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**Title** Christ's Interpretation of Isaiah 52's "My Servant" in 3 Nephi

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**Abstract** Many interpretations exist about who the "suffering servant" in many of Isaiah's writings might be. Interpretations for this figure include Isaiah himself, the people of Israel, Joseph Smith, and Jesus Christ. Without arguing against these understandings of the servant, this paper claims that Christ, in 3 Nephi 20-23, personifies the servant as the Book of Mormon. Both the servant and the Book of Mormon are portrayed as filling the same "great and marvelous" works in the gathering of Israel, reminding the Jews of their covenants with God, and bringing the Gentiles to Christ.

*Christ's  
Interpretation*  
OF ISAIAH 52'S  
*"My Servant"*  
IN 3 NEPHI

GAYE STRATHEARN AND JACOB MOODY

## INTRODUCTION

HEN THE SAVIOR APPEARED to the “more righteous” of the Nephites and Lamanites, he used many teachings that modern readers readily recognize from the Old and New Testaments. Some critics have suggested that Joseph Smith merely lifted these teachings from his copy of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> While some of these quotations are very similar to the accounts in the King James Bible, there are some significant differences that strongly suggest that the process was more complex and nuanced than these critics allow.

The most quoted biblical text in the Book of Mormon is the book of Isaiah. In fact, the Book of Mormon records 21 chapters from Isaiah with frequent quotations from other chapters.<sup>2</sup> This fascination with Isaiah’s writings should not be surprising. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the book of Isaiah is also well represented in the extant texts.<sup>3</sup> Three Book of Mormon individuals in particular quote Isaiah at length: Nephi, his brother Jacob, and Christ.<sup>4</sup> Nephi says that he delighted in the words of Isaiah because “he verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him” (2 Nephi 11:2). He quoted Isaiah that he “might more fully persuade [his people] to believe in the Lord their Redeemer” (1 Nephi 19:23). As we read his Isaiah selections, it becomes evident that one of the major lessons he wanted his people to know about Christ was his desire and power to redeem Israel and gather them from their scattered condition, a condition that was particularly poignant to Nephi because his people were “a remnant of the house of Israel, a branch who have been broken off” (1 Nephi 19:24). Nephi instructed Jacob that he was to continue to use the teachings of Isaiah in his preaching (2 Nephi 6:4).

Six hundred years later when Christ came to the Americas, he spent a significant portion of his sermon on the second day focused on Isaiah’s

teachings. He quoted a substantial portion of chapter 52, although in a rearranged order, and all of chapter 54. What is stunning about this rendition is that Jesus did not include Isaiah 53 in his sermon, even though his audience would probably have expected it. Instead he includes a chapter discussing the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. It is the purpose of this paper to argue that the discussion on the Book of Mormon was not a digression from his teaching from the Isaianic texts, but rather was Jesus’s interpretation of the servant passage in Isaiah 52:13–15, which he had just quoted in 3 Nephi 20:43–45.

## THE SUFFERING SERVANT IN ISAIAH

It has long been noted that Isaiah, starting in chapter 41, includes a series of four Servant Songs or poems (42:1–7; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12), three of which are also included in the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 21:1–8; 2 Nephi 7:4–9; Mosiah 14–15; 3 Nephi 20:43–45; 21:8–10). From these texts we learn that God has a vested interest in this servant. He

He is to be God's "salvation unto the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). In his responsibilities God has prepared him with the qualities that will enable him to be an instrument in God's hands. "And [the Lord] hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me" (Isaiah 49:2), and "The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned" (Isaiah 50:4). "He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth" (Isaiah 42:4).

The servant has a role to play with both the house of Israel and the Gentiles. Among the house of Israel the servant's responsibility is "to bring Jacob again to [God]" and "to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel (Isaiah 49:5–6).

