



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

- Title** The Book of Mormon as Biblical Interpretation: An Approach to LDS Biblical Studies
- Author** Joseph M. Spencer
- Reference** *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 8 (2016): 130–56.
- ISSN** 2151-7800 (print), 2168-3166 (online)
- Abstract** Recent years have seen Mormon biblical scholars asking what it might mean for there to be a specifically Latter-day Saint form of biblical interpretation. This essay outlines one possible answer to this question: a close study of how uniquely Mormon scripture interprets biblical texts. Demonstrating what such an approach might look like, the paper sets forth an investigation of how the Book of Mormon interprets Isaiah 6:9–10, framed comparatively by contrasting it with interpretations of this passage in other religious traditions. Direct alteration made to the biblical text, placement of quotations of the passage within larger textual structures, commentary on the biblical text within the Book of Mormon, use of similar Isaianic texts, and larger treatments within the Book of Mormon of relevant theological themes are all considered. The article concludes that the Book of Mormon carves out an interpretive space irreducible to either classic Jewish or classic Christian approaches to the passage, while sharing certain elements with each. Similar investigation of other biblical texts appearing in Mormon scripture might be profitably pursued.
- DOI** <https://doi.org/10.18809/sba.2016.0108>

# Articles

## The Book of Mormon as Biblical Interpretation: An Approach to LDS Biblical Studies

*Joseph M. Spencer*

RECENT YEARS HAVE WITNESSED a growing recognition in the academy that the Book of Mormon deserves closer attention than it has received. Not surprisingly, adherents to the various Mormon faiths have long read the book with some care. But larger numbers of believing and nonbelieving academics have come to recognize that, despite its often didactic style and relative literary artlessness, the Book of Mormon exhibits remarkable sophistication.<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps nowhere truer than in those passages where the volume interacts—whether explicitly or implicitly—with biblical texts (always in or in relation to the King James rendering).<sup>2</sup> Close reading of the Book of Mormon makes clear

---

1. The sophistication of the Book of Mormon (along with its didactic style and relative artlessness) has been argued for most forcefully in Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). A growing interest in the sophistication of the Book of Mormon is signaled with plans for a forthcoming collection of essays, *The Book of Mormon: Americanist Approaches*, edited by Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman, set to be published by Oxford University Press.

2. A watershed in close study of the Book of Mormon's interaction with biblical texts was Krister Stendahl, "The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious

that Mormonism's founding text models a profoundly inventive biblical hermeneutic that deserves a place in the burgeoning field of reception history. How does Mormon scripture understand and react to particular biblical texts, and what might be learned about the potential meanings of those biblical texts in light of such interactions?<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I want to argue that one form—one particularly promising form—that Latter-day Saint biblical studies might take is to bring the implicit and explicit engagements with biblical texts present in the Book of Mormon into conversation with other work being undertaken in reception history.<sup>4</sup> Rather than argue for the usefulness of such an approach simply in the abstract, however, I wish to demonstrate this usefulness by carrying out the approach in question, at least in outline, with respect to a specific text. Among so many biblical texts that make their appearance in one way or another in the Book of Mormon, I select for this exhibition of sorts Isaiah 6:9–10.<sup>5</sup> A number of considerations make this a particularly illustrative example. First, the importance of Isaiah to the project of the Book of Mormon is immense, obvious to anyone familiar with the volume, and this particular Isaiah text is part

---

Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 139–54. The best work on biblical texts in the Book of Mormon has followed in Stendahl's wake.

3. A general but nonetheless helpful analysis of how biblical texts are treated in the Book of Mormon can be found in Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 26–32.

4. One suggestive example, not without its problems, of this approach in rather general terms might be found in Eran Shalev, *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). For an indication of certain difficulties with Shalev's treatment of the Book of Mormon, see Benjamin E. Park, "The Book of Mormon and Early America's Political and Intellectual Tradition," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 167–75.

5. Treatments of this passage in the Book of Mormon are few and far between, and none have paid sufficient attention to certain difficulties in the preprinting manuscripts of the Book of Mormon. For examples, see Victor L. Ludlow, *Unlocking Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 117; Monte S. Nyman, *I Nephi Wrote This Record: Book of Mormon Commentary* (Orem, UT: Granite, 2004), 522; and Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:244.

of a larger pericope that plays a crucial structural role in the first portion of the Book of Mormon.<sup>6</sup> Second, this Isaiah passage is one of many in which interpretively significant alterations to the biblical text have been made in the Book of Mormon, and in this case those alterations seem clearly to be motivated by a long-recognized theological provocation contained in the Isaianic original: the suggestion in the biblical text that God wills to harden his people's hearts against the prophetic word, leading to their destruction and exile.<sup>7</sup> Third and particularly useful for a brief study such as this, productive reception-historical work has already been done on this particular Isaiah passage, allowing for ready comparison between the Book of Mormon's handling of the passage and that of other traditions.

