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# Joseph Smith and the Words of Isaiah

Ann N. Madsen

*The prophet of the restoration was extensively instructed by Moroni, Jesus Christ himself, and in other ways, concerning the significance of Isaiah's prophecies, which Joseph frequently cited.*



How much did young Joseph Smith know of Isaiah, the man and the prophet? Probably not very much at first. Perhaps the question should be reversed: How much did Isaiah know of young Joseph, the prophet of the restoration? Surely Isaiah prophesied of him. Isaiah's writing is permeated with restoration imagery. Could he have known that many of his own prophecies would be used to expand the boy prophet's vision?

## Instruction of the Young Prophet

What Joseph Smith as an impressionable young man saw and heard and delivered to the world profoundly links Isaiah to each of our lives. It all began in 1820 when Joseph Smith saw a pillar of light exactly over his head and was visited three years later by the angel Moroni, being called to bring to pass a great and marvelous work. Centuries ago, Isaiah described his own call in ways that also involved heavenly manifestations: he "saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple" (Isaiah 6:1). Isaiah became God's messenger in an earlier day, and he continues to speak to the people of this dispensation through Joseph Smith.

In his first vision, after regaining composure enough to speak, Joseph asked God the Father and Jesus Christ which

church he should join. He was answered that he must join none of them. He was told by Christ, who paraphrased the words of Isaiah, "They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men" (JS-H 1:19; compare Isaiah 29:13). So at age fourteen, in the spring of 1820, in the grove we have come to call sacred, Joseph heard Isaiah's words spoken by Jesus Christ—or rather, Christ's words as revealed to Isaiah 2,500 years earlier.

On 21 September 1823 Joseph was first visited by the angel Moroni and was again instructed from the words of Isaiah. The method apparently used by Moroni in teaching the fledgling prophet is interesting. He quoted scriptures and stated when they were to be fulfilled and "offered many explanations" (Joseph Smith—History 1:40–41). In answer to the boy's plea that September evening to know of his "state and standing" before the Lord (see Joseph Smith—History 1:29), Moroni gave Joseph an impressive array of prophecies that sounded like a patriarchal blessing to the young boy. Moroni explained to him that God had a work for him to do that included translating a book written on golden plates. The book, he was told, gave an account of the former inhabitants of the Americas and contained the fulness of the everlasting gospel as delivered by the Savior himself to these ancient Americans. The messenger also quoted several prophecies from the Bible, beginning with Malachi 3 and then moving on to Malachi 4, with a little variation (see Joseph Smith—History 1:36). Malachi 3 announces the coming of a messenger to prepare the way before the coming of the Lord and describes the apostate conditions in the world that will need to be corrected. Malachi 4 speaks of the hearts of fathers and children turning to one another before

the “great and dreadful day of the Lord” (Joseph Smith—History 1:38).

Then Moroni quoted all of Isaiah 11, saying the prophecies therein were about to be fulfilled. By way of background, although not quoted by Moroni, the last few verses of Isaiah 10 speak of a scattering and apostasy, using the metaphor of trees being cut down and branches being lopped off, leaving only stumps. In Jerusalem it is common for such stumps to sprout and grow (one whole garden of such fruitful stumps is called Gethsemane). Emerging out of these images of destruction, Isaiah 11 begins:

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord; . . . [and] with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. (Isaiah 11:1–2, 4–5)

In 1838 the revelation now found in Doctrine and Covenants 113:1–2 revealed that these verses refer to Christ. The next few verses in Isaiah 11 speak of the latter days and the peace and enlightenment of the millennium:

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. . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6, 9)

The Prophet Joseph was to play the key role in the restoration, which would prepare the world for the millennium:

And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, . . . And he shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth. The envy also of Ephraim shall depart, and the adversaries of Judah shall be cut off: Ephraim shall not envy Judah, and Judah shall not vex Ephraim. (Isaiah 11:10–13)

Doctrine and Covenants 113 applies these passages to “a servant in the hands of Christ, . . . on whom there is laid much power” (verse 4). This servant is often identified as Joseph Smith.<sup>1</sup>

After quoting Isaiah 11, Moroni quoted Acts 3:22–23 to Joseph:

For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.

Moroni explained that “that prophet” was Christ, the perfect model for the young Joseph.

Among other scriptures, the angel also quoted Joel 2:28–32, which speaks of the Lord’s Spirit being poured out on all flesh and of young men seeing visions. In addition, he “offered many explanations,” on which Joseph said he could not elaborate in his writings.

