

Prophet, Priest, and King

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It's a pleasure to be here this morning to share some time with you discussing a topic that is important to all of us: our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

I was baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints almost fourteen years ago. But my journey to the Church, which culminated with my baptism, began many years earlier.

On a fall day almost twenty-five years ago I was sitting in a hospital waiting area in San Diego. My fiancée, Lynn, who soon thereafter became my wife, was scheduled to have surgery to remove a blockage in her trachea. The doctor was going to attempt a new procedure using a laser to burn away the excess tissue. Needless to say, I was worried, especially after the doctor who was scheduled to perform the surgery said he had never used a laser before.

In any event, I happened to be sitting next to my future mother-in-law, whom I had just met. The only thing I recall from our brief time together is that she asked me what I believed about Jesus Christ and Heavenly Father. I don't recall my reply, but I doubt it was very satisfactory. You see, I had never really thought seriously about Jesus Christ or His Father.

A few years after Lynn and I married, I still had not made much progress in my under-

standing of the Savior. Although I devoted part of my professional life to studying social and cultural aspects of Christian religions, I had not pursued doctrinal studies, nor had I personalized any of the teachings of the Church. Then I had a dream that shook my soul. I was in the entryway of a white building waiting for Lynn. I looked a few feet to my left and saw her talking to a bearded man. Somehow I knew she was very close to this man—I immediately thought he was her best friend—and it confused me for a moment. But then he looked at me in a rueful way and walked away. An intense feeling of sadness overcame me, for I realized that he was my wife's friend but could not be mine.

I joined the Church a few years later and began a new journey—but I still had a lot to learn. In 2005 my best friend passed away from cancer. Sun was not a member of our church, but he was a fine and honorable Christian man with a wonderful family. A couple of nights before the funeral I had a dream about him. If you'll indulge me, I'd like to read a description

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of this dream, which I delivered as part of his eulogy:

During a fitful night's sleep, having just found out that Sun had passed on to rejoin the Lord, I had a deep desire to see him once more—to make sure he was all right, or perhaps simply to test my faith. I dreamed I was walking along a corridor in a building where I work. I came across a turnoff into another corridor. It was dark, but I could just make out the shadow of a person facing away from me. I could see just enough to realize that it was Sun. He appeared to be waiting for someone. My first thought was one of fear: I did not want him to be in the dark, all alone. So I began to approach him. As I got nearer a light began to glow around him and get brighter. It was then that I realized it was not Sun who was in darkness; it was me. He was bathed in a vivid light that swept me into it. Without saying a word, he turned around and grabbed me in a hug as I began to weep. I then knew that he was there for me—that he was in an eternal light that would never go out.

We know the source of this light. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”¹ In the Book of Mormon Alma taught his son Shiblon that the Lord Jesus Christ “is the life and the light of the world.”² Although I have no idea if my dream had a literal quality, I like to believe that my friend has entered into this light.

These episodes from my life, as well as many others, have led me to want to know more about our Savior. This desire involves both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit that requires study and faith. I wish to get to know Him better and to know about His mortal life, His role in bringing forth the Atonement, and His many teachings that we need to understand and follow so that we can achieve true happiness. Therefore, please let me share a small part of this pursuit, because I think it has

improved my life in ways that I probably don't appreciate enough.

We all know that there are many metaphorical and literal names for the Savior. In addition to His mortal moniker of Jesus and His self-ascription as the Light of the World, we also know Him as the Lord, the Son of God, the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, the Living Water, the Lamb of God, the Redeemer, Immanuel, Jehovah, and by many other titles.

Although we regularly use several titles in the Church, I would like to highlight three that are often used together. Perhaps we know these words best from the hymn written by eighteenth-century Baptist pastor Samuel Medley: “I Know That My Redeemer Lives.” The third verse includes these lines: “He lives, and while he lives, I'll sing. He lives, my Prophet, Priest, and King.”³

For some reason not entirely apparent to me, I have always been intrigued by this triumvirate. Considering the most common uses of these terms, it seems that prophets, priests, and kings are supposed to be subordinate to the Savior. I therefore wish to dig a little deeper and consider how the Lord takes on these roles.

