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Event or Process?: How “the Chamber of Old Father Whitmer” Helps Us Understand Priesthood Restoration

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Abstract: Recent studies describing the restoration of the priesthood have noted and demonstrated that we have been anachronistically shaping our 1829 restoration narrative around twentieth-century notions that the Melchizedek Priesthood represents a separate “authority” or “power” that is distinctly independent from the body of ordained men (it has become something we hold rather than something we join). Jonathan Stapley argues that by the early twentieth century General Authorities explicitly defined priesthood as “the exclusive authority and power of God,” whereas before then it was used more ecclesiastically. Though Joseph Smith was certainly a restorationist, like many antebellum Americans, scholars have tended to frame his restorationism in terms of how the power or authority of God was restored (emphasizing priesthood as something you hold). For example, we focus on how John the Baptist restored an independent entity called the Aaronic Priesthood and how Peter, James, and John restored the higher companion priesthood called the Melchizedek Priesthood. If Stapley is correct, we have good reason to return to the historical record to discover more precisely what the restoration looked like. Perhaps we have been focusing too narrowly upon two events, when there was in fact a deeper sense of restoration that encompassed a far broader sense of theophany.



Event or Process? How “the Chamber of Old Father Whitmer” Helps Us Understand Priesthood Restoration

Michael Hubbard MacKay

Recent studies describing the restoration of the priesthood have noted and demonstrated that we have been anachronistically shaping our 1829 restoration narrative around twentieth-century notions that the Melchizedek Priesthood represents a separate “authority” or “power” that is distinctly independent from the body of ordained men (it has become something we hold rather than something we join). Jonathan Stapley argues that by the early twentieth century General Authorities explicitly defined priesthood as “the exclusive authority and power of God,” whereas before then it was used more ecclesiastically.¹ Though Joseph Smith was certainly a restorationist, like many antebellum Americans, scholars have tended to frame his restorationism in terms of how the power or authority of God was restored (emphasizing priesthood as something you hold). For example, we focus on how John the Baptist restored an independent entity called the Aaronic Priesthood and how Peter, James, and John restored the higher companion priesthood called

1. Stapley describes the priesthood within three categories developing across time. First is ecclesiastical, which describes priesthood as a body of leaders called the priesthood who would “channel the power of God.” Second, he associates the temple theologies developed in Nauvoo with the priesthood that “constituted the very structure of the cosmos.” Finally, at the turn of the twentieth century, “instead of viewing priesthood as channeling the power of God, church leaders began to describe the priesthood as the power of God.” Jonathan Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 11, 12. Stapley also quotes President N. Eldon Tanner saying, “The priesthood is the power by which all things were created and the power by which God has done those things” (26).

the Melchizedek Priesthood.² If Stapley is correct, we have good reason to return to the historical record to discover more precisely what the restoration looked like.³ Perhaps we have been focusing too narrowly upon two events, when there was in fact a deeper sense of restoration that encompassed a far broader sense of theophany.

“Priesthood Restoration as Event”	“Priesthood Restoration as Process”
1. Based on an early twentieth-century definition of Priesthood	1. Based on the historical definition of priesthood, 1829 to 1844
2. Stable, not developing	2. Unstable, developing
3. Restored exclusive power of God	3. Restored as parts of a whole
4. Restored as separate entities (priesthood, Melchizedek Priesthood, Aaronic Priesthood)	4. All parts restoring the whole
5. Restored exclusively by Peter, James, and John	5. Restored by “diverse angels” from Adam down to Joseph Smith

This article challenges the idea that priesthood restoration was an event that restored specific independent “authority” and “power” by carefully examining the historical restoration as a process. Demonstrating the need for such analysis, Joseph Smith wrote that “divers angels, from . . . Adam down to the present” restored the gospel and the last dispensation.⁴ The event we usually refer to as the restoration of the priesthood was just the beginning of a long process.⁵ As a 2015 article

2. See Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

3. The terminology is difficult, to say the least, especially when we are looking for the 1829 historical record that confirms our twentieth-century conceptions of priesthood. See Roger Terry, “Authority and Priesthood in the LDS Church, Part 1: Definitions and Development,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 1 (2018): 25–29. Terry explains, for example, that in 1831 “there was no concept of priesthood as an abstract authority encompassing various offices. There were only offices, and two of these were ‘priesthood’ and ‘high priesthood’ (priests and high priests).”

4. Doctrine and Covenants 128:21 mentions “the voice of Gabriel, and of Raphael, and of divers angels, from Michael or Adam down to the present time, all declaring 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; giving us consolation by holding forth that which is to come, confirming our hope!”

5. I use the term *process* to develop the reality that Joseph Smith did not treat priesthood like an entity that was passed to him. This does not mean that power wasn’t held by the priesthood or that it could not be used in metaphor as

on the Church’s website summarized, “Historical documents make clear . . . that the appearance of Peter, James, and John near Harmony was only the beginning of the restoration of priesthood authority.”⁶ Furthermore, the suggestion that priesthood restoration was a process and not a single event should be palatable considering the restoration of keys in 1836 through Moses, Elias, and Elijah in the Kirtland Temple and the idea that future keys will yet be restored, such as the keys of the Resurrection.⁷ As recently as October 2018, in an interview in Concepción, Chile, President Russell M. Nelson said, “We’re witnesses to a process of restoration. If you think the Church has been fully restored, you’re just seeing the beginning. There is much more to come.” Also, in April 2014, in general conference, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf declared, “In reality, the Restoration is an ongoing process; we are living in it right now.”⁸

To develop the possibility that priesthood restoration is a process and that it includes multiple restorations, this article considers one frequently overlooked event in the Restoration, usually spoken of as the experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer. So, what was this event? First, it was an experience Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had in the

something someone could hold, but instead the process of restoration emphasizes the restoration of a priesthood that the Saints joined. By joining the priesthood, they held power and authority. In an 1841 discourse, Joseph Smith taught, “All priesthood is Melchizedek; but there are different portions or degrees of it.” “Discourse, 5 January 1841, as Reported by William Clayton,” 5, the Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 25, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/account-of-meeting-and-discourse-5-january-1841-as-reported-by-william-clayton/2>.

6. Mark Staker and Curtis Ashton, “Where Was the Priesthood Restored?” August 21, 2015, <https://history.lds.org/article/where-was-the-priesthood-restored?lang=eng>. This article was revised on February 25, 2019. The quoted text was changed to: “Historical documents make clear that after Peter, James, and John restored the Melchizedek Priesthood near Harmony, additional understanding and keys were revealed and committed to Joseph.”

7. Brigham Young was recorded as stating, “We cannot receive, while in the flesh, the keys to form and fashion kingdoms and to organize matter, for they are beyond our capacity and calling, beyond this world.” In addition, he stated, “We have not, neither can we receive here, the ordinance and the keys of the resurrection. They will be given to those who have passed off this stage of action and have received their bodies again, as many have already done and many more will.” Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 15:137 (August 24, 1872).

8. Russell M. Nelson, in “Latter-day Saint Prophet, Wife and Apostle Share Insights of Global Ministry,” October 30, 2018, accessed February 12, 2021, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/latter-day-saint-prophet-wife-apostle-share-insights-global-ministry?lang=eng>; Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Are You Sleeping through the Restoration?” *Ensign* 44, no. 5 (May 2014): 59.

