

Isaiah-Key to the Book of Mormon

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The book of Isaiah and the Book of Mormon teach us much about each other. The better we understand the one, the better we will understand the other. And the more we learn about what both have to say, the more we will learn about the time in which we live.

The Book of Mormon offers four keys essential for understanding Isaiah: (1) the spirit of prophecy or the Holy Ghost; (2) the letter of prophecy or the manner of the Jews; (3) diligent searching of Isaiah's words; and (4) types, or the idea that events in Israel's past foreshadow events in the latter days. When we apply these four keys to Isaiah's writings, a message unfolds there that is immediately applicable and recognizable to Latter-day Saints. The developing spiritual and political shape of the world in which we live parallels precisely the prophetic scenario Isaiah drew up millennia ago.

Knowing these four Book of Mormon keys, we understand Isaiah in a new light. Isaiah speaks to us—to our generation—like a voice from the dust. Isaiah shows us where we as Latter-day Saints fit into the Lord's plan of salvation. He tells us the role we must play in redeeming Israel's ancient covenant people, or else be swept away by the Lord's judgments. The last days portend both good and evil: Isaiah describes a glorious salvation on the earth for the Lord's long-suffering people; but he also portrays a world ripening in iniquity that the Lord will destroy in a fiery holocaust, a war to end all wars. Isaiah identifies the chief actors in this modern drama by means of ancient names and key words. Matching these with their latter-day counterparts resembles putting together a jigsaw puzzle—every piece fits and adds to the picture.

Isaiah's thought also permeates the Book of Mormon. At many key points we find references to Isaiah or sections from his prophecies. Book of Mormon prophet-writers quote from Isaiah in numerous instances. They express their own thoughts in Isaiah's words, often without mentioning him as their source. They use Isaiah's systematic way of employing terms and expressions. They reproduce whole chapters of Isaiah in strategic parts of their narratives, their doctrinal explanations, or their prophesying. The words of Isaiah, far beyond those of any other Old Testament writer, are significant for them.

The Book of Mormon's emphasis on Isaiah leads us to believe that his words furnish a key to understanding the Nephite record. As we appreciate Isaiah's influence on Book of Mormon prophet-writers, we understand the Book of Mormon better. We realize that the Book of Mormon is not simply the story of what happened to Lehi's family and others who journeyed to the Western hemisphere. The book does tell that story, but it tells it in a way intended to teach us things about our time also. One of the ways it does that is by recording especially those events that parallel and reinforce Isaiah's teachings about the last days. These events are included in the Book of Mormon, chosen out of the many that could have been included, to help the Lord's people in our time understand events that are to come—events that will fulfill Isaiah's prophecies about our modern day.

An example of how the Book of Mormon gives us a key for understanding Isaiah can also show how understanding Isaiah aids our understanding of the Book of Mormon. As we study the Book of Mormon more closely, we find that it paints a living portrait of the *types* of things Isaiah prophesied for the last day. Let us look at the exodus theme, which appears prominently in the book of Isaiah.

Isaiah prophesied a literal new exodus for some of the Lord's people in the last days that resembles the ancient exodus out of Egypt. He predicted that the Lord's people will exit "Babylon" on the eve of a cataclysmic destruction, a destruction like that which struck Sodom and Gomorrah. To Isaiah, however, "Babylon" in the latter days consists of a world ripening in iniquity and the wicked who make up its citizenry. Both the exodus out of Egypt, therefore, and also the name Babylon serve as types. First, the Lord will miraculously intervene to save his people from bondage and destruction as he did in Egypt. Second, the ancient Babylonian world, which was known for its idolatry and oppression, here becomes a symbol of latter-day wickedness. Third, there will occur a Sodom-and-Gomorrah type of destruction (by fire rained down from the sky) in the last days.

Isaiah used this method of prophesying throughout his writings. He prophesied new things based on the old. Events that have set important precedents qualify as types and shadows for the last days. In addition to a new exodus, Isaiah predicted a new passover, a new descent of God on the mount (not Mount Sinai this time but Mount Zion), a new wandering in the wilderness, and a new conquest of the promised land—all new versions of things similar to what happened in Moses' day.

