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# ISAIAH Introduction

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*David A. LeFevre*

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF ISAIAH

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Though we are strongly commanded in the scriptures to search and study Isaiah, many find the book quite challenging. There are a number of reasons for this. Two scriptural passages about Isaiah in the Book of Mormon provide seven important concepts that can aid us in better understanding Isaiah (bold text added below which is the basis for the seven concepts):

And now, behold, I say unto you, that ye ought to search these things. Yea, a commandment I give unto you that ye **search these things diligently**; for great are the words of Isaiah. For surely he spake as touching **all things concerning my people which are of the house of Israel**; therefore it must needs be that he must speak **also to the Gentiles**. And all things that he spake **have been and shall be**, even according to the words which he spake (3 Nephi 23:1-3).

Now I, Nephi, do speak somewhat concerning the words which I have written, which have been spoken by the mouth of Isaiah. For behold, Isaiah spake many things which were hard for many of my people to understand; for they know not concerning **the manner of prophesying among the Jews**....Wherefore, hearken, O my people, which are of the house of Israel, and give ear unto my words; for because the words of Isaiah are not plain unto you, nevertheless they are plain unto all those that are **filled with the spirit of prophecy**. But I give unto you a prophecy, according to the spirit which is in me; wherefore I shall prophesy according to the plainness which hath been with me from the time that I came out from Jerusalem with my father; for behold, my soul delighteth in plainness unto my people, that they may learn. Yea, and my soul delighteth in the words of Isaiah, for I came out from Jerusalem, and mine eyes hath beheld **the things of the Jews**, and I know that 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. But behold, I, Nephi, have not taught my children after the manner of the Jews; but behold, I, of myself, have dwelt at Jerusalem, wherefore I know concerning **the regions round about**; and I have made mention unto my children concerning **the judgments of God**, which hath come to pass among the Jews, unto my children, according to all that which Isaiah hath spoken, and I do not write them (2 Nephi 25:1, 4-6).

1. **“Search these things diligently”** (3 Nephi 23:1). So commanded the Savior to the Nephites at the Bountiful temple. Diligent searching includes several efforts, such as:
  - a. Careful and consistent reading, learning line upon line.
  - b. Searching related scriptures (similar terms, topics, cross references, etc.).
  - c. Use of language tools and other translations, including the Dead Sea Scrolls.
  - d. Comparison with the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith Translation versions of Isaiah’s words.
2. Be **“filled with the Spirit of prophecy”** (2 Nephi 25:4). Revelation 19:10 says “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” The sons of Mosiah had the spirit of prophecy when they “searched the scriptures diligently” but also “had given themselves to much prayer, and fasting” (Alma 17:2-3). Pray and fast to understand Isaiah as you study him diligently.
3. Know **“the things of the Jews”** and **“the regions round about”** (2 Nephi 25:5-6). Nephi explained that he understood Isaiah because he had been raised in Jerusalem, while his people had not. To help them, he “taught [them] after the manner of the things of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:5). We can use resources available to us today to learn more

about Isaiah himself, the history and culture of his time, and the geography and lands of the region, all of which help us better grasp the meaning of the text.

4. Understand “**the manner of prophesying among the Jews**” (2 Nephi 25:1), “the things of the prophets” (2 Nephi 25:5). Like other prophetic books, Isaiah is brilliantly and beautifully structured, well-organized and carefully composed. It is mostly written in Hebrew poetic form, which is not like our poetry but relies on parallel phrases and structures that powerfully convey and point to truths. Understanding this poetry makes a huge difference in comprehending Isaiah’s messages (see Don Parry’s *Harmonizing Isaiah* for a good explanation of the poetry and a text that lays it out in the structure so it’s easier to see it). Isaiah is also rich in symbolism, some of which is better understood through knowing “the things of the Jews,” as mentioned above, but others are independent of culture and speak marvelously to us today.
5. Recognize that Isaiah’s themes are “**all things concerning my people**” (3 Nephi 23:2). Isaiah’s key messages all relate to Israel and God’s dealings with them, including the scattering and gathering of Israel, the last days and the millennial days, and the Savior of Israel, Jesus Christ. Watching for these themes throughout his writings—which is our main goal of this class—helps us see what he wants to say to us, modern Israel.
6. Realize that he spoke “**also to the Gentiles**” (3 Nephi 23:2). Isaiah’s audience was not just Israel. His messages reached outside of the borders of the local kingdoms to the whole world and today speak to the Gentiles as much as to Israel.
7. Know that his words “**have been and shall be**” (3 Nephi 23:3). Isaiah offered many prophecies that have more than one fulfillment. Many have two—something for his own day and something

for the last days—but others have even more than two.

