

Joseph Smith's Interpretation of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon

David P. Wright

THE BOOK OF MORMON (hereafter BM), which Joseph Smith published in 1830, is mainly an account of the descendants of an Israelite family who left Jerusalem around 600 B.C.E. to come to the New World. According to the book's story, this family not only kept a record of their history, which, added upon by their descendants, was to become the BM, but also brought with them to the Americas a copy of Isaiah's prophecies, from which the BM prophets cite Isaiah (1 Ne. 5:13; 19:22-23). Several chapters or sections of Isaiah are quoted in the BM: Isaiah 2-14 are cited in 2 Nephi 12-24; Isaiah 48-49 in 1 Nephi 20-21; Isaiah 49:22-52:2 in 2 Nephi 6:6-7, 16-8:25; Isaiah 52:7-10 in Mosiah 12:21-24; Isaiah 53 in Mosiah 14; and Isaiah 54 in 3 Nephi 22. Other shorter citations, paraphrases, and allusions are also found.¹

The text of Isaiah in the BM for the most part follows the King James Version (hereafter KJV). There are some variants, but these are often insignificant or of minor note and therefore do not contribute greatly to clarifying the meaning of the text. The BM, however, does provide interpretation of or reflections on the meaning of Isaiah. This exegesis is usually placed in chapters following citation of the text (compare 1 Ne. 22; 2 Ne. 9-10; 25-33; Mosiah 12:25-31; 3 Ne. 23:1-5), though occasionally it is interspersed in the citation (2 Ne. 6:6-18; 26:15-27:35). It is noteworthy because, instead of laying out the original historical meaning of Isaiah, it re-applies the text to the time of Joseph Smith and to the course of Jewish and Christian history up to his time.

This study of Isaiah in the BM will first briefly examine the source of the BM Isaiah text with a recommendation for a historical approach to the

1. For comprehensive lists of Isaiah passages cited or paraphrased in the BM, see Monte S. Nyman, *Great Are the Words of Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 259-81; John Tvedtnes, *The Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon*, FARMS Preliminary Report (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1981), 6-19.

study of the text. Then, using this approach, it will explore two examples of the BM's interpretation of Isaiah, one where the interpretation follows the citation and one where the interpretation is interwoven with the Isaiah text.

THE DEPENDENCE OF BM ISALAH ON THE KJV

The BM Isaiah text derives directly and without mediation from the KJV. The evidence for this conclusion, summarized, includes the following:²

(1) A basic fact that cannot be overlooked is that the BM Isaiah reproduces the KJV of the text literally except for a few words or phrases here and there. If the BM Isaiah were a translation, one would expect to find synonymous but not identical wording, as between different modern translations of the same passage of the Bible.

(2) There is a focus on changing words which are italicized in the KJV, which shows direct working with that text.³ Only 3.6 percent of the words in the main Isaiah chapters cited in the BM are italicized in the KJV; 40 percent of these, however, are missing in the BM Isaiah citation. Many of the variants at italicized words do not change the meaning at all (compare 2 Ne. 17:22 || Isa. 7:22). Sometimes a mechanical striking of an italicized word creates ungrammatical or unclear English (compare 2 Ne. 8:18 || Isa. 51:18).

(3) The BM Isaiah preserves numerous obscure, problematic, and erroneous translations of the KJV. For example, the phrase "Surely, your turning of things upside down shall be esteemed as the potter's clay" in KJV Isaiah 29:16, and found by 2 Nephi 27:27, cannot be correct. A better translation (with the rest of the saying included to show the context) would be: "How perverse of you (or: You turn things upside down)! Can the potter be considered as the clay? Can a work say of its maker, 'He did not make me,' and can what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'He has no (creative) intelligence?'" (See also notes 18, 20, and 21.)

(4) Some variants in the BM are inconsistent with and therefore show an ignorance of Hebrew language and style, and some even depend upon the ambiguity of the English language. For example, the phrase "for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty" in the KJV Isaiah 2:10 con-

2. This evidence is developed in detail and with numerous examples in my "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon ... and Joseph Smith in Isaiah" (1996), available at <http://members.aol.com/jazzdd/IsaBM1.html>.

3. The KJV translators had a very literalistic concept of translation; when the original Hebrew (or Greek for the New Testament) did not have an exact corresponding word for an English word which was necessary for the translation to make sense, the English word was put in a different font; italics were early on used to represent these words.

sists of two conjoined phrases introduced with the preposition "for," which properly renders the Hebrew *mippenei*, "because of." 2 Nephi 12:10 converts these to a verbal clause: "for the fear of the Lord and the glory of his majesty shall smite thee." Here English "for" changes its function and becomes a conjunction. This variant, however, would require an entirely different underlying Hebrew word (such as *ki* "because"). The polysemy (multiple meanings) of the English word is part of what facilitates this variant in the BM text, i.e., the BM variant is based on the English text.

(5) Many "plusses" in the BM Isaiah (elements lacking in the KJV or Hebrew Isaiah) appear to be secondary expansions (compare especially 2 Ne. 6:17 over against its other parallels 1 Ne. 21:25 and Isa. 49:25). These are often signaled by words and phrases such as "yea" (compare 2 Ne. 12:5 || Isa. 2:5), "for" (as an explanatory conjunction; compare 2 Ne. 23:22 || Isa. 13:22), "it shall come to pass" (compare 2 Ne. 24:3-4 || Isa. 14:3-4), or by their providing clarification or definition (1 Ne. 21:1 || Isa. 49:1). The secondariness of these variants points to their lateness; this is consistent with derivation of the BM Isaiah from the KJV.

(6) The BM portrays its Isaiah text as deriving from no later than about 600 B.C.E., when the character Lehi left Jerusalem. Yet it cites several chapters from Second Isaiah (Isa. 40-55), whose temporal perspective can only be satisfactorily explained by assuming that these chapters were written around the time Cyrus conquered Babylon (539 B.C.E.). Note that (a) the people have recently suffered (past tense) destruction;⁴ (b) Mesopotamia is the place of captivity, and the Babylonians are (present tense) the enemy quickly fading from the picture;⁵ (c) the temple and cities, including Jerusalem, have been destroyed (past tense) and need rebuilding (in the future);⁶ (d) release from Babylonian captivity is imminent (present-future tense);⁷ (e) Cyrus the Persian king is (present tense) the political leader who will effect the release;⁸ (f) the chapters look forward to bounteous blessing upon return from Babylon (future tense).⁹ What further indicates a date of around 539 B.C.E. for these chapters is that historical events are seen with relative precision up to the time of Cyrus, whereas, afterward, the picture is ideal and does not match historical reality after the time of Cyrus. The ideas and perspectives of these chapters of Isaiah, moreover, fit perfectly between the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, on the one hand, much of which come from or pertain to the first part of the sixth century B.C.E. and deal with the exile of the Judeans, and the

4. Isa. 40:1-2; 42:22-25; 43:26-28; 47:6-15; 48:3-4; 49:14-21; 51:19; 54:7-8.

5. Isa. 43:14; 46:1 [the gods of Babylon]; 47:1-15; 48:14, 20.

6. Isa. 40:1-2, 9-11; 41:27[?]; 44:26-28; 45:13; 49:8, 14-21; 51:3, 17-23; 52:1-10; 54 passim.

7. Isa. 43:5-8; 45:13; 48:20; 49:9-12, 22-26.

8. Isa. 44:28; 45:1-13; implied in 41:2, 25; 46:11; 48:14 (see below).

9. Isa. 44:1-5; 48:17-19; 49:20-23; 54:1-5, 9-10, 14 and passim.

books of Haggai and Zechariah 1-8, on the other hand, which come from the end of that century and speak of events just after the return from Mesopotamia, such as rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. Second Isaiah in the BM is most easily explained through Smith's dependence on the KJV.

