



The World Before Christ, an LDS Perspective  
(4000 B.C. – 0 B.C.)

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## Understanding the Words of Isaiah

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The Prophet Isaiah should hold a special place in our hearts, as it is his writings in which the Savior made special mention as to their importance to us. The Lord commanded the Nephite people to search diligently the writings of Isaiah, for he had spoken many things pertaining to the Lord's people. After quoting Isaiah, chapter 54 to the Nephite people, he then gave them this admonition:

*And now, behold, I say unto you, that ye ought to search these things. Yea, a commandment I give unto you that ye search these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah. For surely he spake as touching all things concerning my people which are of the house of Israel; therefore it must needs be that he must speak also to the Gentiles. And all things that he spake have been and shall be, even according to the words which he spake. Therefore give heed to my words; write the things which I have told you; and according to the time and the will of the Father they shall go forth unto the Gentiles. And whosoever will hearken unto my words and repenteth and is baptized, the same shall be saved. Search the prophets, for many there be that testify of these things. (III Nephi 23:1-5)*

Thus the Lord himself declared the importance of the prophecies and teachings of Isaiah. It was also to Isaiah the Lord appealed at the beginning of his ministry. Attending the synagogue on the Sabbath Day the Lord was given the scriptures from which to teach those in attendance. He opened to Isaiah 61:1-3 and began to read.

*And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias [Isaiah]. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. (Luke 4:16-21)*

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified. (Isaiah 61:1-3)*

So many of the prophecies spoken by Isaiah pertain to the last days, those just prior to the Lord's Second Coming. As the fulfillment of these covenants was to center around the Lord's dealing with the Gentiles, we can see that we are living in the very day when Isaiah's prophecies concerning Israel are coming to pass. Nephi's brother Jacob was given a commandment by Nephi to teach the words of Isaiah to the people to help the people understand the covenant the Lord has made with Israel, and the fulfillment of that covenant.

*And now, behold, I would speak unto you concerning things which are, and which are to come; wherefore, I will read you the words of Isaiah. And they are the words which my brother has desired that I should speak unto you. And I speak unto you for your sakes, that ye may learn and glorify the name of your God. And now, the words which I shall read are they which Isaiah spake concerning all the house of Israel; wherefore, they may be likened unto you, for ye are of the house of Israel. And there are many things which have been spoken by Isaiah which may be likened unto you, because ye are of the house of Israel. (II Nephi 6:4-5)*

Isaiah was noted for his writing truth which is confirmed by the Jewish historian Josephus.

Now as to this prophet [Isaiah] he was, by the confession of all, a divine and wonderful man in speaking truth; and out of the assurance that he had never written what was false, he wrote down all his prophecies, and left them behind him in books, that their accomplishment might be judged of from the events by posterity. (Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book X, Chapter II, verse 2)

However, the main reason for reading, searching, and studying the words of Isaiah is pointed out no better than by the prophet Nephi, who made the following comment with regard to why he appealed to Isaiah in his own teachings.

*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)*

Nephi recognized the difficulties in reading and understanding the writings of Isaiah even in his own day, so this difficulty is not something new to our generation. It had been only a hundred years or so since the days of Isaiah's writings that Nephi lived, and if it was difficult then to understand the prophet, how much more difficult is it in our day. However, Nephi did identify three reasons why Isaiah is difficult to understand, and what we must do to be able to understand them ourselves. Applying one or more of these approaches will help us in searching the words of Isaiah.

1. "For they know not concerning the manner of prophesying among the Jews." (II Nephi 25:1) The house of Israel in Old Testament times lived under the law of Moses. One of Isaiah's main objectives in his writings was to bring the people to a consciousness of, and conformity to, the covenants of the law. The law, in turn, was designed to teach them of Christ, to keep them in remembrance of him, and bring them to him. The law of Moses was the root from which the prophesying of the Jews sprang. To understand the manner of their prophesying, one must understand their law.

Isaiah used in his writing images and figures of speech that were well understood by the Hebrew people, who were Eastern, or oriental, in their way of thinking. For those who are Western, or occidental, however, understanding the oriental manner of writing is often difficult. Isaiah did not intend for every word he used to be interpreted in its most literal sense. He made constant use of metaphors (figures of speech containing an implied comparison, i.e., the curtain of the night), similes (a figure of speech in which a thing is likened to another, i.e., "a heart as big as a whale), analogies (similarities in some respect between things otherwise unlike), parables (short, simple stories, usually something familiar, from which a moral or religious lesson may be drawn), types (a person, place, thing, or event that represents or symbolizes another), and shadows (to represent something vaguely, mystically, or prophetically).

As is often the case in prophetic declarations, some of Isaiah's writings have a dual meaning. That is, they can apply to more than one situation or may be fulfilled at more than one time. He also at times combined dualistic phrases with terms which were intended for or understood by only a certain group. Such esoteric language brings to mind religious concepts that only those who have the proper religious background readily understand without further explanation. Isaiah's words are similar to the parables of Jesus in their manner of teaching. Many of the people in Jesus' time were spiritually immature and unprepared to receive the doctrines he taught. When Jesus's disciples asked him why he taught in parables, he said:

He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: for this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. (Matthew 13:11-16)

Through parables the Lord was able to teach the more spiritually mature and at the same time veil his teachings from those who were not prepared to understand or follow them. In that manner he kept many from being condemned for having a knowledge of principles they were unable to live. Isaiah received this same kind of instruction from the Lord when he was sent out to teach ancient Israel.

*And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. (Isaiah 6:9-10)*

Spiritually speaking, Isaiah's writings are meat, not milk, and the Apostle Paul gave an excellent clarification of this principle in his writings.

