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## Lecture XX: Nephi's Comments on Reading Isaiah

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**Abstract:** You might be aware that 2 Nephi 25, which follows immediately after the lengthy quotation, contains a few words of general advice regarding the interpretation of Isaiah. We'll spend today looking at that. But then 2 Nephi 25 goes on to provide Nephi's own prophetic summary of Isaiah 2–14, in a passage that's usually ignored by people working on Isaiah in the Book of Mormon. That's where we'll focus next time. What we hope to get out of this lecture and the next, then, is a bit of clarity regarding what Nephi saw in the chapters we've been reviewing. I think we'll learn a lot.

## Lecture XX

# Nephi's Comments on Reading Isaiah

We've now spent a goodly number of lectures working through the largest block of Isaiah text in the Book of Mormon. It's been fast and furious. We gave a lecture to some general points of introduction. Do you remember? We looked at how Nephi divides this large block of Isaiah into three distinct sequences (we'll be coming back to this point next time), and we looked at the opening verses of Isaiah 2 with their focus on the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. With preliminaries out of the way, we then turned in our next lecture to a kind of summary treatment of Isaiah 2–5. Our aim was really just to get a decent sense for what's going on there with Isaiah's condemnation of Israel. Then we gave two lectures in a row to Isaiah 6. First, we focused on the temple scene of Isaiah's commission, which is clearly related to Lehi's inaugural visions and to some kind of experience Nephi expects all of his readers to have in connection with baptism. And then we focused on Isaiah's theologically difficult commission, which involved in a good deal of textual complexity. We then dedicated two further lectures to Isaiah 6–12, one mostly a summary of Isaiah's account of the production of Judah's remnant, and the other an overly abstract discussion of the messianic texts distributed throughout that account. With those two lectures, our hope was really just to get a general sense for what's going on in Isaiah 6–12 in general terms. I can only hope we succeeded. Finally, the lecture you sat through last time focused on Isaiah 13–14, the burden of Babylon. And there our aim was just to make basically clear what's going on in these final two chapters of Nephi's long quotation of Isaiah.

That's where we've been lately. And now we're coming to the end of it, it seems. But it only *seems* so. We're actually going to dedicate two *more* lectures to Isaiah 2–14. Here's what I'm planning. You might be aware that 2 Nephi 25, which follows immediately after the lengthy quotation, con-

tains a few words of general advice regarding the interpretation of Isaiah. We'll spend today looking at that. But then 2 Nephi 25 goes on to provide Nephi's own prophetic summary of Isaiah 2–14, in a passage that's usually ignored by people working on Isaiah in the Book of Mormon. That's where we'll focus next time. What we hope to get out of this lecture and the next, then, is a bit of clarity regarding what *Nephi* saw in the chapters we've been reviewing. I think we'll learn a lot.

The roadmap is clear, then? Let's get to work!

### What Nephi Doesn't Do

I've mentioned 2 Nephi 25:1–8 before. Here we've got a general statement of sorts on Isaiah. At any rate, it begins this way: "Now I, Nephi, do speak somewhat concerning the words which I have written, which have been spoken by the mouth of Isaiah" (2 Ne. 25:1). And because Nephi goes on to confess that Isaiah's writings are "hard . . . to understand" (v. 1), Latter-day Saints tend to like this passage a lot. We find comfort in Nephi's concession. This has led commentators on the Book of Mormon rather generally to focus their attention on these verses in 2 Nephi 25 much more than on any actual words of Isaiah. For example, in their best-selling commentary, Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie initially hold off any direct commentary on the Isaiah passages in 2 Nephi 12–24. Before engaging the actual text, they provide some reflections on why the Nephites quoted Isaiah, outline a number of "suggestions for better understanding Isaiah" drawn from 2 Nephi 25:1–8, and say a bit about Isaiah's importance more generally. All this takes them five pages. They then provide their actual commentary on the Isaiah chapters, which also takes them five pages. In the end, they write fewer words on what Isaiah actually says than they do their commentary of how one might go about reading Isaiah.

