

*Abstract: Section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants contains what is commonly known by Latter-day Saints as the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood. Priesthood leaders in the church are expected to teach and explain this Oath and Covenant to prospective Melchizedek Priesthood holders. However, the meanings of phrases within the Oath and Covenant are not well understood. For example: What does it mean to become the sons of Moses and Aaron? In what sense are bodies renewed? Are the promised blessings just for holders of the priesthood or for others as well? This paper discusses several ways that phrases in the Oath and Covenant have been interpreted. To identify differing interpretations, I conducted an extensive review of references to the Oath and Covenant in LDS conference addresses and the words of Joseph Smith using the LDS Scripture Citation Index<sup>1</sup>. After considering these interpretations, I explore other ways the phrases could be interpreted to provide greater understanding of what it means to hold the priesthood and “magnify” it.*

Interpreting scripture can be challenging. In an examination of a sample of Joseph Smith’s words, Jeffrey Bradshaw discussed several factors<sup>2</sup> to consider in interpreting scripture, including:

- [Page 2]understanding the meanings of words and phrases as they would have been understood at the time of writing
- understanding the cultural context at the time of writing
- decoding unfamiliar imagery
- recognizing that words are an attempt to explain spiritual concepts that often can be well understood only by personal revelation.

Additional matters to consider are:

- the surrounding text, as the meaning of the word or phrase would be expected to be consistent with the flow of ideas surrounding it
- meanings of similar phrases from earlier scripture likely alluded to
- consistency with more broadly established doctrine and principles.

The person most likely to have understood what was intended by the phrases in the Oath and Covenant was Joseph Smith, through whom the revelation came. However, I could not find any record of his expounding directly on these verses. Since Joseph’s time, many general authorities of the Church have discussed and interpreted the Oath and Covenant, but there have been no definitive statements from the First Presidency to provide authoritative revelatory interpretations.

As stated by President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “the Restoration is an ongoing process; we are living in it right now.”<sup>3</sup> A major part of this is the improving and deepening of our understanding of scriptures that have been with us since the early days of the restoration. This has been assisted by an explosion in access to historical records and historical contextual information in recent years.

Interpretational inertia sometimes occurs, whereby a particular interpretation of scripture is quoted and requoted until over time it gains a high degree of acceptance. The authority and integrity of those stating such interpretations are sufficient for many to mandate unquestioning acceptance, even if it began simply as an opinion. This can be an impediment to considering differing interpretations.

In recent years the Church has clarified that not every statement made by a Church leader, past or present, necessarily constitutes doctrine. An article in the Church’s online Newsroom states: “A

statement made [Page 3]by one leader on a single occasion often represents a personal, though well considered, opinion, not meant to be official or binding for the whole Church. With divine inspiration, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles counsel together to establish doctrine.”<sup>4</sup>

In any case, as scriptures are susceptible to multiple interpretations, there is not necessarily one and only one way of understanding them. Additional meanings can be revealed over time that may never even have occurred to those who first recorded them. For example, as Grant Hardy has pointed out, Nephi was not afraid of adapting the words of Isaiah to applications Isaiah himself would have been unlikely to consider.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, while the statements of the general authorities should be given due weight, alternative interpretations consistent with the canon of scripture and established doctrines can also be valid and a source of wisdom and inspiration.

## Background to Doctrine and Covenants Section 84

Section 84 was dictated by Joseph Smith in Kirtland, Ohio, over the course of two days, September 22 and 23, 1832.<sup>6</sup> It was initially given in the presence of six elders, but at some point the audience of the revelation shifted from the six elders to ten high priests. As explained in the Joseph Smith Papers Project, an understanding of priesthood was still developing among church members:

The Book of Mormon indicated that authority from God was necessary to perform certain ordinances, such as baptism and conferring the gift of the Holy Ghost ... However, extant records up to June 1831 did not call such authority “priesthood”; that term — while appearing in both the Book of Mormon and in [Joseph Smith’s] Bible revision — did not appear in any other contemporary documents until the minutes of a June 1831 conference which noted that several individuals were [Page 4]ordained to the “high Priesthood.” Moreover, the “Articles and Covenants” of the church explained the different duties of apostles, elders, priests, teachers, and deacons but did not explicitly associate these offices with the priesthood.

