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THE *Priesthood's Vital Role* IN THE RESTORATION

Without the return of the priesthood to the earth,
the Restoration would not have been possible.

By April 1829, Joseph Smith had been receiving divine visitations for nearly a decade. The Father and the Son appeared to him in 1820 in a grove of trees near his home when he was 14 years old (see Joseph Smith—History 1:5–17).¹ The angel Moroni's first visit occurred in 1823, followed by annual visits during which Joseph was taught and mentored until 1827, when he received the ancient record written upon plates that would become the Book of Mormon (see Joseph Smith—History 1:30–54).

For 18 months after obtaining the plates, however, Joseph struggled to translate the record because of harassment from locals, revolving scribes, and the loss of a portion of the manuscript. It was a frustrating and painful time for Joseph. (See Joseph Smith—History 1:58–62; Doctrine and Covenants 3.)

But everything changed in April 1829 with the arrival of a schoolteacher named Oliver Cowdery, who became Joseph's full-time scribe. The translation of the Book of Mormon then accelerated at a rapid pace.

After spending much of his time during the fall of 1828 working his farm in Harmony, Pennsylvania, to provide for his family, Joseph turned his full attention in 1829 to the translation of the Book of Mormon. For a brief period, Joseph's wife, Emma, and his brother Samuel acted as scribes. At the same time, Oliver Cowdery was boarding at the home of Joseph's parents in New York.

Having heard about the plates and their translation, Oliver became intrigued and desired to know if these things were of God. "One night after he retired to bed he called upon the Lord to know if these things were so," Joseph recorded, "and the Lord manifested to him that they were true."²

Oliver immediately traveled the 140 miles (225 km) to Harmony to meet Joseph. Oliver was an answer to Joseph's prayers. Two days after they met in April, the translation of the Book of Mormon resumed at a rapid pace, nearing completion in an astounding 60 to 65 estimated working days. The whole translation was complete by June 30.

The Prophet Joseph may have considered that his whole work was nearing completion, having performed his divine mandate prescribed by the angel messenger to translate and publish the ancient record. Little did the

Prophet know then that he was not completing but rather just beginning his fundamental role in the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Few events in history compare in significance to what occurred in the spring of 1829. Oliver described this remarkable chapter of the Restoration as

“days never to be forgotten” (Joseph Smith—History 1:71, note). Beyond the miracle of the translation of the Book of Mormon, angels soon appeared and conferred priesthood authority on Joseph and Oliver. This revelatory season of translation and restoration redirected and expanded Joseph's view and paved the way for the formal organization of the Church one year later.

Restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood

While translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph and Oliver encountered numerous passages regarding baptism and authority. Joseph had previously been told that “the Lord [would] give the holy priesthood to some.”³ On May 15, 1829, Joseph and Oliver retreated to a secluded spot in a nearby sugar maple grove “to inquire of the Lord, by prayer, His will concerning me.”⁴

As they prayed, the voice of the Redeemer spoke peace to them “while the veil was parted and the angel of God came down clothed with glory, and delivered the anxiously looked for message, and the keys of the Gospel of repentance” (Joseph Smith—History 1:71, note). The angel introduced himself as 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” (Joseph Smith—History 1:72).

Joseph and Oliver knelt as the resurrected John placed his hands upon their heads and conferred on them the Aaronic Priesthood, “which holds the

keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins” (Joseph Smith—History 1:69; see also Doctrine and Covenants 13:1). They were promised that additional priesthood authority would be conferred upon them “in due time.” Joseph was named “the first Elder of the Church, and he (Oliver Cowdery) the second” (Joseph Smith—History 1:72). They were also instructed to baptize one another—Joseph to baptize Oliver first and then Oliver to baptize Joseph.