These ancient types are keys to understanding the book of Isaiah. My reading tells me that more than thirty major events that are reported in the Old Testament serve as types for the future, that is, for our day. So, when Book of Mormon writers quote so much from Isaiah, we expect that they will share Isaiah's use of types. We find, in fact, that Book of Mormon writers build on this aspect of Isaiah's thought more than any other.

Many Book of Mormon stories are inspired by types. Why did Book of Mormon writers choose to tell about certain events in their history and not others? For the same reason that Isaiah described certain events of his day and not others. The reason is that those events had special meaning as lessons through which those who would live many generations later could learn what they must watch for and do.

What standard did Book of Mormon writers use to decide what was appropriate to include and what was not? Often it was Isaiah's standard: types. Whatever in their history best served as a type and shadow for the latter days, they included in their narratives. What would not serve effectively as a type, they left out, just as Isaiah did. Their aim was not to give an exhaustive history but rather to teach certain lessons to us and to their descendants.

The Book of Mormon commences with an exodus: the people in Jerusalem were ripening in wickedness; the Lord sent Lehi and others to prophesy a coming destruction and captivity. When the people sought Lehi's life, the Lord commanded him to take his family and flee into the wilderness. Soon Ishmael's family joined them, and they traveled together in the wilderness, then crossed the sea to a promised land. Nephi drew numerous parallels between the families' exodus out of the land of Jerusalem and the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt. Nephi in many instances functioned as a new Moses, preserving his people and leading them to the promised land.

Not long after they arrived in the promised land, Nephi led another exodus. When their father died, Laman and Lemuel sought to kill Nephi. The Lord warned Nephi to flee into the wilderness with all who would join him. They journeyed for days, then reestablished themselves as a righteous people (see 2 Nephi 5:1-11). As the Lamanites increased in numbers and warred incessantly against the Nephites, Mosiah led yet another exodus. His remnant of the Nephites traveled through the wilderness until they discovered the people of Zarahemla and united with them (see Omni 1:12-19). The people of Zarahemla themselves had participated in an exodus from Jerusalem at the time King Zedekiah of Judah was taken captive into Babylon. They had journeyed in the wilderness and crossed the sea to the promised land much like Lehi's group (see Omni 1:15-16).

Alma led an exodus of believers to escape wicked King Noah's wrath. The Lord warned Alma, their high priest, to flee into the wilderness. They discovered the land of Helam and settled there (see Mosiah 23:1-5). After Amulon persecuted Alma and his people, putting them into hard bondage, the Lord again commanded Alma to depart into the wilderness. Many days later his people reached safety in the land of Zarahemla (see Mosiah 24:8-25). King Limhi's people, in bondage to the Lamanites, similarly escaped by an exodus. With Ammon leading the way, they traveled from the land of Nephi through the wilderness and arrived in the land of Zarahemla (see Mosiah 22:11-13). Later, the Lamanites whom the sons of Mosiah converted (the Anti-Nephi-Lehies) also had to flee. When the unconverted Lamanites killed many of them, Ammon led them in yet another exodus through the wilderness to Zarahemla (see Alma 27:2-26).

A classic exodus in the Book of Mormon involves Jared and his brother and their friends. They departed from the "great tower" in Mesopotamia when the Lord confounded the people's language. The brother of Jared obtained the Lord's promise of a new land of inheritance. They wandered through the wilderness and crossed seas, eventually arriving in the promised land (see Ether 1:40-42; 2:5-7; 6:4-12). There are six features common to this exodus and others in the Book of Mormon: First, the Lord is personally involved in the exodus. Second, a prophet-leader communicates with the Lord on behalf of his people. Third, the Lord guides his people as to when they should leave and which direction they should take. Fourth, they gather up and bring with them seeds and livestock of all kinds. Fifth, they dwell in tents during a prolonged journey through the wilderness. Sixth, they arrive safely and prosper in the land of promise. All of this reminds us of Moses and the Israelites leaving Egypt and journeying to the promised land.

