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ISAIAH IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

Kent P. Jackson

EARLY IN THE NARRATIVE OF THE BOOK OF MORMON, THE PROPHET Nephi was led by revelation to obtain an ancient record he called the plates of brass. It contained “the five books of Moses,” “a record of the Jews from the beginning,” and “the prophecies of the holy prophets” down to his own time.¹ It was the Old Testament as it existed in Nephi’s day, only it was larger than what we have of that record now.² Book of Mormon authors quoted liberally from the writings of Isaiah that they found on the plates of brass. Those quotations play an important role in the book’s message, but they have also attracted the attention of critics of the Book of Mormon for two reasons: First, the Isaiah sections appear to be straight out of the King James translation, with minor variations. Second, some of the chapters of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon are considered by scholars to have been written not by Isaiah but by other prophets who wrote after the time Lehi left Jerusalem. Some critical writers have attempted to exploit these two issues, but neither can bring the Book of Mormon’s authenticity into question. As we examine the issue of Isaiah authorship and the process by which the Nephite record was translated, we can see that there are sound arguments in defense of the Isaiah material in the Book of Mormon.

Nephi set the pattern, later followed by other Book of Mormon authors, of quoting from the plates of brass. When he did, his emphasis was on passages that taught God’s covenant with Israel and the promises God made with members of that family. Nephi’s own sense of identity was that he and his people were a branch of a large tree. It was true that they were separated from Israel’s main trunk, but they were nonetheless still part of the family,

and they were heirs to its inheritance.³ To teach that message to his descendants, Nephi transcribed many prophecies of Isaiah into his own record, and Jacob did the same. Between them, they placed all or parts of twenty-four chapters of Isaiah into the Book of Mormon.⁴

The Book of Mormon's use of Isaiah is instructive and very interesting to Latter-day Saints. But it would not be a point of controversy except for the two issues mentioned above: the King James language and the presence of chapters thought to have been written after Lehi's time.

KING JAMES LANGUAGE IN BOOK OF MORMON ISAIAH

There is no question that the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon are in the language of the King James translation of the Bible. It seems that if Nephi had copied them from the plates of brass in Hebrew onto his own record and that if Joseph Smith had then received the English translation by the gift and power of God, the Isaiah passages would read more like the 1830 Book of Mormon and less like the 1611 King James Bible. After all, Nephi and Isaiah were native speakers of the same language, so one might expect that Isaiah in the Book of Mormon would resemble Nephi more than it does. Instead, the Book of Mormon Isaiah passages reproduce most of the King James wording intact and include archaic vocabulary from the King James text instead of using the "plain"⁵ words that are more characteristic of the English of the Book of Mormon. Latter-day Saint scholars are well aware of this and have explored different explanations for it.⁶

One possibility that has been proposed is that during the translation process, the Prophet and Oliver Cowdery, his scribe, simply transcribed the Isaiah text out of a printed copy of the King James Bible. According to this point of view, when Joseph Smith came to Isaiah material, recognizing that equivalent text was in the Bible, he dictated from the pages of a printed Bible rather than translating the material anew, making changes to the text when necessary. The idea here is that because there was already a usable translation available in English, there was no need to make a new one of the same material.⁷

The value of this proposal is that it explains why there is verbatim King James text in the Book of Mormon. And we now know of other examples where the Prophet did essentially the same thing with a translation. When he came to Isaiah 29 while working on his New Translation of the Bible (the Joseph Smith Translation), he simply copied 2 Nephi 27 from the 1830 Book of Mormon—Nephi's recitation of Isaiah 29—onto the pages of his Bible translation.⁸

But recent research on the translation process has raised some questions about this explanation. For one thing, none of those who witnessed the translation process mentioned a Bible being used. BYU professor Royal Skousen's study of the Book of Mormon manuscripts has led him to

conclude, based on textual evidence, that the Prophet did not have a Bible with him while working on the translation. He includes as evidence the fact that the Isaiah material on the Book of Mormon manuscripts is not divided into the Bible's chapter divisions but into larger, content-based units. This suggests to him that a printed King James Bible was not involved in the process of translating the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon.⁹

