



Type: Magazine Article

Did the Nephites Have the Higher Priesthood before the Coming of Christ?

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 45, No. 6 (June 1942)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 385, 413, 415

Abstract: The author argues that the Nephites possessed the higher priesthood during the era before the resurrected Jesus visited the Nephites (citing 1 Nephi 5:14-16, Alma 10:3, Mosiah 25:21, and others).

EVIDENCES AND RECONCILIATIONS

1. Did the Nephites have the Higher Priesthood Before the Coming of Christ?

THERE is no direct answer to this question in the Book of Mormon. Yet, the events recorded in the Nephite scriptures indicate that the Higher Priesthood was among the Nephites prior to the coming of Christ.

The Nephites were descendants of Manasseh, the son of Joseph of Egypt. (1 Nephi 5:14-16; Alma 10:3) The Nephite Priesthood therefore differed from the Levitical Priesthood which was assigned to the sons of Levi, the brother of Joseph. Lehi, father of the Nephites, held the Priesthood, for, while yet in the wilderness, he and his family offered sacrifice and burnt offerings, priestly ordinances of the Church before the coming of Christ. (1 Nephi 5:9)

Nephi, the son of Lehi, also held the Priesthood, probably conferred by his father. Nephi in turn ordained two of his brothers, Jacob and Joseph, to the Priesthood. They should be priests and teachers over the land of my people." (2 Nephi 5:26) The elder and younger Alma (Alma 5:3), several of the latter's sons, and Nephi, the son of Helaman, together with many others, some of whom are not mentioned by name, held the Priesthood even to the coming of Christ. (2 Nephi 18:2; 25:4; Alma 30:20, 23; 46:38) At no time, it would seem, were the Nephites without the Priesthood.

It would appear that not every man held the Priesthood, yet it must have been rather widely distributed. Mosiah records that there was "one priest to every fifty of their number." (Mos. 18:18) Every Church unit was presided over by the Priesthood. (Mos. 25:21)

The nature of the Nephite Priesthood is gathered from various statements made by Book of Mormon characters. Jacob, the brother of Nephi, declared that he had been "called of God, and ordained after the manner of his holy order." (2 Nephi 6:2) Alma, the younger, says "I am called . . . according to the holy order of God, which is in Christ Jesus" (Alma 5:44), and he later states that he confined himself wholly to the High Priesthood of "the holy order of God." (Alma 49:30) This holy order was "after the order of his Son." (Alma 13:2; Helaman 8:18) The "holy order of God," especially when coupled with the order of the Son of God, has always been held to refer to the Melchizedek or High Priesthood. (Doctrine and Covenants 77:11; 84:19)

Alma was a high priest. (Alma 8:23) His sons were ordained high priests, and also many others. (Alma 46:6; Helaman 3:25) Since there

were many Nephite high priests, this office in the Priesthood could not refer to the one high priest, of the order of Aaron, required to stand at the head of the Lesser Priesthood. It is clear that Alma cited in his famous sermon (Alma 13) the story of earlier high priests of the Melchizedek order, to explain and to emphasize his own calling. The existence of numerous high priests is thus another evidence that the Higher Priesthood was among the Nephites.

Under the authority of the Priesthood, the Nephites performed baptisms from the days of the first Nephi. (Mos. 18:13-16; Alma 5:3; 15:13; 48:19) Now, baptism is by itself an incomplete ordinance. Its full value comes when it is followed by the reception of the gift of the Holy Ghost. Numerous references in the Book of Mormon indicate that the Holy Ghost was received by those who had been baptized. For example: "The gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost." (2 Nephi 31:17) "He that is baptized—him will the Father give the Holy Ghost . . . baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost." (2 Nephi 31:12-14) Alma likewise says that he had labored "without ceasing" to bring souls unto repentance "that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." (Alma 36:24)

The ordinance of baptism could be administered by holders of the Lesser Priesthood (priests), but the conferring of the Holy Ghost requires the authority of the Higher Priesthood. Again the conclusion seems warranted that the Nephites had the Higher Priesthood.

President Brigham H. Roberts came to the same conclusion in his comprehensive study of the Book of Mormon. He says:

Lehi held the Priesthood, . . . the Higher Priesthood, which was after the order of Melchizedek, and was a prophet and minister of righteousness. This, Lehi conferred upon his son, Nephi; and Nephi, shortly after his separation from his elder brothers on the land of promise, consecrated his two younger brothers, Jacob and Joseph, to be priests and teachers unto his people. (*New Witnesses for God*, Vol. 2, p. 219)

Undoubtedly, various offices in the Priesthood were recognized by the Nephites. Teachers, priests, and high priests are specifically mentioned in the Book of Mormon. The terms teachers and priests probably refer to offices in the Lesser Priesthood; and the term high priest to an office in the Higher Priesthood. The Priesthood organization of the Nephites was such as to meet the needs of the people of that day.—J. A. W.

