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Abstract Review of *The Book of Isaiah: A New Translation with Interpretive Keys from the Book of Mormon* (1988), by Avraham Gileadi.

Avraham Gileadi, *The Book of Isaiah: A New Translation with Interpretive Keys from the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988. xviii + 250 pp., selected bibliography and index of terms. Hard cover $19.95, paperback $9.95.

Reviewed by Bruce D. Porter

Avraham Gileadi's *The Book of Isaiah* has caused no little stir among Latter-day Saint students of the scriptures. On the one hand, there are several prominent scholars in the Church who have acclaimed the book as a giant step forward in our understanding of Isaiah. On the other hand, the book has generated considerable controversy because of its thesis that the principal prophetic message of Isaiah concerns a "Davidic king" whom the Lord will raise up in the last days for the temporal salvation of his people. Compounding the controversy is Gileadi's assertion that many of the scriptures in Isaiah traditionally thought to refer to the Savior are actually prophecies of this Davidic king. The controversy was possibly a factor in Deseret Book's decision to withdraw from its publications list a more recent work of Gileadi's that holds to the same thesis, *The Last Days: Types and Shadows from the Bible and the Book of Mormon*.[1]

This thesis pertaining to the Davidic king will be examined later in the present review. But before going further, it should be said that whatever one thinks of Gileadi's interpretations of prophecy, *The Book of Isaiah* is no ordinary book. It is a work of uncommon and painstaking scholarship, with an attention to scriptural detail, textual analysis, and stylistic nuance that far surpasses most studies of the Old Testament in or out of the Church. Some measure of the esteem accorded Gileadi's work by several prominent Latter-day Saint scholars may be gleaned from the foreword to the book, which was written by Ellis T. Rasmussen, Dean Emeritus of Religious Instruction at Brigham Young University. Rasmussen writes that Gileadi's work "shows uncommon knowledge and insight into that masterwork of Hebrew prophecy. The Latter-day Saint community urgently needs a work of this high caliber; it combines in a single volume the means for understanding Isaiah." Rasmussen also cites

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1 Avraham Gileadi, *The Last Days: Types and Shadows from the Bible and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991).

several of his colleagues who praise the book in equally categorical terms. Hugh Nibley describes Gileadi as the only Latter-day Saint scholar equipped to seriously study Isaiah and argues that his work "is not controversial and inspires reflection rather than contention." Arthur Henry King expresses his belief that Gileadi has a special mission of helping members of the Church understand Isaiah. The dust jacket of the book also offers an endorsement, this one from Truman Madsen: "Suddenly Isaiah, a book foreign and opaque, becomes a work of light."

Such glowing endorsements no doubt boosted sales of the book and commended it to the attention of many readers who might otherwise have passed it by. In another sense, however, the unqualified nature of the endorsements may have done Gileadi's work more harm than good over the long run. By making it seem that his interpretation of Isaiah is definitive—even though it diverges widely from previous Latter-day Saint commentary on Isaiah, including that of Bruce R. McConkie—the endorsements may lead unwary readers to suppose they have found the key to Isaiah, when in fact Gileadi's book offers an iconoclastic and highly individual interpretation that should be regarded as but one scholar's opinion among many. If the foreword to the book had been more modest and qualified in its praise, perhaps the resultant controversy would have been more subdued. We Latter-day Saints have a longing for definitive answers that sometimes overtakes our better judgment.

The Book of Isaiah is divided into two parts. The first part is a 93-page essay, "Interpretive Keys," that explains Gileadi's approach to understanding Isaiah and offers his interpretation of many critical passages of prophecy. The second part of the book, covering 131 pages, is Gileadi's own translation of Isaiah from the original Hebrew. In good scriptural tradition, let us begin with the last first.

Gileadi has given us a beautiful, even lyrical, translation of Isaiah that is a pleasure to read and full of insights into the original Hebrew meaning. There is a poetic quality about his translation which makes it an exceptional accomplishment for an individual whose native language is neither English nor Hebrew. Scholars of biblical Hebrew will have to judge how accurate his translation is; they can hardly dispute the elegance and beauty of the language he employs. The fact that this translation was done by a believing Latter-day Saint scholar who had the subliminal benefit of the *Book of Mormon* excerpts of Isaiah makes it all

the more valuable. For Latter-day Saints, the purpose of any new biblical translation is not to replace the King James Version—for all its flaws, still the accepted standard—but to further enrich our understanding of scriptural messages and meanings. In this sense, Gileadi has definitely advanced our understanding of this most challenging of Old Testament prophets. His translation alone would have justified publication of the book.