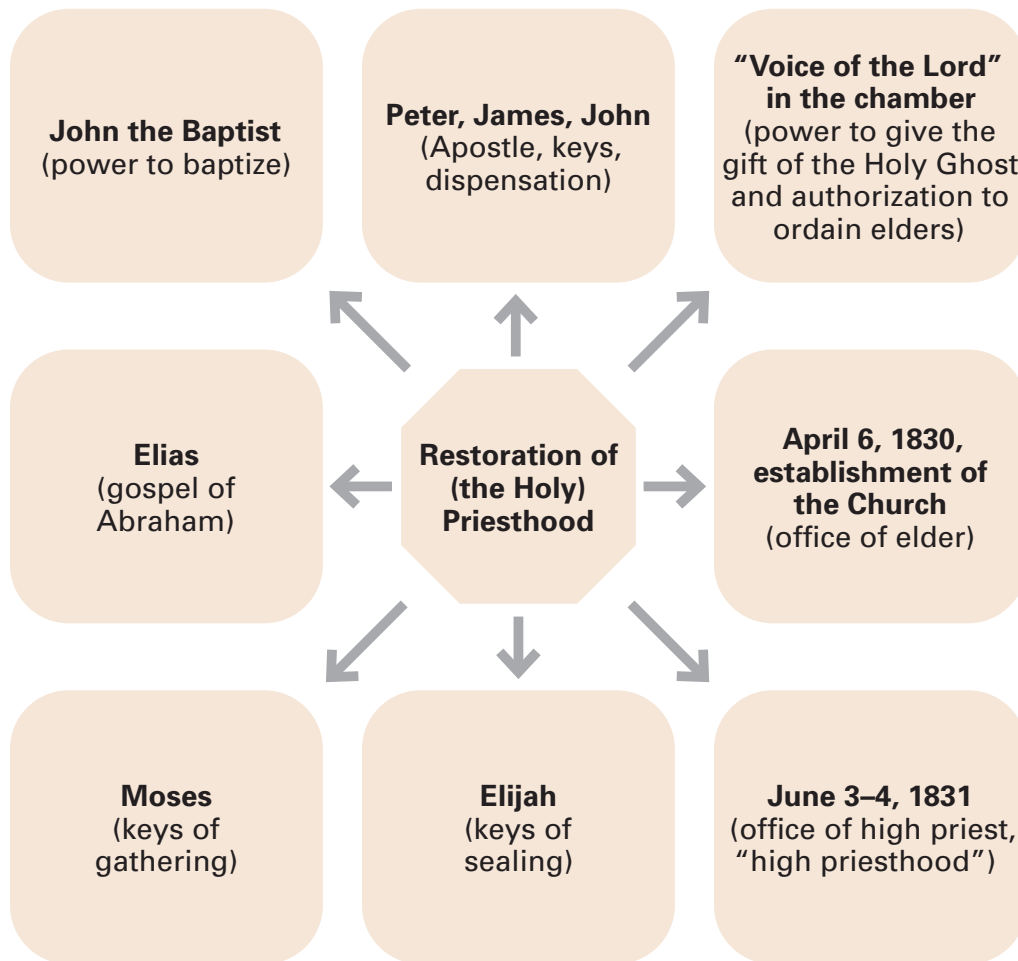


FIGURE 1. Restoration of (the Holy) Priesthood. This diagram provides eight examples of historical restoration events that could be included as part of the narrative of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. This is not all-inclusive.

upstairs room of Peter and Mary Whitmer’s house in Fayette Township, New York. In June 1829, Joseph and Oliver were finishing the translation of the Book of Mormon and contemplating the visitation of John the Baptist that had happened just a few weeks earlier. After they spent countless hours in the upstairs bedroom, referred to as a “chamber,” the “word of the Lord” came to them, directing them to ordain each other elders and to establish the Church of Christ. Joseph recalled that this event was associated with the restoration of the power to give the gift of the Holy Ghost, the Melchizedek Priesthood, and the office of elder, making it a perfect example to explore how priesthood restoration was a

process that included multiple components.⁹ This event is not forgotten by history because it was included in Doctrine and Covenants 128:21 and described in Joseph Smith’s official 1839 history. His letter to the Saints (D&C 128) emphatically declares, “Now, what do we hear in the gospel which we have received? A voice of gladness! A voice of mercy from heaven; a voice of truth out the earth; glad tidings for the dead; a voice of gladness for the living and the dead; glad tidings of great joy” (v. 19). Joseph continued, “And again, the voice of God in the chamber of old Father Whitmer, in Fayette, Seneca county” (v. 21).

Few members of the Church discuss this experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer as an important part of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, regardless of Joseph Smith’s emphasis of it in scripture and in his history.¹⁰ This is understandable because, admittedly, very little is known about this event. The details we get are from Joseph, but it is uncertain whether the event was a revelation to his mind, if it actually included the audible voice of the Lord, or if the Lord physically or spiritually appeared to them in the chamber.¹¹ What is clear is that Joseph Smith’s most extensively written account of priesthood restoration, in his own history, uses the experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer to demonstrate the ongoing restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. This article will examine this event, but not in isolation. Instead it will try to examine how Joseph used this event to explain the developing restoration of the priesthood. To do this, this article will examine Joseph Smith’s 1839 accounts of the restoration of the priesthood in his official history.¹²

9. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 26–27, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/32>.

10. Conversation about the chamber of Father Whitmer is slowly entering into discussions about the priesthood restoration. See the editors’ introduction to Michael Hubbard MacKay and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), xxxviii–xxxix; and Mark Staker and Curtis Ashton’s article on the Church’s website about the priesthood restoration site, “Where Was the Priesthood Restored?”

11. One account states that “the voice of God” was heard in the chamber of Father Whitmer (D&C 128:21), while Joseph Smith’s history states that the word of the Lord “came unto us in the Chamber.” “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 26–27.

12. Joseph Smith’s history was originally started in 1838, drafted periodically through 1839, and eventually copied into the first fifty-nine pages of a large volume, later labeled as A-1. Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 187–464. This history can be found on the Joseph Smith Papers website, and a version of it is found in Joseph

This article will first look at how Joseph positioned the Peter, James, and John visit in his history and how it was associated with the apostleship, keys, and dispensations. Then, in comparison, it will analyze his account of the chamber of Father Whitmer and how it was associated with the restoration of the priesthood.¹³ The Peter, James, and John narrative in Joseph's history described the restoration of administrative authority, generally described as "keys."¹⁴ The experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer, on the other hand, is described as a series of events to demonstrate how the general power to perform ordinances and hold offices in the Church was revealed.¹⁵ This examination of Joseph's history not only emphasizes the importance of the experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer, but it also offers a possibility for why we favor the Peter, James, and John narrative.¹⁶

Peter, James, and John

Priesthood restoration is usually articulated by emphasizing that John the Baptist restored the Aaronic Priesthood (May 15, 1829), and then soon thereafter Peter, James, and John restored the Melchizedek Priesthood (circa late May 1829) to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. This framework is simple and compelling, in which we get one priesthood from John the Baptist and the other priesthood from the Apostles. This avoids the complicated and sometimes distracting historical development of priesthood terminology and ecclesiology and allows us to focus upon the orderly divine nature of priesthood restoration. The

Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971).

13. The process of priesthood restoration in Joseph Smith's history could be compared to the accounting of the First Vision. There were numerous accounts of these events but few that were fully developed and articulated in a narrative format. Comparing early accounts to Joseph Smith's history shows development and perspective, while the accounts in the history are reflective, calculated, and historically informed from his previous accounts. See Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 192–202.

14. See MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 166 n. 267; and Matthew C. Godfrey and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 4: April 1834–September 1835*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2016), 408–12.

15. "History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1," 17, 27, 37.

16. Fitting this together with Jonathan Stapley's work, it demonstrates that the twentieth-century emphasis on priesthood as something you hold can only be associated with the power one receives from joining a priesthood. Defining priesthood restoration as a process of events and restorations emphasizes the power of the priesthood through a grand dispensational and eternal priesthood order.

explanatory power of this model is remarkable for teaching the doctrinal significance of the restoration.

Other models emphasize priesthood restoration differently but also provide a different kind of knowledge about the restoration, though they are admittedly far less compelling in their ability to present a concise message. Historical development, for example, focuses on complex shifts and movements across time that create issues when they are compared to doctrinal concepts. For example, the words *Aaronic* and *Melchizedek* and their association with the priesthood only developed in the years after 1829; the terms were defined in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants in the revelation that became section 107. Terms like *Melchizedek* were certainly used in the Book of Mormon, the book of Moses, and Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible by 1831, yet it is still clear that the duality of priesthood developed across time and was not established immediately.¹⁷ (Therefore this makes defining the priesthood as two events—divided by Aaronic and Melchizedek—anachronistic, since it was not just terminology that developed, it was the idea that there were two priesthoods.) The duality of the priesthood was first observed through the development of ecclesiastical offices and the difference between elders and the other offices described in Doctrine and Covenants 20. Joseph Smith’s 1832 history intimates two different priesthoods, and then D&C 84 codified that separation, describing the priesthood as lower and higher priesthoods. Yet even then the revelation calls the two priesthoods after Moses and Aaron, instead of Melchizedek and Aaron.¹⁸ In April 1835, the “Instruction of Priesthood” (D&C 107) finally defined and clarified that “there are two divisions, or grand heads—one is the Melchizedek priesthood, and the other is the Aaronic, or Levitical priesthood.”¹⁹ The terminology attributed to John the Baptist in Doctrine and Covenants 13 describing the Aaronic Priesthood was written in 1839 as part of Joseph’s history after the two priesthoods had been clearly defined. This developing terminology makes it difficult to label what John the Baptist restored

17. Chapter 13 of the book of Alma is a good example of the priesthood, even when attached to the person Melchizedek, as still not being defined as if there are two priesthoods.

