The prophetic voice is a voice of authority, divine authority. Those called to speak for the Lord Jehovah are empowered by Jehovah and ordained to His holy order. Thus it seems appropriate to devote some attention to the nature of prophetic authority—the power of the holy priesthood among the prophets in ancient Israel.

Joseph Smith the Prophet wrote in 1842, “We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth” (Articles of Faith 1:6). When the time was right, when God the Eternal Father elected in His infinite wisdom to reestablish His kingdom on earth, He began to restore the basic priesthoods, offices, quorums, and councils that had been put in place by Jesus in the meridian of time. The “marvellous work and a wonder” foreseen by Isaiah (Isaiah 29:14) would also entail a restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ that had existed in the centuries preceding the mortal ministry of Jesus (see D&C 107:4). That restoration would consist of Old Testament truths, powers, priesthoods, covenants, and ordinances, such that “a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories should take place, and be revealed from the days of Adam even to the present time. And not only this, but those things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this, the dispensation of the fulness of time” (D&C 128:18).

The Melchizedek Priesthood, that “Holy Priesthood after the order of the Son of God” (D&C 107:3), is, like its Author, infinite and eternal (see Alma 13:7–9). “The Priesthood is an everlasting principle,” Joseph Smith explained, “and existed with God from eternity, and will to eternity, without beginning of days or end of years.”1 It is about that holy priesthood that we shall speak—more specifically, the Melchizedek Priesthood, through which this divine authority operated from Adam to Malachi. Sadly, the Old Testament is almost silent in regard to the high priesthood. Thus we must rely heavily upon the doctrinal teachings of Joseph Smith as set forth in his sermons, revelations, and translations. Further, we will turn to clarifications and expansions provided by those who knew Brother Joseph firsthand, as well as those apostolic and prophetic successors to whom is given the divine mandate to build on the doctrinal foundation he laid.

Adam and the Priesthood

Once the church of God is organized on earth with legal administrators, there is the kingdom of God. “The kingdom of God was set up on the earth from the days of Adam to the present time,” the Prophet Joseph Smith explained, “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.”2 From the days of Adam to the time of Moses, men and women lived under the patriarchal order of the Melchizedek Priesthood. That is, they lived in a family order presided over by a patriarch. It includes the new and everlasting covenant of marriage.3 “Adam held the priesthood,” Elder Russell M. Nelson observed, “and Eve served in matriarchal partnership with the patriarchal priesthood.”4 President Ezra Taft Benson explained that “Adam and his descendants entered into the priesthood order of God. Today we would say they went to the House of the Lord and received their blessings. The order of priesthood spoken of in the scriptures is sometimes referred to as the patriarchal order because it came down from father to son. But this order is otherwise described in modern revelation as an order of family government where a man and woman enter into a covenant with God—just as did Adam and Eve—to be sealed for eternity, to have posterity, and to do the will and work of God throughout their mortality.”5
Though we are uncertain as to the precise organization of the Church during the so-called pre-Christian times, the priesthood leaders among the ancients sought to follow the will of God in all matters. Such persons as Adam, Seth, Enos, Cainan, Mahalaleel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, and Noah were all high priests; they governed the Church and kingdom in righteousness and by virtue of their civil (kingly) and ecclesiastical (priestly) positions. Other worthy men held the higher priesthood, but these patriarchs were the presiding officers and held the keys or right of presidency. As our father, the first man, is the presiding high priest over the earth for all ages,” Elder McConkie observed.

The government the Lord gave him was patriarchal, and the righteous portion of mankind were blessed and governed by a patriarchal theocracy. This theocratic system, patterned after the order and system that prevailed in heaven, was the government of God. He himself, though dwelling in heaven, was the Lawgiver, Judge, and King. He gave direction in all things both civil and ecclesiastical; there was no separation of church and state as we know it. All governmental affairs were directed, controlled, and regulated from on high. The Lord’s legal administrators on earth served by virtue of their callings and ordinations in the Holy Priesthood and as they were guided by the power of the Holy Ghost.