At some point that day, the two “repaired to the water” along the banks of the Susquehanna River to be baptized. They “were forced to keep secret the circumstances of having received the Priesthood and [their] having been baptized, owing to a spirit of persecution which had already manifested itself in the neighborhood” (Joseph

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Smith—History 1:74). The river served as a main thoroughfare for commerce and transportation during the spring floods, with a steady flow of watercraft. It is possible that Joseph and Oliver waited until after dusk or took advantage of higher waters and found a more secluded spot on the floodplain.⁵

After baptizing each other, Joseph ordained Oliver to the Aaronic Priesthood. Oliver then ordained Joseph as the angel had commanded them. President Joseph Fielding Smith taught that it was necessary to reconfirm the initial ordination received under the hands of John the Baptist following their baptisms to “*reseat* those blessings in the proper order.”⁶

Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood

We have less detail regarding the visitation of Peter, James, and John to Joseph and Oliver to restore the Melchizedek Priesthood. Various interpretations based upon reminiscent accounts place the event from the spring of 1829, perhaps late May or June, to months later.⁷ Joseph and Oliver never dated the appearance of Peter, James, and John, as they did for John the Baptist and the restoration for the Aaronic Priesthood. They may not have fully comprehended the nature of the priesthood or its divisions early on. Joseph’s understanding of the priesthood came incrementally.

From 1830 to 1835, priesthood offices were clarified, and quorums, councils, presidencies, and bishoprics were formed. Even the term *Melchizedek Priesthood* was not used as a name for the “High Priesthood” or “greater priesthood” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:9; 84:19) until 1835 (see Doctrine and Covenants 107:2–4).

Joseph did provide rough details about the location. In 1842, he recalled hearing “the voice of Peter, James, and John in the wilderness between Harmony . . . and Colesville . . . on the Susquehanna river, declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom” (Doctrine and Covenants 128:20).

This suggests that the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood occurred somewhere along a 28-mile (45 km) stretch of road between the Smith home in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and the town of Colesville, New York, where the Joseph Knight family lived. The Knight family were early Church members and devoted friends of Joseph Smith. They supplied paper and provisions during the translation of the Book of Mormon and later formed the core of the Colesville Branch of the Church.

In addition to receiving the Melchizedek Priesthood from Peter, James, and John, Joseph and Oliver were ordained “to be apostles, and especial witnesses” of the Lord (Doctrine and Covenants 27:12) and received the



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keys necessary to usher in the dispensation of the fulness of times. They now had the authority to administer all priesthood ordinances, including the bestowal of the gift of the Holy Ghost.

They also received “the keys of all the spiritual blessings of the church” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:18) essential to organize the Church in April 1830 and received revelation to restore all things in their proper order. Spiritual blessings were manifested through miracles, healings, and ordinances performed by the authority of the priesthood. In 1836, additional angelic messengers delivered priesthood keys related to the gathering of Israel and temple work (see Doctrine and Covenants 110).

Implications of Priesthood Restoration

President David O. McKay (1873–1970) taught that the most distinguishing feature of the Savior’s restored Church is “divine authority

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by direct revelation.”⁸ Without the return of the priesthood to the earth, the Restoration would not have been possible. The priesthood authorizes the performing of ordinances and provides the framework for governing the Lord’s Church on earth.

Joseph formally organized the Church on April 6, 1830. Over the next few years, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles were organized. Under the direction of the President of the Church, priesthood keys are delegated to local leaders worldwide, allowing the gospel to “roll forth unto the ends of the earth” (Doctrine and Covenants 65:2).

The restoration of the priesthood was central to the divine call of Joseph Smith as the first prophet of this dispensation. In the preface of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord explained, “Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:17).

Before the visit of John the Baptist in May 1829, Joseph focused on translating the Book of Mormon. With the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, he realized that his call included much more. Receiving authority from heaven further prepared Joseph to shoulder his responsibilities as “a seer, a translator, a prophet, [and] an apostle of Jesus Christ” (Doctrine and Covenants 21:1).

Elder Robert D. Hales (1932–2017) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles described what our lives would be like without the priesthood: “If the power of the priesthood were not upon the earth, the adversary would have freedom to roam and reign without restraint. There would be no gift of the Holy Ghost to direct and enlighten us; no prophets to speak in the name of the Lord; no temples where we could make sacred, eternal covenants; no authority to bless or baptize, to heal or comfort. Without the power of the priesthood, ‘the whole earth would be utterly wasted’ (see Doctrine and Covenants 2:1–3). There would be no light, no hope—only darkness.”⁹

Receiving priesthood ordinances is central to the Lord’s work in “bring[ing] to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). Baptism and confirmation, the temple endowment, and sealing for time and eternity are essential to our salvation. The ability to bind

and seal families in temples for those on both sides of the veil is possible only through priesthood authority and keys as directed by the President of the Church.