Among the Gentiles, he will bring forth judgment (Isaiah 42:1), but he will also be given as "a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, *and* them that sit in darkness

*I*N NEPHI'S EXPLANATION OF ISAIAH 48 THE SERVANT SEEMS TO REFER TO "A MARVELOUS WORK AMONG THE GENTILES" (1 NEPHI 22:8) AND IS USUALLY INTERPRETED TO REFER TO JOSEPH SMITH.

out of the prison house" (Isaiah 42:6–7, emphasis added; see also 49:6).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, "the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for *that* which had not been told them shall they see; and *that* which they had not heard shall they consider" (Isaiah 52:15, emphasis added). These references seem to show that the Gentiles are those who are blind or in darkness and that it is the servant's responsibility to provide them with judgment and the light of understanding. The shut-mouthed reaction of the "kings" of the "many nations" only goes to show the power the servant's message/mission will have on the leaders of the Gentiles. In the Book of Mormon, Nephi implies that the servant of Isaiah 49 would do "a marvelous work among the Gentiles," which would be "of great worth" unto both the Gentiles and the house of Israel (1 Nephi 22:8–11).

Joseph Smith in front of the Nauvoo Temple, by Dale Kilbourn. © IRI.

was formed "from the womb to be [God's] servant" (Isaiah 49:1, 5). Further, God declares, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him" (Isaiah 42:1), and "I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee" (Isaiah 42:6). In addition, it is through this servant that God will be glorified (Isaiah 49:3).

The third and the fourth Servant Songs, in particular, detail the willingness of the servant to fulfill his mission, but describe the intense persecutions and difficulties that accompany the call. “The Lord God hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting. . . . therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed” (Isaiah 50:5–7). Likewise, the most famous of the Suffering Servant Songs describes a servant whose

visage was so marred more than any man, . . . [who] is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows; and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. . . . and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: . . . for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

*T*HE LAST OF THESE SERVANT SONGS (ISAIAH 53) IS THE MOST WIDELY KNOWN. IT IS OF PARTICULAR SIGNIFICANCE FOR CHRISTIANS WHO, IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, THE BOOK OF MORMON, AND NUMEROUS OTHER CHRISTIAN TEXTS, HAVE INTERPRETED IT IN REFERENCE TO CHRIST.

And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. . . . 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. (Isaiah 52:14–53:11)

But, who is this servant? In some places Isaiah identified him with Israel: “But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend” (41:8; cf. 44:1), but in other places the servant seems to refer to a specific individual (42:1; 49:4; 52:13). Thus, the servant has variously been interpreted as referring to corporate Israel, a historical figure such as the prophet Isaiah, a royal servant, a priestly servant, or a second Moses. In Nephi’s explanation of Isaiah 48 the servant seems to refer to “a marvelous work among the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 22:8) and is usually interpreted

Christ in the Land Bountiful, by Simon Dewey. © 2003 IRI.







away with the uncleanness and defilement of Zion.<sup>14</sup> In the 3 Nephi context, however, the servant's role is more specifically to prepare Israel for the gathering.

Even though the Book of Mormon does not specifically combine Isaiah 52:13–15 with Isaiah 53, as we have noted, scholars have almost universally recognized that these verses act as the prologue to Isaiah 53. The characteristics of the servant described in them is therefore expanded and explained in chapter 53. In 3 Nephi, however, Jesus does not continue and quote Isaiah 53. This must have been

