

THE RESTORATION OF THE MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD

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The restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood has long been a matter of interest to Latter-day Saints. For some reason Joseph Smith did not record the date or give an account of that important event, though there is ample testimony and historical evidence to support the fact that it did occur. A revelation on in April, 1830 mentioned that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had been ordained to the Holy Apostleship,¹ and in August of that year the Lord again said: "...Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles, and especial witnesses of my name, and bear the keys of your ministry and of the same thing which I revealed unto them; unto whom I have committed the keys of my kingdom, and a dispensation of the gospel for the last times; and for the fulness of times, in the which I will gather together in one all things, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth."²

The Restoration of Priesthood Promised

During his visit to Joseph Smith in 1823, the Angel Moroni promised that there would be a restoration of priesthood authority and powers in the new dispensation. During his initial appearance to the Prophet, he quoted the prophecy found in Malachi 4:5-6, rendering it as follows: "Behold, I will reveal unto you the priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. . ."³ That promise was fulfilled by the coming of Elijah to the Kirtland Temple, April 3, 1836, to reveal the divine patriarchal order and confer the fulness of the priesthood which faithful individuals were to receive within that celestial family.⁴

Moroni also promised that there would be a restoration of the basic powers of the priesthood by which the church would be established and its program administered. As he ministered to Joseph on the Hill Cumorah the day after his initial appearances, Moroni said of the gold plates: "When they are interpreted the Lord will give the holy priesthood to some, and they shall begin to proclaim the gospel and baptize by water, and after that they shall have power

of their hands.”⁵

That promise began to be fulfilled when John the Baptist conferred the Aaronic Priesthood upon Joseph and Oliver Cowdery, May 15, 1829, giving them the power to preach the preparatory gospel and to baptize in water.⁶ John also gave them a promise of further priesthood powers to be restored. Joseph Smith explained: “The messenger who visited us on this occasion, and conferred this priesthood upon us, said that he acted under the direction of Peter, James, and John who held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, which priesthood he said would in due time be conferred on us.”⁷

The Setting of the Restoration

In order to evaluate the facts related to the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, it is necessary to understand the setting in which that important event took place. While speaking of heavenly messengers who ministered to him to establish the new gospel dispensation upon the earth, Joseph Smith said: “The voice of Peter, James, and John in the wilderness between Harmony, Susquehanna County [Pennsylvania] and Colesville, Boone County [New York] on the Susquehanna River, declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom, and of this dispensation of the fulness of time!”⁸ This statement suggests that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were somewhere between Colesville and Harmony when Peter, James, and John restored the Melchizedek Priesthood. An understanding of Joseph Smith's association with those two villages helps set the restoration of the priesthood in its historical context.

The first people to give credence to Joseph's testimony concerning the appearances of the Angel Moroni and the Nephite record, other than his parents and some members of his father's family, were Josiah Stowell, Joseph Knight, Sr., and possibly Joseph Knight, Jr., who lived near Colesville. The Prophet had worked as a hired hand for both Stowell and the elder Knight, and they were at the home of Joseph Smith, Sr., at Manchester, New York, in September, 1827 when Joseph finally got the gold plates and brought them to his father's house. He had been assaulted by men who tried to get the plates from him as he made his way home. In dispatching them, Joseph dislocated his thumb, and he apparently handed the plates wrapped in a cloth to Josiah Stowell, so that he could care for his injured thumb.⁹ In a letter to the Prophet some years later, written in behalf of Stowell, Martha Campbell reported:

He says he has never staggered at the foundation of the work, for he knew too much concerning it. If I understand him right, he was the first person that took the plates out of your the morning you brought them in, and observed

“Blessed is he that sees and believeth, and more blessed is he that believeth without seeing.”¹⁰