But first, what is the source of this triple combination? Although the terms are common titles for the Savior, they are not used in this particular arrangement anywhere in the standard works. Thus we must search a little more broadly to find the origin of this phrase.

The historical record suggests that the terms *prophet*, *priest*, and *king*, as applied to Jesus, originated with Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine during the early fourth century. In his *Church History*, Eusebius wrote:

*That his anointing was divine is proved by the fact that he alone, of all who have ever lived, is known throughout the world as Christ and . . . is honored by his worshipers throughout the world as King, held in greater awe than a prophet, and glorified as the true and only High Priest of God.*⁴

More than one thousand years later, John Calvin used the term “threefold office” to designate these roles taken on by the Lord.⁵ Calvin was particularly interested in linking the Jesus of the New Testament with these three offices from the Old Testament that represented God’s appointed servants. Yet he also saw that these three sacred offices were exemplified and perfected in Jesus Christ.⁶ Others, such as Moses and Melchizedek, may have fulfilled these roles during certain dispensations, but Jesus is the only perfect prophet, high priest, and king anointed to rule on earth and in heaven. One scholar wrote that when we understand the Savior in these roles, they “[come] into perfect bloom.”⁷

Many others have emphasized another name for Jesus that encompasses the threefold office—that of Messiah. As you know, *Messiah* is a Hebrew word meaning “the anointed.” The Greek parallel is Christ, thus Jesus Christ means “Jesus the Anointed.” In the Old Testament it was through sacred anointing that prophets, priests, and kings were set apart to perform their duties. They were anointed as a symbol of purification and consecration, being made holy and thus fit to serve God.⁸

For instance, we learn that Moses “poured . . . the anointing oil upon Aaron’s head, and anointed him, to sanctify him”⁹ so that Aaron could perform his priestly duties. The Lord commanded Elijah to anoint Elisha as a prophet.¹⁰ Samuel anointed David to be king even before he took over the throne from Saul.¹¹ And we learn in the Book of Mormon that kings were anointed among the Nephites and Jaredites.¹²

The Savior was also anointed to conduct His sacred duties, perhaps—as with His baptism at the hands of John—to serve as an example to others. Some have pointed out that He was anointed three times: once during the premortal existence and twice during His ministry on the earth.¹³ Joseph Smith lends support for the premortal anointing: “He, the

Lord being a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek, and the anointed Son of God, from before the foundation of the world.”¹⁴ The two mortal anointings occurred when the Savior was baptized and when Mary poured oil on Him at Bethany prior to His entry into Jerusalem.¹⁵

I’ll now examine the three offices that Jesus Christ fulfills: prophet, priest, and king. I have two reasons for taking this step. First, I hope it will help us honor Him better, perhaps by understanding a little more about what it means to say, “He is the Messiah.” Second, just as with other sacred roles, it is helpful to see how Jesus perfected them, thus providing an example for others.

Jesus’ Role as Prophet

In simple terms, a prophet is one who represents God to mankind. We learn from numerous passages in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon that prophets serve as messengers who reveal God’s word, call people to repent, teach them to obey God’s laws, and prepare them for the coming of the Savior. Thus we recall that Lehi, following his first recorded vision,

went forth among the people, and began to prophesy and to declare unto them concerning the things which he had both seen and heard.

And it came to pass that the Jews did mock him because of the things which he testified of them; for he truly testified of their wickedness and their abominations. . . .

