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Review of Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch, *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*

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DONALD W. PARRY and JOHN W. WELCH, eds. *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998. x; 548 pp. Scripture citation index, index. \$24.95.

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As students of the Bible are aware, Isaiah is not always an easy book to understand, and those portions of it that appear in the Book of Mormon can be equally difficult to interpret. However, by applying various interpretive tools, the authors of the nineteen articles in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* offer readers a clearer understanding of the function and message of Isaiah as presented by the Book of Mormon authors.

“Overviews,” the first of four parts in the volume, presents four essays. In “‘More Fully Persuaded’: Isaiah’s Witness of Christ’s Ministry,” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland highlights the ways in which the Book of Mormon authors use Isaiah’s prophecies to emphasize aspects of Jesus’ ministry.

In the second essay, “Getting through Isaiah with the Help of the Nephite Prophetic View,” John Welch provides a framework derived from the Book of Mormon within which to read the Isaiah passages. Welch contends that Nephi foresaw the future in four stages: the coming of Christ, his attention to scattered Israel, the day of the Gentiles, and the events at the end of time. When Nephi and other Book of Mormon authors quoted Isaiah, the quotations applied to one of these stages. Three helpful charts classify by their appropriate stage all the chapters and verses of Isaiah used in the Book of Mormon.

Demonstrating that two people can read the same material and arrive at different although ultimately complementary conclusions, Donald Parry’s essay “Nephi’s Keys to Understanding Isaiah (2 Nephi 25:1–8)” suggests five keys for unlocking Isaiah that are more personal and spiritual than the framework suggested by Welch. However, Parry’s keys also lead us into the historical setting of Isaiah, especially as Parry focuses on symbolism, poetic parallelism, and prophetic speech forms.

In the fourth essay, “‘Choose the Things That Please Me’: On the Selection of the Isaiah Passages in the Book of Mormon,” John Gee’s intent is fourfold: to show how the Isaiah text is divided, why certain blocks of text were chosen by Book of Mormon authors, how the Nephite prophets interpreted these texts, and how the authors revealed their reasons for using the texts. Readers may find this chapter difficult, largely because so much material is covered—any one of the sections could have been expanded into a separate article.

The heart of the book is the second part—eight articles which offer explanations of the Isaiah texts. The centerpiece is Robert Cloward’s article entitled “Isaiah 29 and the Book of Mormon.” He begins with a verse-by-verse exposition of Isaiah 29, focusing on the meaning that the text would have had to Isaiah’s listeners. Cloward treats several themes from Isaiah, but perhaps his conclusions about the sealed book will be of greatest interest to Latter-day Saints. According to Cloward’s reading, the sealed book Isaiah spoke of is not a literal book that will speak from the dust, but rather the voice of Jerusalem that will *symbolically* whisper from the dust. “It was Nephi who made Isaiah’s symbolic book into a literal book” (201).

Cloward’s strength is that he takes seriously Isaiah’s historical meaning and only then turns to the Book of Mormon to see how Isaiah is treated there. He discovers that Nephi first quotes from Isaiah and then in 2 Nephi 25–30 “likens it” to his own people and their situation. Nephi calls this likening his “own prophecy” (204) and includes a commentary on Isaiah 29. In these chapters, Nephi interprets Isaiah’s symbolic book as a literal book—the Book of Mormon—which will play a role in restoring the Jews and the New World peoples to their rightful places before God. The fulfillment of Nephi’s own prophecy occurs with the Restoration. Cloward’s conclusion is instructive:

Isaiah foresaw both the fate and the future restoration of Jerusalem and her people. Nephi . . . likened Isaiah’s words to his people in a new prophecy, showing how Nephite writings would advance the Lord’s work in the latter days. . . . Then, the Savior and the resurrected Moroni taught the significance of Nephi’s likening for this dispensation to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith, in turn, replaced Isaiah’s words in his inspired translation of the Bible with his new understanding of how they had been likened to him and to the Lord’s latter-day work.

In this process, Isaiah’s sealed book was reinterpreted as Nephi’s gold plates and as Joseph Smith’s Book of Mormon. Isaiah’s dust of death was reinterpreted as Nephi’s source of renewed life and as Joseph Smith’s Cumorah. . . . This is the process of likening. Prophets do it readily. . . . There is no impropriety in their giving old scripture new meaning for their lives (233–34).

