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## The Holy Order of God

Author(s): Robert L. Millet

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Robert L. Millet

**T**o the wayward people of Ammonihah, Amulek had delivered a poignant testimony of Christ as God, had borne witness of the necessity of repentance, and had held out the hope of redemption from sin and death through the merits and mercy of the coming Messiah (see Alma 11:26–46). Alma then delivered a companion and confirming witness of the reality of the Savior and the manner in which men and women can, through faith, pass from death unto eternal life. “Therefore,” he said, quoting the Lord to the ancients, “whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest.” Alma then pleaded: “And now, my brethren, seeing we know these things, and they are true, let us repent, and harden not our hearts, . . . but let us enter into the rest of God, which is prepared according to his word” (Alma 12:34, 37). It is in the context of Alma’s discussion of how the Saints can, through applying the atoning blood of Christ, enter into the rest of God, that Alma begins a discussion of the holy order of God. His discussion is a deep and ponderous and insightful prophetic declaration as to how, through the blessings of the priesthood—those called and prepared from the foundation of the world—the people of God may be sanctified from sin and enjoy the “words of eternal life” in this mortal sphere, all in preparation for eternal life with God and holy beings hereafter (see Moses 6:59).

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Robert L. Millet is dean of Religious Education and associate professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University.



## The Priesthood Among the Nephites

Before we undertake a serious consideration of Alma 13, let us turn our attention to the matter of priesthood among the Nephites. From the days of Adam to the time of Moses, the High Priesthood was administered through what we know as the Patriarchal Order, a patriarchal theocracy whereby the will of God in heaven was made known to the inhabitants of earth through worthy high priests who governed their families in both civil and ecclesiastical matters (see Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines* 3:104; *Way to Perfection* 72–73; *Answers* 2:174; McConkie, *New Witness* 35, 657–58). When the children of Israel proved unworthy and unwilling to receive the highest blessings of the gospel, including the fulness of the priesthood and the privilege of seeing the face of God, Jehovah took from the midst of Israel the fulness of the High Priesthood; he also took Moses, the man on earth who held its keys or right of presidency (see JST, Ex 34:1–2; JST, Deut 10:1–2; D&C 84:19–27). There were men among the people of the covenant who held the Melchizedek Priesthood after Moses was translated—including the sons of Aaron and the seventy elders of Israel—but they had probably been ordained to the same previously. President Joseph Fielding Smith stated that after this time in Israel,

the common people, the people generally, did not exercise the functions of priesthood in its fulness, but were confined in their labors and ministrations very largely to the Aaronic Priesthood. The withdrawal of the higher priesthood was from the people as a body, but the Lord still left among them men holding the Melchizedek Priesthood, with power to officiate in all its ordinances, so far as he determined that these ordinances should be granted unto the people. Therefore, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Elijah, and others of the prophets held the Melchizedek Priesthood. (*Doctrines* 3:85)

Because there were no Levites in the colony of Lehi (the Nephites and Mulekites were of the tribes of Joseph and Judah, respectively), we assume that the Aaronic Priesthood was not



among the Nephites, at least not until the coming of Jesus to the Americas. The titles *priests* and *teachers* (2 Nephi 5:26; Jacob 1:17–18; Alma 45:22) thus appear to describe ministerial duties in the higher priesthood rather than offices in the Aaronic Priesthood (Smith, *Doctrines* 3:87; *Answers* 1:123–26; McConkie, *Promised Messiah* 427; *A New Witness* 311). In seeking to understand the nature of authority among the Nephite branch of Israel, we turn to a capsule statement by Joseph Smith: “All Priesthood is Melchizedek but there are different portions or degrees of it. That portion which brought Moses to speak with God face to face was taken away; but that which brought the ministry of angels remained.” The latter-day Seer then added this important detail: “*All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained by God himself*” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 180–81; hereafter *TPJS*; emphasis added). Lehi was a prophet. Nephi and Jacob were prophets. Mosiah, Benjamin, Alma, Samuel, Mormon, and Moroni all wore the prophetic mantle and held the Melchizedek Priesthood. Surely what the Lord said to Nephi, son of Helaman, was true in regard to others of the Nephite oracles who held the keys of power: “Behold, I give unto you power, that whatsoever ye shall seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven; and thus shall ye have power among this people” (Helaman 10:7; compare D&C 132:39). To what degree all male persons among the Nephites held the priesthood, how and under what circumstances it was conferred, and the nature of priesthood organization between 600 B.C. and 34 A.D. are not clear from the account in the Book of Mormon.

The Nephites were neither primitives nor Jews. They were Christians. They were Former-day Saints who enjoyed transcendent spiritual blessings. They had the veil parted and saw the visions of heaven. They knew the Lord, enjoyed his ministrations, and received from him the assurance of eternal life. They built temples (see 2 Nephi 5:16; Jacob 1:17; 2:2; 11; Mosiah 1:18; Alma 10:2; 16:13; 26:29; 3 Nephi 11:1), not to



perform work for the dead, for such was not done until the ministry of Christ to the world of spirits, but to receive the covenants and ordinances of exaltation. During the Nephite “mini-millennium,” and we would suppose during those prior periods of Nephite history when the people qualified themselves for such, “they were married, and given in marriage, and were blessed *according to the multitude of the promises which the Lord had made unto them*” (4 Nephi 1:11, emphasis added). These were the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the promise of the gospel, the priesthood, and eternal life (see D&C 2; Abraham 1:2–3; 2:8–11).

