

*Prophetic Authority:
Democratic Hierarchy and the Mormon Priesthood*
By Michael Hubbard MacKay

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Reviewed by Roger Terry

Considering how central the concept of authority is in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is somewhat surprising that so few scholarly examinations of this topic have been attempted, which makes this book by Michael Hubbard MacKay a welcome and overdue contribution to the short list of publications on authority in the Church. And for the most part, MacKay does not disappoint. Although much of what he presents is not new and the writing can at times be challenging to digest, his exploration of the topic is both surprisingly thorough and notably insightful.

The traditional account of the genesis of authority in the Church of Jesus Christ has John the Baptist restoring the Aaronic Priesthood to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in May 1829 and then Peter, James, and John sometime later reestablishing the Melchizedek Priesthood. But anyone who has delved into the historical documents, as MacKay has done, will be aware that this account is neither without complications nor entirely satisfying. Part of the complexity surrounding the origin and development of authority in the Church arises from the fact that there are no contemporaneous accounts; all reports of these events are both retrospective and anachronistic in certain ways. And MacKay places these founding events in the context of several other episodes that serve to complicate the picture. As is often the case with history, what actually happened turns out to be much thornier than the uncomplicated story that has come down through institutional channels.

MacKay begins his analysis with a chapter on the earliest form of authority claimed by Joseph Smith: the charismatic authority he established through translating of the Book of Mormon and receiving revelation, often in answer to requests from friends, family members, and early followers. This prophetic authority had as yet no institutional

framework to give it support and staying power, but it did establish one important difference between Joseph Smith and the traditional religions of his day: the long-closed canon of Christian scripture was fully open to Joseph and his followers.

Chapter 2 deals with the next stage in Joseph's ongoing expansion of authority. As he and Oliver Cowdery were producing the translation of the Book of Mormon, they became aware that, first, they needed to be baptized and, second, they needed authority from heaven to perform this sacred ritual. While Joseph and Oliver "believed that they needed special authority to perform baptisms," they "apparently understood that the power to baptize was distinct from [Joseph's] authority to speak for God or the gift to translate" (30). In 1830, Joseph and Oliver began saying they received authority from an angel the previous year. The records do not identify the angel as John the Baptist until 1835. The text we now know as Doctrine and Covenants 13, which contains John the Baptist's words to Joseph and Oliver, was recorded a decade after the event and contains language that doesn't seem to fit in the context of 1829. For instance, in both the Book of Mormon and Joseph's early writings, there is no apparent indication that authority to baptize and the notion of priesthood as authority are connected. This connection came later. Indeed, insofar as the record reveals, the very concept of an Aaronic (or a Melchizedek) Priesthood came significantly later than 1829.

In the next chapter, MacKay turns to the idea of apostolic authority and traces its beginnings to June 1829, when "a single revelatory commandment" instructed Joseph to call twelve "disciples" (40), a term used in the Book of Mormon to describe twelve men chosen by Jesus to form a group parallel to the twelve apostles he had selected in Palestine. The documentary trail here is not clear. It is apparent that Joseph used the term *apostle* to "designate both a missionary, like Paul or Barnabas, and one of Jesus's chosen twelve apostles, like Peter" (40). Early Mormon priesthood licenses and other documents indicate that missionaries as well as those who ordained them were sometimes referred to as apostles, but this term obviously did not have the same meaning that it would acquire in 1835 when Joseph and the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon selected and ordained a formal quorum of twelve Apostles.

In chapter 4, MacKay discusses the authority to establish a church and the structural authority that flowed from this new organization. The founding of the Church was a significant step in what social historian and economist Max Weber termed the routinization of charisma, the creating of a channel through which fragile charismatic authority can survive

and transform itself into enduring institutional authority. In this chapter, MacKay also introduces the somewhat ill-defined experience Joseph and Oliver had in “the chamber of old Father Whitmer,” a topic MacKay explored in detail in a recent *BYU Studies Quarterly* article.¹ This experience involved instructions that fulfilled promises given by “the Angel [John the Baptist],” as described in Joseph’s 1839 account of John’s visit, including receipt of authority to give the Holy Ghost and to establish the Church (56–57). The experience in the chamber also possibly supports a concept that is illustrated in the Book of Mormon—namely, that authority can be given by word of mouth or through prayer, not always by laying on of hands. “In the Book of Mormon,” writes MacKay, “Christ bestowed the authority to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost through a vocal authorization. The concept of receiving authority from the voice of God, though certainly not the predominant method as the church developed, appears to have been accepted by early members” (62).

