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An Other Approach to Isaiah Studies

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AN OTHER APPROACH TO ISAIAH STUDIES

Joshua M. Sears

Abstract: *A recent review of Joseph M. Spencer's book The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record made the case that the book contains several challenges and problems, in particular that it advocates a theologically deficient interpretation of Isaiah that denies Isaiah's witness of Jesus Christ. This response provides an alternative reading of Spencer's work and suggests these assertions are often based on misunderstanding. At stake in this conversation is the question of whether or not there is more than one valid way to read Isaiah that draws upon a faithful, Restoration perspective. While Spencer may interpret and frame some things differently than some other Latter-day Saint scholars, the prophecies of Isaiah provide enough richness and possibility to accommodate a chorus of faithful approaches.*

In a previous issue of *Interpreter*, Donald W. Parry reviewed Joseph M. Spencer's book *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record*.¹ I am offering a response for two reasons. First, although they were not intended this way, a few statements in the review may incorrectly be taken to imply that Spencer, as a person, lacks an understanding of Restoration doctrine, does not accept Church teachings, and is closed to the influence of the Holy Ghost. When readers come away from the review thinking this is what the review meant, it can lead to significant personal and professional repercussions for Spencer, who is a Brigham Young University religion professor. Second, I believe the review significantly misunderstands Spencer's book, and these misunderstandings led to substantial misrepresentations of what Spencer's

1. Donald W. Parry, "An Approach to Isaiah Studies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020): 245–64, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/an-approach-to-isaiah-studies/>.

book says. My aim, then, is to offer my own reading of Spencer's book and gently correct the errors I perceive in the earlier review.

Before proceeding, I wish to state categorically that my response should in no way signal disrespect for the intelligence, talent, or good intentions of Dr. Parry. He has been my teacher, mentor, and friend for many years, and there are few people whose opinions on Isaiah or Hebrew I value as highly. I believe Dr. Parry's review was written with the best of intentions and that the inaccuracies were the result of honest misunderstanding. Although the record should be set straight regarding Spencer's book, this should in no way diminish Dr. Parry's numerous contributions to our study of Isaiah, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other important fields of study, for which Latter-day Saints will always be in his debt.

Faithfully Approaching Isaiah

Unfortunately, some lines in the review could be read to infer that Spencer is not a believing or faithful Latter-day Saint. For example, these two sentences are taken from the same page:

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. ...

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.²

Based on my personal familiarity with Dr. Parry — a model of kindness and professionalism — I do not read these statements as personal criticisms of Spencer, and Dr. Parry himself has assured me that they were absolutely not intended that way. However, I have also spoken with many individuals who read the review and came away thinking a personal criticism was intended. I believe this miscommunication resulted from the fact that the

2. Ibid., 246.

review occasionally makes general observations about how to approach Isaiah (including the necessity of having the Holy Ghost), and some readers naturally understood these statements had some bearing on the individual scholar whose work was being reviewed. It is admittedly easy to read these general observations as criticisms when they appear in close proximity to sentences that negatively evaluate other aspects of Spencer's writings.³ It is regrettable that the review did not more clearly distinguish between its Isaiah-in-general and Spencer-specific observations, but I wish to clarify for anyone who took it that way that no accusation of faithlessness was intended.

On Searching for Jesus Christ in Isaiah's Text

The majority of the review of Spencer's book is dedicated to defending the presence of Jesus Christ in the book of Isaiah. I appreciate and applaud the motivation of defending the Savior and the scriptures that witness of Him. However, I believe the review misreads Spencer's actual arguments and that all the evidence it musters does not address the issues at hand.

The review takes particular exception to a statement of Spencer's that it quotes multiple times: "*Stop looking for Jesus in Isaiah.*"⁴ The review is emphatic: "I take an opposite view."⁵ The review goes on to establish that Christ is ubiquitous in Isaiah by using the following pieces of evidence:

- Numerous Church authorities have identified Jesus as Jehovah, the biblical God of Israel.⁶
- Jehovah's name (*Yahweh* in Hebrew) appears more than 6,000 times in the Old Testament (euphemistically rendered "the LORD" in the King James Version).⁷
- In Isaiah alone, Jehovah's name appears 450 times.⁸
- Certain Old Testament titles for Jehovah, such as "rock" or "king," are also used in the New Testament to refer to Jesus.⁹

3. See also *ibid.*, 257 and 258. Page 247 also mentions those who do not "accept" the position of Church authorities that Jesus Christ's premortal name was Jehovah, but while it is clearly implied that Spencer does not accept that position, I will argue below that this was based on a misreading of Spencer.

4. Parry, "Approach to Isaiah Studies," 247, 255.

5. *Ibid.*, 247.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 248–49.