18. See Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 10–11; Matthew C. Godfrey and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 289–303; for references to priesthood in Doctrine and Covenants 76, see Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 188.

19. See Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 4*, 309–12.

historically in 1829 as the “Aaronic” Priesthood and what Peter, James, and John restored as the “Melchizedek” Priesthood. This is certainly a historical argument and can only be taken so far, since these visits were eventually labeled that way, but it is also highly problematic to not uncover and understand the historical development that led to the later conclusions.

The point of this section is to examine how Joseph Smith described the visit of Peter, James, and John in his 1839 history, a description that unavoidably complicates the priesthood restoration narrative. The description also calls for textual analysis and an unpacking of Joseph’s history. The most obvious way that Joseph could have included the Peter, James, and John visit is by including it in a chronology of events to mark the date that they visited Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. Unfortunately, he did not identify a date or associate their visit with other contextualized events. His history does not make timing—*when* the visit of Peter, James, and John happened—an important data point for understanding the apostolic visit. Most historians have deduced that they came sometime between May 15, 1829, and July 1830. There are two primary events within this fifteen-month window that historians debate over to determine when they came. Larry Porter, a BYU professor who published his study of the priesthood restoration in the *Ensign* in 1979, argues that they came within a few weeks after John the Baptist in late May or early June 1829 (I favor this argument, but Joseph Smith does not find it necessary to identify the date in his 1839 history).²⁰ By contrast, Richard Bushman and others have argued that there is evidence that the visitation could have occurred as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery rushed out of a trial in Colesville, New York, in early July 1830.²¹ The second date is theologically at odds with the idea that the “keys of the kingdom” were needed to establish the Church and has not been adopted by most Church members. Nonetheless, neither of these scenarios has been overwhelmingly adopted by scholars, in part because Joseph Smith never used the dating as a way to understand the purpose of the apostolic visit. His 1839 history in particular does something completely different, and though the timing issue is interesting and relevant

20. Larry C. Porter, “Dating the Melchizedek Priesthood,” *Ensign* 9, no. 6 (1979): 5–10.

21. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 162–63 and 240–41 n. 55; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 16–27; Gregory Prince, *Power from On High* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996).

for other reasons, it is a fact that Joseph’s history does not try to place the apostolic visit historically in a time frame that matters here.²²

22. The context for the event began in January 1829 when Joseph Knight Sr. gave Joseph Smith Sr. and Samuel Smith a ride from Colesville, New York, on his sleigh to Harmony, Pennsylvania. Knight remembered that once they arrived, he “gave the old man [Joseph Smith Sr.] a half a dollar and Joseph a little money to Buoy paper to translate.” Joseph Knight Sr., *Reminiscences*, in Dean Jesse, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection of Early Mormon History,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976): 36. By April 7, Smith was translating in earnest with Oliver Cowdery, but by April 27, Smith needed \$50 to pay his father-in-law for the house he had purchased from him on April 6. Davidson and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 28–33; “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 13; Oliver Cowdery, Norton, Ohio, to William W. Phelps, September 7, 1834, *LDS Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 14. Joseph Knight Jr. remembered his father being unable to raise the money, so Joseph came to Joseph Knight Jr., who remembered, “I sold my house lot and sent him a one horse wagon.” Joseph Knight Jr., *Autobiographical Sketch*, 1862, 1, Church History Library (hereafter CHL), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, MS 286, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=0963cfb9-cc6f-45ad-96eb-71e52cb28e00&crate=0&index=0>. Joseph made the payment on April 27, just three weeks after the translation had begun. As the translation continued, Smith and Cowdery ran out of paper and provisions, which brought the translation to a halt.

They paused their work and traveled to Colesville, New York, to see if Joseph Knight Sr. would provide them with more paper and food to help them finish the translation. When they found that Knight was visiting another township on business, they returned to Harmony to find work to help pay for the provisions themselves. During this same time, Cowdery had been writing to David Whitmer in Fayette, who agreed to bring his wagon to Harmony to help them move to Fayette. Knowing that they needed provisions and paper to finish the translation in Fayette, Knight remembered them looking for work when he arrived. With intentions of helping, he brought a barrel of mackerel, nine or ten bushels of grain, five or six bushels of potatoes, and a pound of tea, but most importantly, “lined paper” for the translation. His intentions were to provide for them “provisions enough to Last till the translation was done.” Knight Sr., *Reminiscences*, in Jesse, “Joseph Knight’s Recollection,” 36.

Knight’s arrival can potentially offer a historical event in May 1829 that meets the requirement for when the Peter, James, and John scenario occurred. First, we know that Samuel was at Joseph’s house “a few days” after May 15, 1829, likely between May 16 and 25. Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 296, 299 n. 107; Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, bk. 8, pgs. 3–4, CHL, MS 2049. Creating this window was relevant to Joseph Smith’s history because the history was trying to date when Smith received D&C 11 and calculate when they moved to Fayette, New York. The history explains that Samuel was in Harmony a “few days” after May 15 and before Hyrum arrived, at which time Joseph delivered D&C 11 to him. MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 50–54. It states that Samuel was baptized and “he returned to his father’s house.” It then adds, “Not many days afterwards, my brother Hyrum Smith came to us” in Harmony. Therefore, the broadest window in which Samuel was in Harmony, Pennsylvania, was between May 16 and 25, 1829. Completely unrelated to Joseph Smith’s history and without access to the

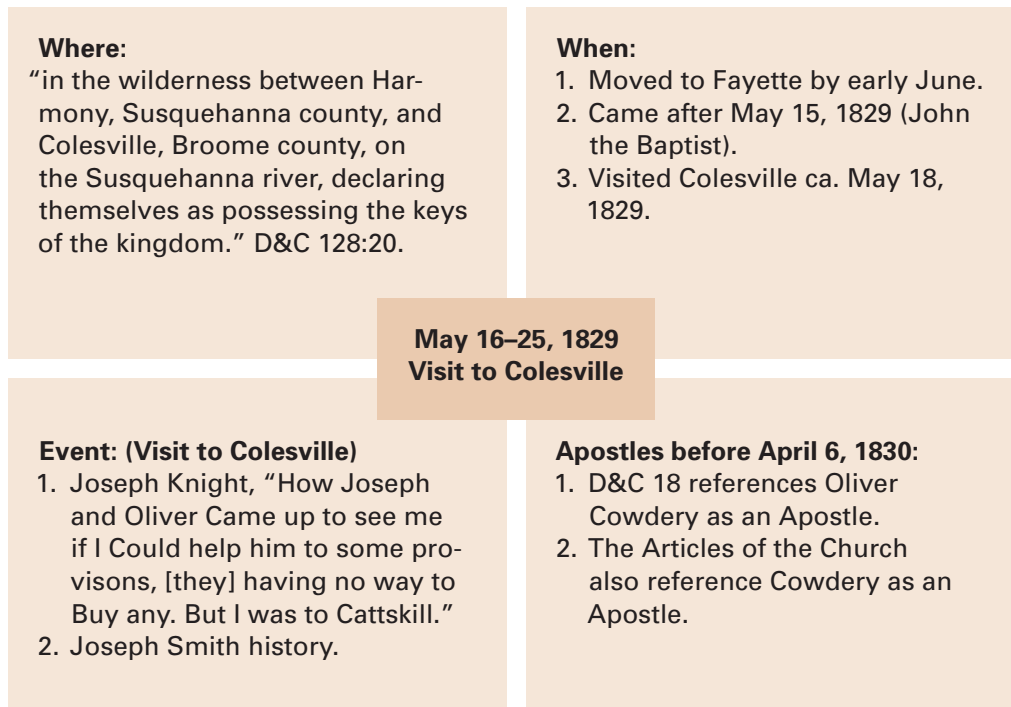


FIGURE 2. May 1829—the Larry Porter Thesis. This represents some of the evidence for dating the Peter, James, and John visit to late May 1829. This argument has been traditionally been associated with the research of Larry Porter.



FIGURE 3. July 1830—the Bushman Thesis. This represents some of the evidence for dating the Peter, James, and John visit to July 1830. This argument has been traditionally associated with the research of D. Michael Quinn and Richard Lyman Bushman.