*And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? (I Corinthians 3:1-3)*

*For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Hebrews 5:12-14)*

So the Lord, Nephi, Jacob, Isaiah and many other prophets are trying to tell us that if we want to understand the deeper doctrines of the kingdom, we must become spiritually minded, put off the natural man and be born again in the Lord. We must cease to be carnal and devilish, and become men and women of God. When we become such, then the mysteries of the kingdom will be revealed to us, and we will understand what the Lord is trying to say. If we are not to that point in our lives, we should repent and get ourselves in line with what the Lord wants us to be.

To understand Isaiah one needs also to understand the historical background of the people among whom he ministered. It is valuable to gain an overall view of the exodus of Israel from Egypt and their wanderings in the wilderness, their covenants with God, their conquest of Canaan, the reigns of the judges and the birth of the united kingdom of Israel, the golden age of the great King David and the division of Israel into two kingdoms. One should learn of Israel's apostasies and the struggle they had with the influence of the nations that surrounded them and by which they were often led from God. Isaiah used numerous concepts and figures of speech that came directly from that history. It is often necessary to be familiar with Israel's history to see the point that Isaiah was trying to make. It is imperative to view the writings of Isaiah in their proper context, for he often spoke of the conditions of his time and their effect on the Lord's people.

2. "They are plain unto all those that are filled with the spirit of prophecy." (II Nephi 25:4) The Apostle John stated in Revelation 19:10 that the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. The spirit of prophecy, however, is far more than just a belief that Jesus lives. It includes an understanding that Jesus is the literal Son of God. It includes a correct knowledge of his purpose in coming into mortality and of the significance of the gospel plan for his children, particularly those who spiritually become his sons and daughters through the power of the Holy Ghost. The prophet Isaiah wrote under the spirit of prophecy, and his writings must be interpreted under the influence of that same spirit. This is a gentle reprimand to us to repent and obtain this spirit of prophecy and strengthen our testimony of Jesus. Peter made it clear that since prophets deliver their message through inspiration from the Holy Ghost, a correct understanding of their message must come from the same source.

We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. (I Peter 1:19-20)

The Lord gave similar advice to Joseph Smith and all Latter-day Saints as to the truth of how to interpret the scriptures and how to teach the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ in the last days. Notice the responsibility placed upon both the teacher and learner, and how we must remove ourselves from the ways of the world and focus upon the spiritual things of God. If we are not like this, then we must repent and become more like God.

*Verily I say unto you, he that is ordained of me and sent forth to preach the word of truth by the Comforter, in the Spirit of truth, doth he preach it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? And if it be by some other way it is not of God. And again, he that receiveth the word of truth, doth he receive it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? If it be some other way it is not of God. Therefore, why is it that ye cannot understand and know, that he that receiveth the word by the Spirit of truth receiveth it as it is preached by the Spirit of truth? Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together. (D&C 50:17-22)*

3. "Live in the days that the prophecies of Isaiah shall be fulfilled." (II Nephi 25:7) The Lord is consistent in his dealings with his children in all ages of the world. This consistency is of the greatest importance to his children as they seek to work out their salvation. It is also very helpful to them in seeking to understand and follow the counsel he gives

through his prophets. To understand Isaiah's writings, one should know of the Lord's teachings and workings given through other prophets. Blessings and cursings came to the people of Isaiah's time according to the same principles that have been set down in any age of the world. As one learns of the patterns of actions that cause people to withdraw from God and of the actions that bring down the Lord's wrath upon them, the warnings and pronouncements of Isaiah can be better understood. That which was condemned by Isaiah is treated similarly by the Lord in all ages. The Lord's message in all dispensations is that there are laws upon which all consequences are based.

*There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated – and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated. (D&C 130:20-21)*

To know the Lord's laws provides a framework from which to interpret the writings of Isaiah or any other prophet. The Lord has revealed to many prophets the grand panorama of the earth's history. By learning what they have written, it is possible to see where Isaiah's writings fit into the Lord's overall plan. Frequently the prophecies of one prophet help one to properly view the prophecies and writings of another. One can look for the fulfillment of many of Isaiah's words in the events that are transpiring in this dispensation.

The Book of Mormon is the world's greatest commentary on the book of Isaiah. Its prophets loved the writings of Isaiah and quoted from them often. Large blocks of Isaiah material are found in the Book of Mormon with inspired commentary and explanations. These prophets obtained this material from the brass plates which were written before 600 B.C., therefore the Isaiah material in the Book of Mormon is the oldest and most accurate available and provides commentary by prophets who, in some cases, had the same historical and cultural background as Isaiah had.

The more one knows of the scriptures, the better one can understand Isaiah. All elements of the gospel plan are interrelated. The consistency of the gospel enables gospel writers of all ages to speak with common terms and connected ideas. It is possible to draw from the latest scriptural sources to understand teachings of the earliest available scriptures. The Lord always provides a way for his children to fulfill his commandments [I Nephi 3:7]. When he gave instructions to study the words of Isaiah, he fully intended that those who followed his instructions would be able to understand Isaiah's message and be positively affected by it. To those who are willing to pay the price, Isaiah can become an open book. Its greatest message is for the Saints of today, who live in an era when one can see the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies. For all who will seek, Isaiah will provide enlightenment that will be of great value in their efforts to perfect their lives and to contribute to the building up of the Lord's kingdom. Understanding will come, though not all at once. It will come "line upon line, precept upon precept" [II Nephi 28:30], according to the efforts of the seekers of truth. (LDS Church, Old Testament Student Manual, I Kings-Malachi, page 135)