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The Vision of All

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Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record

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Preface

We Latter-day Saints are all trying to make sense of Isaiah. We naturally feel the weight of those moments in the Book of Mormon where we're told to take this prophet seriously, but we also naturally feel the enormity of the task of understanding the prophet's message. Perhaps we put off getting serious about Isaiah for a number of years, or we put it off for the first handful of times we work our way through the Book of Mormon. But at some point we start to feel a little guilty, and we start making commitments: "You know what? I'm going to see if I can't begin to make some sense of Isaiah this year!" Resolutions made, we turn to the Book of Isaiah in the Bible, or perhaps to the Isaiah chapters in the Book of Mormon, and we start reading. We begin by reading slowly, paying careful attention to chapter headings and cross-references in the footnotes. But it doesn't take long before we're convinced that our work isn't getting us very far. The chapter headings are too short, the cross-references often confusing, and we're still entirely unsure of what at least half of the verses we're reading could possibly mean.

And so we turn to books—some more and some less scholarly in nature—in the hope that we can get a little help. We're looking for someone to get us started, as well as to give us some pointers during the more confusing moments in Isaiah's writings. Of course, most of us have few grand ambitions. We're not looking to become Isaiah scholars. We just want to have a decent sense for what's going on. And we're hoping that people who write books know enough about the subject to get us oriented. We're happy to let them feast on the sumptuous banquet of Isaiah's prophecies while we just gather some of the delicious crumbs that fall from the table. Perhaps, if that helps us to see what all the fuss is about, we'll look for a place at the table or ask ourselves over for dinner. But first we're really just interested in getting a taste—enough of a taste to feel like we know what we've been missing.

Are we really missing anything? Is the spread so remarkable at the Isaianic table? I think so. I don't know that I'm too frequent a guest at that table. I certainly don't have a reserved seat, and I doubt the waiters know me by name. But I attend the feast as often as I can get away with it, and

I'm startled by the richness of the experience every time. Perhaps what startles me the most is that the experience is richer every time I return. The food only gets better. Or perhaps my palate just gets more refined, making it so that I can appreciate the food better each time I return. Either way, I'm not only *happy* each time I attend the feast, I'm *happier* than I was the last time. That doesn't make me intellectually or spiritually superior, of course. I've just come to love Isaiah. I find his writings endlessly fascinating, and I can't stop reading about him. And the more I read Isaiah's own words, and the more I read in the massive library of things written about Isaiah's words, the more I love this difficult prophet. He's no longer inaccessible to me, and I think I get why Nephi was so taken by his prophecies. In fact, as I've worked on the Book of Mormon's use of Isaiah, I've come to see that this one Hebrew prophet's writings are far more central to the Restoration than we generally recognize. And I inevitably find myself wanting to share with others what I've learned.

So I've written a book, and you've decided to open it and start reading. What can you expect in the following pages? Well, let's be clear from the very beginning that I won't try to simplify Isaiah here. It seems to me a bit deceptive to try to give people a taste of Isaiah's delicious prophecies by stripping away the fat or by replacing the honey with high fructose corn syrup. I don't want highly processed and preservative-laden foods to be substitutes for the real thing. I want my readers to get a real taste of Isaiah, even if their palates aren't yet accustomed to what they experience.

How to accomplish this? Rather than attempt a line-by-line commentary (which gets dull fast and alienates most readers) or an overview and introduction (which remains too abstract to be of much use), I've written a series of twenty-five lectures, each of which could be delivered in forty-five minutes. This format has forced me to keep my writing informal or even chatty, as well as relatively clear, even though I'm dealing with topics of great depth and complexity. It's also forced me to leave off using footnotes and other distracting scholarly tools. (I *do* mention occasional books and articles of interest in the course of discussion, and full bibliographical information for all of these can be found at the end of the book. But that's the only piece of scholarly apparatus in the whole volume.) Finally, this format has forced me to keep focused, to get to the point quickly, and to leave out overly technical points of discussion. As for what this format means for you, I hope it invites you to be an active participant with me, rather than just a passive reader. That is, I hope we explore these texts *together*. So whenever it's possible, it would be beneficial for you to have

your scriptures out and ready, just as you would in a class setting. (And don't worry, while I occasionally suggest some resources and outside readings, I don't assign you any homework.)

In addition to using the format of a lecture series, I've limited the scope of what's to be covered in this book. Rather than attempting to review the biblical Book of Isaiah (sixty-six chapters long!), I've kept my focus just on Isaiah as he appears in Nephi's writings (that is, in First and Second Nephi, the first two books of the Book of Mormon). This focus allows me to give my attention to a good deal less of Isaiah's writings, but it simultaneously requires me to say a lot about Nephi and his approach to Isaiah. In the end, however, I think this is useful for most Latter-day Saints. We're more interested in Isaiah in the Book of Mormon than we're interested in Isaiah in general, and we're often genuinely perplexed by Nephi's deep interest in this prophet. More importantly, perhaps, by giving my attention primarily to Nephi and his approach to Isaiah, I'm free to ignore many other approaches to Isaiah that are unquestionably important but of much less interest to many Latter-day Saint readers. I'm relatively sure that most of us wish above all to learn just how to read Isaiah like Nephi.

To read Isaiah like Nephi! It's a worthy goal. I can only hope I've helped to make such a thing possible for some few readers through this project.

This book, like every book, owes much to many. I'd like, though, just to mention four sources of assistance and inspiration in particular.

First, I'd like to thank Karen, my wife, who's done a great deal to encourage this project. Every time I've said aloud that I'm planning to do some work on "my Isaiah lectures," she's responded not only supportively, but with visible excitement. Her confidence that this book could do some good has meant much to me, and it's kept me working on it consistently.

Second, I'd like to thank Sharon Harris and Jenny Webb, both of whom took the time to read through the manuscript to provide feedback and encouragement. They're among my best friends, and their investment in what I'm doing means a great deal to me. I'd also like to thank Loyd Ericson at Greg Kofford Books for his interest in the project. His consistent support for my work has been sustaining.

Third, I'd like to thank the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. The idea for this book took shape while I was a Hugh W. Nibley Dissertation Fellow, during the academic year of 2014–2015. The

financial resources made available to me by the Maxwell Institute that year allowed me to acquire numerous sources on Isaiah I'd not had access to before that point. This book (and all of my work on Isaiah) is richer for their support.

Finally, I'd like to thank students and audiences in dozens of different classrooms and lecture venues where I've worked through my ideas about Isaiah out loud. This book likely owes more to them, nameless here, than it does to anyone else. In early-morning seminary classes, in Sunday School lessons, in Book of Mormon courses at Brigham Young University, in bookstore-sponsored lectures, in academic conference venues—all over the place I've found a host of willing and interested Latter-day Saints eager to make sense of Isaiah. Their questions and their reflections, all in response to what I've tried to piece together of Isaiah, have helped me to give shape to my thoughts. If I've said anything valuable here, it's largely due to such interactions.

For that reason above all, I dedicate this book to my students.

Lecture I

Nephi's Vision

Two Reactions to Isaiah

Admit it. The very mention of Isaiah's name is enough to put you in a mood. I don't know which mood, since that depends very much on who you happen to be. But *some* kind of a mood. Perhaps a certain bemusement settles over you. Or maybe a state of anxiety overtakes you. Likely you prepare yourself for exasperation. Or, let's be frank, some degree of (justified) annoyance at—perhaps suspicion of—those strange souls who get excited about Isaiah. Or maybe you happen to be one of those strange souls, one of the few who like it when someone brings Isaiah up. Then it might be a bit of pride you begin to feel at the mention of Isaiah's name—a sense of accomplishment or even spiritual superiority.

Why all these moods? Why can't we simply be indifferent to Isaiah? Well, that's easy to answer. *Because the Book of Mormon won't let us be indifferent to Isaiah*. It's not just that certain Nephite prophets quote Isaiah. It's that they say things like this from Nephi: Isaiah's writings "shall be of great worth unto them in the last days, for in that day shall they understand them" (2 Ne. 25:8). Or this from Moroni: "Search the prophecies of Isaiah" (Morm. 8:23). Perhaps we *could* ignore these kinds of things, but we *can't* ignore the fact that *Jesus himself* has something to say about Isaiah when he comes to visit Lehi's children: "Ye had ought to search these things," he says right after quoting from Isaiah. "Yea, a commandment I give unto you that ye search these things diligently—for great are the words of Isaiah" (3 Ne. 23:1). How could we get around that?

Well, we can't. Instead, we tend to develop one of two problematic relationships to Isaiah. Either we feel a kind of guilt about the fact that we don't give much attention to Isaiah's writings, or we feel a kind of pride about how hard we work at understanding Isaiah. Nephi says that "the words of Isaiah . . . are plain unto all they that are filled with the spirit of prophecy" (2 Ne. 25:4), so we either fret and worry that we're not spiritual enough to

have that gift, or we pat ourselves on the back since the work we've put into understanding Isaiah seems to mean that we're worthy of that gift. Let's call this the Isaiah complex, an illness peculiar to those who cherish the Book of Mormon. My aim, over the twenty-five lectures you've volunteered to sit through, is to start the process of healing that illness. You can find a lot of material on Isaiah out there written and published by Latter-day Saints, but it's chiefly aimed at producing just an intellectual understanding of Isaiah's writings. I suspect the authors hope that developing some understanding will *eventually* lead to healing. But maybe we could reverse things here. I probably won't succeed, but I aim first to set right our collective relationship to Isaiah—that is, to get us started on healing—and *then* to see if understanding doesn't follow quite naturally.

How's that for a cute beginning to the lecture series? It's probably too cute. So let's get down to business. The question I'll be asking and doing my best to answer in our meetings is this: *What's Isaiah doing in the writings of Nephi?* Notice a couple of things about this question. First, it deliberately limits how much we'll try to tackle together. Isaiah shows up in crucial places in the Book of Mormon outside of Nephi's writings, but I think it's clear we can't actually get any work done on those other places until we've made some basic sense of what's going on with Nephi. It's Nephi who's first interested in Isaiah in the Book of Mormon. And his project is so intricate and so robust that we barely have time to cover even the basics of what he's up to. A second thing to notice is that my basic question assumes that Isaiah's *doing something* in the Book of Mormon. We're wrong to assume, as we often do, that Nephi just quotes chapters from Isaiah that he happens to find interesting. And we're especially wrong to assume, as we often do, that something changes when we come to the Isaiah material in Nephi's record—as if we could divide Nephi's investment in Isaiah from his desire to tell his own life's story or from his emphasis on the dreams and visions he and his father had. I'll see if I can't convince you that Nephi's whole project is a package deal, and that Isaiah's there in the text for discernible reasons.

So you see where we're going. Now let's start going there. I want to make sure we have enough time in this first lecture to set up the stakes of the project.

Nephi Sees a Book

Let's start gently, by setting Isaiah himself aside for a few minutes to look at something more familiar. Do you remember Nephi's apocalyptic

vision in 1 Nephi 11–14? You'll certainly remember Lehi's dream of the tree of life, recorded in 1 Nephi 8. Nephi tells us that, after he heard about the dream, he had a deep desire to "see and hear and know" what his father had seen (1 Ne. 10:17). And you'll remember that he was rewarded with a visionary experience of his own, but quite a bit more expansive than Lehi's (at least as Nephi tells the story).

The focus of Nephi's expanded vision is the situation of Christianity at the height of what historians call the Enlightenment, but for our purposes, we might say the situation of Christianity shortly after the American Revolution. Now, what Nephi tells us is that Christianity at that time and in that place was founded on "a book." Here are Nephi's words: "And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld that they"—that is, "the Gentiles which had gone out of captivity" and "were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations"—"that they did prosper in the land. And I beheld a book, and it was carried forth among them" (1 Ne. 13:19–20). Once Nephi sees this, his angelic guide focuses him on the book and provides him with a complex explanation of it:

> Knowest thou the meaning of the book? . . . Behold, it proceedeth out of the mouth of a Jew. . . . [It] is a record of the Jews, which contain the covenants of the Lord which he hath made unto the house of Israel. And it also containeth many of the prophecies of the holy prophets. And it is a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass—save there are not so many. Nevertheless, they contain the covenants of the Lord which he hath made unto the house of Israel; wherefore, they are of great worth unto the Gentiles. (1 Ne. 13:21, 23)

There's the first bit of the angel's explanation of the book. Let's say a few things about just this much of the text before turning to what else the angel has to say.

