



Type: Book Chapter

Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon

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Source: *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*

Editor(s): Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch

Published: Provo, UT; Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies,
1990

Page(s): 293-312



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While Abinadi and others in antiquity interpreted Isaiah's suffering servant messianically, the Hebrew text left enough unstated that Noah's wicked priests could adopt another reading.



Isaiah 53 is unsurpassed in the Book of Mormon, if not in all of scripture, for its detailed prophetic images of the suffering and death of the supernally meek servant of God. Quoted in its entirety by Abinadi in Mosiah 14, near the middle of his response to the priests of Noah, this beautiful poem formed not only the crux of Abinadi's theological testimony and legal defense, but also comprised one of the mainstays of prophetic knowledge in the Book of Mormon about the coming atonement of the Savior.

In this poem, Isaiah speaks in short, powerful phrases. His compact expressions project strong bursts of imagery; he does not dwell long on each painful scene in the travail of the Redeemer. Each of these flashes evokes sober reflection. Isaiah has seen the suffering of the servant, but it is almost as if he cannot stand to look.

In this study, I will explore several issues: (1) How does Isaiah 53 connect with Isaiah 52? Why did Abinadi quote Isaiah 53 in answering the question raised against him by the priests from Isaiah 52? (2) How did Abinadi use and understand Isaiah 53? To what extent is his discourse in Mosiah 15-16 grounded in the words and phrases of Isaiah 53? (3) How much was Isaiah 53 understood and used by Book of Mormon prophets before Abinadi? (4) In light of the fact that Isaiah 53 seems to have been clearly understood by many Nephites, what linguistic features in the text of Isaiah 53 may have contributed to the priests' thorough

misunderstanding of this text? Finally, because Isaiah 53 offers the most extensive description in the Old Testament of the suffering servant of God, I will survey in an addendum the comments made by LDS scholars on this exquisite text. Readers of the Book of Mormon should have little difficulty getting through this section of Isaiah if they follow Abinadi as their guide.

Narrative Setting in the Trial of Abinadi

Abinadi recited and interpreted Isaiah 53 because his accusers, the priests of Noah, had challenged him to explain the meaning of Isaiah 52:7–10. What was the thrust of their challenge? It appears that the priests intended, by their direct examination of Abinadi, to catch him in conflict with that scripture and thereby convict him of false prophecy—a capital offense under the law of Moses (see Deuteronomy 18:20).¹ In essence, they were apparently asking Abinadi why he bore tidings of doom and destruction when Isaiah had declared that the beautiful and true prophet brings good tidings and publishes peace: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth *good* tidings” (Mosiah 12:20–22, emphasis added). Isaiah gave cause for great joy: “They shall see eye to eye when the Lord shall bring again Zion; break forth into joy” (Mosiah 12:22–24), and yet Abinadi had brought nothing but bad tidings of destruction.

Abinadi’s rebuttal was an extensive and brilliant explanation of the true essence of redemption and how it brings good tidings to those who accept Christ (see Mosiah 12:29–37 and chs. 13–16). His words comprise an elaborate midrash or explanation of the text quoted to him by the priests from Isaiah 52, especially in light of Isaiah 53. Abinadi’s fundamental position was based on solid

ground, for Isaiah had also clearly stated that “they that rule over them make them to howl” (Isaiah 52:5), and accordingly, Abinadi predicted that the people of Noah “shall howl all the day long” due to the wickedness of their leaders (Mosiah 12:4).

Readers might wonder if Abinadi’s speech was responsive to the specific question posed to him by the priests. On examination it becomes clear that his answer was constructed around specific words and phrases in Isaiah 52, interpreted in connection with Isaiah 53. His discourse sheds great light on the meaning of these two closely related texts.

Connections between Isaiah 52 and Isaiah 53

Abinadi quoted Isaiah 53:1–12 in Mosiah 14. That chapter stands as the central passage in his legal defense and prophetic message. Although some scholars have wondered whether the song of the suffering servant should begin at Isaiah 53:1 or 52:13, the fact that Abinadi began quoting at Isaiah 53:1 implies that he and the ancient Nephites understood that a poetical unit began at Isaiah 53:1, as it does today in the traditional chapter divisions in the Bible, not at Isaiah 52:13, as has been suggested by such scholars as Dion and Clines.² Indeed, other biblicists, including Orlinsky and Whybray, have argued in favor of commencing the unit at 53:1, the traditional starting point.³

