



John the Baptist restored the Aaronic Priesthood to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery on May 15, 1829, saying, "Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer the Priesthood of Aaron."



The Mission of John the Baptist

“John [the Baptist] held the Aaronic Priesthood, and was a legal administrator, and the forerunner of Christ, and came to prepare the way before him.”

From the Life of Joseph Smith

In Harmony, Pennsylvania, during the winter of 1828–29, Joseph Smith continued to work on the translation of the Book of Mormon, but the work progressed slowly. Not only did Joseph have to work on his farm to provide for his family, but he had no full-time scribe to assist him. In this time of need, he recalled, “I cried unto the Lord that he would provide for me to accomplish the work whereunto he had commanded me.”¹ The Lord promised that He would provide the help Joseph Smith needed to continue the work of translation (see D&C 5:34). On April 5, 1829, a young schoolteacher named Oliver Cowdery accompanied the Prophet’s brother Samuel to Harmony to meet Joseph. Oliver had heard about the plates while staying in the home of the Prophet’s parents and, after praying about the matter, had received personal revelation that he was to write for the Prophet. On April 7, the two men began the work of translation, with Oliver as scribe.

As Joseph and Oliver were translating from the plates, they read the Savior’s instructions to the Nephites regarding baptism for the remission of sins.² On May 15, they went to a wooded area near the Prophet’s home to ask the Lord for more understanding about this important ordinance. “Our souls were drawn out in mighty prayer,” Oliver Cowdery recalled, “to know how we might obtain the blessings of baptism and of the Holy Spirit, according to the order of God, and we diligently sought for the

right of the fathers and the authority of the holy priesthood, and the power to administer in the same.”³

Joseph Smith recorded what happened in answer to their prayer: “While we were thus employed, praying and calling upon the Lord, a messenger from heaven descended in a cloud of light, and having laid his hands upon us, he ordained us, saying: *Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; and this shall never be taken again from the earth until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness.*

“He said this Aaronic Priesthood had not the power of laying on hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but that this should be conferred on us hereafter. . . .

“The messenger who visited us on this occasion and conferred this Priesthood upon us, said that his name was John, the same that is called John the Baptist in the New Testament, and that he acted under the direction of Peter, James and John, who held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, which Priesthood, he said, would in due time be conferred on us” (Joseph Smith—History 1:68–70, 72).

The coming of John the Baptist was a significant event in the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith and in the progress of God’s kingdom on earth. Although Joseph Smith had seen God the Father and Jesus Christ, had been visited by heavenly messengers, and had received the gold plates and the ability to translate them, he had not yet been given the authority and power of the priesthood. Now Aaronic Priesthood power had been restored to earth, and the power of the Melchizedek Priesthood would soon be restored. Joseph Smith had become a legal administrator in God’s kingdom.

Teachings of Joseph Smith

John the Baptist fulfilled the important missions of preparing the way before the Savior and baptizing Him.

“I attended [a] meeting at the Temple [on January 29, 1843]. . . . I stated that there were two questions which had been asked me concerning my subject of the last Sabbath, which I had promised to answer in public, and would improve this opportunity.

“The question arose from the saying of Jesus—‘Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.’ [Luke 7:28.] How is it that John was considered one of the greatest of prophets? His miracles could not have constituted his greatness. [See John 10:41.]

“First. He was entrusted with a divine mission of preparing the way before the face of the Lord. Whoever had such a trust committed to him before or since? No man.

“Secondly. He was entrusted with the important mission, and it was required at his hands, to baptize the Son of Man. Whoever had the honor of doing that? Whoever had so great a privilege and glory? Whoever led the Son of God into the waters of baptism, and had the privilege of beholding the Holy Ghost descend in the form of a dove, or rather in the *sign* of the dove, in witness of that administration? The sign of the dove was instituted before the creation of the world, a witness for the Holy Ghost, and the devil cannot come in the sign of a dove. The Holy Ghost is a personage, and is in the form of a personage. It does not confine itself to the *form* of the dove, but in *sign* of the dove. The Holy Ghost cannot be transformed into a dove; but the sign of a dove was given to John to signify the truth of the deed, as the dove is an emblem or token of truth and innocence.

“Thirdly. John, at that time, was the only legal administrator in the affairs of the kingdom there was then on the earth, and holding the keys of power. The Jews had to obey his instructions or be damned, by their own law; and Christ Himself fulfilled all righteousness in becoming obedient to the law which He had given to Moses on the mount, and thereby magnified it and

made it honorable, instead of destroying it. The son of Zacharias wrested the keys, the kingdom, the power, the glory from the Jews, by the holy anointing and decree of heaven, and these three reasons constitute him the greatest prophet born of a woman.