I will proceed as follows. In a first, rather brief section of the paper, I outline the basic theological puzzle contained in Isaiah 6:9–10, as well as common responses to the puzzle that can be traced in early Jewish and Christian translations of the passage. In four further sections, I look at how the Book of Mormon structurally privileges its quotation of Isaiah 6, provides an important variant reading of verses 9–10, offers a few words of commentary on the larger block of Isaiah text within which Isaiah 6 appears, and weaves a larger network of passages that allude to this text or develop its central themes. Along the way, I unfold an argument that the Book of Mormon's handling of Isaiah 6:9–10 carves out a space irreducible to either traditionally Jewish or maturely Christian

---

6. The most detailed scholarly treatment of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon to date is Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch, eds., *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998). On the basic structural roles played by Isaiah's writings in the Book of Mormon, see Joseph M. Spencer, "Prolegomena to Any Future Study of Isaiah in the Book of Mormon," *Claremont Journal of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (April 2011): 53–69.

7. For what remains the most detailed treatment of variants in the Isaiah texts found in the Book of Mormon, see John A. Tvedtnes, *The Isaiah Variants in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1981). A substantive critical treatment can be found in David P. Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Or Joseph Smith in Isaiah," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 157–234. Important shortcomings of all published analyses of the variants have been noted in John A. Tvedtnes, "Isaiah in the Bible and the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 161–72.

responses (although it might be said to align in interesting ways with the use of the passage in the earliest texts of the New Testament). Finally, at the end of the paper, I outline a few conclusions regarding what it might mean to develop a discipline of Latter-day Saint biblical studies along the lines pursued here.

## Puzzles

Isaiah 6:9–10, rather faithfully translated from the Masoretic Text, reads as follows in the King James Version of the Bible (with some quotation marks inserted into the text for clarity):

And he [the Lord] said, “Go, and tell this people, ‘Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not.’ Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.”<sup>8</sup>

This instruction—or rather, this theologically paradoxical command—comes to Isaiah in the course of his famous encounter with the Lord in the temple, which took place, according to the text, in the year of Uzzi-ah’s death. Seeing the Lord seated on an exalted throne and attended by worshipful seraphs, as well as being cleansed by one of the seraphs and thereby prepared to speak the divine word, Isaiah receives a startling commission. Despite a long tradition of attempts at explaining away the relatively obvious meaning of the text, the twentieth century saw the development of a consensus of interpretation that takes the passage at its word while situating its meaning within the larger context of ancient Hebrew thought. Thanks especially to Gerhard von Rad, most interpreters today understand Isaiah’s commission to represent a watershed

---

8. For detailed critical commentary on these verses, see Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12: A Commentary*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 271–73.

in Hebrew thinking regarding the sovereignty of God.<sup>9</sup> Like the God of the exodus story, Isaiah's God is even sovereign enough to harden human hearts to see to his larger purpose. But where the God of the exodus story hardens only the hearts of noncovenantal people, Isaiah's God here goes so far as to harden his own people's hearts against the prophetic message for a time in order to accomplish a "strange work" (Isaiah 28:21). Only this sort of God, one willing even to "hide his face from the house of Jacob" (Isaiah 8:17) at times, is fully master of history. And such a paradoxical move, it turns out, is necessary because part of God's plan with his people involves reducing them to a holy remnant that is finally prepared to represent God to the world (see Isaiah 6:13 and, more generally, Isaiah 7–12).<sup>10</sup>

Ancient readers were as confused by—or at least as concerned with—Isaiah 6:9–10 as are modern readers. In fact, in an important study, Craig Evans has traced in broad outlines the ancient reception of this provocative pericope. Looking at ancient Greek, Aramaic, and Syriac translations of the passages, as well as at quotations of and allusions to Isaiah 6 in early Jewish and Christian texts into the early medieval era, he marks out a few clear patterns. In ancient Jewish translations, he finds "a marked tendency to move away from the harsh, telic understanding of the Hebrew text," discerning nonetheless several distinct

---

9. See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 2:153–55; as well as a helpful exposition of the basic theological problems in Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 56–57. Craig Evans, in his study of the reception of this text, has provided a good survey of modern critical scholarship on the passage. See Craig A. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive: Isaiah 6.9–10 in Early Jewish and Christian Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 17–52. The success of von Rad's approach can be glimpsed in the fact that it is reflected at quite opposite extremes of the ideological spectrum of commentaries. See both Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 223–24; and John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 188–90.

10. On the remnant theme in the Hebrew Bible, and especially in Isaiah, see Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (Barrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1972).

forms in which this tendency manifests itself.<sup>11</sup> Representative is the rendering in the Septuagint, where several subtle grammatical alterations of the Hebrew in the Greek text make the hardness of the people's heart into a simple historical fact—presumably the consequence of their own sins—rather than something the Lord aims to bring about.<sup>12</sup> Evans traces this same general approach to the text into the rabbinical tradition, where “the text is moralized and applied in a way that has little to do with the original sense.”<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, Evans finds this general trend among ancient Jewish interpreters to have been reversed in the singular case of nascent (and therefore still-Jewish) Christianity. This took place in a first form already with Jesus (in Mark 4), but then also with Paul (in Romans 9–11).<sup>14</sup> For both Jesus and Paul, the Isaiah passage was transmitted in a form closer to the Hebrew original and was apparently helpful in explaining how “rejection and ostracism” of early followers of Jesus “unwittingly furthered God's purposes in producing a new remnant of the faithful.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of reworking Isaiah's words to soften their impact, the earliest Christians understood them as referring to God's surprising intention to establish a chosen people *within* the chosen people, a believing persecuted remnant that would be involved in the eschatological fulfillment of the promise made to Israel that the gentiles would come to worship the true God with them.<sup>16</sup>

---

11. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 163.