### The Calling of High Priests Anciently

In beginning his discussion of foreordination to the priesthood, Alma said: “And again, my brethren, I would cite your minds forward to the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children” (Alma 13:1). His use of the word *forward* is unusual, especially in light of the fact that he will speak of people in the past; we would normally say *backwards*. But actually forward can also mean toward the beginning, toward the front, “[n]ear or at the forepart” (*Webster’s*). The commandments mentioned here seem to be those referred to in Alma 12. Alma had stated, “Wherefore, [God] gave commandments unto men” after Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden, “after having made known unto them the plan of redemption, that they should not do evil, the penalty thereof being a second death, which was an everlasting death as to things pertaining unto righteousness.” (Alma 12:31, 32).

Alma noted, “that the Lord God ordained priests, after his holy order, which was after the order of his Son, to teach these things unto the people” (13:1). Presumably he is speaking here of those who held the priesthood in its fulness from Adam to Moses, whom this prophet could have learned of through the brass plates, by independent revelation, and through the traditions and group memory of this branch of American Hebrews.



“All of the ancient patriarchs were high priests,” Joseph Fielding Smith explained, “but the direction of the Church in those days was by patriarchs” (*Doctrines* 3:104). In those early ages, the presiding high priest was “God’s chief representative on earth, the one who holds the highest spiritual position in [the Lord’s] kingdom in any age. . . . This special designation of the chief spiritual officer of the Church has reference to the administrative position which he holds rather than to the office to which he is ordained in the priesthood” (McConkie, *Mormon* 355–56).

Continuing from the Nephite text: “And those priests were ordained after the order of his Son, in a manner that thereby the people might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption” (13:2). The preeminent responsibility of prophets is to bear witness of the Savior, “for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev 19:10). Those who preceded the Lord of Light spoke of the redemption and reconciliation that would come through Jesus Christ. They thus pointed toward and anticipated his coming. The messianic age would indeed be the apex, the midpoint, truly the meridian of time. At the same time, all prophets are types and shadows of the Savior. He was called and prepared from before the foundations of this world. So were they. He speaks the truth. So do they. He offers the words of life. So do they. He preaches as one having authority. So do they. He offers his life as a final testament. Such also is required on occasion of those who stand in the prophetic office. Thus the ancient prophets were living Messianic prophecies.

## Foreordination to the Priesthood

One cannot fully comprehend the boundless and eternal implications of priesthood by examining its purposes and powers as pertaining to this life alone. Priesthood is God’s almighty power. Men are not called and ordained to the priesthood in this life without appropriate readiness and preparation,



and no person receives the higher priesthood in this second estate who was not called, prepared, and foreordained for the same in the first estate. Joseph Smith declared: “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 I was ordained to this very office in that Grand Council” (*TPJS* 365). In referring to this statement by the Prophet, President J. Reuben Clark, Jr. said: “I do not know whether we have a right to interpret the Prophet’s statement. . . , but I like to think that it does include those of us of lesser calling and lesser stature. . . . I like to think that perhaps in that grand council something at least was said to us indicating what would be expected of us, and empowering us, subject to the re-confirmation here, to do certain things in building up the kingdom of God on earth” (170–71). In that same spirit, Wilford Woodruff had remarked some seventy years earlier:

Joseph Smith was ordained before he came here, the same as Jeremiah was. Said the Lord unto him, ‘Before you were begotten I knew you,’ etc. So do I believe with regard to this people, 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. If this be so, what manner of men ought we to be? If anything under the heavens should humble men before the Lord and before one another, it should be the fact that we have been called of God. (*Journal of Discourses* 21:317; hereafter *JD*).

Alma’s discourse on priesthood continued: “And this is the manner after which they were ordained—being called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works” (13:3). We are prone to say in the Church that in the premortal existence we walked by sight but now we walk by faith. This is only partly true. Though in that pristine sphere we saw the Gods and surely conversed with them; though we



had the plan of salvation, the Gospel of God the Father, presented to us and heard the noble and great ones attest to its veracity; though we walked by knowledge in that estate, still *faith* was required to be obedient and thereby to qualify for the blessings of the Father. There was a gradation of faithfulness among the spirits. There were many who were “noble and great” (Abraham 3:22), implying that there were those spirits who were less great and less noble, perhaps some even ignoble. Those men who demonstrated “exceeding faith and good works” that Alma discusses were ordained there to receive the priesthood here. This is the doctrine of foreordination. It is based upon a man’s faithfulness in premortality and God’s foreknowledge, that is, God’s infinite capacity to have the past, present, and future before him as “one eternal ‘now’” (see *TPJS* 220). Joseph Fielding Smith observed: “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*” (*Doctrines* 3:81; emphasis added).

