

# AUTHORITY AND PRIESTHOOD IN THE LDS CHURCH, PART 1: DEFINITIONS AND DEVELOPMENT

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The issue of authority in Mormonism became painfully public with the rise of the Ordain Women movement. The Church can attempt to blame (and discipline) certain individuals, but this development is a lot larger than any one person or group of people. The status of women in the Church was basically a time bomb ticking down to zero. With the strides toward equality American society has taken over the past several decades, it was really just a matter of time before the widening gap between social circumstances in general and conditions in Mormondom became too large to ignore. When the bomb finally exploded, the Church scrambled to give credible explanations, but most of these responses have felt inadequate at best. The result is a good deal of genuine pain and a host of very valid questions that have proven virtually impossible to answer satisfactorily.

At least in my mind, this unfolding predicament has raised certain important questions about what priesthood really is and how it corresponds to the larger idea of authority. What is this thing that women are denied? What is this thing that, for over a century, faithful black LDS men were denied? Would clarifying or fine-tuning our definition—or even better understanding the history of how our current definition developed—perhaps change the way we regard priesthood, the way we practice it, the way we bestow it, or refuse to bestow it? The odd sense I have about priesthood, after a good deal of study and pondering, is

that most of us don't really have a clear idea of what it is and how it has evolved over the years. Many women, even though they want to be supportive of their leaders, feel varying degrees of distress and pain over the mere mention of priesthood. They know they are being left out of something important, and they know that this signals unequal treatment, regardless of how the institutional Church portrays it, but perhaps they, like most of us men who "hold" the priesthood, don't really grasp what it is, particularly if we compare the modern Mormon conception of priesthood with certain scriptural or historical clues. And this may partly explain why the two sides of this encounter often seem to be speaking past each other and are unable to find any common ground. Perhaps some clarification about this issue's basic vocabulary might improve our collective communication and might help us find a path forward, because this issue is not going to go away, even if it has temporarily slipped into the shadows. But when it becomes more public again, if both sides just dig in their heels, the Church and its individual members will be poorly served. So, this pair of articles is intended to lay a conceptual foundation on which more productive communication might take place.

Over the space of several years, I have come to view authority in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as something quite different from what I previously assumed it to be. Primarily this is because I started seeing distinct differences between the concept of priesthood and the larger notion of authority. Growing up Mormon, I simply assumed the two were the same, and this perception is quite common in the Church.<sup>1</sup> But as I will explore in detail in this article, priesthood and authority are

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1. See, for example, Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," Apr. 2014, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng>: "We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be?" The assumption behind this statement is that in the LDS Church priesthood and authority are the same thing.

quite distinct ideas, especially in ancient scripture, with authority being a much broader and more general concept. Authority can be a difficult topic, and inadequately understood authority can be problematic on multiple levels, but the unique Mormon definition of priesthood creates a structure that complicates rather than simplifies matters related to authority. In this article, I will address the question of what priesthood is, but first we need to establish a context for understanding priesthood, so let's step back and look at the nature of authority in general.

### Two Sources of Authority

I hate to do this, and some readers will probably never forgive me for beginning this investigation like a really bad sacrament meeting talk, but let's look at the dictionary definition of authority. Merriam-Webster includes the following: "power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior," "persons in command," and "convincing force." Synonyms include "influence" and "power."<sup>2</sup> These definitions subtly suggest two distinct types of authority or power: individual and institutional. And this is an important point because it is difficult to understand what, exactly, authority is without also understanding how a person gets it. If authority is primarily the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior in other people, how do we get this power? We often assume it can just be given by someone who occupies a higher position in an institutional hierarchy, but I'm not convinced that the power to influence others' thoughts and opinions is simply a capacity that can be transferred from one person to another like a hundred-dollar bill or a shiny badge. I think it's much more complicated than this. So let's look more closely at the two primary sources of authority.

Individual authority manifests itself in two different ways. Some people, because of their unique attributes, possess a certain power

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2. Merriam-Webster, s.v. "authority (*n.*)," accessed Feb. 16, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authority>.

(often referred to as charisma) to influence others. Their words, their bearing, and their ideas project “a convincing force.” This would be a consensual form of authority, granted by those who accept another person’s influence.<sup>3</sup> And this sort of power cannot be given through institutional channels. Either you are born with it or you develop it, but it involves personal qualities, not organizational standing. The opposite of consensual authority, of course, would be authority that an individual claims and maintains by force or manipulation. This type of negative authority may influence other people’s thought and opinion if they are susceptible to evil or are easily deceived, but it is more liable to control their *behavior*, often through threat or fear. Between these two poles, however, are various degrees of personal influence, including the confidence some people exude that permits them to be domineering without attracting followers or admirers.

Institutional authority is another matter altogether. Some people occupy positions of “command” because of their skill (or perhaps good fortune) in negotiating the paths of organizational hierarchy, thus landing themselves in stations where they are able to use the weight of institutional power to command or at least direct those who occupy lower echelons of the organizational chart, usually maintaining compliance by threat of organizational punishment or expulsion. Other persons, who may not possess this sort of skill or luck, are often

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3. It should be noted that this sort of personal authority can be used for either righteous or evil ends. Lucifer certainly possessed and possesses this sort of influence to shape the thoughts and behavior of others, as have many evil individuals in mortality. But even though Lucifer wields great influence among his followers, his authority is dependent on the will of his followers. Many years ago, when temple presidents sometimes instructed patrons in the temple and answered questions about the ordinances, I sat in such a session in the Provo Utah Temple. Someone raised a question about Lucifer’s claim to possess “power and priesthoods.” The temple president responded that Lucifer does indeed have priesthood, but it is a priesthood granted him by his followers. This principle is not official doctrine, but it rings true. For without followers, any person’s authority would be empty and meaningless.

granted a degree of institutional authority anyway by those who rank above them in the organizational hierarchy. Their success in advancing within the hierarchy, however, is dependent on how well they please (or perhaps deceive) those who have granted them authority.

Organizations themselves are generally the fruit of a charismatic leader's influence. Once the founder of the institution has moved on or has died, authority in the organization usually becomes routinized and is based either on heredity (in a family business, for instance, or in a patriarchal religion) or on some form of legal and orderly framework (a corporation, for example) that the charismatic leader established before his or her departure.

This view of authority has significant overlap with the writings of German social and economic theorist Max Weber, who identified three "pure types" of legitimate authority: rational ("resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands"), traditional ("resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them"), and charismatic ("resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person").<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Weber used Joseph Smith as an example of charismatic authority: "Another type [of charismatic leader] is represented by Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, who may have been a very sophisticated swindler (although this cannot be definitely established)."<sup>5</sup> Weber may not have known what to think of Joseph Smith, but he was particularly interested in what happens "with the death or decline of a charismatic leader. Charismatic authority is 'routinized' in a number of ways according to Weber: orders are traditionalized, the staff or followers change into legal or 'estate-like' (traditional) staff,

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4. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, translated by Ephraim Fischhoff and others (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 215.

5. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 242.

or the meaning of charisma itself may undergo change.”<sup>6</sup> Weber would undoubtedly have been interested in the transition of the LDS Church from a charismatic “new movement” to a unique combination of traditional legitimacy and legal-rational bureaucracy in which charisma plays a sporadic and unpredictable role.