12. See Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 62–63. Here is Evans's translation of the Septuagint rendering: “And he said, ‘Go and say to this people: “You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive.” For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn for me to heal them.” Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 62.

13. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 166; see also 137–45.

14. See especially Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 81–106.

15. Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 165.

16. This depends on a careful interpretation of Romans 9–11, helpfully worked out from a Jewish perspective in Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). See also, of course, Isaiah 2:1–4, where this expectation is given one of its richest expressions.

Unfortunately, as Christianity developed into a religious movement increasingly estranged from and even antagonistic toward its Jewish origins, this earliest approach to Isaiah 6:9–10 was supplanted by another, according to Evans. Beginning with later New Testament writings and then more starkly in the writings of the early Christian fathers, interpreters shifted away from affirming the production of a remnant within Judaism, moving instead toward positioning Jews as radical outsiders. From that point on, the passage—along with much of the remainder of Isaiah’s writings—came to serve the purposes of Christian anti-Semitism.<sup>17</sup> For Christians, Isaiah’s commission came to mean that God mysteriously announced long in advance that he would deliberately harden the hearts of Jews against the Messiah, thereby inaugurating the wholesale replacement of one chosen people with another. This played into a fully revitalized, but deeply troubling, theology of divine sovereignty.

Such is the framework provided by the general trends Evans traces: (1) general Jewish discomfort with Isaiah 6:9–10, (2) Jesus’s and Paul’s reinvestment in the passage’s original implicit remnant theology, and (3) subsequent Christian use of the passage in the construction of an anti-Semitic salvation history. Crucially, this schematic outline of the ancient interpretive tradition proves helpful for making sense of the Book of Mormon’s handling of this same Isaianic text. But, naturally, we must first explore how the Book of Mormon handles it.

## Structures

The first major portion of the Book of Mormon presents itself as the writings of Nephi, a barely preexilic Jerusalemite whose family escapes before Zedekiah’s rebellion and the consequent devastation of the city. Decades after removing to the New World, where the fledgling colony tragically divides into two warring factions, Nephi produces a record of the family’s travels and travails, using the narrative to contextualize his

---

17. This is something John Sawyer has also noted; see various discussions in John F. A. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

and his father's prophetic experiences.<sup>18</sup> The focal point of the narrative is an apocalyptic vision obviously—and explicitly—connected to the New Testament Apocalypse of John, which Nephi places in a mutually interpretive relationship with a host of texts from the canonical book of Isaiah.<sup>19</sup> Nowhere else in the Book of Mormon does Isaiah become such a consistent focus as in Nephi's record. More important, nowhere else in the Book of Mormon are Isaiah's writings woven into the organizing structure of the text. And Isaiah 6:9–10 makes its chief appearance in the Book of Mormon in Nephi's record, where it plays an important structural role.

Late in his record, Nephi reproduces in one massive block the whole of Isaiah 2–14 (see 2 Nephi 12–24), albeit with a great number of variants (many quite minor, many others interpretively significant). These Isaiah chapters appear in the center of a triptych, preceded and followed by prophetic sermons by Nephi (2 Nephi 25–30) and his brother Jacob (2 Nephi 6–10) that quote from other Isaianic texts (specifically Isaiah 11, 29, and 48–52) and provide commentary. The entire triptych constitutes what Nephi describes as the core of his record, “the more sacred things” (1 Nephi 19:5). It is at the structural center of this already-central block of Isaiah text that Isaiah's temple theophany appears.<sup>20</sup> These first details preliminarily clarify that Isaiah 6 is of some importance to the Book of Mormon's interest in the writings of Isaiah. Not only is the story of Isaiah's commission included in the record, it receives a structurally privileged position at the heart of the most Isaianic portion of the record.

---

18. For a good introduction to Nephi as a figure in the Book of Mormon, see Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 29–86.

19. A helpful general analysis of this mutually interpretive relationship can be found in the “summary report” of the Mormon Theology Seminar project from 2009 on 2 Nephi 26–27. See Joseph M. Spencer and Jenny Webb, eds., *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: 2 Nephi 26–27*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 7–17.

20. Here I only summarize these structures. I have provided a full analysis of and argument for them elsewhere. See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 33–68.

Isaiah 6 occupies its place in Nephi's "more sacred things" for what seems a relatively apparent reason. The Book of Mormon arguably interprets the long quotation of Isaiah 2–14 as telling a three-part story.<sup>21</sup> The first part of the story, consisting of Isaiah 2–5, draws a sharp contrast between Israel's eschatological destiny as a redeeming force in the world and its always-sinful status in the present.<sup>22</sup> The second part of the story, consisting in turn of Isaiah 6–12, describes God's historical interventions with Israel, in particular his use of prophets to warn the covenant people before winnowing them down to a holy remnant that, joined by a messianic deliverer, is finally prepared to receive the divine word. The third and final part of the story, consisting of Isaiah 13–14, describes the final elimination of all those (primarily Babylon) who had persecuted and tormented Israel before its ultimate redemption. In this larger three-part story, Isaiah 6 reports the beginnings of the divine response to Israel's corruption: commissioning a prophet to provide the covenant people with a call to repentance and transformation before it becomes necessary to reduce Israel to a small band of survivors. For the Book of Mormon, Isaiah 6 provides a paradigmatic story of how God begins to involve himself in covenantal history.<sup>23</sup> More specifically, this seems to imply that the Book of Mormon regards Isaiah 6:9–10 as containing a paradigmatic prophetic commission.

