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How Not to Read Isaiah

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HOW NOT TO READ ISAIAH

John Gee

Abstract: *In the Book of Mormon, Nephi draws upon his own knowledge of the Jewish people, their culture and language, and the surrounding area to add to his understanding of Isaiah's words, and commends that approach to his reader. In his book The Vision of All, it is clear that Joseph Spencer lacks knowledge in these topics, and it negatively affects his interpretation of Isaiah. Specifically, this lack of knowledge causes him to misinterpret the role of the Messiah in Isaiah's teachings, something that was clear to Isaiah's ancient readers.*

Review of Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016). 318 pages. \$59.95 (hardback); \$29.95 paperback.

Recently, Don Parry reviewed Joseph Spencer's book on Isaiah¹ in what, to this observer, was a kindly and understated but also critical way, pointing out particularly Spencer's inability to read Hebrew.² Years ago James Faulconer, Spencer's undergraduate mentor, had a rule that he would not allow his students to write commentary on a book of scripture unless they controlled the original language of the text. This is a laudable ideal and obviously has much to recommend it. While knowledge of Hebrew is not a prerequisite to study Isaiah, it is very helpful — not least for avoiding serious errors — if one wishes to write about Isaiah as a scholar.

Parry's review deserves some additional comment because, if anything, Parry was not critical enough. Toward that end, in this review I will add to the conversation by focusing on just one chapter in Spencer's book.

1. Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016).

2. Donald W. Parry, "An Approach to Isaiah Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 245-64.

The Things of the Jews

Not only is Hebrew highly desirable as preparation for writing about Isaiah, but the Book of Mormon points out other prerequisites to understanding Isaiah. It is worth reviewing these, particularly since Spencer seeks to focus on Isaiah in Nephi's record.³

Nephi instructs his readers, “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” (2 Nephi 25:5). Therefore, someone who wishes to follow Nephi's method ideally needs to know the things of the ancient Jews, like their language (through philology), their script, their culture, their history, their material culture (through archaeology), their poetry, and their rhetorical patterns. In short, one needs to be “taught somewhat in all the learning of [Nephi's] father” (1 Nephi 1:1).

Nephi also notes that he knows “concerning the regions round about” (2 Nephi 25:6). From Nephi's own words it can be extrapolated that one also needs to be familiar with the cultures surrounding the lands of the Jews. Isaiah provides two lists of these. One is the major sections with prophecies against major nations. The other is the list: “from Assyria, and from Egypt, and from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea” (Isaiah 11:11).

Meeting these requirements requires a great deal of effort, more than most people want to invest. Still, even if no living mortal can reproduce “the manner of the things of the Jews” from Nephi's day, the closer we try to match that, the better our chances of understanding Isaiah properly and Nephi's use of Isaiah specifically.

Nephi provides another way to understand Isaiah: “The words of Isaiah are not plain unto you, nevertheless they are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy” (2 Nephi 25:4). The Holy Ghost can teach an individual things that are unavailable through scholarship, “for the Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be; wherefore, these things are manifested unto us plainly, for the salvation of our souls” (Jacob 4:13). But there is a rub — revelation that we receive has to be within the sphere of our stewardship. The only ones who can speak their revelation for the whole Church are those who have been “ordained

3. This is made clear in the subtitle of Spencer's book: *Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record*.

by some one who has authority, and it is known to the church that he has authority and has been regularly ordained by the heads of the church” (Doctrine and Covenants 42:11).

Scholarship and Revelation

Nephi obviously recognized that there were two ways to understand the words of Isaiah — what we would call scholarship and revelation. In our modern world there is often a curious tension between these two approaches. As Hugh Nibley once said, “The prophet recognizes the scholar for what he is, but the scholar does not return the compliment. He cannot conceive how anyone could possibly acquire knowledge by any method other than his. He cannot believe that any man has experienced anything which he has not experienced.”⁴ This would explain repeated efforts by historians who know no language but English to redefine Joseph Smith’s translations into anything other than the process of making “a version from one language or form of words into another.”⁵

It should go without saying that neither I nor Spencer nor Parry nor any other similar commenter on Isaiah has been ordained or sustained to any position of prophetic authority for the Church. Therefore, the only authority that any of us can claim to possess must derive from the quality of our scholarship. This is precisely where I have concerns about Spencer’s book, and I will shortly outline some reasons for these concerns.