It is important to point out in this context that Joseph Smith established at least two distinct paths by which authority became routinized after his death: the hereditary patriarchal priesthood and the institutional, hierarchical Melchizedek Priesthood. And the latter was not specifically enough defined, leaving the door open for two competing institutional claims—hence the confusion that reigned in the aftermath of his assassination. He also left sufficient room for a rogue charismatic claim to authority that arose outside these two typical channels.

### The Savior’s Authority

In light of the distinctions outlined above between individual (or charismatic) authority and institutional (or routinized) authority, it is interesting to note that the Savior’s authority during his earthly ministry was almost exclusively individual, not institutional, and it was consensual, not claimed by force or threat or deception. He did declare a certain authority as God’s Son—which established a patriarchal line of authorization and perhaps even implied some sort of eternal though undefined organization—and he based his own mandate upon the frequent declaration that he came to do his father’s will.<sup>7</sup> These declarations were important, but people followed him not because of these claims; they followed him primarily because of a personal or charismatic influence. The manner of his teaching, “as one that had authority” (Mark 1:22),

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6. Dana Williams, “Max Weber: Traditional, Legal-Rational, and Charismatic Authority,” <http://danawilliams2.tripod.com/authority.html>.

7. See, for instance, Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42; John 5:30, 6:38; 3 Nephi 11:11, 27:13; Doctrine and Covenants 19:24.

and his deeds—healing illnesses, raising the dead, and miraculously controlling physical matter—strengthened people’s perception of the authority he claimed.

It is noteworthy, I believe, that even though Jesus spoke of his own or his father’s kingdom, and though he may indeed have laid the foundation for the church his followers expanded after his death, the Gospels are strangely silent about any effort on the Savior’s part to establish anything more than a minimal formal organization. Indeed, he insisted that his kingdom was not of this world (see John 18:36), and his recorded actions appear to support this declaration. He went about doing good, preaching a radical new doctrine, healing the sick, and irritating the entrenched and apostate power structure of the Jewish religion, but he did not focus much energy or many resources on establishing a rival organization. He ordained twelve apostles (or emissaries—those who were sent forth), gave them authority (not ever identified in the Bible as *priesthood*) to act in his name (primarily to preach and to heal), and commissioned seventy others as missionaries to teach his doctrine, but we read nothing, for instance, of Jesus establishing congregations of believers or erecting any sort of formal power structure.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, his

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8. The account in John 21, which describes how the apostles “go a fishing” at the Sea of Tiberius after the Savior’s death and resurrection, suggests that they assumed their duties in the ministry were completed. There was apparently no formal organizational structure that they felt obligated to assume control over, no official priesthood hierarchy such as Joseph Smith erected in the early 1830s, no network of congregations that demanded their attention—in essence, no “church.” Jeffrey R. Holland, taking what he calls “some nonscriptural liberty,” concurs with this basic assumption: “In effect, Peter said to his associates, ‘Brethren, it has been a glorious three years. . . . But that is over. He has finished His work, and He has risen from the tomb. He has worked out His salvation and ours. So you ask, “What do we do now?” I don’t know more to tell you than to return to your former life, rejoicing. I intend to “go a fishing.”’ And at least six of the ten other remaining Apostles said in agreement, ‘We also go with thee’” (“The First Great Commandment,” Oct. 2012, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/10/the-first-great-commandment?lang=eng>).

instructions to the apostles recorded in Matthew 20:20–28 (which we will look at shortly) suggest the exact opposite of a *power* structure. If he established any sort of formal organization, it should probably be described as a *service* structure.

Similarly, in the Book of Mormon, when Jesus visited the people at Bountiful, he taught them some fundamental Christian principles, commissioned twelve disciples, gave them authority (once again not identified as *priesthood*) to baptize and administer the sacrament, but the record does not indicate that he established any sort of formal hierarchical structure. Although Alma<sub>1</sub> had established a church among the people at the waters of Mormon and expanded it in the land of Zarahemla and surrounding regions, this church apparently disintegrated in the thirtieth year after Christ's birth (see 3 Nephi 6:14), and its successor was not organized until after Jesus had ascended into heaven a second time. In 3 Nephi 18, Jesus mentions his church twice, but as a future entity (see vv. 5, 16). It is not until 3 Nephi 26:17–21 that we read of the twelve disciples teaching and baptizing the people, “and they who were baptized in the name of Jesus were called the church of Christ.” This is the first mention of an organized church after the Savior's initial appearance, but it seems the disciples were unsure what to call this group of baptized believers, so they prayed for this information, which brought another appearance of Jesus, who told them to “call the church in my name” (3 Nephi 27:7). The record does not indicate that Jesus himself organized this church, but that his disciples did this after he had ascended to heaven.

In a similar manner, but with significant differences, the apostles in the Old World set up not an institutional “church” such as we have today (which would have been conceptually impossible at that date) but several “churches” (Greek *ekklesia*, assembly, likely small congregations of believers) in various cities during their post-Pentecostal missionary journeys, but the apostles apparently did not engage in any sort of



intricate or hierarchical institution-building.<sup>9</sup> Geographical distance, communication limitations, and persecution probably restricted the extent to which they could establish a complex organizational structure. After the apostles were gone, however, the bishops of the various congregations formed regional synods to resolve doctrinal and policy disputes. Eventually, a council of bishops throughout the Roman Empire coalesced, which gave rise to what we now know as the Catholic Church, with its sprawling power structure, transformed sacraments, and Hellenistic creeds.<sup>10</sup>

This institutional structure for Christian authority endured and evolved for centuries, but in the middle of the past millennium the Reformation created several other avenues and definitions of religious authority, most of them rejecting the formal hierarchy and power channels of Catholicism. Since I haven't spent much time investigating authority in the Catholic or Protestant spheres, I won't have much to say about them. Authority in Mormonism is quite enough to tackle for one article (even divided into two fairly lengthy parts). To see how the Lord seems to view authority, its purpose, and its bounds, let's look at two passages of scripture, one from the New Testament and one from the Doctrine and Covenants.

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9. A Catholic explanation of the difference between bishop, priest, and deacon provides some interesting detail about how the early "churches" were organized. According to Ignatius of Antioch, writing in about AD 110, every church recognized three offices—bishop (*episcopos*), priest (*presbuteros*), and deacon (*diakonos*)—and without these three offices a group could not be called a church. In the apostolic era, these three terms were somewhat fluid, with Paul, for instance, referring to himself as a deacon (2 Corinthians 3:6, 6:4, 11:23; Ephesians 3:7) and Peter referring to himself as a "fellow elder" (1 Peter 5:1), elder being an equivalent name for priest. According to Hippolytus (ca. AD 215), a deacon was not ordained to the priesthood ("Bishop, Priest, and Deacon," Catholic Answers, accessed Feb. 16, 2018, <https://www.catholic.com/tract/bishop-priest-and-deacon>).

10. An approximately similar process occurred in the Orthodox Church.

### Not as “the Princes of the Gentiles”

After the mother of James and John had approached the Savior and inappropriately requested that her sons sit on Jesus’ right and left hand in his eternal kingdom, the other apostles were understandably indignant. But Jesus set them straight. He explained that even though the “princes of the Gentiles” exercised dominion and authority over their subjects, it was not to be so among his disciples. His kingdom was different.

Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister;

And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant:

Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:26–28)

Even on the surface, this is a startling statement. It runs counter to the attitudes regarding authority we generally see in the world, and even sometimes in the Church, where hierarchy, formal titles, reverence for position, and the act of presiding have become crucial concepts. Some LDS practices, when we consider them, seem to run counter to what the Savior was trying to teach his apostles. For instance, high councils that are assigned seats according to seniority or whose members must exit the room in that same order are enshrining the very sort of pecking order Jesus prohibited among his original apostles. In our sacrament meetings, we are also very careful about serving the bread and water to the “presiding authority” first. Not only can this get confusing for the deacons when visiting authority figures are in attendance, but for some reason it is difficult to imagine Jesus insisting that he be the first served. If the account in Matthew 20 is accurate, he would probably insist on being served last, and not because last is the place of honor.

Although the Savior was very clear about his own authority and the fact that he was always in charge—preaching, inviting, commanding, reprimanding, forgiving, sending, and so forth—his instructions to his apostles seem specifically to forbid any sort of ranking system

among them (except perhaps an inverted ranking, where those with the most authority were to serve rather than rule). If we can draw a lesson from this, it is perhaps that we are not to use authority in the Church as the world uses it. This is expressly forbidden. President David O. McKay translated this same idea into a modern context: “We cannot run the Church like a business.”<sup>11</sup> This may seem obvious, but business philosophies, practices, and structures are so pervasive in our modern organizational world that they tend to be difficult to circumvent in the Church, at both the individual and the institutional level.

### “No Power or Influence”

Expanding on the central principle pronounced in the Savior’s brief reprimand of his apostles, Joseph Smith was very explicit in the revelation/commentary published in Doctrine and Covenants 121 about the use of priesthood authority and how it differs from worldly authority:

Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not chosen?

Because their hearts are set so much upon the things of this world, and aspire to the honors of men, that they do not learn this one lesson—

That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness.

That they may be conferred upon us, it is true; but when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise

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11. Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 150. This remark came in the context of the correlation movement and the organizational changes the Correlation Executive Committee was proposing for the Church, which included, according to Ed Kimball, son and biographer of President Spencer W. Kimball, “applying management practices that were standard in the American business world” (Edward L. Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005], 249).

control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man. . . .

We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, [that] they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion. . . .

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile. (D&C 121:34–37, 39, 41–42)

Hidden in plain view in this inspired commentary is an insight about priesthood that is not well understood. If we truncate verse 41 before it runs off into the list of qualities a leader should employ in exercising priesthood authority, a very important lesson comes suddenly into focus: “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood”—period. A man cannot maintain power or influence over somebody simply by virtue of the fact that he holds the priesthood or occupies a priesthood office; nor should he try because if he does, he loses the *power* of the priesthood. As the prophet made abundantly clear in verses 36 and 37, the priesthood of God is powerless if held over someone else’s head. Priesthood power and influence (here undoubtedly meaning authority exercised in an institutional setting) come only as a consequence of long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love unfeigned, kindness, and pure knowledge (in other words, the spirit of serving and ministering the Savior was trying to teach his apostles during his earthly ministry). People will not follow if they are pushed, coerced, controlled, threatened, or manipulated. Those being ordered about may *comply*, but they will not *follow*. Stated another way, individuals become leaders not merely because they occupy a position of presumed authority, even if that office is granted by divine directive. They become leaders only

because others willingly follow them. Leadership is entirely dependent on the willingness of the followers. Mormons are known, by and large, for their obedience to authority. Indeed, sometimes we are rightly accused of being blindly obedient. But sometimes that obedience is more a passive compliance with edicts from authoritarian figures than an active following that leaders have earned by their behavior. In this light, true priesthood leadership always considers the rights, desires, development, well-being, free will, and autonomy of the followers first. Terry L. Givens refers to this paradoxical idea of priesthood as “power with no compulsion.”<sup>12</sup>

### Authority by Consent

This idea adds a new wrinkle to the standard LDS definition of *priesthood*. Priesthood is more than just an abstract agency granted by the Lord to speak or act in his name. It is also authority sanctioned or consented to by peers. Unless a person in a position of authority has the consent or approval of those over whom he or she exercises authority, then that authority lacks power—in essence, it is meaningless or empty. And this idea becomes even more significant when we understand that the modern Church, as it was initially established, was both a theocracy and a democracy. For instance, we read in one of the earliest revelations to the Church: “*All things shall be done by common consent in the church, by much prayer and faith*” (D&C 26:2, emphasis added). In other words, authority in the Church is not just an institutional authority granted to leaders through approved priesthood channels; it is also a *consensual* matter, contingent upon the approval of the rank-and-file members. We also read, “No person is to be ordained to *any* office in this church, where there is a regularly organized branch of the same, without the *vote* of that church” (D&C 20:65, emphasis added). These verses suggest

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12. Terry L. Givens, “Paradox and Discipleship,” *Irreantum* 11, nos. 1–2 (2009): 39.

that, at least in theory, the Church is not just a top-down, authoritarian hierarchy. Indeed, the very name of the Church suggests as much. It is the Church of Jesus Christ, but it is also the Church of the Latter-day Saints. The name is a dual possessive. Sometimes we just assume it is the Lord's church and that's all there is to it. But it appears that he expects something more of us.

This notion of consensual authority is central, I believe, to the whole framework of eternity of which we are a part.<sup>13</sup>

### Priesthood as an Abstract Idea

Charles Harrell has pointed out that the LDS Church is unique in the way it regards priesthood. Rather than being tied exclusively to the fact of being a priest, in modern Mormonism priesthood has become an abstract idea. It is a generalized power or authority.<sup>14</sup> To illustrate what I mean, let me suggest that it is theoretically possible (although institutionally inconceivable in today's Church) to bestow upon a young man the Aaronic Priesthood without ordaining him to the office of deacon,

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13. I explore this idea in detail in my article "The Source of God's Authority: One Argument for an Unambiguous Doctrine of Preexistence," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 3 (2016): 109–44.

14. Charles R. Harrell, "*This Is My Doctrine*": *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), chapter 17. Interestingly, the LDS definition of priesthood as abstract authority does appear in the four-inch-thick *Webster's* unabridged dictionary, but it is limited only to Mormon usage: "3: the authority to speak and administer in the name of the Deity given in the Mormon Church by ordination; *also*: the body of those so ordained including those of the Aaronic as well as the Melchizedek orders" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* [Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1993], s.v. "priesthood"). For a history of how this definition evolved, see Gregory A. Prince, *Having Authority: The Origins and Development of Priesthood during the Ministry of Joseph Smith* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1993).

teacher, or priest.<sup>15</sup> In the official (though not rigid) language used when laying hands on the recipient's head and granting either the Aaronic or Melchizedek Priesthood, the *bestowal* and the *ordination* to office are two distinct elements, although this was not always the case. In essence, although this never happens today, it would be possible to give someone the abstract authority without placing him in a particular institutional category (office or quorum). The authority is seen as separate from the office.<sup>16</sup> The authority is certainly separate from any particular calling in the Church, such as bishop, high priests group leader, or deacons quorum secretary. Until a couple of years ago, for instance, I did not hold a priesthood calling (I was a Primary teacher), but I still "held the priesthood" and could exercise it by giving health blessings or dedicating graves or performing other acts that were unrelated to a particular institutional position.

