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THE RESTORATION OF THE PRIESTHOOD

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THE PATTERN FOR DESIGNATING THOSE ON EARTH WHO REPRESENT GOD and his authority is clear in both the Old and the New Testaments. God called and then sanctioned those who were to act as his earthly delegates. In the book of Hebrews, this concept is clarified: "No man taketh this honor unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron."¹ Latter-day Saints believe that after the death of Jesus and his Apostles, the authority to act in God's name disintegrated and eventually disappeared. The Bible foretells of events that will occur before the Second Coming of Jesus² that require God's authority. The restoration of this authority, also known as priesthood power, came through the ministrations of heavenly messengers to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery beginning in 1829 and during the early days of the Church.

Joseph Smith was "about the age of twelve years" when concerns about God and Jesus and his standing before them first stirred his soul.³ He had grown up in a home with parents who disagreed on the matter of religion. His mother, Lucy Mack Smith, taught her children the traditional views then advocated by many Christian churches. Joseph's father's beliefs about God's earthly work were considered by local ministers as a perverted form of religion. Though Joseph leaned toward a particular denomination, the Methodists, he likely did not attend church regularly; 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 also grew more confused about God and his work on earth, as well as his

own spiritual welfare. But because Joseph acted on his yearnings for greater knowledge, what followed in his life led to seminal religious events, preparing the world for the Savior's Second Coming.

THE NECESSITY OF ANGELIC DELIVERY OF PRIESTHOOD POWERS

While Joseph was translating 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 were praying in the woods, an angel visited them and restored the authority to perform valid baptisms, authority that would later be defined as the Aaronic Priesthood.⁴

Some may wonder why Moroni did not transmit his priesthood authority during the many visitations 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."⁵ 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, he could have simplified his claims by reporting that Moroni not only gave him the golden plates but also authorized Joseph 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. Instead, Joseph commented briefly over time on 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 understanding 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" creates a "gradual unfolding" that characterizes "the history of God's work."⁶ 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.”⁷ 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 organize a church and to perform authentic baptisms, 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 called Harmony. The Smith home, located near Emma’s parents’ home, which was near the Susquehanna River, became a particularly important site in the unfolding process of restoring the fulness of the gospel.⁸ But Joseph and Emma were not alone in their efforts. Oliver Cowdery became acquainted with Joseph Smith’s family in April 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 to be true,⁹ Oliver moved from New York to Harmony and became Joseph’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 “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 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!¹⁰

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."¹¹

Now with the authorization to do so, "by the direction of the angel," Joseph Smith baptized his friend Oliver, "the first received into this church, in this day."¹² Joseph, in his own account of the visitation, prepared in 1838–39, said that following Oliver's baptism, "he baptized me."¹³ When the baptisms were performed, Joseph continued, "I laid my hands upon his head and ordained him to the Aaronick [*sic*] priesthood, and afterward he laid his hands on me and ordained me to the same priesthood, for so we were commanded."¹⁴

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 Melchesidec [*sic*] Priesthood" given to them.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ This lack of documentation has led some critics to speculate that the Melchizedek Priesthood was not restored until after the organization of the Church in 1830, claiming it was not done under proper authority. The arguments for an earlier restoration are more compelling, however.

Despite the lack of written narrative, Oliver Cowdery affirmed that he, with Joseph, had indeed been visited by the "holy angles [angels] of God" who gave them the greater priesthood of Melchizedek.¹⁷ In 1846, Oliver relayed to one of his close friends his experience with the angel: "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.”¹⁸ 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 provided additional testimony. The Saints had temporarily relocated westward to 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 an unusual 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, he declared to attendees: “I was present with Joseph when an holy angle [angel] 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 [angels] of god.”¹⁹ Oliver was accepted by the Saints and was rebaptized shortly thereafter.

In Joseph Smith’s account of the visitation of the ancient Apostles, he stated that once he and Oliver Cowdery had been ordained by Peter, James, and John, to the “greater” or Melchizedek Priesthood, they “for some time [had] made this [restoration of authority] a subject of humble prayer,” surely uncertain about the scope of what they had experienced. 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 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.”²⁰ 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.

But this was not the final delivery of divine power to Joseph and Oliver. Again, had Joseph manufactured God’s involvement 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 that had been held by the ancient prophets of God.

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.²¹ After Church growth required relocation from New York to Ohio, other powers were then bestowed upon Joseph and Oliver. In northeastern Ohio, where the Saints had gathered at Kirtland, Joseph received a revelation that a house of the Lord, where God could further reveal important information, should be built.²² After three years of sacrifice and difficulty, the house of the Lord, or temple, was completed and awaited dedication. The dedicatory services for the temple at the end of March and early part of April 1836 involved another of the important components of priesthood restoration to the early Church, though it is usually not described as such. There were, as witnessed by numerous attendees, remarkable spiritual events that accompanied the solemn assembly and the temple's dedication. But it was on April 3, when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were in the western pulpits of the temple, that the most-noted occurrence of the dedicatory period took place. It paralleled the great New Testament vision when Jesus participated in what occurred on the Mount of Transfiguration with the transfer of prophetic authority to Peter, James, and John.²³

The remarkable event of April 3, 1836, was described in Joseph's own journal shortly after the event occurred, penned by Joseph's scribe at the time, Oliver Cowdery's brother Warren. After Jesus appeared to Joseph and Oliver to accept the labors of the Saints in constructing the house of the Lord, a singular event in itself, the account states that Joseph and Oliver acquired something that perhaps they did not expect: significant heavenly authority from heavenly messengers that opened more doors as part of the restoration of all things. "[T]he 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."²⁴ 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 event was part of the larger restoration plan, 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."²⁵ 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 that each of the prophetic figures give to Joseph Smith "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.”²⁶ 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.