Over half a century ago, Hugh Nibley addressed the issue of the authority of scholars by saying that they should be respected “for that knowledge and proficiency which they have demonstrated to the world” otherwise “they invite legitimate censure”⁶ since they “parade as scholars without being scholars.”⁷ He further warned scholars associated with the Latter-day Saint community against being “like a man setting out to explore a wonderful cavern without bothering to equip himself with either lights or ropes.”⁸ As an antidote, Nibley recommended returning “to the program of the School of the Prophets and the University of Nauvoo, which was the acquisition of basic knowledge (especially languages)

4. Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Provo, UT: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1987), 31.

5. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. *translate*.

6. Hugh Nibley, “Nobody to Blame,” in Hugh Nibley, *Eloquent Witness* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 138.

7. *Ibid.*, 136.

8. *Ibid.*, 138.

for the avowed purpose of aiding the spreading of the gospel.”⁹ This is because “all knowledge of the past — historical, philosophical, literary, religious, etc. — comes to us through written texts which ... *cannot* be critically examined or understood in translation.”¹⁰

Spencer’s Approach

Here I will deal only with Isaiah chapters 7–12 and with Spencer’s treatment of them. The prophecy in these chapters was given on the occasion of a plot by the kings of Samaria and Damascus to conquer Judah and replace its king Ahaz with their own tribute-paying puppet. Anyone familiar with the histories of the various kingdoms of the period will recognize this as an oft-repeated scenario and that no nation did it more successfully than the Assyrians. To us it may seem hackneyed, but back then it was a high-stakes game with many losers. Isaiah’s message to Ahaz was that things would go well in the short term and even better in the long term, which they did.

Of chapters 6 through 12 in Isaiah, Spencer asserts that “we’ve got to look at them carefully.”¹¹ He claims that we need “to read the passage in context,”¹² that is, in “both textual and historical” context.¹³ Spencer thinks that there is much to be gained by reading these chapters through the lens of secular scholars because “biblical scholars make arguments for their conclusions, and their arguments about the relatively un-Christian scope of much of the Hebrew Bible are generally good ones.”¹⁴

Spencer accepts the line of reasoning of many biblical scholars and claims that “before any one scholar can make a contribution to the question of the messianic here, she first has to establish what she takes to be the basic textual history of these chapters, and that will always be a rather controversial position.”¹⁵ Spencer then attributes the position of modern scholars to the ancient inhabitants of Jerusalem: “Nephi reads certain parts of Isaiah messianically even as he recognizes that his predecessors may seldom, if ever, have been able to do that.”¹⁶ He provides no evidence for this assertion.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 132.

11. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 203.

12. Ibid., 210.

13. Ibid., 209.

14. Ibid., 204.

15. Ibid., 207.

16. Ibid., 207-8.

But surely a close reading of a text should not include assumptions not *based* on the text. Spencer asserts that the reader is “free to see in Isaiah 6-12 *two* rival interpretations of the text — one non-messianic (or at least not messianic in any strong sense), and one messianic (in a strong sense).”¹⁷ Of these two rival interpretations, Spencer recognizes the latter but seems to lean toward the non-messianic: “There’s very little reason for seeing Isaiah’s prophetic sign as referring to Jesus.”¹⁸ “It makes little sense in context to understand it as a reference to Jesus. How would the birth of Jesus, seven and a half centuries away, serve as a sign to Ahaz regarding the imminent demise of his enemies?”¹⁹ Spencer ignores the fact that even if one assumes the prophecy referred to Jesus, it would still be true. He claims that “we’re *far* too quick to find Jesus in Isaiah, privileging traditionally messianic passages over everything else because we think we can see Christian themes in the prophet.”²⁰

Spencer asserts that Isaiah 9 is “already closer to the question of the messianic,” but only in the sense that “what’s predicted here is a Davidic king who will finally get some things right.”²¹ On the other hand,

If we think the prediction of any decent Davidic king amounts to a messianic prophecy, then we’ve got a messianic prophecy here. If we think messianic prophecy must include something bigger than that — an anticipation of a figure who will bring history to a kind of end, suspend the law in fulfilled righteousness, and usher in an era of unending peace — then we’re arguably not yet dealing with a messianic prophecy.²²

To Spencer “it seems pretty clear that Isaiah’s prophecy here is focused primarily on Ahaz’s son Hezekiah. ... It seems pretty clear that he’s got Hezekiah in mind.”²³