Alma noted that individuals were called with a holy calling “on account of their exceeding faith and good works; in the first place”—that is, in the premortal world—“being left to choose good or evil; therefore they having chosen good, and exercising exceedingly great faith, are called with a holy calling” (13:3). The question arises at this point: Does this call to the priesthood refer to righteousness and subsequent ordination in premortality or mortality? We cannot tell for sure from the context. Alma in fact moves back and forth between the past and the present, and we simply do not always know when he has changed perspectives. The fact is, the principle is true in regard to both spheres: men are called to serve because of faith and obedience—there and here. The faithful “are called with a holy calling, yea, with that holy calling which was prepared with, and according to, a preparatory redemption for such” (13:3). Men are called to the priesthood to assist in the redemption of souls. They are called to preach and make available what Paul described as “the



ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). They are called to bless lives—to lighten burdens, to strengthen the feeble knees and lift up the hands that hang down—just as their Master, the great High Priest, is called upon to do. Priesthood bearers who lived before and after Christ are and have been involved in the work of His ministry; their work is preparatory. They, like the preeminent forerunner, John the Baptist, prepare the way of the Lord. Those prophets and priests who labored before the meridian of time sought to prepare the people for the coming of the Redeemer. In the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie: “They could preach redemption; they could foretell its coming; but their work was preparatory only. Redemption itself would come through the ministry of Him of whom they were but types and shadows” (*Promised* 451). Those who have lived since that time seek to instruct and warn and exhort the people—all in preparation for his second advent, that final redemption of the earth and its inhabitants.

Alma then offered prophetic insight into this doctrine, insight which readily distinguishes foreordination from the false concept of predestination: “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. Or in fine, in the first place they were on the same standing with their brethren . . .” (13:4–5). The simple truth is that men and women may fall from grace and depart from the living God through sin; in short, many live beneath their privileges. They qualify in the first estate for transcendent earthly blessings, but then come into this life, fail to hearken to the voice of the Spirit, and thus traverse the broad roads of the world as natural beings, existing in an uninspired and unregenerated state. Nephi had spoken centuries earlier of those who harden their hearts. These are they who say in regard to further light and knowledge: “We have received, and we need no more! . . . We have received the word of God, and we need no more of the word of God, for we have



enough!” (2 Nephi 28:27, 29). Alma had similarly spoken: “It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God,” but, on the other hand, those that harden their hearts, “the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word” until “they know nothing concerning his mysteries; and then they are taken captive by the devil, and led by his will down to destruction. Now this is what is meant by the chains of hell” (Alma 12:9–11). President Harold B. Lee suggested:

Despite that calling which is spoken of in the scriptures as ‘foreordination,’ we have another inspired declaration: ‘Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. . . .’ (D&C 121:34). This suggests that even though we have our free agency here, there are many who were foreordained before the world was, to a greater state than they have prepared themselves for here. Even though they might have been among the noble and great, from among whom the Father declared he would make his chosen leaders, they may fail of that calling here in mortality (7).

Alma explained that those who fail to live up to their privileges had been “in the first place” on the “same standing with their brethren” (Alma 13:3, 5). That is, even though no two persons were exactly alike in premortality; even though gifts and talents, abilities and capacities varied infinitely from person to person in this pre-existence, still all had the opportunity to choose the right, to love the truth, and to exercise exceedingly great faith.

This description in the Book of Mormon of foreordination may be the first reference in modern scripture to the doctrine of the premortal existence. Once we grasp this fundamental verity, once our minds have been enlightened to understand the eternal nature of humanity, then we recognize these teachings in Alma 13 (or later in Ether 3 with the appearance of the premortal Christ) without difficulties. It may be, however, that few of the Saints in the early years of the Restored Church turned initially to the Book of Mormon as a scriptural source for the doctrine of pre-existence. Elder Orson Pratt explained: “I do not think that I should have ever discerned it in [the Book of Mormon], had it not been for the new translation of the Scriptures”—



specifically, what we would call the book of Moses—“that throwing so much light and information on the subject, I searched the Book of Mormon to see if there were indications in it that related to the pre-existence of man” (*JD* 15:249).

## From Eternity to All Eternity

Alma explained that “this high priesthood [was] after the order of [God’s] Son, which order was from the foundation of the world; or in other words, being without beginning of days or end of years, being prepared from eternity to all eternity, according to his foreknowledge of all things” (*Alma* 13:7). Joseph Smith declared: “The Priesthood is an everlasting principle, and existed with God from eternity, and will to eternity, without beginning of days or end of years” (*TPJS* 157). In the words of President George Q. Cannon, the priesthood “had no beginning; [it will have] no end. It is [as] eternal as our Father and God, and it extends into the eternities to come, and it is as endless as eternity is endless, and as our God is endless: for it is the power and authority by which our Father and God sits upon His throne and wields the power He does throughout the innumerable worlds over which He exercises dominion” (*JD* 26:245). The Holy Priesthood after the order of the Son of God is from eternity to eternity, from everlasting to everlasting, meaning from one existence to the next. It was in operation in the first estate, it blesses lives and seals souls to eternal life in mortality, and it will continue into the world of spirits and beyond, on into the kingdoms of glory wherein dwell kings and queens, priests and priestesses.

The loss of plain and precious truths from the Old and New Testaments had led many to believe that Melchizedek, the great high priest of antiquity, rather than the priesthood, was himself without “beginning of days [or] end of life” (*Heb* 7:3). We learn, however, from the Joseph Smith Translation (*JST*, *Hebrews* 7:3) and from the Book of Mormon (*Alma* 13:8) that it was the order of the priesthood to which Melchizedek was ordained that



is endless. “The Melchizedek Priesthood holds the right from the eternal God,” Joseph Smith clarified, “and not by descent from father and mother; and that priesthood is as eternal as God Himself, having neither beginning of days nor end of life” (TPJS 323). Indeed, as Alma pointed out, the priesthood of the Son of God is as eternal as the Son of God. Persons “thus . . . became high priests forever, after the order of the Son, the Only Begotten of the Father, who is without beginning of days or end of years, who is full of grace, equity, and truth. And thus it is. Amen” (Alma 13:9).