2. What is the Distinction Between the Priesthood and the Keys of the Priesthood?

A KEY unlocks the door to our house, or the cover of our jewelbox, or the ignition of our automobile. Without the key, we cannot have access to the house, possess the jewels, or drive the car. Our property is inactive, (Continued on page 413)

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awaiting the coming of the key. A man, likewise, holds the Priesthood by which all the work in the Church is accomplished, but he can use it in certain Church activities only when the necessary keys are conferred upon him.

Further, a man who owns a car may not be allowed, because of police orders, to drive down certain streets. Similarly, a man may receive the Priesthood, but can exercise its power, within the Church, only by the authority of the proper officials.

On his own property and on open streets the man may drive his car without question. Similarly, in behalf of himself and his family, and for the general good, a man may exercise his Priesthood without reference to the official body of the Church.

They who have the right to say when, where, and how the Priesthood shall be used for the Church have keys of authority. They may give authority or keys to others.

Every priest has the authority to administer the sacrament; every elder has the authority to baptize; but neither can so officiate in the activities of a ward unless called to do so by the bishop who holds the keys of authority for the ward.

Every high priest has the authority to preside, but cannot preside over any stake organization without being called to do so by the stake president, who holds the keys of authority for the stake.

All members of a Priesthood quorum hold equal Priesthood authority, but in the president of the quorum is vested the authority to use the Priesthood for quorum purposes, for he holds the keys of authority for the quorum.

A seventy by virtue of his Priesthood has authority to preach the gospel, but he cannot fill a mission unless he is called by the proper officers of the Church, and set apart for that purpose—that is, unless the keys of that ministry are conferred upon him, within his specific field, by those who hold the general keys of spreading the gospel abroad, and can confer them on others.

Therefore it is customary and proper in ordaining or setting apart men to presiding offices to confer upon them the associated keys of authority. If in ordaining a man to

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V



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the office of elder, seventy, or high priest, the keys of authority are conferred, it means that henceforth he has full right to the use of the power committed to him to meet his own needs, and in guarding and blessing his own family, and all who have need of help. But, when men are called to specific offices of responsibility, the corresponding keys of authority are conferred, even though the man already holds the Priesthood.

President Joseph F. Smith has drawn the clear distinction between the Priesthood and the keys of the Priesthood:

The Priesthood in general is the authority given to man to act for God. Every man ordained to any degree of the Priesthood, has this authority delegated to him.

But it is necessary that every act performed under this authority shall be done at the proper time and place, in the proper way, and after the proper order. The power of directing these labors constitutes the KEYS of the Priesthood. In their fullness, the keys are held by only one person at a time, the prophet and president of the Church. He may delegate any portion of this power to another, in which case that person holds the keys of that particular labor. Thus, the president of a temple, the president of a stake, the bishop of a ward, the president of a mission, the president of a quorum, each holds the keys of the labors performed in that particular body or locality. His Priesthood is not increased by this special appointment, for a seventy who presides over a mission has no more Priesthood than a seventy who labors under his direction; and the president of an elders' quorum, for example, has no more Priesthood than any member of that quorum. But he holds the power of directing the official labors performed in the mission or the quorum, or in other words, the KEYS of that division of that work. So it is throughout all the ramifications of the Priesthood—a distinction must be carefully made between the general authority, and the directing of the labors performed by that authority.—Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, pages 168-9.

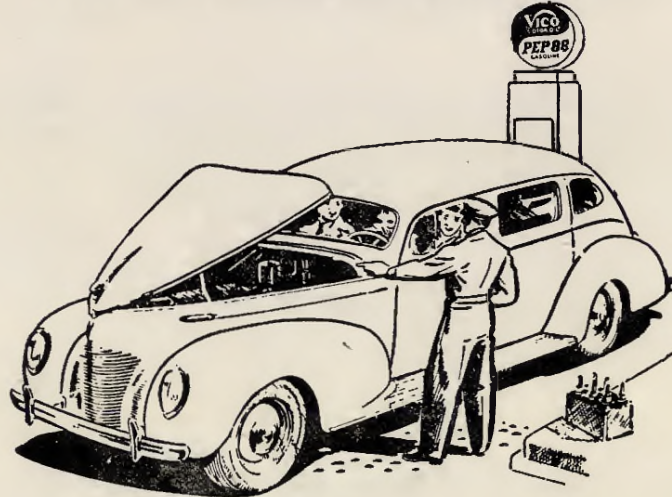
—J. A. W.

Summer Photography

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main scene will not appear so empty. Avoid getting two pictures in one. By this I mean tell only one picture story at a time. If you show Brother Joe milking the family cow, show just that and nothing else. Do not include sister gathering eggs nearby. By all means get her picture, but on another negative. To be successful, pictures must have unity. They must have one center of interest. Clashing subjects spoil the best subject matter.

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