

INTERPRETER

— ∞ —
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 29 · 2018 · Pages 227 - 246

Isaiah 56, Abraham, and the Temple

Taylor Halverson

Offprint Series

© 2018 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at MormonInterpreter.com. You may subscribe to this journal at MormonInterpreter.com/annual-print-subscription.

ISAIAH 56, ABRAHAM, AND THE TEMPLE

Taylor Halverson

Abstract: *In the days of the first Israelite temple, only certain individuals were allowed into the temple and sacrificial services; foreigners and eunuchs were excluded. However, in Isaiah 56:1–8, formerly excluded individuals are invited into the presence of God at the temple. This paper will explore how metaphorically connecting Isaiah's words with Abraham, the eponymous father of the covenant faithful, may demonstrate that even the most unlikely candidates for the presence of God are like Abraham; they too will inherit the ancient covenants according to their faithfulness.*

In the most basic sense, God's everlasting covenant is represented by these things: a promised land, priesthood, posterity, to be blessed, and to be a blessing to others (Genesis 12:1–3).¹ All God's children have access to these promises. But how does reading Isaiah 56 with Abraham in mind make the case that all people can be heirs to God's promises? Primarily, Abraham is an excellent example of one who practiced fidelity to God and received a fullness of God's promises. However, had Abraham lived during the first temple period (ca. 10th century BC to 6th century BC) — according to a metaphorical interpretation of biblical law to be explained a bit further into the paper — he may have been excluded from the temple and sacrificial services (Exodus 12:43–45; Leviticus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:1–3).² Only later were such exclusionary prohibitions

1. Throughout this paper, God's everlasting covenant to Abraham will be expressed interchangeably with the phrases *everlasting covenant*, *God's promises*, *God's covenants*, *the Abrahamic promise*, and *the Abrahamic covenant*.

2. In this paper, I use the words *stranger* and *foreigner* interchangeably. I speak of Abraham in a semantic category of being a stranger or a foreigner. I also interpret the Deuteronomy 23 exclusion of foreigners from the temple (Ammonites and Moabites) to represent strangers and foreigners in general who, not being letter

lifted (see Isaiah 56). What are the qualities of Abraham that possibly would have excluded him from the temple? He was like a stranger or a foreigner in the land of Canaan (Abraham 1–2; Genesis 12). And he was like a eunuch, incapable of having posterity with his wife Sarah until there was miraculous intervention (Genesis 11:30; 21:3).

In this article, I'll review the story of Abraham and the covenantal promises that God offered him. I'll then explore Isaiah 56:1–8 verse by verse to call upon the memory of Abraham to argue that all people, even those considered most excluded from the promises of God, as symbolized by exclusion or inclusion to the temple, will be brought into the fold if they are willing to practice justice (keep the *torah* = law of God) and observe the Lord's sabbaths.³

Abraham: Exemplar of Covenantal Faithfulness

One of the best starting points to lay the foundation for understanding God's everlasting covenant is with the story of Abraham.⁴ In this story, readers learn of God's promises, his testing the faith of Abraham, the faithful response by Abraham, and the eventual fulfillment of all promises. The story of Abraham essentially begins in Genesis 12 when God speaks to Abraham, commanding him to leave his homeland. Without much explanation, God also guarantees Abraham's posterity,

of the law Israelites, would be excluded from the temple. Using this reasoning, had Abraham been alive during the first temple period, letter of the law interpretations of biblical law may have, ironically, identified Abraham as a non-Israelite. There are a variety of Hebrew words that underlie the English *stranger* or *foreigner* in the King James Version translation of the Bible. In Genesis 15:13 God calls Abraham a *ger*, a Hebrew word with the basic meaning of *stranger*, *newcomer*, *sojourner*, *temporary dweller*. Other Hebrew words underlying the English words *stranger* and *foreigner* are *zar* (a stranger to a family or household, one who is not part of the family or tribe) and *nekar* (a foreigner, pertaining to another tribe or family). Isaiah 56 uses *nekar* repeatedly, not *ger*. And Deuteronomy 23 does not use the words *ger*, *nekar*, or *zar* specifically. Instead, a certain class of strangers or foreigners to Israel are identified: ancient enemies or antagonists of Israel, the Ammonites and Moabites.

3. Living God's law qualifies one for the fullness of God's promises, for then one is living the stipulations of the covenant. The theme of the law of God (such as the *torah* or the 10 commandments) serving as the stipulations of a divine treaty or covenant between God and his people is explored in RoseAnn Benson and Stephen D. Ricks, "Treaties and Covenants: Ancient Near Eastern Legal Terminology in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005), 48–61.

4. There are several key scriptural episodes that constitute the pronouncement of the Abrahamic promises: Genesis 12:1–3, 13:14–17, 15:1, 15:5, 17:1–9, 22:17–18; Abraham 1:1–4, 1:16, 1:18–19, 2:6, 2:8–11, 2:19, 3:12, 3:14.

a promised land, and endless blessings. These are promises anyone would aspire to obtain. Curiously, in the Genesis version of the Abraham story, God pronounces the covenant blessings without any indication as to why Abraham was the chosen recipient. Only as his life story plays out in Genesis do we see Abraham's consistent faithfulness to the Lord, which qualifies him for the promised blessings.