Even though Abinadi’s quotation begins at Isaiah 53:1, his discourse still supports the general idea that Isaiah 53 is closely linked to and should be understood in connection with Isaiah 52. In explaining the meaning of Isaiah 52, Abinadi readily turned to Isaiah 53, weaving together phrases from both chapters in his summation in Mosiah 15–16 of the mission of the Messiah. Beginning where the priests had left off when they asked him the meaning of Isaiah

52:7–10 (see Mosiah 12:21–24), Abinadi first paraphrased and interpreted the remaining verses in Isaiah 52, and they work together marvelously in Abinadi’s hand. Although Abinadi did not expressly quote Isaiah 52:11–15 (the five verses between the text quoted by the priests and the beginning of Isaiah 53), four of the ideas in those verses were integral and sequential parts of Abinadi’s argument:

1. Immediately after Isaiah 52:7–10, quoted by the priests, comes a stern admonition concerning the worthiness of those who officiate in the house of the Lord: “Touch no unclean thing, . . . Be ye clean that bear the vessels of the Lord” (Isaiah 52:11). Consistent with this sequence in Isaiah 52, Abinadi commenced his answer by challenging the worthiness of the priests of Noah (see Mosiah 12:26–31). One might wonder why Abinadi did not *quote* Isaiah 52:11 at this point. Perhaps Abinadi sensed that it would do no good to tell the priests of Noah in so many words, “be ye clean,” for it was too late to prevent the impurity of the priests; they had continued to violate several of the ten commandments in spite of Abinadi’s warning two years earlier (see Mosiah 11:20–25; 12:36–37). In light of God’s judgment concerning them, Abinadi probably knew that they would not respond favorably to righteous counsel.
2. The text in Isaiah 52 continues, “My servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extoled, and be very high” (Isaiah 52:13). Abinadi may well have seen in these words a prediction of Christ’s final exalted station (compare Mosiah 16:9). These words may also have reassured Abinadi that he himself, as one of the Lord’s servants, would be blessed in many ways by God: “I finish my message, and then it matters not whither I go, if it so be that I am saved” (Mosiah 13:9).

3. Isaiah 52 next declares that people would be astonished by the prophet's message: "As many were astonished at thee" (Isaiah 52:14). Abinadi expected and remarked the same: "Yea, and my words fill you with wonder and amazement" (Mosiah 13:8).
4. Finally, the amazing and shocking sight seen by Isaiah was this: "His visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men" (Isaiah 52:14). Again, compatible with the sequence in Isaiah 52, Abinadi next declared that Christ would live among "the children of men [in] the form of man, [to] be oppressed and afflicted" (Mosiah 13:34–35), immediately before he began quoting Isaiah 53.

The evidence thus sustains the observation that Abinadi was very familiar with the Isaiah text between Isaiah 52:10 and 53:1, for he used its elements in bridging the question of the priests with the answer of the Lord.

Abinadi's Use of Isaiah 53:1–12

After Abinadi called the priests to repentance, declared that salvation would not come by observance of the law of Moses alone, withstood the priests by radiating the power of God, and rehearsed to them the ten commandments, the prophet turned his attention to the coming of the Messiah to explain the true source of salvation and redemption. Approaching Abinadi's use of Isaiah 53 from a forensic standpoint, one might wonder why he decided to quote this particular chapter as his main defense against the accusations of the priests of Noah.

It appears that the priests intended, by their direct examination, to catch Abinadi in conflict with Isaiah 52 on five potential points: (1) Why did he bear tidings of doom and

destruction when Isaiah had declared that the beautiful and true prophet brings *good* tidings (see Mosiah 12:20–22)? (2) How could he condemn them when Isaiah said that the redemption of the land was a cause for great joy, and they had *redeemed* the land of Nephi (see Mosiah 12:23–24)? (3) How could he accuse the people of not keeping the law of Moses when Isaiah had said that the uncircumcised and unclean would *not* come in (see Isaiah 52:1)? (4) How did Abinadi dare to prophesy that the people “shall be brought into bondage” (Mosiah 12:2), when Isaiah had spoken of Jerusalem *loosing* herself “from the bands of thy neck” (Isaiah 52:2)? And (5), How could Abinadi value Noah’s life as a garment in a furnace when the true prophet had invited Zion to “put on thy beautiful garments” (Isaiah 52:1)? Potential arguments such as these made Isaiah 52 a potent choice as the point of departure in the priests’ examination of Abinadi.