Latter-day Saints come to various conclusions on why the Book of Mormon's Isaiah passages are in the form of the King James translation. It is a question asked by sincere seekers of understanding, and better explanations may yet be found. For now, I would propose the following in response to the question:

1. Because it was the common Bible in the English language in 1830, accepted by virtually all English-speaking believers, God intended the Book of Mormon's Isaiah passages to be in the words of the King James translation. Today we may look at this as an oddity or an anachronism, but that would not have been the case among many of Joseph Smith's contemporary readers. Having biblical texts in the Book of Mormon in different wording than they knew from the Bible may have hurt the book's credibility in the eyes of many potential converts.
2. We cannot rule out the possibility that the Prophet drew passages from a printed Bible.
3. Joseph Smith did not *translate* the Book of Mormon. The evidence both from the original manuscript and from the earliest witnesses is clear that the words of the translation were shown to him by revelation. He *saw* them in the interpreters and dictated to his scribes the words he saw.¹⁰ If the Prophet did not read and dictate the Isaiah passages from a printed Bible, then they were shown to him visibly in the interpreters. And, by divine design, they were shown in the form of the common Bible of his time and place—the King James translation.

AUTHORSHIP OF ISAIAH

A second major question is sometimes raised about the Isaiah material in the Book of Mormon. Some scholars believe that some of the chapters of the current book of Isaiah were not written by that prophet but by one or more different authors long after Isaiah's time—in fact, after the time that Lehi and his family left Jerusalem. So how could those chapters have been on the plates of brass and included in the record of Nephi before they were even written?¹¹

From the outset, it must be made clear that multiple-authorship theories for the book of Isaiah have no support from any ancient manuscripts or

traditions. The earliest known translation of Isaiah (the Greek Septuagint) is from the third century BC, and it includes all the material now found in the book of Isaiah. The same is true of the earliest existing manuscript of Isaiah, from the second century BC, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. No ancient document—including the New Testament and the rabbinic literature—shows any hint that readers in antiquity questioned Isaiah’s authorship of the entire book. Some modern scholars, however, see features within the text of the book that cause them to conclude that in its present state, it is not the product of one author but of two, three, or perhaps more.¹²

Here is the most common system for dividing the book:

“First” Isaiah—Chapters 1–39: From Isaiah son of Amoz, ca. 740–700 BC. This includes chapters 1–35 plus an excerpt from 2 Kings that is found in chapters 36–39.

“Second” Isaiah—Chapters 40–55: From an anonymous prophet during the Jews’ exile in Babylonia, ca. 540 BC.¹³

“Third” Isaiah—Chapters 56–66: From one or more anonymous disciples of “Second” Isaiah after the return of the Jews from exile, ca. 515 BC. Some commentators include these chapters under “Second” Isaiah. According to the proponents of multiple authorship, the anonymous “Second” and “Third” Isaiah materials became attached to the writings of Isaiah because the succeeding writers were of the same school of thought as Isaiah, and the entire collection was viewed as representing one specific branch of prophetic tradition. Scholars who hold to the theory generally do so for the following major reasons:

1. “First” Isaiah mentions Isaiah son of Amoz and provides biographical material regarding him and others of his time. These chapters clearly fit within the period of time in which they purport to have been written, in the late eighth century BC. The prophecies in “Second” and “Third” Isaiah, on the other hand, make no mention of Isaiah’s name and give no other biographical clues that would link them to him.
2. Most scripture has a historical setting that is recognizable, to some degree, in how the text is written and what it emphasizes. The historical setting of “Second” and “Third” Isaiah is different from that of “First” Isaiah. This is seen in the following examples: (a) Cyrus, a Persian king who lived over a century after Isaiah, is mentioned by name; (b) emphasis is placed on the power of the Babylonians, who in Isaiah’s day were neither powerful nor very important for the Israelites; (c) the cities of Judah and the temple in Jerusalem are already described as being destroyed, seemingly reflecting circumstances a century after Isaiah; (d) the Judahites are described as already being punished and exiled, which took place after 586 BC.
3. The theological perspective is different between the early chapters and the later chapters. Chapters 1–35 place much emphasis on

judgment, and the later chapters place greater emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation.