8. *Ibid.*, 249.

9. *Ibid.*

- Non-Latter-day Saint Christian scholars also believe that “it is to Him that [all] Old Testament Scripture points.”¹⁰
- The book of Isaiah describes Jehovah with titles we associate with Christ, including “Prince of Peace” or “Redeemer.”¹¹
- The book of Isaiah refers to the law of Moses, which the New Testament and Book of Mormon teach pointed to Christ.¹²
- Several names in Isaiah incorporate Jehovah’s Hebrew name (Yahweh) in them, including Hezekiah, Isaiah, and Uzziah.¹³
- Isaiah mentions ordinances, rituals, and ceremonies, all of which symbolized Christ.¹⁴
- Several New Testament passages state that the Old Testament teaches of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

Some of these points are stronger than others, but collectively they do provide an excellent summary of the theological position of Latter-day Saints that Jesus Christ should be identified with Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament. In the context of this review, however, the problem is that none of this has anything to do with what Spencer is saying in his book.

In the statements by Spencer to which the review takes exception, Spencer is using the terms “Jesus” and “Christ” in a very restricted sense, referring more or less to the mortal ministry of Jesus as described in the New Testament. In other words, when Spencer says, “Stop looking for Jesus in Isaiah,” what he means is “Stop looking for *nothing but detailed references to Jesus’s mortal ministry as described in the New Testament* in Isaiah.”¹⁶ I can understand why Spencer made this suggestion: I have

10. Ibid., 253.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 254–55.

16. There are a few places where Spencer qualifies what he means by “Christ,” such as where he describes “Christ from the New Testament” or where he describes “Christ’s life” (Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* [Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016], 34, 290). However, I do believe that Spencer should have more carefully and more frequently made this nuance clear. While careful readers should pick up on the fact that Spencer is saying only that the *mortal* Jesus is relatively rare in Isaiah, I can understand how some readers would miss that distinction.

been in several settings where fellow Saints have read Isaiah under the assumption that every sentence refers *somehow* to something familiar in the four Gospels — if only you are spiritually sensitive enough to discern the hidden symbolism. That approach can be useful for devotional reading, but Spencer is trying to help people see that Isaiah talks about many other things as well, when read in context.¹⁷ Helping people appreciate those contexts — the Assyrian threat, the Babylonian exile, the Persian restoration, etc. — is crucial for Spencer’s book because the prophet Nephi is familiar with those contexts and uses them to develop his brilliant likening of Isaiah to new settings.

The review, then, takes a broad, everything-counts approach to finding Jesus in Isaiah and then unfairly compares that to Spencer’s assertion that Isaiah contains relatively little (at least without likening) regarding the details of Christ’s mortal ministry in first-century Judea. If the review were to challenge Spencer’s approach on its own grounds that would be one thing (i.e., it would be helpful to see specific references where Parry sees details of Christ’s mortal ministry described in Isaiah), but simply making the argument that Jesus is Jehovah does not address Spencer’s actual assertion. It’s easy to make the case that (from a Latter-day Saint perspective) Jesus is Jehovah, but to present Spencer as opposed to that position sets up a straw man argument.

Besides misreading Spencer’s claim that Isaiah says relatively little in detail about Jesus’s mortal ministry, the review also unfairly presents Spencer’s position by highlighting a few carefully-selected lines that most

17. When we come to “the Isaiah chapters” in my BYU Book of Mormon classes, many students share their previous frustration with Isaiah’s writings. These feelings are not uncommon, of course, but I have discovered that for some of these students the frustration (or even antagonism) they feel toward these chapters derives in part from the expectations they developed in Seminary or Sunday School. Their teachers had framed Isaiah as a book of prophecies about the coming of Christ, and they illustrated that point with two or three verses they said talked about the Savior’s birth, life, or death. This approach does not equip the students to be able to understand anything about the hundreds of other Isaiah verses in the Book of Mormon that do not so easily sound like they relate to Christ’s life. As they read the Isaiah chapters on their own, the students become frustrated, concluding they must not be smart enough or spiritual enough to see the descriptions of Jesus they have been set up to expect in nearly every sentence. When I begin to explain the context of Isaiah’s writings, I have seen students become visibly relieved to discover, for example, that most of the time “Assyrians” just means Assyrians — not Pharisees or lepers or Roman soldiers. I do, of course, also show them places where I believe Isaiah *is* directly prophesying of Christ’s life as well as show them how to find Jesus in Isaiah through likening, types and shadows, and other interpretive approaches.

strongly suggest Spencer opposes finding Jesus in Isaiah while ignoring many more statements that show Spencer in fact *supports* finding Jesus in Isaiah — provided the references are methodologically sound. For example:

- Before stating the line of greatest controversy — “Stop looking for Jesus in Isaiah” — Spencer himself announces that the suggestion will be worded “far too strongly at first.” The review includes that line in its quotation of Spencer,¹⁸ but does not stop to notice that Spencer himself admits that the suggestion is deliberately exaggerated, nor does the review note that Spencer then takes multiple pages to tone down and qualify that purposefully over-the-top opening statement.¹⁹ Spencer’s initial self-described exaggeration was apparently a rhetorical device, and I think he should have been more careful about how he set up his actual position. Nevertheless, the review should not have singled out the exaggeration without including Spencer’s subsequent discussion of what he actually means by it.
- Rather than not looking for Christ at all, as implied in the review, Spencer actually advocates for a process of looking at Isaiah’s historical context *first* and *then* looking for Christ. “Wait a bit before trying to find Christ,” Spencer says, “don’t try too quickly to force [a passage of Isaiah] to tell us something about Christ. It’ll do that in good time.”²⁰ “It’ll do that in good time” indicates that Spencer *does* believe Christ’s mortal ministry appears in Isaiah.
- The review quotes Spencer saying, “Now, let me be perfectly clear on something: Christ *is* there in Isaiah, I think.” The review then states, “Note the uncertainty Spencer expresses with the words ‘I think.’”²¹ A more charitable reading might be that Spencer is expressing epistemological humility, something Spencer values perhaps to a fault. Spencer is not uniquely expressing caution regarding the particular idea of Christ in Isaiah; attentive readers will notice that in his book he is cautious in virtually *everything* he says. According to an electronic word search using the book preview at Amazon.com, that phrase “I think” appears 89 times

18. Parry, “Approach to Isaiah Studies,” 247.

19. See Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 33–34.

20. *Ibid.*, 34.

21. Parry, “Approach to Isaiah Studies,” 247.

in the book — and “maybe” appears 41 times, “possibly” 66, and “perhaps” 103. In this book, that’s just the way Spencer talks. Furthermore, the review focuses solely on the potentially negative “uncertainty” of that “I think” clause without appreciating the fact that Spencer has just said quite clearly that he *does* think Christ is in Isaiah. This is even clearer when Spencer’s complete thought is quoted in full: “Christ *is* there in Isaiah, I think. There are very good Isaiah scholars who find messianic anticipation in Isaiah’s prophecies, even if there are others who don’t. (I actually find *the latter’s* arguments a bit obtuse.) And we’ll see later that *Nephi* insists that certain Isaiah passages have something to say about Christ. Abinadi’s even stronger on that point.”²² Although the review paints Spencer as opposing any and all messianic anticipation in Isaiah’s prophecies, Spencer himself actually evaluates such a position negatively.

- The review fails to mention Spencer’s analysis of Lehi’s use of Isaiah and the possibility he describes there that “Isaiah saw the time and coming of Christ in vision. Isaiah’s prophecies would be fulfilled first and foremost when the messianic age would dawn and the redemption of the world would begin in earnest.”²³ Although Spencer presents this as just one of three possible ways to read Lehi’s use of Isaiah, Spencer says that they are “all genuine possibilities, any of them could work.”²⁴
- The review fails to mention that when Spencer gets to Isaiah 4:2, he concludes that “this is most likely to be understood as a messianic reference.”²⁵
- The review quotes Spencer saying, “When we start digging in Isaiah’s writings for clear prophecies of Christ, we find relatively little that makes sense.”²⁶ The review fails to mention the corrective that Spencer offers immediately after that statement: “... though we ought to be careful not to let it make us overly skeptical. There’s plenty of evidence that *Nephi* saw at least a few major passages in Isaiah’s writings as messianic

22. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 34.

23. *Ibid.*, 64.

24. *Ibid.*, 65.

25. *Ibid.*, 160; see also 199.

26. Parry, “Approach to Isaiah Studies,” 247.

(as pointing directly to Christ).”²⁷ Shortly thereafter Spencer repeats, “But again, it’s clear from what Nephi does with Isaiah that we can’t get too skeptical . . . we’d be overly hasty if we simply dismissed every messianic reading of the prophet.”²⁸ Ironically, the review paints Spencer as “dismiss[ing] every messianic reading of the prophet” even though he advocates against such an approach.

To summarize, while the quotations selected for the review create the impression that Spencer opposes any efforts to locate Christ in Isaiah, Spencer’s position is actually much more nuanced: “We *ought* to be looking *in modest and informed ways* for prophecies in Isaiah that might indeed point to the coming of Christ several centuries later.”²⁹ Perhaps the reviewer has a different approach regarding how “modest” one must be and what constitutes an “informed” approach to locating Christological passages — but setting up Spencer as wholly opposed to this process once again creates a straw man.

