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## **An Approach to Isaiah Studies**

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## AN APPROACH TO ISAIAH STUDIES

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Donald W. Parry

Review of Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016). 318 pages. \$59.95 (hardback); \$29.95 paperback.

**Abstract:** *This review makes a case, briefly, for the unmistakable presence of Jesus Christ in Isaiah's text, which case is based on a corpus linguistic-based description of the Hebrew Bible, equivalent designations of deific names, self-identification declarations by the Lord, and more. And, importantly, one can never set aside the multiple teachings and testimonies of our modern prophets and apostles regarding Isaiah's prophecies of Jesus Christ. Moreover, in my view, a knowledge of biblical Hebrew helps us to penetrate the very depths and heights of Isaiah's text.*

I have been invited to review Joseph Spencer's *The Vision of All*.<sup>1</sup> Before moving on to the review, I extend appreciation to Joseph Spencer for researching and writing a book that deals with Isaiah's text. Spencer and anyone who wholeheartedly seeks to understand Isaiah deserve sincere gratitude and due recognition.

Because the words of Isaiah are so important and expansive, any book about his prophecies — let alone a review of the same — can call to attention, in abbreviated terms, only a handful of factors. The book under review comprises 25 lectures (spanning 298 pages), a three-page bibliography, a one-page subject index, and an eight-page scripture index. Dealing only with Isaiah in 1 and 2 Nephi, its chapter titles include “Nephi's Vision,” “The Nature of First Nephi,” “Approaching Jacob on Isaiah,” and “Nephi's Plain Prophecy.”

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1. I extend appreciation to three Brigham Young University professors for reading this review and for their helpful suggestions.

In my own personal view, Spencer's work presents certain challenges and problems, especially for Christians who maintain that Isaiah's text contains numerous Jesus Christ-focused elements. On this, see the section of this review titled "Searching for Jesus Christ in Isaiah's Text."

Because the chapters in Spencer's book were developed as informal lectures, their prose is consciously "chatty" (viii), pervasively using diction such as "cute beginning" (2), "here's the weird part" (4), "take a stab at Isaiah" (11), "yikes" (23, 116, 141, 237), and "ack" (58). This chatty approach, according to Spencer, has "forced [him] to leave off using footnotes and other distracting scholarly tools" (viii). Spencer's work, then, is admittedly not scholarly; he explains that the bibliography is the "only piece of scholarly apparatus in the whole volume" (viii). But even the bibliography lacks a scholarly comportment: titled "Resources Mentioned along the Way," it lacks dozens of bibliographic entries by scholars and writers who have investigated Isaiah's writings recorded in the Book of Mormon. I am concerned that these omissions may signify to some readers a disregard of previous works in particular or a disrespect for the normal academic process in general. *The Vision of All* may help some readers attain their objectives in trying to get through the Isaiah sections in the Book of Mormon; however, in my view, all readers deserve to know more about previously published insights and approaches and how Isaiah's ancient prophecies were understood and used by Nephi in the Book of Mormon.

Rather than reviewing *The Vision of All* by commenting on its contents line upon line, here a little and there a little, I accept the expansive invitation extended by the book's title to step back and reflect more widely on the long-developed artistry of conducting scholarship on the book of Isaiah. In my experience and considered opinion, academics (particularly those who belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) who intend to explicate Isaiah's text in books or media would do well to possess the following: (1) a comprehensive understanding of the doctrinal framework of the Restoration of the gospel (and acceptance of and compliance with its teachings), and (2) a heart open to the promptings of the Holy Ghost, the quintessential revelator and teacher.

### Searching for Jesus Christ in Isaiah's Text

First and foremost, I wish to briefly (*briefly*, because this is a book review and not a scholarly article or monograph) make a case for the distinct presence of Jesus Christ in Isaiah's text. Spencer's understanding of finding Jesus Christ in Isaiah reveals much about his approach to Isaiah.

He writes, “Here it is, put far too strongly at first: *Stop looking for Jesus in Isaiah*” (33; emphasis in original), and “Now, let me be perfectly clear on something: Christ *is* there in Isaiah, I think” (34; emphasis). Note the uncertainty Spencer expresses with the words “I think.” He also states, “Isaiah’s chief purpose wasn’t to predict the Messiah” (34); “When we start digging in Isaiah’s writings for clear prophecies of Christ, we find relatively little that makes sense” (290); and “We should be looking first and foremost for the covenant as we read Isaiah, but a major part of the story of the covenant is the mission of the Messiah” (291). To more fully comprehend Spencer’s understanding of Jesus in Isaiah’s text, one must read these quotations in both their immediate and greater contexts (e.g., see 33–34, 64–65, 152, 160–61, 191, 193, 199–200, 203–7, and 290–91; see also his description of a Messiah, 204–7). Regarding Spencer’s imperative to “*stop looking for Jesus in Isaiah*,” I take an opposite view. I personally maintain that Jesus Christ (Jehovah) has the greatest character zone in Isaiah’s text. Both thematic and linguistic (including corpus linguistic) studies of Isaiah sustain my view.

