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Prolegomena to Any Future Study of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon

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WHAT I INTEND TO SHOW in the course of this paper is, in a word, that making sense of Isaiah's place in the Book of Mormon is the essential key to making sense of the Book of Mormon as such. Whether the Book of Mormon is approached as an ancient book of inspired scripture (as it is by most believers) or whether the Book of Mormon is approached as a nineteenth-century artifact (inspired or otherwise), what it *is* or *does* or *enacts* cannot be grasped without close attention to the role played in it by the writings of Isaiah. Thus, what follows is an outline of a kind of "program" for the study of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon—a program intended both to lay the foundation for further study of Isaiah's role in the book and to begin to clarify the status and the stakes of the Book of Mormon's self-presentation.

Clearing the Ground

In order even to begin to outline such a program, it is necessary first to critique—in order to be definitively done with—two misguided approaches to Isaiah in the Book of Mormon. The first of these regards

Isaiah's presence in the Book of Mormon as effectively accidental, while the second regards Isaiah's presence in the book as essential, but for accidental reasons. Each deserves close attention.

The Accidental Isaiah

The first problematic approach assumes from the outset that the presence in the Book of Mormon of large swaths of Isaiah's writings is strictly unnecessary. Such an assumption generally takes one of two forms: either one assumes that the ancient historical person Nephi had a kind of unjustified fetish for an obscure Old Testament figure that led him to include confusing material that is, in the last analysis, irrelevant to the modern reader¹; or one assumes, as did Fawn Brodie, that whenever the "literary reservoir" of Joseph Smith, author of the book, "ran dry, . . . he simply arranged for his Nephite prophets to quote from the Bible."² Whether deriving from the confrontation of a believer with the unfortunate "Isaiah barrier," or whether deriving from the task the unbeliever has of explaining the thoughtless work of the author of a less-than-aesthetically-pleasing book of scripture, the assumption that Isaiah is accidental to the Book of Mormon has been prevalent.

What, then, is wrong with this prevalent approach? Simply that it begs the question. That is, it assumes without argumentation that nothing of significance is at work in the Book of Mormon's employment of Isaiah. Study of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon is foreclosed in advance and without explanation. In the end, it is perhaps better not to call this first approach an *approach*. Really, it simply leaves Isaiah alone. Something at least more *interesting* is obviously called for.

1. This assumption is ultimately what lies behind the flood of publications aimed at helping Latter-day Saints "make it through the Isaiah chapters." Just from the past decade or so, see Jay A. Parry and Donald W. Parry, *Understanding Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998); Victor L. Ludlow, *Unlocking Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003); John Bytheway, *Isaiah for Airheads* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006); Terry Ball and Nathan Winn, *Making Sense of Isaiah: Insights and Modern Applications* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009); and David J. Ridges, *Isaiah Made Easier in the Bible and the Book of Mormon* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2009).

2. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 58.

The Accidentally Essential Isaiah

Seemingly opposed to this first (non-)approach's unwillingness to engage with Isaiah in the Book of Mormon is the critical regard of a second approach, an approach that ultimately roots itself in concern for (or in the desire to argue against) the historicity of the Book of Mormon. This approach came to the attention of Latter-day Saints generally in 1939 when Sidney Sperry published his scholarly analysis, "The 'Isaiah Problem' in the Book of Mormon," in the Church's periodical, *The Improvement Era*.³ After summarizing the modern critical conviction that the Book of Isaiah should be divided up into the work of (at least) three distinct authors working in (at least) three distinct historical periods, Sperry describes the "Isaiah problem" in the following terms: "If the critics are right the Book of Mormon quotes extensive portions of the sayings of unknown prophets who lived sixty years or more after the Nephites were supposed to have left Jerusalem, and mistakenly attributes them to Isaiah."

As with the first problematic approach to Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, this approach takes two distinct shapes. On the one hand, believers interested in the Isaiah problem have found themselves with the task either of arguing against what Christopher Seitz has appropriately called "the greatest historical-critical consensus of the modern period" by asserting the authorial unity of the Book of Isaiah (this was Sperry's own approach),⁴ or of trying to establish the possibility that the bits and pieces of Isaiah that apparently should not appear in the Book of Mormon *could* have been written by disciples of Isaiah before the Babylonian exile.⁵ On the other hand, critics interested in the Isaiah problem have occupied

3. Sidney B. Sperry, "The 'Isaiah Problem' in the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 42 (1939): 524–525, 564–569, 594, 634, 636–637. Versions of this same original paper appear in almost all of Sperry's later books on the Book of Mormon.