I don't know about you, but I'm struck first by the angel's question at the outset of this explanation: "Knowest thou the meaning of the book?" The angel's explanation, it seems to me, is supposed to answer this question, so we ought to make sure we understand it. The book Nephi sees, the angel suggests, has a *meaning*—but perhaps not a meaning in the way we'd assume. Today, the most common meaning of the word "meaning" is "sense" (to ask what something means is to ask what its sense is), but at the time Joseph Smith was working on the translation of the Book of Mormon, this wasn't its most common signification. Let's quote the handy 1828 edition of Webster's Dictionary, shall we? "Meaning": "that which exists in the mind, view or contemplation as a settled aim or pur-

pose, though not directly expressed"; or again: "intention; purpose; aim; with reference to a future act." When Nephi's angel asks Nephi about the "meaning" of the book—and then goes on to answer his own question, he's asking primarily about the book's *purpose,* its implicit aim.

And what can we say of its purpose, if we read the angel's words closely? Well, one major feature of the book gets mentioned twice, both at the beginning and at the end of what the angel says in answering his own question. It "contain[s] the covenants of the Lord which he hath made unto the house of Israel." So it seems that what the book means to accomplish, what it's meant to do, is first and foremost to make known or at least to clarify what we usually call the Abrahamic covenant, the covenant made with Israel. Perhaps this helps to explain why, in the angel's words, the book "proceedeth out of the mouth of a Jew." What Nephi sees in vision is a Jewish book intended from the start to say something about the covenant given to Israel thousands of years ago. The book is a container of sorts (that's how the angel puts it, right?), and what it contains is a basic exposition of the Abrahamic covenant.

The angel also says that the book contains "many of the prophecies of the holy prophets." No surprise there. The chief purpose of the prophetic writings in the Hebrew Bible—that is, in the Old Testament—is *also* to clarify the status of the Abrahamic covenant. And can you guess which prophet this is truest about? Yes, a certain Isaiah of Jerusalem. Isaiah's book is unquestionably the most sustained and the profoundest engagement with the idea of the Abrahamic covenant that you can find in scripture. So when the angel mentions the Jewish prophets, he makes perfectly clear that the chief aim of the book from Nephi's vision is to alert the world to the stakes and status of Israel's covenant.

The Gentiles and the Book

So far, so good? Now here's the weird part. All this talk of the covenantal nature of the book, emphasized by the identification of its author ("a Jew") and some of its contributors ("the holy prophets"), culminates in the following—the very last words of the angel in the bit of the text we've already quoted: "wherefore, [the book is] of great worth unto the Gentiles." A quintessentially Jewish book, filled with quintessentially Jewish writings, focused on a quintessentially Jewish question—and it's *therefore* particularly useful for *non*-Jews? What's the angel getting at? We'll have to make this clearer as we go along, but this much should be apparent

already: that the book Nephi sees in his vision is a Jewish book aimed at clarifying for non-Jews the heart of Judaism's historical encounter with God. This is what makes for the "great worth" of the book, or at least its "great worth" specifically for non-Jews—and it's they who actually *have* the book, who carry it around with them, in Nephi's vision.

Alright, so what *is* this book? Simply put, it's the Christian Bible. If you read further along in 1 Nephi 13, that's entirely clear. Remember the context. Nephi's seeing in vision "the Gentiles which . . . were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations." We'd simply call these people the inhabitants of the Colonies and then of the United States, from the seventeenth century up until about the Civil War. And they've got a cherished book they carry around with them. What could it be but the Bible? So the point of the angel's words is to help us understand the *real*—but generally overlooked—purpose of the Bible. The book these Americans cherish is actually a Jewish book about Israel's covenant, and it's what the book says about the covenant that makes it particularly precious for non-Jewish peoples. But, oddly, this isn't why the *Americans* Nephi sees cherish it. They've got their own reasons, and they seem to be oblivious to the real reasons it's of so much worth to them.

So why do they misunderstand the nature of the book? Well, this is what the angel explains next, in a rather complex passage. Let's see if we can't make it easier by taking it in bits and pieces.

First, the angel recapitulates what he's already said to Nephi about the Bible, but adding a few details:

> Thou hast beheld that the book proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew. And when it proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew, it contained the fullness of the gospel of the Lamb—of whom the twelve apostles bare record. And they bare record according to the truth which is in the Lamb of God. Wherefore, these things go forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God. (1 Ne. 13:24–25)

Here again there's talk of the Bible's proceeding "from the mouth of a Jew." And here again it's clear that the book eventually finds its way into the hands of "the Gentiles." But the angel adds a few other details that make clear that this so-very-Jewish book we've been discussing is *also* a Christian book. It proceeds "from the mouth of Jew" even as it contains "the fullness of the gospel of the Lamb," and the Lamb is the one "of whom the twelve apostles bare record." Here, then, the angel makes clear that the Jewish book is a Christian book as well.

Actually, let's nuance this point a bit. It's not so much that the Bible is both Jewish *and* Christian. Rather, the angel makes clear that the line we usually draw between Judaism and Christianity is fuzzier than we think. Remember that Jesus, all his earliest disciples, and most or all of the earliest believers in Christ were Jews. Christianity began as a Jewish movement, a sect within Judaism. It was only a century and a half into Christianity's history that there began to be attempts—both by non-Christian Jews and by non-Jewish Christians—to distinguish Christianity from Judaism in a definitive way. There's so much we could say about this, but we'll have to see if there's time to go into the details later. For the moment, let's just make sure this much is clear: the Jewish book Nephi sees in vision concludes in some way with the testimony of the (Jewish) apostles, at which point the thing is taken to non-Jews, "the Gentiles."

One final detail from this first part of the angel's further explanation. The Bible goes "from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God." When the book initially goes from the Jews to the Gentiles, it does so "in purity," in fact "according to the truth which is in God." You can already sense what's coming, can't you? The Bible won't remain in this state of "purity" and "truth." But the angel wants to make perfectly clear in advance that any impurity or falsehood to be found now in the Bible gets introduced into it only after it goes to the Gentiles. The prophets and the apostles whose writings are found in the Bible executed their offices righteously. If things go wrong at some point, it's only after the prophets and the apostles have done their work.

Okay, now let's look at a little more of the text. Here the angel lays out the unfortunate fate of the Bible once it's fully under Gentile control:

> And after that they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb—from the Jews unto the Gentiles—behold, after this thou seest the formation of that great and abominable church, which is the most abominable of all other churches. For behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious—and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away. And all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men. Wherefore, thou seest that after the book hath gone forth through the hands of the great and abominable church, that there are many plain and most precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God. And after that these plain and precious things were taken away, it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles. (1 Ne. 13:26–29)

Here we have the story of how the original "purity" of the Bible ends up compromised. And this we have to read most carefully.

Great and Abominable

Notice, at the beginning of this sequence, that the angel refers Nephi back to something he's already seen earlier in his vision, namely "the formation of that great and abominable church." You'll remember that from your own readings of First Nephi, I assume. But don't be too quick to assume anything about the identity of this church. Years ago now, Stephen Robinson—of *Believing Christ* fame—wrote a nice study of 1 Nephi 13–14 that rightly warned against equating this church with any particular organization, and especially with the Catholic Church. The best biography of David O. McKay—written by Greg Prince and Robert Wright a decade ago—also recounts how the popular (and sometimes semi-official) equation of the great and abominable with Catholicism deeply troubled President McKay and how he tried to work against it. You can go review those discussions as you'd like; we just need to be clear here that we're not going to jump to any quick conclusions about the historical referent of "the great and abominable church" discussed in Nephi's vision.

We can, however, say a few things about this church. Nephi witnesses its formation "among the nations of the Gentiles" (1 Ne. 13:4), and he sees "the devil, that he was the founder of it" (1 Ne. 13:6). What we're dealing with, clearly, is a Gentile phenomenon—or really, a specifically European phenomenon—and we're to understand that it's the devil's work. That's what Nephi already knew from an earlier part of the vision. Here what he learns in addition is that this church has something to do with the Bible's perversion. What makes this church "the most abominable of all other churches," according to the angel, is that "they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious." These are taken from the gospel, and more particularly from the Bible. The angel explains that "there are many plain and most precious things taken away from the book, which is the book of the Lamb of God." The abominable church manipulates the biblical text.

So, now we have the basic outline of this part of the angel's words. Once the Jewish book that's meant to bring Israel's covenants to the attention of the Gentiles actually comes into Gentile possession, there's something like a systematic attempt to transform it—or at least to control the way it's read. But here's the key question we need to ask: What exactly gets "taken away"

from the biblical text in Nephi's vision? Well, given all we've said about the nature of the Bible as the angel describes it, it'd seem that the worst thing that could be done to it would be to strip it of its covenantal bearings, no? What makes the book so valuable for the Gentiles is what it has to say about the covenant made to Abraham, the profoundly Jewish message of this book aimed at bringing salvation to the Gentiles. Now note this. The only thing the angel says by way of specifying or clarifying the nature of the "plain" and "precious" things taken away from the book concerns the "covenants of the Lord." Here's the text again, drawn from the part of the angel's words we're still in the middle of interpreting: "they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious—and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away." Did you catch that? The abomination of the great and abominable church would seem to be *this*, above all: that they reframed the Bible so that its message concerning the Abrahamic covenant effectively disappeared.

This, I think, is the story the angel wants to tell. The biblical text originally has a kind of purity about it, but it then gets manipulated by early Gentile Christianity. And the ways in which it's manipulated specifically concern what the book has to say about the covenantal status of Israel.

Now, I'm not a trained historian, and I'm certainly not an expert on early Christian history. But the reading I've done on the subject convinces me that we can tell a historically responsible story about when and how what the angel describes here actually happened. Over the course of the second century A.D., there was a complex and almost systematic effort by Gentile Christians (who were by that point the majority) to downplay the covenantal status of the Jews. A troubling interpretation of the covenant came to dominate Christian self-understanding, namely—that the *earlier* covenant people (the Jews, or Israel more generally) had *lost* their status as a covenant people, and so they'd been *replaced* in full by a *later* covenant people (the Gentiles, or at least those among the Gentiles who embraced Christianity). The anti-Semitic rhetoric of those who developed this notion in their writings is terrifying. I don't want to name names, but I suppose I'd better. I'll cite for the moment only Justin Martyr (see his *Dialogue with Trypho*) and Tertullian (see his *Against the Jews*), and I'll note that a close eye has to be kept on a complicated guy by the name of Marcion. But let's not go into those details today. Suffice it to say that it was arguably this development, the series of events through which Christianity came to define itself both *against* and *in the place of* Judaism, that Nephi sees in vision and that his angelic guide calls "the formation of

that great and abominable church." (And don't ignore the fact that these events take place about a century and half before it's even possible to speak of the Catholic Church. We're dealing with something further back in history than the scapegoat of certain traditional apostasy narratives.)

Quickly, before summing up and turning to the third and final sequence of the angel's elaboration of the fate of the Christian Bible, I want to make one other note about this story of corruption. It's often assumed that the process of removing the plain and the precious from the biblical text was one of direct tampering with texts, or perhaps of ensuring that certain writings didn't make it into the canon. That's entirely possible, and I've become more convinced myself in recent years that there's a responsible way to tell the story of corruption along those lines. But let's be clear that it isn't at all necessary to tell the story that way. It would be enough, I think, to tell a story about how the transformation of early Christianity's general understanding of the Abrahamic covenant made it largely impossible for believers to make any real sense of the biblical record, even if the text hadn't really been tampered with. You're all postmodern enough to believe that your biases determine in part what you get out of a text, right? Perhaps things were "taken away" primarily because a new, noncovenantal bias was put in place, which made it difficult to understanding the Bible's real purposes. That'd be sufficient for the angel's words to be verified, I think. Of course, it might be that there *was* actual manipulation of texts. I don't want to deny that at all, just to keep our options open.

