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## The Earliest Accounts of the Restoration of the Priesthood

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Main room in the restored Peter Whitmer home, Fayette, New York, where the Church was organized on April 6, 1830, and priesthood ordinances were performed. Courtesy John W. Welch.

# The Earliest Accounts of the Restoration of the Priesthood

*Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff*

Few events in the history of the Restoration are as consequential as the bestowal of the priesthood upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. The following excerpts from early Church documents recount all the known direct statements from the first twenty years of Church history specifically concerning the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods. In addition to compiling the descriptions that were written or dictated by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, this collection also includes the accounts by contemporaries of Joseph and Oliver up to the time of Cowdery's death in 1850. Reflecting information that was probably gleaned from conversations or unrecorded discourses of Joseph and Oliver, a few of these statements offer details unavailable elsewhere. Additionally, these statements help to reveal early Church members' understanding of the restoration of the priesthood and show how they described the priesthood restoration to others.

Long before he received the priesthood, Joseph Smith learned of it from Moroni. According to an Oliver Cowdery account published in 1835, Moroni appeared to Joseph in September 1823 and informed him, "When they [the golden plates] are interpreted the Lord will give the holy priesthood to some, and they shall begin to proclaim this gospel and baptize by water, and after that they shall have power to give the Holy Ghost by the laying on of their hands."<sup>1</sup> While it is

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1. Oliver Cowdery, "Letter VIII," *Messenger and Advocate* 2 (October 1835): 199, available on "Mormon Publications: 19th and 20th Centuries," *BYU*

unclear to what extent this retrospective account may contain details that were actually learned after 1823, Joseph definitely learned more about the priesthood as he translated the Book of Mormon in 1829. From the golden plates, Joseph learned that power was necessary to perform ordinances including baptism (3 Ne. 11:22), the sacrament (3 Ne. 18:5), and conferring the Holy Ghost (3 Ne. 18:37; Moro. 2:1–3); that this power was conferred by the laying on of hands (3 Ne. 18:38; Moro. 2:1; 3:2); that one could be ordained to the calling of disciple or elder, who in turn could ordain priests and teachers (Moro. 3:1); and that elders or disciples, unlike priests and teachers, could confer the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands (Moro. 2:1–2). Additionally, a passage in Alma 13 discussed the calling and ordination of high priests including Melchizedek to the “high priesthood of the holy order of God” (Alma 13:6, 14, 18).

Having learned through the writings of ancient prophets that baptism by proper authority was necessary, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery sought that ordinance. In response to their supplication, John the Baptist appeared and conferred the priesthood of Aaron upon them. At a later date, Peter, James, and John appeared and bestowed what is known today as the Melchizedek Priesthood.<sup>2</sup>

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*Harold B. Lee Library Digital Collections*, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/NCMP1820-1846/id/7162>. Further words given by Moroni at that time, now found in Doctrine and Covenants 2, were provided by Joseph Smith in 1838: “Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah.” D&C 2:1; see also “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 5, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, available on Church Historians Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/5>; Karen Lynn Davidson and others, eds., *Histories: Volume 1, Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 224.

2. As Gregory Prince has observed, the earliest occurrences of the word *priesthood* in written Mormon sources outside the Book of Mormon begin in 1831 (27). Moreover, although priesthood authority had been restored prior to that time, the terms *Aaronic Priesthood* and *Melchizedek Priesthood* “were not adopted until 1835” (14). Gregory A. Prince, *Having Authority: The Origins and Development of Priesthood during the Ministry of Joseph Smith* (Independence, Mo.: Independence Press, 1993). William E. McLellin’s journal entry for October 25,

## The Restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood

The historical record clearly identifies the circumstances surrounding the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood, including the date that it occurred, and unambiguous evidence links Joseph and Oliver's quest for that priesthood to knowledge they gained while translating the Book of Mormon. An 1829 document in Oliver Cowdery's handwriting entitled "Articles of the Church of Christ" testified that Cowdery had been given power to baptize "of Jesus Christ" (document 1 below).