---

21. The Book of Mormon as originally dictated divided the quotation of Isaiah 2–14 into three larger blocks of text: Isaiah 2–5, Isaiah 6–12, and Isaiah 13–14. This is most easily glimpsed in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. See Joseph Smith Jr., *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra: E. B. Grandin, 1830), 86–102. For a much fuller analysis of how Nephi develops this three-part story, see Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 143–249.

22. This it does twice, first by contrasting the vision of Isaiah 2:1–5 (or 2 Nephi 12:1–5) with the accusation of Isaiah 2:6–4:1 (or 2 Nephi 12:6–14:1), and then by contrasting the vision of Isaiah 4:2–6 (or 2 Nephi 14:2–6) with the accusation of Isaiah 5 (or 2 Nephi 15).

23. That Nephi's record interprets Isaiah's writings as paradigmatic—rather than solely as historical—is explicit. The technical term employed in numerous places in the Book of Mormon in connection with the interpretation of Isaiah is "likening." See, for instance, 1 Nephi 19:23–24; 22:8; 2 Nephi 6:5; 11:2, 8.

Another structural feature of Nephi's record reveals that the Book of Mormon regards Isaiah's temple theophany as paradigmatic. Accounts of divine encounters clearly parallel to Isaiah's appear in two other places in Nephi's writings: one as part of the record's opening narrative, which describes the prophetic experiences of Nephi's father in Jerusalem before the family flees the Old World (1 Nephi 1:8–15), and the other as part of the record's exhortative conclusion, where Nephi enjoins his readers to join the heavenly chorus as his father had done back in Jerusalem (2 Nephi 31).<sup>24</sup> In each of these visions, the recipient witnesses the divine, describes being overcome by the experience before being ministered to (thanks to some kind of mediating element like Isaiah's glowing coal), and finally joins the divine council to receive a prophetic commission.<sup>25</sup> Nephi's record thus uses Isaiah's encounter in the temple, alongside the similar encounter of Nephi's own father, as the basic outline for an experience that it then, quite audaciously, recommends that all of its readers seek to replicate. Not only does the Book of Mormon place Isaiah 6 at the turning point of the structurally privileged center of Nephi's writings, it also draws on Isaiah 6 to outline the aim of the true Christian disciple.

All these structural details, reviewed here only in passing, collectively suggest that the Book of Mormon means to privilege Isaiah 6. That chapter, and therefore Isaiah 6:9–10, is thus of real importance to the Book of Mormon. But structural privilege alone does not make clear what this uniquely Mormon volume of scripture has to say about the meaning of this theologically complex passage. Beyond granting a certain pride of place, Nephi reproduces Isaiah 6:9–10 with some variation from the biblical version. In considering the variants within the Book of Mormon's version of this key passage, readers might most clearly identify the contribution of Isaiah 6 to a larger history of interpretation.

---

24. The key connection between 2 Nephi 31 and 1 Nephi 1 is the reference to angels and their songs of praise (see 2 Nephi 31:13; 1 Nephi 1:8).

25. For a detailed comparison of these three texts, see Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 55–56. It might be noted that the Book of Mormon expresses no particular interest in either of the closest (and therefore often-noted) biblical parallels to Isaiah's commissioning: 1 Kings 22:19–23 and Amos 9:1–6.

## Variants

By presenting a variant reading of Isaiah 6:9–10, rather than attempting through interpretive commentary simply to explain the passage, the Book of Mormon positions itself within a fascinating history of direct manipulation of this peculiar text.<sup>26</sup> But as it turns out, determining exactly how the Book of Mormon's version of Isaiah 6:9–10 varies from the biblical version requires some work. That is, several difficulties attend the transmission of the Book of Mormon's rendering of Isaiah 6:9–10, making it necessary to address a few textual-critical concerns.

Unfortunately, the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, produced in the course of the volume's dictation by Joseph Smith, is no longer extant for Isaiah 6:9–10. The result is that the only preprinting manuscript available for study is the so-called printer's manuscript, a handwritten copy of the original manuscript produced for the use of the book's first printer. And, as can be seen by comparing the printer's manuscript with the original where portions of the latter have survived, the printer's manuscript is an inconsistent guide to what Smith originally dictated.<sup>27</sup> Making matters worse, enough confusion exists in the printer's manuscript where Isaiah 6:9–10 appears that Smith or one of his assistants felt compelled to change the text for the second edition of the Book of Mormon in 1837.<sup>28</sup> As a result, at least three possible

---

26. It would, of course, require a separate study to compare the Book of Mormon's largely implicit interpretation of Isaiah 6:9–10 with explicit commentaries on the passage available in early nineteenth-century America, where the Book of Mormon made its first appearance in English. I leave such a study for another occasion.