The contrast between the introductions to the character of Abraham in Genesis and the Book of Abraham is stark. The Book of Abraham gives us a more robust introduction into the character and righteous desires of Abraham *before* God interacts with Abraham. We learn in Abraham 1:2 that Abraham, having been "a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of peace, and desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God, [he] became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers." In all likelihood, Abraham went to the temple to receive a fullness of these blessings. However, later Israelite laws (Exodus 12:43–45; Leviticus 22:25; Deuteronomy 23:1–3) might have excluded someone like Abraham from the temple and sacrificial services, the very place where he most likely would have encountered fulfillment of these righteous desires.

As Abraham 1 continues we learn that wicked priests targeted Abraham for execution. God came to save him with these words, "Abraham, Abraham, behold, my name is Jehovah, and I have heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee, and to take thee away from thy father's house, and from all thy kinsfolk, into a strange land which thou knowest not of" (Abraham 1:16). Then the promise from God, "I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee" (Abraham 1:18). Core themes in these verses include "put upon thee my name" and "strange land." We'll explore these themes further in Isaiah 56:1–8 to demonstrate that even though Abraham was metaphorically a stranger and a eunuch, characteristics that could potentially exclude one from the temple, according to certain readings of Israelite law (e.g., Exodus 12, Leviticus 22, Deuteronomy 23), he still qualified for God's covenant. Abraham had full access to the temple and to the promises of God. Isaiah speaks comfort to those who worry they may be excluded from the temple and God's promises; if they keep the law of God and his sabbaths, they will be invited in. If they are faithful

like Abraham, they receive the promises of Abraham, which are fully expressed in the temple.

Instructive Irony in the Abrahamic Promises and the Story of Abraham

The promise of land and posterity pervade the Abraham story and are key elements of God's everlasting covenant. Ironically, these are the very aspects of the divine promises to Abraham that appear to be most in jeopardy throughout the Abraham story. Why? Because Abraham is like a stranger in the land and is like a eunuch who cannot have children.

Isaiah promises such individuals (strangers and eunuchs) that they can be admitted into God's temple and receive his everlasting name. I see a compelling and instructive connection to Abraham in the words of Isaiah. Let us review Abraham's position as a stranger and a eunuch of sorts and learn from the instructive irony that the Abraham story presents to us.

Abraham was commanded to leave his homeland and wander as a stranger in a new land (Genesis 12:1–3). Then as now, strangers or foreigners often struggled in new lands to adapt to new cultures, languages, environments, peoples, laws, and social networks and norms. Being a stranger was seldom seen as an advantage. Strangers were often on the margins of society with little to no access to “blessings” the larger society had to offer.⁵ Strangers usually had no legal right to land or inheritance. And if they had no posterity, they would have no one to maintain their memory or family,⁶ no one to provide them proper burial rights.⁷ Not only did Abraham arrive as a stranger in his promised land, when he arrived the land was blighted with devastating famine (Genesis 12) — not very promising! Again he uprooted, leaving behind his new homeland to become a stranger in the land of Egypt.

In addition to being a wandering stranger in and out of his promised land, the blessings of posterity also eluded him. Abraham and Sarah

5. The story of Ruth in the Old Testament is an excellent example of how a stranger is at the mercy of the individuals in the host nation. Ruth was a Moabitess herself, one specifically called out in Deuteronomy 23 for exclusion from the temple.

6. We see this principle in action — of the importance of a posterity for maintaining the memory of parents or family — with the words of Boaz in reference to why he married Ruth: “Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: ye *are* witnesses this day” (Ruth 4:10).

7. Genesis 23, 24:10, 35:19, 47:29–31, 50:5–14.

were barren (Genesis 11:30). This major obstacle to the fulfillment of God's promises was only later rectified through divine intervention (Genesis 21). Significantly, God tested this promise to Abraham as well. As soon as Abraham arrived in Egypt, Pharaoh took Sarah away (Genesis 12). How could Abraham have posterity without his covenant wife? Sarah was later liberated. But sometime after Abraham and Sarah returned prosperous to the Promised Land, the famine having abated, king Abimelech took Sarah from Abraham with the intent to make her his wife (Genesis 20). Once again, the promise of posterity was put in peril only to be resolved after a period of testing. Though Abraham and Sarah are often revered for their faithfulness, God truly put to the test their trust in him and their trust in his promises.

On other occasions, Abraham and Sarah attempted to fulfill God's promises on their own. Abraham adopted his servant Eliezer as his son and heir (Genesis 15). God came to Abraham to reaffirm the covenantal promises and explain that they would be fulfilled in other ways. Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as a means to have posterity (Genesis 16). Though God had blessings in store for Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 16:10), God clarified that he would yet fulfill his promise to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:19). Indeed he did, through the birth of Isaac. But soon thereafter God put Abraham to test yet again, commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, his beloved son (Genesis 22). The subsequent salvation of Isaac is well-known. What is central to the story is that God faithfully fulfills his promises to his servants if they trust in him and live his law.