Details regarding the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood, including John the Baptist's role in that event, however, were seldom if ever shared prior to 1832 "<owing to> a spirit of persecution," as Joseph Smith indicated in 1838.<sup>3</sup> Two of Joseph and Oliver's close associates, David Whitmer and William McLellin, recalled in 1885 and 1878, respectively, that they first learned of John the Baptist's 1829 appearance two to four years after the Church's organization.<sup>4</sup> In

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1831, speaks of "the High-Priesthood" and "the lesser Priest-Hood." Jan Shippy and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 45, 283.

3. "History, circa June–October 1839 [Draft 1]," [1], Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-june-october-1839-draft-1/1>; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 294–96; Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 1:43 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

4. While remaining true to his testimony as a witness to the Book of Mormon, David Whitmer rejected any aspect of the Restoration that recognized or promoted central Church authority. In 1885, Whitmer stated, "I moved Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to my fathers house in Fayette Seneca County New York, from Harmony, Penn. in the year 1829, on our way I conversed freely with them upon this great work they were bringing about, and Oliver stated to me in Josephs presence that they had baptized each other seeking by that to fulfill the command—And after our arrival at fathers sometime in June 1829, Joseph ordained Oliver Cowdery to be an Elder, and Oliver ordained Joseph to be an Elder in the church of Christ and during that year Joseph both baptized and ordained me an elder in the church of Christ. . . . I never heard that an Angel had ordained Joseph and Oliver to the Aaronic priesthood until the year 1834 5. or 6—in Ohio." Notwithstanding numerous attestations to the contrary by Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer in 1885 maintained, "I do not believe that John the

writing, Joseph Smith first referred to this event in 1832 (document 6), describing “the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring—of Aangels [*sic*] to adminster the letter of the Law <Gospel—>.” Oliver Cowdery offered the first detailed, recorded account of the restoration of the lower priesthood in 1834 (document 20). The following year, Cowdery specified the date and location of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood (document 23). Joseph Smith’s fullest account of the event (document 12) corroborated Oliver’s record and added new details: for instance, Joseph recorded words used by John regarding the nature of the keys that he bestowed; explained that John had acted under the direction of Peter, James, and John; and indicated that John promised them that later they would receive power to bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost. In 1844 (documents 17–19), Joseph Smith referred to the preparatory priesthood as “the power of Elias” and indicated that John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Savior, was “the Spirit of Elias.”<sup>5</sup>

Early members read Joseph’s and Oliver’s testimonies regarding the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood and used the information in their missionary work. For instance, Orson Hyde (documents 50, 51) quoted directly from Oliver Cowdery’s 1834 account (document 20), while Reuben Miller in an 1847 publication (document 67) relied on

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Baptist ever ordained Joseph and Oliver as stated and believed by some.” Zenas H. Gurley, Interview, January 14, 1885, Gurley Collection, Church History Library, quoted in Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 154–55. Earlier, Whitmer had been very impressed, however, by Oliver Cowdery’s testimony regarding the visitation of Peter, James, and John; see note 10 below.

In 1878, William E. McLellin wrote, “In 1831 I heard Joseph tell his experience about angel visits many times, and about finding the plates, and their contents coming to light. . . . But I never heard one word of John the baptist, or of Peter, James, and John’s visit and ordination till I was told some year or two afterward [that is, in 1832] in Ohio.” William E. McLellin statement, 10, numbered item 28, quoted in D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 19.

5. Part of a revelation dated August and September 1830 (D&C 27) and published for the first time in 1835 stated that Elias had informed Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, that John would “be filled with the spirit of Elias” (D&C 27:7). “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 52; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 430.

Joseph Smith's accounts of John's visitation (documents 12, 14). Many accounts mention John the Baptist by name (documents 4, 12, 26, 29, 66, 69, 70); others call him "the angel John" (document 23), "the angel of the Lord" (document 41), simply "the angel" (documents 13, 14, 21), or some other similar appellation (documents 8, 12, 21, 27, 68).

Despite detailed accounts by Joseph and Oliver, some errors crept into the record: William Appleby, for instance, erroneously indicated in a tract published in 1844 that the power to baptize had been restored in 1830 (document 62). Additionally, ambiguity and imprecision arose through leaders' and members' frequent use of the phrase "the holy priesthood" to refer to the Aaronic Priesthood on some occasions (document 20), to the Melchizedek Priesthood on others (documents 8, 23, 58, 71), and to the priesthood in general on yet other occasions (documents 24, 28, 37, 47, 48, 49, 59, 62, 63). Still, the documentary record demonstrates that detailed accounts of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood were available to members of the Church as early as 1834 and that early members used those accounts in teaching others about the Aaronic Priesthood's restoration.