By late 1831, the high priesthood was understood to refer to both the office of high priest and to a broader authority ... A history [Joseph Smith] began writing around summer 1832 suggests that he had received two separate powers with different responsibilities. In that history, [Joseph Smith] noted that “the ministring of — Aangels” gave him an authority that allowed him “to adminster the letter of the Gospel.” He also recorded receiving “the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God,” which gave him “power and ordinance from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

Section 84 brought together, clarified, and expanded these doctrines about priesthood, in particular, expounding on the eternal nature of the two priesthoods — their purpose and authority — and the relationship of the previously established offices to the eternal priesthood of God.

For convenience in this paper, the two priesthoods are called the Melchizedek Priesthood and the Aaronic Priesthood, consistent with terminology used in other revelations (e.g. Doctrine and Covenants 107:1) and commonly used today. However, in Section 84 these terms are not used; the Melchizedek Priesthood is referred to as the “Greater Priesthood” (v19), “Holy Priesthood” (v6, 23), “High Priesthood” (v29), and “Priesthood ... after the holiest order of God” (v18). The Aaronic

Priesthood is referred to as the “Lesser Priesthood” (v26, 29) and the priesthood “confirmed ... upon Aaron” (v18).

## The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood

Section 84 begins by foreshadowing a temple to be built in the city of New Jerusalem on which a cloud would rest, “which cloud shall be even the glory of the Lord, which shall fill the house” (v5). Between verses 5 and 31, there is a digression that describes the two priesthoods. It encompasses the authority of each, how they were passed down anciently, and how they were exercised by Moses and Aaron. It goes on to explain that the sons of [Page 5]Moses and Aaron would “offer an acceptable offering and sacrifice in the house” (v31) and would be “filled with the glory of the Lord” (v32).

The part known as the Oath and Covenant follows in verses 33-42:<sup>8</sup>

For whoso is faithful unto the obtaining these two priesthoods of which I have spoken, and the magnifying their calling, are sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies. They become the sons of Moses and of Aaron and the seed of Abraham, and the church and kingdom, and the elect of God.

And also all they who receive this priesthood receive me, saith the Lord; For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me; And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father; And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father’s kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him.

And this is according to the oath and covenant which belongeth to the priesthood. Therefore, all those who receive the priesthood, receive this oath and covenant of my Father, which he cannot break, neither can it be moved. But whoso breaketh this covenant after he hath received it, and altogether turneth therefrom, shall not have forgiveness of sins in this world nor in the world to come. And wo unto all those who come not unto this priesthood which ye have received, which I now confirm upon you who are present this day, by mine own voice out of the heavens; and even I have given the heavenly hosts and mine angels charge concerning you.

In the remainder of Section 84 directions are given to the high priests concerning their responsibility to proclaim the gospel to the world.

To better understand the Oath and Covenant, the following questions are discussed in this paper:

- What does it mean to “become the sons of Moses and Aaron and the seed of Aaron” and why is this important?
- What is meant by “sanctified by the spirit unto the renewing of their bodies”?
- What is the “calling” and how is it “magnified”?
- [Page 6]What does it mean to become “the church and kingdom and the elect of God”?
- Who are those who “receive” this priesthood and consequently the blessings promised by the Oath and Covenant?

## Becoming Sons of Moses and Aaron and Seed of Abraham

Section 84 explains that the recipients of the revelation as well as others who were called and sent forth, are sons of Moses and Aaron (v32). It explains that they became sons of Moses and Aaron and the seed of Abraham by “obtaining the two priesthoods” previously spoken of (Melchizedek and Aaronic) and “the magnifying of their calling” (v33-34).

“Obtaining” the priesthood has generally been read to mean the ordination to the priesthood by one having authority. This is consistent with the recitation of priesthood lineage earlier in Section 84 that traces the priesthood of the “sons of Moses,” who received the priesthood as Moses did “under the hand” of his father-in-law Jethro, from person to person back to Abraham, who received the priesthood from Melchizedek, who received it “through the lineage of his fathers” from Adam (v6-16). Thus, being a “son” is used here as a metaphor suggesting that one who is ordained to the priesthood inherits priesthood authority and responsibility from the covenantal fathers Moses, Aaron, and Abraham, just as a literal blood descendant might inherit rights to a name or title.

This use of “son” is consistent with the metaphorical use of the related term “seed” in the covenant made with Abraham. Abraham, it is recorded, “sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto [he] should be ordained to administer the same” (Abraham 1:2). There is a distinction made here between the blessings that flow from the priesthood (the “blessings of the fathers”) and the holding of the priesthood itself (the “right to ... administer the same”). A person receives the blessings of the priesthood by receiving ordinances with associated covenants. The right to administer those ordinances is given by ordination to the priesthood. Hence, the person who is baptized receives the blessings associated with the baptismal ordinance and covenants, while the priesthood holder ensures the validity of the ordinance but does not himself receive any blessings from that baptism.