To make sure the reader recognizes the exodus theme in the Book of Mormon, its writers quote many of Isaiah's prophecies of the latter-day exodus out of Babylon (see 1 Nephi 20:20; 2 Nephi 8:10-11; 21:15; 3 Nephi 20:41-42). The Book of Mormon illustrates by a series of types what the exodus predicted by Isaiah will be like. What the Nephite prophet-writers have chosen to mention about each exodus, particularly the commonly shared elements, teaches us about the nature of exoduses. Yet an exodus is not an abstract idea, a figure of speech, or merely a point of historical interest. Instead, it is a literal and dramatic event, one that changes people's lives forever. It involves the Lord's intervention in behalf of his righteous people when only his help can deliver them from calamity.

An exodus means irrevocable separation from those, perhaps loved ones, who do not merit the Lord's deliverance. It signals a fresh beginning, the replanting of a community, the restoring of a righteous civilization. The Book of Mormon leaves no doubt about the kind of candidates who qualify for the Lord's deliverance. Nor does it leave us in the dark about who the oppressors are. As the latter-day exodus draws near that Isaiah prophesied, the Book of Mormon is there to teach us about conditions preceding it. Knowing with what faithfulness the Lord acts in times of great judgment will inspire us to act in faith toward him, to endure with long-suffering the oppressions that must come. Having received from the past "a pattern in all things" (D&C 52:14), and having received latter-day prophecies of an exodus by the Saints (D&C 103:15-20), we will not easily be deceived.

We thus see that what Isaiah prophesied directly about the last days by drawing on ancient types, the Book of Mormon prophesied indirectly by highlighting certain aspects of its history that reinforce or echo the types used by Isaiah. One further example will help to make this point. The Lord's judgments in the last days possess a twofold dimension: at his coming, the Lord will both deliver (by an exodus) the righteous and destroy the wicked. The righteous will inherit the land vacated by the wicked who perish. This reversal will take place in two stages: first, when his people ripen in wickedness, the Lord will raise up enemies to invade their land and destroy many of them; and second, when the Lord's purpose of punishing the wicked has been served, he will empower a righteous

remnant of his people to overthrow the invaders. Those who remain to inherit the land will be the Lord's righteous, proven people.

Isaiah projected this as the pattern of deliverance and destruction for the last days. Using ancient Assyria as the type of an oppressive latter-day superpower, Isaiah predicted that the Lord will raise up a new "Assyria" as his instrument for destroying and taking captive his people. This "Assyria," after invading and ravaging the promised land, will prevail until it fully accomplishes the Lord's purpose of cleansing the wicked from the land. But "Assyria's" own wickedness will prove its downfall also. Its armies will perish when the Lord smites them at the hands of a righteous Ephraimite army whom he will lend his own power.

Like the exodus theme, the Book of Mormon emphasizes this pattern of invasion and reconquest. Why do Book of Mormon writers take up so much space on precious gold plates with stories of warfare? They tell us that not a hundredth part of their history is recorded in the Book of Mormon, so this pattern of invasion and reconquest must have been important for them to emphasize so much. Why do Book of Mormon writers play up certain episodes of their military history, such as the wars Moroni waged, and yet deliberately downplay others, such as King Benjamin's great victory over the Lamanites (see Words of Mormon 1:13)? Is it because in King Benjamin's case no actual conquest by the Lamanites had occurred? Is it because at that time few dissenting Nephites were destroyed in the war? The typical military stories of the Book of Mormon feature both wickedness by the Lord's people and conquest of their land by enemies.

The Lord permits enemies to destroy and take away the promised lands when his people do not keep his commandments. This is a key lesson that they must learn. The Nephites' wickedness constitutes *the* reason for the wars that are emphasized. That much the Lord had shown Nephi before they reached the promised land (see 1 Nephi 2:24). The Lord raised up the Lamanites as "a scourge" against the Nephites when the Nephites ripened in iniquity (see 2 Nephi 5:25). By means of wars, the Lord often destroyed the more wicked part of the Nephites but spared the righteous (see Omni 1:5-7; Alma 50:22).