“Second question:—How was the least in the kingdom of heaven greater than he? [See Luke 7:28.]

“In reply I asked—Whom did Jesus have reference to as being the least? Jesus was looked upon as having the least claim in God’s kingdom, and [seemingly] was least entitled to their credulity as a prophet; as though He had said—‘He that is considered the least among you is greater than John—that is I myself.’”⁴

**There must be legal administrators
in the kingdom of God.**

“Some say the kingdom of God was not set up on the earth until the day of Pentecost, and that John [the Baptist] did not preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; but I say, in the name of the Lord, that the kingdom of God was set up on the earth from the days of Adam to the present time. Whenever there has been a righteous man on earth unto whom God revealed His word and gave power and authority to administer in His name, and where there is a priest of God—a minister who has power and authority from God to administer in the ordinances of the gospel and officiate in the priesthood of God, there is the kingdom of God; and, in consequence of rejecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Prophets whom God hath sent, the judgments of God have rested upon people, cities, and nations, in various ages of the world, which was the case with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, that were destroyed for rejecting the Prophets. . . .

“As touching the Gospel and baptism that John preached, I would say that John came preaching the Gospel for the remission of sins; he had his authority from God, and the oracles of God were with him, and the kingdom of God for a season seemed to rest with John alone. The Lord promised Zacharias that he should have a son who was a descendant of Aaron, the

Lord having promised that the priesthood should continue with Aaron and his seed throughout their generations. Let no man take this honor upon himself, except he be called of God, as was Aaron [see Hebrews 5:4]; and Aaron received his call by revelation. . . .

“But, says one, the kingdom of God could not be set up in the days of John, for John said the kingdom was at hand. But I would ask if it could be any nearer to them than to be in the hands of John. The people need not wait for the days of Pentecost to find the kingdom of God, for John had it with him, and he came forth from the wilderness crying out, ‘Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is nigh at hand’ [Matthew 3:2], as much as to say, ‘Out here I have got the kingdom of God and I am coming after you; I have got the kingdom of God, and you can get it, and I am coming after you; and if you don’t receive it, you will be damned;’ and the scriptures represent that all Jerusalem went out unto John’s baptism [see Matthew 3:5–6]. There was a legal administrator, and those that were baptized were subjects for a king; and also the laws and oracles of God were there; therefore the kingdom of God was there; for no man could have better authority to administer than John; and our Savior submitted to that authority Himself, by being baptized by John; therefore the kingdom of God was set up on the earth, even in the days of John. . . .

“. . . Christ came according to the words of John [see Mark 1:7], and He was greater than John, because He held the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood and kingdom of God, and had before revealed the priesthood of Moses, yet Christ was baptized by John to fulfill all righteousness [see Matthew 3:15]. . . .

“. . . [Jesus] says, ‘Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God;’ and, ‘heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.’ [John 3:5; Matthew 24:35.] If a man is born of water and of the Spirit, he can get into the kingdom of God. It is evident the kingdom of God was on the earth, and John prepared subjects for the kingdom, by preaching the Gospel to them and baptizing them, and he prepared the way before the Savior, or came as a forerunner,



*The Savior went to John the Baptist to be baptized because John
“held the Aaronic Priesthood, and was a legal administrator.”*

and prepared subjects for the preaching of Christ; and Christ preached through Jerusalem on the same ground where John had preached. . . . John . . . preached the same Gospel and baptism that Jesus and the apostles preached after him. . . .

“Whenever men can find out the will of God and find an administrator legally authorized from God, there is the kingdom of God; but where these are not, the kingdom of God is not. All the ordinances, systems, and administrations on the earth are of no use to the children of men, unless they are ordained and authorized of God; for nothing will save a man but a legal administrator; for none others will be acknowledged either by God or angels.”⁵

“John [the Baptist] held the Aaronic Priesthood, and was a legal administrator, and the forerunner of Christ, and came to prepare the way before him. . . . John was a priest after the order of Aaron before Christ. . . .

“The keys of the Aaronic Priesthood were committed unto him, and he was as the voice of one crying in the wilderness, saying, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord and make his paths straight.’ [Matthew 3:3.] . . .

“The Savior said unto John, I must be baptized by you. Why so? To answer my decrees [see Matthew 3:15]. . . . Jesus had no legal administrator [except] John.

“There is no salvation between the two lids of the Bible without a legal administrator.”⁶

A person who has the spirit of Elias has a preparatory work assigned to him by the Lord.

“It is the spirit of Elias I wish first to speak of; and in order to come at the subject, I will bring some of the testimony from the Scripture and give my own.

