

Pattern and Purpose of the Isaiah Commentaries in the Book of Mormon

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The words of Isaiah . . . are written, ye have them before you, therefore search them (3 Nephi 20:11). 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).

As part of his marvelous vision recorded in 1 Nephi 11–14, Nephi saw that the gentiles in the last days would have a book (the Bible) containing the “covenants of the Lord” and “many of the prophecies of the holy prophets,” which would include Isaiah (see 1 Nephi 13:20–5). Given that these “nations and kingdoms of the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 13:3) would have the writings of the biblical prophets, the question naturally arises, why would Mormon include in the Book of Mormon record twenty-one nearly complete chapters of Isaiah as well as quotations from them and other Isaiah chapters? Why this duplication of scripture?¹

One could argue that because eighteen of these twenty-one chapters were on the small plates of Nephi, which Mormon seems to have found among the Nephite records after he had completed his abridgment (see Words of Mormon 1:3) and which he apparently added to his abridgment without editing, this duplication was an oversight on the part of Mormon. But to those who believe in the divine stewardship of the production, transmission, and translation of Nephite records, the inclusion of this large body of information from the prophet Isaiah must surely be attributed to more than human oversight. Indeed, in this view the Book of Mormon’s repeated affirmations of the great worth of Isaiah’s words suggest a divine purpose behind their preservation in two different yet complementary collections of scripture. For example, Nephi indicates that the writings of Isaiah are for the benefit of the people in our day, or at least for the benefit of his own descendants: “In the days that the prophecies of Isaiah shall be fulfilled men shall know of a surety, at the times when they shall come to pass. . . . For I know that they shall be of great worth unto [mine own people] in the last days; for in that day shall they understand them; wherefore, for their good have I written them” (2 Nephi 25:7–8).

I suggest two possible reasons for the duplication of Isaiah’s writings. First, the Isaiah text translated by Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon contains numerous differences from the biblical translations of the same text available in his day and in ours. The doctrine of the LDS Church is that the Isaiah text in the Book of Mormon is an inspired translation of a transcript taken originally from the brass plates of Laban. Consequently, it predates our current Isaiah manuscripts by several centuries. After Lehi departed from Jerusalem with the writings of Isaiah firmly inscribed on the brass plates, changes were apparently introduced into the Isaiah manuscripts from which our current Bibles have been translated.² The Isaiah material in the Book of Mormon corrects textual errors perpetuated in the biblical versions.

A second reason for the duplication is that the Book of Mormon Isaiah text comes complete with a number of specific commentaries, an advantage that the biblical text of Isaiah does not have.

The Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon occur within a very interesting lexical or contextual pattern. Careful readers of the book are aware that one of its major themes is the history and destiny of the Lord’s covenant relationship with the house of Israel—a theme that includes the Abrahamic covenant, the covenant of the infinite atonement, the scattering of Israel, and the reestablishment of the house of Israel in the last days by a mighty gentile nation.

The contextual pattern is this: the Isaiah passages appear extensively on the small plates of Nephi and then not again (with the exception of Isaiah 53, quoted by Abinadi) until after the account of the Savior's appearance in 3 Nephi. Also, the term *house of Israel* and references to the Abrahamic covenant and to the gentile nation that will restore the house of Israel in the last days occur only where Isaiah is being cited. To illustrate, the term *house of Israel* occurs 107 times in the Book of Mormon (plus occasional references to the synonymous wording house of Jacob), but the term is not used randomly throughout the text. Like the Isaiah passages, this term appears with great frequency on the small plates and is not mentioned again (nor, with one exception, is Isaiah) until the tenth chapter of 3 Nephi—that is, no mention in Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, or the first part of 3 Nephi.³ But when the Savior appears to the Book of Mormon people in 3 Nephi, the theme is reintroduced, one is tempted to say, with a vengeance.

In 3 Nephi 10:2 the text tells us “there was silence in all the land for the space of many hours.” This silence is broken by the voice of the Savior, who immediately tells the people they are of the house of Israel. He goes on to remind them of this four more times in that chapter alone. In all, the Savior uses the term *house of Israel* thirty-eight times during his visit with the people as described in 3 Nephi—twenty-four times in chapters 16, 20, and 21, the chapters that serve as commentary on and an introduction to Isaiah 52 and 54, which are quoted by the Savior.

This contextual pattern linking the Isaiah passages with the term *house of Israel* has additional components. The term *covenant* appears in the same Book of Mormon sections in which the Isaiah passages and the term *house of Israel* occur. In the Book of Mormon the term *covenant* most frequently refers to God's covenant promises, given through Abraham to the house of Israel, of an “infinite atonement” (see 2 Nephi 9). The Book of Mormon further teaches that the law of Moses and “all the prophets who have prophesied ever since the world began” (Mosiah 13:33) have pointed to the fulfillment of this covenant promise (see Mosiah 13, 15) and, more specifically, that God has not forgotten “scattered” Israel but will remember and restore them “in the last days.” Frequently there is a reference directly to the restoration of the “seed” of Lehi (see 1 Nephi 15:14–20; 22, especially verses 8–11). With the exception of those few places where the word *covenant* is used in another meaning (such as the covenant made by the Gadianton robbers or the covenant made by the people of Alma at the time of their baptism), the word appears prominently in the small plates and then disappears until 3 Nephi, when the Savior reintroduces the concept to the people in connection with his reintroduction of the theme of the house of Israel and his citation of the prophet Isaiah.

