

Hard Questions in Church History

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Questions to Consider

- Why is priesthood authority important?
- What is the difference between the Priesthood and God’s Power?
- What is the purpose of the Priesthood?
- When did Joseph receive the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood?

Priesthoods Restored

Timeline

1829 (Joseph is 24)

April 7	Oliver Cowdery acts as scribe while Joseph translates the Book of Mormon.
April	Oliver’s questions are answered by the Lord in four revelations, published as D&C 6, 7, 8, and 9.
May 15	John the Baptist confers the Aaronic Priesthood upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery (D&C 13).
May 25	Oliver baptizes Samuel Smith.
Late May	Joseph Knight, Sr. brings provisions to enable Joseph and Oliver to continue the translation.
June 1	David Whitmer comes to Harmony with the intention of transporting Joseph and Oliver to his father’s house in Fayette, New York.
June	Joseph and Oliver reside in the Peter Whitmer, Sr. home in Fayette; Emma joins them later.
June 4-29	The Book of Mormon translation takes place in the upstairs of the Peter Whitmer home with Oliver Cowdery and the Whitmer sons (Christian, John, David) acting as scribes.
June 26	The Wayne Sentinel (newspaper) publishes the Book of Mormon title page.
June 30	Translation of the Book of Mormon is finished.
July	Arrangements made for publishing the Book of Mormon
October 4	Joseph returns to the farm in Harmony, PA.

Introduction

The restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods came as welcome blessing to the church—and an abrupt departure from the Protestantism of the day. The restored priesthoods were patterned after Biblical practices rather than the trends of Protestant America. This section looks at the historical background; the priesthood ordinations of Joseph and Oliver by first John the Baptist and subsequently by Peter, James, and John; biblical examples of the priesthoods, and Joseph’s modern scripture and teachings on the priesthood.

Historical Background: Priesthood in the Second Great Awakening

To appreciate the context of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery receiving the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, let us consider the prevailing Christian beliefs in the 19th century. With each new revelation given to the Prophet Joseph, the Lord tore down false doctrines of the era, including:

- 1) The concept of Trinity and the teachings of Christian churches in 1820
- 2) Angels and revelation in 1823
- 3) New scripture in 1827
- 4) Priesthood in 1829

And doctrines explained in the Book of Mormon:

- 5) Fall of Adam and Eve, and the depravity of humanity
- 6) Atonement of Jesus Christ
- 7) Repentance needed for forgiveness of sin, etc.

At the beginning of the early 19th century, the United States was a predominantly Protestant-Christian nation, with very few Catholics. (This changed by the end of the 19th century, when the Irish potato famine and similar events brought thousands of Catholic immigrants to the new nation). Protestants advocated a priesthood of all believers and contended that the Catholic claim to priesthood authority was from the Devil. Protestants referred to Catholic priesthood as “Popish” (Pope-ish). At that time, Protestants interpreted “priest” or “priesthood” as corrupt. In the 19th century, Protestants printed such statements as:

- 1) “We distinctly know that the Popish Priests only seek for power that they may employ it against our principles” (1824)
- 2) “An act against Jesuites [sic] (Jesuits) and Popish priests” (1842)
- 3) “These monstrous doctrines Popish priests have enforced” (1856).

Joseph Smith’s claim of priesthood restoration was in direct opposition to Protestant beliefs. Even though the priesthood shares a biblical foundation—Old Testament and New Testament—Joseph’s claim that the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood had been restored was in direct opposition to society’s Protestant norms.

Timing of the Book of Mormon Translation As It Relates to the Restoration of the Priesthood May 15, 1829

Oliver Cowdery wrote, “After writing the account given of the Savior’s ministry to the remnant of the seed of Jacob, upon this continent . . . none had authority from God to administer the ordinances” (JS-H 1:75, footnote), it is assumed that Joseph Smith had just translated 3 Nephi 12:1 “. . . the number of them who had been called, and received power and authority to baptize was twelve . . . whom I have chosen from among you to minister unto you, and to be your servants; and unto them I have given power that they may baptize you with water.” We also assume that Joseph Smith had probably translated 3 Nephi 11, with its instructions about the manner and necessity of baptism, by May 15, 1829. (Note: Joseph began the translation of Mosiah on April 7, 1829. The first and possibly second chapter of Mosiah were included in the 116 lost pages. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part 2*; John Welch, “Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57 no. 4, 2018: 10-50.)