4. Christopher R. Seitz, "Introduction: The One Isaiah // The Three Isaiahs," in Christopher R. Seitz, ed., *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 14. Note Grant Hardy's comment that Sperry-like responses to the Isaiah problem would today be but "an inadequate (and inaccurate) response to a significant body of detailed historical and literary analysis." Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 69.

5. See, for example, William J. Hamblin, "'Isaiah Update' Challenged," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 4–7; and John W. Welch, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon," in Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch, eds., *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 423–437.

themselves with drawing on the scholarly consensus concerning Isaiah in order to clinch their case against the Book of Mormon's historicity.⁶ In this second approach, then—whether employed *for* or *against* the historicity of the Book of Mormon—Isaiah's presence in the Book of Mormon is regarded as essential, but as essential only to establishing or demolishing the book's historicity. Its essentiality is, in the end, only accidental; it is not essential to the book *itself*, to the book's *self-presentation*, but to questions ultimately foreign to the book.

So what is wrong with this second approach to Isaiah in the Book of Mormon? Simply that it only *appears* to pay attention to the place of Isaiah in the book. It unquestionably grants Isaiah a privileged position in the work of making sense of the Book of Mormon, but it determines in advance that there is only one question to ask about the book, namely, whether it is historical or not. It does not ask about, but instead assumes, that the Book of Mormon principally presents itself as an irremediably historical book. But such insistence on enclosing the Book of Mormon in a debate about its historicity can be—*should* be—criticized. Whether or not the book is historical, it does things with Isaiah that deserve close attention, things that any exclusive focus on the question of historicity will likely never get around to addressing. The question of historicity is unquestionably important, but it is only *one* question, and it should not be allowed to distract readers from other, perhaps more crucial questions.

Towards the Essential Isaiah

It is important, I believe, that each of these first two approaches to Isaiah in the Book of Mormon takes two distinct shapes. One can assume Isaiah to be accidental to the Book of Mormon as a believer *or* as a critic, and one can regard Isaiah as essential to the accidental question of the book's historicity from the position of a believer *or* of a critic. The same is true of the approach I hope to spell out in the remainder of this paper: One can assert Isaiah's essentiality to the Book of Mormon as a believer *or* as a critic. But there is nonetheless a crucial difference between this third approach and the two approaches I have here criticized. In the two foregoing approaches, the believer and the critic cannot agree on the *significance* of Isaiah to the Book of Mormon. This is especially clear in the second approach, where the believer takes Isaiah to be central to the be-

6. See, for instance, George D. Smith, "Isaiah Updated," in Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 113–130.

lief that the Book of Mormon is historical and the critic takes Isaiah to be central to the recognition that the Book of Mormon is *not* historical.

In the third approach I will now outline, on the other hand, it seems to me that the critic and the believer can agree on the significance of Isaiah's presence in the Book of Mormon. Whether that significance was created through the work of ancient prophets or through the work of a modern mythmaker, the significance itself can be agreed upon. In what follows, I therefore attempt to use language that is, in terms of the question of believer-versus-critic, essentially neutral. Though I have my own convictions concerning the book, I want here to bracket them in the name of making sense of what the Book of Mormon is, does, and enacts.

All that said, then, what does the essential Isaiah look like?⁷

Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: An Outline

The Book of Mormon is clearly a narrative. And it unquestionably moves from its beginnings towards the culminating visit of the Christ to the New World six centuries later in Third Nephi. So far, though, the way the words of the visiting Christ in Third Nephi provide a remarkably illuminating retroactive interpretation of the whole Nephite narrative has been entirely overlooked.