Joseph explicitly mentions Peter, James, and John twice in his history, and both mentions provide some indication for why the trio came, at least as we look at how Joseph included them in his history. The first mention of Peter, James, and John has nothing to do with their visit, but begins to indicate their purpose and how Joseph Smith was using their visit in his history. This first mention will also be explored even more extensively below, since they are mentioned as part of the dialogue between John the Baptist, Joseph Smith, and Oliver Cowdery. John the Baptist is described in the 1839 history as claiming to lack the authority to give the power to give the gift of the Holy Ghost, telling them “that this should be conferred on [them] hereafter.” John the Baptist also told them that “he acted under the direction of Peter, James, and John who held the keys of the priesthood,” evoking a kind of delegation of authority from the Apostles to himself. This use of the term *keys* and the notion of delegation or administration reflects a later use of the term, which was more likely to be used to reference the access to the “mysteries of the kingdom,” revelation, or scripture in the time between 1829 and 1832.²³ The idea of delegation and the relationship with the keys of the priesthood began developing with the presidency of the High Priesthood in Doctrine and Covenants 65:2, and then by March 1832 (D&C 81:2), the term “keys” was used explicitly to reference the presidency and the distribution of authority.²⁴ Even then the idea of keys and Apostles

history, Joseph Knight Sr. explained that when he traveled to Harmony, he saw Samuel Smith at Joseph Smith’s Harmony home, but not Hyrum Smith. Therefore, Knight went to Harmony during that very small window of time when Samuel was at Joseph’s house. Therefore, sometime between when Samuel arrived and when he returned to Manchester, Smith and Cowdery traveled to Colesville to get provisions from Joseph Knight Sr. The following day, before Samuel left, Knight came to Harmony and provided them with provisions. Given the correlation between these two primary accounts, Smith and Cowdery’s visit to Colesville took place about May 20, 1829. The dating of their travel provides an event that can be used within the deductive reasoning for identifying the *scenario* described by Joseph Smith in D&C 128. However, it still only analyzes possible scenarios for dating Smith’s reminiscent account.

23. As early as April 1830, one of Joseph Smith’s revelations (D&C 6:27–28) uses the term “keys” to reference his ability to translate the Book of Mormon. Then in September 1830 another revelation references “keys” as access to “the mysteries, and the revelations” (D&C 28:7).

24. Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 92–94. On October 30, 1831, Joseph Smith used the term *keys* to represent authority at this point in D&C 65:2, rather than the previous use of the term *keys* to receive revelation. He revealed, “The keys of the kingdom of God is committed unto man on the Earth & from thence shall the Gospel roll forth unto the ends of the Earth.” The 1835 Doctrine and Covenants added to

was never fully developed or connected together in revelation until 1835 when the Twelve Apostles were called. This is relevant to Joseph Smith's history because the first reference to Peter, James, and John is not about the purpose of their visit, but instead it is about their authority to authorize and delegate keys to John the Baptist. This is anachronistic terminology and invites the question about how Joseph Smith was using the role of Peter, James, and John in his history.

References to Peter, James, and John in Joseph Smith's History (A-1)

First Reference	Second Reference
John the Baptist references Peter, James, and John	Peter, James, and John were mentioned in the 1835 version of D&C 27:12–13

The second reference to Peter, James, and John in Joseph's history is not even found within the prose but instead is found in the text of Doctrine and Covenants 27 that was inserted into his history chronologically as part of the events that happened at the end of summer 1830. What makes this even more complicated is the fact that the part of the revelation that describes the visit of Peter, James, and John was added to the revelation in 1835. Interestingly, the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants was the first published documentation of the visit of Peter, James, and John. The additions made to section 27 also emphasize the transmission of priesthood authority or keys to Joseph Smith by multiple biblical prophets and patriarchs to govern the modern church.²⁵

Retrospectively, Peter, James, and John became one link in a long chain leading back from dispensation to dispensation and patriarch to patriarch in a line of key-holding authority back to Adam. As such, the verses in Doctrine and Covenants 27 inform us that the Apostles delivered to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery administrative keys and a new dispensation in the form of their apostleship. The 1835 text of

D&C 68 explicit references to the "Melchizedek priesthood," "keys," and "presidency." Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 4*, 357. Contemporarily, D&C 81:2 included the following instruction to Joseph Smith's counselor Jesse Gause, referring to "the calling wherewith your called even to be a high Priest in my church and councillor unto my servant Joseph unto whom <I> have given the keys of the Kingdom which belongs to always to the pridency of the high Priesthood; therefor verily I acknowledge him and will bless him and also thee inasmuch as thou art faithful in council in the office." Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 208.

25. Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 4*, 408–11.

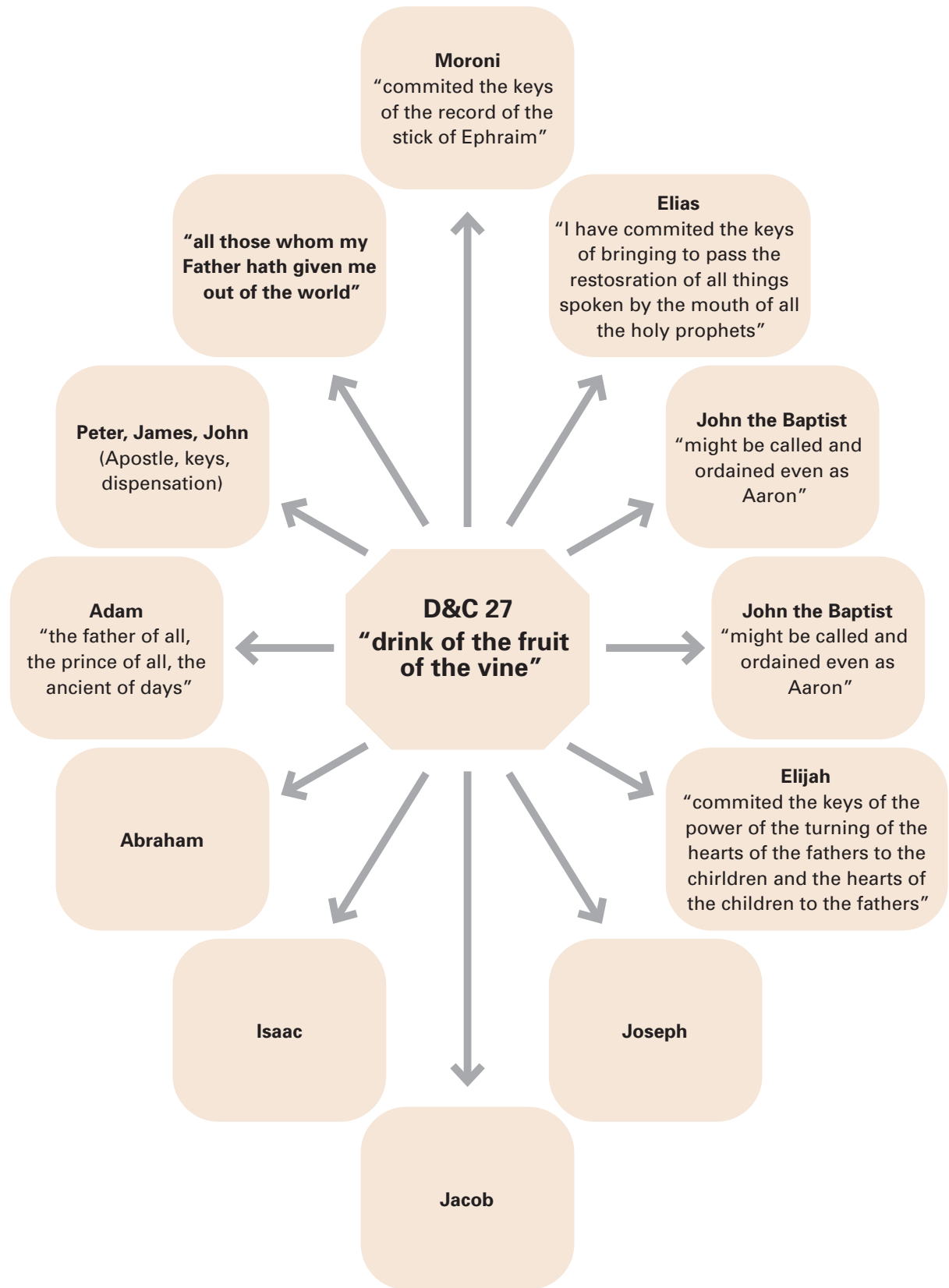


FIGURE 4. The Lord's Supper with the Ancient Patriarchs. This is a list of restoration events and the principal actors/participants who will one day partake of the sacramental wine with Jesus Christ.

section 27 describes the purpose of the Peter, James, and John visit without referencing priesthood, high priesthood, and especially Melchizedek priesthood:

<i>Doctrine and Covenants</i> 27:12–13	<i>Doctrine and Covenants</i> 128:20
Ordained Apostles	
"ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles"	
Committed Keys of the Kingdom	
"I have committed the keys of my kingdom."	"Declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom."
Committed A New Dispensation	
"I have committed . . . a dispensation of the gospel for the last times."	"and the dispensation of the fulness of times!"

