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THE PRACTICE AND MEANING OF DECLARING LINEAGE IN PATRIARCHAL BLESSINGS

M. Steven Andersen

Abstract: *In this paper, I show that declarations of lineage in patriarchal blessings have, since the earliest days of the Restoration, evolved in terms of frequency of inclusion, which tribal lineages predominate, and understanding of the meaning of the declaration. I argue for a non-literal understanding consistent with scripture and science, but posit that these declarations have deep and important significance in connection with the gathering of Israel.*

Two and a half years into my service as a Church¹ patriarch, I found myself puzzled by the subject of the declaration of lineage. I embarked on a study of the matter, which in turn led to this paper. I concluded and will show that the practice of declaring lineage evolved over time. I will discuss the extent to which these declarations have contemplated a literal Abrahamic bloodline. I argue that there is a way to give respect to the concepts of literal bloodlines without connecting them to patriarchal declarations of lineage. Finally, I propose that there can be a literal gathering of Israel without concern for bloodlines.

When Did the Church Start Declaring Lineage as Part of Patriarchal Blessings, and When Did It Evolve from Common Practice to Required Element?

The practice of including a declaration of lineage in a person's patriarchal blessing was not routine in the beginning of the Restoration. Michael H. Marquardt has collected as many as he could find of the

1. All references to "the Church" indicate The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

blessings given between December 1833 and September of 1845.² The charts shown in figures 1 and 2 reveal the trend.³

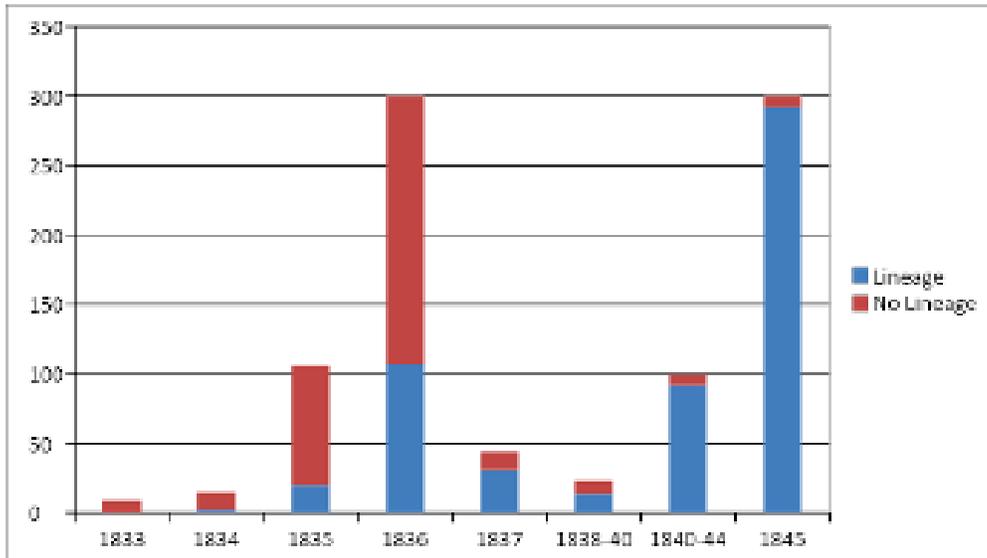


Figure 1. Blessings with and without a declaration of lineage in Marquardt's sample, 1833 to 1845.

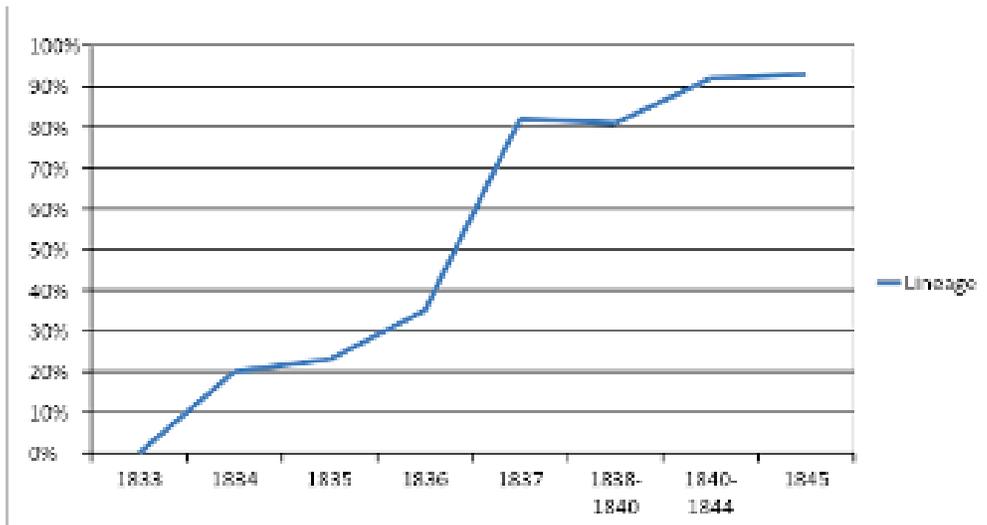


Figure 2. Percentage of blessings with a declaration of lineage in Marquardt's sample, 1833 to 1845.

2. H. Michael Marquardt, *Early Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007). Marquardt's second compilation, *Later Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2012), contains some additional early blessings, but mostly later blessings.

3. I make no pretense that the information I have mined from Marquardt, *Early Blessings*, and Marquardt, *Later Blessings*, has been vetted for suitability for deriving statistically meaningful data. I present it here only for what it may be worth.

For each year from 1835 through 1846, and for 11 of the 17 years from 1847 through 1862, Marquardt's book *Later Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* contains some blessings for which no lineage was declared. But from 1863 through 1995, only 23 of the 471 blessings in the book fail to declare lineage.

When did a declaration of lineage become a more or less required element of a patriarchal blessing? Lacking access to the various editions of the Church's manuals for and written instructions issued to patriarchs over the years, I have not been able to determine when (or whether) the patriarchs of this dispensation were first instructed to declare lineage, how those instructions may have changed over time, and whether they were accompanied by suggestions on how to go about it. The sixth Church Patriarch, Hyrum G. Smith, who served from 1912 to 1932, issued instructions from time to time to all stake patriarchs. In one (undated) document, he included the following as one of the duties of the patriarch: "According to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, declare the lineage of those you bless."⁴ The document gives the impression this was more a reminder than a new directive.