### **The Events of the Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood**

The written record regarding the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood is less complete. Although repeatedly testifying that Peter, James, and John had appeared to them and restored this high priesthood authority (documents 4, 15, 16, 29) or referring alternatively to "apostles" (document 7), "Peter" (document 26), "angels" (documents 6, 27), or "those who had been held in reserve" (document 8), neither Joseph Smith nor Oliver Cowdery specified the date of that restoration or reported the words used by Peter in ordaining them to this priesthood beyond "declaring themselves as possessing the keys" (document 16; see also 40). Oliver Cowdery's accounts concerning the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood corroborate the accounts of Joseph; whereas Oliver Cowdery provided the earliest detailed report of the visit of John the Baptist, his accounts of the visit of Peter, James, and John seldom add new information.

Significant evidence suggests that the Melchizedek Priesthood may have been restored in connection with the translation of the Book of



*The Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood*, by Minerva Teichert, oil on canvas, 1934. Courtesy Church History Museum.

Mormon. A revelation dated June 1829 (documents 1, 3) referred to the apostolic calling of David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery, likening their calling to Paul's, although the revelation did not detail the restoration of priesthood authority or any ordination in connection with that calling. Additionally, David Whitmer recalled in 1887 that he was "baptized, confirmed, and ordained an Elder" in June 1829 and that "previous to this, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had baptized, confirmed and ordained each other to the office of an Elder."<sup>6</sup> The Book of Mormon, which was being translated at that time, described the ancient ordination of disciples, known as elders, who had power to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost (3 Ne. 18; Moro. 2–3). Inasmuch as the translation of 3 Nephi 11 had made Joseph and Oliver sensitive to their lack of power to baptize and impelled them to seek that power, it is possible that the translation of 3 Nephi 18 and Moroni 2–3 had a similar effect upon them, motivating them to pray to receive by the laying on of hands the additional power to bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost.

The first printed reference to Joseph's and Oliver's ordination as apostles appeared in 1831. It indicated that Joseph and Oliver were each "called of God and ordained an apostle of Jesus Christ" (document 2). In 1833, Joseph Smith discussed the restoration of apostolic authority in greater detail. Thereafter, most of his and Oliver's written accounts expressly mentioned that angels played a role in the restoration of apostolic authority and of the power to bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost. In 1833 (document 7), Joseph Smith testified that he had seen "the Apostles" and could perform miracles. The following year, Joseph met with the Kirtland Stake High Council. On February 12, 1834, he discussed "the dignity of the office which has been conferred upon me by the ministring of the Angel of God" (document 9). While this might have been a reference to John the Baptist, it is also possible that Joseph was referring to Peter's role in conferring the Melchizedek Priesthood upon him. Five days later he instructed the same group

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6. David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ: By a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Richmond, Mo.: By the author, 1887), 32, available on *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/stream/addressstoallbeli00whit#page/32/mode/2up>.

that anciently “the apostle, Peter, was the president of the council ~~in ancient days~~ and held the Keys of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>7</sup> In a blessing which Oliver Cowdery dated 1833 and copied in 1835, Joseph Smith referred to the reception of “the holy priesthood under the hands of those who . . . received it under the hand of the Messiah” (document 8).

In 1835 the original edition of the Doctrine and Covenants gave the first precise published account of the appearance of Peter, James, and John to Joseph and Oliver.<sup>8</sup> This edition indicated that the three ancient apostles had “ordained” and “confirmed” Joseph and Oliver as “apostles” and granted them “the keys of your ministry” (document 4). In subsequent statements, Joseph reiterated the role of Peter, James, and John in the restoration of the “priesthood” and “the keys” of the kingdom (documents 15, 16) and indicated that the angelic ministrants’ voices had come to them “in the wilderness” between Harmony, Pennsylvania, and Colesville, New York (document 16).<sup>9</sup> Following the Prophet’s death, Oliver Cowdery testified repeatedly and fervently that he had received the higher priesthood under the hands of angelic ministrants (documents 26–29).<sup>10</sup> In 1846 he mentioned only Peter’s

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7. “Minute Book 1” [Kirtland High Council Minutes], 30, February 17, 1834, Church History Library, available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-1/34>; Gerrit J. Dirkmaat and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 3: February 1833–March 1834*, vol. 3 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 437.