Similarly, the term *gentile(s)* appears in the small plates of Nephi and then disappears from the text until the Savior's appearance in 3 Nephi. Understanding Isaiah in the Book of Mormon thus presumes an understanding of the terms *house of Israel*, *covenant*, and *gentile*, which predominate in the Isaiah commentaries in the Book of Mormon and do not occur elsewhere in the book.⁴

The scope of this paper does not allow a detailed explication of the Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon. Rather, my approach is to suggest how the commentaries unite in purpose to clarify and reinforce Isaiah's teachings. These commentaries are remarkably consistent in their interpretation and application of Isaiah's words. Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, and the Savior himself well understood the meaning, relevance, power, and authoritative nature of Isaiah's words, which often can be seen as stimulating the prophetic gift of those who so ably quoted and expounded them.

Lehi's Commentary on Isaiah

Perhaps because of the loss of the 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon we have Lehi's commentary on Isaiah only through the words of Nephi. His words are sufficient, however, to indicate that Lehi taught his sons what specifically to look for in the prophet Isaiah's writings that would be of particular value to his people and to later readers of the Book of Mormon. Nephi tells us that in order to explain "my proceedings, and my reign and ministry" (1 Nephi 10:1), he must comment on the teachings of his father. He then gives a summary of Lehi's teachings that is a rather precise outline for all the commentaries on Isaiah that follow in the Book of Mormon. First Nephi 10 indicates that

1. **Jerusalem will be destroyed and the Jews will be carried away (verse 3);**
2. **the Jews will return and "possess again the land of their inheritance" (verse 3);**
3. **the Messiah will come and "take away the sins of the world," but he will be rejected and slain and will then "rise from the dead" (verses 4–11);**
4. **the house of Israel will then be scattered "upon all the face of the earth" (verses 12–13);**
5. **the gentiles will receive "the fulness of the Gospel," and then the house of Israel will be gathered together and "come to the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer" (verse 14).**

Nephi returns from having been "carried away in the spirit" (1 Nephi 15:1) to find his brothers engaged in a dispute because they cannot understand Lehi's words concerning the scattering of Israel and the subsequent gathering through the fulness of the gentiles (see verses 7, 13). Nephi's explanation of these concepts follows the same pattern as that noted above in 1 Nephi 10:3–14: the house of Israel will be scattered (see verses 12, 17, 20), the Messiah "shall be manifested in body unto the children of men" (verse 13), "then shall the fulness of the gospel of the Messiah come unto the Gentiles" (verse 13), from the gentiles the gospel will be taken again to "the remnant of our seed" (verse 13), and "at that day shall the remnant of our seed know that they are of the house of Israel, and that they are the covenant people of the Lord" (verse 14). Nephi then reveals that he used the prophet Isaiah as his scriptural support for these teachings: "I did rehearse unto them the words of Isaiah, who spake concerning the restoration of the Jews, or of the house of Israel; and after they were restored they should no more be confounded, neither should they be scattered again" (verse 20). Apparently, Nephi's recourse to Isaiah's words satisfied his brothers, who "were pacified and did humble themselves before the Lord" (verse 20).

Nephi's Commentary on Isaiah 48–9 (1 Nephi 20–1)

Nephi's commentary on Isaiah 48 and 49 begins in 1 Nephi 19, where Nephi again mentions his father, Lehi, and states that Lehi's record and prophecies are contained on the other (large) plates. He then begins his own commentary, which asserts that "the God of Israel," who would come in six hundred years, would be rejected and crucified, and the signs of his death would be given to "all the house of Israel" (see 1 Nephi 19:7–8, 9–12). As a consequence, "those who are at Jerusalem . . . shall wander in the flesh and perish, and become a hiss and a byword" (verses 13–14). But the Lord, who "will remember the covenants which he made to their fathers," will also remember "all the people who are of the house of Israel" and will gather them again (see verses 15–16).

Nephi tells us that these things were written to persuade his people to "remember the Lord their Redeemer" (verse 18). Several texts from the brass plates helped him in this task, he states, but so that he "might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer," he turned particularly to the prophet Isaiah (see verse 23). With this context and commentary as preparation for what will follow, Nephi then copies from the brass plates those sections from the writings of Isaiah that now constitute 1 Nephi 20–1 (Isaiah 48–9).

The introduction to Isaiah 48 serves, in a way, as an introduction to the purpose of all prophecy. God reveals future events through his prophets so that when those events transpire, people will not attribute them to natural (or even to supernatural but likewise ungodly) causes, but will recognize his supervening hand in human affairs. As stated by Isaiah, “Before it came to pass I showed them thee . . . for fear lest thou shouldst say—Mine idol hath done them, and my graven image, and my molten image hath commanded them” (1 Nephi 20:5).

In addition to inviting Nephi’s illuminating commentary, the Book of Mormon text of Isaiah 48 fulfills the other purpose mentioned earlier by correcting two major errors that appeared in later biblical manuscripts and that were carried over into the King James Version of Isaiah. In 1 Nephi 20:1 (Isaiah 48:1) the information that the “house of Jacob” had come “out of the waters of baptism” is restored to the text, and in verse 2 the statement that the people of the holy city “stay themselves upon the God of Israel” is corrected to the exact opposite—they “do not stay themselves on the God of Israel.”⁵ This correction is important because it is consistent with the message that follows—that if the people had not broken the covenant, the house of Israel would not have been scattered (see 1 Nephi 20:18–19).