Interpreting Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah 9:6

Another issue relating to finding Christ in Isaiah is how to interpret “Isaianic passages that many Christians interpret to refer to Jesus Christ.”³⁰ The review focuses on the two examples of how Spencer approaches Isaiah 7:14 (“a virgin shall conceive”) and Isaiah 9:6 (“unto us a child is born”). The review’s exclusive focus on these two passages is in itself misleading, however, because the chapter where Spencer discusses them is actually about *three* passages — Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 9:6, and Isaiah 11:1. Spencer finds Isaiah 11:1 the most messianic of the three but also mentions the irony that a Latter-day scripture (Doctrine and Covenants 113:4) interprets this traditionally messianic passage as *not* about Jesus. None of this fits the review’s position that Spencer opposes all messianic passages or that every potentially messianic passage is definitely about Jesus — which may be why the review is silent about Spencer’s evaluation.

In its discussion of Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah 9:6, the review explains that Spencer “attempts to diminish [the] interpretation” that these passages refer to Jesus Christ.³¹ That’s true in a sense, but the review fails

27. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 290–91.

28. *Ibid.*, 291.

29. *Ibid.*, 291; emphasis added.

30. Parry, “Approaches to Isaiah Studies,” 249.

31. *Ibid.*, 249.

to communicate any of Spencer's stated reasons for wanting to nuance (perhaps a better word than "diminish") the traditional Christological interpretations. Unfortunately, this can leave readers with the sense that Spencer is attacking Christological interpretations just for the sake of attacking Christological interpretations. Rather than simplistically dismissing Christ-centered readings of Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah 9:6, Spencer explains that "whether these are messianic prophecies ... is a *really* complicated question."³²

The review defends a Christological reading of Isaiah 7:14 on several grounds:

- Matthew 1:21–23 states that Isaiah 7:14 was fulfilled in Christ's birth.³³
- Modern prophets like Gordon B. Hinckley and Thomas S. Monson have quoted Isaiah 7:14 in relation to Christmas.³⁴
- Aspects of Isaiah 7:14 fit with the story of the birth of Jesus, including "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.'"³⁵

These points summarize why Latter-day Saints can and should see Christ in this passage. However, the review fails to engage *any* of the reasons Spencer gives for *also* interpreting Isaiah 7:14 in another way.³⁶ This is especially surprising given that Spencer's argument is so compellingly simple: when read in the full context of Isaiah chapter 7, the child mentioned in v. 14 *has* to refer to a child who lived contemporaneously with Isaiah in the late eighth-century BC. *Nothing* about the entire set up of the prophecy makes sense if it were to refer *exclusively* to a baby born seven centuries in the future. Spencer is perfectly content to say the Holy Ghost could have intended an additional meaning to refer to the future birth of Christ and that we can read this passage as a type or shadow of His coming,³⁷ but he does not believe this

32. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 204.

33. Parry, "Approach to Isaiah Studies," 250.

34. *Ibid.*, 250–52.

35. *Ibid.*, 252–53.

36. See Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 208–10.

37. See *ibid.*, 210.

Christological reading is incompatible with the view that the immediate context of the prophecy was talking about a different baby.

The review's unilateral defense of Isaiah 7:14 as a prophecy of Jesus's birth — without any hint that it could also describe other events — is particularly perplexing given the fact that Parry has elsewhere supported a dual reading not entirely dissimilar from Spencer's.³⁸ In that earlier work, Parry describes the fulfillment in Christ as the "greater fulfillment" and the fulfillment in Isaiah's day as a "lesser fulfillment," in contrast to Spencer, who focuses on the immediate fulfillment as the primary meaning and the fulfillment in Christ as a likening given later by the Holy Spirit. However, that distinction in their approach is not nearly as incompatible as the review makes it out to be ("My understanding of Isaiah 7:14 ... is completely dissimilar to Spencer's").³⁹

Furthermore, the idea that this passage can have multiple fulfillments is supported by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland,⁴⁰ so it is puzzling that the review quotes Elder Holland to imply that a Christological reading is the *only* valid interpretation.⁴¹ The review also fails to mention the many other

38. "The prophecy has a dual application, as shown by a close reading of Isaiah 7:10–16; 8:3–7; and Matthew 1:21. First, the greater fulfillment of the prophecy centers in Jesus Christ, who was Immanuel, the son of the virgin Mary ... Second, because the sign was given in part to nurture Ahaz's faith, it would have had some fulfillment in his lifetime. The lesser fulfillment of the Immanuel prophecy thus pertains to Isaiah's wife, the prophetess, who also fulfilled the conditions of Isaiah's prophecy when she brought forth a son." (Donald W. Parry, Jay A. Parry, and Tina M. Peterson, *Understanding Isaiah* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998], 72–73).