8. These verses did not appear in the earlier text of the revelation printed in the Book of Commandments, 1833. Joseph Smith recalled in 1839 that all of section 27 was received as a revelation in August 1830 but that most of the revelation, including these words, was not recorded until September 1830. “History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2],” 51; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 428.

9. This passage mentions “the voice of Peter, James, and John” but does not discuss a physical ordination. The reason is that this is part of a response to the preceding question, “What do we *hear*?” (italics added).

10. During an 1861 visit with David Whitmer, David H. Cannon reported that Whitmer recalled yet another testimony given by Cowdery regarding the appearance of Peter, James, and John: “The thing which impressed me most of all was, as we stood beside the grave of Oliver Cowdery the other Witness, who had come back into the Church before his death, and in describing Oliver’s action, when bearing his testimony, said to the people in his room, placing his hands like this upon his head, saying ‘I know the Gospel to be true and

role in the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood (document 26), but in 1849 he confirmed that James and John had also been present (document 29).

Supplementing Joseph's and Oliver's own accounts in several respects are Addison Everett's recollections, written in 1881, 1882, and 1883, of statements he had heard Joseph Smith make in a conversation in 1844. According to Everett's longest account, Joseph Smith indicated that while translating the Book of Mormon in Harmony, Pennsylvania, he and Oliver had been arrested; after escaping from a courtroom, they spent the night in the woods eluding their enemies. At daybreak, Peter, James, and John appeared to them and "ordained to us <to> the Holy Apostelship and gave <unto> us the Keys of the Disp<e>nsation of the fullness of times."<sup>11</sup>

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upon this head has Peter James and John laid their hands and conferred the Holy Melchesdic Priesthood,' the manner in which this tall grey headed man went through the exhibition of what Oliver had done was prophetic. I shall never forget the impression that the testimony of . . . David Whitmer made upon me." David H. Cannon, *Diary*, 5, March 13, 1917, Church History Library, cited in Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 5:218.

11. Addison Everett wrote: "A few days Before Br Joseph & Hiram ware calld to Carthage By Gov. Ford I wus Passing the Mansheon House I observed Br Joseph & Hiram & some five or six Brethren in earnest conversation. Before the Door of the House. I opened the gate and staped in. . . . Br Joseph Ex[p]resed Greate simpathy for Br Oliver saying Poor Boy[,] Poor Boy[,] casting his eyes to the ground. And then Said as 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 Kng<i>hts 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. And they ware teachi[n]g And preaching the Gospele they ware taken with <a> writ and Before a Judge as fals[e] Prophets. And the Prossicuting Atorny had conceived in his own Mind That A few simple qu[e]stions would Convince the Court By the Answers Br Joseph would giv[e] <to> that <the> charge was Correct. So he calls out Jo which was the first Merial Jesus raught [wrought.] Why <said Br Joseph> we read He Created the worlds And what He done previous to that I have not as yet Learned. This answer completly confounded the Prossicuting Atorny that he requested the Judge to Dismiss the case. and went out To Organ<ize> the Mob that was on the Out Side. At about this time a Lawyer By the Name of Reede I think