FIGURE 5. What Did Peter, James, and John Restore? This table compares the two revelations in the *Doctrine and Covenants* (27 and 128) that describe the purpose of the visit of Peter, James, and John.

And also with Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles and especial witnesses of my name, and bear the keys of your ministry: and of the same things which I revealed unto them: unto whom I have committed the keys of my kingdom, and a dispensation of the gospel for the last days times; and for the fulness of times, in which I will gather together in one all things, both which are in Heaven and which are on earth.²⁶

Though the uninterrupted line of authority from dispensation to dispensation was not defined by each patriarch possessing the apostleship, *Doctrine and Covenants* 27 emphasized the postincarnation apostleship because Peter, James, and John ordained Smith and Cowdery to be Apostles. Also, though there is no identifiable unified narrative that tells the story of the developing apostleship or the changing ideas about keys over Joseph's life, they are nonetheless a theme that emerges throughout Joseph Smith's history. The restoration of the apostleship and the ability to call additional Apostles, like the New Testament Apostles, emerged

26. "History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1," 52. This is not an explicit account of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. Joseph used the narrative of Peter, James, and John as an explicit reference to how they received administrative keys to distribute and govern the priesthood (see previous footnote).

first in the text of the 1829 Book of Mormon.²⁷ This was the seed that would eventually grow into the Latter-day Saint Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1835.²⁸ The text of the Book of Mormon created an ecclesiastical possibility for Christ’s Apostles to be replicated as a quorum or authoritative body of twelve, in spite of the fact that antebellum Protestants believed there was no succession of the New Testament Apostles.²⁹ Steps were also taken to call additional Apostles in 1829, even before the Church of Christ was established, when a revelation was given to Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer to call “even unto twelve” as part of the restoration.³⁰

Though they did not call twelve immediately, the revelation developed much like many of the other revelations, as a major initiative that would flower over years. For example, as the Church established its ecclesiastical structure and administrative center, the mention of twelve Apostles emerged again in the fall of 1831. Church leadership had recently been introduced to a higher expression of the priesthood and the office of high priest as an administrative office in the Church.³¹ On October 26, 1831, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon offered instruction on the priesthood at a Church conference.³² Cowdery also informed the Church that he had been recently told that the twelve “would be

27. The Book of Mormon declares, “Wherefore, the twelve ministers of thy seed shall be judged of them; for ye are of the house of Israel” (1 Ne. 12:9). See Michael Hubbard MacKay, *Prophetic Authority: Democratic Hierarchy and the Mormon Priesthood* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2020), ch. 3; and Taylor G. Petrey, “Purity and Parallels: Constructing the Apostasy Narrative of Early Christianity,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, ed. Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 174–95.

28. MacKay, *Prophetic Authority*, ch. 6.

29. Adam Clark, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The Text Carefully Printed from the Most Correct Copies of the Present Authorized Version Including the Marginal Reading and Parallel Texts. With a Commentary and Critical Notes* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1831), 736–37; Gregory A. Prince, *Power from On High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 56–62; Albert C. Outler, “Biblical Primitivism in Early American Methodism,” in *The American Quest for the Primitive Church*, ed. Richard T. Hughes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 134–37.

30. Davidson and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 69–74; Prince, *Power from On High*, 56–62.

31. MacKay, *Prophetic Authority*, ch. 3; Davidson and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 317–27.

32. Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 79.

ordained & sent forth from the land Zion.”³³ Then, just a few days later, one of Joseph Smith’s revelations (D&C 65:2) addressed the authority of the kingdom of God, which would prepare the earth for the Second Coming of Christ. It stated, “The keys of the kingdom of God is committed unto man on the Earth & from thence shall the Gospel roll forth unto the ends of the Earth, as the stone which is hewn from the Mountain without hands shall role forth untill it hath filled the whole Earth.”³⁴

Considering this slow development of the apostleship and the fact that it was initiated in 1829 (D&C 18), its latent development may have been a reason for Joseph to exclude the Peter, James, and John visit from the part of his history that described 1829.³⁵ Within months of each other, in 1835, the first members of the Quorum of the Twelve were ordained and the Peter, James, and John visit was added to D&C 27. Then the 1835 additions to D&C 27 ended up in Joseph Smith’s history as if they were written in the summer of 1830. Joseph had numerous places in his history to emphasize the Peter, James, and John visit, but instead he let the text of D&C 27 describe the event. With that brief mention, his history of 1835 described the ordination of the Twelve Apostles.

The idea of keys flowered over time also. Paralleling the keys given to Peter in the New Testament by Christ, this authority was intended to be used to build the “kingdom of heaven” on earth. This was also associated with the creation of the presidency of the High Priesthood who would use those keys to authorize and administer the priesthood in the last days.³⁶ Authority was delegated to leaders like bishops, who were also high priests, to administer to Church members and distribute authority among them.³⁷

By 1835, the administrative authority described as keys was codified into revelation through authorized revisions added to previous revelations and by additional new revelations in preparation to publish the Doctrine and Covenants. In particular, the majority of the verses in

33. “Minutes, 25–26 October 1831,” in Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 87; also “Minute Book 2,” 25–26 October 1831, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-2/17>.

34. Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 92–93.

35. For a detailed history of apostleship in 1829 and 1830, see MacKay, *Prophetic Authority*, ch. 3.

36. See Doctrine and Covenants 81:2: “Unto whom I have given the keys of the Kingdom, which belong always unto the Presidency of the High Priesthood.” Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 2*, 208.

37. See Doctrine and Covenants 68:14–17 and 84:18–29.

section 27 were added after the original revelation in 1830,³⁸ and these later additions introduced an apocalyptic event just before Christ’s Second Coming in which the patriarchs across the dispensations would meet to return their “keys” of their dispensations back to Adam.³⁹ It is in this added part of D&C 27 that Peter, James, and John are mentioned as having delivered the “keys of the kingdom” to Joseph Smith in succession with all of the patriarchs.⁴⁰ Additions to several revelations (D&C 7, 27, 68, and 107) all represented the administrative and distributive authority of the priesthood and the importance of the concept of keys. In other words, as Joseph and editors of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants prepared the revelations for publication, keys and administration were emphasized more than ever before. Of course, the Peter, James, and John visit was understood and described in terms of administration and keys.

In particular, these changes came as Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and the presidency chose and ordained twelve Apostles for the first time.⁴¹ Once they were ordained and before the Twelve were sent out to the branches of the Church across the United States, Joseph provided them with instruction on the priesthood (now D&C 107) that outlined the priesthood orders and Church governance. The Twelve

38. In preparation for subsequent printings of his revelations, Joseph Smith (or those under his direction) amended and added to many early Doctrine and Covenants verses to clarify and expand ideas based on developing revelation. To compare our current edition of section 27 with the early manuscript version in Revelation Book 1, see “Revelation, circa August 1830 [D&C 27],” 36, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 28, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-circa-august-1830-dc-27/2>.

39. The “Instruction on Priesthood” (D&C 107:53) explained that in the last days of Adam’s life he blessed his posterity with his “last blessing.” The 1835 additions to D&C 27 describe the gathering of past patriarchs at the Second Coming to take the sacrament and return their keys to Adam. Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 4*, 308–21, 408–11.

40. Compare MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 164–66, and Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 4*, 408–11.

41. See MacKay, *Prophetic Authority*, ch. 3; Ronald K. Esplin, “Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve: A Succession of Continuity,” *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 301–41; Ronald K. Esplin, “The Emergence of Brigham Young and the Twelve to Mormon Leadership, 1830–1841” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1981); Ronald W. Walker, “Six Days in August: Brigham Young and the Succession Crisis of 1844,” in *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration*, ed. Arnold K. Garr and David J. Whitaker (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 161–96; Christopher J. Blythe, “Recreating Religion: The Response to Joseph Smith’s Innovations in the Second Prophetic Generation of Mormonism” (master’s thesis, Utah State University, 2001); D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 105–264.

were instructed that “the order of this priesthood was confirmed to be handed down from father to son. . . . This order was instituted in the days of Adam, and came down by lineage.”⁴² Each priesthood and office were delineated and defined within the ecclesiology that identified how authority within the branches of the Church was distributed. In particular, the Twelve became the traveling high council that held the keys of the kingdom and who would establish leaders and distribute the keys to local authorities and offices outside of Zion and her stakes.⁴³ To some extent, this was a moment when the Peter, James, and John visit could have been understood with more precision and understanding.

