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Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon

John W. Welch

While questions remain about exactly when some Isaiah passages were written or assembled, the Book of Mormon shows that its Isaiah passages took their final form before 600 B.C.



Over the years, biblical scholars have raised questions about the authorship of the book of Isaiah, often viewing it as a compilation of scripture written by more than one author. In the opinion of many text-critical scholars, the disputed chapters (mainly chapters 40–66) were written or edited after the time Lehi and Nephi left Jerusalem, after the Babylonian destruction and the resulting deportation of Judah to Babylon in the sixth century B.C.¹ Because most of Isaiah 48–54 is quoted in the Book of Mormon with specific attribution to the prophet Isaiah, biblical scholarship and the Book of Mormon diverge in this regard. Although many fundamentalist anti-Mormons do not raise this point as an issue against the Book of Mormon because they accept the literal integrity of the Bible and hence the single authorship of Isaiah, this discrepancy has been noted by several liberal critics of the Book of Mormon.² This chapter briefly outlines and documents the basic nature of the so-called Isaiah question regarding the Book of Mormon and describes the answers given by Latter-day Saints in respect to this matter.

Affirmative Arguments by Latter-day Saints in Favor of Single Authorship

Most Latter-day Saint writers ultimately resolve the Isaiah authorship question by accepting the scriptures at face value.³ The Book of Mormon clearly attributes to Isaiah the authorship of the Isaiah chapters quoted by the Nephite

prophets, and from this fact most LDS readers strongly infer that Isaiah was the author of all sixty-six chapters. Several Latter-day Saint scholars have also pursued the linguistic and historical critiques in greater depth and have responded in various ways to the idea of late authorship for Isaiah 40–66. These Latter-day Saint writers often advance arguments based on the internal unities that run through all sixty-six chapters of Isaiah.⁴ The presence of internal consistencies in such stylistic elements as parallelism, psalmody, imagery, repetition, paronomasia, and certain distinctive expressions support Isaiah's unity.⁵ In this line of reasoning, Latter-day Saint scholars have essentially joined sympathies with a strong contemporary school of Isaiah scholarship that has actually left the question of Isaiah authorship and simply undertaken the study of the many unifying characteristics that are indeed demonstrable in the book of Isaiah as it is found in the Bible.⁶

While these unifying characteristics provide evidence of single authorship, at least to the extent that one would usually expect to find commonalities throughout any book written by a single author, these unities do not necessarily establish authorship, though they are most easily explained as the result of a single hand. In other words, while all the writings now found in the book of Isaiah could have been produced by multiple authors who shared common vocabularies, idioms, philosophies, ideologies, and stylistic features, or while the observable unities in the resultant text could have been fashioned by a final editor or compiler, it is hard to imagine how and when all that collaborative or consolidating work could have been accomplished. It is easier to believe that all those unities were there from the beginning.

Moreover, LDS writers have pointed out that New Testament authors and Christ himself are recorded as having quoted later chapters of Isaiah, using the name of Isaiah (in

Greek, Esaias) and no other.⁷ Critical scholars, however, do not feel that this settles the historical authorship question. Perhaps Christ and the New Testament writers simply used the name and person of the prophet Isaiah to identify the quote as coming from “the book of Isaiah,” without necessarily certifying whether the textual history of each part of the Isaiah scroll dates to before or after 600 B.C. Thus, these New Testament references are helpful but do not settle the question of authorship.

Arguments against Multiple Authorship: Issues of Form, Content, and Prophetic Foreknowledge

Other Latter-day Saint studies have pointed out weaknesses in the arguments presented by critical biblical writers. The main arguments can be separated into three areas: (1) the form of the prophecies, (2) the content of the prophecies, and (3) the ability of a prophet to foretell the future.

Form

Some scholars feel that the differences in form are so varied (some structures vanishing, others appearing, even when the subject matter remains the same) that their diversity establishes multiple authorship.⁸ However, diversity in form is still inconclusive in resolving the problem of Isaiah authorship. Isaiah was active as a prophet and apparently as a writer for at least forty years. Any author, working as Isaiah did over a long lifetime, might well produce an eclectic book that contains a disparate collection of his own poems, prophecies, and narratives. Certain stylistic differences, either deriving from the writer’s association with new ideas or alternately due to increased seclusion are not only possible, but are probably to be expected in writings coming

from different times in a long lifespan of an author. Hebrew poetry and Isaiah's abilities and style (praised as "genius") allow for a range of creative differences. As a prophet, Isaiah could either speak as himself or for God—using God's own "literary style" in addition to his own. Moreover, it is evident that the various sections and chapters of the book of Isaiah were drafted originally as independent prophecies or separate oracles that were eventually gathered together on a single scroll. Isaiah did not sit down one day and write all sixty-six chapters systematically. Thus, many reasons may account for the various forms of writing found in the book of Isaiah.

