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The Priesthood

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The New Testament provides a perspective of the priesthood during the ministry of Christ in the Holy Land. The Book of Mormon supplements that perspective with revelation and instruction given to the Nephites. Through studying the priesthood among the Nephites, we better understand the priesthood in the New Testament as it relates to foreordination, the work of John the Baptist, the law of Moses, baptism, the calling of apostles, and the administration of the sacrament as instituted by the Savior. Combining our study of the Book of Mormon with the New Testament enriches our understanding of the divine role and power of the priesthood.

The priesthood is the power of God and the authority to act in His name. Although the word *priesthood* is not found in the four Gospels, sufficient biblical references reveal that the priesthood, in some form or another, was active during the New Testament period. These references are reinforced by a study of the Book of Mormon, which provides insights into the working of the priesthood and the extent of its use. We learn from the Book of Mormon that all who hold the priesthood were foreordained in the pre-earth life. We gain insights regarding the nature of the priesthood under the law of Moses and a better understanding of the mission of John the Baptist, including the function of the priesthood which he held. The Book of Mormon enables us to see more clearly the authority given to the apostles, and how the keys of the priesthood functioned with them. Thus the Book of Mormon clarifies greatly the purpose and the function of the priesthood as it was used in the time of the four Gospels.

Foreordination and Priesthood

The doctrine of foreordination is not discussed in the four Gospels; however, it is referred to elsewhere in the New Testament. For instance, Luke, the writer of Acts, recorded Paul's statement that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation" (Acts 17:26). Paul taught that "whom he [God] did foreknow, he also did predestinate [meaning foreordain]" (Rom. 8:29). Paul also taught the Ephesians that God chose us "before the foundation of the world" to be his in Christ (Eph. 1:3-4). This same concept was taught by Paul to the Thessalonians (2 Thes. 2:13) and to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:9). Peter also declared this doctrine (1 Peter 1:2, 20). It is evident from this review that the doctrine of foreordination was understood and taught in the early Church.

However, from the Book of Mormon we obtain a clearer understanding of foreordination as it applies to the priesthood. Alma, in his discussion on the priesthood (see Alma 13), takes our minds back to the early days of the children of God. He explains that men were ordained priests after "[God's] holy order, which was after the order of his Son," to teach the nature of the Fall and the Atonement to the people (Alma 13:1). Alma teaches that these prophets, as well as everyone who holds the priesthood, were foreordained and prepared for it from the very beginning. They were "called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works; in the first place being left to choose good or evil; therefore they having chosen good, and exercising exceedingly great faith, are called with a holy calling, yea, with that holy calling which was prepared with, and according to, a preparatory redemption for such" (Alma 13:3).

From Alma's teachings we learn that those who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood (the holy order of God's Son) were foreordained to it in the premortal spirit world. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught a similar truth when he said: "Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was. I suppose that I was ordained to this very office in that Grand Council."¹

President Wilford Woodruff added further support by teaching: "So do I believe with regard to the apostles, the high priests, seventies and the elders of Israel bearing the holy priesthood, I believe they were ordained before they came here; and I believe the God of Israel has raised them up, and has watched over them from their youth, and has carried them through all the scenes of life both seen and unseen, and has prepared them as instruments in his hands to take this kingdom and bear it off."² In his vision of the spirit world, President Joseph F. Smith identified some of those individuals as Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and "other choice spirits who were reserved to come forth in the fulness of times . . . among the noble and great ones who were chosen in the beginning to be rulers in the Church of God" (D&C 138:53, 55).

Note in Alma's statement that the basis of individual foreordination in the premortal spirit world was "on account of their exceeding faith and good works" (Alma 13:3). This verse appears to imply that there existed a gradation of faithfulness and obedience in the premortal spirit world. Abraham saw those spirits who were "noble and great" (Abr. 3:22), suggesting that perhaps there were some who were not as noble and great.