Later the Prophet and Oliver Cowdery, in whom Joseph confided the vision, cited thirty-one scriptural references

Moroni used to tutor Joseph.<sup>2</sup> On this list are nine Isaiah references in addition to Isaiah 11. They include Isaiah 1:7, 23–24, 25–26; 2:1–4; 4:5–6; 29:11, 13, 14; and 43:6. These passages cover the topics of the apostasy, the gathering, the restoration, the Book of Mormon, and a latter-day temple in the tops of the mountains. That was quite a curriculum for the seventeen year old!

### **The Words of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon**

It is interesting to note how very often Joseph encountered Isaiah in the formative years of his ministry. Although Joseph received the plates of the Book of Mormon in 1827, the translation of what we now have did not begin until 7 April 1829, when Oliver Cowdery first served as his scribe. As he translated the Book of Mormon, Joseph soon learned the importance and value of Isaiah, just as Nephi had more than two thousand years earlier. Nephi reports:

And now I, Nephi, write more of the words of Isaiah, for my soul delighteth in his words. For I will liken his words unto my people, and I will send them forth unto all my children, for he verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him. . . . And now I write some of the words of Isaiah, that whoso of my people shall see these words may lift up their hearts and rejoice for all men. Now these are the words, and ye may liken them unto you and unto all men. (2 Nephi 11:2, 8)

What does Nephi choose to copy into his record from the words of Isaiah contained in the plates of brass? He copies the passage that speaks of the mountain of the Lord's house—a temple (2 Nephi 12). Further in the record, Nephi prophesies using words from Isaiah 29 (paralleled in 2 Nephi 27), which prophesies of events in the last days. Since the work of translation was arduous, time-consuming, and

demanding, Joseph probably had little opportunity to ponder Isaiah's words while translating the Book of Mormon, but he was at least exposed to these new insights about his times as he saw his own mission in Nephi's words.

In translating the speech of Abinadi, delivered about four hundred years later in the record, Joseph again came upon words of Isaiah. Abinadi refers to Isaiah 53, beginning, "Yea, even doth not Isaiah say: Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" (Mosiah 14:1). Mosiah 15 then contains Abinadi's enlightening commentary on the lengthy passages of Isaiah he has just quoted, which describe the atonement of Jesus Christ in inspired detail.

Did Joseph wonder why he was encountering so much Isaiah? Why are so many of Isaiah's teachings found in the Book of Mormon? Let us explore some possible answers to that question.

1. Isaiah's teachings are so important that Jesus Christ himself quoted all of Isaiah 54 to the righteous Nephites then commanded them to search the words of Isaiah (see 3 Nephi 22; 23:1–5). Moroni also emphasizes their importance to God's children: "Search the prophecies of Isaiah, behold, I cannot write them" (Mormon 8:23).
2. The Book of Mormon's purpose is to testify that Jesus is the Christ (see title page of the Book of Mormon). Isaiah's writings are messianic. Nephi and Jacob saw Christ in a vision, as did Isaiah (see Isaiah 6; 2 Nephi 11:2–3; Joseph Smith—History 1:17–20). Those prophets surely felt an extraordinary familiarity with Jesus, which Joseph must have shared because of his experience in his first vision.
3. Many of Isaiah's prophecies describe the last dispensation. Readers and hearers in his time ignored his message;



hence his words are more completely relevant for those who would live in the time period he describes. That message is spotlighted for us in the Book of Mormon.

## **Joseph Teaches the Words of Isaiah**

After the publication of the Book of Mormon and the organization of the church in 1830, Joseph often used the words of Isaiah to instruct his growing flock, just as he had been tutored by Isaiah's words. As modern scriptures were revealed through him and the canon of scripture expanded, the influence of Isaiah's words is evident. The Doctrine and Covenants is a major repository of Isaianic language. Many of its sections either interpret verses in Isaiah or use phrases that are also found in Isaiah. Two researchers, Ellis T. Rasmussen and Lois Jean Smutz, have identified parallels between the Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>3</sup> Although they use different methodologies, they both find that in its wording the Doctrine and Covenants more often resembles the New Testament than the Old Testament. "However," says Smutz, "paralleled passages referring to the latter days are particularly abundant in Isaiah, Joel, Zephaniah and Malachi, raising the ratio of frequency of parallels in these books considerably."<sup>4</sup> Their studies show that the Old Testament passages most often paralleled or alluded to in the Doctrine and Covenants come from Isaiah, particularly in sections 1, 45, 49, 66, 88, 101, 109, 117, 124, and 133.

The Prophet Joseph Smith also used the words of Isaiah while producing the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. Joseph did the bulk of his work translating the Old Testament in the Gilbert-Whitney store in Kirtland between 2 February and 2 July 1833.<sup>5</sup> In Doctrine and Covenants 90:13 we learn that on 8 March 1833 Joseph was in the midst of



translating the prophets. So, as early as 1833 Joseph was deeply involved with the words of Isaiah, making corrections and additions that, in some cases, can make a difference as one studies those words.<sup>6</sup> For instance, opposite meanings are given to clarify the sense of the passage in Isaiah 65:1:

King James Version: "I am sought of them that asked  
not for me; I am found of them that sought me  
not."