First Nephi 21 (Isaiah 49) presents the scattering of Israel as a result of breaking the covenant and specifically addresses “all ye that are broken off and are driven out because of the wickedness of the pastors of my people” (verse 1). If Israel is scattered, then is the Lord’s work for the house of Israel all in vain? (see verse 4). No, because the Lord will gather them again through the gentiles, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed by his ministry, “that thou mayest be my salvation unto the ends of the earth” (see verses 5–6). The Lord will remember his covenant to those scattered, even to the “isles of the sea” (see verses 8–9, 15–16).

An interesting dialogue follows (verses 18–23) in which the Lord tells Israel that although she has lost her first children, she will have many more brought to her by the gentiles: “Behold, I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people; and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders. And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers” (verses 22–3).

We have Laman and Lemuel to thank for Nephi’s further commentary on Isaiah 48 and 49. “What meaneth these things which ye have read?” they ask (1 Nephi 22:1). Nephi explains that the house of Israel “will be scattered upon all the face of the earth, and also among all nations” (verse 3); that God will then “raise up a mighty nation among the Gentiles” who will continue the scattering of Israel (verse 7); and that God will then “proceed to do a marvelous work among the Gentiles” that will greatly benefit scattered Israel and “is likened unto their being nourished by the Gentiles and being carried in their arms and upon their shoulders” (verse 8).⁶

In the day when God brings “his covenants and his gospel unto those who are of the house of Israel . . . they shall be gathered together to the lands of their inheritance; and they shall be brought out of obscurity and out of darkness; and they shall know that the Lord is their Savior and their Redeemer, the Mighty One of Israel” (verses 11–12).

Nephi’s commentary on Isaiah 48 and 49 in 1 Nephi 19 and 22 is entirely consistent with Lehi’s commentary that Nephi recorded in 1 Nephi 10 and 15.

Jacob’s Commentary on Isaiah 50–1 (2 Nephi 7–8)

Jacob quotes the next section of Isaiah and makes it clear that he is following the pattern set by his brother Nephi: “I will read you the words of Isaiah. And they are the words which my brother has desired that I should speak unto

you . . . because ye are of the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 6:4–5). Before quoting Isaiah 50 and 51 (2 Nephi 7–8), Jacob begins his commentary by quoting from Isaiah 49:22: “I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles . . .” (2 Nephi 6:6). The remainder of his preface to Isaiah 50 and 51 is consistent with Lehi’s and Nephi’s commentaries on Isaiah discussed earlier. Jacob tells us in 2 Nephi 6 that

1. **“those who were at Jerusalem” have been scattered (verse 8);**
2. **they will return (verse 9);**
3. **Christ will be born among them, but they will reject and crucify him (verse 9);**
4. **those at Jerusalem will be scattered again, “driven to and fro” (verses 10–11);**
5. **but the Lord will remember the covenant and will “set himself again the second time to recover them” (from Isaiah 11) through the gentiles (verses 12–14).**

After this prefatory outline, Jacob then quotes Isaiah 50 and 51.

Isaiah 50 begins with a series of questions that, as understood by Jacob, are concerned with the scattering of the house of Israel. Speaking messianically, Isaiah uses the metaphor of divorce to draw attention to this scattering: “Have I put thee away, or have I cast thee off forever?” the Lord asks rhetorically. Isaiah then answers his own question with the Lord’s accusation: “For your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away” (verse 1). Isaiah then asks Israel if this separation could have been prevented had they only had faith in the Lord’s power: “O house of Israel, is my hand shortened at all that it cannot redeem, or have I no power to deliver?” (verse 2).

The imagery of scattering and eventual gathering continues through Isaiah 50 and 51, and at the outset of 2 Nephi 9 Jacob clearly tells why he has quoted these two chapters and what their major message is: “I have read these things [Isaiah 50–1] that ye might know concerning the *covenants* of the Lord that he has covenanted with all the *house of Israel*” (verse 1). One aspect of this covenant, as Jacob goes on to explain, is that the time will come when Israel “shall be restored to the true church and fold of God; when they shall be gathered home to the lands of their inheritance, and shall be established in all their lands of promise” (verse 2).

At this point in 2 Nephi 9, Jacob suddenly shifts the emphasis from this temporal gathering to a universal and spiritual gathering and suggests a second and even more important aspect of the covenant mentioned in verse 1: “I speak unto you these things that ye may rejoice, and lift up your heads *forever*, because of the blessings which the Lord God shall bestow upon your children” (verse 3). Jacob then proceeds to give a powerful sermon on universal death, the resurrection, and the atonement: “Our flesh must waste away and die” (verse 4), but Christ will die for all men and bring about a general resurrection (verses 5–6). Were it not for an “infinite atonement,” the “first judgment [i.e., when mortals were, through Adam, cast out from the presence of God] . . . must needs have remained to an endless duration” (verses 6–7). Not only would we have died through a physical separation from God, but our spirits, without this “infinite atonement,” would “have become . . . devils, angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God, and to remain with the father of lies, in misery, like unto himself” (verse 9).