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was his name came in to the court and Stated He was Mr Smiths Atorny and wished to see him <in> a Private room And was <put> in to <a> Back room and when in he hoisted a window and told Br Joseph & Oliver to flee in to the forest which was close at hand. And they wandered in a dense Forest all Night and often times in Mud and water up to thare Knees. And Brother Oliver got quite exausted 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 to 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 <after the Endowment>. Now as to time and Place. I heard the Name of the Banks of the Susquehanah river spoken <of> But whare it was pla[c]ed I cannot till. No doubt the Oake tree and the field fence was ajacent to the river. As to time I cannot Be Very Explsit. But as the Mob spirit had not abated when they returned they had to remove to Father Whitmores <at Fayet[te] Seneca Co> to finish the Translation. I should <jud[g]e> it to <Be> the Latter part of August. Now Beloved Brother I am Not Writing as wone of the Lords Historians But as your friend reproduc<i>ng the last words I heard our Beloved and Gods Holy Prophet Speake before his depart[ure] Into the Eternal Heavens to Dwell with the Holy & Eternal gods forever & Ever!” Addison Everett to Joseph F. Smith, January 16, 1882, Joseph F. Smith Papers 1854–1918, Church History Library, underlining in original, available on *Church History Library*, [https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE146205](https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE146205), images 14–19, quoted in Larry C. Porter, “The Restoration of the Priesthood,” *Religious Studies Center Newsletter* 9, no. 3 (May 3, 1995): 8. Angle brackets < > designate material inserted by Everett above the line. See also Addison Everett to Oliver B. Huntington, February 17, 1881, recorded in “Oliver Boardman Huntington Journal no. 14,” under backdate of January 31, 1881; and “Oliver Boardman Huntington Journal no. 15,” entry for February 18, 1883, Oliver Boardman Huntington Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, quoted in Porter, “Restoration of the Priesthood,” 7. The 1881 entry reads as follows: “Joseph went on to state that ‘at Coalville he & Oliver were under arrest on charge of Deceiving the people & in court he stated that the first miracle done was to create this earth. About that time his attorney told the court that he wanted to see Mr. Smith alone a few moments. When alone Mr. Reid said that there was a mob in front of the house, & ho[i]sting the window, Joseph & Oliver went to the woods in a few rods, it being night, and they traveled until Oliver was exhausted & Joseph almost carried him through mud and water. They traveled all night and just at the break of day Olive[r] gave out entirely and exclaimed ‘O! Lord! How long Brother Joseph

The foregoing accounts all seem to describe a single event: a restoration between Harmony and Colesville of (what came to be known as) the Melchizedek Priesthood under the Savior's direction by Peter with the assistance of James and John. However, the draft and final version of an 1839 account by Joseph Smith may describe a separate set of events connected with the restoration of "the Melchizedek Priesthood, which holds the authority of the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost" (documents 13, 14). Those documents indicate that after Joseph and Oliver had prayed for this authority, "the Word of the Lord" came to them in a second location, the Whitmer home in Fayette, commanding them to ordain one another to the office of Elder once they had "called the Church together our brethren and had their sanction" and then to "attend to the laying on of hands for the Gift of the Holy Ghost."<sup>12</sup>

No single document written by the principals discusses both the appearance of Peter, James, and John and the revelation received in the Whitmer home, specifying the chronological order of these revelations, but the revelation described in documents 13 and 14 was definitely received prior to the organization of the Church, since Joseph Smith carried out its instructions on April 6, 1830. Joseph Smith's history indicates that he and Oliver ordained each other on April 6 "according to previous commandment."<sup>13</sup>

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have we got to endure this thing; Brother Joseph said that at that very time Peter, James, & John came to them and ordained them to the Apostleship. They had 16 or 17 miles to travel to get back to Mr. Hales his father in law and Oliver did not complain anymore of fatigue." Compare these comments with the early history of Joseph Smith by Joseph Knight, *Reminiscences*, 2, MS 3470, Church History Library, available on *Church History Library*, [https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE1276586](https://dcms.lds.org/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE1276586), image 9; Joseph Knight, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," ed. Dean Jessee, *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (1976): 37–38.

12. The first ordinations to the office of elder occurred in 1829. On April 6, 1830, Joseph and Oliver reordained one another as First and Second Elder and then "laid our hands on each individual member of the Church present, that they might receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, and be confirmed members of the Church of Christ." "History, circa June–October 1839 [Draft 1]," [9]; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 366; *History of the Church*, 1:78. Both Joseph and Oliver were elders prior to this time. See Porter, "Restoration of the Priesthood," 3.

13. "History, circa June 1839–circa 1841 [Draft 2]," 37; Davidson and others, *Histories, Volume 1*, 366; *History of the Church*, 1:77–78.