4. The literary style of chapters 40–66 differs from that of the earlier chapters.

Latter-day Saint scholars agree that the observations presented above, for the most part, represent accurately the change in tone that begins in Isaiah 40. Scholars who believe in the essential unity of the book acknowledge the changes, but they do not see them as grounds for denying the material in chapters 40–66 to Isaiah son of Amoz. If the Book of Mormon did not quote from “Second” Isaiah, the discussion of authorship would have little meaning for Latter-day Saints; it would not matter to us either way. But because there is material after chapter 39 in the Book of Mormon, the issue is important.

A SCRIPTURAL PERSPECTIVE

There are legitimate academic arguments for the unity of the book of Isaiah. But even more importantly, there are sound reasons for rejecting the assumptions of those who insist that the Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon could not have been written before Lehi’s time.

PROPHETIC BIOGRAPHY

While it is true that Isaiah’s name is never mentioned after chapter 39, neither do the later chapters ascribe authorship to anyone else. The lack of biographical inferences does not argue either for or against Isaiah as the author. Almost all of the sixteen prophetic books in the Old Testament identify the author by name at the beginning of the book.¹⁴ This is true of Isaiah, in that the entire sixty-six chapters of the book are under one heading: “The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.”¹⁵ Nowhere are there different headings to tell readers otherwise, and because the book has been a unified whole as far back as its existence can be traced, the burden of proof is on those who choose to assign the later chapters to other ancient writers.

SPEAKING TO A LATER GENERATION

The material in chapters 40–66 does seem to address, to a degree, historical circumstances different from those of Isaiah’s day. Because envisioning multiple settings is a characteristic of much prophetic writing in the Old Testament, the matter is hardly unique to Isaiah. In the Book of Mormon, we find a similar situation. President Ezra Taft Benson reminded the Church that the Book of Mormon “was written for our day,” echoing the words of the book’s authors.¹⁶ Moroni explained, “Behold, I speak unto you as if ye

were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing.”¹⁷

As the Nephite writers saw and understood our time, they also wrote to meet our needs, not exclusively those of their contemporaries, who would never see the Book of Mormon as we have it. In the book of Isaiah is a striking parallel: Isaiah saw and understood the circumstances of his countrymen beyond his own lifetime, and through the inspiration of heaven he wrote in their behalf, as he also did for his contemporaries. He also saw our own latter-day setting, and the powerful witness that he left in his record speaks to our generation as well, when appropriately “likened” to us.¹⁸

FROM JUDGMENT TO RECONCILIATION

There is indeed a significant shift in tone and subject matter that begins in chapter 40, and the shift was deliberate. In the prophetic books of the Old Testament, as a general rule, prophecies of judgment and punishment precede those of blessing and restoration. This is true within individual prophecies and chapters as it is in the organization of entire books. This order of things mirrors real life, particularly the history of the house of Israel. God’s judgment would be the inevitable consequence of Israel’s rebellion, but in the latter days, Israel would be gathered and restored and would enjoy full reconciliation with God. It seems likely that Isaiah’s prophecies were meant to follow the same sequence. We should not be surprised if he prepared two collections of revelations (or if his followers arranged them later). The first collection, chapters 1–35, is the “Book of Judgment.” The second collection, chapters 40–66, is the “Book of Reconciliation.”¹⁹

LITERARY CONTINUITY

Even conservative scholars who argue for the unity of the entire book note some stylistic differences between “First” and “Second” (and “Third”) Isaiah. More significant, however, is the fact that even critical scholars who argue for multiple authorship see a great deal of Isaiah son of Amoz throughout the entire collection, pointing to language and themes that were carried on in the later chapters.²⁰ It is important to note that the vast majority of Isaiah is written in poetry, and Hebrew poetry has sufficient flexibility to allow an author a wide range of literary options. In fact, the literary variations within chapters 1–35 are such that if one wanted to, one could argue for multiple authors within that section alone. Thus arguments defending multiple authorship based on different literary styles are inconclusive, especially since we do not know the history of Isaiah’s words once they left his mouth or his pen.