Above all, it is crucial to recognize that *Jehovah* is “the covenant and proper name of the God of Israel” and that Jehovah Himself is none other than “the premortal Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Church authorities have affirmed the truth that Jesus Christ is Jehovah. President Gordon B. Hinckley stated in 2008, “Jesus was in very deed the great Jehovah of the Old Testament.”<sup>3</sup> In 2017, President Russell M. Nelson implored, “Commence tonight to consecrate a portion of your time each week to studying *everything* Jesus said and did as recorded in the Old Testament, for He is the Jehovah of the Old Testament.”<sup>4</sup> In “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” written in 2000, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles asserted that Jesus Christ was “the Great Jehovah of the Old Testament, the Messiah of the New.”<sup>5</sup> There are many similar statements by other Church authorities. Those who accept the teaching that Jesus Christ’s premortal name was *Jehovah* have a completely different view regarding the prominence of Jesus Christ in Isaiah’s text.

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2. See the Bible Dictionary in the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Version of the Bible, “Jehovah,” 710–11.

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Testify of Jesus Christ,” *Ensign* (March 2008), 4.

4. Russell M. Nelson, “Prophets, Leadership, and Divine Law,” Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, January 8, 2017, Brigham Young University, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2017/01/prophets-leadership-and-divine-law?lang=eng>.

5. “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” *Ensign* (April 2000), 2.

A corpus linguistic–based description of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., the Old Testament), based on the Leningrad Codex, demonstrates the prominence of the name *Jehovah* (specifically, the Tetragrammaton, or hwhy). In terms of frequency, the top six linguistic structures in the Hebrew Bible are function words, or discourse particles (function words in English include *a, all, an, and, as, at, be, but, by, for, from, he, her, I, in, it, no, not, of, on, or, she, so, than, that, the, their, this, to, up, we, what, which, and who*). These particles are located in the table below, together with the frequency of use of each particle and the percentage of words in the Hebrew Bible that each particle represents. For example, the conjunction ו (= “and”) occurs 50,524 times in the Hebrew Bible and represents 11.68% of all words in the corpus. The definite article ה (= “the”) occurs 31,244 times in the Hebrew Bible and, together with ו, signifies 18.90% of the total words.

**High-Frequency Words in the Hebrew Bible — Lexical Forms**

Hebrew (English)	Frequency	Percentages
ו (and)	50,524	1 word; 11.68% of total
ה (the)	31,244	2 words; 18.90% of total
ל (to, for)	20,322	3 words; 23.60% of total
ב (in, with)	15,608	4 words; 27.21% of total
ל-את (object marker)	10,980	5 words; 29.75% of total
מ (from)	7,594	6 words; 31.51% of total
יהוה (LORD)	6,828	7 words; 33.09% of total

Altogether, the top six linguistic structures in the Hebrew Bible comprise 31.51% of all words in that corpus. These various function words serve in utilitarian capacities in sentence structure. In contrast, content words have a major role in sentences, regardless of the text type or genre, by providing substance. Both function and content words are vital to a literary work, but content words provide considerably more meaning. Function and content words interact to make up an infinite number of expressions, which form sentences, paragraphs, and compositions.

The seventh structure in the Hebrew Bible in terms of frequency is also the first content word — none other than the name *Jehovah*<sup>6</sup>

6. Or, more precisely the Hebrew יהוה (YHWH). Space concerns do not permit me to explain more regarding the transliteration *Jehovah*.

(expressed as *LORD* in many English translations of the Bible); this particularly significant name is used more than 6,800 times in the Hebrew Bible. Jehovah is frequently referred to nominally, but more often He is pronominalized, meaning that Jehovah is very frequently the referent of inflectional elements (e.g., the affix of a verb, preposition, or noun); referential elements include possessive determiners (e.g., *your, his, my*), independent pronouns (e.g., *he, you, I*), and direct or indirect objects (e.g., *me, him*). Thus, linguistically, the name *Jehovah* is the most frequently occurring content word in the Hebrew Bible, and through pronominal forms, Jehovah possesses the most prominent character zone.

In Isaiah, Jehovah's topical apportionment is abundantly greater than any other topic, including Isaiah himself, the prophetess, kings, Zion, Israel, and the Abrahamic covenant (contrast Spencer, 4, 9, and elsewhere). Each reference to Jehovah belongs to a context that provides readers with awareness of His mission, character, or attributes. In Isaiah's text, Jehovah is referred to 450 times. Contrast this frequency with the occurrence of the following content words: *Isaiah* (16 times), *Abraham* (four times), *Hezekiah* (30 times), *Zion* (47 times), and *covenant* (12 times).