(7) Proofs for the antiquity of the BM Isaiah text are wanting or indecisive. The best piece of evidence that has been advanced for the antiquity of the text is the similarity of the BM's version of Isaiah 2:16 to the reading of the Greek Septuagint and Aramaic Targum translations. The KJV, following the Hebrew, reads: "And upon all the ships of Tarshish." 2 Nephi 12:16 reads: "And upon all the ships of the sea, and upon all the ships of Tarshish." The Greek reads "And upon every ship of the sea," and the Aramaic reads "And upon all those who go down in ships of the sea." These seem to support the BM's reading of "ships of the sea." One problem with this evidence is that the ancient translations are not exactly the same as the BM. They are merely translating "Tarshish" as "sea," a translation tendency found throughout the Aramaic Bible. They do not have a second clause with "Tarshish" as in the BM. Moreover, the understanding of the "ships of Tarshish" as "ships of the sea" was widely publicized in eighteenth- and early- nineteenth-century Bible commentaries. John Wesley, in comments on Isaiah 2:16 published in his *Explanatory Notes* (Bristol, England, 1765), notes: "V. 16 Tarshish—The ships of the sea, as that word is used. ..." ¹⁰ William Lowth, in his *Commentary on the Prophets* (London, 1727), noted that "'ships of Tarshish' signify in Scripture any trading or merchant ships. Accordingly, here the Septuagint render the words, 'ships of the sea,' as our old English translation does, Psal. xlviii 6." ¹¹ Wesley's comment is essentially reproduced in Matthew Poole's *Annotations* (Edinburgh, 1801), ¹² and Lowth's comment is cited in John Fawcett's *Devotional Family Bible* (London, 1811) ¹³ and in the many editions of Thomas Scott's *Holy Bible ... with Original Notes* (Philadelphia, 1810-12; New York, 1812-15; Boston, 1823-24; 1827). ¹⁴ Joseph Smith could have become familiar with this translation "fact" through reading such

10. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, Vol. 3 (Bristol, Eng.: William Pine, in Wine Street, 1765; Reprint: Salem, OH: Schmud Publishers, 1975), 1,953.

11. William Lowth, *Commentary Upon the Old and New Testaments: The Prophets*, Vol. 4 (London: Samuel Bagster, 1809 [original 1727]), 12.

12. Matthew Poole, *Annotations Upon the Holy Bible*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Thomas and John Turnbull, 1801), 773 (Reprint: *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, Vol. 2 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, [n.d.]], 331).

13. John Fawcett, *The Devotional Family Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments*, Vol. 2 (London: Suttaby, Evance, & Co. and R. Baldwin, 1811), at 2:16.

14. Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, with Original Notes, Practical Observations, and Copious References* (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1810-12; other editions: New York: Whiting and Watson, 1812-15; Boston: 1823-24; 1827); see at 2:16.

works or, more likely, through hearing sermons or conversations based on such sources.

The foregoing observations only sample the evidence that could be adduced. When examined in its full extent (see note 2), it shows clearly that the BM Isaiah text depends directly on the KJV. The alternative claim that the BM is a translation but follows the KJV when the KJV is correct cannot be maintained since this cannot explain the preoccupation with italicized words, variants based on English polysemy, inconsistencies with Hebrew language and style, and the persistence of KJV translation errors in the BM. The proper place to start in understanding Isaiah in the BM is, therefore, to see the KJV as its source and, with this, to see Joseph Smith as the one who introduced the variants that do exist, as well as the one responsible for the interpretations that follow or are sometimes interspersed with the citation of Isaiah in the BM text.¹⁵

Recognition of whence the BM Isaiah text and its interpretation derives calls for a broader and more historically aware approach to the text than is usually found in traditional discussions. The approach should first seek to determine the original sense, significance, and meaning of a given passage from Isaiah in its historical context insofar as this is possible. It should then examine Joseph Smith's interpretation of the text, and see how he has transformed its meaning, how he has "likened" the passage, a term he often uses in the BM of how Isaiah is analogically interpreted (1 Ne. 19:23-24; 2 Ne. 6:5; 11:2, 8), to his situation and view of history. Ideally, the examination of Smith's interpretation will compare the views of expositors of Isaiah in America and the British Isles up to his

15. For earlier arguments that Joseph Smith is responsible for the interpretation of Isaiah in the BM, see George D. Smith, "Isaiah Updated," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16 (Summer 1983): 37-51, and the exchange between Smith and William Hamblin in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Spring 1984): 407. For Joseph Smith's authorship of the BM, see the papers and their bibliographies in Brent Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993). See the FARMS response to this book, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, Vol. 6 (ed. Daniel C. Peterson, Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), and the reviews of both the Metcalfe and FARMS volumes: Stephen Thompson, "'Critical' Book of Mormon Scholarship," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (Winter 1994): 197-206; Todd Compton, "Christian Scholarship and the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* 19 (Sept. 1996): 74-81. For critical studies of Joseph Smith's "ancient" scripture since the Metcalfe volume, see Ronald V. Huggins, "Did the Author of 3 Nephi Know the Gospel of Matthew?" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30 (Fall 1997): 137-48; Ronald V. Huggins, "Joseph Smith's 'Inspired Translation' of Romans 7," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Winter 1993): 159-82; Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Fall 1993): 153-84; Stephen E. Thompson, "Egyptology and the Book of Abraham," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 28 (Spring 1995): 143-60. See also the works cited in notes 16, 26, 35, and 52.

time.¹⁶ This approach will be sampled in an abbreviated fashion in what follows.

TEXT CITATION WITH CONSEQUENT INTERPRETATION:
ISAIAH 48-49 (| | 1 NEPHI 20-21) AND 1 NEPHI 22

Joseph Smith cites Isaiah 48-49 in 1 Nephi 20-21 and then offers an interpretation in 1 Nephi 22. In this latter chapter he goes beyond the original sense of the Isaiah chapters and, focusing on the theme of the return of Israel to its land, describes how this will occur in his age. Our first concern, however, is to look at the original sense of Isaiah 48-49.¹⁷ (In the following, the translation of the Bible cited is sometimes the KJV's and sometimes my own, as clarity requires.)

Isaiah 48-49 in Their Original Context

These chapters are part of Second Isaiah (chaps. 40-55) that deal in the main with the situation of the Judeans in Babylon around 540 B.C.E. Their historical perspective was summarized in the previous section of this essay (observation 6) and should be kept in mind as they are discussed in what follows.

48:1-11: After beginning with a criticism of the hypocrisy or unworthiness of the prophet's sixth-century B.C.E. audience (vv. 1-2), the passage moves on to declare that Yahweh, Israel's God, has brought to pass the "former things" that he announced in the past (vv. 3-6a), and that he has begun to do "new things," which he did not announce (vv. 6b-8). In the larger context of Second Isaiah, and vv. 12-16 that follow, the "former things" and "new things" are related, perhaps respectively, to the de-

16. For these, see notes 10-14 and the fuller list in Mark Thomas, "A Mosaic for a Religious Counterculture: The Bible in the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Winter 1996): 54n11.

17. For interpretations of the text in its original context and the context of Second Isaiah, see Richard J. Clifford, "Isaiah 40-66," *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays et al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 571-96; Chris Franke, *Isaiah 46, 47, and 48: A New Literary-Critical Reading* (Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego 3; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994); John L. McKenzie, *Second Isaiah* (Anchor Bible Commentary 20; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968); Carroll Stuhlmueller, "Deutero-Isaiah [chaps. 40-55] and Trito-Isaiah [chaps. 56-66]," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 329-48; Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40-66* (New Century Bible; London: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1975); R. N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah* (Old Testament Guides; Sheffield: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* Press, 1983); Christopher North, *The Second Isaiah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964); H. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

struction of Judah by the Babylonians and Cyrus' conquest of Babylon and impending release of the Judeans to return from Mesopotamia to their lands. Even though the people are being benefitted here, they are criticized throughout vv. 1-11. Yahweh's actions are mainly to guard his holy reputation, to protect his name (vv. 9-11) which forms a counterpart to the theme of name in vv. 1-2.

48:12-16: These verses develop the theme of the "new things" that Yahweh is performing (vv. 12-14a). The context seems to abruptly shift in 14b, but this still relates to the context of God's new acts. The verse speaks of an individual whom God loves and who performs his (God's) pleasure against Babylon and the Chaldeans (14b). This unspecified individual is Cyrus. His place in the redemptive history of Second Isaiah is clear from chapters 44-45 where he is specifically named. There, Yahweh calls him his shepherd, who "shall fulfill all his (God's) pleasure" (44:28). The term "pleasure" here is the same that the individual will perform in 48:14 (Hebrew *hefets*). Chapter 45 continues the description of Cyrus' position as God's anointed one, who will subdue nations (compare v. 1). This matches the military victory of the individual in 48:14. God ensures Cyrus' success in 45:1-3 and similarly prospers the individual in 48:15.