Okay, let's gather up the details and then read a bit more from the text. So far, we've got a quintessentially Jewish book, focused chiefly on the Abrahamic covenant and aimed at bringing the light of that covenant to the Gentiles. But then we've got a situation in which the Gentiles who become the caretakers of that book systematically distort its meaning, reassigning sole covenantal status to themselves. And then we've got this final bit from the angel's words we've looked at so far: "And after that these plain and precious things were taken away, [the book] goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles." The general circulation of the Bible happens only once it becomes impossible for Gentile Christianity—its principal audience by that point—to understand its real importance and purpose.

Then comes this last part of the angel's discussion of the book's fate:

> And after it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles—yea, even across the many waters (which thou hast seen) with the Gentiles which have gone forth out of captivity—and thou seest because of the many plain and precious things which have been taken out of the book, which were plain unto

> the understanding of the children of men, according to the plainness which is in the Lamb of God—and because of the things which are taken away out of the gospel of the Lamb, an exceeding great many do stumble—yea, insomuch that Satan hath great power over them. (1 Ne. 13:29)

The Book in the New World

This brings us back at last to where we began with Nephi's vision. Remember that the angel first begins talking about the Bible because Nephi sees it among the Gentiles in the New World—that is, among Protestants of European descent who came to establish a nation in the New World in the age of the Enlightenment. Here we come back to that moment and see what all this talk of the corruption of the Bible is really about. The Bible on which American Christianity is founded is apparently essential for those who love it and live by it, but not for the reasons they think it is. Remember that the angel tells Nephi that the book's covenantal contents are what make it "of great worth" to the Gentiles in the New World. But then the story the angel goes on to tell makes clear that the Gentiles necessarily fail—entirely fail!—to see the worth of the record they cherish. In effect, they cherish the Bible for all the wrong reasons. Not for *bad* reasons, of course, since they find in the biblical text a lot about Jesus Christ. But nonetheless for the *wrong* reasons, since it's the message of the covenant that they're especially supposed to be attuned to, or that they're supposed to embrace alongside the Christian gospel. (It's this *larger* picture that the angel seems to have in mind when he speaks of "the fullness of the gospel.")

So this, according to the angel, is what Christianity would come to by about the time of Joseph Smith. But, also according to the angel, God wouldn't let this situation continue forever. The Gentiles must be alerted to the true meaning of the Bible, and all of Israel—the Jews, but also the unknown remnants of Israel, like those among the native peoples of the New World—must also be brought to a real understanding of both the covenant and its entanglement with Jesus Christ. And what tools could be used for all this repair work? The angel relays a message from the Lamb of God addressed to Nephi: "I will manifest myself unto thy seed, that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious. And after that thy seed shall be destroyed and dwindle in unbelief, and also the seed of thy brethren, behold, these things shall be hid up to come forth unto the Gentiles by the gift and power of the Lamb" (1 Ne. 13:35–36). There you have it, as straightforwardly as pos-

sible: the solution to the problem posed by the Bible's problematic history of reception is nothing other than the appearance, in nineteenth-century America, of the Book of Mormon.

You get what that means, I hope. The purpose of the Book of Mormon, according to Nephi's vision, is to refocus Christianity on its Abrahamic foundations, to restore to Christianity the idea that the Gentiles aren't a kind of replacement Israel, but that they're to be grafted into the everlasting covenant that's still vouchsafed to Jacob's children. This shouldn't be a surprise to us, though it usually is. Take a look at what the very title page of the Book of Mormon has to say about its primary purpose. It's "to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel how great things the Lord hath done for their fathers, and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever." As we often note, it's certainly "also" meant to convince "the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God," but it's first focused on the covenant. And Nephi's vision makes this perfectly clear. Long before the Book of Mormon would take shape, its first prophet saw in vision what the record's ultimate purpose would be. And its purpose is to launch anew the covenantal project that began with Abraham's call thousands of years ago.

Now, you've probably long since begun to wonder what all this has to do with Isaiah. Well, here's the short version. It's this vision of the Book of Mormon's purpose (to save Christianity from itself!) that drew Nephi's attention to Isaiah. In Isaiah's writings, Nephi found—as anyone who reads Isaiah carefully can find—the most brilliant available biblical explanation of the complex relationship between covenantal Israel and non-covenantal Gentiles. The book that bears Isaiah's name is nothing if it isn't a kind of systematic attempt to make sense of Abraham's covenant in the richest way possible. The only potential rival to Isaiah's attempts to think through the covenant would be Paul's letters in the New Testament, but we'd have to launch a second lecture series even to begin to talk about Paul. Maybe we'll have to do that at some point. (Or maybe you could read my book *For Zion* . . . .) For now, it's enough to take a stab at Isaiah, and especially at Nephi's interest in Isaiah.

And we've got a decent starting place. For the moment, you're probably just taking my word that Isaiah has something to do with the angel in Nephi's vision. But we'll soon enough be making as clear as we can how this all works. Let's hope I've given you enough for now to get you to come back for my next lecture!

Lecture IV

The More Sacred Part

Matters of Structure

Well, I've been promising to get to questions of structure for a while now, so we should get right to it. With the last two lectures, we've hopefully got some kind of basic sense for what to expect from Isaiah. But what's to be expected from Nephi himself? What is he up to in his record? Well, we already saw in our first lecture that he's got some discernible purposes—even if we tend to read Nephi as if he were somewhat haphazardly sticking things together without any unifying vision. To the contrary, he does have a unifying vision, and we've got to begin to uncover it. And the key, I think, is structure.

Why structure? It's actually not terribly difficult, I think, to see why structure is important. If you set about some task, and you have the freedom to design its execution from scratch, most of your work is structural in nature. Let's say you're organizing an all-Saturday event for your community about the increasing difficulties associated with an extended drought. Once you've decided on some basic parameters (an all-day event, aimed at the general public), you set about organizing structure. What should the major components of the event be? How do you divide up the day? You want people to see that there are things they should start doing right now to help, so how do you make sure those get communicated? Do you have a public talk with an expert people would trust? If so, where should it be in the schedule so that it gets the best possible attendance? What other activities should be involved? Would it be better to have a kind of carnival with educational games to make sure families attend? Or would it be better to make it a more serious occasion, more like a science fair, so that it's mostly adults who come? And once these questions can be answered, it's necessary to decide when each part of the event should happen so that everything is as effective as possible.

No surprises here. This is everyday stuff. But now assume that *Nephi's* doing something like this. He's got an overarching purpose, and he's organizing his materials in order to accomplish it as effectively as possible. We learn from 2 Nephi 5:28–34 that he had *at least* thirty to forty years to reflect on things before he actually produced the record we have from him. This isn't something he dashed off in a couple of days, and it's certainly not something he wrote in bits and pieces as he went along, without any particular aim. Rather, after having kept a kind of aimless chronicle of events in his "large plates," he gathered his thoughts and created his "small plates," a deliberate record with specific points of focus. And so it's best if we recognize from the outset that he took up the task of writing with an eye to organizing his materials. I see him sketching out a variety of different possible approaches to his task, only eventually settling on the one we've got in the text. And he's careful to let us know exactly what he's up to.

Is that making sense? Nephi's got a purpose, and so he's got a structure. If we want to sort out his purpose, and especially if we want to see that purpose fulfilled as we read, we've got to keep a close eye on how he organizes his material. The structure of Nephi's record is absolutely key to everything he's doing.

So, what is the structure of Nephi's record?

Dividing Nephi's Record

Well, the most obvious and certainly the first thing we've got to say is simply that *Nephi divides his record into two major parts*, what we call "First Nephi" and what we call "Second Nephi." Have you ever asked yourself why? He doesn't seem to be trying to imitate the division of Samuel or Kings or Chronicles into two books in the Bible. (For one, it's not at all clear whether he knew *our* books of Samuel or Kings or Chronicles. His brass plates, he tells us, had a history of the Jews in it, but the historical books of our Old Testament seem to have been written—or at least finished and fully edited—only well after Nephi and his family left Jerusalem. That's not controversial at all and should be obvious when closely reading Samuel, Kings, or Chronicles.) Further, we should note that most of the Book of Mormon *isn't* divided into "First So-and-So" and "Second So-and-So." We don't have "First Alma" and "Second Alma," though it would have maybe made more structural sense to do it that way (the Book of Alma actually divides into two parallel halves quite evenly). We *do* have "Third Nephi" and "Fourth Nephi," but those were written by

different men named Nephi, and these titles were given to them only by Orson Pratt anyway.

So there's something actually *surprising* about the fact that Nephi divides his record into two separable books. So we've got to wrestle with this first point. Why *First* Nephi and *Second* Nephi?

And we've got to wrestle with this first point right alongside a second point. Because it turns out that Nephi doesn't just divide his record into two *books*, right there between 1 Nephi 22 and 2 Nephi 1. He also divides his record into two *parts*, let's call them: a part he calls "the more sacred things" and that's located in 2 Nephi 6–30, and a part that should be called, he seems to imply, "the less sacred things," made up by everything else in his record: all of First Nephi, and then chapters 1–5 and 31–33 of Second Nephi. I'll be justifying this claim in a moment here, but let's make this point clearly first: Nephi divides his record in two *twice*, and *in a different place in each instance*. That's weird. There's the division of Nephi's record into two books—First Nephi, Second Nephi—and then there's the division of Nephi's record into two parts—more sacred (2 Ne. 6–30) and less sacred (the rest of the record). So we've got to wrestle with this second point right alongside the first. Why *more* and *less* sacred parts of the record, clearly delineated?

And between these first two points is a third one, making us ask a third and especially difficult question: *Why don't the two ways of dividing the record map onto one another?* If there's a "more sacred" part of the record, why not just make it into one of the two books? And if there's a "less sacred" part, why not just make it into the other book? Why this mismatch between the two ways of dividing up the record? I've been wrestling with this question myself for a long time, and I think I've finally begun to come up with some answers. I gave some preliminary answers, largely useless, in my first book, *An Other Testament*. We'll see if we can't go well beyond them today.

More and Less Sacred Parts

But let's get back to the second way Nephi divides up his record. You can all see that the record's divided into two books, First and Second Nephi. But I doubt you all see that it's also divided into "more sacred" and "less sacred" parts. To see this, we've got to look in great detail at a couple of passages, on which I've done some work that's available in print. (You

can check out *An Other Testament* if you're interested.) So let's turn to 1 Nephi 19, where we'll look at the first handful of verses.

Here's the context: Nephi and his family have just arrived in the New World after a complicated journey. 1 Nephi 18 closes with their arrival, and with their discovery of all kinds of resources there—fertile land and useful animals and, especially relevant to our interests, "all manner of ore, both of gold and of silver and of copper" (1 Ne. 18:25). Nephi puts all this ore to good use, as he explains in the first verse of 1 Nephi 19: "And it came to pass that the Lord commanded me, wherefore I did make plates of ore that I might engraven upon them the record of my people." More or less upon arrival in the New World, Nephi produced a record, including in it his father's record, as well as some account of the journey. And he included both his father's and his own prophecies, as he goes on to tell us in that same verse.

What record is Nephi describing here? Well, this is what we usually call Nephi's "large plates," but what he himself usually calls his "other plates." Let's refresh our memory here, since Nephi goes on to give a kind of general description of these large plates in verses 2 and 4:

> The record of my father, and the genealogy of his forefathers, and the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness are engraven upon those first plates. . . . [These things] are of a truth more particularly made mention upon the first plates. . . . I, Nephi, did make a record upon the other plates, which gives an account—or which gives a greater account—of the wars and contentions and destructions of my people.

It's perhaps that last detail that's most familiar: Nephi's large plates gave much more space than his small plates did to what we might call the secular—to historical matters, to wars and the like, and to his father's experiences. It clearly included religious material as well (like Lehi's prophecies), but the large plates were apparently a good deal more inclusive than the small plates. And of course, *we're* familiar only with the small plates. (You'll remember that Mormon made an abridgment from Nephi's large plates, apparently calling it the Book of Lehi. But that was part of what was lost when Martin Harris let the first manuscript get out of his hands.)

Okay, so we've got the first record Nephi produced, the so-called large plates. And we're clear that he made that record quite soon after he and his family got to the New World. Now, what of his other record, the small plates, the thing we're reading? He tells us about it also in this passage. It comes up first in verses 2–3, where Nephi says this:

> I knew not at that time which I made [the other plates] that I should be commanded of the Lord to make these plates. . . . And after that I made these plates by way of commandment, I, Nephi, received a commandment that the ministry and the prophecies, the more plain and precious parts of them, should be written upon these plates—and that the things which were written should be kept for the instruction of my people which should possess the land, and also for other wise purposes (which purposes are known unto the Lord).