The experience in Father Whitmer’s chamber also complicates the story of Peter, James, and John coming to restore the Melchizedek Priesthood, because in Joseph’s 1839 history, he leaves out the Peter, James, and John narrative while including the experience in the chamber of Father Whitmer that is seemingly tied directly to the receipt of the Melchizedek Priesthood. MacKay explains further, “Because the apostles were mentioned [by John the Baptist], most historians have assumed that Peter, James, and John would give [Joseph and Oliver] that priesthood and the power to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost. But John never identifies Peter, James, and John as the messengers that would give Smith the priesthood” (138 n. 2). While MacKay focuses on Joseph’s 1839 account of the experience in Father Whitmer’s chamber and ties it to receipt of the Melchizedek Priesthood, he neglects to mention relevant text added in perhaps 1835 to the August 1830 revelation recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 27, a verse that supports the traditional narrative: “And also with Peter, and James, and John, whom I have sent unto you, by whom I have ordained you and confirmed you to be apostles” (v. 12). In short, sorting out the evidence regarding the receipt of the Melchizedek Priesthood is a difficult task because of the incomplete and ambiguous documentary record, but MacKay does give us reason to consider another option than the traditional account.

1. See Michael Hubbard MacKay, “Event or Process? How ‘the Chamber of Old Father Whitmer’ Helps Us Understand Priesthood Restoration,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2021): 73–101.

At the end of chapter 4, MacKay discusses the founding of the Church on April 6, 1830, in Fayette, New York, where Joseph was ordained not just “first elder” but also the prophet of the Church (65). This point opens the door to a topic MacKay explores in the later chapters: how Joseph was able to share authority with an expanding circle of others while maintaining his sole position at the pinnacle of that authority. All authority in the Church always flowed through Joseph Smith, at least until he was murdered, and then, because he had not spelled out clearly who would take his place in the event of his death, there were multiple competing claims to succeed him.

Significantly, it is not until chapter 5 that MacKay addresses the topic that a twenty-first-century Latter-day Saint might assume to be the central pillar of authority in the Church: priesthood. In today’s Church, priesthood and authority are virtually synonymous, but priesthood was hardly a pressing concept at the founding of the Church; it is not mentioned at all in Doctrine and Covenants 20 and is virtually absent in the Book of Mormon, appearing in only a handful of verses, all in the book of Alma and all referring specifically to the office of high priest, the person who was the religious leader of the entire Nephite people or of various regional Nephite churches. One deficiency in MacKay’s book is that you have to read between the lines to arrive at a basic fact about priesthood in the Church: namely, that the meaning of the word changed significantly over the first few years of Joseph Smith’s prophetic activity. In the beginning, at least as evidenced by early Church documents, *priesthood* to Joseph and his followers meant exactly what it does to this day in every other Christian denomination. Most dictionaries, for example, carry two definitions for *priesthood*: (1) the office or condition of being a priest (similar to how *parenthood* is the condition of being a parent) and (2) the collective body of priests (similar to how *neighborhood* is a collective body of neighbors). To find the current Latter-day Saint definition of priesthood, you have to search in a larger dictionary, such as the unabridged volume we have in our editorial office, which gives this third definition: “the authority to speak and administer in the name of the Deity given in the Mormon Church by ordination.”² Priesthood as a form of authority, as something one can hold, is unique to the Latter-day Saints. But this concept sprouted and grew over time, and this creates problems for modern Church members who read early LDS

2. *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1993), s.v. “priesthood.”

documents and assume that the current definition in the Church was operative then also.

This definitional development is one reason why the accounts of John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John restoring the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods appear to be anachronistic and why Joseph Smith did not invoke any sort of priesthood authority in organizing the Church. The term *priesthood* does not appear in the earliest Church documents until June 1831, more than a year after the Church was organized, and then *priesthood* meant simply that someone was a priest, and *high priesthood* meant that someone was a high priest. Significantly, this is also how the term is used in the Book of Mormon. MacKay traces some of the development of the terminology—how the high priesthood eventually came to be known as the Melchizedek Priesthood and how the Melchizedek and Aaronic priesthoods came to variously absorb the offices of deacon, teacher, elder, and seventy. Some of the early minutes of meetings, for instance, record how elders were ordained to the high priesthood (76). What this indicates is that elder was not an office in the high priesthood at the time. The high priesthood was simply the fact of being a high priest.

Soon after Joseph Smith began ordaining men to the high priesthood, he received a revelation calling him and others to travel to Missouri to establish Zion. “During the trip, newly converted preacher Ezra Booth and the recently called bishop, Edward Partridge, challenged Smith’s authority by questioning his decisions about land purchases” (77). After his return to Kirtland, Joseph received a revelation commanding him to establish an office called “the President . . . of the High Priesthood” (D&C 107:91), which eventually became the President of the Church, who, with two counselors, formed the First Presidency. Before this time, Joseph was the first elder in the Church and an ordained prophet, but this new position gave him additional recognizable institutional authority.