This retroactive interpretation first begins to emerge after all those present at Christ's appearing have had the opportunity to feel his hands and feet, at the point when Christ turns his attention to baptism. After authorizing twelve men to perform the rite, he offers a crucial, stern rebuke concerning what he describes as a double Nephite controversy. First, Christ asserts that there had been, previous to his visit, consistent debate about the specifics of the rite's performance (see 3 Nephi 11:22–28). Second, he makes clear that there had also been ongoing debate about the specifics of what might loosely be called Trinitarian theology (see 3 Nephi 11:28–41). Close reading of the text suggests, moreover, that the two debates are to be understood as closely connected: The debate over ritual performance appears to have been rooted in the debate over the triune nature of God—specifically, over whether the individual should be baptized in the name of Christ alone, or whether she should be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Though these de-

7. The arguments I will present in what follows are drawn from my findings worked out in the course of researching my book on conceptions of typology in the Book of Mormon: Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament* (Salem, Oregon: Salt Press, 2011).

bates have been largely ignored by readers of the Book of Mormon,⁸ their importance for making sense of the larger Nephite narrative cannot be overstated.

In fact it is not difficult to guess to what Christ is meant to be referring. In the larger narrative that precedes Third Nephi, one finds two drastically distinct accounts of the triune nature of God, each closely associated with what are clearly distinct baptismal traditions. The first of these is to be found in the so-called small plates of Nephi. There, in what is now 2 Nephi 31, the reader finds Nephi laying out an account of the relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost that is in striking accord with what Christ himself is described as presenting in 3 Nephi 11. And, importantly, this small-plates account of God's nature is intertwined in 2 Nephi 31 with a detailed explanation of the meaning of baptism. The second and clearly distinct account is to be found later, in the middle of the great speech of the martyr Abinadi before the court of King Noah. There, in what is now Mosiah 15, Abinadi provides an explanation of the Godhead that still confuses many Latter-day Saint readers.⁹ And, as with Nephi, this theological presentation is coupled in the text with an explanation of baptism: The narrative that follows Abinadi's speech and subsequent martyrdom describes how Alma, Abinadi's only convert, goes on to found a baptismal tradition distinct from Nephi's, and in direct fidelity to Abinadi's teachings.

The differences between Nephi's and Abinadi's accounts of baptism *have* been noticed,¹⁰ but their significance has been generally overlooked. Though nothing is said in the narratives before Third Nephi to indicate that there was debate about whether the Nephite or Abinadite approach to baptism and the nature of God was the true one, the words of Christ in Third Nephi are clearly meant to indicate that there had been such debate, that the Nephites had seen the two traditions as being essentially ir-

8. None of the standard commentaries available on the Book of Mormon attempts to identify the nature of the disputations to which Christ refers. Especially interesting are those commentaries that specifically warn against any attempt to identify the disputations. See Joseph F. McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987–1992), 4:57; and Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical & Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:346.

9. It is an explanation that can be reconciled with Nephi and Christ—and Joseph Smith!—*only* through rather tortured hermeneutical acrobatics.

10. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 3:327–328: “Alma’s baptism ... differs from Nephi’s.” Cf. also 2:433–436.

reconcilable. Importantly, other differences can be detected between the theological interests and emphases of the small plates and those of the Nephites associated with the Abinadite tradition. While Nephi's small plates, for example, focus almost exclusively on the importance of Israel and its covenant, thus being attuned to eschatological concerns and interested in texts drawn from the Hebrew Bible (see especially 1 Nephi 11–15, 19–22; 2 Nephi 3, 6–8, 10, 12–30), the leaders of the Abinadite church are almost never portrayed as paying attention to such themes, instead being focused almost exclusively on formulating a systematic theology of atonement (see especially Mosiah 11–18; Alma 5–15; 31–34; 36–42; Helaman 13–15).

From all this it appears that the Book of Mormon is—on its own account—stretched across three narrative hinges: (1) Nephi's production of the small plates; (2) Abinadi's theologically innovative speech before Noah's court; and (3) the epoch-ending visit of Christ to the New World. But what has all this to do with Isaiah? Quite simply, this: At each of the historical hinges of the Book of Mormon is to be found an explicit thematization of Isaiah—in fact, a systematically presented exposition of how to interpret the writings of Isaiah. The two books of Nephi in the small plates are *explicitly* structured so as to privilege the writings—and the interpretation of the writings—of Isaiah, and in a very particular way; Abinadi's prophetic intervention is *explicitly* presented as a response to a demand to interpret Isaiah, in the course of which response a distinctive approach to Isaiah is formulated; and the visiting Christ of Third Nephi brings his sermonizing to a close by marking an unmistakable return to Isaiah, coupling it also with the outline of an interpretive methodology. Obviously, it is to these three moments in Nephite history that one must pay attention in order to make sense of Isaiah's place in the Book of Mormon.