Other evidence demonstrates that the Jehovah of the Old Testament is Jesus Christ, including a number of equivalent designations of the Lord in the Old Testament that correspond with Jesus Christ in the New Testament. For example, the Lord of the Old Testament is designated Rock: "Unto thee will I cry, O Lord my rock" (Psalms 28:1). Jesus Christ is also denominated *Rock*: "For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). Other equivalent designations include *King* (Psalms 10:16; Revelation 17:14), *Everlasting God* (Genesis 21:33; Romans 16:26), *I Am* (Exodus 3:14; John 8:58), *Savior* (Isaiah 43:3; 49:26; Titus 2:13), *God Is with Us (Immanuel)* (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23), and *Light* (Isaiah 60:19; John 1:9; 8:12). These designations (and others) provide straightforward affirmations that Jesus Christ is indeed the Jehovah of the Old Testament.

While Spencer examines Isaianic passages that many Christians interpret to refer to Jesus Christ, he attempts to diminish that interpretation. For example, he cites Isaiah 7:14 ("Behold a virgin shall conceive, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel") and then remarks, "in context — both textual and historical — there's very little reason for seeing Isaiah's prophetic sign as referring to Jesus" (209). Spencer also cites Isaiah 9:6 ("For unto us a child is born! Unto us a son is given! And the government shall be upon his shoulder! And his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting

Father, the Prince of Peace!”) and argues that Hezekiah is the fulfillment of this passage. “You see,” Spencer summarizes, “it seems pretty clear in context that Isaiah’s prophecy here is focused primarily on Ahaz’s son Hezekiah. ... It seems pretty clear he’s got Hezekiah in mind” (211). But how does Spencer contend that the “Mighty God” (see the passage just cited, Isaiah 9:6) refers to Hezekiah rather than Jesus Christ? He cites two English translations that render “Mighty God” differently than does the King James Version (i.e., “Hero Warrior” and “one Mighty in Valor”), but the translation “Mighty God” has both lexical<sup>7</sup> support and validation from multiple prominent translations. A knowledge of biblical Hebrew, with support from prominent lexicons, assists in comprehending the meaning of these passages.

Spencer also makes the following incredible claim: “Isaiah ... likely wouldn’t have understood any of this to point to Jesus” (212).

For multiple reasons, my understanding of Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6 is completely dissimilar to Spencer’s. First, the apostle Matthew, using explicit and plain words, wrote that Isaiah 7:14 finds fulfillment in Jesus Christ:

She shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet [Isaiah], saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. (Matthew 1:21–23)

Second, with great clarity and with no hesitation, our modern prophets and apostles testify that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the prophecies in Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah 9:6. The following are representative statements:

**President Gordon B. Hinckley:** “Jesus was in very deed the great Jehovah of the Old Testament, who left His Father’s royal courts on high and condescended to come to earth as a babe born in the most humble circumstances. His birth was foretold centuries earlier by Isaiah, who declared prophetically, ‘For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his

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7. See, for example, Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Brill: Leiden, NLD, 2000), 172, which states, for אֵל גִּבּוֹר, “Messiah אֵל גִּי Is 9<sub>5</sub> trad. God the heroic force.”



name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6)."<sup>8</sup>

**President Thomas S. Monson:** "What did the holy prophets of old declare? Isaiah, more than 700 years before the birth of Christ, prophesied, 'Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.'"<sup>9</sup>

**Elder Dallin H. Oaks:** "Isaiah, a great prophet of the Old Testament, announced the coming birth of the Messiah. 'The Lord himself shall give you a sign,' he declared. 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14). Isaiah also declared: 'For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever' (Isaiah 9:6–7)."<sup>10</sup>

**The First Presidency:** "We rejoice with you in another wonderful Christmas season when with all Christendom we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Seeing ahead several centuries, the prophet Isaiah said: 'For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. . . . And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6)."<sup>11</sup>

**Elder Russell M. Nelson:** "Jesus was foreordained to be the promised Immanuel. Remember Isaiah's remarkable prophecy: 'The Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold,

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8. Hinckley, "We Testify of Jesus Christ," 4.

9. Thomas S. Monson, "What Is Christmas?" *Ensign* (December 1998), 4.

10. Dallin H. Oaks, "Prophetic Announcements of Christ's Birth," Christmas Broadcast, December 4, 2016, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/first-presidency-christmas-devotional/2016/12/prophetic-announcements-of-christs-birth?lang=eng>.