48:17-22: Yahweh is called "Redeemer" and the "Holy One of Israel" (v. 17), divine appellations found throughout Second Isaiah. The title Redeemer refers to the deity's rescuing the people out of political bondage; the title Holy One of Israel is a reflection of the high reputation that the deity deserves and seeks to maintain. Against the backdrop of criticism earlier in the chapter, vv. 18-19 are an indirect call to righteousness, which state that if the people had been obedient, they would have had peace and that their posterity would be numerous. After this call, the people are instructed to act. They are to leave Babylon and to declare that Yahweh has redeemed his people. The redemption is implicitly compared to the exodus from Egypt (see below on 49:7-13), where God led the people through the desert and brought water from the rocks. The chapter then ends with the isolated dour note that there is no peace or safety for the wicked (the Babylonians? the Judeans?).

49:1-6: This is one of four passages which describe a servant of Yahweh that stand out contextually from the rest of Second Isaiah (see also 42:1-4; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12). These passages may come from an author different, and later, than the one responsible for the bulk of Second Isaiah. The identity of the servant is not clear. While 49:3 identifies the servant as Israel, 49:5-6 describe the servant's works as being for the benefit of Israel: "to restore Jacob to him (i.e., to God), and that Israel be gathered to him"¹⁸ ... you are my servant ... to establish the tribes of Jacob, to restore

18. The KJV and BM parallel have a negative clause here: "Thou Israel be not gathered." The "not" *lo'*, however, should be read instead as *lo* "to him."

the preserved of Israel" (vv. 5-6).¹⁹ Therefore the servant must be other than Israel. The word "Israel" in 49:3 may be a later addition, assimilating the passage to the other instances where Israel is called Yahweh's servant (41:8, 9; 44:1, 2, 21; 45:4; 48:20).

The main alternative to viewing Israel as the servant in these poems is viewing the servant as an individual. If we assume the servant in all four servant passages is the same, a relatively detailed picture of his duties and career emerges. This person is a prophetic figure, called by and subordinate to Yahweh (42:1; 49:1-3). He aids in restoring Israel to its land (49:5-6) and is given a further responsibility toward foreign nations (42:1-2, 4; 49:6; 52:15). He is subdued, reticent, and submissive, even to attackers (42:2; 50:6; 53:7-8, 9). The last and longest passage describes his hapless fate: he is not attractive and has some physical debility, apparently caused by sickness and inflicted on him by Yahweh, which is disfiguring enough to startle people (52:14-15;²⁰ 53:2-4, 6, 10). This debility is interpreted as the individual's suffering for the people's sins (53:4-6, 10-12), an idea that differs from views elsewhere in the Bible that individuals are to suffer for their own sins (compare Ezek. 18) and that suffering is due to one's own sin (compare the comments of the friends of Job). The servant is persecuted; this eventually leads to his death and is part of his expiatory suffering (53:7-9). The downward spiral is complete when he is buried "with the wicked and with evil doers" (53:9).²¹ There is some difficulty in the verse that follows this report, since it seems to say that if the servant gives himself as a "guilt offering," he will see (i.e., "beget") offspring and live long, situations that pertain to mortal life (53:10). The passage says nothing about a resurrection of the individual (in v. 9 he is left in the grave), a belief that is, by all evidence, a late development in the theology of the Hebrew Bible.²² Nor is there an indication that the servant's death in vv. 7-9 is to be taken figuratively, that he was saved at the last moment, or that it was only a near-death experience. The contradiction between v. 10 and the foregoing is so great as to make one suppose that vv. 10-12 may be an addition to the previous verses, and that they seek to reinterpret the tradition of the servant.

If the servant is an individual, it is reasonable to think that the one who added the four servant passages to Second Isaiah intended them to

19. The verbal infinitives in these verses seem to refer to the work of the servant; compare 42:6-8.

20. The KJV translation "sprinkle" in v. 15 (also found in 3 Ne. 20:45) is certainly incorrect; the verb may mean something like "startle"; compare the larger context of vv. 14-15.

21. "And he made his grave ... with the rich ('*asir*') should probably be corrected, by adding one Hebrew letter, to "And he made his grave ... with the evil doers ('*osei ra*')." The BM (Mosiah 14:9) retains the KJV/Masoretic Hebrew "rich."

22. Compare Robert Martin-Achard, "Resurrection (OT)," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:680-84.

refer to Second Isaiah himself. Much of Second Isaiah's prophecy elsewhere is devoted to preparing the Judeans to leave Babylon and return to their land or to addressing the fortunes of their land, duties of the servant elaborated in the next verses of chapter 49.

49:7-13: These verses are not strictly part of the foregoing servant passage, but nonetheless provide an elaborative sequel. Two other of the servant passages have such sequels (42:5-9; 50:10-11), and two of the sequels are capped with a short hymn of praise, including the present case (42:10-12; 49:13). The despised servant (v. 7; compare 52:13-53:12) was chosen at a propitious moment, probably meaning when Cyrus came to power over Babylon (v. 8). This calling has two aspects (vv. 8-9): (a) to establish the land and apportion desolate inheritances (which recalls 49:5-6) and (b) to tell those in exile (the "prisoners" and "those that are in darkness") to leave Babylon and return to their land (compare the similar metaphors in 42:6-7). In accord with the first of these aspects, Second Isaiah often promises Jerusalem and the land of Judah restoration and prosperity (40:2, 9-11; 44:26-28; 49:14-26 [see below on this]; 51:16-23; 52:1-10; 54:1-17; compare 41:27). In accord with the second of these, Second Isaiah instructs the exiled Israelites to leave Babylon (48:20-21 [on this, see above]; 52:11-12).

Mention of freeing the people leads to a description of the favorable conditions under which the people will return to the land (vv. 10-12). This includes God's preparing a road for the people's return, a motif found elsewhere in Second Isaiah, and sometimes compared to the exodus from Egypt (40:3-4; 42:16; 43:16-21; compare 41:17-19; 48:21; 50:2; 51:10-11).

49:14-21: This section is the first of a number of longer passages (see also 51:16-23; 52:1-10; 54:1-17) in the latter half of Second Isaiah devoted to consoling Zion, which in the Hebrew Bible refers to Jerusalem and, at times, the land of which Jerusalem is the capital. Zion is God's unforgettable child, to whom her children will quickly return (vv. 14-17). The land's population will be so numerous that her formerly desolate places will be overcrowded (vv. 18-20). "Where did these come from?" Zion asks (v. 21). God answers that he is raising a "standard" or banner to the foreign nations; they will then bring back Zion's children (vv. 22-23; the pronouns "you [thou/thee]" and "your [thy]" in vv. 22-26 are feminine singular and refer to Zion). The raising of the banner is a metaphor from military practice, where it is a signal for warning people of attack and for moving troops or rallying them (Isa. 5:26; 13:2; 18:3; Jer 4:6, 21; 51:12, 27). Here it signals the start of the return from Babylon.

The text at this point asks whether weak captives can be freed from their powerful captors (v. 24). The instinctive answer is, no. But in this case, Yahweh, implicitly more powerful than all captors, will contend

with Zion's adversaries, and thus deliver her children (v. 25). The image turns vicious: God will make Zion's oppressors fight with each other (v. 26). Thus all will know that Yahweh is the one who has saved and redeemed his people (v. 26). The attitude toward the nations in vv. 24-26 seems to contradict the positive picture in vv. 22-23; the two passages may have been formulated independently and then later placed together.

Joseph Smith's Interpretation of Isaiah 48-49

The chapters of Second Isaiah are originally and primarily concerned with the events of the sixth century B.C.E.: the deportation of Judeans to Babylonia and their return; though, to be sure, in the hopes for blessing, there a sense is conveyed that these will be comprehensive and apply to all God's chosen people. Smith makes this comprehensiveness explicit in 1 Nephi 22 by specifying the diverse groups of Israel throughout the world who will be affected. With this he bestows on the prophecies a new chronological horizon: they are to be finally fulfilled in his own age. Certain assumptions operate implicitly in this revisioning of the meaning of the Isaiah chapters. Smith believes that prophets' words always come to pass. Though many Judeans returned to their land and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple in the latter half of the sixth century B.C.E., the ideal blessings in Second Isaiah never materialized. Hence, for Smith, they remained to be fulfilled. When would they be fulfilled? In Smith's time, for he also believed he was living in the "last days," the period just prior to the return of Jesus. All the prophetic promises about the return of the Israelites to their land were to be fulfilled at this time. These perspectives led Smith to deal mainly with Isaiah 49:22-26, which, more directly than other verses in chapters 48-49, treat the return of the exiled people to their land. (He probably also gives them the most attention since they come at the end of the two chapters cited and are thus fresh in his mind.)