They are not alone. Millet and McConkie do more or less what most other Mormon commentators do. Because it looks like 2 Nephi 25:1–8 provides a few words about *how* to read Isaiah, commentators find it easier to comment extensively on those verses while more or less ignoring *what* Isaiah actually has to say. I think I mentioned this before, but I've deliberately avoided saying much of anything about 2 Nephi 25:1–8 before now. Nephi doesn't begin with hints about reading Isaiah *and only then* go on to quote the prophet. He gives us Isaiah first, often and at length, and only subsequently does he say anything about strategy—if he ever really says

anything about strategy at all. He wants us wrestling with Isaiah directly first, it seems. And so we've tried to do just that here. Nonetheless, it's now time to see what we can learn from 2 Nephi 25:1–8. Do these verses help us to see what's at stake in reading Isaiah?

Let me put all my cards on the table right away. I don't find here anything like what's usually found here. I don't find Nephi giving us instruction about how to read Isaiah. It seems to me that there's something rather different going on, in fact. We've got to read these verses carefully, and if we do, I think we find Nephi telling his readers that they're largely *incapable* of reading Isaiah, and then promising them that he's willing to help them nonetheless. Let's see if we can't spell this out.

### Words that Aren't Plain

Let's begin at the beginning: “Now I, Nephi, do speak somewhat concerning the words which I have written, which have been spoken by the mouth of Isaiah” (2 Ne. 25:1). Nephi's about to tell us something about Isaiah 2–14. That much is clear, right? He then tells us why he's going to say a bit about these Isaiah chapters. It's because “Isaiah spake many things which were hard for many of my people to understand” (v. 1). We've discussed how Nephi recognizes that Isaiah can be difficult to understand, but we didn't mention what is clearly at issue here in this verse: Nephi recognizes that Isaiah is difficult for *his*—that is, *Nephi's*—people to understand. He doesn't say that Isaiah's just generally hard to make sense of. He says that he's hard for the Nephites to get their heads around. *They* have trouble with Isaiah. He says nothing about us, latter-day Gentile readers. He's only making a concession to his own people, those who've left the Old World behind to settle on the other side of the world some twenty-six hundred years ago. And what's his concession? He's clear about this: “they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews” (v. 1). Nephi recognizes that the Nephites have been cut off from the culture that would help them to contextualize Isaiah's prophecies. Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob have launched their own prophetic tradition, and it's a tradition that's rather distinct from Isaiah's. That can only leave them scratching their heads when they try to read the biblical prophet. And so Nephi recognizes the difficulty they face. We shouldn't ourselves be in any such difficulties, should we?

Well, maybe we should. Nephi explains why his people ended up ignorant of the tradition and context in which Isaiah prophesied: “I,

Nephi, have not taught them many things concerning the manner of the Jews, for their works were works of darkness, and their doings were doings of abomination” (2 Ne. 25:2). These words should probably be read as the words of someone still upset at how things went for his family in Jerusalem. Nephi’s antipathy for the city he left behind is pretty clear here, and it apparently led him to remain largely silent about Old-World things when he spoke to his children and his people. He basically tells us that he threw out the baby with the bathwater, failing to teach about the necessary context for understanding Isaiah’s prophecies because he didn’t want to say much about the people who’d threatened his father’s life and effectively driven the whole family into the wilderness. But should that be an excuse for us? We find ourselves in difficulties when we read Isaiah because we’re as ignorant as Nephi’s people about Israelite history, about Hebrew prophecy, about the interpretive tradition, and so on. But they had only one real resource for learning about these things—Nephi—and he wouldn’t really talk about these things with them. *We*, on the other hand, have *many* resources to learn about these things, resources that are happy to tell us more or less everything we wish to know. Our ignorance is largely our own fault.

