

Last class we introduced the priesthood by comparing it to other biblical traditions and the Book of Mormon. This week we will continue to look at the restored doctrines relating to the priesthood in the Doctrine and Covenants and beyond. This class touches on the timing of the higher or Melchizedek Priesthood, the Oath and Covenant of the priesthood for women and men, and the way Joseph addressed the priesthood in his Nauvoo years in terms of Authority. (Nancy Saunders has headed up the research through Joseph Smith Papers.org.)

What in the Book of Mormon Stimulated Joseph and Oliver to Ask about the Priesthood?

As Joseph and Oliver worked through the translation of the Book of Mormon, 3 Nephi 11-12 may have stimulated Joseph's and Oliver's questioning about the need for the Lord's authority to baptize. The timing of May 15, 1829, also fits into that section of scripture. We may also assume that when they translated 3 Nephi 18:37, "the disciples bare record that he gave them power to give the Holy Ghost," they would have equally wondered about the need for additional authority.

Apostles Peter, James, and John Restored the Melchizedek Priesthood

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

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

- It followed the May 15, 1829, Aaronic Priesthood ordination (D&C 13).
- It preceded the organization of the Church on April 6, 1830. Because the higher priesthood was used that day to confirm baptized members for the first time and offer the Gift of the Holy Ghost (Smith, *History of the Church*, 1.77).
- In June 1829, Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer were called apostles, "even as unto Paul . . . for you are called even with that same calling" (D&C 18:9). This may or may not mean they had received an ordination.
- During the time that Joseph translated the *Book of Mormon* in Harmony, Pennsylvania (April through May 1829).

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

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

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

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

moment Peter James & John came to us and Ordained <us to> the Holy Apostelship and gave <unto> us the Keys of the Disp<e>nsation of the fullness of times. And we had some 16 or 17 miles to goe to reach our place of residence and Brother Oliver could travel as well as I could (Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, 229).

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

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

The addition of a horse for at least part of the journey makes the mileage more reasonable.

Priesthood Power

The Prophet Joseph often referred to God’s all-encompassing power as the priesthood. This overarching definition acts like an umbrella that covers all of God’s works—from creation to the Gifts of the Spirit. In the Doctrine and Covenants sections 84 and 107 we especially see the priesthood used in the work of organizing the church and male ordinations. Yet, in D&C 84, we see both the expansive definition of the priesthood power, and the specific definition of priesthood keys and offices used.

Background to D&C 84

We have many sections of the Doctrine and Covenants that refer to the priesthood—most significantly, D&C 84 and 107. They refer to God’s priesthood power, organization, and offices. These two sections on the priesthood were so important to the early saints that they took them out of chronological order and placed them at the beginning of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. That edition begins with the preface (D&C 1), the Articles and Covenants (D&C 20), and then D&C 107 and 84.

Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood (D&C 84:38-41)

Section 84 is sometimes referred to as, “The oath and covenant of the Priesthood.” The phrase is found only in this section, once each in verses 39 and 40. The oath promises *IF* we do our best, *THEN* God the Father will reward us amply. The Lord describes the requirements as a three-part covenant.

IF

1. You covenant to serve the Lord (like Moses, Aaron, and Abraham),
2. Magnify your service to Him, and are
3. Sanctified by the Spirit as you receive Jesus as your Redeemer,

THEN,

You may “receive[...] my Father; And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father’s kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him” (D&C 84:38). In short, the oath and covenant of the priesthood are the requirements for God’s promise of exaltation.

Even though the phrase “oath and covenant” is only found in this section, it has been repeated as a title in hundreds of General Conference talks, church manuals, and class discussions. One recent use was in a broadcast with President Russell M. Nelson and President Jean B. Bingham in 2020, where they both concluded that “the oath and covenant of the priesthood [is] just as relevant to women as it is to men.”¹ The oath and covenant of the priesthood is all about God’s blessings for those who are sanctified through repentance and obediently serve Him; it is not about gender.

Women Make Priesthood Covenants and Receive Spiritual Blessings

The promises given in the oath and covenant of the Priesthood are the same blessing that God offers all who enter into the highest order of the temple ordinances—for male and female (D&C 132:18-19). According to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, “Women thus may act in priesthood power when called, set apart, and authorized by those who hold the keys” (Ludlow, vol 3, 1137). Priesthood power is God’s power—including God’s gifts of visions, revelation, healing, faith, hope, and charity (for more see D&C 46)—which are available to all disciples. But women do not hold priesthood keys, nor do they administer in some saving ordinances. We each have different roles in serving God, but God’s power and rewards are the same.