He begins with the fundamental question of whether the promises of gathering are "temporal" and "according to the flesh" or only "spiritual," i.e., literal or just symbolic (1 Ne. 22:1-3, 27, compare 18, 22). He says that they are, in fact, literal. This was a hermeneutical question for English readers of Isaiah in the nineteenth century. It was addressed, for example, in the Reverend Dr. John Smith's (no relation to Joseph) 1804 tract "A Summary View and Explanation of the Writings of the Prophets," of which Adam Clarke cites a substantial portion in the preface to his commentary on Isaiah.²³ In this exposition the Reverend Smith says that "the

23. Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments; with a Commentary and Critical Notes: Volume IV: Isaiah to Malachi* (Nashville: Abingdon, n.d. [preface date 1823]), cited on 7-13.

same prophecies have frequently a double meaning; and refer to different events, the one near, the other remote; the one temporal, the other spiritual, or perhaps eternal."²⁴ Notice that Joseph Smith uses some of the same terminology—"temporal" and "spiritual"—that John Smith uses.²⁵

After setting down this basic hermeneutical perspective, Joseph Smith addresses the extent of Israel being included in the promises of the Isaiah chapters. As the subject of the promises, he specifies four sub-groups of Israel, who, in his view, were scattered throughout the world and throughout history up to the early nineteenth century.

(1) He deduces that "it appears that the house of Israel, sooner or later, will be scattered upon all the face of the earth" (22:3). This conclusion, which shows a sensitivity to the historical perspective of Second Isaiah, which presumes but does not prophesy of the dispersion of Israel, introduces the referent of "house of Israel" as the object of the prophecies. This implicitly includes the Israelites who, from the context of the BM story, were still living in the land of Israel. The next chapter of the BM refers to the "scattering" of this group when it notes that God informed Nephi's father Lehi that "Jerusalem is destroyed" (by the Babylonians; 2 Ne. 1:4).

(2) The term "house of Israel" in 1 Ne. 22:3 also includes other groups. One of these groups is "more part of all the tribes [that] have been led away" which have been "scattered to and fro upon the isles of the sea; and whither they are none of us knoweth" (1 Ne. 22:4). These are the so-called "ten lost tribes."

(3) The text, speaking of the promises of Isaiah 49:22-23, says "it meaneth us in the days to come" (1 Ne. 22:6). The pronoun "us" refers to the descendants of the family of Nephi, who in Smith's view were the native American Indians (so, for example, the implication of 1 Ne. 22:7; see below). That the Indians were Israelites in some way was a common speculation of Smith's time.²⁶

(4) Smith also says that "these things (in the Isaiah citation) have been prophesied ... concerning all those who shall hereafter be scattered and be confounded, because of the Holy One of Israel; for against him will they harden their hearts, wherefore, they shall be scattered among all nations and shall be hated of all men" (1 Ne. 22:5). This refers to what

24. John Smith in Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible*, 12 (italics in original).

25. On the bifurcation between "temporal" and "spiritual" interpretation in the BM and the nineteenth-century commentators, compare Thomas, "A Mosaic for a Religious Counter-culture," 62-67. Compare Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews or the Tribes of Israel in America* (Poultney, VT: Smith & Lutz, 1825), 259: he contrasts "mystical" and "literal" fulfillment of prophecy.

26. Compare Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).

from his traditional Christian perspective is the Jews' rejection of Jesus. The BM elsewhere, and as part of an interpretation of several other chapters cited from Isaiah (2 Ne. 12-24 || Isa. 2-14), develops in detail the theme of the Jews' rejection of Jesus and their consequent exile for this, and eventual reconciliation (2 Ne. 25:9-19): the Jews will first be exiled to Babylon (v. 10), then return (v. 11), later they will reject the "Only Begotten of the Father ... because of their iniquities, and the hardness of the hearts, and the stiffness of the necks" (v. 12), they will crucify him and he will be resurrected (vv. 13-14), Jerusalem will be destroyed (v. 14), "the Jews shall be scattered among all nations" (v. 15), and then, after "the space of many generations," they shall eventually "be persuaded to believe in Christ" (v. 16), in which event the BM is to play an integral and effective role (v. 18). From this it is clear that the group intended in 1 Nephi 22:5 is the Jewish diaspora after 70 C.E., when Jerusalem was captured by the Romans.

Just as Smith specifies the scope of those to be saved, so he specifies who will provide salvation. 1 Nephi 22:6 picks up on many of the words and phrases of 49:22-23 and speaks of the gathering and the nations' agency in this (the language from Isaiah 49 is in boldface type with the Isaiah verses in parentheses):

Nevertheless, after they (i.e., the house of Israel) shall be **nursed** (23) by the **Gentiles** (22), and the Lord has **lifted up his hand upon the Gentiles** (22) and **set them for a standard** (22), and their **children** (17, 20, 21, 25) have been **carried in their arms** (22), and their **daughters** have been **carried upon their shoulders** (22) ...

Two ideas have been significantly transformed here from Isaiah 49. First, "nursing" becomes a chief governing verb and concept, as opposed to the KJV Isaiah 49 where it is incidentally mentioned in the nominal description of "nursing" or foster parents; second, in the BM passage God will lift up his hand upon the gentiles and set them for a standard as opposed to Isaiah 49 where the hand and the standard are a signal to the gentiles.

In this inventive rereading of the text, the gentiles are no longer just agents of conveying the Israelites to their land, but now take center stage as the standard themselves and those who nurse the Israelites. Smith tells us who these gentiles are: "it meaneth that the time cometh that after all the house of Israel have been scattered and confounded, that the Lord God will raise up a mighty nation among the Gentiles, yea, even upon the face of this land" (1 Ne. 22:7). This mighty nation is the United States.

Finding America in the Old Testament prophecies was not an unusual interpretive move in the nineteenth century. Ethan Smith (again, no direct relation to Joseph), who in 1825—five years before publication of the BM—argued in the second edition of his *View of the Hebrews* that the

American Indians were descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes and should be included in the promises made in the Old Testament prophecies of restoration, believed that Isaiah 18, for example, addressed the "Christian people of the United States of America."²⁷ One of his considerations was that "Some of the greatest and best of divines have thought it would be strange, if nothing should be found in the prophetic scriptures having a special allusion to our western world." Ethan Smith then goes on to discuss other prophetic passages that refer to the gathering of lost Israel from America, and makes the following conclusion:

Such promises of the restoration of Israel from *far countries*, from the *west* or the *going down of the sun*, from the *coasts of the earth*, from the *ends of the earth*, from *isles afar*, their being brought in *ships from far*, making their way in the sea, their path in the mighty waters; these expressions certainly well accord with the ten tribes being brought from America. And such passages imply an agency by which such a restoration shall be effected. Where shall such an agency be so naturally found, as among a great Christian people, providentially planted on the very ground occupied by the outcast tribes of Israel in their long exilement; and who are so happily remote from the bloody scenes of Europe in the last days, as to have leisure for the important business assigned?²⁸

The answer to the rhetorical question is, of course, America. Joseph Smith's interpretation in the BM is solidly in the tradition out of which Ethan Smith writes.

The United States has both negative and positive aspects associated with it in 1 Nephi 22. On the one hand, "by them shall our seed be scattered" (1 Ne. 22:7), i.e., the American Indians are to be removed and relocated by the U.S. government. Hence the theme of scattering is developed beyond the basic issue of dispersal from Jerusalem. This passage, by the way, shows that Joseph Smith considered the Native Americans of North America to be descendants of the BM founding families.

On the other hand, the United States, the "standard,"²⁹ will provide the context for God's "marvelous work," which is primarily the BM.³⁰ This work "will be of great worth unto our seed" (1 Ne. 22:8). The text says that in the prophecy this work "is likened unto their (the Indians') being nourished by the Gentiles and being carried in their arms and upon

27. Ethan Smith, *View*, 228; see 227-50.

28. *Ibid.*, 235 (the originally italicized words cite phrases from scripture).

