

A Word in Season: Isaiah's Reception in the Book of Mormon
by Joseph M. Spencer

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Reviewed by Joshua M. Sears

This groundbreaking study by Joseph Spencer, who teaches in Religious Education at Brigham Young University, invites both Latter-day Saints and those outside our faith to consider what the Book of Mormon has to say about the relevancy of prophecy and scripture in our modern world.

A Word in Season makes this invitation through two primary tasks. The first is to analyze how Isaiah is used in the Book of Mormon and make the case that Isaiah's prophecies are not incidental but one of the Book of Mormon's major organizing forces. Readers today first encounter Isaiah in the record of Nephi, who "likens" Isaiah's prophecies to his own vision of the latter days, using one revelatory source to interpret the other (see 1 Ne. 19:23–24). Isaiah reappears hundreds of years later when a corrupt Nephite colony spars with the prophet Abinadi over the meaning of Isaiah 52:7–10, with the colony's leadership having apparently twisted Nephi's interpretive strategy to justify their own self-serving ends. In response, Abinadi undercuts their use of scripture by abandoning the program of likening completely, offering instead a Christological reading of Isaiah that focuses on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus (see Mosiah 12–15). Spencer makes the case that this new approach, while effective, had the consequence of dampening subsequent Nephite interest in Isaiah—after all, if Isaiah is simply describing the coming of Christ, why should anyone bother wrestling with his complexity when Benjamin and other Nephite prophets predict Christ's coming much more clearly?

However, the Book of Mormon's midbook disinterest in Isaiah is definitively reversed when the resurrected Christ appears to the Nephites and recentralizes Nephi's focus on the latter-day fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel. Marking the shift, Christ selects as his first

Isaianic quotation the very passage Abinadi had interpreted and assigns it a different meaning. Whereas Abinadi centered salvation history on the Messiah's suffering and death, Christ focuses on the covenants that were granted anciently to Israel and await fulfillment in the last days, incorporating Abinadi's picture into a broader historical view of how the Messiah will redeem his people.

Spencer treats Nephi's use of Isaiah last (following the order in which Joseph Smith first dictated the Book of Mormon), which enables him to bring out how much Nephi shares his approach to Isaiah with 3 Nephi's Christ, although Nephi takes a lot more space to develop his approach. Through all of this, Spencer makes the case that the Book of Mormon programmatically uses Isaiah in creative and sometimes conflicting ways as a means of reflecting on the nature of prophecy and scripture.

Spencer's second primary task is to situate the Book of Mormon's "remarkably inventive" (xv) use of Isaiah among the interpretations offered throughout Christian and (to a lesser extent) Jewish history. While we have existing studies that explore Isaiah's place in the Book of Mormon,¹ none have attempted to systematically fit the Book of Mormon into Isaiah's larger reception history, let alone make the case that the Book of Mormon is a significant contribution to it.² Imagine Nephi's take on a passage set alongside Augustine's, or Christ's approach to Old Testament prophecy compared with the Millerites'.³ To help us see where the Book of Mormon is familiar or disruptive, Spencer imagines an "ideal reader/listener," a theoretical person who, when engaging with the Book of Mormon for the first time in 1830, is so thoroughly versed in Isaiah's existing reception history that they appreciate just how the Book of Mormon fits in (22–24). It turns out, according to Spencer's constructed "ideal reader," that the Book of Mormon is often outside the mainstream, operating on the fringes of standard biblical interpretation if not out of bounds altogether. However, the creativity emerging on the margins is part of how the Book of Mormon makes some of its most significant claims.

1. For example, the classic collection of essays in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998).

2. Certainly, many Latter-day Saints have *claimed* that the Book of Mormon is history's best interpreter of Isaiah, but this is typically assumed without actually engaging with any other interpreters to demonstrate that their claim holds up.

3. Millerism was a nineteenth-century Christian movement whose descendants include the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Bringing his two primary tasks together, Spencer argues that the Book of Mormon's own internal debates about the meaning of Isaiah's prophecies collectively outline an approach to scripture that can secure the relevancy of Isaiah—and scripture itself—in our modern world, a world “rapidly falling under the sway of widespread secularism” (xvii). Spencer sees the climax of this argument coming early in the Book of Mormon (at least in publication order, though it appears near the end of dictation order), when Nephi creatively draws upon Isaiah 29 to explore how the world will react to the coming forth of new revelation in the form of the Book of Mormon (see 2 Ne. 26:12–27:35). The “learned” reject “the words of the book” (the translation published by Joseph Smith) because they insist first on having access to “the book” itself (the gold plates). In response to their privileging of evidentiary proofs, God enacts a “turning of things upside down” by affirming that “I am a God of miracles” and that he will only respond to people “according to their faith” (see 2 Ne. 27:6–27).⁴ By critiquing latter-day skepticism, Spencer says, the Book of Mormon “studies what it might mean to restore to Christianity its original radical nature” (218). Is it possible to accept the witness of twelve men who saw the risen Christ if we automatically preclude the witness of twelve men who saw the gold plates (213)?