Restoration of the Priesthood: Contemporaneous Documents

Early Church documents discuss the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods. In 1835, Oliver Cowdery wrote that Joseph Smith gained knowledge of the priesthood from Moroni’s first visit on September 21-22, 1823: “The Lord will give the holy priesthood to some and they shall begin to proclaim this gospel and baptize by water and after that they shall have power to give the Holy Ghost by the laying on of their hands” (“Letter of Oliver Cowdery to W. W. Phelps,” *Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835).

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery learned more about the priesthood while translating the Book of Mormon. They learned that priesthood was necessary to have the authority to perform ordinances—

Baptism (3 Ne 11:22), Sacrament (3 Ne 18:5), and the Gift of the Holy Ghost (3 Nephi 18:37, Moroni 21:3), Laying on of Hands (3 Nephi 18:38, Moroni 3:1-4), and the roles of different priesthood offices (Alma 13:6, 14, 18) Joseph Smith’s most detailed account of the priesthood restoration concurs with Oliver’s account ([see Brian Cannon’s Priesthood Restoration Documents online](#)).

John the Baptist Restored the Aaronic Priesthood (D&C 13)

By piecing together the historical data mentioned above, it appears that on May 14 or 15, 1829, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery finished translating 3 Nephi 12. On May 15, they went outside to join together in prayer regarding the priesthood. Their prayer was answered with a visitation of John the Baptist, the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, and a descendant of Aaron the high priest (Luke 1:5).

John the Baptist acted as a bridge between the Old and New Covenants. His genealogy, how he lived, looked, ate, and acted fit the pattern of faithful Old Testament prophets (2 Kgs 1:8; Matt. 3:4; Mark 1:6). He baptized in the River Jordan near Bethabara, where Joshua entered the Promised Land (Jos 4:5-18). Yet he preached the message of the New Covenant—Jesus fulfilled the Law as the Promised Messiah. John preached repentance and baptism. The Joseph Smith Translation of John’s preaching offers a significant addition: “I indeed baptize you with water, *upon your repentance*” (Matthew 3:38, JST). John the Baptist again bridged a dispensation as he restored the keys of the preparatory or Aaronic Priesthood truths in both the Meridian of Time and the Fulness of Times.

As the keeper of the keys of the Aaronic priesthood, John the Baptist returned on May 15 as a resurrected being. He restored the keys of the Aaronic Priesthood to the earth, again preparing the way for another restoration (D&C 13; 27:8; 84:27). After he ordained Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the woods, they went down to the Susquehanna River and baptized each other.

John the Baptist taught Joseph Smith that the Aaronic Priesthood held “the keys of the ministering of angels” (D&C 13:1). Years later, Joseph elaborated on this:

The manifestations of the gift of the Holy Ghost, the ministering of angels, or the development of the power, majesty or glory of God were very “publicly, and that generally to the people of God, as to the Israelites; but most generally when angels have come, or God has revealed himself, it has been to individuals in private, in their chamber; in the wilderness or fields, and that generally without noise or tumult” (Joseph Smith, *HC*, 5:30-31)

The angelic ministration may be experienced by all “people of God”—young and old, women and men. It may include mortal and immortal servants of God who follow the Lord’s direction to bless those in need.

John the Baptist also explained that the sons of Levi will “offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness” (D&C 13:1). Many have speculated, but we do not know what that offering will be; it will, however, be made in a consecrated, sacred space and may refer to temple work. The two Levitical lines—the sons of Aaron and Moses—may be expanded through adoption:

And the sons of Moses and of Aaron shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, upon Mount Zion in the Lord’s house, whose sons are ye; and also many whom I have called and sent forth to build up my church (D&C 84:32; also see Mal 3:1-4).