At a 2005 training meeting for stake patriarchs and stake presidents, then Elder Dallin H. Oaks declared that "an essential part of every patriarchal blessing is the declaration of lineage."⁵ At the same meetings, President Gordon B. Hinckley taught that "a patriarchal blessings is still a patriarchal blessing without the naming of lineage, but the recipient is entitled to a declaration of his or her lineal birthright."⁶ I expect that no blessing given these days omits a declaration of lineage.

Do These Declarations Involve a Literal Abrahamic Pedigree?

A variety of positions has been taken on the extent to which patriarchal declarations of lineage contemplate a literal Abrahamic lineage. Logically flowing out of the literal position are concepts of blood purging, adoption, assignment, and so forth, as discussed in the following sections.

4. Irene M. Bates and E. Gary Smith, *Lost Legacy: The Mormon Office of Presiding Patriarch* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), 162.

5. Dallin H. Oaks, "Patriarchal Blessings," in *Transcript of Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting on The Patriarch* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, January 2005), 7.

6. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Message to Patriarchs," in *Transcript of Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting on The Patriarch* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, January 2005), 13.

Literalist Thinking about Lineage in the Church

The biblical scriptures in which the early Church was steeped are saturated with the language and vocabulary of an important and chosen literal bloodline. Given that the Lord speaks to men and women in their language according to their understanding (2 Nephi 31:3), it is to be expected that the early Church would hear and understand the latter-day revelations in these same terms.

As one scholarly article has noted,

Quite literally, in fact, early Mormons believed they were descended from the fabled “Ten Lost Tribes” of Israel, whose members were presumed to have been dispersed throughout the world ... (hence the designation of lineage given in patriarchal blessings to recipients).⁷

Being of Abraham’s literal bloodline was thought to bring with it certain rights. One revelation given to the Lord’s servants proclaimed, “Thus saith the Lord unto you, with whom the priesthood hath continued through the lineage of your fathers — for ye are lawful heirs, according to the flesh Your life and priesthood have remained, and must needs remain through you and your lineage” (Doctrine and Covenants 86:8 10). Patriarchs are instructed that, subject to worthiness, “lineage may give a person the right to receive blessings in Israel.”⁸

The idea seems to be that those in the world who are literal, pedigree descendants of Abraham have “believing blood.”⁹ But not others. Missionaries were to be sent out to find and gather in the literal descendants: “Will we go to the Gentile nations to preach the Gospel? Yes, and gather out the Israelites, wherever they are mixed among the nations of the earth. ... When we send to the nations we do not seek for the Gentiles, because they are disobedient and rebellious. We want the blood of Jacob, and that of his fathers Isaac and Abraham, which runs in

7. Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, *Binding Earth and Heaven: Patriarchal Blessings in the Prophetic Development of Early Mormonism* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2012), 62.

8. Oaks, “Patriarchal Blessings,” 8.

9. “What then is believing blood? It is the blood that flows in the veins of those who are the literal seed of Abraham — not that the blood itself believes, but that those born in that lineage have both the right and a special spiritual capacity to recognize, receive, and believe the truth. ... It identifies those who developed in pre-existence the talent to recognize the truth and to desire righteousness.” Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985) 38–39.

the veins of the people. There is a particle of it here, and another there.”¹⁰ Those not literal descendants could still be baptized, but they enjoyed a different, lesser status.

Many of the early blessings that mentioned lineage could be quite specific on the matter of blood lineage, but not so others, as in these examples in blessings given by William Smith:

- “thou are designated as one of the house of Israel and appointed out as the seed of Joseph”¹¹
- “for among the remnants of Israel thou shalt receive thy inheritance”¹²
- “in Jacob’s inheritance thou shalt be crowned”¹³
- “the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are upon thee ... for in [Jacob’s] heritage shall thine inheritance be called and of his promised inheritance that thou be an inheritor”¹⁴
- “thou art of the Royal stock a descendant of Joseph, for altho [sic] in this blessing thy lineage is revealed, yet in that day thou shall be numbered with Joseph[‘]s children, and with his posterity”¹⁵
- “the Spirit saith concerning thee that thou art a sharer of the blessings of Abraham, and one of his daughters by faith”¹⁶

In 1943, Apostle John A. Widtsoe wrote, “In the great majority of cases, Latter-day Saints are of the tribe of Ephraim, the tribe to which has been committed the leadership of Latter-day work. Whether this lineage is of blood or adoption does not matter.”¹⁷ The idea of adoption may sound quite reassuring, but there remains the question “adopted into what, exactly?” The notion that non-lineals are being adopted into a favored bloodline still inhabits this thinking.

Our concern with literal bloodlines and that — Elder Widtsoe notwithstanding — bloodlines *do* matter, has persisted for many

10. Brigham Young, “Preaching and Testimony — Gathering of Israel — The Blood of Israel and the Gentiles — the Science of Life,” *Journal of Discourses* 2 (April 1855): 268. <https://jod.mrm.org/2/266>.

11. Marquardt, *Early Blessings*, 374.

12. *Ibid.*, 377.

13. *Ibid.*, 388.

14. *Ibid.*, 395.

15. *Ibid.*, 402.

16. *Ibid.*, 408.

17. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1943), 72–77.

generations in the Church. In the April 1952 General Conference, the final Patriarch to the Church, Eldred G. Smith, taught, “Joseph [of Egypt] received a special blessing which we are most interested in because we are his descendants, the most part of us, and the blessings of the gospel have come through this line, for Joseph Smith, Senior, was a true descendant, through Ephraim, the younger son of Joseph.”¹⁸

A fully literal point of view was still on display a quarter century later. Daniel Ludlow extensively discussed and embraced a literalist point of view in a 1991 *Ensign* article:

The question is raised hundreds of times each year throughout the Church: **Are Church members literal descendants of Israel, as most patriarchal blessings state? Or are we Gentiles and belong to the house of Israel only by adoption? The answer is important**, for the literal seed of Abraham are the natural heirs to the remarkable promises given anciently to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ... The basic meaning of *lineage* is “descent in a line from a common progenitor.” Thus, in a patriarchal blessing, lineage is being declared (from Abraham, or Israel, or Ephraim, etc.) when terms indicating direct descent are used, such as “son of,” “daughter of,” “seed of,” “blood of,” “descendant of,” or “from the loins of.” ... In view of the foregoing statements, we can see that the lineages declared in patriarchal blessings are almost always statements of actual blood lines; they are not simply tribal identifications by assignment. ... President Joseph Fielding Smith emphatically stated: “The great majority of those who become members of the Church are literal descendants of Abraham through Ephraim, son of Joseph.” ... [Brigham Young said] “The Book of Mormon came to Ephraim, for Joseph Smith was a pure Ephraimite, and the Book of Mormon was revealed to him.” ... The clear teaching of the prophets is that few persons *not* of the blood of Abraham have become members of the Church in this dispensation; the terms “adopted into the house of Israel” or “assigned to a tribe of Israel” pertain *only* to those relatively few members. ... From what the prophets have said, then, most members

18. Eldred G. Smith, “Patriarchal Order of the Priesthood,” *One Hundred Twenty-second Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1952), 38–41, <https://archive.org/details/conferencereport1952a/page/n41/mode/2up>.

of the Church come from Gentile nations, but they have some Israelite ancestors in their lineage. Therefore, they are not “assigned to” or “adopted into” the house of Israel. They are legal heirs of the covenant, and the lineage proclaimed in their patriarchal blessings identifies the bloodline that ties them back to Abraham.¹⁹

The 2001 edition of the Church’s Old Testament Gospel Doctrine teacher’s manual (the most recent one I can find, currently available on the Church’s website) suggested the following question and answer as part of the introduction to lesson 7 on the Abrahamic covenant: “What does it mean to have the patriarch declare our lineage in a blessing? (When a patriarch declares our lineage, he reveals to us that we are descendants of the prophet Abraham through Ephraim, Manasseh, or another of Abraham’s descendants.)”²⁰

Likewise, the 2011 Gospel Principles manual stated that “The Lord promised Abraham that he would have numberless descendants. He promised that all of them would be entitled to receive the gospel, the blessings of the priesthood, and all of the ordinances of exaltation. ... [But, t]he blood descendants of Abraham are not the only people whom God calls His covenant people. ... [T]wo groups of people are included in the covenant made with Abraham: (1) Abraham’s righteous blood descendants and (2) those adopted into his lineage by accepting and living the gospel of Jesus Christ.”²¹

The current Gospel Topics essay on patriarchal blessings on the Church’s website, while embracing Elder Widtsoe’s teaching that the distinction between lineal and non-lineal is unimportant, still speaks in terms of different bloodlines:

19. Daniel Ludlow, “Of the House of Israel,” *Ensign* 21, no. 1 (January 1991) (italics in original; bold emphasis added). [tps://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1991/01/of-the-house-of-israel](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1991/01/of-the-house-of-israel).

20. “Lesson 7: The Abrahamic Covenant,” *Old Testament: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2001), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/old-testament-gospel-doctrine-teachers-manual/lesson-7>.

21. “Chapter 15: The Lord’s Covenant People,” *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2011), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-principles/chapter-15-the-lords-covenant-people>. See also “Every member of the Church belongs to one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Those who aren’t literal descendants are “adopted” into the house of Israel through baptism.” “About Patriarchal Blessings,” *New Era* 34, no. 3 (March 2004), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2004/03/about-patriarchal-blessings.html?lang=eng#title1>.

A patriarchal blessing includes a declaration of lineage, stating that the person is of the house of Israel — a descendant of Abraham, belonging to a specific tribe of Jacob. Many Latter-day Saints are of the tribe of Ephraim, the tribe given the primary responsibility to lead the latter-day work of the Lord.

Because each of us has many bloodlines running in us, two members of the same family may be declared as being of different tribes in Israel.

It does not matter if a person's lineage in the house of Israel is through bloodlines or by adoption. Church members are counted as a descendant of Abraham and an heir to all the promises and blessings contained in the Abrahamic covenant (see Abrahamic Covenant).²²

Clearly, then, literal bloodline concepts still manifest themselves in our current literature, thinking, and teaching, and result in a “two group” (lineal and non-lineal) paradigm.

How to Think About “Non-Lineals” in the Church

As stated in 1952 by Church-wide patriarch Eldred G. Smith, “Now we know that some of the inhabitants of the earth are not descendants of Israel. . . . We know that some of the inhabitants of the earth who join the Church are not direct descendants of Israel.”²³ This was still the view in 1994, when Elder Faust said, “There may be some come into the church in our day who are not of Jacob's blood lineage.”²⁴ The aforementioned 2001 Gospel Doctrine Old Testament manual instructs that “all Church members are the ‘seed of Abraham,’ which means we are his descendants. [But t]hose who are not literal descendants of Abraham and Israel must become such,” which, the manual goes on, happens by accepting the gospel and being grafted in. So unavoidably connected with literalist thinking is the problem of how to understand those who embrace the gospel but are not (supposedly) of literal Israel. I will endeavor to show that the vocabulary used to refer to such non-lineal members and our

22. “Patriarchal Blessings,” Gospel Topics, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/patriarchal-blessings>.

23. Smith, “Patriarchal Order,” emphasis added.

24. James E. Faust, “Priesthood Blessings,” *Ensign* 25, no. 11 (November 1995), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1995/11/priesthood-blessings>.

understanding of how they fit in has evolved in a direction that places ever less importance on literal bloodlines.

Literal Blood Purging

Quite consistent with the idea of literal, pedigree lineage is the concept of blood purging upon conversion. Joseph Smith is said to have taught that when

the Holy Ghost falls upon one of the literal seed of Abraham, it is calm and serene; ... while the effect of the Holy Ghost upon a Gentile, is to purge out the old blood, and make him actually of the seed of Abraham. That man that has none of the blood of Abraham (naturally) must have a new creation by the Holy Ghost.²⁵

Brigham Young relied on this teaching in stating

If a pure Gentile firmly believes the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and yields obedience to it, in such a case I will give you the words of the Prophet Joseph — “When the Lord pours out the Holy Ghost upon that individual he will have spasms, and you would think that he was going into fits.” Joseph said that the Gentile blood was actually cleansed out of their veins, and the blood of Jacob made to circulate in them; and the revolution and change in the system were so great that it caused the beholder to think they were going into fits.²⁶

Joseph’s teaching was quoted with approval by Elder Joseph Fielding Smith in 1972.²⁷ Elder Faust quoted it in a speech at BYU in 1980.²⁸ Though they may exist, I have not found any more recent iterations of this unusual concept.