Alma also taught that we had a choice between good and evil in the pre-earth life, for men were "left to choose good or evil" (Alma 13:3). To choose to be good and obey the Father requires faith. Thus a test took place in the spirit world just as there are trials and tests in our mortal lives. Those who kept their first estate in the pre-earth life came to earth, and men who were faithful and obedient in their first estate were called and ordained to hold positions in the priesthood on earth. Furthermore, we learn from Alma that the premortal experience was preparatory, and that there was a "preparatory redemption" based on the future Atonement of Jesus Christ (Alma 13:3; see also D&C 138:56). Just as all the prophets from Adam's time to the time of Christ taught and practiced a gospel based on the future Atonement of Christ, the experience in the spirit world was based on the future Atonement of Christ. A third part of the hosts of heaven chose not to accept the Atonement and were cast out with Satan. All others exercised faith, to one degree or another, in the Atonement that Christ was to make in the meridian of time on this earth. All the doctrines and principles practiced in the premortal world were based on the

reality of that future Atonement. Some who manifested great faith in the Atonement were foreordained to receive the priesthood during mortality. Thus, priesthood ordinations on this earth fulfill the foreordination. Alma was faithful and obedient because of his great faith in the Atonement, and so are all those who receive the Melchizedek Priesthood in this life. As Alma recorded: "And thus they have been called to this holy calling on account of their faith, while others would reject the Spirit of God on account of the hardness of their hearts and blindness of their minds, while, if it had not been for this they might have had as great privilege as their brethren" (Alma 13:4).

However, being foreordained to the priesthood in the premortal life does not guarantee that the ordination will take place in this life. Although many are called, "few are chosen" (D&C 121:34). In addition to foreordination, great faith and obedience are required in this life to qualify one to receive the priesthood. Elder Neal A. Maxwell emphasized: "Foreordination is like any other blessing—it is a conditional bestowal subject to our faithfulness. Prophecies foreshadow events without determining the outcome, because of a divine foreseeing of outcomes. So foreordination is a conditional bestowal of a role, a responsibility, or a blessing which, likewise, foresees but does not fix the outcome."³ Even after receiving the priesthood in mortality, men need continued faith and obedience to receive all the blessings of the priesthood and to qualify to retain it in the postearth worlds. In many ways, the impact of the premortal life on this life is similar to the impact of this life on the postmortal life.

Another possible insight gained from Alma's discussion of foreordination to the priesthood is the implied concept of priesthood and church organization in the premortal world (see Alma 13:3-7). Joseph Smith taught that the Melchizedek Priesthood was instituted "prior to 'the foundation of this earth' . . . and is the highest and holiest Priesthood, and is after the order of the Son of God,"⁴ and that Adam "obtained it in the Creation, before the world was formed."⁵ Thus a priesthood existed in the premortal world.

Joseph Fielding Smith commented: "In regard to the holding of the priesthood in pre-existence, I will say that there was an organization there just as well as an organization here, and men there held authority. Men chosen to positions of trust in the spirit

world held priesthood.”⁶ Accordingly, the doctrines of the gospel and the priesthood, and the priesthood’s organization, are not new but had their roots in the premortal world of the spirits.

Priesthood of John the Baptist and the Nephites

During the hundreds of years that the Jews functioned without prophets, they changed the ordinances and the doctrines of the gospel. By Nephi’s time the apostate Jews had changed the ordinances of the gospel so dramatically that Nephi refused to teach his own children many things concerning the Jews because “their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abominations” (2 Ne. 25:2).

We learn in the scriptures that worthy men of God ministered in the lesser or the Aaronic Priesthood around the time of Christ. For example, the priest Zacharias officiated in the temple in behalf of the Jewish people. Zacharias and his wife, Elisabeth, walked in righteousness before the Lord and kept all of his commandments and ordinances (Luke 1:6). By divine intervention a son was born to them, a son who was named John and is known as John the Baptist. He became an Elias, preparing the way before the coming of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. His mission was to overthrow the kingdom of the Jews, to baptize individuals, and to assist in setting up the kingdom of the Lord (D&C 84:28). John was fulfilling this mission when the Savior came to him to be baptized (see Matthew 3).