A Word in Season offers much to reflect on. First, while most readers recognize that Isaiah is something of a big deal in the Book of Mormon, we sometimes exhibit a communal tendency to downplay just how embedded these Isaiah texts are. When our manuals include Isaiah quotes in a reading block, they tend to focus as much as possible on the Isaiah-adjacent parts. Teachers are often much more comfortable declaring that “great are the words of Isaiah” than they are diving into the actual words of Isaiah. Some of us are conditioned to see the “Isaiah chapters” as extraneous and even distracting from more important Book of Mormon chapters.⁵ But while believers in the Book of Mormon rightly bristle at the suggestion of critics that Joseph Smith simply dumped in

4. For a standalone treatment of these passages from 2 Nephi 27, see Joseph M. Spencer, “The Book, the Words of the Book: What the Book of Mormon Says about Its Own Coming Forth,” *Religious Educator* 17, no. 1 (2016): 64–81.

5. I see this in the Book of Mormon classes I teach at Brigham Young University, where students sometimes puzzle over why our class is covering Isaianic blocks like 1 Nephi 20–21 or 2 Nephi 12–24 at the same speed as “regular” chapters. Their previous experience apparently led them to view these blocks as hard to understand but easy to summarize and, therefore, best treated quickly. In written reviews of the class, some students have complained about being tested on figures like Ahaz (2 Ne. 17) or events like the Assyrian invasion of Judah (scattered throughout 2 Ne. 12–20), since these “Old Testament” things

Isaiah as filler whenever “his literary reservoir . . . ran dry,”⁶ we’re not taking the book much more seriously if we assume Nephi himself was just filling space. *A Word in Season* is one of the most compelling cases I have read for treating the prophecies of Isaiah as a fundamental part of the message—something we cannot divorce from the rest of the Book of Mormon. Given our collective anxiety about Isaiah, Spencer’s work should provoke serious discussions about how we can better understand and utilize the Book of Mormon’s favorite Hebrew prophet.

Second, through its engagement with Isaiah’s reception history, *A Word in Season* can help us see Book of Mormon doctrinal contributions that are less visible in isolation. For example, Christians will perceive Abinadi as being eminently traditional in using Isaiah 53 to describe the rejection, vicarious suffering, and death of Jesus Christ.⁷ Christians have read Isaiah 53 this way at least since the texts of the New Testament (see Matt. 8:17; Mark 15:28; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32–33; Rom. 4:25; 10:16; Heb. 9:28; and 1 Pet. 2:22–25). But while Abinadi’s approach to Isaiah 53 seems generally inoffensive and mainstream (53–54), it gets less so when Spencer dives into the details. Abinadi shares with early and medieval Christian interpreters an understanding that Isaiah 53:8 (“who shall declare his generation?”) describes Christ’s incarnation, but that interpretation had fallen out of favor centuries before the Book of Mormon’s appearance, making Abinadi look “quaint” in a nineteenth-century context (55–60). Where Abinadi fully departs from Christian interpretation is his insistence that Christ’s “seed” (Isa. 53:10) and the messengers who publish peace (Isa. 52:7) describe *pre-Christian* prophets and disciples. In contrast, traditional Christianity has routinely insisted that the “seed” applies exclusively to those who have accepted Jesus as the Savior *since* the time of his Crucifixion and Resurrection (62–65). The fact that Abinadi’s approach to Isaiah 53 otherwise aligns

don’t “fit” within a Book of Mormon class. In other words, these students don’t seem to think of the Isaiah quotations as being Book of Mormon texts in their own right.

6. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (Knopf, 1971), 58.

7. Among the Nephites, the case has been made that even before Abinadi they had a history of using Isaiah 53 Christologically. See John W. Welch, “Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon,” in Parry and Welch, *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, 305–8. However, it is very possible that Abinadi’s approach was novel. The textual evidence for earlier Nephites using Isaiah 53 to describe Christ is scarce to nonexistent, so the argument in favor of a long tradition depends on thematic overlap with Nephi and Jacob’s teachings rather than explicit quotation.

so well with traditional Christian interpretations actually highlights, Spencer argues, this major point where Abinadi subversively breaks with them. This in turn contributes to the Book of Mormon's broader insistence that the Christian gospel was available to God's children well before Christ appeared in the flesh (65–68).

This example of Spencer putting the Book of Mormon into conversation with Isaiah's reception history is one of many that helped me better appreciate how the Book of Mormon was designed to help latter-day readers understand "the very points of [the Savior's] doctrine" (1 Ne. 15:14). If we lack a meaningful grasp of the history of Christian theology, we may not appreciate all the ways the Book of Mormon corrects and expands on points of controversy and misunderstanding. *A Word in Season* helpfully brings out those contributions.