Here's our introduction to the small plates. Note that they were made quite a bit later. Here Nephi doesn't yet tell us *when* they were produced, but just that he had no idea at the time he made the *large* plates that he'd later be commanded to produce the *small* plates. Nonetheless, he gives us a bit of information about the content of the small plates. When he was later commanded to produce them, the commandment was accompanied by some instruction about their content: "the ministry and the prophecies, the more plain and precious parts of them."

All this, I assume, is relatively old news. But the crucial point is still coming. Turning now to verse 5, we read this: "An account of my making these plates shall be given hereafter." Which plates? The small plates. Nephi's been consistent here, calling the large plates his "other plates" and the small plates "these plates." So here he tells us that he'll give us *only later* in his record an account of the actual production—the actual physical production and subsequent inscription—of the small plates. It might seem peculiar that he bothers to tell us this, but we'll see how important it is in a moment. So, where does he later tell us about making the small plates? It's not hard to find. Take a look at the last verses of 2 Nephi 5:

> And I, Nephi, had kept the records upon my plates which I had made of my people thus far. And it came to pass that the Lord God said unto me, "Make other plates, and thou shalt engraven many things upon them which are good in my sight for the profit of thy people." Wherefore, I, Nephi, to be obedient to the commandments of the Lord, went and made these plates, upon which I have engraven these things. And I engravened that which is pleasing unto God. And if my people be pleased with the things of God, they be pleased with mine engravings which are upon these plates. And if my people desire to know the more particular part of the history of my people, they must search mine other plates. And it sufficeth me to say that forty years had passed away, and we had already had wars and contentions with our brethren. (2 Ne. 5:29–34)

That's a long passage, I realize, but you'll see why it's important in a moment. For now, let's just make this much clear. In 1 Nephi 19:5, Nephi notes that he'll later give an account of the actual physical production of

the small plates, and then in the very last verses of 2 Nephi 5, he provides that promised account.

That's clear, then? And now you're asking why all this matters. The answer is back in 1 Nephi 19:5: "An account of my making these plates shall be given hereafter"—at, as we've seen, the end of 2 Nephi 5—"and *then*, behold, I proceed according to *that which I have spoken*." I've tried to emphasize two parts of that last bit. First, the word "then." "And then," Nephi says. Meaning what? I think it's clear. "Later on, at the end of 2 Nephi 5, I'll tell you about when I actually made the small plates," he says, "and *then*, beginning right after I've told you about that—hence, starting with 2 Nephi 6—I'm going to do something very specific." Good? That seems to be the force of Nephi's "then": "An account of my making these plates shall be given hereafter, and *then*, behold, I proceed according to that which I have spoken." There's a kind of break in Nephi's record at the border between 2 Nephi 5 and 2 Nephi 6. Something *new* is to be found beginning in 2 Nephi 6.

The second thing I've tried to emphasize in what I just quoted is "that which I have spoken." Whatever that phrase refers to is what Nephi promises he'll start doing when 2 Nephi 6 begins. And what's that? Well, as he puts it, it's the thing he's already "spoken" about with respect to the small plates. That makes it easy to identify: "the ministry and the prophecies, the more plain and precious parts of them" are supposed to be "written upon these plates." Nephi's telling us, pretty unmistakably, that 2 Nephi 6 marks the beginning of what he was divinely commanded to write on the small plates—the plain and precious parts of the ministry and the prophecies.

Interestingly, Nephi gives us a name for the material that begins only in 2 Nephi 6. He goes on in verse 5 to tell us this: "This I do"—he relegates the plain and the precious to a later, specified place in his record—"this I do that the more sacred things may be kept for the knowledge of my people." There's a whole lot we could do in thinking about what Nephi's saying with these words, but let's note just one point for our purposes. Nephi here calls the stuff to be found only beginning with 2 Nephi 6 "the more sacred things." However his organization of the record is supposed to ensure that these things are "kept for the knowledge of [his] people," we can see that he regards that plain and precious stuff to be found only later in the record as "more sacred" in some way than everything else that appears in his writings.

So, what have we got so far? In the opening verses of 1 Nephi 19, Nephi makes clear that there's a special part of his record, one that's more

sacred than the rest—in fact, one that he produced by way of direct commandment from God—and this is to be found beginning only with 2 Nephi 6. But now we ought to ask a further question. Where does that "more sacred" part of the record end? Does it stretch all the way through the end of Nephi's record, right to 2 Nephi 33? I think we can find a clear answer to this, actually. Take a look at the last verse of 2 Nephi 30. Right as Nephi wraps up an extended prophecy, he says this: "And now, my beloved brethren, I must make an end of my sayings." And then the next chapter opens like this: "And now, I, Nephi, make an end of my prophesying unto you, my beloved brethren. . . . The things which I have written sufficeth me" (2 Ne. 31:1–2). Nephi here marks another seam in the text, making pretty clear, I think, that 2 Nephi 31–33, those final three chapters of the record, come only *after* the "more sacred things," as a kind of conclusion to the whole record. As we'll see in a moment, this makes really good sense of things.

All these details add up to the following, it seems to me. Nephi divides his record into a "more sacred" and particularly privileged part, which stretches from 2 Nephi 6 to 2 Nephi 30, and what we'd probably have to call a "less sacred" or at least less privileged part, made up of the whole of First Nephi, along with the first five and the last three chapters of Second Nephi. And now we find we have yet another question. What's to be said about the apparently less sacred material that makes up so much of Nephi's record? Why is it there at all? Does Nephi explain his inclusion of all this other stuff? Actually, I think he does. Let's go back to 1 Nephi 19 for one more minute. After all he says in verse 5 there about the "more sacred things," he begins to apologize, so to speak, in verse 6: "Nevertheless, I do not write anything upon plates, save it be that I think it be sacred." This comes across as an apology of sorts, doesn't it? He's just told us that 2 Nephi 6–30 makes up "the more sacred things," such that we'll only find what God specifically commanded him to write in that rather limited part of the record. But then he's sure to tell us that *everything* he writes is sacred, even if some of it technically qualifies as *less* sacred by comparison to the *more* sacred.

He goes still further in his apology, too. Still in the same verse: "And now if I do err, even did they err of old—not that I would excuse myself because of other men, but because of the weakness which is in me according to the flesh, I would excuse myself." Here Nephi recognizes pretty openly that he *might* be making a mistake in adding things to what God commanded him to inscribe. He's consciously taking a risk, consciously packing what God told him to write into a larger framework he's built

up on his own. And he recognizes that he might be erring in doing so. But note this also: Nephi sees what he's doing as following a pattern that others before him have followed, "they . . . of old." Apparently, as he reads scripture, he finds other authors and editors doing much the same thing, carefully arranging the strictly prophetic into larger structural frameworks so that their readers won't miss what's most essential. This is perhaps a weakness that all producers of scripture share. Nephi worries right along with others, as he explains in the next verse, that "the things which some men esteem to be of great worth . . . others set at naught and trample under their feet" (1 Ne. 19:7). That's reason enough to couch the directly-commanded word of God in a not-directly-commanded package!

Okay, so now we know what to say about the "less sacred" material in Nephi's record as well. It seems it's included in order to make our reception of the "more sacred" a bit smoother. If we're careful readers of First Nephi, as well as of the opening and closing chapters of Second Nephi, we'll be all the better readers of 2 Nephi 6–30, the privileged core of Nephi's record. If we were just to begin with 2 Nephi 6–30, we'd likely miss the point of the whole project.

So the question we've got to ask now is simply this: What's to be found in 2 Nephi 6–30, and why is it so important to Nephi—or really, to God, to whom Nephi attributes the commandment he received to write those chapters?

The More Sacred Part

Have you ever noticed how we read Nephi? The parts we really don't like seem to be the parts Nephi wants to privilege, at least in light of what we've seen today. You know what I mean. We enjoy Nephi's writings immensely until we get to somewhere around 2 Nephi 6, and then we find ourselves bored or deeply confused until 2 Nephi 31 or so. There are parts of 2 Nephi 6–30 we don't mind. There are lots of fans of 2 Nephi 9, Jacob's major sermon on the atonement. And it isn't too hard to find people who really enjoy 2 Nephi 29, where Nephi rails against those who reject the Book of Mormon because they already have a Bible. But only two chapters out of twenty-five! We're not doing so hot. What is it about 2 Nephi 6–30 that turns us all off? That's easy enough to answer, and in just one word—or rather one name: *Isaiah*.

If we're right that Nephi sets apart 2 Nephi 6–30 as the "more sacred" and only divinely ordered part of his record, then we've got to grapple with

this fact. *The core of Nephi's record is the part where he focuses extensively on Isaiah.* There's no way around this, I think. What Nephi most wanted us to have in our possession—actually, scratch that. What *God* most wanted us to have in our possession, thanks to Nephi's efforts at writing, is Isaiah. What we get in 2 Nephi 6–30, in those privileged twenty-five chapters, is Isaiah—Isaiah, Isaiah, Isaiah. And note that there's something essential about saying it three times—Isaiah, Isaiah, Isaiah—because we get Isaiah three times over. Here's a passage from Nephi's "more sacred things" that emphasizes this point:

> And now I, Nephi, write more of the words of Isaiah, for my soul delighteth in his words. For I will liken his words unto my people, and I will send them forth unto all my children. For he verily saw my Redeemer even as I have seen him, and my brother Jacob also hath seen him as I have seen him. Wherefore, I will send their words forth unto my children to prove unto them that my words are true. Wherefore, by the words of three, God hath said, I will establish my word. (2 Ne. 11:2–3)

The law of witnesses, right? Nephi emphasizes that he's giving us three witnesses concerning the Redeemer, that is, concerning the redemption of Israel: Jacob and Isaiah in addition to himself. In his beautiful book *Christ and the New Covenant*, Elder Holland says that in 2 Nephi 6–30 Nephi presents us with three angelic messengers who stand as sentinels at the gate of the Book of Mormon, prepared to admit us into the scriptural presence of the Lord.

But it's precisely this part of the Book of Mormon, this passage through the veil, as it were, that we want to avoid most. Why? Because it's *saturated* with Isaiah. It's not just that we get thirteen chapters drawn straight from Isaiah—that chunk of text we usually just call "the Isaiah chapters" (2 Nephi 12–24, drawn from Isaiah 2–14). It's that Jacob and Nephi *also* give us, in their respective contributions to this "more sacred" portion of the record, *more* Isaiah. Jacob comes first, and he's giving us a sermon that stretches over two days. His assigned topic, given him by Nephi, is a passage of scripture from—you guessed it!—Isaiah. Nephi has him speak about Isaiah 49:22–23. And in order to develop the meaning of the passage, Jacob not only provides some explanations in his own words, but he also quotes the rest of Isaiah 49, and then all of Isaiah 50–51, and *then* the first couple of verses of Isaiah 52! Perhaps we find some comfort in the fact that Jacob gives us a break from Isaiah in 2 Nephi 9, that sermon on the atonement, but he returns to things Isaianic in 2 Nephi 10,

and we're forced to realize that the whole point of his sermon is to get us to understand certain among Isaiah's prophecies.

You're all too aware that Jacob's sermon on Isaiah is followed almost immediately by the longest single quotation of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, that thirteen-chapter stretch we talked about a moment ago. Once that ends, Nephi takes over to provide us with his own contribution to this "more sacred" part of his record. And what does he do? He quotes and reworks more or less all of Isaiah 29 (he skips over just the first two verses)! And he concludes his contribution with a lengthy quotation of the heart of Isaiah 11! And, if you read carefully, you'll see that everything else in his contribution is built on a complicated web of further quotations of and allusions to Isaiah! (If you want to see these clearly, get your hands on Grant Hardy's *Reader's Edition* of the Book of Mormon. He italicizes and footnotes all the borrowings from Isaiah running through Nephi's prophecy. It'll startle you to see how much of Isaiah appears there in Nephi.)

So we don't get a break from Isaiah at all. Jacob gives us Isaiah. Isaiah *is* Isaiah. And then Nephi gives us more Isaiah. Isaiah, Isaiah, Isaiah.