John the Baptist had rights to the priesthood through the lineage of his father and was given the authority and power necessary to preach the correct doctrine and perform the ordinances necessary to prepare for the Lord’s coming. He was ordained “by the angel of God at the time he was eight days old unto this power” (D&C 84:28). In the context of this verse, “unto this power” refers to more than the priesthood authority held by his father, Zacharias. Apparently the additional authority that John held necessitated a restoration of priesthood power. President Joseph Fielding Smith explained the need for an angel to act in giving this power and authority to John:

The reason Zacharias could not ordain John is because of the fact that John received certain keys of authority which his father Zacharias did not possess. Therefore this special authority had to

be conferred by this heavenly messenger, who was duly authorized and sent to confer it. John's ordination was not merely the bestowal of the Aaronic Priesthood, which his father held, but also the conferring of certain essential powers peculiar to the time among which was the authority to overthrow the kingdom of the Jews and to 'make straight the way of the Lord.' Moreover, it was to prepare the Jews and other Israelites for the coming of the Son of God. This great authority required a special ordination beyond the delegated power that had been given to Zacharias or any other priest who went before him, so the angel of the Lord was sent to John in his childhood to confer it.⁷

John the Baptist's mission was understood by Lehi and his family even though the name of John is not mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Lehi prophesied concerning a prophet who would come before the Messiah and "prepare the way of the Lord – yea, even he should go forth and cry in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight" (1 Ne. 10:7-8). According to Lehi, this prophet would testify of one among the Jews whom they would not know, who would be mightier than John, "whose shoe's latchet" John was not worthy to unloose (1 Ne. 10:8). Lehi also prophesied that John would baptize in Bethabara, would baptize the Savior, and would later bear testimony of that baptism (1 Ne. 10:9-10).

When Lehi established his family in the promised land and set about to teach them the doctrines of the kingdom, it appears that he did so under the authority of the Melchizedek Priesthood. He left Jerusalem at a time when there were prophets, such as Jeremiah, who held the Melchizedek Priesthood. The Prophet Joseph Smith declared that "all the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood."⁸ Lehi was definitely a prophet, as were many other men from Nephi to Moroni. Therefore, it may be assumed that they held the Melchizedek Priesthood and that the Nephite church functioned under the order of the Melchizedek Priesthood, thus differing from the Jewish organization found in the New Testament during the early ministry of John the Baptist, which functioned under the Aaronic Priesthood. The high priest of the Aaronic Priesthood was always the firstborn son of the direct descendants of Aaron, and the priests were always descendants of Aaron, who were of the tribe of Levi. Consequently, "there was no Aaronic Priesthood among the Nephites prior to the ministry

of the resurrected Lord among them, for none of the tribe of Levi accompanied the Nephite peoples to their promised land.”⁹

The Law of Moses

What John the Baptist taught might be understood by comparing and examining Nephite doctrines and practices before the coming of Christ. Both John the Baptist and the Nephites practiced the law of Moses in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. Paul spoke of the law of Moses as being a “schoolmaster” until Christ (Gal. 3:24). Abinadi echoed that same concept when he addressed the priests of Noah: “And now I say unto you that it was expedient that there should be a law given to the children of Israel, yea, even a very strict law; for they were a stiffnecked people, quick to do iniquity, and slow to remember the Lord their God; therefore there was a law given them, yea, a law of performances and of ordinances, a law which they were to observe strictly from day to day, to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him. But behold, I say unto you, that all these things were types of things to come” (Mosiah 13:29–31).

Although the Nephites held the Melchizedek Priesthood, they also understood and lived the law of Moses. In fact, one of the reasons Nephi gave for wanting to obtain the plates of Laban was that they contained the law of Moses: “Yea, and I also thought that they could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law. And I also knew that the law was engraven upon the plates of brass. And again, I knew that the Lord had delivered Laban into my hands for this cause – that I might obtain the records according to his commandments” (1 Ne. 4:15–17). As holders of the Melchizedek Priesthood, the Nephites looked forward to the coming of Christ and understood that the law of Moses was to prepare them for that great event. Nephi proclaimed: “Behold, my soul delighteth in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ; for, for this end hath the law of Moses been given; and all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him” (2 Ne. 11:4).