somewhat surprising to his audience. We know from Abinadi's teaching that Isaiah 53 was included on the brass plates and would therefore have been familiar to Jesus's listeners (Mosiah 14). Instead, Jesus returns to the subject of the gathering. At the end of 3 Nephi 20 he says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, all these things [i.e., the servant prophecy] shall surely come, even as the Father hath commanded me. Then shall this covenant which the Father hath covenanted with his people be fulfilled; and then shall Jerusalem be inhabited again with my people, and it shall be the land of their inheritance" (v. 46). The future tense of the passage indicates that Jesus is *not* using the servant passage to speak of himself. As he spoke these words, he stood before his audience as a glorified, resurrected being; not as someone whose "visage was so marred more than any man." Latter-day Saint commentators, therefore, have generally understood this passage to refer to Joseph Smith or, occasionally, to another latter-day prophet.<sup>15</sup> Without doubt, Joseph Smith was "marred" for the work, as prophesied by Moroni (Joseph Smith—History 1:33) and yet his influence has continued to grow even after his death. The difficulty with this interpretation of the servant in the 3 Nephi context is that the Savior himself connects the servant in 3 Nephi 20 with his teachings in chapter 21, and this chapter is not about Joseph Smith per se; it is about the Book of Mormon. Readers, therefore, should not view chapter 21 as a digression from Jesus's discussion of Isaiah; rather, it should be understood as his interpretation of the servant passage in Isaiah 52:13–15. At least in our minds, it is this interpretation that is the most significant contribution of the 3 Nephi rendition of Isaiah 52 and 54.

Chapter 21 begins with Jesus identifying a sign for the people to recognize the beginning of the gathering. Although the gathering is the major theme of Jesus's discourse, the

sign that he gives of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, on the surface, comes abruptly.

And verily I say unto you, I give unto you a sign, that ye may know the time when these things shall be about to take place—that I shall gather in, from their long dispersion, my people, O house of Israel, and shall establish again among them my Zion; And behold, this is the thing which I will give unto you for a sign—for verily I say unto you that when these things which I declare unto you, and which I shall declare unto you hereafter of myself, and by the power of the Holy Ghost which shall be given unto you of the Father, shall be made known unto the Gentiles that they may know concerning this people who are a remnant of the house of Jacob, and concerning this my people who shall be scattered by them; . . . Therefore, when these works and the works which shall be wrought among you hereafter shall come forth from the Gentiles, unto your seed . . . —it shall be a sign unto them, that they may know that the work of the Father hath already commenced unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the people who are of the house of Israel. (3 Nephi 21:1, 2, 5, 7)

This covenant teaching is, according to one scholar, the very heart of the chiasmic structure of Jesus’s teaching in this second-day sermon.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus then teaches that the Book of Mormon will come forth from the Gentiles (vv. 5–6) and that it will be the means whereby the Gentiles “may repent and come unto me and be baptized in my name and know of the true points of my doctrine, that they may be numbered among my people, O house of Israel” (v. 6). Furthermore, he teaches that “when these things [i.e., the coming forth of the Book of Mormon] come to pass that thy seed shall begin to know these things—it shall be a sign unto them, that they may know that the work of the Father hath already commenced unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the people who are of the house of Israel” (v. 7).<sup>17</sup>

We would like to suggest, therefore, that there is another nuance that Jesus is making by his inter-

pretation of the servant. He may be using a literary device called personification, which applies human attributes to inanimate objects. This technique is often found in other scriptural passages. For example, we read in Isaiah 55:12, “the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” Mountains and hills don’t sing, and trees don’t have hands to clap, but in this instance they are given human characteristics to portray a picture for the reader. Likewise, sometimes concepts like Christ’s everlasting covenant are described as “a messenger before my face to prepare the way before me” (D&C 45:9). We would suggest that Jesus is using a similar technique to identify the servant as the Book of Mormon. After all, in the first half of chapter 21, Jesus’s emphasis is on the writings rather than on an individual. Even when he refers to the agent who brings forth the writing in verse 5, he uses a more

*L*ATTER-DAY PROPHETS HAVE FREQUENTLY EQUATED THE “GREAT AND MARVELOUS WORK” WITH THE COMING FORTH OF THE BOOK OF MORMON, AND THE CONTEXT OF 3 NEPHI 21 SUPPORTS SUCH AN INTERPRETATION.

generic plural term, Gentiles, rather than make reference to a specific individual.

