

THE HOLY ORDER OF GOD

(Alma 13)

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To the wayward people of Ammonihah, Amulek had delivered a poignant testimony of Christ as God, had borne witness of the necessity of repentance, and had held out the hope of redemption from sin and death through the merits and mercy of the coming Messiah. Alma then stood and delivered a companion and confirming witness of the reality of the Savior and the manner in which men and women can, through faith, pass from death unto eternal life.

"Therefore," he said, quoting the Lord to the ancients, "whosoever repenteth and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest." Alma then pleaded: "And now, my brethren, seeing we know these things, and they are true, let us repent, and harden not our hearts, . . . but let us enter into the rest of God, which is prepared according to his word" (Alma 12:34, 37). It is in the context of Alma's discussion of how the Saints can, through applying the atoning blood of Christ, enter into the rest of God, that Alma begins a discussion of the holy order of God. This discussion is deep and ponderous; it is an insightful prophetic declaration as to how, through the blessings of the priesthood, the people of God--those called and prepared from the foundation of the world--may be sanctified from sin and enjoy the "words of eternal life" in this mortal sphere, all in preparation for eternal life with God and holy beings hereafter (see Moses 6:59).

The Priesthood Among the Nephites

Before we undertake a serious consideration of Alma 13, let us turn our attention to the matter of priesthood among the Nephites. From the days of Adam to the time of Moses, the High Priesthood was administered through what we know as the Patriarchal Order, a patriarchal theocracy whereby the will of God in heaven was made known to the inhabitants of earth through worthy high priests who governed their families in both civil and ecclesiastical matters (Smith,

Doctrines 3:104; The Way 72-73; Answers 2:174). When the children of Israel proved unworthy and unwilling to receive the highest blessings of the gospel, including the fulness of the priesthood and the privilege of seeing the face of God, Jehovah took from the midst of Israel the fulness of the High Priesthood; he also took Moses, the man on earth who held its keys or right of presidency (see JST, Exodus 34:1-2; JST, Deuteronomy 10:1-2; D&C 84:19-27). There were men among the people of the covenant who held the Melchizedek Priesthood after Moses was translated--including the sons of Aaron and the seventy elders of Israel--but these had probably been ordained to the same previously. After this time,"in Israel, the common people, the people generally, did not exercise the functions of the priestood in its fulness," wrote President Joseph Fielding Smith,

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. (Smith, Doctrines 3:85.)

Because there were no Levites in the colony of Lehi (the Nephites and Mulekites were of the tribes of Joseph and Judah, respectively), we assume that there was no Aaronic Priesthood among the Nephites, at least until the coming of Jesus to the Americas. The words priests and teachers (2 Nephi 5:26; Jacob 1:17-18; Alma 45:22) thus appear to be descriptive of their ministerial duties in the higher priesthood rather than offices in the Aaronic Priesthood (Smith, Doctrines 3:87; Answers 1:123-26;) (McConkie, The Promised 427; A New Witness 311.) In seeking to understand the nature of authority among the Nephite branch of Israel, therefore, we turn to a capsule statement by Joseph Smith. "All priesthood is Melchizedek," he explained, "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." The latter-day Seer then added this important detail: "All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained by God himself." (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 180-81, hereafter TPJS, emphasis added.) Lehi was a prophet. Nephi and Jacob were prophets. Mosiah, Benjamin, Alma,