However, a major difference between the Nephites and the Jews was the Nephite understanding of the purpose of the law of

Moses. It was apparent that the Jews felt that the law was an end in itself. Nephi taught the preparatory role of the law of Moses:

And, notwithstanding we believe in Christ, we keep the law of Moses, and look forward with steadfastness unto Christ, until the law shall be fulfilled. For, for this end was the law given; wherefore the law hath become dead unto us, and we are made alive in Christ because of our faith; yet we keep the law because of the commandments. And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins. Wherefore, we speak concerning the law that our children may know the deadness of the law; and they, by knowing the deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ, and know for what end the law was given. And after the law is fulfilled in Christ, that they need not harden their hearts against him when the law ought to be done away (2 Ne. 25:24-27).

Jacob also understood the role of the Law of Moses: "Behold, they [all the holy prophets who went before] believed in Christ and worshiped the Father in his name, and also we worship the Father in his name. And for this intent we keep the law of Moses, it pointing our souls to him; and for this cause it is sanctified unto us for righteousness, even as it was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient unto the commands of God" (Jacob 4:5). This concept of the law of Moses pointing one to Christ was lost among the Jews well before the time of John the Baptist, but it appears that John the Baptist lived the law of Moses in a way similar to the Nephite practices. John kept the law of Moses, but he also believed in Christ, talked of Christ, rejoiced in Christ, and prophesied of Christ. A study of the Nephites' practices and doctrine provides great insights into what John probably believed and taught as he prepared the way for Christ.¹⁰

Use of the Priesthood by the Savior

We see a similar relationship between the Nephites' teachings and practices and what the Savior practiced during his ministry concerning the use of the priesthood. The Savior gave the authority to baptize to both the Jewish and Nephite disciples before they were called to the apostleship (see John 4:1-3 and 3 Ne.

11:22–28). After calling the Twelve apostles in Jerusalem, Christ gave power and a charge to the Twelve that they were to go to the lost sheep of Israel and “heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils” (Matt. 10:8). Similarly, according to the Nephite account, the Twelve disciples called in the Americas received authority to preach and baptize (3 Ne. 12:1) and to grant the Holy Ghost (3 Ne. 18:36–37). The Savior placed his hand upon each of the disciples to bestow upon them this authority.

It is important to note that the authority to baptize was not new to the Nephites nor the Jews at the coming of the Savior but had been present from the very beginning whenever the fulness of the gospel was found. For example, Jacob taught that all men “must repent, and be baptized in [Christ’s] name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel” (2 Ne. 9:23). Nephi testified of the necessity of the Savior’s baptism in 2 Nephi 31. Furthermore, this doctrine was not specific to the Nephites. Elder Bruce R. McConkie suggested that the Jews were familiar with baptism as an eternal law: “John’s procedure was not new to them [the Jews]. Baptism had been performed by them and their forbearers for four thousand years. It was a well known ordinance which of itself caused no stir among them.”¹¹ The Book of Mormon enlightens us that priesthood authority was necessary for the ordinance of baptism to be performed. For instance, when Alma baptized Helam at the waters of Mormon, he declared that he did so with authority from the Almighty God (see Mosiah 18:13), and those who were baptized by the power and authority of God were “added to his church” (Mosiah 18:17–18). When King Limhi and his people were desirous to be baptized “there was none in the land that had authority from God. And Ammon declined doing this thing, considering himself an unworthy servant” (Mosiah 21:33). As mentioned above, when Christ came to visit the Nephites, he renewed this authority with Nephi and the twelve disciples.

The New Testament record of the calling of the Twelve (see Matt. 4:17–22) does not define their roles nor the authority they would hold (see Matthew 10). However, the Book of Mormon prophets understood very early the role and authority that these apostles would bear. Six hundred years before the apostles were called in Jerusalem, Nephi saw the Twelve as they followed Christ, and he beheld that their glory “did exceed that of the stars in the firmament” (1 Ne. 1:10). He also saw that after the death of

the Savior, the multitudes would be gathered together to fight against the apostles (see 1 Ne. 11:34–36). Moreover, Nephi prophesied of the apostles' judging the house of Israel (see 1 Ne. 12:9) and writing a book of scripture (see 1 Ne. 13:24).