For Latter-day Saints, the compositional variety in the book of Doctrine and Covenants might come to mind as a possible comparison. The revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants were not written at one time: Doctrine and Covenants 1 was not the first but the sixty-sixth section written, as a preface to the 1833 Book of Commandments; many sections are not printed in their chronological order; a few sections are aggregates of separate revelations; while Joseph Smith was solely instrumental in most of the revelations, one revelation to Joseph Smith was jointly received with Sidney Rigdon (section 76), a few others were drafted by Oliver Cowdery (sections 20, 134), and two were written by Brigham Young (section 136) or John Taylor (section 135) after Joseph Smith's death. A similar amount of complexity may have been involved in the creation of the book of Isaiah. Indeed, it seems likely that Isaiah 1, like Doctrine and Covenants 1, was written as a preface to an initial collection of Isaiah's prophecies. Stylistically, a high degree of repetitive language is found throughout the Doctrine and Covenants, but changes in style, emphasis, and themes also occur over

time. The same can be said of the book of Isaiah. If a person 2,600 years from now did not know the history of the Doctrine and Covenants, that person might conclude that there was a deuterio-Joseph, a tertio-Joseph, and perhaps would even suggest that section 87 must have been written after the outbreak of the Civil War.

Moreover, some of the stylistic differences between the various parts of Isaiah might be the result of the work of a scribe or collector. Although we have no evidence of this one way or the other, it is not out of the question that Isaiah sometimes used a scribe (as did Jeremiah, Paul, and Joseph Smith), or that a prophet who succeeded Isaiah and knew him well compiled or abridged Isaiah's writings and in indeterminate ways influenced the final form of Isaiah's texts. Two Latter-day Saint examples show the possibility of such subsequent assistance: Mormon collected and abridged the various Nephite texts, and Joseph Fielding Smith compiled and edited the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. If such compiling or editing is accomplished by a skilled person duly called and inspired to prepare the final text, the Latter-day Saint view is not troubled by the prospect of such subsequent involvement. So long as such work was completed fairly soon after Isaiah's lifetime and was clearly attributed to Isaiah before 600 B.C., this prospect would also raise no particular difficulty for the Book of Mormon. Indeed, the Book of Mormon does not require all of the Isaiah material found in the Book of Mormon to have been written by a single individual—only that the content and final form of those chapters were authoritatively attributed to Isaiah prior to 600 B.C. But, of course, we cannot conclusively determine whether anything like these possible scenarios actually occurred in the case of the book of Isaiah.

Content

The content of the book of Isaiah embraces a vast field—too many subjects, some analysts feel, to have been written by one person.⁹ LDS and other scholars, however, have countered that, as Isaiah came to understand more about the future during his lengthy prophetic ministry, he naturally adapted his theological ideas to different needs, insights, and circumstances.¹⁰

Many critics believe that if the theological ideas in chapters 1–39 are typical of the earliest historical Isaiah, then the shift to much larger and fuller ideas in the following chapters are not his and must have been written later:¹¹ the first thirty-nine chapters warn and rebuke; while the last twenty-seven are full of comfort, deliverance, and redemption. But LDS writers have responded that this development could have been deliberate—other books feature the same progression from doom to hope. Over time, as Isaiah received more understanding, changing circumstances could have brought him to shift the content and emphasis of his messages.¹²

Moreover, one may well argue that the differences between the first and second halves of Isaiah are not as great as the critics have asserted. Warnings, rebukes, promises, and blessings are found throughout the entire book, as has been shown in many of the recent studies of unities in Isaiah. It has also been suggested that errors in the transmission and translation of some biblical texts may stand behind certain difficulties that have been detected by critical scholars in studying the words of Isaiah.¹³ In light of these eventualities, it seems that the critical scholars may have correctly and adeptly identified certain inconsistencies or disunities in the ancient biblical texts, but they may not always be so adroit at proposing explanations for those discrepancies.