So the first couple of verses here in 2 Nephi 25 leave us without much of an excuse for our being mystified by Isaiah. At the same time, they leave Nephi’s own people with a pretty big excuse for *their* being mystified. And Nephi recognizes it. He states next that, even though he knows they can’t make much sense of it all, he copies down Isaiah for them so that “they may know the judgments of God—that they come upon all nations according to the word which he hath spoken” (2 Ne. 25:3). In a certain way, it seems, Nephi hopes that his own people will get just one major message as they struggle their way through Isaiah’s writings, and that’s the idea that judgment comes only after prophetic warnings have first been given. “The judgments of God” come only “according to the word which he hath spoken.” Nephi will make this same point with other words in verse 9: “Never hath any of [the Jews] been destroyed save it were foretold them by the prophets of the Lord.” There, it seems, is the most basic message of Isaiah as Nephi sees it.

And we’ve already seen how that message lies at the foundation of Nephi’s three-sequence quotation of Isaiah, haven’t we? The first sequence mostly lays out the constitutive wickedness of Judean society during the eighth century. The second sequence then describes the Lord’s commissioning of a prophet and the prophet’s subsequent intervention in apos-

tate Jerusalem before destruction is meted out. There are, of course, other themes at work there as well—we've been dwelling on them ourselves in the past few lectures—but these other themes are apparently the sorts of things Nephi's people won't catch on a first read. The first time through, Nephi expects them just to get the message that God sends prophets to warn his people before he does anything drastic with them.

### The Spirit of Prophecy

Of course, Nephi wants his people to get more than *just* this out of their experience with Isaiah. This he makes clear as he goes on. He directly addresses himself to them, telling them to listen up, and then he explains how they might go deeper into Isaiah: "Because that the words of Isaiah are not plain unto you—nevertheless, they *are* plain unto all they that are filled with the spirit of prophecy" (2 Ne. 25:4). Ouch. Seriously? Nephi's willing to hit his people with *that* one? "Look, Isaiah's writings would be simple enough if you just had the spirit of prophecy!" We've got to be prophets to understand this? Then who'll ever get to the bottom of Isaiah? Just a few people who happen to have received the spiritual gift of prophecy? Sometimes we read this verse and we say that Nephi's encouraging those who wish to understand Isaiah to pray for inspiration, but that's a pretty drastic weakening of Nephi's words. He says that Isaiah's words are *plain*—got that? plain!—to anyone with the spirit of *prophecy*—got that? prophecy! We're not talking here about everyday guidance by the Spirit. We're talking about high-octane prophetic experience. And Nephi expects everyone to have that sort of experience?

Actually, he doesn't. Notice what he says as he goes on: "But *I* give unto you a prophecy according to the spirit which is in *me*" (2 Ne. 25:4). Did you catch the significance of that? Here's what I hear in these words: "Isaiah's perfectly clear to those like me who've been given to experience an apocalyptic vision of the world's history, to those like me who've received in pure grace the prophetic gift of seeing the larger stakes of the Abrahamic covenant. But I know that most of you won't ever have that sort of experience. Perhaps you could, but I recognize that most of you won't. But because I *have* had that sort of experience, I can tell you about what I've seen, and that should give you a kind of foothold. You need the spirit of prophecy to make Isaiah plain, so let me give you a few words deriving from the spirit of prophecy that was given to me. And that should help you to get started, anyway." Is that a fair interpretation? Here are

Nephi's words again: "Because that the words of Isaiah are not plain unto you, nevertheless they are plain unto all they that are filled with the spirit of prophecy, but I give unto you a prophecy according to the spirit which is in me." Isn't that relatively clear? Nephi doesn't expect all of his people—or us, for that matter—to have prophetic experiences like he did. He expects us to listen to him as he lays out his own prophetic experience, and that should help us to get beyond just the basic message of Isaiah.