Jacob refers to this double separation as a double “monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (verse 10). But “because of the way of deliverance of our God, the Holy One of Israel, this death, . . . which is the temporal, shall deliver up its dead; which death is the grave. And this death . . . , which is the spiritual death, shall deliver up its dead; which spiritual death is hell” (verses 11–12). Now we understand why Jacob stated at the outset of the commentary that all mankind should “rejoice, and lift up [their] heads forever”

(verse 3). Jacob's commentary expands on these points through verse 20, and with this commentary in mind we can now go back to Isaiah 50 and 51 (2 Nephi 7-8) and consider Isaiah's meaning in light of Jacob's commentary.

It seems clear that in Jacob's interpretation of Isaiah 50 and 51 the salvation spoken of may include, but goes much deeper than, the physical gathering of scattered Israel. Isaiah turns to the role of the Savior in gathering all mortal humanity from the ultimate scattering, death: "Is my hand shortened at all that it cannot redeem, or have I no power to deliver?" (2 Nephi 7:2). The verbs *redeem* and *deliver* seem to take on a more universal character when Isaiah then makes specific reference to the suffering of Christ: "I gave my back to the smiter, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair. I hid not my face from shame and spitting" (verse 6).

Second Nephi 7 (Isaiah 50) ends with the rather enigmatic comment that those who try to walk by the light of their own fire "shall lie down in sorrow" (verse 11). If I understand and apply Jacob's commentary in 2 Nephi 9 correctly, this metaphor has reference to the universal death that will come upon all mortals, and this theme then continues throughout Isaiah 51. As a word of caution, I should point out that when Jacob talks about the double monster, death and hell—that is, death of the body and death of the spirit—in 2 Nephi 9 as commentary on Isaiah 50 and 51, he is not suggesting that all mortals are doomed to suffer these two deaths. Rather, he is describing the result if a vital condition were not in place, a rhetorical style common to Book of Mormon writers. For example, beginning in 2 Nephi 9:7, Jacob details the sad state of all mortality "*save it should be an infinite atonement.*" This rhetoric is similar to Nephi's phrasing "save Christ should come . . ." (2 Nephi 11:6), Alma's "except it were for these conditions . . ." (Alma 42:13), or Abinadi's "And now if Christ had not come . . ." (Mosiah 16:6). Following are a few quotations from Isaiah 51 (2 Nephi 8) with my own interpretive comments, both of which I believe correspond to Jacob's commentary in 2 Nephi 9: "Look unto the rock from whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit from whence ye are digged" (2 Nephi 8:1). Look to Christ, the Holy One of Israel, for your salvation from the grave. "Look unto Abraham, your father, and unto Sarah, she that bare you" (verse 2). Remember the covenant that through Abraham's seed will come the Messiah, through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed.⁷ "The Lord shall comfort Zion. . . . Joy and gladness shall be found therein" (verse 3) because of the atonement that will overcome death.

The reader who proceeds through 2 Nephi 8 (Isaiah 51) with Jacob's commentary from chapter 9 firmly in mind will see the possibility that Isaiah 51 is a powerful commentary on the saving power of the "infinite atonement" (2 Nephi 9:7). For example, having in mind Jacob's discussion of physical and spiritual death and his characterization of death and hell as an "awful monster" (verse 10), the interesting parallelism in 2 Nephi 8:9 takes on a new dimension: "Art thou not he that hath cut Rahab [i.e., death] and wounded the dragon [i.e., hell]?" Then the verbs *ransomed* and *redeemed* in verses 10 and 11 take on a broader meaning, and of course "sorrow and mourning shall flee away" (verse 11), because of the infinite atonement that overcomes death and hell.

The remainder of 2 Nephi 8 continues to sustain the theme of the atonement that so clearly informs Jacob's commentary. "Among all the sons [Jerusalem] hath brought forth" (verse 18) there is no salvation (see verse 17), as there is no salvation in the law of Moses. The only sons left are "desolation and destruction" (verse 19)—that is, death and hell—and these two sons "lie at the head of all the streets" (verse 20), as death and hell lie at the end of every life, "save it should be an infinite atonement" (2 Nephi 9:7). Who, then, will comfort us, and why should we rejoice. The ultimate comfort—salvation—is of the Lord: "The Lord and thy God pleadeth the cause of his people; behold, I [the Lord and thy God] have taken out of thine hand the cup of trembling, the dregs of the cup of my fury; thou shalt no more drink it again" (verse 22). Christ has overcome death by drinking the bitter cup himself.

Certainly Jacob's commentary on Isaiah 50 and 51 allows a deeper, more personalized reading of these chapters than would otherwise likely be considered.

In 2 Nephi 10, Jacob's commentary on Isaiah continues, and his discussion of what he has just quoted from Isaiah also serves as an introductory commentary on the next group of Isaiah writings, 2 Nephi 12–24 (Isaiah 2–14).