A Major Historical Mistake

Despite Spencer’s admonition that Isaiah 6–12 needs to be read in context, the reading he presents is neither close nor careful. In fact, it is an impossible reading. To understand why, we need to look more

17. Ibid., 208.

18. Ibid., 209.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 214.

21. Ibid., 210.

22. Ibid., 210-11.

23. Ibid., 211.

carefully at the historical context that Spencer commends to us. We can do so by noting two overlooked passages. The first of these is in 2 Kings:

Now it came to pass in the third year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, that Hezekiah the son of Ahaz king of Judah began to reign. Twenty and five years old was he when he began to reign; and he reigned twenty and nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name also was Abi, the daughter of Zachariah. (2 Kings 18:1–2)

The second passage is slightly earlier in 2 Kings:

Ahaz ... reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem, and did not that which was right in the sight of the Lord his God, like David his father. (2 Kings 16:2)

If Ahaz ruled for sixteen years and his son Hezekiah took over at the age of twenty-five, then Hezekiah was born before Ahaz began to rule, before he was king. So when Isaiah prophesied to Ahaz, while he was king, about the birth of a child, if there is one person the prophecy cannot be about, it is Hezekiah. With that, Spencer's entire case for Isaiah 6–12 being about Hezekiah collapses; his reading of Isaiah as prophesying about Hezekiah makes no sense in the historical context.

There are clearly aspects of the historical context that we do not fully understand, such as what Ahaz may have thought the sign meant and how it may have been meant to persuade him. At the very least Ahaz would have known that he needed at least nine months plus however long it took a child to “know to refuse the evil, and choose the good” (Isaiah 7:16) before he could expect the threat to be completely removed. Yet, since Ahaz's son Hezekiah was past that point, Ahaz would not have been expecting the prophecy to refer to Hezekiah, and neither would have Isaiah.

Ignoring Hebrew Again

Of course, Spencer brings in other arguments against understanding the chapters as referring to a Messiah. He argues that the translation “the mighty God” in Isaiah 9:6 is in error. He prefers “Hero Warrior” or “one Mighty in Valor.”²⁴ This enables him to claim that “Isaiah may not exactly have meant to indicate that anyone about to be enthroned was fully divine.”²⁵ The problem is that without having examined the original Hebrew himself, Spencer is left at a disadvantage, with no option

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

but to uncritically accept other translations as accurate. But because “we believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” (Articles of Faith 1:8), Latter-day Saints do not need to accept bad translations. In this case the King James version is superior to the more recent translations cited by Spencer. The Hebrew term in question is *’ēl gibbôr*. However one chooses to translate *gibbôr* (strong, mighty, etc.), the term *’ēl* does not mean *hero*, or *one mighty*, but *God*.

Still, we should look at how Isaiah uses the term. This is the textual context that Spencer says is critical. According to Isaiah, the Egyptians are men and not *’ēl* (Isaiah 31:3). Men make an *’ēl* when they make a graven image (Isaiah 44:17; 46:6), and they pray to that *’ēl* (Isaiah 45:20). The stars belong to *’ēl* (Isaiah 14:13). The Lord says: “I am *’ēl*, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:22; 46:9; 43:12). Isaiah also points out that *’ēl* is “holy and will be sanctified in righteousness” (Isaiah 5:16). And, of course, “thus saith YHWH, the *’ēl*” (Isaiah 42:5). Isaiah never uses the term *’ēl* to mean something that is not claimed to be divine. Spencer has made an assertion completely backwards precisely because he did not and cannot look at the Hebrew and, as a result, completely ignored the textual context.

Another error relating to Hebrew is Spencer’s allegation that “the Hebrew word translated as ‘virgin’ doesn’t, strictly speaking, mean ‘virgin’; it means ‘young woman.’”²⁶ Here again, though, a close examination of that Hebrew word weakens his claim. The term used in Isaiah 7:14, *’almāh*, is a lesser used, more poetic synonym for a young woman or virgin. The term is also used in the meaning *virgin* in Proverbs 30:19 (translated in the King James Version as “maid”), as also is arguably the case in Genesis 24:43. In all uses of the term, and especially given the cultural context of the Hebrew Bible, the notion of *virgin* is in the very least implied.