Joseph Smith Translation: "I am found of them who  
seek after me, I give unto all them that ask of me;  
I am not found of them that sought me not, or  
that inquireth not after me."

The Lord used Isaianic language in the revelations he gave to Joseph Smith. Similarly, Joseph Smith used the words of the ancient prophet in his discourses and correspondence. A scouring of the standard sources of Joseph's writings<sup>7</sup> produces many references to Isaiah as early as 1828 and continuing until his martyrdom in 1844. In a survey of Joseph's references to the Old Testament in the books *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, and *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, Grant Underwood found that "over 200, or nearly half the total number of references are drawn from just three books."<sup>8</sup> Ninety-nine of them—the greatest number—are from Isaiah. The next most oft-cited books, Psalms and Genesis, contribute fifty-eight and fifty-seven phrases, respectively. Underwood also noted that in these compilations, most scriptures occur only once. Those that occur more often include Isaiah 29:21, which refers to persecution, cited six times; Isaiah 51:3 or 58:12, which refers to the gathering to and restoration of Zion, one or the other being cited six times; and Isaiah 2:2–3, which refers to latter-day temples, cited four times.<sup>9</sup>

As the Prophet cited Isaiah's teachings, three themes occurred repeatedly: First, a "voice from the dust," a book brought forth to the world—the Book of Mormon; second, a gathering to Zion, a restoration; and third, the mountain of the Lord—latter-day temples.

### **The Book of Mormon, a Voice from the Dust**

Joseph saw the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah 29:11–12, which says, "And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned." The Prophet's recognition of this fulfillment is evidenced in a passage he wrote in his personal history. During the early months of the Book of Mormon translation, Martin Harris came to Joseph and told him that

the Lord had shown him [Martin] that he must go to New York City with some of the characters so we proceeded to copy some of them and he took his Journey to the Eastern Cities and to the Learned saying, "read this, I pray thee," and the learned said "I cannot" but if he would bring the plates they would read it, but the Lord had forbidden it and he returned to me and gave them to me to translate and I said "[I] cannot for I am not learned," but the Lord had prepared spectacles for to read the Book therefore I commenced translating the characters and thus the Prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled which is written in the 29th chapter concerning the book.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, Joseph saw the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as fulfillment of Isaiah 29:11–12.<sup>11</sup>

## Establishing Zion

In June 1831 Joseph arrived in Jackson County, Missouri, where the gathering to Zion was just beginning. He wrote,

[The Lord] designed to commence the work of the gathering, and the upbuilding of an “holy city,” which should be called Zion—Zion, because it is a place of righteousness, and all who build thereon are to worship the true and living God, and all believe in one doctrine, even the doctrine of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. [Then, quoting Isaiah 52:8 directly, he said:] “Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion.”<sup>12</sup>

All will believe in one doctrine and be united in righteousness. This interpretation of watchmen or prophets proclaiming together and “seeing eye to eye” as referring to Zion is striking. Only a few times in the world’s history have so many prophets lived on earth at the same time. The latter days are unique in this regard. The councils of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators, as well as the Seventy, take action only by unanimous vote (see D&C 107:27).

The idea of Zion was compelling to early converts. Gathering to Zion was an ideal that inspired early pioneers in Europe and Great Britain. Joseph Smith said that the “Land of Zion . . . consists of all North and South America but that any place where the Saints gather is Zion, which every righteous man will build up for a place of safety for his children.”<sup>13</sup> Members of the church today take comfort in this idea, that wherever the Saints gather is Zion. It is not so much where we live but how we live that matters to the Lord. Zion is the living of righteous principles contained in the restored gospel, the unity of seeing eye to eye, just as Isaiah envisioned (see Isaiah 52:8).

## The Mountain of the Lord

As late as 8 April 1844, only a few weeks before his martyrdom, Joseph proclaimed triumphantly:

I have now a great proclamation for the Elders to teach the Church hereafter, which is in relation to Zion. The whole of North and South America is Zion. The mountain of the Lord's House is in the center of North and South America. When the House is done, [the] Baptismal font erected and finished, and the worthy are washed, anointed, endowed, and ordained kings and priests, . . . then the Elders are to go through all America and build up Churches until all Zion is built up. But [they are] not to commence to do this *until the Temple is built up here and the Elders endowed*. Then go forth and accomplish the work and build up stakes in all North and South America.<sup>14</sup>

Here we see the close connection of Zion, conversion, and temple ordinances. The elders are not to go until they are endowed. They will lead their converts to the temple, and the cycle will repeat. The centerpiece of the establishment of Zion is to be a temple, the image of which is spoken of with clarity in this proclamation:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:2–3)

Joseph and Isaiah shared many visions, some of which would be fulfilled by Joseph himself. Isaiah foretold “a marvelous work and a wonder” taking place that would include the gathering of scattered Israel to Zion, a process that would

be facilitated by the flooding of the earth with the Book of Mormon, which Joseph translated. The wondrous work would also include building a latter-day temple to which all nations would flow to be taught and to be sealed together as an eternal family.