At times, some have misinterpreted God’s oath and covenant to be only for those males ordained to an office in the priesthood, but President Russell M. Nelson (Conference Report on October 5, 2019) explained otherwise:

How I yearn for you to understand that the restoration of the priesthood is just as relevant to you as a woman as it is to any man. Because the Melchizedek Priesthood has been restored, both covenant-keeping women and men have access to “*all* the spiritual blessings of the church” (D&C 107:18). . . The heavens are just as open to *women* who are endowed with God’s power flowing from their priesthood covenants as they are to men who bear the priesthood. I pray that truth will register upon each of your hearts because I believe it will change your life. . . . When you are set apart to serve in a calling . . . you are given priesthood authority to function in that calling.

President Nelson emphasized the importance of making temple covenants.

The D&C calls the saints to make covenants and be endowed with God’s power five times, and it is never gender specific (D&C 38:32, 238; 43:16; 95:8; 105:11). President Nelson explained that all who make and magnify their temple priesthood covenants may receive God’s priesthood power and blessings.

Every woman and every man who makes covenants with God and keeps those covenants, and who participates worthily in priesthood ordinances, has direct access to the power of God. Those who are endowed in the house of the Lord receive a gift of God’s priesthood power by virtue of their covenant, along with a gift of knowledge to know how to draw upon that power. . . . If you are endowed . . . from those covenants flows an endowment of His priesthood power upon you. . . . As a righteous, endowed Latter-day Saint woman, you speak and teach with power and authority from God.ⁱⁱ

All sanctified saints who worthily enter the temple and make and keep the same sacred priesthood covenants will receive God’s same promised oath (D&C 84:33).

Similarly, the Prophet Joseph also wanted women to realize their potential to utilize God’s priesthood power and future blessings. In his famous letter from Liberty Jail (parts of which became D&C 121-123) he explained exactly: “When we say brethren we mean those who have continued faithful in Christ men, women, and children.”ⁱⁱⁱ Also in the 1835 *Doctrine and Covenants*, the Lectures on Faith 49:3 reads,

The saints are, by the same Spirit, to be partakers of the same fulness, to enjoy the same glory; for as the Father and the Son are one, so in like manner the saints are to be one in them, through the love of the Father, the mediation of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit; they are to be heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

Joseph did not limit the reception of God’s power and blessings in His oath and covenant to a gender.

In 1842, while speaking to the Relief Society, Joseph introduced a new—non-biblical phrase—“gifts of the priesthood” which was available for women.

[I, Joseph] gave a lecture on the Priesthood shewing how the sisters would come in possession of the privileges, blessings, and gifts of the Priesthood, and that the signs should follow them, such as healing the sick, casting out devils and that they might attain unto these blessings by a virtuous life and conversation and diligence in keeping all the commandments.^{iv}

In these citations, I see the Prophets Joseph Smith and Russell M. Nelson offering a very broad definition of the priesthood: they do not reserve the “gifts of the priesthood” to those with priesthood keys. Rather, in these citations, access to the priesthood as spiritual power or as the power of God, is open to men and women, young and old. Of course elsewhere, Joseph *does* reserve some priesthood roles (namely keys,

administration, and the performing of certain ordinances) to male office holders. With this as background, let us look at the promises in the oath and covenant of the Priesthood.

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

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

Scriptural Use of Priesthood

The Book of Mormon is only a third the size of the Bible, and the Bible is seven times the size of the Doctrine and Covenants. Yet we find the greatest number of references to the priesthood (referenced in a variety of words), far greater in those smaller books of scripture. This was an important topic for the restoration.

Table 1: Scriptural Words Relating to the Priesthood of God

	Priesthood(s)	God’s “Authority”	Aaronic/Levitical	*Melchizedek	Priest(s)
Old Testament	9	0	26	1	617
New Testament	7	12	2	6	15
Book of Mormon	8	23	0	14	104
D&C 1-133	124	38	31	32	70
Official Declaration 2	8	2	3	1	
Pearl of Great Price	20	4	3	1	15

* Melchizedek is referenced: Melchisedec (NT), Order of [God / Son], God’s order, Holy Order, and the like.

ⁱ <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2020-05-0280-the-oath-and-covenant-of-the-priesthood-is-relevant-to-women?lang=eng&collectionId=9e790dc7ca744028bf6f1e1e4676fd60>

ⁱⁱ President Russell M. Nelson, *Conference Report*, Oct 5, 2019

ⁱⁱⁱ Jesse, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 374 – 382. The context of this section includes the subject of the keys of the kingdom, the priesthood, and a sentence about buffetings of Satan. The preceding paragraph reads: “And again we say unto you that inasmuch as there be virtue in us and the holy priesthood hath been conferred upon us, and the keys of the kingdom hath not been taken from us, for verily thus saith the Lord be of good cheer for the keys that I gave unto <you> are yet with you Therefore we say unto you dear brethren in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we deliver these characters unto the buffetings of satan untill the day of redemption that they may be dealt with according to their works [p.6] and from henceforth their works shall be made manifest. *And now dear and well beloved brethren . . .*”

^{iv} Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph*, 119.