### Entering the Rest of God

It is often the case that the scriptures may be understood on many levels. Words and phrases and doctrinal concepts may mean a number of things, depending upon the context, the audience, and the need at the time. For this reason, it is seldom wise to be overly zealous about exclusive definitions, singular interpretations, formulas, steps, etc. when it comes to comprehending holy writ. We have this principle illustrated in Moroni’s recitation to Joseph Smith of the prophecy of Malachi concerning the coming of Elijah. In the midst of quoting numerous passages from the Old and New Testaments, Moroni quoted Malachi 4:5–6 quite differently from how it appears in the KJV. Did this new rendition invalidate the old one? Are the renditions in our present Bibles inaccurate, or does Moroni’s account simply represent another dimension of the prophecy? Knowing full well what Moroni had said in 1823, Joseph the Prophet, in an epistle to the Church in 1842, quoted the Malachi passage directly from the King James Version. “I might have rendered a plainer translation to this,” he said, “but it is sufficiently plain to suit my purpose as it stands” (D&C 128:18). In discussing this specific example, Elder Bruce R. McConkie said: “Moroni gave an *improved* rendering. All this does is establish that there is more than one way to render a passage, and that the version that the people receive depends upon the



spiritual maturity they possess. . . . Thus, we have two versions, both of which accurately portray and give a doctrine of the kingdom. One of them gives it in a way that is intended to open our eyes to something over and beyond and above that, shall we say, the generality of mankind who are not so spiritually endowed are entitled to receive” (“The Promises Made to the Fathers” 50–51).

Alma 13 teaches us to appreciate that men were foreordained to the priesthood and that we all should walk in the light to live worthy of premortal promises. This is an important realization. It is true, and it is what is intended. At the same time, there appear to be additional messages presenting themselves to us as we read and search and compare. We will illustrate the principle in this and the next section, through a consideration of two main concepts: (1) entering the rest of the Lord, and (2) being received into the holy order of God.

In reading Alma 13 in context—as a part of a larger sermon—we begin to see that the idea of entering the rest of the Lord is a central theme. The word *rest* is mentioned in each of the final four verses of the preceding chapter. It is mentioned five times in chapter 13. It would appear that Alma is trying to point out that it is through the atoning blood of Christ and by the power of the holy priesthood that individuals and congregations are prepared and made ready to enter the rest of God. In one sense, a person enters the rest of God when he or she gains a testimony of the gospel, and is brought out of worldly confusion into the peace and security that comes only from God. In this sense, the rest of God is “the spiritual rest and peace which are born from a settled conviction of the truth in the minds of [individuals].” (Smith, *Gospel* 126; see also 58). It is to know the peace of the Spirit, to enjoy the blessing of the Comforter. It is what Jesus promised to disciples when he said: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). Second, spirits enter the rest of God when they enter paradise, the home of the righteous in the postmortal spirit world at the time of death (Alma 40:11–12; 60:13). A third



dimension of the rest of the Lord is that which follows the resurrection and judgment, as we enter the celestial kingdom and receive exaltation. It is interesting that Mormon, speaking to the members of the Church in his day, uses *rest* in at least two ways. “Wherefore,” he said, “I would speak unto you that are of the church, that are the peaceable followers of Christ, and that have obtained a sufficient hope by which ye can enter into the rest of the Lord,”—meaning here in mortality—“from this time henceforth until ye shall rest with him in heaven” (Moroni 7:3).

There is yet another sense in which the word *rest* is used in scripture, particularly in the Book of Mormon. This is also the sense in which a modern revelation uses the word:

And this greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God.

Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest.

And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh;

For without this [the power of godliness] no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live.

Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God;

But they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, *which rest is the fulness of his glory*.

Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also. (D&C 84:19–25; emphasis added)

This is a significant scriptural statement, especially as we consider Alma’s remarks to the people in Ammonihah. His invitation for them to enter into the rest of the Lord is built upon the notion that ancient Israel provoked God and proved unworthy of this blessing (see Alma 12:36–37). Moses desired to make available the highest privilege of the priesthood to Israel—the privilege of seeing the face of God, of coming



directly into the divine presence. Of the Israelites, Jehovah said: “I have sworn in my wrath, that *they shall not enter into my presence, into my rest*, in the days of their pilgrimage” (JST, Ex 34:2; emphasis added). Here the rest of the Lord is equated with being in the personal presence of the Lord while the recipients are still mortal.

It appears that the concept of the “rest of the Lord” is used occasionally in terms of what other scriptures call the *Church of the Firstborn* (see Heb 12:23; D&C 76:54). The Church of the Firstborn is the church of the exalted, an organization of saved souls, a body of believers who have passed the tests of mortality and received the approval of God. They qualify for life in the celestial kingdom, and because they have been true to all their trusts, are worthy to be joint heirs with Christ, co-inheritors with him to all of the blessings of the firstborn (see Smith, *Doctrines* 2:42; *Man* 272; *The Way* 208; McConkie, *Mormon* 139–40; *The Promised* 47). The phrase “Church of the Firstborn” is not found in the Book of Mormon, but it may be that to enter the rest of the Lord is to enter the Church of the Firstborn. In speaking of the ancient worthies, Alma said: “They were called after this holy order, and were sanctified, and their garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb. Now they, after being sanctified by the Holy Ghost, having their garments made white, being pure and spotless before God, could not look upon sin save it were with abhorrence; and there were many, exceedingly great many, who were made pure and entered into the rest of the Lord their God” (13:11–12). From one point of view we can grasp and apply this vital lesson from the past: those of us who magnify our callings in the priesthood are sanctified—made pure and holy—by the renovating powers of the Spirit (see D&C 84:33). We come in time to hate sin and to love and cherish righteousness. We are at peace in a troubled and turbulent world. We enter the rest of the Lord. From another perspective, these qualify, through the atonement of Christ, for the highest of priesthood blessings spoken of in the revelations. “These are they who have come to an innumerable company of