Significantly, this view of priesthood as an abstract authority is not present in ancient scripture, which is probably why it also does not exist in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant universes. In the Bible, if you had priesthood, you were a priest. And in ancient Judaism, you became a priest through heredity, not through formal ordination. Indeed, the word *ordination* does not appear at all in the Bible, and the

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15. While it is theoretically possible to separate these two acts in today's Church, it wasn't prior to at least 1900, and perhaps even 1919, when Joseph F. Smith's *Gospel Doctrine* officially proposed the distinction. Nor was it possible in the Book of Mormon (see Moroni 3:1–3). See a complete discussion of this change in William V. Smith, "Early Mormon Priesthood Revelations: Text, Impact, and Evolution," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 46, no. 4 (2014): 43–46.

16. Gregory A. Prince, *Power from On High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 48–50, raises the question of why the nine priesthood offices we currently recognize became offices when others, such as high council, did not, even though they met all the obvious requirements. "In attempting to define the rationale behind the nine offices now recognized by the Utah church, one is thus constrained by historical irregularities" (49).

word *ordain(ed)* is never used to signify the bestowal of priesthood authority or office.<sup>17</sup>

### The Ancient Meaning of Priesthood

The modern LDS usage of the word *priesthood* is a linguistic anomaly. In dictionaries, including Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary, there are two traditional definitions of the word: "the office or character of a priest" and "the order of men set apart for sacred offices; the order composed of priests."<sup>18</sup> This is in keeping with the typical definitions of other "-hood" words. *Parenthood*, for instance, is the condition or character of being a parent. *Neighborhood* is an order or group of people composed of neighbors. These follow a pattern that makes linguistic sense. But *priesthood*, as a type of authority that can be given to people, falls well outside the normal definition of "-hood" words.

A mother, for instance, would never claim to "hold the motherhood" or to "have the parenthood." A group of neighbors would never say that they "hold the neighborhood." Other churches do refer to bodies of priests as "the priesthood" as do Mormons, but this is a collective term, not an ethereal "something" a person can be given, something that can be held (or withheld). Thus, in LDS usage, *priesthood* is a word that has been wrenched from its historical and linguistic roots and given a meaning not present in any other context, even in ancient LDS scripture.

On the surface, the relationship between *priest* and *priesthood* may appear to be some sort of chicken-and-egg enigma. Which came

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17. See Kevin Barney, "Ordained," *By Common Consent* (blog), June 1, 2014, <http://bycommonconsent.com/2014/06/01/ordained>. Some verses can be read with the modern meaning (1 Timothy 2:7; Hebrews 8:3), but this is what Barney calls a presentist reading, misapplying current definitions of terms to ancient contexts.

18. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828 ed., s.v. "priesthood (*n.*)," accessed Feb. 16, 2018, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/priesthood>.



first? In Mormon dogma, the answer is obvious. According to Bruce R. McConkie, for instance, “Priesthood is power like none other on earth or in heaven. It is the very power of God himself, the power by which the worlds were made, the power by which all things are regulated, upheld, and preserved.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, God held the priesthood and then gave it to men, who were made priests. But simple linguistics gives us a different answer. In terms of word development, *priesthood* is obviously derived from the root word *priest*. There couldn’t be the concept *priesthood* until there were actual priests, just as the concept of *parenthood* could not exist prior to the existence of the word *parent*. God certainly had authority before the world was framed, but it is doubtful it was called *priesthood*. Regardless of the language, the term signifying the state of being a priest would have to be dependent on the prior term describing the priest himself. Why would God refer to his authority as *priesthood*? That makes no sense. He could call it *godhood* or some other term derived from his nature and station and being, but even that does not make linguistic sense. *Godhood* is the state or condition of being God, not some abstract form of authority.

Thus, *priesthood* (and its equivalent terms in other languages) is likely an earthly term, derived from the word *priest*, which came into existence at some point in human history to describe those called to represent God. If we accept the biblical account, this office is first mentioned in Genesis 14:18, referring to Melchizedek. In the modern LDS Church, however, it is common for individuals who are not priests to “hold the priesthood” (deacons and teachers, for instance), which is linguistically confusing and only makes sense to us because we have separated the term *priesthood* from its historical context and given it new meanings.

Most Latter-day Saints would probably be surprised to discover that the word *priesthood* appears only eight times in the entire Book of Mormon, all of them in the book of Alma—once in Alma 4:20, where

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19. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Doctrine of the Priesthood,” Apr. 1982, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1982/04/the-doctrine-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

Alma<sub>2</sub> delivers the judgment seat to Nephiah and confines himself “wholly to the high priesthood” (the office of high priest over the church), and seven times in Alma 13, each instance employing again the term *high priesthood*, referring to those who “became high priests of God” (Alma 13:10). Melchizedek is specifically mentioned as having “received the *office* of the high priesthood” (Alma 13:18) but not merely “the priesthood.” I will return to the historical notion of high priesthood later in this article, but for now let me say that although I am a high priest in the LDS Church, Alma certainly would not have considered me a high priest, which to him would have been the religious leader of either the entire church or a regional subdivision of it. He certainly wouldn’t have understood how a person like me could be a high priest without even occupying any sort of “priestly” position (I now serve on the high council, which is a priesthood calling but not technically a “priestly” position). I am also quite certain that the high priests he was referring to in Alma 13 did not include today’s thousands upon thousands of LDS high priests. Alma would not recognize the priesthood as Mormons define it today. Indeed, nowhere in the Book of Mormon do we read of just “the priesthood,” meaning a general abstract authority bestowed upon all male members of the church or even a select few. We don’t even read of “priesthood” as the condition of being a priest. Priesthood in the Book of Mormon is always the “high priesthood,” the fact of being a high priest.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the word *priesthood* appears 125 times in the Doctrine and Covenants and there mostly takes on the specialized

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20. The book of Abraham presents an interesting mix of definitions. Usage of *priesthood* in this book is somewhat vague, but, in my opinion, most instances in the text itself reflect the ancient definition of the term, which lends weight to the argument that it is an ancient text. The captions for the facsimiles, however, most definitely reflect modern usage.

meaning described above, although some of the early revelations had to be revised in 1835 to reflect this new and evolving meaning.<sup>21</sup>

Obviously, what we understand as priesthood in twenty-first-century Mormonism was not a familiar concept among the Book of Mormon peoples. Nor was it familiar to descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Old World before Jesus' birth or to Christians during and shortly after his mortal ministry. Thus, the word *priesthood* appears only nine times in the Old Testament, all referring to the descendants of Aaron or, more generally, the Levites. *Priesthood* appears only seven times in the New Testament—five times in Hebrews 7 and twice in 1 Peter 2.<sup>22</sup> Not once does this word appear in the Gospels, and if it did, it would probably refer to the religious leader of the Jewish people, the high priest (similar to its usage in the Book of Mormon), or to the priests who served in the temple at Jerusalem, including Zacharias, father of John the Baptist. Sometimes we have a tendency to read into ancient

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21. See Smith, "Early Mormon Priesthood Revelations," 1–84, especially 8–9, 12–13, 39–43, 63 n. 15, and 64 n. 17; Prince, *Having Authority*, 39–40, 51–57.