Once again Jacob identifies the major themes that always accompany his citing of Isaiah. From 2 Nephi 10 we read that

1. **Christ will come and the Jews will reject and crucify him (verse 3);**
2. **the Jews will be “scattered among all nations” (verse 6);**
3. **according to the covenant, the house of Israel will be “restored in the flesh, upon the earth, unto the lands of their inheritance” (verse 7);**
4. **the gentiles “shall be great in the eyes of [God]” in bringing about this gathering (verse 8).**

Jacob's sermon shows further consistency with the teachings of his brother Nephi and his father, Lehi, because Jacob again quotes from Isaiah 49: “Yea, the kings of the Gentiles shall be nursing fathers unto them, and their queens shall become nursing mothers [Isaiah 49:23]; wherefore, the promises of the Lord are great unto the Gentiles” (2 Nephi 10:9; compare 1 Nephi 10:12, 14; 15:13–15; 22:8). Jacob then takes this promise to the gentiles one step further with a commentary on Isaiah 49:23: “I [God] will soften the hearts of the Gentiles, that they shall be like unto a father to them; *wherefore, the Gentiles shall be blessed and numbered among the house of Israel*” (2 Nephi 10:18).

With these background commentaries on Isaiah by Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob, we can better anticipate and understand the long section of Isaiah comprising 2 Nephi 12–24 (Isaiah 2–14).

Nephi's Commentary on Isaiah 2–14 (2 Nephi 12–24)

In introducing the next section of quotations from Isaiah, Nephi continues Jacob's emphasis on “the coming of Christ” (2 Nephi 11:4; compare 2 Nephi 9:21; 10:3), “the covenants of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers,” (2 Nephi 11:5; compare 2 Nephi 6:12; 9:1, 53) and “the great and eternal plan of deliverance from death” (2 Nephi 11:5; compare 2 Nephi 9:10–13). Nephi is going to do this by quoting “more of the words of Isaiah, . . . for [Isaiah] verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him. And my brother, Jacob, also has seen him” (2 Nephi 11:2–3). Finally, Nephi tells us that he will “write some of the words of Isaiah, that whoso of my people shall see these words may lift up their hearts and rejoice for all men” (verse 8). This final statement is an echo of Jacob, “rejoice, and lift up your heads forever” (2 Nephi 9:3), which was in turn a comment on Isaiah 51:11, “joy and holiness shall be upon their heads; and they shall obtain gladness and joy” (2 Nephi 8:11).

Nephi's major commentary on these thirteen chapters of Isaiah, however, comes by way of summary and conclusion in 2 Nephi 25, the chapter immediately following the long Isaiah section.

Because Isaiah's metaphoric and poetic language is difficult to understand, Nephi presents his own version of Isaiah's prophecy “according to [Nephi's] plainness” (see 2 Nephi 25:1–7). An important part of Nephi's commentary is to identify the time of fulfillment for Isaiah's prophecies: “In the days that the prophecies of Isaiah shall be fulfilled men shall know of a surety, at the times when they shall come to pass. . . . I know that they shall be of great worth unto [mine own people] *in the last days*; for in that day shall they understand them” (verses 7–8).

Nephi then gives “in plainness” his own prophecy, which is also a commentary on the thirteen chapters of Isaiah he has just quoted. The pattern in 2 Nephi 25 is by now all too familiar:

1. the Jews have “been destroyed from generation to generation” (verse 9);
2. those who have been taken to Babylon “shall return again, and possess the land of Jerusalem; wherefore, they shall be restored again to the land of their inheritance” (verses 10–11);
3. Christ will come, they will reject and crucify him, he will be resurrected (verses 12–13);
4. Israel will be scattered again “by other nations” (verses 15–16);
5. the Lord “will set his hand again the second time” (quoting Isaiah 11:11) to gather and restore Israel, an event that Nephi (quoting Isaiah 29:14) refers to as “a marvelous work and a wonder” (verse 17).

Using Nephi’s introductory commentary on Isaiah in 2 Nephi 11 and his summarizing commentary in 2 Nephi 25 as a guide, we can make our way more confidently through the thirteen chapters of Isaiah quoted in 2 Nephi 12–24 by watching for and identifying the themes discussed in the many commentaries on Isaiah: the Jews will be scattered and “scourged” (2 Nephi 25:16); the Messiah will come among them but will be rejected; yet in the “last days” the Lord will remember his covenant with the house of Israel and will, through the gentiles, “set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people” (2 Nephi 21:11). It is interesting to note that Nephi’s indication that the prophecies mentioned in Isaiah 11 will be fulfilled “in the last days” is confirmed by the visit of Moroni to Joseph Smith: “He [Moroni] quoted the eleventh chapter of Isaiah, saying that it was about to be fulfilled” (Joseph Smith—History, 1:40).

Nephi’s Commentary on Isaiah 29 (2 Nephi 26–7)

Beginning in 2 Nephi 26 and continuing in 2 Nephi 27, Nephi’s commentary on Isaiah 29 is different from the earlier commentaries because he provides not only an introductory and a summarizing commentary but also a type of intertextual commentary.

The first eleven verses of 2 Nephi 26 prophesy the eventual destruction of the Nephite nation, a branch of the house of Israel. Beginning with verse 14, however, Nephi turns his attention to the “last days,” and his introductory remarks in verses 13 and 14 lead directly into the quotation of Isaiah 29. This type of commentary constitutes perhaps the most specific interpretation of Isaiah in the entire Book of Mormon, and I submit that no one without Nephi’s commentary would be able to grasp the nuances of these writings of Isaiah.