It is in the first part of *The Book of Isaiah* where the real controversy is most obvious, for it is here that Gileadi expounds at length his viewpoint that the mission of a latter-day "Davidic king" is central to the prophecies of Isaiah. He sets forth this interpretation in the course of a long discussion of four general "keys" to studying Isaiah: (1) the spirit of prophecy; (2) the letter of prophecy, including forms of speech, governing structures, parallelism, metaphors, and knowledge of the Hebrew language; (3) "searching," which includes reading between the lines, rhetorical connections, and scriptural links; and (4) types, of which Gileadi offers several examples. In discussing these interpretive keys, Gileadi attempts to school the reader "after the manner of the Jews," which Nephi identifies as critical to understanding Isaiah (cf. 2 Nephi 25:5-6 and Gileadi's discussion, pp. 4-7). Gileadi's own understanding of the Jewish manner of prophecy and interpretation was obtained from many years of study at *yeshivas* in Israel (pp. xiii-xvi, 4-5).

Even if one does not accept all of Gileadi's explication of Isaiah, his discussion of these four keys is a superb primer in the rhetorical and symbolic tradition of Hebrew prophecy. Isaiah really cannot be understood simply by reading it as conventional expository prose. It is full of metaphors, symbols, poetic allusions, foreshadowings, chiasms, hints, clues, and numerous messages concealed in part in the complexities of the Hebrew language. Much of this was completely natural and commonplace in the cultural world of the Old Testament, but it is largely foreign to Western culture, which is why we must study, ponder, and puzzle it out. Isaiah prophesied of our day, but he did not speak in the manner of our day, no doubt because the Lord intended for us to labor at understanding his message. It appears that even in the dispensation of the fullness of times, we are not to receive everything on a silver platter. The prophet who ushered in the dispensation understood this, demonstrating his own humility and hunger for truth by studying the Hebrew

language and making its instruction a top priority of the School of the Prophets.

As Gileadi sets forth various interpretive keys to understanding Isaiah, he weaves in numerous examples of how to apply those keys. The result is by no means a comprehensive interpretation of Isaiah, for Gileadi does not attempt to comment on every verse or even on every chapter. But he does offer detailed interpretations of numerous passages and sets forth what he considers to be the main prophetic themes of Isaiah. Among the main prophecies of Isaiah regarding the last days, Gileadi sets forth the following: the rise of two great world powers, of which ancient Egypt and Assyria are types; the emergence of an "arch-tyrant" who is the evil ruler of the latter-day "Assyria"; an attack by this evil tyrant on the rival nation of "Egypt," a type of a modern-day superpower; widespread apostasy among the people of the Lord, as the dominions of Babylon spread throughout the earth; the defeat of the arch-tyrant by a righteous remnant of the Lord's people, led by a "Davidic king"; the gathering of Israel from the four quarters of the earth and the return of the ten tribes; the salvation and restoration of Israel, the establishment of Zion, and the Second Coming of the Lord.

It is impossible in a short review to give any sense of the minute detail, scholarly depth, and impressive nuances contained in Gileadi's analysis of these themes. Portions of his analysis are wholly orthodox and essentially beyond dispute; other portions are original and bold, but wholly plausible; and some parts are highly iconoclastic and represent a marked departure from past scholarship. Gileadi's entire interpretive essay, however, reflects a dedication to scriptural scholarship and a sincere thirst for understanding that is wholly admirable. One need not agree with all of what he writes to recognize the quality of his work and the path-breaking nature of certain of his insights. There is much here of worth to students of Isaiah.

Unfortunately, despite the impressive body of scholarship found in *The Book of Isaiah*, Gileadi's work is seriously flawed by its insistence on the dominance within Isaiah of prophecies pertaining to the mission of the latter-day Davidic king. I believe, along with other scholars who have read and admire Gileadi's work, that he has vastly overstated his case on this point, and that in critical respects he is simply wrong. Because the *leitmotif* of a future Davidic king is so central to his interpretation—and is the aspect of the book that has generated

the most interest and controversy—the remainder of this review will concentrate on his discussion of that subject.

