

The Restoration of the Priesthoods

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Joseph Smith was “about the age of twelve years” when concerns about God and Jesus and his standing before them first stirred his soul.¹ He had grown up in a home with parents who disagreed on the matter of religion. Being drawn to the Presbyterian faith, rooted in Calvinism, his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, held beliefs shaped by the religious doctrine that had dominated the British colonies before the American Revolution. Joseph’s father’s views about God’s earthly work, characterized as Universalism, were considered by local ministers as a perverted form of religion. Though Joseph leaned toward the teachings of the Methodists, a denomination considerably different from the Calvinists that had grown significantly after the Revolution, he likely did not attend church regularly, meaning he was not overly familiar with pulpits and pews. And while he had been taught to read and believe in the Bible as a boy, he had not been saturated with religion as were other young people around him. Not surprisingly, as he grew older he grew more confused about God and his work on earth, as well as his own spiritual welfare. But because he acted on his yearnings for greater knowledge, what followed in his life led to significant religious events, preparing the world for the Savior’s Second Coming.

THE NECESSITY OF ANGELIC DELIVERY OF PRIESTHOOD POWERS

After Joseph's initial experiences with God and Jesus in 1820, the appearance of Moroni to him in 1823 and thereafter, resulting in his acquisition of gold plates, inaugurated the young man's prophetic future. While he translated the Book of Mormon, the matter of God's earthly authority became a concern to the young prophet and his scribe, Oliver Cowdery. They had come across a discussion dealing with baptism and the remission of sins and wondered about the authority to perform the baptismal ordinance. As they prayed in the woods for answers, an angel visited them and restored the authority to perform valid baptisms. At the time this authority was called the "lesser" priesthood and was later defined as the Aaronic Priesthood.²

Some may wonder why Moroni, as part of his role in the restoration of the gospel, did not transmit his own godly authority during his many visitations to Joseph preceding the delivery of the plates. Elder Orson Pratt, one of the Church's early Twelve Apostles, addressed this question:

A revelation and restoration to the earth of the *everlasting gospel* through the angel Moroni would be of no benefit to the nations, unless someone should be ordained with authority to preach it and administer its ordinances. . . . Did Moroni ordain Mr. [Joseph] Smith to the [priesthood and] apostleship, and command him to administer ordinances? No, he did not. But why not confer authority by ordination, as well as reveal the everlasting gospel? Because in all probability he had not the right to do so. All angels have not the same authority.³

Apparently, Moroni was not given the authority to restore the lost priesthoods.

THE GRADUAL UNFOLDING OF THE RESTORED GOSPEL

If Joseph Smith had made up the stories of his experiences with Deity and with other heavenly beings, as some have claimed, he could have simplified his assertions by reporting that not only did Moroni give him the golden plates, but he also authorized him to do everything else required by God to restore and organize a church in the latter days. It would have been as believable as any other explanation. As it turned out, because of his instincts of protecting his sacred experiences, Joseph revealed over time the sometimes

complicated, step-by-step process involved in the restoration of the gospel, which included the specific restoration of God's authority to the earth.

The comprehension of priesthood authority developed in the same manner that we all gain understanding. Elder Neal A. Maxwell noted that the divine procedure of giving "unto the faithful line upon line, precept upon precept" created a "gradual unfolding" that characterized "the history of God's work."⁴ Elder Boyd K. Packer clarified further that the entirety of the restoration of the gospel, including the priesthood, must be considered in this light. He stated: "Some suppose that the organization was handed to the Prophet Joseph Smith like a set of plans and specifications for a building, with all of the details known at the beginning. But it did not come that way. Rather, it came a piece at a time as the Brethren were ready and as they inquired of God."⁵ Even the concept of authority, as it was initially understood and later more broadly known as priesthood, crystalized over time in the mind of Joseph Smith through revelation and visitations by angelic beings. The surviving historical record confirms this understanding. It also sheds light on the delivery from heavenly messengers of the priesthood of God that at the beginning gave Joseph Smith power to perform authentic baptisms and organize a church, followed later by other prophetic powers.