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 and publish what had happened to them?” There are several explanations for the lack of documentation, only two of which will be given here. The first was given by Joseph himself just after recording his own 1838–39 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.”²⁷ Because both men desired to protect their divine experiences from public attention and ridicule, the disclosure of 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.”²⁸ 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.”²⁹ Clearly, there was a sensibility emphasized here that could not have escaped Joseph, which imposed restraint on sharing the revelations of God before it was appropriate.

Not only did Joseph understand this principle, but he also 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 such things. 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, Joseph recorded, “We must be

clean every whit. Let us be faithful and silent brethren, and if God gives you a manifestation, keep it to yourself.”³⁰ 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.

With the powers and priesthood that God gave to his ancient prophets now given to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, they could, under the direction of God, perform valid baptisms and give the gift of the Holy Ghost; confer the biblical spiritual gifts, such as healing and the working of miracles; share the priesthood with others; and organize a church. Joseph F. Smith said in 1894 of Joseph Smith:

[W]e 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. . . .

[H]e 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. 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

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Cannon, Brian Q., and BYU Studies staff. “Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents.” In *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, edited by John W. Welch and

Erick B. Carlson, 215–63. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005.

Harrell, Charles R. “The Restoration of the Priesthood.” In *Studies in Scripture*. Vol. 1, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, edited by Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson, 86–99. Sandy, UT: Randall Book Co., 1984.

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NOTES

1. Hebrews 5:4.
2. Matthew 24.
3. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., “History, Circa Summer 1832,” in *Histories Volume 1: Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 11 (hereafter *JSP*, H1).
4. Joseph Smith–History 1:68–72; “History Drafts, 1838–circa 1841,” Draft 2, in *JSP*, H1:294.
5. Orson Pratt, *Divine Authority, or the Question, Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?* (1848; repr., Liverpool: R. James, 1851), 4. See also Orson Pratt, “The Question Answered, Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?” *Frontier Guardian*, February 7, 1849.
6. Neal A. Maxwell, “Out of Obscurity,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 8–11.
7. Boyd K. Packer, “The Twelve Apostles,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 6.
8. 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.
9. *JSP*, H1:16.
10. Oliver Cowdery, *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, 1 (October 1834): 14–16.
11. Oliver Cowdery, letter to W. W. Phelps, September 7, 1834, Norton, Ohio, *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 15–16.
12. Cowdery, letter to Phelps.

13. "History Drafts, 1838–circa 1841," Draft 2, *JSP*, H1:294.
14. "History Drafts, 1838–circa 1841," Draft 2, *JSP*, H1:294.
15. "History Drafts, 1838–circa 1841," Draft 1, *JSP*, H1:326.
16. In the absence of a priesthood restoration narrative for the Melchizedek Priesthood, the precise date of its restoration is not known. See Larry C. Porter, "Dating the Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood," *Ensign*, June 1979, 4–10, for a discussion of localizing the lesser and greater priesthood reception dates to 1829. See also D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 14–26; and Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 116–18, for the argument that the Melchizedek Priesthood restoration occurred after the Church was organized in April 1830.
17. Reuben Miller, journal, October 21, 1848, Church History Library, Salt Lake City (hereafter CHL).
18. Oliver Cowdery, letter to Phineas Young, March 23, 1846, Tiffin, Seneca County, Ohio, CHL.
19. Reuben Miller, journal, October 21, 1848, CHL.
20. "History Drafts, 1838–circa 1841," Draft 1, *JSP*, H1:326.
21. See D&C 29:7; 33:6–12.
22. See D&C 88:119.
23. See Matthew 17.
24. Dean C. Jessee, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., "Joseph Smith, journal, April 3, 1836," in *Journals, Volume 1: 1832–1839*, vol. 1 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 219–22 (hereafter *JSP*, J1).
25. D&C 128:18.
26. "Letter from Joseph Smith," *Times and Seasons*, 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 Latter-day Saint general conference. The cited language can be found in verses 18, 20–21.
27. "History Drafts, 1838–circa 1841," Draft 2, *JSP*, H1:294.
28. Alma 12:9.
29. Moses 1:42; Moses 4:32.
30. "Joseph Smith, journal, November 12, 1835," in *JSP*, J1:98; clear text transcription, punctuation and capitalization standardized.
31. Joseph F. Smith, "Recollections of the Prophet," in *Collected Discourses*, 5 vols., comp. and ed. Brian H. Stuy (Burbank and Woodland Hills, CA: B.H.S. Publishing, 1987–92), 5:27–29.
32. See D&C 121:31.