

Isaiah in the Book of Mormon

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Introduction to Isaiah the Man

Dr. Donald Parry, of BYU, gives us this insightful introduction to Isaiah:

Isaiah's name means "Jehovah is salvation." How fitting that a man who devoted his life to testifying of the saving power of the Messiah should also have a name that so testified.

Many scholars believe that Isaiah's ministry took place between the years 740 and 700 (or perhaps 699) B.C.—approximately forty years. According to Isaiah 1:1, Isaiah served as a prophet during the reign of several kings in Judah, including Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. He had personal dealings with at least two of those kings. According to one ancient Jewish source, Isaiah's wife was a daughter of one of the kings of Judah, making Isaiah a member of the royal family by marriage.

Isaiah's wife is called "prophetess" in Isaiah's record (8:3), suggesting that she too had the gift of revelation. Isaiah and his wife had at least two sons who served as signs to Israel, as did Isaiah and his wife themselves. "Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts" (8:18). . . . Isaiah stood as a type of God the Father; the prophetess was a type of Mary, the mother of Christ; and one of their sons was a type of Jesus Christ.

According to Josephus, Isaiah was martyred for the faith. King Manasseh, who took rule at the early age of twelve, reportedly put Isaiah in a hollow tree and had him sawed in half (Hebrews 11:37 may be an allusion to this).⁽¹⁾

Why is Isaiah in the Book of Mormon?

The Book of Mormon quotes approximately one-third of the writings of Isaiah. This is curious. Nephi's engraving of this record had to be extremely laborious; and his people already had the writings of Isaiah on the brass plates. A careful reading of Nephi's introduction to his Isaiah quotations in 2 Nephi gives us some important insights. First, Nephi specifically states that he is giving these particular words of Isaiah to his people as an additional witness of Jesus Christ. He testifies that both he and his brother, Jacob, have seen their Redeemer and sees in Isaiah a third witness of the saving work of Christ (2 Nephi 11:2-4). Thus, the Book of Mormon begins with the testimony of *three witnesses*—Nephi, Jacob, and Isaiah. Further, Nephi implies that he sees in these selected words of Isaiah *proof* of the saving mission of Christ (verses 4-6). He also states that it is his intent to "liken his [Isaiah's] words unto my people," (2 Nephi 11:2) and he recommends this *likening* of Isaiah's words to all men (2 Nephi 11:8).

That Nephi isn't writing these words of Isaiah solely for the benefit of his own people is suggested in 2 Nephi 25. There Nephi acknowledges that his people don't understand Isaiah. He also gives some reasons for their failure to comprehend these writings and states that he, Nephi, will give his own prophecies in words of plainness that cannot be misunderstood. Isn't Nephi saying, "Since I knew that my people didn't understand Isaiah, I told them what he said"? That is, Nephi is giving us a prophetic interpretation of Isaiah—he is teaching us how to understand this ancient prophet. Nephi states that these prophecies of Isaiah "shall be of great worth unto them of the last days; for in that day shall they understand them; *wherefore, for their good have I written them.*" We are beginning to

see that a primary reason for Nephi's inclusion of these writings of Isaiah was to pass to us of the *last-days* the keys to this promised understanding of Isaiah. It is in the study of the teachings of Nephi, together with other Book of Mormon commentaries on Isaiah, that the veil is beginning to be lifted and the locks that have sealed this ancient record are beginning to fall away.

Today the integrity of Isaiah's writings are under attack. Biblical scholars claim that the whole of the Book of Isaiah could not have been written by one man. Some divide the book between two authors, some as many as eleven. All agree that a major portion of those writings bearing Isaiah's name *must* have been written sometime after the return of the Jews from their Babylonian captivity—*they provide detail regarding this captivity that could not have been known in Isaiah's day*. One additional value of the Isaiah quotations in the Book of Mormon is their testimony of the integrity and unity of the Book of Isaiah. The Book of Mormon's testimony is clear: extensive quotations are included from those chapters which scholars would date well after the time of Lehi's departure from Jerusalem.

Why Should We Study Isaiah?