If we believe Nephi, it's *this* part of his record that we're supposed to pay the most attention to. And what we're getting there is nothing but Isaiah. And if we start paying close attention to what's going on there, we start to realize that it doesn't just throw us in the deep end—except maybe in that thirteen-chapter stretch taken more or less straight from Isaiah. Instead, Nephi takes care to use his brother's and his own words to clarify and comment on Isaiah. We're not only being confronted with Isaiah, we're getting a bit of training in how to read Isaiah—at least in the way that Nephi wants us to read Isaiah. 2 Nephi 6–10 and 2 Nephi 25–30 make up two "manuals" of sorts, aimed at getting us to see what it means to read Isaiah's writings correctly. Nephi's helping us out all along the way.

But this much we shouldn't miss—can't miss, I hope. The point of Nephi's record is to bring us face to face with Isaiah, to get us to read Isaiah carefully. Will we do so?

Well, it turns out that Nephi's giving us a lot more help than already appears. We've already seen that everything in Nephi's record that *isn't* the "more sacred" part is there, it seems, to help us get ready for what *is* the "more sacred" part. So we ought quite naturally to ask what help, say, First Nephi might give us in making sense of Isaiah in Nephi's writings. The answer, it turns out, is that there's a lot there to help us, but we'll have to do more careful reading. We'll turn to this in our next lecture.

Lecture V

The Nature of First Nephi

Why First Nephi?

We covered *a lot* of ground last time. We've made this much clear, at least in a preliminary way: that the whole point of Nephi's record is to get us to read Isaiah carefully. Nephi explicitly distinguishes between two major parts of his record—a "more sacred" and a "less sacred" part—and the "more sacred" part is taken up entirely with presenting and interpreting Isaiah. Further, the "more sacred" part of the record is something God directly commissioned Nephi to write, but Nephi felt he could serve the Lord's purposes best by couching that divinely commissioned text within a larger setting—that is, by contextualizing it by some "less sacred" (but *still* sacred) textual material. The "more sacred" part, we've made clear, is to be found in the twenty-five chapters stretching from 2 Nephi 6 to 2 Nephi 30. The "less sacred" part is found chiefly in First Nephi, but also in the first and last few chapters of Second Nephi.

So we're left with a picture something like this. Second Nephi is the *real* core of Nephi's larger record. It opens with an introduction of sorts (2 Ne. 1–5) and it closes with a conclusion of sorts (2 Ne. 31–33), but all the rest of it makes up that hardest and most divine core of the record. The question that remains, then, is this: *Why First Nephi? Why does Nephi bother to give us this other book at all? How is this "less sacred" book supposed to help us?*

Let's make note of some obvious answers. The most obvious of all would be that Nephi *has* to tell us his story, doesn't he? If he were to jump right into his Isaiah project, we'd be beyond lost, wouldn't we? And since Martin Harris went and lost the Book of Lehi for us, it's *especially* necessary that we be provided with some explanation of how the Nephites got to the New World! Isn't First Nephi at the very least just a kind of contextualizing narrative, a story that explains who's writing this record, where he came from, and how he came to be a prophet? Isn't that reason enough for Nephi to have written his first book? Well, actually, no, it isn't. It's clear already

that Nephi was willing to insert an introduction into Second Nephi. Why couldn't he just make the opening chapters of Second Nephi a kind of abbreviated record of how he and his family came to the New World? We could have had a cleaner abridgment than we've got, couldn't we? You can see the wisdom in that kind of approach, can't you? Imagine Nephi producing 2 Nephi 6–30 and then wondering how to introduce it to his readers. Rather than deciding to write all of First Nephi and then add the first chapters of Second Nephi, he writes just a couple of chapters of introduction to "the more sacred things." Here's who I am, who my parents are, where we came from; here's a brief account of how much trouble we had as a family, which led to a long-term schism; here's a quick story about how we got to the New World and settled in; and here's a word or two about what you're about to read. Why didn't Nephi do something like that?

So it turns out that we can't explain the existence of First Nephi just by saying that we need some background. But maybe another obvious explanation is better. It's obvious that the stories in First Nephi are there to show us a good example of obedience and faith, right? "Nephi was courageous," "I will go and do," and all that. Isn't the point of First Nephi to add a slightly less sacred narrative to the slightly more sacred sermons of Second Nephi, so that we have, in addition to prophecies about heady, abstract stuff, some concrete, readily applicable stories? It's Nephi himself, after all, who tells us we're to liken the scriptures to ourselves, and so he's given us a set of stories that so easily apply to everyday life that we can be better people by reading his record. Well, actually, this doesn't work either. Sure, there are some stories about obedience in First Nephi, and we certainly can learn important lessons from them, but that's hardly all that's there. In fact, it's not even *half* of what's there. There's Lehi's dream (ch. 8) and his later sermon on Christian history (ch. 10); there's Nephi's own apocalyptic vision (chs.11–14) and his subsequent attempt to explain it to his brothers (ch. 15); there's the long sermon on Israelite history (ch. 17); and there's the first substantial quotation of Isaiah (chs. 20–21) and Nephi's attempt to explain that to his brothers (ch. 22). Really, there are just a few stories in First Nephi, and they're constantly interrupted by prophetic material that anticipates the focus of Second Nephi. Add to all this the fact that the stories in First Nephi are actually far more complex than we often make them, something we won't have time even to touch on in our lectures (though I'll note that I've given a sample of this in an essay of mine on René Girard).

So we can't say that First Nephi just provides necessary historical and biographical context for Second Nephi, and we can't say that it exists just to provide us with a set of spiritually-inflected stories. So what's it doing there? It seems we're going to have to be a good deal more careful if we want to answer this question!

Two Halves of First Nephi

We can start to get somewhere, I think, if we turn our attention to another moment in the text where Nephi talks about what he's doing structurally. A first such moment happens in 1 Nephi 1:16–17. Perhaps you won't remember this passage, so let me quote it in full. Nephi's here in the middle of his opening narrative, the story of Lehi's first visionary experiences—the ones that lead to his becoming a prophet and facing serious opposition in Jerusalem. Here's what Nephi says when he interrupts this story for a moment:

> And now I, Nephi, do not make a full account of the things which my father hath written. For he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams, and he also hath written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children—of which I shall not make a full account. But I shall make an account of my proceedings in my days. Behold, I make an abridgment of the record of my father upon plates which I have made with mine own hands. Wherefore, after that I have abridged the record of my father, then will I make an account of mine own life.

Alright, here we're seeing a move not unlike the one we looked at last time. Nephi's here telling us in simple prose about certain divisions in the structure of his text. Here he tells us about the basic structure just of First Nephi. It comes, it seems, in two parts. First we get "an abridgment" of Lehi's record. And "then," "after that," we get "an account" of Nephi's own life. So it seems that First Nephi comes in two halves.

That's simple enough, but where are the two halves? Where's the dividing line? That's actually *perfectly* clear. Take a look at 1 Nephi 10:1: "And now I, Nephi, proceed to give an account upon these plates of my proceedings and my reign and ministry." That's nothing if not a clear marker of the moment Nephi switches from the first half—the abridgment of his father's record—to the second half—the record of his own proceedings. This is confirmed by another detail, actually. Did you notice how he worded things there in 1 Nephi 10:1? He speaks, as in 1 Nephi 1:17, of his "proceedings," but he adds to it a reference to his "reign and

ministry." Where's that coming from? Well, have you ever noticed that First Nephi has a subtitle? Look at the first page of the book. We're reading "The Book of Nephi, His Reign and Ministry." So here in 1 Nephi 10:1 we have an echo of the subtitle of First Nephi. We're clearly moving into the second half of the record, the part where we'll get Nephi's account of his own life—and of his reign and ministry.

Original Chapter Breaks

So this much we can say without any doubt. First Nephi divides into two clear halves: an abridgment of Lehi's record, found in 1 Nephi 1–9, and a record of Nephi's own proceedings and reign and ministry, found in 1 Nephi 10–22. But this only gets us started. What else can we find here? The key to getting any further with this might be surprising—at least, it surprised me when I first stumbled on it. To get further, we have to look at chapter breaks. I don't mean the chapter breaks we're all familiar with from current or even recent editions of the Book of Mormon, but chapter breaks that go much further back in the history of the printing of the Book of Mormon. Did you know that Joseph Smith dictated chapter breaks along with the text of the Book of Mormon—*and* that they're different from the ones you know so well? This is something Royal Skousen has made clear in his scholarship.

Are you familiar with Royal Skousen's work on the Book of Mormon? Skousen is a linguistics professor at Brigham Young University, and he's dedicated almost thirty years now to establishing a critical text of the Book of Mormon. He's done intensely close work on the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon—well, of what's left of it (it suffered a great deal of damage at one point). And he's done equally intensely close work on the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon, the copy of the text made for the use of the printer (and on which revisions were made for later editions). On top of that, he's looked carefully at every single printed edition of the Book of Mormon published by either of the two major branches of Mormonism—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Community of Christ (what used to be called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). In all this work, Skousen's tracked every variant in the texts and undertaken detailed analysis of what they might mean. And he's made guesses in other cases about where there might be variants without there being clear evidence of it. All this work has been published in a six-volume series, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book*

of Mormon. Each entry in the *Analysis* concludes with a specific recommendation for how the text should read in a critical edition of the Book of Mormon. His aim has been to get as close as possible to what Joseph Smith originally dictated to Oliver Cowdery (and others).

A few years ago, Skousen finally put all of his findings together in an edition of the Book of Mormon, *The Earliest Text*, published by Yale University Press. It's a crucial resource. I've actually been using it whenever I've quoted the text of the Book of Mormon in our discussions here (though I've used my own punctuation, since that's a matter of interpretation, and I often differ from Skousen on how I'd point the text). If we're serious about looking at the Book of Mormon with a critical eye, we've got to use Skousen.

Now, why bring all this up? As I mentioned a minute ago, in his work on the critical text, Skousen has established firmly that Joseph Smith dictated chapter breaks along with the text of the Book of Mormon. Apparently, the chapters weren't numbered in the dictation. When Joseph would come to a break in the text, Oliver would write "Chapter," but without a number. When they were finished, they went back through the manuscript and inserted numbers for each chapter in order. But it's clear that Joseph told Oliver in the course of dictation when there were breaks in the text. Those chapter breaks were part of the original text of the Book of Mormon. They go back to Nephi, to Mormon, to Moroni. And we'll see that they're extremely helpful for making better sense of the text.

There's a problem for us, though. The original chapters of the dictated Book of Mormon were often rather long. That was maybe fine for the first fifty years or so of the book's publication, since it was published in a format that was something like a novel—in prose paragraphs, without verse numbers and the like. If what you're reading is presented like a novel, you're not terribly bothered if chapters stretch on for ten or twenty pages. But in the 1870s, it was decided to reformat the text of the Book of Mormon to make it look more like biblical scripture. Orson Pratt was given the responsibility to divide the text up into more Bible-like chapter lengths, as well as to add verse numbers and so on. The result was that the original chapter breaks were obscured. What we read now doesn't alert us to the chapter breaks of the original. Of course, you can find the original chapter breaks pretty easily. They're marked in Skousen's *Earliest Text*, just as they are in Grant Hardy's *Reader's Edition* of the Book of Mormon. Any Community of Christ edition has the original chapter breaks as well, since that tradition never reworked the chapter breaks. You can find them also in repub-

lications of pre-1870s editions. You've probably seen those 1830 edition reprints. And there's a Penguin Books edition of the Book of Mormon that reproduces the 1840 edition. And of course, you can look at images of early editions online in a variety of places, including the Joseph Smith Papers website. Any of these resources will give you the original chapter breaks.

What we'll see as we go along today is that the original chapter breaks in First Nephi are essential to understanding its purpose. In our current edition we have twenty-two chapters, but as Joseph originally dictated the book it had only seven. Here's how they map onto our current chapter-and-verse divisions: the original Chapter I is today's chapters 1–5; the original Chapter II is today's chapters 6–9; the original Chapter III is today's chapters 10–14; the original Chapter IV is today's chapter 15 (here's one Orson didn't change); the original Chapter V is complicated, consisting of today's chapters 16–18 and the first twenty-one verses of chapter 19; the original Chapter VI is also complicated, consisting of the last three verses of today's chapter 19, as well as all of today's chapters 20–21; and the original Chapter VII is today's chapter 22 (another one Orson didn't change). Here's all that again:

Chapter I	1 Nephi 1–5
Chapter II	1 Nephi 6–9
Chapter III	1 Nephi 10–14
Chapter IV	1 Nephi 15
Chapter V	1 Nephi 16:1–19:21
Chapter VI	1 Nephi 19:22–21:26
Chapter VII	1 Nephi 22

There we are. Seven chapters in the original. Now, why is all this supposedly helpful?