What follows, then, is a series of preliminary analyses of the role Isaiah plays in each of these three crucial moments in the Nephite narrative. For reasons that will become clear, the bulk of attention is given to the place of Isaiah in the small plates. These three analyses will be followed by a few general conclusions.

Nephi and Isaiah

As any first-time reader of the Book of Mormon immediately notes, it is the two books of Nephi that first and foremost dedicate themselves to appropriating Isaiah. In addition to the so-called "Isaiah chapters" of 2 Nephi 12–24 (the whole of Isaiah 2–14 in one lengthy quotation), one

finds in Nephi's small plates quotations of and commentary on Isaiah 29 (2 Nephi 26–27) and Isaiah 48–51 (1 Nephi 19–22 and 2 Nephi 6–8, 10). These additional Isaianic texts deserve quite as much attention as the “barrier” of Isaiah in 2 Nephi 12–24. But how are these several quotations distributed among the several parts of Nephi's record? Is there a discernible structure in that record that helps to make sense of what Isaiah is doing there?

There is, in the end, a structure to First and Second Nephi, and one that *should* not be missed. It is no mostly invisible chiasmic structure. Rather it is something that the record itself explicitly identifies in a passage generally skimmed over (1 Nephi 19:1–6). This structure has been preliminarily outlined by Frederick Axelgard in a largely ignored study.¹¹ As Axelgard shows, there is a definite line drawn between what the text refers to as the “more sacred things,” the privileged essential core of Nephi's record (the twenty-five chapters stretching from 2 Nephi 6 to 2 Nephi 30), and the merely “sacred” remainder of the record.¹² Importantly, the thus privileged “more sacred things” consist of what the record describes as the words of three witnesses: (1) Nephi's brother Jacob, who quotes and comments on Isaiah 50–51 (and a few verses from Isaiah 49), (2) Isaiah, in the shape of the “Isaiah chapters,” and (3) Nephi himself, whose contribution is systematically built on an appropriation of Isaiah 29 (and a few other scattered references to Isaianic texts). That Isaiah is sandwiched between the other two witnesses appears to be intentional, since they both consistently and explicitly defer to Isaiah. From the beginning to the end of the “more sacred things,” explicitly structurally privileged in the small plates, Isaiah is the star of the show.

From these details, it becomes clear that the inclusion of long quotations from Isaiah in the small plates is not only deliberate, but actually the focus of all the editorial energies that went into producing the record. The meaning of Isaiah's prophecies is undoubtedly meant to be the key to the meaning of the small plates. To ignore Isaiah in this record is, in the end, to ignore the record as such. But what happens in these structurally privileged chapters dealing with Isaiah? And what happens in those quotations of Isaiah that appear elsewhere in the small plates, particularly in

11. See Frederick W. Axelgard, “1 and 2 Nephi: An Inspiring Whole,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (Fall 1986): 53–66.

12. Axelgard actually fails to recognize that this “more sacred things” come to a close with 2 Nephi 30 (he includes in them 2 Nephi 31–33). For reasons I will not review here, it is best to understand 2 Nephi 31–33 as a supplement to the “more sacred things.”

the last chapters of First Nephi?

The first mention of Isaiah in the record comes in 1 Nephi 15:20, a brief narrative note in which the text explains that Nephi employed the writings of Isaiah to teach his brothers about “the restoration of the Jews, or of the house of Israel.” Though this is a passing reference, it lays out the basic intentions that seem always to accompany the employment of Isaiah in the small plates: to make sense of the larger covenantal history of Israel. This first, passing reference is then expanded in great detail in the last chapters of First Nephi (1 Nephi 19–22), where the actual words of Isaiah are introduced into the record for the first time (1 Nephi 20–21 quote Isaiah 48–49 in full) and explicated at length (in a somewhat disjointed, preliminary way in 1 Nephi 19, and then in an almost systematic way in 1 Nephi 22). Here again, the emphasis on the Israelite covenant is unmistakable, and the will to interpret Isaiah as having provided a kind of template for making sense of covenantal history—past *and* future—is modeled. Moreover, the text has Nephi give a (much misappropriated) name to this approach to Isaiah at this point: *likening*.

