Isaiah in America, 1700-1830

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Although commentators and ministers in America made use of all parts of the Bible, they did not cite Isaiah as extensively or in the same ways as did the writers of the Book of Mormon.

The Nephite record in the Book of Mormon provides great knowledge about Isaiah and his messages. This chapter discusses the use of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon as compared with eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American use and understanding of the writings of this biblical prophet. Many of the early ministers and theologians clearly loved the Bible and succeeded in some ways in both understanding and living its teachings, but the book of Isaiah was perhaps still quite difficult for them to understand. The Prophet Joseph's translation of the ancient Nephite record was a unique, valuable, and timely resource for understanding the gospel in general and Isaiah's teachings in particular. In the record, several prophets, and even Christ himself, quote Isaiah extensively and give lengthy and detailed discussions of this ancient prophet's writings. The publication of the Book of Mormon in early-nineteenth-century America thus provided a wealth of insight into Isaiah's message.

Knowing how the Bible as a whole was used in America during the first decades of the 1800s and in earlier centuries provides a better understanding of how the book of Isaiah was used by ministers in Joseph Smith's time. Although early America was home to a number of Christian denominations, most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans, especially those living in the North, were heirs to the early Puritan emphasis on the Old Testament. The Puritans were

devout Christians, some of whom settled New England in the 1600s in hopes of reestablishing the "covenant society" that existed between God and the ancient Israelites. With such an agenda, the Puritans looked to the Old Testament for insights on the workings of the ancient covenant, as well as for the laws upon which they based their society; indeed, many of the Massachusetts Bay Colony's early laws were quoted directly from the legal sections of the books of Exodus and Leviticus. These laws prohibited many of the same practices that were prohibited in the Old Testament and prescribed some of the same punishments for transgressing laws that the Lord delivered to Israel through Moses.[1] The emphasis on the legalism of the Old Testament slowly subsided during the colonial period because the founding Puritans' vision failed to reproduce itself in succeeding generations, but as more people arrived in America from various parts of Europe, the larger Old Testament idea of America as a "covenant" nation lived on, and subsequent generations of American colonists, in true Puritan fashion, persisted in looking to the Old Testament to help them explain, interpret, and understand everything from natural disasters to military setbacks in terms of this covenant.[2]

As tensions mounted between the American colonies and England in the late 1700s, Americans continued to view the stories comprising Israel's epic history as types for their own experiences.[3] Many preachers and ministers of the period found the parallels between the Americans' plight under British rule and that of the ancient Israelites under Egyptian rule so compelling that they explicitly identified the colonies' cause against the king of England with captive Israel's cause against the pharaoh of Egypt.[4] This identification became so complete and pervasive in American society during the Revolutionary era that many civic leaders promoted it. The patriot and dignitary Benjamin Franklin, for

example, suggested that the national seal be adorned with the image of Moses leading the Israelites to safety through the midst of the Red Sea; Thomas Jefferson proposed for this same seal a picture of Israel being led through the wilderness by pillars of cloud and fire.[5]

Old Testament themes continued to permeate American culture for half a century after the Revolution—so much so that according to one historian, scholars "have as much difficulty taking cognizance of [them] as of the air the people breathed."[6] At the same time, however, because the threat from Indians and foreign nations was subsiding, American clergymen were able to turn their attention away from the idea of a national covenant relationship—which was in their eyes clearly being fulfilled—and focus their energies on an aspect of the new nation's religious life that most felt needed much improvement and that did not seem to be taking care of itself—that is, on individual spirituality and conversion. This was not the first time in America's history that large numbers of preachers and laymen became concerned with their own and others' spirituality. Because of the efforts of such theologians as Jonathan Edwards and itinerant preachers like George Whitefield, America underwent a series of religious revivals in the late 1730s and early 1740s known as the First Great Awakening, in which large numbers of people recommitted themselves to religion. Although widespread and emotional, the First Great Awakening was much shorter than the Second Great Awakening, which lasted for the first half of the nineteenth century.[7] Ministers and laymen of this period in a sense rediscovered the New Testament and all its treasures; religions that had formerly focused mainly on the Old Testament now turned to the four Gospels and to Paul's letters. The new orientation was drastic enough that some well-established conservatives accused members of the rising generation of

preachers, like Alexander Campbell, of "throwing away the Old Testament."[8] Although the Old Testament was far from forgotten in American culture during this time, churchgoers heard much less of it during the 1820s, the period when Joseph Smith was translating the plates, than had their parents and grandparents.[9]