The notion of a latter-day king assuming the Davidic throne is not new to Gileadi and is not of itself particularly controversial. The prophet Joseph Smith himself prophesied of such a figure: "Although David was a king, he never did obtain the spirit and power of Elijah and the fullness of the Priesthood; and the Priesthood that he received, and the throne and kingdom of David is to be taken from him and given to another by the name of David in the last days, raised up out of his lineage."[2] Orson Hyde, in his dedicatory prayer on the Mount of Olives, also apparently made reference to the same person: "Let them know that it is Thy good pleasure to restore the kingdom to Israel—raise up Jerusalem as its capital, and constitute her people a distinct nation and government, with David Thy servant, even a descendant from the loins of ancient David to be their king."[3]

Aside from such almost cryptic references, there is little else explicitly said about a Davidic king by modern prophets. When the terms *David* and *throne of David* appear in the scriptures, one of three cases applies: they refer plainly to David of old; they refer plainly to Christ; or they are not plain at all. For example, Jeremiah 30:9 and Ezekiel 34:23-24 both refer to a latter-day David ruling over Israel, yet it is not entirely clear whether these refer to a mortal or to Christ assuming his rightful place as heir of the throne of David. Competent scholars have arrived at both interpretations. Gileadi for one clearly believes that these and numerous other scriptures, many of which are far more ambiguous, refer to a latter-day Davidic king, a great mortal leader who is *not* the Savior.

If this were all that Gileadi argued, his book would be only mildly controversial and would not plow particularly new ground. But Gileadi goes much further. He argues that prophecies about the Davidic king are the *dominant* theme of Isaiah, and he sets forth a detailed exposition of the mission of this mortal figure in the last days. In this regard, virtually all of what he sets forth is new. No one else in the Church, to my knowledge, has ever made the same case. Details such as Gileadi offers about the Davidic king cannot be found in any of the writings of modern prophets, nor are there are any plain,

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2 *TPJS*, 339.
3 *DHC* 4:457.

explicit, and unambiguous references to such a figure or his mission in any of the standard works. To reach Gileadi's conclusions, it is indeed necessary to "read between the lines," as he says.

Gileadi develops a detailed description of the mission and life of this future Davidic king by applying his interpretive keys to Isaiah, supplemented by Book of Mormon references and a complex exposition of D&C 113. According to Gileadi, the Davidic king will do all of the following:

- he will be born of the lineage of David;
- he will stand as a proxy for Israel's temporal salvation;
- the wicked will be destroyed and the righteous delivered upon his accession to the throne;
- he will be Israel's teacher, lawgiver, and judge;
- he will gather the scattered tribes of Israel from their dispersion and captivity;
- he will defend the House of Israel from an invasion by a wicked king from the latter-day Assyria;
- he will be known in the scriptures as "arm of the Lord," "servant," or "righteousness";
- he will bring about the political and temporal salvation of the House of Israel;
- all of the missions of all the previous prophets of Israel will be encompassed in his own mission;
- he will suffer severe afflictions and humiliation;
- he will ransom Zion;
- he will establish peace;
- he will personify light;
- his life will be typified by the life of Moses;
- he will bear the transgressions and iniquities of his people, and by his personal righteousness make possible their salvation;
- he will be a touchstone by which the Lord's people may measure themselves.

This is truly an astonishing list. It is no wonder Gileadi writes that Isaiah "describes the missions and attributes of the Davidic king in the most celebrated and consummate terms" (p. 65). There is, moreover, at least one scriptural figure to whom this list unquestionably applies, but he is not merely a mortal. Any seminary class of ninth graders in the Church, if presented with this list, would instantly identify whom it describes: namely, Jesus Christ. The list is a summary of the attributes and

mission of the Savior. Who else? But according to Gileadi, the Davidic king is not Christ:

> Christ's role of proxy for Israel's spiritual salvation possesses a type in the Davidic king's role of proxy for Israel's temporal salvation. In the Old Testament, the idea of a human proxy resides alone in the Davidic king. Therefore, Christ himself must be a son of David. He is not identical, however, with the Davidic king, although the latter must also come of the lineage of David. (pp. 12-13)

The Davidic king is an ordinary mortal, according to Gileadi, who will play a role in the temporal salvation of Israel closely parallel to the role that Christ plays in its spiritual salvation.

There are serious problems with this thesis and with the scriptural defense Gileadi makes of it. To begin with, at several crucial points of his argument, Gileadi makes assertions that he is unable to back up by any authority, reference, or source other than himself. The term *Davidic king* does not appear anywhere in Isaiah or in the standard works. Joseph Smith did not use it. It appears to be Gileadi's own phrase. He first introduces the concept on page 11 of his book, boldly asserting that it is the main theme of the 37th through 39th chapters of Isaiah. Yet the word *David* appears nowhere in these chapters, which tell the story of King Hezekiah. Gileadi unequivocally asserts that Hezekiah is a type of the Davidic king before even explaining why he believes such a king is the central prophetic figure in Isaiah. Having made this assertion at an early point, however, he then builds on it to make the rest of his case.