Adam was earth’s first Christian. He was baptized, confirmed, born of the Spirit, quickened in the inner man, ordained, and received into the holy order of God (see Moses 6:64–68). “The priesthood was first given to Adam; he obtained the First Presidency, and held the keys of it from generation to generation.” In the book of Moses, Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of the early chapters of Genesis, the Prophet 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).

Adam was born again and became through adoption a son of Christ. 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.” Truly, as Elder John Taylor wrote, “Adam was the natural father of his posterity, who were his family and over whom he presided as patriarch, prophet, priest, and king.”

The account of Cain and Abel’s offerings in Genesis 4 is brought to life and given a doctrinal context by the Prophet’s inspired translation. We learn that God had commanded Adam, Eve, and their posterity to “offer the firstlings of their flocks” as an offering in “similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father” (Moses 5:5–7). Cain, one who “loved Satan more than God” (Moses 5:18), turned away from his parents’ teachings and entered into league with the father of lies. At Satan’s urging, and in what seems to be a defiance of the command to offer a blood sacrifice, Cain “brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord.” On the other hand, Abel “hearkened unto the voice of the Lord” and “brought of the firstlings of his flock.” The Lord “had respect unto Abel, and to his offering; but unto Cain, and to his offering, he had not respect.” Cain then entered into an unholy alliance with Satan, plotted and carried out the death of his brother Abel, and instigated secret combinations in the land (see Moses 5:18–51).

The Prophet Joseph explained that by faith in the Atonement of Christ and the plan of redemption:

Abel offered to God a sacrifice that was accepted, which was the firstlings of the flock. Cain offered of the fruit of the ground, and was not accepted, because he could not do it in faith, he could have no faith, or could not exercise faith contrary to the plan of heaven. It must be shedding the blood of the Only Begotten to atone for man; for this was the plan of redemption; and without the shedding of blood was no remission [see Hebrews 9:22] and as the sacrifice was instituted for a type, by which man was to discern the great Sacrifice which God had prepared; to offer a sacrifice contrary to that, no faith could be exercised, because redemption was not purchased in that way, nor the power of atonement instituted after that order; consequently Cain could have no faith; and whatsoever is not of faith, is sin.

The Prophet went on to say that however varied may be the opinions of the learned “respecting the conduct of Abel, and the knowledge which he had on the subject of atonement, it is evident in our minds, that he was instructed more fully in the plan than what the Bible speaks of. . . . How could Abel offer a sacrifice and look forward with faith on the Son of God for a remission of his sins, and not understand the Gospel?” Now note what the Prophet asks: “And if Abel was taught of the coming of the Son of God, was he not taught also of His ordinances? We all admit that the Gospel has ordinances, and if so, had it not always ordinances, and were not its ordinances always the same?”

Almost seven years later, Brother Joseph stated that God had “set the ordinances to be the same forever and ever, and set Adam to watch over them, to reveal them from heaven to man, or to send angels to reveal them.” That Adam “received revelations, commandments and ordinances at the beginning is beyond the power of controversy; else how did they begin to offer sacrifices to God in an acceptable manner? And if they offered sacrifices they must be authorized by ordinance.”

The Prophet then quotes from the Apostle Paul: “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testing of his gifts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh” (Hebrews 11:4). “How doth he yet speak?” Joseph asked. “Why he magnified the Priesthood which was conferred upon him, and died a righteous man, and therefore has become an angel of God by receiving his body from the dead, holding still the keys of his dispensation; and was sent down from heaven unto Paul to minister consoling words, and to commit unto him a knowledge of the mysteries of godliness.” And then, as a type of summary on these matters, the Prophet spoke concerning Cain and Abel: “The power, glory and blessings of the Priesthood could not continue with those who received ordination only as their righteousness continued; for Cain also being authorized to offer sacrifice, but not offering it in righteousness, was cursed. It signifies, then, that the ordinances must be kept in the very way God has appointed; otherwise their Priesthood will prove a cursing instead of a blessing.”

We know little concerning the keys of Abel’s dispensation,
spoken of above, except for the fact that a modern revelation indicates that one line of the priesthood descended “from Noah till Enoch, through the lineage of their fathers; and from Enoch to Abel, who was slain by the conspiracy of his brother, who received the priesthood by the commandments of God, by the hand of his father Adam, who was the first man” (D&C 84:15–16; emphasis added). With the murder of Abel and the defection of Cain to perdition, God provided another son for Adam and Eve through which the blessings of the evangelical priesthood or patriarchal order would continue. Seth was “ordained by Adam at the age of sixty-nine years, and was blessed by him three years previous to his (Adam’s) death, and received the promise of God by his father, that his posterity should be the chosen of the Lord, and that they should be preserved unto the end of the earth; because he (Seth) was a perfect man, and his likeness was the express likeness of his father, insomuch that he seemed to be like unto his father in all things, and could be distinguished from him only by his age” (D&C 107:42–43; compare Moses 6:10–11).

Enoch and His City

Enoch, the son of Jared, was the seventh from Adam. Jared “taught Enoch in all the ways of God” (Moses 6:21). “Enoch was twenty-five years old when he was ordained under the hand of Adam; and he was sixty-five and Adam blessed him” (D&C 107:48). He was called by God as a prophet and seer to declare repentance to a wicked generation. Because Enoch was obedient and submissive, Jehovah transformed a shy and hesitant young man into a mighty preacher of righteousness. The Lord put His Spirit upon Enoch, justified all his words, and walked with him (see Moses 6:26–34). “And so great was the faith of Enoch, that he led the people of God, and their enemies came to battle against them; and the mountains fled, even according to his command; and the rivers of water were turned out of their course; and the roar of the lions was heard out of the wilderness; and all nations feared greatly, so powerful was the word of Enoch, and so great was the power of the language which God had given him” (Moses 7:13). That is to say, Enoch was faithful to the covenant of the Melchizedek Priesthood, which allowed God to swear an oath unto him, an oath that granted unto Enoch godlike powers (see Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 14:27–31; compare Helaman 10:4–10; D&C 84:33–44).14

Because of his own righteousness and the power of his witness, Enoch established a society of the pure in heart. He established Zion, a people who “were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18; compare D&C 97:21). Zion represents the pinnacle of human interaction, the ideal community, or, as President Spencer W. Kimball taught, “the highest order of priesthood society.”15 Through preaching righteousness and incorporating the doctrines of the gospel into all they did, including applying the pure love of Christ into their social relations and thereby consecrating themselves completely, Enoch and his people founded a holy commonwealth and were eventually translated or taken into heaven without tasting death. The people of Enoch “walked with God, and he dwelt in the midst of Zion; and it came to pass that Zion was not, for God received it up into his own bosom; and from thence went forth the saying, Zion is fled” (Moses 7:69). “And men having this faith, coming up unto this priesthood order of God, were translated and taken up into heaven” (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 14:32). “And [Enoch] saw the Lord, and he walked with him, and was before his face continually; and he walked with God three hundred and sixty-five years, making him four hundred and thirty years old when he was translated” (D&C 107:49).

Noah and the Priesthood

Noah, the tenth from Adam, was ordained at the age of ten years (see D&C 107:52). “God made arrangements beforehand,” Elder John Taylor explained, “and told Methuselah that when the people should be destroyed, that a remnant of his seed should occupy the earth and stand foremost upon it. And Methuselah was so anxious to have it done that he ordained Noah to the priesthood when he was ten years of age. Noah then stood in his day as the representative of God.”16

Noah was thus more, far more, than a weather prophet; he was a legal administrator, one empowered by God to call a wicked generation to repentance. “And the Lord ordained Noah after his own order, and commanded him that he should go forth and declare His Gospel unto the children of men, even as it was given unto Enoch. And it came to pass that Noah called upon the children of men that they should repent; but they hearkened not unto his words.” Further, his call to repentance was not just a warning of impending disaster; it was a call to come unto Christ and be saved. “Believe and repent of your sins,” Noah said, “and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, even as our fathers, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost, that ye may have all things made manifest” (Moses 8:19–20; 24; emphasis added). In speaking of the patriarchal order of the Melchizedek Priesthood in the days of Noah, President John Taylor stated that “every man managed his own family affairs. And prominent men among them were kings and priests unto God.”17

The Prophet Joseph Smith explained the position of Noah (the angel Gabriel) in the priesthood hierarchy. Noah “stands next in authority to Adam in the Priesthood; he was called of God to this office, and was the father of all living in this day, and to him was given the dominion.”18 The Prophet also observed that “the keys of this Priesthood consisted in obtaining the voice of Jehovah that He talked with him [Noah] in a familiar and friendly manner, that He continued to him the
Melchizedek and Abraham

Abraham, known to us as the “father of the faithful,” sought for the “blessings of the fathers” and the right to administer the same (see Abraham 1:1–3). He was not only a prince on the earth but a prince in the heavens, and by right came to the earth in his time to accomplish the things given him to do. And he found by tracing his genealogy that he had a right to the priesthood, and when he ascertained that, he prayed to the Lord, and demanded an ordination. His father, Terah, was an idolater, so Abraham’s blessings could not come to him in father-son fashion. And so it was that he looked to Melchizedek, the great high priest of that day, for counsel, direction, and authority. In his discussion of the ancients who entered the rest of the Lord, Alma chose 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” (Alma 13:13–14). God swore the same oath to Melchizedek that he had sworn to Enoch and granted him the same godlike powers. Melchizedek obtained peace in Salem, “and his people wrought righteousness, and obtained heaven, and sought for the city of Enoch which God had before taken” (see Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 14:25–36).

The Saints of God who lived at this time, “the church in ancient days,” called the holy priesthood after the name of Melchizedek (see D&C 107:2–4). 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). Further, it appears that Abraham received additional rights and privileges from Melchizedek. The father of the faithful sought for the power to administer endless lives, the fulness of the powers of the priesthood. According to Elder Franklin D. Richards, the Prophet Joseph 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.”

James Burgess recorded a sermon by Joseph Smith, a kind of doctrinal commentary on Hebrews 7, in which he spoke of three orders of the priesthood: the Aaronic, the patriarchal (the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, which Abraham held), and the fulness of the priesthood (the realization of the blessings promised in the eternal marriage covenant). The Prophet is reported to have said:

Paul is here treating of three different priesthhoods, namely, the priesthood of Aaron, Abraham, and Melchizedek. Abraham’s priesthood was of greater power than Levi’s [Aaron’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.

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.” The keys of the priesthood then continued through Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Ephraim, and so on through the centuries, down to the time of Moses. To what degree the Melchizedek Priesthood and its powers were utilized among the people of Israel during their Egyptian bondage is unclear.

From Moses to Christ

We learn from modern revelation that Moses was ordained to the high priesthood by his father-in-law, Jethro the Midianite. That priesthood line then traces back from Jethro through such unknown ancient legal administrators as Caleb, Elihu, Jeremy, Gad, and Esaias. The revelation then speaks of the divine authority coming through Abraham, Melchizedek, Noah, Enoch, Abel, and Adam (see D&C 84:6–16). That the priesthood had been given to Jethro through Midian implies—one again, as was the case with the priesthood descending through Abel, in addition to Seth (see D&C 84:6–16; 107:40)—that there was more than one line of authority. It may be that the priesthood was transmitted through several lines but that the keys or right of presidency remained with and were passed on by the ordained patriarchs.

In speaking of the children of Israel, the Prophet stated: “Their government was a theocracy; they had God to make their laws, and men chosen by Him to administer them; He was their God, and they were His people. Moses received the word of the Lord from God Himself; he was the mouth of God to Aaron, and Aaron taught the people, in both civil and ecclesiastical affairs; they were both one, there was no distinction.” Moses sought diligently to bring the children of Israel to a point of spiritual maturity wherein they could enjoy the highest blessings of the priesthood—the privilege of entering into the rest of the Lord, into the divine presence. Jehovah’s desire was that the Israelites become “a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). “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; and the lesser priesthood continued” (D&C 84:19, 24–26; compare D&C 107:18–19). That is, Israel’s unwillingness to enter the Lord’s presence (see Exodus 20:19) signaled their lack of preparation as a nation to see God and thus the need to bear the holy priesthood and enjoy its consummate privileges. For one thing, as Abinadi pointed out, many of the children of Israel did not comprehend the place of the law of Moses as a means to a greater end. “And now,” he asked, “did they understand the law? I say unto you, Nay, they did not all understand the law; and this because of the hardness of their hearts; for they understood not that
there could not any man be saved except it were through the redemption of God” (Mosiah 13:32).

And the Lord said unto Moses, 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.

But I will give unto them the law as at the first, but it shall be after the law of a carnal commandment; for I have sworn in my wrath, that they shall not enter into my presence, into my rest, in the days of their pilgrimage. (Joseph Smith Translation, Exodus 34:1–2; emphasis added; see also Joseph Smith Translation, Deuteronomy 10:1–2)

When Moses was translated, the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood were taken from among the Israelites as a body and the patriarchal order of priesthood ceased. True, there were still men like Aaron, his sons, and the seventy elders of Israel who bore the Melchizedek Priesthood. But no longer did the Melchizedek Priesthood pass from father to son. Thereafter, the priesthood of administration among the people generally was the Aaronic Priesthood. The ordination of men to the Melchizedek Priesthood and the bestowal of its keys came by special dispensation.

President Joseph Fielding Smith therefore pointed out:

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, and their prophesying and their instructions to the people were directed by the Spirit of the Lord and made potent by virtue of that priesthood which was not made manifest generally among the people of Israel during all these years.

President Smith adds this detail: “We may presume, with good reason, that never was there a time when there was not at least one man in Israel who held this higher priesthood (receiving it by special dispensation) and who was authorized to officiate in the ordinances.”

Or, as he wrote on another occasion:

The Lord, of necessity, has kept authorized servants on the earth bearing the priesthood from the days of Adam to the present time; in fact, there has never been a moment from the beginning that there were not men on the earth holding the Holy Priesthood. Even in the days of apostasy, . . . our Father in heaven held control and had duly authorized servants on the earth to direct his work and to check, to some extent at least, the ravages and corruption of the evil powers. These servants were not permitted to organize the Church nor to officiate in the ordinances of the gospel, but they did check the advances of evil as far as the Lord deemed it necessary.

Joseph Smith was asked: “Was the Priesthood of Melchizedek taken away when Moses died?” The Prophet stated—and this principle guides our understanding of who held the High Priesthood from the translation of Moses to the days of Christ—that “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.” Now note this important clarification: “All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained by God himself,” meaning that God Himself performed the ordination or sent a divine messenger to do so. In a meeting of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve on April 22, 1849, Elder John Taylor asked President Brigham Young, “If Elijah, David, Solomon and the Prophets had the High Priesthood, how it was,” inasmuch as “the Lord took it away with Moses.” After much discussion, President Young said he did not know, but wished he did.” Elder Taylor, who had not been with the Prophet Joseph when the answer was first given in 1841 (he was in England), “thought perhaps the Lord conferred it himself upon some at times whom he had considered worthy, but not with permission for them to continue it down upon others.”