angels, to the general assembly and church of Enoch, and of the Firstborn.” Further, “They who dwell in his presence are the church of the Firstborn” (D&C 76:67, 94). Indeed, the ultimate privileges of God’s holy authority are spoken of as follows: “The power and authority of the higher, or Melchizedek Priesthood, is to hold the keys of all the spiritual blessings of the church—to have the privilege of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, to have the heavens opened unto them, to commune with the general assembly and church of the Firstborn, and to enjoy the communion and presence of God the Father, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant” (D&C 107:18–19).

## The Holy Order of God

Related to this doctrine is the second topic which might be viewed from more than one perspective—being received into the holy order of God. We have generally understood that we enter into the holy order of God through receiving the Melchizedek Priesthood, inasmuch as the full name of this sacred authority is “*the Holy Priesthood, after the Order of the Son of God*” (D&C 107:3). At another level, we encounter the holy order of God through receiving the ordinances of the temple, through receiving the endowment and the blessings of eternal marriage.

I would suggest the possibility that the scriptures speak of an additional and ultimate way of entering the holy order—through receiving the promise and seal of eternal life, through receiving what the scriptures and the prophets call the “fulness of the priesthood” (see D&C 124:28). In the book of Moses, the Prophet Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of the early chapters of Genesis, he recorded the revelation of the gospel to Adam. We read there of Adam’s baptism and spiritual rebirth. “And he heard a voice out of heaven, saying: Thou art baptized with fire, and with the Holy Ghost. This is the record of the Father, and the Son, from henceforth and forever.” And now



note the language of the scripture: “*And thou art after the order of him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity. Behold, thou art one in me, a son of God; and thus may all become my sons. Amen*” (Moses 6:66–68; emphasis added). Adam was born again and became through adoption a son of Christ. But there was more. He became, through the powers of the holy priesthood and the ordinances associated therewith, a son of God, meaning the Father. Of this matter Elder Bruce R. McConkie has written:

As men [and women] pursue the goal of eternal life, they first enter in at the gate of repentance and baptism, thereby taking upon themselves the name of Christ. They then gain power to become his sons and daughters, to be adopted into his family, to be brethren and sisters in his kingdom. Baptism standing alone does not transform them into family members, but it opens the door to such a blessed relationship; and if men so live as to obtain the Spirit and are in fact born again, then they become members of the Holy Family.

Then, if they press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, keeping the commandments and living by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God, they qualify for celestial marriage, and this gives them power to become the sons [and daughters] of God, meaning the Father. They thus become joint-heirs with Christ who is his natural heir. Those who become sons [and daughters] of God in this sense are the ones who become gods in the world to come (D&C 76:54–60). They have exaltation and godhood because the family unit continues in eternity (D&C 132:19–24). (*Doctrinal* 2:474)

Again, in referring to the experience of our first parent, President Joseph Fielding Smith wrote: “To Adam, after he was driven from the Garden of Eden, the plan of salvation was revealed, and upon him the *fulness* of the priesthood was conferred.” (*Doctrines* 3:81; emphasis in original). President Ezra Taft Benson, in an address delivered at the Logan Temple Centennial in May of 1984, spoke the following about this order of God:

The temple is a sacred place, and the ordinances in the temple are of a sacred character. Because of its sacredness we are sometimes reluctant to say anything about the temple to our children and grandchildren.



As a consequence, many do not develop a real desire to go to the temple, or when they go there, they do so without much background to prepare them for the obligations and covenants they enter into.

I believe a proper understanding or background will immeasurably help prepare our youth for the temple. This understanding, I believe, will foster within them a desire to seek their priesthood blessings just as Abraham sought his.

When our Heavenly Father placed Adam and Eve on this earth, He did so with the purpose in mind of teaching them how to regain His presence. Our Father promised a Savior to redeem them from their fallen condition. He gave to them the plan of salvation and told them to teach their children faith in Jesus Christ and repentance. Further, Adam and his posterity were commanded by God to be baptized, to receive the Holy Ghost, and *to enter into the order of the Son of God.*

*To enter into the order of the Son of God is the equivalent today of entering into the fullness of the Melchizedek Priesthood, which is only received in the house of the Lord.*

Because Adam and Eve had complied with these requirements, God said to them, "Thou art after the order of him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity" (Moses 6:67) (8).

The Prophet Joseph Smith stated in June 1843: "If a man gets a fullness of the priesthood of God he has to get it in the same way that Jesus Christ obtained it, and that was by keeping all the commandments and obeying all the ordinances of the house of the Lord" (TPJS 308). In the latter part of August in that same year, he said: "Those holding the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood are kings and priests of the Most High God, holding the keys of power and blessings" (TPJS 323).