Throughout the book the reader is asked to accept assertion after assertion of this nature, with little that can be offered by way of proof. For example, Gileadi assertively states (p. 11) that the Davidic king is normally referred to "by a pseudonym, such as the key words *ensign*, *staff*, *hand* of the Lord, *arm* of the Lord and *righteousness*" (p. 11). Why we must accept these key words as referring to a Davidic king is never made clear, but having made this assertion, it is easy to find references to a Davidic king throughout Isaiah, since these phrases appear in abundance. Gileadi does not address other possible meanings of these terms, some of which seem far more plausible. For example, *arm of the Lord* sometimes seems to refer figuratively to the power of the Lord. Yet Gileadi flatly states that it refers singly and consistently to the Davidic king, even though the

same phrase appears in other scriptural contexts where it could not possibly mean that (see, for example, Omni 1:13; D&C 3:8; 15:2; 84:119; Exodus 15:12). Likewise, the word *ensign* is sometimes linked with *the root of Jesse*, who Gileadi believes is the Davidic king (see 2 Nephi 21:10 and D&C 113:6), but elsewhere it refers to Zion as a whole (D&C 64:42). Gileadi, however, insists that its rhetorical usage throughout Isaiah is unvarying and that wherever it appears it must be taken as a reference to the Davidic king.

A second and far greater problem is that many of the scriptures Gileadi cites as prophecies of the Davidic king are passages that traditionally have been understood to refer to the Savior. Two of the most glaring examples may be cited to illustrate the problem. Gileadi cites Isaiah 61:1-3 as the commissioning of the Davidic king (p. 48). Yet in Luke 4:18, Christ himself quotes the first verse of this scripture: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised." He then declares, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21). Christ thus relates the prophecy to himself. Yet Gileadi insists that it refers to a future Davidic king, and he fails even to mention the reference in Luke.

Another striking example is Isaiah 9:6-7, the famous verses popularized by Handel's *Messiah*, which begin, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given . . ." According to Gileadi, even this passage refers to the Davidic king. It is he who shall be called "Wonderful, Counsellor, . . . the Prince of Peace," he upon whose shoulder the government shall be and of whose "government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David" (pp. 48 and 60-61). Recognizing perhaps how much he flies in the face of tradition, Gileadi does retreat slightly on pages 59 and 60, acknowledging that certain verses may have multiple meanings. Isaiah 9:6-7 and Isaiah 61:1, he states, refer primarily to the Davidic king, but may also refer secondarily to Christ or to the Prophet Joseph Smith, since "certain messianic attributes appear common to all three." But lest we have any doubt about Gileadi's main thesis, he reaffirms it: "In the book of Isaiah, rhetorical connections identify chiefly the Davidic king" (p. 60).

There are numerous other examples of scriptures that Gileadi insists refer to the Davidic king, but which traditionally

have been interpreted as prophecies of Christ. In many instances, Gileadi does not quote these scriptures directly in his essay, but only cites their references; the reader must look them up in order to appreciate how truly radical Gileadi's interpretation is. To give some sense of this, it is only necessary to cite a few key phrases from the following verses, all of which Gileadi identifies as being prophecies of the Davidic king, rather than of Christ: Isaiah 7:14-16 ("Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel"); Isaiah 11:2-5 ("But with righteousness shall he judge the poor; . . . he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth"); Isaiah 22:20-25 ("I will fasten him as a nail in a sure place"); Isaiah 28:16 ("a precious cornerstone"); Isaiah 42:1-7 ("mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth, . . . a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison"); Isaiah 50:6 ("I hid not my face from shame and spitting"); Isaiah 52:13-15 ("he shall sprinkle many nations"); and Isaiah 63:5 ("mine own arm brought salvation unto me"). Two score generations of Christian scholars, as well as such distinguished Latter-day Saint scholar-apostles as James Talmage and Bruce R. McConkie, have agreed that these verses prophesy of Christ. Gileadi does not openly say that they are all wrong; he simply ignores the prevailing viewpoint and offers a dramatically different interpretation.

Gileadi does concede that the suffering servant spoken of in Isaiah 53 refers solely to Christ, but even here he adds a peculiar caveat, arguing that the last two verses of the chapter refer to the Davidic king (pp. 63-66). Those two verses read in part as follows: "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities . . . because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:11-12). According to Gileadi, the Davidic king will bear his people's iniquities, suffer on their behalf, and vindicate them, bringing about their temporal salvation, even as Christ atones for their sins and brings about their spiritual salvation (pp. 63-66). This is a very bold thesis indeed, for in effect Gileadi is arguing that Israel requires two Messiahs, one for its spiritual and one for its temporal salvation. In fairness to him, he does make clear that Christ's role is supreme and that only Christ can atone for spiritual sins. But he insists that the Davidic king will also act as

a suffering proxy for his people's transgressions, thus making possible their temporal salvation in the last days. Again, Gileadi does not mention scriptures that suggest the contrary. Why does so distinguished a commentator as Abinadi, who quotes Isaiah 53 in its entirety (Mosiah 14), obviously believe it refers only to Christ? In Mosiah 15:12, Abinadi even quotes part of Isaiah 53:12 (the verse Gileadi relates to the Davidic king) and makes clear that it pertains to Christ.