11. The First Presidency, "First Presidency Christmas Greeting," *Liahona* (December 1988).

a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14). Fulfillment of that prophecy was not just unlikely, it was humanly impossible. Incredible! Everyone knew a virgin could not bear a child. And then for that child to be given such a pretentious name was doubly daring. The Hebrew name — the title of which Isaiah prophesied, *Immanuel* — literally means 'with us is God'! (See Isaiah 7:14, footnote.) That holy name was subsequently given to Jesus in the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants (see Matthew 1:23; 2 Nephi 17:14; D&C 128:22)."<sup>12</sup>

**Elder Robert D. Hales:** "Christ's coming was foretold for thousands of years. ... About 700 years before His birth, Isaiah revealed the circumstances of His birth, life, and death: 'Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14). 'For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6)."<sup>13</sup>

**Elder Jeffrey R. Holland:** "What *is* known is that most of the 'greater views' of the gospel found in the teachings of the small plates of Nephi come from the personal declarations of these three great prophetic witnesses of the premortal Jesus Christ — Nephi, Jacob, and Isaiah. These three doctrinal and visionary voices make clear at the very outset of the Book of Mormon why it is 'another testament of Jesus Christ.'"<sup>14</sup>

And such very clear statements can be multiplied. In my view, thematic elements in Isaiah 6–9 support the centuries-old Christian understanding that the prophecies in Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah 9:6 find fulfillment in Jesus Christ (non-Christians, of course, draw different conclusions). Themes to look for in Isaiah 7–8 include female titles,

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12. Russell M. Nelson, "Jesus the Christ: Our Master and More," *Ensign* (April 2000), 9.

13. Robert D. Hales, "The Promise of Christmas," *Ensign* (December 2013), 17–18.

14. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 34.

conception, the child being a son, the naming of the son, the child's knowledge, the child before eight years old, land, kings, the role of the Lord, and the refrain "God is with us" (Hebrew: *Immanuel*). In addition, themes to look for in Isaiah 7–9 include the birth of a son, the naming ritual, oppression and the removal of oppression, old kings and the new king, destruction and peace in the land, God's control of history, and divine names. Again, a knowledge of biblical Hebrew makes Isaiah's thematic approaches more comprehensible.

Many Latter-day Saint interpretations of Isaiah's text are not unique to Latter-day Saints. Non-Latter-day-Saint Christians, too, interpret scores of Old Testament passages in light of Jesus Christ. As Biblical scholar Hulitt Gloer explains,

The writers of the New Testament were convinced that the true meaning of the Old Testament is Jesus Christ and that He alone provides the means of understanding it. True interpretation of the Old Testament is achieved by reading Old Testament passages or incidents in light of the event of Christ. ... For the early Christians, all Scripture was to be interpreted by the fact of Christ because it is to Him that the Old Testament Scripture points (John 5:39).<sup>15</sup>

Beyond equivalent designations of the Lord and a corpus linguistic description of the name Jehovah, the text of Isaiah refers or alludes to Jesus Christ (Jehovah) in multiple ways:

Names and titles of deity, including *King of Israel* (Isaiah 44:6), *Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6), *Lord of Hosts* (Isaiah 54:5), *Redeemer* (Isaiah 49:7), *Savior* (Isaiah 43:3), *Lamb* (Isaiah 53:7), and *Salvation* (Isaiah 12:2)

- Isaianic allusions to the law of Moses, which focuses on Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:24; Alma 25:16; 34:14)
- Theophoric names (e.g., Eliakim, Hezekiah, Isaiah, Joah, Jotham, Uriah, and Uzziah)
- Isaianic references and allusions to ancient ordinances, rituals, and ceremonies, which symbolized Jesus Christ's divine mission and atoning sacrifice
- Prophecies of Christ

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15. Hulitt Gloer, "Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament," in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, ed. Trent C. Butler, et al. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 1047.

- Symbols (including metaphors, similes, and implications), types, and shadows of Christ
- Isaiah and his children (Isaiah 8:18)
- Prophetic or revelatory speech forms (i.e., “Thus saith the LORD,” “Hearken to the word of the Lord,” and “As the Lord liveth”)
- The Lord’s role in historical events (e.g., nations, kingdoms, and peoples, especially Israel)
- The Lord’s role in future events, such as the judgments of the last days, the building and establishment of Zion, His second coming in power and glory, and His millennial reign.
- All of these and much more are set forth in Isaiah’s writings.

Let us return, for a moment, to the topic of names and titles of deity (the first bulleted item in the list above). In several self-identification statements in Isaiah, the Lord himself asserts that He is our *Redeemer*; for example, “I will help thee, saith the Lord, and thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 41:14); “Thus saith the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 43:14); “Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his Redeemer the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 44:6); “Thus saith the Lord, thy Redeemer” (Isaiah 44:24); “As for our Redeemer, the Lord of hosts is his name, the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 47:4); “Thus saith the Lord, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 48:17). See also Isaiah 49:7, 26; 54:5, 8; 59:20; 60:16; and 63:16.