Thus it may be that in the ultimate sense we enter the holy order of God when we enter that ultimate rest of the Lord, when we receive the fulness of the priesthood, when we gain membership in the Church of the Firstborn. Such a blessing may come here or hereafter, for as the Lord declared in a modern revelation: "blessed are they who are faithful and endure, *whether in life or in death*, for they shall inherit eternal life" (D&C 50:5; emphasis added). It is in this light that the meaning of a number of related scriptures begins to surface. For example, the order into which Enoch and his people were received (and that which was later conferred upon Melchizedek) is described



as follows: “For God having sworn unto Enoch and his seed with an oath by himself; that every one being ordained after this order and calling should have power, by faith, to break mountains, to divide the seas, to dry up waters, to turn them out of their course; . . . to stand in the presence of God.” Then, in some cases, people were even taken from the earth because of their righteousness: “And men having this faith, *coming up unto this order of God, were translated and taken up into heaven*” (JST, Genesis 14:30–32; emphasis added). After the children of Israel rejected their spiritual privileges at the base of Sinai and after Moses had broken the first set of tablets, Jehovah said to the Lawgiver: “Hew thee two other tables of stone, like unto the first, and I will write upon them also, the words of the law, according as they were written at the first on the tables which thou brakest; but it shall not be according to the first, for I will take away the priesthood out of their midst; therefore *my holy order, and the ordinances thereof, shall not go before them*; for my presence shall not go up in their midst, lest I destroy them.” (JST, Exodus 34:1; emphasis added). In speaking of this “last law,” the higher priesthood privilege which Israel lost, Joseph Smith observed: “God cursed the children of Israel because they would not receive the last law from Moses.” Or, stated another way, “The law revealed to Moses in Horeb never was revealed to the children of Israel as a nation” (TPJS 322, 323). Similarly, the group of 144,000 seen by John the Revelator in vision—those who in a future day will have the seal of God in their foreheads (see Revelation 7:4–8; D&C 133:18)—“are high priests, *ordained unto the holy order of God . . . who are ordained out of every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, by the angels to whom is given power over the nations of the earth, to bring as many as will come to the church of the Firstborn*” (D&C 77:11; emphasis added).

And so what does all of the above have to do with Alma 13? I feel it to be no stretch of the imagination, no wresting of the scriptures, to suppose that many of the descendants of Lehi were possessors of great knowledge and power, that they sought



for and received the mysteries of the kingdom, and thus that many of the Nephite Saints proved worthy of all of the blessings of the house of the Lord. They did so, even as those about whom they read. They built and used temples. President Brigham Young said simply: “The ordinances of the house of God are expressly for the Church of the Firstborn.” (*JD* 8:154.) Thus, in the words of Alma, “there were many, exceedingly great many, who were made pure and entered into the rest of the Lord their God” (13:12). Alma’s appeal to the attainments of the faithful of the past serves as a model and a pattern for his own people, and, by extension, as a guide and incentive for modern readers.

### Melchizedek: The Scriptural Prototype

Alma’s discussion of the ancients who entered the rest of the Lord narrows at this point as he chooses Melchizedek to illustrate his doctrine. “And now, my brethren,” he said, “I would that ye should humble yourselves before God, and bring forth fruit meet for repentance, that ye may also enter into that rest. Yea, humble yourselves even as the people in the days of Melchizedek, who was also a high priest after this same order [the holy order of God] which I have spoken, who also took upon him the high priesthood forever” (13:13–14). Melchizedek is one of the most enigmatic figures in Judaeo-Christian history. Legends about Melchizedek abound in Jewish traditions, in Christian literature and art, and among the writings of the Qumran sectaries (see John W. Welch, “The Melchizedek Material in Alma 13:13–19,” in *By Study and Also By Faith*, 2:238–72). In some Jewish and Christian writings he is identified as Shem, the son of Noah, while later traditions hold that he was a descendant of Shem. Others suggest that he was named Melchizedek by God when the priesthood was bestowed upon him (see Ginzberg 1:233; 5:225–26). Josephus explained that the city of Salem, over which Melchizedek reigned, later became known as Jerusalem. (“The Antiquities” 1.10.3.) In writing of Jerusalem, Josephus observed: “He who



first built it was a potent man among the Canaanites and is in our tongue called [Melchizedek] the Righteous King, for such he really was; on which account he was [there] the first priest of God, and *first built a temple* [there], and called the city Jerusalem, which was formerly called Salem.” (“The Wars” 6.10.1; emphasis added). And, most important for our study, the legends attest that Melchizedek was both king and priest in Salem (Heb 7:1; Ginzberg 1:233).

As Latter-day Saints, we know a great deal about Melchizedek as a result of these verses in Alma, from Joseph Smith’s translation of the fourteenth chapter of Genesis and the fifth and seventh chapters of Hebrews, and from the Prophet’s sermons on the priesthood. Alma tells us that Melchizedek reigned under or in the stead of his father, whose name is not given; that he received tithes from Abraham; that he was king over the land of Salem, initially a people steeped in wickedness; and that through the exercise of mighty faith and through his preaching ministry as a high priest of the holy order, he helped to establish peace and righteousness among his people (13:15–18). The scriptures also make clear that Melchizedek is a marvelous type of Christ. His name comes from two Hebrew roots, *melekh* (king), and *tzdek* (righteousness), Melchi-tzedek meaning literally “king of righteousness” or “my king is righteousness.” We know from modern revelation that to honor him as a great high priest and to avoid the too frequent repetition of the sacred name of Deity, the church in ancient days called the priesthood after his name (D&C 107:3–4). His was a single-minded existence, a life of devotion to duty, a life which pointed people toward the great High Priest, *the Prince of Peace*. From the Joseph Smith Translation we learn:

Now Melchizedek was a man of faith, who wrought righteousness; and when a child he feared God, and stopped the mouths of lions, and quenched the violence of fire.