As can be seen there is much irony in the Abraham story. Abraham is introduced as the man of promise. God offers him all that a righteous individual could desire. And yet at every turn, those blessings are just out of reach or potentially put in jeopardy. However, Abraham trusted the Lord and eventually realized all his righteous desires. Because of his faithfulness, Abraham has become an example for millions of people throughout the ages that even the most unlikely of individuals can have God's divine name securely in their lives, granting them access to God's greatest blessings. These blessings are symbolically represented by returning to the presence of the Lord in his temple.

Exclusion from the Temple

Before we can appreciate the nature of the message of Isaiah 56, we must first understand how aspects of the Law of Moses may have placed significant barriers against entry into the temple or sacrificial services for some types of individuals. One scholar explains, "Although all Israel

must keep a heightened level of moral and ritual purity, there are indeed gradations of holiness as one more closely approaches the divine presence. One finds a ring-like structure in Priestly texts in which God occupies the holy of holies, with the high priest at the next level of holiness. At a lower level are the other priests who work in the sanctuary, who in turn are followed by the Levites who maintain, move, and guard God's sanctuary. Finally, one has the other Israelite tribes along with anyone else residing in the Holy Land, which is the land made holy by God's presence."⁸

In addition to this layering of admissibility to the temple, certain categories of people were barred from the presence of God and hence from the fullness of his blessings. Several Old Testament quotes should help to establish this reality, "He that is wounded in the stones, or hath his privy member cut off, shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD. A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to his tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of the LORD. An Ammonite or Moabite [i.e., a foreigner] shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD for ever" (Deuteronomy 23:1–3).

Deuteronomy 23 seems to exclude certain classes of people from the temple. Anyone who was a non-Israelite, that is, a foreigner or a stranger is excluded (in this passage the non-Israelites are identified as Ammonites and Moabites, historic enemies of Israel). Also excluded are eunuchs, that is, someone who could not procreate. They were permanently barred from the temple.

Other Old Testament passages also appear to exclude strangers or foreigners from temple or sacrificial services. For example, Exodus 12:43–45 gives instructions about who is included or excluded from the Passover sacrificial rituals, "And the LORD said unto Moses and Aaron, This *is* the ordinance of the passover: There shall no stranger eat thereof: But every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof. A foreigner and an hired servant shall not eat thereof." We read later in this chapter that only foreigners who convert to the worship of Yahweh (through circumcision) and thus are no longer considered foreigners will be allowed to keep the Passover.

Later we read in Leviticus 22:25, in the context of instructions to priests regarding how to enact the sacrifices at the temple, "Neither from a stranger's hand shall ye offer the bread of your God of any of these; because their corruption *is* in them, *and* blemishes *be* in them: they shall not be accepted for you" (emphasis added). Again, a stranger is barred

8. Joel S. Kaminsky, "Loving One's (Israelite) Neighbor: Election and Commandment in Leviticus 19," *Interpretation* 62, no. 2 (April 2008): 126.

from offering the sacrifice, though apparently the priest could make the sacrifice *on behalf* of the stranger or foreigner.

In light of these Old Testament passages, Isaiah's message was revolutionary that God's "house shall be called an house of prayer for *all* people" (Isaiah 56:7, emphasis added) and that those individuals formerly barred from the temple and sacrificial services are now openly admitted.

Isaiah 56:1–8

I have introduced Abraham as an exemplary faithful follower of God and yet one who may have been excluded from the first Israelite temple according to some Mosaic laws. I'll now explore Isaiah 56:1–8, interpreting these verses in light of the Abraham story. I'll also consider additional themes and ideas in these Isaiah passages, connecting them to Abraham and other illustrative scriptures where appropriate. Major themes are justice and judgment; servants, strangers, and eunuchs; sabbaths and covenants; and everlasting names and memorials.

Isaiah 56:1

Isaiah 56 opens with statements that God's redemptive salvation is near to come and therefore everyone should prepare, which nicely echoes the themes in the opening chapter of Isaiah:

Zion shall be redeemed
with judgment [justice],
and her converts [repentant people]
with righteousness. (Isaiah 1:27)

Those who practice justice and righteousness toward others and themselves will find redemption through the justice and righteousness of the Lord. Abraham was certainly one who exercised righteous judgment with the intent to help redeem others as demonstrated by his bargaining with the Lord to save Sodom and Gomorrah if but ten righteous individuals were found in the cities (Genesis 18:23–33)

Isaiah 56:2

Isaiah 56:2 further describes the state of those who keep judgment and do justice. They are blessed, they keep the sabbath, and they eschew evil. The importance of sabbath observance will be addressed in the Isaiah 56:4 section of the paper. Let us focus a moment on the phrase, "blessed is the man." It also appears in Psalm 1. This psalm serves as the overriding

thesis statement for the entire book of Psalms and contains direct links to the message of Isaiah 56 as well as subtle connections to Abraham.