Adoption

A step away from blood purging is the construct of adoption. Most members are probably acquainted with the teaching that those not born in Abraham’s bloodline can be adopted into his literal lineage. Paul often used the word adoption to describe how converts may

25. *Scriptural Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, ed. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 149–50, <https://scriptures.byu.edu/tpjs/STPJS.pdf>.

26. Young, “Gathering Israel,” 269.

27. *Scriptural Teachings*.

28. James E. Faust, “Patriarchal Blessings,” Speeches, Brigham Young University, March 30, 1980, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/james-e-faust/patriarchal-blessings/>.

become the children of Abraham (Romans 8; 9 King James Version²⁹; 2 Corinthians 6:17–18). The vocabulary of “adoption” is seen as early as 1834 in a patriarchal blessing given by Father Smith.³⁰

We seem to be somewhat inconsistent on whether there is any difference between the birthright literals and the adoptees. In his 1991 *Ensign* article, quoted above, Ludlow explored whether members of the Church are “literal descendants of Israel,” or are “Gentiles and belong to the house of Israel only by adoption,” noting that “[t]he answer is important . . . ” The phrase “*only by adoption*” stands out. It is interesting that he would still perceive an important distinction in the wake of Elder Widstoe’s teaching that literal vs. adopted has no importance at all.

Assignment

Even in the earliest years, patriarchs were (as noted above) giving some blessings that used language stopping short of a declaration of literal blood lineage, as William Smith began using such terms as “numbered with,” “counted with,” “as one of the house of,” “of his blood and lineage thou shalt be called,” “I shall number thee in this blessing as one of the children of,” and “thine inheritance shall be appointed unto thee by lot.” “Assignment” may be a useful term to describe these expressions. Whether there is a meaningful difference between “adoption” and “assignment” is less than clear to me — maybe the terms are interchangeable.

In 1952, Eldred G. Smith said in a General Conference talk, “A patriarchal blessing today, given by an ordained patriarch, should contain a declaration of lineage, that is, the tribe of Israel through which the promises of inheritance shall come, *even as assignments of inheritances [that is, lands] were given in ancient Israel*. . . . [A]s these patriarchal blessings are given, there is given a declaration of lineage, *or an assignment*. We have people on the earth we know are not descendants of Israel, yet in the acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ they are entitled to the blessings of Israel, *and through the power of inspiration the patriarch will assign them to Israel*.”³¹ Thus, Brother Smith discussed both literal lineage and *assignment* (with *assignment* possibly — though not clearly — being reserved for those not literal descendants).

29. All biblical references are to the King James Version unless otherwise stated.

30. Marquardt, *Early Blessings*, 71.

31. See Smith, “Patriarchal Order,” emphasis added.

Nothing in the current literature made available to Church patriarchs encourages or endorses the use of the term “assignment,” and it is sometimes taught that patriarchs do *not* assign lineage.³²

“The tribe through which ...”

As Church leaders have worked through these issues, a different solution (that is, different from blood purging, adoption, and assignment) for the declaration of lineage to non-lineals has surfaced. It is that the declaration of lineage simply indicates “the tribe through which” the blessings of Abraham will be received by the member. As noted, Eldred G. Smith employed this language in his 1952 conference talk (along with the language of *assignment* as discussed above). It has now found its way into official teachings: “In declaring lineage, the patriarch identifies the tribe of Israel through which the person will receive his or her blessings.”³³

This phrasing seems quite careful. The idea may be that you will receive your blessings *through* this tribe, not that you are, ancestrally or genetically, *of* this tribe. What this means, exactly, is not spelled out. In fact, it seems to be helpfully vague, and can perhaps accommodate everything from literal blood lineage, to purging, to adoption, to assignment.

Identification of Responsibilities

In another segue away from literal bloodline ideology, the idea developed that being of the house of Israel is about responsibilities. The Church’s website declares,

In the last days [Ephraim’s] privilege and responsibility is to bear the priesthood, take the message of the restored gospel to the world, and raise an ensign to gather scattered Israel. ... The children of Ephraim will crown with glory those from the north countries who return in the last days.³⁴

The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* maintains that “many of Ephraim’s descendants are being gathered first, for they have the responsibility of preparing the way for the gathering of the other tribes.”³⁵ Perhaps

32. Oaks, “Patriarchal Blessings,” 7.

33. *Ibid.*

34. “Ephraim,” Guide to the Scriptures, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/ephrain>.

35. Brian L. Smith, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, s.v. “Ephraim,” accessed July 11, 2021, <https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Ephraim>.

“lineage” could be regarded as shorthand for the declaration of a set of responsibilities and should be understood that way rather than as a matter of lineal descent. That said, while we have some scriptural information on what might be the responsibilities of Ephraim and Manasseh, it is harder to find much on the responsibilities of the other tribes (though some writers have treated the subject³⁶). And the patriarchs were taught in 2005 that “a patriarch would want to be very sure of his inspiration if he declared lineage from a tribe other than [Ephraim, Manasseh or Judah].”³⁷

A Softening of Strictly Literal Concepts

Notwithstanding decades of literalist statements, summarized in the 1991 Ludlow piece quoted above and persisting thereafter, and consistent with softening in the ways of talking about the distinction between lineals and non-lineals, the strictly literalist paradigm is no longer the only view. Among patriarchs, it appears, there has been a lack of uniformity in understanding. In 1999, Armand Mauss reported on having interviewed some two dozen stake patriarchs on the subject and noted that their

responses range along a continuum: At one end is the traditional explanation that by inspiration the patriarch identifies a person’s literal descent. At the other end are some who routinely assign a person to the tribe of Ephraim, simply because that is the lineage given responsibility for the Lord’s kingdom in this dispensation. Between these two positions are some patriarchs who occasionally feel inspired to specify an unusual lineage (perhaps for manifest racial reasons) but who routinely name Ephraim. Still others explain that lineage is indeed assigned by inspiration but does not necessarily have anything to do with actual ancestry.³⁸

Six years ago, in a July 2015 *By Common Consent* blog post, Kevin Barney wrote,

36. Brad Wilcox, *Born to Change the World: Your Part in Gathering Israel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 39–49; Alonzo L. Gaskill, *65 Questions and Answers about Patriarchal Blessings* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2018).