Nephi begins: “But behold, I prophesy unto you concerning the last days; concerning the days when the Lord God shall bring these things forth unto the children of men. After my seed and the seed of my brethren shall have dwindled in unbelief, and shall have been smitten by the Gentiles . . .” (verses 14–15). And then, with only the word *yea* as a connector, Nephi begins quoting from Isaiah 29:3–4. In so doing he changes Isaiah’s first-person narrative into a third-person narrative and expands the scriptural text. “Yea, after the Lord God shall have camped against them [i.e., against “my seed and the seed of my brethren”] round about, and shall have laid siege against them with a mount, and raised forts against them; and after they shall have been brought down low in the dust, even that they are not, yet the words of the righteous shall be written, and the prayers of the faithful shall be heard, and all those who have dwindled in unbelief [i.e., “my seed”] shall not be forgotten” (2 Nephi 26:15). Nephi continues this methodical explication of Isaiah 29 throughout 2 Nephi 26 and 27 by quoting sections of Isaiah, commenting, and then quoting further. For example, 2 Nephi 26:18, which paraphrases and quotes directly from Isaiah 29:5, is surrounded by Nephi’s commentary.

It is perfectly understandable why Nephi should wish to give us such a careful comment on Isaiah 29. First, according to Nephi’s understanding, Isaiah is prophesying in part about Nephi’s own people—his “seed,” a branch of the house of Israel that has been scattered and that “in the last days” will be brought back as part of the rebuilding of the house of Israel. Second, Isaiah is prophesying about Nephi’s own book, the record of his people that later would become the Book of Mormon. We can only imagine the excitement and gratitude Nephi must have felt when through “the spirit of prophecy” (2 Nephi 25:4) he realized the prophecies in Isaiah 29 applied specifically to his people and his sacred record.

In 2 Nephi 27, Nephi speaks of the “sealed” record of “those who have slumbered in the dust” (verse 9) and of the learned person who is unable to read a sealed book (see verse 15–18). At the beginning of the chapter, Nephi is careful to indicate the time when this prophecy will be fulfilled and that its fulfillment is not restricted to his seed only: “But, behold, in the last days, or in the days of the Gentiles—yea, behold all the nations of the Gentiles and also the Jews, both those who shall come upon this land and those who shall be upon other lands, yea, *even upon all the lands of the earth*, behold, they will be drunken with iniquity [an interpretation of Isaiah 29:9, “drunken, but not with wine”] and all manner of abominations” (2 Nephi 27:1). Nephi then immediately resumes quoting Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 27:2; compare Isaiah 29:6), beginning at the point where he left off in chapter 26 (verse 18).

Nephi continues quoting Isaiah through 2 Nephi 27:7 and then inserts a long commentary of his own concerning the familiar story of the incident with Professor Charles Anthon (see Joseph Smith—History, 1:63–5). Following this careful combination of quotation and commentary, Nephi continues his own summarizing commentary in 2 Nephi 28, and once again he repeats the time when these prophecies of Isaiah will be fulfilled: “For it shall come to pass *in that day*” (2 Nephi 28:3).

Beginning with verse 30 of chapter 28, Nephi’s revelation shifts from third person to first person; that is, it becomes a revelation directly from the Lord. For example: “I shall proceed to do a marvelous work among them [Isaiah 29:14], that I may remember my covenants which I have made unto the children of men, that I may set my hand again the second time to recover my people [changed from third person in Isaiah 11:11], which are of the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 29:1). Note that the Lord’s quoting of Isaiah’s words anticipates his expressed approbation of Isaiah’s writings to the Nephite survivors at Bountiful half a millennium later (see 3 Nephi 23:1).

It is also significant that the Book of Mormon makes a very important correction to the Isaiah text. As it stands in the Bible, Isaiah 29:10 reads: “For the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes: the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered.” Here the Lord is represented as having closed the people’s eyes. The Book of Mormon corrects this by making clear that “ye [the people] have closed your eyes, and ye have rejected the prophets.” Consequently, the Lord has removed (“covered”) their seers. Why? “Because of [Israel’s] iniquity” (2 Nephi 27:5).

In summary, the words of Nephi (and the Lord) from 2 Nephi 26 through 29 constitute what must be the most careful and specific commentary on Isaiah in the entire Book of Mormon.

Abinadi’s Commentary on Isaiah 52–3 (Mosiah 12, 14–15)

Abinadi’s commentary on Isaiah is stimulated by one of the priests of King Noah’s court who asks, “What meaneth the words which are written, and which have been taught by our fathers?” (Mosiah 12:20). The priest then quotes the well-known passage from Isaiah 52:7–10, which begins: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings; that publisheth peace . . .” (see Mosiah 12:21–4). This quotation, concluding with

the words “the Lord hath made bare his holy arm . . .,” initiates Abinadi’s sermon on the Ten Commandments (see Mosiah 12:25–13:26).

As a preparatory commentary on Isaiah 53, Abinadi teaches that although it is necessary to keep these commandments, “salvation doth not come by the law alone,” but by the “atonement, which God himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people” (Mosiah 13:28). He further explains that the “performances and ordinances” of the law of Moses were “types of things to come” (see verses 30–1). “For behold, did not Moses prophesy unto [the children of Israel] concerning the coming of the Messiah, and that God should redeem his people? Yea, and even all the prophets who have prophesied ever since the world began—have they not spoken more or less concerning these things?” (verse 33). With this introduction, Abinadi then quotes Isaiah 53, which Abinadi understands as referring to the Messiah: “Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows . . .” (Mosiah 14:4; Isaiah 53:4).