Several valuable insights can be drawn from Psalm 1 that relate to Isaiah 56 and to Abraham. Through God's miraculous intervention, Abraham brought "forth his fruit [i.e., the promised child Isaac] in his season," in the season that God had ordained. Furthermore, God prospered Abraham in all things (Genesis 13:2; 14:18–20; 20:15–16; 21:22; 22:17–18). Psalm 1 also identifies the blessed man as the one who delights in the law of the Lord. The Hebrew word *torah* underlies the English word *law* in Psalm 1. The law of the Lord (*torah*) can refer to any and all of the laws of God, though over the centuries interpreters have often equated *torah* specifically with the Law of Moses, especially as found in the Five Books of Moses. That man who meditates day and night on the *torah* is compared to a fruitful tree planted by living waters. This tree will live, grow, prosper, and never die. Such imagery echoes themes in Isaiah 56. Indeed, the Lord tells the eunuch of Isaiah 56:3 not to call himself a dry tree. Instead the eunuch who keeps the Lord's sabbaths will be more prosperous than if he had many sons and daughters. So too, Abraham was for a time like a eunuch, not able to have children. But eventually Abraham had many children. He became like a fruitful tree planted by the rivers of water.⁹

Isaiah 56:3

Isaiah 56:3 introduces readers to two key constituents who desired to come to the Lord in his temple but had legitimate reasons for voicing their concerns that they would be excluded. The stranger worries that he will be separated from the people of God and thus be cut off from the presence of God while the eunuch identifies the cause of his inadmissibility into the temple. I have already established thematic linkages between Abraham and each of these constituencies. To make those thematic connections more apparent, let us consider additional Abrahamic passages from Genesis.

In Genesis 17, God visits Abraham, now nearly 100 years old, and renews the promise that he will have land and posterity. To provide evidence for the promises, God renames Abraham (from Abram) and says, "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto

9. Significantly, at times in the Bible trees represent life, even eternal life (see Genesis 1:9). The fruit of trees may represent posterity or the ability of the lineage of that tree to be perpetuated potentially indefinitely.

thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God” (Genesis 17:7–8).

This Genesis passage plays upon themes of Abraham’s foreignness in the Promised Land. But that quality of Abraham does not preclude access to “everlasting possessions” or knowledge that “I will be their God.” So too, Isaiah argues, is it for the foreigner who “hath joined himself to the Lord.”¹⁰

Perhaps the eunuchs would find comfort in remembering Abraham. Concerned about being “dry trees,” they could look to Abraham who “planted a grove [of trees] in Beersheba [at the seven wells], and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God” (Genesis 21:33). Just as Abraham called on the name of God and received God’s promises, so too could faithful eunuchs hope for such blessings from the Lord.

Isaiah 56:4

After Isaiah identified the concerns followers of God had in preceding verses, he transitions to explain in concrete terms what God expects of the faithful. In summary, God expects observance of sabbaths, attentiveness to things that please him, and holding fast to covenants. We will consider briefly here the sabbaths and why this requirement was so essential for access to God.

Keeping the sabbath was a sign of God’s covenant with Israel. “Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, *for* a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever” (Exodus 31:16–17). Those people formerly excluded from the temple and God are now included with the expectation that they keep the sabbath holy days.¹¹

10. Paul likewise preaches in Ephesians 2:17 the promise that outsiders are invited into the assembly of God.

11. Isaiah stresses the importance of keeping sabbaths in chapter 56. Consider that the words *sabbath* and *sabbaths* are used only once in all of Isaiah 1–55. But here in Isaiah 56, these words appear three times. Certainly, Isaiah makes the case that keeping the sabbaths underscores any opportunity for receiving the redeeming salvation offered through God’s promises. “Respect for the Sabbath now permits entrance into the house of the Lord in the same way that profanation of the Sabbath demands exclusion.” Bernard Gosse, “Sabbath, Identity, and Universalism Go Together after the Return from Exile,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, no. 3 (2005): 367.

Inclusion into God's everlasting covenants is not automatic, however, because covenants are reciprocal.¹² Each party brings something to the agreement. In this instance, what must the potential covenantal candidate do? Keep the sabbaths. Notice that "sabbaths" is in the plural in Isaiah 56:4. Does this plural represent attending church each Sunday? No, this plural signifies that the sabbaths were any sacred day set aside to worship and celebrate God (Exodus 23:14–17; 34:18–23; Deuteronomy 16:1–17). Examples include the following: (1) The weekly Sabbath, to celebrate the creation of earth and the deliverance from oppression (Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 5:12–15); (2) The sabbath festival of Passover, to celebrate God saving the Israelites from Egypt (Leviticus 23:5; Deuteronomy 16:1–8); (3) The sabbath of Pentecost, to thank God for the prosperity and abundance of the earth (Deuteronomy 16:9–12); (4) The sabbath festival of booths, to celebrate God's presence among the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 16:13–17); and (5) The sabbatical year, every seventh year, to celebrate that God gave Israelites the land (Leviticus 25:1–22). Many of these sabbaths required people to