How was the book of Isaiah used throughout all this religious excitement? Surprisingly enough, despite its own emphases on Israel's covenant with God and the importance of living the spirit of the law, the book of Isaiah played a relatively humble role in early America's religious history. Ministers quoted it far less frequently than they quoted other biblical texts. Clerics of the 1600s and 1700s who were concerned about the developing nation's covenant relationship with God found the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Noah, and Moses better suited to their needs and tastes than the prophecies contained in the prophetic books.[10] This trend continued into the 1800s, when preachers who quoted the Old Testament—notwithstanding the renewed interest in conversion and Christ's teachings—quoted more from these grand narratives than from other portions of the Bible, such as Isaiah.[11] Parley P. Pratt, who as a boy attended Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist meetings in New York during the early 1800s, began his study of the scriptures by reading lessons on Joseph in Egypt, Saul, Samuel, and David.[12] With all the religious instruction Pratt received, however, and despite this future apostle's interest in religious matters and his insatiable appetite for reading, he was twenty-three years old before he delved into the Old Testament prophets—something he was apparently forced to do on his own. It was an exercise that left him "astonished," he wrote, "at the darkness of myself and mankind on these subjects."[13]

Although their use was not widespread, the Old Testament prophets, and specifically Isaiah, were used by early American clergy. Ministers of the colonial and early national periods used Isaiah and other books of both the Old and New Testaments in two rather similar ways. Ministers often used several verses from a book of scripture as the text of their sermons, essentially as an introduction to the topic they wished to address. These topics included everything from national politics to the dynamics of conversion. Ministers also frequently quoted a passage of scripture, or several passages from a number of different books in the Bible, to illustrate a particular point. While virtually all sermons included these so-called demonstrations to some degree, theologians like Jonathan Edwards were frequently embroiled in theological controversies and dug deeper into gospel principles than most, pulling references from virtually every book in the Bible as they sought to clarify their points and to silence the opposition. Just as the sermons covered a wide variety of subjects, so the theological treatises addressed all of Christianity's big questions, including topics still being debated today: ethics, virtue, the need for baptism, and the requirements for conversion.

While it was quoted less frequently at that time than other books in the Bible, Isaiah was nevertheless quoted and discussed by ministers and theologians alike in early America on some occasions. It is clear, however, that these churchmen were more concerned with establishing and maintaining positions on contemporary religious issues than they were with understanding the issues that weighed heavily on Isaiah's mind, for despite extensive coverage of virtually every subject of concern to Americans, no one ever systematically developed and consolidated the themes of Isaiah's writings. Ministers found Isaiah's messianic

prophecies most valuable as they discussed such subjects as the nature of Christ and real humility. And some, notably a number of early missionaries to the Indians, made tentative suggestions about how the colonists' efforts to convert the Indians—identified as members of the lost tribes of Israel by some and as Gentiles by others—fit into the historical scheme outlined by Isaiah.[14] But these early ministers and missionaries often based their ideas about Christ and the restoration of Israel on their reading of a very few, almost standard verses, and they made no attempt to look at the book as a whole or to integrate these and the book's other themes so that "both Jew and Gentile," "black and white, bond and free, male and female, and . . . the heathen" (2 Nephi 26:33) could understand their respective roles in history and the nature and extent of the salvation that is offered them through the atonement of Christ.

Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the most famous of all the colonial theologians and author of scores of discourses, quoted Isaiah extensively in his discourse "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," in which he argued that the ultimate purpose of the creation of the world is to glorify God. Edwards quoted many of the same Isaiah passages that the Nephite prophets found remarkable and useful, including verses from Isaiah 48 and 49. True to form, however, Edwards used these verses out of the context in which the prophet wrote them and simply used them, along with numerous passages from other books of scripture, to back up his ideas about the purpose of the creation.[15] Such a method leaves readers well versed in scriptural passages that attest that the Lord created this earth for a purpose but leaves them completely uninformed about the full message of Isaiah. In stark contrast to this approach, the prophet Nephi reads Isaiah 48 and 49 (see 1 Nephi 20–21) to his brothers before contextualizing and clarifying the full range

of significance, "both temporal and spiritual," that these scriptures hold for "all the kindreds of the earth" (1 Nephi 22:3, 9).

George Whitefield, one of Edwards' contemporaries who was as influential as Edwards, also used passages from Isaiah, especially as texts for his famous sermons. For example, Whitefield turned to Isaiah 54:5 and 48:10 to introduce masterful sermons on what it means to have Jesus Christ as a "husband" and to be "chosen . . . in the furnace of affliction," but Whitefield went no further with Isaiah's overall message than to summarize briefly the surrounding verses in an attempt to familiarize his listeners with Israel's predicament at Isaiah's time.[16] Again, such use of these Isaiah verses, however well it may have awakened some of the more irreligious people in colonial America to a sense of their religious duties, contrasts sharply with how the same verses are used in the Book of Mormon. During his visit to the Nephites, Christ closes his sweeping discussion of the fulness of the Gentiles, the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the restoration of Israel by quoting Isaiah 54 (see 3 Nephi 22), which addresses these themes. Nephi finds many of the same themes in Isaiah 48, which he quotes to his brothers in an effort to "more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer" (1 Nephi 19:23).

The sermons and writings of these and other colonial clergymen influenced later generations of Americans, and their style of using Isaiah in particular and the scriptures in general continued into the nineteenth century.[17] Nowhere is this more apparent than in the works of Charles Grandison Finney, one of the Prophet Joseph's most famous contemporaries and a fellow upstate New Yorker. Like his predecessors and most other nineteenth-century ministers, Finney studied and preached from all parts of the Bible, especially the New Testament, to help sinners identify themselves,

renounce their sins, and become Christians. For all his familiarity with the Bible, however, this popular revivalist and talented theologian limited his use of Isaiah almost solely to those portions that discuss the nature of Christ and the Holy Spirit.[18] Finney was much less concerned than Whitefield or even Edwards with placing the passages he used in their historical and scriptural contexts, and accordingly, the lessons Finney draws from the verses he used are much more narrow in scope than those drawn by the Nephite prophets, who also turned to Isaiah for insight on the Savior. For example, Finney's partial quotation of Isaiah 53 to prove only that Christ had a "human soul"[19] draws far less about Christ from this text than does the Nephite prophet Abinadi's treatment, which expounds the same chapter in what are some of the most beautiful and enlightening chapters in the Book of Mormon about the Savior and his relationship with his Heavenly Father (see Mosiah 14–15). Of course, in his interpretation of these and the other Isaiah passages he quoted, Finney was not wrong or misguided, but when one compares his use of the book with that of the Nephite prophets, one sees that the ancient prophets found Isaiah's message far more meaningful than did the modern minister.

The nineteenth-century minister who perhaps came the closest to using Isaiah to the same extent and to drawing similar conclusions as the Nephites was Ethan Smith, a contemporary of the Prophet Joseph and pastor of the Congregational Church in Poultney, Vermont. Using parallels between some Native American religious beliefs and certain Old Testament teachings as his guide, Smith argued that the American Indians were nothing less than the lost ten tribes. Smith drew heavily on Old and New Testament sources, including Isaiah, to show that the gospel would be completely restored to these tribes, as was foretold in the scriptures. He

then turned to Isaiah 18 for evidence that this restoration was to take place through the people of the United States of America.[20] Despite his insight, however, Smith used Isaiah and other texts to promote his own agenda rather than to illuminate the fine points of Isaiah's teachings.

Virtually every minister who turned to the book of Isaiah in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries—with the notable exception of Joseph Smith, as Ann Madsen has shown[21]—used it as the text of a sermon or to illustrate a particular point. But despite the emphasis early Americans placed on reading the Bible, they used Isaiah almost exclusively as a good quote book. The Nephites, on the other hand, who quoted Isaiah extensively and who took time to develop fully his teachings about Christ, the Lord's covenants with his people, and the future restoration of Israel, used it as a primary source for learning about the history of what the Lord had done for the salvation and redemption of mankind.

The only people in early America who made any real attempt to understand Isaiah as a whole were the biblical commentators of the time, most of whom, like their counterparts today, systematically examined the contents of every chapter and book in the Bible and provided readers with their findings. Two biblical commentaries commonly used by American ministers, scholars, and churchgoers in the 1830s were the multivolume sets by Thomas Scott and Adam Clarke. Both works are masterpieces of scholarship. Clarke used several Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Syriac versions of various passages of scripture and other manuscripts in order to clarify many scriptural passages, and both authors, in their attempts to present the most up-to-date interpretation possible of the scriptures' true meaning, drew on the insights of earlier commentators and ministers. Both tackled Isaiah with gusto, and serious students of the Bible no

doubt found their discussions of various topics as helpful as we find good commentaries today. By their own admittance, however (see below), portions of Isaiah remained shrouded in mystery and obscurity for these commentators—portions which, interestingly enough, are highly developed in the Book of Mormon.