The title is for all those who “magnify their calling, are sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies” (D&C 84:33). In 1842-1844, Joseph restored more on how men and women can prepare and make priesthood covenants and wear priesthood garments in a temple setting (which initially was his Red Brick store in Nauvoo).

Apostles Peter, James, and John Restored the Melchizedek Priesthood

The Melchizedek Priesthood was restored by Jesus’s ancient Apostles—Peter, James, and John. These three apostles were together at the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:37; Lk 8:51), on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt 17:1), and at Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). In the Apostolic Church, they were referred to as the “pillars of the church” (Gal 2:9). Peter became the chief apostle after Jesus’s death. John the Beloved has continued to minister on earth to heirs of salvation (Acts 2:37; D&C 7:6).

When did Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery received the Melchizedek Priesthood? This question endures in church history, but the date of the Melchizedek priesthood restoration was not recorded. However, it is known that:

- It followed the May 15, 1829 Aaronic Priesthood ordination (D&C 13).
- It preceded the organization of the Church on April 6, 1830. Because the higher priesthood was used that day to confirm baptized members for the first time and offer the Gift of the Holy Ghost (Smith, History of the Church, 1:77).
- In June 1829, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were called apostles, “even as unto Paul . . . for you are called even with that same calling” (D&C 18:9). This may or may not mean they had received an ordination.
- During the time that Joseph translated the Book of Mormon in Harmony, Pennsylvania (April through May 1829).

An account from Addison Everett’s visit to the Prophet Joseph Smith shortly before the martyrdom refers to the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood having happened during the translation of the Book of Mormon in Harmony (April-May 1829):

. . . they Ware Tran[s]lating the Book of Mormon at His Father In Laws in Susquhanah County Penny. T[h]ey ware thretned By a Mob and in the same time Father Kn<i>ghts came Down from Cole[s]vill[e] Broom[e] County New York and Desired them to go home with him and preach to them in his Neighbourhood And on Account of the Mob Spirit prevailing they concluded to goe.

After arriving at the Knights’ home in Colesville, a mob gathered, forcing Joseph and Oliver to return to Harmony. Everett continues:

. . . they wandered in a dense Forest all Night and often times in Mud and water up to thare Knees. And Brother Oliver got quite exhausted in the After Part of the Night and Brother Joseph had to put his arm arround him and allmost carry him. And Just as the day Broke in the East Brother Oliver gave out Entirely and he[,] Br Joseph[,] leaned him against an Oake tree Just out side a field fenc[e] Br Oliver Crying out how long O Lord O how Long Br Joseph hav[e] we got to suffer these things[?] Just this moment Peter James & John came to us and Ordained <us to> the Holy Apostelshp and gave <unto> us the Keys of the Disp<e>nsation

of the fullness of times. And we had some 16 or 17 miles to go to reach our place of residence and Brother Oliver could travel as well as I could (Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 229).

This account is corroborated by Joseph's records, which suggest he made more than one journey to Colesville, New York when translating the Book of Mormon in Harmony, Pennsylvania. For example, Joseph wrote—

When I first commenced this work, and had got two or three individuals to believe, I went about thirty miles with Oliver Cowdery to see them. We had only one horse between us. When we arrived a mob of about one hundred men came upon us before we had time to eat, and chased us all night; and we arrived back again [in Harmony] a little after daylight, having traveled about sixty miles in all and without food (Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:219).

Knowing that the translation of 3 Nephi 11-12 led Joseph and Oliver to wonder about the need for authority to baptize in the Lord's way, we may also assume that when they translated 3 Nephi 18:36-39, they would have equally wondered about the need for additional authority in order to have "power to give the Holy Ghost."

Biblical References to the Melchizedek Priesthood

The restoration of the priesthood is consistent with the biblical and other ancient records that refer to ordained and anointed holy men and priests. The Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis revealed that Adam, the first of God's spirit children to live on earth, received the holy priesthood, with all its power, authority, and keys: "And thus all things were confirmed unto Adam, by an holy ordinance" (Moses 5:59).