Abraham was promised his “literal seed,” meaning his descendants, would bear the priesthood and use it to bless all nations with the blessings of the gospel, even salvation and life eternal. His “seed” is also referred to as his priesthood, implying that those who hold the priesthood are his “seed.” [Page 7]But those who are blessed through the priesthood are to be accounted his “seed” also (Abraham 2:9-11). The term “seed” is thus used in three ways: firstly, the literal or biological descendants; secondly, those who inherit the priesthood authority Abraham held; and thirdly, those who inherit the blessings of the gospel through the ministration of that priesthood. The context in Section 84 suggests that the sonship referred to is the second of these three: inheriting Abraham’s priesthood — the right to teach and administer the ordinances and covenants of the Gospel — which was passed from Abraham down through the fathers to Moses and Aaron.

### Sanctified by the Spirit unto the Renewing of Their Bodies

This phrase has been interpreted in a few different ways. In the 19th Century, Orson Pratt interpreted it in context of priesthood holders entering the temple to be built in Jackson County, Missouri. He stated that the Lord would “purify not only the minds of the Priesthood in that Temple, but he will purify their bodies until they shall be quickened, renewed and strengthened, and they will be partially changed, not to immortality, but changed in part that they can be filled with the power of God, and they can stand in the presence of Jesus, and behold his face in the midst of that Temple.”<sup>9</sup> Charles W. Penrose may have had this interpretation in mind when he said “When that holy temple is built in Zion God will take away the veil from the eyes of his servants; and the day is yet to dawn when the sons of Moses and Aaron, having become sanctified to the renewing of their bodies, will administer in that holy house, and the veil will be taken away, and they will gaze upon the glories of that world now unseen, and upon the faces of beings now to them invisible.”<sup>10</sup> I could

not find this interpretation reiterated since then.

Hugh B. Brown linked the renewing with a blessing of physical health stating: “that promise has been realized in the lives of many of us. I know that it has been realized in the life of President David O. McKay, that he has been sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of his body, and some of the rest of us are better off today than we were many years ago so far as physical health is concerned — and we attribute that fact [Page 8]to his blessing.”<sup>11</sup> Henry B. Eyring interpreted it similarly: “I have seen that promise fulfilled in my own life and in the lives of others. A friend of mine served as a mission president. He told me that at the end of every day while he was serving, he could barely make it upstairs to bed at night wondering if he would have the strength to face another day. Then in the morning, he would find his strength and his courage restored. You have seen it in the lives of aged prophets who seemed to be renewed each time they stood to testify of the Lord Jesus Christ and the restored gospel. That is a promise for those who go forward in faith in their priesthood service.”<sup>12</sup>

Harold B. Lee associated the phrase “renewing of their bodies” with being spiritually born into the family of God, stating: “The Saints might become one with the Father and the Son, spiritually begotten by baptism and through the Holy Ghost even unto the renewing of their bodies as the Lord tells us, and thus ‘... become the sons of Moses and of Aaron ... the church and kingdom, and the elect of God,’ (D&C 84:34) and thus become adopted into the holy family, the Church and kingdom of God, the Church of the Firstborn.”<sup>13</sup> Bruce R. McConkie similarly associated this phrase with being “born again,” stating:

Those who magnify their callings in the priesthood “are sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies.” (D&C 84:33) They are born again; they become new creatures of the Holy Ghost; they are alive in Christ.

Of such faithful persons among the ancients, Alma says: “They were called after this holy order” — that is, they held the Melchizedek Priesthood — “and [they] were sanctified, and their garments were washed white through the blood of the Lamb. Now they, after being sanctified by the Holy Ghost, having their garments made white, being pure and spotless before God, could not look upon sin save it were with abhorrence” (Alma 13:11-12).<sup>14</sup>

[Page 9]Brent Farley blends a couple of the above interpretations and suggests that a level of physical renewal results from the spiritual sanctification:

To be sanctified is to be made clean through the power of the Holy Ghost and then to have its operative power giving guidance for life’s activities. Such influence has a positive effect upon the body. *Renew* is defined as something that restores to a good state, rebuilds, repairs, confirms, revives, makes fresh and vigorous, transforms, implants holy affections, etc. It is not necessarily that the body is visibly transformed (though this could be the case at times), but the positive effects of the Spirit support and invigorate physical and mental well-being.<sup>15</sup>

