

Each essay within this volume is worth acknowledgment for its profound impact. As I sat in my office and read through the accounts of sorrow, hope, grief, and love, I was met by the comfort of forty-six individuals who offered their story as a guiding light for life's journey. I would recommend this volume to anyone, Mormon or otherwise, who seeks the knowledge that they are not alone.



The Empty Space between the Walls

Joseph M. Spencer. *The Vision of All: Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record*. Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2016. 298 pp. Paper: \$25.95. ISBN: 9781589586321.

Reviewed by Mark D. Thomas

The intellectual strength of Mormon scholarship lies in the academic study of its own history. As important as the study of that history is, less than one percent of the world's population has any interest in it. If Mormonism wishes to become more than a local sect, if it wishes to become a global religion, it must stop being so self-absorbed and start speaking a moral language comprehensible to a larger portion of the world. The Hebrew Bible would make a wise starting point for engaging in global moral dialogue and influence. The Hebrew Bible is accepted by three billion people across the globe, nearly half the world's population. The influence of the book of Isaiah is already an important part of that moral and artistic dialogue in the world—in famous pieces of high art, in European cathedrals, in works of feminist exegesis, in articles by liberation theologians and environmentalists, and even in

the lyrics of Bob Dylan. Knowing Isaiah better would also change the writing of Mormon history. Mormon history, sermons, publications, and revelations are full of unnoticed echoes from Isaiah. The writing of Mormon history would be very different with a better understanding of Isaiah. Mormon history itself would be very different without the Hebrew prophet.

Mormonism's traditions of reading, alluding to, quoting, and echoing Isaiah provide us with ambivalent perspectives. On the one hand, Mormonism provides us with a creative and prophetic midrash on Isaiah of great value and creativity that speaks to a modern populist reader. On the other hand, Mormonism's treatment of Isaiah is largely devotional, isolated, sect-like, and genuinely embarrassing to anyone familiar with mainstream scholarship on the Hebrew Bible. With few exceptions, we do not have the competence to engage anyone in a discussion of Isaiah beyond the local ward Sunday School teacher. This is the general context as Joseph Spencer enters the room with his examination of Nephi's reading of Isaiah. How does Spencer fare?

First, style. Spencer tries to engage the reader by using the very informal style of a casual lecture. "Yikes! We've gone down a rather long tangent here, haven't we?" (23). Call me old fashioned, but this is one of the most distracting and annoying styles that I have ever read in any book. It seriously gets in the way of my reading and appreciating Spencer's book. And there is much to appreciate in his book.

Second, scholarship and theology. In addition to consulting mainstream biblical scholarship, Spencer brings in a careful reading of textual variants of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, the original chapter structure, and text of the Book of Mormon to explore the Nephite view of Isaiah. His advocacy of mainstream scholarship is laudable, but he recommends sticking to very conservative scholars. He thus avoids serious discussion of the revolution in scholarship on Isaiah that has taken place during the past few decades, which has witnessed a major paradigm shift in studies on Isaiah. The trend is no longer to view Isaiah as a single text

or a text segmented into two or three simple authors. Current scholars see a careful and prolonged organizing of the book; there is compelling internal evidence of creative compiling, editing, reinterpreting, reapplying, emending, and adding to the text over a period of at least four centuries before it became relatively stable sometime in the second temple period, after 530 BCE. Rather than a book, Isaiah is often seen today by many of those who study it most competently as an anthology whose authors are often inconsistent.

Spencer is not neutral about critical scholars. Since he does not speak Hebrew, Spencer flatly states that he is not competent to assess David Wright's work on the Hebrew Bible and so avoids the issues that Wright raises entirely (98). But as a philosopher, he is not above committing the ad hominem fallacy, by labeling Wright's work as "antagonistic" (95–96). As a philosopher, it would be better for Spencer to stick to Hebrew rather than to commit the most common logical fallacy.

Also, as a philosopher, Spencer's interest in Isaiah is to interpret Isaiah under uniform, theological themes. This is a perfectly legitimate approach. In this he is following the lead of Brevard Childs in calling for a theology based on the final state of the text. But Spencer's theology ignores careful exegesis. For example, he is very interested in the Abrahamic covenant, which (according to Spencer) is a central theme throughout Isaiah. The problem with this approach is that there are multiple and very different notions of covenant in Isaiah, not just one. The Abrahamic covenant is present primarily in the later chapters. Earlier chapters represent varying notions of covenant.¹ The weight of Spencer's building has exceeded the strength of its foundation.