And when the Jews heard these things they were angry with him; yea, even as with the prophets of old, whom they had cast out, and stoned, and slain; and they also sought his life, that they might take it away.¹⁶

Samuel the Lamanite likewise preached repentance in the land of Zarahemla and was run off by disbelievers;¹⁷ Abinadi was executed for teaching God’s will for the people and for

teaching about the coming of the Anointed One.¹⁸ Thus we see that the fate of many of God’s messengers included persecution, mockery, and even death.¹⁹ Just as many prophets before Him suffered such tribulations, the Savior experienced widespread rejection of His holy mantle.

Two prophets of the Old Testament whose lives most directly anticipated the Savior’s were Moses and Elijah. It is no coincidence that these two prophets of old appeared during Christ’s Transfiguration on the mount.

Jesus was likened unto Moses by a number of parallel life experiences, including being tempted by Satan,²⁰ being transfigured on the mount,²¹ being saved as an infant from certain death,²² and confronting powerful political and religious leaders.²³

Like Elijah, Jesus taught using parables, healed the sick, raised the dead, and suffered rejection and persecution at the hands of His own people.²⁴ He also preached to people outside of Israel.²⁵ Unlike most of the prophets before His time, the Savior expressed concern for all individuals, both Jew and Gentile, to conduct themselves according to the laws that He had prepared for them.²⁶

Yet the Savior transcended the sacred mantles of all previous prophets. While on the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah spoke to Him about His “departure” or “exodus.” This referred to His impending death and resurrection,²⁷ but it also represented the journey that would bring people to God through the Atonement.²⁸ By offering an atoning sacrifice and overcoming death, the Lord surpassed the prophetic roles of both Moses and Elijah.

The theologian Robert J. Sherman wrote:

The New Testament . . . clearly portrays Jesus as more than a prophet: . . . he speaks and acts with his own authority and power. He proclaims the kingdom of God; more than that, he is himself the revelation of God’s truth and purposes. Indeed,

*he not only enlightens, but empowers persons to recognize and claim God’s truth as their own true meaning and end, and as such in him prophecy itself is fulfilled.*²⁹

Nephi taught that God would raise up a prophet from among the Jews six hundred years from then. Yet this man would be more than a prophet: He would be the Messiah, the “Savior of the world.”³⁰

Jesus’ Role as High Priest

Whereas prophets represent God to the people, priests represent the people to God; priests function as mediators between God and mankind.³¹ Understanding the Savior’s role as a priest can be difficult in a biblical sense because priests were of the Levitical line and the Savior was a descendent from the tribe of Judah. Yet we learn in Psalm 110 that the Lord would be “a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.”³² In other words, the Lord was a priest of an order that predated the Levites. We understand through modern revelation that this involves the distinction between the Aaronic Priesthood and the Melchizedek Priesthood.

We are fortunate to have this information since it is difficult to fully understand the Savior’s priestly role without our non-biblical sources. For example, who was this Melchizedek in whom we find a higher priesthood? The Old Testament briefly mentions that he was the king of Salem (Jerusalem) and a high priest who blessed Abraham and received his tithing.³³ But if we read inspired scripture, we learn that he also bestowed the priesthood on Abraham³⁴ and was a man of mighty faith who convinced the people of his kingdom to repent.³⁵ Because of his great works, Melchizedek was known as “the Prince of peace” and “the king of heaven.”³⁶ These titles suggest that he was the Old Testament figure who resembled the Savior most closely.³⁷ He was a prophet, priest, and king.

Much of our understanding of the Savior's role as a high priest of the order of Melchizedek comes from the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews. Paul was writing to a group of Jewish Christians who would have been familiar with the Levitical priesthood and its responsibility for the sacrificial rites held in the temple. He told his readers that Jesus was "the Apostle and High Priest of our profession."³⁸ Paul's intent was to show that the Savior, in His role as high priest, fulfilled and transcended the law of Moses, because He offered a perfect sacrifice through His Atonement.

