [exaltation](#).

“How come the Blacks didn't get the priesthood until 1978?” he said as if this was a question he had been asked. “What's up with that, Brother Wilcox? What, was Brigham Young a jerk? Members of the church were prejudiced?”



Wilcox suggested that the wrong question is asked. “Maybe instead of asking why the Blacks had to wait until 1978 to get the priesthood, we should be asking, why did the whites and other races have to wait until 1829,” he said.

Social media lit up in response, with Wilcox getting criticized from all angles for his insensitive comment—even though his view seems to be consistent with LDS teachings over the years. While it is rare for someone in Mormon authority to back down for what has been said, Wilcox issued a public apology the next night while admitting that he made a serious mistake as “what I hoped to express about trusting God's timing did NOT come through as I intended.”

However, a [YouTube video clip](#) from January 18, 2020 and posted four months later depicts Wilcox making the same comments two years ago in Lilburn, Georgia. In that talk, he said,

I don't mean to be a little over-simplistic, but sometimes I just think that we make things too complicated. Why didn't the Blacks get the priesthood until 1978?

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What's up with that, Brother Wilcox? What, Latter-day Saints were prejudiced? What, Brigham Young was a jerk? I mean, you'll hear a lot of things. But maybe we're asking the wrong question. Maybe instead of asking why didn't the Blacks get the priesthood until '78, we should be asking why didn't everybody else get it before 1829? I mean, why did they have to wait until 1829 to have the priesthood restored?

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There was no fervor resulting from that talk, possibly because the video appeared to be taken on a cell phone with inferior audio. A [third video](#) at a different event posted on February 2, 2022 has also been posted, showing that Wilcox has reused this talk at least three times. Who knows how many other times, whether in religion classes or other speaking events, Wilcox said this same thing.

Regardless, I was struck by the claim made by Wilcox about Brigham Young.

## Was Brigham Young a jerk?

By bringing up this question, Wilcox did not say he agreed. After all, this would be a lack of respect for the former top leader of God's "restored" church to talk about other "brethren," even those who are deceased. Young served as the second president of his church; if it were not for Young, we may not even be talking about Mormonism any more than we talk about the Shakers or, for that matter, the Community of Christ, in everyday conversations. Even the church's main university is named after this important leader. If he were a jerk, then it would seem the church should have let us know and even pull his name off the university's title.

Many times Young taught that those with African heritage should be denied the church's priesthood, saying that this ban was a "true eternal principal" ordained by God Himself as he described in a speech given in Salt Lake City in 1852:

Now then, in the kingdom of God on the earth, a man who has the African blood in him cannot hold one jot nor tittle of Priesthood; Why? Because they are the true eternal principals the Lord Almighty has ordained, and who can help it – men cannot, the angels cannot, and all the powers of Earth and Hell cannot take it off, but thus saith the Eternal, "I am, what I am, I take it off at My pleasure, and not one particle of power can that posterity of Cain have, until the time comes the [Lord] says He will have it taken away. That time will come, when they will have the privilege of all we have the privilege of, and more. In the Kingdom of God on the Earth the Africans cannot hold one particle of power in Government" (*The Teachings of President Brigham Young: Vol. 3 1852-1854, Fred C. Collier, ed., 43.*

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Speech given to the Joint Session of the Legislature in Salt Lake City, on Thursday, February 5, 1852. Brackets in original).

In that same speech, Young said,

But let me tell you further. Let my seed mingle with the seed of Cain, [and] that brings the curse upon me, and upon my generations, [after me – should we do this] we will reap the same rewards with Cain” (Ibid., 44. Brackets in original).

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A few days later, Wilford Woodruff—who later became Mormonism’s fourth president—recounted Young’s comments in Woodruff’s diary (brackets, spelling, and punctuation intact):

The Lord said I will not kill Cane But I will put a mark upon him and it is seen in the [face?] of every Negro on the Earth And it is the decree of God that that mark shall remain upon the seed of Cane & the Curse [remain] untill all the seed of Abel should be re[deem?]ed and Cane will not receive the priesthood untill or salvation untill all the seed of Abel are Redeemed. Any man having one drop of the seed of Cane in him Cannot hold the priesthood & if no other Prophet ever spake it Before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ. I know it is true & they know it. The Negro cannot hold one particle of Government But the day will Come when all the seed of Cane will be Redeemed & have all the Blessings we have now & a great deal more. But the seed of Abel will be ahead of the seed of Cane to all Eternity. Let me consent to day to mingle my seed with the seed of Cane. It would Bring the same curse upon me And it would upon any man. And if any man mingles his seed with the seed of Cane the ownly way he Could get rid of it or have salvation would be to Come forward & have his head Cut off & spill his Blood upon the ground. It would also take [require] the life of his Children” (*Waiting for World’s End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff*, Susan Staker, ed., 300. Wilford Woodruff recounting Brigham Young’s remarks on February 7, 1852).