Several self-identification declarations, again by the Lord, identify Him as the Savior, for example, “For I am the Lord thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour” (Isaiah 43:3); “I, even I, am the Lord; and beside me there is no Saviour” (Isaiah 43:11); “There is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me” (Isaiah 45:21); “And all flesh shall know that I the Lord am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob” (Isaiah 49:26); “Thou shalt know that I the Lord am thy Saviour and thy Redeemer, the mighty One of Jacob” (Isaiah 60:16). See also 45:15 and 63:8. These several declarations are completely transparent and unambiguous statements that reveal Jesus Christ — *the Lord* — to be our Savior and Redeemer. And once again, these statements signify additional evidence that Jesus Christ is indeed revealed in Isaiah’s text.

Additionally, several New Testament passages make it clear that the Old Testament (including Isaiah’s writings) reveals Jesus Christ:

- “To him [speaking of Jesus Christ] give all the prophets witness” (Acts 10:43).
- “A certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures. ... This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord. ... For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, shewing by the scriptures [i.e., the Old Testament] that Jesus was Christ” (Acts 18:24–25, 28).
- “Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth” (John 1:45).
- Three such New Testament passages were uttered by Jesus Christ himself! That is to say, Jesus Christ himself testified that the Old Testament scriptures pertained to him:
- “Search the scriptures [the Old Testament] ... they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39).
- “All things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me” (Luke 24:44).
- “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he [Jesus] expounded unto them [his two disciples] in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Can the New Testament writers, and Jesus Christ himself, be any clearer?

All of the points presented in this section demonstrate that Isaiah’s text is indeed Jesus Christ–focused. I therefore take a contrary view to Spencer, who advised, “Stop looking for Jesus in Isaiah” (33).

### Other Matters

Finally, I wish to point out a few general issues that Isaiah scholars must address. With regard to textual variants (which Spencer discusses on pages 95–106 and 292–94), it is doubtful that biblical scholars can adequately conduct text-critical studies on Isaiah’s writing recorded in the Book of Mormon.<sup>16</sup> Because the Book of Mormon is an English translation (i.e., we do not have access to the language of the brass plates),

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16. My own view on this matter has evolved over many years as I continue to research, write, and publish in the field of text-critical studies.

word-to-word correspondences and lemmatizations are impossible. And synchronic/diachronic challenges yet remain. The text-critical approaches of Septuagint scholars Duhm, Klein, Koenig, Ottley, Seeligmann, Tov, Troxel, Ulrich, van der Kooij, and Ziegler underscore the difficulties of using a translation of Isaiah for text-critical purposes. As van der Kooij summarizes, “The text-critical value of LXX-Isaiah is limited because, due to its complexities, it is often difficult to say which Hebrew the Greek text might reflect.”<sup>17</sup>

The manner in which Spencer deals with Isaianic authorship (21–24) and “the so-called third Isaiah” (22) reminds me of David Hackett Fischer’s *Historians’ Fallacies*,<sup>18</sup> especially his chapter titled “Fallacies of Factual Verification” (40–63). One of the fallacies he discusses is that of “negative proof,” which “is an attempt to sustain a factual proposition merely by negative evidence. It occurs whenever a historian declares that ‘there is no evidence that X is the case,’ and then proceeds to affirm or assume that not-X is the case. . . . The only correct empirical procedure is to find affirmative evidence of not-X — which is often difficult.”<sup>19</sup> Besides Spencer’s other statements, he writes that the Book of Mormon “omits all of Third Isaiah, all of Isaiah 56–66” (22), and that “there’s reason to think that the Book of Mormon wants us to believe that Isaiah 56–66 was in fact missing from the brass plates” (22). But the absence of Isaiah 56–66 in the Book of Mormon is not evidence that these chapters were not on the brass plates nor that these chapters were written by an individual other than Isaiah. Much more could be said regarding authorship issues, but this is not the appropriate place to deal with them.

Several of Spencer’s many generalized statements belong to the category of Fischer’s “Fallacies of Generalization.”<sup>20</sup> For example, in Spencer’s claim that “line-by-line commentary . . . gets dull fast and alienates most readers” (viii), the phrase “most readers” creates a fallacy of generalization.<sup>21</sup> And the fallacy of factual significance is present in Spencer’s statement that “we’re more interested in Isaiah in the Book of Mormon than we’re interested in Isaiah in general” (ix). Such broad, unsupportable claims lack any form of empirical or textual evidence.

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17. Arie van der Kooij, “Review: Eugene Ulrich and Peter W. Flint, Qumran Cave 1.II: The Isaiah Scrolls: Part 1: Plates and Transcriptions; Part 2: Introduction, Commentary and Textual Variants. DJD 32.” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 22 (2015): 116–17.

18. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper, 1970).

19. *Ibid.*, 47.

20. *Ibid.*, 103–30.

21. *Ibid.*, 103ff.

Spencer writes, “don’t get lost in the details” (35), but I take, and recommend, a contrary approach. To better comprehend Isaiah’s genius and artistry, one must comprehend the overarching themes, pericopes, text divisions, and intervals of the Masoretic Text, 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>, and the other Hebrew witnesses of Isaiah from the Dead Sea Scrolls. But one must also carefully scrutinize the details in Isaiah’s text by decoding the thousands of linguistic forms (including morphological values and lexical structures), poetic arrangements, and rhetorical configurations he used. As God’s prophet and seer, Isaiah provided hundreds and even thousands of brilliantly articulated, magnificent particulars that exist in various forms, structures, and configurations throughout his text. He set forth a variety of parallelisms, including through synonyms (Isaiah 9:3), antithetical structures (Isaiah 65:14), complements (Isaiah 5:28), resultative relationships (Isaiah 7:14), gender matching (Isaiah 52:2), grammar (Isaiah 1:10), domains and subcategories (Isaiah 35:9), double similes (Isaiah 1:9), progression (Isaiah 3:13), numbers (Isaiah 17:6), declarations followed by an explanations (Isaiah 3:9), metaphors (Isaiah 5:7), and masculine and feminine nouns (Isaiah 41:2). There are approximately 1100 parallelistic structures in Isaiah of which about 100 are chiastically arranged! His use of figures of speech is of the highest quality. He used metaphors, similes, personification, synecdoche, metonymy, climactic forms, amphibologia, duplication, intertwining words, synonymia, refrain, interpretation, pleonasm, hyperbole, distribution, contrast, name changes, irony, condescension, apostrophe, anticipation, exultation, interrogation, and dialogue, among others. These elements represent significant and fascinating details in Isaiah’s text. In short, Isaiah was a masterful rhetorician and a quintessential wordsmith who presented the word of God in an eloquent, persuasive, and powerful manner. It is an indisputable reality that he had an astounding command of the Hebrew language.

It remains for us to fully appreciate and come to know Isaiah’s text through diligent study, and especially through the power of the Holy Ghost. Most significantly, we may know, in every particular and in all points, the paramount and significant words of Isaiah that pertain to Jesus Christ and his Atonement. As the Lord himself revealed through his prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 49:26): “I am the LORD your Savior and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”

### Excursus: Using Biblical Hebrew to Comprehend Isaiah

In this excursus, I wish to make a case for acquiring an intermediate (at the very least) or advanced knowledge of biblical Hebrew. (I readily acknowledge, of course, that biblical Hebrew may not be for everyone). In writing about and teaching Isaiah, knowledge of biblical Hebrew is less important than the two items mentioned earlier: (1) a comprehensive understanding of the doctrinal framework of the Restoration of the gospel (and acceptance of and compliance with its teachings), and (2) a heart open to the promptings of the Holy Ghost, the quintessential revelator and teacher.

Before acquiring a knowledge of biblical Hebrew, I had little appreciation for the enhanced comprehension of scriptural texts this significant language allows. But both time and experience have provided me with greater understanding regarding the considerable value of biblical Hebrew, and importantly and personally, the Holy Ghost now opens up avenues of understanding in the Old Testament that were not readily available to me before I learned biblical Hebrew.

Why biblical Hebrew? Based on my experience teaching biblical Hebrew at Brigham Young University for more than a quarter century and publishing multiple books and articles dealing with biblical Hebrew-related topics in scholarly venues (in addition to my publications for Latter-day Saint audiences), I now have a determined view on the importance of knowing biblical Hebrew, especially in approaching the writings of Isaiah and other ancient Israelite prophets.

In my opinion, to truly penetrate the very depths and heights of Isaiah's text, one must have an advanced knowledge of Hebrew. Although every reader cannot be expected to reach that level of linguistic proficiency, perhaps every teacher of the books of the Hebrew Bible would benefit from learning as much as possible about biblical Hebrew and making good use of the many tools and resources that are available to experts and amateurs alike.

There are dozens of reasons why biblical Hebrew informs an understanding of Isaiah in particular, including the following:

- Knowledge of biblical Hebrew opens the way for proper exegetical understanding.
- Isaiah was a quintessential wordsmith whose text contains multiple instances of *hapax legomena*, *dislegomena*, *trislegomena*, and other linguistic forms rare to modern



readers (but not necessarily rare to Isaiah's contemporaries). Many of these forms are difficult to render into English.