So Nephi's taking us by the hand and gently leading us through the task of interpretation. Or at least he's rather graciously giving us a kind of starting point, a boost, so that we can then begin to figure out what's going on in Isaiah's prophecies. And he goes on to explain that he's doing his best to make this starting point as gentle and useful as possible: "I shall prophesy according to the plainness which hath been with me from the time that I came out from Jerusalem with my father—for behold, my soul delighteth in plainness unto my people, that they may learn" (2 Ne. 25:4). He's going to lay out a prophecy that's as plain as possible, that's plain in the way that so much of Nephi's writing is plain. This is supposed to help Nephi's people to see clearly the kind of general themes Isaiah's working on, and then they can go back and read Isaiah again, getting a whole lot more out of him than just the idea that God sends prophets to warn his people before he visits them with destruction. Nephi's gracious enough to provide his people with this help. And because we're reading the record he wrote for his people, it turns out he's gracious enough to help us as well. He says in verse 3 that he writes not only to his people, but also to "all they that shall receive hereafter these things." So we get to enjoy the gift too.

Now, naturally, your next question is—or should be—this: *Where's the plain prophecy that's supposed to clear up Isaiah?* It appears to start in verse 9, but right now we're only in verse 4. We still have a bit more ground to cover before we get to what Nephi actually has to say. And I've set aside the whole of our next lecture so that we can work through that prophecy in some detail. So you'll have to be patient with me for the moment. Let's spend the rest of our time just leading up to that prophecy. Nephi's now told us that it's coming, but he has a few other things he wants to say before he actually gets to it. Why? What else should we understand before we try to tackle Nephi's plain prophecy?

### Repetition and Exposition

Well, as it turns out, there's not a whole lot *more* that we're supposed to understand before we try to tackle Nephi's prophecy. We're apparently supposed just to understand *better* the same thing we've just covered. Why do I say that? Because, curiously, verses 5–7a more or less repeat, but of course in different words, verses 1–4. In fact, it's a bit startling how *exactly* verses 5–7a repeat verses 1–4. Let's take a look at this.

Verse 1 opens with Nephi telling us his intent to focus further on Isaiah, to “speak somewhat” concerning what he's copied down from Isaiah 2–14. Verse 5 opens with Nephi telling us, in parallel, that his “soul delighteth in the words of Isaiah.” That doesn't seem like anything terribly substantial, but then see what comes next. Verse 1 continues as follows: “Isaiah spake many things which were hard for many of my people to understand, for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews.” How does verse 5 continue? Like this: “I came out from Jerusalem, and mine eyes hath beheld the things of the Jews. And I know that the Jews do understand the things of the prophets, and there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them—save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews.” Here the parallel is quite striking, isn't it? What's interesting, of course, is that the restatement of verse 1 in verse 5 is a good deal richer than the original. Where verse 1 just says that Isaiah's “hard . . . to understand” if you don't know “the manner of prophesying among the Jews,” verse 5 undertakes to explain all this at greater length. It's because Nephi “came out from Jerusalem,” and because his eyes “beheld the things of the Jews,” that he can make sense of Isaiah. As he puts it, “the Jews do understand the things of the prophets”—and that uniquely, it seems: “there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them.” Here the heavy emphasis on “the Jews” makes clear that we should read Isaiah (and the Hebrew prophets more generally) always in their original context. And Nephi tells us pretty straightforwardly at the end of verse 5 what we need to do if we're serious about making sense of Isaiah and the prophets. We've got to be “taught after the manner of the things of the Jews.”

Let's pause on that last statement for a couple of minutes, if we can. Various interpretive programs for making sense of Mormon scripture—programs that are usually novel and provocative but as often as not overly narrow in important ways—have often been justified by making reference



to Nephi's talk of being "taught after the manner of the things of the Jews." Some have insisted that these words point to medieval Jewish mystical interpretation. Others have insisted that they point to early rabbinical reading practices. Still others have insisted that they point to modern Jewish interpretive strategies. While I think there's much to be learned from reading the Book of Mormon (or Mormon scripture more generally) by using all of these historically Jewish interpretive programs, I'm entirely unconvinced that *Nephi* has any of them in mind. The Jews Nephi seems pretty clearly to be thinking of are those he left behind in Jerusalem, those to whom the prophets originally addressed their messages. And all of the various Jewish interpretive strategies that get read into Nephi's words here had their origins much, much later in history. Even ancient rabbinical interpretation, the earliest of these interpretive traditions, seems only to have come into existence a century or so before Christ. There's some reason to think that rabbinical interpretation had its roots in the exile in Babylon, but Nephi didn't experience that exile. He seems pretty clearly to have pre-exilic Jews in mind, those who hadn't yet found it necessary to invent novel ways to approach their texts because they hadn't yet been deprived of their land. In short, Nephi seems in verse 5 just to be saying that Isaiah's words were given in a real historical context, and that that context is more than a bit useful for making sense of the prophet's words. Note that he goes on in verse 6 to mention Jerusalem and "the regions round about" as particularly useful for understanding Isaiah.