After citing this same passage, 11th President Harold B. Lee explained,

Surely no one of you who is an heir to a body of more favored lineage would knowingly intermarry with a race that would condemn your posterity to penalties that have been placed upon the seed of Cain by the judgments of God. It might not be amiss likewise to urge upon you the most serious consideration of any question of your possible intermarriage with individuals of any other race than your own. No one of you with safety can defy the laws of heredity and the centuries of training that have developed strong racial characteristics and tendencies among the distinctive peoples of the earth and then expect to find a happy, congenial

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family relationship from such a union. The wisdom of experience fully demonstrates the importance of your marrying those of your own race and those with a similar background of customs and manners (*Decisions for Successful Living*, 168).

Young was very clear about his thought of those with black skin. At the October [general conference](#) in 1859, he taught,



You see some classes of the human family that are black, uncouth, uncomely, disagreeable and low in their habits, wild, and seemingly deprived of nearly all the blessings of the intelligence that is generally bestowed upon mankind. The first man that committed the odious crime of killing one of his brethren will be cursed the longest of any one of the children of Adam. Cain slew his brother. Cain might have been killed, and that would have put a termination to that line of human beings. This was not to be, and the Lord put a mark upon him, which is the flat nose and black skin. Trace mankind down to after the flood, and then another curse is pronounced upon the same race—that they should be the “servant of servants;” and they will be, until that curse is removed; and the Abolitionists cannot help it, nor in the least alter that decree. How long is that race to endure the dreadful curse that is upon them? That curse will remain upon them, and they never can hold the Priesthood or share in it until all the other descendants of Adam have received the promises and enjoyed the blessings of the Priesthood and the keys thereof. Until the last ones of the residue of Adam’s children are brought up to that favourable position, the children of Cain cannot receive the first ordinances of the Priesthood. They were the first that were cursed, and they will be the last from whom the curse will be removed. When the residue of the family of Adam come up and receive their blessings, then the curse will be removed from the seed of Cain, and they will receive blessings in like proportion (*Journal of Discourses* 7:290-291).

Would Brigham Young have agreed with the decision in 1978 to allow the priesthood to those with African heritage? Notice how he said that the Blacks “were the first that were cursed” and that “they will be the last from whom the curse will be removed.” In other words, he believed that the priesthood should be withheld to Blacks until all other races had the opportunity. A few years later in 1863 he said,

Shall I tell you the law of God in regard to the African race? If the white man who belongs to the chosen seed mixes his blood with the seed of Cain, the penalty, under the law of God, is death on the spot. This will always be so (March 8, 1863, *Journal of Discourses* 10:110. See also John Lewis Lund’s *The Church and the Negro*, 1967, p. 54).

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Young also taught,

In ancient days old Israel was the chosen people in whom the Lord delighted, and whom he blessed and did so much for. Yet they transgressed every law that he gave them, changed every ordinance that he delivered to them, broke every covenant made with the fathers, and turned away entirely from his holy commandments, and the Lord cursed them. Cain was cursed for this, with this black skin that there is so much said about. Do you think that we could make laws to change the color of the skin of Cain's descendants? If we can, we can change the leopard's spots; but we cannot do this, neither can we change their blood (April 9, 1871, *Journal of Discourses* 14:86-87).

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## Is it Brigham's opinion? Or is what he taught 'doctrine'?

Using these citations as a background, many Latter-day Saints may be willing to say that, indeed, Brigham Young was a jerk. I recommend caution to those wanting to throw Brigham under the proverbial bus. After all, it was Young himself who believed that anything he had ever taught should be considered true doctrine revealed to him by God. Consider the following citations taken from several sermons given by Young:

What man or woman on the earth, what spirit in the spirit-world can say truthfully that I ever gave a wrong word of counsel, or a word of advice that could not be sanctioned by the heavens? The success which has attended me in my presidency is owing to the blessings and mercy of the Almighty (December 29, 1867, *Journal of Discourses* 12:127).

I know just as well what to teach this people and just what to say to them and what to do in order to bring them into the celestial kingdom. . . . I have never yet preached a sermon and sent it out to the children of men, that they may not call Scripture. Let me have the privilege of correcting a sermon, and it is as good Scripture as they deserve. The people have the oracles of God continually (January 2, 1870, *Journal of Discourses* 13:95).