Abinadi’s response was effective and inspired. By quoting Isaiah 53, Abinadi put himself in a position to answer each of these five potential arguments of the priests: (1) Through Isaiah 53, Abinadi could explain the good tidings of the gospel; the suffering and death of the Lord’s servant was a cause of eternally good news, and thus it pleased even God to bruise his servant. (2) In Isaiah 53, one finds several clear statements about the correct meaning of redemption: Only when a person “makes [Christ’s] soul an offering for sin” will the Lord “prolong his days” and bring prosperity to his hand (verse 10). True redemption comes when the Father “shall see of the travail of [the Savior’s] soul” and “shall be satisfied” (verse 11). By bearing “the sin of many,” the Savior shall make “intercession [redemption] for the transgressors” (verse 12). Moreover, because Isaiah

53 prophesied that the people would not esteem Christ (verse 3) and would “esteem him stricken, smitten of God” (verse 4), it was evident (3) that they had not properly understood or kept the law, and, therefore, (4) the law would not protect them from bondage or, even more so, (5) from death and destruction. The priests had taken Isaiah 52:7–10 out of context in accusing Abinadi; he averted their attack by putting that passage of scripture back into its surrounding context.

In addition, several of Isaiah’s phrases would have taken on trenchant local meanings that would have set the priests of Noah back in their bold affront against Abinadi. For example, Isaiah had asked, “Who hath believed our report?” (Isaiah 53:1). This plaintive question must have taken on a new ring of truth when Abinadi quoted these words, directing his quote squarely at the unbelieving priests, and Abinadi probably took some solace knowing that disbelief was the typical response of many people to the messages of the prophets. In the same way, the question “and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (Isaiah 53:1) invites the retort, “Not to Noah and his priests.”

But most importantly, Isaiah 53 not only provided Abinadi with a defense against his accusers, but it allowed him to take the higher ground of an affirmative defense. Abinadi used Isaiah 53 to declare the plan of salvation and testify of the resurrection and day of judgment whereby the wicked priests would be punished by God. Isaiah 53 teaches clearly enough the basic messages that were consistently promoted by Book of Mormon prophets.

Isaiah 53 understands many details involved in the life and death of the coming Messiah: “For he [the Messiah] shall grow up before him [the Father] as a tender plant, and

as a root [the root of Jesse] out of a dry ground [in the land of Israel]" (verse 2). Isaiah knew that Christ's people would reject their Savior because he would not come as an exalted, glorious being; thus, Isaiah taught that Christ "hath no form nor comeliness" (verse 2); "when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (verse 2); and "he is despised and rejected of men, . . . he was despised, and we esteemed him not" (verse 3). In lieu of recognizing Christ's worth, Isaiah taught, "we [his friends] hid as it were our faces from him" (verse 3), and "we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted" (verse 4). But the people will be in error: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way" (verse 6).

Isaiah 53 poignantly affirms that Jesus will suffer pain and grief, according to the will of God: He will be "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (verse 3); "surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (verse 4); "he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities" (verse 5); "he was oppressed, and he was afflicted" (verse 7); "he was taken from prison and from judgment" (verse 8); and "Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief." (verse 10).

Not only will Christ suffer, but he will die: "And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death" (verse 9); "He hath poured out his soul unto death" (verse 12); and "For he was cut off out of the land of the living" (verse 8).

Despite the fact that people would erroneously number him "with the transgressors" (verse 12), Christ would be innocent: "He had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth" (verse 9). Yet he would go voluntarily: "He opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and

as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth" (verse 7).

The astounding purpose in all of this is that Christ's suffering will benefit all humanity: "The chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" (verse 5). This is the peace that the messenger would publish. The expiation of sin would not come through the sacrifices called for by the law of Moses (as the priests of Noah taught), but instead our iniquities are taken up *by him*: "the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (verse 6); "for the transgression of my people was he stricken" (verse 8); "for he shall bear their iniquities" (verse 11), "and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession [with the Father] for the transgressors" (verse 12). This messianic offering will satisfy the demands of justice and will bring about a reconciliation and atonement between God and mankind: "He [the Father] shall see of the travail of [the Savior's] soul, and shall be satisfied" (verse 11). But each person will need to accept his offering, which will become efficacious "when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin" (verse 10).