Farley then goes on to suggest that the reference to renewal of the body is also an allusion to resurrection.<sup>16</sup>

Jeff Bradshaw argues that the renewal of the body relates to the ultimate renewal of the body in the

resurrection but that some level of renewal can occur in mortality. He also argues that renewal of the body is done symbolically in the ordinances of the temple.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the interpretations presented above have problems. If the renewal of the body refers to a renewal of the physical body in this life, then it is a blessing given inconsistently, as many presumably worthy priesthood holders — including apostles — have suffered very poor health and died young. The association of bodily renewal with spiritual rebirth leaves open the question of why this is specifically related to priesthood holders and therefore implicitly not to the women of the church who are not ordained to the priesthood. This has been explained by asserting that such blessings also come to women through the eternal marriage covenant. For example, ElRay L. Christiansen said that “Wilford Woodruff, speaking upon this revelation, made note of the marvelous blessings that await the faithful bearers and sharers of the priesthood; our wives are not without the same blessings that come to the men who bear the priesthood.”<sup>18</sup> However, this [Page 10]still seems to restrict this blessing to the eternities for women who are unable to marry in this life.

In the New Testament, Paul uses a body metaphor to represent the church, with the members all united as the “body” of Christ, each having different roles like eyes, ears, hands, and feet, yet all working together and suffering together (1 Corinthians 12:12–28). This metaphoric use of the word “body” could also be applied to the use of the word in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood. The “renewing of their bodies” could mean the renewal of the body of the Melchizedek priesthood and the body of the Aaronic priesthood, becoming together the “church and kingdom.” This would be consistent with its use later in Section 84 where it refers to the priesthood holders as a body that should work together: “Therefore, let every man stand in his own office, and labor in his own calling; and let not the head say unto the feet it hath no need of the feet; for without the feet how shall the body be able to stand? Also the body hath need of every member, that all may be edified together, that the system may be kept perfect” (v109–110).

Another, simpler interpretation for this phrase comes from connecting it to the next phrase within the text. This is further supported by transcripts recently made available of the earliest handwritten versions of the revelation. The two earliest extant handwritten recordings of Section 84<sup>19</sup> include the word “that” just after “bodies” between verses 33 and 34, a connecting word not in the currently published edition of the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>20</sup> With the connecting word included, verses 33–34 read a little differently:

For whoso is faithful unto the obtaining these two priesthoods of which I have spoken, and the magnifying their calling, are sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies, **that** they become the sons of Moses and of Aaron and the seed of Abraham, and the church and kingdom, and the elect of God.<sup>21</sup>

[Page 11]The added “that” directly connects the phrase “renewing of their bodies” with becoming the sons of Moses and Aaron and the seed of Abraham. Since becoming sons is a metaphor for a covenantal relationship, the phrase “renewing of their bodies” is likely part of the same metaphor, with the change that occurs being covenantal rather than physiological.

According to Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, the verb “sanctify” had, at that time, several related meanings depending on context.<sup>22</sup> These include:

- To separate, set apart or appoint to a holy, sacred or religious use.
- To separate, ordain and appoint to the work of redemption and the government of the church.



Consistent with this use of the word *sanctify*, the phrase “sanctified by the Spirit unto the renewing of their bodies, that they become the sons of Moses and Aaron and the seed of Abraham” can be read as a metaphor for priesthood holders becoming separated, or set apart, by the Spirit to the holy calling of Moses, Aaron, and Abraham, becoming their “sons” or “seed.” This reading fits well into the flow of meanings in the text.

Being separated or set apart implies a complete devotion to the work, a separation from the world and its desires, being in the world but not of it, serving only one Master (God), such service being given with all one’s heart, might, mind, and strength (D&C 4:2) in the manner of Moses, Aaron, and Abraham.

## Magnifying Their Calling

What, then, is the “calling” that priesthood holders are to magnify in order to become sons of Moses, Aaron, and the seed of Abraham, and how is it “magnified”?

