

Surviving Isaiah

Yes, the title to this essay is meant to be a little humorous. But if you have read (or tried to read) the Book of Mormon, you know what I mean. First and Second Nephi have their challenges, but in general they are not too hard to read. That is, until you hit the Isaiah chapters. The first inkling of trouble comes with 1 Nephi 20 and 21, which quote Isaiah 48 and 49. That's only two chapters, though, and is over quickly enough. 2 Nephi 7 and 8, quoting Isaiah 50 and 51, repeat almost the same experience – painful, but nothing to panic over. Then comes The Hedge – 2 Nephi 12-24, quoting Isaiah 2-14. How are you supposed to survive 13 straight chapters of obscure allusions, difficult imagery, and ancient politics?

All joking aside, the chapters from Isaiah are more difficult to read than many other parts of the Book of Mormon. The language is different, the cultural context is obscure, and some of it just seems way too specific to 800 B.C. However, we know that the Book of Mormon is primarily a composition for our day¹, so there must be some reason for having those scriptures there. I have found that contemplating the reasons for their existence can help in reading them – and actually getting something out of them.

There are two key things that I have felt useful in getting something out of the Isaiah chapters. The first requires recognizing and remembering Nephi's stated purposes in including the material – testifying of Christ and of God's dealings with the house of Israel. The second is an observation of my own – Isaiah wrote in a form of poetry, and trying to study it as prose makes life harder.

In fact, let's take the second idea first. The fact that Isaiah is writing poetry does nothing to change the content of his message, but it affects the form – word choice and order – heavily. Poetry is meant as much for the ear as for the mind. So read the Isaiah chapters aloud! True, much of the original structure has been obscured through translation, but you can still get some of his artistry. Pay attention to the repetition of words and ideas:

For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.

1 However, all the Isaiah chapters except for those quoted by Abinidi and Christ come from the part of the Book of Mormon that was written by Nephi – a man who lived a large part of his life in the world of revelation, and may have had a hard time understanding the limitations of us mortals.

That phrase appears multiple times in the space of a few chapters (2 Nephi 19, 20). Emphasis through repetition is best received through the ear. Or how about 2 Nephi 22? I have sung a choral work (actually, two) based on that chapter. Even if you don't know the music, picture it as a hymn of praise. It really flows.

The first point, which I treat second, is more weighty, and more revealing. Nephi states two reasons for quoting from Isaiah:

And I did read many things unto them which were written in the books of Moses; but that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning.

Wherefore I spake unto them, saying: Hear ye the words of the prophet, ye who are a remnant of the house of Israel, a branch who have been broken off; hear ye the words of the prophet, which were written unto all the house of Israel, and liken them unto yourselves, that ye may have hope as well as your brethren from whom ye have been broken off; for after this manner has the prophet written. (1 Nephi 19:23-24)

Although Nephi repeats the reasons elsewhere, they both appear here. First, Isaiah testifies of Christ, so Nephi cites his words to support that mission of the Book of Mormon. Second, Isaiah testifies of God's interest in and dealings with the house of Israel, another of the missions of the Book of Mormon.

So as you read the Isaiah chapters, ask yourself: What does this passage teach me about the Savior? What does it reflect about the Lord's four-millennium relationship with the house of Israel?

I should point out, if you haven't already noticed, that the footnotes in the newest edition of the scriptures also add some valuable explanations. If you are truly intent on studying the Isaiah chapters and learning all you can from them, you must read the footnotes in the Bible as well, because they are more extensive than those included in the Book of Mormon. However, even if you just read the latter you will learn some interesting details. Who would have believed that there was any significance to the mention of the ships of Tarshish?

As you become more serious about learning from Isaiah, it is valuable to refer to other books dedicated to that understanding. I have learned

mostly from wise teachers (why did Joseph smith add the alternate phrase to 1 Nephi 20:1?) but there is a lot more available.

There has been a vast amount of study put into understanding the words of Isaiah, and I cannot pretend to have mastery of even a small fraction of it. However, I hope that my suggestions can help you to learn from – and maybe even enjoy – the Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon.