

# Doctrine and Covenants 12-17

## Joseph Smith—History 1:66-75

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Lesson 8: *Come, Follow Me*, Doctrine and Covenants, 21 February 2025

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### Introduction

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During the two months of April and May 1829, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had many great experiences, and others around them were also the beneficiaries of Joseph's revelations. The two men were facing growing opposition in Harmony, mainly due to the opposition from Emma's extended family. About 1 June 1829, with the arrival of David Whitmer and with the translation done from Mosiah to Moroni, they left Harmony for Fayette, New York, to live with the Whitmers, as arranged by Oliver from his acquaintance with that family. The work was finished by translating the Small Plates record (1 Nephi to Omni, and the Words of Mormon) in the Whitmer home in June, and they applied for a copyright for the book on 11 June. The translation was completed no later than 1 July 1829, shortly after the three and eight witnesses had their experiences with the plates. With Grandin's agreement to print the book, the printing work began.

### Summary Chronology

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- **Fri, 15 May 1829** (Harmony, PA) – Aaronic Priesthood restored by John the Baptist; D&C 13.
- **Mid-May 1829** (Harmony, PA) – Samuel Smith visited, was baptized.
- **Mid to late May 1829** (Near Susquehanna River, between Colesville, NY and Harmony, PA) – Melchizedek Priesthood restored by Peter, James, and John.
- **Late May 1829** (Harmony, PA) – D&C 11, to Hyrum Smith.
- **Late May 1829** (Harmony, PA) – D&C 12, to Joseph Knight, Sr.
- **About Sat, 29 May 1829** (Fayette, NY) –
- **Late May/early June 1829** (Palmyra, NY) – Lucy Harris, Martin's wife, filed a complaint against Joseph Smith, trying to prove that he never had gold plates.
- **About Mon, 1 Jun 1829** (Harmony, PA) – David Whitmer arrived in Harmony to take Joseph and Oliver to move in with the Whitmers in Fayette, New York, and finish the translation.
- **About Thu, 4 Jun 1829** (Fayette, NY) – Joseph and Oliver Cowdery arrive in Fayette to stay at the Peter Whitmer, Sr. home, and finish the translation of the Book of Mormon. Emma joined them later (exact date unknown).
- **Early to mid-Jun 1829** (Fayette, NY) – Joseph Smith received D&C 14, 15, and 16, for David Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Peter Whiter, Jr., respectively.
- **About Wed, 10 Jun 1829** (Fayette, NY) – Joseph Smith received D&C 17, for Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris.
- **Thu, 11 Jun 1829** (Utica, NY) – Richard R. Lansing, clerk of the Northern District Court in Utica, New York, entered Joseph Smith's copyright application, including the title page, for the Book of Mormon, perhaps filed by Martin Harris. Joseph traveled there and back, pausing the translation for several days.
- **Early to mid-Jun 1829** (Palmyra and Rochester, NY) – Martin Harris, Joseph, and Oliver began to look for a printer for the Book of Mormon, going to several in Palmyra and Rochester. After first turning them down, Egbert B. Grandin of Palmyra finally decided to take it on with Harris' land as a guarantee. Trip to Rochester is another pause in the translation.
- **Fri, 26 Jun 1829** (Palmyra, NY) – Book of Mormon title page printed in the *Wanye Sentinel*.
- **End of June 1829** (Fayette, NY) – The "word of the Lord" instructs Joseph and Oliver to ordain each other elders as well as perform other ordinances once those baptized were assembled and approved their ordination.
- **End of Jun 1829** (near Fayette, NY) – The three witnesses were shown the plates and other items and had a divine witness to the truth of the Book of Mormon. The eight witnesses also saw the plates about this same time.
- **About Wed, 1 Jul 1829** (Fayette, NY) – The translation of the Book of Mormon completed.

# Doctrine and Covenants 13

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## Setting

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As Joseph and Oliver were translating, they came upon the words of the Savior in 3 Nephi 11:22-30 that explained the importance of baptism and how the ordinance should be performed. They realized this applied to them as well but also that they had no authority. They went into the woods to pray about this. John the Baptist appeared as an answer to that prayer. The date was 15 May 1829, the place Harmony, Pennsylvania. Recent research has revealed that the location was not down toward the river on Joseph Smith's

13-acre lot, which was mostly cleared for farming and bordered on the very busy Susquehanna River. Rather, the event likely took place in a grove of maple trees at the north end of Joseph's property, which was secluded.<sup>1</sup>

## Documents and Publication

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The words of D&C 13 come from Joseph Smith's history of the event. This section was first published in the *Times and Seasons* on 1 Aug 1842. It was included in the Doctrine & Covenants for the first time in the 1876 edition.

## Introduction

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Joseph and Oliver were ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, of repentance, and of baptism, which shall remain on the earth. This prepared them to receive the Melchizedek priesthood not long afterward, and allowed them to perform saving ordinances and eventually organize the Church.

## The Aaronic Priesthood is Restored (1)

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**1** 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.

### Commentary

**1 *you my fellow servants.*** The two young men kneeling before this amazing angelic presence must have been humbled by his opening declaration—they were “fellow servants” with a man they had read about in scripture, who baptized the Messiah and prepared the way for his mortal ministry.

**1 *in the name of Messiah.*** This was a completely appropriate thing for John the Baptist to say. In his native tongue, “Messiah” was the title he applied to Jesus, not “Christ,” which is the Greek form of the same word. This small element adds a real touch of veracity to the story.

**1 *the keys of the ministering of angels.*** The Aaronic Priesthood does hold keys, including these. Joseph learned what these keys were shortly after this experience. He was walking down near the river when a heavenly messenger—perhaps Michael—met him and taught him how to use these keys to distinguish between true angels and messengers of the devil, even if the devil himself “appeared as an angel of light” (D&C 128:20). He taught some of the brethren about these in February 1843, including Parley P. Pratt, who wrote it down and whose writings thus became the source for D&C 129.

But seeing an angel is not always required to experience their ministrations. “Angelic messages can be delivered by a voice or merely thoughts or feelings communicated to the mind. President John Taylor described ‘the action of the angels or messengers of God, upon our minds, so that the heart can conceive . . . revelations from the eternal world.’”<sup>2</sup>

**1 *repentance, and of baptism.*** The other keys of the Aaronic Priesthood mentioned by John are those of repentance and of baptism, which includes not only the ordinance of baptism but of the sacrament as well, according to Dallin H. Oaks.<sup>3</sup>

**1 *until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering.*** Oliver Cowdery's recollection of what was spoken is a little different than Joseph's, where John says, “Upon you my fellow-servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer this Priesthood *and this authority, which shall remain upon earth, that the Sons of Levi may yet offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness*” (footnote, JS-H 1:71; italics added). The point is that this priesthood will always remain, which Oliver Cowdery also stated was the case with the Melchizedek Priesthood.

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<sup>1</sup> See [Where Was the Priesthood Restored?](#) and also [Priesthood Restoration Site](#) showing the various locations in Harmony.

<sup>2</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, “[The Aaronic Priesthood and the Sacrament](#),” General Conference, October 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Griffiths, *Scripture Central Commentary*, 1:154.

## Results

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Joseph and Oliver were ordained by John the Baptist, then went to the Susquehanna River and baptized each other, probably looking for a quiet moment between the hundreds of river boats passing that way each day. Then they ordained each other to the priesthood, either near the river's edge or when they returned to the house.

Later priesthood restorations occurred with the visits of Peter, James, and John later in May 1829, and with subsequent keys restored, especially in the Kirtland temple on 3 April 1836 (D&C 110).

# Doctrine and Covenants 12

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## Setting

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Joseph Knight, Sr., had been an early believer and supporter of Joseph Smith. The two met him in 1826 when Joseph Smith was working for Josiah Stowell, and then also worked for Joseph Knight for many months the following year. Joseph Knight loaned his horse and wagon to Joseph and Emma so they could go get married, and they used it again the night Joseph received the plates. Knight provided many supplies such as food and paper and some money to Joseph Smith during the Harmony period. Toward the end of May 1829, about, or perhaps at the same time Hyrum came for a visit, if he gave Hyrum a ride like he had Joseph Smith, Sr., and Samuel in February, Joseph Knight again made the thirty-mile trip from Colesville to Harmony, bringing much needed supplies to the Prophet, including writing paper used in the translation.

Joseph Smith said this of the visit:

About the same time [as Hyrum's visit] came an old Gentleman to visit us, of whose name I wish to make honorable mention; M<sup>r</sup> Joseph Knight Sen of Colesville, Broom County, Penn [New York]; who having heard of the manner in which we were occupying our time, very kindly and considerately brought us, a quantity of provisions, in order that we might not be interrupted in the work of translation, by the want of such necessaries of life: and I just mention here (as in duty bound) that he several times brought us supplies (a distance of at least thirty miles) which enabled us to continue the work when otherwise we must have relinquished it for a season.<sup>4</sup>

The exact date of the revelation is not known; it could have been just before, at the same time as, or just after Hyrum's revelation (D&C 11).<sup>5</sup> From all accounts, both were after D&C 13, toward the end of May 1829.

Like Hyrum, Joseph Knight wanted to know his duty in the work, and the Prophet inquired, receiving this revelation in response.

## Documents and Publication

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The original manuscript is not extant, nor does it appear to have been included in Revelation Book 1 (not in the index).

The oldest version is in the 1833 Book of Commandments where it was first published as Chapter 11, then as Section 38 in the 1835 and 1844 Doctrine and Covenants.

## Outline

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1. Qualifications to serve ([1-6](#))
2. A message to all ([7-9](#))

## Introduction

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Father Knight was counseled that the marvelous work was coming, and he should give heed to God's word. He was told that the harvest was prepared and he could bring salvation to his soul as he helped in the work. He could ask of God and receive answers and blessings, but he needed to first seek to keep the commandments and develop godly characteristics as he sought to establish Zion.

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<sup>4</sup> History, 1838-1856, vol. A-1 [23 December 1805—30 August 1834], [20-21](#).

<sup>5</sup> Revelation, May 1829—B [D&C 12], [Historical Introduction](#).

## Qualifications to Serve (1-6)

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**1** A great and marvelous work is about to come forth among the children of men.

**2** Behold, I am God; give heed to my word, which is quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, to the dividing asunder of both joints and marrow; therefore, give heed unto my word.

**3** Behold, the field is white already to harvest; therefore, whoso desireth to reap let him thrust in his sickle with his might, and reap while the day lasts, that he may treasure up for his soul everlasting salvation in the kingdom of God.

**4** Yea, whosoever will thrust in his sickle and reap, the same is called of God.

**5** Therefore, if you will ask of me you shall receive; if you will knock it shall be opened unto you.

**6** Now, as you have asked, behold, I say unto you, keep my commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion

### Commentary

Compare these verses to D&C 4:1-4; 6:1-5; and 11:1-9 and see commentary on those verses.

## A Message to All (7-9)

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**7** Behold, I speak unto you, and also to all those who have desires to bring forth and establish this work;

**8** And no one can assist in this work except he shall be humble and full of love, having faith, hope, and charity, being temperate in all things, whatsoever shall be entrusted to his care.

**9** Behold, I am the light and the life of the world, that speak these words, therefore give heed with your might, and then you are called. Amen.

### Commentary

**7** *I speak unto you, and also to all those who have desires.* The revelation to Father Knight was personal but also universal. We are all profited by the counsel he received.

**8** *humble and full of love.* Joseph Knight was fairly well off, but his position did not qualify him to serve. Humility, love, and other virtues are the traits that enable a person to be of service to God and others. He was actually an excellent example of these traits.

**8** *being temperate in all things.* To be “temperate” means to exercise self-control and to resist the carnal man. It means to avoid extremes and indulgences.

**9** *I am the light and the life of the world.* While Knight’s revelation did not use the name “Jesus Christ,” this declaration served the same purpose. Referring to both John 8:12, John 6:33, and perhaps John 3:16, but more importantly quoting Mosiah 16:9, Alma 38:9, and 3 Nephi 11:11, which Joseph had recently translated, there is no mistaking the voice of the Savior of the world.

## Results

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Joseph Knight is a quiet hero in the early history of the Church. He had faith in the Lord and in Joseph Smith’s calling as a young prophet. He supplied the Prophet, his family, and his scribes during the critical translation period as best he could, making it possible for the translation to move forward. Joseph Knight and all nine of his children later joined the Church and became the heart of the Colesville branch, forsaking all to follow the Lord and Joseph Smith to Ohio and Missouri and Illinois.

In Nauvoo, Joseph Smith said this about Joseph Knight:

I am now recording in the Book of the Law of the Lord, of such as have stood by me in every hour of peril, for these fifteen long years past; say for instance; my aged and beloved brother Joseph Knights [Knight] Sen<sup>r</sup>, who was among the number of the first to administer to my necessities, while I was laboring, in the commencement of the bringing forth of the work of the Lord, and of laying the foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: for fifteen years has he been faithful and true, and even handed, and exemplary and virtuous, and kind; never deviating to the right hand nor to the left. Behold he is a righteous man. May God Almighty lengthen out the old mans days; and may his trembling, tortured and broken body be renewed, and the vigor of

health turn upon him; if it can be thy will, consistently, O God; and it shall be said of him by the sons of Zion, while there is one of them remaining; that this man, was a faithful man in Israel; therefore his name shall never be forgotten.<sup>6</sup>

## Doctrine and Covenants 14

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### Setting

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The translation of the Book of Mormon began in earnest on 7 April 1829 and continued through the end of May in Harmony. On about 1-4 June 1829, Joseph and Oliver Cowdery moved to the Peter Whitmer, Sr. home in Fayette, New York, to continue working on the translation. Oliver Cowdery had become friends with David Whitmer while teaching school in Palmyra and had been writing to him about the translation work, including sending him excerpts. Joseph and his parents may have met the Whitmers as well, perhaps through Oliver.<sup>7</sup> David Whitmer was about the same age as the two men, almost exactly a year older than Joseph.<sup>8</sup> When there were some concerns about the people in Harmony growing opposed to Joseph's work, and due to their meager circumstances, Oliver asked David if they might come stay there.<sup>9</sup> David needed to get his fields plowed and fertilized first, but woke one morning to find much of the work done, so he left for Harmony in his wagon.<sup>10</sup>

When David Whitmer arrived in Harmony, Oliver informed him that Joseph had shared with him (Oliver) many details of his trip, which David verified exactly, to David's astonishment.<sup>11</sup> Whitmer took Joseph and Oliver to Fayette, and there they finished the translation of the Book of Mormon.<sup>12</sup>

On the way to Fayette, the men had a unique experience, told by David Whitmer to Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith in September 1878:

When I was returning to Fayette with Joseph and Oliver, all of us riding in the wagon, Oliver and I on an old fashioned wooden spring seat and Joseph behind us, we were suddenly approached by a very pleasant, nice looking old man in a clear open place, who saluted us with "Good morning, it is very warm," at the same instant whipping his face or forehead with his hand. We returned the salutation and by a sign from Joseph I invited him to ride if he was going our way, but he said very pleasantly, "No, I am going to Cumorah." This was something new to me, I did not know what Cumorah meant, and as I looked enquiringly at Joseph, the old man instantly disappeared so that I did not see him again. . . . He was, I should think, about 5 feet 9 or 10 inches and heavy set . . . His face was large. He was dressed in a suit of brown, woolen clothes; his hair and beard were white, about like Brother Pratt's, but his beard was not so heavy. I also remember that he had a sort of knapsack on his back, and something was in it which was shaped like a book. It was the messenger who had the plates.<sup>13</sup>

Right after this account, he told how the same man came and visited with his mother when she was feeling overwhelmed by everything going on in her house, and showed her the plates.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Reflections and Blessings, 16 and 23 August 1842, [179](#).

<sup>7</sup> Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 76. In Joseph's later history, it is recorded that he became acquainted with Peter Whitmer, Sr. and some of his family "shortly after commencing to translate" (History, 1838-1856, vol. A-1 [23 December 1805—30 August 1834], [21](#)). Given the location of the statement in the history (right after D&C 12), it likely means after Oliver's arrival in April 1829, not in 1828, meaning Oliver could have introduced them.

<sup>8</sup> Whitmer was born 7 Jan 1805 (*JSP*, D1:487; [David Whitmer](#)), Joseph on 23 Dec 1805 (JS-H 1:3), and Oliver Cowdery 3 Oct 1806 (*JSP*, D1:470, [Oliver Cowdery](#)), making him the youngest of the three.

<sup>9</sup> *JSP*, D1:66-67; Revelation, June 1829—A [D&C 14], [Historical Introduction](#).

<sup>10</sup> Marsh, *Eyewitness History*, 172; McConkie and Ostler, *Revelations*, 124-125.

<sup>11</sup> Marsh, *Eyewitness History*, 172.

<sup>12</sup> Emma came to Fayette shortly after Joseph and Oliver, because she was present during the final part of the translation of the Book of Mormon (MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 145), but I was not able to find a reference as to when or how she arrived.

<sup>13</sup> Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:44-45.

<sup>14</sup> Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:45.

During the translation work, about 5-8 June 1829, the men made a trip to nearby Lake Seneca, where Joseph baptized his brother Hyrum and David Whitmer, and Oliver baptized Peter Whitmer, Jr.<sup>15</sup> Other people in the area were receptive as well, and many opened their homes “for the purpose of instruction, and explanation.”<sup>16</sup> and several came forward for baptism under Joseph and Oliver’s hands, now both holding the Melchizedek Priesthood.<sup>17</sup>

Sections 14, 15, and 16 were all given in this period of time to the three Whitmer brothers, David, John, and Peter, through the “Urim and Thummim”<sup>18</sup> (probably Joseph’s seer stone), near the beginning of June 1829.

## Documents and Publication

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This revelation was first published as Chapter 12 in the 1833 Book of Commandments, which is the oldest known version since the pages where it was recorded in Revelation Book 1 are lost, and as Section 39 in the 1835 and 1844 Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>19</sup>

## Outline

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1. Salvation for laborers ([1-6](#))
2. The gift of eternal life ([7-8](#))
3. Christ the creator ([9-11](#))

## Introduction

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David Whitmer’s revelation was very meaningful for him. A great work was happening and he was called to be part of it. He was promised that if he asked, God would answer, and if he endured to the end, eternal life was his gift.

## Salvation for Laborers (1-6)

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**1** A great and marvelous work is about to come forth unto the children of men.

**2** Behold, I am God; give heed to my word, which is quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, to the dividing asunder of both joints and marrow; therefore give heed unto my word.

**3** Behold, the field is white already to harvest; therefore, whoso desireth to reap let him thrust in his sickle with his might, and reap while the day lasts, that he may treasure up for his soul everlasting salvation in the kingdom of God.

**4** Yea, whosoever will thrust in his sickle and reap, the same is called of God.

**5** Therefore, if you will ask of me you shall receive; if you will knock it shall be opened unto you.

**6** Seek to bring forth and establish my Zion. Keep my commandments in all things.

## Commentary

1-6 These verses are basically identical to D&C 6:1-6 to Oliver Cowdery, D&C 11:1-6 to Hyrum Smith (verse 6 is the only one that is somewhat different, though the message is the same); and D&C 12:1-6 to Joseph Knight, Sr.; see the commentary for those sections.

## The Gift of Eternal Life (7-8)

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**7** And, if you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God.

**8** And it shall come to pass, that if you shall ask the Father in my name, in faith believing, you shall receive the Holy Ghost, which

giveth utterance, that you may stand as a witness of the things of which you shall both hear and see, and also that you may declare repentance unto this generation.

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<sup>15</sup> History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], [23](#).

<sup>16</sup> JSP, H1:312; History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], [23](#).

<sup>17</sup> JSP, H1:313; History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], [23](#).

<sup>18</sup> JSP, D1:67; Revelation, June 1829—A [D&C 14], [Historical Introduction](#).

<sup>19</sup> JSP, D1:66; Revelation, June 1829—A [D&C 14], [Source Note](#); Cook, *The Revelations*, 24.

## Commentary

**7 *endure to the end*.** This counsel proved to be difficult for David Whitmer, who joined a group of men in 1837 who thought Joseph had abandoned the true faith and drifted into error and blindness, being obsessed with power and station. Whitmer was excommunicated on 13 April 1838 and never returned to the Church.<sup>20</sup> Throughout his life, he spoke out strongly against Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints, including Brigham Young later, except when it came to the Book of Mormon, to which he bore fervent testimony to his dying day. David settled in Richmond, Missouri, and lived there for fifty years. He was considered a leading citizen and an honest and upright man.<sup>21</sup>

**7 *the greatest of all the gifts of God*.** This phrase was used before, in D&C 6:13 to Oliver Cowdery. There the greatest gift was to “be saved in the kingdom of God”; here it is “eternal life.” It’s also used in the Book of Mormon, in 1 Nephi 15:36, where the greatest gift is the fruit of “that tree of life” (it’s unclear if at this time in early June the brethren had translated that Book of Mormon passage yet, but it’s possible).

**8 *stand as a witness . . . you shall both hear and see*.** David became one of the three witnesses (D&C 17), thus hearing and seeing great things.

**8 *declare repentance unto this generation*.** In these early revelations, the Lord consistently focused on the message of repentance. Since there was no church yet, they cannot preach the doctrines of baptism, confirmation, or other principles that only come later. But repentance is a preparatory doctrine that brings humility and opportunity for the Spirit to teach.

## Christ the Creator (9-11)

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**9** Behold, I am Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, who created the heavens and the earth, a light which cannot be hid in darkness;

**11** And behold, thou art David, and thou art called to assist; which thing if ye do, and are faithful, ye shall be blessed both spiritually and temporally, and great shall be your reward. Amen.

**10** Wherefore, I must bring forth the fulness of my gospel from the Gentiles unto the house of Israel.

## Commentary

**9 *I am Jesus Christ*.** The declaration of who was speaking the words Joseph Smith was dictating to his scribe must have been powerful. The voice of the Lord was heard again, speaking to man through a prophet of God.

**9 *who created the heavens and the earth*.** Going to Genesis 1:1 (and 3 Nephi 9:15), Jesus identified himself as the one who was the creator of all things.

**9 *a light which cannot be hid in darkness*.** Though Jesus is called the “light” in several scriptures, this is the only time in scripture that this particular phrase is used. See also D&C 6:21.

**10 *the fulness of my gospel*.** This phrase is not found in the Bible but several times in the Book of Mormon. This is the first chronological use of it in the Doctrine and Covenants, though it is used many other times subsequently.

**10 *from the Gentiles unto the house of Israel*.** In Jesus’ time, the gospel went first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. In our dispensation, that is reversed, with the Gentiles carrying the gospel to the house of Israel.

**11 *thou art David*.** Calling David by his name made the revelation more personal and represents God’s intimate knowledge of our lives.

**11 *thou art called to assist*.** David Whitmer’s calling was one of supporting Oliver and Joseph so they could finish the translation. He will have a greater role shortly (see D&C 17).

**11 *blessed both spiritually and temporally*.** David had already experienced such blessings, making this promise very personal. He had been miraculously assisted prior to going to get Joseph and Oliver. He said that he had 20 acres to plow before he could go but one morning woke up and “found between 5 and 7 acres of my ground had been plowed during the night. I don’t know who did it, but it was done, just as I would have done it myself, and the plow was left standing in the furrow. This enabled me to start sooner.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Black, *Who’s Who*, 329; [David Whitmer](#).

<sup>21</sup> Black, *Who’s Who*, 330.

<sup>22</sup> Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:44.

## Results

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David Whitmer was probably baptized just before this revelation was received.<sup>23</sup> Now he was promised the support of the Holy Ghost and the opportunity to assist in the work, including declaring repentance and being a witness. He did become one of the three witnesses (D&C 17), helped select the members of the first Quorum of the Twelve, was among the founding six members of the Church, and served in several positions, including President of the Church in Missouri (similar to a stake president today). Sadly, as mentioned above, he did not endure to the end and was excommunicated on 13 April 1838, after joining forces with those opposed to Joseph Smith. However, he was true to his testimony of the Book of Mormon all of his life, sharing his testimony of it at least fifty times, including on his death bed.<sup>24</sup>

## Doctrine and Covenants 15-16

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### Setting

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See Setting for D&C 14 above. D&C 15 was for John Whitmer and 16 for Peter Whitmer. Like D&C 14 for their brother David, both were received through the “Urim and Thummim,” likely Joseph’s seer stone.<sup>25</sup>

### Documents and Publication

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D&C 14 and 15 were first published as Chapters 13 and 14 in the 1833 Book of Commandments, which are the oldest extant copies (the relevant pages from Revelation Book 1 are missing), and Sections 40 and 41 in the 1835 and 1844 Doctrine and Covenants, respectively.

D&C 15 and 16 are identical except for the name of the recipient and one word in verse 5 (“unto” is added in D&C 16), though this change is not in the 1833 or 1835 editions but was added in the 1844 version. Accordingly, the commentary for both sections is combined here.

### Outline

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1. The Lord’s arm ([1-2](#))
2. Preach the gospel ([3-6](#))

### Introduction

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John and Peter Whitmer both had great, zealous desires to serve the Lord in this new, exciting work, and the Lord recognized their willingness, promising great blessings as they opened their mouths to preach and gave their energies to work in the future Church.

It was the voice of the Lord to them personally, speaking straight to their hearts, and though the revelations were identical, both considered them intensely individual and matching their desires perfectly.

### The Lord’s Arm (1-2)

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**1** Hearken, my servant John, and listen to the words of Jesus Christ, your Lord and your Redeemer.

**2** For behold, I speak unto you with sharpness and with power, for mine arm is over all the earth.

### Commentary

**1** *listen to the words of Jesus Christ.* These revelations came first as aural communications, spoken by Joseph Smith but conveying the words of the Savior, then were written down by scribes (probably Oliver Cowdery, but could have been one of the Whitmers, especially John, who had scribed some for the Book of Mormon translation) for the benefit of the person and others who would also read it.

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<sup>23</sup> JSP, D1:67 n219.

<sup>24</sup> Black, *Who’s Who*, 329-330.

<sup>25</sup> Harper, *Making Sense*, 59.



**2 I speak unto you with sharpness and with power.** Other revelations (D&C 6:2; 11:2; 12:2; 14:2) speak of the Lord's word as being "powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword." This phrase carries the same connotation but without the sword metaphor.

## Preach the Gospel (3-6)

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**3** And I will tell you that which no man knoweth save me and thee alone—

**4** For many times you have desired of me to know that which would be of the most worth unto you.

**5** Behold, blessed are you for this thing, and for speaking my words which I have given you according to my commandments.

**6** And now, behold, I say unto you, that the thing which will be of the most worth unto you will be to declare repentance unto this people, that you may bring souls unto me, that you may rest with them in the kingdom of my Father. Amen.

### Commentary

**3 no man knoweth.** Both John and Peter had sought to know God's will for them. The Lord shared that he knew their innermost thoughts. Though the message was the same to both, it is likely because they both had the same desire but had not shared it with each other. The Lord's messages to these brothers that no one else knew changed over the course of their lives as they each found their own path to service.

**5 for speaking my words which I have given you.** "My words" included the words of the Book of Mormon, the translation of which was nearly completed, and the words of personal revelation, such as these just received in these sections.

**6 bring souls unto me.** A task which is of the greatest worth then as it is today. This also foreshadows a more in-depth discussion of this principle in Section 19.

## Results

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John Whitmer played a key role in the early history of the Church, being one of the eight witnesses, Joseph's scribe for many activities, including some of the Book of Mormon, much of the Joseph Smith Translation, and copies of Joseph's revelations. He also served as Church historian for several years, writing the first detailed history of Church events (D&C 47:1), which history recently came into possession of the Church. He was editor of the *Messenger and Advocate*, participated in the dedication of the Kirtland temple, and was a Church leader in Missouri.

In a dispute over the handling of funds to purchase lands, he was excommunicated on 10 March 1838. He lived and prospered in Missouri until his death in 1878.<sup>26</sup> Though estranged from the Church, John never denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon, emphatically testifying of it until his death, including: "[O]ld Father Whitmer [John] told me [Myron Bond] last winter, with tears in his eyes, that knew as well as he knew had an existence that Joseph translated the ancient writing which was upon the plates, which he 'saw and handled,' and which, as one of the scribes, he helped to copy, as the words fell from Joseph's lips, by supernatural or almighty power."<sup>27</sup>

Peter Whitmer, Jr., who was 19 years old when the Book of Mormon was translated, was also one of the eight witnesses. He went on a mission to the Lamanites with Oliver Cowdery and Parley P. Pratt, resulting in many conversions in Kirtland, Ohio. He was an early leader in the Church, serving on the Missouri high council, and worked as a tailor in Ohio and Missouri, having the opportunity to make the suit that Lilburn W. Boggs wore at his inauguration as lieutenant governor in 1832. Peter contracted and died from tuberculosis on 22 September 1836, just ten months after his brother, Christian, had also died. During his life, Peter bore a strong testimony of his own witness of the Book of Mormon, as did Christian, who preceded him in death.

Oliver Cowdery wrote of both brothers, "though they have departed, it is with great satisfaction that we reflect, that they proclaimed to their last moments, the certainty of their former testimony: The testament is in force after the death of the testator. May all who read remember the fact, that the Lord has given men a witness of himself in the last days, and that they, have faithfully declared it till called away."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Black, *Who's Who*, 331-333; [John Whitmer](#).

<sup>27</sup> Myron H. Bond to Editors, *Saints Herald* 25 [15 August 1878], 253; quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:251.

<sup>28</sup> "The Closing Year," *Latter-day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, Dec. 1836, 3:426, quoted in Griffiths, *Scripture Central Commentary*, 1:179.

# Doctrine and Covenants 17

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## Setting

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Through a revelation in March 1829, Joseph Smith knew that the Lord would provide three witnesses to support Joseph’s story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (D&C 5:11-15). Then while translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph and Oliver recorded two passages that discussed the same topic (Ether 5:2-4 and 2 Nephi 11:3 are mentioned in *History of the Church*, though 2 Nephi 27:12 was likely also influential). The Lord had already told three men that they could be witnesses: Martin Harris (D&C 5:11-13, 24-28), Oliver Cowdery (D&C 6:25-28), and David Whitmer (D&C 14:8).

Because of this, Joseph recorded that “it <almost immediately> occurred to, Oliver Cowdery David Whitmer and the aforementioned martin Harris who had came to see us, and make enquiry how we got along with our work--<of translation;> that they would have me enquire of the Lord, to know if they might not obtain of him to be allowed to be the three witnesses and ~~at length~~ <finally> they became so very solicitous, and teased me so much almost without intermission for some time, that I at length complied.”<sup>29</sup> Joseph asked through the “Urim and Thummim” (probably the seer stone) toward the end of June, and the result is Section 17.

## Documents and Publication

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The oldest version is the copy in Revelation Book 2. It was first published in the *Messenger and Advocate* (Sep 1835). It was not included in the Book of Commandments but was Section 42 in the 1835 and 1844 Doctrine and Covenants.

## Outline

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1. Three witnesses will see the plates ([1-4](#))
2. The Book of Mormon is of God ([5-9](#))

## Introduction

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This short section was extremely important to Joseph Smith and the three men who became witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Joseph would no longer be the only one to bear testimony to the world about the work he was bringing forth—he would be supported by others charged with that responsibility and armed with equivalent spiritual experiences to validate and strengthen their testimonies.

## Three Witnesses Will See the Plates (1-4)

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**1** Behold, I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do with full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breastplate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the Red Sea.

**2** And it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old.

**3** And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God;

**4** And this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work.

## Commentary

**1** *you shall have a view of the plates*. Why have witnesses at all? In fact, given the accounts of how the plates were translated (Joseph didn’t look at them but only at the seer stone/Nephite interpreters, virtually ignoring the plates themselves), why have plates at all? Why go to all the trouble of preserving the plates if Joseph didn’t even do much except leave them sitting on the table?

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<sup>29</sup> *JSP*, H1:314; History, 1838-1856, vol. A-1 [23 December 1805—30 August 1834], [23](#).

The answer is in the witness the physical plates provide to believers and the world. With no plates, there could not be other people who saw the plates and who could testify to the truth of the work. Without the plates, it would truly be Joseph alone, because the witnesses would not have seen anything.<sup>30</sup> With the plates and witnesses, there is tangible evidence of the reality of Joseph's story, and thus his authority and authorization to speak and act as he had been doing—and will yet do.

1 *the breastplate, the sword of Laban*. Being mentioned in the Book of Mormon and then produced for the witnesses, these physical objects speak to the truth of the translation. Even if Joseph had real plates, the story he produced could have been totally fabricated. But the story included these objects, and seeing them was additional confirmation to the truth of that story to the witnesses.<sup>31</sup>

1 *Urim and Thummim*. This section was not published in the 1833 Book of Commandments and the original manuscript is not extant, but like Section 10, this reference to the “Urim and Thummim” was probably added for the 1835 printing. See notes for Section 10, verse 1.

1 *given to the brother of Jared*. This is the only reference to the brother of Jared in the Doctrine and Covenants. It is also apparently where we learn that the stones, or the Nephite interpreters that Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon, came from that ancient source (see also Ether 3:23-28).

1 *miraculous directors*. We typically call this the Liahona today, after the name given in Alma 37:38. However, the “directors” (plural) refer specifically to the two “spindles” within the “round ball of curious workmanship.” One of the spindles “pointed the way whither we should go” (1 Nephi 16:10) but the function of the second one is unstated. Perhaps more detail was provided in the Book of Lehi that Martin Harris lost, but from the broken bow incident, it appeared to have writing that was the voice of the Lord to them (1 Nephi 16:26-29), much like Joseph received the word of the Lord through the Nephite interpreters and his seer stones.

2 *that faith which was had by the prophets of old*. The faith that the witnesses needed to exhibit was the same that Biblical prophets exercised to see and experience what they did. Martin Harris was lacking such faith, and so the blessing did not come at first to him (see Results below), but he continued to exercise his faith, and with Joseph's help was able to bring it up to the level needed to fulfill his calling as a witness. It is no different with us in our callings today. We must work to grow our faith to receive the grace of God to be able to fulfill our own callings, no matter how simple or complex they might be.

3 *testify of them*. The witnesses told this charge seriously, especially after the divine voice told them again to do so. Not only did they write their testimony and have it included with the Book of Mormon itself, but though they all three later left the Church and even developed a very contentious spirit against Joseph Smith, they still bore testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon at every opportunity, including on their death beds. For example, Martin Harris was challenged in 1869 about his testimony—did he still believe it? His response “was electric. A changed old man stood before me,” said William H. Homer. “‘Young man,’ answered Martin Harris with impressiveness, ‘Do I believe it! Do I see the sun shining! Just as surely as the sun is shining on us and gives us light . . . just as surely as the breath of life sustains us, so surely do I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, chose of God to open the last dispensation of the fulness of times; so surely do I know that the Book of Mormon was divinely translated. I saw the plates; I saw an Angel; I heard the voice of God. I know that the Book of Mormon is true and that Joseph Smith was a true Prophet of God. I might as well doubt my own existence as to doubt the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon or the divine calling of Joseph Smith’.”<sup>32</sup>

4 *that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., may not be destroyed*. One of the Lord's reasons for having the three witnesses was so that Joseph could avoid destruction. This was first the destruction of his testimony and work. Many have attacked Joseph's testimony alone, but when Joseph is supported by the witnesses—the three and the eight—he is stronger and impossible to refute. But the three witnesses also played critical roles in keeping Joseph from being physically destroyed.

Martin Harris provided financial support when no one else did or could, including the incredible sacrifice of getting the Book of Mormon published. John Gilbert, the typesetter for the Book of Mormon, recalled, “Martin was the main spoke in

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<sup>30</sup> Consider D&C 7, which was a translation of a manuscript that may or may not still exist. If the entire Book of Mormon had been provided to Joseph Smith in that manner, what could others testify to?

<sup>31</sup> McConkie and Ostler, *Revelations*, 127-128; Robinson and Garrett, *A Commentary*, 1:99.

<sup>32</sup> McConkie and Ostler, *Revelations*, 132-133.

the wheel of Mormonism in its start in Palmyra, and I may say, the only spoke.”<sup>33</sup> Without Martin’s support in those critical early years, Joseph would have failed.

Oliver came at the right time and boosted the work in an amazing way. For months, Joseph had produced essentially nothing. After Oliver arrived, the entire book was finished in just over two months. Oliver kept the work and Joseph from being destroyed at this important time.

Finally, David Whitmer arrived and took Joseph and Oliver to a safe location to complete the work and get the publication going, just as persecution was beginning to rear up in Harmony. His faith and commitment made all the difference to getting the book done and off to the press.<sup>34</sup>

## The Book of Mormon is of God (5-9)

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5 And ye shall testify that you have seen them, even as my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., has seen them; for it is by my power that he has seen them, and it is because he had faith.

6 And he has translated the book, even that part which I have commanded him, and as your Lord and your God liveth it is true.

7 Wherefore, you have received the same power, and the same faith, and the same gift like unto him;

8 And if you do these last commandments of mine, which I have given you, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; for my grace is sufficient for you, and you shall be lifted up at the last day.

9 And I, Jesus Christ, your Lord and your God, have spoken it unto you, that I might bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men. Amen.

### Commentary

**5 *it is by my power that he has seen them.*** The witnesses were promised to see the Book of Mormon plates by the same power Joseph Smith experienced to see them. It was only because God allowed Joseph to see and hold the plates that he was able to do so, and it would be the same with the witnesses.

**6 *as your Lord and your God liveth it is true.*** Not many books have the testimony of God affixed to it, but the Book of Mormon is declared true by an ancient oath made by the Lord himself.

**7 *the same power, and the same faith, and the same gift.*** The witnesses would be blessed with a testimony like Joseph’s, a combination of direct evidence and a divine witness, which they should consider a gift of God.

**8 *the gates of hell shall not prevail against you.*** This phrase is used in the New Testament (Matthew 16:18), the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 4:32; 3 Nephi 11:39-40; 18:13), and the Doctrine and Covenants (17:8; 18:5; 21:6; 98:22; 128:10). Gates work to prevent movement either in or out of a place. In some cases, the gates of hell are open, ready to receive the sinner (3 Nephi 11:40; 18:13) but other times they are continually shut so that we are prevented from entering (2 Nephi 4:32). In this case, it appears that the phrase means that if the witnesses are put into hell, that the gates will not be able to hold them in, if they keep the commandments to testify of what they will see. In other words, as we all sin, we put ourselves essentially in hell and under Satan’s power. Through the Atonement of Christ, we will be able to walk out of that miserable place and nothing can hold us there as we repent and strive to align our will to God’s.

### Results

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A few days after receiving this revelation, Joseph called family and friends together one morning for singing and prayer. After getting up from his knees, he turned to Martin Harris and said, “you have got to humble yourself before God this day and obtain if possible a forgiveness of your sins and if you will do this it is God’s will that you and Oliver Cowdery and David Whitmer should look upon the plates.”<sup>35</sup>

David Whitmer recounted, “I was plowing in the field one morning, and Joseph and Oliver came along with a revelation stating that I was to be one of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. I got over the fence and we went out into the woods, near by, and sat down on a log and talked awhile. We then kneeled down and prayed.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Keith J. Wilson, “The Three Witnesses,” in Black and Skinner, *Joseph*, 98-99.

<sup>34</sup> Keith J. Wilson, “The Three Witnesses,” in Black and Skinner, *Joseph*, 95-106.

<sup>35</sup> Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1844-1845, [bk. 8, p. 11](#); underlining in the original.

<sup>36</sup> Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:91.

Whitmer doesn't mention it, but Joseph wrote that Martin Harris was also with them at the beginning. They took turns praying, starting with Joseph, then the others. After two rounds of such prayers, nothing had happened and Martin proclaimed that it was surely on his account, so he left. The other three prayed again and soon Moroni appeared with the plates in his hands, which he slowly showed to the three, one page at a time.<sup>37</sup> According to David Whitmer, Moroni also showed them the Liahona, the Brass Plates, the plates of Ether, other (unnamed) plates, the interpreters, and the sword of Laban; some of this was displayed on a table.<sup>38</sup> They then heard a voice from heaven proclaiming that it was true and that they were to bear record of what they had seen and heard.<sup>39</sup>

Joseph next went and found Martin, and together they prayed and had a similar experience. As a result, Martin cried, "'tis enough. 'tis enough mine eyes have beheld, mine eyes have beheld."<sup>40</sup>

Oliver Cowdery later said:

I wrote with my own pen the entire book of Mormon (save a few pages) as it fell from the lips of the prophet, As he translated <it> by the gift and power of god, By means of the urim and thummin, or as it is called by that book [“]holy interpreters.” I beheld with my eyes. And handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters. That book is true. Sidney Rigdon did not write it, Mr Spaulding did not write it. I wrote it myself as it fell from the Lips of the prophet.<sup>41</sup>

In 1869, Martin Harris declared:

Just as surely as the sun is shining on us by day, just as surely as the breath of life sustains us, so surely do I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God; so surely do I know that the Book of Mormon was divinely translated. I saw the plates, I saw the angel. I heard the voice of God. I know that the Book of Mormon is true.<sup>42</sup>

David Whitmer's testimony was recorded in 1881 as follows:

All at once a light came down from above us and encircled us for quite a little distance around; and the angel stood before us. He was dressed in white, and spoke and called me by name and said 'Blessed is he that keepeth His commandments.' This is all that I heard the angel say . . . the voice of God spoke out of heaven saying that the Book was true and the translation correct.<sup>43</sup>

This experience lifted a huge burden from Joseph's shoulders. As Lucy Smith recorded, they were visiting Joseph in Fayette when this happened, and Joseph came in the room and said:

Father! Mother! You do not know how happy I am. The Lord has now caused the plates to be shown to three more besides me. They have also seen an angel and will have to testify to the truth of what I have said, for they know for themselves that I do not go about to deceive the people. I do feel as though I was relieved of a dreadful burden which was almost too much for me to endure. But they will now have to bear a part, and it does rejoice my soul that I am not any longer to be entirely alone in the world.<sup>44</sup>

The three witnesses had their marvelous experience about the end of June 1829. A few days later, Joseph and Oliver were in Manchester at his parents' home to negotiate in Palmyra about the printing of the book. Several of the Whitmers had accompanied him. Joseph invited the Whitmers—Christian, Jacob, Peter, and John—their brother-in-law, Hiram Page, his own father, Joseph, Sr., and his two brothers, Hyrum and Samuel, to go “to a grove where the family were in the habit of offering up their secret devotions to God.”<sup>45</sup> There “one of the ancient Nephites” met them and brought the plates. The eight men were able to hold them and look at the pages, then wrote their own testimony of the experience, also included in every edition of the Book of Mormon.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *JSP*, H1:318; History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], [24](#).

<sup>38</sup> Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:91.

<sup>39</sup> *JSP*, H1:319–320; History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], [25](#).

<sup>40</sup> *JSP*, H1:320; History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834], [25](#).

<sup>41</sup> Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:494.

<sup>42</sup> Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 2:316.

<sup>43</sup> Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:91.

<sup>44</sup> Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, [bk. 8, p. 11](#).

<sup>45</sup> Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845, [bk. 9, p. 1](#); this could have been the same grove where the First Vision took place.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, *Investigating*, 16–17.

One of the most interesting witnesses to the plates never had her testimony printed in the book. She was, in fact, the first witness to the plates after Joseph himself. Mary Whitmer began hosting Joseph and Oliver on 1 June 1829. Soon Emma also came, then the Smith parents. She already had a houseful with her own family, and now their little log cabin was bursting with guests. She was very busy caring for all of these people. This was early June 1829. As Mary went out into the yard to milk the cows one morning, an old man was there with a large knapsack. She was afraid at first, but he told her about what was happening in her house, and she calmed. He then said, “You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase of your toil; it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened.” He then showed her the plates, turning the pages over one at a time and showing her the engravings. The experience completely removed her feelings of fatigue and she was able to bear the increased burdens with cheerfulness.<sup>47</sup>

## Joseph Smith—History 1:66-75

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### Setting

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The first two verses (66-67) cover the arrival of Oliver Cowdery in Harmony to work with Joseph Smith, which we have already covered with D&C 6-9. The other verses cover the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood and the immediate aftermath of that experience with John the Baptist. At the end of verse 75 is an account given by Oliver Cowdery from a letter he wrote in 1834 covering the similar period. Both will be included here with comments.

### Documents and Publication

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See previous notes on Joseph Smith—History in D&C 6-9.

### Outline

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1. Oliver Cowdery’s arrival ([66-67](#))
2. Priesthood restoration ([68-75](#))
3. Oliver’s account ([addendum](#))

### Introduction

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In this published history, several important events are skipped over, which we will fill in through the commentary below. Oliver Cowdery’s account provides additional details that are worth considering. The published Pearl of Great Price history ends abruptly after the priesthood restoration; we will also cover other events in this period of Church history in this and future lessons.

### Oliver Cowdery’s Arrival (66-67)

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**66** On the 5th day of April, 1829, Oliver Cowdery came to my house, until which time I had never seen him. He stated to me that having been teaching school in the neighborhood where my father resided, and my father being one of those who sent to the school, he went to board for a season at his house, and while there the family related to him the circumstances of my having

received the plates, and accordingly he had come to make inquiries of me.

**67** Two days after the arrival of Mr. Cowdery (being the 7th of April) I commenced to translate the Book of Mormon, and he began to write for me.

### Commentary

As mentioned above, this period of Church history was covered in the lesson on D&C 6-9.

### Priesthood Restoration (68-75)

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**68** We still continued the work of translation, when, in the ensuing month (May, 1829), we on a certain day went into the woods

to pray and inquire of the Lord respecting baptism for the remission of sins, that we found mentioned in the translation of the

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<sup>47</sup> Anderson, *Investigating*, 30-32; Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5:45.

plates. 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:

**69** 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.

**70** 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; and he commanded us to go and be baptized, and gave us directions that I should baptize Oliver Cowdery, and that afterwards he should baptize me.

**71** Accordingly we went and were baptized. I baptized him first, and afterwards he baptized me—after which I laid my hands upon his head and ordained him to the Aaronic Priesthood, and afterwards he laid his hands on me and ordained me to the same Priesthood—for so we were commanded.\*

**72** 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, and that I should be called the first Elder of the Church, and he (Oliver Cowdery) the second. It was on the fifteenth day of May, 1829, that we were ordained under the hand of this messenger, and baptized.

## Commentary

**68 to pray and inquire of the Lord respecting baptism.** As the two brethren continued the Book of Mormon translation, they came to a passage in the book that talked about baptism. This was possibly 3 Nephi 11 where the disciples were given authority to baptize by the Savior.<sup>48</sup> Other references to baptism in the Book of Mormon that they already translated might also have played into the conversation. This gave them pause, generated discussion and finally action, leading to the experiences described in the following verses.

**68 having laid his hands upon us, he ordained us.** The laying on of hands was thus established from the beginning as the means of ordination.

**69 I confer the Priesthood of Aaron.** This quotation from John the Baptist (though we don't learn his name in Joseph Smith's account until verse 72) became Section 13 in 1879, before there was a scripture called the Pearl of Great Price with Joseph Smith's history in it. See the commentary on D&C 13 below for more details.

**70 this should be conferred on us hereafter.** Referring to the authority to confer the Holy Ghost, John told Joseph and Oliver that they would receive it shortly. Joseph Smith did not record any details about this experience, though there are references to it in the Doctrine and Covenants (18:9; 20:2-3; 27:12; 128:20). This event happened as Joseph and Oliver were returning from a visit to Joseph Knight in Colesville (D&C 128:20). As they walked along the river, Peter, James, and John appeared, "declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom, and of the dispensation of the fullness of times!" (D&C 128:20).

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<sup>48</sup> Oliver Cowdery commented (at the end of Joseph Smith-History) that this event was "after writing the account given of the Savior's ministry to the remnant of the seed of Jacob," which could be anything after 3 Nephi 10. In John Welch's proposed timeline, the translation would have only reached 3 Nephi 18 by 15 May (John W. Welch, "Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon: 'Days [and Hours] Never to Be Forgotten,'" *BYU Studies*, 57, no. 4 (2018), 46. Other chapters referring to baptism come later in the book but are candidates as well.

**73** Immediately on our coming up out of the water after we had been baptized, we experienced great and glorious blessings from our Heavenly Father. No sooner had I baptized Oliver Cowdery, than the Holy Ghost fell upon him, and he stood up and prophesied many things which should shortly come to pass. And again, so soon as I had been baptized by him, I also had the spirit of prophecy, when, standing up, I prophesied concerning the rise of this Church, and many other things connected with the Church, and this generation of the children of men. We were filled with the Holy Ghost, and rejoiced in the God of our salvation.

**74** Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of. In the meantime we were forced to keep secret the circumstances of having received the Priesthood and our having been baptized, owing to a spirit of persecution which had already manifested itself in the neighborhood.

**75** We had been threatened with being mobbed, from time to time, and this, too, by professors of religion. And their intentions of mobbing us were only counteracted by the influence of my wife's father's family (under Divine providence), who had become very friendly to me, and who were opposed to mobs, and were willing that I should be allowed to continue the work of translation without interruption; and therefore offered and promised us protection from all unlawful proceedings, as far as in them lay.

Oliver spoke of this event when he returned to the Church in 1848: “I was also present with Joseph when the Melchizedek priesthood was conferred by the holy angles of god.—which we then confirmed on each other by the will and commandment of god. This priesthood is also to remain upon the earth until the Last remnant of time. This holy priesthood we conferred upon many. And is just as good and valid as if god had conferred it in person.”<sup>49</sup>

In terms of the date, it has to be after 15 May 1829, but how long? Larry C. Porter did some excellent work several decades ago that is still helpful in narrowing it down.<sup>50</sup> According to his research, the first mention of the priesthood is in D&C 18:9, which was in early June 1829.<sup>51</sup> Joseph and Oliver moved to Fayette, NY, leaving Harmony sometime around 1 June. They had been ordained by Peter, James, and John before they left, based on D&C 128:20. Because that scripture declares that the event took place between Colesville and Harmony, it had to be when Joseph and Oliver were traveling twenty-eight miles between Joseph’s house in Harmony and the Knight’s home in Colesville, sometime between 15 May and the end of the month.

One account from Addison Everett, who said he heard it from Joseph Smith in 1844, explained how Joseph and Oliver were arrested in Colesville but managed to escape into the woods. As they traveled at night in the mud and water, Oliver prayed, “O Lord, How long Brother Joseph have we got to endure this thing.” Everett stated that next Peter, James, and John appeared and gave them the priesthood. However, there are some problems with the account, including the attorney mentioned by Everett not being involved with Joseph Smith until the summer of 1830. Nevertheless, a second source, Erastus Snow, said a similar thing in 1882 (without mentioning the attorney), so it could be that Everett simply conflated a couple of events but got the priesthood ordination narrative correct.<sup>52</sup>

A second event was critical in this timeline. Sometime in June 1829, while at the Whitmer home in Fayette, Joseph and Oliver became anxious to receive the promised authority to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost on others (D&C 13). In Joseph’s 1838 history, it says, “We had for some time made this matter a subject of humble prayer, and at length we got together in the Chamber of M<sup>r</sup> Whitmer’s house in order more particularly to see of the Lord what we not so earnestly desired: . . . for we had not long been engaged in solemn and fervent prayer, when the word of the Lord, came to us in the Chamber, commanding us; that I should ordain Oliver Cowdery to be an Elder in the Church of Jesus Christ, and that he also should ordain me to the same office, and then to ordain others as it should be made known unto us, from time to time.”<sup>53</sup> The men were told to perform these ordinations later, when those that had been baptized could vote to sustain them. This was done on 6 April 1830, when the Church was organized. Thus the ordinations received by the hands of Peter, James, and John were not replicated for several months, unlike the command they received from John the Baptist to ordain each other right away.