22. A Catholic commentary on why the Greek word for priest (*hierous*) is not used in the New Testament (with two exceptions) explains that to the early Christians, who were primarily Jews, it would have been absurd to refer to Jesus or his apostles as priests, because they were not Levites, who were the only ones who could be priests among the Jews. This is why the Greek term *presbuteros* was used instead. Interestingly, this commentary makes the following statement: "It is okay for Jesus to be a high priest because he was not a priest of the order of Aaron but of the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:20), an order which was older than the Aaronic one (7:1), which did not require a special genealogy (7:3), which was superior to the Aaronic order (7:4–10), which was prophesied to arise again one day (7:11; cf. Psalms 110:4), and which required 'a change in the law as well. . . . For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests' (7:12–14)" (Catholic Answers Staff, "Why Doesn't the Greek Word for 'Priest' in the Letter to the Romans Appear in the Bible More Often?," Catholic Answers, Aug. 4, 2011, <https://www.catholic.com/qa/why-doesnt-the-greek-word-for-priest-in-the-letter-to-the-romans-appear-in-the-bible-more-often>).

texts our current understanding of terms. This skews our perception of what Christianity was like in its earliest days or how God's people practiced their religion in Old Testament times. But clearly, the ancients' understanding of *priesthood* was different from our conception today.

In the Book of Mormon, none of the prophets is said to have the priesthood generally. Alma<sub>2</sub> confined himself to the high priesthood, meaning he gave up the office of chief judge and devoted all his time to being high priest over the church, but he wouldn't have claimed to "have" or "hold" the priesthood. His father, Alma<sub>1</sub>, began baptizing at the waters of Mormon, claiming simply that he had "authority from Almighty God" (Mosiah 18:13), not priesthood. And there is no evidence that he received this authority by the laying on of hands or by ordination. In fact, the circumstantial evidence argues specifically against it. Later, we read that Alma<sub>1</sub>, "having authority from God, ordained priests" (Mosiah 18:18). Interestingly, because Alma<sub>1</sub> had been a priest in King Noah's court, he could have claimed at that time to "have" priesthood or to be part of the priesthood, the body of priests, but only because of his position in the government of Noah, not because of the authority he received from God. A question that comes up now and then in LDS lessons on the Book of Mormon is how Alma<sub>1</sub> "received the priesthood." I've heard it hypothesized that he received the priesthood directly from God through the laying on of hands. But the record says no such thing (you'd think it would not omit such a glorious manifestation), nor does it require such an interpretation. This is simply an example of reading our modern concept of priesthood back into the ancient record. The more correct answer would be that Alma did not receive the priesthood from anyone because priesthood was not something people "received" in the Book of Mormon. Alma received authority from God, just as the record states, and he may have received such authority simply by word of mouth or by a manifestation of the Spirit, commissioning him to act as an agent of God.

After Alma's group of converts arrived in Zarahemla, King Mosiah gave Alma "authority over the church" (Mosiah 26:8), but again, this is not identified as priesthood, which had a very restricted meaning among the Nephites. This phrase means simply that he received permission from the king to lead the church within Mosiah's political realm. Earlier, when Abinadi was preaching to King Noah and his priests, including Alma, the record states that Abinadi "spake with power and authority from God" (Mosiah 13:6). Nowhere does the Book of Mormon identify this general authority from God with the specific word *priesthood*, although anachronistically we assign this label to the authority these men did obviously have. That Mormon did not make this connection is probably significant. Authority and priesthood were two distinct concepts in the Book of Mormon; we have conflated them in the modern Church.

Similarly, in the Old Testament, no prophet is directly associated with *priesthood*, although a few, like Samuel, do offer sacrifices. Descendants of Aaron *are* the priesthood, and, according to the LDS Bible Dictionary, "the presiding officer of the Aaronic Priesthood was called the high priest. The office was hereditary and came through the firstborn among the family of Aaron."<sup>23</sup> This is the modern LDS explanation, which, contrary to our present understanding, places the office of high priest under what we now consider the lesser priesthood. To the ancient Hebrews, however, the priests as a body would have been the priesthood, and the high priest was part of that priesthood, its highest-ranking member. The terms "Aaronic Priesthood" or "Priesthood of Aaron" never appear in the Old Testament, nor does the term "Melchizedek Priesthood." The prophets, as mentioned, were not said to have priesthood, although they obviously had authority. They were messengers of the Lord who spoke his word and recorded it and sometimes performed miracles in his name. Interestingly, the Old Testament identifies five different

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23. Bible Dictionary, "High priest," 659.

women as prophetesses. As with the prophets, they are not said to have priesthood (or even “priesthood”).

In the New Testament, *priesthood* is never explicitly mentioned at the calling of the apostles or the “other seventy” (Luke 10:1) who were sent out, nor is it mentioned in connection with bishops or deacons. These individuals had authority, perhaps even a commission from the Lord, although it is possible they were simply chosen by their fellow saints, but any authority they had is not identified as *priesthood*. The more general term *authority*, however, appears thirty-two times in the New Testament (twenty-two in the Gospels), only twice in the Old Testament, and forty-three times in the Book of Mormon. So *authority* was an important concept in ancient scripture (except apparently the Old Testament), but *priesthood* was a much more restricted idea, referring specifically to the fact of occupying the office of priest, and particularly of officiating in priestly rituals. And this is how it is still primarily used in the non-LDS Christian world.

### Modern Usage

The fact that the modern Mormon understanding of priesthood does not appear in ancient scripture, including ancient LDS scripture, has bearing on the current debate about ordaining women to the priesthood. One of the common defenses offered for retaining the current priesthood prohibition is that women were not ordained to the priesthood in the Bible or Book of Mormon. This may or may not be true,<sup>24</sup> but by this same reasoning one might well ask, does the absence of the

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24. It has been argued that women served as deacons or deaconesses, a particular type of church official, in the New Testament church and in subsequent years as the church evolved. See, for instance, Ann Nyland, “Women in Bible Ministry—Phoebe the Deacon and Presiding Officer,” Dec. 14, 2008, <http://ezinearticles.com/?Women-in-Bible-Ministry---Phoebe-the-Deacon-and-Presiding-Officer&id=1787659>. Of course, as mentioned earlier, deacons may not have been part of the priesthood.

modern definition of priesthood in these books therefore invalidate it? The Church would certainly answer no. Thus, the absence of an idea or convention in ancient scripture does not necessarily prevent us from accepting it in modern times. Indeed, the practice of banning black men and boys from the priesthood had a stronger scriptural precedent (although murky and dubious) than does the practice of denying women this opportunity (see Abraham 1:25–27). Prior to 1978, some interpreted these verses in the book of Abraham as *positive* proof in the case of denying priesthood to blacks, whereas all we have regarding women is *negative* proof, the purported absence of a practice being interpreted as incontestable evidence that it should never happen, but this negative proof is by no means as convincing as we often portray it to be.

Regardless, the scriptural/historical meaning of *priesthood* (as opposed to the modern LDS definition) can be seen clearly in mainstream media descriptions of the pre-1978 priesthood ban. “Blacks could not be priests,” stated a 2012 *Atlantic* article,<sup>25</sup> and this exact wording appears in numerous other articles from various publications. Most non-Mormons would not understand the concept of “holding” the priesthood, since priesthood to them is not something one can hold, and therefore they do not use this uniquely LDS construction. Stephen Webb, a Catholic scholar who became fascinated with Mormonism before his untimely death in 2016, describes the Mormon priesthood and contrasts it with priesthood in mainstream Christianity:

Mormonism accepts the absolute sufficiency of Jesus’ blood atonement on the cross and rejects the need for a special class of priests set apart for performing sacred rituals.