And so we operate from a perspective that all the Old Testament prophets held the Melchizedek Priesthood. Exactly how Isaiah and Micah, who were contemporaries, related to one another or who supervised whom, we cannot tell. Who was in charge when Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, Obadiah, or Lehi ministered in the prophetic office, we do not know. It is inconceivable to me that they went about their prophetic labors independent of one another. That Lord who called and empowered them is a God of order and not of confusion (see D&C 132:8), and we would suppose that their labors were coordinated and directed by one holding the appropriate keys of the kingdom—the right of presidency, the directing power (see D&C 107:8). These principles are, unfortunately, nowhere to be found in the Old Testament record.

It is from modern revelation that we learn that the ordinances of the house of the Lord have been delivered from the beginning. The book of Abraham speaks of “the grand Key-words of the Holy Priesthood, as revealed to Adam in the Garden of Eden, as also to Seth, Noah, Melchizedek, Abraham, and all to whom the Priesthood was revealed” (Facsimile No. 2, Explanation, Fig. 3). Modern revelation tells us, further, that sacred ordinances such as washings and anointings were carried out in ancient temples, which, the Lord said, “my people are always commanded to build unto my holy name” (D&C 124:39) and that “Nathan, my servant, and others of the prophets” held the keys of the sealing power associated with eternal marriage and the everlasting union of families (D&C 132:39). Surely if and when God elected to make available the ordinances of the priesthood to certain individuals—including the endowment and sealing blessings—he could do so in the wilderness or on mountaintops.

The scriptural passages quoted also seem to imply that the ancient tabernacle and temples allowed for more than Aaronic Priesthood sacrificial rites. The exact relationship between the prophet (who held the Melchizedek Priesthood) and the literal descendants of Aaron (who held the keys of the Levitical ordinances) is unclear. Elder Bruce R. McConkie has, however, made the following clarification: “Do not let the fact that the performances of the Mosaic law were administered by the Aaronic Priesthood confuse you. . . . Where the Melchizedek Priesthood is, there is the fulness of the gospel; and all of the prophets held the Melchizedek Priesthood.” He continues: “The Melchizedek Priesthood always directed the course of the Aaronic Priesthood. All of the prophets held a position in the hierarchy of the day.”

In
short, “in all ages of the world, whenever the Lord has given a
dispensation of the priesthood to any man by actual revelation, or any set of men, this power has always been given” (D&C 128:9).

The Lehite colony, a branch of ancient Israel that was
brought by God to the Americas, took the priesthood to the
New World. Lehi was a prophet, and, as we have seen, would
have held the Melchizedek Priesthood. The Nephites enjoyed the
blessings of the fulness of the everlasting gospel, a
gospel that is administered by the higher priesthood. There
were no Levites among the Nephites, and so we would
assume that they offered sacrifice and carried out the
ordinances and ministerial duties as priests and teachers by
virtue of the Melchizedek Priesthood. President John Taylor
explained that the higher priesthood was held by “Moroni, one
of the prophets of God on this continent. Neph, another of the
servants of God on this continent, had the gospel with its keys
and powers revealed unto him.”

Elijah and the Keys of the Priesthood

A statement from Joseph Smith seems, to some extent at
least, to contradict what has been said heretofore in regard to
the keys of the priesthood in ancient Israel. The Prophet
Joseph stated: “Elijah was the last Prophet that held the keys
of the Priesthood, and who will, before the last dispensation,
restore the authority and deliver the keys of the Priesthood,
in order that all the ordinances may be attended to in
righteousness.”

Elijah lived about 850 B.C. If this statement
were taken at face value, then no prophet after Elijah, at least
in the Old Testament or Book of Mormon, would have held the
keys of the holy priesthood. That would include such men as
Elisha, Joel, Hosea, Jonah, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Nahum,
Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Daniel, Habakkuk, and
Ezekiel, as well as Lehi and the American branch of Israel.
Are we to understand that none of these men held keys? Was
there no right of presidency, no directing power in regard to
the covenants and ordinances of the gospel?