Alma the Younger's battle against the Amlicites and Lamanites is a good example of this pattern of wars. Those Nephites who sought to change the constitution of their government allied themselves with the Nephites' arch-enemies, the Lamanites. The combined forces of these two groups caused much destruction. After many perished, the Lord strengthened the Nephites, and they overthrew their enemies and ousted them from the land (see Alma 2:1-3:3). Another war occurred after Alma and Amulek preached to the people of Ammonihah. The inhabitants of that city burned to death all who believed in the words of the prophets. Very soon a Lamanite army succeeded in utterly destroying the city, killing every inhabitant, before the Nephites rallied an army sufficient to overpower them. With the Lord's intervention, however, the Nephites defeated their enemies and delivered their captives (see Alma 16:1-10).

Classic military encounters in the Book of Mormon occurred in the days of Moroni, the Nephite chief captain. Zoramite dissenters joined forces with the Lamanites and invaded the land of the Nephites. Moroni inspired his forces to fight for their freedom, and they called on the Lord to aid them. Moroni's superior technology and strategies allowed the Nephites to rout a much larger force than theirs. The Lamanites made a covenant of peace with Moroni never to come against the Nephites again (see Alma 43:3-44:20).

A further effort to destroy the Nephites' freedom by changing the government led to war. Amalickiah, attempting to become king, caused internal dissension among the Nephites, even in the church. Moroni raised the title of liberty and put down the dissenters. Amalickiah, however, fled with a small band and succeeded in becoming king

of the Lamanites. He send an innumerable army to attack the Nephites in their cities. But Moroni's methods again took them by surprise, and the Lamanites went home in defeat (see Alma 46:1-49:30).

Amalickiah returned at the head of another Lamanite army, just as Moroni was putting down the king-men who had attempted to alter the government. Amalickiah's armies captured many Nephite cities, and a long war ensued. The Nephite armies under Moroni, Lehi, Teancum, Helaman, and others fought under difficult conditions. Further dissensions by king-men weakened Nephite efforts. Peace was restored only after much suffering and loss of life (see Alma 51:1-62:52).

Other battles receive much less attention in the Book of Mormon. The great victory King Benjamin achieved over the Lamanites, discussed earlier, is reported in only two verses (see Words of Mormon 1:13-14). Later, a tremendous battle between the Nephites and Lamanites took place when many Lamanites converted to the Lord. The loss of life in these battles exceeded any up to that time (see Alma 28:1-3). But both episodes receive little prominence in the Book of Mormon, possibly because they do not follow the pattern of wickedness leading to destruction, followed by victory by the righteous.

All the Nephite-Lamanite wars that follow the pattern I mention occur from 87-51 B.C., a thirty-six year period. When we look at these wars as a series of types, we should not necessarily assume that as many wars will repeat themselves in our time. Just as several exoduses in the Book of Mormon may prefigure a single latter-day exodus—the exodus of which Isaiah prophesied—so several Nephite-Lamanite wars may prefigure a single war between the Lord's people and an alien power. Remember that Isaiah's code name for this latter-day power is Assyria.

Elements the Book of Mormon battles have in common teach us about this great last war of which Isaiah prophesied: First, internal dissensions and secret combinations will weaken and divide the Lord's people. Second, an alien power will invade the land, conquering and destroying, and seeking to impose its oppressive rule over the Lord's people. Third, a righteous prophet-commander will lead an army of the Lord's people against their enemies. Fourth, their cause will be to defend their freedom, their religion, and their families. Fifth, they will call on the Lord to assist them. Sixth, the hand of the Lord will be with them so that they will succeed in defeating their enemies and restoring peace.

Each set of parallels in the Book of Mormon (of the exodus and war stories) foreshadows the events Isaiah prophesied. I expect that many of these parallels particularly concern the Lord's people on the American continent. That makes the Book of Mormon an informative guide to the future. It helps us to see a deeper meaning behind Nephi's statements that his people may "liken" Isaiah's words to themselves (see 1 Nephi 19:23-24; 2 Nephi 11:2, 8). Since Nephi saw the last days in vision, he established a pattern for recording history that would best serve the Lamanites in that latter day. I believe the source of Nephi's prophetic pattern is Isaiah. The chronicling of those things that will most typify and benefit a future generation of the Lord's people constitutes the difference between sacred and secular history. The Book of Mormon's wide use of such types helps to establish its authenticity as an ancient, sacred record written by prophets for the instruction of the Lord's people in the last days.