At the time of Jesus' mortal ministry, the temple high priest was designated in Jewish tradition to represent the Lord. He wore the name of the Lord on his forehead and was the only priesthood member allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and make the blood sacrifice on the annual Day of Atonement.³⁹ Paul maintained that Jesus was able to save all because He was sinless, unlike the high priests who presided in the temple. Consequently, there was no longer a need for daily sacrifices—first for the priests' sins and then for the people's. The blameless Lord, "the spotless Lamb of God"⁴⁰ whose blood was far superior to any animal's, offered a sacrifice beyond that which any other person could offer.⁴¹ It is only through the shedding of His blood and through His atoning sacrifice that we can be reconciled fully with Heavenly Father.

As Paul wrote in the ninth chapter of Hebrews:

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;

Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. . . .

And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under

*the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.*⁴²

The Savior understands our weaknesses and infirmities. He knows the temptations we face.⁴³ He has suffered for us. He is thus the perfect High Priest and the perfect Mediator for representing mankind to the Father. Yet He is much more than this: unlike other high priests, He was both priest *and* sacrifice.⁴⁴ In fact, His one sacrifice is of greater eternal worth than all of those sacrifices that had come before.

Jesus' Role as King

The third part of the threefold office of Christ is king. Of the three, this is probably the Savior's best-known title. We find it in films, such as the 1961 epic *King of Kings*, and in some of the songs in our LDS hymnbook, such as "I Believe in Christ" and "Jesus of Nazareth, Savior and King."

Christ's kingly duties are also easier to understand than His prophet or priestly duties. We know that the Jesus who lived a mortal life is the Lord of the Old Testament, the one known as Jehovah. He created the earth and continues to lead His Church.⁴⁵ Thus He is our Holy Leader, our Lord who reigneth, our "King of kings."⁴⁶

His mortal claims to kingship are due to both His earthly parents being descendants of King David, for it was prophesied by Samuel that one of David's descendants would rule over God's everlasting kingdom.⁴⁷ Like David, this Messiah would be a shepherd king who would save Israel. Even before Jesus' conception, the angel Gabriel told Mary:

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

*And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.*⁴⁸

Following His birth, Jesus was recognized by the “wise men from the east”⁴⁹ and by Anna the prophetess⁵⁰ as the fulfillment of Samuel’s prophecy.

However, Jesus was unlike any king who had come before. The Old Testament kings were leaders of nations—often warrior-kings who led their people in battle⁵¹ and administrator-kings who oversaw the running of the state.⁵² Most kings eventually ran afoul of God in some way, usually because of their sinful acts.⁵³ For example, we read that “when Solomon was old, . . . his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God.”⁵⁴ Others were simply wicked, like King Noah, who encouraged priestcraft and put Abinadi to death.⁵⁵ In fact, many of us have been conditioned to dislike and mistrust the idea of a king.

Yet as we search for exemplary kings who were in the image of the Savior, we need look no further than King Benjamin. Not only was he a just ruler who seemed to care little for his own aggrandizement, he was also a genuine servant-king who cared for his people, worked alongside them, and taught them to serve each other.

He exclaimed during his famous address:

Behold, I say unto you that because I said unto you that I had spent my days in your service, I do not desire to boast, for I have only been in the service of God.

And behold, I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.

Behold, ye have called me your king; and if I, whom ye call your king, do labor to serve you, then ought not ye to labor to serve one another?⁵⁶

This notion of a servant-king was perfected in the Lord. Indeed, He often resisted the title of king during his mortal ministry. The Gospel

of John reports that after miraculously feeding the multitude, “Jesus . . . perceived that [the people who had witnessed his miracles] would come and take him by force, to make him a king, [so] he departed.”⁵⁷

He also would not give Pilate or Herod the satisfaction of indicting Him for the seditious act of designating himself King of the Jews. He told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

Then, when Pilate asked Him, “Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.”⁵⁸

The Savior understood His role. He was tasked with teaching the people a new covenant and bringing mankind back from a fallen state into the presence of the Father through the Atonement—the ultimate sacrifice.⁵⁹ He was already a king, so there was no need to be given the title. Even those who knew of His divine kingship must have been confused, because His mortal life represented the humble nature of His sovereignty.⁶⁰