During the period Joseph Smith was translating the Book of Mormon at Harmony, Joseph Knight, Sr., kept in touch with him and provided him with some food and a revelation for Knight, now comprising in his history, Joseph Smith said: “Mr. Joseph Knight, Sr., of Colesville, Broome County, New York, who, having heard of the manner in which we were occupying our time, very kindly and considerately brought us a quantity of provisions, in order that we might not be interrupted in the work of translation by the want of such necessities of life; and I would just mention here, as in duty bound, that he several times brought us supplies, a distance of at least thirty miles, which enabled us to continue the work when otherwise we must have relinquished it for a season.”¹¹

Joseph Knight's journal account gives further details of his association with the Prophet. Having mentioned the refusal of Issac Hale, Joseph's father-in-law, to assist with the work of translation by supplying provisions to sustain the Prophet, Knight said of the Prophet:

He and his wife came up to see me the first of the winter 1828 and told me his case. But I was not in easy circumstances, and I did not know what it might amount to, and my wife and family all against me about helping him. But I let him have some little provisions and some few things out of the store--a pair of shoes and three dollars in money to help him a little.

In January, his father and Samuel [Smith] came from Manchester to my house, when I was busy drawing lumber. I told him they had traveled far enough; I would go with my sleigh and take them down tomorrow. I went down and found them well, and they were glad to see us. We conversed about many things. In the morning I gave the old man a half dollar and Joseph a little money to buy paper to translate, I having but little with me. The old gentleman told me to come and see him once in awhile, as I could. I went home, followed teaming till the last of March, the sleighing being good.

I told my wife I must go down and see Joseph again. “Why do you go so soon?” said she.

Says I, "Come go and see." And she went with me.

Next morning we went down and found them well, and they were glad to see us. Joseph talked with us about his translating and some revelation he had received; and from this time my wife began to believe, and continued a full believer until she died, and that was the 7 day of August, 1831.

In the spring of 1829, Oliver Cowdery, a young man from Palmyra, went to see old Mr. Smith about the book that Joseph had found; and he told him about it and advised him to go down to Pennsylvania and see for himself, and to write for Joseph. He went down and received a revelation concerning the work, and he was convinced of the truth of the work, and he agreed to write for him till it was done.

Now Joseph and Oliver came up to see me, if I could help him to some provisions, [they] having no way to buy any. But I was to Catskill [Village]; but when I came home my folks told me what Joseph wanted. But I had engaged to go to Catskill again the next day, and I went again; and I bought a barrel of Mackerel and some lined paper for writing. And when I came home I bought some nine or ten bushels of grain and five or six bushels [of] potatoes, and a pound of tea; and I went down to see him, and they could find a place to work for provisions, but found none. They returned home and found me there with provisions, and they were glad, for they were out.¹²

Besides throwing added light on the general picture of Joseph Smith's life during that period, this interesting statement is important for three reasons:

First, it reveals the Prophet's dependence upon Joseph Knight, Sr., for physical sustenance while the translation proceeded at Harmony. Second, it discloses Knight's developing faith in the Prophet and his work, and makes clear the point at which his wife, Polly, began to believe. Finally, it establishes the fact that early in April of 1829 Joseph and Oliver went to see the Knight's at Colesville, shortly after Cowdery arrived in Harmony to assist the Prophet in the work of translating the Book of Mormon. It was therefore apparent that a close bond of friendship and of faith was being established with the Knight family as the work of translation got underway in the spring of 1829.

In his history, Joseph Smith did not mention the journey he and Oliver Cowdery made to Colesville early in April, 1829. It is therefore apparent that the Prophet failed to record some of the details of his association with the Knight family at that period of his ministry. If Joseph and Oliver went to Colesville early in April, 1829, which visit the Prophet did not record, did they also make a later trip to that area at which time the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored. Evidence to be given hereafter “suggests that they did.

The Time of the Restoration

The earliest historical evidence indicating that the Melchizedek Priesthood had been restored is found in Section 18 of the Doctrine and Covenants, which was given as a revelation to Joseph Smith in June, 1829, although the exact date is not known. In speaking of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, the Prophet wrote, as he recorded that revelation in his history: “The following commandment will further illustrate the nature of our calling to this Priesthood, as well as that of others [i. e. , the Twelve Apostles] who were yet to be sought after.”¹³

There are two statements in Section 18 that also give evidence that the Melchizedek Priesthood had been restored prior to the giving of the revelation.

