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Nephi's Lessons to His People: The Messiah, the Land, and Isaiah 48-49 in 1 Nephi 19-22

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Andrew C. Skinner

*Nephi used Isaiah to teach his people faith in the future Redeemer
who will reject the rebellious, save the righteous from sins,
suffering, and scattering, and redeem them to their land.*



The first of the Book of Mormon chapters that quote extensively or entirely from the great prophet Isaiah are 1 Nephi 20–21, in which Nephi quotes Isaiah 48–49 from the brass plates brought from Jerusalem. That Nephi begins his expansive recitations of Isaiah with chapters 48 and 49 and not with other chapters of that prophet's book shows that, as a prophet to his family, to his descendants, and to the Gentiles and Jews of the latter days, Nephi first offers Isaiah's message of hope and redemption in Christ.

Nephi's Text of Isaiah

The Isaiah text that Nephi possessed was somewhat different from that found in the King James Version of the Bible (KJV).¹ This is not surprising, however, because Nephi's version came from the brass plates, which seem to have contained a Northern Kingdom version of the Old Testament.² The Old Testament text of Isaiah found on the brass plates was apparently more expansive and expressive than the Masoretic text that originated in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Sidney B. Sperry suggests that "From the time of the division [of the twelve tribes] until the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C., the Brass Plates may well have been the official scripture of the Ten Tribes."³ In proposing how

the brass plates were transferred from the Northern Kingdom to Jerusalem in Judea, Sperry further notes:

The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians when its capital of Samaria capitulated to Sargon II in 722 B.C. The forebears of Laban may have fled to Jerusalem to prevent the sacred records from falling into alien hands. Lehi's grandfather or great-grandfather may have left his northern home for Jerusalem in order to prevent his children from intermarrying and making religious compromises with the foreigners brought into the land by the Assyrians.⁴

The following example that compares the King James Version with 1 Nephi shows that there are small but significant differences between the two versions:

Isaiah 48:1

Hear ye this, O house of Jacob, which are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah, which swear by the name of the LORD, and make mention of the God of Israel, but not in truth, nor in righteousness.

1 Nephi 20:1

Hearken and hear this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah, or out of the waters of baptism, who swear by the name of the Lord, and make mention of the God of Israel, yet they swear not in truth nor in righteousness.

The first words in Nephi's version of Isaiah are not "Hear ye this" but "*Hearken and hear this,*" a phrase that conveys a sense of immediacy, action, and seriousness. While some suggest that this addition may reflect Nephi's own bridge to the Isaiah passages, it seems more likely from the structure of the Book of Mormon narrative that the original Isaiah text uses this parallel phraseology to secure the attention of the ancient audience. The more complete phrase, *Hearken and hear this*, implores its listeners to engage in a more serious

level of interaction with the text. Also, the repetition of the verb *to swear*, in parallel antithetical clauses (“who swear” / “yet they swear not”) appears to be more consistent with Isaiah’s Hebrew literary style than the abbreviated phrasing of the King James Version.

Nephi’s version of Isaiah 48 and 49 was also apparently slightly different from the text that appears in the current edition of the Book of Mormon. The phrase *out of the waters of baptism* was added to 1 Nephi 20:1 by Joseph Smith, presumably to explain the previous phrase, *out of the waters of Judah*. It first appeared in the 1840 and 1842 editions of the Book of Mormon and was eventually adopted by Elder James E. Talmage in the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon.⁵ It has appeared in all subsequent editions. If the phrase were part of the original brass plates version of Isaiah, it would likely have been in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, but it was not. Thus, with the Book of Mormon version of Isaiah, modern readers are blessed to have not only a brass plates edition of Isaiah but also the added inspired commentary of a modern prophet.

Nephi’s Context for Isaiah 48 and 49

In chapter 19 of 1 Nephi⁶—the chapter immediately preceding his quotations of Isaiah 48 and 49—Nephi teaches the things he deems *most* sacred, namely, the coming of Christ and Christ’s relationship to the house of Israel. Nephi speaks of the Messiah’s mortal ministry, including the hardships he would endure as the Redeemer come to earth. Nephi cites the prophecies of Zenock, Neum, and Zenos (prophecies not mentioned in our modern versions of the Old Testament).⁷ These powerful preachers revealed in detail to their own ancient groups of people the signs and scenes that would accompany the crucifixion and burial of the God of nature

(see 1 Nephi 19:10–12). Quoting and paraphrasing the prophet Zenos, Nephi describes the fate of Jerusalem’s inhabitants after the crucifixion, as well as the fate of those who reject the Holy One of Israel: “And because they turn their hearts aside, saith the prophet, and have despised the Holy One of Israel, they shall wander in the flesh, and perish, and become a hiss and a byword, and be hated among all nations” (1 Nephi 19:14).

The record of Israelite and Jewish history reveals that these predictions of the ancient prophets have indeed come to pass; we see an instant, significant, and uncomfortable parallel—uncomfortable because of the accuracy of the prophecies when seen in light of centuries of inhuman, unconscionable cruelties heaped upon the different branches of the house of Israel, including the Jews and Lamanites.