Nevertheless, they have priests! Yet, as one might expect, their understanding of the priesthood fits no previous categories. Churches typically

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25. Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, “How (George) Romney Championed Civil Rights and Challenged His Church,” *The Atlantic*, Aug. 13, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/08/how-george-romney-championed-civil-rights-and-challenged-his-church/261073>.

have a priesthood only if they have sacred rituals to perform, like the transformation of the bread and wine into the real presence of Jesus Christ. The priests who perform the Eucharistic transformation are thus heirs of the priesthood that performed the animal sacrifices in the Jewish temple. Mormons have a priesthood, but they do not treat the Eucharist, which they hold in their churches and not their temples, as a sacrificial ritual. . . . Rather than signifying expertise in performing rituals, the priesthood is a symbol of God's promise to grant believers an exalted and divine status in the afterlife. Instead of being a specially trained group set apart from other believers, Mormon priests are at the forefront of where the whole church should be heading. Mormonism thus follows Protestantism in democratizing the priesthood but follows Catholicism in associating the priesthood with increasing intimacy with Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Webb offers an outsider's view of the Mormon priesthood, perhaps not understanding entirely the sometimes confusing connection between priesthood and ordinances, but he does make a significant point: priesthood in both Judaism and Christianity is generally a specialized and separate order that exists for the sole purpose of performing sacred rituals. This is why most Protestant denominations do not have priests. I'm not sure, however, that Webb completely grasps the unique, abstract nature of Mormon priesthood. Still, this difference between the ancient notion of priesthood, which persists in the Catholic Church, and the Mormon conception is significant because, in modern Mormonism, priesthood as *the right to preside* is as significant as its capacity to officiate in rituals, which we refer to as ordinances. This seems also to be a modern development. Although some ancient prophets, such as Moses and

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26. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 150. Toward the end of this quotation, Webb is referring to the Protestant notion of a "priesthood of all believers," where "every individual has direct access to God without ecclesiastical mediation and each individual shares the responsibility of ministering to the other members of the community of believers" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*).



Enoch, did lead the people, most prophets did not preside over any sort of hierarchical organization. They taught, called people to repentance, performed occasional miracles, and spoke for God. Think of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Elijah, Jacob (Nephi's brother), Abinadi, Samuel the Lamanite, and others. None of these prophets could be said to *preside* in the way we think of it today. They also could not be said to "hold" the priesthood. In modern Mormonism, however, we have combined several disparate notions from ancient scripture in creating a priesthood that is necessary not only for officiating in sacred rituals but also for being a prophet and for presiding in a hierarchical organization. Because the idea of presiding is so central to modern LDS priesthood practices, I will return to it in the sequel to this article. For now, though, let us merely conclude that in Mormonism we appear to have appropriated a word and assigned it meanings that it did not previously have. This affects almost everything we do in the Church.

### The Development of *Priesthood* Usage in Modern Mormonism

As might be expected, the modern Mormon definition of *priesthood* did not appear immediately with the establishment of the Church (or with the visit of John the Baptist). Just as the notion of priesthood as a form of authority does not appear in the Book of Mormon, it is likewise absent from Joseph Smith's earliest revelations. Indeed, I find it quite surprising that the word *priesthood* does not appear at all for well over a year after the organization of the Church. It is noticeably absent from the "Articles and Covenants" (now Doctrine and Covenants section 20). In other words, Joseph Smith did not invoke priesthood authority at all in organizing the Church. Even the instructions for performing baptism that now appear in Doctrine and Covenants 20 do not mention priesthood, merely the words "Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ" (v. 73). But these words are the result of later editing. The earliest extant

version of the “Articles and Covenants” contained this sentence: “And the manner of baptism & the manner of administering the sacrament are to be done as is written in the Book of Morman [*sic*].”<sup>27</sup> By the time this document was transcribed into Revelation Book 1, however, excerpts from the Book of Mormon had been added to provide the wording for these ordinances, including this: “And the way of Baptism is to be ministered in the following manner unto all those who Repent whosoever being called of God & having authority given them of Jesus Christ shall go down into the water with them & shall say calling them by name having authority given me of Jesus Christ I baptize thee in the name of Jesus Christ the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Ghost amen.”<sup>28</sup> No mention of “priesthood,” but a recognition that “authority” is needed.

The first appearance of the word *priesthood* in the revelations does not come until what is now Doctrine and Covenants section 68, received on November 1, 1831, more than a year and a half after the organization of the Church, where we find the following statement: “behold & lo this is an ensample unto all those who were ordained unto this priesthood whose mission is appointed unto them to go forth.”<sup>29</sup> Nothing earth-shattering there.

A search through the earliest Church documents reveals that the first instance of *priesthood* appears on October 1, 1831 in the minutes of a meeting: “Br Joseph Coe & William W. Phelps were ordained to the High Priest hood under the hand of Br. Joseph Smith jr.”<sup>30</sup> The usage here

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27. “Articles and Covenants, circa April 1830 [D&C 20],” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, n. 27, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/articles-and-covenants-circa-april-1830-dc-20/1#full-1257920176035385574>.

28. *Ibid.*

29. “Revelation Book 1,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 113, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/99>.

30. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, vol. 2 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed.

is identical to that found in the Book of Mormon. Coe and Phelps, in other words, were ordained high priests. In a meeting held October 25, 1831, the minutes include a list of men “ordained to the Highpriesthood.” That this refers to being ordained a high priest is plainly evident from the lists that follow—of men being ordained elders, priests, teachers, and deacons. After the lists, we find the following text:

Br. Joseph Smith jr. said that the order of the High priesthood is that they have power given them to seal up the Saints unto eternal life. And said it was the privilege of every Elder present to be ordained to the Highpriesthood. . . .

Br. Sidney Rigdon said it was the privilege of those Elders present to be ordained to the High Priesthood . . .

Conference adjourned until 8 o'clock A.M. on 26th. . . .

Br. Signey Rigdon then made certain remarks on the privileges of the Saints in these last days. Remarks to those who were ordained to the High priesthood last evening, saying that the Lord was not well pleased with some of them because of their indifference to be ordained to that office . . .<sup>31</sup>

At this point in time, 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). This is further attested by a revelation received on November 11, 1831, which, after significant alteration in 1835, became part of what is now Doctrine and Covenants 107. A portion of that revelation, in the earliest extant copy, reads as follows: “Also the duty of the president over the priesthood is to preside over forty eight priests & set in council with them & to teach them the duties of their office as given in the covenants And again the duty of the president over the office of

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Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 71.

31. Godfrey, et al., *Documents*, Volume 2, 80, 82, 85–86.

the Elders is to preside over ninety six Elders & to set in council with them & to <teach> them according to the covenants And again the duty of the president of the office of the High Priesthood is to preside over the whole church.”<sup>32</sup> Note the parallel usage of “priesthood,” “Elders,” and “High Priesthood.” Elders were not part of the priesthood or high priesthood. Priests *were* the priesthood, and high priests *were* the high priesthood. This was still true on January 28, 1832, as seen in the minutes of a meeting held in Independence, Missouri: “Names of Elders present who were ordained to the H.P.H. . . .” followed by “Names of Elders who were not ordained to the H.P.H.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, elders could be ordained to the high priesthood, in which case they became high priests, or they could remain unordained to the high priesthood, but either way, elders were not part of the high priesthood. As yet, there was nothing called the Melchizedek Priesthood.

The first mention of Melchizedek regarding priesthood came in February 1832, with the vision that became Doctrine and Covenants 76: “they are they who are priests and kings who having [received?] of his fulniss and of his glory and are prists of the most high after the order of Melchesadeck which was after the order of Enoch which was after the order of the only begotten son.”<sup>34</sup> This usage is similar to how it appears in the Bible: “Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec” (Hebrews 6:20). Interestingly, if you combine these two references, Jesus becomes a high priest after the order of himself, and so does Melchizedek, which looks like some sort of circular puzzle.