12. According to the rhetorical logic of Isaiah 56, keeping the sabbaths qualifies one to enter into the temple of the Lord. Unfortunately, such inclusion was not always practiced at the Jerusalem Temple after the time of Isaiah (see the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah). In the days of Jesus, a prominent warning sign placed at the wall that separated the court of the gentiles from the other courts read, "No foreigner is to go beyond the balustrade and the plaza of the temple zone. Whoever is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his death which will follow." That warning was no jest. The Apostle Paul found himself in a serious trouble and potential bodily harm at the Jerusalem Temple when he brought gentile converts into the temple. "Then Paul took the [gentile converts], and ... with them entered into the temple. ... The Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him, Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all *men* every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place. ... And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut. And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar" (Acts 21:26–28, 30–31). Paul and the converts would have likely walked right past the temple warning sign, knowing they could face death for coming into the temple that excluded all non-Jews. Paul was seeking to make a point Isaiah had sought to make hundreds of years earlier. One's birth and nationality no longer mattered for access to the temple or God's everlasting name. What mattered was that one was willing to follow the Lord. Ironically, had Abraham arrived at the wall of separation within the Herodian Temple soon after his leaving Haran, he may have been barred from entering or possibly even been killed.

go to the temple and make offerings to the Lord; it was a holy day that involved the act of pilgrimage worship. Significantly, the temple was central to these sabbaths. If some people were excluded from the temple, how could they keep the sabbaths or covenants with God? And if people were not keeping the sabbaths of God, how would they be making full use of their access to him through the temple? That is to say, if they were not celebrating the sabbaths, they likely were not attending the temple, and if they did not have access to the temple, they could not keep the sabbaths. Isaiah rectifies that. Those formerly excluded from the temple could have access if they kept the sabbaths, which required that they enter the temple and participate in the religious rites and festivals that occurred there on holy days.

Isaiah 56:5

Some of the most powerful themes in Isaiah 56 are found in verse 5. Here we learn that God will give a place to the strangers and eunuchs in the temple. Indeed, he gives them an everlasting memorial in the temple.¹³ That everlasting memorial is his name, which these new servants have taken upon themselves. They will never again be cut off from the presence of the Lord.¹⁴

If the stranger and eunuch are willing to agree to these terms and conditions, to keep the sabbaths, they are then admitted into the temple. But then God offers everlasting blessings. God promises that even if they do not have living posterity in this life, he will give them a place and a name better than sons and daughters, a name that will never perish. The phrase “place and a name,” Hebrew *yad vashem*, seems to be a rather insignificant phrase in English. However, in Hebrew and ancient Israelite culture this phrase was permeated with everlasting significance. It signified a monument or a memorial, but more importantly it represented God’s eternal hand of fellowship and his everlasting name. Instead of one’s immortality secured by the memorializing of a name on stone or of having a large and growing posterity, God assures immortality by

13. D. W. Van Winkle, “The Meaning of *yadvašem* in Isaiah LVI 5”, *Vestus Testamentum* 47, no. 3 (July 1997), 378–85.

14. “Cutting off” comes from the Hebrew root word *krt*, a word frequently associated with cutting covenants. Isaiah artfully calls to mind a whole host of references throughout the Old Testament where covenants are made by cutting. Jared Parker, “Cutting Covenants” quoted in D. Kelly Ogden, Jared Ludlow and Kerry Muhlestein, eds., *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament: The 38th Annual Brigham Young University Sperry Symposium* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book Company, 2009), 109–28.

naming his faithful servants, by placing his name on them. And his name is everlasting. We see this doctrine taught clearly in the Book of Mormon. In Mosiah 5:5–9, King Benjamin teaches that those willing to covenant with God receive an eternal name, that of the children of Christ. They will be called Christians, Christ.

Let us take a moment to explore further what is in a name.¹⁵ Why is a name so important?¹⁶ A name (or a noun) is a way of identifying

15. Moshe Garsiel, “Homiletic Name-Derivations as a Literary Device in the Gideon Narrative: Judges VI–VIII,” *Vetus Testamentum* XLIII, 3 (1993), 302–17. Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1991).

16. “Between a character’s name and the surrounding narrative, an intricate relation can be observed, especially in ancient literature. Names beget narrative, and narrative begets names. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, for instance, the name of the wise Ūta-napišti — “He reached life” — underlies the unfolding of the plot: reaching the faraway Ūta-napišti, who will show him where to find the plant of life, becomes the ultimate goal of Gilgamesh’s quest for immortality. Similarly, in archaic Greek poetry the name of Achilles (Achilleus), the main character of the Iliad, matches his role in the epic: Achilles is the one who brings about *achos*, “grief,” to his laos, the “people” of the Achaeans.... In biblical narrative the link between name and plot is pervasive; suffice it to mention the bearing of Ishmael’s, Isaac’s, and Jacob’s names on the plot of Genesis. The play on Isaac’s name (יצחק) “He will laugh”) is well known: it stretches from Sara’s skeptical laughter in the annunciation scene (Genesis 18:12–14) to her humorous conclusion after the birth of the child (“God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me” [Genesis 21:6]). The meaning of Ishmael’s name (ישמעאל, “God hears”) is brought into play three times in the story by God or his angel: while helping his mother, Hagar (“You shall name him Ishmael, for Yhwh has heard [שמע] of your misery” [Genesis 16:11]), then in support of Abraham, his father (“And as for Ishmael, I have heard you [שמעתיך]” [Genesis 17:20]), and finally on account of the child himself (“God has heard [וישמע] the boy crying as he lies there” [Genesis 21:17]). The process goes even further in the next generation, that is, in Jacob’s story. As in the cases of Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob’s name (יעקב) is a key to the narrative: it connects the hero’s tricky birth in Genesis 25:26, gripping his brother’s heel (עקב), and his tricky dealings in regard to Esau’s birthright and benediction (עקב, “to supplant”; see Genesis 27:36). Yet the name of the third patriarch is also deconstructed and reconstructed in Genesis 32–33 in the narrative of Jacob’s wrestling with the mysterious Other and of the brothers’ reunion. Mixed up with the words יבֶקֶד (Yabboq), אִבֶּקֶד (“to wrestle, rolling in dust”), יִקַּע (“to be dislocated”), and חִבֵּק (“to embrace”), Jacob’s name undergoes a semantic recasting, which expresses the hero’s new birth.” Jean-Pierre Sonnet, “*Ehyeh asher ehyeh* (Exodus 3:14): God’s ‘Narrative Identity’ among Suspense, Curiosity, and Surprise,” *Poetics Today* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 332.