The Ongoing Restoration

How might priesthood authority inspire your participation in the ongoing Restoration of the Church? We may not know what the future holds, but it is clear that the Restoration is ongoing. The Lord did not reveal every doctrine or ordinance, or impart all instructions to Joseph in the Sacred Grove, through Moroni on Cumorah, or at the organizational meeting of the Church. The Restoration did not occur as a single event. Rather, the Lord revealed things “line upon line” (2 Nephi 28:30) to Joseph just as He continues to reveal things to His prophets today according to His purposes and timing.

An unbroken line of prophets since the days of Joseph Smith has spoken on behalf of the Lord and continues to make known His will. Prophets see the wider view and receive specific direction for the challenges of their day. President Russell M. Nelson proclaims that we are all “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.”¹⁰

The Restoration and You

May each of us be willing participants in the ongoing Restoration of the gospel by enthusiastically embracing and practicing what has been revealed to modern-day prophets. Examples include living the higher and holier law of ministering to our brothers and sisters.¹¹ And may each of us find enduring gospel joy through the home-centered, Church-supported plan to learn doctrine, strengthen faith, keep the

commandments, and foster greater personal worship, including a home evening that meets individual and family needs.¹²

We can prepare for the Second Coming of the Savior by accelerating the gathering of Israel on both sides of the veil.¹³ We can do better at making the Sabbath day a delight both in our Sunday worship services and at home.¹⁴ We can stay more closely attuned to the Holy Ghost by doing the spiritual work necessary to receive daily personal revelation.¹⁵

I testify that the heavens remain open and that there is much more to come as the Lord prepares us for the exciting days ahead. The restoration of the priesthood allows God's children to administer and receive saving ordinances, and it authorizes modern prophets, seers, and revelators to direct the Lord's kingdom.

Countless blessings come daily to the Church and its members because of the accessibility of the Lord's priesthood. May we express our gratitude daily for the appearances of John the Baptist and of Peter, James, and John and for the return of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods in this last and final dispensation preparatory for the return of our Lord and Savior, even Jesus Christ. ■

NOTES

1. Joseph Smith, History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1, created June 11, 1839–Aug. 24, 1843, 15, Church History Library.
2. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 1:35.
3. Oliver Cowdery, letter to W. W. Phelps, in *Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, Oct. 1835, 199.
4. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 85. While long-held tradition placed them along the banks of the Susquehanna River, contemporaneous records indicate that they retreated to a grove of sugar maple trees on the north end of the property (see Mark Lyman Staker, "Where Was the Aaronic Priesthood Restored? Identifying the Location of John the Baptist's Appearance, May 15, 1829," *Mormon Historical Studies* 12, no. 2 [Fall 2011]: 142–59).
5. See Mark L. Staker, "Where Was the Aaronic Priesthood Restored?" 153.
6. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (1955), 1:197.
7. See Larry C. Porter, "Dating the Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood," *Ensign*, June 1979, 5–9; Larry C. Porter, "The Restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods," *Ensign*, Dec. 1996, 42–44.
8. David O. McKay, "The Mission of the Church and Its Members," *Improvement Era*, Nov. 1956, 781.
9. Robert D. Hales, "Blessings of the Priesthood," *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 32.
10. "Latter-day Saint Prophet, Wife and Apostle Share Insights of Global Ministry," newsroom.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
11. See Russell M. Nelson, "Ministering with the Power and Authority of God," *Liahona*, May 2018, 68–70, 75; Russell M. Nelson, "Ministering," *Liahona*, May 2018, 100; Henry B. Eyring, "Inspired Ministering," *Liahona*, May 2018, 61–64; Jean B. Bingham, "Ministering as the Savior Does," *Liahona*, May 2018, 104–106.
12. See Russell M. Nelson, "Opening Remarks," *Liahona*, Nov. 2018, 6–8; Quentin L. Cook, "Deep and Lasting Conversion to Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," *Liahona*, Nov. 2018, 8–12.
13. See Russell M. Nelson, "Hope of Israel" (worldwide youth devotional, Jun. 3, 2018), Hope of Israel.ChurchofJesusChrist.org; Russell M. Nelson, "Sisters' Participation in the Gathering of Israel," *Liahona*, Nov. 2018, 69–70.
14. See Russell M. Nelson, "The Sabbath Is a Delight," *Liahona*, May 2015, 129–132.
15. See Russell M. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives," *Liahona*, May 2018, 93–96.