Recall that the Old Testament was understood by many as prophesying a messiah who would be king, and this king was to deliver the people from conquest and the physical suffering they endured at the hands of their rulers.⁶¹ Instead, Jesus, who had authority over the entire world, turned the notion of a messianic king on its head.⁶² He was born in a stable. He traveled not with soldiers but with fishermen and tax collectors. He dined with Samaritans and sat with the poor and downtrodden. Not only did He refuse all earthly treasures that kings tended to receive, but He also showed the people a humble king, entering Jerusalem on a donkey. He did not come to Jerusalem for a rich, royal feast but to preside over a humble meal with His friends, even washing the feet of those in attendance.⁶³

The mistake made by many was assuming He would come as a warrior-king when the Savior actually came as a shepherd-king and

as a servant-king. His sovereignty was not demonstrated by temporal wealth or political conquest but by His victory over death and the freedom for mankind that this entailed.⁶⁴

We await His triumphant return that will usher in the Millennium. His kingdom shall be fulfilled, and He will reign as king over the millennial earth. As we are taught in the Doctrine and Covenants, “The Lord shall be in their midst, and his glory shall be upon them, and he will be their king and their lawgiver.”⁶⁵

In closing, allow me to quote President Thomas S. Monson:

*Who is the King of glory, this Lord of hosts? He is our Master. He is our Savior. He is the Son of God. He is the Author of our Salvation. He beckons, “Follow me.” He instructs, “Go, and do thou likewise.” He pleads, “Keep my commandments.”*⁶⁶

It is my desire that all of us may get to know the Savior better, including his roles as the perfect Prophet, Priest, and King. But recall some of the other names we use for the Savior: Son of God, the Anointed One, the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, the Living Water, the Lamb of God, the Truth, the Redeemer, Immanuel—which means “God is with us”—the Master, and Jehovah.

Now let me emphasize yet another name for Him: *Friend*. I was mistaken in the conclusion I drew from the dream I discussed earlier. He is my Friend, but as with all close and precious friendships, it requires effort to get to know the Savior better and to appreciate all that He does for me, for my family, and for the world.

I offer testimony that it is to Him that we owe our lives and the promise of full potential as noble children of a Heavenly Father. May we love and honor Him always. I leave these words with you in His sacred name, amen.

Notes

1. John 8:12.
2. Alma 38:9.

3. “I Know That My Redeemer Lives,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 136.

4. Eusebius: *The Church History*, trans. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2007), 30; see also Michael F. Bird, *Are You the One Who Is to Come?: The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 164–66.

5. John Calvin, *A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 78; see also Rose M. Beal, “Priest, Prophet and King: Jesus Christ, the Church and the Christian Person,” in Gerard Mannion and Eduardus Van der Borght, eds., *John Calvin’s Ecclesiology: Ecumenical Perspectives* (London: T & T Clark International, 2011), 90–106.

6. See Kim Riddlebarger, “The Triple Cure: Jesus Christ—Our Prophet, Priest, and King,” *Modern Reformation* 4, no. 6 (November/December 1995): 16–20; see also Bird, *Are You the One?* 165.

7. John E. Johnson, “The Old Testament Offices as Paradigm for Pastoral Identity,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (April–June 1995): 189.

8. See David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely, “Jesus the Messiah: Prophet, Priest, and King,” in Paul H. Peterson, Gary L. Hatch, and Laura D. Card, eds., *Jesus Christ: Son of God, Savior* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002), 249–51.

9. Leviticus 8:12; see also Exodus 29:7.

10. See 1 Kings 19:16; see also Seely and Seely, “Jesus the Messiah,” 251–52.

11. See 1 Samuel 16:13.

12. See Jacob 1:9; Ether 9:14.

13. See Seely and Seely, “Jesus the Messiah,” 253–54.

14. *Teachings*, 265.

