Review of *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* by Victor L. Ludlow

LUDLOW, VICTOR L. *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982. 578 pp. $13.95.

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With the publication of *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet,* Victor L. Ludlow has accomplished what few scholars have done—presented a worthy commentary on one of the most difficult books in world literature. The task that Victor L. Ludlow set for himself would have discouraged lesser scholars, but he has the credentials and the will to pursue the project. The work examines the "historical context, literary style, scriptural context and doctrinal application" of Isaiah and is designed "to help the readers of Isaiah understand his writings" (p. xi). Here for the first time Latter-day Saints have at their command a commentary on Isaiah that brings together LDS doctrine, reputable scholarship, and an informed discussion of the nature of the Hebrew writings of Isaiah.

Two features of the book have special note. First, the entire Book of Isaiah has been included within the text of the commentary, making it unnecessary to keep a copy of the Bible at hand to read the passages being discussed. The text of Isaiah used for inclusion varies from section to section with fourteen different translations being used, including some of Ludlow's original renderings. This use of different English versions of Isaiah allows the reader to see other possibilities of interpretation and to become familiar with the style and readability of the various translations now available on the market.

Second, Isaiah wrote in a language and literary style that is foreign to most contemporary readers. His use of Hebrew poetry, with complicated chiastic structures, parallels and repetitions, unfamiliar to native English speakers, only complicates the problem of understanding his message. Ludlow explains in an intelligent manner at appropriate points how Isaiah used these Hebrew poetic devices and how a knowledge of these forms actually contributes to a better understanding of the text.

The publisher, Deseret Book, is to be complimented for the layout and liberal use of bold face, italics, and different sized fonts that visually help the reader to organize what could have been a complicated and dizzying sequence of commentaries. However, the maps on pages 175 and 181 are not precisely drawn, an unfortunate lapse given the graphic care with which the book was otherwise assembled.

As with any finite commentary on a major work, selections were made concerning the material that could be included. Scholars of Hebrew and the Ancient Near East will find Ludlow's book lacking in commentary on

the Hebrew text. Students of Latter-day Saint theology might wish there were more quotations from authoritative modern sources. However, given the size of the book, Ludlow has made a happy balance between the various source materials used in his commentary.

Some readers may fault this book for not giving single answers to the problems raised by a reading of the Book of Isaiah, but I think this is one of the strong points of Ludlow's commentary. Rather than giving doctrinaire answers to questions, he offers various alternatives usually based in part on the different approaches that he has presented, i.e., answers based on secular scholarship, scriptural comparisons, quotations from modern prophets. While this approach may be disconcerting to a few, it will be refreshing to many. The paragraph on page 360 is characteristic of the best passages in Ludlow's commentary. He summarizes the data, and "rather than categorically stating" the one and only correct solution, he lets the list stand by proffering an interpretation that includes all the possibilities.

The chapter "Why and How to Study Isaiah" is very helpful. The historical background and the explanation of parallelism in Hebrew are particularly useful. Later, beginning on page 93, there is a section with many helpful insights on the use of the Book of Mormon Isaiah passages to aid in understanding Biblical Isaiah. This is one of the most valuable sections of the book, but unfortunately it is hidden in the middle of a discussion of Isaiah chapter 2. This important commentary should have been give a chapter by itself, or at least a place in the table of contents so that those who use this book as a reference work would be aware that this topic is treated. Similarly, the welcome section "Why Is Isaiah Deliberately Difficult" is unfortunately tucked away in the discussion of Isaiah 6, where it will be found only by those who read through the book page by page.

While I obviously believe that this is a valuable book, it does contain a number of items with which I, as a specialist in the Ancient Near East, would take issue. Some of these are probably mere typographical errors, such as the statement that deutero-Isaiah starts after chapter 29 (p. 97). It should read chapter 39. There are also significant omissions. Along with the appropriately cited Isaiah texts contained in the Septuagint and the Book of Mormon (from the Brass Plates), I expected to find comparisons with the Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) Isaiah material. Except for three passages—only one of which adds to the commentary on the Hebrew text—the Dead Sea scrolls are not even mentioned. The one passage that does make a substantive contribution (p. 506) is not listed in the index. On page 48, Ludlow attributes the division of the Isaiah text into paragraphs and chapters to medieval scribes. Here is a case where evidence from the Qumran material would have helped to avoid a mistake. A comparison of the $1QIs^{a}$ text with the paragraph and chapter divisions of the Masoretic

text would have shown that by and large these divisions were known to the scribes of the Dead Sea Scrolls and were not invented subsequently in the Middle Ages.

Most of my questions about Ludlow's book have to do with matters of fact or interpretation. For example, on pages 98 and 99 the significance of the phrase "top of the mountains" is discussed. The explanation that the temple mount in Jerusalem, though "in fact lower than the surrounding hills," attains a position of "relative height" is at best forced. The temple mount in Jerusalem is indeed considerably lower than the surrounding hills and can in no way to considered a "top of the mountains." When Isaiah says that this holy city "shall be established in the top of the mountains" (Isa. 2:2), it is the King James translation that is misleading. The Hebrew text literally say, "The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be in the head of the mountains," most likely referring to the spiritual standing of the city of the Lord among all the other cities of the world, no doubt because of the presence of the Lord's temple. The New English Bible translates, "The mountain of the LORD'S house shall be set over other mountains, lifted high above the hills." The last two phrases are parallel and therefore most likely mean the same thing. There is also a climax in this parallelism, namely, that compared to the mountain or city of the Lord all others will seem as hills. Given this metaphysical explanation of the "top of the mountains," there is no need to explain why the low hill of the temple mount in Jerusalem is "relatively" high or that the temples "along the Wasatch Front of the Rockies" are "one thousand feet" higher in absolute elevation than Jerusalem.