But Nephi does not leave the story of scattered Israel at its lowest ebb. He explains that all their difficulties notwithstanding, the battered and scattered house of Israel ultimately does have a bright future. The Lord will remember the covenants he made with Israel and bring about the spiritual and temporal salvation of those who initially rejected his atonement. When Israel no more turns aside from their Holy One, they will be gathered in. Continuing to quote Zenos, Nephi says, “Yea, and all the earth shall see the salvation of the Lord, saith the prophet; every nation, kindred, tongue and people shall be blessed” (1 Nephi 19:17).

After quoting to his brothers the testimonies of the prophets Zenock, Neum, and Zenos, Nephi reads to them many things found in the books of Moses, as written on the brass plates. He then does something that, in his view, is even more important:

[B]ut that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scrip-

tures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning. Wherefore I spake unto them, saying: . . . hear ye the words of the prophet, which were written unto all the house of Israel, and liken them unto *yourselves*, that *ye* may have hope as well as your brethren from whom ye have been broken off. (1 Nephi 19:23–24)

Nephi then reads chapters 48 and 49 of Isaiah to his little gathering, bearing powerful testimony of Isaiah's ability to do three things: first, to help all people believe in the Lord as their ultimate Redeemer (see 1 Nephi 19:23); second, to address their personal circumstances (see 1 Nephi 19:24); and third, to provide a profound hope in the future for all the house of Israel, including Nephi's own family (see 1 Nephi 19:24).

These three purposes, then, provide the context for Nephi's first recitation of Isaiah's words. Nephi's concerns give full meaning to and applicability of Isaiah's preexilic prophecies in chapters 48 and 49. Nephi establishes his family on the cutting edge, so to speak, of the scattering of Judah that Isaiah prophesied. Those people were alone in a strange land, bereft of their familiar surroundings and struggling to forge a new life. Nephi envisions how an understanding of Christ's redemptive power, including the specific promises made to the house of Israel of a physical, geographical redemption, could buoy up and strengthen his family as well as future generations.

To teach about Christ, Nephi does not rely only on his personal testimony, which his older brothers have scorned; rather, he invokes the powerful witness of one of the greatest prophets of Israel—Isaiah. Isaiah was, after all, the prophet of Nephi's hometown, Jerusalem. He was an educated and articulate man who would have understood the social and economic circumstances of Nephi's people. Isaiah himself lived during a difficult time; he witnessed the

destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century B.C. Isaiah was a respected spokesman for the Lord both in his day and in Nephi's. But above everything else, Isaiah knew of Christ's coming and of Christ's power to ransom all mankind not only from sin and suffering but also from scattering. As Isaiah taught, the power of the Messiah is the power of restoration—the power to restore people to their lands of promise and ultimately to the presence of God.

Fall of Judah Foreshadowed

Chapter 48 of Isaiah (parallel to 1 Nephi 20) begins by summoning the religious hypocrites of Israel to heed God's message for them; those summoned are they who talk about God and consider themselves holy, but who act duplicitously toward God.

Hearken and hear this, O house of Jacob . . . who swear by the name of the Lord, and make mention of the God of Israel, yet they swear not in truth nor in righteousness. Nevertheless, they call themselves of the holy city, but they do not stay themselves upon the God of Israel, who is the Lord of Hosts; yea, the Lord of Hosts is his name. (1 Nephi 20:1–2, parallel to Isaiah 48:1–2)

These introductory words of Isaiah apply so well to Laman and Lemuel, who often act wickedly but consider themselves righteous. Indeed, Isaiah's opening comments in chapter 48, though addressed to all Israel, seem to speak directly to the rebellious and stubborn members of Nephi's family. Isaiah's description of Israel—"thou art obstinate, and thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass" (Isaiah 48:4, parallel to 1 Nephi 20:4)—fits Nephi's older brothers Laman and Lemuel perfectly.

After his initial call to hearken, Isaiah continues for several verses to remind Israel how its constant rebellion against

God began right at the time of its birth as a nation at Sinai. Speaking for the Lord, Isaiah says, “Yea, and thou heardest not; yea, thou knewest not; yea, from that time thine ear was not opened; for I knew that thou wouldst deal very treacherously, and wast called a transgressor *from the womb*” (1 Nephi 20:8).

The Lord revealed many great future events to his wayward people long before they could claim that idols possessed the power to prophesy about or bring to pass the great events associated with Israel’s salvation history (1 Nephi 20:3–9, parallel to Isaiah 48:3–9). But the chosen people ignored their living God. God deferred the fulness of his wrath and judgments so that the priesthood and the covenant he made with Abraham could be solidly established in Israel, but Israel encountered hardships as a result of its rebellion: “For, behold, I have refined thee, I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction” (1 Nephi 20:10, parallel to Isaiah 20:10). The Lord implies that Israel will suffer even more because he will not allow his “name to be polluted” by his chosen people (1 Nephi 20:11), and this greater affliction will include Judah’s deportation at the hands of the king of Babylon. At the same time, however, Jehovah will not “give [his] glory unto another” (1 Nephi 20:11, parallel to Isaiah 48:11). In other words, regardless of Israel’s transgressions, God will not select another group to be his “chosen” people.