Well, let's first note that we can draw a line here between the two halves of First Nephi, which we've already discerned. 1 Nephi 1–9 makes up the first half of the book, while 1 Nephi 10–22 makes up the second half. That means that the first half of First Nephi originally consisted of just two chapters, the original Chapters I and II, while the second half of First Nephi originally consisted of five chapters, the original Chapters III through VII. How about another chart or table of sorts?

The Abridgment of Lehi's Record

Chapter I	1 Nephi 1–5
Chapter II	1 Nephi 6–9

The Record of Nephi's Own Proceedings

Chapter III	1 Nephi 10–14
Chapter IV	1 Nephi 15
Chapter V	1 Nephi 16:1–19:21
Chapter VI	1 Nephi 19:22–21:26
Chapter VII	1 Nephi 22

This is starting to look like a table of contents, no? And we'll see that it's actually quite helpful to look at it this way.

Two Stories in 1 Nephi 1–9

Now, to go further with all this, let's look for a moment just at the original Chapters I and II. There's a host of details here I'd absolutely love to spend some time on, but we just can't cover everything. So let's deal just with what's essential. The details concern the fact that Nephi himself marks the boundaries of each of the first two original chapters, making clear that he wanted them to be read as structural wholes, as separable units. What happens if we read them that way? We're used to reading 1 Nephi 1 as the story of Lehi's first vision, 1 Nephi 2 as the story of the journey into the wilderness, 1 Nephi 3 as the trek up to retrieve the brass plates, 1 Nephi 4 as the actual retrieval of the plates, and 1 Nephi 5 as the aftermath of that dangerous situation. But what if we read 1 Nephi 1–5 as *one* story, rather than as *five* stories? Well, then I think we find that it's just the one story of how the brass plates came into the Lehites' possession. 1 Nephi 1 and much of 1 Nephi 2 then become just the context or background for that story; the remainder of 1 Nephi 2 provides the Lord's word that focuses Nephi on the necessity of keeping commandments; 1 Nephi 3 tells the first part of the story of getting the plates, during which Nephi demonstrates his slightly problematic zeal without knowledge; 1 Nephi 4 tells us of how Nephi finally got things right concerning his relationship to the Lord and to his brothers; and 1 Nephi 5 provides us with a further reconciliation in the family, as well as with some explanation of the actual contents of the plates recovered from Jerusalem. But all this is just one story—complex and multi-layered, but a single story nonetheless.

Are we getting somewhere? It seems we're to read 1 Nephi 1–5, the original Chapter I, as a single story, and that story's focused just on how the Lehites came to possess the brass plates. What of the original Chapter II, now 1 Nephi 6–9? What if we read *that* as a unit, as just one story? We usually read 1 Nephi 6 as an aside about record-keeping, 1 Nephi 7 as the retrieval of Ishmael's family, 1 Nephi 8 as the dream of the tree of life, and 1 Nephi 9 as another aside about record-keeping. But what if we take it as one story? I think it's clear its chief focus is then on the dream of the tree of life, with the asides in 1 Nephi 6 and 9 just setting up the boundaries of the story and the narrative in 1 Nephi 7 just setting up the basic conflict between Nephi and his brothers that's then expressed in crucial ways in Lehi's dream. Forced to simplify a bit, we see that all of 1 Nephi 6–9 amounts to just one story: that of how the Lehites were first confronted with an image-laden dream that provided an outline of their own future history.

Let's put all this together. The first half of First Nephi, treated as two and only two stories told in two and only two original chapters, is aimed at distilling from Lehi's record just two points. In abridging his father's writings, Nephi wants us to know (1) how he and his family came to have a collection of Old-World prophetic writings and (2) how he and his family came to launch their own New-World prophetic tradition. From Lehi's experiences and writings, we're just to glean this: Nephi had in his possession the written prophecies of those they were leaving behind, and he had in his possession the oral prophecies of the leader of the colony they were themselves going to found. Two stories, nice and simple, which allow us to flesh out our little table of contents a bit more:

The Abridgment of Lehi's Record

Chapter I (1 Nephi 1–5)	How We Received the Biblical Prophetic Tradition
Chapter II (1 Nephi 6–9)	How We Started Our Own Prophetic Tradition

Parallels in 1 Nephi 10–22

Now, lest you think I'm just making stuff up as I go along, let's take a look at what we can say about the second half of First Nephi. Here, as we've already made clear, we have five original chapters to deal with. And it doesn't take much work to begin to see how they're organized. There's at

least one clear bit of patterning here. Notice that in the original Chapter III (today's 1 Nephi 10–14) we have Nephi simply recounting some prophetic stuff, but then in the original Chapter IV (today's 1 Nephi 15) we have him attempting to explain that prophetic stuff to his brothers. And then notice that we have the same thing all over again later. In the original Chapter VI (today's 1 Nephi 19:22–21:26) we have Nephi recounting some more prophetic stuff, but then in the original Chapter VII (today's 1 Nephi 22) we have him attempting to explain that prophetic stuff to his brothers. So there's at least this much that needs to be said here: Nephi organizes his material in the second half of First Nephi in terms of a repeating pattern of just quoting prophetic stuff and then explaining that stuff to his brothers. The original Chapters III and IV and then the original Chapters VI and VII make this perfectly clear. And sandwiched between these two pairings of the prophetic and the explanatory is, quite simply, just the story of how the family finally traveled from the Old to the New World—the original Chapter V (today's 1 Nephi 16:1–19:21).

But we can get a good deal more specific about things here. Notice *what* the prophetic stuff is in the original Chapters III and VI. In Chapter III (today's 1 Nephi 10–14), we have Nephi outlining his own visionary experience of what his father saw in the tree-of-life dream. And in Chapter VI (today's 1 Nephi 19:22–21:26), we have Nephi quoting at length for the first time from the writings of Isaiah (specifically, from Isaiah 48–49). I assume you're already beginning to see what's going on here. Here we have Nephi drawing from the two sources whose provenance he recounted in the two stories making up the *first* half of First Nephi, the stories of the original Chapters I and II. In Chapter I Nephi told us how his family came to possess the brass plates, and in Chapter VI he begins quoting at length from that prophetic source. And then in Chapter II Nephi told us how his family sat around and listened to Lehi recount his dream of the tree of life, and in Chapter III he outlines his own prophetic experience of the same vision. And then in each case, he finds that he has to explain these things to his brothers—his own Lehi-like vision in Chapter IV and Isaiah's writings from the brass plates in Chapter VII. Do you see how close a relationship there is, suddenly, between the two halves of First Nephi?

So we can flesh out our table of contents even more, now. Here it is, with overly colloquial chapter titles:

The Abridgment of Lehi's Record

Chapter I (1 Nephi 1–5)	How We Received the Biblical Prophetic Tradition
Chapter II (1 Nephi 6–9)	How We Started Our Own Prophetic Tradition

The Record of Nephi's Own Proceeding

Chapter III (1 Nephi 10–14)	My Experience of Our Prophetic Tradition
Chapter IV (1 Nephi 15)	I Try to Explain It to My Brothers
Chapter V (1 Nephi 16:1–19:21)	Our Journey to the New World
Chapter VI (1 Nephi 19:22–21:26)	My Experience of the Biblical Prophets
Chapter VII (1 Nephi 22)	I Try to Explain It to My Brothers

Now, I think, we're really getting somewhere.

Anticipating Second Nephi

Lots of structure here, and all of it unquestionably right there, quite intentionally, in First Nephi. But now the essential question: *Why does any of this matter to us?* That's the key question. And here's a first answer. Remember the "more sacred" part of Nephi's record, positioned at the heart of Second Nephi. What's to be found there? In 2 Nephi 6–30, we get not only Isaiah's writings but a bunch of commentary on Isaiah's writings. And where does the inspiration for all that commentary come from? Quite simply, it comes from the visionary tradition that begins with Lehi's dream, that comes to a first culmination with Nephi's expansion of that dream in vision, and that continues with Jacob's much later experience of the same visions. What we get in Nephi's "more sacred things" is, precisely, a weave of two prophetic sources, one hailing from the Old World, and another hailing from the New World. The visions of Lehi and Nephi and Jacob serve as interpretive keys to reading Isaiah. And, in turn, Isaiah's

writings serve as interpretive keys to understanding the stakes of the visions of Lehi and his sons. (Nephi lays out this close relationship in the clearest of terms in 2 Nephi 25, in a text we'll be looking at much more closely in a later lecture.)

Now, I hope you're beginning to see how all this works. There are two major purposes of First Nephi, each of them accomplished in one or the other of its two halves. The first half of First Nephi—the abridgment of Lehi—provides us with a basic understanding of *how the Lehites came to possess* the two prophetic resources that in Second Nephi work to interpret each other. And the second half of First Nephi—Nephi's own reign and ministry—provides us with *a first investigation into the contents and significance* of those two prophetic resources that form the crux of Second Nephi. If Nephi were to talk us through it, he might say something like: "Here's how we became aware of the written prophetic tradition of our forebears. And here's how God granted us our own prophetic tradition to supplement that. And now here's how our own prophetic tradition was expanded, and how I went about explaining its significance to my boneheaded brothers. And here's the sort of thing I found when I studied the written prophetic tradition that preceded us, and how I went about explaining its significance also to those same boneheaded brothers of mine. Now, if you see all this, you're quite ready to begin reading a little book God's commanded me to write, which weaves our own prophetic insights into the written prophecies we inherited. Are you ready?"

Now, there's one other major way First Nephi anticipates Second Nephi that we haven't yet mentioned, but it's essential. In the second half of First Nephi, Nephi gives a whole chapter in each case to describing how he explained his two prophetic resources to his brothers. Here's the key thing: *In each case, he explains the one prophetic resource by drawing on the other.* Let me make this perfectly clear. In the original Chapter III (today's 1 Nephi 10–14), Nephi provides us with his own visionary expansion of Lehi's dream. And then in the original Chapter IV (today's 1 Nephi 15), he explains Lehi's dream to his brothers. But look at this. When he really wants them to understand things, he tells us, he turned to the writings of Isaiah. Here's what he says in 1 Nephi 15:19–20: "And it came to pass that I, Nephi, spake much unto them concerning these things—yea, I spake unto them concerning the restoration of the Jews in the latter days. And I did rehearse unto them the words of Isaiah, which spake concerning

the restoration of the Jews (or of the house of Israel)." I don't know if the vision wasn't clear enough already in Nephi's own words, but at any rate, Nephi tells us that he only really got his explanation of the vision off the ground when he wove Isaiah into it.

And then we find the same thing later. In the original Chapter VI (today's 1 Nephi 19:22–21:26), Nephi provides us with a first chunk of Isaiah's prophecy, quoted in full. And then in the original Chapter VII (today's 1 Nephi 22), he explains those Isaianic writings to his brothers. And how does he explain those writings? He doesn't give us a one-liner that refers to his vision—nothing like his one-liner about using Isaiah to explain the vision in 1 Nephi 15. But even a cursory reading of 1 Nephi 22 makes perfectly clear how it is that Nephi feels he can explain Isaiah. He's just using what he learned in his vision in 1 Nephi 11–14. The whole of his explanation of Isaiah to his brothers follows exactly the outline of his own prophetic experience. (And, actually, the first couple of verses of 1 Nephi 22 have him suggesting that he'd seen something on his own.)

So now we can add to what we've already said about how First Nephi prepares for Second Nephi. First Nephi not only gives us the provenance of the two prophetic resources that get woven together in Second Nephi. And it not only gives us preliminary expansions and quotations of those resources, along with relevant explanations of their significance. It *also* builds into all of this an intertwining of the two resources, making clear that each helps to interpret the other. By the end of First Nephi, if we're reading carefully, we see that Isaiah can't be interpreted without the Nephite visionary tradition, just as the Nephite visionary tradition can't be interpreted without Isaiah. And so you can see quite clearly that Nephi had a kind of program with his first book. It wasn't something God commanded him to write (like Second Nephi). Rather, he rightly saw a good deal of wisdom in putting it together and attaching it to Second Nephi, even if he hadn't been commanded to do so. And if we read First Nephi carefully, we're fully prepared to read Second Nephi, the plain and the precious.