Past interpretations have explained it in broad terms as wholehearted service in God’s work. For example, Bruce R. McConkie explained: “Now, to magnify as here used means to enlarge or increase, to improve upon, to hold up to honor and dignity, to make the calling noble and respectable in the eyes of all men by performing the mission which appertains to the calling in an admirable and successful manner.”<sup>23</sup> Carlos E. Asay stated [Page 12]that one magnifies his priesthood calling: “By learning one’s duty and executing it fully. By giving one’s best effort in assigned fields of labor. By consecrating one’s time, talents, and means to the Lord’s work as called upon by our leaders and the whisperings of the Spirit. By teaching and exemplifying truth.”<sup>24</sup> He referred to Jacob in the Book of Mormon, who testified that he and his brother “did magnify our office unto the Lord, taking upon us the responsibility ... [teaching] them the word of God with all diligence ... [and] laboring with our might” (Jacob 1:19).

The text of Section 84 suggests a more specific interpretation of the calling of priesthood holders. The image of being a son suggests the priesthood holder inherits rights, roles and responsibilities from the covenantal fathers. They are sons of Moses, Aaron, and Abraham, for they do the same priesthood work as their covenantal fathers. Jeffrey Bradshaw mentioned this, stating: “In similitude of Moses and Aaron, priesthood holders assist in gathering latter-day Israel and establishing them as a people of the Lord. They perform temple work wherein they ‘offer an acceptable offering and sacrifice in the house of the Lord.’”<sup>25</sup> Farley similarly observed that “the corollary between the mission of Moses in ancient Israel and the mission of the sons of Moses in modern Israel is not coincidental.”<sup>26</sup> Later parts of Section 84 suggest that magnifying their calling also requires giving diligent heed to the words of God (v43-44) and remembering and acting according to the new covenant in the Book of Mormon and other commandments (v57).

Section 84 discusses the work of Moses and Aaron in guiding ancient Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land in what is commonly known as the Exodus. Specifically, it states that Moses taught the children of Israel while in the wilderness that without the ordinances and the authority of the higher priesthood, “no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live,” and he “sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God” (v19-23).<sup>27</sup> Further [Page 13]allusions to their work are the references to the cloud resting upon the temple as upon the tabernacle of Moses (v5); the world lying under the bondage of sin analogous to the bondage of the Israelites in Egypt (v49); plagues to go forth upon the nations (v97) as happened in Moses’ Egypt; and a scourge to be poured upon the children of Zion, lest they pollute the holy land, as happened to many in Israel who rebelled in the wilderness (v58, 59).

The events of the Exodus as set out in the Old Testament can be considered a type of man’s journey through life, from the bondage of sin to the presence of the Father in the celestial world. This is shown in the table below.

<b>Exodus Event</b>	<b>Analogous Personal Event</b>
Children of Israel were in bondage in Egypt.	In our fallen state, we are in the bondage of sin.
Children of Israel passed through the Red Sea.	We are baptized.
Children of Israel were fed by manna provided by God, and water obtained from a rock.	We are spiritually fed by ‘living water’ and the ‘bread of life’ in our daily lives, and symbolically fed in the ordinance of the sacrament.
Children of Israel went to Sinai where they built a temple (the Tabernacle) and received ordinances, covenants, instruction, and blessings.	We go to the temple where we receive ordinances, covenants, instruction, and blessings.
Priests received the people’s sacrifices and offerings, and administered the sacrificial ordinances, on their behalf, in the temple.	We administer the ordinances in the temple on behalf of those who are dead, including commitments to sacrifice and consecration.
Children of Israel wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, until all those who still yearned for Egypt had died. They then entered the promised land.	We endure to the end, becoming saints through the atonement of Christ, sanctified and purified from the effects of sin until we enter the celestial kingdom.

[Page 14]While animal sacrifice ended with Christ’s sacrifice, both ancient and modern temple ordinances, at their heart, have the same fundamentals that make them acceptable to the Lord — the offering upon the altar of a broken heart and contrite spirit (see Psalm 51:16,17; 3 Nephi 9:19, 20).

Moses and Aaron were called to act as God’s agents to teach, lead, and help ancient Israel in their journey to the Promised Land. Priesthood holders today, the “sons of Moses and Aaron,” likewise have a calling to teach, lead, and help the people of modern Israel to receive and keep the ordinances of the priesthood, to trust and rely on Christ (the living bread and water) from day to day, and to thereby prepare themselves to return to the presence of the Father in the celestial kingdom. Fulfilling the calling of Moses and Aaron is also fulfilling the calling of Abraham their father, through whose seed all the families of the earth would be blessed with salvation and eternal



life (Abraham 2:12). Individual priesthood holders fulfill specific callings in various times and places, and have particular responsibility for their own families.