27. For a good summary introduction to the printer's manuscript, see Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers, Revelations and Translations Volume 3: Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2015), 1:xi–xxviii, 3–11. For extensive discussion of the relationship between the original and printer's manuscripts, see Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Provo, UT: FARMS and Neal A. Maxwell Institute Press, 2004–2009).

28. For the text of the printer's manuscript, along with a photographic reproduction of the manuscript page, see Skousen and Jensen, *Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 1:162–63. This 1837 revision to Isaiah 6:9–10 as quoted in the Book of Mormon has unfortunately been reproduced in all subsequent official editions of the book from

reconstructions of Smith's original dictation of Isaiah 6:9–10 provide at least three possible variant texts to consider. Fortunately, Royal Skousen has done detailed textual-critical work on this passage, reconstructing what was most likely the original dictated text. Skousen's reconstruction is convincing, and I will use it here, but it should be noted that it is not the only possible reconstruction—and it is, moreover, emphatically a reconstruction (Skousen's reconstructed text does not appear in any extant manuscript or in any printed edition apart from Skousen's own critical edition).<sup>29</sup>

According to Skousen's reconstruction of the original text, then, the Book of Mormon's revision to Isaiah 6:9 is relatively minimal in terms of actual words altered, while no revisions at all appear in Isaiah 6:10.<sup>30</sup> The King James Version's "hear ye indeed, but understand not" becomes "hear ye indeed, but *they* understand not," while "see ye indeed, but perceive not" becomes "see ye indeed, but *they* perceive not." However minimal these revisions actually appear—the mere addition of two pronouns!—they alter the meaning of the text substantially. Two major consequences of the revisions deserve notice.

First, the inserted pronouns in both clauses alter the mood of the verbs following them, which are imperative in the original but indicative

---

all branches of Mormonism. The result has been that the vast majority of readers and even scholars have been entirely unaware of the difficulty in the printer's manuscript. This has, moreover, compromised most scholarly discussions of the variant in the Book of Mormon's version of Isaiah 6:9–10.

29. For Skousen's discussion and conclusions, see Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 2:697–99. The earlier *Book of Mormon Critical Text*, 3 vols. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986), 1:217–18, largely the work of Robert F. Smith, retains the reading of the printer's manuscript but includes in a footnote several variant readings found in the New Testament and other ancient versions. Skousen's critical edition (published without a critical apparatus), is Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). All quotations from the Book of Mormon in this paper come from this edition.

30. Smith revised a portion of Isaiah 6:10 for the 1837 edition of the Book of Mormon, directly annotating the printer's manuscript (the active "convert" Smith changed to the passive "be converted"). This revision has been retained in subsequent official editions from all branches of Mormonism. See, again, Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 2:699–700.

in the Book of Mormon's revised text. In the latter, Isaiah's Judean audience is not *commanded* to fail to understand or to perceive; rather, the text just reports that Isaiah's audience *in fact* fails to understand or to perceive. In the Book of Mormon version of the passage, Isaiah commands Judah to hear, but they do not understand—to see, but they do not perceive. This first consequence of the variant reading leads directly to a second. Because the inserted pronouns alter the mood of the verbs they precede, they make unclear exactly who is supposed to be talking when the mood of the text's verbs shifts from the imperative to the indicative.<sup>31</sup> That is, while it remains clear that the Lord instructs Isaiah to say to the people both “hear ye indeed” and “see ye indeed,” it is unclear in the Book of Mormon version whether the Lord means Isaiah to say also to the people that “they understand not” and that “they perceive not”<sup>32</sup> or whether perhaps the Lord rather uses these further words to explain to Isaiah the reaction he can expect from his hearers<sup>33</sup> or whether Isaiah here inserts awkward anticipatory asides to his audience about how his preaching was later received<sup>34</sup>—or whether in fact some *other* interpretation than these should be sought.<sup>35</sup>

---

31. In a critical analysis of the Book of Mormon rendering, Wesley Walters rightly points out—though he too quickly and facilely draws larger implications from the fact—that the revised text seems to “confuse the persons in the verb, jumping from second to third person.” Wesley P. Walters, “The Use of the Old Testament in the Book of Mormon” (master's thesis, Covenant Theological Seminary, 1981), 61–62. Wright, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon,” 230, makes the same unilluminating move.

32. The sense of this interpretation might be conveyed by using the following punctuation of the Book of Mormon text: “Go and tell this people, ‘Hear ye indeed, but they understand not,’ and ‘See ye indeed, but they perceive not.’” (It should be noted that Joseph Smith did not dictate punctuation as part of the Book of Mormon.)

33. The sense of this interpretation might be conveyed with slightly different punctuation: “Go and tell this people, ‘Hear ye indeed,’ but they understand not, and ‘See ye indeed,’ but they perceive not.”

34. The sense of this third interpretation might be conveyed with yet another way of punctuating the text: “Go and tell this people, ‘Hear ye indeed’—but they understand not!—“and ‘See ye indeed’—but they perceive not!”

