

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 41 · 2020 · Pages 49 - 54

A Priesthood Restoration Narrative for Latter-day Saints Believers

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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A PRIESTHOOD RESTORATION NARRATIVE FOR LATTER-DAY SAINTS BELIEVERS

Brian C. Hales

Review of Michael Hubbard MacKay, *Prophetic Authority: Democratic Hierarchy and the Mormon Priesthood* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020). 184 pages. \$22.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *With ready access to all the documents acquired by the Joseph Smith Papers project, Michael Hubbard MacKay, co-editor of the Joseph Smith Papers' Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831, presents a new historical reconstruction of the priesthood restoration in Prophetic Authority: Democratic Hierarchy and the Mormon Priesthood. MacKay summarizes how Joseph Smith's initial authority was based primarily on charisma drawn from the Book of Mormon translation and his revelations. The transition next to apostolic authority — derived from priesthood keys restored by Peter, James and John — is also detailed. MacKay contextualizes the priesthood as part of Smith's efforts to offer "salvation to humankind and [bind] individuals to Christ" (37–38). Historical controversies are handled with frankness and depth. This study constitutes an important upgrade in the historiography of this controversial topic.*

While serving in Venezuela years ago, we missionaries taught investigators that the priesthood was restored by John the Baptist, and thereafter the Apostles Peter, James, and John appeared with higher ordinations. If additional questions arose regarding authority, we related accounts of the subsequent visits of Moses, Elias, and Elijah. It was a neat chronological package, orderly and easily defended.

Over the ensuing decade I learned that the priesthood restoration narrative was far more complex. Eventually, I encountered important works by Michael Quinn and Gregory Prince that examined significant questions regarding the establishment of the priesthood among the

Latter-day Saints.¹ Multiple differences of opinion among historians were evidently due to the absence of clarifying historical documentation, along with the presence of some contradictory data.

Despite these limitations, imagine a new historical reconstruction that describes the restoration of the priesthood written by a skilled author who is a fan of the Prophet Joseph Smith and who has access not only to all the previously published studies but also to every original document tied to Joseph Smith known to exist. Michael Hubbard MacKay, co-editor of the Joseph Smith Papers' *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, used his remarkable researching abilities and access to voluminous resources to piece together a new narrative. His *Prophetic Authority* represents a significant advancement in our understanding of the unfolding priesthood in the early days of the Church.

Prophetic Authority uses seven chapters along with an introduction and an epilogue to explore and clarify this complex subject. The few excerpts from the book on key topics, included below, show the texture of this new dialogue about priesthood restoration. Chapter 1 starts not with ordinations but by a discussion of the importance of Joseph Smith's establishing a connection with the past: "Smith did not simply act like a prophet: he used material implements to bind himself successfully to a perceived ancient world from which he produced an ancient text" (12). Smith's authority began with the Book of Mormon translation: "Like a royal coronation, the plates and the Urim and Thummim crowned Smith as a religious leader" (14).

Besides the Book of Mormon, Smith's authority flowed from his revelations, which "were more than just text; they were visions, angelic experiences, physical expressions, embodied realities, all of which were demonstrated alongside and through objects" (21). Those around Joseph "were familiar with his human frailty and imperfections. Still, they believed he spoke for God when he was divinely directed to do so" (19). This God-connection presaged claims to priesthood authority, but communicated divine approval that set Joseph apart from other devotees.

After describing the religious milieu into which Joseph Smith was able to introduce and perpetuate priesthood leadership and power, *Prophetic Authority* identifies the overriding priority for the entire process: "To Smith and his early converts, sacramental ordinances identified Mormonism as a church that offered salvation to humankind and bound

1. See D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994) and Gregory A. Prince, *Power from on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995).

individuals to Christ” (25). MacKay consistently positions Joseph Smith’s efforts to establish priesthood ordinances as Christ-centric and salvific. Joseph’s “high-ranking position was only valuable insofar as it offered the saints the ability to find certainty of their own salvation” (103).

Prophetic Authority recounts how Smith and his followers “were not ordained by other clergymen or by an inner calling from God” (31). That is, “Smith did not assume the authority to baptize. Rather, he constructed that authority through complex restoration narratives in which God delivered and authorized his power, a pattern that would hold true for future issues as well, such as the establishment of priesthood and apostleship” (30). *Prophetic Authority* points out how “the narratives, commandments, and translations did the heavy lifting of the Mormon construction project” (126).

From the beginning, the Christian denominationalists struggled with Smith’s claims. “Joseph Smith’s angelic visitations were harder for clergy to swallow,” explains *Prophetic Authority*, “because they were wrapped in his claims to exclusive authority and prophetic responsibility” (31). Steeped in the culture that placed the Bible as the sole source of authorized teachings, Smith’s declarations that the heavens were newly opened were easily rejected by traditionalists but embraced by his followers. “Placing aside *sola scriptura*, Smith’s converts clung to the principle of *sola propheta*, in which the prophet was the supreme authority in all matters of doctrine and practice” (66).