Moroni may have been referring to this work and its connection with Abraham, Moses, and Aaron when he recast Malachi 4:5-6 while speaking to Joseph Smith. He referred to the revelation of the Priesthood which would result in the promises made to the Fathers being planted in the hearts of the children. As we receive the ordinances of the priesthood, we enter into the same covenants (promises) as our spiritual fathers Abraham, Moses and Aaron.

The Book of Revelation may also be alluding to the role of these two priesthoods in the latter days. Chapter 11 refers to two witnesses who would testify in the last days. While modern revelation tells us that these two witnesses are two prophets to be raised up to the Jewish nation in the last days (D&C 77:15), it can also be interpreted (like so many scriptures) as a metaphor of the work of the two priesthoods in the last days. The allusion is supported by references in Chapter 11 to their turning water to blood; smiting the earth with plagues, like Moses; and shutting the heavens, like Elijah (v6).

## Becoming the Church and Kingdom and the Elect of God

In addition to becoming the sons of Moses and Aaron and the seed of Abraham, priesthood holders become “the church and kingdom and the elect of God.”

Farley, referring to statements by Harold B. Lee and Bruce R. McConkie, asserted that the “church and kingdom” is a reference to the church of the Firstborn — those who are destined to be joint heirs with Christ in [Page 15]receiving all that the Father hath. He further stated that those upon the earth living to be worthy of such future attainment are also “the elect of God.” They are the portion of church members who are striving with all their hearts to keep the fullness of the gospel law in this life so they can become inheritors of the fullness of the gospel rewards in the life to come.<sup>28</sup>

Bradshaw asserted that: “the phrase ‘the church and kingdom’ refers to the blessings of the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood, belonging to one who is made a ‘king and a priest unto God, bearing rule, authority, and dominion under the Father.’ Correspondingly, worthy women may receive the blessings of becoming queens and priestesses.”<sup>29</sup> He went on to associate becoming the “elect of God” with having one’s calling and election made sure, or in other words, as having received a knowledge that they are sealed up to eternal life.<sup>30</sup>

A more straightforward interpretation is that becoming “the church and kingdom” represents forming the backbone to the institutional church on the earth, as that church is formed around the keys and authority of the Melchizedek and Atonic priesthoods. It is a kingdom in the sense that it is directed by Jesus Christ through his appointed prophets.

As the phrase, “elect of God,” also means, “chosen of God,” a question is raised regarding what these souls are chosen to do. Perhaps this refers to being chosen for eternal life, as Bradshaw has stated, but it could also refer to being chosen to exercise the powers of heaven in fulfilling their callings. Section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants (v34-44) explains that many are called (ordained to the priesthood) but few are chosen, since they do not learn that the “rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected to the powers of heaven” and that those powers can be exercised only in righteousness, through persuasion, long suffering, meekness, love unfeigned, and so on. Thus, the “elect of God” may in this case refer to those priesthood holders chosen, because of the righteous magnification of their calling, to exercise the powers of heaven in fulfilling that calling, as did their covenant fathers, Moses, Aaron, and Abraham.

## Receiving the Priesthood

Section 84 continues with these words (v35–42):

And also all they who receive this priesthood receive me, saith the Lord; For he that receiveth my servants receiveth me; [Page 16]And he that receiveth me receiveth my Father; And he that receiveth my Father receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him.

And this is according to the oath and covenant which belongeth to the priesthood. Therefore, all those who receive the priesthood, receive this oath and covenant of my Father, which he cannot break, neither can it be moved.

But whoso breaketh this covenant after he hath received it, and altogether turneth therefrom, shall not have forgiveness of sins in this world nor in the world to come. And wo unto all those who come not unto this priesthood which ye have received.

These verses promise great blessings to those who “receive” the priesthood and, conversely, great condemnation to those who reject it. “Receiving” the priesthood constitutes a covenant, and the Father has made an oath that those who keep that covenant will receive all that He has. On the other hand, those who break the covenant and altogether turn from it “shall not have forgiveness of sins,” and those who “come not unto” it will be in a state of woe.

“Receiving” the priesthood can be interpreted two ways. The first is to have it conferred upon you, and thus to become a priesthood holder. The second is to receive the ministrations of priesthood holders, specifically, to receive ordinances and covenants administered by priesthood holders. Under the first interpretation the blessings and potential condemnation apply to priesthood holders; under the second, they apply to everyone.