Both these scholars—especially Scott, who was much more concerned with historical interpretation than was Clarke—understood some of the concepts and verses that the Nephite prophets found particularly noteworthy. For example, the restoration of the Jews in the last days is one of the most important ideas in Isaiah. Scott argued that such phrases as "the branch of the Lord" and "them that are escaped of Israel" (Isaiah 4:2) specifically "point at the conversion of the Jews in the latter times of the world."[22] He believed that the restoration of which Isaiah speaks is to be a literal one.[23] How and through whom this restoration was to be effected, however, was unclear to Scott, who made it clear to his readers that his commentary was in no way an attempt "to *prophesy* from the *prophecies*."[24] Scott found enough evidence in Isaiah 14:1–2 and 49:24–26 to suggest that Israel's restoration would follow the destruction of Rome and the Catholic Church,[25] but he cautioned his readers "not [to] judge of what [he] said upon these obscure subjects, as so many positive assertions, but only as probable conjectures."[26]

The Nephite prophets, on the other hand, who had themselves "escaped of Israel," saw Isaiah 14 and the restoration of the Jews in an entirely different light. Blessed with several resources Scott did not have—personal familiarity with Jewish prophecy, the authority to expound revelation under inspiration of the Holy Ghost, prophecies about the patriarch Joseph's descendants, and a visit by Christ himself—the writers of the Book of Mormon understood that

those who had fled Jerusalem would become Isaiah's branch (see 2 Nephi 3:4–5), and through the fulness of the gospel that would be restored to the Gentiles, their writings would be instrumental in bringing the house of Israel to a knowledge of the Savior (see 1 Nephi 13:34–35; 19:18–19; 2 Nephi 3:12; 3 Nephi 16:4). The workings of this restoration are discussed throughout the Book of Mormon: Nephi, using Isaiah as his guide, presents the whole plan in the first two books of that ancient record, and prophets like Lehi, Enos, Mormon, and Christ himself flesh out the details. Not only is the finished product a much clearer explanation of how "the Lord will set his hand again the second time to restore his people" (2 Nephi 25:17) than Scott and other commentators—who were entirely unaware of ancient America's prophets, their origins, and their faith—could have hoped for, but it is also an explanation that involves far more historical figures than early commentators ever imagined.

Nineteenth-century American biblical commentators also saw much less in Isaiah 29 than did the prophet Nephi. Both Scott and Clarke found this chapter to be largely a generalized account of the various destructions awaiting Jerusalem and the Jews. They viewed the sieges foretold in verse 3 as refering in turn to the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Romans;[27] the "speech . . . low out of the dust" (verse 4) as the Jews' "timid and servile intreaties, and doleful complaints" to their "haughty conquerors";[28] the sealed book's "vision of all" (verse 11) and its deliverance to both the learned and the unlearned as describing the Jews' inability to understand their own prophecies, which lack of knowledge led them to crucify "their promised and long expected Messiah";[29] and the "marvellous work and a wonder" (verse 14) as the Lord's leaving the shortsighted Jews "to their ruin."[30] Except for the last few verses in Isaiah 29,

which promise that "they . . . that erred in spirit shall come to understanding," (verse 24) this whole chapter, according to Scott and Clarke, is little more than a detailed pronouncement of woe upon the Lord's ancient covenant people.[31]

How different in both content and tone are such commentaries from the prophet Nephi's writings on this chapter. For Nephi, this revelation is a vision of hope for Jews and Gentiles alike, describing the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, its early reception among the Gentiles, and its utility in righting the wrongs of generations (see 2 Nephi 26–27). A commonly held belief in America during the 1800s, and one that these commentators apparently endorsed, was that, in the words of the Reverend Leonard Woods, "no command or promise, either of the Old Testament or the New, was particularly addressed by the writers to any individual now living."[32] Scott and his colleagues thus believed that the references to individuals in Isaiah 29 foretold events that had been fulfilled long before the early nineteenth century. Nephi, however, who was familiar with "the manner of prophesying among the Jews" (2 Nephi 25:1), saw through inspiration that this chapter described the momentous sequence of dialogues that was to take place between three individuals of the early nineteenth century: Joseph Smith, Martin Harris, and Charles Anthon.