At a meeting on January 5, 1841, someone asked the Prophet Joseph if the Melchizedek Priesthood had been taken away when Moses died. His answer opens a new understanding of the priesthood throughout biblical history:

All the Prophets had the Melchizedek [sic] Priesthood and was ordained by God himself. All priesthood is Melchizedek; but there are different portions or degrees of it. That portion which brought Moses to speak with God face to face was taken away; but that which brought the ministry of angels remained ("Discourse, 5 January 1841, as Reported by William Clayton," p. 5, www.josephsmithpapers.org).

The insight that all prophets held the Melchizedek Priesthood sheds light on our biblical understanding.

Restored Ancient Scripture Additions on Priesthood

The Book of Abraham teaches that Abram sought the blessings of his fathers, or the right to be ordained to the priesthood. He qualified himself for the priesthood, even though his own father had not. Abraham obtained the priesthood from Melchizedek, the king of Salem and a priest of God (Abr 1:2-5). Melchizedek met Abraham and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth part of all he had (Heb 7:1-3). Melchizedek exercised mighty faith by using his priesthood to bring a people from iniquity to repentance. Alma recorded,

Melchizedek did establish peace in the land in his days; therefore he was called the prince of peace, for he was the king of Salem; and he did reign under his father. Now, there were many before him, and also there were many afterwards, but none were greater” (Alma 13:18-19).

Alma’s record reads as if he were quoting from an older source, likely the Brass Plates.

Originally, the higher priesthood was known as the “Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God” (D&C 107:2-4; Alma 13:18). Alma 13:6-19 also highlighted the importance of Melchizedek as the paragon high priest in “the high priesthood in the holy order of God” (Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 884).

Joseph Smith’s Expansion of the Priesthood

When the Prophet Joseph refers to the priesthood, he includes a large spectrum of thought. At times, he refers to the general power of God that is available to all devoted disciples in the form of the gifts of the Spirit—such as healing, casting out devils, and miracles. At other times, he means a specific office in the church or the priesthood keys that are only available to a specific male servant of God.

Critics have conjectured that Joseph came up with the idea of priesthood a decade later in Nauvoo (as no known records from 1830 discuss it). However, a careful examination of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants shows the early, abundant, and consistent use of these words that reference priesthood. For example, the Book of Mormon cites, “The Holy Order of God” or variations of that title at least twenty-five times. This phrase refers to the higher Priesthood without mentioning it. We have found over a thousand examples of references to the priesthood in the Book of Mormon alone.

After examining modern scripture, Joseph’s writings, and sermons for ideas dealing with the restored priesthood, we also find the same several words or attributes that consistently describe different aspects of the priesthood (i.e. ordain or authority). At the end of this handout, I will include an appendix that systematizes a sampling of over one-hundred scriptural uses of words associated with the priesthood in the Book of Mormon. Some refer to bestowing authority and others to attributes of God’s priesthood power.

Joseph Smith’s Use of Priesthood in Conjunction with the Spirit

The priesthood power works in conjunction with the power of the Holy Spirit. When Joseph speaks of the power of the priesthood, or accessing the priesthood, he often includes a connection with the Spirit. In this regard, access to God’s power and Spirit is available for sincere and worthy seekers to receive. For the gifts of faith, hope, visions, healing, and the like, gender and keys are not needed—just sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. The Prophet Joseph explained this when he encouraged the newly organized Relief Society to function under the order of the priesthood as “the sisters would come in possession of the privileges, blessings, and gifts of the Priesthood, and that the signs should follow them, such as healing the sick, casting out devils.” He promised them “these blessings” if they would live “a virtuous life and conversation and diligence in keeping all the commandments” (Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 119; Apr 28, 1842).

The following chronological sampling demonstrates Joseph’s regular connection between the priesthood and Spirit.

April 6, 1830—Journal record of the proceedings of the day:

“We now proceeded to call out and ordain some others of the brethren to different offices of the Priesthood, according as the Spirit manifested unto us: and after a happy time spent in witnessing and feeling for ourselves the powers and blessings of the Holy Ghost” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:79).

Between Summer 1832 and late November, 1832—History:

“. . . 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 Keys of the Kingdom of God conferred upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:287).

