

GREGORY A. PRINCE. *Power from On High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995. 231 pp. Index. \$24.95.

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“I’m glad *you* are doing priesthood history,” a prominent LDS historian once told me, “because it bores *me* to tears.” True, studies of priesthood development aren’t ripsnorting reading, but they are fundamental for understanding early Mormonism and are literally foundational for LDS and RLDS history. In this expansion of his 1993 volume on priesthood origins, Gregory Prince gives us a carefully researched, thoughtfully interpreted, and measured exposition about the vital foundational years of LDS and RLDS priesthood theory and practice. This is a solid, finely sawed and sanded first plank in what needs to be a three-plank floor for fully understanding early priesthood restoration, development, and operations.

Responsible priesthood history studies are rare, primarily because they require meticulous textual analyses that ultimately produce interpretations wrapped in qualifiers. Not only is the Joseph Smith period a big time span through which to research *any* topic, but the priesthood’s growth occurred so subtly that some of it can only be glimpsed, and not clearly seen, in oblique and ambiguous statements too often tucked inside obscure sources.

Priesthood studies about early Mormonism are few. The most detailed are Robert Marrott’s thesis about early Aaronic Priesthood work,<sup>1</sup> James Baumgarten’s thesis that surveys seventies’ history into this century,<sup>2</sup> Ronald K. Esplin’s dissertation regarding the development of the Quorum of the Twelve,<sup>3</sup> and D. Michael Quinn’s monumental and controversial *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*,<sup>4</sup> along with less than a dozen excellent scholarly articles. In 1996, after a decade of research and editing, *BYU Studies* has published a definitive edition of seventy “Priesthood Restoration Documents,”<sup>5</sup> which should be consulted while reading Prince’s book.

Greg Prince’s fine history takes its place as one of the most important published studies of early LDS priesthood development. *Power from On High* contains eight chapters: Authority; Offices;

Ordinances, 1829–30; Ordinances: the Endowment; Ordinances, 1831–36; Ordinances: the Second Anointing; Judicial Systems; and Women and Priesthood.

Joseph Smith's prophetic claims are bound tightly to his explanations about and implementations of priesthood authority. Scholars who write positively about an inspired Joseph Smith, those positing naturalistic assessments, and writers who are adamantly anti-Mormon in their approaches all must face several problematic priesthood "facts" and developments, which Prince addresses. Was apostolic authority present by 1829? When did Joseph Smith and others first speak of "priesthood" rather than "authority"? How and when did higher and lesser priesthoods become defined as such? Where does patriarchal priesthood fit into the Aaronic-Melchizedek Priesthood duality? What was the relationship between the "endowment from on high" and priesthood callings? Why were the Book of Mormon office of high priest and the biblical office of bishop not present in the Church in 1830? What were the connections between ordinances and priesthood? What did "ordain" mean and not mean? How did women interface with priesthood and ordinances?

Prince develops firm positions on these matters, based on research as good as anyone has done to date. One of his overriding theses is that the crowning piece in the priesthood restoration picture is the coming of Elijah and that the sealing powers he restored directly shaped Joseph Smith's final understanding of priesthood.

Prince documents, sometimes month by month, statements about priesthood offices and functions as found in the early revelations, minute books, diaries, sermons, and histories. Only a few factual errors are evident. Now that we have the McLellin journals, it is clear that the terms "lesser priesthood" and high priesthood "office" were in use at least as early as 1831.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, appointment of pastors started in 1852 in the British Mission,<sup>7</sup> not 1856 as Prince states (49).

Prince's familiarity with the source materials is equal to Quinn's, but he uses more responsible judgment about what weight to give many of the questionable or lesser sources. Prince adheres to primary sources religiously—even to a fault, because he chooses not to cite or discuss studies by other scholars, except in

a rare case. Regrettably, the book provides no bibliography of Prince's sources, let alone of the basic secondary books, articles, and theses relevant to his subject.

As Prince demonstrates, no researcher can hope to deal documentarily with early Mormonism without scrutinizing the earliest versions (not current versions) of the revelations and making hard, painstaking word and phrase comparisons. Such text-checking requires serious scholarship, and Prince carefully consults Robert Woodford's monumental dissertation, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants,"<sup>8</sup> and Dean C. Jessee's meticulously crafted editions of *The Papers of Joseph Smith*.<sup>9</sup>

Prince takes a documentary, evolutionary approach, and anyone using this methodology must ultimately decide what weight to give Joseph Smith's later, fuller explanations of priesthood operations in contrast to his early, initiating statements. Priesthood offices and operations were first announced, then implemented, then made to fit changing realities of Church growth and spread, then reexplained and clarified. So, does the scholar credit Joseph with integrity for introducing and then modifying offices and operations and then later offering explanations of the beginnings? Or does the scholar distrust the later explanations, suspicious that they are dishonest or disingenuous? Prince is willing to give more credence to the later explanations than does Quinn, but both still subscribe to the documentary, natural evolutionary approach to writing priesthood history.

This interpretive choice brings me to four qualifiers I believe need to be applied by anyone taking the evolutionary, documentary approach to LDS priesthood development:

1. Joseph Smith's later perspectives on early events deserve as much trust as do his early statements. Only after years of experience and implementation was Joseph Smith able to say how priesthood offices and operations worked together or should work together realistically and functionally in a maturing church structure. My experience with diaries and diarists convinces me that the later, reflective recollections sometimes are more important than comments recorded at the time of an event. It takes time to understand some things that are ongoing.

