

# REVIEWS

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## *A Not So Great Commentary*

*Great Are the Words of Isaiah.* By Monte S. Nyman. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981, 309pp., \$6.95.

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The "words of Isaiah" constitute a body of some of the greatest religious literature in existence, both in an aesthetic and a spiritual sense. As Monte S. Nyman correctly points out in his introductory chapter, Isaiah's writings are, or at least should be, of special interest to Latter-day Saints. This is primarily due to the emphasis placed upon them in the Book of Mormon, along with citations in other authoritative Mormon writings. Thus the LDS commentator potentially has a unique advantage in determining the meaning of Isaiah.

Unfortunately, it is this very advantage—the additional light and knowledge resulting from modern revelation—which sets a trap for the Mormon scriptural interpreter. Because of our fixation upon the present dispensation as the fullness of times, the gathering together of all truths into one, we ironically tend to *restrict* the application of ancient scripture to our own era and church. Brother Nyman's commentary is of this all-too-predictable genre. Rather than using the additional sources to broaden our understanding of Isaiah by adding them to the linguistic, cultural and historical studies advocated by D. & C. 88:78–79, he has taken the much easier path which narrows Isaiah into little more than a collection of Mormon proof-texts. Although Nyman casts an occasional glance at alternate versions such as the *Revised Standard* or the *Anchor Bible*, it is only done tentatively. For Nyman, Isaiah has little importance in its ancient historical,

social, cultural or religious context; it is to be interpreted primarily from the viewpoint of modern American Mormons.

Although he recognizes a distinction between application and fulfillment of a prophecy, Nyman goes through Isaiah chapter by chapter, often verse by verse, and focuses on how the Restoration fulfills or is about to fulfill the words of the prophet. The practice of "applying the scriptures to ourselves" is quite legitimate and useful in a community of faith. Mormons such as Nyman are following a Judeo-Christian exegetical tradition evident among the Nephites, the Qumran community, the early Christians and indeed almost all Christian denominations when they read the scriptures as addressed to themselves. It is this universal applicability which is the hallmark of scriptural greatness. The danger is to see such contemporary application as the exclusive correct interpretation or literal fulfillment. Nyman seems oblivious to this problem, and consequently frequently distorts the text.

A Mormon interpretation may be quite valid for a passage like Isaiah 29:11–12, which in light of 2 Nephi 27 appears to be fulfilled specifically in the Martin Harris-Charles Anthon incident. (Nyman of course does not raise the issue of whether or to what extent the incident itself may have influenced Joseph Smith's translation of the corresponding Book of Mormon passage.) Other examples, however, are not quite so clearcut. Isaiah 5:8 reads:

Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth.

Nyman sees this as a warning against central government control, which led to Judah's scattering and desolation. This

immediate interpretation is questionable enough, but for Nyman it is only the surface meaning. Actually, he confidently informs us, this passage is really directed against the movement toward socialism in our own day, which would preclude private ownership of property and thus the Law of Consecration and stewardship. In case you are confused by this train of thought, Nyman explains that to "join house to house" is socialistic. May we conclude from this that there will be no condominiums in the Millennium?

Nyman's standard approach to a passage in Isaiah, however, involves a minimum of risk: follow the brethren. He rarely ventures beyond the safety of previous applications of Mormon scriptures or pronouncements by church leaders, with little attempt at examining their validity or appropriateness. Of Isaiah 3:12, he reports, "Isaiah's statement about 'children' oppressing Judah and causing them to err was used by Elder Ezra Taft Benson as a warning to the women of the Church against the sinful practices of birth control and abortion." This is a very creative application of a passage which tells of the coming crisis of leadership and breakdown of authority in Judah.

At least the attempts at explicit interpretation such as those just cited, however far-fetched, have the merit of involving the reader's faculties to think about the passage in question. Elsewhere Nyman simply paraphrases verses with no attempt at analysis, or digresses into a kind of free association. Consider his comment on Isaiah 6:8:

Isaiah's volunteering exemplifies the great desire one feels to serve the Lord when one comes under the influence of the Spirit. Peter was determined to follow Christ wherever he went, even to the laying down of his own life (see John 13:36-37). It is true that he later denied the Savior, as Christ had prophesied, but after the Holy Ghost came upon Peter, he did lay down his life for Christ.

This sort of thing may be very edifying in the author's BYU religion classes, but readers may wonder how much they are learning about the book of Isaiah.

Calling this a "scriptural commentary" apparently offers Nyman the ideal vehicle for his rambling, disjointed style, because he feels no need to seek for an overall theme or organization in holy writ, and thus no necessity to organize his thoughts. But even as a devotional or apologetic guide, the book is awkward to use, since Nyman only occasionally quotes the subject text. The reader must spread out two books, Nyman's and a Bible, alongside each other in order to follow along.

What the book does offer is a collection of tables and indices on the *uses* or interpretation of Isaiah in Mormon sources, including the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* and, selectively, writings and speeches of General Authorities. It is regrettable that this appendix was not expanded into a full-scale topical and historical analysis of Mormon interpretation of Isaiah.

Such an approach could have opened up opportunities for a new level of understanding of how we obtain as well as interpret scripture, particularly with regard to the Book of Mormon. Sydney B. Sperry has made some contributions in this area, but Nyman's one-sided approach is too dogmatic to advance real solutions to the questions that arise. Nyman can't quite make up his mind how to defend the messianic application of the famous "virgin birth" prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. First he argues on the basis of similar Book of Mormon prophecies, then on the endorsement of Matthew's citation of the Septuagint (Greek version), and then on a less-than-cogent contextual argument. It is a scatter-gun effect which hits everything but the scholarly objection itself.

Another major disappointment is his failure to shed new light on the question of who wrote Isaiah. Although the single authorship of Isaiah is now almost universally rejected, Mormons have a special insight (or problem) on this issue. The Book of Mormon, drawing upon the brass plates which were taken from Jerusalem c. 600 B.C., quotes not only from chapters 1-39 ('First Isaiah,' attributed to the actual 8th-century prophet),

but also includes several citations from chapters 40–55, now designated ‘Second Isaiah,’ by scholars and dated c. 500 B.C., a century after Lehi’s party left the scene. Contrary to Nyman’s assertion, these Book of Mormon citations do not conclusively establish the complete unity of Isaiah, even on LDS assumptions. In fact, the major textual argument used to date Second Isaiah is the mention of Cyrus, the Persian King who decreed the Jewish return from their Babylonian Captivity (c. 537), by name in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1. Since these passages are not cited in the Book of Mormon, it remains entirely possible that the material in Second Isaiah was edited at the later date, and that Cyrus was specified in retrospect of the fulfilled prophecy. This would explain both the specific naming of a secular king in a religious prophecy (a feature without scriptural parallel), and the difference in style and emphasis. The Jewish transmitters or teachers responsible for this editing would have been merely applying the scriptures to their own situation, which was a perfectly legitimate practice, as we noted earlier.

Even more striking is the absence of any quotations from chapters 55–66 of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, since there is still some scholarly disagreement as to the distinct identity of a ‘Third Isaiah.’ Considering the focus upon the future and final restoration of Israel in these latter chapters, and the commonality of themes with the Nephite prophets, it is surprising that Moroni or his predecessors didn’t cite any of this portion of Isaiah if it was indeed at hand. Nyman’s argument is that since “the Savior himself” quotes Isaiah 61:1–2 (in Luke 4:17–19), and that passages from ‘Third Isaiah’ are quoted by Paul and cited several times in the Doctrine and Covenants, there can be no question that these chapters are from Isaiah himself. Even assuming the incident described by Luke is historical in detail, the ascription of Jesus’ quote to “the prophet Esaias” is by Luke the narrator, not Christ himself. Moreover, the possibility remains that Jesus knew he was quoting from a later source or version, or even that he mistake-

only assumed, as did Luke, that the words were Isaiah’s verbatim. As for the Doctrine and Covenants quotations from the latter part of Isaiah, Nyman acknowledges that they do not name the prophet himself as their source. This is automatically taken as proof that the Lord knew there was no need to correct the attribution to Isaiah. Nyman thus ignores the pertinent questions on this issue. To what extent does this silence on the source reflect Joseph Smith’s assumptions, or divine accommodation to the contemporary level of understanding? Why should ‘Third Isaiah’ be invalidated or considered less prophetic than its namesake if it was written later than previously supposed? In fact, the Book of Mormon’s omission of any citations from Isaiah 55–66 provides a striking “argument from silence” in favor of the Third Isaiah theory.

Frankly, I am baffled by the growing attitude among Mormons that insist on such a conservative, anti-scholarly interpretation of the scriptures, evidence to the contrary be damned. Are we to subscribe to the fundamentalist “verbal-inspiration” dogma that every word is dictated (in King James English) by the Holy Spirit, and that all of our received traditions and texts are infallible? Ironically, Joseph Smith was perhaps the first religious leader to dispute this belief in modern times with his radical assertion that the biblical text suffers from corruptions, deletions and mistranslations, that parts were not inspired at all, and that it needed drastic revision. Even though he claimed the Book of Mormon to be “the most correct of any book on earth,” it is clear from the title page on that it contains “faults” which must be attributed to “the mistakes of men.” A refusal to recognize the limitations of scripture is, it seems to me, a manifestation of spiritual insecurity inconsistent with the claim to knowledge “beyond the shadow of a doubt,” and with our avowed ongoing quest for truth. Nyman’s book on Isaiah does not expand our understanding of the truth; it rather reinforces the safe truths—and errors—of the past.