THE "LESSER" OR AARONIC PRIESTHOOD

In 1829 Joseph Smith and his wife of two years, Emma Hale Smith, lived in a small frame home in a village in northeastern Pennsylvania known as Harmony (today called Oakland). The Smith home, located near Emma's parents' home adjacent to the Susquehanna River, became a particularly important site in the unfolding process of restoring the fulness of the gospel.⁶ But Joseph and Emma were not alone in their efforts. Oliver Cowdery became acquainted with Joseph Smith's family by 1829 while he was living near Palmyra, New York. He heard about Joseph's work, and after receiving a visitation from Jesus Christ declaring the work in which Joseph was involved to be true,⁷ Oliver moved from New York to Harmony in April 1829 and became Joseph Smith's scribe. While they worked together in the middle of May 1829 translating the plates—Joseph dictating and Oliver transcribing—they arrived at the point in the story where Jesus appeared to the Nephites. Coincident to translating the book of 3 Nephi, Oliver realized that in the current religious climate "it was easily to be seen, that amid the great strife and noise concerning religion, none had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the gospel."

Oliver recorded that after “writing the account given of the Savior’s ministry” to those who lived “upon this continent,” he and Joseph determined to pray to God about the matter. The result was that he and Joseph were visited by an angel:

On a sudden, as from the midst of eternity, the voice of the Redeemer spake peace to us, while the vail was parted and the angel of God came down clothed with glory, and delivered the anxiously looked for message. . . . What joy! what wonder! what amazement! . . . our eyes beheld—our ears heard. As in the “blaze of day;” yes, more—above the glitter of the May Sun beam, which then shed its brilliancy over the face of nature! Then his voice, though mild, pierced to the center, and his words, “I am thy fellow servant,” dispelled every fear. We listened—we gazed—we admired! ‘Twas the voice of the angel from glory—’twas a message from the Most High! and as we heard we rejoiced, while his love enkindled upon our souls, and we were rapt in the vision of the Almighty! Where was room for doubt? No where: uncertainty had fled, doubt had sunk, no more to rise, while fiction and deception had fled forever!

The angel’s visitation, besides confirming to Joseph and Oliver their recognition that they were now part of something much larger than themselves, involved the actual bestowal of divine authority. Oliver continued: “We received under his hand the holy priesthood as he said, ‘upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer this priesthood and this authority, which shall remain upon earth that the sons of Levi may yet offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness!’ . . . The assurance that we were in the presence of an angel; the certainty that we heard the voice of Jesus, and the truth unsullied as it flowed from a pure personage, dictated by the will of God, is to me, past description.”⁸

Now with authorization to do so, Joseph Smith “by the direction of the angel” baptized his friend Oliver, “the first received into this church, in this day.”⁹ Joseph, in his own account of the visitation, prepared in 1838–1839, said that following Oliver’s baptism, “afterwards he baptized me.”¹⁰ When the baptisms were performed, Joseph continued, “I laid my hands upon his head and ordained him to the Aaronick priesthood, and afterward he laid his hands on me and ordained me to the same priesthood, for so we were commanded.”¹¹



The Restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood, by Del Parson. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

THE “GREATER” OR MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD

To the young men, the reception of heavenly power to perform the gateway ordinance of baptism at the time became of paramount importance. In

Joseph Smith's portrayal of the event, which he noted occurred on May 15, 1829, the same angel, whom he identified as John the Baptist, promised that if Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery "continued faithful," besides the "priesthood of Aaron," they "should also have the Melchisedec Priesthood" given to them.¹² While both Oliver and Joseph created a brief narrative of their experience with John the Baptist, there is a lack of certainty as to whether it was their intent to recount the reception of the higher or greater priesthood from Peter, James, and John, as they both did regarding the lesser priesthood. At any rate, such a portrayal was never prepared for publication.

Nonetheless, in October 1835 Joseph affirmed the experiences he and Oliver had with the angel bestowing on them the "lesser priesthood" and with the ancient Apostles Peter, James, and John bestowing the greater priesthood. In a blessing he gave to Oliver, recorded on paper but never meant for public and institutional purposes, Joseph stated that they obtained "by the hand of the angel . . . the lesser priesthood," which was then amplified when they received the greater priesthood "under the hands of those who had been held in reserve for a long season, even those who received it under the hand of the Messiah."¹³

Oliver Cowdery also later declared several times that he, with Joseph, had indeed received a divine manifestation in which they were given the greater priesthood of Melchizedek. In 1846 Oliver wrote to one of his close friends, his brother-in-law Phineas Young, and related his experience with the angels: "Had you stood in the presence of John, with our departed Joseph, to receive the Lesser Priesthood—and in the presence of Peter, to receive the Greater . . . you would feel what you have never felt."¹⁴ Oliver, who had been out of sorts with the Church since 1838 and who could have denied the heavenly visitations, undermining more effectively than any other single person the truth claims of Joseph Smith, instead verified his and Joseph's experience with heavenly beings.