If these appropriations of Isaiah in First Nephi introduce (and name) the method, they only set the stage for the “more sacred things” that make up the bulk of Second Nephi. There, in the chapters whose centrality I have already identified, the same interpretive method is employed again. In 2 Nephi 6–10 (Jacob’s part in the “more sacred things”), the connection between the Second Nephi and First Nephi appropriations of Isaiah is explicit: Jacob’s words open with an explanation that his focus on Isaiah has been guided by his brother, and his teachings open with exposition of some of the verses that appear in Nephi’s discussion of Isaiah in 1 Nephi 19–22. The text thus presents Jacob’s sermon in 2 Nephi 6–10 as a kind of updating for a now-established Nephite community of Nephi’s earlier words delivered to his now-estranged brothers in 1 Nephi 19–22.

Through to the end of Jacob’s words concerning Isaiah, there is a consistent and unmistakable program guiding the inclusion of Isaiah’s writings in the small plates. The focus is on a string of chapters, unmistakably in the canonical order known from the Christian Bible, drawn collectively from Second Isaiah’s prophecies regarding the “new exodus” from Babylon and the subsequent return to the promised land (Isaiah 48–49, and then Isaiah 50–51). But then there is a sudden shift in 2 Nephi 11. As the record turns from Jacob’s sermon directly to the writings of Isaiah (Isaiah 2–24)—quoted without manipulation or even commentary—First Isaiah replaces Second Isaiah, marking a shift from prophecies concerning a new, essentially eschatological exodus to prophecies principally

associated with the Assyrian threat in the eighth century before Christ. This shift deserves close attention.

The shift is confirmed in the chapters that follow the quotation of Isaiah 2–14, where the text presents, as part of Nephi’s own prophecies, a strikingly creative Nephitizing of another text from First Isaiah: Isaiah 29 (in 2 Nephi 26–27). This further foray not only confirms the record’s interest in First Isaiah; it also *clarifies* the focus on, specifically, Isaiah 2–14. The strong ties between Isaiah 29 and Isaiah 6–8, often noted by commentators, are certainly crucial to the small plates interest in Isaiah, something made especially clear by the particular aspects of Isaiah 29 to which 2 Nephi 26–27 gives the most sustained attention. What seems to drive the record’s interest in these particular chapters of First Isaiah is their singular focus on what has long been called Isaiah’s “turn to the future.”¹³ Faced with the fact, according to Isaiah 6, that his contemporaries would completely reject his message, Isaiah develops especially in Isaiah 7–8 a theology of the “hidden God,” of a God whose work would be understood only by a future generation. The key moment of this development, for the small plates, would seem to be Isaiah 8:16–20 (the crucial elements of which text are repeated in Isaiah 29): that point at which rejection in the present and hope for the future led Isaiah to “seal up” his writings for a generation still to come. The Book of Mormon presents Nephi as being deeply interested in this Isaianic theme, something that makes good sense given that Nephi’s prophetic career is described as having been launched by an apocalyptic vision of the latter-day emergence of a book (clearly to be understood as the Book of Mormon itself) that would shatter longstanding inattention to covenantal Israel.

Thus, rather late in Second Nephi, a kind of shift in emphasis as regards the use of Isaiah can be witnessed. Where First Nephi and the first ten chapters of Second Nephi exclusively quote from Second Isaiah in order to give prophetic shape to the idea that Israel will experience an eschatological exodus in the distant future, most of Second Nephi focuses instead on the writings of First Isaiah in order to exploit the Isaianic motif of a prophetic text written in an earlier, apostate period for a later, prepared period. But it is possible to suggest that this shift from Second to First Isaiah is less radical than it at first appears. Studies of Isaiah published since the 1970s, consistently emphasizing the (redactional, not authorial) unity of the book of Isaiah, have seen important, apparently

13. The best theological exposition of this is to be found in Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 2:151–155.

intentional theological connections between First and Second Isaiah. Among such studies, of particular interest to the interpretation of Isaiah in the small plates is the work of Edgar Conrad.¹⁴

On Conrad's interpretation—anchored in a heavy emphasis on Isaiah 6–8 and Isaiah 29—Second Isaiah was originally written as if it were a “reading,” by the coming generation projected in First Isaiah, of the sealed book written by First Isaiah. If the author/editor of the small plates, heavily emphasizing the same texts from First Isaiah, was working with a similar interpretation of the relationship between First and Second Isaiah, it would be possible to suggest that deep connections tie the small plates interest first in Second Isaiah and then in First Isaiah. Certainly, at any rate, Nephi's record anticipates a connection between the eventual emergence of a covenantal book projected by First Isaiah and the eschatological re-gathering of Israel outlined by Second Isaiah. It is perhaps best to suggest that whoever put First and Second Nephi together saw a complex promise-and-fulfillment relationship as weaving together First and Second Isaiah.