And thus, having been approved of God, he was ordained an high priest after the order of the covenant which God made with Enoch,



It being after the order of the Son of God; which order came, not by man, nor the will of man; neither by father nor mother; neither by beginning of days nor end of years; but of God;

And it was delivered unto men by the calling of his own voice, according to his own will, unto as many as believed on his name. (JST, Genesis 14:26–29)

In writing his epistle to the Hebrews, Paul spoke of Christ who “glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee. As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 5:5–6).

Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared;

Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered. (Heb 5:7–8)

Most of us have heard these verses quoted scores of times, particularly verse eight, in reference to the place of obedience and suffering in the process of the Son of God becoming perfect. There is, however, a fascinating note at this point on the manuscript page in the Joseph Smith Translation; it states that verses seven and eight “are a parenthesis alluding to Melchizedek and not to Christ” (see footnote a to Heb 5:7 in the LDS Bible). That is to say, Melchizedek, though a son, learned obedience by the things which he suffered. But is such not true of Christ? Certainly. As Elder McConkie has suggested, it is true of both.

The fact is verses 7 and 8 apply to both Melchizedek and to Christ, because Melchizedek was a prototype of Christ and that prophet’s ministry typified and foreshadowed that of our Lord in the same sense that the ministry of Moses did. . . . Thus, though the words of these verses, and particularly those in the 7th verse, had original application to Melchizedek, they apply with equal and perhaps even greater force to the life and ministry of him through whom all the promises made to Melchizedek were fulfilled. (*Doctrinal* 3:157; see also *Promised* 450–51)

And what of the relationship of Melchizedek to Abraham? Alma mentions simply that Abraham paid tithing to him



(13:15). An old tradition among the Jews states that “Melchizedek, the king of righteousness, priest of God Most High, and king of Jerusalem, came forth to meet [Abraham],” as Abraham was returning from the war “with bread and wine. And *this high priest instructed Abraham in the laws of the priesthood and in the Torah*” (Ginzberg 1:233; emphasis added). More specifically, a modern revelation informs us that “Esaias . . . lived in the days of Abraham, and was blessed of him—which Abraham received the priesthood from Melchizedek, who received it through the lineage of his fathers, even till Noah” (D&C 84:13–14). It appears that Abraham sought for the same power and authority as Melchizedek, the power to administer endless lives, the fulness of the powers of the priesthood. We read the following from the book of Abraham:

And finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same; having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of peace, and desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God, I became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers. (Abraham 1:2)

On 27 August 1843, Joseph Smith offered prophetic commentary on the seventh chapter of Hebrews, Paul’s discussion of the place and power of the Melchizedek Priesthood. According to James Burgess, the Prophet said:

Paul is here treating of three different priesthoods, namely, the priesthood of Aaron, Abraham, and Melchizedek. Abraham’s priesthood was of greater power than Levi’s, and *Melchizedek’s was of greater power than that of Abraham*. . . . I ask: was there any sealing power attending this [Levitical] Priesthood that would admit a man into the presence of God? Oh no, but Abraham’s was a more exalted power or priesthood. He could talk and walk with God. And yet consider how great this man [Melchizedek] was when even this patriarch Abraham gave a tenth part of all his spoils and then *received a blessing under the hands of Melchizedek—even the last law or a fulness of the law or priesthood, which constituted him a king and priest after the order of Melchizedek or an endless life*. (*Words of*



*Joseph Smith 245–46, spelling and punctuation corrected; emphasis added.)*

According to Elder Franklin D. Richards, the Prophet explained that the power of Melchizedek was “not the power of a prophet, nor apostle, nor patriarch only, but of a king and priest to God, to open the windows of heaven and pour out the peace and law of endless life to man. And no man can attain to the joint heirship with Jesus Christ without being administered to by one having the same power and authority of Melchizedek” (*Words of Joseph Smith 245; spelling and punctuation corrected*). In summary, Joseph the Prophet explained, “Abraham says to Melchizedek, I believe all that thou hast taught me concerning the priesthood and the coming of the Son of Man; so Melchizedek ordained Abraham and sent him away. Abraham rejoiced, saying, Now I have a priesthood” (*TPJS 322–23*).

As we have noted already, Alma taught that the people of Salem “did repent; and Melchizedek did establish peace in the land in his days; therefore he was called the prince of peace” (13:18). More specifically, we are told elsewhere that Melchizedek and his people established Zion and attained a level of transcendent righteousness, even as Enoch. That is, he “obtained peace in Salem, and was called the Prince of peace. And *his people wrought righteousness, and obtained heaven, and sought for the city of Enoch* which God had before taken. . . . And this Melchizedek, having thus established righteousness, was called the king of heaven by his people, or, in other words, the King of peace” (JST, Genesis 14:33–34, 36; emphasis added). We can thus understand why Alma would close his discussion of Melchizedek in the spirit of tribute: “Now, there were many before him, and also there were many afterwards, but none were greater; therefore, of him they have more particularly made mention” (13:19).