In Mosiah 15 Abinadi provides a thorough commentary on Isaiah 53, emphasizing that those who accept Christ’s sacrifice for sin will become the seed of Christ (see Mosiah 15:10–12). He then returns to the question asked earlier in Mosiah 12:20–4, setting up his response to it with a question of his own: Those who listen to the words of the prophets “are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions, are they not his seed? Yea. . . . And these are they who have published peace, who have brought good tidings. . . . And O how beautiful upon the mountains were their feet” (Mosiah 15:12–15).

Abinadi’s quoting of Isaiah leads into a commentary on the resurrection of mankind and the justice of God (see Mosiah 15:21–7). Like Nephi, Abinadi identifies a time for the events he will describe: “And now I say unto you that the time shall come that the salvation of the Lord shall be declared to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (verse 28). This establishes a helpful context for understanding the remaining Isaiah verses (Isaiah 52:8–10) that gave rise to the original question posed by the priest of King Noah in Mosiah 12:20–4. The last Isaiah verse Abinadi quotes, Isaiah 52:10 (“The Lord hath made bare his holy arm . . .”), is linked to, and thoroughly consistent with, Nephi’s interpretation of the same verse in 1 Nephi 22 (see 1 Nephi 22:10–11 and surrounding commentary).

Abinadi concludes his sermon and Isaiah commentary with a return to the purpose of the law of Moses: “Therefore, if ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a shadow of those things which are to come—Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father” (Mosiah 16:14–15).

The Savior’s Commentary on Isaiah 52 and 54 (3 Nephi 16, 20, 22)

The last full chapters of Isaiah quoted in the Book of Mormon, Isaiah 52 and 54, are quoted by the Savior himself in 3 Nephi 16, 20, and 22 and are preceded by a lengthy and detailed commentary beginning in 3 Nephi 16. Here the Savior tells of visiting his other sheep and then turns his attention to the destiny of the house of Israel, which according to the familiar pattern will be scattered and then gathered again in the last days by the gentiles: “O house of Israel, in the latter day shall the truth come unto the Gentiles, that the fulness of these things shall be made known unto them. . . . And then will I remember my covenant which I have made unto my people, O house of Israel, and I will bring my gospel unto them. . . . I will remember my covenant unto you, O house of Israel, and ye shall come unto the knowledge of the fulness of my gospel. But if the Gentiles will repent and return unto me, saith the Father, behold they shall be numbered among my people, O house of Israel” (3 Nephi 16:7, 11–13).

The Savior then concludes this section of his introductory commentary on Isaiah by returning to those same verses quoted in part by Nephi and in full by Abinadi, beginning with “Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice . . .” and

concluding with “The Lord hath made bare his holy arm . . .” (see Isaiah 52:8–10; 3 Nephi 16:18–20).

The Savior’s commentary on Isaiah continues in chapter 20 when he returns to the theme of the house of Israel: “Behold now I finish the commandment which the Father hath commanded me concerning this people, who are a remnant of the house of Israel. Ye remember that I spake unto you, and said that when the words of Isaiah should be fulfilled . . . then is the fulfilling of the covenant which the Father hath made unto his people, O house of Israel” (3 Nephi 20:10–12). The Savior has been sent “to bless you in turning away every one of you from his iniquities” (verse 26). The house of Israel will be scattered by the gentiles (see verses 27–8), but the Lord will remember the covenant and gather them again (see verse 29). The Savior then turns again to Isaiah 52:8–10, verses that, having been quoted by Nephi, the priest of Noah, Abinadi, and the Savior, have by this time become rather familiar to the readers of the Book of Mormon.

In this instance, however, the Savior gives an interesting commentary on the verse by quoting it differently. In Isaiah 52:9 the text reads, “Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the Lord hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem.” As quoted by the Savior in the Book of Mormon, the text reads: “Then will the Father *gather them together again*, and give unto them Jerusalem for the land of their inheritance. Then shall they break forth into joy—Sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem; *for the Father hath comforted his people*, he hath redeemed Jerusalem” (3 Nephi 20:33–4).

There is also a significant change in the verse that follows: “The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isaiah 52:10). “The Father hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of the Father; and *the Father and I are one*” (3 Nephi 20:35). The Savior then quotes the remainder of Isaiah 52 with some further variation, but he does not repeat verses 8 through 10.

Continuing this theme, 3 Nephi 21 begins with a specific statement that again identifies the time when these prophecies of Isaiah are to be fulfilled: “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” (verse 1). The time prophesied by Isaiah for the gathering of Israel is identified here by the Savior as the last days, “when these works and the works which shall be wrought among you hereafter shall come forth from the Gentiles, unto your seed. . . . And when these things 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” (see verses 5, 7).

At this point the Savior again quotes Isaiah and once again identifies the time of the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “And *when that day shall come*, it shall come to pass that kings shall shut their mouths” (3 Nephi 21:8, quoting Isaiah 52:15). “*For in that day*, for my sake shall the Father work a work, which shall be a great and a marvelous work among them” (3 Nephi 21:9, quoting Isaiah 29:14). “But if [the gentiles] will repent . . . I will establish my church among them, and they shall come in unto the covenant and be numbered among this the remnant of Jacob” (3 Nephi 21:22).