37. Oaks, “Patriarchal Blessings,” 8.

38. Armand L. Mauss, “In Search of Ephraim: Traditional Mormon Conceptions of Lineage and Race,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 168, <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=mormonhistory>.

What does the lineage assignment mean? Opinions on this subject differ widely. To some it is referring to literal genealogical ancestry; to others, adoptive ancestry; to others, it is a metaphor or symbol of inclusion within the House of Israel, while still others see the different tribes as representing different responsibilities in building the Kingdom of God in the last days.³⁹

My own informal survey of patriarchs reveals no consistency in understanding,⁴⁰ and the comments in the Latter-day Saint blogosphere are likewise diverse.⁴¹ Today, it seems, there is no single point of view as to the meaning of a patriarchal declaration of lineage.

As stated by former BYU professor Wilfreid Decoo,

“Lineage” can continue to have special significance in the patriarchal blessing which, since the dawn of Mormonism, has become a treasured once-in-a-lifetime experience for Latter-day Saints. In earlier times, when nearly all members were of North European descent (including the American-born white converts), it seemed uncomplicated to assume literal tribal descendency from Ephraim, in line with the beliefs of scattering of the lost tribes. For American Indians, as supposed descendants of Lamanites, the physical lineage was evidently traced to Manasseh. But in view of expanding the church to all countries and races, as well as of advancing insights in demography, adjustments in rationale and formulation help smooth the attribution to a certain tribe. ... Whether literal or spiritual, the determination of tribal descent is meant as an emotional confirmation of *belonging* to the House of Israel.⁴²

39. Kevin Barney, “Patriarchal Blessing Lineages,” *By Common Consent* (blog), July 29, 2015, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2015/07/29/patriarchal-blessing-lineages/>.

40. One said lineage “makes no difference in this life.” BYU History Professor Ignacio Garcia said the same at a February 20, 2020, campus lecture entitled “A Vision To Be Whole: Unlearning Ephraim and re-engaging 2 Nephi 26:33,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNBDbVf8LXQ>.

41. See, e.g., comments on the post “You are of the tribe of Ephraim,” *By Common Consent* (blog), May 11, 2004, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2004/05/11/you-are-of-the-tribe-of-ephraim/>.

42. Wilfried Decoo, “The Blood of Israel in Europe,” *Times and Seasons* (blog), September 25, 2012, <https://www.timesandseasons.org/harchive/2012/09/the-blood-of-israel-in-europe/>.

Armand Mauss seems to have had something like this in mind when he wrote, “It is important for all peoples, but especially scholars, to understand that these constructed histories and lineages carry their own truths and have their own purposes totally apart from historically reality.”⁴³ He went on to say that “the collective construction by a people of their own ethnic and genealogical past is probably more important than the historical and empirical realities, even if these could be scientifically determined. After all, people act on what they *believe* to be true and real, about themselves and about others, rather than on what science has ‘shown’ to be real.”⁴⁴

To the extent such views suggest that patriarchal declarations of lineage are nothing more than a bestowal of warm, emotional comfort, they are, I believe, incorrect. But to the extent they are leading us to something “true and real” that happens to be unconnected with bloodlines, they are very useful. This leads to the next topic.

Is There a Way to Give Respect to Literal Bloodlines without Connecting Them to Patriarchal Declarations of Lineage?

Perhaps there is a way to think about these issues that gives respect and meaning to blood lineage and literal pedigree without the drawbacks of seeing the family of man divided into the “favored lineage” and “only adopted” categories that have prevailed. Such a paradigm would allow us to dispense with concepts of adoption, assignment, etc.

Somewhere in the range of 2,500 years after Abraham, Israel not only survived as a literal (if not undiluted) bloodline but continued as a self-aware culture. As of the time of Christ, the lost tribes, though forcibly removed from their lands centuries earlier, evidently still maintained a separate identity as branches of Israel. In 3 Nephi 16, after the Lord told the Nephites they were the “other sheep” of which he spoke in Jerusalem, he explained that besides them he had yet “other sheep, which are not of this land, neither of the land of Jerusalem, neither in any parts of that land round about whither I have been to minister.” And though they had “not as yet heard [his] voice,” He was commanded of the Father to “go and show [himself] unto them.” Nephi assures us that “the Jews shall have the words of the Nephites, and the Nephites shall have the words of the Jews; and the Nephites and the Jews shall have the words of the lost tribes of Israel; and the lost tribes of Israel shall have the words of the Nephites and the

43. Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 4.

44. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 6.

Jews” (2 Nephi 29:13). Of necessity then, as of that time “these lost tribes understood their identity and had prophets among them.”⁴⁵

For how long after the time of Christ the various peoples of the lost tribes retained such self-awareness is unknown. In the illustrative case of the Lehites, a self-aware identification with the house of Israel lasted until at least 421 CE. But eventually the Abrahamic identity of the lost tribes became extinct, as foretold by the prophets. As reviewed in the following paragraphs, the words of Jacob, Moses (or those attributed to him in the case of Deuteronomy), Amos, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Nephi, and Zenos support the proposition that the loss of self-aware identity is what is meant by the tribes becoming “lost.”

Speaking to Joseph, Jacob said, “Therefore, O my son, he hath blessed me in raising thee up to be a servant unto me, in saving my house from death” (JST Genesis 48:8). Of course, the most obvious meaning of these words is that Joseph would provide safe harbor for Jacob and his house during the famine. But the scriptures often have layers of meaning, and I wonder if another meaning here is that Israel’s house would again need saving from a form of “death” in a later day.