Ack. We're well beyond out of time for today's discussion. We'll draw up a summary and see what's next when we meet next time.

Lecture VIII

Isaiah 48–49 in Summary

"Hear ye the words of the prophet!" Nephi says. "Hear ye the words of the prophet!" (1 Ne. 19:24). I don't know about you, but I'm getting more than a bit eager to get on to following his advice. Let's take the plunge, shall we?

Isaiah 48 in Summary

Nephi gives us Isaiah 48 first. That's a bit of a surprise. I think I mentioned last time that Nephi never comes back to Isaiah 48. He quotes it in 1 Nephi 20. But then he never again, not even once, refers back to it. And recognize that that's quite unusual. Much of what Nephi quotes from Isaiah shows up all over his writings—a little allusion here, a brief quotation there, occasionally a longer selection. Isaiah 48, however, he gives us just in this *one* form, its full quotation in 1 Nephi 20. I suggested last time, moreover, that he quotes it here as an example of an unlikened Isaianic text. He seems to leave it trapped in its original historical context, refusing to begin the work of adapting and appropriating it for his own theological purposes. It's almost as if he wants us to encounter Isaiah 48 as a kind of museum piece, carefully preserved and certainly not to be touched.

So what does it say?

It's clear from the outset of Isaiah 48 that we're dealing with wayward Israel. It opens with a command to the "house of Jacob," those "called by the name of Israel," to "hearken and hear" (1 Ne. 20:1). And then we're given this description of the state of Israel's relationship to the God to whom they're bound in covenant. They "swear by the name of the Lord and make mention of the God of Israel, yet they swear not in truth nor in righteousness" (v. 1). Or again: "They *call* themselves of the holy city, but they do not stay themselves upon the God of Israel" (v. 2). Here we have a basic motivation for the prophet's intervention. Israel needs to hear

a few words of rebuke. They aren't much exemplifying faith in or fidelity to the Lord, even as they outwardly identify as his followers, his covenant people. In what circumstances? Well, we'll come to that. For the moment, it's enough to recognize that such a word could have come to Israel at a great many points in their recorded history, just as it could come to us at a great many points in our recorded history.

Having indicted Israel in these general terms, the prophet next describes the lengths the Lord has to go to keep the covenant people from wandering too far astray. This comes in two sequences. The first focuses on "the former things" (1 Ne. 20:3), on things "declared" to Israel "from the beginning" (v. 5). The second then focuses on "new things" (v. 6), on things "created now and not from the beginning" (v. 7). The Lord, it seems, has found it necessary to employ a double strategy to keep Israel in check. First, knowing Israel to be "obstinate" (v. 4), he made a number of things known to them by the prophets long in advance. In the Lord's words, "before it came to pass, I showed them thee" (v. 5). And his reason for doing this he states clearly: "I showed them for fear lest thou shouldst say, 'Mine idol hath done them'" (v. 5). Some words attributed to the Lord, it seems, had to be in circulation from ancient times so that Israel couldn't claim that their fulfillment was a function of whatever newfangled idolatrous cult they happened to have discovered quite recently. There's the first part of the strategy. But it's not enough, because Israel might well respond by saying that such ancient prophecies are just common knowledge. "Who cares about the old? Take a look at the new!" Hence the Lord's second strategy. Knowing Israel to be "a transgressor from the womb," prone to "deal very treacherously" (v. 8), the Lord *still* sends prophets, ones who now declare "new things from this time," things Israel could "not know" (v. 6). The Lord has his own new things, and so he can trump Israel's tendency to respond to the ancient with "Behold, I knew them" (v. 7). And so at least some prophetic words have to be as new as possible, supplementing more ancient prophecies, so that Israel can't squirm its way out of the situation. They're to deal with a God who calls himself, just a few verses later, both "the first" and "also the last" (v. 12).

It should be no surprise that all this necessary strategizing leaves the Lord less than impressed with the covenant people. In fact, Isaiah says clearly, it leaves him in a state of "anger" (1 Ne. 20:9). So why does the Lord put up with Israel at all? Isaiah gives the Lord's response: "Nevertheless for my name's sake will I defer mine anger, and for my praise will I refrain from thee, that I cut thee not off" (v. 9). The Lord sticks with Israel, but not

because Israel deserves it. It's for God's own purposes, much broader and richer than anything Israel has in mind, that he keeps working with them. It seems he's got a plan. And drawing from our discussion at the end of our last lecture, we can already say something about what that larger, more expansive plan seems to be. It concerns the Abrahamic task to which Israel *should* be dedicated, but which it almost systematically ignores. The Lord will hold to Israel, wearing himself out in strategically thwarting Israel's waywardness, so that he can accomplish his larger purposes in the world. "For mine own sake—yea, for mine own sake—will I do this" (v. 11).

But I hope you're asking yourself, at this point, the following question: *What* will the Lord do? What *concrete* shape does his double strategy take? Can we actually say anything *specific* about "the former things," these ancient prophecies that predict rather specific events? Or can we actually say anything specific in turn about "the new things," these novel prophecies that apparently also predict rather specific events? I think we can. And in fact, we get our first hint at concrete content at the very moment that the Lord explains that he's got his own larger purposes. Isaiah quotes him thus: "For behold, I have refined thee. I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction" (1 Ne. 20:10). This doesn't sound good. And in fact, we *might* at this point begin to feel compassion rather than disgust at Israel's wonted waywardness, condemned so forcefully at the outset of the chapter. They might be wayward, but the Lord himself seems to make clear here that they're in a difficult situation, passing through "the furnace of affliction." Suddenly, the story looks rather different. Before this point in Isaiah 48, we might feel like we're listening to the Lord chastising unrepentant Israel, fat and happy in their own land. Suddenly we realize that we're listening to the Lord chastising a people experiencing intense pressure.

It gets worse, though, because soon Isaiah identifies the exact situation Israel is in. The Israel Isaiah's talking to is the Israel that's wallowing in Babylonian exile. They've seen their monarchy fall, they've watched their temple's destruction, they've witnessed the slaughter of their people, and they've experienced the loss of their land as they've been resettled in foreign territory. And *there*, in that most difficult situation, Isaiah dares to quote words of chastisement from the Lord! But note that he always and inevitably couples such words of chastisement with words of comfort. At the very moment we begin to realize that Isaiah 48 is addressed to Israel in exile, we find the Lord making promises through Isaiah. They're in the furnace of affliction, yes, but there they've been chosen. The Lord is refining them. And Isaiah makes this crucial promise: "The Lord . . . will fulfill

his word. . . . He will do his pleasure on Babylon, and his arm shall come upon the Chaldeans" (1 Ne. 20:14). *This*, it turns out, is the ancient word that's been in circulation for so long that Israel can barely remember when it was first spoken. Babylon will be overcome! It seems like we're supposed to be thinking here of Isaiah 13–14, Isaiah's oracle against Babylon to be found much earlier in the book, certainly one of "the former things." Or anyway, it seems quite likely that *Nephi* has Isaiah 13–14 in mind. Those two chapters make up the last bit of his lengthy quotation of Isaiah at the heart of Second Nephi.

So here we begin to get concrete. The ancient word is a promise that Babylon will fall. And what's the new thing that's happening now? That isn't made quite as clear in Isaiah 48 as it will be in Isaiah 49, but we can say something about it already. The new thing is that there's a secret purpose on the Lord's part for having Israel go into and then return from exile. It's not *just* a process of refinement that he's got in mind. And it's not just a kind of covenant faithfulness to a chosen people that he wants to maintain. The Lord's purpose is to put his faithfulness and his power on display before the nations. The whole world—according to what might well seem like a bit of hyperbole!—will witness Israel's redemption when Babylon falls, and the Gentile nations will get their first glimpse of what it might mean to turn from their idols to the true God. That, it seems, is the new thing, or at least the chiefest of the new things. But we'll say more about this theme in a bit, since, as I just said, it's a lot clearer in Isaiah 49.

Now we've got a concrete picture taking shape. Long before it could possibly seem relevant—indeed, long before Babylon was even a serious contender on the world political scene—the Lord gave his word that he'd redeem Israel by bringing Babylon to its knees. And this is supposed to keep Israel from being able to say that their deliverance is the fruit of their adhering to whatever recently adopted idolatrous cults have come into fashion among them. Because now it's all finally happening. The Lord's ancient word is coming true. But, lest Israel respond by saying that this is all then just a bit of old news, and that they've got little to learn from this situation, they're about to be confronted with some remarkable surprises, things the Lord has kept hidden so that they can't deny their dependence on him. And now it seems that we were wrong a moment ago to think of the opening part of Isaiah 48 as unfair or inopportune chastisement. What we're seeing here is the Lord's everlasting love and covenant fidelity being put fully on display. He's carefully thwarting their attempts to skirt their own covenantal obligations, preventing their tendency to swear by

the Lord's name always and only in vain. He's about to do something of world-historical importance, and they're doing all they can to miss out on it. He won't let them. And that's a gesture of profoundest grace.

The rest of Isaiah 48 casts the resulting situation as a reboot of the story of the exodus from Egypt, but now, of course, it's an exodus from Babylon. First, just as in the ancient exodus, the Lord calls a servant to lead Israel from their bondage. It's no longer Moses, of course (in fact, we don't get any clear identification of the servant in Isaiah 48), but it's some leader nonetheless. Here are the Lord's words about the new servant as Isaiah quotes them: "I have called him to declare. I have brought him, and he shall make his way prosperous" (1 Ne. 20:15). This servant figure is, of course, also a prophet figure, just like Moses. This becomes apparent when Isaiah next quotes the servant himself: "Come ye near unto me. I have not spoken in secret from the beginning. From the time that it was declared have I spoken, and the Lord God and his spirit hath sent me" (v. 16). Lest Israel ignore this word, the Lord himself confirms it immediately: "I have sent him" (v. 17). So we've got a Moses-like figure set up to lead Israel out of exile. Next, as with the exodus, we're told that this situation should be understood within the larger frame of the Abrahamic history. Isaiah has the Lord cry out: "O! that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! Then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea! Thy seed also had been as the sand, the offspring of thy bowels like the gravel thereof!" (vv. 18–19). This is unmistakable Abrahamic language, language we're all quite familiar with. Of course, it's cast somewhat negatively here, since Israel *hasn't* kept the Lord's commandments to them, and so they *haven't* yet seen anything of the fulfillment of these promises. But Israel has another chance. Always another chance. They're given a new commandment: "Go ye forth of Babylon! Flee ye from the Chaldeans!" (v. 20). And with this commandment, the reboot of the exodus can begin in earnest. And so, third and finally, we get language that describes the new trek through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land: "And they thirsted not. He led them through the deserts. He caused the waters to flow out of the rock for them. He clave the rock also, and the waters gushed out" (v. 21). You can't miss the allusions here. The exodus has begun anew.

There. That's Isaiah 48. And I think it's nothing like so obscure as we often take it to be. Let's review it briefly, shall we? It opens (verses 1–2) with the Lord making clear that Israel has been unfaithful, but this is immediately followed with an outline of the Lord's double strategy for keeping

Israel faithful: first by providing them with prophecies long in advance of fulfillment (verses 3–6a), and second by providing them with brand new prophetic things to think about (verses 6b–8). Isaiah follows this with an explanation of the Lord's patience, which is a product of his own larger purposes (verses 9–11) and a statement of the Lord's sovereignty (verses 12–13). And then we finally get the first clear indication of what all this is about, the Lord's ancient word that he'd bring Babylon's towering empire crashing to the ground (verse 14). From that point on, we watch the old exodus story play itself out in a new situation—in three sequences: a prophetic servant is raised up to lead Israel (verses 15–17), the Abrahamic context of the exodus is clarified (verses 18–19), and the actual trek through the wilderness is described (verses 20–21). We haven't mentioned the final verse in our discussion, but it's an ominous conclusion: "And notwithstanding he hath done all this—and greater also!—there is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked" (1 Ne. 20:22). It's a fitting conclusion.