Brother Orson Hyde referred to a few who complained about not getting revelations . . . I say now, when they [Young's sermons] are copied and approved by me they are as good Scripture as is couched in this Bible, and if you want to read revelation read the sayings of him who knows the mind of God, without any special command to one man to go here, and to another to go yonder, or to do this or that, or to go and settle here or there (October 6, 1870, *Journal of Discourses* 13:264).

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If there is an Elder here, or any member of this Church, called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who can bring up the first idea, the first sentence that I have delivered to the people as counsel that is wrong, I really wish they would do it; but they cannot do it, for the simple reason that I have never given counsel that is wrong; this is the reason (August 31, 1873, *Journal of Discourses* 16:161).

Stake president David Cameron remembered how Young defended himself from critics when he spoke at the fall 1903 general conference and said,

I remember many years ago, when I was a boy, hearing President Young state in Provo, where I lived, something like this: "Some people may think I am not leading the Church aright. Now, I will tell you how you may know when I do not lead the Church aright. The Lord will just nip my wind; for He will never allow any man to lead this Church astray" (*Conference Reports*, October 1903, 47-48).

Mission President J. N. Lambert spoke at the spring 1921 general conference and declared,

My testimony is that Joseph Smith was a prophet; that his legal successors have been prophets. Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant, have been sent by the Almighty for a purpose; the Lord has blessed them with prophetic vision, and with the power to discern and tell the people the things that they should know. He has given to this people a mouthpiece, that we may know when to go and where to go, when to do and when not to do things; that if we find we are not doing the things we should do, that we should repent, and repent sincerely; that we should get in line and remain in line, not set up our judgment against our leaders, or against the rule or direction of the Church (*Conference Reports*, April 1921, 53).

George Q. Cannon, a member of the First Presidency, lifted Young up when he said,

Talk about revelation! You go and read the sermons of President Young, and if you do not believe now that he was a Prophet, I think after you have read them you will be sure he was, because he talked as a Prophet to this people concerning their future, and his words were full of godlike wisdom, and he poured them out in a constant stream during his lifetime (*Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon* 1:328).

Both during his lifetime and continuing for many years after his death, Brigham Young was publicly considered a true prophet who spoke with authority given to him by God.

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## Who teaches doctrine? Answer: The president of the church

Brigham Young held the highest position of the LDS Church for close to 30 years, longer than any other president. If he was not a legitimate leader for this amount of time, shouldn't the other leaders have been valiant and tried to remove him from his position? Yet there never seemed to be a serious effort to oust him.

According to the principles of Mormonism, the president is supposed to keep the church on track while speaking authoritatively on spiritual affairs. Consider what Wilford Woodruff said,

I say to Israel, the Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as president of this 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, and so he will any other man who attempts to lead the children of men astray from the oracles of God and from their duty. God bless you (*The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, 212-213. See also *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Wilford Woodruff*, 199 and Doctrine and Covenants Official Declaration—1).

Speaking of all general authorities, J. Reuben Clark, a member of the First Presidency, explained in a general conference:

Having in mind that this Church of ours is a practical Church, that it deals with temporal as well as with spiritual affairs, I submit that whatever comes from the voices of those who hold that authority is scripture, no matter of what they may speak. That conclusion to me is inevitable (*Conference Reports*, April 1944, 112).

Tenth President Joseph Fielding Smith did not hold back when he wrote:

What time, since the organization of the Church, have any of the brethren exercising the Spirit of the Lord, ever taught this people that which was false? When have they ever said unto you that you should do that which was not right; that which would not make you better citizens and better members of the kingdom of God? You cannot, nor can any man, in righteousness, point to the time when any of them have wilfully stated anything that was contrary to the principles of righteousness, or that did not tend to make the people better in every way, that did not build them up in their salvation, temporally as well as spiritually (*Doctrines of Salvation* 3:297).

He was also cited in a church manual, saying,

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I think there is one thing which we should have exceedingly clear in our minds. Neither the President of the Church, nor the First Presidency, nor the united voice of the First Presidency and the Twelve will ever lead the Saints astray or send forth counsel to the world that is contrary to the mind and will of the Lord (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Fielding Smith*, 2013, 159).

What is scary is how quickly some LDS leaders have distanced themselves from the priesthood ban after June 1978. For instance, Apostle Bruce R. McConkie—whose racist comments in the first edition (1958) of his book *Mormon Doctrine* were changed in the second edition—said the following two months after the doctrine was changed:

There are statements in our literature by the early Brethren that we have interpreted to mean that the Negroes would not receive the priesthood in mortality. I have said the same things, and people write me letters and say, “You said such and such, and how is it now that we do such and such?” All I can say is that it is time disbelieving people repented and got in line and believed in a living, modern prophet. Forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whoever 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 (*Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, 164-165. From his address “All Are Alike unto God,” given at a Book of Mormon Symposium for Seminary and Institute teachers, Brigham Young University, August 18, 1978).