First, in the revelation the Lord said: “And now, Oliver Cowdery, I speak unto you, and also unto David Whitmer, by the way of commandment; for, behold, I command all men everywhere to repent, and I speak unto you, even as unto Paul mine apostle, for you are called even with that same calling with which he was called.”¹⁴

Brigham Young later explained: “Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer were the first Apostles of this dispensation, though in the early days of the Church David Whitmer lost his standing.”¹⁵

Second, the Lord foreshadowed the calling of the Twelve Apostles, setting forth the basic qualifications of those who were to receive that sacred office, and commissioned Oliver and David to search out the Twelve.¹⁶ The appointment of Oliver and David to that calling implied that they had been ordained to that office within the Melchizedek Priesthood.

Because the revelation in Doctrine and Covenants¹⁶ gives the earliest indication that the Melchizedek Priesthood had been

restored, the date of that revelation is a matter of great importance. Though Joseph Smith merely recorded the date as June, 1829, a letter from Oliver Cowdery in Fayette, New York, to Hyrum Smith identifies a more exact time period. That letter, which was recorded in one of Joseph Smith's letter books now in the Historical Department of the Church,¹⁷ is dated June 14, 1829, and is significant because in it Oliver quoted several lines from the revelation in Section 18, thus establishing the likelihood that the revelation had been received on or before that date. Consider the ideas and sentence structure in the parallel statements below:

Doctrine and Covenants 18

Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God; For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer buffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him.

And he hath risen again from the dead, that he might bring all men unto him, on conditions of repentance.

And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!

Wherefore, you are called to cry repentance unto this people...

Take upon you the name of Christ, and speak the truth in soberness.

And as many as repent and are baptized in my name, which is Jesus Christ, and endure to the end, the same shall be saved.

Behold, Jesus Christ is the name which is given of the Father, and there is none other name given whereby man can be saved;

Wherefore, all men must take upon them the name which is given of the Father, for in that name shall they be called at the last day.

Wherefore, if they know not the name by which they are called, they cannot have place in the kingdom of my Father. (D&C 18: 10-14, 21-25.).

Oliver Cowdery's Letter

These few lines I write unto you feeling anxious for your

steadfastness in the great cause of which you have been called to advocate and also feeling it a duty to write to you at every opportunity. Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God. Behold the Lord Your God suffered death upon the cross after the manner of the flesh wherefore he suffered the pain of all men that all men might repent and come unto him, and he hath risen again from the dead that he might bring all men into him upon conditions of repentance, and how great is his joy in the soul that repents. And behold he commandeth all men everywhere to repent and be baptized, and not only men but women and children which have arrived to the years of accountability. Stir up the minds of our friends against the time we come unto you that thus they may be willing to take upon them the name of Christ, for that is the name by which they shall be called at the last day; and if we know not the name by which we are called I fear we shall be found on the [left] hand. .
 . (Punctuation, etc. added)

It hardly seems coincidental that Oliver Cowdery's expressions so closely parallel the language of Section 18 . Nowhere else in holy writ is the atoning sacrifice of the Lord spoken of in the same classic terms as in verse one of the above quotation. It also seems unlikely that Oliver would make use of two prominent expressions from the revelation in almost the precise words of the revelation. These facts strongly suggest that Oliver was familiar with the revelation when he wrote to Hyrum Smith, which means that the revelation was given on or before June 14th and that the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored prior to that date, or between May 15 and June 14, 1829.

The time during which the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored can be narrowed even further when it is remembered that Peter, James, and John ministered to Joseph and Oliver somewhere between harmony, Pennsylvania, and Colesville, New York. Having begun the work of translating the Book of Mormon at Harmony, where the Aaronic Priesthood was restored May 15, 1829, Joseph and Oliver later moved to the home of Peter Whither, Sr., at Fayette, Seneca County, New York, where the revelation in Doctrine and Covenants was given and where the translation of the look of Mormon was finished. David Whitmer later explained that the translation at his father's house "occupied about one month, that is from June 1 to July, 1829."¹⁸ Joseph Smith stated that he and Oliver

went to Fayette in the beginning of the month of June”¹⁹ Since the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored somewhere between Harmony and Colesville near the Susquehanna River, it therefore appears that this important event occurred, before Joseph and Oliver left Harmony for Fayette, about the first of June, 1829. Otherwise, they would have had to return to Harmony then go to Colesville and back to Fayette before June 14, 1829. If this reasoning is correct, the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored sometime between May 15, and about June 1, 1829.