Prophetic Foreknowledge

Ultimately, the main problem turns on the nature of prophecy. In many ways, the argument against Isaiah being the sole author of all sixty-six chapters is an argument against the possibility of divine, prophetic inspiration about future historical developments. Some scholars believe that Israelite prophets spoke only to and about their contemporaries.¹⁴ Prophetic messages, they believe, were intimately related to the circumstances of the time and that their messages were focused solely on their particular age. To avoid futuristic interpretations, many scholars have offered the following alternatives: some have changed the time the prophecy was made or the time to which the prophecy refers; some have interpreted the prophecy so that the prediction disappears, or have understood the prophecy as a literary device used by a contemporary to give the effect of foretelling; and others insist that later editors must have added the section.¹⁵ Other scholars, including Latter-day Saints, however, believe that prophets are not restricted to foretell only a certain portion of the immediate future. God may see fit to reveal much more information to his servants than we realize or presently understand.

Similar arguments against single authorship are also advanced by scholars who deny the possibility of revelation in the precise sense of detailed foreknowledge of future names and specific events. If such foreknowledge is impossible, then an alternative explanation must be given for future prophecies in Isaiah about the destruction of the temple or the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. One of the main problems is a result of the prophecy about Cyrus found in Isaiah 45; how could Isaiah have known the name of this Persian king over 250 years before Cyrus lived?

The LDS response to such a question and its related problems affirms that ancient prophets had detailed foreknowledge of future names and specific events. The Book of Mormon contains several specific revelations recorded by Nephi, Jacob, Benjamin and others, disclosing the names of Jesus, John, and Mary, as well as particulars about the life and ministry of Christ. Latter-day Saints also cite evidence in the book of Moses, which testifies that future details of the eternal plan of salvation were revealed to Adam, Enoch, and others in antiquity.

When Were the Plates of Brass Written?

Another issue that might bear on the Isaiah authorship problem in connection with the Book of Mormon arises from the uncertainty over when the plates of brass were written. If that date were better known, it would establish the latest possible date for the final composition of the version of Isaiah found on the plates. While the Book of Mormon gets us very close to the original text of Isaiah himself, it takes us only as close as the version found on the plates of brass. In other words, if the plates of brass were not made and inscribed until around 620–610 B.C., this would allow time for possible collecting, editing, redacting, or supplementing to have been done to the writings of Isaiah after his death, around 700 B.C., and for that work to have already entered the standard version of the biblical text before the Isaiah texts were written on the plates of brass. In other words, in certain respects the critical biblical scholars may be right: it is possible that the book of Isaiah did not take its final form until sometime after Isaiah's death. On the other hand, the Book of Mormon rules out a late date for most of that process, establishing a *terminus post quem*, after which at least the Isaiah texts quoted in the Book of Mormon could not have been written and finalized.

Although earlier dates for the making of the plates of brass are possible, it makes sense to view them as a royal record compiled and inscribed around 620–610 B.C. by King Josiah, who reigned from 640–609 B.C. The plates contained the book of Deuteronomy (1 Nephi 5:10), and that scroll was most likely the book of the law that was not discovered by Josiah until 625 B.C. That discovery made Josiah and others in Jerusalem acutely aware of the fact that books of scripture could get lost, which would have motivated them to do everything in their power to create a permanent archive and a durable copy of their most sacred records to prevent any loss of scripture from happening again. Moreover, Deuteronomy 17 requires the king to have a copy of the law and to read in it all the days of his life. The rediscovery of the forgotten book of Deuteronomy that contained this particular scripture could have prompted Josiah to see record keeping as a royal function and to make records that would not wear out or become illegible through extensive use. In addition, the plates of brass were in Laban's custody in a treasury. The text simply says, "Laban hath the record" (1 Nephi 3:3), not that he necessarily owned them. Because he commanded a garrison of fifty soldiers inside the walls of Jerusalem, Laban may have been the captain of the king's guard or a high-ranking military officer. His treasury could have held public as well as personal records. While the plates of brass contained important genealogies, it is not likely that records of this quality would have been "family records" alone. Perhaps the genealogies served several royal purposes, such as settling disputes over marriage, inheritance, property, or other legal claims based on family status. Finally, dating the plates of brass to the end of the seventh century is consistent with the fact that they included information down to the commencement of the reign of

Zedekiah and many prophecies of Jeremiah, who began to prophesy in 628 B.C.

Of course, other possible dates and scenarios can be imagined. Perhaps the plates of brass were a sacred record that had been kept up to date all along by prophets who preceded Lehi. Perhaps Laban had confiscated this book, making it property of the state, when one of those prophets was put to death for prophesying against Jerusalem and the king. But without knowing when the plates of brass were inscribed, it is not possible to say whether the writings of Isaiah underwent any modifications between his day and Lehi's lifetime, which changes may have caused some of the results that puzzle the scholars today.

How Much of Isaiah Was on the Plates of Brass?