McConkie also said this:

It doesn’t make a particle of difference what anybody ever said about the Negro matter before the first day of June 1978. It is a new day and a new arrangement, and the Lord has now given the revelation that sheds light out into the world on this subject. As to any slivers of light or any particles of darkness of the past, we forget about them (*Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie*, 165).

But should a clear Mormon doctrine be forgotten when it had been taught publicly for about 125 years?

## Was Joseph Smith involved in the teaching?

Many Latter-day Saints like to blame Brigham Young for the creation of the priesthood ban. Yet Young’s contemporaries swear that the doctrine originated with Joseph Smith, the founder of the religion. Certainly this was the view of Brigham Young as reported by Wilford Woodruff from Christmas Day of 1869:



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Lorenzo Young asked if the Spirits of Negroes were Nutral in Heaven. He said someone said Joseph Smith said they were. Presidet [Brigham] Young said No they were not. There was No Nutral spirits in Heaven at the time of the Rebelion. All took sides. he said if any one said that He Herd the Prophet Joseph Say that the spirits of the Blacks were Nutral in Heaven He would not Believe them for He herd Joseph Say to the Contrary” (*Waiting for World’s End: The Diaries of Wilford Woodruff*, Susan Staker, ed., 300. Wilford Woodruff recounting Brigham Young’s remarks on December 25, 1869. Spelling in the original).

Joseph Fielding Smith declared how Young only taught what Joseph Smith believed:

This doctrine did not originate with President Brigham Young but was taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith. At a meeting of the general authorities of the Church, held August 22, 1895, the question of the status of the negro in relation to the Priesthood was asked and the minutes of that meeting say: “President George Q. Cannon remarked that the Prophet taught this doctrine: That the seed of Cain could not receive the Priesthood nor act in any of the offices of the Priesthood until the seed of Abel should come forward and take precedence over Cain’s offspring” (*The Way to Perfection*, 110. See also Milton R. Hunter’s *Pearl of Great Price Commentary*, 1948, 141-142).

Joseph Fielding Smith also reported,

President Brigham Young, answering a question put to him by Elder Lorenzo D. Young in a meeting held December 25, 1869, in Salt Lake City, said that Joseph Smith had declared that the Negroes were not neutral in heaven, for all the spirits took sides, but “the posterity of Cain are black because he (Cain) committed murder. He killed Abel and God set a mark upon his posterity” (*The Way to Perfection*, 105).

Until 1978 when Declaration 2 was announced, LDS leaders throughout the 20th century such as Wilford Woodruff, George Q. Cannon, and Joseph Fielding Smith had no problem repeating Young as telling the truth. In 1951, these three men who made up the church’s First Presidency said that the teaching was *not* a “policy” but rather a “direct commandment from the Lord.” They said,

The attitude of the Church with reference to the Negroes remains as it has always stood. It is not a matter of the declaration of a policy but of direct commandment from the Lord, on which is founded the doctrine of the Church from the days of its organization, to the effect that Negroes may become members of the Church but that they are not entitled to the Priesthood at the present time. The prophets

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of the Lord have made several statements as to the operation of the principle. President Brigham Young said: "Why are so many of the inhabitants of the earth cursed with a skin of blackness? It comes in consequence of their fathers' rejecting the power of the Holy Priesthood, and the law of God. They will go down to death. And when all the rest of the children have received their blessings in the Holy Priesthood, then that curse will be removed from the seed of Cain, and receive all the blessings we are moved from the seed of Cain, and they will then come up and possess the Priesthood, and receive all the blessings we are entitled to'" (Official statement of the First Presidency to BYU President Ernest L. Wilkinson, dated August 17, 1951, quoted in John Lewis Lund, *The Church and the Negro*, pp. 89-90).

Referring to this First Presidency statement in a Pearl of Great Price commentary published in 1967 comes the following:

The position of the Church regarding the Negro may be understood when another doctrine of the Church is kept in mind; namely, that the conduct of spirits in the pre-mortal existence has some determining effect upon the conditions and circumstances under which these spirits take on mortality, and that while the details of the principle have not been made known, the principle itself indicates that the coming to this earth and taking on mortality is a privilege that is given to those who maintain their first estate; and that the worth of the principle is so great that spirits are willing to come to earth and take on bodies no matter what the handicap may be as to the kind of bodies they are to secure; and that among the handicaps, failure of the right to enjoy in mortality the blessings of the priesthood, is a handicap which spirits are willing to assume in order that they might come to earth. Under this principle there is no injustice whatsoever involved in this deprivation as to the holding of the Priesthood by Negroes" (Hyrum L. Andrus, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price*, 1967, 406-407).