Besides, a closer reading of what Nephi says suggests that he doesn't at all have reference to reading strategies. He doesn't say, as he often gets quoted as saying, that scripture should be read "after the manner of the Jews." He says that Isaiah's easier to understand when one is "taught after the manner of *the things of the Jews*." The point here isn't to say that there's a specifically Jewish manner of reading or interpreting texts, and that that's the right or privileged way to go about understanding the prophets. It's to say that the prophets become easier to read when one is familiar with *things*, with "the things of the Jews." What things? Well, the things Nephi himself saw when he was growing up in Jerusalem: "I came out from Jerusalem," he says earlier in verse 5, "and mine eyes hath beheld the things of the Jews." Here again it's clear that he has preexilic Jews in mind, the people dwelling in Jerusalem that he and his family left behind. It seems Nephi means only to suggest that Isaiah can be understood more readily if we're familiar with ancient Jewish history and culture, ancient Hebrew language and idioms, ancient Israelite beliefs and practices. We

ought to get familiar with all things preexilic and Jewish if we want to get our minds around Isaiah's prophecies.

Okay, that was a bit of tangent, but an important one. There's a lot that can be learned from using traditional Jewish styles of interpretation to read scripture—I've especially learned a lot from rabbinic interpretation (and Bradley Kramer's recent book, *Beholding the Tree of Life*, shows how rich this can be). But Nephi's pretty clearly got something else in mind. At any rate, I think we ought to steer clear of programmatic uses of 2 Nephi 25:5, as well as of interpreters of scripture who claim that they've got access to some kind of special form of Jewish interpretation that can mysteriously get underneath the surface of Isaiah's words, usually to reveal some kind of coded meaning. That sort of thing makes me nervous.

But let's get back to where we were. Verses 5–7a repeat verses 1–4, and apparently in certain cases in a way that expands on and develops what's stated the first time through. We've looked at verses 1 and 5 and seen this happening. What of the rest?

In verses 2 and 6, we find that the first iteration is more detailed than the second. In verse 2, Nephi informs us that he “had not taught” his people “many things concerning the manner of the Jews,” apparently because of the “darkness” and “abominations” he saw among them. In verse 6, he tells us simply just that he had “not taught [his] children after the manner of the Jews.” Apparently here he feels he's said enough about this subject the first time around. Interestingly, the next item on Nephi's list gets essentially the same attention in each iteration. In verse 3, Nephi identifies what he seems to regard as the basic and most obvious message in Isaiah 2–14, namely that judgment comes upon the nations only after God has announced it in advance. In verse 6, in the parallel text, Nephi says this: “And I have made mention concerning the judgments of God which hath come to pass among the Jews unto my children, according to all that which Isaiah hath spoken—and I do not write them.”

By this point, we might start to wonder why Nephi's bothering with this larger repetition of verses 1–4 in verses 5–7a. He seems to have had a good reason to expand on and clarify the material from verse 1, so we're pretty happy to have verse 5. But the rest of this seems largely unnecessary. Is Nephi just repeating for the sake of repeating, giving us structure for the sake of having structure? But maybe we're about to come again to something more expansive? Actually, no. Verse 4, you'll remember, tells us that Nephi's planning to give us a prophecy of his own that'll serve as a interpretive key, a starting point that'll get us moving in our attempt