In the end, this close bond between First and Second Isaiah—the one “book” putting together the sealed text, the other “book” finally opening and responding to that text—seems to be essential to the small plates. Moreover, such a bond, because it is specifically a bond between *texts*, is what interpreters of scripture call typology. Indeed, it has long been asserted that it is precisely Isaiah 6–8 that marks the *origin* of the idea of typology in the biblical tradition. And, interestingly, the small plates record of Nephi has important things to say about typology, principally in 2 Nephi 11, just before the “Isaiah chapters.” (The text, significantly, returns to the theme of typology, though without using the actual term, in 2 Nephi 25, immediately after the “Isaiah chapters”). The possibility must therefore, it seems, be countenanced that the understanding of typology presented in the small plates is to be understood as having been drawn from (a very carefully read) Isaiah. That the discussion of typology in 2 Nephi 11 (as that in 2 Nephi 25) is associated with the Law (of Moses) only makes this clearer: What is to be sealed up in Isaiah 8 is specifically called “the law.”¹⁵

It is only after all of this carefully structured and complexly nuanced

14. See Edgar W. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

15. Brevard Childs points out the possibility that references to “the law” in Isaiah, while not having had reference to the Mosaic code in their original settings, should be interpreted in that way in their larger, canonical settings. See Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 30.

appropriation of Isaiah that Second Nephi turns, in its thirty-first chapter, to the double question of baptism and the triune nature of God. Significantly, though, it is not only with Nephi's approach to baptism and Godhead that Abinadi will disagree; Abinadi's speech is also at odds with what Nephi has to say about Isaiah, as well as what he seems to understand by typology (drawn, apparently, from Isaiah's own writings). Thus if a controversy emerges in the wake of Abinadi's speech before Noah's court, the small plates are what sets up—in advance—the stakes of that controversy, and those stakes are largely borrowed from Isaiah.

Abinadi and Isaiah

The small plates after Nephi—in the shorter books of Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni—have little to say about either Nephite history or Nephite preaching. It is only in the last of these books that one finds recorded any event of larger narrative importance, but what is recorded there in Omni is narratively crucial for making sense of the Nephite theological controversies to which the Christ of Third Nephi refers.

The book of Omni records the end of the Nephites' centuries-old establishment in the land of Nephi, the settlement of which is first recorded in 2 Nephi 5. In the midst of prophetic warnings about imminent destruction—apparently at the hands of invading Lamanites—a certain Mosiah leads a small group of followers to settle in safer territories. Arriving in the valley of Zarahemla, they find a settlement of people with whom they soon unite, with Mosiah somewhat precariously positioned as the king over the unified people. The book of Omni, the transitional “Words of Mormon,” and the first chapters of the non-small-plates book of Mosiah then describe the process of stabilization, coming to fruition with the sermon of King Benjamin, who is described as finally fully uniting the people by replacing cultural and political differences with a shared commitment to Christian faith. Before complete stabilization is realized in the first chapters of Mosiah, however, the text mentions that a significant group of Benjamin's subjects begin a campaign to return to their former lands in Nephi, now occupied by their Lamanite enemies. As one learns only later in the book of Mosiah, the group—despite some difficulties—eventually achieves its aim, establishing a Nephite colony in the heart of Lamanite territory, a colony that immediately loses contact with the larger Nephite contingency in Zarahemla. All these narrative complications turn out to be crucial: It is to this cut-off colony, established in the formerly lost lands of the Nephites' “first inheritance,” that Abinadi eventually comes to deliver his prophetic message.