39. Parry, "Approach to Isaiah Studies," 250.

40. "There are plural or parallel elements to this prophecy [Isaiah 7:14], as with so much of Isaiah's writing. The most immediate meaning was probably focused on Isaiah's wife, a pure and good woman who brought forth a son about this time, the child becoming a type and shadow of the greater, later fulfillment of the prophecy that would be realized in the birth of Jesus Christ." (Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997], 79). "The dual or parallel fulfillment of this prophecy [Isaiah 7:14] comes in the realization that Isaiah's wife, a pure and good young woman — symbolically representing another pure young woman — did bring forth a son. This boy's birth was a type and shadow of the greater and later fulfillment of that prophecy, the virgin birth of the Lord Jesus Christ." (Jeffrey R. Holland, "More Fully Persuaded?: Isaiah's Witness of Christ's Ministry," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch [Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998], 6).

41. See Parry, "Approach to Isaiah Studies," 252.

Latter-day Saint scholars⁴² — as well as other apostles⁴³ — who have approached Isaiah 7:14 in a similar way.

The review also defends a Christological reading of Isaiah 9:6. As with the previous example, the review unfortunately fails either to adequately address Spencer's interpretation that the passage refers to King Hezekiah or to acknowledge that Spencer is perfectly willing to allow a double-interpretive approach that sees in Hezekiah's birth a type of Christ's.⁴⁴ To counter Spencer's identification of Hezekiah, the review asks, "But how does Spencer contend that the 'Mighty God' ... refers to Hezekiah rather than Jesus Christ?"⁴⁵ The review summarizes and dismisses Spencer's appeal to alternate Bible translations that modify the wording to a less-divine title but fails to mention that Spencer's explanation is more robust than that, citing ancient Near Eastern throne names and the perceived divine connection between gods and kings.⁴⁶ Spencer's quick synopsis of these issues does have scholarly support,⁴⁷ but the review does not engage with any of the extensive literature identifying the royal child as Hezekiah, content instead to simply dismiss Spencer's summary of that literature.

To be clear, I think there are places where Spencer's arguments do deserve further exploration and even some serious critiques. For example, Spencer asserts without explanation that it is unlikely Isaiah himself would have understood Isaiah 7:14 or Isaiah 9:6 to have been

42. See Jason R. Combs, "From King Ahaz's Sign to Christ Jesus: The 'Fulfillment' of Isaiah 7:14," in *Prophets and Prophecies of the Old Testament: The 46th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Aaron P. Schade, Brian M. Hauglid, and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 95–122, as well as the many other references included in his endnotes.

43. For example, President Dallin H. Oaks wrote, "Many of the prophecies and doctrinal passages in the scriptures have multiple meanings ... The book of Isaiah contains numerous prophecies that seem to have multiple fulfillments. One seems to involve the people of Isaiah's day or the circumstances of the next generation. Another meaning, often symbolic, seems to refer to events in the meridian of time, when Jerusalem was destroyed and her people scattered after the crucifixion of the Son of God. Still another meaning or fulfillment of the same prophecy seems to relate to the events attending the Second Coming of the Savior." (Dallin H. Oaks, "Scripture Reading and Revelation," *Ensign* 25, no. 1, January 1995, 8).

44. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 212.

45. Parry, "Approach to Isaiah Studies," 250.

46. See Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 211.

47. See Combs, "King Ahaz's Sign," 102–5, as well as the many works cited in his endnotes.

pointing ahead to Jesus. But why couldn't Isaiah have understood the fuller meaning of his prophecies, even if his contemporaries saw only the immediate application? It is regrettable the review did not engage Spencer's actual arguments in more detail, or some of these points could have been explored more fully.

One final point can be made regarding Spencer's approach to finding Christ in Isaiah: Spencer takes many of his cues regarding where to locate Christ from none other than the prophet Nephi. The review fails to mention how tenaciously Spencer is trying to track Nephi's interpretive approach (indeed, the review barely acknowledges this is actually a book about 1 and 2 Nephi, not the book of Isaiah). But since Spencer's book is *all about* how Nephi interprets Isaiah, this focus on Nephi instead of Matthew makes sense. It is Nephi who encourages Spencer not to be too skeptical in the face of secular scholars who deny the presence of Jesus in Isaiah.⁴⁸ Nephi's influence also goes the other way: one reason Spencer hesitates to declare that a passage like Isaiah 7:14 only refers to Jesus is that *Nephi himself does not explicitly interpret the passage that way*. In fact, when Nephi gets to his interpretation of the Isaiah chapters in 2 Nephi 25–30, he's hardly interested at all in the birth and mortal ministry of Jesus, mentioning them only when he's doing quick historical overviews.⁴⁹ Nephi is certainly sensitive to the infinite effects of Christ's atoning sacrifice, but as far as Christ's place in history is concerned, Nephi is laser-focused on the last days, not the meridian of time.