We read in Deuteronomy of a scattering “from one end of the earth even unto the other” (Deuteronomy 28:64) and even to “the outmost parts of heaven” (Deuteronomy 30:4). Israel would become “unmindful” (Deuteronomy 32:18). God said he “would scatter [Israel] into the corners” and “would make the *remembrance* of them cease from among men” (Deuteronomy 32:26, emphasis added). As Amos prophesied, God would “sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn in a sieve” (Amos 9:9). Isaiah foresaw the day when Ephraim (meaning, in this context, all tribes of the northern kingdom) would “be broken, that it be not a people” (Isaiah 7:8).

Ezekiel was shown a valley of “very dry” bones (Ezekiel 37:2). They were totally lifeless. God said to Ezekiel, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts” (Ezekiel 37:11). To be clear, *literal* Israel would not die: Abraham’s (and Jacob’s) bloodline seed would, as promised, continue as numberless as ever. But God showed the Old Testament prophets that *covenant* Israel, cultural Israel, self-aware Israel, would become dead among all the tribes (other than Judah, speaking in cultural terms).

45. Paul K. Browning, “Gathering Scattered Israel: Then and Now,” *Ensign* 29, no. 7 (July 1998), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1998/07/gathering-scattered-israel-then-and-now>.

I think Nephi achieved a similar understanding. Nephi was steeped in Old Testament notions of the importance of seed and blood lineage. He viewed their journey from Jerusalem as part of the prophesied scattering: “[A]re we not broken off from the house of Israel, and are we not a branch of the house of Israel?” (1 Nephi 15:12). Nephi knew his *bloodline* would survive, having seen in vision his seed in “the latter days” (1 Nephi 15:13). Nevertheless, he was “overcome because of my afflictions, for I considered that mine afflictions were great above all, because of the destruction of my people, for I had beheld their fall” (1 Nephi 15:5). “O the pain, and the anguish of my soul for the loss of the slain of my people! [I]t well nigh consumeth me” (2 Nephi 26:7). What caused him such anguish, perhaps, was not the loss of his bloodline, but the loss of his posterity as a self-aware people of covenant Israel.

Zenos saw this, too, in the allegory passed on to us by Jacob. In a passage understood to refer to the Lehite branch, he said, “And the wild fruit of the last had overcome that part of the tree which brought forth good fruit, even that *the branch had withered away and died*” (Jacob 5:40 emphasis added). Lehi’s bloodline descendants had not died out, but his branch of Israel had become a lost (i.e., unmindful, not self-aware) tribe, and in that sense this dry branch had become as dead as the dry bones in Ezekiel’s vision.

Some Restoration teaching embraces this idea that the tribes “lost their identity and were assimilated into local populations. . . . They lost their remembrance of and concern for their Abrahamic origins.”⁴⁶

How thorough was the sifting and mixing of the bloodlines of Israel? As stated by one prominent Latter-day Saint scientist, Dr. Brian Shirts, MD/PhD, of the Department of Laboratory Medicine, University of Washington Medical School, based on modeling generally accepted in the scientific community, if one posits the factual existence of the man Abraham several thousand years ago, “it is expected that many individuals if not *everyone* alive today qualifies as a descendant of Abraham.”⁴⁷ Nathan H. Lents, Ph.D., a professor of biology at John Jay College of the City University of New York, concurs:

The fact is, if you go back far enough, each one of us has a shared ancestor with every other person on earth. Scientists estimate

46. Browning, “Gathering Scattered Israel.”

47. Brian H. Shirts, “Genetics and Gathering the House of Israel,” unpublished paper in author’s possession, 2, emphasis original. The author expresses deep appreciation to Dr. Shirts for his help in explaining the universality of Abraham’s progeny, and for the ideas expressed herein on the relevance of Ezekiel 37 to the issues discussed in this paper.

that the most recent common ancestor of all humans lived just a few thousand years ago. Let that sink in for a minute. There was someone, a specific man or woman, who probably lived in either Egypt or Babylonia during the classical period, to whom we can all trace our ancestry.⁴⁸

In 1998, Joseph T. Chang of Yale University wrote a paper addressed to the question, “How far back in time do we need to trace the full genealogy of mankind in order to find any individual who is a common ancestor of all present-day individuals?”⁴⁹ He concluded that “within about 1.77 lg n generations, a tiny amount of time, ... everyone in the population is either a CA [Common Ancestor] of all present-day individuals or extinct.” The meaning of the formula is detailed in his rather technical article, but as boiled down in an article in *The Atlantic*, it means that “the most recent common ancestor of all six billion people on earth today probably lived just a couple of thousand years ago.”⁵⁰ That means Abraham could quite easily qualify as a common ancestor of all people on the planet today. To the same effect, see a *By Common Consent* blog post concluding that “If Ephraim had descendants that survived to today, then pretty much everyone on the planet is a descendant of Ephraim.”⁵¹

Maybe these modern, scientific conclusions are hinted at in New Testament scripture: “And [God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26).

In any event, the idea that everyone alive today is certainly (or at least probably) a descendant of Abraham and Ephraim has some interesting implications. First, it means that God kept his promise: Abraham’s posterity *is* as numberless as the sands of the sea. Second, it means that to the extent patriarchal blessings are intended to declare a literal bloodline connection to Ephraim or another of the tribes, they are entirely accurate. In this way, we can be glad that the literal, blood lineage of Abraham survived and prospered.

Another implication is that if we accept the view that Abraham’s blood lineage has survived and that his genealogical descendants now

48. Nathan H. Lents, “The Meaning and Meaninglessness of Genealogy,” *Psychology Today*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beastly-behavior/201801/the-meaning-and-meaninglessness-genealogy>.

49. Joseph T. Chang, “Recent Common Ancestors of All Present-Day Individuals,” *Advances in Applied Probability* 31, no. 4 (December 1999): 1003–1004.

50. Steve Olson, “The Royal We,” *The Atlantic*, May 2000, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/05/the-royal-we/302497/>.

51. See Barney, “Patriarchal Blessing Lineages.”

include everyone in the world, then we need not see the lost tribes as isolated pockets of bloodline communities or scattered individuals.