But why not? Continuing to speak the words of Jehovah, Isaiah decrees that Israel is God’s chosen people because they were called and foreordained by him in premortality to be such (see 1 Nephi 20:12, parallel to Isaiah 48:12)—a doctrine reminiscent of instruction given to Israel through Moses in an earlier day (see, for example, Exodus 4:22). Isaiah reminds his listeners that the Lord governs the whole universe, all creation obeys him, and it is his plan and purposes that are carried out: “Hearken unto me, O Jacob, and Israel my called,

for I am he; I am the first, and I am also the last. Mine hand hath also laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand hath spanned the heavens. I call unto them and they stand up together” (1 Nephi 20:12–13, parallel to Isaiah 48:12–13).

Good News about Israel’s Future

Isaiah next turns to God’s panoramic and prophetic perspective of Israel’s destiny. He reveals, through prophecies that carry double meanings, the many redemptive events that will occur in Israel’s future, as well as the several redeemers who will be raised up to help bring about God’s desires and purposes for his chosen people (see 1 Nephi 20:14–21, parallel to Isaiah 48:14–21).

Isaiah seems to be alluding to a specific historical episode when he proclaims that one will come along who will “do his pleasure on Babylon,” and whose “arm [will] come upon the Chaldeans” (1 Nephi 20:14, parallel to Isaiah 48:14). Surely this is a prophetic reference to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, whom the Lord raised up to conquer the very kingdom responsible for the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.—Babylon. History shows that Cyrus was indeed a redeemer to Israel who did “his pleasure on Babylon” and afterwards sponsored the return of Israel’s remnant to their homeland. He even financially supported the reconstruction of Jerusalem and the holy temple. But this prophecy also points to the Lord himself, who, as scripture teaches, stands behind those whom he raises up and who guides the destinies of nations (see, for example, 2 Kings 17). Just a few verses after the mention of Babylon’s fate at the hands of Cyrus, Isaiah declares:

And thus saith the Lord, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I have sent him [Cyrus], the Lord thy God who teacheth thee to profit, who leadeth thee by the way thou

shouldst go, hath done it. . . . Go ye forth of Babylon, flee ye from the Chaldeans, with a voice of singing declare ye, tell this, utter to the end of the earth; say ye: The Lord hath redeemed his servant Jacob. (1 Nephi 20:17, 20; parallel to Isaiah 48:17, 20)

Verse 20 also seems to hold a double meaning. Israel was commanded to go forth from Babylon in a literal sense, and this they did when they returned to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. Through Cyrus, the Lord redeemed his people and brought them out of Babylon after they had endured fifty years of captivity. But Israel was also commanded to go forth or flee from Babylon in a spiritual sense. In a revelation given to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1831, when the church was still young, the Lord issued a similar command, adding a few words of clarification: “Go ye out from among the nations, even from Babylon, from the midst of wickedness, which is spiritual Babylon” (D&C 133:14). Thus ancient Israel was to go forth from the literal place called Babylon as well as to flee from the wickedness and spiritual corruption that existed in their world—just as modern Israel has been commanded to do.

In whatever ways Israel is commanded to flee Babylon, the Lord makes clear through his prophets that he can assist his people. Isaiah reinforces the idea of God’s power to save and redeem Israel by reminding his audience of the great miracles Jehovah performed during an earlier but defining moment in Israel’s redemptive history—the time when they were brought forth out of Egypt: “And they thirsted not; he led them through the deserts; he caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them; he clave the rock also and the waters gushed out” (1 Nephi 20:21, parallel to Isaiah 48:21). Yet, despite all that the Lord has done and will continue to do in behalf of his people, they will enjoy no lasting peace or geographical redemption while they remain wicked: “And

notwithstanding he hath done all this, and greater also, there is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked" (1 Nephi 20:22, parallel to Isaiah 48:22).

These verses are especially well suited to Nephi's family, particularly to the rebellious and spiritually impoverished brothers. Though Isaiah's words seem to have made little sense to many in Nephi's audience (see 2 Nephi 25:1–2), there were some gathered in the group to whom the Spirit of the Lord testified of the truthfulness of Isaiah's words. Father Lehi and his younger son Jacob seem to have been forcefully affected by Isaiah's message of hope and redemption for a broken-off branch of Israel (see 2 Nephi 1:1 and 10:7–9, respectively), even if Laman and Lemuel and their followers continued to waver. It would be but a few short years before Lehi's family learned that Jerusalem's destruction had occurred according to the promise of the Lord (see 2 Nephi 1:4).

Redemption in the Latter Days

At the beginning of Isaiah 49 (parallel to 1 Nephi 21), Isaiah advances to scenes of the latter days as he further prophesies of Israel's redemption and restoration. Chapter 49 refers to our modern dispensation—the dispensation of the fulness of times—as latter-day prophets have indicated. Wilford Woodruff said, "The revelations that are in the Bible, the predictions of the patriarchs and prophets who saw by vision and revelation the last dispensation and fulness of times plainly tell us what is to come to pass. The 49th chapter of Isaiah is having its fulfillment."⁸

Isaiah 49 opens with another summons for all Israel to pay strict attention to what is about to be revealed to them. Isaiah describes the life and work of another redeemer who will be raised up by the Lord in the latter days to bring salvation to Israel. As was the case with chapter 48, the introductory

statements of chapter 49 also point out the completeness of Nephi’s text of Isaiah compared with the KJV Isaiah:

Isaiah 49:1

Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye people, from far; The Lord hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name.