29. Scott (*Holy Bible*, on Isa 49:22, 23) takes the standard as including "the preaching of the Gospel" and Fawcett (*Devotional Family Bible*, on Isa 49:22) takes it as the "ministry of the word."

30. Compare 2 Ne. 25:17-18, 26; 29:1ff.; 3 Ne. 21:9-11; 28:32-33; and see D&C 4:1; 6:1; 11:1, 12:1; 14:1.

their shoulders" (v. 7). Observe how "nursing" has been transformed into "nourishing" (perhaps a play with the English word) and becomes a primary activity of the gentiles. The text then goes on to say that not only the Indians will benefit, but "it (i.e., the marvelous work, the BM) shall also be of worth unto the Gentiles; and not only unto the Gentiles but unto all the house of Israel, unto the making known of the covenants of the Father of heaven unto Abraham" (v. 9).

The benefits of the BM—a scriptural work—for the Indians resonates with Ethan Smith's exhortation to non-Native Americans to teach the Bible to the Indians. Among other things, note the concern about teaching the Indians about matters involving Abraham:

Remember then your debt of gratitude to God's ancient people for the word of life. Restore it to them [the Indians, who are Israelites] ... Learn them to read the book of grace. Learn them its history and their own. Teach them the story of their ancestors; the economy of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. ... Elevate them ... by showing them ... what is yet to be done by the God of their fathers. ... Inform them that by embracing this true seed of Abraham [i.e., Christ], you and multitudes of other Gentiles, have become the children of that ancient patriarch.³¹

After laying out who will be gathered and who will be an agent of gathering, Joseph Smith goes on to take into account the negative verses at the end of the Isaiah citation (Isa. 49:24-26). The object of this critique, for Smith, is the "great and abominable church, which is the whore of all the earth," i.e., those who are opposed to God's miraculous restoration activities. He takes the reciprocal conflict of the last verse of Isaiah 49 to mean that elements of the abominable church will fight among themselves, "and the blood of that great and abominable church ... shall turn upon their own heads; for they shall war among themselves, and the sword of their own hands shall fall upon their own head, **and they shall be drunken with their own blood**" (1 Ne. 22:13), the bold-type clause being a citation from the Isaiah verse. In Smith's view, as presented in the BM, the great and abominable church includes a wide range of individuals and organizations. Often it is described as the organized Christianity of Smith's day (1 Ne. 13-14). But this "whore of all the earth" (compare 1 Ne. 14:9-10) also "includes all who fight against Zion," which can include Jews as well as gentiles (2 Ne. 10:16). Zion fighters are condemned in 1 Ne. 22:14, 19; this may in part pickup on the Zion theme in Isaiah 49:14. But if so, it should be noted that in the BM Zion has a broader meaning than just Jerusalem and its land. It includes the land of the New World Is-

31. Ethan Smith, *View*, 249. On pp. 254-55 he discusses the *covenant* obligations that pertain to the Israelites.

raelites (2 Ne. 10:10-14) as well as the Old World Zion, and also appears to have a broader metaphorical meaning referring to God's works and plans and his church or people (2 Ne. 6:12-13; 26:29-31). The last meanings are similar to the view of pre-BM commentaries that Zion in chapter 49 refers to the Christian church.³²

In addition to the mention of the great and abominable church and those who fight against Zion, Smith also mentions nations that war against the house of Israel (1 Ne. 22:14) and the wicked in general (vv. 15, 16). These most likely fall under the rubric of the great and abominable church. The mention of the nations in particular, however, may have been due to the political theme of the Isaiah chapters, and the mention of the wicked may arise from the statement in 48:22: "There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked." The last verse of the interpretation provides a contrast: "... Behold, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people shall dwell safely in the Holy One of Israel if it so be that they will repent" (1 Ne. 22:28). The wicked are charted for destruction (v. 22), but the righteous will be "preserved" (v. 17). The latter term and theme may have been partly influenced by the phrase "preserved of Israel" in Isaiah 49:6.

Comparable to Joseph Smith's condemnation of the "great and abominable church" is Ethan Smith's denunciation of European, or European-based, Christianity and institutions. In the passage, cited above, where he indicates that America is the agent of the lost tribes' restoration, he speaks of bloody scenes about to occur in Europe. Later he speaks of America as a land "so distant from the seat of anti-christ and of the judgments to be thundered down on old corrupt establishments in the last days. ... this land of liberty is beginning to feel her distinguishing immunities compared with the establishments of tyranny and corruption in the old continent."³³ Similar to Ethan Smith's view here, Joseph Smith sees America as a land of promise (1 Ne. 2:20; 4:14; 12:1, 4; 13:14; etc.), even a Zion, as observed earlier. Set in opposition to the marvelous work among the gentiles in America is the devil's "great and abominable church." Joseph Smith here again shares and develops within the BM a view of some of his contemporaries.

In his principles for interpreting the prophets, the Reverend John Smith included a short summary of "prophecies still future" which is remarkably similar to the outline of Joseph Smith's interpretation of Isaiah 48-49. In his view, these prophecies indicated that "the Jews will be gathered from their dispersions, restored to their own land, and converted to Christianity; that the fulness of the Gentiles will likewise come in; that Antichrist, Gog and Magog, and all the enemies of the Church will be de-

32. Poole, *Annotations*, on 49:14-21; Scott, *Holy Bible*, on 49:14-16, 17, 18-21; Fawcett, *Devotional Family Bible*, on 49:14, 18, 19.

33. Ethan Smith, *View*, 245.

stroyed. ..."³⁴ Joseph Smith's interpretation of Isaiah 48-49 touches on each of these points. This shows that, to a significant extent, he is echoing what some of his contemporaries thought about the meaning of Isaiah. But some elements of Joseph's interpretation are exceptional. Most notably, he sees an implicit reference to the BM in Isaiah 49. Another distinction is the contextualization of the interpretation in antiquity; this is what sixth-century B.C.E. Nephi has to say about Isaiah. Thus Joseph Smith makes a bidirectional anachronistic exchange of ideas: (a) he applies the prophecies that ideally speak of events that were to occur in the sixth century B.C.E. to the far future, the nineteenth century C.E.; at the same time (b) he casts the questions and the mode of prophetic interpretation of the nineteenth century C.E. back into the sixth century B.C.E. so that it becomes the way the ancient Nephites read the text. This produces a mirrored harmony between past expression and modern interpretation.

INTERWOVEN INTERPRETATION: ISALAH 29 AND 2 NEPHI 26-27

Just as Joseph Smith read the fulfillment of Isaiah 48-49 as pertaining to his time and situation, so he reads Isaiah 29 in 2 Nephi 26-27, and a theme of his exegesis of Isaiah 48-49 reappears: Isaiah 29 speaks of the BM. This, in fact, is one of two prophetic passages from the Old Testament that for Joseph Smith predicted clearly the coming forth of the BM, the other being Ezekiel 37:15-20.³⁵ The sample of exegesis in 2 Nephi 26-27, however, is different from that in 1 Nephi 22: here interpretation is interwoven with the citation of the text. This allows a more detailed, point-by-point, explanation, and with this, a reformulation of the Isaiah text. Since Smith makes the whole of the passage refer to the coming forth of the BM, a concern unique to him, there are no significant parallels (to my knowledge) to his interpretation of Isaiah 29 in the biblical commentaries of his age, in contrast with the situation that exists in his interpretation of Isaiah 48-49.

Isaiah 29 in Its Context

While Isaiah 48-49 come from the sixth century B.C.E., the bulk of

34. John Smith in Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible*, 8.

35. The Ezekiel passage is probably alluded to in 1 Ne. 13:41; 2 Ne 3:12 (note the connection of the Nephites with the tribe of Joseph in the chapter, v. 4); and 29:8. D&C 27:5 (1830) makes clear allusion to it. Smith may not cite the passage in an obvious way in the BM since Ezekiel, even from a traditional perspective, would post-date the departure of Lehi's family from the Old World. On the passage and the BM, see Brian E. Keck, "Ezekiel 37, Sticks, and Babylonian Writing Boards: A Critical Reappraisal," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23 (Spring 1990): 126-38.