But here is one more implication: A universal Abrahamic blood lineage means that viewed from our perspective rather than Abraham's, there is nothing particularly special about being in Abraham's literal family tree. Some scientists conclude that after thousands of years, there is little meaning in talking about literal, genealogical, Abrahamic bloodlines. An article in *BYU Studies* notes,

Because of the continued halving at each generation, autosomal DNA testing for genealogical purposes is limited to investigating family relationships within the past five or six generations. Beyond that, the amount of shared inherited genetic segments becomes too small and is no longer feasible to use to trace it back to specific ancestors. This means that although we can be genealogically related to all of our ancestors, we carry genetic segments for only a few of them. In fact, it is estimated that individuals bear autosomal DNA from only about 20 percent of their 1,024 ancestors who lived at the tenth-generation level.⁵²

In other words, after enough generations (usually given as fewer than 10), we literally inherit no DNA from our literal blood ancestors. Thus, I am able to connect to Abraham on a big enough pedigree chart, but so can everyone else, and I have none of his DNA.

And if all this is true, perhaps it is not helpful to perpetuate ideas of literal bloodlines in our thinking about patriarchal declarations of lineage, even if we agree with Elder Widtsoe that it makes no difference whether one is lineal or non-lineal. Armand Mauss certainly thinks so:

I am distressed at the continuing evidence of racist thinking among today's Mormons, especially in high places. Considering the wholesale conversions that have taken place for decades in parts of the world far outside the supposed concentrations of Israelite "blood" in northwestern Europe, it is sheer folklore to continue perpetuating ideas from 19th-century LDS leaders that were based upon the early but temporary success of our missionary work in the

52. Ugo A. Perego, "Using Science to Answer Questions from Latter-day Saint History: The Case of Josephine Lyon's Paternity," *BYU Studies* 58, no. 4 (2019): 145, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/using-science-to-answer-questions-from-latter-day-saint-history-the-case-of-josephine-lyons-paternity/>.

UK and in Scandinavia. Also, once we recognize with Paul (to the Galatians) that conversion to Christ immediately renders irrelevant all questions of race, lineage, or “blood” in the convert’s origins, then there is no reason to find (or even seek) any theological or doctrinal significance in one’s origins, whether mortal or premortal. Even the mention of lineage in today’s patriarchal blessings is less a claim about a person’s literal ancestry than an “assignment” of lineage for future administrative purposes in the Lord’s kingdom — or such is at least one recurring explanation that I have gotten from numerous stake patriarchs whom I have interviewed over the years. In short, the Church will be far better served by allowing all such racist thinking to drift quietly into the dustbin of non-scriptural LDS folklore.⁵³

Can There Be a Literal Gathering of Israel Without Concern for Literal Bloodlines?

I am convinced the answer is yes. The paradigm I propose we leave behind is that there are certain people on the planet who are literally of the favored genealogical lineage of Abraham, whom we must search out, and who will readily accept the gospel because of their believing blood. I also propose we leave behind the belief that there are other people *not* of the favored lineage who, if they accept the gospel at all, may at best become adopted members of the House of Israel.

The scriptures compellingly steer us away from emphasizing literal ancestry as a source of entitlement to personal blessings (either our own or those shared with others by the gathering of Israel). In the New Testament, Jesus outright rejected a boast of Abrahamic lineage: “They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham” (John 8:39). John the Baptist likewise did not seem much impressed by those attributing superiority to a literal Abrahamic bloodline, flatly stating that God, if He wanted to, could raise up that kind of seed to Abraham from stones (Luke 3:8).

As Paul labored to spread the gospel to all the world following Christ’s mortal ministry, he spent considerable effort trying to convince his hearers that literal blood lineage was *not* important, something he would have found unnecessary if the notion of a privileged lineage

53. Armand Mauss, in an online comment on Decoo, “*Blood of Israel.*”

weren't still firmly rooted in their religious culture. After spending an entire chapter explaining that "there is no respect of persons with God" (Romans 2:11), and chiding any hypocritical Jew who "makest thy boast of God" (Romans 2:17) and is "confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind" (Romans 2:19), Paul then asks a question critical to our analysis: "What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision?" (Romans 3:1). His answer: "Much every way: chiefly because that unto them were committed the oracles of God" (Romans 3:1). In other words, the advantage of being born in the house of Israel was having access to the teachings of the prophets, the oracles of God. But the fact of birth in the house of Israel gives no special rights or claims, as the Prophet Joseph Smith made clear in his rendition of these same verses: "What advantage then hath the Jew over the Gentile? or what profit of circumcision, who is not a Jew from the heart? But he who is a Jew from the heart, I say hath much every way" (JST Romans 3:1–2). Is not Joseph teaching that being Jewish "from the heart" is what matters, while being Jewish by birth is of no consequence?

In writing to the Galatians (3:16), Paul can be understood as saying that God's promise that the posterity of Abraham would bless all nations refers only to Christ, not to his entire blood lineage: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many, but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." [It is possible that this scripture from the Book of Abraham should be read the same singular way: Abraham was told by God that the rights given him "shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body)" (Abraham 2:11).]

In a further pushback against the idea that the blessings of the fathers were available as a matter of right to the literal, biological descendants of Abraham, Paul also told the Galatians, "[T]hey which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7).

Perhaps seeing this difference between bloodlines and covenant belonging led Nephi to an understanding of seed and lineage that must have comforted him considerably. He came to be in full harmony with Paul's later teachings on the subject. He explained to his brothers that being Abraham's literal descendants entitles a people to nothing if they are not faithful: "Do ye suppose that our fathers would have been more choice than they [i.e., the indigenous people of Palestine driven out by the Israelites] if they had been righteous? I say unto you, Nay. Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God" (1 Nephi 17:34–35). Elsewhere he declared that "as many of the Gentiles as

will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off; for the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, who is the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 30:2). He firmly maintained that “all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33). Nephi pointed out that “at that [latter] day shall the remnant of our seed *know* that they are of the house of Israel, and that they are covenant people of the Lord” (1 Nephi 15:14, emphasis added). This would cause them to “be remembered again among the house of Israel; they shall be grafted in” (1 Nephi 16:16). These concepts of recovered *knowing* and *remembering*, taught Lehi, applied not just to his own seed, but to “all the house of Israel” (1 Nephi 15:18). It is interesting that Nephi used the term “grafted in” to refer to his own posterity, a people he knew were literal descendants of Israel and Abraham.