In sum, Spencer's book is not out to excise the mortal Messiah from the book of Isaiah as much as it is invested in helping us appreciate how much Nephi is trying to point us in the latter days to Christ — not to the Babe in Bethlehem or the Son of Man who walked the roads of Palestine, but to the Redeemer of Israel who remembers His ancient covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and who is gathering His people in preparation for His glorious second coming.

On Other Matters

The middle section of the review, titled "Other Matters," criticizes Spencer on a number of miscellaneous points. Unfortunately, each paragraph misrepresents Spencer or leaves an unfairly poor impression of him.

- The review makes the point that "it is doubtful that biblical scholars can adequately conduct text-critical studies on

48. See Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 34, 207–8, 210, 212, 245, 290–91.

49. See 2 Nephi 25:12–13, 18–19.

Isaiah's writing recorded in the Book of Mormon. Because the Book of Mormon is an English translation (i.e., we do not have access to the language of the brass plates), word-to-word correspondences and lemmatizations are impossible."⁵⁰ Spencer certainly knows this, and I can't identify any places where Spencer's writing suggests otherwise. The review provides no examples to explain why it brings up this topic, so I'm not sure why it goes over this information. For most readers of the review, the implication they will be left with is that Spencer does not understand this.

- The review says Spencer commits a fallacy of negative proof when he suggests that perhaps the fact that the Book of Mormon never quotes from Isaiah 56–66 could mean that those chapters were not on the brass plates.⁵¹ The review is correct to point out that this absence does not *prove* these chapters were not on the brass plates. However, it would have been helpful to at least briefly acknowledge that Spencer's suggestion is not outside the mainstream of conservative Book of Mormon scholarship; a similar observation that Isaiah 56–66 might not have been on the brass plates has been made by authors such as Hugh Nibley, John Welch, Kevin Christensen, and Kent Jackson.⁵² The review also fails to mention that Spencer's reasons for suggesting that some chapters of Isaiah might not have been on the brass plates are much more extensive than

50. Parry, "Approach to Isaiah Studies," 255–56.

51. *Ibid.*, 256.

52. See Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 125; John W. Welch, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 432–33; Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001): 78–79; and Kent Jackson, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon," in *A Reason for Faith*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), 75. Note that these authors are not *arguing* that Isaiah 56–66 were not on the brass plates; they are allowing only for the possibility. Since Spencer is similarly making only suggestions, not a hard argument, I see his position as compatible. Spencer's overall point is that there is much we can learn from (non-Latter-day Saint) Isaiah scholars, even if "someone committed to the Book of Mormon's historical claims can't uncritically accept every conclusion" they draw (Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 23).

simply observing that the Book of Mormon does not quote from them.⁵³ The review does indicate that authorship of Isaiah is a complicated issue, but because it provides no additional background, uninformed readers will come away from this paragraph with the impression that Spencer’s “fallacy” is an uncommon and illogical position.

- The review accuses Spencer of fallacies of generalization for claiming that most Latter-day Saint readers would find detailed academic commentaries dull and that more Latter-day Saints are interested in Isaiah in the Book of Mormon than they are in the book of Isaiah itself.⁵⁴ The review demands “empirical” evidence for these “unsupportable claims,” which surprises me. Is the review really suggesting the *majority* of all Latter-day Saints really do think academic commentaries are page turners or that more of them care about the biblical book of Isaiah than they do the Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon?
- The review quotes Spencer saying, “Don’t get lost in the details” when reading Isaiah and says that “I take, and recommend, a contrary approach.”⁵⁵ The review seems to understand that Spencer is saying one can safely ignore the details of Isaiah, and the review recommends that instead one should seek to “comprehend the overarching themes, pericopes, text divisions, and intervals of the Masoretic Text, 1QIsa^a, and the other Hebrew witnesses of Isaiah from the Dead Sea Scrolls” and that “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.”⁵⁶ But Spencer is not saying the details are unimportant or that you should not get to them eventually; he is saying you should explore those details only *after* “you have a good sense for what’s going on in general.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, the review’s recommendations speak to readers who are diving deep into Isaiah, whereas Spencer is speaking to readers just

53. See Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 17–23.

54. Parry, “Approach to Isaiah Studies,” 256.

55. *Ibid.*, 257.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 35.

getting started — who don't even know what “pericopes,” “the Masoretic Text,” “1QIsa,” or “morphological values” *are*. Spencer is encouraging people not to get bogged down or give up when they come to tricky passages; he is not encouraging ignorance.