35. Brant Gardner suggests without sufficient argument that “the Book of Mormon reading solves the problem in the KJV that God has commanded his people not to understand his message by creating a command/response structure rather than seeing

However the ambiguity just noted should be interpreted, it seems relatively clear that the Book of Mormon's version of Isaiah 6:9 works to soften the theological force of the biblical version. In this respect, the Book of Mormon might in fact be fruitfully set side by side with the Aramaic rendering of the passage in *Targum Jonathan*: "And he said, 'Go, and speak to this people that hear indeed, but do not understand, and see indeed, but do not perceive.'"<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that the Targum removes the imperative mood from all the verbs (rather than just from two of them, as the Book of Mormon does), making "hear indeed" and "see indeed" into descriptions as much as "do not understand" and "do not perceive." In this way it avoids the ambiguity of the Book of Mormon version, reading somewhat more smoothly. Yet, this last difference notwithstanding, the Book of Mormon and targumic renderings appear to soften the impact of the Hebrew text in similar ways, making factual descriptions out of paradoxical commands.

Interestingly, while the Book of Mormon arguably softens the theological impact of Isaiah 6:9, it in no way softens the theological impact of Isaiah 6:10, since it offers no variant reading of that verse at all.<sup>37</sup> Even if in the Book of Mormon the Lord does not tell Isaiah to command Judah neither to understand nor to perceive, he nonetheless seems to burden the prophet with the responsibility to harden his hearers against the prophetic word, "lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed." Because the Book of Mormon in no way attempts to revise the equally provocative "lest" of Isaiah 6:10, it is difficult to argue that

---

both clauses as part of the command." Gardner, *Second Witness*, 2:244. That the alternation between the imperative and the indicative moods amounts to a "command/response structure" requires further motivation.

36. Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 15. For discussion, see Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 69–76. Note that Evans provides his own translation of the Aramaic text.

37. It might, of course, be suggested that either Nephi or the translator failed to reproduce certain textual variants in verse 10. In the absence of any concrete evidence for such a possibility, however, I pursue here a reading of what appears in the text of the Book of Mormon itself.

its softening of the implications of sovereignty in the Hebrew original is either complete or uniform.<sup>38</sup> In this way, interestingly, the Book of Mormon distinguishes itself from the Targum, where the Hebrew לֵאמֹר (“lest”) is translated by לֹא־לְמַדָּה, which, while it *can* mean “lest,” seems in context to have been intended to mean “unless” or “until” (it is so used elsewhere in the Isaiah Targum) and was certainly understood in this way by later rabbinical interpreters of the passage, as Evans points out.<sup>39</sup> The Targum revises both Isaiah 6:9 and Isaiah 6:10 in similar ways, while the Book of Mormon oddly provides a variant reading of only one of the two verses. It leaves at least half of the biblical text’s theological provocation in place.

This inconsistency in the Book of Mormon rendering of Isaiah 6:9–10 proves quite surprising on further inspection. Close study of the many variant readings in the Book of Mormon’s long quotations of Isaiah suggests remarkable consistency, especially where theological motivations seem to underlie the differences between the Book of Mormon and the biblical presentations of Isaiah.<sup>40</sup> Thus, given the patterns

---

38. Commentators implicitly recognize this. It should be noted, for instance, that Latter-day Saint interpreters who address in some detail the possibility that the Book of Mormon’s rendering of Isaiah 6:9 solves the theological conundrum posed by the Isaianic text as it stands in the Bible feel compelled to offer creative interpretations of Isaiah 6:10, which the Book of Mormon does not alter in a similar way. See, for instance, the discussions in Monte S. Nyman, *Great Are the Words of Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 50–51; and Ludlow, *Unlocking Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, 117–19. Such interpreters can be seen as seeking ways to make Isaiah 6:10, which is not changed in the Book of Mormon, follow suit with Isaiah 6:9, which is changed in the Book of Mormon.

39. See Evans, *To See and Not Perceive*, 71.

40. A rather striking example might be cited to illustrate this point. In two passages similar in theme but separated by several chapters of text, extremely nuanced revisions are made, both apparently connected to an underlying and profoundly subtle theological conception of history. The passages in question are Isaiah 7:20 and Isaiah 10:5. In the former, the Book of Mormon removes just the word *namely* from the King James rendering of the verse, an italicized interpolation by the King James translators meant to ward off an ambiguity that might result without it. By removing the italicized word, the Book of Mormon version of the text restores the ambiguity skirted by the King James Version. The passage can thus be said either to mean that the Lord will use Assyria as a razor with which to shave Judah or to mean that the Lord will use some person or

of revision found in the Book of Mormon's presentation of Isaiah quite generally, something odd seems to be afoot in the fact that a revision appears in Isaiah 6:9 but not a corresponding one in Isaiah 6:10. Whatever degree of theological softening is implied by the revision in one verse thus seems clearly to be lessened by the lack of revision in the other. Although the Book of Mormon version of Isaiah 6:9–10 seems unwilling to make Isaiah's message to Judah one of commanding them neither to understand nor to perceive, it nonetheless prefers not to deny that God's will in commissioning Isaiah involves an intentional desire that the prophet's hearers *not* "see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed."