The above are all good reasons for the inclusion of Isaiah in the Nephite record. Yet, the most important reason for that inclusion may be the Book of Mormon testimony of the importance of Isaiah's writings. This importance is particularly emphasized for those who will live in the last days, in the days of the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies. Nephi proclaimed: "Wherefore, they are of worth unto the children of men, . . . for I know that they shall be of great worth unto them in the last days" (2 Nephi 25:8).

Christ, in describing the teachings of Isaiah, said, "For surely he spake as touching all things concerning my people which are of the house of Israel" (3 Nephi 23:2). *We are the house of Israel!* Christ is saying that Isaiah wrote about *us*.

Christ declared, "For great are the words of Isaiah" (3 Nephi 23:1). Nephi taught that in the study of Isaiah we might *learn and glorify the name of God* (2 Nephi 6:4). This is not a claim that should be difficult for us to understand and accept as choirs the world over weekly sing praises to God using as their texts the words of Isaiah.

While these may be impressive reasons to study Isaiah, *the* reason was given to us by the Savior himself: "And now, behold, I say unto you, that ye ought to search these things. Yea, a *commandment* I give unto you that ye search these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah" (3 Nephi 23:1).

Why Are Isaiah's Writings so Hard to Understand?

Nephi said that the words of Isaiah were hard for his people to understand "for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews" (2 Nephi 25:1). Dr. Donald Parry provides valuable insight into the nature of this "manner of prophesying."

Dr. Parry's field is Hebrew language and literature. He describes three aspects of the writing of Isaiah which are common stumbling blocks to the modern reader. First, much of Isaiah is written in a poetic form that is unfamiliar to most of us. Second, Isaiah's writings are laced with unfamiliar symbols and metaphors. The third point also relates to symbols, a very technical symbolism that draws on the geography, history, and political intrigues of Isaiah's world.

Poetic parallelism

Simply stated, *poetic parallelisms* means that the prophet may say something, then immediately restate the same or similar thought in different words.

Poetic parallelism may be defined as two short balanced lines (phrases or sentences), with line one featuring words that are paralleled by the words of line two. Line two is a repetition, echo, or symmetrical counterpart of line one. . . . A preliminary count reveals more than one thousand parallelisms in Isaiah's writings, indicating that Isaiah used the poetry as a major means of presenting his prophecies to the world.⁽²⁾

Understanding this parallelism is very important in the understanding of Isaiah. He uses it to define terms, explain symbols, and generally enhance the comprehension of the text. You might think of it as a running commentary. Isaiah gives us a sentence or a phrase, then follows that immediately with a form of commentary or explanation.

Dr. Parry uses Isaiah 2:2-4 (2 Nephi 12:2-4) as his example. This passage, which is very familiar to most Latter-day Saints, speaks of the building of a temple in the last days. In verse 2, *shall be establish* is paralleled with *shall be exalted*. The prepositional phrase, *in the top of* parallels the preposition *above*; and *mountains* and *hills* are linked as at least poetically synonymous (Dr. Parry says that they "harmonize"). How might this verse then be interpreted? I read it this way: "In the last days, the temple of the Lord will be built in the tops of the mountains (man's symbol of closeness to the Lord), and the Lord will accept it and establish in it such high spiritual stature (it shall be exalted) that the mountains, by comparison, will be but hills."

Dr. Parry goes on in this passage of Isaiah to show that this parallelism, begun in verse two, continues in phrase couplets through verse four.

Symbols and metaphors

Joseph Fielding McConkie describes symbols as the language of the scriptures and speaks of the richness of this form of expression:

Symbols are the timeless and universal language in which God, in his wisdom, has chosen to teach the gospel and bear witness of his Son. They are the language of the scriptures, the language of revelation, the language of the Spirit, the language of faith. They are a means whereby we enrich, deepen, and enhance understanding and expression. They enable us to give visual and conceptual form to ideas and feelings that otherwise defy the power of words.⁽³⁾

Isaiah 2:2-4

2 And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house

shall be established in the top of the **mountains**, and shall be exalted above the **hills**;

and all nations **shall flow** unto it.