We have an unbroken line of prophets from Joseph Smith to our own day who teach of the significance of temple work. As recently as October 1994, President Howard W. Hunter said,

All of our efforts in proclaiming the gospel, perfecting the Saints, and redeeming the dead lead to the holy temple. This is because the temple ordinances are absolutely crucial; we cannot return to God's presence without them. I encourage everyone to worthily attend the temple or to work toward the day when you can enter that holy house to receive your ordinances and covenants.

May you let the meaning and beauty and peace of the temple come into your everyday life more directly in order that the millennial day may come, that promised time when [as Isaiah promised] "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. . . [but shall] walk in the light of the Lord" (Isaiah 2:4–5).<sup>15</sup>

Thus a common bond unites the great prophets Isaiah, Joseph Smith, and our latter-day leaders. That bond is the temple, with Jesus Christ and his atonement standing at its center. The prophets all invite us to come to Christ. They teach us of him in many ways, but especially through their own lives of devotion and faith. They offer us the hope of returning to his presence through righteous living and essential temple ordinances.

## Conclusion

How much did Joseph Smith know of Isaiah? It is hard to evaluate the extent of his knowledge before the first vision when he was fourteen years old, but from then on we can trace this great prophet's words in a curriculum beginning with his receiving Isaianic quotations as instructions from Jesus Christ himself, progressing as he encounters those words throughout the Book of Mormon, and later culminating in his incorporation of them into his own sermons and writings. The themes in the book of Isaiah that become themes in Joseph's ministry are the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, "a voice from the dust"; establishing Zion, a place of righteous unity; and temple building, "the mountain of the Lord." Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of Isaianic writing, often directly, and many times indirectly as the Holy One of Israel. He is mentioned and alluded to again and again.

Joseph Smith was inspired, motivated, and empowered profoundly by his connection to Isaiah's teachings. In the past ten years, my immersion in the words of Isaiah has led me to know that clarity, power, and inspiration await anyone willing to search his words.

## Notes

1. In his book *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 170–4, Victor L. Ludlow discusses the ways in which Joseph Smith could possibly be identified as "the root of Jesse," but he leaves open the possibility of other interpretations. Ludlow points out that Doctrine and Covenants 113:1–2 identifies "the stem of Jesse" as Christ (see p. 168), but Doctrine and



Covenants 113:3–4 does not explicitly identify “the rod of Jesse” or “the root of Jesse.”

2. Kent P. Jackson, *From Apostasy to Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 104.

3. Ellis T. Rasmussen, “Textual Parallels to the Doctrine and Covenants and Book of Commandments as Found in the Bible,” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1951); Lois Jean Smutz, “Textual Parallels to the Doctrine and Covenants (Sections 65 to 133) as Found in the Bible” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1971).

4. Smutz, 255.

5. Robert J. Matthews, “A Plainer Translation”: *Joseph Smith’s Translation of the Bible: A History and Commentary* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 92.

6. See Royal Skousen, “Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations in the Book of Mormon,” in this volume for a discussion of Joseph’s use of the Book of Mormon in his inspired translation of Isaiah.

7. Sources include Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978); Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976); N. B. Lundwall, ed., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.); Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984); Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989); and Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991).

8. Grant Underwood, “Joseph Smith’s Use of the Old Testament,” in *The Old Testament and the Latter-day Saints: Sperry Symposium 1986* (Salt Lake City: Randall Books, 1986), 382.

9. *Ibid.*, 383.

10. “History [1832],” *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:9; spelling and punctuation standardized for modern audience.

11. Note that these verses come immediately before those quoted to Joseph by Jesus in Joseph’s first vision about the minis-

ters drawing near to him with their lips while their hearts are far from him (see Isaiah 29:13 and Joseph Smith—History 1:19).

12. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 80.

13. *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 415. The date for this utterance is uncertain, but it may have been 1843. See also TPJS Conference 8 April 1844 cited below. He made similar references to Zion being North and South America at both conferences.

14. *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 363–4; spelling and punctuation standardized for modern audience; italics added.

15. Howard W. Hunter, “Follow the Son of God,” *Ensign* (November 1994): 88.