Isaiah 29 appears to reflect historical concerns of the eighth century B.C.E., the period of the prophet Isaiah (for possible exceptions, see below).³⁶

Isaiah 29:1-5b: In these verses Jerusalem is under siege. The context is possibly that of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E., as described in the historical chapters of Isaiah (36-38 || 2 Kgs. 18:13-19:37).³⁷ The line that says "it shall be to me as Ariel" (v. 2) might be understood as "it shall be to me as an altar hearth," since the term also has this meaning (Ezek. 43:15, 16). This would figuratively refer to the destruction that could result from the attack.

Verses 5b-8 show that the siege was not successful (see below), hence the figures in v. 4 which seem to indicate the city has succumbed to the attack have to be taken metaphorically. The city's population in v. 4 is compared to ghosts in the underworld, the place of the dead in the Hebrew Bible:³⁸ "You will speak deep from the earth, your speech will be low out of the dirt, your voice will be like a ghost from the earth, your speech will twitter from the dirt." The twittering of ghosts is found in Isaiah 8:19 in a negative context; ghosts or people who use ghosts as a source of information are otherwise condemned in the Bible (Lev. 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deut. 18:11; 1 Sam. 28:3-9; 2 Kgs. 21:6 || 2 Chron. 33:6; 2 Kgs. 23:24). Thus the picture painted is not one of declaring inspired words, but of weakness and being placed in dire straits.

Isaiah 29:5c-8: The siege against Jerusalem is suddenly and miraculously brought to an end. This is probably to be correlated with the miraculous cessation of attack by the Assyrians (compare Isa. 37:33-38 || 2 Kgs. 19:35-37). The attack, from the attackers' point of view, is like a dream where one eats or drinks but is not filled. The agent of the reprieve is God.

Isaiah 29:9-16: Isaiah's responsibility is to a recalcitrant people, and the rhetoric of his divine commission in chapter 6 paints them as unrepentant. Isaiah is there told to say to the people: "Indeed listen, but do

36. On this chapter and First Isaiah, see Ronald E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (New Century Bible; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980); Joseph Jensen and William H. Irwin, "Isaiah 1-39," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 229-48; Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974); Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Interpretation Commentary; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993); Gerald T. Sheppard, "Isaiah 1-39," *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays et al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 542-70; Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1-39: With an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Forms of the Old Testament Literature 16; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); Hans Wildberger, *Jesaja 28-39* (Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament X/1-3; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982).

37. For critically reading the events of these chapters as a single event, see Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (Anchor Bible 11; [New York]: Doubleday, 1988), 223-51.

38. See Theodore J. Lewis, "Dead, Abode of the," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:101-105.

not understand; indeed look, but do not comprehend"; God then tells Isaiah directly to "Make that people's mind heavy, stop its ears, and close its eyes, lest when they look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, they comprehend, repent, and are saved" (6:9-10; compare 28:11-12). Chapter 29 similarly tells the people to be stupefied and blind (v. 9) and explains that God has spread over them a "spirit of deep sleep, [he] has shut your eyes, the prophets, and covered your heads, the seers" (v. 10).

This blindness and repression of revelation is compared in a simile to a document which is sealed. This probably refers to the practice in biblical antiquity of rolling or folding a document, wrapping it with string, and affixing a clay seal to prevent tampering (compare 1 Kgs. 21:8; Jer. 32:10-14). The simile emphasizes the lack of legibility or accessibility in two ways: a person who knows how to read cannot read it because the document cannot be opened, and a person who does not know how to read cannot read the document at all, sealed or open. This simile is not a prophecy, but simply a figure of speech to emphasize the spiritual blindness of Isaiah's people already set out in vv. 9-10. The simile makes perfect sense in the Isaiah context and therefore appears to be its original formulation.

The theme of spiritual incorrigibility continues in vv. 13-14. The people have been hypocritical, honoring God with their lips, but not with their hearts. The result is that the deity is going to do something miraculous (v. 14a; KJV's "marvelous work and a wonder"). This miraculous act is not necessarily positive in view of the previous and immediately following verses (compare also vv. 20-21); it may be a punishment (compare the use of the same Hebrew term to refer to extraordinary punishments in Deut. 28:59).

Verse 15 begins a new subsection reprimanding the people. Some seek to hide their plans from Yahweh. They claim no one sees them. God responds: "How you turn things around! Can the potter be considered (equal to the) clay? Can what is made say to the one who made it 'He did not make me'? Can the vessel formed say to his shaper 'He has no creative talent?'" (v. 16; on this verse, see first section above, point 3).

Isaiah 29:17-24: Blessing, in striking contrast to the foregoing, is now promised for the people. This passage may come from a period later than the first part of the chapter. Certain themes in vv. 17-24 can be related to, and perhaps even were developed from, elements earlier in the chapter: (a) "Tyrants" (*'arits*, v. 20), a term mentioned in v. 5, will cease along with other troublemakers. (b) The deaf will be able to hear even "written words" and the blind will see even in darkness (v. 18; compare Isa. 35:5). The term "written words" does not clearly refer to the document of v. 11; the phrase is indefinite "words of a book." Nevertheless, this may be said to develop the theme of not being able to read in vv. 11-12. The words com-

prehended are apparently the prophetic words of v. 10.³⁹ (c) Those who err will have prudence (*binah*, v. 24). This counters the failure of the prudence of the wise in v. 14.

Inasmuch as certain themes seem developed in vv. 17-24 from vv. 1-16, it is possible that the whole blessing of vv. 17-24 responds to and seeks to interpret what the miraculous act of v. 14 involves. This is a wide-ranging blessing, including agricultural, moral, legal, political, national, and spiritual matters. Thus, though perhaps originally negative, the miraculous act becomes something positive, except of course for the punishment of the wicked in vv. 20-21.

Joseph Smith's Interpretation of Isaiah 29

Chapters 25-27 of 2 Nephi are presented as a continuous interpretive discourse of Nephi coming after the citation of Isaiah 2-14 in 2 Nephi 12-24. Isaiah 29 is cited in the middle of this larger interpretive discourse. The citation begins in 2 Nephi 26:15-16, 18 (=Isa. 29:3-5), without introduction or indication of source, in the middle of a predictive delineation of events relating to the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Smith does not read these verses according to their original context referring to a siege of Jerusalem, but takes them to refer to the afflictions God will impose on the descendants of Nephi and his family.

Of particular note in these first cited verses is that the speaking from the underworld in Isaiah 29:4 is understood to refer to the BM record kept by Nephi and his descendants: even though they are destroyed (and this destruction is to come suddenly; compare 2 Ne. 27:18 and Isa. 29:5), they will "speak unto them out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be as one that hath a familiar spirit; for the Lord God will give unto him power, that he may whisper concerning them, even as it were out of the ground ... They shall write the things which shall be done among them, and they shall be written and sealed up in a book" (2 Ne. 26:16-17; compare 27:13). Thus a passage, which in its original context had a completely negative connotation—in terms of suffering and the ghostly metaphors used—becomes a prophecy of blessing and revelation.

After a digression to other matters, the interpretive citation of Isaiah 29 resumes at the beginning of 2 Nephi 27. In a contextual reading of Isaiah 29, the subject of the visitation in v. 6 is Jerusalem. Smith ignores the context and gives the subject a new referent: "all the nations of the Gen-

39. In fact, the terms "prophets" and "seers" in v. 10 may be additions; if so they may come from the author of v. 18, who would seek to clarify just what the metaphor of God's shutting eyes and heads means in v. 10.

tiles and also the Jews, both those who shall come upon this land and those who shall be upon other lands, yea, even upon all the lands of the earth, behold, they will be drunken with iniquity and all manner of abominations" (2 Ne. 27:1). In sum, all the evil people on earth are those who "shall be visited of the Lord of Hosts" (2 Ne. 27:2; compare the gloss "all ye that doeth iniquity" in 2 Ne. 27:4). This visitation, moreover, is to take place in the last days, i.e., near Smith's time (2 Ne. 27:1). The broadening of the subject of prophecy and contemporizing it with Smith's time is consistent with the BM interpretation of Isaiah 48-49, seen above.