In their written accounts, most of which were produced for didactic purposes, many early members compressed all the events of priesthood restoration into a general reference to a visitation by a holy messenger or angel (documents 33–35, 39, 43, 50, 52, 53, 55, 56, 60–63). Although a published revelation (document 4) referring to separate ministrations by John the Baptist and by Peter, James, and John was widely disseminated and readily available beginning in 1835, more details were circulated about the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood, probably because that authority was more immediately relevant to the issue of conversion and baptism. Under these circumstances, it is possible that some members regarded the restoration of the authority to baptize as the primary facet of priesthood restoration and therefore focused on that restoration in their teachings.

It is also likely that some writers focused on a single messenger's role in the restoration of the priesthood in order to simplify the Restoration for hymns or missionary work, particularly when they desired to draw a parallel between the other angel mentioned in Revelation 14:6 and the Restoration of the gospel. Charles Thompson, for instance, borrowed heavily from John's prophecy in Revelation when he wrote, "God sent an holy angel from the midst of heaven, with the Priesthood and authority of Jesus Christ, to preach the everlasting Gospel unto them who dwell on the earth, and to every nation, kindred, tongue and people" (document 53).

Statements by William McLellin (document 68) and David Patten (document 41) demonstrate that some members who had studied Doctrine and Covenants 27 understood clearly that the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods were restored on separate occasions. Similarly, other leaders and missionaries, including Brigham Young (document 70) and Reuben Miller (documents 66, 67), referred to two separate appearances in their sermons and writings.

The accounts by Joseph's and Oliver's contemporaries show that early members arrived at different conclusions regarding the timing of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. In the 1880s, Everett calculated that it probably occurred in August 1829. Although William McLellin recognized the importance of Peter, James, and John's visitation (document 68), he seems to trace the reception of the Melchizedek Priesthood to the ordination of Joseph and Oliver as elders on April 6, 1830

(document 69). Hiram Page, one of the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, was convinced that Joseph and Oliver received the Melchizedek Priesthood from Peter, James, and John “before the 6th of april 1830” (document 71). Agreeing with Hiram Page, in 1853 and again in 1874, Brigham Young emphasized that Joseph Smith received apostolic power from Peter, James, and John prior to the organization of the Church. Independent historian D. Michael Quinn’s reading of Brigham Young’s comment that “Peter, James, and John came to him [Joseph Smith] . . . in Kirtland” led Quinn to conclude that key words and contextual information found in that discussion by President Young concerning several revelations regarding the priesthood were omitted.<sup>14</sup>

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14. On April 6, 1853, President Young said, “I know that Joseph received his Apostleship from Peter, James, and John, before a revelation on the subject was printed, and he never had a right to organize a Church before he was an Apostle.” Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 1:137, available on “Journal of Discourses,” *BYU Harold B. Lee Library Digital Collections*, <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/JournalOfDiscourses3/id/1774>. On June 23, 1874, Brigham Young indicated, “[Joseph Smith] received the Aaronic Priesthood, and then he received the keys of the Melchisedek Priesthood, and organized the Church. He first received the power to baptise, and still did not know that he was to receive any more until the Lord told him there was more for him. Then he received the keys of the Melchisedek Priesthood, and had power to confirm after he had baptized, which he had not before. He would have stood precisely as John the Baptist stood, had not the Lord sent his other messengers, Peter, James and John, to ordain Joseph to the Melchisedek Priesthood.” *Journal of Discourses*, 18:240. In 1861, in a discourse on the priesthood, President Young said, “How came these Apostles, these Seventies, these High Priests, and all this organization we now enjoy? It came by revelation. Father Cahoon, who lately died in your neighbourhood, was one of the first men ordained to the office of High Priest in this kingdom. In the year 1831 the Prophet Joseph went to Ohio. He left the State of New York on the last of April, if my memory serves me, and arrived in Kirtland sometime in May. They held a General Conference, which was the first General Conference ever called or held in Ohio. Joseph then received a revelation, and ordained High Priests. You read in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants how he received the Priesthood in the first place. It is there stated how Joseph received the Aaronic Priesthood. John the Baptist came to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. When a person passes behind the veil, he can only officiate in the spirit-world; but when he is resurrected he officiates as a resurrected being, and not as a mortal being. You read in the revelation that Joseph was ordained, as it is written. When he received the Melchisedek Priesthood, he had another