The revelatory additions to Doctrine and Covenants 7, 27, 68, and 107 shape the primary narrative in Joseph Smith’s history and explain why the Peter, James, and John narrative in the history emphasizes administrative keys and apostolic restoration. Joseph Smith framed the visit of Peter, James, and John within the administrative and distributive developments that created the Latter-day Saint concept of keys, the ordination of Apostles, and purpose of the last dispensation. His history captures this narrative within the development of Latter-day Saint ecclesiology, particularly as part of his revelations about priesthood authority. The restoration of priesthood through Peter, James, and John was described as administrative (broadly speaking, as if this administrative authority controlled the kingdom of God and the last dispensation), rather than simply a restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood.⁴⁴ These categories

42. Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 4*, 316.

43. There is scholarly debate about the Twelve Apostles receiving the keys, since only a few of them were given keys in their blessings and ordinations. Additionally, they did not immediately receive administrative authorities like they would once they returned from the mission to England. Yet it is clear that their ordination was a fulfillment of the commandment to Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer in D&C 18 “to search out the Twelve” (v. 37) and was associated with the 1835 version of D&C 27 that explicitly claims that Peter, James, and John delivered the “keys of the kingdom” as part of the authority that was given to Joseph and Oliver as ordained Apostles.

44. Joseph Smith had faced significant challenges to his authority in Kirtland and in Missouri. This is a likely reason for him to begin to trace his authority back to angelic visits. It should be specifically noted that Joseph’s 1832 history states, “The Lord brought forth and established by his hand <firstly> he receiving the testimony from on high secondly the ministering of Angels thirdly the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministering of—Aangels to adminster the letter of the Law <Gospel—><—the law and commandments as they were given unto him—> and in <the> ordinencs, forthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God confereed upon

and narratives are clearly not indivisible, but rather overlapping, which enabled Joseph to also address the restoration of the priesthood as a nonadministrative power to perform saving ordinances.

**The Restoration of Melchizedek Priesthood:
The Power to Baptize, Give the Gift of the Holy Ghost,
and Ordain Elders**

The second restoration narrative that Joseph Smith describes in his history is about the power to perform ordinances and ordain individuals to priesthood offices. This restoration is formed around three events: (1) the visit of John the Baptist, (2) the chamber of Father Whitmer, and (3) the establishment of the Church of Christ. The key to understanding this narrative is realizing that Joseph Smith did not describe these events separately. In fact, the core of this argument depends upon not only the textual connections Joseph Smith used to inseparably link them together but also the fact that he left the Peter, James, and John visit out of this 1829 narrative in his official history. In other words, Joseph connected these three events together and disconnected the visit of Peter, James, and John from these three events.

This is no small demarcation, since Joseph Smith claimed that the three events together restored the power to baptize, the power to give the Gift of the Holy Ghost, the Melchizedek priesthood, the office of elder, and the directive to organize the Church. Yet it can be demonstrated that Joseph Smith’s intentions were to create this narrative and to intentionally leave the Peter, James, and John narrative to be discussed later in his history. Many Latter-day Saints follow Larry Porter’s argument that Peter, James, and John visited in the second half of May 1829, the timing of which would put their visit in the middle of the period that I’m calling here the “second narrative,” yet Joseph Smith conspicuously left their visit out of the chronological flow of the events he narrated in his 1839 history.⁴⁵

him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c.” Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 10. Matthew C. Godfrey, “A Culmination of Learning: D&C and the Doctrine of the Priesthood,” in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 167–81.

45. Larry Porter, “The Restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods,” *Ensign* 26, no. 12 (December 1996): 30–47.

Textual Connection between the John the Baptist Narrative and the “Chamber of Father Whitmer”

Joseph Smith, History, Vol. A-1

John the Baptist in the woods in Harmony, Pennsylvania, pp. 17–18.

“Voice of the Lord” in the “chamber of Father Whitmer” in Fayette, New York, pp. 27–28.

Three Promises made by John the Baptist in Smith’s history and fulfilled in the chamber.

Transition: “We now became anxious to have that promise realized to us, which the Angel [John the Baptist] that conferred upon us the Aaronick Priesthood had given us, viz:”

Promise 1 (power to give the gift of the Holy Ghost)

Fulfillment 1 (power to give the gift of the Holy Ghost)

“He said this Aaronic priesthood had not the power of laying on of hands, for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but that this should be conferred on <us> hereafter”

“Authority of the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

Promise 2 (Melchizedek Priesthood)

Fulfillment 2 (Melchizedek Priesthood)

Melchizedek “priesthood he said should in due time be conferred on us.”

“that provided we continued faithful; we should also have the Melchesidec Priesthood”

Promise 3 (office of elder)

Fulfillments 3 (office of elder)

“And that I should be called the first Elder of the Church and he the second.”

“when 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”

FIGURE 6. Textual Connection between the John the Baptist Narrative and the “Chamber of Father Whitmer.” This chart demonstrates that there are three promises made by John the Baptist that are all fulfilled in the chamber of Father Whitmer (restoration of power to give the gift of the Holy Ghost, the Melchizedek Priesthood, and the office of elder). The experience in the chamber came as a direct result of the dialogue with John the Baptist, not the visit from Peter, James, and John. (This table was originally designed by the author for *Prophetic Authority: Democratic Hierarchy and the Mormon Priesthood*.)

The key to understanding Joseph Smith’s narrative is in the language he used to connect the John the Baptist visit, the chamber of Father Whitmer, and the establishment of the Church. Thus, the best place to start is with Joseph Smith’s account of the John the Baptist visit. Joseph’s history describes three promises that John the Baptist makes to Joseph Smith: (1) to receive the power to give the Holy Ghost, (2) to receive the Melchizedek priesthood, and (3) to be ordained the first elder. Many readers have assumed, for good reason, that these three promises were fulfilled by the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood through Peter, James, and John.⁴⁶ However, Joseph Smith’s own 1839 history does not turn to the visit of Peter, James, and John to fulfill these promises. Instead, he leaves the apostolic visitation out and describes the fulfillment of all three promises to have occurred at the house of Peter Whitmer Sr., where they were finishing the translation of the Book of Mormon in the chamber of Father Whitmer, and in the April 6, 1830, organization of the Church of Christ.⁴⁷

46. One of the passages that readers of the history use to claim that Peter, James, and John fulfilled the promises John made is a misreading of the history. It states: “The messenger who visited us on this occasion and conferred this priesthood upon us said that his name was John, the same that is called John the Baptist in the new Testament, and that he acted under the direction <of> Peter, James, and John, who held the keys of the priesthood of Melchisedeck, which priesthood he said should in due time be conferred on us. And that I should be called the first Elder of the Church and he the second.” “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 18. This passage actually demonstrates that the Peter, James, and John narrative was about the restoration of keys and administrative authority, when it states that John “acted under the direction of Peter, James, and John.” The misreading happens when the reader connects the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood with Peter, James, and John. It does not say that they were going to restore the priesthood, but rather that the priesthood they hold will be restored. This misreading is best demonstrated from following the history’s textual connection between John the Baptist’s promises and their fulfillment in the chamber of Father Whitmer (fig. 6). A careful reading of this passage supports the two narratives described in Joseph Smith’s history.