Looking at these passages, it does not appear that Nephi would have seen much value in the idea of a patriarchal declaration of lineage that speaks in terms of literal bloodlines.

I believe a non-literal approach to patriarchal declarations of lineage finds resonance with Abinadi’s teaching about Jesus. “Who shall be [Christ’s] seed?” Abinadi asked rhetorically. His answer: the faithful who have hearkened unto the prophets, believed that the Lord will redeem his people, and looked forward to a remission of their sins, “these are his seed” (Mosiah 15:11–12). Very much in harmony is the teaching of King Benjamin: “And now, because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters” (Mosiah 5:7). This passage from the Doctrine and Covenants is also apt: “For whoso is faithful unto the obtaining these two priesthoods of which I have spoken, and the magnifying their calling, are sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies. They become the sons of Moses and of Aaron and the seed of Abraham, and the church and kingdom, and the elect of God” (D&C 84:33–34). And this passage is to the same effect: “For, verily I say that the rebellious are not of the blood of Ephraim, wherefore they shall be plucked out” (D&C 64:36).

A talk given by then Elder Dallin H. Oaks at the aforesaid 2005 training meeting for patriarchs is, I believe, hugely significant to this discussion:

A declaration of lineage is not a scientific pronouncement or an identification of genetic inheritance. A declaration of

lineage is representative of larger and more important things. ... This declaration concerns the government of the kingdom of God, not the nature of the blood or the composition of the genes of the person being blessed.⁵⁴

He may have had this same theme in mind when he taught as follows in a 2006 General Conference:

The Book of Mormon promises that all who receive and act upon the Lord’s invitation to “repent and believe in his Son” become “the covenant people of the Lord” (2 Ne. 30:2). This is a potent reminder that *neither riches nor lineage nor any other privileges of birth* should cause us to believe that we are “better one than another.”⁵⁵

I view these as most welcome and profound insights.

But how, in light of these omni-literal, omni-bloodline concepts, are we to understand our belief in the “literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the Ten Tribes” (Articles of Faith, 10)? Clearly, given Elder Oaks’s teaching on the absence of any link between patriarchal declarations of lineage and literal bloodline concepts, something else is going on.

To discover what that is, let us return to Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones. I believe God made clear to Ezekiel just how the “lost” of Israel would be gathered into covenant Israel again. God told Ezekiel to “say unto them, O ye dry bones, *hear the word of the Lord*. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live” (Ezek. 37:4–5, emphasis added). Perhaps the Lord was telling Ezekiel of the day when covenant Israel, though dead, would live again; a day when there would once more be a people (in addition to Judah) who self-identified as the house of Israel, and who would look to Abraham as their father and to his God as their God. Note especially *how* the Lord made the bones live again: he commanded Ezekiel to teach them “the word of the Lord.”

This is the work that Jacob foresaw for Joseph’s posterity in the latter days: “For thou shalt be a light unto my people, to deliver them in the days of their captivity, from bondage; and to bring salvation unto them, when they are altogether bowed down under sin: (JST Genesis 48:11). How was this to be done? Joseph of Egypt was given to understand that

54. See Oaks, “Patriarchal Blessings.”

55. Dallin H. Oaks, “All Men Everywhere,” *Ensign* 36, no. 5 (May 2006), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2006/05/all-men-everywhere> (emphasis added).

one of his seed, clearly referring to Joseph Smith, “shall bring them [i.e., the posterity of Jacob] to the knowledge of the covenants which I have made with thy fathers” (JST Genesis 50:28). We are assured all who are faithful in receiving the priesthood thereby “become the ... seed of Abraham” (D&C 84:34). God made this clear to Abraham himself: “As many as receive this gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed ... ” (Abraham 2:10).

The paradigm I propose we move towards, then, is that while *all* people on the planet are probably of Abraham’s literal blood lineage, only as we accept the gospel do we become *literally* a part of covenant Israel. All of *covenant* Israel would then be a people who are both literal descendants of Abraham *and* who worship God and look to Abraham as their spiritual father. We would be one both in bloodline and in covenant. And we would, hopefully, bless all nations of the earth.

Under this paradigm, our missionaries are not looking for a few, isolated remnants of literal, bloodline Israel when they take the gospel to *all* the world, to *every* creature, to *every* nation, kindred, tongue and people. They are searching among a world *full* of literal Abrahamic descendants for those who are spiritually willing to be gathered into covenant Israel. As in Ezekiel’s vision, they are breathing life into once-dead covenant Israel as they teach people “the word of the Lord.”

Perhaps, in this same sense, a patriarchal declaration of lineage is a way to breathe life into covenant Israel, another way of declaring the “word of the Lord” as per Ezekiel. As the author of Deuteronomy said, the gathering requires that “thou shalt *call them to mind* among all nations” (Deuteronomy 30:1, emphasis added). Taking the view that patriarchal declarations of lineage have nothing to do with literal bloodlines or genetic inheritances brings us into alignment with John the Baptist, Paul, Nephi, and President Oaks. Patriarchal declarations of lineage are one more way the Lord is fulfilling his promise to the house of covenant Israel that “ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, and shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live” (Ezekiel 37:13–14). Elder Widtsoe taught as much: “The oft-asked question, ‘Who are the children of Abraham?’ is well answered in light of the revealed gospel. All who accept God’s plan for his children on earth and who live it are the children of Abraham. Those who reject the gospel, whether children in the flesh, or others, forfeit the promises made to Abraham and are not children of Abraham.”⁵⁶

56. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, 400.

The bones of the house of covenant Israel in Ezekiel's vision were dry and dead, but the Lord is nevertheless able to restore and gather literal covenant Israel and "call them to mind." Missionaries, patriarchs, and all the rest of us are a part of the effort. Patriarchal declarations of lineage in the house of Israel inform the recipients that they have divine potential and confirm their capacity to become, by their choices, *literally* the Lord's people in *literal* covenant Israel. These declarations help plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers. They are part of the process by which, through the word of the Lord, life is breathed back into covenant Israel.

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