More than five decades later, Andrus continues to make a good point since Abraham 1:26 is still printed in the Standard Works, which was the primary passage used to support the ban of the priesthood on those with African heritage. As 9th President David O. McKay put it, "I know of no scriptural basis for denying the Priesthood to Negroes other than one verse in the Book of Abraham (1:26)" (*The Church and the Negro*, 91). As Abraham 1:26 says,

Pharaoh, being a righteous man, established his kingdom and judged his people wisely and justly all his days, seeking earnestly to imitate that order established by the fathers in the first generations, in the days of the first patriarchal reign, even in the reign of Adam, and also of Noah, his father, who blessed him with

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the blessings of the earth, and with the blessings of wisdom, but cursed him as pertaining to the Priesthood.

For so many years, this verse was pointed to as support for a doctrine that thousands of LDS leaders taught from official leadership positions, from seminary teachers to bishops and even general authorities. Since the verse remains in the Pearl of Great Price (and is therefore “scripture”) and reads no differently, how should Latter-day Saints interpret it today? If those with black skin are no longer “cursed” with it pertains to the Priesthood, shouldn’t the church have changed this verse to coincide with its change in theology?

For more on this topic, see [Abraham 1:26 and the Priesthood Ban](#).

## Conclusion

According to Brad Wilcox, some Latter-day Saints think Brigham Young may have been a jerk. Depending on your perspective, maybe he was or maybe he wasn’t.

Yet the second president of the church believed he had the authority to teach what he did and he even called it “Scripture.” In fact, Young firmly believed that what he was teaching about the priesthood ban was true, just as much as he believed men in the church needed to marry multiple women to prepare for the exalted state.

Borrowing from C.S. Lewis, there are several possibilities concerning Young. Was he a liar? Or a lunatic? Perhaps he was sincerely deceived by Satan. If any of these possibilities were true, then *nobody* should believe anything the second president ever said or taught. Whether he knowingly taught error, he was deluded, or he was unknowingly deceived, his status is completely marred and he ought to be rejected as a false prophet. Those who believe any of these three possibilities ought to reject him and wonder if any who succeeded him are also to be doubted.

Let’s consider the current president of the church, Russell M. Nelson, whose days are certainly numbered. What will happen when this mortal passes away and the next man in line takes over? Will people say Nelson did not have the authority in 2018 to [remove the nicknames LDS or Mormon in reference to the church or its people](#)? Or will they say [he should never have allowed children of homosexual parents to be baptized in 2019?](#)

After all, there have to be a number of Mormons who firmly disagree with one or both of Nelson’s decisions. Yet the president is supposed to be led by God and should not care what any mortal thinks. Instead, he is supposed to focus on communicating God’s directives. Imagine Nelson’s possible disgust from the grave if Dallin H. Oaks decides a

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week after the funeral to overrule his predecessor and encourage Latter-day Saints to use “Mormon Church” and call the religion “Mormonism.” Would Jesus be pleased after Nelson said he is appalled by these nicknames?

If what Nelson teaches can be easily overturned in the future, then what good is having the restoration? If God’s directives are good only as long as the doctrines are politically correct, why are “Latter-day prophets” and other leaders even needed?

The fourth possibility is that Young was a prophet of God who was speaking the truth. If that last possibility is correct, then how can any Latter-day Saint even suggest that Young was a “jerk”?

As a non-member, I disagree with Brigham Young’s teachings. But for those who belong to this church, Young is supposed to have been an inspired leader just as much as Russell M. Nelson is. It is time for Latter-day Saints to own both their history and their leaders or else admit that the God of Mormonism is quite fickle and can change His mind in telling humanity what is supposed to be believed.

Folks, this is not the God of the Bible. And Brigham Young is not a prophet of God. If this is what is meant by being a “jerk,” then maybe I agree.

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2018). Eric served as an associate editor for the *Apologetics Study Bible for Students* (B&H, 2010) and is a regular contributor to the *Christian Research Journal*. Eric taught high school Bible classes for 17 years (1993-2010) at Christian High School (El Cajon, CA) and 8 years as an adjunct English professor at Grossmont College (El Cajon, CA); in addition, he instructed classes at San Diego State University and Bethel Seminary San Diego. Eric is married to Terri; together they have three daughters: Carissa, Janelle, and Hannah. He and his wife live in the Salt Lake City area.

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