After this seemingly abrupt shift in focus to the Book of Mormon, Jesus then makes three deliberate statements that show his discussion of the Book of Mormon is in fact linked to the servant prophecy in the previous chapter. First, in verse 8, Jesus again quotes Isaiah 52:15//3 Nephi 20:45. “And when that day shall come, it shall come to pass that kings shall shut their mouths; for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.” Then in verse 9 he interprets: “For in that day, for my sake shall the Father work a work, which shall be a great and a marvelous work among them; and there shall be among them those who will not believe it, although a man shall declare it unto them.” This language, as we have seen, parallels that of Nephi’s interpretation of the servant in 1 Nephi 22:8–11. Latter-day prophets have frequently equated the “great and marvelous work” with the coming forth of the Book

of Mormon, and the context of 3 Nephi 21 supports such an interpretation. In verses 8 and 9, the phrase *in that day* refers to the beginning of the fulfilling of the covenant that was facilitated by the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Second, Jesus again refers to “my servant” in verse 10, tying this chapter back to the Isaiah 52 prophecy, just as he does in Isaiah 53. “But behold, the life of my servant shall be in my hand” (3 Nephi 21:10).

Third, just as the Isaianic servant had been described, “his visage was so *marred* more than any man,” so Jesus prophesies that because “the life of my servant shall be in my hand; therefore they shall not hurt him, although he shall be *marred* because of them. Yet I will heal him, for I will show unto them that my wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil” (3 Nephi 21:10). Speaking of the Book of Mormon, the Lord declared, “I will not suffer that they shall destroy my work; yea, I will show unto them that my wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil” (D&C 10:43). Nevertheless, many critics have tried to undermine and destroy the Book of Mormon. In 1887 the Reverend M. T. Lamb described the Book of Mormon as “verbose, blundering, stupid.”<sup>18</sup> In a famous statement, Mark

know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.” But “Israel. . . must first return to their covenants and then to their covenant lands.”<sup>21</sup> Second, as we have seen in 3 Nephi 20, the purpose of the gathering is so that the house of Israel “shall be brought to the knowledge of the Lord their God, who hath redeemed them” (v. 13). The Book of Mormon is the sign for the gathering because its purpose is also to convince both “Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ” (Book of Mormon title page).

The gathering includes both Jew and Gentile. Jesus specifically taught that if the Gentiles “will not harden their hearts, that they may repent and come unto me and be baptized in my name and know of the true points of my doctrine, that they may be numbered among my people, O house of Israel” (3 Nephi 21:6). Again, later in the chapter he reiterates, “But if they will repent and hearken unto my words, and harden not their hearts, I will establish my church among them, and they shall come in unto the covenant and be numbered among this the remnant of Jacob, unto whom I have given this land for their inheritance” (v. 22). In this dispensation, it is the Book of Mormon that has been most influential in helping the Gentiles come unto Christ. As President Ezra Taft Benson taught,

[The Book of Mormon] contains the words of Christ, and its great mission is to bring men to Christ and all other things are secondary. The golden question of the Book of Mormon is, “Do you want to learn more of Christ?” . . . Anyone who has diligently sought to know the doctrines and

teachings of the Book of Mormon and has used it conscientiously in missionary work knows within his soul that this is the instrument which God has given to the missionaries to convince Jew and Gentile and Lamanite of the truthfulness of our message.<sup>22</sup>

Having interpreted the servant as the Book of Mormon, outlining the importance of the Gentiles in bringing it forth, and outlining the place of the Gentiles vis-à-vis latter-day Israel, Jesus gives a series of “then” statements, which highlight aspects of the gathering: *then* the Gentiles will assist Israel

**C**ERTAINLY THE MAJOR ROLE OF THE BOOK OF MORMON IS TO TEACH ABOUT JESUS CHRIST, BUT THAT IS ONLY A PRECURSOR TO THE TIME WHEN IN THE LAST DAYS, JUST AS HE WAS WITH THE PEOPLE OF 3 NEPHI, HE WILL COME TO HIS GATHERED PEOPLE AND TEACH THEM PERSONALLY.