On the Necessity of Knowing Hebrew

The review ends with a lengthy excursus on the value of using biblical Hebrew when analyzing Isaiah. As one who has spent many years studying Hebrew and enjoying the richness it brings to my scripture study, I agree with this basic premise. However, in the context of the larger review of Spencer's book, I see three problems with the excursus.

First, I believe the excursus is overly dismissive of Spencer's qualifications to write about Isaiah. Spencer is disparaged for “lack[ing], or fail[ing] to communicate, an understanding of biblical Hebrew” and for instead “rel[ying] on English translations.”⁵⁸

The excursus goes on to declare that “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”⁵⁹ and states that “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.”⁶⁰ The review is speaking more broadly to biblical scholars, but why do so here in this particular book review? Spencer is not a biblical scholar, and he is open about that in his book (“I'm not an expert in ancient texts and languages”).⁶¹ The publisher for this book is not a “specialized journal of the Hebrew Bible,” nor is Spencer's audience other academics. It seems strange to criticize a book on apples for not meeting the requirements of academic journals on oranges.

All of this raises some larger questions, in particular, *should* anyone who does not possess “advanced knowledge of biblical Hebrew”⁶² be allowed to say anything about Isaiah?

If we assume for the sake of argument that people without such skills *should* be allowed a place at the table, the best things they could do to make up for their lack of language skills would be to read the Bible

58. Parry, “Approach to Isaiah Studies,” 262.

59. *Ibid.*, 263.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 98.

62. Parry, “Approach to Isaiah Studies,” 258, 263.

in multiple translations, read commentaries by scholars who do know Hebrew, compare biblical texts with Restoration scripture, and seek help from the Holy Ghost to discern meaning.⁶³ And for his part, Spencer does his homework. Even as he himself recognizes that advanced Hebrew proficiency would be the ideal,⁶⁴ he takes all of the necessary “next best” steps such as reading commentaries and comparing translations. That explains why, for someone who doesn’t know Hebrew, he seems to discuss the meaning of Hebrew words and sentences quite regularly.⁶⁵

So, unless we are going to take the extreme position that *only* people with advanced Hebrew be permitted to speak on Isaiah, I think we need to acknowledge that Spencer did do his best to responsibly incorporate the Hebrew insights of specialists. This is not to say that Spencer’s work would not have benefited had he known Hebrew or that there are no places where Hebrew could be used to critique his arguments.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the review does not engage with any specific arguments but dismisses Spencer categorically.⁶⁷

While most of the individual points in the excursus are accurate descriptions of the value of knowing Hebrew, I think the problem is that the excursus — at least as written, and coming at the end of a review of a book by a non-Hebraist writing to non-specialists — conveys a very exclusionary tone. I’m sure this was not intentional, and had these points been made in another setting they would work better. But as it is, dismissing people for talking about Isaiah when they have *merely*

63. “In an ideal world, we would follow Joseph Smith’s example and develop a strong tradition of studying the Bible in its original languages, but the next best method for getting closer to the original texts is to compare several translations, along with the additional witness of modern scriptures.” (Grant Hardy, “The King James Bible and the Future of Missionary Work,” *Dialogue* 45, no. 1 [2012]: 5).

64. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 31.

65. I found examples in Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 27, 29, 161, 162, 172, 175, 180, 186, 187, 188, 190, 194, 199, 205, 209, 211, 221, 222, and 273.

66. For example, Noel B. Reynolds critiques Spencer’s uses Hebrew to argue against a particular point Spencer made in another publication (although Reynolds is reconstructing what he believes the Hebrew behind our English translation would have been). (Noel B. Reynolds, “On Doubting Nephi’s Break Between 1 and 2 Nephi: A Critique of Joseph Spencer’s *An Other Testament: On Typology*,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 25, 2017), 85–102.

67. In another irony, the review also demonstrates that it is easy to make unwitting errors when it comes to Hebrew: on page 248, the Tetragrammaton *yhwh* is spelled backwards as *hwhy*. There is no question that the author knows his Hebrew, so this is likely nothing more than a typesetting error.

“relie[d] on English translations of Isaiah’s text”⁶⁸ sends the impression that only a select few can have anything meaningful to contribute. The tone unintentionally makes the excursus come across as disciplinary boundary maintenance.

The second problem with the excursus is that it overstates the necessity of knowing Hebrew even for average, non-academic readers of Isaiah. While the review admits up front that “biblical Hebrew may not be for everyone” and that “knowledge of biblical Hebrew is less important than ... understanding ... the doctrinal framework of the Restoration doctrine” and being “open to the promptings of the Holy Ghost,”⁶⁹ the tone of much of the rest of the excurses seems to ignore those statements.