Most authorities have assumed the first interpretation.<sup>31</sup> But this begs the question how these blessings relate to those who don't hold the priesthood, particularly women. In discussing this, Russell M. Nelson stated that “men who worthily receive the priesthood” receive all that the Father has. However, he then went on to say that “incredible blessings flow from this oath and covenant to worthy men, women, and children in all the world,”<sup>32</sup> implying that these blessings extend from priesthood holders to others but not explaining how this occurs.

Bradshaw appears to favor the second interpretation, saying, “no one can receive the Father or the Father's kingdom until he has received [Page 17]the Son, and no one can receive the Son unless he accepts the Lord's authorized priesthood servants,” and noting additionally that, “in the last dispensation, the Lord specifically told his Saints to receive the Prophet Joseph Smith's word ‘as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith.’ Conversely, he who rejects the Lord's servants rejects the Lord and the Lord's prophet.”<sup>33</sup>

The text itself appears to support the second interpretation more easily than the first, equating “receiving” the priesthood with receiving the Lord's servants, meaning receiving the ministrations of priesthood holders (see also v87 and 88). Consistent with this, a major portion of the rest of Section 84 is devoted to how the elders are to go about their work of ministering to the world.

The nature of this ministry is implied earlier in Section 84 where it states that the lesser (Aaronic) priesthood “holdeth the key of the ministering of angels, and the preparatory gospel; which gospel is

the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins, and the law of carnal commandments" (v26, 27), and the greater (Melchizedek) priesthood "administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God" and "in the ordinances thereof the power of godliness is manifest" (v19, 20). Considering this, those who "receive the priesthood" can be interpreted as those who repent, are baptized, and receive the ordinances and covenants of the higher priesthood; these are they who will receive "all that the Father hath."

Section 84 goes on to state that those who break their covenant or reject the priesthood will not receive forgiveness of sins (v41-42). The remission of sins is associated with the ordinances of baptism and receiving the Holy Ghost elsewhere in scripture. Therefore, this reading suggests that those who reject the priesthood will not receive forgiveness because they will not receive the required ordinances.

If the second interpretation is adopted, it can also be inferred that the Oath and Covenant of the priesthood is one and the same as the new and everlasting covenant as described in Section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Section 132 was recorded in 1843, but may have been given in large part in 1831 prior to Section 84.<sup>34</sup> While Section 132 focuses on the marriage covenant after verse 15, the earlier part is more general, stating [Page 18]that those who are to receive a fullness of the glory of the Lord must enter into the new and everlasting covenant or be damned (v6). This new and everlasting covenant is described as those covenants administered by priesthood holders acting consistently with priesthood keys (v7). The covenant of marriage is one part of the new and everlasting covenant.

Both the Oath and Covenant of the priesthood in Section 84 and the new and everlasting covenant of Section 132 have outcomes that are effectively the same. The blessings for those who keep the covenants are "all that the Father hath" in Section 84, and "the fullness of the glory of the Lord" in Section 132. The result of not keeping the covenants is "not having forgiveness of sins in the world to come" in Section 84 and "damnation" in Section 132. They may reasonably be assumed to be the same thing expressed in different ways, since there are no alternate paths to obtain salvation.

## Conclusion

While it has been commonly understood that "becoming the sons of Moses and Aaron, and the seed of Abraham" represents inheriting their priesthood, a considered study of adjoining parts of Section 84 suggests that this role can be clarified to mean teaching, leading, and helping the people of today to receive baptism and temple ordinances, to trust and rely on Christ (the living bread and water) from day to day, and thereby to prepare them to return to the presence of the Father in the celestial kingdom. This is shown in type by how Moses and Aaron anciently led their people out of the captivity of Egypt, through the waters of the Red Sea to the temple at Mount Sinai, providing manna and water in the wilderness as they made their way to the Promised Land.

It is proposed that the phrase "renewing of their bodies" is part of the metaphor of becoming sons of Moses and Aaron, the change that actually occurs being covenantal rather than physiological, and that becoming the "elect of God" refers to those priesthood holders who are chosen, because of the righteous magnification of their calling, to exercise the powers of heaven to fulfil this priesthood calling passed down from the fathers.

Lastly, it is proposed that the Oath and Covenant of the Father, including the promise that "all that [the] Father hath shall be given unto him," can be readily interpreted as applying to those who receive priesthood holders by receiving the ordinances and covenants they administer. It thus

applies to both men and women and not just to those ordained to the priesthood. Considered this way, the Oath and Covenant [Page 19] is another expression of the new and everlasting covenant mentioned elsewhere in the scriptures.