to understand Isaiah. He has a lot to say about this in verse 4. He there explains that because Isaiah *isn't* clear to his people but *is* clear to him because of his prophetic experiences, he's happy to provide them with a prophecy they can use to begin their own work of interpretation. And he there explains that his own prophecy will be plain in nature, following the pattern of his prophesying from the very beginning. Finally, he there says a little bit about how much he himself appreciates plainness. That's a lot of content, all to be found in verse 4. Does this get expanded or contracted in verse 7? The answer, unfortunately, is that it gets drastically contracted. He says only this in the parallel text (in verse 7): "But behold, I proceed with mine own prophecy, according to my plainness, in the which I know that no man can err." That's it. Apparently, he thinks he's said what needs saying already back in verse 4. He has nothing, really, to add.

### **The Last Days**

So we're left wondering all over again why Nephi bothers to repeat verses 1–4 in verses 5–7a. Why state again in such summary terms what's already been said more robustly just a moment before? Actually, the answer to this question comes, I think, in verses 7b–8. Once Nephi's worked back through verses 1–4 in verses 5–7a, you'd expect him to begin laying out his promised plain prophecy. He doesn't do so immediately, however, putting off the prophecy until verse 9. Instead, he uses his repetition of verses 1–4 in verses 5–7a to set up a discussion of Isaiah's relevance in "the last days" (2 Ne. 25:8). His review in verses 6 and 7 of everything he's said at greater length in verses 2–4 sets up Isaiah's relevance in *our* day. This ought to draw our attention.

So what does he say? It comes immediately after he's again stated the necessity of providing his people with his own plain prophecy. And he says this:

Nevertheless, 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—wherefore they are of worth unto the children of men! And he that supposeth that they are not, unto them will I speak particularly and confine the words unto mine own people. For I know that they shall be of great worth unto them in the last days, for in that day shall they understand them—wherefore, for their good have I written them. (2 Ne. 25:7–8)

This is a bit of a shocker, I think. If I understand this right, Nephi's telling us that he's included his lengthy quotation of Isaiah in his record really

only because he's become aware that his writings will circulate in the last days. I think we mentioned in one of our first lectures that Nephi writes his record primarily with his children in mind. But here's one of the odd moments in his writings where it's clear that he's also been given to know that his record will get into the hands of many others, specifically in the last days. And here he tells us that that's the only reason he's bothered to make the very heart of his "more sacred things" a long quotation of Isaiah 2–14. He's written it down *for us*, even though we have it already in our bibles. That's peculiar. *Really* peculiar.

Nephi tells us something else rather important here. He lets us know that his own people were pretty skeptical about Isaiah. They didn't just find him difficult; they apparently thought he was something of a lunatic. Nephi's clear here that there are those who suppose that Isaiah's words are "not" of any "worth unto the children of men." And he's equally clear that the people who think this are largely "confine[d]" to "[his] own people." He fully anticipates *our* full recognition of the importance of Isaiah. That's almost funny, I think, since we've generally developed exactly the attitude Nephi says his people had regarding Isaiah. But here's the trick. We seem to have developed that attitude because we *don't* understand Isaiah. Nephi says that those of the last days certainly *will* understand Isaiah's words. But the fact is that we're collectively terrible at making any sense of Isaiah. And so we find ourselves more akin to Nephi's people twenty-five hundred years ago than to ourselves as Nephi describes us. That's puzzling—and fascinating.

Yikes! We've got to wrap up. Here's what all this comes down to, I think. Nephi expects us to be different from his own people. He tells us that he'll confine his attempts at clarifying Isaiah to his own people because he knows they need it. But it turns out that *we* need it also. We're just as hardened against Isaiah as Nephi's people were, and so we find ourselves biting our nails in anticipation of the plain prophecy that's supposed to clear all this up for us. "Please, Nephi! Get us out of having to interpret Isaiah!" I imagine he's now shaking his head at us, wanting to tell us just to open our eyes. We've got the historical resources and the linguistic knowledge to make Isaiah quite plain. And we're living through times to which Isaiah's prophecies are peculiarly relevant. And yet we're scratching our heads.

Well, we'll have to look at Nephi's prophecy, won't we? Next time.

