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“LET THE METAPHORS  
SPEAK TO YOU”

An LDS Commentary on Isaiah

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ANN N. MADSEN

*Dedicated to those who live in the time about which Isaiah prophesied*

## **Introduction**

As a people, we have somehow been misled into believing that the writings of the majestic prophet Isaiah are too difficult to fathom. That is false. This belief is akin to dismissing the Book of Mormon without ever reading it. I would plead with all readers of the Old Testament not to dismiss Isaiah without meekly and carefully reading his prophecies.

Isaiah's prophecies are delivered to you in elegant poetry, and my task is to help you as you carefully walk the path towards understanding what his words signify. Latter-day Saints are uniquely equipped to see and hear Isaiah's message. We proclaim to a chaotic world that God has an eternal plan and that each of us has a part in it. There are Godly precepts that have existed since before the earth was created, and they have been revealed to us by His chosen prophets.

These truths were lived and taught by Jesus Christ. He was and is central to this plan. His role in this plan makes eternal happiness possible for each one of us. Isaiah often refers to the need for all people to see and comprehend, as well as the need to hear, listen and intentionally obey.

You will find that as you ponder Isaiah's words you will learn to recognize the voice of the LORD. Listen for it. As President Russell M. Nelson has recently emphasized, "Therefore, the only way to survive spiritually is to be determined to let God prevail in our lives [and] . . . learn to hear His voice."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," October 2020 general conference, online at [churchofjesuschrist.org](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org).

You may not realize that you are already equipped to understand Isaiah's words. Five things you are already familiar with can help you as you study:

### **1. Metaphors**

You will find Isaiah using one metaphor after another. A good metaphor paints a picture, and examining that picture both enriches and expands your understanding. As you examine the picture in your mind you combine your personal experiences with the written words, leading to greater insight.

This may be what Nephi referred to as “the manner of prophesying among the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:1). Metaphors are useful because each of us has had a unique set of life experiences. Because of this, a symbol might mean one thing to you but the person sitting next to you has lived his own life and is therefore seeing a totally different picture.

Isaiah's use of metaphor makes his writings particularly suited to inspiring personal revelation.

### **2. Temple Imagery**

The imagery of temple worship is obvious throughout Isaiah. One who attends the temple will find many of Isaiah's words and symbols familiar. This means that the temple will contribute to what you find as you search Isaiah, and Isaiah will bless your temple worship as you absorb his words. Both require serious pondering and will result in significant testimony growth.

Years ago, as I studied Isaiah, I would put a small drawing of a temple beside each passage that referred to any aspect of the temple (washings, anointings, symbols, etc.)

I invite you to do the same. One example of this is Isaiah 1:16, which reads, “Wash you, make you clean.” A verse like that would deserve a temple drawing in the margins.

### **3. Covenants**

President Russell M. Nelson has often stated that covenants mark a straight and narrow path as we intentionally follow Jesus.<sup>2</sup> One beautiful description of this path is in Isaiah 35, which describes how, in the day of Restoration, the desert will blossom, the LORD will come, Israel will be gathered, and Zion will be built up. Verses 8–10 promises there will be a path (or *way*) for the redeemed.

And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No lion

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Russell M. Nelson, “As We Go Forward Together,” *Liahona*, April 2018, 7.

shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there: and the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

#### **4. Modern Scriptures**

The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price all reveal additional truths about Isaiah's teachings. Each make their own unique contribution to understanding Isaiah.

**Book of Mormon.** The Book of Mormon has its own text of Isaiah (from the Plates of Brass), principally in 2 Nephi. Jesus, Nephi, Abinadi, Mormon, and Moroni frequently quote Isaiah and often express the blessings of having his writings in the plates of brass. One specific example of how the Book of Mormon can aid students of Isaiah is found in 3 Nephi. When Jesus appears to the Nephites in 3 Nephi, He explains the scattering of Israel and quotes all of Isaiah 54 to explain the gathering to the descendants of Lehi.

**Doctrine and Covenants.** In the midst of a flurry of revelations given to the Prophet Joseph Smith as he was organizing the Church, we find Doctrine and Covenants 113. This revelation changes the subject abruptly from church structure to biblical insights, interpreting Isaiah 11 and 52. In Doctrine and Covenants 20 we have the sacramental prayers, and verse 37 describes replacing animal sacrifices found in the Old Testament with a sacrifice we bring of "a broken heart and a contrite spirit," shedding light on how Isaiah's discussion of animal sacrifice can be understood today. The Word of Wisdom, as we have come to know section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants, sets forth a dietary law comparable to ancient Israel's strict kosher rules, aiding in how Isaiah's discussion of ancient food codes can be understood in modern times.

**Pearl of Great Price.** The Books of Moses and Abraham greatly enlarge our vision of humankind's pre-mortal and post-mortal existence referred to throughout Isaiah.

#### **5. Modern Prophets**

Today's prophets, seers, and revelators, whom we sustain, often quote Isaiah directly. At the April 2021 general conference, I noted twelve quotations where Isaiah was cited by name as well as many more where his words were used but Isaiah was not cited by name. As the brethren and sisters address us in these semi-annual events, they focus on timely prophecies for us. How interesting that Isaiah's words so regularly come to mind!

Have I convinced you to read Isaiah more carefully? Isaiah wrote for us, and prophesied of us, so we owe it to him to read what he left us.

### ***As you begin your study:***

Here are some things to consider in Isaiah that will help you as you begin your study:

1. When is this taking place? For example, what year did King Uzziah die?
2. What's happening in Isaiah's world at this time?
3. You are reading a translation from Biblical Hebrew. There is no punctuation in Biblical Hebrew. This is important to know because when reading Biblical Hebrew texts, one must use the context to determine the meaning of a word, whether it be a name, an action, an object, or anything Isaiah might be talking about.
4. Ignore chapter breaks, they often interrupt a metaphor and are arbitrary divisions.
5. Start a list of symbols and metaphors you encounter, describing the picture they paint for you.
6. Note how Isaiah draws the reader into his discourse, sometime beginning with references to others, "they" or "them", and then progressing to "we" or "us, and then to "all of you," then finally to "you."
7. You will find that Isaiah describes for us what he sees, allowing us to see it too. He often does this with something called the prophetic present tense in which a prophet is talking about something in the future as though it were taking place now.
8. Notice how Isaiah speaks in first person as if he is the LORD. In cases like this, he is the messenger speaking the exact words of the LORD as they were spoken to him.

### **Credits**

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