Accepting the official date of May 15, 1829 for John the Baptist’s visit, *Prophetic Authority* acknowledges that “Smith’s understanding of this visitation by John evolved over time” (34). MacKay explains: “The role of the prophet was not just to receive new revelation, but to continue to seek and receive better understanding of older revelations” (49). “Reinterpretation happened frequently with Smith’s revelations, to the extent that it formed a consistent pattern. Small pieces from earlier revelations appeared to be part of much larger initiatives that came into focus only years later” (36).

Prophetic Authority describes how Joseph Smith initially founded his authority on his prophetic calling in general — his charisma: “When Smith was constructing his own historical narrative in his official history ... he left the Peter, James, and John story out of his account to emphasize charisma and the construction of the Church of Christ” (54). But MacKay recognizes that “a sustainable and manageable priesthood hierarchy was not possible until he grounded his tradition within an official church where ordinations could be performed and ordinances carried out with the legitimating force of the institution” (53).

MacKay confronts head-on the controversial timing of Melchizedek Priesthood restoration: “Why did some eyewitnesses use language that claimed that the Melchizedek priesthood was restored in the 1831 conference when other equally reliable sources also claimed that Peter, James, and John had restored the Melchizedek priesthood in either 1829 or 1830?” (76). Following these ordinations from Peter, James, and John, *Prophetic Authority* describes how God’s voice in the “chamber of Father Whitmer” authorized the first ordinations (128; see D&C 128:21): “Smith’s history explains that with that authority given to them, he and Cowdery were commanded to ordain each other elders (thus officially connecting this ordinance to an ecclesiastical office) but to delay that ordinance until later” (59).

Eventually, priesthood authority was “established theologically and ecclesiastically ... on the metaphor of keys, so all that was left to do was to turn the key and open the door” (117). The emphasis of keys required a different supportive narrative: “Once quorums received the keys of the priesthood from the president of the high priesthood, the narrative of Peter, James, and John became very relevant” (92–93). However, “The Peter, James, and John restoration narrative did not emerge immediately or even as a cohesive whole, but it has had the longest-lasting effect of all of Smith’s restoration narratives” (101). Responding obliquely to critical assertions regarding the timeline of reports of these ordinations, *Prophetic Authority* notes: “Although there are no direct statements that claim the complaints from Missouri caused Smith and Cowdery to begin talking about the visit of Peter, James, and John, it is interesting that it was during this period that the two leaders began to include the narrative in private blessings, histories, and eventually a public revelation in the Doctrine and Covenants” (90).

Prophetic Authority identifies “three main historical milestones” for the development of apostolic authority as the presiding authority within the Church: “1829 (when the three ancient apostles apparently came), 1835 (when twelve modern apostles were chosen), and the 1839–46 Nauvoo period (which culminated with the modern apostles becoming the official administrators for the whole church)” (100–01). Smith’s death on June 27, 1844 created a leadership void wherein the 1829 narrative of the visit of Peter, James, and John restoring Melchizedek priesthood keys and the apostleship became paramount. Simplifying that story created a more easily understood and defended narrative: “The succession crisis caused the twelve to describe Smith’s priesthood restoration as an individual event rather than a process of angelic visits, progressive revelations, and ongoing struggles” (98).

In the Epilogue, MacKay “briefly opens the door to the next phase of authority in Mormon history [by] tracing the development of Mormon liturgy in five key areas” (119):

- “First, Smith’s concern for the fate of those who died before baptism” (119).
- “Second, Smith’s goal of binding the human family did not stop at baptism for the dead but extended to eternal marriages and sealings” (120).
- “Third, Smith expanded the priesthood through the exploration of Freemasonry in Nauvoo” (121).
- “Fourth, and related to the Quorum of the Anointed’s panoptic prayer, Smith created Mormonism’s most extensive ritual — the endowment — during the Nauvoo period” (122).
- “Once women were also participating in the ceremony and receiving their own endowment, Smith introduced the fifth innovation, which he termed the fullness of the priesthood: the notion of human deification” (124).

Apparently, we will have to wait for volume two to gain MacKay’s insights regarding this unfolding of these priesthood-related rituals and blessings.

As a point of criticism, it is unfortunate that the author would use the descriptor “Mormon” nearly 500 times in a book published two years after the Church asked that writers avoid using that term in reference to the Church or its members. Also, the final section discusses the highest of all temple ceremonies, a topic only recently and briefly acknowledged in official Church venues, undoubtedly due to the sacredness attributed to such ordinances.²

Prophetic Authority comprises a unique blend of scholarship, research, and historical retelling that goes well beyond accounts that detail who, what, and where. By portraying Joseph Smith as reacting to external pressures, but equally responding to the ongoing heavenly flow of revelation, MacKay’s reconstruction can easily sustain the fabric of faith. Even for those who disagree with how MacKay connects the dots, *Prophetic Authority* constitutes required reading for anyone interested in this controversial subject.

2. See “Nauvoo Journals, May 1843–June 1844,” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/intro/introduction-to-journals-volume-3?p=1&highlight=second%20anointing#8909556251496237924>.

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