PROPHETIC VISION

But the fundamental issue that underlies the idea of multiple authors within the book of Isaiah is not centered on biographical references or literary style.

It is centered on this basic question: Can a prophet see beyond his own time? One's answer to the question necessarily determines whether one can accept the book being in place when Nephi acquired it or whether one must date parts of it to a later time. Those who begin with the assumption that people cannot see beyond their own day must logically conclude that Isaiah could not have written those sections of the book that speak to a different historical setting than his own.

In contrast, those who understand the true nature of revelation and prophetic foresight have no trouble with prophecies of future events. Latter-day Saints are blessed with abundant revealed evidence that God can indeed inspire his servants with views of future days. The Book of Mormon provides us with ample proof of that.

For me, the evidence that matters most is the reality of the Book of Mormon. It is a record of people who left Jerusalem in 600 BC that contains excerpts from both "First" and "Second" Isaiah. Thus the passages Lehi and his sons quoted in the Book of Mormon must be dated before their departure, and those revelations were identified then to be the writings of Isaiah, decades before "Second" Isaiah was supposed to have been written. This is the most important piece of evidence for Isaiah's authorship of later chapters.

But we must be careful to understand what we can and cannot conclude from the available evidence. From "Second" Isaiah on the plates of brass, the Book of Mormon attests only to chapters 48–51, 53, and a few verses of chapters 40 and 55.²¹ The Book of Mormon thus makes no statement regarding the other chapters and cannot be used as proof that all of "Second" Isaiah comes from Isaiah son of Amoz. In this context, it should be noted that the passage mentioning the Persian King Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28) is not included in the Nephite record. Also, because the Book of Mormon's Isaiah quotations do not include anything from "Third" Isaiah (chapters 56–66), it cannot tell us anything about the history and authorship of those chapters.

Latter-day Saints who accept the evidence from the Book of Mormon and believe that prophets can see beyond their own time should have no difficulty accepting the idea that the Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon were compiled before 600 BC. But this does not mean that all our questions have been answered. The great Old Testament scholar W. F. Albright pointed out that the prophetic books are not really books but rather "anthologies of oracles and sermons."²² This description certainly fits the book of Isaiah. Like the Bible itself, it is a collection. And, as with the Bible, the circumstances under which it was written and compiled are not clearly known. Did Isaiah record his prophecies himself, or did he dictate them to scribes? If they were dictated, was Isaiah responsible for their poetic structure, or were others? Did Isaiah gather and compile the revelations himself, or did others do it—even after his lifetime?²³ Were Isaiah's words edited or reworded by later scribes? Who is responsible for the final order of the prophecies in the

book? And what is the book's history in the century between Isaiah's death and Nephi's acquisition of the plates of brass?

The answers to these questions are not critical for our understanding of Isaiah's message. But the questions show us that we cannot speak with certainty on many issues related to how and when the book of Isaiah became what it is today. What we do know is that Lehi and his sons had at least part of the book with them when they left Jerusalem and that Isaiah's words are "great" because "all things that he spake have been and shall be, even according to the words which he spake."²⁴

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Harrison, R. K. *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 371–78. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969.

LaSor, W. S., D. A. Hubbard, and F. W. Bush. *Old Testament Survey*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982.

Sperry, Sidney B. "The 'Isaiah Problem' in the Book of Mormon." In *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 493–512. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968.

Welch, John W. "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon." In *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, edited by Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch, 423–37. Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997.