We may also wonder how much of Isaiah the plates of brass contained. Because the Book of Mormon does not absolutely require any part of the book of Isaiah to have been written before 600 B.C. except for those chapters or passages that are quoted or otherwise used in the Book of Mormon itself, it is possible that some parts of Isaiah were missing from the plates of brass.

For example, because Nephi begins quoting Isaiah in 2 Nephi 12 at Isaiah 2:1 instead of at Isaiah 1:1, it is possible that Isaiah 1 was not on the plates of brass. If it had been, one might have expected Alma the Younger to have quoted Isaiah 1:18 about "though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." In addition, the Cyrus information in Isaiah 45 is not quoted in the Book of Mormon. Although one may well believe that Isaiah 45 was original with Isaiah, nothing in the Book of Mormon precludes the possibility that all or part of that chapter was written after Lehi left Jerusalem and, hence, was not on the plates of brass. Likewise, chapters 56–66, the so-called Third Isaiah, which scholars

have argued most strongly to be post-exilic, do not appear in the Book of Mormon. Were these chapters not on the plates of brass?

Isaiah 54 presents a particularly interesting case. Did the Nephites have this text before Jesus quoted it to them in 3 Nephi 22? In the same speech, Jesus quoted Malachi 3–4, and it is evident that those chapters were not on the plates of brass (3 Nephi 26:2). While the answer to this question about Isaiah 54 is uncertain, we have a number of clues: (1) In 3 Nephi 22:1, Jesus introduced Isaiah 54 by saying, “And then shall that which is *written* come to pass.” On another occasion when Jesus quoted from texts already possessed by the Nephites, he said: “ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, and it is also *written before you*” (3 Nephi 12:21). Does the absence of the words “before you” in 3 Nephi 22:1 imply that the Nephites did not previously have Isaiah 54, or is this omission insignificant? (2) After quoting Isaiah 54, Jesus said: “And now, behold, I say unto you, that ye ought to search these things. Yea, a commandment I give unto you that ye search these things diligently.” Is this a new commandment to search these things because they are new, or is it an instruction to search the old records more diligently? (3) In 3 Nephi 23:6, when Jesus is about to give the Nephites Malachi 3–4, he said: “Behold *other* scriptures I would that ye should write, that ye have not.” (23:6). Does the word “other” imply that he has already given them one other scripture, namely Isaiah 54, that they did not previously have, or does the phrase “that ye have not” introduce only Malachi 3–4? (4) After giving Malachi 3–4, and following same pattern as with Isaiah 54, Jesus “expounded” that text “unto the multitude.” In each case, Jesus gave the text, explained it, and commanded the people to record and teach it. Does this pattern imply that Isaiah 54 was just as new to the Nephites as was Malachi 3–4? When Jesus said,

“These scriptures, which ye had not with you, the Father commanded that I should give unto you” (3 Nephi 26:2), was he referring only to Malachi 3–4 or also to Isaiah 54?

Conclusion

It is interesting to think about the issue of Isaiah authorship in light of the Book of Mormon. Although several puzzles remain unsolved, there is no question in my mind that Isaiah wrote everything attributed to him in the Book of Mormon and that strong presumptions and reasonable arguments can be mounted in support of Isaiah’s authorship of the entire book that bears his name. I do not believe that a record created around 600 B.C. could ever have passed off as an original Isaiah text something that everyone knew had been written only a few days earlier. But, if it should somehow, hypothetically, turn out that some of the Isaiah texts that are found in the Book of Mormon were written or edited between 700 and 600 B.C., the Book of Mormon itself does not rule this out as a possibility. In the meantime, the Book of Mormon gives direct evidence that the plates of brass contained Isaiah chapters 2–14, 28–29, 40, 43, 48–53, perhaps 54, and 55:1–2. Because these sections are widely scattered throughout much of the book of Isaiah, one may infer that all of Isaiah was on the plates of brass. Indeed, if the Book of Mormon is accepted on other sufficient grounds as a true historical account, then this record in turn adds new evidence concerning the perplexing issues of Isaiah authorship that has not been not available to or considered by the scholarly world.¹⁶

In the final analysis, in response to all the criticisms and questions concerning Isaiah authorship, most Latter-day Saints simply ascribed greater authority to the Book of Mormon than to critical biblical scholarship. Because the

Book of Mormon expressly indicates that Isaiah wrote Isaiah 2–14 and 48–54, few additional questions about the authorship of those chapters need to be asked in LDS circles. Moreover, even in scholarly terms, any bearing that the questions of Isaiah authorship might have on the Book of Mormon must be begin and end with the acknowledgment that we probably lack sufficient evidence to answer all those questions conclusively. For Latter-day Saints, this ultimately leaves the question of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, as it has always been, in the realm of faith and as a matter of personal testimony.