1 Nephi 21:1

And again: Hearken, O ye house of Israel, all ye that are broken off and are driven out, because of the wickedness of the pastors of my people; yea, all ye that are broken off, that are scattered abroad, who are of my people, O house of Israel. Listen, O isles, unto me, and hearken ye people from far; the Lord hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name.

Nephi’s Isaiah text helps form in Nephi and other listeners a consciousness of their own identity as a remnant of Israel—a remnant broken off and separate from the rest of their people in the Old World. No wonder Nephi loves the words of Isaiah: he views them as being pointed directly at his people. Jeremiah, who prophesies and writes to Old World Israel during Nephi’s own era, also knows that there will be a remnant scattered, and, like Isaiah, he understands that the scattering will be caused by the corrupt leaders of the Israelite community: “Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:1). Unlike Isaiah, however, Jeremiah does not boldly announce the appearance of a deliverer who will be raised up in the latter days to help bring about the final spiritual and geographical redemption of God’s chosen people.

Who is this servant whom Isaiah announces in Isaiah 49:1, which Nephi quotes in 1 Nephi 21? Isaiah provides us with important clues as he describes this servant's life and work. The servant would be someone

- whom "the Lord hath called . . . from the womb" (1 Nephi 21:1, parallel to Isaiah 49:1);
- whose "mouth [was] like a sharp sword," or, in other words, someone who spoke with authority (1 Nephi 21:2, parallel to Isaiah 49:2);
- who was hidden "in the shadow of [the Lord's] hand" (1 Nephi 21:2, parallel to Isaiah 49:2);
- who was "made . . . a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he [the Lord] hid [the servant]" (1 Nephi 21:2, parallel to Isaiah 49:2);
- who would say, "I have labored in vain" (1 Nephi 21:4, parallel to Isaiah 49:4);
- who would authoritatively say, "And now, saith the Lord" (1 Nephi 21:5, parallel to Isaiah 49:5);
- who would say that the Lord "formed me from the womb" to do a special work, or, in other words, someone who *knew* he was foreordained (1 Nephi 21:5, parallel to Isaiah 49:5);
- whose life's work would be "to bring Jacob again to [the Lord]—though Israel be not gathered" (1 Nephi 21:5, parallel to Isaiah 49:5);
- who would be the Lord's "servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel" (1 Nephi 21:6, parallel to Isaiah 49:6);
- whom the Lord would "give . . . for a light to the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 21:6, parallel to Isaiah 49:6);

- “whom man despiseth,” but, at the same time, someone whom “Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship” (1 Nephi 21:7, parallel to Isaiah 49:7); and
- who will be given to Israel “for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages,” who will free the prisoners and enlighten those who sit in darkness, and who will shepherd the chosen people (1 Nephi 21:8–9, parallel to Isaiah 49:8–9).

Various aspects of these characteristics could probably be applied to several different individuals. Jewish theology maintains that this prophecy of the “suffering servant” depicts the Jewish nation,⁹ but, taken together, the words Isaiah uses to describe this helper of Israel in the latter days apply only to two beings: the Messiah and the Prophet Joseph Smith. Nephi and Lehi seem to know not only that Isaiah intended to prophesy of Jesus *and* Joseph Smith (see 2 Nephi 3), but also that the latter-day restoration of the gospel would help bring about the final redemption of Israel.¹⁰

That these characteristics refer primarily to the Savior is probably obvious to many Christians, but Joseph Smith also fits many of the qualifications of that special servant. After all, every true prophet is a type, a foreshadowing, or a symbol of the Lord Jesus Christ. Consider that Joseph Smith

- was called “from the womb,” or foreordained (2 Nephi 3:7–9, 14–15);
- knew through revelation, now recorded as Doctrine and Covenants 127:2, that he had been chosen to be the prophet of the restoration. On another occasion he said:

Every man who has a calling to minister to the inhabitants of the world was ordained to that very purpose in the Grand Council of heaven before this world was. I suppose I was ordained to this very office in that

Grand Council. It is the testimony that I want that I am God's servant, and this people His people.¹¹

- spoke as a "sharp sword" (1 Nephi 21:2, parallel to Isaiah 49:2) because he spoke the words of the Lord (see D&C 18:35–36; 21:5), which are described in modern revelation as "quick and powerful, sharper than a two-edged sword, to the dividing asunder of both joints and marrow" (D&C 6:2);
- was "hid" by the Lord (D&C 86:9);
- became a polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty, as his own characterization of himself testifies:

I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priestcraft, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, suborned judges and jurors, and the authority of perjured executives, backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women—all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty, who will give me dominion over all and every one of them, when their refuge of lies shall fail, and their hiding place shall be destroyed, while these smooth-polished stones with which I come in contact become marred.¹²

- at times became discouraged and felt that he labored in vain (see D&C 121:2);
- not only had the authority to speak for God but on numerous occasions validated his messages by uttering the very words Isaiah predicted he would: "Thus saith the