2. As Dean Jessee cautions, only a small percentage of what Joseph Smith ever taught survives in our records, so conclusions we reach based on all available documents can only be partial and tentative.<sup>10</sup>

3. Ideas have little meaning until implemented. That is, priesthood and keys can be bestowed, but they have meaning only when put into use. Restoration is more than an act—it is function. Elijah came and bestowed keys in 1836, but a full understanding of what that meant could *not* come until sealing ordinances actually were being performed involving spouse to spouse, children to parents, and deceased to deceased. (Thus, the sealing powers were not fully implemented and restored until 1877 when the St. George Temple was opened and deceased were sealed to deceased for the first time.)

4. Joseph Smith's life was cut short as far as implementing all that was revealed to him, so researchers need to examine closely Brigham Young's directions of priesthood work to discern as much as possible what was innovative on his part and what was implementation of what Joseph had taught him. Brigham Young devoted himself and the Church to completing Joseph Smith's work—finishing the Nauvoo Temple, taking the gospel to the world, gathering Israel, *and* implementing priesthood operations.

For example, just after Joseph Smith's death, the Twelve engineered a mass-ordination of seventies in late 1844, designed apparently to launch a vast missionary outreach in the United States, with seventies serving as the missionary force (Prince says there is little evidence the seventies had a missionary function by 1844). Was this an intended *new* use of the seventies by the Twelve, or rather an intended *implementation* of the seventies' missionary function that Joseph Smith had already taught the Twelve? Likewise, was Brigham Young's role in widely developing wards, ward bishops, and ward ordinances innovation or implementation?

When the Church transplanted itself from Nauvoo to Utah, it settled into a theocratic situation where, for the first time, it had the ability to fully implement several priesthood operations and offices. In early Utah, we see such priesthood developments (which Prince does not discuss) as the center stake having authority over

other stakes; wards functioning as fundamental worship and membership units; ward bishops becoming the most important local officers in the Church; priesthood relating to local congregational meetinghouses and therefore local meetings, which the Church lacked until then; and, rebaptism additionally functioning as a ritual of joining—joining Zion in the mountains, joining communities, joining united orders, joining in a Churchwide reformation.

Further, discussions of women and early priesthood should take into consideration the fact that in Utah the first Relief Societies did create mirror “quorums” to the priesthood, complete with deaconesses who took care of Relief Society meetinghouses just as ordained deacons cared for the ward meetinghouses; teachers quorums that visited the sisters just as priesthood teachers and priests visited families; and a presidentess who presided over the ward Relief Society.

In many aspects, the pre-1844 period was an experimental farm for priesthood work, but much of the implementational field was cultivated during the next few decades. Post-1844 implementations and teachings do shed light on what the pre-1844 understandings were and deserve to be considered in studies like *Power from On High*. (Prince does stick a toe or two through that door, such as when he explains that the endowment was first written down in 1877.)

Another cross-check to help assess what Joseph Smith’s generation understood about priesthood operations is to evaluate how RLDS Church leaders explained and activated priesthood offices when their church started in 1860. Given the tight parameters Prince has chosen for his study, a more appropriate subtitle for his book might be “The Early Stage of Development of the Mormon Priesthood, 1823-1844.”

As mentioned previously, Prince gives us a sturdy, finely sawed and sanded first plank of a three-plank floor required for a historical understanding of the early progressions in priesthood restoration. A needed second plank would be a study of the post-1844 “implementations” and further developments of priesthood matters. A third plank would be a wider search in and study of diaries, autobiographies, and recollections of priesthood officers

who served during the Joseph Smith period to determine what they did and how they functioned as holders of specific priesthood offices.

As a useful study in building our understanding of the history of the priesthood, and subject to the allowances mentioned, Prince's book is a thoughtful, masterful, major contribution—a "must" book for all serious scholars dealing with the beginnings of Mormonism and the history of LDS priesthood and Church government.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert L. Marrott, "History and Functions of the Aaronic Priesthood and the Offices of Priest, Teacher, and Deacon in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1829 to 1844" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1976).

<sup>2</sup>James N. Baumgarten, "The Role and Function of the Seventies in L. D. S. Church History" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1960).

<sup>3</sup>Ronald K. Esplin, "The Emergence of Brigham Young and the Twelve to Mormon Leadership, 1830-1841" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1981).

<sup>4</sup>D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1994).

<sup>5</sup>Brian Q. Cannon and BYU Studies Staff, "Priesthood Restoration Documents," *BYU Studies* 35, no. 4 (1995-96): 162-207.

<sup>6</sup>Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds. *The Journals of William E. McLellin* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 45.

<sup>7</sup>William G. Hartley, "LDS Pastors and Pastorates, 1852-55," in *Mormons in Early Victorian Britain*, ed. Richard L. Jensen and Malcolm Thorp (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), 195.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Woodford, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974).

<sup>9</sup>Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989-92).

<sup>10</sup>Dean C. Jessee, "Priceless Words and Fallible Memories," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 2 (1991): 22-23; Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:xx, xxii-xxiv.