Notes

1. See Walter Brueggemann, "Unity and Dynamic in the Isaiah Tradition," *JSOT* 29 (June 1984): 89–107; David Carr, "Reaching for Unity in Isaiah," *JSOT* 57 (March 1993): 61–80; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979): 316–25; 325–38; Ronald E. Clements, "Beyond Tradition-History: Deutero-Isaianic Development of First Isaiah's Themes," *JSOT* 31 (February 1985): 95–113; Ronald E. Clements, "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah," *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 117–29; Richard J. Clifford, "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language," *CBQ* 55 (1993): 1–17; Craig A. Evans, "On the Unity and Parallel Structure of Isaiah" *VT* 38 (1988) 129–47; and John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, vol. 20 of the Anchor Bible Series (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964): xv–xxiii.

2. See Wayne Ham, "Problems in Interpreting the Book of Mormon as History," in *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* 1 (1970–71): 19–20; George D. Smith, "Isaiah Updated," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16 (summer 1983): 41, 47–51; reprinted in Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake: Signature Books, 1990): 114–5, 123–4.

3. See, for example, LaMar L. Adams, "Isaiah: Disciple and Witness of Christ," in *A Witness of Jesus Christ: The 1989 Sperry Symposium on the Old Testament*, ed. Richard D. Draper (Salt Lake

City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1–17; Keith H. Meservy, “Isaiah 53: The Richest Prophecy on Christ’s Atonement in the Old Testament,” in *A Witness of Jesus Christ*, ed. Draper, 155–77; Cleon W. Skousen, *Isaiah Speaks to Modern Man* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Publishing, 1984), and many others.

4. See such works as Avraham Gileadi, “The Holistic Structure of the Book of Isaiah” (Provo: Brigham Young University, Ph.D. diss., 1981); Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 547; Sidney B. Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 88–91.

5. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet*, 547–8. Of course, the earliest Bible manuscripts from the Dead Sea Scrolls (about 100 B.C.) present Isaiah as one complete book. No one doubts, however, that the book of Isaiah took its final form any later than the fifth century B.C., well before the time when the earliest known Bible manuscripts were copied. Thus, this evidence does not go back far enough to be of much use to the Book of Mormon. More useful information would need to demonstrate that Isaiah chapters 48–54 were written before the sixth century B.C.

6. See works such as, Oswald T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah: A Study in Prophecy* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1950); David Carr, “Reaching for Unity in Isaiah,” *JSOT* 57 (March 1993): 98–107; Ronald E. Clements, “The Unity of the Book of Isaiah,” *Interpretation* 36 (April 1982): 117–29; Richard J. Clifford, “The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language,” *CBQ* 55 (Jan. 1993): 1–17; Craig A. Evans, “On the Unity and Parallel Structure of Isaiah,” *VT* 38 (April 1988): 129–47; Letitia D. Jeffreys, *The Unity of the Book of Isaiah* (Cambridge: Deighton Bell, 1899); Rolf Rendtorff, “The Book of Isaiah: A Complex Unity: Synchronic and Diachronic Reading,” *SBL 1991 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 8–20.

7. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet*, 543; Roberts, “Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon,” 778–80; Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions*, 86; James E. Talmage in *Conference Report* (April 1929): 45–9.

8. S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 238; McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, xvi.

9. Richard J. Clifford, "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language," *CBQ* 55 (January 1993): 1–17. Clifford suggests three themes in Isaiah 40–55 that do not coincide even with a redactional unity: Zion as the destination of the Exodus and land-taking; creation; and Cyrus as Yahweh's king. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, xv–xxiii. On the basis of vocabulary, style, thought, knowing the name of Cyrus, and having a different world of discourse than First Isaiah, along with numerous other details, McKenzie holds to a multiple authorship of Isaiah.

10. Kent P. Jackson, "The Authorship of the Book of Isaiah," *1 Kings to Malachi*, vol. 4 in *Studies in Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 80; Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet*, 544.

11. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, 242.

12. Jackson, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah," 81–3; Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet*, 544.

13. Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions*, 91–7.

14. See, for example, works concerning Isaiah by Karl Marti, Heinrich F. Hackmann, Bernhard Duhm, and Thomas K. Cheyne. See also McKenzie, *Second Isaiah*, xvi. The nature of prophecy is also discussed by Jackson, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah," 82; Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet*, 543; Roberts, "Higher Criticism and the Book of Mormon," 774; Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions*, 77.

15. See Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet*, 542.

16. Jackson, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah," 84.