Lord” (D&C 52:1; 54:1; 55:1; 60:1; and 87:1, to name a few references);

- spent his life working to bring the house of Israel again to the Lord by bringing forth the Book of Mormon and restoring the gospel (see Mormon 8:16; D&C 5:9–10; 6:6; 109:67);
- was also commissioned to “raise up the tribes of Jacob” (1 Nephi 21:6) and restore them by overseeing the latter-day gathering of Israel (see D&C 110:11, 16);
- is spoken of in the scriptures as “a light unto the Gentiles” (D&C 86:11). Only one other person can claim that distinction—the Lord himself (see Isaiah 42:6);
- was both despised and revered, just as the Lord had said he would be (see Joseph Smith—History 1:33). Joseph was also promised that the gospel he restored would be preached before “kings and rulers” (D&C 1:23);
- was the servant through whom the eternal gospel covenant was reestablished (see D&C 1:17–22). Surely it is not mere coincidence that this same section of the Doctrine and Covenants, the revelation in which the Lord introduces Joseph Smith to the world, begins with the same language as Isaiah 49:1. And just as Isaiah foretold, Joseph was commanded to “proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the gospel of salvation” (D&C 93:51).

Redemptive Events of the Latter Days

Having described the special latter-day servant, the one who would be instrumental in bringing about the restoration

and eventual redemption of Israel, Isaiah reveals the events associated with that restoration and redemption. He first asks Israel a rhetorical question: Is it really possible that the Lord can forget his people? Absolutely not. The Lord proclaims, “Yea, they [Israel, typified as a woman] may forget [the Lord], yet will I *not forget thee*, O house of Israel” (1 Nephi 21:15, parallel to Isaiah 49:15). Isaiah then describes how the Lord of the universe will bring about this redemption from sin, suffering, and scattering. It will be through the gentiles. He explains:

Thus saith the Lord God: 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; they shall bow down to thee with their face towards the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord; for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me. (1 Nephi 21:22–23, parallel to Isaiah 49:22–23)

Nephi explains in his prophetic commentary on Isaiah 49 (found in 1 Nephi 22:7–14) that this work among the gentiles constitutes the raising up of “a mighty nation among the Gentiles, yea, even upon the face of *this* land; and by them shall [his] seed be scattered” (1 Nephi 22:7). The Lord will then deliver his covenant people:

And after our seed is scattered the Lord God will proceed to do a marvelous work among the Gentiles, which shall be of great worth unto our seed; wherefore, it is likened unto their being nourished by the Gentiles and being carried in their arms and upon their shoulders. And it shall also be of worth unto the Gentiles; and not only unto the Gentiles but unto all the house of Israel, unto the making known of the covenants of the Father of heaven

unto Abraham, saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. . . . Wherefore, he will bring them again out of captivity, and 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. (1 Nephi 22:8, 9, 12)

This inspired interpretation by Nephi is the key to understanding Isaiah 49.

The modern reader ought to consider four questions when reading 1 Nephi 22:7–14:

1. Who are the gentiles of the “mighty nation” to which Isaiah and Nephi refer?
2. What is the “mighty nation” Nephi mentions?
3. Which land is “this land” upon which the mighty nation will be established?
4. What is the marvelous work that the Lord will proceed to do among the gentiles of the mighty nation?

The answers to these questions explain *why* Nephi is so excited about the message of Isaiah 48 and 49 and *how* Nephi connects the Messiah’s redemptive powers to Israel’s restoration to its land of promise.

Significant help to understanding these questions is found in 3 Nephi 21:1–4, which contains words that the Savior speaks to the Nephites when he appears to them after his resurrection. The Savior speaks not only about the same scattering of Israel that Nephi discusses but also about the divine timetable for the gathering of scattered Israel:

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 . . . 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. . . . For it is wisdom in the Father that they [these gentiles] should be established in this land, and be set up as a free people by the power of the Father, that these things [the gospel truths] might come forth from them unto a remnant of your seed, that the covenant of the Father may be fulfilled which he hath covenanted with his people, O house of Israel. (3 Nephi 21:1–2, 4)

These verses indicate that the Savior will gather his people, the house of Israel, through the same gentiles of whom Nephi spoke. Nephi explains in his inspired interpretation of Isaiah 49 that the Lord will “raise up a mighty nation among the Gentiles . . . upon the face of *this* land” (1 Nephi 22:7) and that the gentiles would be responsible for scattering Nephi’s descendants. The Lord will then “do a marvelous work” (1 Nephi 22:8) among these gentiles, and this marvelous work will then bless Nephi’s descendants by “making known [unto them] the covenants of the Father of heaven” (1 Nephi 22:9). In 3 Nephi, the Savior says much the same thing in a slightly different way: the gentiles will be set up by the power of the Father as a free people “in *this* land,” and through these gentiles will the covenants of the Father to Israel be fulfilled, especially the branch of Israel already in “this land” (see 3 Nephi 16:8; 20:22, 28).