The Circumstances of the Restoration

Although there is no evidence to support the view that Joseph and Oliver returned immediately to Harmony after going to Fayette about June 1, here is evidence that they went to Colesville before they left Harmony for New York State; and even though there can be no final conclusion that this was when the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored, the circumstances associated with that journey are in full accord with the known facts that pertain to the coming of Peter, James John.

Joseph and Oliver knew beforehand that they would be leaving Harmony for Fayette, New York. Oliver had become acquainted with David Whitmer while the latter was on a business trip to Palmyra, in 1828. When Oliver went to Harmony to see the Prophet, early in April, 1829, he stopped at the Whitmer home in Fayette and conversed with the family about the claims of Joseph Smith. After arriving in Harmony, he wrote two letters to David. In the second, he asked if he and Joseph could stay at the Whitmer home, and requested David to come and get them. He gave as a reason, “that they had Harmony and wanting to

received a commandment from God to that effect.”²⁰ Knowing that they would be leaving Harmony and wanting to see their friends at Colesville to tell them of their plans, it would seem natural for Joseph and Oliver to visit them shortly before David was scheduled to arrive and take them to Fayette. It is not known if the Prophet was referring to such a visit, but he later said:

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 a little after daylight, having traveled about sixty miles in all, and without food.²¹

Though dates and places are omitted, the general time and circumstances of this account can be established by placing it in its historical setting. First, the journey was made after April 5, 1829, for that was the date Oliver Cowdery arrived in Harmony and became a scribe for the Prophet in the translation of the Book of Mormon.²² Second, the statement that it was at a time when but two or three” people believed in Joseph's testimony suggests that it took place before he and Olive went to Fayette where the Whitmer family and others accepted the Prophet's testimony. Third, Joseph Smith's statement that he and Oliver traveled about thirty miles to see their believing friends implies that they went from Colesville to Harmony, which was thirty miles distance. Finally, the fact that the Prophet and his companion were chased all night by a mob suggests that they left the road and fled on foot through the brush and trees, along the bank of the Susquehanna River which connected the towns of Colesville and Harmony. Had they stayed on the road with but one horse for both men to ride, they would undoubtedly have been overtaken.

Though it cannot be said with absolute certainty that this was when the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored, it is known that the sacred confirmation took place under such trying circumstances. Erastus Snow, an early convert and a close associate of the Prophet, said of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood: “It was at a period when they [Joseph and Oliver] 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.”²³

A corroborating testimony comes from Addison Everett, another early convert who heard Joseph and Hyrum Smith talking about the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood a few days before they were martyred. Elder Everett reported that the Prophet explained that he and Oliver Cowdery had been placed under arrest at Colesville, on the charge of deceiving the people. John Redd, a local citizen with some understanding of legal matters, had been employed to assist them in dealing with the unlawful procedures which were initiated

against them. Elder Everett said:

. . . Mr. Reid came in and said he wanted to speak to his clients in private and that the law allowed him that privilege, he believed. The judge pointed to a door to a room in the back part of the house and told them to step in there. As soon as they got into the room, the lawyer said there was a mob outside in front of the house, "and if they get hold of you they will perhaps do you bodily injury; and I think the best way for you to get out of this is to get right out there," pointing to the window and hoisting it. They got into the woods in going a few rods from the house--it was night and they traveled through brush and water and mud, fell over logs, etc., until Oliver was exhausted; then Joseph helped him along through brush and water, almost carrying him.