March 26, 1833—Journal record of a Council of High Priests:

“. . . claiming for themselves as much power by the authority of their Priesthood, and gift of the Holy Ghost, as those set apart and appointed to preside over the branches” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:336).

July 1833—Letters to Elders stationed in Zion & Churches Abroad, in Love & Greeting published in the Evening and Morning Star:

“. . . that you may be enabled to deliver His message in the demonstration of His Spirit. . . ordained according to the gifts and callings of God unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost which is in the one who ordains them” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:385, 388).

March 1, 1842—Historical Sketch for John Wentworth:

“On the 6 of April 1830, the ‘Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,’ was first organized . . . Some few were called and ordained by the Spirit of revelation, and prophecy, and began to preach as the Spirit gave them utterance, and though weak, yet were they strengthened by the power of God, and many were brought to repentance, were immersed in the water, and were filled with the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands. They saw visions and prophesied, devils were cast out and the sick healed by the laying on of hands” (Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 216).

May 17, 1843—Journal entry of meeting held in Fountain Green, Illinois:

“The more sure word of prophecy means a man's knowing that he is sealed up into eternal life by revelation and the Spirit of prophecy, through the power of the holy priesthood. It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:392).

June 11, 1843—Sermon on the Purpose for the Gathering of Israel:

“The main object was to build unto the Lord a house whereby He could reveal unto His people the ordinances of His house and the glories of His kingdom, and teach the people the way of salvation; for there are certain ordinances and principles that, when they are taught and practiced, must be done in a place or house built for that purpose” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:423-424).

July 12, 1843—Revelation on the Marriage Covenant, though this was received earlier:

“Therefore prepare thy heart to receive and obey the instructions which I am about to give unto you; for all those who have this law revealed unto them must obey the same; for behold, I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant . . . All covenants, contracts, bonds, obligations, oaths, vows, performances, connections, associations, or expectations that are not made and entered into and sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, of him who is anointed, both as well for time and for all eternity, and that too most holy, by revelation and commandment, through the medium of mine anointed, whom I have appointed on the earth to hold this power, (and I have appointed unto my servant Joseph to hold this power in the last days, and there is never but one on the earth at a time on whom this power and the keys of this Priesthood are conferred) . . . (D&C 132:3-4,7; Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:601).

“If a man marry a wife, and make a covenant with her for time and for all eternity, if that covenant is not by me or by my word, which is my law, and is not sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, through him whom I have anointed and appointed unto this power, then it is not valid, neither of force, when they are out of the world, because they are not joined by me, saith the Lord, neither by my word . . . And again, verily I say unto you, If a man marry a wife by my word, which is my law, and by the new and everlasting covenant, and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise, by him who is anointed, unto whom I have appointed this power and the keys of this Priesthood, and it shall be said unto them, Ye shall come forth in the first resurrection” (D&C 132:18-19; Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:502).

“. . . If a man marry a wife according to my word, and they are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, according to mine appointment, and he or she shall commit any sin or transgression . . . The blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, which shall not be forgiven in the world, nor out of the world (D&C 132:26-27; Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:503).

“. . . I reveal it unto you, my servant Joseph, then shall you have power, by the power of my Holy Priesthood to take her and give her unto him that hath not committed adultery but hath been faithful; for he shall be made ruler over many; for I have conferred upon you the keys and power of the Priesthood, wherein I restore all things, and make known unto you all things in due time. . . . I will reveal more unto you hereafter; therefore, let this suffice for the present. Behold, I am Alpha and Omega. Amen (D&C 132:44-45, 66; Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:505, 507).

October 9, 1843—Sermon given at the Funeral of James Adams:

“What is the object of our coming into existence, then dying and falling away, to be here no more? It is but reasonable to suppose that God would reveal something in reference to the matter, and it is a subject we ought to study more than any other. We ought to study it day and night, for the world is ignorant in reference to their true condition and relation. If we have any claim on our Heavenly Father for anything, it is for knowledge on this important subject. Could we read and comprehend all that has been written from the days of Adam, on the relation of man to God and angels in a future state, we should know very little about it. Reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these things can only be

obtained by experience through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose. Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject” (Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:50).

Sources

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