Third, *A Word in Season* challenges its readers—both Latter-day Saints and others—to think more carefully about what questions we're trying to answer when we seriously consider the Book of Mormon. Since the 1830s, most Book of Mormon scholarship has centered on the book's historicity, with arguments trying to prove or disprove its claim to be a translation of an ancient text. Spencer's reading, however, suggests that this development is highly "ironic" because "Nephi himself argues against the validity of all such debate" (219). Nephi never claims, Spencer says, that these questions don't matter, and Spencer himself acknowledges how important they are. But in Nephi's use of Isaiah, Spencer sees a call to avoid *prioritizing* questions of the Book of Mormon's historicity. Such questions, though important, should "come only after a genuinely *faithful* reading of the book, one that does not decide on its meaning or its value or its truth without having first demonstrated a kind of fidelity to its call" (220, emphasis original). This provocative analysis invites reflection about whether we have been so focused on questions of historicity that we, at times, unintentionally neglect to mine the Book of Mormon for answers to other questions of great spiritual and social importance.⁸

8. See also the section "Apologetics as an Enterprise" in Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, "The Book of Mormon and the Academy," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 184–87. They argue that our apologetic efforts should be about much more than defending ancient authorship and should show people why the Book of Mormon is so crucially relevant to their deepest questions and practical challenges. They write, "A number of students come into our classes fully convinced that the Book of Mormon is ancient but seem unconvinced that they have more to learn from it" (185).

Finally, it is worth noting what *A Word in Season* signifies about the field of Book of Mormon studies.⁹ This isn't the first study of the Book of Mormon to be published by an academic press, but it does show how far things have come. By way of comparison, when Grant Hardy's seminal narrative analysis, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, was published in 2010, it was not a given that the Book of Mormon would be of serious interest to scholars who lacked faith commitments to the Church, so Hardy had to persuade them that "the Book of Mormon is a much more interesting text . . . than has generally been acknowledged."¹⁰ Despite how compellingly he made this argument, the book was regularly punctuated by what Kimberly Matheson has called "performances of shame"—acknowledgments of the Book of Mormon's more inelegant features, which rhetorically served to ease in critical readers who may not have been open to learning of the Book of Mormon's strengths had they not also felt validated in their assumptions about its weaknesses.¹¹ If such posturing was the academic price of admission a decade and a half ago, *A Word in Season* is remarkable for its consistently positive tone and its unqualified assumption that *of course* the Book of Mormon deserves to be taken seriously. We should be encouraged that more scholars outside our faith are willing to engage with our signature scripture and take up Spencer's invitation to consider more than just the book's historical provenance.

I imagine that serious readers of the Book of Mormon will find, as I did, points of disagreement with Spencer. I occasionally felt that he attributed intentionality to Book of Mormon characters in places that went beyond what we can know from the text,¹² and there are places where his exegetical take on a passage is a bit different than mine.¹³ However,

9. For a broader analysis of the state of the field, see *Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide*, ed. Daniel Becerra, Amy Easton-Flake, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Joseph M. Spencer (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2022).

10. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2010), xvii.

11. See Kimberly Matheson, "Emboldened and Embarrassed: The Tenor of Contemporary Book of Mormon Studies and the Role of Grant Hardy," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 31 (2022): 75–99.

12. For example, Spencer suggests several times that Abinadi may have deliberately sought to undermine Nephi's hermeneutical approach to Isaiah and to lead the Nephites away from Isaian interpretation altogether (73–76). I find these suggestions highly speculative.

13. For example, Spencer makes much of the semantic overlap between "generation" (Isa. 53:8) and "seed" (Isa. 53:10), both of which can concern progeny (see 42–44). However, while "generation" in the sense of "what is generated" can refer to generated

I always felt I was being challenged in a good way, and I learned (and unlearned) a great deal. This is one of those books where the insights come so plentifully that some of the most interesting gems are tucked away in the endnotes. Those who have read overlapping material in Spencer's previous works will also find that various arguments have been refined.¹⁴ I recommend *A Word in Season* and hope it will provoke new conversations about the Book of Mormon as "a marvelous work and a wonder" (2 Ne. 27:26).

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children in English (as well as with its etymological ancestor, the Latin *generatio*, which early Christians did in fact identify in Isaiah 53:8 as a reference to Christ's incarnation), this does not work so well in Hebrew, where the word's usual sense refers to the period of time when a man lives.

14. For example, Spencer has previously received criticism that his argument for a major break between 2 Nephi chapters 5 and 6 overlooked the most obvious literary division Nephi himself had created: the boundary between the books of First Nephi and Second Nephi. *A Word in Season* maintains that 2 Nephi 6–30 is signposted by Nephi as the heart of his project, but it does more to address why Nephi structured his writings into two books (158–66).