The troublesome statement is from a discourse on
priesthood delivered at a conference of the Church held in
Nauvoo in October 1840. The Prophet Joseph began by
defining the priesthood and then observed that the
Melchizedek Priesthood “is the grand head, and holds the
highest authority which pertains to the priesthood, and the
keys of the Kingdom of God in all ages of the world to the
latest posterity on the earth; and is the channel through which
all knowledge, doctrine, the plan of salvation and every
important matter is revealed from heaven.” He went on to say
that “all other Priesthoods are only parts, ramifications,
powers and blessings belonging to the same, and are held,
controlled, and directed by it. It is the channel through which
the Almighty commenced revealing His glory at the beginning
of the creation of this earth, and through which He has
continued to reveal Himself to the children of men to the
present time, and through which He will make known His
purposes to the end of time.”

The Prophet then discussed the role of Michael or Adam
as the one designated to oversee the revelations and ordinances
of God to His people, stressing, as Joseph did so often, that
the ordinances of the gospel are forever the same. He went
on to describe the descent of priesthood powers and rites to
Abel, Cain, Enoch, Lamech, and Noah. The Prophet provided
very important information regarding Enoch and the doctrine
of translation. “Now the doctrine of translation,” he taught, “is
a power which belongs to this Priesthood. There are many
things which belong to the powers of the Priesthood and the
keys thereof, that have been kept hid from before the
foundation of the world; they are hid from the wise and
prudent to be revealed in the last times.”

Joseph Smith then began to discuss at length the
restoration of sacrificial offerings as a part of the restitution of
all things, for “all the ordinances and duties that ever have
been required by the Priesthood . . . at any former period,
shall be had again, bringing to pass the restoration spoken of
by the mouth of all the Holy Prophets. . . . The offering of
sacrifice has ever been connected and forms a part of the
duties of the Priesthood. It began with the Priesthood, and will
be continued until after the coming of Christ, from generation
to generation. We frequently have mention made of the
offering of sacrifice by the servants of the Most High in
ancient days, prior to the law of Moses; which ordinances will
be continued when the Priesthood is restored with all its
authority, power and blessings.” Then came the statement:
“Elijah was the last Prophet that held the keys of the
Priesthood, and who will, before the last dispensation, restore
the authority and deliver the keys of the Priesthood, in order
that all the ordinances may be attended to in righteousness.
It is true,” the Prophet continued, “that the Savior had
authority and power to bestow this blessing; but the sons of
Levi were too prejudiced. ‘And I will send Elijah the Prophet
before the great and terrible day of the Lord,’ etc., etc. Why
send Elijah? Because he holds the keys of the authority to
administer in all the ordinances of the Priesthood.” He added
once again that “these sacrifices, as well as every ordinance
belonging to the Priesthood, will, when the Temple of the Lord
shall be built, and the sons of Levi be purified, be fully
restored and attended to in all their powers, ramifications, and
blessings. This ever did and ever will exist when the powers
of the Melchizedek Priesthood are sufficiently manifest; else
how can the restitution of all things spoken of by the Holy
Prophets be brought to pass?”

Remember, this sermon was delivered in October 1840,
more than four years after Elijah had come to the Kirtland
Temple (see D&C 110). But Joseph Smith stated that Elijah
“will, before the last dispensation”—meaning, presumably,
before the dispensation is complete—“restore the authority
and deliver the keys of the Priesthood, in order that all the
ordinances may be attended to in righteousness.” It could well
be that the Prophet was referring to a past event as though it
was yet to come. On the other hand, the context of the
sermon may suggest that a part of Elijah’s role as one who
would restore the “fulness of the priesthood” is to restore the
keys associated with all the ordinances, including animal
sacrifice, an event prophesied by Malachi (4:5–6), quoted by
Jesus to the Nephites (3 Nephi 25:5–6), rendered differently
by Moroni (D&C 2), and described in modern revelation (D&C
84:31–32). One wonders whether Elijah will not deliver those
particular keys at the Council of Adam-ondi-Ahman, that
great gathering of priesthood leaders—those who have held
keys of authority in all ages—just before the coming of the
Lord in glory.