15. See John 12:3; Matthew 26:7, 12.

16. 1 Nephi 1:18–20.

17. See Helaman 13–16.

18. See Mosiah 11–17.

19. See D&C 136:36.

20. See Matthew 4:1–11; Moses 1:12–22.

21. See Luke 9:28–30; Moses 1:1–2, 11.
22. See Exodus 1:22; 2:2–10; Matthew 2:7–8, 11–16.
23. See Seely and Seely, “Jesus the Messiah,” 256–57. See also Exodus 7:10–13; Luke 11:45–50.
24. See Luke 11:47–50; see also Daniel J. Harrington, “The Rejected Prophet,” *America* (15–22 January 2007): 46; and see Seely and Seely, “Jesus the Messiah,” 257–58.
25. See Harrington, “The Rejected Prophet,” 46.
26. See Paul E. Davies, “Jesus and the Role of the Prophet,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 64, no. 2 (June 1945): 241–54.
27. See Luke 9:30–31; JST, Luke 9:31. See also J. Severino Croatto, “Jesus, Prophet Like Elijah, and Prophet-Teacher Like Moses in Luke–Acts,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124, no. 3 (fall 2005): 461.
28. See Daniel J. Harrington, “The Transfiguration of God’s Prophet,” *America* (26 February 2007): 31.
29. Robert J. Sherman, *King, Priest, and Prophet: A Trinitarian Theology of Atonement* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 220. See also 3 Nephi 9:17; 3 Nephi 12:46; Hebrews 8:13.
30. 1 Nephi 10:4.
31. See Bird, *Are You the One?* 166.
32. Psalms 110:4.
33. See Genesis 14:18–20.
34. See D&C 84:14.
35. See Alma 13:14–19.
36. JST, Genesis 14:33, 36.
37. See Andrew C. Skinner, *Prophets, Priests, and Kings: Old Testament Figures Who Symbolize Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 25.
38. Hebrews 3:1.
39. See Margaret Barker, “The Great High Priest,” *BYU Studies* 42, nos. 3–4 (2003): 68–70.
40. Noel Due, “Christ Ascended for Us—‘Jesus Our Ascended High Priest,’” *Evangel* 25, no. 2 (summer 2007): 56.
41. See Hebrews 7:24–28; 1 Peter 1:19; 3 Nephi 9:19.
42. Hebrews 9:11–12, 15.
43. See Hebrews 4:15.
44. See Gerald O’Collins and Michael Keenan Jones, *Jesus Our Priest: A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 46.
45. See 3 Nephi 9:15; 3 Nephi 27:7.
46. 1 Timothy 6:15; see 2 Nephi 10:14; Revelation 3:21.
47. See 2 Samuel 7:12–16.
48. Luke 1:32–33.
49. Matthew 2:1–2.
50. See Luke 2:36–38.
51. See Genesis 14:8; Joshua 10:3–5.
52. See 1 Kings 4:21; 1 Chronicles 18:14.
53. See 1 Samuel 13:13–14; 2 Samuel 11.
54. 1 Kings 11:4.
55. See Mosiah 17:20.
56. Mosiah 2:16–18.
57. John 6:15.
58. John 18:36–37.
59. See 2 Nephi 9:6–7.
60. See Jey J. Kanagaraj, “Jesus the King, Merkabah Mysticism and the Gospel of John,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47, no. 2 (November 1996): 349–66.
61. See Jeremiah 23:5.
62. See Sherman, *King, Priest, and Prophet*, 114–15.
63. See John Witte Jr., “No Ordinary King,” *Christianity Today* 55, no. 7 (July 2011): 55. See also Matthew 21:7–10; John 13:5–12.
64. See Sherman, *King, Priest, and Prophet*, 119.
65. D&C 45:59.
66. Thomas S. Monson, “Finding Joy in the Journey,” *Ensign*, November 2008, 88.