Modern readers have also arrived at divergent conclusions regarding the timing of the Melchizedek Priesthood restoration and Joseph Smith's early understanding of the distinction between the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods. Two recent interpretations are illustrative. Larry C. Porter, professor emeritus of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University, maintains that "the evidence suggests a date near the end of May 1829" and "certainly before the organization of the Church on 6 April 1830."<sup>15</sup> In support of this conclusion, Porter highlights the revelation received prior to June 14, 1829, and first printed in the "Articles of the Church of Christ" (documents 1, 3) that identifies Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer as apostles who are "called even with that same calling" as "Paul mine apostle." As evidence that this call to the apostleship included priesthood authority, Porter highlights the Prophet's preface to a later publication of this revelation: "The following commandment will further illustrate the nature of our calling to this Priesthood as well as that of others who were yet to be sought after" (document 14). Porter also notes that

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revelation. Peter, James, and John came to him. You can read the revelation at your leisure. When he received this revelation in Kirtland, the Lord revealed to him that he should begin and ordain High Priests; and he then ordained quite a number, all whose names I do not now recollect; but Lyman Wight was one; Fathers Cahoon and Morley, John Murdock, Sidney Rigdon, and others were also then ordained. These were the first that were ordained to this office in the Church. I relate this to show you how Joseph proceeded step by step in organizing the Church. At that time there were no Seventies nor Twelve Apostles." *Journal of Discourses*, 9:88–89. Readers may judge for themselves if the Kirtland revelation referred to here was the visit of Peter, James, and John or the revelation instructing Joseph Smith to begin ordaining high priests. Likewise, when Brigham Young said that Joseph Smith "was taken in the spirit to the 3d heavens & all this with the aronic priesthood" (Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 26) before he was ordained an apostle, Brigham need not have been referring to the vision of the three degrees of glory received by Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon in February 1832, as Quinn argues. It was common for people to use the phrase "third heaven" from 2 Corinthians 12:2 in connection with Paul's gift of vision in general, but this phrase is ambiguous. See, for example, "History, 1838–1856, Volume C-1 Addenda," 69, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-addenda/69>; *History of the Church*, 5:30.

15. Porter, "Restoration of the Priesthood," 3, 6–7.

Joseph and Oliver conferred the gift of the Holy Ghost upon members of the Church on April 6, 1830, and assumes that they used the priesthood that they had received from Peter, James, and John to do so. Based on Joseph Smith's later recollections of instructions he had received in 1829 from John the Baptist, Porter infers that by April 1830 "Joseph Smith recognized the limitations of John's power"<sup>16</sup> and thus would not have conferred the Holy Ghost on members unless he had already received the power to do so from Peter, James, and John. To support this view, Porter cites Joseph Smith's 1844 statement:

He [John] told the people that his mission was to preach repentance and baptize with water; but it was he that should come after him, that should baptize with fire, and the Holy Ghost. If he had been an impostor, he might ha[v]e gone to work beyond his bounds, and undertook to have performed ordinances which did not belong to that office and calling, under the Spirit of Elias. . . . John's mission was limited to preaching and baptizing; but what he did was legal, and when Jesus Christ came to any of John's disciples, he baptized them with fire and the Holy Ghost. We find the Apostles endowed with greater power than John. . . . John did not transcend his bounds, but faithfully performed that part belonging to his office.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Porter identifies spring 1829 as the time for the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, D. Michael Quinn concludes that Joseph Smith did not receive the higher priesthood from Peter, James, and John until July 1830.<sup>18</sup> He acknowledges the 1829 reference to the calling of apostles (documents 1, 3), but he argues that the revelation merely likens Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer to Paul. Then, overlooking Paul's assertion in 1 Timothy 2:7, "I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not)," Quinn follows Dan Vogel's interpretation and suggests that Paul may have been an unordained "charismatic apostle and special witness"<sup>19</sup>

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16. Porter, "Restoration of the Priesthood," 3.

17. "History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," 1919, Church History Library, available on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/291>.

18. Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 22.