And so Melchizedek is the prototype, the example, the scriptural illustration. He received the priesthood, magnified callings in the priesthood, and chose to work righteousness; he



made it possible for himself and his people to enter into the rest of the Lord through applying the atoning blood of Christ and by virtue of the sealing powers of the priesthood. Paul likewise stressed the importance and example of this faithful soul: “For this Melchizedek was ordained a priest after the order of the Son of God, which order was without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life. And all those who are ordained unto this priesthood are made like unto the Son of God, abiding a priest continually” (JST, Heb 7:3). It is in this context, then, that we see the ultimate reward of faithful service in the priesthood, a reward “according to the oath and covenant which belongeth to the priesthood” (D&C 84:39). Those who abide by the *covenant* of the priesthood, magnify their callings therein, and live by every word of God, eventually receive what Enoch and Melchizedek received: God swears unto them with an *oath*, by his own voice, that the fulness of eternal reward will be theirs (see D&C 84:33–40).

## Conclusion

I have believed for some time that at certain periods in their history the Nephites were a spiritually sensitive and accomplished people, that they knew their God and enjoyed fellowship with him. In addition, for some time I have wrestled to understand the nature of the condemnation, the scourge and judgment that rest upon the Church because of our near neglect of the Book of Mormon (see D&C 84:54–60). I have come to feel that the key to having the condemnation lifted is not simply to read the Book of Mormon, though that is a necessary and appropriate beginning. The Lord has indicated that we are not only to say—read or quote or discuss—what is in the book; we are to *do* what is written (D&C 84:57). That is, we are not just to read the Nephite record; we are to *live* it. The Book of Mormon is not just another book about religion; it *is* religion! It is as though the Nephite prophets were crying out to us: “We had the fulness of the gospel. We sought for the Lord. We found



him. We enjoyed unspeakable blessings at his hand. We feel to sing the song of redeeming love. And now, O reader, go and do thou likewise!" In short, I have a witness that the Book of Mormon is intended to do more than present valuable doctrines and principles and precepts, though it would be worth its weight in gold if it did that alone. In addition, the narrative details and encourages encounters with the divine. From Nephi to Moroni we see and hear the steady witness that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever—that he constantly and consistently reveals himself to those who seek him and strive to do his will. In that sense, Alma 13 is more, much more, than a theological exercise; it is the blessed ideal, the goal to which the Saints of the Most High aspire.

Alma is a master teacher. As is so typical of the great prophetic spokesmen of the ages, he warns, instructs, points toward the divine goal and blessings which follow from faithfulness, and gives specific and simple counsel. How are people to qualify to enter into the rest of the Lord in this life and ultimately rest with God hereafter? They are to live their lives with watchfulness and carefulness. Alma encouraged his people to prepare for the coming of the Son of Man, a divine directive that is equally applicable for the Latter-day Saints. Note the timeliness of his counsel, given some eighty years before the birth of Jesus: "And now we only wait to hear the joyful news declared unto us by the mouth of angels, of his coming; for the time cometh, we know not how soon. Would to God that it might be in my day; but let it be sooner or later, in it I will rejoice" (Alma 13:25). Like all of the Lord's mouthpieces, he warned against procrastination. He testified that safety from Satan is to be had through vigilance: "Humble yourselves before the Lord and call on his holy name, and watch and pray continually, that ye may not be tempted above that which ye can bear, and thus be led by the Holy Spirit, becoming humble, meek, submissive, patient, full of love and all long-suffering" (28).

How are we to qualify to enter the rest of the Lord? It is not through conducting spiritual marathons, not through excessive



zeal, not through attempting to run faster than our file leaders. It is “by a godly walk and conversation” (D&C 20:69), by a quiet but steadfast commitment to the Lord, his gospel, and his anointed servants. It is through applying the blood of Christ, putting off the natural man, becoming free from the taints and stains of the world, by enjoying the gifts and fruit of the Spirit. In the words of Alma, it is through “Having *faith* on the Lord; having a *hope* that ye shall receive eternal life; having the *love* of God always in your hearts, *that ye may be lifted up at the last day and enter into his rest*” (13:29; emphasis added). Alma later declared to his son Helaman “that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass” (Alma 37:6). And so it is in regard to the highest of spiritual blessings and the grandest of priesthood privileges—we gain them, in process of time, through acquiring and exemplifying faith, hope, and charity. Only by abiding by principles of righteousness thereby is anyone entitled to the rights of the priesthood, the powers of heaven (D&C 121:36).

The Book of Mormon is a vital window to the past. It is, in conjunction with the words of living oracles, a standard against which our present beliefs and practices may be measured. In addition, it is an invitation to come unto Christ and partake of his love and life hereafter. Though this sacred volume is not intended as a procedural handbook—it is Christ-centered more than church-centered—it makes known precious and profound truths relative to the holy order of God and the manner in which the ancients were sanctified, sealed, and saved. This is not just a lesson in history, for as the revelation declares: “Now this same Priesthood, which was in the beginning, shall be in the end of the world also” (Moses 6:7). What was true for the Former-day Saints is true for the Latter-day Saints. What inspired and motivated them can and should entice us to continued fidelity and devotion. In the words of a modern Apostle: “This is the priesthood which we hold. It will bless us as it blessed Melchizedek and Abraham. The priesthood of Almighty God is here” (McConkie, “Ten Blessings of Priesthood” 35).



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