Third, Christ and Isaiah. According to Spencer, there are kings, and deliverers, but no Messiah, as Christians conceive of one, in Isaiah. "*Stop looking for Jesus in Isaiah . . .* Isaiah's chief purpose wasn't to predict the Messiah" (33–34). Spencer thinks that the Messiah is there in some small

1. See Marvin A. Sweeney, *TANAK: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 7, 269–92.

form, but only rarely and obliquely. Spencer argues that in the original Isaiah there is almost no unambiguous passage pointing to anything like Jesus as Christ (203–14). According to Spencer, Nephi’s whole reason for quoting Isaiah is to explore one, grand theological theme: the redemption and expansion of Israel (285).

But Nephi tells us otherwise. He quotes Isaiah extensively to explicitly prove the divinity and atonement of Christ. Spencer states that Nephi is largely mistaken in his Christocentric reading of Isaiah. Spencer is right. Yet, Spencer supports Nephi’s rereading of Isaiah because he had “the spirit of prophecy.” In fact, Nephi’s interpretation is exemplary in Spencer’s mind.

Fourth, interpretive methodology. The book appeals to a very useful methodology. In addition to consulting mainstream biblical scholarship, Spencer brings a careful reading of textual variants of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, the original chapter structure, and text of the Book of Mormon to explore the Nephite view of Isaiah.

Fifth, midrash of Nephi. The most important contribution of Spencer’s book is to try to distinguish how the original intent of Isaiah differs from Nephi’s reading of Isaiah. This approach is not original, as we shall see. But Spencer’s attempt at making such a distinction is well worth the price of the book. The distinction is also fundamental to reading the Book of Mormon well.

Spencer offers an extension of what has been happening in Mormon studies in the past few decades. He does not trace that history in this work. Let us take Isaiah 29 as an example of how he distinguishes Isaiah from Nephi’s reading of Isaiah. There is wide acceptance among non-Mormon readers of Isaiah that the plain and simple meaning of Isaiah 29 is as a prophecy of an enemy assault on ancient Jerusalem. The Isaiah text is very clear that that is its plain meaning. Nevertheless, the conventional and widely held Mormon reading of this chapter is as a simple and direct prophecy of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the Mormon Restoration in the last days. The voice from the dust

and the sealed book in Isaiah 29 are understood in this conventional Mormon view to be Isaiah's prophecy of the Book of Mormon. Verses 11–12 in this chapter are understood in the conventional Mormon view as a remarkable prophecy by Isaiah of the visit of the Mormon disciple Martin Harris to Charles Anthon of Columbia College in 1828 to discuss a sealed book—the gold plates.

The Book of Mormon espouses this conventional Mormon understanding of Isaiah 29. Sidney Sperry is typical of this Mormon conventional position when he states that “well-meaning scholars and commentators have misconstrued most of Isaiah's words” in Isaiah 29. Mormon apostle Mark E. Petersen agreed and stated that “only the Latter-day Saints” can interpret Isaiah 29 as a prophecy of the last days, without typology or double meaning. This traditional Mormon reading of chapter 29 has been remarkably intact and uniform throughout Mormonism from the 1820s (before the Book of Mormon) down to the present day among Mormon leaders, commentators, and scripture.

However, in the past few decades, a small group of revisionist Mormon authors (including Spencer) have been influenced by conservative Christian scholarship when interpreting Isaiah 29. This new Mormon interpretation of Isaiah 29 sees it as being fulfilled in one or more sieges of Jerusalem by Assyria, Babylon, and Rome. These authors portray the traditional Mormon interpretation as a secondary, creative rereading of the original meaning of the text of Isaiah.

Spencer concludes that Nephi is totally misreading the original authorial intent of Isaiah 29, which is describing a siege of Jerusalem. According to Spencer, Nephi does “*some mangling of Isaiah's text. Who doesn't?*” (276). But Spencer gives Nephi his interpretive blessing in misreading Isaiah, because he has been given the “spirit of prophecy.” According to Spencer, Nephi is our model for reading Isaiah well (289–92).

There are many ways to understand texts, especially scriptural texts, with typology, spiritualizing, allegory, reader response, and so forth. I

would be willing to give Spencer the benefit of the doubt in his unusual interpretive methods, if he were consistent. But he is not.

Here is one example. The Book of Mormon is an advocate of a well-known method of reading prophecy on two levels: the literal/historical level and the spiritual/mystical level. Nephi interprets his own dream of the tree of life with this two-tiered method (1 Nephi 22:1–3). But Spencer encourages us to dismiss Nephi’s method, when he tells us to avoid “mystical” readings of Isaiah (35). So is Nephi’s method for reading Isaiah legitimate, according to Spencer? I do not know.

It is clear that Spencer’s work on this topic is not finished. I hope he continues on the topic. He is making nice strides, even when he trips into an empty room. But whether his edifice is the lighthouse that guides that voyage or just a grand edifice of sand on the shore, will now largely depend on the empty space it created and on who gathers there.