Not only does the excursus summarily dismiss Spencer’s work as the author, it actually faults Spencer for advising *his non-specialist readers* to compare multiple translations to better understand Isaiah (“Spencer’s book ... even recommends to readers various modern English translations”).⁷⁰ The review dismisses every single existing translation of Isaiah, stating, “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.”⁷¹

From my point of view, this is the wrong approach to take. While fully acknowledging the value of knowing biblical Hebrew — I have three degrees in Hebrew Bible — I would imagine that, statistically speaking, the number of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who actually read biblical Hebrew is zero. And most people do not have the time, means, talent, and interest in learning to doing so. Rather than shame Spencer’s readership of everyday, non-academic Latter-day Saints by calling their ability to read Isaiah less than “even a simulated engagement” with Isaiah’s words, we should be encouraging them to do the exact things Spencer advises them to do — read Isaiah in multiple translations and compare the different ways they illuminate Isaiah’s meaning.⁷²

While encouraging original-language learning to certain people in certain situations is appropriate, we also want to be careful about overly disparaging translations of scriptural texts or suggesting they cannot be meaningfully appreciated unless read in the original tongue. After

68. Parry, “Approach to Isaiah Studies,” 262.

69. *Ibid.*, 258.

70. *Ibid.*, 262.

71. *Ibid.*, 263.

72. Spencer, *The Vision of All*, 31–33; Joshua M. Sears, “Study Bibles: An Introduction for Latter-day Saints,” *Religious Educator* 20, no. 3 (2019): 27–57.

all, where would that leave us with the New Testament, which preserves Jesus's Aramaic teachings only in Greek translation? Or with the Book of Mormon, where Mormon's words are accessible only in English?

The third problem with the excursus is that, despite that it appears in a review of Spencer's book, it actually does not tell readers anything specific or helpful about how Hebrew could have improved Spencer's book. Instead, readers are given only this vague summary evaluation:

Spencer's book lacks, or fails to communicate, an understanding of biblical Hebrew. Rather it relies on English translations of Isaiah's text ... A knowledge of biblical Hebrew would have appreciably informed Spencer's topics and writing.⁷³

Despite spending pages making the case that Spencer's book suffers from his lack of Hebrew, the excursus offers one and only one specific example: "The front cover of Spencer's book depicts a small Hebrew document — with the Hebrew writing upside down!"⁷⁴ The review seems to be saying that Spencer (or perhaps Spencer's publisher) is so laughably inept at Hebrew that he even let a blunder like that make its way onto the cover.

Antonio Balestra's painting of Isaiah *does* show Hebrew text upside down from the perspective of the one viewing the painting, but a closer look reveals that Isaiah is holding a writing instrument and is composing Hebrew on a document lying atop a hard writing surface, and that the top of the document has been slid up and rolled over the top of the writing surface. It's *supposed* to be upside down to the viewer, or it would have been upside down to Isaiah in the painting.⁷⁵

Misunderstanding the painting is a minor issue, but unfortunately it is typical of much of the rest of the review: it spots something wrong on the surface and attacks the perceived problem without taking into account the larger context. If the Hebrew were really upside down — if Spencer really doesn't believe that Jesus is Jehovah, or really opposes modern apostles, or really were out of touch with other Latter-day Saint scholars, or really advocated ignoring the details in Isaiah — then the review's spirited critiques would be appropriate. But as it is, the review misreads Spencer on so many points that the criticisms, however well intentioned, simply miss the mark.

73. Parry, "Approach to Isaiah Studies," 262–63.

74. *Ibid.*, 263.

75. "Antonio Balestra — Prophet Isaiah," Wikimedia Commons, updated September 22, 2014, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Antonio_Balestra_-_Prophet_Isaiah.jpg.

Spencer's book is not perfect, and his approach may not be for everyone. However, I believe fellow Latter-day Saints would miss out were they to dismiss him simply because his approach is different from theirs. For thousands of years, the book of Isaiah has inspired all kinds of people to repent, to hope, to prophesy, to believe, to dream. The Book of Mormon itself models the fact that Isaiah can speak differently to people. Nephi used Isaiah to point latter-day readers to Christ, who is even now leading His Church in preparation for His long-anticipated return. Jacob likened lines from Isaiah differently than Nephi did, and Nephi included both interpretations in his record. Abinadi used Isaiah to teach his contemporary audience about the Messiah's mortal suffering and death. Christ Himself quoted Isaiah to teach the Nephites about the latter-day gathering of Israel, and He felt free to give multiple interpretations and even multiple versions of the same prophecy. Perhaps Isaiah's ability to be read in such multifaceted richness is one reason Nephi emphasized that Isaiah "pertain[s] to things both temporal *and* spiritual" (1 Nephi 22:3). His words not only accommodate but demand a variety of approaches.

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