In September 1832, with two revelations that are now combined in Doctrine and Covenants 84, the offices of elder and bishop became “appendages belonging to the high priesthood” and the offices of teacher

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32. *Ibid.*, 135. For a thorough discussion of the various revelations that now make up Doctrine and Covenants 107, see Smith, “Early Mormon Priesthood Revelations,” 1–84.

33. *Ibid.*, 163.

34. Godfrey, et al., *Documents, Volume 2*, 186.

and deacon became “appendages belonging to the lesser priesthood.” As late as June 1833, there was still some fluidity in the terminology. In a description of the plat of the City of Zion (in Missouri), we find both “the high and most holy priesthood after the order of Melchisedeck” and “the high priesthood after the order of Aron.”<sup>35</sup> The two divisions were becoming clearer, but both were referred to as “high priesthood.” Eventually, an April 1835 revelation that became part of Doctrine and Covenants 107 makes further changes: elder was now an office in what was called the Melchizedek Priesthood, and teachers and deacons became offices in what was called the Aaronic Priesthood.<sup>36</sup>

### Implications for Priesthood Restoration

Although the header to section 13 of the Doctrine and Covenants (which purportedly gives the words John the Baptist spoke to Joseph and Oliver when he restored the Aaronic Priesthood) is dated May 15, 1829, the text of this section was actually extracted from Joseph’s 1838 history, so it was composed long after the event. John is reported here to have declared: “Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer the Priesthood of Aaron . . .” (D&C 13:1). As indicated above, however, the Aaronic Priesthood was not a concept in 1829 or even 1832. Indeed, *priesthood* did not seem to be on Joseph’s radar at all, even though the word appears in one book in the Book of Mormon, referring only to individuals who are high priests. So I suspect that the wording of section 13 is anachronistic, recasting John’s words in a later vernacular.

In Joseph’s 1832 history, he describes the experience this way:

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35. “Plat of the City of Zion, circa Early June–25 June 1833,” in *Documents, Volume 3: February 1833–March 1834*, edited by Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Brent M. Rogers, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, vol. 3 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2014), 127–30.

36. See discussion in Smith, “Early Mormon Priesthood Revelations,” 15.

(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 administer the letter of the Law <Gospel—> <—the Law and commandments as they were given unto him—> and in <the> ordinences, forthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinences from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit.<sup>37</sup>

The usage here appears to be consistent with the time frame in which it was written: no mention yet of the terms Aaronic or Melchizedek; the angels as yet unidentified; a subtle shift in referring to the priesthood as something that may be received, but likely referring to two different offices, the second “after the holy order of the son of the living God”; and a yet undeveloped sense of what the two types of priesthood were designed to do.

So what did John actually restore, and what words did he use? I suspect that Joseph’s 1844 account might be more accurate in this sense than some of his earlier descriptions: “I saw an angel & he laid his hands on my head & ordained me to be a priest after the order of Aaron.”<sup>38</sup> If John’s words reflected this description, it would partially explain why Joseph would have no real concept of *priesthood* after receiving from the angel the authority to baptize. So, I suspect that the Baptist, rather than declaring that he was conferring the priesthood of Aaron on Joseph and Oliver, more likely stated that he was ordaining them priests after the order of Aaron. The concept of priesthood as an abstract authority that could be conferred came later.

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37. Joseph Smith, “History, circa Summer 1832,” *Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/1>.

38. Joseph Smith, Sermon, Mar. 10, 1844, recorded by Wilford Woodruff in his journal, in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 327.

Now, what about the second visitation? Among LDS historians, a popular venture is to try to answer the question, “When did Peter, James, and John restore the Melchizedek Priesthood?” Various answers have been proposed, some of them relying on anachronistic evidence. But this may actually be what we might call a trick question, along the lines of “How many of each kind of animal did Moses take with him on the ark?” By trick question I mean a question to which there is no possible answer. Based on the usage of terms as described above and the evolution of the idea of priesthood, whatever Peter, James, and John did in 1829 or 1830, it is very likely they did not “restore the Melchizedek Priesthood.” Melchizedek Priesthood was not a concept either in biblical times or in modern times before about 1835, and the notion of priesthood as a thing that could be restored was linguistically impossible in the earliest years of the Restoration. Indeed, as mentioned above, the word *priesthood* appears to have been totally absent before the autumn of 1831.

It is apparent in the Bible (with Philip, in Acts 8) that a greater authority is needed to give the Holy Ghost than to baptize. The Book of Mormon is less clear about this, but Jesus did give his twelve disciples specific “power” to give the Holy Ghost (3 Nephi 18:36–37). How this was to occur, however, is a bit murky. The day after Jesus first appeared and gave them this power, the disciples baptized each other, and the Holy Ghost “did fall upon them” without any sort of separate ordinance or ritual. Likewise, in describing centuries later how the people in the church were baptized, Moroni simply explains that “after they had been received unto baptism, and were wrought upon and cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost, they were numbered among the people of the church of Christ” (Moroni 6:4). Thus, it appears that the concept of a dual priesthood, two orders that referred back to Aaron and Melchizedek, was derived from a biblical and not a Book of Mormon framework.

According to William V. Smith, this development occurred in April 1835 with a revelation Joseph received: “The text of the April 1835 revelation takes the form of a lecture, settling different questions, establishing

terminology and the ordering of offices, and appealing to both Old Testament and New Testament–related narratives, a tradition with Joseph Smith, as well as combining several revelatory threads.”<sup>39</sup> This revelation now appears as Doctrine and Covenants 107:1–57, and, significantly, the latest edition of the Doctrine and Covenants now gives the appropriate time frame for the various portions of section 107, although it does not detail the significant edits that introduced new terminology.

The important point here, though, is that most accounts of the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, all of which come from later dates, impose anachronistic linguistic formulations on earlier events in such a way as to give the impression that two distinct authorities were conferred upon Joseph and Oliver, and that they were called the Aaronic Priesthood and the Melchizedek Priesthood. Early Church documents, however, suggest that this was not possible. Whatever commissions or ordinations Joseph and Oliver received from angelic ministrants, it was only later that they came to be understood as the conferral of specifically named priesthood authorities.

### Priesthood Keys

Continuing with the theme of terms we assume we understand but maybe don't, let us look at a rather nebulous term that over time has grown in importance in the LDS lexicon: *priesthood keys*. First, though, let me point out that the concept of priesthood keys exists only because of the unique LDS definition of priesthood. If priesthood meant simply the state of being a priest, we would have no such thing as keys. Keys exist only because priesthood has become an abstract principle, a generalized authority. Keys unlock this authority so that it can be used in various ways.

So, what exactly are priesthood keys? According to Bruce R. McConkie, “The *keys of the kingdom* [which may not be the same as priesthood

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39. Smith, “Early Mormon Priesthood Revelations,” 19.



keys] are the power, right, and authority to preside over the kingdom of God on earth and to direct all of its affairs.”<sup>40</sup> Joseph F. Smith taught that every man ordained to the priesthood has authority, 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.”<sup>41</sup> The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* defines priesthood keys as “the right to exercise power in the name of Jesus Christ or to preside over a priesthood function, quorum, or organizational division of the Church. Keys are necessary to maintain order and to see that the functions of the Church are performed in the proper time, place, and manner.”<sup>42</sup> Robert Millet and his coauthors explain that “the keys of the priesthood are the right of presidency.” They also point out, “While such persons as the Sunday School president, the Relief Society president, the Primary president, the Young Women president, and the Young Men president all have the right to inspiration and divine guidance because of the responsibility they bear, they do not hold keys.”<sup>43</sup> This last statement again tosses us into murky definitional waters. Most presidents of auxiliary organizations in the Church do indeed preside, as their title suggests, but they apparently preside without keys, which indicates that keys are not really necessary in order to preside, except in priesthood functions.