Although the commentators of Joseph Smith's time seem to have addressed more of Isaiah's themes than did those who confined themselves to writing sermons and theological treatises, it is clear that neither group used the ancient prophet's writings as extensively as they are used in the Book of Mormon. Neither did any early Americans use Isaiah's words with the same interpretive slant that we find in the Nephite record. This is not to suggest, of course, that we have all the answers; many Latter-day Saints would probably agree with Scott that despite the "elegance and

sublimity of [Isaiah's] style and imagery, . . . [and] the profoundness of his thoughts, . . . the Lord seems purposefully to cast an obscurity on [his writings], as a trial of our humility."[33] It does suggest, however, that the Latter-day Saints have, among other insights in the Book of Mormon, a wonderful and unique commentary on a biblical book that few people over the centuries seem to have appreciated or fully understood. That we will employ this resource in our study of Isaiah and the gospel is my humble prayer.

Notes

1. See, for example, *Abstract of the Lawes of New England as They Are Now Established* (London: Coules and Ley, 1641), reprinted in Peter Force, comp., *Tracts and Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America, from the Discovery of the Country to the Year 1776*, vol. 3 (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1947). One early minister suggested that New Englanders do away with kings, governors, and magistrates altogether in an effort to pattern their government after that given in the Pentateuch (see John Eliot, *The Christian Commonwealth: or, The Civil Policy of the Rising Kingdom of Jesus Christ* [London: Livewell Chapman, 1660], reprinted in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd ser., 9 (1846): 127–64.

2. Perry Miller, "The Old Testament in Colonial America," in *Historical Viewpoints*, ed. John A Garraty (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 1:96–9; Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (New York: Norton, 1967). For examples of sermons preached on natural and military disasters, see Samuel Davies, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1828), 3:132–44, 160–73.

3. Mark A. Noll, "The Image of the United States as a Biblical Nation," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 43.

4. Ibid., 40–4

5. Ibid., 40.

6. Miller, "The Old Testament," 95.

7. The Second Great Awakening was nowhere more intense than in upstate New York in the 1820s, where Methodists and Presbyterians held so many revival meetings that ministers began to refer to that region as the "burned-over district."

8. Ibid., 100.

9. Ibid., 95–6, 99–101.

10. Ibid., 98.

11. Noll, "The Image of the United States," 44–5.

12. Parley P. Pratt, ed., *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 1–2.

13. Ibid., 14.

14. For examples, see, "Tracts Relating to the Attempts to Convert to Christianity the Indians of New England," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society,* 3rd ser., 4 (1834): 25, 29, 72–4, 119–20, 155–7, 197; Daniel Gookin, "Historical Collections of the Indians in New England [1674]," in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society,* 1st ser., 1 (1859): 141, 143–6, 154, 160, 223; and Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews; or The Tribes of Israel in America* (Poultney, Vt.: Smith and Shute, 1825), republished as Charles D. Tate Jr., ed., *View of the Hebrews by Ethan Smith* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1996). I am indebted to both Kent Jackson and John Welch for directing me to Smith's work.

15. Jonathan Edwards, *Ethical Writings,* vol. 8 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards,* ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 475–502.

16. George Whitefield, *Sermons on Important Subjects* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1829), 151–3, 687–8.

17. Leonard Woods, *Lectures on the Inspiration of the Scriptures* (Andover, Mass.: Mark Newman, 1829), 49. Many of the sermons and writings of such influential men as Edwards, Whitefield, and Samuel Davies were common fare for early-nineteenth-century preachers, revivalists, and laymen. Major works of all three of these men were published or republished during Joseph Smith's lifetime. For example, Davies, one-time president of Andover Col-

lege, was author of sermons so popular with Americans that they went through at least four editions.

18. Charles Finney, *The Heart of Truth: Finney's Lectures on Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976), 137, 139–40, 142–4, 148.

19. Ibid., 139.

20. Smith, *View of the Hebrews*. A number of anti-Mormon writers have suggested that Joseph Smith borrowed heavily from Ethan Smith's work when he "wrote" the Book of Mormon. For a summary of their arguments and Mormon refutations, see Tate, *View of the Hebrews by Ethan Smith*, vii–xxii.

21. See Ann Madsen, "Joseph Smith and the Words of Isaiah," in this volume.

22. Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible . . . Containing the Old and New Testaments: With Original Notes, Practical Observations, and Copious Marginal References* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1826), 3:95–6.

23. Ibid., 3:128.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 3:134, 254.

26. Ibid., 3:81.

27. Ibid., 3:178.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 3:179.

30. Ibid., 3:180.

31. Ibid., 3:178–81; Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible . . . Containing the Old and New Testaments: With a Commentary and Critical Notes* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1831), 3:774–7.

32. Woods, *Lectures*, 56.

33. Scott, *The Holy Bible . . . with Original Notes*, 3:81.