something, defining its character, characteristics, features, function, role, boundaries, purpose, past history, or future potential.¹⁷ For example, the name “Adam” is the masculine form of the Hebrew word *adamah*, which means “dirt or earth” (Genesis 2:7).¹⁸ Eve’s name is also specifically given due to her role. Her name is a form of the Hebrew word *hawwah* which means, “life.” She truly was the mother of all living people (Genesis 3:20), therefore her name was given to identify a key aspect of her character as well as future potential.

Abraham had two names, both of which identify his character, purpose, and future potential. His original name was *Abram* (Genesis 12:1), a combination of two Hebrew words “ab” = father and “ram” = high, lofty, exalted. His original name identified his future potential, character, and role. Indeed, Abram is now an exalted father (D&C 132:20). His original name could also have served as a testimony of the characteristics of God the Father, that is, that Heavenly Father is an Exalted Father. Later, Abram’s name was changed to Abraham (Genesis 17). This new name derived, once again, from the combination of two Hebrew words “ab” = father and “raham” = multitudes. This name speaks to the character, characteristics, role, and future potential of Abraham, that he would be a father of multitudes. Today millions upon millions of people identify Abraham as their father (see Genesis 22:15–18). Sarah, Abraham’s wife, also had a name change. She originally was named Sarai, which meant “my princess” (Genesis 11:29). Later Sarai’s name was changed to Sarah (Genesis 17:15), which in Hebrew means “princess.”¹⁹ As a faithful daughter of God her name appropriately identified her character and role as a princess.

17. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David Weston Baker, Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), s.v. “creation.”

18. Adam’s name relates to his past history and perhaps serves as a reminder to him and all of us for our need to be humble. Since we are children of Adam, we are reminded that we are nothing but dust (see Mosiah 2:25; 4:11) and therefore should be humble. The word *humble* derives from the Latin *humilis*, which originated from the Latin word for earth, soil, and dirt.

19. The change to her name (“my princess” changed to “princess”) does not appear to be of major significance. Perhaps the change to “princess” from “my princess” was evocative of a newer, less delimited role. “My princess” may have meant that Sarah was defined by her relation to someone else who “owns” her. Perhaps the title “princess” is more universal for her. She is no longer a princess because of someone else (such as an earthly king or prince that might call her “my princess”). Rather, now, she is a princess by divine decree.

Naming in ancient Israel carried weighty significance. The namer had authority over or responsibility for what was named.²⁰ For example, Adam had the responsibility to name the animals at creation (Genesis 2:19–20). Adam’s naming of animals signified that Adam had responsibility for being a good steward of the animals of the earth in addition to his role as the keeper of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15). When God names someone, or places his name on them, he has defined that individual’s character, characteristics, role, and future potential. Furthermore, by naming people, God takes responsibility for the stewardship of those individuals that they might flourish. He allows them to fully participate in his love, protection and covenants. When God names someone, that individual becomes part of his dominion and kingdom.²¹

God wants to make his children great through his name. Unfortunately, humans tend to try to make their own names great.²² They try to make a name for themselves instead of having God make

20. “In the Ancient Near East, the name is the soul and essence of the person who receives it, and the one who names binds the meaning of the name to the person as a fate or destiny. The only way that the fate or destiny can change is if a creature of higher power changes the name. As long as the name of the being exists, the being will exist throughout eternity as part of the fabric of the divine order.” Nicholaus Benjamin Pumphrey, “Names and Power: The Concept of Secret Names in the Ancient Near East” (master’s thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2009), 6–7.