The notion that the presiding officer in a ward or branch of the Church holds the keys pertaining to the performance of ordinances in that unit was apparently not understood as late as 1838. Often in

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40. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 411, italics in original.

41. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1919), 136.

42. Alan K. Parrish, “Keys of the Priesthood,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:780.

43. Robert L. Millet, Camille Fronk Olson, Andrew C. Skinner, and Brent L. Top, *LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 361.

the early Church, teachers were specifically assigned to preside over congregations, so that high priests, elders, and priests could travel and preach. Therefore, teachers presided, even though they did not have sufficient authority to baptize or bless the sacrament, which suggests that they also did not possess priesthood keys regarding the performance of ordinances in the branches over which they presided.<sup>44</sup>

### Did Keys Exist Anciently?

Joseph Smith is reported to have taught that “the fundamental principles, government, and doctrine of the Church are vested in the keys of the kingdom,”<sup>45</sup> and “the keys have to be brought from heaven whenever the Gospel is sent.”<sup>46</sup> If this is true, we might well ask why there is no mention of this concept in any ancient scripture, including the Book of Mormon. Not only does the term *priesthood* appear very infrequently and then only in a very specialized usage in the Bible and Book of Mormon, but the word *key* appears even less frequently in ancient scripture. *Key* appears only one time in the entire Book of Mormon and, interestingly, occurs in the setting of Jerusalem, referring to the treasury of Laban (1 Nephi 4:20), which makes me wonder if this is a technology that the Lehites did not take with them to the promised land (even though Nephi was a *Wunderkind* of world-class proportions). The word *key* appears only two times in the Old Testament, once as a literal device to open a door (Judges 3:25) and once as a figurative expression: “the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder” (Isaiah 22:22). Similarly, this term, in singular or plural form, appears only six times in the New Testament, all of them used figuratively—“the key of the bottomless pit”

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44. Prince, *Power from On High*, 52–53.

45. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:338 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

46. *History of the Church*, 3:385–88.

(Revelation 9:1; 20:1), “the keys of death and hell” (Revelation 1:18), “the key of David” (Revelation 3:7), “the key of knowledge” (Luke 11:52), and “the key of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:19). This last reference is the only one even loosely associated with priesthood keys, where Jesus is telling Peter he will build his church upon “this rock” and give him “the key of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,” suggesting that this key involves making earthly acts valid in heaven. Of course, this key is never directly connected to priesthood in the New Testament, for Peter is never said to have priesthood. This reference, however, is probably where Joseph Smith came upon the idea of priesthood keys, even though this notion is far from clear in Matthew’s account. In contrast to the infrequent use of the word *key(s)* in ancient scripture, it appears sixty-three times in the Doctrine and Covenants, referring to the keys of the priesthood, of the kingdom, of patriarchal blessings, of the ministering of angels, of mysteries, of spiritual blessings, of salvation, and so forth, all usages being figurative.

This disparity in usage raises an obvious question. Could it be that mention of figurative keys is an indication of how prevalent literal keys might be in the society in question? A literal key opens a lock, generally on a door. That is its function. This sort of *lock* is mentioned only four times in the Old Testament, all in the book of Nehemiah. *Door(s)*, by contrast, is mentioned 198 times. In the New Testament, we find no *lock(s)*, although *door(s)* is mentioned thirty-eight times. Could it be that most doors in ancient Palestine did not have locks and therefore had no keys either? As mentioned, the word *key* appears only once in the Book of Mormon, referring to Laban’s treasury, which understandably would have had a door and a lock. But the word *lock* does not appear in the entire Book of Mormon, and *door(s)* appears only eight times. One of these instances is a quotation from Isaiah (2 Nephi 16:4), so it tells us nothing about Nephite society. Another is from the Savior’s

New World version of the Sermon on the Mount (3 Nephi 13:6), about praying in secret with the door shut. Of the remaining six instances, two refer to prison doors (Ether 7:18; Alma 14:27), two refer to tent doors (1 Nephi 16:10; Mosiah 2:6), one refers to the doors in the Jaredites' barges (Ether 2:17), and one is a figurative usage: "Yea, even at this time ye are ripening . . . for everlasting destruction; yea, and except ye repent it will come unto you soon. Yea, behold it is now even at your doors" (Helaman 8:26–27). From evidence in the book itself, the only doors among the Nephites that would probably have had locks and keys were prison doors. There is no direct evidence that the Nephite homes even had doors, although the verse in Helaman suggests they did. But nowhere do we read that those doors had locks or keys. Considering the scarcity of literal doors and the absence of locks in the Book of Mormon text, it is not surprising that the concept of figurative keys, especially keys to priesthood power or to salvation, likewise does not appear in the record. The figurative usage of words has little or no meaning where the literal usage is rare or totally absent. It should be mentioned, however, that the Book of Mormon does not include any other metaphor that might correspond to our modern concept of priesthood keys. Certain individuals had authority from God, although not a generic priesthood, and they did not apparently require keys or any other metaphorical device to use authority themselves or give it to others. Alma<sub>1</sub> and his descendants presided over the church, but none of them is said to have exercised priesthood or keys.

Whenever I hear someone refer to priesthood keys existing in the ancient world, I can't help but imagine a fictitious encounter between a modern Mormon theologian and Adam. Assuming Adam could understand English, if the theologian were to ask him whether he held priesthood keys, his likely answer would be, "What are keys?" His follow-up answer might be, "What is priesthood?" Physical keys were invented in ancient Egypt and Babylon, but these keys were made of wood, as were locks, and were both bulky and weak. Keys and locks made from

iron and bronze were invented in ancient Rome, which enabled them to be smaller and stronger. But Adam and the early patriarchs would not have been acquainted with physical keys and therefore would have had no understanding of figurative keys.

So if the ancients had no abstract concept of priesthood similar to the LDS notion of priesthood today, and if they had no figurative concept of keys connected to priesthood, where did this idea of priesthood keys come from? Michael Quinn suggests that “the doctrine of ‘the keys of the priesthood’ (and the related ‘keys of the kingdom’) became central to the question of presidential succession.”<sup>47</sup> The concept of presiding, of being at the pinnacle of a power structure, requires some sort of mechanism for maintaining order. Priesthood keys serve that function in Mormonism. But hierarchies have existed and continue to exist without any concept like priesthood keys. As long as established patterns of granting authority and providing for orderly succession are in place, organizations can and do thrive. As an aside, it is interesting to note that the presence of priesthood keys did not prevent multiple relatively credible claims to succeed Joseph Smith after his death. So apparently this concept was not widely understood (or perhaps not understood the way we view it today) prior to Joseph’s death.

This brings us to a good stopping point for the first article in this two-part series. In the sequel, I will examine several ideas that flow from the concepts discussed here, including ordinances, quorums, priesthood bans, and non priesthood authority in the Church.

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47. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 16.