The plot of the narrative thickens when the reader encounters subtle but crucial hints in Mosiah 9–10 that the Nephite return to the land of Nephi was—particularly after it was secured by several miraculous military victories—interpreted by the colony’s inhabitants as a kind of return to Nephite beginnings, a kind of re-establishment of the golden era of Nephi’s original reign in that very land.¹⁶ Even more significantly, the ensuing narrative, beginning in Mosiah 11, sets up a strong—and apparently intentional—parallel between the aftermath of the *re*-establishment in Nephi and the aftermath of the *original* establishment in the same land. Just as Nephi’s celebrated reign is followed in the book of Jacob by a period of licentiousness and materialism, so the death of the first king of the newly founded Nephite colony in the land of Nephi gives way to sexual and economic decadence. With the rise in the colony of the wicked King Noah, things in Nephi fall apart according to a pattern recorded in the small plates.

It is against this period of spiritual malaise that Abinadi prophetically rages (as a kind of reembodyment of the figure of Jacob, brother of Nephi). But, according to the narrative, Abinadi gets little chance to deliver his message: He is summarily arrested and brought before Noah’s court. But it is in Noah’s court rather than out among the people that Abinadi shines, so to speak. Faced with a group of priests who have questions for him to answer regarding, of all things, the meaning of a passage from Isaiah, Abinadi is forced to make of his defense an intervention on how to interpret the prophet consistently privileged in the small plates (see Mosiah 12:19–24). A little reading between the lines allows one to make clear sense of the motives behind the priests’ questions concerning Isaiah. The best explanation is that the decadent establishment in Nephi has come to use Isaiah to provide itself with the ideological justification necessary to defend its sinfulness and sloth. That is, according to an argument that cannot be presented in any detail here, the text presents the Nephi establishment as having claimed that with the return to the land of Nephi—duly interpreted as a return to the primordial age of Nephi’s original reign—the eschaton projected by (Second) Isaiah had already been experienced, such that history, and with it the normativity of the Mosaic Law itself, had come to an irreversible end.

What absolutely must not be missed here is a delicate and subtle but infinitely crucial detail: As Abinadi’s speech helps to make clear, the

16. Mosiah 9–10 are presented in the text as a first-person account written by the first king of the Nephite colony. See Grant Hardy’s rich discussion in Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 123–132.

reader is meant to understand that Noah's regime, by tying their ideological self-justification to a likening of Second Isaiah, believed itself to be following out the project outlined by Nephi in the small plates. With this in mind, it seems best to understand the question put to Abinadi concerning Isaiah to be, in its narrative context, meant as a challenge to Abinadi not only to defend his politically subversive prophetic activities, but also to explain his refusal to follow the by-then established understanding of the small plates project.

Abinadi does not disappoint. Indeed, as the narrative of his speech unfolds, he is portrayed as effectively forging an interpretive approach to Isaiah that radically breaks with the one attributed to Nephi in the small plates. In effect, Abinadi replaces Nephi's interest in Isaianic covenantal theology with an explicit and unmistakable Christological approach. Though Nephi is portrayed as having given himself almost exclusively to the way Isaiah's writings frame the history of Israel's covenant—the apostate present (First Isaiah) as much as the eschatological future (Second Isaiah)—Abinadi is portrayed as taking Isaiah to have been speaking in straightforward terms only of the coming of Christ (and that in enough detail even to lay out particular aspects of his life!). Thus, while Nephi fixes his attention most closely on Isaiah 6–8, Isaiah 29, and Isaiah 48–51—texts in which Christological (or even generally messianic) elements are difficult to find—Abinadi is riveted to Isaiah 53, the Christological interpretation of which is second nature to the Christian reader of the Old Testament. Tying the prophecy of Isaiah to the life of Christ—and to that *alone*—Abinadi is portrayed as making a radical break with the small plates way of making sense of Isaiah.

Strikingly, the narrator telling the story of Abinadi seems to be attuned to the difficulty Abinadi's break with the small plates might imply. At the very moment in the story when Abinadi uproots the interpretive methodology associated with Nephi, the narrator leaves off direct quotation of Abinadi in order to draw a connection between the story of Abinadi and the narrative of Exodus 32–34—the story of Moses' breaking the stone tables because of the idolatry perpetrated by Israel during his absence. The point of this narrative move seems clear: Abinadi, faced with the idolatry of the Nephite colony, effectively breaks the small plates and their theological intentions, putting in their place a rather different theological project.