3 And many people **shall go** and say,

Come ye,

and let **us go up**

to the mountain of the **LORD**,

to the house of the God of Jacob;

and he will teach us of **his ways**,

and we will walk in **his paths**:

for out of Zion shall go forth **the law**,

and the **word of the LORD** from Jerusalem.

4 And he shall judge among the **nations**,

and shall rebuke many **people**:

and they shall beat their swords into **plowshares**, and their spears into **pruninghooks**:

nation shall not lift up **sword** against nation,

neither shall they learn **war** any more.

While the language of symbolism may seem strange and unfamiliar, Dr. Parry points out that it's really a language we use every day. He illustrates this with examples of how we in common speech use *heart* as a symbol. We talk about "a change of heart"; we might express our thanks "from the bottom of our hearts"; we could perform our work "with heart and soul"; we may "have our heart set" on a new TV or car; we may conclude that our neighbor "has his heart in the right place." While these are simple idioms that we all understand, imagine coming across a document two thousand years from now, having these expressions, *and we've lost the key*. Actually, we don't have to go to some future time, just observe anyone attempting to learn our language. These idioms are *the language of symbols*. Like any language, symbolism is easy to understand once you know the meaning.

What's daunting with Isaiah is the scope and frequency of his symbolic phrasing. Dr. Parry says that Isaiah contains few verses which don't include some symbolic element. He has classified Isaiah's symbols into twenty-one major categories. These include, persons, actions, anatomy, animals, objects, places, foods, elements, numbers, colors, occupations, time, geography, etc.⁽⁴⁾

"Concerning the regions round about"

Nephi stated that one contributor to his understanding of Isaiah was his knowledge of Jerusalem and "the regions round about." Isaiah makes extensive use in his symbolism of the geography of Israel and surrounding lands. An understanding of this Near Eastern geography, together with an appreciation for the political relationships between the nations in Isaiah's day is essential to the understanding of these symbols of Isaiah. When we realize that Isaiah references over one-hundred place-names, most of them symbolically, the scope of this geographical usage becomes apparent. Donald Parry explains:

Isaiah's prophecies frequently mention geographical place-names and physical features connected with the ancient Near East. . . Understanding aspects of the place-names may explain the meaning behind Isaiah's use of the name. At times, when Isaiah refers to a place-name, he makes an actual reference to that city, territory, or country; on other occasions, Isaiah attaches a symbolic meaning to the place name.⁽⁵⁾

Dr. Parry gives several examples:

Sodom—"symbolizes all wicked cities of the last says that will suffer the judgements of God."

Assyria—"represents warring nations of the last days."

Ships of Tarshish—"symbolize the materialism and worldliness during the time of the 'day of the Lord.'"

Isaiah also uses various geographical features symbolically. Dr. Parry lists over thirty, including: rivers, seas, deserts, island, valleys, pools, hills, mountains, and wildernesses.

There Has Been Significant Progress

This decade has seen a significant increase in LDS attention to Isaiah's writings. Even this year, two pivotal works have been published: *Understanding Isaiah*, by Parry, Parry, and Peterson, is a verse by verse commentary which also shows the poetic structure of each chapter. *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, Parry and Welch, ed., is the publication of the expanded proceedings of the 1995 FARMS "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon" symposium. Due to time constraints, little more than abstracts of these papers were read at this symposium. These landmark works join many others already on LDS book shelves. The LDS understanding of the words of Isaiah is increasing at a rapid pace.

One example of the Book of Mormon contribution is given by John Welch. He looks specifically at the selection of the Isaiah texts in the Book of Mormon and proposes that this selection fits into and supports a very particular and comprehensive prophetic theme which is applied throughout Nephi's writings. He calls this "the Nephite prophetic view" and describes a four-phase pattern that covers:

1. Christ's coming;
2. his rejection and the scattering of the Jews;
3. the day of the Gentiles; and
4. the restoration of Israel and the ultimate victory of good over evil.