Twain characterized the Book of Mormon as “such a pretentious affair, and yet so ‘slow,’ so sleepy; such an insipid mess of inspiration. It is chloroform in print.”<sup>19</sup> In modern times some seem to have devoted their lives to trying to discredit the Book of Mormon.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of the ongoing attacks against the legitimacy of the Book of Mormon, its influence continues to increase throughout the world.

Why is the Book of Mormon *the* sign that the gathering is about to take place? There are two major reasons. First, one of its purposes, as stated on the title page, is that the house of Israel “may

to be gathered (3 Nephi 20:24); “*then* shall the power of heaven come down among them; and I will be in their midst” (v. 25), reinforcing his statement in 20:22; “*then* shall the work of the Father commence at that day, even when this gospel shall be preached among the remnant of this people” (v. 26); and “*then* shall the work commence, with the Father among all nations in preparing the way whereby his people may be gathered home to the land of their inheritance” (v. 28). None of these stages would be possible without the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Jesus concludes his discussion of Isaiah by quoting Isaiah 54, which rejoices in the blessings that will come to both Israel and the Gentiles as they gather. One of those blessings is that they will “be taught of the Lord” (3 Nephi 22:13), which must have reminded his audience of what he said at the beginning of this sermon about the reason for the gathering, “and they shall be brought to a knowledge of the Lord their God, who hath redeemed them” (3 Nephi 20:13). The genitive construction “taught of the Lord” in 3 Nephi 22:13 can be understood either as a subjective genitive: they will be taught by the Lord, or as an objective genitive: they will be taught about the Lord.<sup>23</sup> Certainly the major role of the Book of Mormon is to teach about Jesus Christ, but that is only a precursor to the time when in the last days, just as he was with the people of 3 Nephi, he will come to his gathered people and teach them personally.

Another blessing that Jesus extends to gathered Israel is “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall revile against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord” (3 Nephi 22:17). Jesus thus returns to the servant theme, but here, as in the biblical text, there is a shift from the singular servant in 3 Nephi 20:43 and 21:10 to the plural servants here in verse 17. In 3 Nephi as well as Isaiah, this verse forms a crucial link back to the earlier chapters. In this context, the work of the Book of Mormon, as a servant of the Lord, rather than being destroyed by its marring has, rather, engendered the testimony of the many servants who have received righteousness from the Savior! Thus the promise of Moroni that weak things will become strong is fulfilled in the Book of Mormon (Ether 12:27; see also Mormon 9:33).

## CONCLUSION

There are numerous ways that the servant in the Servant Songs can be understood. It may refer to Israel as a whole; it may refer to an individual prophet or to all prophets collectively. As Christians, we certainly recognize the interpretation of the servant as a reference to Christ. All of these interpretations have merit in helping us better understand the work of God in bringing to pass the

immortality and eternal life of his children (Moses 1:39). In this paper we have argued that when Jesus quotes the servant passage in Isaiah 52:13–15 during his second-day sermon, he does so to add another interpretive layer to the servant. He teaches his audience, and all who would read the account, that the work of the Book of Mormon, though marred in the eyes of many critics, plays an essential role in the gathering of Israel. It is God’s servant in preparing both Israel and the Gentiles to remember or enter into covenants that will prepare them to be a part of the great gathering of the latter days that will prepare them for the return of the Savior. The Book of Mormon is the standard for the gathering because its main purposes are to teach the covenants and to bring people to Christ. It is an important servant of the Lord, to bring about his purposes in the latter days. ■

## Notes

1. As far back as 1887, one critic criticized the Book of Mormon because he said it duplicated the Sermon on the Mount “word for word.” He claimed that there is “no excuse for this lack of originality and constant repetition of the Bible” because “God



