

Section 13

Section 13 is an excerpt from Joseph’s Manuscript History. It contains the words by which John the Baptist ordained Joseph and Oliver to the priesthood of Aaron on May 15, 1829.

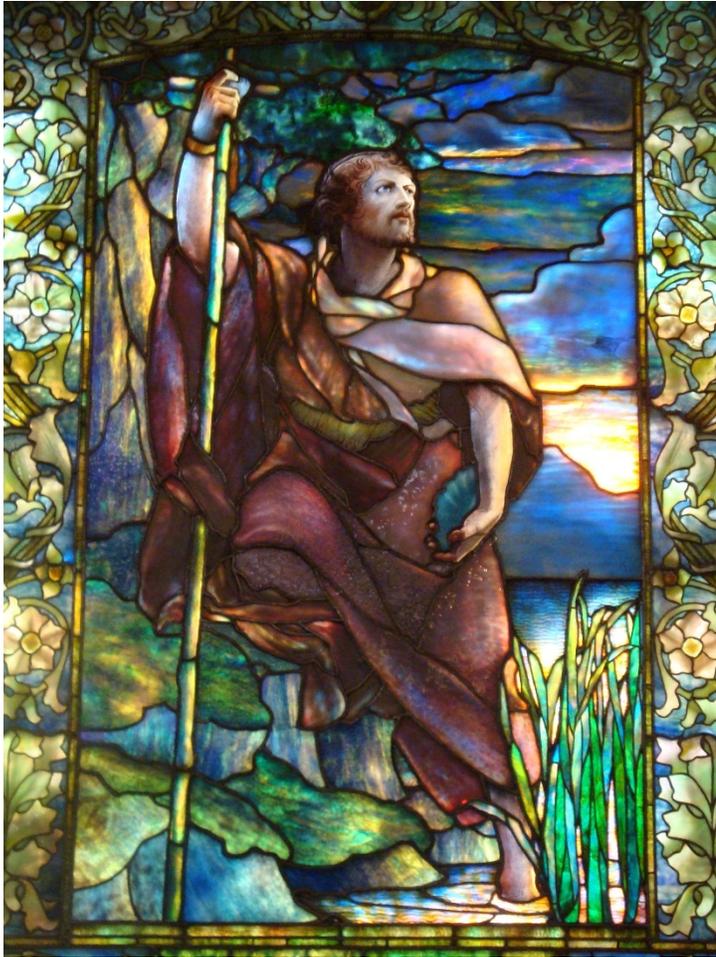
They had been translating the Book of Mormon, likely in 3 Nephi, about the Savior’s commission to Nephi and others: “I give unto you power that ye shall baptize this people when I am again ascended into heaven” (3 Nephi 11:21–26). As Joseph read those words to Oliver in May 1829, it was as if the Savior was teaching them too. They realized that no one on earth in 1829 had the Lord’s permission and power to baptize—no one.¹ They went to the woods for what Oliver described as “fervent prayer.” They desired to “inquire of the Lord respecting baptism for the remission of sins as we found mentioned in the translation of the plates,” Joseph said.² His account continues:

A Messenger from heaven, descended in a cloud of light, and having laid his hands upon us, he ordained us, saying unto us; “Upon you my fellow servants in the name of Messiah I confer the priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission

¹ “History, 1834–1836,” p. 48, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 22, 2020.

² “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” p. 17, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 22, 2020.

of sins, and this shall never be taken again from the earth, untill the sons of Levi do offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness.”³



Detail of stained glass window created by Louis Comfort Tiffany in Arlington Street Church (Boston) depicting John the Baptist. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Only later in his narrative, almost as an afterthought, Joseph reveals the messenger's identity: “[He] said that his name was John, the same that is called John the Baptist in the new Testament, and that he acted under the direction [of] Peter, James, and John.”

Joseph’s straightforward account can seem matter-of-fact. Oliver, by contrast, could barely contain himself when he wrote the story years later: “Twas the voice of the angel from glory—twas a message from the Most High! . . . Where was room for doubt? No where.”⁴

Joseph and Oliver followed John the Baptist's instructions and immersed each other in the Susquehanna River, then ordained each other. “We were filled with the Holy Ghost,” Joseph said, “and rejoiced in the God of our salvation.”⁵ Soon Joseph's brother

³ “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” p. 17, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 22, 2020.

⁴ “History, 1834–1836,” p. 48, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 22, 2020.

⁵ “History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” p. 18, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 22, 2020.

Samuel was baptized by this authority, and so on down to each person who has received the gospel of repentance and baptism by immersion in the last dispensation.

That will continue until, or so that, the sons of Levi (modern Aaronic priesthood holders, cross reference D&C 84:26–34 and D&C 128:24) can offer the Lord the latter-day equivalent of their service in the ancient temples.

There is reason to believe that there is more to the keys of ministering angels mentioned by John the Baptist than most commentaries on section 13 consider. The keys are mentioned again and associated with John the Baptist in D&C 84, a temple revelation describing how priesthoods, keys, ordinances, and endowments of power were offered anciently and will be again. When Joseph gave a rapid rundown of temple-related restorations of keys, knowledge, and power in D&C 128, he mentioned how Adam showed him how to discern the devil on the banks of the Susquehanna River. That must have happened at about the same time John the Baptist restored the priesthood that held the keys to that knowledge. Joseph taught it to Parley Pratt, as recorded esoterically in D&C 129 with the euphemism of handshaking standing in for temple knowledge, or in other words, keys governed by Aaronic priesthood that enable a person to detect the devil when he appears as an angel of light (D&C 128:20).⁶

⁶ Wilford Woodruff Journal, June 27, 1839. President Joseph Smith's Journal 1843, as kept by Willard Richards, 170–172 (February 9, 1843). Both journals are in the Church History Library, Salt Lake City.