Brother Welch offers this summary of the value and application of this insight:

The Nephite prophetic view supplies modern readers with the big picture in understanding Isaiah. The lines and images in the prophetic poetry of Isaiah are like puzzle pieces in a large jigsaw puzzle, and the Nephite prophetic view is the picture on the box. With that picture, we can put the puzzle of Isaiah's words together.⁽⁶⁾

A Marvelous Work and a Wonder

Isaiah 29 has long been seen as a prophecy of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. As a stake missionary I once visited the home of a local minister and explained to him how this chapter of Isaiah so clearly and precisely speaks of the events associated with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. I pointed out that it even suggests the time in history when these events will occur. He listened patiently, then explained that he had his own interpretation of Isaiah 29 which he believed was correct and much more probable and consistent with the contexts of the chapter than the explanation which I had given him. I put him down as having a closed mind and heart.

In the spring of 1995, FARMS held a symposium on Isaiah in the Book of Mormon. I noted that one of the papers presented was on Isaiah 29. I obtained the video copy of this presentation and was most disturbed to find that the speaker, an institute instructor, said that the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was *not* the message of Isaiah 29. In fact he devoted most of his paper to the demonstration that my minister friend's interpretation was correct: Isaiah 29 is about the destruction of Jerusalem, and the scattering and gathering of Israel. My first impression was that his position as institute instructor should at least be reconsidered. He went on to explain that Nephi's use, in 2 Nephi 27, of verses from Isaiah 29 was not a reconstruction of the original Isaiah 29, it was, rather, Nephi's own prophecy in which he freely used Isaiah's words. I couldn't buy this explanation. Joseph Smith had made clear that Nephi was giving us Isaiah's original text. In the JST the Prophet used Nephi's version for Isaiah 29, copying almost verbatim 2 Nephi 27, beginning with verse 2.

Well, three years of reflection and careful review of Brother Robert Cloward's symposium paper have brought me to a new understanding. This understanding has been further solidified by reading Brother Cloward's full paper, recently published.⁽⁷⁾ Nephi is teaching us to *liken* the teachings of Isaiah unto ourselves. Nephi specifically says that this is what he intended to do: "For I will liken his words unto my people" (2 Nephi 11:2). I now believe that Nephi is teaching us that an important, perhaps the most important, understanding of Isaiah comes as we learn to relate Isaiah's words to our own time and circumstance. I believe that Joseph Smith used Nephi's words to teach us the same thing—the only meaning of Isaiah's words that are important to us today is that meaning which applies to our day. Yes, Isaiah 29 teaches of the destruction and gathering of Israel. And that message of gathering is significant and is not lost in Nephi's *likening*. Rather, the focus is the gathering and the means whereby that gathering will be accomplished.

Nephi is also teaching us a pattern of biblical prophecy. Like the two meanings of Isaiah's poetic parallelism, prophecy often has multiple fulfillments. Isaiah 29 does have the meaning ascribed by my minister friend. It also has the meaning given to it by Nephi. Similarly, the world sees the LDS interpretation of Ezekiel 37 to be strange. In context the meaning is clear. The *nation* of Judah and the *nation* of Ephriam (these are the Southern and Northern Kingdoms of Israel) will one day be again joined together as one people. This is how the Christian world understands this prophecy and we should have no problem with this interpretation. However, the Lord has given us a second interpretation. We might try to develop this second meaning from the context, but we must remember: *that's not our source*. We came to know the application of this prophecy to the Book of Mormon when the Lord himself referred (D&C 27:5) to that book as *the stick of Ephriam*. Both meanings are true!

References:

1. Donald W. Parry, Jay A. Parry, & Tina M. Peterson, *Understanding Isaiah*, 1998, pp. 2-3.
2. Donald W. Parry, "Nephi's Keys to Understanding Isaiah," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, Parry & Welch, ed., 1998, pp. 51-2.
3. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Gospel Symbolism*, p. 1.
4. "Nephi's Keys to Understanding Isaiah," pp. 49-51.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 58 & 60.
6. John W. Welch, "Getting Though Isaiah with the Help of the Nephite Prophetic View," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, p. 32.
7. Robert Cloward, "Isaiah 29 in the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, pp. 191-247.