21. “[I]n the patriarchal stories, Abraham’s name change is a symbol that he belongs to the God, YHWH, who named him. Sarah’s name change from Sarai is an extension of this transformation emphasizing her covenant with YHWH to become the first matriarch.” (Pumphrey, 26)

22. We see this human tendency at play in the story of King Saul. One of the reasons that Saul, first king over united Israel, fell from grace is that he sought to honor and memorialize himself and his own name by “setting him up a place” instead of memorializing God and God’s name (1 Samuel 15:12). Though it sounds innocuous in English, the phrase “set him up a place” literally means that Saul established a monument to his own name and memory. Instead of having God create a lasting name and memory for him, he tried to do it on his own. In the very chapter where Saul takes his immortality into his own hands (that is, he tries to achieve immortality through reputation and memorials to his own name and deeds) God rejected Saul from being king of the Israelites (1 Samuel 15:22–23). These stories (Saul and Gilgamesh) exemplify the human desire to create a name and memory that will persist across the ages and immortalize the individual. What we find in Isaiah 56 is different. God wants to give his children an everlasting name. Those who accept his name accept his covenants and have a place at the temple. All who trust in him and keep his sabbaths are welcomed in.

them great through his name.²³ Isaiah 56 and the story of Abraham intersect on this point.

In Genesis 11, the people of the earth settle the plain of Shinar and devise a plan to build a great city and tower whose top could touch the heavens. Their rationale for such an undertaking? “Let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Genesis 11:4). They wanted to make and secure their own name by physical, man-made objects and monuments to avoid being scattered across the earth as if human efforts could provide the lasting safety they wanted. In stark contrast stands Abraham, introduced in the same chapter as the tower of Babel. God comes to Abraham in Genesis 12:2 and says, “[Abraham], I will ... make thy name great.” Instead of seeking to make his own name great, Abraham let God make Abraham’s name great. When individuals seek to establish their own promised lands without the direction of God, their only recourse to “immortality” is human-made, the physical objects and memorials that humans can create. But these eventually will crumble to the dust. If instead people are like Abraham, they can follow God, who will make their names great by leading them to their promised lands where they will find refreshment and eternal life.

Isaiah 56:6

Isaiah 56:6 promises that those who love his name and join themselves to him will become his servants. In the Old Testament, servants can refer to a variety of individuals or groups: Moses, other prophets, King David, King Solomon, Davidic kings, the people of Israel, and all those who have bound themselves to the Lord through covenant.²⁴ In Isaiah 56,

23. Instead of being named by God and being within his domain of stewardship, humans typically want independence to create their own forms of immortality. This they attempt by the posterity they create, the monuments, buildings, or institutions that they name in their own honor, or by doing great deeds that they hope will be remembered in songs and stories across the ages. The Epic of Gilgamesh is an excellent example of how many in the ancient Near East believed that immortality was only possible by the deeds one accomplished in this life and the great name one built for himself. Tzvi Abusch, “The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 4 (2001): 614–22. Esther J. Hamori, “Echoes of Gilgamesh in the Jacob Story”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 4 (2011): 625–42.

24. Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Servant and the Servants in Isaiah and the Formation of the Book,” quoted in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretative Tradition*, eds. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 155–75.

servants refer to the covenant people of God, those willing to obey the *torah*. Other Old Testament passages broaden our understanding of what it means to be a covenant-keeping servant of God while also echoing Abraham and key ideas in Isaiah 56.²⁵

“O ye seed of Abraham his servant, ye children of Jacob his chosen. He *is* the LORD our God: his judgments *are* in all the earth. He hath remembered his covenant for ever, the word *which* he commanded to a thousand generations. Which *covenant* he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac; And confirmed the same unto Jacob for a law, *and* to Israel *for* an everlasting covenant” (Psalm 105:6–10).

Correspondences between Psalm 105, Abraham, and Isaiah 56 are many. First, Abraham is identified as the Lord’s servant in Psalm 105. This connects to Isaiah 56:6, where we see the formerly excluded strangers and eunuchs identified as servants to God. Second, the covenant that God initiated with Abraham is remembered in Psalm 105. This is the very covenant the servants of God (the eunuchs and strangers) must take hold of in Isaiah 56:6. Third, themes of the law (*torah*) and everlasting covenants (which are secured by obedience to God’s law) are invoked in Psalm 105. Isaiah 56 plays on both themes of law and everlasting covenant. Insofar as people keep the law, they will be admitted into the temple where God will place his everlasting name upon them as a sign that they have eternal right to the everlasting covenants of Abraham. Finally, the barrenness of Abraham is but a memory in Psalm 105 (and will be for the eunuchs as well) as thousands of generations of posterity are acknowledged.

Isaiah 56:7

In Isaiah 56:6–7 we learn that the strangers and eunuchs have become servants to God and that once in the temple, these servants joyfully participate in prayer and worship. Perhaps these strangers and eunuchs sang Psalm 113 in the temple. Psalm 113 plays upon the themes of servants, barrenness, and praise, which connect both to Isaiah 56 and the Abraham story, “Praise ye the LORD. Praise, O ye servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD. . . . He maketh the barren woman to keep house, *and to be* a joyful mother of children. Praise ye the LORD,” (Psalm 113:1, 9). Just as Sarai was originally described as “Sarai was barren; she *had* no child” (Genesis 11:30), now because of the promises

25. Ulrich Berges, “Who Were the Servants? A Comparative Inquiry in the Book of Isaiah and the Psalms,” in *Past, Present, Future: The Deuteronomistic History and the Prophets*, eds. Johannes C. de Moor and Harry F. van Rooy (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2000), 1–18.

of God, she became a joyful mother of children. In fact the meaning of her son Isaac's name, "he will laugh" is poetically connected to Sarai's laughter at becoming a mother (Genesis 18:13, 15; 21:6). Psalm 113 also connects to Isaiah 56 thematically because the servants are commanded to praise the *name* of the Lord. As we explained above, the name of God is a permanent symbol to the righteous recipients of it, of their everlasting access to his promises and presence.