Finally, a word about authorship. The large number of scholars in the world today believe that there were two or perhaps even three authors of the book of Isaiah as we have it now. They cite differences in style and approach but most importantly point to his mentioning of things in the prophet’s own future—like names of people not born for years after his death or events that were future to his own life—as evidence of someone writing well past Isaiah’s day. In short, they do not believe in prophecy, so they say prophetic sections were written in the day of which they speak, and not by Isaiah in the eighth or seventh century B.C.

Latter-day Saints (and many other believing scholars) take issue with these conclusions because we do believe in prophetic vision. Significantly, because of large quotations from Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, we see no reason to attribute these writings to a later hand. Because The Book of Mormon was pre-exilic (Lehi left Jerusalem before the Babylonian captivity), everything it quotes had to be on the brass plates by about 600 B.C., only 100 years after Isaiah and before scholars propose the later sections were written. The Book of Mormon quotes all or part of chapters 2-14, 28-29, 40, 45, 48-50, and 52-55, meaning that Isaiah’s writings up to at least chapter 55 were on the brass plates. It is interesting to note that there are no quotations of the last 11 chapters (56-66) in the Book of Mormon, a section some scholars attribute to a unique author. This does not mean they were written by a later hand but it does mean that the Book of Mormon does not negate the possibility either.

Still, even without drawing on the Book of Mormon quotations, the arguments for the unity of Isaiah given in the introductions of many of the book in the select bibliography below powerfully outweigh the arguments for division of authorship, in my view (one of the best is in Grogan, *Expositor’s*, 444f).

## STRUCTURE OF ISAIAH

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There are many different ways to structure and outline Isaiah, depending on the approach.

One author (Motyer) intriguingly sees three large divisions in Isaiah, which align with the major divine title and focus in each section:

- 1-37 The book of the King
- 38-55 The book of the Servant

56-66 The book of the Anointed Conqueror

Others broadly paint the first section (chapters 1-35 or 1-39) as focused on judgment with the last part of the book (40-66) focused on salvation.

The details of the structure are not as important as an understanding that there is a structure, that Isaiah is not just a collection of sayings (like Proverbs) or a history

book (like Kings), but rather a message from God to his people through his prophet.

There are some natural large divisions in the book that help in putting individual passages in context and helpfully fall along chapter divisions. These are what we shall follow in this commentary for the major outline, but will follow the section headings from Parry, *Understanding Isaiah*, and from Grogan, *Expositor's* for the details.

- 1-5 Introduction of major themes
- 6 Isaiah's call
- 7-12 Judah's politics and the Messiah
- 13-23 Prophecies to the nations
- 24-27 God will deliver his people (apocalyptic)
- 28-35 Evil leaders and God's justice
- 36-39 Hezekiah and Isaiah
- 40-48 Israel delivered and redeemed
- 49-55 The suffering servant and the daughter of Zion
- 56-59 Transforming Israel
- 60-66 Deliverance of Zion

Other commentary about Isaiah the person, historical and geographical settings and places, the politics, geography, culture, and other elements will be provided as we go through the text during the course of the lessons.

Finally, though the headings with each paragraph of commentary are from the KJV, an alternate translation is included at the beginning of each section, based mainly on Parry, *Harmonizing Isaiah*, but with some changes. One of its main values is to display the poetic structure of the text. Careful comparison with the KJV is a valuable exercise to gain greater insight into the meaning of the text. Parry's translation is based on the KJV but modernizes word choice and formats the text in poetic format, where applicable. I have also added bold text to indicate Book of Mormon/JST changes. Consulting alternate translations, such as the NIV, NASB, RSV, JPS, and more, is highly encouraged. Such translations will occasionally be quoted here where they add particular insight.

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## GOD'S CHARGE AGAINST HIS PEOPLE (1)

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### INTRODUCTION ( These Paragraphs apply to most of Isaiah)

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The first two chapters of Isaiah lay the groundwork for the entire work, presenting the themes that will be discussed throughout the prophet's writings. Indeed, the first five chapters can be seen as playing that role, with chapters 1-2 being an intense and focused summary of the concepts and 3-5 providing a deeper look. In this first chapter, the sins of a rebellious nation are delineated, while chapter 2 focuses more on the potential of a future righteous city and nation. This concept of a rebellious present and a potentially exalted future is what the rest of Isaiah works to explain and expand on. Isaiah is a book of dramatic reversals, of divine paradoxes, and of stark contrasts. God's covenant people have a divine calling and potential, and Jehovah just wants them to live up to their covenant relationship. **The first 27 verses of chapter 1 are read each year by Jews on the Sabbath preceding *Tish'ah be'av*, the commemoration of the destruction of the temple, because Isaiah 1 offers the theological justification for that destruction (JSB, 784).**

Isaiah is not presented in chronological order like other books, such as Ezekiel. Rather, it is thematically arranged. Chronologically, the book begins at chapter 6. The information in these first chapters were likely given to the prophet at various times through his ministry and

only collected later into these chapters to serve as an introduction.