Third Nephi 21 continues to identify the time of fulfillment—“and then” (verses 24, 25, 26), “the work shall commence” (verse 27), “and then shall the work commence” (verse 28)—and concludes with an adaptation of Isaiah 52:12: “And they shall go out *from all nations*; and they shall not go out in haste, nor go by flight, for I will go before them, saith the Father, and I will be their rearward” (3 Nephi 21:29).

With this introduction, the Savior then quotes Isaiah 54 in its entirety. Verse 3 is perhaps the significant verse in the context of the Savior's commentary on the role of the gentiles in restoring the house of Israel: "For thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left, *and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles* and make the desolate cities to be inhabited."

As mentioned earlier, the scope of this paper has not allowed an in-depth study of the Isaiah passages themselves.⁸ The excitement of discovery is the rightful pleasure of each individual reader. This brief overview should, however, help the reader to understand that the key to understanding Isaiah in the Book of Mormon is in the commentaries.

In view of the significance of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, it is perhaps fitting that Moroni should quote from Isaiah as part of his final exhortation and farewell: "And again I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ, and lay hold upon every good gift, and touch not the evil gift, nor the unclean thing [from Isaiah 52:11]. And awake, and arise from the dust, O Jerusalem; yea, and put on thy beautiful garments, O daughter of Zion [from Isaiah 52:1]; and strengthen thy stakes and enlarge thy borders forever [from Isaiah 54:2], that thou mayest no more be confounded, that the covenants of the Eternal Father which he hath made unto thee, O house of Israel, may be fulfilled" (Moroni 10:30–1).

In summary, it should be emphasized that the Isaiah passages in the Book of Mormon are not unnecessary duplications of the biblical Isaiah. Rather, they are an inspired, integral part of that sacred text. Although the Book of Mormon Isaiah makes significant corrections to the biblical Isaiah, the greater value lies, first, in the contextual setting in which the doctrines of the covenant of Christ's atoning sacrifice, the prophesied scattering of Israel, and the restoration of the house of Israel in the last days through the instrumentality of the gentiles receive their full and proper emphasis; and, second, in the rich and detailed interpretations given us through the commentaries of Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, Abinadi, and the Savior.

Notes

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1. Quoted in the Book of Mormon is Isaiah 2–14, 29 (except for verses 1–2), and 48–54 (except for verses 4–5 of chapter 52). A helpful listing of nearly all the quotations is found in Legrande Davies, "Texts in the Book of Mormon," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:700. The most thorough listing of all Isaiah quotations found in the standard works as well as in the writings of selected General Authorities is found in Monte S. Nyman, *Great Are the Words of Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), appendix B.
2. For a verse-by-verse comparison of the Book of Mormon Isaiah texts with five modern translations, see 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). This study highlights textual differences and discusses the insertion of changes into the Isaiah texts "with malice aforethought" after Lehi's departure from Jerusalem with the brass plates.
3. Abinadi quotes Isaiah 53 in answer to a question concerning a passage found in Isaiah 52 (see Mosiah 12:20–4; 14). In so doing he relates the atonement of Christ to the law of Moses, but he does not use the term *house of Israel* in this context.
4. Often two and even three of these terms are found in the same verse: "For behold, I say unto you that as many of the *Gentiles* as will repent are the *covenant* people of the Lord" (2 Nephi 30:2). "The book that thou beholdest is a record of the Jews, which contains the *covenants* of the Lord, which he hath made

unto the *house of Israel*; . . . wherefore, they are of great worth unto the *Gentiles*” (1 Nephi 13:23).

“Nevertheless, after they shall be nursed by the *Gentiles*, and the Lord has lifted up his hand upon the *Gentiles* . . . , behold these things of which are spoken are temporal; for thus are the *covenants* of the Lord with our fathers; and it meaneth us in the days to come, and also all our brethren who are of the house of Israel” (1 Nephi 22:6).

5. See Gorton, *Legacy of the Brass Plates*, for thorough commentary on these corrections.
6. In 1 Nephi 22:8–10, Nephi links Isaiah 29:14 (“a marvelous work . . .”), Isaiah 49:22–3 (“thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders . . .”), and Isaiah 52:10 (“the Lord hath made bare his holy arm . . .”), thus bringing together and explaining three of the most frequently quoted Isaiah verses in the Book of Mormon. This makes 1 Nephi 22 one of the most important Isaiah commentaries in the Book of Mormon.
7. Compare Galatians 3, in which the apostle Paul refers to the Abrahamic covenant in similar terms. During his visit to the Nephites, Jesus Christ indicated the precise nature of the blessing that would be extended to all nations: “In thy [Abraham’s] seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed—unto the *pouring out of the Holy Ghost* through me [Christ] upon the Gentiles, which blessing upon the Gentiles shall make them *mighty above all*, unto the scattering of my people. . . . Nevertheless, when they shall have *received the fulness of my gospel*, then if they shall harden their hearts against me I will return their iniquities upon their own heads, saith the Father” (3 Nephi 20:27–8).
8. Specific Isaiah selections in the Book of Mormon are discussed in detail in Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch, eds., *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998).