Cloward takes seriously both Isaiah and Nephi in their historical contexts. The potential weakness in Cloward’s approach is that he may not leave enough room for a fuller meaning in Isaiah than the merely historical. Even so, his methodology is one from which we can all learn.

Of the remaining seven articles in the second section of the book, three others strike a balance between the historical and interpretive elements, as does Cloward’s work. “Nephi’s Lessons to His People: The Messiah, the Land, and Isaiah 48–49 in Nephi 19–22,” by Andrew Skinner, adds insight into textual differences between biblical Isaiah and Book of Mormon Isaiah. David Seely focuses on the issue of pride in both Isaiah and Nephi

in “Nephi’s Use of Isaiah 2–14 in 2 Nephi 12–30.” In “‘How Beautiful upon the Mountains’: The Imagery of Isaiah 52:7–10 and Its Occurrences in the Book of Mormon,” Dana Pike explains various ways in which the passage may be understood as he considers Isaiah’s historical context, as well as typology and multiple fulfillments of prophecy.

Stephen Ricks and John Thompson employ form-critical tools (seeking the historical situation in life that gave rise to a particular text or saying) to explore issues. Ricks examines prophetic call narratives and provides some interesting insights in “Heavenly Visions and Prophetic Calls in Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16), the Book of Mormon, and the Revelation of John.” Thompson explores religious festivals in the Book of Mormon in “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10.” His conclusions are possible, albeit somewhat speculative, since the Book of Mormon does not seem to be concerned enough with religious festivals to mention them explicitly.

John Welch gives an interesting exposition of Isaiah 53 in “Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon,” focusing particularly on Abinadi’s use of the text. However, the article shows a tendency to Christianize Isaiah without asking what he might have meant in his historical context. Finally, Cynthia Hallen provides a womanist perspective on Isaiah in “The Lord’s Covenant of Kindness: Isaiah 54 and 3 Nephi 22.” Her essay goes significantly beyond the text with free association and questionable parallels.

The third section, “Isaiah and the Restoration,” contains Ann Madsen’s “Joseph Smith and the Words of Isaiah,” Royal Skousen’s, “Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations in the Book of Mormon,” and Andrew Hedges’s “Isaiah in America, 1700–1830.” Madsen treats Isaiah in a restorationist context; Skousen provides solid conclusions about the texts of Isaiah as found in the Bible and in the Book of Mormon; and Hedges competently shows how Isaiah was used by contemporaries of Joseph Smith, indicating that Isaiah was less important for them than it was for the prophet Joseph.

“Words Ancient and Modern” contains the final four articles. In “Vocabulary in Isaiah 2–14, 48–54,” Donald Parry and Janet Garrard Willis provide a chapter-by-chapter glossary of KJV terms with explanations of their meanings. Most of these linguistic difficulties could also be solved by consulting various modern translations. Both John Welch in “Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon” and John Hilton in “Wordprinting Isaiah and the Book of Mormon” deal with the long-standing question of the unity of Isaiah. Welch concludes that Isaiah is most probably written by one author. Hilton indicates that the poetic form makes a conclusive wordprint difficult. He notes, however, a slight shift between the first and second halves of the book, but the shift occurs ten chapters before the traditionally suggested break between chapters 39 and 40.

Finally, John Thompson and Eric Smith provide one of the most interesting articles, “Isaiah and the Latter-day Saints: A Bibliographic Survey.” This annotated bibliography of Latter-day Saint treatments of Isaiah begins with an Orson Pratt discourse given in 1855 and concludes with Hoyt Brewster’s *Isaiah, Plain and Simple: The Message of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, published in 1995. The reader gains an appreciation of the various ways in which Isaiah has been interpreted by Latter-day Saints over the past 140 years and the degree to which historical interpretation, typology, fuller meaning, and future prophecy intertwined in LDS hermeneutics.

Isaiah in the Book of Mormon forces readers to examine the way in which Isaiah can be understood, both in his historical context and as interpreted by Book of Mormon prophets. The reader leaves the book with the understanding that there are many levels of meaning in Isaiah and that there may be several “correct” interpretations of a given passage. The reader also concludes that there is yet much in Isaiah that will be understood only after future events occur, when we will see that Isaiah also spoke of these.