In this way, the Lord shall have spiritual offspring: "he shall see his seed" (verse 10), and he will be able to reward and prosper his people: At the day of judgment, "by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many" (verse 11), and this shall pave the way for eternal rewards: "He shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand" (verse 10). These blessings, the spoils of the war against evil, will be turned over to the Servant for division among his followers: "Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong" (verse 12).

The Grounding in Isaiah 53 of Abinadi's Theological Explanations in Mosiah 15–16

To the casual reader, the relationship between Isaiah 53 (parallel to Mosiah 14) and the remainder of Abinadi's discourse to the priests (see Mosiah 15–16) may seem slight; but on closer inspection, it becomes clear that Abinadi's theology and prophetic understanding of God's salvation are deeply grounded in the words and phrases of Isaiah 53.

One of Abinadi's main messages was that God himself would come down among his people (see Mosiah 15:1). This idea is imbedded in the text of Isaiah 53. For example, Isaiah 53:1–2 says that "the arm of the Lord" will be revealed when "he [that is the Lord] shall grow up before him as a tender plant." Abinadi attributes to God all of the humiliation, pain, and death of the suffering servant here on earth among his people.

A closely related point is Abinadi's insistence that this Lord, "the Son of God," will subject his flesh "to the will of the Father" (Mosiah 15:2). Nevertheless, Abinadi hastens to add that the Son of God is "one God," called the Father (not of the spirits, but "of heaven and earth") and also called the Son ("because of the flesh").⁴ Abinadi's words were carefully selected—perhaps to avoid further controversy with the priests and possibly another legal accusation, this time on the grounds that he had violated the commandment that is often read as requiring monotheism, "thou shalt have no other God before me" (Mosiah 13:35)—and he appears to teach the priests all that their understanding allowed. But beyond those limitations, it remains clear that Abinadi understood that at least two distinct beings are involved in the godhead, and he could have found some support for this in Isaiah 53, if he understood Isaiah to be speaking of two

divine beings: “*He* [the Son] shall grow up before *him* [the Father]” (verse 2); “*the Lord* [God the Father] laid on *him* [the Son] the iniquities of us all” (verse 6); “it pleased *the Lord* to bruise *him*” (verse 10); “*he* hath put *him* to grief” (verse 10); “*he* shall see the travail of *his* soul, and shall be satisfied” (verse 11); “*I* will divide *him* a portion” (verse 12).

Used by Abinadi’ as part of his testimony that God himself shall redeem his people, Isaiah’s prophecy affirmed that the Son would “suffer temptation,” but “yield not”; would allow himself “to be mocked and scourged” (compare Isaiah’s words: esteemed him not, grief, wounded, oppressed, afflicted), and to be “cast out and disowned by his people” (compare Isaiah: despised and rejected), yet “he opened not his mouth” (Mosiah 15:5–6). He would become “subject even unto to death” (compare Isaiah: he hath poured out his soul unto death), and the will of the Son would be “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7; compare Isaiah: it pleased the Lord to bruise him). Thus he would gain “the victory over death” (compare Isaiah: and divide the spoils, i.e. the spoils of victory), which would give the Son “power to make intercession for the children of men” (Mosiah 15:8; in Isaiah’s words: and made intercession for the transgressors), having “satisfied the demands of justice” (Mosiah 15:9; compare Isaiah: he shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied).

Next, Abinadi turned to answer another pressing issue raised by the priests: Who are the true messengers of the Lord, and was Abinadi one of them? As Isaiah had asked, “Who shall declare his generation?” (Isaiah 53:8). Abinadi proceeded to explain that “when his soul has been made an offering for sin” (Isaiah 53:10) then shall Jesus “see his seed” (Mosiah 15:10); and all prophets who declare this message, and all people who believe their words are his seed, “for

whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions" (Mosiah 15:12; compare Isaiah: he shall bear their iniquities). Thus, those prophets are the ones "who have published peace, who have brought good tidings of good, who have published salvation; and said unto Zion: Thy God reigneth!" (Mosiah 15:14). Accordingly, if and when the priests of Noah will repent and recognize that Christ's sacrifice is the proper offering for sin, then Christ will see his seed and how beautiful upon the mountains will be their message of peace (see Mosiah 15:15–18). In this way, Abinadi answered effectively the question, "Who is entitled to speak as a prophet?" and thereby countered the charge that he had committed the crime of false prophecy.