I am grateful to my friend and colleague Robert J. Matthews
for suggesting the following principles, each of which adds
somewhat to our understanding of this matter of the keys of
the priesthood:
1. It is evident that a person who holds the keys can “give” them to another without losing them himself.

2. There is a difference between holding the keys sufficiently to function and being the person designated to convey those keys to others. Both Moses and Elijah gave keys to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, yet it was still Moses and Elijah who brought them to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in 1836. No doubt Peter had sufficient of “Elijah’s keys” to operate the Church during the meridian dispensation, yet the Lord did not use Peter to convey those sealing keys to Joseph and Oliver.

3. It is clearly stated in the Book of Mormon, more than once, that the Twelve in the Western Hemisphere were subject and would be subject to the Twelve in Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 12:9; Mormon 3:18–19). This suggests, again, that a people may have sufficient keys of the priesthood to operate the Church without having the right to pass those keys to future dispensations.

4. Truly, all of the keys and powers of the priesthood have not yet been delivered to us in our day; much lies in futurity, including the keys of creation, translation, and resurrection.

In summary, the keys of the kingdom of God have always been on earth when the higher priesthood was on earth; there must be order in the house of God. Those keys would have been held by the Lord’s anointed after the time of Elijah. Elijah was not the last man to hold keys in the Old Testament period, since many did after him, but he was the last one in the Old Testament commissioned to return in the dispensation of the fulness of times to see to it that “all the ordinances may be attended to in righteousness.”

Conclusion

Ammon explained to King Limhi that “a seer is a revelator and a prophet also; and a gift which is greater can no man have, except he should possess the power of God, which no man can; yet a man may have great power given him from God. But a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light. . . . Thus God has provided a means that man, through faith, might work mighty miracles; therefore he becometh a great benefit to his fellow beings” (Mosiah 8:16–18).

As Latter-day Saints we love the Old Testament. We cherish the lessons and language of its sacred pages. We know, however, that it has not come down to us in its pristine purity. Many plain and precious truths and many covenants of the Lord have been taken away and kept back by designing persons (see 1 Nephi 13:20–32). The understanding that the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ was once among the ancients is missing. The insight that prophets in the Old Testament were Christians who taught Christian doctrine and administered Christian covenants and ordinances is lacking. But thanks be to God that a seer has been raised up, even a “choice seer” (2 Nephi 3:6–7), Joseph Smith, who began the work of restoring many of those plain and precious truths to the Bible. Jehovah instructed Moses to write the things that would be spoken to him. “And in a day when the children of men shall esteem my words as naught and take many of them from the book which thou shalt write, behold, I will raise up another like unto thee; and they shall be had again among the children of men—among as many as shall believe” (Moses 1:40–41).

A study of the Old Testament by the lamp of the restored gospel ties the Latter-day Saints to the former-day Saints. Such a study becomes far more than 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 ancients is true for us. What inspired and motivated them can and should entice us to continuing fidelity and devotion to our covenants. The same authority by which they were baptized, confirmed, endowed, washed, anointed, married, and sealed unto eternal life—that same authority has been delivered to Joseph Smith by heavenly messengers. That we will believe, accept, and rejoice in the treasure house of doctrinal understanding delivered to us through modern revelation is my sincere prayer.

Notes

2. Smith, Teachings, 271.
19. Taylor, Gospel Kingdom, 139.
42. Smith, *Teachings*, 158.
44. Smith, *Teachings*, 172.