Peculiar though this inconsistency may be, it proves to be suggestive as well, especially when one attempts to frame the Book of Mormon's approach to Isaiah 6:9–10 in terms of the earliest Jewish and Christian approaches to the passage. In a preliminary approximation, it should be said that the Book of Mormon's presentation of Isaiah's commission falls somewhere *between* two of the three major trends Evans traces in

---

persons hired out by Assyria's king as a razor with which to shave Judah. The second of these possible interpretations introduces a three-tiered conception of divine intervention in history. Rather than directly mobilizing Assyria to punish Judah through military force, the Lord uses Assyria's already-existent military purposes (hiring mercenaries, apparently, for its campaign for dominance) to accomplish his own purposes with Judah. That this, rather than the other interpretive possibility, is meant becomes clear only when the other passage is considered. In Isaiah 10:5, a single possessive pronoun is replaced in the Book of Mormon text: "mine [the Lord's] indignation" becomes "their [Assyria's] indignation." Here again the Lord's instrumental relationship to Assyria is at issue. The revision in the Book of Mormon this time produces no ambiguity but directly implies the three-tiered conception of divine intervention. Where in the King James rendering the only anger or indignation spoken of belongs to God, in the Book of Mormon a distinction is drawn between the Lord's anger (Assyria is "the rod of mine [the Lord's] anger") and Assyria's own anger ("the staff in their hand is their indignation"). Here again, then, the implication is that the Lord's anger is expressed through the Assyrians' anger, rather than through some sort of direct manipulation of Assyria's destiny. The fact that two extremely nuanced revisions in texts several chapters apart from each other can result in a remarkably consistent—but subtle—theology of history in Book of Mormon Isaiah suggests that greater consistency should be expected from the revisions made to Isaiah 6:9–10.

the earliest reception of the text. With the earliest Jewish interpreters, the Book of Mormon exhibits discernible concern about the idea that the Lord would send a prophet with a message directly commanding his audience not to understand or not to perceive. But with the earliest Christian interpreters, the Book of Mormon nonetheless exhibits interest in the idea that God might for a time mysteriously but intentionally harden his covenant people against a prophet's message—and against Isaiah's message in particular. (Importantly, the Book of Mormon expresses *no* interest in the later Christian approach in which Isaiah's commission perceives Judah as excluded from the covenant, excluded specifically in order to be replaced by gentile Christians as the new Israel. Rather generally, the Book of Mormon insists that gentiles receive salvation only by assisting in the redemption of historical Israel. In this regard, it is unmistakably Pauline in its theological orientation.)<sup>41</sup> In attempting to make sense of a particularly difficult Isaiah passage, then, the Book of Mormon aligns itself with the perspective of earliest New Testament Christianity, even as it exhibits a certain pre-Christian Jewish interpretive sensibility.

This, however, is only a preliminary approximation. To make the stakes of the Book of Mormon's theological middle position clearer, we might look at the volume's other treatments of this particular Isaiah passage, as well as at its treatment of associated themes. It is not in this one passage alone that the Book of Mormon weighs in on the idea of Israel's hearts being hard.

## Comments

As it turns out, numerous resources distributed throughout the Book of Mormon might be gathered together to produce an exhaustive study of its relationship to Isaiah 6:9–10. At least two of these must, unfortunately, be set aside for present purposes, left for another occasion when

---

41. See Joseph M. Spencer, *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 71–78.

they might be developed fully, though they ought to be mentioned here. The first is the book's extensive treatment of the Isaianic theme of the remnant, something in the Book of Mormon that has not yet received systematic study. Reconstructing the volume's remnant theology would provide a larger context for its approach to Isaiah's mysterious commission, since the latter is best interpreted as part of a larger divine plan to winnow the covenant people down to a holy remnant.<sup>42</sup> A second important resource I will not pursue here is the general theme, prevalent in the Book of Mormon, of the hardened heart. The litany of passages in the book that draw on this image deserves systematic exposition, and such an exposition would certainly help to clarify the book's relationship to the biblical hardening theme more generally—of which Isaiah 6:9–10 is a particularly poignant example.<sup>43</sup>

These two helpful (perhaps crucial) resources I must, unfortunately, set aside here so as to focus instead just on a singular passage in which Nephi provides the closest thing available in the Book of Mormon to a commentary on Isaiah's commission. This is to be found in Nephi's brief but nonetheless informative attempt to summarize, in his own prophetic voice, the general meaning of Isaiah 2–14, within which Isaiah 6:9–10 appears.<sup>44</sup> Nephi does not in this summary *directly* address

---

42. I am aware of no serious treatment of the remnant in the Book of Mormon available in publication. In 2010, I dedicated a series of blog posts to a preliminary clarification of the topic, though they present sketches of research rather than finished studies. The first of them, introductory to the series, can nonetheless be accessed at <http://feastuponthewordblog.org/2010/02/05/towards-a-thinking-of-remnant-theology-in-the-book-of-mormon/>.

43. I am unaware of any scholarly treatment of this important theme in the Book of Mormon, but a largely devotional treatment—which, at the very least, gathers important references—can be found in Michael J. Fear, "Blind Eyes and Hard Hearts: Apostasy in the Book of Mormon," in *Selections from the Religious Education Student Symposium 2003*, ed. Robert C. Freeman et al. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2003), 49–58.

44. That the purpose of 2 Nephi 25:1–20 is to explain the quotation of Isaiah 2–14 is evident from the following two details: (1) in verses 1–8, Nephi concedes to his people their bafflement at Isaiah but offers to provide them a prophecy of his own to help them interpret the prophet; (2) in verses 9–20, then, Nephi outlines a summary prophecy of his own that maps onto Isaiah 2–12 (but perhaps not Isaiah 13–14) rather cleanly.