The “mighty nation among the Gentiles,” spoken of by Nephi, and the gentiles “set up as a free people by the power of the Father,” spoken of by the Savior, appear to be one and the same. Both would be established “in this land,” and both would bring forth the covenants of the Father that would

benefit the house of Israel. This gentile nation would also fulfill Isaiah's prophecies about the restoration of the rest of the house of Israel to its land of promise, acting, as it were, like nursing fathers and mothers (see 1 Nephi 21:22–23, parallel to Isaiah 49:22–23; 2 Nephi 10:8–9).

Let us now discuss each of the four questions posed above. First, who are these gentiles to whom both Nephi and, later on, the Savior refer? "We are," says Elder Mark E. Petersen, a modern prophet, seer, and revelator, referring to the members of the church. He declares:

We are referred to in this prophecy [3 Nephi 21:1–4] as Gentiles, but we are the "believing Gentiles" because we have the "believing blood" of Ephraim in our veins as well as the blood of the Gentiles. Our pedigrees show that we come from many nationalities. In the revealed dedicatory prayer for the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet used this expression: "Concerning the revelations and commandments which thou hast given unto us, who are identified with the Gentiles" (D&C 109:60).

It is inspiring indeed to realize that we who live now and have received this restored gospel are the very ones to whom Nephi and the Christ referred some two thousand years ago. We have lived in prophecy!

"These things . . . shall be made known unto the Gentiles. . . . [T]hese things shall be made known unto them of the Father, and shall come forth of the Father from them unto you."

When we consider that "these things shall be made known unto them of the Father," let us keep in mind that it was the Father who appeared to Joseph Smith in the first vision, together with the Savior, and it was He who directed Joseph to "Hear ye Him," referring to the Christ. The Father definitely was in charge, and truly enough the gospel came by his direction. Indeed it was made known "of the Father."¹³

Second, what is the “mighty nation”? According to Elder Peterson’s interpretation of the term *gentiles*, the identification of the “mighty nation” to which Nephi also refers seems to be America, especially considering that Elder Petersen’s statement describes the prophetic history of the United States.¹⁴ Does this interpretation fit the descriptions presented by both Nephi and the Savior in their commentaries on Isaiah? Which nation most resembles a mighty country of free people, one that provides the setting for the establishment of a “marvelous work” that promotes and defines the covenants of the Father of heaven but at the same time is responsible for scattering the descendants of Nephi’s family? In addition, which nation meets the following specific qualification mentioned by Nephi’s brother Jacob:

But behold, this land, said God, shall be a land of thine inheritance, and the Gentiles shall be blessed upon the land. And this land shall be a land of liberty unto the Gentiles, and there shall be no kings upon the land, who shall raise up unto the Gentiles. And I will fortify this land against all other nations. (2 Nephi 10:10–12)

No nation but America so completely fits the prophetic descriptions. Years ago President Ezra Taft Benson, student of the Book of Mormon and prophet of God, made various statements about America that correspond to the specific scriptural descriptions of the mighty nation that will be instrumental in gathering Israel:

Our Heavenly Father raised up the men who founded this government (see D&C 101:80), thereby fulfilling the prophecy of His Beloved Son that the people “should be established in this land and be set up as a free people by the power of the Father.” (3 Nephi 21:4)¹⁵

In the scriptures there are set forth three phases of the gathering of Israel. One, the gathering of Israel to the land

of Zion which is America, this land. That is under way and has been under way since the Church was established and our missions abroad inaugurated. Then two, the return of the lost tribes, the ten lost tribes, from the land of the north (see D&C 133). And the third phase is the re-establishment of the Jews in Palestine as one of the events to precede the second coming of the Master. Isaiah said they will be gathered together.¹⁶

God revealed over twenty-five hundred years ago that the kingdoms of Europe would try to exercise dominion over the colonists who had fled to America, that this would lead to a struggle for independence, and that the colonists would win (1 Nephi 13:17–19). The Book of Mormon foretold the time when the colonists would establish this land of liberty which would not be governed by kings. The Lord declared that He would protect the land and whoever would attempt to establish kings from within or without would perish. (2 Nephi 10:11–14)¹⁷

This is a great country and certainly this greatness was foreshadowed and foreseen by ancient prophets who lived here, prophecies made by the brother of Jared (Ether 13:8), by Lehi, by Jacob (2 Nephi 10:18–19), and by Nephi of old (1 Nephi 13:13–20). It is enough to know that this nation has a prophetic history.¹⁸

It was here under a free government and a strong nation that protection was provided for His restored Church. Now God will not permit America, His base of operations, to be destroyed. He has promised protection to this land if we will but serve the God of the land (see Ether 2:12). He has also promised protection to the righteous even, if necessary, to send fire from heaven to destroy their enemies (1 Nephi 22:17).¹⁹

Third, to which land is the prophecy of Isaiah and the commentary of Nephi referring? In his last statement quoted

above, President Benson links Nephi's commentary on Isaiah (in 1 Nephi 22) with America. While we cannot say with exactness where Nephi was actually standing when he used the phrase *this land*, there is little doubt that the mighty nation that would rise upon it would be located in North America—more particularly, the United States of America. Apparently President Benson thought so, and so did Elder Petersen.