Abinadi went on to explain that "the Son reigneth" (compare Isaiah 52:7) because the Son will overcome death (see Mosiah 15:20–25), and that indeed "the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:10) at the day of judgment before every nation (see Mosiah 15:26–28); and for that reason the "watchmen" (Isaiah 52:8) shall sing for joy (see Mosiah 15:29–31).

Abinadi concluded his speech by explaining the rewards that will be given in the resurrection (see Mosiah 16:1–12), and, with this theme, he turns to the final concepts found in Isaiah 53. The wicked, such as the priests of Noah, will weep (see Mosiah 16:2–7), for there will be a victory over death (compare Isaiah: he shall divide the spoil), and only in Christ will there be "a life which is endless" (compare Isaiah: he shall prolong his days) and the Lord's judgment will stand and the righteous of God will prevail (see Mosiah 16:8–12; compare Isaiah: the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand).

Thus, each segment in Isaiah 53 contributes to the main points of Abinadi's speech. Indeed, Mosiah 18:2 confirms and summarizes these as the main precepts taught by

Abinadi. As Alma began to teach the words of Abinadi, Alma crystallized from this discourse the same concepts we have seen here: Alma taught “concerning that which was to come, and also concerning the resurrection of the dead, and the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven” (Mosiah 18:2).

Was Isaiah 53 Known and Used by Earlier Nephite Prophets?

The teachings of Abinadi, of course, were not new in Nephite history. Abinadi’s death occurred about 150 B.C. Four hundred years earlier, Nephi and Jacob had taught, in the same city as Abinadi, similar points about the coming of Christ, the suffering and death of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead. Interestingly, the set of doctrines taught by Abinadi closely tracks these key elements in the messianic portions of the Nephite prophetic worldview articulated in 1 Nephi 11, 1 Nephi 19, 2 Nephi 9, 2 Nephi 25, and in other early Nephite and brass plates texts.⁵ The similarity between Abinadi’s set of doctrines and the writings of Nephi and Jacob raises the following additional questions: To what extent was Nephi’s messianic expectation, like Abinadi’s, grounded in Isaiah 53? Did Nephi and Jacob use Isaiah 53 in formulating their teachings about the coming of the Messiah? Several concepts and phrases in Nephite writings, together with the fact that Nephi and Jacob made extended use of Isaiah 48–51, make it likely that Abinadi was not the first Nephite to use Isaiah 53 as an extensive source of knowledge about the coming of Christ.

Isaiah 53 begins by describing Christ's condescension and life upon the earth (see Isaiah 53:2). Nephi similarly saw and declared that "the Son of Man [would go] forth among the children of men" (1 Nephi 11:24).⁶ Nephi also concurred with Isaiah's vision of Christ being "exalted" (Isaiah 52:13) as he taught that Christ would be "lifted up" (1 Nephi 11:33; 19:10) both in death and in his ascension.

As Isaiah prophesied that Christ would be "taken from prison and from judgment" (Isaiah 53:8) and we would hide "as it were our faces from him" (Isaiah 53:3), Nephi taught that Christ would be "taken by the people . . . and judged of the world" (1 Nephi 11:32) and would be put "into the hands of wicked men" (1 Nephi 19:10), and that people would "turn aside their hearts against the Holy One" (1 Nephi 19:15).

Regarding Christ's rejection and suffering (see Isaiah 53:3, 8, 14), Nephi prophesied that the "Holy One of Israel" would be "despised" (1 Nephi 19:14; 2 Nephi 15:24) and "rejected" (2 Nephi 25:18). Isaiah wrote that Christ will be "acquainted with grief" and "a man of sorrows" (Isaiah 53:3); Nephi said the same, explaining that "they scourge him, and he suffereth it; and they smite him, and he suffereth it. Yea, they spit upon him, and he suffereth it" (1 Nephi 19:9). Isaiah said that Christ would suffer "more than any man" (Isaiah 52:14), and this detail was also expressed by Jacob: "he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam" (2 Nephi 9:2).

Isaiah wrote that Christ suffered for our sake—he was "wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). Again, Nephi and Jacob each declared that Christ would be "lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world" (1 Nephi 11:33; see also Jacob

1:8). Similarly, Isaiah wrote that Christ should die—that he would be “cut off out of the land of the living” (Isaiah 53:8), and this is recorded in the Book of Mormon as well (1 Nephi 11:33; Jacob 1:8).