“In the first place, suffice it to say, I went into the woods to inquire of the Lord, by prayer, His will concerning me, and I saw an angel [John the Baptist], and he laid his hands upon my head, and ordained me to a Priest after the order of Aaron, and to hold the keys of this Priesthood, which office was to preach repentance and baptism for the remission of sins, and also to baptize. But I was informed that this office did not extend to the laying on of hands for the giving of the Holy Ghost; that that office was a greater work, and was to be given afterward; but that my ordination was a preparatory work, or a going before, which was the spirit of Elias; for the spirit of Elias was a going before to prepare the way for the greater, which was the case with John the Baptist. He came crying through the wilderness, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’ [Matthew 3:3.] And they were informed, if they could receive it, it was the spirit of Elias [see Matthew 11:14]; and John was very particular to tell the people, he was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light [see John 1:8].

“He told the people that his mission was to preach repentance and baptize with water; but it was He that should come after him that should baptize with fire and the Holy Ghost [see Matthew 3:11].

“If he had been an imposter, he might have gone to work beyond his bounds, and undertook to have performed ordinances which did not belong to that office and calling, under the spirit of Elias.

“The spirit of Elias is to prepare the way for a greater revelation of God, which [the spirit of Elias] is the Priesthood of Elias, or the Priesthood that Aaron was ordained unto. And when God sends a man into the world to prepare for a greater work, holding the keys of the power of Elias, it was called the doctrine of Elias, even from the early ages of the world.

“John’s mission was limited to preaching and baptizing; but what he did was legal; and when Jesus Christ came to any of John’s disciples, He baptized them with fire and the Holy Ghost. . . . John did not transcend his bounds, but faithfully performed that part belonging to his office; and every portion of the great building should be prepared right and assigned to its proper place; and it is necessary to know who holds the keys of power, and who does not, or we may be likely to be deceived.

“That person who holds the keys of Elias hath a preparatory work. . . . The spirit of Elias was revealed to me, and I know it is true; therefore I speak with boldness, for I know verily my doctrine is true.”⁷

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Consider these ideas as you study the chapter or as you prepare to teach. For additional help, see pages vii–xii.

- Read the accounts of John the Baptist conferring the Aaronic Priesthood on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery (pages 79–80, 85). What effect did this event have on Joseph and Oliver? What effect has this event had on your life?
- Read the first full paragraph on page 80, noting that John the Baptist called Joseph and Oliver his “fellow servants.” In what ways might this phrase help priesthood holders? In what ways might this phrase influence our interaction with young men who hold the Aaronic Priesthood?

- Review the section of the chapter that begins on page 81. What are your thoughts and feelings about John the Baptist and the mission he performed during his mortal life?
- The Prophet Joseph taught that John the Baptist was a “legal administrator” (pages 82–85). What do you think the term “legal administrator” means as it relates to the priesthood? Why is there “no salvation . . . without a legal administrator”? (page 85).
- As you read the final section in the chapter (pages 85–86), review also the definition for the term “Elias” given in the Bible Dictionary (see Bible Dictionary, page 663). What is the spirit of Elias? How did John the Baptist prepare the way for the coming of the Savior?
- Joseph Smith said that the conferral of the Aaronic Priesthood is “a preparatory work” because it prepares the way for something greater (page 85). What can Aaronic Priesthood holders do to prepare to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood? What can parents, grandparents, teachers, and leaders do to help them prepare?

Related Scriptures: Matthew 3:1–17; 1 Nephi 10:7–10; Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 3:43–46

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, History 1832, p. 6; Letter Book 1, 1829–35, Joseph Smith, Collection, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.
2. Oliver Cowdery, quoted in Joseph Smith—History 1:71, footnote; from a letter from Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps, Sept. 7, 1834, Norton, Ohio, published in *Messenger and Advocate*, Oct. 1834, p. 15.
3. Oliver Cowdery, statement recorded Sept. 1835 in “The Book of Patriarchal Blessings, 1834,” pp. 8–9; Patriarchal Blessings, 1833–2005, Church Archives.
4. *History of the Church*, 5:260–61; bracketed word in final paragraph in original; capitalization modernized; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Jan. 29, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards and an unidentified *Boston Bee* correspondent. The *Boston Bee* letter was written on Mar. 24, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois, and published in *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1843, p. 200. See also appendix, page 562, item 3.
5. *History of the Church*, 5:256–59; spelling and punctuation modernized; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Jan. 22, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Wilford Woodruff.
6. Discourse given by Joseph Smith on July 23, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois; Joseph Smith, Collection, Addresses, July 23, 1843, Church Archives.
7. *History of the Church*, 6:249–51; paragraph divisions altered; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Mar. 10, 1844, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Wilford Woodruff.