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NOTES

1. 1 Nephi 5:11–13.
2. See 1 Nephi 13:23.
3. See 1 Nephi 10:12–14; 15:12–16; 19:24.
4. Nephi and Jacob included all or parts of the following chapters of Isaiah in 1 and 2 Nephi: 2–14, 28–29, 40, 48–51, 55. See Monte S. Nyman, "Great Are the Words of Isaiah" (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 283–87.

5. 2 Nephi 31:2–3.
6. See, for example, B. H. Roberts, “Bible Quotations in the Book of Mormon; and Reasonableness of Nephi’s Prophecies,” *Improvement Era* 7, no. 3 (January 1904): 183–84, 191; Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 66–68.
7. This is the point of view in Roberts, “Bible Quotations,” and in Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 141–42.
8. See Robert A. Cloward, “Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies), 227–32.
9. See Royal Skousen, “Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations in the Book of Mormon,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, 369–90. The current Bible-matching chapter-and-verse divisions were added in the 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon.
10. Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 22–31; Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness into Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2015), 79–104, 119–39.
11. Latter-day Saint approaches to this question include Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 493–512; John W. Welch, “Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, 423–37.
12. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19 of the Anchor Bible Series (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 87; Shalom M. Paul, *Isaiah 40–66: Translation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 1–3; accessible responses to the issue are provided in W. S. LaSor, D. A. Hubbard, and F. W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 371–77; R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 764–80.
13. Some authors also assign chapters 34–35 to “Second” Isaiah. See Marvin A. Sweeney, *TANAK: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 270–71.
14. The books of Daniel and Jonah do not begin this way because they are primarily narratives about the prophets rather than collections of prophecies. (But see Daniel 7:1; 8:1; 9:2; 10:1–2; 11:1.)
15. Isaiah 1:1.
16. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*, November 1986, 6.
17. Mormon 8:35.
18. See 1 Nephi 19:23.
19. Chapters 36–39, excerpted from 2 Kings 18:13–20:19, provide a bridge between the “Book of Judgment” and the “Book of Reconciliation.”
20. See, for example, David Carr, “Reaching for Unity in Isaiah,” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 18, no. 57 (1993): 61–80. Also note the extensive bibliography in notes 3–5.
21. Abinadi’s quotation of Isaiah 53 (in Mosiah 14), with the implied criticism of his audience for not understanding that revelation, shows that it was on the plates of brass. Jesus quoted from Isaiah 52 and 54 (3 Nephi 16:18–20; 20:32–45; 22:1–17), but there is no

indication that those revelations were on the plates of brass. See the discussion in Welch, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah," 433–34.

22. William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1957), 275.

23. A rabbinic tradition (*Baba Bathra* 15a) states that the book was compiled by "Hezekiah and his company." Hezekiah was the king of Judah during a significant portion of Isaiah's lifetime.

24. 3 Nephi 23:3.

In his book, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Grant Hardy faces this issue head on, critiquing the positions of Latter-day Saints who dismiss the Deutero-Isaiah problem as “simply the work of academics who do not believe in prophecy.” He asserts that this is “clearly an inadequate (and inaccurate) response to a significant body of detailed historical and literary analysis” [3] I could not agree more. The last full Isaiah chapters quoted in the Book of Mormon that discuss the restoration of the house of Israel are Isaiah 52 and 54. These two chapters are accompanied by a lengthy and detailed commentary by the Lord himself in 3 Nephi 16 and 20 to 22. It is here that the Savior tells of visiting his other sheep, then turns his attention to the destiny of the house of Israel. Joseph Smith went to Isaiah to give his Book of Mormon and its supposed Israelites and himself more ancient authenticity, gravitas, and prophetic and scriptural Christian weight. Isaiah has many of the out-of-context “proof-texts” that were promiscuously used by the early Jesus Jews/Christians to interpret the life and death of Jesus, and develop an inventive, new christological meaning and apply it by mere acclamation to their now-dead Jesus. Along in that process, for instance, the author of Matt used the quirky Isa 7:14 of the LXX “which has nothing to do with either a messiah or a v.