This points to a third problem with Gileadi's approach: his tendency to gloss over or ignore scriptures that call into question his interpretation, as well as his failure even to mention alternative interpretations, of which there are many. The Book of Mormon quotes Isaiah lavishly, often in whole chapters, and Gileadi at certain points in his discussion refers to Book of Mormon variants in the translation of Isaiah. He makes relatively little use, however, of the extensive Book of Mormon commentaries that follow the quoted chapters. In particular, he largely ignores Nephi's extended commentary in 2 Nephi 25-26, mentioning only its positive commentary on the learning of the Jews (p. 5). Nephi makes no mention of any Davidic king, but to the contrary makes clear his view that Isaiah's primary prophetic message is of Christ's atonement and of the events in the last days preliminary to his Second Coming. Gileadi also makes no mention in his book of the extended and eloquent case made by Bruce R. McConkie in *The Millennial Messiah* that Christ is the Second David, the only rightful heir of the throne of David, and the one referred to in Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's prophecies of a latter-day David reigning over Israel.[4] Elder McConkie's interpretation is neither binding nor definitive, and there is no reason Gileadi cannot differ with it, but his book would have been more honest and complete had he acknowledged the existence of alternative and conflicting viewpoints.

Despite all these problems, Gileadi's book will be of worth if it forces us to examine Isaiah more closely than we have before. It would be tragic, however, if Gileadi's excessive preoccupation with the theme of a Davidic king led any Latter-day Saint to look forward to the coming of a great mortal king or political leader who will stand as the temporal savior of Israel. It

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4 Bruce R. McConkie, *The Millennial Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 589-611. See Elder McConkie's heading to Jeremiah 30 in the LDS edition of the Bible.

is abundantly clear from the prophets that we are to look forward only to the coming of the Savior himself. No mortal servant of God, however great he may be, would deserve the kind of adulation Gileadi intimates in Isaiah, nor is it tenable to suppose that Isaiah's main message was to testify of any mortal. The mission of all prophets, without exception, has been to testify of Christ. To be sure, there are certain passages of Isaiah that refer to the work of latter-day figures other than Christ, such as Isaiah 11:1 and 10 (see D&C 113); Isaiah 29:11-12; Isaiah 44:1-2 and 21-22; and Isaiah 51:17-20. But these are exceptions to the general pattern of Isaiah's prophecy, which centers around the mission of the Savior.

Jesus of Nazareth, and he only, is our Savior, both spiritually and temporally (2 Nephi 2:5-6). In his first coming, he wrought a spiritual salvation for Israel; in his second coming, he will work a temporal salvation as well. Most of the scriptures that Gileadi identifies as pertaining to a Davidic king pertain in fact solely to Christ. Perhaps Gileadi has discovered a valid rhetorical distinction in Isaiah between a Messiah responsible for spiritual salvation and a king responsible for temporal salvation, but if so, it merely reflects the different roles of Christ in his first and second comings, and does not distinguish a spiritual from a temporal savior. If there is in fact a latter-day Davidic king other than Christ, his mission is only preparatory to the Second Coming, and he is not the main object of Isaiah's or any other prophet's attention.[5]

Perhaps there is such a thing as too much learning of the Jews. For all their understanding of the manner of Hebrew prophesying and symbolism, the scribes of Israel looked beyond the mark at the crucial moment of their history. As Nephi said, in his extended comment on Isaiah:

> Wherefore, he shall bring forth his words unto them, which words shall judge them at the last day, for they shall be given them for the purpose of convincing them of the true Messiah, who was rejected by them; and unto the convincing of them that they need not look forward any more for a Messiah to come, for there should not any come, save it should

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5 For a discussion of scriptures that may pertain to such a king, see Victor L. Ludlow, "David, Prophetic Figure of Last Days," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:360-61.

> be a false Messiah which should deceive the people; *for there is save one Messiah spoken of by the prophets*, and that Messiah is he who should be rejected of the Jews. (2 Nephi 25:18)

It is he of whom Isaiah and all the prophets have testified, he to whom they have looked for salvation in all things, he for whose coming we anxiously await, and he alone upon whose shoulder the government shall rest—the Prince of Peace and the anointed and final heir of the throne of David forever.