Crucially, the narrative goes on to explain that Abinadi's speech did not fall entirely on deaf ears. His one convert, Alma, escapes from Noah's grasp and goes on to found, in the borders of the land, a full ecclesiastical organization, a church that, once it finds its way to the land of Zarah-

hemla, ends up displacing the kingdom so carefully stabilized by King Benjamin. The text clearly places the launching of this new ecclesiastical tradition in direct fidelity to Abinadi's speech, and that tradition continues to form the heart of Nephite—and eventually Lamanite—religious experience all the way through the following narrative books up to the visit of Christ in Third Nephi. And, as if to make quite clear that Abinadi's message regarding Isaiah was heard loud and clear by Alma and the church he established, Isaiah's writings disappear *entirely* after Abinadi's speech. Taking up the Abinadite Christological approach to Isaiah, the church—the reader is meant to assume—quickly lost interest in the anything-but-plain words of the Old World prophet, since their own Nephite prophecies concerning the coming of Christ were much clearer. As a consequence, from Abinadi until the visit of Christ, there is not a word about Isaiah in the Book of Mormon.

The Abinadite break with the small plates, it seems, is complete. And the controversy between two rivalrous traditions—each with its distinct theological emphases, its different ways of relating to Old World scripture, and its unique understandings of baptism and the nature of God—is completely set in motion, though only one of them gets privileged in the Book of Mormon narrative.

Christ and Isaiah

If nothing about Isaiah appears between Abinadi's speech in Mosiah and the appearance of Christ in Third Nephi, much of significance about Isaiah appears on the lips of the visiting Christ. Indeed, the entirety of Christ's two-day speech—beginning especially with 3 Nephi 15—is ostensibly a commentary on the very verses Noah's priests ask Abinadi to interpret (Isaiah 52:7–10). Still more significantly, Christ is portrayed in Third Nephi as interpreting those verses in a fashion entirely distinct from Abinadi. Speaking in broad terms, while Abinadi couples the passage in question with Isaiah 53 in order to present a Christological hermeneutic, Christ couples it with Isaiah 54, thereby placing the Israelite covenant again at the heart of Isaianic interpretation. Moreover, immediately after quoting Isaiah 54 at length, Christ is presented as intentionally bringing the long silence concerning Isaiah to a definitive end, commanding his hearers in the New World to “search ... the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 23:1).

This return to the small plates approach to (and interest in) Isaiah is rich in implications. Not only does it mark what can only be interpreted as a direct intervention on the question of Isaiah interpretation, it also

seems to provide the beginnings of an explanation for what the Book of Mormon intends to have its readers understand by Christ's introduction of a new baptismal tradition, his departure from the Abinadite tradition that had obtained for fully two centuries before his visit. And it thus begins to explain the meaning of Christ's references to disputations and controversies. Any baptismal and/or theological tradition subtracted from or ignorant of the covenantal context worked out in nuance and detail in the small plates must be replaced with a tradition anchored in (Isaiah's) exposition of the theological and historical significance of the covenant.

Of course, the visiting Christ of Third Nephi has a lot to say about the particulars of Isaiah interpretation as well. Particularly interesting is the way that Third Nephi weaves the writings of both Micah and Malachi into bits and pieces of Isaiah 52. And the curious way that Christ is depicted as quoting certain prophecies of Isaiah and Micah twice, the second time replacing references to the Lord with references to the Father, deserves close interpretive attention. Indeed, though Christ in Third Nephi has far less to say than Nephi in the small plates about Isaiah, the employment of Isaiah in the account of the visiting Christ perhaps deserves the closest attention of all. For the purposes of this essay, however, the outline thus far provided will have to suffice.

Conclusion

In the course of this essay, I believe I have presented a basic—a very basic—outline of what Isaiah seems to be doing in the Book of Mormon. And because Isaiah clearly plays a central role in the Book of Mormon's self-presentation—especially in the shape the Book of Mormon gives to its own projected emergence—it seems to me clear that study of the Book of Mormon, whether focused on the nineteenth century or on the ancient Americas, must anchor itself in careful study of how the book appropriates the writings of Isaiah. If, as Richard Bushman has claimed, the Book of Mormon “gave to the word *restoration* its peculiar Mormon flavor,”¹⁷ or if, as Jan Shipps has claimed, the Book of Mormon “effected,” for Latter-day Saints, “a break in the very fabric of history,”¹⁸ it is high time the book—in all its narrative/structural complexity and in all its

17. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 76.

18. Jan Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 52.

theological innovation—received some attention. It may not be a work of art, but it is nonetheless a marvelous work, and something to wonder—deeply—about. ❁

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