In October 1848 Oliver, in a remarkable setting, provided additional verification of his encounter. The Saints had temporarily relocated westward of the Missouri River en route to Utah after being driven from Nauvoo, Illinois, and were holding a regular conference. But as it turned out, the meeting became no regular gathering. Oliver Cowdery, still out of the Church, apparently visited the conference unannounced, intent on reuniting with his former friends. Invited to speak before the audience, Oliver, besides emphasizing his witness of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, declared to attendees: "I was present with Joseph when an holy angle from god came down from heaven and conferred, or restored the Aronic

priesthood. And said at the same time that it should remain upon the earth while the earth stands. I was also present with Joseph when the Melchizedek priesthood was conferred by the holy angles of god.”¹⁵ He was accepted by the Saints and was rebaptized shortly thereafter.¹⁶

In Joseph Smith’s account of the visitation of the ancient apostles, he stated that once he and Oliver Cowdery had been ordained by Jesus’s Apostles, they “for some time [had] made this [restoration of authority] a subject of humble prayer.” They were surely uncertain about the grand scope of what they had experienced. Later, gathered at the home of Peter Whitmer Sr., where the Church would later be organized, “the Word of the Lord came unto us, in the Chamber [of the Whitmer home] commanding us, that I should ordain Oliver Cowdery to be an Elder in the Church of Jesus Christ, and that he also should ordain me to the same office, and that after having been thus ordained, we should proceed to ordain others to the same office.”¹⁷ The authority necessary to empower the Church to perform valid baptisms and to administer in the other functions of the priesthood, including organizing a church itself, had been given by heavenly messengers to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery.¹⁸

But this was not the final delivery of divine power to Joseph and Oliver. Again, had Joseph contrived God’s preoccupation with him, he could have bundled the entirety of God’s authority in the person of Moroni. But not only did he define the separate functions and purposes of the “lesser” and “greater” priesthoods, he further described other specific priesthood powers he had been given as conveyed by the ancient prophets of God.¹⁹

PRIESTHOOD RESTORATION IN THE KIRTLAND HOUSE OF THE LORD

The “lesser” and “greater” priesthoods had empowered the Prophet Joseph and his associates since 1829. Much had been done to expand the growing church, particularly the gathering of the elect through missionary efforts.²⁰ After outside pressure and the surge of Church membership in Ohio’s Western Reserve, Joseph and the Church relocated from New York to Ohio. There other powers of authority were bestowed on Joseph and Oliver. In Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph received a revelation that a “house of God” should be built, a sanctuary where God could further reveal important information.²¹ After three years of sacrifice and difficulty, the temple was completed and awaited dedication in the spring of 1836. The dedicatory services for the temple at the end of March and early part of April included another of

the important components of priesthood restoration to the early Church, though it has not generally been connected with priesthood restoration like the lesser and greater priesthoods. There were, as witnessed by numerous attendees, remarkable spiritual events that accompanied the solemn assembly and the temple's dedication at the end of March. But it was on April 3, when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were in the western pulpits of the lower court of the house of the Lord, that the most noted occurrence of the dedicatory period took place. Some have argued that the event paralleled the great New Testament vision on the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus participated in the transfer of prophetic authority to his Apostles Peter, James, and John.²²

The significant event of April 3, 1836, was described in Joseph's own journal, likely shortly after the event occurred, penned by his scribe at the time, Oliver Cowdery's brother Warren. According to the prophet's rehearsal, after Jesus appeared to Joseph and Oliver to accept the labors of the Saints in constructing the house of the Lord, a singular moment in itself, the account states that Joseph and Oliver acquired something that perhaps they did not expect: significant divine authority from heavenly messengers that opened more doors as part of the restoration of all things. "The heavens were again opened unto us; and Moses appeared before us. . . . After this, Elias appeared. . . . After this vision had closed, another great and glorious vision burst upon us; for Elijah the prophet, who was taken to heaven without tasting death, stood before us."²³ Thus, after Jesus appeared, Joseph and Oliver were successively visited by Moses, Elias, and Elijah, all administering their particular priesthood powers held during their biblical ministries.