- Throughout Isaiah's text are several wordplays (e.g., Isaiah 5:7), theophoric names, proper names, divine names, idioms, sound-patterning (e.g., assonance, consonance, and alliteration), and amphibologia (six instances of such double meanings are found in Isaiah 53 alone), none of which is immediately and confidently comprehensible in English translations.
- A number of Hebrew content words are in some measure untranslatable (e.g., *hesed*, *kpr*, *YHWH*, *ezer*, *goel*, *hrm*, and *cherubim*). Although a translator may approach the meanings of such words, he or she may wish to elucidate the meanings in a note or commentary.
- Isaiah's complicated scene shifts and alternative functions of actors or actants are easier to comprehend in Hebrew than in a translational language that interchanges masculine and feminine forms (nouns, verbs, pronouns) or singular and plural (e.g., Isaiah 57:3–9).
- All translators are biased by their sociocultural and religious backgrounds and doctrinal understanding. Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and atheist scholars will translate Isaiah's words in different ways, and translations are often interpretations. This is equally true of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Moreover, readers should be aware that some translators reject the concept of prophecy, others do not view Jesus Christ as the Savior and Redeemer, and still others have an incorrect understanding of the nature and being of God. The King James Version (KJV) of Isaiah 1:12 serves as an example. Based on the Hebrew consonantal framework, the phrase "When ye come to appear before me [the Lord]" is an impossible reading;<sup>22</sup> the Hebrew consonants convey "When you come to see my face." (The verb "to see" is a *qal* stem rather than a *nip'al* stem, as many text critics have

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22. See Hinckley G. Mitchell's discussion, which includes other scriptural examples (Exodus 23:15; 34:20, 23, 24; Deuteronomy 31:11; Psalms 42:3) in *Isaiah: A Study of Chapters I–XII* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1897), 93. Many other scholars discuss this passage from Isaiah 1:12.

pointed out). Theologies related to anthropomorphism and theophany may have affected the KJV's translation of verse 12.

- Biblical Hebrew employs seven chief verbal stems: *qal*, *nip'al*, *pi'el*, *pu'al*, *hip'il*, *hop'al*, and *hitpa'el*; in addition to these seven, Isaiah employs several rare stems: *hitpalpel*, *pilpel*, *polel*, *po'el*, *polal*, *polpal*, *pulal*, *po'al*, *hotpa'al*, *hitpolel*, *hitpalpel*, and *hishtafel*. Because many of these are to some extent complex, readers untrained in biblical Hebrew would have difficulty understanding certain rare forms in Isaiah's text.
- The English pronoun *you* may hearken back to plural or singular and feminine or masculine subjects, but biblical Hebrew has four forms: feminine singular and plural and masculine singular and plural. Knowledge of biblical Hebrew, therefore, proves to be advantageous in determining antecedence, gender, scene shifts, and ever-changing actants.
- Knowledge of biblical Hebrew allows one to determine which Biblical translation is the most accurate, based on the Article of Faith expression "as far as it is translated correctly."
- Word studies can be conducted accurately only in biblical Hebrew; for example, the English words *atonement* and *atonements* appear 82 times in the KJV Old Testament, but the Hebrew root *kpr* appears 102 times in the Hebrew Bible. This difference indicates that the KJV translators were fluid in their translation of this important word. For a discussion of the difficulties in translating *kpr* and other words into a target language, consult the Hebrew-English lexicons.
- Reading the original language of any author (including Isaiah) encourages greater understanding of that author's cultural, social, intellectual, and doctrinal constitution.
- A host of diachronic-versus-synchronic issues exist when scholars attempt to translate an ancient language, such as biblical Hebrew, into a modern language.
- Respective character zones (e.g., Isaiah, the prophetess, and Hezekiah) and zones of actants (e.g., Zion and Jerusalem) are more clearly articulated in biblical Hebrew than in translations. Actants are referred to nominally and then pronominalized, meaning an actant is the referent of a biblical

Hebrew inflectional element (e.g., affix of a verb, preposition, or noun). Biblical Hebrew allows readers to comprehend pronominalized forms much better than does English.

- Biblical Hebrew's complex verbal aspects (perfective, imperfective, infinitives, etc.) are nuanced differently depending on the context, usage, and form — and there are more than 1200 verbs in Isaiah! Understanding this point is especially important with regard to biblical Hebrew prophetic texts (versus historical narrative texts, legal texts, or wisdom literature). Ewald's taxonomy is useful: "With reference to action, the speaker views everything either as already *finished*, and thus *before* him, or as *unfinished* and non-existent, but possibly *becoming* ... and *coming*. ... These two ideas, viz. of what is complete and what is incomplete (or coming), sharply distinguished from the point of time at which the speaker takes his stand, lead, of course, to those of the purely past and *future*."<sup>23</sup>
- Poetic parallelisms, chiastic structures, and figures of speech are better comprehended, syntactically and lexically, in biblical Hebrew than in a translational language.
- In productive ways, knowledge of biblical Hebrew frequently affects one's doctrinal knowledge. For example, KJV Isaiah 56:5 reads, "Even unto them will I give in mine house [i.e., the temple], and within my walls a place and a name." But a literal translation is "I will give to them in my house and within my walls a hand and a name."