In chapter 6, MacKay explains that Joseph Smith received a revelation in October 1831 declaring his authority to establish the kingdom of God on earth (D&C 65:2). This imperative tied the expanding concept of priesthood to the New Testament idea of “keys of the kingdom of heaven,” which Jesus’s chief apostle, Peter, possessed (see Matt. 16:19). MacKay traces the history of how the narrative of Peter, James, and John visiting Joseph and Oliver first appeared in the documentary history and how this visitation grew in prominence as the concept of priesthood evolved and became entwined with the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. As the Church grew and authority needed to be

extended to other leaders in the expanding kingdom, “a dialogue was formed around the concept of keys of the kingdom. Smith had to maintain the unique power of *sola propheta* while simultaneously distributing authority. . . . The authority had to be divided but not diminished. Once quorums receive the keys of the priesthood from the president of the high priesthood, the narrative of Peter, James, and John became very relevant” (92–93).

The first extant reference to the Peter, James, and John visit came on December 4, 1834, from Oliver Cowdery, but in 1835 this narrative became central to the calling of twelve Apostles. Even though this account grew in importance over time, two revelations to Joseph Smith about priesthood (D&C 27, received in 1835, and D&C 128, received in 1842) neglected to mention that Peter, James, and John restored either the high priesthood or the Melchizedek Priesthood. “These revelations,” explains MacKay, “are important because the single nonrevelatory account from Smith that describes how the Melchizedek priesthood was restored, found in his 1839 history, states that it occurred in the chamber of Father Whitmer.” Further, “the majority of the accounts that explicitly claim that Peter, James, and John restored the Melchizedek priesthood are found in sources created after Joseph Smith’s death” (95).³ These accounts became all the more important as the Twelve Apostles staked their claim to succeed Joseph in leading the Saints and consolidated their power. MacKay adds an interesting side note here about the development of the temple endowment under Brigham Young’s direction: “In early December 1845, more than a year after Smith’s death, it appears that they added a ritual to the endowment that included actors who played Peter, James, and John as the intercessors between temple-goers and God. . . . Once the rituals were expanded to members of the church outside Smith’s chosen circle, the endowment emphasized the central role of Peter, James, and John as the apostles who restored the keys of the kingdom” (98–99).

The final chapter in the book adds more detail about the development of temple rituals and discusses the appearance of Elijah to Joseph and Oliver in the Kirtland Temple a week after its 1836 dedication. The keys restored by Elijah became crucially important in Joseph Smith’s

3. It is interesting to note that, despite MacKay’s seeming ambivalence in this book, in his *BYU Studies Quarterly* article on this topic, he claims to favor Larry Porter’s argument that the Peter, James, and John visit occurred in late May or early June 1929. MacKay, “Event or Process?” 80.

unfolding temple theology, a program aimed at ensuring salvation among his followers. The Elijah appearance raises significant questions, however, about priesthood and keys. Why, for instance, did not Peter, James, and John restore the sealing keys when they restored the Melchizedek Priesthood? Latter-day Saint teachings and the New Testament account in Matthew 16 indicate that Peter did indeed possess the authority to seal on earth and in heaven (v. 19). Or, as MacKay implies, did the visit of Peter, James, and John serve some purpose other than restoring the Melchizedek Priesthood? Also, what are we to make of the fact that in Joseph's later years, as he introduced new temple rituals, Elijah seemed to eclipse Peter, James, and John in prominence?

The unfolding of authority in the Church and, in particular, the development of priesthood, in both theory and practice, create a complex and sometimes confusing historical tapestry. MacKay's book on prophetic authority tackles this challenge head-on and attempts to marshal a dizzying array of documentary evidence in a short 127-page analysis. It is not an easy read, but the author provides substantial connective tissue to tie together several potentially confusing elements of the early Restoration.

One specific quibble I have with MacKay's analysis is his frequent mention of what he calls the "democratic hierarchy" of the Church, a term he also embeds in the subtitle of the book. Although the Church is in theory both a theocracy and a democracy, in practice the democratic impulse has been in retreat since the early years, and even then it was not as prominent as we might assume. Indeed, one important theme in MacKay's book is how Joseph Smith shared authority while retaining his position as the sole conduit through which that authority flowed.

MacKay sometimes equates Joseph's widespread distribution of priesthood authority with democracy. For example, he stated, "Smith's exertion of power became the delivery of authority to others, who then, in turn, exerted their power by delivering authority to others democratically, all the while forming an even stronger hierarchy" (102). But this is not democracy any more than the granting of authority in a top-down corporation produces a democracy. Democracy (literally "people rule") is a form of government in which power resides in the people. There are generally two forms of democracy: *direct*, in which the people deliberate and decide legislation by direct vote, and *representative*, in which the people select representatives who deliberate and decide legislation on behalf of the people. The priesthood hierarchy that Joseph Smith created was, in practice, neither a direct nor a representative democracy. It was

an ordinary hierarchy in which all power ultimately and increasingly resided in the person of Joseph Smith, even though certain actions were voted upon by the Saints.

This quibble aside, MacKay has given us a well-researched and thought-provoking examination of authority both preceding and following the 1830 organization of the Church. For those who are interested in the history of how this authority originated and developed through Joseph Smith's instrumentality, MacKay's brief book is a valuable resource.

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