They traveled all night, and just at the break of day Oliver gave out entirely and exclaimed, "O Lord! Brother Joseph, how long have we got to endure this thing?" They sat down on a log to rest and Joseph said that at that very time Peter, James, and John came to them and ordained them to the Apostleship.

They had 16 or 17 miles to go to get back to Mr. Hales, his father-in-law's, but Oliver did not complain any more of fatigue.²⁴

Conclusion

Though Joseph Smith did not write a formal account of the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, some general conclusions can be drawn from the information that is given in this article. First, it appears that Peter, James, and John restored the higher Priesthood before Joseph and Oliver moved from Harmony to Fayette, which suggests that that significant event took place late in the month of May or, possibly, very early in the month of June, 1829. Second, at that time Joseph and Oliver were somewhere between Colesville and Harmony, on the bank of the Susquehanna River. Finally, Erastus Snow and Addison Everett, who received their understanding from the Prophet, reported that he and Oliver were being pursued by a mob at the time the ancient apostles ministered unto them. Thus, in an obscure place and under circumstances of adversity, one of the great events of modern times took place.

Besides the above evidences, with other testimonies that could be given, the fact that the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored is also attested to by the tangible results that flow from that sacred confirmation. The Holy Priesthood administers the everlasting gospel,²⁵ which has been taught with spiritual power to millions of people. By the authority which Peter, James, and John conferred upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, The Church of Jesus Christ has been organized once again upon the earth with all its ancient gifts, powers, and blessings. Thereby, also, the sacred gift of the Holy Ghost has been given to millions of people who testify that through that means their lives have been spiritually transformed. All of these facts are tangible evidences that attest to the coming of Peter, James, and John, to give Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery the divine channel through which sacred spiritual powers and blessings can be obtained that are not to be found in any other system or organization upon the earth.

Endnotes

¹ Doctrine and Covenants 20:2-3: See also 21:1. Hereafter this source will be abbreviated D&C, followed by the section and verse numbers.

² D&C 27:12-13.

³ Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith 2:38; D&C 2.

⁴ See D&C 110:13-16; History of the Church (Salt Lake City, 1951), VI, p. 251. Hereafter the latter source is abbreviated HC, followed by the appropriate and page number.

⁵ Messenger and Advocate, Kirtland, Ohio, II (October, 1835), p. 199.

⁶ HC, 1, pp- 39-40.

⁷ Ibid., p. 40.

⁸ D&C 128:20. The following from John Murdock's journal, who embraced the gospel in the fall of 1830 and later became intimately acquainted with Joseph Smith, supports the conclusion that this statement pertained to the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood: "Peter, James, and John, the three presidents who held the keys of the kingdom and authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood, appeared to Joseph in the wilderness near the Susquehanna River and ordained him to that Holy Priesthood, thus conferring the apostleship on him."--"An Abridged Record of the Life of John Murdock," taken from his journal, typescript in Brigham Young University Library, p. 145.

⁹ Lucy Mack Smith, History of Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City, 1954), p.

¹⁰ Letter on file in the Historical Department of the Church, Salt Lake City, Utah.

¹¹ HC, I, p. 47.

¹² From an account written by Joseph Knight, Sr., between 1833 and his death in 1847, Historical Department of the Church, Salt Lake City, Utah. Grammar and punctuation added.

¹³ HC, I, pp. 61-62.

¹⁴ D&C 18:9

¹⁵ Journal of Discourses, VI3 p. 320.

¹⁶ See D&C 18:27-33, 37-40.

¹⁷ MS. d, 155, box 2, Folder 1.

¹⁸ Kansas City Daily Journal, June 5, 1881.

¹⁹ HC, I, p. 48

²⁰ Kansas City Daily Journal, June 5, 1881.

²¹ HC, V, p- 219.

²² See Messenger and Advocate, I (October, 1834) , p. 14.

²³ Journal of Discourses, XXIII, p. 183.

²⁴ Letter of Addison Everett to Oliver B. Huntington, St. George, UT, February 17, 1881, in Young Woman's Journal, II (November, 1890), pp. 75-76.

²⁵ D&C 84:19.