



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

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Volume 9 | Number 2

Article 4

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1997

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John S. Thompson

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Thompson, John S. (1997) "Hoyt W. Brewster Jr. *Isaiah Plain and Simple: The Message of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon.*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 9 : No. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol9/iss2/4>

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**Title**

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**Reference** *FARMS Review of Books* 9/2 (1997): 11-15.

**ISSN** 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

**Abstract** *Review of Isaiah Plain and Simple: The Message of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (1995), by Hoyt W. Brewster Jr.

**Hoyt W. Brewster Jr. *Isaiah Plain and Simple: The Message of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995. xiv + 281 pp., with index. \$14.95.**

Reviewed by John S. Thompson

Since the early 1980s numerous books devoted specifically to the words of Isaiah have been published by Latter-day Saint authors.<sup>1</sup> A survey of these works reveals a variety of interpretive approaches as well as conclusions concerning the meaning of Isaiah's messages.<sup>2</sup> Some simply interpret each prophecy in a single historical context, while others see prophetic fulfillment on many levels and in multiple time periods. Some maintain traditional interpretations, especially those dealing with Christ (e.g., the Immanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7) and the Book of Mormon (e.g., the "sealed book" prophecy in Isaiah 29), while others propose that Isaiah's prophecies focus primarily on his own day, viewing people of latter ages, including the Nephites and early

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<sup>1</sup> Monte S. Nyman, *Great Are the Words of Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980). L. La Mar Adams, *The Living Message of Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981). Mark E. Petersen, *Isaiah for Today* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981). Avraham Gileadi, *The Apocalyptic Book of Isaiah: A New Translation with Interpretative Key* (Provo, Utah: Hebraeus, 1982). Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982). Loren D. Martin, *Isaiah: An Ensign to the Nations* (Salt Lake City: Valiant, 1982). W. Cleon Skousen, *Isaiah Speaks to Modern Times* (Salt Lake City: Ensign, 1984). Avraham Gileadi, *The Book of Isaiah: A New Translation with Interpretive Keys from the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988). David J. Ridges, *Isaiah Made Easier* (Springville, Utah: Copies Plus, 1991). Avraham Gileadi, *The Literary Message of Isaiah* (New York: Hebraeus, 1994). H. Clay Gorton, *The Legacy of the Brass Plates of Laban: A Comparison of Biblical and Book of Mormon Isaiah Texts* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the many Latter-day Saint books and articles concerning Isaiah, see John S. Thompson and Eric Smith, "Isaiah and the Latter-day Saints: A Bibliographic Survey," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 445-509.

Christians, as simply likening these prophecies to their own events and circumstances.

The latest installment to these Isaiah commentaries is *Isaiah Plain and Simple: The Message of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, by Hoyt W. Brewster Jr. As the title implies, only those passages of Isaiah that are found in the Book of Mormon are addressed in this commentary, giving this volume the potential to be a unique contribution, since most other Latter-day Saint commentaries deal primarily with the Isaiah text as found in the Old Testament (though most make mention of the Book of Mormon textual variations).

Brewster's work is on the whole a worthy effort. His intent, as revealed in his introduction, is to "assist [the reader] in the personal process of gaining greater scriptural understanding of the writings of this giant among the prophets—as well as a greater witness of Him of whom Isaiah testifies" (p. xiii). Brewster "assists" the reader by providing a brief introduction to the study of Isaiah and by reproducing all the significant Isaiah quotations in the Book of Mormon alongside parallel verses from the Bible. Overviews for each chapter or group of verses are followed by verse-by-verse commentary. This commentary clarifies or paraphrases difficult wording, identifies and explains differences between Book of Mormon and biblical Isaiah versions, gives historical or cultural context to the passages, sometimes explores the Hebrew or Greek meanings of certain terms, suggests interpretations for prophecies, and very often includes annotations from LDS Church leaders and scholars relevant to the verse in question. Indeed, one of the strengths of this volume is Brewster's ability to compile the thoughts of others concerning Isaiah.

For some of the more difficult Isaiah passages, Brewster does not shy away from mentioning alternative arguments but typically will defend the traditional Latter-day Saint viewpoint. Some of the arguments for a particular interpretation originate with Brewster himself; however, most come from other Latter-day Saint commentators—particularly Monte Nyman, Victor Ludlow, and Sidney Sperry. In interpreting the Immanuel prophecy, for example, Brewster makes clear his belief that Immanuel is Jesus Christ by citing biblical and Book of Mormon passages about the birth of Christ and by quoting a portion of Sperry's interpretation of the



prophecy. However, Brewster also mentions that biblical scholars typically assign the fulfillment of this prophecy to Isaiah's day (see pp. 69–70). In this instance, he does not seem to entertain the possibility of dual or multiple fulfillment in Isaiah's prophecy, namely that the Immanuel prophecy could apply to both Isaiah's day as well as Christ's birth.