On page 115, Ludlow suggests that the Hebrews of Isaiah's day found some sort of mysticism in the Hebrew language so that they could feel "there was some power inherent in words that are mysteriously linked by similarity and contrast." While this may have been the case with post–70 A.D. Judaism, there is no evidence that kabalistic tendencies predate the common era. The power of the words of Isaiah lies not in mysticism but in their poetic quality, prophetic vision, and deadly accuracy.

Part of the commentary on page 338 is based on the interpretation of the Hebrew word *elohim* as God the Father. This usage is quite standard among members of the Church, but the word as it is used in Hebrew does not denote exclusively God the Father. In fact at times it seems interchangeable with the Hebrew for Jehovah (*yahweh*). For instance, see Judges 3, where the angel sent to announce Samson's birth is alternately described as an "angel of *yahweh*" (v. 3) and an "angel of *elohim*" (v. 6), as "a man of *elohim*" (v. 6) and again "an angel of *yahweh*" (v. 11). But the telling verse for the present point is 22, where after the angel had ascended in the flame of the altar, Samson's father said, "We have seen *elohim*." They

had not seen God the Father but only a messenger, and that messenger was called *elohim* by them. In other words, *elohim* could denote not only God but also a divine messenger, a "man," as he is called in the foregoing verses. Therefore, it is not correct to base an interpretation of Isaiah 40 upon the assumption that every occurrence of *elohim* in this chapter refers to God the Father and that when *yahweh* appears the subject has become the Son.

The claim that "Bel and Nebo were the two most prominent gods of the Assyro-Babylonian pantheon" (p. 391) is true only for the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and there is no evidence that Bel and Nebo "were the Babylonian apostate versions of Jehovah and the Holy Ghost." Babylonian religion is fairly well known back to the third millennium B.C., and there is no reason to believe that during that period (2000–700 B.C.) the gospel was ever known in Mesopotamia to any extent beyond a personal level. There is a similar problem on page 477, where Ludlow states that "ancient idol worship was inseparably connected with ritual prostitution and fertility cults." This is simple not true of the Ancient Near East. There are no texts from the Phoenician, Ugaritic, or Palestinian cultural spheres at or before the time of Isaiah that even suggest ritual prostitution. The only evidence of prostitution as part of the cults of Babylonia comes from a late and non-native source, Herodotus. There is no native text or other indigenous evidence from any period that cultic prostitution was ever practiced in Mesopotamia.[1]

There are other questionable claims scattered through the book. For example, the equation proffered on page 205 that the "land shadowed by wings" of Isaiah 18:1 is the Americas may or may not be true. The evidence marshaled does not convince this reviewer. The suggestion that the phrase "house of prayer for all people" (Isa. 56:7) found its fulfillment "on June 6, 1978, when the temple blessings were made available to all worthy people, regardless of race" (p. 474) is not the only possible explanation. The "house of prayer for all people" is quoted in Matthew 21:13 to refer to the proper use of the temple. The outer court of the temple was reserved for non-Israelites as a place of prayer, truly a place "of prayer for all people." And the explanation of the word *forgive* on page 452 is based on a faulty etymology.

Exception must be made to the statement on page 293: "It seems that the presently irreligious Jews, trusting in their own power, have returned to their promised land and established a strong modern state." The word *irreligious* is far too strong. It is true that many of the Jewish people of Palestine are not religious, but the correct term for this is *areligious* and not *irreligious,* the former meaning without religion and the latter meaning irreverent or even antireligious. Indeed, many of the Jews of Palestine are very religious, and though they may be in the minority their influence in the politics of the Jewish state far outweighs their numbers.

Despite my questions on these and other points, I see this book as an important achievement. Dr. Ludlow is especially to be commended for his introduction to the poetic imagery and explanation of the lyrics of Isaiah. The English approximations are faithful and give much to the richness of Isaiah's colors. I look forward to more.

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1. Back in 1913 it was proposed that the Akkadian temple word *gagu* be interpreted as *brothel* and that the women who served therein, *naditu* women, were sacred prostitutes. Unfortunately, this erroneous assumption based on faulty Syriac etymology has remained the grown into a whole theory about cultic prostitution. Old theories that fire the imagination seem to have a life of their own that defies the truth. If anything, the *naditu* women were required to be chaste in deed. (See Rivkah Harris, "The *naditu* women," in *Studies Presented to A. Leo Oppenheim* [Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1964], p. 106, with the literature in footnotes 1 and 2. See also E. J. Fischer, "Cultic Prostitution in the Ancient East? A Reassessment," *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 6 [1976]: 225–36.