In taking any approach to the writings of Isaiah, commentators or exegetes would do well to be aware of the disadvantages of working through translations of any kind. Who would want to read a Sanskrit translation of Shakespeare without considering, wherever possible, what Shakespeare wrote in his Elizabethan English? How can a reader grasp Shakespeare's full intent and authorial awareness as well as develop a complete sense of his genius in a translated language? Reading Isaiah in a translational language may be likened to seeing Leonardo da Vinci's *La Gioconda* (i.e., *Mona Lisa*) with the bottom half of her face covered. To appreciate this celebrated masterpiece, viewers would have to rely on a museum docent's verbal description of her famous, enigmatic smile.

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23. Heinrich Ewald, *Syntax of the Hebrew Language of the Old Testament*, trans. James Kennedy (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1891), 1–3.

How much we would miss if we were forced to hear a docent's description rather than viewing her smile with our own eyes! It properly humbles all readers when they seek to roll back the barriers of a translated language in order to unveil or reveal the truths that undergird sacred texts. One of the constant desires of Joseph Smith was that, "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly" (Articles of Faith 1:8).

As the prophet of the Restoration, Joseph Smith was occupied with several pursuits of eternal significance. But at one point, he set aside time to acquire a knowledge of biblical Hebrew,<sup>24</sup> even dedicating a room on the third floor of the Kirtland Temple for that purpose.<sup>25</sup> During this pursuit, he recorded a number of statements regarding his study of biblical Hebrew:

- "Our latitude and longitude can be determined in the original Hebrew with far greater accuracy than in the English version. There is a grand distinction between the actual meaning of the prophets and the present translation."<sup>26</sup>
- "My soul delights in reading the word of the Lord in the original."<sup>27</sup>
- "This day [January 19, 1836] we commenced reading in our Hebrew Bibles with much success."<sup>28</sup>
- "May the Lord help us to obtain this language, that we may read the scriptures in the language in which they were given."<sup>29</sup>

Joseph's biblical Hebrew teacher, Joshua Seixas, observed that Joseph had "so far accomplished a knowledge of it [biblical Hebrew], that he is able to translate to my entire satisfaction."<sup>30</sup>

Spencer's book lacks, or fails to communicate, an understanding of biblical Hebrew. Rather it relies on English translations of Isaiah's text and even recommends to readers various modern English translations

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24. See Matthew J. Grey, "'The Word of the Lord in the Original': Joseph Smith's Study of Hebrew in Kirtland," in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2015), 239–91.

25. *Ibid.*, 265.

26. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1969), 290; *History of the Church* 5:342–43.

27. *History of the Church* 2:396.

28. *History of the Church* 2:376–77.

29. *History of the Church* 2:391.

30. Grey, "'The Word of the Lord in the Original,'" 270.

(31–32). While these translations are competent, their purposes are different from that of helping modern readers experience even a simulated engagement with the meaning, beauty, and depth of the Hebrew composition. For many of the reasons I’ve stated, a knowledge of biblical Hebrew would have appreciably informed Spencer’s topics and writing. (Far less relevantly, the front cover of Spencer’s book depicts a small Hebrew document — with the Hebrew writing upside down! This is likely the publisher’s doing and not Spencer’s.)

It would be fitting, in my view, for scholars interested in teaching the Old Testament (through classroom instruction or via published writings) to expand their scholarly competence by learning biblical Hebrew. Certainly, a knowledge of biblical Hebrew would greatly enhance their instructional objectives and goals. This knowledge (for Latter-day Saint scholars) would raise the expectation for learning among Latter-day Saint readers and possibly decelerate criticisms of those who oppose Latter-day Saint doctrines. There are not many excuses for biblical scholars — especially in this age of disposable time and computerized resources — for not learning and using biblical Hebrew. By way of comparison, my bibliography for a recently published book for academia (totaling more than 500 pages) on the Hebrew witnesses of Isaiah (the Masoretic Text; the 22 Isaiah Dead Sea Scrolls, e.g., 1QIsa<sup>a</sup>, 1QIsa<sup>b</sup>, 4QIsa<sup>a-r</sup>; 5QIsaiah and Murlsaiah) lists more than 300 scholarly publications from the past 150-plus years; the authors of each of these publications possess advanced knowledge of biblical Hebrew! Similarly, not one specialized journal of the Hebrew Bible or Dead Sea Scrolls would generally consider publishing an article by someone who lacks sufficient knowledge of biblical Hebrew; to do so would put the reputation of that journal at risk.

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