47. John the Baptist came on May 15, and the experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer occurred in the middle of June 1829. There are very few things I would disagree with in Larry Porter’s research, but I question his notion that Peter, James, and John fulfilled John the Baptist’s promises. Porter claims that “the ancient Apostles had instructed Joseph and Oliver to not yet ordain each other to an office within the Melchizedek Priesthood,” which is not supported in Joseph’s 1838 history, where Joseph states that when they were in the chamber of Father Whitmer, they “became anxious to have that promise realized to us, which the Angel [John the Baptist] that conferred upon us the Aaronick Priesthood had given us” (fig. 6). Porter has developed a sophisticated argument for dating when Peter, James, and John visited Smith and Cowdery (which I

Joseph Smith's history directly connects the promises given by John the Baptist to the purpose of the events that occurred in the chamber of Father Whitmer. He began by writing, "We now became anxious to have that promise realized to us, which the Angel [John the Baptist] that conferred upon us the Aaronick Priesthood had given us." In other words, Joseph and Oliver asked for the fulfillment of John the Baptist's promises. First, they asked for the power to give the gift of the Holy Ghost, and second, they asked for the associated Melchizedek Priesthood. Within Joseph Smith's accounts about the restoration of the priesthood (whether he was explaining the restoration of priesthood through Moses, John the Baptist, Elias, or Elijah), none of them explicitly claim that the "Melchizedek Priesthood" was restored by them, except for in the chamber of Father Whitmer.⁴⁸ Curiously, none of his accounts about Peter, James, and John claimed that they restored the Melchizedek Priesthood either. After asking the Lord for the fulfillment of John the Baptist's promises, Joseph Smith wrote that "here to our unspeakable satisfaction did we realize the truth of the Saviour's promise; 'Ask, and you shall receive, seek, and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.'" He explained that "we had not long been engaged in solemn and fervent prayer, when 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."⁴⁹

agree with, and I do think the Apostles came before the experience in the chamber), but this point about the Apostles evoking the experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer is not true, at least according to Joseph's history. It is also not supported by any extant historical document. Porter, "Restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood," 38–39. Following Porter's lead, *Saints: The Standard of Truth* also tries to make the same connection. It states, "The Lord's ancient apostles Peter, James, and John had appeared to them and conferred on them Melchizedek Priesthood, as John the Baptist promised." *Saints: The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 84, emphasis added. On the other hand, other recent explanations have chosen to allow the reader to simply read the account describing the event in the chamber of Father Whitmer. The Joseph Smith Papers Project, in particular, chose to let the account stand on its own in the introduction to *Documents, Volume 1*. Davidson and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, xxxix. Richard Lyman Bushman did the same in *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alford Knopf, 2006), 79–80.

48. Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, "Seventy Contemporaneous Priesthood Restoration Documents," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, ed. John Welch with Erick B. Carlson (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 215–64.

49. "History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1," 27.

Joseph Smith's History "according to previous commandment"

Commandment	Fulfillment
The Chamber of Old Father Whitmer, June 1829, Joseph Smith, History, vol. A-1, 27.	Establishment of the Church, April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith, History, vol. A-1, 37.
"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."	"I then laid my hands upon Oliver Cowdery and ordained him an Elder of the Church. . . . He ordained me also to the office of an Elder of said Church."
"such times, as it should be practicable to have our brethren, who had been and who should be baptized, assembled together."	"we had received commandment to organize the Church And accordingly we met together for that purpose, at the house of the above mentioned Mr Whitmer [Peter Whitmer Sr.] (being six in number) on Tuesday the sixth day of April, AD One thousand, eight hundred and thirty."
"have them decide by vote whether they were willing to accept us as spiritual teachers, or not."	"We proceeded, (according to previous commandment) to call on our brethren to know whether they accepted us as their teachers."
"when also we were commanded to bless bread and break it with them, and to take wine, bless it, and drink it with them."	"We then broke bread, blessed it, and brake it with them, also wine, blessed it, and drank it with them."
"then attend to the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, upon all those whom we had previously baptized; doing all things in the name of the Lord."	"We then laid our hands on each individual member of the Church present that they might receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, and be confirmed members of the Church of Christ."

FIGURE 7. "According to Previous Commandment." This chart demonstrates that the text of Joseph Smith's history explicitly connects the commandments in the chamber of Father Whitmer with the establishment of the Church of Christ on April 6, 1830.

Joseph Smith's history unquestionably connects the visit of John the Baptist and the experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer but then describes additional commandments in the chamber, given by Christ, to be fulfilled at the establishment of the Church. According to Joseph's history, Christ commanded them to (1) ordain each other as the first and second elders, (2) to perform those ordinations at the establishment of the Church where believers had been gathered, (3) where the congregation could vote by common consent to accept Joseph and Oliver as their leaders, (4) then prepare and receive the Lord's Supper, and finally (5) give the Gift of the Holy Ghost to those who had been baptized. Joseph Smith's history explicitly states, "We proceeded, (according to previous commandment)"⁵⁰ to follow what was given by the Lord in the chamber of Father Whitmer. The Prophet fulfilled, at the April 6, 1830, establishment of the Church, all five commandments given in the chamber as shown by figure 7.

Through this examination of the text of Joseph Smith's history, it is clear that Joseph Smith saw the visitation of John the Baptist and the events that followed as essential aspects of a single restoration narrative. The visit of John the Baptist, the experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer, and the establishment of the Church were part of one single restoration narrative that restored the power to baptize, the power to give the gift of the Holy Ghost, the Melchizedek Priesthood, the office of elder, and the Church of Christ. The fact that these terms have to be understood in an 1835–1839 context actually makes these restoration narratives more potent, though more anachronistic for an 1829 context, regarding a conception of how the priesthood was restored. When Joseph Smith worked on his history in 1839, he was well aware of the historical changes that had occurred over the previous decade, yet he felt confident in declaring that the "Melchizedek Priesthood" was restored in the chamber of Father Whitmer. His history is a complicated text, but in this instance, there is little reason to question the deliberate narrative developed from a retrospective position.⁵¹ This specific narrative

50. "History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1," 37.

51. That being said, the question of intent will always be a factor. Was Joseph Smith cognizant of the fact that his official history described the chamber of Father Whitmer as part of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood? The textual links described above are enough to assure us as readers that the author of the text undoubtedly intended the John the Baptist appearance, the chamber of Father Whitmer experience, and the establishment of the Church to be one continuous narrative. So, if the text demonstrates clear intent, then one must question the author. Is Joseph Smith the author? The primary

moves us away from traditional accounts that describe the restoration of the priesthood as an event because it was a process including several events that constituted the Restoration.

It was never just one event that welcomed Joseph Smith and the Church’s leadership into the priesthood and offered them the authority to perform ordinances and govern The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Joseph continued to outline the process of events in his history and revelations. His history itself chronologically works through numerous restoration events to demonstrate the process of the restoration. For example, his history starts soon after the narratives described above by including the 1835 version of D&C 27 in which numerous restoration experiences are noted, including when Peter, James, and John ordained him and Oliver Cowdery as Apostles. Then, perhaps even more perplexing, on June 3, 1831, Joseph was “ordained to the High Priesthood under the hand of br. Lyman Wight” and he “conferred, <the high priesthood> for the first time, upon several of the elders.”⁵² Following this event, he was guided by revelation to form the Presidency of the High Priesthood, construct quorums, and create new sacraments. By 1836, the priesthood was then restored through Jesus, Moses, Elias, and Elijah (D&C 110) in the Kirtland temple.⁵³ Interestingly, with retrospection, Joseph wrote in his history that from his earliest visits with Moroni, Moroni told to him, “I will reveal unto you the Priesthood by the hand of Elijah the prophet.”⁵⁴ All of this complicates the traditional two-event

critique would be to question whether James Mulholland, the scribe for the history, created this narrative. This is an impossible task to prove one way or the other, but Joseph never changed the account, even though he had numerous chances to fix errors. Instead, Joseph printed the history publicly in the *Times and Seasons* in Nauvoo. Joseph was considered its author, a stance that the Joseph Smith Papers Project has also embraced.

52. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 118. MacKay and others, *Documents, Volume 1*, 326. High priesthood is often referred to as a specific power that is later called the “Melchizedek Priesthood” in D&C 107 in 1835. Here it is the group of high priests that make up the high priesthood. This gives the sense of joining the priesthood, rather than being given a specific power. By 1835, there are two priesthoods the leaders could join, Aaronic and Melchizedek, the second being associated with the high priesthood. The process of communing with angels and participating with heaven happens over time and constitutes the restoration of the priesthoods, or the restoration of the living church participating in the priesthood.

53. Dean Jesse and others, *Journals, Volume 1*, 219–22.

54. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 5. The use of the term “reveal” suggests that Moroni was referencing priesthood as something you would join rather than something you would hold. The edits to D&C 107 in 1835 suggest that the priesthood order on earth went back to Adam. Elijah, Elias, and Moses “revealed” this priesthood order and

restoration narrative of the Melchizedek Priesthood by including multiple restoration events across Joseph Smith's ministry that were part of that restoration.

Conclusion

As Church members, we have commonly abbreviated the narrative of the restoration of the priesthood by associating the Aaronic Priesthood with John the Baptist and the Melchizedek Priesthood with Peter, James, and John. Yet members are well aware that priesthood restoration was a process, not an event, or even just two events. Members are well aware of the abridgments we make to the priesthood restoration narrative, but occasionally we need reminders of its nuanced and ongoing history. To expand our understanding should be an exciting part of this process.

The process of the restoration of the priesthood is described in revelations like Doctrine and Covenants 27, 107, 110, and 128 to be a meeting of heavenly beings on earth with Joseph Smith. In fact, D&C 128:21 records that Joseph was visited by "divers angels, from Michael or Adam down to the present time." The priesthood existed before the foundation of the world and Joseph was welcomed to join by angels who delivered "their rights, their keys, their honors, their majesty and glory, and the power of their priesthood; giving line upon line, precept upon precept" (D&C 128:21). The priesthood was not treated or restored as the power of God, but God's power was used authoritatively by this holy order and restored by angels who were ordained members of the priesthood. As such, the priesthood was later described as the restoration of something one could hold, as if Melchizedek Priesthood was restored in that way and within a single visit or event.

The discrepancy between the priesthood being restored as a single event and it being restored as part of a process of events can be explained by the complicated transition after Joseph Smith's death and when Brigham Young become the second prophet. By 1839, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles had become increasingly important, and once they returned from their mission to England, they took on more authoritative administrative roles. In Nauvoo, they participated in the most important councils and temple rites, and by the end of Joseph's life, they

offered up keys of their dispensations that would open doors in the final dispensation to prepare the earth for the Second Coming.

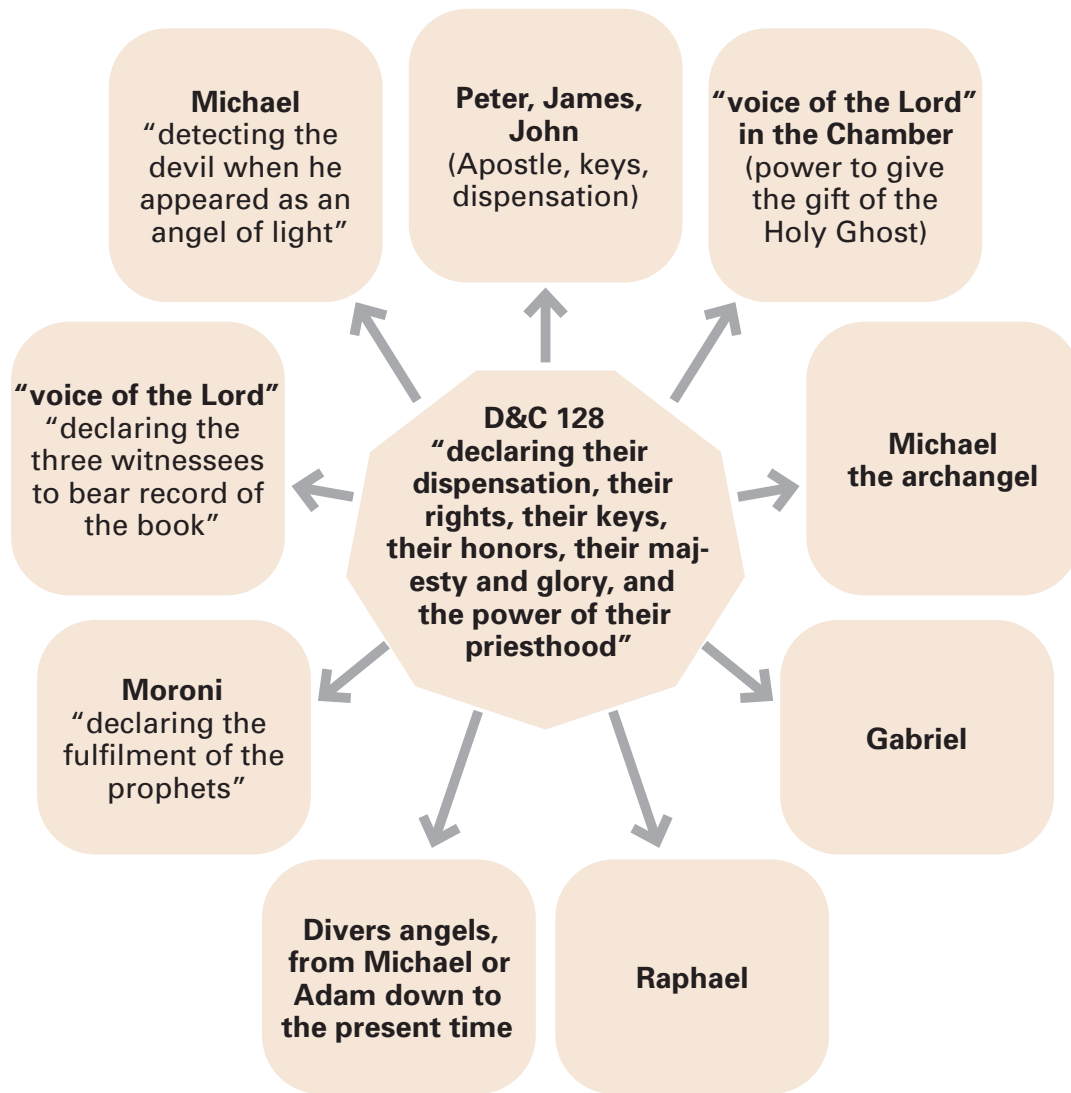


FIGURE 8. Doctrine and Covenants 128. This chart is a list of visitations that Joseph Smith describes in D&C 128, which can be compared with figures 1 (a historical example) and 4 (D&C 27) to demonstrate that priesthood restoration is expressed as a process within scripture.

had become the predominant key-holding quorum of the Church.⁵⁵ After Joseph Smith's death, their authority needed to be demonstrated.

As the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles found itself holding the reins of the Church, the visit of Peter, James, and John was the restoration event that best represented the priesthood restoration and became highlighted as the Church developed over time. Brigham Young emphasized the centrality of apostleship above all other restorations, marking the Peter, James, and John visit as the central event in the restoration of the priesthood.⁵⁶ In 1853, Brigham addressed the membership to demonstrate the foundational authority that the Apostles held in their hands. He preached, "I speak thus to show you the order of the Priesthood." He insisted, "We will now commence with the Apostleship, where Joseph commenced." He explained that after Joseph "was ordained to this office, then he had the right to organize and build up the kingdom of God, for he had committed unto him the *keys* of the *Priesthood*." Having the keys of that same priesthood given to him as an Apostle, Brigham declared, "All the Priesthood, all the keys, all the gifts, all the endowments, and everything preparatory to entering into the presence of the Father and of the Son, are in, composed of, circumscribed by, or I might say incorporated within the circumference of, the Apostleship."⁵⁷ Brigham Young's emphasis on the centrality of the Peter, James, and John visitation has since then become the Church's official position, expressed in simple and compelling terms. This paper, conversely, has developed an additional historical reconstruction of priesthood restoration by focusing directly upon how Joseph Smith told the

55. See D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies* 16, no. 2 (1976): 187–233; Reid L. Harper, "The Mantle of Joseph: Creation of a Mormon Miracle," *Journal of Mormon History* 22, no. 2 (1996): 35–71; Orson Pratt, *Divine Authority; or, The Question Was Joseph Sent of God?* (Liverpool: R. James, 1848), 4–5, 7; Parley P. Pratt, *Proclamation of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Liverpool, Eng.: Wilford Woodruff, 1845), 1–2; Wilford Woodruff, *Journal*, 3:257; Godfrey and others, *Documents, Volume 4*, xxviii, 312–15, 318; Oliver Cowdery to Phineas Young, March 23, 1846; Reuben Miller, *Journal*, October 21, 1848, CHL, accessed January 29, 2021, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets?id=22222322-f4fe-41e3-aa86-bfc54b94df92&crate=o&index=14>.

56. Joseph Smith believed that the Peter, James, and John visit was highly significant and essential. This comment above is tempered by the fact that Joseph Smith described them as restoring the kingdom of God and "the dispensation of the fulness of times" (D&C 128:20).

57. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 1:134–35 (April 6, 1853).

story in 1839, centered on his experience with “the voice of God in the chamber of old Father Whitmer” (D&C 128:21).

This suggests that priesthood restoration was a process. Joseph Smith’s accounting of the Peter, James, and John visit, which was clearly part of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, was associated with apostleship, keys, and dispensations; it was not a single event that restored the priesthood but rather the conferring of an office and administrative authorities that developed over time. Additionally, Joseph’s history framed the John the Baptist visit together with the “voice of the Lord” in the chamber of Father Whitmer and the establishment of the Church to emphasize this part of the process, not to emphasize an event. This bound the restoration of ordinances, offices, and priesthood together in his detailed account of priesthood restoration in 1839.

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