This great episode was part of the larger restoration plan, as described by Joseph to the Saints, where "in the ushering in of the dispensation of the fulness of times" it was required "that a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories should take place." This restoration included revelations and bestowal of authority held by ancient prophets "from the days of Adam even to the present time." But, he told the Saints, "not only this, but those things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this, the dispensation of the fulness of times." It was required, according to the prophet, that each of the prophetic figures gave to him "their dispensation, their rights, *their keys*, their honors, their majesty and glory, and *the power of their priesthood*; giving line upon line, precept upon precept; here a little, and there a little."²⁴ The dramatic panorama

of priesthood restoration may appear complicated, but the “dispensation” given to Joseph Smith required all of the power and authority held by the ancient prophets. Joseph Smith testified to the Saints that these priesthood keys had been restored.²⁵

DISCLOSURE OF PRIESTHOOD RESTORATION ACCOUNTS

There is one last factor to consider in understanding priesthood restoration. The inquirer may ask, “If priesthood restoration was of such consequence to the early Church, then why didn’t Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery run to the local newspapers after their visitations to have published what had happened to them?” There are several explanations for the lack of documentation, only two of which will be given here. The first is that given by Joseph himself just after recording his own 1838–1839 account: “we were forced to keep secret the circumstances of our having been baptized, and having received this priesthood; owing to the spirit of persecution which had already manifested itself in the neighborhood.”²⁶ Because both men desired to protect their divine experiences from public attention and ridicule, the accounts revealing the events of priesthood restoration were initially kept in confidence.

This was consistent with the behavior of other prophetic figures who preceded them. During the course of translating the Book of Mormon, for example, Joseph repeated this significant passage to Oliver: “It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men.”²⁷ In other words, those who receive revelation from God are “under a strict command” to keep it to themselves and share it only as appropriate. While receiving the revelation known as the Book of Moses, Joseph was twice counseled to be discreet: “show them not unto any except them that believe” and “see thou show them unto no man, until I command you, except to them that believe.”²⁸ Clearly there was a sensibility emphasized here that could not have escaped Joseph, which imposed restraint in revealing the revelations of God before it was appropriate.

Not only did Joseph understand this principle, he tried to teach this precept to Church leaders, helping them to understand that keeping sacred experiences sacred was expected of all to whom the Lord revealed sacred matters. In November 1835 Joseph taught the newly called Quorum of the

Twelve about the anticipated outpouring of spiritual gifts as they prepared for the solemn assembly associated with the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. Regarding their ministries, his scribe recorded him stating: “We must be clean every whit. Let us be faithful and silent brethren, and if God gives you a manifestation, keep it to yourself.”²⁹ Thus it is not surprising that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery kept their sacred experiences to themselves until it was required and appropriate that they explain the essential restoration of the priesthood.³⁰

With the powers and priesthood that God gave to his ancient prophets now possessed by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, they could, under the direction of God, perform valid baptisms, give the gift of the Holy Ghost, and organize a church. Joseph F. Smith said in 1894 of Joseph Smith:

We must not forget the fact that he was the man out of the millions of human beings that inhabited this earth at the time—the only man, that was called of God, by the voice of God Himself, to open up the dispensation of the Gospel to the world for the last time; and this is the great thing to bear in mind, that he was called of God to introduce the Gospel to the world, to restore the holy priesthood to the children of men, to organize the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the world, and to restore all the ordinances of the Gospel, for the salvation not only of the living, but also of the dead. . . .

He also communed with the Father and the Son and spoke with angels, and they visited him, and conferred blessings and gifts and keys of power upon him that were never before bestowed upon any human being other than the Son of God himself. No man yet that ever lived upon the earth had all the keys of the Gospel and of the dispensations bestowed upon him as were bestowed upon the Prophet Joseph Smith.³¹

The restoration of the priesthood played a central role in the restoration of the gospel through Joseph Smith. But it was not simply a delivery of the “lesser” and “greater” priesthoods to the Prophet and Oliver Cowdery in 1829. It was far more complex and impressive in scope than is generally recognized. The larger understanding of this perspective leads to a greater appreciation of Joseph Smith’s significant role in the unfolding of the Lord’s work in the “dispensation of the fulness of times.”³²

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Ronald O. Barney, “The Restoration of the Priesthoods,” in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura H. Hales (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 59–68.