The major innovation in Smith's interpretation of Isaiah 29 is turning the simile of a sealed book in vv. 11-12 into a *prediction* of the BM and relating it to an experience that his aid and supporter Martin Harris had with Charles Anthon, a professor of classical studies and literature at Columbia College, from 1820 until his death in 1867.⁴⁰ According to the 1839 Manuscript History,⁴¹ in February 1828, Harris took a copy of characters which Smith was to have copied from the gold plates, from which the BM was to have been translated. He went to New York and presented the transcript to Anthon. The account claims that Anthon pronounced a translation of some of the characters a correct translation from Egyptian, and upon viewing untranslated characters of the transcript, "he said that they were Egyptian, Chaldeak [sic], Assyriac [sic], and Arabac [sic]; and he said they were true characters." Harris says Anthon gave him a certificate verifying the accuracy of the translation, but when finding out that the gold plates were obtained by revelation from God, he tore up the certificate. Then he said, according to Harris, "that if I would bring the plates to him, he would translate them. <I informed him that part of the plates were sealed, and that I was forbidden to bring them. he [sic] replied 'I cannot read a sealed book' .>"⁴²

The last part of this citation in angle brackets is an insertion into the original manuscript. But the idea expressed is not a late development. In the first history of the events of the early church, written in 1832, the connection with Isaiah 29 is fully developed:

40. On this event, see Stanley B. Kimball, "The Anthon Transcript: People, Primary Sources, and Problems," *BYU Studies* 10 (1970): 325-52. The so-called "Anthon Transcript" with columns of characters with a circular figure, and a statement supposedly from Smith on the back identifying the characters as those taken to Anthon (e.g., Dean C. Jesse, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984], 223-26), is a Mark Hofmann forgery.

41. Dean C. Jesse, *The Papers of Joseph Smith, Volume 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 284-86; published in the *Times and Seasons* 3 (May 2, 1842): 773; a "corrected" edition appears in Joseph Smith, Jr., et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 1:19-20, and the Pearl of Great Price, JS-H 2:64-65.

42. Jesse, *Papers*, 285.

<he> [Martin Harris] immediately came to Su[s]quehanna and said the Lord had shown him that he must go to new York City with some of the c[h]aracters so we proceeded to cobby some of them and he took his Journey to the Eastern Cittys 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 fo<r>bid it and he returned to me and gave them to <me to> translate and I said I said [I] cannot for I am not learned but the Lord had prepared ~~specticke~~ spectacles for to read the Book therefore I commenced translating the characters and thus the Prop[h]jicy of Is<ia>ah was fulfilled with is written in the 29 chapter concerning the book⁴³

In his own reports, found in letters to E. D. Howe (1834) and T. W. Coit (1841),⁴⁴ Anthon admits to the meeting with Harris, but he says he thought the transcript was a fraud from the beginning, denies any real connection with Near Eastern languages, describes in detail the extraordinary facts surrounding the BM's origin and translation related by Harris, and says he warned Harris about being duped. He does not mention anything about the book being "sealed" or anything connectable with Isaiah 29, though in the Coit letter he says that, although he has not paid much attention to Mormonism, "I have often felt a strong curiosity to become an auditor [of Mormon sermons], since my friends tell me that they frequently name me in their sermons, and even go so far as to say, that I am alluded to in the prophecies of scripture!"⁴⁵

It is reasonable, after a critical reading of Anthon's letters together with Smith's and Harris' reports and with several other second-hand accounts that go back to the time not long after the event,⁴⁶ to conclude that Anthon, though properly skeptical from the beginning, found the characters intriguing, speculated openly before Harris about the their possible language connections, and asked Harris to bring the original record from which they were taken. He may have given Harris his guarded opinion in writing.⁴⁷ Harris then told him some of the strange facts associated

43. *Ibid.*, 9 (boldface material is from Joseph Smith's own hand, otherwise it is in the hand of his scribe, Frederick G. Williams; angle brackets indicate addition to original manuscript; square brackets are modern editorial insertions for clarity).

44. Reprinted in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1965 [orig. 1957]), 1:102-107.

45. *Ibid.*, 1:107.

46. See Kimball, "Anthon Transcript," 342-44. For another piecing together of what may have happened, see Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 77.

47. Anthon is contradictory on this matter; in the Howe letter he denies giving a written report, but in the Coit letter he says he gave Harris a document. In the latter letter he says that he gave the note to Harris to warn him and others of the fraud, but interestingly when he recalls what he wrote, it had a much more limited scope: "The import of what I wrote was, and far as I can now recollect, simply this, that the marks in the paper [i.e., the transcript] appeared to be merely an imitation of various alphabetical characters, and had, in my opinion, no meaning at all connected with them." This is quite reserved if Anthon considered the matter bunk from the beginning. It may indicate that he expressed a more positive opinion before he found out about the mystical aspects of the BM.

with the BM's origin and translation and that he could not bring the original. Anthon then came to the conclusion that Harris had certainly been duped and warned him.

Harris may have been happy to ignore the warning, being satisfied with Anthon's speculation about the possible language connections of the transcript, as well as Smith's apparent ability to produce a translation while Anthon could not. As one report which goes back to the time soon after the event says: "Martin returned from his trip east satisfied that 'Joseph' was a 'little smarter than Professor Anthon'."⁴⁸

Harris may have also been happy to ignore any unfavorable judgments that Anthon may have given since the event soon became seen as a fulfillment of the "prophecy" of Isaiah 29:11-12. It is unlikely that, when Harris left for Anthon, either he or Joseph had this passage in mind; i.e., they were not trying to fulfill prophecy. Harris's intent was apparently simply to determine if Smith was a fraud. The event, however, was shortly connected with the prophecy and written into 2 Nephi 27. The books of 1 and 2 Nephi were produced in June-July 1829.⁴⁹ This means that within a year and about four months after Harris's visit to Anthon, Smith came to view the event as the fulfillment of the passage from Isaiah 29. If speculation is permitted, it can be imagined that Smith, who had a significant knowledge of scripture for one unschooled, might have made the association with the biblical chapter as soon as Harris reported that learned Anthon said he could not read or translate the characters.

In any case, 2 Nephi 27—which turns out to be the earliest confidently datable document pertaining the Harris-Anthon meeting and should be used by historians to help cast light on the pair's discussion—shows that the connection with Isaiah 29:11-12 came relatively quickly. Smith's main novelty, as already noted, was reading the passage as a predictive prophecy. Observe this reorientation in 2 Nephi 27:

⁶And it shall come to pass that the Lord God shall bring forth unto you the words of a book ...; ⁷... and ... the book shall be sealed. ... ⁹... the book shall be delivered unto a man [i.e., Smith]. ... ¹⁰But the words which are sealed he shall not deliver, neither shall he deliver [publicly] the book. ... ¹⁵... God shall say unto him to whom he shall deliver the book: Take these words which are not sealed and deliver them to another [i.e., Harris], that he may show them unto the learned [i.e., Anthon], saying: Read this I pray thee. And the learned shall say: Bring hither the book, and I will read them. ¹⁷And the man shall say: I cannot bring the book, for it is sealed. ¹⁸Then shall the learned say: I cannot read it. ¹⁹Wherefore it shall come to pass, that the Lord God will deliver again the book and the words thereof to him that is not learned; and the

48. John H. Gilbert, cited in Kimball, "Anthon Transcript," 342.

49. Brent Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," 413, and passim in Metcalfe, *New Approaches*.

man that is not learned shall say: I am not learned.²⁰ Then shall the Lord God say unto him: The learned shall not read them, for they have rejected them, and I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee.