One interesting element of this is that calling what they received from Peter, James, and John the “Melchizedek priesthood” is a later development. The accounts closer to the event speak of them being ordained apostles and of receiving keys and being able to give the gift of the Holy Ghost. As Joseph’s understanding of priesthood structure and offices grew in the next decade, his later histories look back at this event as the restoration of the Melchizedek priesthood.<sup>54</sup>

**71 *we went and were baptized.*** Following John’s instructions, the two journeyed down to the Susquehanna river at the south end of Joseph’s property. Joseph first baptized Oliver, then Oliver baptized Joseph, then they each ordained each other to the priesthood they had just received (perhaps back at the house after putting on dry clothing).

**72 *John the Baptist.*** This is where we learn the name of the messenger, the same who was beheaded in the New Testament for his testimony of Christ. Resurrected and restored, he returned again to the earth as the last holder of the keys of Aaron and restored that priesthood.

**72 *acted under the direction of Peter, James and John.*** As a holder of the lesser priesthood, John was following the lead and direction of the three senior apostles of the dispensation of Jesus’ time. The two men were instructed that the priesthood held by the apostles would be given to them “in due time” (see v. 70 commentary for a discussion on that event).

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<sup>49</sup> Recorded by Reuben Miller in his journal in the Church Archives, cited in Cook, *Revelations*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> Larry C. Porter, “[Dating the Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood](#), *Ensign*, June 1979.

<sup>51</sup> *JSP*, D1:69; Revelation, June 1829-B [D&C 18], [Historical Introduction](#).

<sup>52</sup> See the article by Brian Q. Cannon, “[Priesthood Restoration Documents](#), *BYU Studies* 35:4 (1995-1996), 162-207, that documents known comments about the priesthood restoration and provides some analysis.

<sup>53</sup> History, 1838-1856, Vol. A-1 [23 December 1805—30 August 1834], [27](#).

<sup>54</sup> See the documents in Cannon’s article that document the progression of understanding.



72 **first Elder of the Church.** There was no church, of course, at this time, but the term Elder was commonly used in Joseph Smith's day among many churches as a leadership position. When the Church was later organized in April 1830, Joseph and Oliver ordained each other elders at the organization of the Church (D&C 21 heading).

72 **fifteenth day of May, 1829.** The exact date was preserved of this first ordination and the baptisms, which is celebrated around the Church each year with commemorations of various kinds.

73 **he stood up and prophesied many things.** The two men were filled with the Holy Ghost after their baptisms and both prophesied many things. What things they said were not recorded in detail, but Joseph spoke of "the rise of this Church" and other things connected with it. Note that they had not yet been commanded to organize a church, so this was truly a preparatory revelation that perhaps was the first time that Joseph knew what the next step after completing the Book of Mormon might be.

74 **we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings.** The timing of Joseph's comment could relate not only to their baptisms, but also to their reception of the gift of the Holy Ghost not many days afterwards. Both experiences triggered revelatory experiences, and like Paul in the New Testament who, after his vision of Christ suddenly saw Christ all throughout the scriptures, now these two had the Holy Ghost as their instructor. They read the Bible with new eyes, understanding it in a way they "never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of."

74 **forced to keep secret the circumstances of having received the Priesthood.** The first mention of this in print was 1834 by Oliver Cowdery, though certainly they taught it prior to that. Joseph first wrote about it in 1838, though that history wasn't published until 1842 in Nauvoo. Bushman points out that some have said that the delay in mentioning it might make it look like a later addition to boost Joseph's authority, but there is no attempt at aggrandizement in his recollections, nor in Oliver's. They simply were relating their experiences.<sup>55</sup>

75 **my wife's father's family.** Emma's father never did like Joseph but her brothers were much more supportive and helped protect Joseph, Emma, and Oliver as they worked in Harmony. But by late May 1829, the persecution they experienced was strong, and they returned to Fayette to stay at the Whitmer home, and there finished the translation. Joseph did not know the Whitmers, but Oliver did, so he enabled that move and support, and the Whitmers would become key players in the early history of the Church.

## Oliver's Account (addendum)

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Oliver Cowdery describes these events thus: "These were days never to be forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom! Day after day I continued, uninterrupted, to write from his mouth, as he translated with the Urim and Thummim, or, as the Nephites would have said, 'Interpreters,' the history or record called 'The Book of Mormon.'

"To notice, in even few words, the interesting account given by Mormon and his faithful son, Moroni, of a people once beloved and favored of heaven, would supersede my present design; I shall therefore defer this to a future period, and, as I said in the introduction, pass more directly to some few incidents immediately connected with the rise of this Church, which may be entertaining to some thousands who have stepped forward, amid the frowns of bigots and the calumny of hypocrites, and embraced the Gospel of Christ.

"No men, in their sober senses, could translate and write the directions given to the Nephites from the mouth of the Savior, of the precise manner in which men should build up His Church, and especially when corruption had spread an uncertainty over all forms and systems practiced among men, without desiring a privilege of showing the willingness of the heart by being buried

in the liquid grave, to answer a 'good conscience by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.'

"After writing the account given of the Savior's ministry to the remnant of the seed of Jacob, upon this continent, it was easy to be seen, as the prophet said it would be, that darkness covered the earth and gross darkness the minds of the people. On reflecting further it was as easy to be seen that amid the great strife and noise concerning religion, none had authority from God to administer the ordinances of the Gospel. For the question might be asked, have men authority to administer in the name of Christ, who deny revelations, when His testimony is no less than the spirit of prophecy, and His religion based, built, and sustained by immediate revelations, in all ages of the world when He has had a people on earth? If these facts were buried, and carefully concealed by men whose craft would have been in danger if once permitted to shine in the faces of men, they were no longer to us; and we only waited for the commandment to be given 'Arise and be baptized.'

"This was not long desired before it was realized. The Lord, who is rich in mercy, and ever willing to answer the consistent prayer of the humble, after we had called upon Him in a fervent manner, aside from the abodes of men, condescended to manifest to

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<sup>55</sup> Bushman, *Rough Stone*, 75-76.

us His will. On a sudden, as from the midst of eternity, the voice of the Redeemer spake peace to us, while the veil was parted and the angel of God came down clothed with glory, and delivered the anxiously looked for message, and the keys of the Gospel of repentance. What joy! what wonder! what amazement! While the world was racked and distracted—while millions were groping as the blind for the wall, and while all men were resting upon uncertainty, as a general mass, our eyes beheld, our ears heard, as in the ‘blaze of day’; yes, more—above the glitter of the May sunbeam, which then shed its brilliancy over the face of nature! Then his voice, though mild, pierced to the center, and his words, ‘I am thy fellow-servant,’ dispelled every fear. We listened, we gazed, we admired! ‘Twas the voice of an angel from glory, ‘twas a message from the Most High! And as we heard we rejoiced, while His love enkindled upon our souls, and we were wrapped in the vision of the Almighty! Where was room for doubt? Nowhere; uncertainty had fled, doubt had sunk no more to rise, while fiction and deception had fled forever!

“But, dear brother, think, further think for a moment, what joy filled our hearts, and with what surprise we must have bowed, (for who would not have bowed the knee for such a blessing?) when we received under his hand the Holy Priesthood as he said, ‘Upon you my fellow-servants, in the name of Messiah, I confer this Priesthood and this authority, which shall remain upon earth, that the Sons of Levi may yet offer an offering unto the Lord in righteousness!’

### Commentary

Oliver’s account was written in a series of letters to William W. Phelps and was published in the *Messenger and Advocate*. He adds many interesting details with his verbose and enthusiastic writing style, which is why this excerpt from his letters was included in the Pearl of Great Price.

I will call out one thing in particular: according to Oliver, when John the Baptist came, his appearance was preceded by “the voice of the Redeemer” (paragraph 5 above) and again in paragraph 7 (“one word from the mouth of the Savior”). He doesn’t record what the voice said, but that is a detail missing from Joseph Smith—History.

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