Finally, let’s consider another place where a familiarity with Hebrew would have helped Spencer better understand the textual context of the passage he is attempting to explain. Spencer claims that reading the messianic prophecies in Isaiah has “been put on hold” because a scholar “has to establish what she takes to be the basic textual history of these chapters.”²⁷ This proposal assumes — without argument or perhaps much critical reflection — that the text of this portion of Isaiah has been put together from various authors who wrote at different times, sometimes significantly later than Isaiah, many after Lehi left Jerusalem. Isaiah 7–12 has a number of leitmotifs that unify the composition, but

26. Ibid., 209.

27. Ibid., 207.

these are obliterated in the translation. Isaiah actually draws attention to the leitmotifs when he says (following the King James version): “Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 8:18). Throughout Isaiah 7–12 there are word plays and references to Isaiah and the various children named in the passage. Let us consider each of these in turn.

We will start with Isaiah himself. The name *Yeša’yāhû* means “the Lord (*Yāhû*) will save.” Its spelling (*yš’yhw*) is close to the spelling for the term for *salvation* (*yšw’h*). The name appears at the beginning of the section (Isaiah 7:3) while the latter term appears three times at the end of the section (Isaiah 12:2–3), forming an *inclusio* for the entire passage.²⁸

Isaiah is instructed to bring his son, Shear-jashub, with him (Isaiah 7:3). The name *Še’āryāšûb* can be translated either “the remnant shall return” or “the rest will repent.” There are direct uses of the name elsewhere in the passage (Isaiah 10:20; 21, 22) as well as word plays on this name throughout the passage (Isaiah 9:11, 12, 16, 20; 10:4, 19; 11:11, 16; 12:1).

The next person mentioned is the prophesied child, Immanuel, whose name in Hebrew (*‘immānû’ēl*) means “God is with us.” This name is repeated three times in the prophecy (Isaiah 7:14; 8:8, 10). In the King James Bible it is transliterated two times and translated once.

Finally, we have the child with the extremely long name, Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isaiah 8:1, 3). The name *Mahēršālālḥāšbaz* means “the pillaging hastens, the plundering hurries.” Though the name is not repeated with another meaning, there are word plays referencing the name throughout the section (Isaiah 8:4; 9:2; 10:2, 6).

These sections also have a number of repeated units that follow a particular form (Isaiah 9:8-12; 9:13-17; 9:18-21; 10:1-4):²⁹

a- Crime

b- Punishment

c- Epistrophe³⁰ or catchphrase: “For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.” (Isaiah 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4).

28. See Jerome T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001), 57-69, 73-75.

29. This is identified as complex inclusion in Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*, 74.

30. See John Gee, “Rhetorical Devices in Ancient Egyptian Texts,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 45 (2018-2019): 68; Waltraud Guglielmi, “Der Gebrauch rhetorischer Stilmittel in der ägyptischen Literatur,” in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms*, ed. Antonio Loprieno (Leiden, NDL: E. J. Brill, 1996), 471.

Note that the leitmotifs are used in the repeated units. These leitmotifs pervade and unify the passage into a rhetorical whole. Editorial insertions tend to destroy rhetorical devices and structure.³¹ Hypothesizing the textual history destroys the structural cohesion of the text, and should thus prompt Spencer to question the assumption that these passages are a late conglomerate of sources. His unfamiliarity with the base language renders such evidence opaque to him, and thus to his audience. He might appeal to other evidence to support his assumption that the text is the result of many layers of redaction, but he has not done so, save via the appeal to authority. Being unable to critique those authorities on their own ground, he is unfortunately not able to weigh their evidences for himself.

Looking Forward to the Messiah

Let's return to Spencer's contention that "there's no full-blooded scholarly consensus on whether Isaiah 6–12 contains messianic prophecies."³² This puts the emphasis on the scholarly consensus, which is the wrong place on which to focus, especially if Spencer is unable to weigh the merits of the various scholarly voices because he is not able to analyze the original language about which those voices speak.

Furthermore, there is little (if any) scholarly consensus on anything in biblical studies. But Spencer goes further and asserts that "if there *is* consensus about anything regarding the messianic in Isaiah 6–12, it's that *this* text isn't messianic."³³ He is demonstrably wrong.

Targum Jonathan is the name currently given to a Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic that reached its final form in the late second or early third century AD.³⁴ Despite the final date of its composition, it contains a number of elements that go back to earlier times. (We do not necessarily know how much earlier in any given case.) The attribution of the Targum to Jonathan is a misattribution; it was originally known as Targum Jerusalem and it contains interpretations that circulated around the area of Jerusalem and Galilee.³⁵ The translation is mostly literal but it is also idiomatic and cultural, giving the sense and understanding of the reading (Nehemiah 8:8). Targum Jonathan for Isaiah 7–12 contains four

31. Compare Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*, 70-71.

32. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 204.

33. *Ibid.*, 209.

34. Paul V. M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 81-82.

35. *Ibid.*, 132-39.

direct references to the Messiah, demonstrating that ancient Jews took this entire prophecy to be messianic.

The first of these is the famous passage that reads, in the King James version: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).³⁶ In the Targum Jonathan it reads (in my unpoetic translation): “The prophet said to the house of David: Behold, a boy will be born to us, a son will be given to us. He has covenanted to keep the Law. His name has been called from the beginning: the miracle worker, counsel, the mighty God who lives forever, the Messiah in whose days peace will increase upon us.”³⁷ Ancient Jews explicitly understood this passage as a messianic prophecy.

The second reference to the Messiah comes in the next chapter. The King James has the somewhat enigmatic: “And it shall come to pass in that day, that his burden shall be taken away from off thy shoulder, and his yoke from off thy neck, and the yoke shall be destroyed because of the anointing” (Isaiah 10:27). The Targum Jonathan here has: “And it shall come to pass at that time, his dominion shall be removed from you, and his yoke from off your neck, and the nations will become desolate before the Messiah.”³⁸

The third reference is in the following chapter. In the King James translation this appears as: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isaiah 11:1). Targum Jonathan is more explicit: “And the king will proceed from the sons of Jesse, and the Messiah will be anointed from his descendants.”³⁹

Finally, a few verses later where the King James translation has: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6), Targum Jonathan has: “In the days of the Messiah of Israel peace will increase in the earth and the wolf shall stable with the lamb; and the tiger will dwell with the kid; and the calf and the lion and the fatling together and the suckling child shall lead them.”⁴⁰ Once again, ancient Jews explicitly understood this text to be messianic. This interpretation was not imposed by Christians

36. The Hebrew versification differs at this point, so in Hebrew this is Isaiah 9:5.

37. Targum Jonathan Isaiah 9:5, in Alexander Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic: Based on Old Manuscripts and Printed Texts* (Leiden, NDL: E. J. Brill, 2004), 1:530.

38. Targum Jonathan Isaiah 10:27, in Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic*, 1:526.

39. Targum Jonathan Isaiah 11:1, in Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic*, 1:524.

40. Targum Jonathan Isaiah 11:6, in Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic*, 1:523.

reading something back into the text that was not originally there — and indeed we must remember that the earliest Christians were all Jews, and did not invent entirely foreign or novel ways of seeing their sacred texts. Although we may not know how far back these messianic understandings go, they are ancient and Jewish, not modern and Christian.

Spencer confuses the matter by claiming that a “messianic prophecy would be prophecy that anticipates *a* messiah, however that messiah figure is understood.”⁴¹ In the Targum Jonathan of these passages, however, the term *Messiah* is always accompanied by the definite article. These are not references to a generic deliverer, but a singular, specific Messiah.

Conclusions

Spencer thinks that Latter-day Saints are “*far* too quick to find Jesus in Isaiah”⁴² and urges his readers to “*stop looking for Jesus in Isaiah*.”⁴³ This is a very odd attitude to take in a book that claims to want “to read Isaiah like Nephi.”⁴⁴ Nephi, on the other hand, claims that Isaiah “verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him” (2 Nephi 11:2). Nephi says, “that I might more fully persuade [my brethren] to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah” (1 Nephi 19:23). According to Nephi, “according to the words of the prophets, the Messiah cometh in six hundred years from the time that my father left Jerusalem; and according to the words of the prophets, and also the word of the angel of God, his name shall be Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (2 Nephi 25:19). According to its title page, the whole point of the Book of Mormon is to convince people “that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God.” To stop looking for Jesus in Isaiah is to read Isaiah contrary to the way that Nephi read him, and contrary to his purpose in including these texts in his record.

By training, Joseph Spencer is a philosopher, not a philologist. With *The Vision of All* he has ventured into territory where at least some philological expertise would have been very helpful. James Faulconer’s rule about the value of knowing the original language of a text when writing a commentary on it remains wise counsel. One should feel free to explore the cave, but one ought to take a light.

41. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 204.

42. *Ibid.*, 214.

43. *Ibid.*, 33.

44. *Ibid.*, ix.

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