Besides giving the Isaiah material a future orientation, note how these verses further expand the original sense of the Isaiah passage: (a) The subject who delivers the document in Isaiah 29:11 is indefinite and apparently unimportant. In 2 Nephi 27, two subjects are specified and are absolutely necessary to the context: God delivers the book to the unlearned individual (i.e., Smith; vv. 6, 10, 15, 19), and the unlearned individual delivers the words to Harris (v. 15). (b) In Isaiah the "book" is what is given to the learned person (notice the singular referents *'oto* "it" and *hatum hu* "it is sealed" in v. 11), whereas in 2 Nephi 27:15 only the "words" (i.e., the transcribed words) are given. (c) 2 Nephi 17:15 adds the intermediate stage of delivering the words to Harris who will in turn take them to Anthon. (d) 2 Nephi 27:15-18 add a stage to the confrontation with Anthon: it has him asking for the book and Harris saying he cannot bring it because it is sealed. Only then does Anthon say he cannot read the book. In the earliest historical reports outside the BM, including Anthon's letters, the book's being sealed is not reported as the reason for Harris's not being able to bring it, but rather divine restrictions about who may handle and view it. (e) Isaiah 29:11-12 say simply that the document is sealed. 2 Nephi 27 changes this so that only part of the document is sealed (compare v. 15). (This, by the way, contradicts the learned's claim not to be able to read a sealed book; he should be able to read some of it.) (f) The delivery of the book to the unlearned in Isaiah 29:11-12 comes *after* the delivery to the learned, whereas in Smith's history he is given the record *before* delivery to the learned (2 Ne. 27:9, 15). The delivery to Smith after delivery to Anthon is then made a *second* delivery, accompanied by the adverb "again" (v. 19). A problem accompanying this revision is that the book was never at this point taken from Smith so that it might be redelivered to him. (g) The Isaiah verses give no indication that the unlearned will read the document. In 2 Nephi 27 (passim), the unlearned reads and translates.

The revisions required to make the Isaiah passage fit the Harris-Anthon encounter show that originally it had a significantly different meaning. Smith has readapted the passage to reflect his interests and experiences.

The rest of the 2 Nephi 27 (vv. 25-25) finish the citation of Isaiah 29 (vv. 13-24) with only a few transitional glosses. These last verses, in the BM context, are what God will say to Smith when he "reads the words that shall be delivered him" (2 Ne. 27:24). The "marvelous work" in Isaiah 29:14 (2 Ne. 27:26) becomes, in the context, a prophecy of the coming

forth of the BM. Isaiah 29:18 comes into the service of Smith's reinterpretation when it says, in the KJV, "And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the [sic!] book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness." "The book" is the BM.

CONCLUSIONS

Joseph Smith's approach to and use of Isaiah is not unique in the larger context of Jewish and Christian traditions. As Isaiah and other prophetic works became perceived as authoritative, their passages were reinterpreted to refer to the events and times of later readers. The book of Matthew in the New Testament, for example, cites many prophetic passages and sees their fulfillment in the time of Jesus. A number of these are from Isaiah. The so-called "Immanuel Prophecy" in Isaiah 7:14 is applied to Jesus at his birth (Matt. 1:23); this passage, however, originally referred to events in the eighth century B.C.E., as the larger context shows. The passage about a voice calling out to make a road in the wilderness in Isaiah 40:3 (see modern translations for the correct translation), part of the exodus-from-Babylon motif developed by Second Isaiah (see above), is secondarily applied to John the Baptist (Matt. 3:3). The commission to Isaiah to speak to a spiritually deaf and blind people (Isa. 6:9-10) is seen as a prophecy of the effect of Jesus' speaking in parables (Matt. 13:14-15). The passage about the hypocrisy of the people in Isaiah 29:13 is taken as a prophecy of the attitudes of the Pharisees and scribes (Matt. 15:7-9). Remarkably, Isaiah 6:9-10 and 29:13 are not predictions of the future; but the New Testament writer here turns them into such, much as Smith turned Isaiah 29:11-12 into a prediction.⁵⁰ Smith's approach, therefore, is not new, but follows an age-old impulse, found even among many of the religious thinkers of and just prior to Smith's time, as we have seen, to apply the prophetic works to the reader's own time.

Smith's approach can help explain some of his comments about the difficulty of understanding Isaiah. After citing Isaiah 2-14, he says that "Isaiah spake many things which were hard for many of [Nephi's people] to understand; for they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews ... 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" (2 Ne. 25:1, 5; compare v. 6). This manner of prophesying was, according to

50. Compare also Isa. 8:15 and Matt. 4:15-16; Isa. 42:1-4 and Matt. 12:18-21; Isa. 53:4 and Matt. 8:17; Isa. 62:11 and Matt. 21:5. These are all secondarily applied to the time of Jesus. Outside of Isaiah, compare Hos. 11:1 and Matt. 2:15; Mal. 3:1 and Matt 11:10.

Smith, not one of simplicity. He says elsewhere that "the Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore ... God hath taken away his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand" (Jacob 4:14).

Joseph Smith's views about the lack of clarity in Isaiah were not exceptional. John Smith's tract on the prophetic writings contains similar sentiments, including a negative assessment of Jewish treatment of prophecy:

... Many prophecies are somewhat dark, till events explain them. They are, besides, delivered in such lofty and figurative terms, ... that ordinary readers cannot, without some help, be supposed capable of understanding them. ...

Some prophecies seem as if it were not intended that they should be clearly understood before they are fulfilled. ...

... Some prophecies ... relate to events still future; and these too may be understood in general, although some particular circumstances connected with them may remain obscure till they are fulfilled. If prophecies were not capable of being understood in general, we should not find that the Jews so often blamed in this respect for their ignorance and want of discernment. ...

But this degree of obscurity which sometimes attends prophecy does not always proceed from the circumstances or subject; it frequently proceeds from the highly poetical and figurative style. ...⁵¹

The Reverend Smith goes on to discuss various figurative features of prophecy as well as the feature of parallelistic poetic structure.

While it is true that Isaiah and other prophetic works in the Bible are often obscure and difficult, largely because they are collections of poetic oracles without introductions or other direct context-clarifying information, the particular approach that the two Smiths take toward prophecy leads to an exaggeration of its complexity. Modern critical scholarship, through contextual study of the prophetic works, examination of the nature and content of biblical interpretation throughout Jewish and Christian history, and consideration of the philosophy of interpretation, has come to the conclusion that the biblical prophets spoke primarily to the people of their time and that the punishments and promises they announced were to be imminent rather than distant events.⁵² The horizon

51. John Smith, in Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible*, 7-8. Compare Ethan Smith, *View*, 228: "[Isaiah 18] has been esteemed singularly enigmatical. This circumstance has usually attended the prophecies in proportion to the distance of their events. And they have often been left in silence, or their true intent misapplied, till near the time of their fulfilment."

52. Compare Anthony Hutchinson, "Prophetic Foreknowledge: Hope and Fulfillment in an Inspired Community," *Sunstone* 11 (July 1987): 13-20; reprinted in Dan Vogel, ed., *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 29-42.

of expectation is similar to that which Joseph Smith himself had for the establishment of Mormon Zion in Jackson County, Missouri. This was to happen in the time of the first members of the church, not far in the future (compare the wording of D&C 97; 98; 101; 103; 105). The two Smiths, in contrast, believe that the biblical prophecies speak directly of their time and of the history leading up to it. Much of their perception of complexity and obscurity in the prophets can be seen as due to the imperfect fit between their contemporizing interpretation and the actual, original, and full contextual meaning of the prophetic passages.

Now while the two Smiths share a similar perception about the complexity and even significance of Isaiah, Joseph Smith departs ways with the Reverend at one crucial point. John Smith's goal in writing his tract, was, according to Adam Clarke, to put "within the reach of the common people" the results of biblical scholarship of the time, so that they can better understand the text. Joseph Smith does not appear to believe that learning these technical matters is absolutely necessary. Nephi says that his people "know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews. For I, Nephi, have not taught [his people] many things concerning the manner of the Jews; for their works were works of darkness ... I, Nephi, have not taught my children after the manner of the Jews" (2 Ne. 25:1-2, 6). Joseph Smith, following in the revivalist tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which felt it could reject learning and training in religious matters,⁵³ believes instead that divine inspiration can produce a proper estimate of the text. Nephi says to his untrained people that "the words of Isaiah are not plain unto you, nevertheless they are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy, ..." (2 Ne. 25:4). Indeed, when Nephi provides clarification of Isaiah 2-14, and also of Isaiah 29 as his interpretation proceeds, he is not so much interested in explanation as in prophesying: "but behold, I proceed with mine own prophecy, according to my plainness; in the which I know that no man can err" (2 Ne. 25:7). Interpretation of the prophets for Joseph Smith, therefore, becomes a new act of prophecy.

53. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in America* (New York: Vintage, 1963) 69-74. The BM has both exhortation to gain knowledge by inspiration (e.g., Moro. 10:4) and warnings about being learned (e.g., 2 Ne. 9:28; 26:20; 28:4, 15). Smith strikes an ostensible compromise between the two poles by saying: "to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God" (2 Ne. 9:29).