Fourth, what is the marvelous work? There is hardly any question that the marvelous work to come forth in association with the mighty nation upon the land, as noted in Nephi's commentary on Isaiah, is the restoration of the gospel. In Isaiah's vision of the future, the believing gentiles would nurse the house of Israel by giving them both the milk and the meat of the gospel that would be restored in America. President Joseph F. Smith said:

This great American nation the Almighty raised up by the power of his omnipotent hand, that it might be possible in the latter days for the kingdom of God to be established in the earth. If the Lord had not prepared the way by laying the foundations of this glorious nation, it would have been impossible (under the stringent laws and bigotry of the monarchical governments of the world) to have laid the foundations for the coming of his great kingdom. The Lord has done this. His hand has been over this nation, and it is his purpose and design to enlarge it, make it glorious above all others, and to give it dominion, and power over the earth, to the end that those who are kept in bondage and serfdom may be brought to the enjoyment of the fullest freedom and liberty of conscience possible for intelligent men to exercise in the earth.²⁰

But there is another way in which the believing gentiles would fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah and "bring [the sons of

Israel] in their arms, and [the] daughters . . . upon their shoulders” (1 Nephi 21:22, parallel to Isaiah 49:22). This likely refers to the tangible assistance (economic, military, political, and so forth) that will be given to Israel as they begin to reestablish themselves in their lands of promise. Such help is reminiscent of that provided by Cyrus the Great in ancient times:

When Israel’s chief rabbi paid President Truman a visit in early 1949 and told him, “God put you in your mother’s womb so you would be the instrument to bring about the rebirth of Israel after two thousand years,” tears rose to the president’s eyes. The rabbi then opened the Bible he was carrying with him and read the words of King Cyrus from the book of Ezra: “The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He hath charged me to build Him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah” (Ezra 1:2). . . .

“The Jews who wish for a State shall have it,” wrote Theodor Herzl in the summer of 1895, over a half-century after Orson Hyde’s prophetic prayer offered from the Mount of Olives on October 21, 1841. And while Elder Hyde would probably never have thought that someone like the irascible “Man from Missouri” would someday help realize the petition that God “inspire the hearts of kings and the powers of the earth,” history has confirmed that Harry S. Truman truly was a modern Cyrus.²¹

Nephi’s message to his brothers is that the Lord will redeem Israel by restoring the gospel covenant on the land that they, the family of Lehi, already inhabit. In other words, the new land on which they are living is the choicest of the promised lands to be possessed by Israel, and it is *their* land of promise. Their land would be instrumental in redeeming the rest of Israel in the latter days.

Results of Nephi's Use of Isaiah 48 and 49

What were the results of Nephi's efforts to teach his brethren by reciting Isaiah 48 and 49? Nephi's brothers were too spiritually immature to understand the teachings of Isaiah; they asked Nephi what it all meant. In response to this query, Nephi gave the profound interpretations found in 1 Nephi 22, showing just how extensive his intimate relationship with the spirit of prophecy is. Nephi demonstrated his knowledge of future events, including the restoration of the gospel in the latter days and the role of America in the redemption of all Israel. Father Lehi was apparently present to hear Nephi's instruction, for Nephi says, "After I, Nephi, had made an end of teaching my brethren, our father, Lehi, also spake many things unto them, and rehearsed unto them, how great things the Lord had done for them in bringing them out of the land of Jerusalem" (2 Nephi 1:1). Lehi clearly understood the message of Isaiah, as did Nephi's brother Jacob, who was profoundly affected by Nephi's and Isaiah's message. When Jacob bore his testimony of the Messiah and his atoning power, he quoted Isaiah 49:22 and reiterated Nephi's (and the Savior's) panoramic perspective of the destiny of America, the promised land. That Jacob was in perfect harmony with Nephi's interpretation of Isaiah is evident in Jacob 6:4, which explains that it was Nephi who "desired" that Jacob speak to the people of Nephi. In fact, Jacob added some significant details to Nephi's interpretation of Isaiah 49 that indicate that Lehi's, Nephi's, and Jacob's appreciation for and understanding of Isaiah 48 and 49 was without parallel in all Israel:

Yea, the kings of the Gentiles shall be nursing fathers unto them, and their queens shall become nursing mothers; wherefore, the promises of the Lord are great unto

the Gentiles, for he hath spoken it, and who can dispute? But behold, this land, said God, shall be a land of thine inheritance, and the Gentiles shall be blessed upon the land. And this land shall be a land of liberty unto the Gentiles, and there shall be no kings upon the land, who shall raise up unto the Gentiles. And I will fortify this land against all other nations. And he that fighteth against Zion shall perish, saith God. For he that raiseth up a king against me shall perish, for I, the Lord, the king of heaven, will be their king, and I will be a light unto them forever, that hear my words. (2 Nephi 10:9–14)

Conclusion

Nephi's hope for a bright future is grounded in the panoramic perspective of Isaiah's prophecy. No chapters in all of scripture teach this faith and hope in Israel's future redemption better than Isaiah 48 and 49. Similarly, no chapters more forcefully address Israel's rebellious hypocrites, including Laman and Lemuel, than do Isaiah 48 and 49. Isaiah's words teach powerfully about the Father's work and the Messiah's mission to redeem and restore the house of Israel first to their lands of promise and, more important, to the presence of the Father.