19. Dan Vogel, *Religious Seekers and the Advent of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 144–45; Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 10.

rather than an ordained apostle, citing the LDS Bible Dictionary for general support. Quinn argues that Cowdery and Whitmer as witnesses of the Book of Mormon were called apostles in that sense prior to 1830.<sup>20</sup> Quinn admits that elders were ordained as early as mid-1829, but he suggests that those ordinations and all confirmations prior to that time might have been performed solely on the basis of the revelation received in June 1829 instructing Joseph and Oliver to ordain each other (documents 13, 14). He suggests further that the ordinations carried out on April 6, 1830, were reordinations.<sup>21</sup>

Quinn looks mainly to documents 10 and 16, and to the 1881 and 1882 Addison Everett accounts to support his conclusion that the Melchizedek Priesthood was formally restored by Peter, James, and John in July 1830. In document 10, Joseph Smith mentions the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood and the pouring out of “the gift of the Holy Spirit” upon the Church after referring to the Church’s organization. Quinn infers that this document as well as document 16 (also found in D&C 128:20) are a chronological listing of events. But

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20. Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 10; “Bible Dictionary,” in *Holy Bible* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 612, s.v. “Apostle.”

21. Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 10, 27–30. Quinn argues that Joseph and Oliver could have felt justified in ordaining elders using the authority that they received from John the Baptist because they did not at that time associate the office of elder exclusively with the Melchizedek Priesthood. In support of this position, Quinn indicates that Joseph Smith conferred the Melchizedek Priesthood upon several who had previously been ordained elders in June 1831. At the June 1831 conference in Kirtland, “the authority of the melechisedec <priesthood> was manifested and <I> conferred, <the high priesthood> for the first time, upon several of the elders.” “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 118, Church History Library, available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/124>; *History of the Church*, 1:175–76. A September 1832 revelation specified that “elder and bishop are ~~nessessarery~~ necessary appendages belonging unto the high priesthood” (D&C 84:29). “Revelation Book 1,” 150, Church History Library, available on Church Historian’s Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/138>; Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, vol. 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 215.

document 16 helps Quinn's case only if one assumes that one can date to June 1830 the event referred to in document 16 as "the voice of Michael on the banks of the Susquehanna, detecting the devil when he appeared as an angel of light."<sup>22</sup> While he acknowledges that the date specified by Everett for the restoration of the higher priesthood is 1829, Quinn notes that this date does not match the events that Everett described surrounding Joseph's arrest and court trial, which occurred in June and July 1830. Thus, for Quinn, Everett's account "seems to confirm the July 1830 date."<sup>23</sup>

While Porter acknowledges the statements by Everett and believes that "Addison Everett was a man of veracity," he is more skeptical of Everett's statements because thirty-seven years had passed between the time that Everett heard the Prophet's statements and the time that he recorded them, and because Everett admitted his limitations and "lack of technical skills" as a historian. Porter concludes that "portions of his [Everett's] remembrance are inconsistent enough to warrant some obvious cautions when attempting to reconstruct the sequence of events surrounding the restoration process from his citations."<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The fact that the historical record can be used to support different interpretations demonstrates how puzzling any fragmentary record of the past can be. Because Joseph and Oliver never identified a date for the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, they left room for

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22. Quinn dates this event only by indirect association with two other events. Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 23.

23. Quinn, *Origins of Power*, 25. Quinn also cites a discourse by Erastus Snow in 1882: "In due course of time, as we read in the history which he has left, Peter, James and John appeared to him—it was at a period when they were being pursued by their enemies and they had to travel all night, and in the dawn of the coming day when they were weary and worn who should appear to them but Peter, James and John, for the purpose of conferring upon them the Apostleship, the keys of which they themselves had held while upon the earth, which had been bestowed upon them by the Savior. This Priesthood conferred upon them by those three messengers embraces within it all offices of the Priesthood from the highest to the lowest." *Journal of Discourses*, 23:183.

24. Porter, "Restoration of the Priesthood," 8–9.

speculation about the date of that priesthood's restoration. Further complicating the task is our inability using extant documents to determine with certainty Joseph Smith's full understanding of the nature of the priesthood at the time of the Church's organization.

While the documentary record is fragmentary regarding the date for the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, and further work remains to be done in analyzing and interpreting these documents, the record is extensive and rich in many respects. It strongly shows that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery repeatedly testified that they received power from on high to perform ordinances, first from John the Baptist and then from Peter, James, and John. Their testimonies began early in Church documents and intensified as these first and second elders drew closer to their own impending deaths. The powerful thrust of these accounts, corroborated by numerous statements from other early members of the Church, is intellectually challenging and spiritually invigorating.

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