The beautiful benefits of Christ’s suffering and death were also described in Isaiah, and similar points are found in the teachings of the early Book of Mormon prophets. Isaiah says that Christ would be led like “a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7); Nephi refers to Christ as a lamb nearly sixty times in 1 Nephi chapters 11–14, gratefully aware that Christ “suffereth it, because of his loving kindness and his long-suffering towards the children of men” (1 Nephi 19:9; compare Isaiah 53:5, “with his stripes we are healed”). Because of Christ’s sacrifice, those who partake of his gift will receive the blessings (compare Isaiah 53:12, “he shall divide the spoil with the strong”); Nephi and Jacob promised that those who believe in the Son (see 1 Nephi 11:6), “seek to bring forth . . . Zion” (1 Nephi 13:37), and “labor diligently in his vineyard” (Jacob 6:3) will be “a blessed people upon the promised land forever” (1 Nephi 14:2) and that God will “bestow [blessings] upon [their] children” (2 Nephi 9:3).

And this is not all. After Christ’s death, Isaiah prophesied, Christ would be resurrected (see Isaiah 53:12). Likewise Nephi declared that Christ “shall rise from the dead, with healing in his wings” (2 Nephi 25:13), punishing the wicked and effecting the “resurrection of the dead” (2 Nephi 26:3; see also 2 Nephi 2:8).

The words, phrases, concepts, and expressions are similar enough in all these cases that one may readily conclude that Book of Mormon prophets prior to Abinadi knew and used Isaiah 53 and understood the relevance of this song of the suffering servant to their own revelations concerning the coming Messiah.

Parenthetically, it is interesting to note that the Book of Mormon prophets were not the only Jews or members of the house of Israel before the time of Jesus Christ who understood Isaiah 53 messianically and who expected the Messiah to suffer at the hands of his people. One recently published Dead Sea Scroll, 4Q541, fragment 9, column I, reads: “They will utter many words against him, and an abundance of lies; they will fabricate fables against him, and utter every kind of disparagement against him. His generation will change the evil, and [. . .] established in deceit and in violence.”⁷ The translator, Florentino García Martínez, sees in this text an important confirmation that the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 was “not an innovation of purely Christian origin,” but rather was already “the result of previous developments.”⁸ Some scholars have even proposed that this ancient Jewish text from Qumran may have “contained the idea of the violent death of this ‘Messiah-priest,’”⁹ but unfortunately the text appears too fragmentary to allow solid conclusions in this regard.

For a summary, verse by verse, of the extensive Latter-day Saint messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53, see the bibliographic addendum in this volume, pages 495–502.

Why Did the Priests of Noah Not Understand the Messianic Content of Isaiah 52–53?

Because Abinadi’s interpretation and use of Isaiah 53 was complete, cogent, and bound up with Nephite tradition, one naturally wonders why the priests of Noah did not understand or accept what he said to them. Likewise, if Isaiah 53 had been understood all along as a messianic text, how could the priests of Noah and others, like Sherem, who rejected the Nephite prophetic view, not agree with this basic interpretation? There is no reason to believe that the priests of Noah were unfamiliar with Isaiah 53 before

Abinadi quoted it to them, for they knew and introduced Isaiah 52 into the discussion. People of their persuasion must have somehow understood Isaiah 53 differently.

While hindsight is 20/20, making it much easier for Christian readers to perceive the relevance of Isaiah 53 on the mission and passion of Jesus Christ, several ambiguities in the Hebrew in Isaiah 53 have, indeed, given rise over the years to other interpretations. It seems quite likely that these ambiguities would have been an even greater source of uncertainty about the meaning of Isaiah 53 in the minds of people like the priests of Noah, who lived before the time of Christ. Clines concisely and conveniently summarizes the main points of debate among modern Isaiah scholars concerning the veiled meanings of Isaiah 53.¹⁰ Several problems exist, arising mainly from the fact that Isaiah used so many pronouns or other grammatical constructions with unspecified antecedents:

1. In Hebrew, the identity of the servant is ambiguous. Who is *he*? The servant is never actually named or identified, except by the things that he suffered. In fact, it is difficult to determine the antecedent of many of the pronouns in Isaiah 53. To whom do these pronouns refer: “we” (verse 6), “our” (verses 3–6), “I” (verse 12), or “thou” (verse 10)?
2. The song is unclear about when the servant had lived in the past or would yet live in the future. It is fair to ask, should Isaiah 53 be read in reference to the past, the present, or the future? Because the Hebrew verbs are in the perfect mode, some people have argued that Isaiah 53 speaks only of a person who lived in Isaiah’s own day, whom he knew, who was despised, rejected, and wrongly put to death, perhaps an innocent prophet who went silently to his death, executed because of some testimony he bore. Others read Isaiah 53 as a “prophetic

retrospective,” looking back in vision at the future death of the Messiah as if it had already occurred. According to this view, Isaiah 53 is written in the “prophetic past.” Accordingly, it is debatable whether this text was written in the historical past or the prophetic past. Apparently, this was in fact a major issue for the priests of Noah, for Abinadi had to explain to them that he, like Isaiah, spoke “of things to come *as though they have already come*” (Mosiah 16:6, emphasis added), a marvelous description of the Hebraic prophetic perfect.¹¹ This grammatical comment by Abinadi is an important acknowledgment from antiquity that people were aware of this manner of speaking, which is known today by grammarians as the prophetic past.

3. Other questions include, What did he suffer or will he suffer? and What led the “we” to change their minds about the servant? At first people despised him, but later they agreed that he had borne their griefs. The text is not specific about the answers to such questions, and thus it is open to a variety of interpretations.

Behind all of these questions, however, stands the ultimate interpretive issue: whether or not the servant is a divine future being. This is the crucial point of departure in determining how one reads Isaiah 53, and it is possible to read this text several ways. Because of the open texture of Isaiah 53 in this regard, Abinadi was textually vulnerable on this very point, and thus it is logical that the priests attacked him precisely on this position, that a divine being, “that God himself should come down” (Mosiah 17:8). However, Abinadi’s words and his blood stand as a testimony of this crucial declaration, for which Abinadi too went like a lamb to the slaughter. He also was innocent—another servant of the Lord who suffered death and was cut off from the land of the living.

The Book of Mormon says nothing about Abinadi's children or posterity, but his legacy or prophetic seed lived on in Alma and his converts. Abinadi was more than a witness in word alone; his life and death show that he also knew that meaning of Isaiah 53 from the inner workings of personal suffering and testing to the extreme.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion of the legal aspects of the trial of Abinadi, see John W. Welch, "Judicial Process in the Trial of Abinadi," (Provo: FARMS Preliminary Report, 1981); and "The Trial of Abinadi," in John W. Welch, *Law in the Book of Mormon: The Nephite Court Cases* (Provo: BYU Law School, 1996); see also Lew W. Cramer, "Abinadi," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Daniel H. Ludlow ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:5–6, and Paul Y. Hoskisson, "How Beautiful Were the Feet of Abinadi," unpublished manuscript (1997). I am grateful to Paul Hoskisson for reviewing this chapter and discussing his paper with me.

2. Paul-Eugène Dion, "Les chants du Serviteur de Yahweh et quelques passages apparentés d'Is 40–55. Un essai sur leurs limites précises et sur leurs origines respectives," *Biblica* 51 (1970); 17–38, cited in David J. A. Clines, *I, He, We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* (Sheffield, England: University of Sheffield, 1983), 11.

3. Harry M. Orlinsky, "The So-Called 'Servant of the Lord' and 'Suffering Servant' in Second Isaiah," in *Studies on the Second Part of the Book of Isaiah* (Netherlands: Brill, 1967), 17–23; R. N. Whybray, *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53* (Sheffield, England: University of Sheffield, 1985), 110–3; R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66* (London: Oliphants, 1975), 169.

4. See the discussion of Jeffrey R. Holland in this volume; see also Robert L. Millet, "Jesus Christ, Fatherhood and Sonship of," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, Ludlow ed., 2:739–40.

5. On the Nephite prophetic outlook, see my essay on that subject earlier in this volume.

6. Benjamin, a few years after Abinadi, likewise taught that Christ would “dwell in a tabernacle of clay” (Mosiah 3:5), and it was widely known among the Nephites that he would “take upon him flesh and blood, and go forth upon the face of the earth” (Mosiah 7:27).

7. Florentino García Martínez, “Messianic Hopes in the Qumran Writings,” in Donald W. Parry and Dana M. Pike, *LDS Perspectives on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Provo: FARMS, 1997), 136-7.

8. *Ibid.*, 137.

9. *Ibid.*, 138, referring to E. Puech, cited in *ibid.*, 167 n. 5.

10. Clines, *I, He, We and They*, 25–33.

11. See Gesening, section 106: “perfectum propheticum.”