Thanks to Isaiah, and Nephi's and Jacob's usage and interpretation of the great eighth-century B.C. prophet, the modern reader can gain a greater appreciation for how lands of inheritance and messianic redemption are linked. These Isaiah passages and scriptural commentaries show how God used the gentiles as instruments to bring about the physical and spiritual redemption of Israel. The restoration of the gospel will ultimately redeem Israel from sin, suffering, and scattering. The fuller text found in the Book of Mormon helps

us see that deliverance is both restoration to land and the removal of the debilitating effects of sin.

Related to these doctrines is the concept of the role of America in God's plan to redeem and restore Israel. The phrase *mighty nation* refers to the United States of America as the place of the restoration of the gospel covenants, as indicated in the interpretive pronouncements on Isaiah uttered by Nephi, Jacob, and the Savior, as well as by modern prophets.

The textual variants of Nephi's version of the book of Isaiah, which he took from the brass plates, contain important words and meanings long lost to modern readers of the Masoretic version found in the King James Version of the Bible. These restorations are sometimes only a word or two, but sometimes they restore entire sentences. They show that Isaiah 48 and 49 were intended for the remnant of Israel that would be broken off and taken to other lands.

Studying Nephi's use of Isaiah 48 and 49 also provides a valuable lesson to modern readers on how to teach from the scriptures, how to select the most appropriate and applicable passages to enhance the messages one wants to teach, and how better to engage the specific audiences one addresses. On a different level, however, the message of Isaiah 48 and 49 that Nephi transmits has great personal application. Just as Nephi's family found themselves struggling with new challenges and new surroundings, so too will many of us find ourselves in new places (both physically and spiritually) struggling and unsure and perhaps lacking hope in the future. Isaiah's message can help us in this case as well. The God who gave hope and promised redemption to the scattered remnant of Israel is the same Messiah who promises us all redemption from sin, suffering, and scattering. That is guaranteed if we look to him and remain faithful.

Notes

1. Not discussed in this essay but important to mention are previous studies that compare the textual variants of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon with other ancient versions or text-types of the prophet's book. The studies conclude that pre-1830 evidence among the other text-types of the Old Testament supports the textual variants in the Isaiah passages of the Book of Mormon. These other text-types include the Septuagint, Syriac, and Dead Sea Scrolls versions of the Old Testament. See John A. Tvedtnes, "Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah and the Prophets*, ed. Monte S. Nyman (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1984), 169, 174–5.

2. Nephi explains earlier in the Book of Mormon that "Laban also was a descendant of Joseph, wherefore he and his fathers had kept the records [that is, the brass plates]" (1 Nephi 5:16). Joseph's son Ephraim was a leader among the tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, also called the Kingdom of Ephraim.

3. Sidney B. Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 43–4.

4. *Ibid.*

5. See Sperry, *Compendium*, 127–8; see also Royal Skousen's discussion of this topic in his chapter, "Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations in the Book of Mormon," in this volume.

6. Chapter 18 of 1 Nephi concludes with Nephi's account of his family's long-awaited arrival in the land of promise in the Western Hemisphere. Nephi records in 1 Nephi 19 that the Lord commanded him to make a set of metal plates, which were the large plates upon which Nephi recorded the genealogy of his ancestors and his family's activities in the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 19:2), as well as the contentions of his people (see 1 Nephi 19:4). Perhaps twenty or thirty years later, God commanded Nephi to make another set of plates (see Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968], 127), and the actual manufacture of the small plates is mentioned in 2 Nephi 5:30. On the small plates, Nephi records the events of his ministry, the

prophecies, and the sacred truths that would be used to fulfill the Lord's wise purposes. Among those purposes is the instruction of not only Nephi's people but also the whole house of Israel (see 1 Nephi 19:3, 19). What we read today in 1 Nephi 19–22 (including the quotations from Isaiah) is from the small plates of Nephi.

7. The writings and prophecies of Zenock, Neum, and Zenos were more than likely recorded on the brass plates—the Northern Kingdom's version of the Old Testament—but not on the version of the Old Testament produced in the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

8. Quoted in Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Signs of the Times* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), 112.

9. See Theodore Friedman, "Isaiah," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), 9:49. See also Joseph F. McConkie, "Joseph Smith as Found in Ancient Manuscripts," in *Isaiah and the Prophets*, Monte S. Nyman, ed. (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1984), 19.

10. Verse 3 refers to "my servant, O Israel," but this phrase might be regarded as a symbolic name for the corporate church body of the faithful, functioning under the direction of the Messiah and Joseph Smith to help restore scattered Israel.

11. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 365.

12. *Ibid.*, 304.

13. Mark E. Petersen, *The Great Prologue* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 5–6.

14. *Ibid.* See the entire work.

15. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 594.

16. *Ibid.*, 91.

17. *Ibid.*, 578.

18. *Ibid.*, 575.

19. *Ibid.*, 571–2.

20. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968), 409.

21. Michael T. Benson, "Harry S. Truman as a Modern Cyrus," *BYU Studies* 34/1 (1994): 21–2.