The calling of the Twelve disciples during the ministry of Christ to the Nephites also gives insights into the function and mission of the Twelve apostles, because their authority and duties were similar to those of the Twelve apostles. According to 3 Ne. 27:27, the Twelve disciples will judge the Nephites. They were granted power to baptize and minister unto the Nephites (see 3 Ne. 12:1–2). The Nephite disciples also assumed their place at the head of the Church after the Savior left for a time (see 3 Ne. 19:1–14), which is similar to the Twelve apostles' role after Christ ascended from Jerusalem.

There is perhaps evidence that Christ also instituted the Aaronic Priesthood and its offices among the Nephites when he visited them. Four hundred years after the visit of Christ, Moroni left instructions on the plates detailing how an elder would ordain priests and teachers (see Moroni 3). Paul refers to the office of teacher in the early New Testament Church (see Eph. 4:11). From both accounts it appears that when the Savior organized the Church on both continents, he instituted the offices of the Aaronic Priesthood.

The use of the priesthood in administering the sacrament is also clarified in the Book of Mormon. In the New Testament, the Savior introduced the sacrament in the upper room just prior to his arrest. Mark's account simply states that the Savior took bread and blessed it and gave it to his disciples with the declaration that "this is my body" (Mark 14:22). The wine was presented similarly with the pronouncement: "This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many" (Mark 14:24).¹² The Book of Mormon prophets wrote about the administration of the sacrament in a more illuminating manner. When the Savior introduced the sacrament to the Nephites, he indicated that there would be one "ordained among you, and to him will I give power that he shall break bread and bless it and give it unto the people of my church" (3 Ne. 18:5). This emphasized the fact that the sacrament was a priesthood ordinance to be performed only with the authority of the priesthood. The Savior also instructed the Nephites as to the covenant-making and renewing aspect of the sacrament. He

taught that by partaking of the sacrament, they were testifying to the Father “that [they] do always remember me” (3 Ne. 18:7), and “that [they] are willing to do that which I have commanded” (3 Ne. 18:10) with the promise that if they lived up to this covenant, they would always have his spirit with them (see 3 Ne. 18:11). This is re-emphasized in the sacramental prayers recorded in Moroni 4 and 5. We also see the repetitive nature of the sacramental covenants when the Savior administered the emblems again to the Nephites in 3 Nephi 20. After miraculously providing the bread and the wine, the Savior gave the Nephites the same teaching of the symbolism of the emblems that he gave the disciples in Jerusalem. After the sacrament had been passed to the multitude, Christ declared that he had completed the commandments the Father had given him (see 3 Ne. 20:10). From the Book of Mormon we learn that the sacrament is a covenant-renewing process to be repeated over time and is to be administered by the priesthood to those accepting the covenant.

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon provides considerable insight into how the priesthood functioned among the Nephites. From this information we can better understand the role of the priesthood among the Jews during the same time period. The Book of Mormon reveals how the Melchizedek Priesthood functioned in the Nephite church during the period between the Old and New Testaments, when the priesthood was not available in its fulness to the people of Judah. This aids us in understanding John the Baptist’s ministry. It also helps us to understand why the Savior taught some of the doctrines, and why he challenged the Jews over the doctrines they taught. Together, the Book of Mormon and the four Gospels provide a much clearer picture of the priesthood, and they enhance our understanding more fully than if we had only one record.

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Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *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, 1957), 6:364.
2. *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 21:317.
3. Neal A. Maxwell, "A More Determined Discipleship," *Ensign*, February 1979, 71.
4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 167.
5. *Ibid.*, 157.
6. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 3:81. It appears that what we have here we had in the premortal life
7. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 5:2.
8. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 181.
9. Bruce R. McConkie, "Aaronic Priesthood," *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 10.
10. For a list of some of the doctrines taught by John the Baptist, see Robert J. Matthews, *A Burning Light: The Life and Ministry of John the Baptist* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1972), 47–48.
11. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary, The Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 115.
12. See also the Joseph Smith Translation of Mark 14:20–25 for additional clarification of the New Testament text.