Although Brewster often mentions opposing views to typical Latter-day Saint interpretations, he rarely takes issue with those arguments. For example, Brewster's discussion of the "rod" and "root of Jesse" in Isaiah 11 favors the traditional Latter-day Saint view that these prophecies refer to Joseph Smith. He mentions Ludlow's interpretation of this being a latter-day Davidic king, but with the qualification that "this interpretation is not consistent with the view generally held by Latter-day Saints" (p. 109). However, he does not tell the reader why Ludlow's interpretation is not consistent.

Apart from the general lack of critical analysis of opposing views, I was extremely disappointed that this volume failed in its potential to provide a unique approach to understanding Isaiah from a Book of Mormon perspective—the volume seems to be no more than a restatement of all that has already been said. The organization of the book and the commentary reveal that Brewster gives little attention to the Book of Mormon context of the Isaiah passages and merely uses the Book of Mormon to choose which chapters or verses from the book of Isaiah to comment on and to identify variations of Isaiah's words found in the King James Version.

The title of Brewster's work suggests that he intends to focus on the Isaiah passages found in the Book of Mormon. One would therefore expect the organization of his book to address each passage in the order it appears in the Nephite record, allowing the unique situations and contexts within which the Isaiah passages are quoted (even if they are duplicate passages) to have bearing on the intended meaning of the Book of Mormon writer. However, Brewster's volume follows the Old Testament sequence of Isaiah, skipping those chapters that do not appear in the Book of Mormon. This can be confusing at times. For example, it is not until chapters 16 and 17 in Brewster's book that the earliest Isaiah passages quoted in the Book of Mormon are featured.

The organization of the book would not be much of an issue except that it punctuates the overall neglect of the Book of Mormon's contextual influence on the meaning of the Isaiah passages. The reader's focus is on the Old Testament, which removes the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon from their context and forces an interpretation of Isaiah's words without any identifiable purpose or stress. For example, Brewster does not answer why the Lord quoted Isaiah 52:7 (parallel to 3 Nephi 20:40) in his sermon to the Nephites, but does show how Abinadi used the passage in Mosiah 12:21 (cf. Mosiah 15:10–8). Was the Lord emphasizing the same interpretation that Abinadi gave the passage? If not, why not? If so, how does the Lord portray it in his sermon? Is there any greater significance in the Lord's use of "beautiful garments" (Isaiah 52:1) in his sermon to the Nephites in 3 Nephi 20:36 than to Jacob's use in 2 Nephi 8:24 or in Moroni's allusion to the same passage in Moroni 10:31? Such questions beg to be answered in a commentary on Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon.

One would also expect that the overviews of the chapters and the verse-by-verse commentary Brewster provides would be heavily influenced by the Book of Mormon context within which the Isaiah passages appear; unfortunately, such is not the case. The overviews deal mostly with the Old Testament background of Isaiah's words, and the commentary, for the most part, is merely a general explanation, simplified restatement, or remark by another commentator on Isaiah's words with little regard for the context the Book of Mormon provides.

An inherent danger in verse-by-verse commentaries is focusing too much on words and phrases so that the "big picture" is often neglected at the expense of obtaining the author's intended meaning. Brewster rarely gives reasons why the Book of Mormon authors selected the passages they did and what bearing the selections, and the context into which those selections fall, had on the meaning of the Isaiah passages. In other words, Brewster fails to address what the Book of Mormon writers wanted the reader to gain. For example, in his overview of Isaiah 2 (parallel 2 Nephi 12, pp. 9–10), before giving verse-by-verse commentary, Brewster mentions that this chapter begins Nephi's lengthy quotation of Isaiah 2–14 (parallel to 2 Nephi 12–24). He does not, however,

discuss why Nephi selected these chapters nor does his verse-by-verse commentary give any insight into the meaning Nephi wanted his readers to gain from these particular passages or how these passages relay that message.

In all fairness, Brewster does mention in his introduction that "Nephi's inclusion of the writings of Isaiah in *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* must have been for the purpose of persuading us to 'come unto Christ'" (p. xii); and on a few occasions he does seem to be sensitive to the Book of Mormon context by either mentioning it or allowing it to affect his interpretation of Isaiah. For example, he comments on the "servant" in Isaiah 49, stressing that it should be interpreted as the Savior since Nephi quoted this chapter to persuade the reader to believe in the Lord (p. 186). However, the bulk of his book lacks such insight. Regarding the Isaiah quotations in 3 Nephi 20 and 22 (parallel Isaiah 52 and 54 respectively), Brewster mentions the context briefly and goes so far as to say that, "to get a full appreciation of Isaiah's words, they should be read in the context of the Lord's teachings to the ancient Nephites in 3 Nephi" (p. 231); however, there is hardly any mention of the Lord's teachings to the Nephites in Brewster's own commentary. Thus the reader cannot fully appreciate Isaiah's words in this context.

If any distinct significance is to be given to a volume that specifically addresses those Isaiah passages quoted in the Book of Mormon, then, in my opinion, it should draw convincing connections between Isaiah's words and the Book of Mormon world. Indeed, this would make Brewster's volume a unique contribution to the Latter-day Saint Isaiah commentaries. However, rather than being centered on the Book of Mormon, Brewster's comments focus mostly on the Old Testament background and are devoid of any significant context—leaving the reader to wonder why he did not just write a complete Old Testament Isaiah commentary as others have done.