NOTES

1. In *The Joseph Smith Papers, Histories*, 1:11 (hereafter *JSP*, H1).
2. See Joseph Smith, History Drafts, 1838-circa 1841, Draft 2, in *JSP*, H1:294.
3. Orson Pratt, *Divine Authority, or the Question, Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?* (Liverpool: R. James, 1851), 4. See Orson Pratt, “The Question Answered, Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?,” *Frontier Guardian*, February 7, 1849.
4. Neal A. Maxwell, “Out of Obscurity,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 8–11.
5. Boyd K. Packer, “The Twelve Apostles,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 6.
6. See Mark Lyman Staker, “Where Was the Aaronic Priesthood Restored? Identifying the Location of John the Baptist’s Appearance, May 15, 1829,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 143–59.
7. See *JSP*, H1:16.
8. Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps, September 7, 1834, Norton, Ohio, *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 15–16.
9. Cowdery to Phelps, September 7, 1834.
10. In *JSP*, H1:294.
11. In *JSP*, H1:294.
12. In *JSP*, H1:326.
13. Joseph Smith blessing to Oliver Cowdery, October 2, 1835, Patriarchal Blessing Book, Book 1, p. 12, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter CHL); see *JSP, Documents*, 5:513–14. Another extremely important entry in the Patriarchal Blessing Book prepared by Oliver Cowdery in September 1835, one also never meant for public distribution, is a personal narrative of his and Joseph’s experience with the angel delivering the lesser priesthood. He wrote that they “diligently sought for the right of the fathers, and the authority of the holy priesthood, and the power to admin[ister] in the same.” Consequently they were “drawn out in mighty prayer to know how we might obtain the blessings of baptism and of the Holy Spirit, according to the order of God.” In their amazement while in “the heavenly vision the angel came down and bestowed upon us this priesthood.” That is, the “angel John” appeared to them and ordained them “unto the lesser or Aaronic priesthood . . . in the town of Harmony, Susquehannah County, Pennsylvania, on Fryday, the 15th day of May, 1829.” Oliver Cowdery narrative, Patriarchal Blessing Book, Book 1, pp. 8–9.
14. Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, March 23, 1846, Tiffin, Ohio, CHL.
15. Reuben Miller, Journal, October 21, 1848, CHL. See George A. Smith to Orson Pratt, October 31 postscript to October 20, 1848, letter, Carbonca, Council Bluffs, Iowa, *Latter Day Saints’ Millennial Star* 11, no. 1 (January 1, 1849): 14.

16. Oliver Cowdery is also reported to have written to Samuel W. Richards in January 1849, again affirming his experiences with Joseph and the heavenly messengers who bestowed on them the priesthoods. See John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 245, 261n31.
17. In *JSP*, H1:326.
18. See the broad overview of restoration of the priesthoods in the Church's first generation in Ronald O. Barney, *Joseph Smith: History, Methods, and Memory* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 161–222.
19. It must be recognized that clarity about the two priesthoods, their authorities, and exact purposes as is known today was during Joseph Smith's lifetime never well understood by Church members. As previously suggested, it took a number of years for the implications of what Joseph and Oliver had received to be comprehended, articulated, and then instituted among Church leaders and members. See Barney, *Joseph Smith*, 183–85.
20. See Doctrine and Covenants 29:7; 33:6–12 (1981 edition).
21. Doctrine and Covenants 88:119.
22. See Matthew 17.
23. Joseph Smith, Journal, April 3, 1836, in *JSP, Journals*, 1:219–22.
24. "Letter from Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 23 (October 1, 1842): 935–36; emphasis added. This letter became part of the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants as section 128 and was canonized in an 1880 general conference of the Church. The cited language can be found in verses 18, 20–21.
25. The Prophet also identified several others of those who delivered to him their authorities in this context. See Doctrine and Covenants 128:21.
26. In *JSP*, H1:294.
27. Alma 12:9.
28. Moses 1:42; 4:32.
29. Joseph Smith, Journal, November 12, 1835, in *JSP*, J1:98; punctuation and capitalization standardized.
30. See the explanation of how Joseph Smith's personality and experiences influenced the manner in which he disclosed what had happened to him in Barney, *Joseph Smith*, 271–91.
31. Joseph F. Smith, "Recollections of the Prophet," in *Collected Discourses*, ed. Brian H. Stuy, 5 vols. (Burbank and Woodland Hills, CA: B. H. S. Publishing, 1987–1992), 5:27–29.
32. See Doctrine and Covenants 121:31.

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