And with that, I think we can move on to Isaiah 49. We're making decent time today for once, so perhaps we'll get all the way through it too!

Isaiah 49 in Summary

Isaiah 49 opens with one of the four so-called "servant songs" that can be found in Isaiah 40–55. A whole lot has been written about the servant songs, from the time they were first isolated from their literary contexts by Berhard Duhm at the end of the nineteenth century to the time, quite recently, when they've been pretty definitively set back into their literary contexts by, among others, Trygvve Mettinger. Here's the short version. At different points in Isaiah 40–55, there's talk of a servant, and at a few places there appear extended poems focused on the servant. The first of the four that have been traditionally identified doesn't appear in the Book of Mormon, but the other three do—one of them here in Isaiah 49. (The others appear in Jacob's quotation of Isaiah 50 in 2 Nephi 7 and in Abinadi's quotation of Isaiah 53 in Mosiah 14—as well as in a few scattered quotations by Christ in Third Nephi.) Much of the scholarly work that's been done on the servant songs addresses the identity of the servant, a question that seems especially pressing in the fourth and final servant song. We can ignore more or less all of that debate for our purposes here, since Nephi never quotes from the fourth song. He seems satisfied with the straightforward identification of the servant in Isaiah 49. And so we'll start there, with the Lord addressing the servant as follows: "Thou art my servant, O Israel,

in whom I will be glorified" (1 Ne. 21:3). Let's leave the whole question of the servant songs at that, for now, with the equation of Israel with the servant in Isaiah 49. That seems to be all that matters to Nephi.

In the opening verses of Isaiah 49, we're told that God's purposes with his servant Israel have been long in the making: "The Lord hath called me from the womb. From the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name" (1 Ne. 21:1). And for what purpose? Well, Isaiah attributes to Israel *one* understanding of the Lord's purposes. He has Israel say of the Lord that he "formed me from the womb that I should be his servant to bring Jacob again to him" (v. 5). On Israel's account, it seems, the Lord's intention is that they look out for themselves, that they fulfill their obligations to the Lord so that they can receive all the blessings promised to them. That would glorify the Lord, and it's in his servant Israel that the Lord "will be glorified" (v. 3). Nothing here seems *terribly* offensive yet, since we might hear in what Isaiah puts in Israel's mouth at this point little more than what we hear in an average sacrament meeting talk. God loves us, and he wishes us to be righteous so that we can receive the blessings promised to the obedient. But there's a kind of sinister note here, since Isaiah also has Israel saying that the Lord's made them "like a sharp sword," a dagger that's then hidden "in the shadow of [the Lord's] hand" (v. 2). Or again, Israel understands itself to be "a polished shaft," an arrow hidden in the Lord's "quiver" (v. 2). These are more violent images, and one can't help but wonder whether Isaiah means to suggest that Israel has understood its task to be one of military might. They're to look out for themselves, not only in obedience, but in rising to power and prominence in a world of war and violence.

If that's so, then we can understand Israel's eventual response: "I have labored in vain! I have spent my strength for naught and in vain!" (1 Ne. 21:4). All that their chosenness seems to have earned them by the time of Nephi is exile in foreign territory, their lands taken from them and their temple laid waste. Some dagger in the hand of the Lord! Does he not know how to strike an enemy down? So here we find ourselves back where we were in Isaiah 48, with Israel in exile wondering at the Lord's failure to redeem. And as before, naturally, we're going to get the promise that redemption is about to happen at last. But we're going to get something more this time as well. We're going to get a *larger* purpose for the exile. And we get this in a first form pretty early in Isaiah 49. In response to Israel's lament, Isaiah quotes the Lord as saying these remarkable words: "It is a light thing that thou shouldst be my servant to raise up the tribes of

Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will *also* give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the ends of the earth" (v. 6). With these words, Isaiah offers a crucial corrective to Israel's self-understanding. They seem to think that their whole work is to look out for their own redemption, to see that they do what's necessary to secure the Lord's blessing. But when they express their inevitable frustration at failing, the Lord responds by making clear that there's a bigger picture. It's too "light," too easy, just to redeem Israel. God's got his eyes on *the whole world*. You see, Israel isn't there with the task of redeeming itself, but of being "a light to the Gentiles," of being God's "salvation unto the ends of the earth." That's a much grander affair.

This becomes only clearer as the text of Isaiah 49 goes on. Isaiah quotes the Lord describing Israel as "him whom man despiseth" and "him whom the nation abhorreth," a mere "servant of rulers" (1 Ne. 21:7). But then he announces that "kings shall see and arise," that "princes also shall worship" (v. 7), and that Israel will be given "for a covenant of the people to establish the earth" (v. 8). Humiliated in foreign exile for a moment, Israel will be redeemed with a strong hand, and the whole world will witness the Lord's glory and power. And Israel will less *have* a covenant that puts them in relation to God than *be* a covenant that puts all human beings in relation to God. There's the bigger plan. And once it's laid out, Isaiah starts to give us material familiar from Isaiah 48: exodus talk that describes the return of Israel from exile. When Israel leaves Babylon, "they shall feed in the ways" (v. 9), and "they shall not hunger nor thirst" because the Lord will "guide them" to all "the springs of water" (v. 10). Israel will be gathering from every place of exile, "from the north and from the west," some even "from the land of Sinim," the far east (v. 12). And all this is reason, indeed, to rejoice: "Sing, O heavens," Isaiah exults, "and be joyful, O earth!" (v. 13). Even the mountains are to "break forth into singing," because "the Lord hath comforted his people and will have mercy upon his afflicted" (v. 13). This is an old story by this point, but now we've been introduced to the larger context in which it's supposed to function—a larger story about the possibility of drawing non-covenantal peoples into the covenant.

And then Isaiah tells us the same thing all over again, but, of course, in a different way, giving us the same story from a rather different perspective. It's a *really* different perspective. It's that of the *land*. The land of Zion speaks up: "The Lord hath forsaken me! And my lord hath forgotten me!" (1 Ne. 21:14). That's what Zion says, but neither Isaiah nor the Lord will have any of it. Isaiah retorts, "But he will show that he hath not!" (v. 14),

and the Lord responds with a famous rhetorical question: "Can a woman forget her sucking child?" (v. 15). This is then followed up with a word of encouragement to the forsaken land to open her eyes, because there's a massive crowd already gathering for resettlement: "Lift up thine eyes round about, and behold all these gather themselves together!" (v. 18). The reunion is to be a kind of wedding feast, with the once-abandoned land clothing itself "as a bride" (v. 18). And the marriage is to be a fruitful one: "Thy waste and thy desolate places . . . shall even now be too narrow by reason of the inhabitants. . . . The children which thou shalt have after thou hast lost the other shall say again in thine ears, 'The place is too strait for me! Give place to me that I may dwell!'" vv. 19, 21). There won't even be room in Jerusalem for all the peoples that will occupy it after the redemption of Israel from exile!

And now we get to the crucial moment of this retelling from the perspective of the land. When the once-forsaken finally looks up to see the approaching multitudes, *she doesn't recognize their faces*. This, at least, the land says to herself within her heart. Isaiah explains: "Then shalt thou say in thine heart, 'Who hath begotten me these, seeing I have lost my children, and am desolate, a captive and removing to and fro? And who hath brought up these? Behold, I was left alone—these, where have they been?" (1 Ne. 21:21). Here we have repeated the moment from the first part of Isaiah 49, where Israel, wallowing in exile, whines that all its work in seeking its own redemption has yielded nothing. And you remember the response from the Lord, right? That there's a much bigger picture Israel fails to see, a story that's as much about the non-covenantal Gentiles as about covenantal Israel. We get the same thing here. The forsaken land looks in the faces of the approaching people, gathered from all over, and she recognizes none of them. But then the Lord explains what's going on in what turns out to be among Nephi's favorite passages in Isaiah:

> Thus saith the Lord God: Behold, I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles and set up my standard to the people, and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders. And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers. They shall bow down to thee with their face towards the earth and lick up the dust of thy feet. And thou shalt know that I am the Lord—for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me! (vv. 22–23)

There's a whole lot going on in this verse, so let's slow down and spell it out.

The forsaken land looks up and stares at the faces of those approaching for resettlement, but she recognizes none of them. Who are these people?

The Lord responds, essentially, by telling the land to look higher. "Don't you see? Of course you don't recognize the faces of the people walking toward you. *Your children are riding on their shoulders!* The people whose footsteps you're tracing are Gentiles, non-Israelites, but *they're carrying your children back to you!* Your children aren't coming home alone, but with hosts of others who seek redemption!" Here again, as earlier in the chapter, Isaiah clarifies the breadth and scope of the Abrahamic covenant. Here again, it's too light a thing for Israel to be redeemed alone; the point is to set up the covenant people as a standard, a banner that waves before all the non-covenant peoples to invite them to join in the worship of the true God. And it's worked. Israel comes home to its beloved land, carefully tended by the very kings and queens of the Gentile nations. Even Gentile royalty lies prostrate before Israel, licking up the dust of their feet with their tears and kisses. Waiting for the Lord's faithfulness has proven more than worth it.

Isaiah 49 ends with a few words of confirmation. The predicted redemption of Israel along with the Gentiles is miraculous indeed. It's like "prey be[ing] taken from the mighty" (1 Ne. 21:24). And it's God who's done it: "I will save thy children," he says (v. 25). And the chapter thus ends with these beautiful words that announce the theme that's at the heart of Isaiah 49: "All flesh shall know that I, the Lord, am thy savior and thy redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob" (v. 26). Israel's redemption has set the Lord's goodness before the whole world. And there the prophecy ends.

Shall we summarize things again like we did with Isaiah 48? I think that's useful. And here it's perhaps even easier. In Isaiah 49, we get the same story twice over, the story of Israel's redemption from exile. And in each telling of the story, the point is to correct Israel's terribly narrow view of the covenant that binds them to the Lord. Their focus is consistently on just their own redemption, their own benefit. But each telling of the story finds Israel corrected by the Lord on this point. It turns out that their covenantal status is part of a larger project, one that's meant to make of their eventual redemption a kind of beacon to the whole world. *Here* the nations can find a God who keeps covenant and redeems people. *Here* the nations can find a God who seeks to establish real peace. *Here* the nations can find a God who would have all people reconciled in genuine worship. Israel's task is to let God redeem them in a way that puts God's grace on display before the whole world. And that's to happen, in each telling of the story, right in Israel's miraculous return from Babylon.

There's Isaiah 49 in a nutshell. Now before we wrap up—and we're already almost out of time—let's add just one further point. Remember from last time that Nephi treats Isaiah 49 somewhat differently than Isaiah 48. He leaves Isaiah 48 unlikened, a story solely about Israel's redemption from Babylonian exile. But he simply *can't* leave Isaiah 49 untouched. Throughout his quotation of this chapter, there are differences between what he says and what appears in the King James Version of Isaiah 49, and some of them at least seem to be Nephi's own alterations of the text—moments where he's changing the text in order to begin the work of likening it. And what he sees in Isaiah 49 is of major importance to him. He sees something much, much bigger than just the return to Palestine from Babylon, accomplished with some fanfare but in relative obscurity in the sixth century before Christ. He finds there at least the outline of a larger pattern, a pattern that just as well describes the events he's seen in vision: the eventual redemption of all the scattered branches of Israel from among the Gentile—that is European—nations. And that's where Nephi goes as soon as he gets a chance to explain the meaning of Isaiah 49 to his brothers in 1 Nephi 22. He wants to see in this remarkable chapter a series of allusions to events, of which escape from Babylon is only a foretaste. Something just like return from exile is coming, but it'll *actually* be before all the nations of the world, and it'll *actually* result in massive numbers of Gentiles joining with Israel to worship the Lord. And, I hope and pray every day, it'll also *actually* result in the cessation of war and violence, that source of almost all of human misery still today. Nephi sees in Isaiah 49 reason to look forward to genuine transformation of the whole world.

I think I see it there too.

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Subject Index

Scripture Index

Note that Isaiah 2–14, 29, 48–49, and 50–51 are correspondingly quoted in 2 Nephi 12–24, 26–27, 1 Nephi 20–21, and 2 Nephi 7–8, such that passages cited from the former appear also in the latter and vice versa.

Old Testament

New Testament

Book of Mormon

Doctrine and Covenants

Pearl of Great Price