Isaiah 56:6–7 are also poetically parallel to Isaiah 56:4–5. Once again, God addresses the non-Israelites, the strangers. He promises that inasmuch as they keep his sabbaths, and lay hold to the covenants they will be brought into the temple. God's holy mountain and house of prayer are synonyms for the temple as multiple scriptural references illustrate.²⁶ The temple is where God will accept the prayers and offerings of *all* the covenant faithful.

Though we have focused primarily on specific groups excluded from the temple (e.g., strangers and eunuchs) throughout this paper, the promises of the temple that Isaiah describes here are for *all* people. The phrases in Isaiah 56:2 "blessed is the man"²⁷ and "the son of man" (literally in Hebrew *ben adam* = son of Adam) are both generic phrases referring to any human. Isaiah is here speaking of a day when the covenant will be universally available to any man or woman, regardless of his or her circumstances, regardless if under the Law of Moses he or she would have been excluded from God's assembly at the temple. Everyone who keeps the law and the sabbaths will be invited into the divine covenants and be counted as God's people. In this regard, Isaiah transitions from focusing on specific cases of exclusion to proclaiming that *all* people, whether eunuch or stranger or some other temple-excluded group, can be brought into the temple. Isaiah ends the 56:1–8 pericope on this note.

26. References in the Old Testament to "holy mountain": Isaiah 11:9, 56:7, 57:13, 65:11, 65:25, 66:20; Ezekiel 20:40, 28:14; Daniel 9:16, 9:20, 11:45; Joel 2:1, 3:17; Obadiah 1:16; Zephaniah 3:11; Zechariah 8:3. References in the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) to "house of prayer": Isaiah 56:7, Matthew 21:13, Mark 11:17, Luke 19:46.

27. All references in the Old Testament to the phrase "happy is" or "blessed is": Deuteronomy 33:29; 1 Kings 10:8; 2 Chronicles 9:7; Job 5:17; Psalms 1:1, 2:12, 32:1, 33:12, 34:8, 40:4, 41:2, 65:4, 84:5, 84:12, 89:15, 94:12, 106:3, 112:1, 119:1, 127:5, 128:1, 137:8, 144:15, 146:5; Proverbs 3:13, 8:32, 8:34, 14:21, 16:20, 20:7, 28:14; Ecclesiastes 10:17; Isaiah 30:18, 32:20, 56:2; Daniel 12:12.

Isaiah 56:8

Isaiah 56:8 indicates that God seeks to gather in from the dispersed corners of the earth not just the outcasts of Israel, he wants to gather in all of his children. God will gather in non-Israelites as well and make them part of his covenant if they are willing. Jesus testifies of this doctrine in John 10:16, where he explains to his disciples, “Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.” We know this message was descriptive of scattered Israel and those who are adopted into Israel through baptism. These God seeks to bring into the fold as the Allegory of the Olive tree (Jacob 5) so beautifully and symbolically represents. The gathering takes place at the temple. The temple is where the fullness of the Abrahamic promises are made and realized. It is at the temple where the faithful take God’s name upon themselves yet again, as they do in other saving ordinances such as baptism.

Conclusion

God wants to give us a name, that of Jesus Christ. For the faithful, God’s everlasting name includes access to the temple and covenants. Through temples and the blessings of this covenantal name of Christ, *all* the righteous who keep God’s law and honor his sabbaths will be like Abraham. They will have a fullness of the Abrahamic covenant, the promise of enduring posterity, and rest in a promised land. God’s temple embodies these promises and covenants. He stands ready to welcome in all who would faithfully hold fast to his covenant and join him in his holy mountain in joyful prayer and worship.

Taylor Halverson is a BYU Teaching and Learning Consultant; a member of the Book of Mormon Central executive committee; founder and co-director of the BYU Virtual Scriptures Group; a columnist for the Deseret News; founder and co-director of the BYU Creativity, Innovation, and Design group; a travel leader to Mesoamerica and the Holy Land; and the Chief Innovation Officer at Vereo Training. At BYU Taylor has taught Book of Mormon, Old Testament, History of Creativity, Innovation Boot Camp, Basic Entrepreneurship Skills, and an interdisciplinary design course called “Illuminating the Scriptures: Designing Innovative Study Tools.” His education includes: BA in Ancient Near Eastern Studies (BYU), MA in Biblical Studies (Yale University), MS in Instructional Systems Technology (Indiana University), PhD in Instructional Systems

Technology (Indiana University), and PhD in Judaism and Christianity in Antiquity (Indiana University). Taylor has published and presented widely on scripture, innovation, entrepreneurship, technology, teaching, and learning. (More at taylorhalverson.com.)