1. *BYU LDS Scripture Citation Index*, last updated 2015, <http://scriptures.byu.edu>. This index identifies scriptures referenced in general conferences, the *Journal of Discourses*, and *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*.
2. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, "Now That We Have the Words of Joseph Smith, How Shall We Begin to Understand them?", *Interpreter, A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 20 (2016): 47-150.
3. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Are You Sleeping through the Restoration?", *Ensign* (May 2014), 59.
4. "Approaching Mormon doctrine," *LDS Newsroom*, May 4, 2007, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/commentary/approaching-mormon-doctrine>.
5. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 64.
6. For an in-depth examination of the historical context of Section 84, see Matthew C. Godfrey, "A Culmination of Learning: D&C 84 and the Doctrine of the Priesthood," in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 167-81.
7. Dean C. Jessee, et. al., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831-January 1833* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2013), 290.
8. There is some variation in the verses designated as the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood. Some conclude them at verse 39, others at 42, and still others at 48. For the scope of this paper, I conclude with verse 42.
9. Orson Pratt, "Consecration," *Journal of Discourses*, reported by David W. Evans 9 March 1873, Vol. 15 (London: Latter-Day Saint's Book Depot, 1873), 365-66.
10. Charles W. Penrose, "The Word of the Lord," *Journal of Discourses*, reported by George F. Gibbs 29 November 1879, Vol. 21 (London: Latter-day Saint's Book Depot, 1881), 49.
11. Hugh B. Brown, "Participation: The Way to Salvation," *Conference Report* (April 1963), 90.
12. Henry B. Eyring, "Faith and the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood," *Ensign* (May 2008), 62.
13. Harold B. Lee, "Let Us Be as One," *Conference Report* (April 1950), 99.
14. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Ten Blessings of the Priesthood," *Ensign* (November 1977), 33.
15. S. Brent Farley, "The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood (D&C 84)," *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Craig K. Manscill (Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2004), 223.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 28-29.
18. ElRay L. Christiansen, "For Whoso Is Faithful," *Conference Report* (April 1955), 30.
19. The two handwritten recordings are reproduced in Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations: Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2011). The relevant text from Revelation Book 1 (John Whitmer as primary recorder) is on page 216 of the book, with the relevant text from Revelation Book 2 (Oliver Cowdery as primary recorder) is on page 344.
20. The copy of the revelation transcribed into Revelation Book 2, which does not include the connecting "that," is likely the source of the current published version of Section 84.
21. Capitalization, spelling, and punctuation follows our current scripture. The only change is the addition of the word "that."
22. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, Webster's Dictionary 1828 — Online Edition, s.v. "sanctify," accessed March 2, 2018, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/sanctify>.

- [23.](#) Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), s.v. "Melchizedek Priesthood."
- [24.](#) Carlos E. Asay, "The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood," *Ensign* (November 1985), 43.
- [25.](#) Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood*, 33-34.
- [26.](#) S. Brent Farley, "The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood (D&C 84)," *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Doctrine and Covenants*, ed. Craig K. Manscill (Provo, UT, and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2004), 225.
- [27.](#) The blessing of seeing the face of the Father and living, mentioned here, in my opinion more likely refers to Moses's preparing his people to finally enter the celestial kingdom, where the Father dwells, and having eternal life, as opposed to seeing God in mortality. The connection between ordinances and seeing God in mortality is not strictly tied to receiving ordinances, as Joseph Smith saw the Father in his First Vision long before he received the ordinances of the priesthood. It could also refer to the symbolic entry into the presence of the Father in the temple, which in the case of ancient Israel was initially intended for all but was, after their disobedience, restricted to the High Priest only.
- [28.](#) Farley, "The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood (D&C 84)," 226.
- [29.](#) Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood*, 53.
- [30.](#) *Ibid.*, 59.
- [31.](#) See, for example, Marion G. Romney, "The Oath and Covenant Which Belongeth to the Priesthood," *Ensign* (November 1980), 45; Asay, "The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood," 43; and Eyring, "Faith and the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood," 61.
- [32.](#) Russell M. Nelson, "Covenants," *Ensign* (November 2011), 88.
- [33.](#) Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood*, 67.
- [34.](#) The heading to Section 132 states in part, "although this revelation was recorded in 1843, evidence indicates that some of the principles involved in this revelation were known by the Prophet as early as 1831."