Isaiah's theologically provocative commission, but he nonetheless provides a larger interpretive framework within which its place in the Book of Mormon can be considered.

Nephi's commentary of sorts appears immediately following the full quotation of Isaiah 2–14, and it is apparently meant to provide an outline of the meaning of at least Isaiah 2–12.<sup>45</sup> Those particular chapters the Book of Mormon presents in two blocks of text, dividing Isaiah 2–5 from Isaiah 6–12.<sup>46</sup> In the course of what the text calls Nephi's "own prophecy," offered up in "plainness," he provides a key to these chapters, with a focus primarily on Isaiah 6–12 (2 Nephi 25:7). In just a few words, Nephi appears to summarize the content of Isaiah 2–5 (as he is supposed to have understood these chapters): "As one generation hath been destroyed among the Jews because of iniquity, even so have they been destroyed from generation to generation according to their iniquities" (2 Nephi 25:9). There then follows immediately what appears to be a one-sentence summary of Isaiah 6 (which serves as the opening of the longer stretch of text from Isaiah 6 through Isaiah 12): "And never hath any of [these generations] been destroyed save it were foretold them by the prophets of the Lord" (2 Nephi 25:9).<sup>47</sup> Obviously,

---

45. The commentary in question appears in 2 Nephi 25:9–20. Interestingly, the commentary there offered does not obviously attempt to explain Isaiah 13–14, the final two chapters of Isaiah quoted by Nephi. Other passages in Nephi's record, however, arguably present a summary of what he is supposed to have understood those particular chapters to mean. Seemingly, he understood their prophecy of Babylon's collapse to be readily likened to the fall of what he calls "the great and abominable church," while he understood their discussion of the fall of Babylon's king to be readily likened to the final binding of Satan at the time of Israel's ultimate redemption. See 1 Nephi 14:8–17; 22:13–28; 2 Nephi 30:8–18.

46. This is according to the original chapter breaks of the Book of Mormon, no longer preserved in official editions of the book published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (though they are retained in official editions published by Community of Christ, the second-largest branch of Mormonism). Royal Skousen has made clear that the original chapter breaks are to be regarded as a structural feature of the text of the Book of Mormon. See Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 1:43–45.

47. I have elsewhere provided a basic analysis of the larger context in which Nephi's prophecy quoted here appears. See Joseph M. Spencer, "What Can We Do? Reflections

such a brief summary interpretation of Isaiah 6 sheds little light on how Nephi is supposed to have understood Isaiah's prophetic commission. Yet as Nephi's summary interpretation continues and summarizes the chapters following Isaiah 6, the commentary begins to provide a basic sense of how the Book of Mormon apparently understands the difficult passage of Isaiah 6:9–10.

First, Nephi describes the response of Jerusalem's inhabitants to his own father's prophetic interventions with the following, clearly Isaianic words: "They hardened their hearts" (2 Nephi 25:10). Similarly, a few lines afterward, when he summarizes the response of the same city's later inhabitants to Jesus Christ, Nephi says that "they will reject him because of their iniquities and the hardness of their hearts and the stiffness of their necks" (2 Nephi 25:12). In both of these interpretive statements, Nephi is presented as assuming that the hardening of the covenant people results from human willfulness, rather than from divine imposition. Human beings harden their hearts, do iniquity, and reject those who are divinely appointed to come to their assistance. In no way is the reader asked to believe that there is a strictly divine hardening of human hearts. In this, Nephi follows the rendering in 2 Nephi 16 of Isaiah 6:9.

And yet, as Nephi's commentary of sorts continues, it begins to use language more indicative of divine sovereignty, as in 2 Nephi 16's rendering of Isaiah 6:10. After the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome, Nephi prophesies, "The Jews shall be scattered among all nations" (2 Nephi 25:15). This event and its unfortunate aftermath the text directly (and uncomfortably, for modern readers) makes into the work of the Lord: "They have been scattered and the Lord God hath scourged them by other nations for the space of many generations" (2 Nephi 25:16).<sup>48</sup> Although the

---

on 2 Nephi 25:23" *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 15/2 (2014): 33–35.

48. One might, from a twenty-first-century perspective, be naturally inclined to find traces of anti-Semitism in Nephi's description of these events, though there is reason to recognize why Nephi might have harbored strong feelings regarding Jerusalem's inhabitants (they tried to kill his father; see his strong comments in 2 Nephi 25:2). Much more troubling are the words of Nephi's brother Jacob (found in 2 Nephi 10:3–5), though there it should be noted that Jacob narrows the scope of those he blames for

Book of Mormon does not attribute the hardening of the covenant people's hearts directly to God, it nonetheless claims here that the long subsequent history of their persecution has its origins, at least in part, with God. This seems perfectly consistent with the other half of Nephi's rendering of Isaiah 6:9–10.

Here there is a clear confirmation of the variant text of Isaiah 6:9–10 from the Book of Mormon. Nephi's apparent refusal, in what appears to be his own commentary on Isaiah 6–12, to attribute the hardening of Jewish hearts directly to God (in some kind of confession of God's mysterious sovereignty) echoes the slight variation in the Book of Mormon's rendering of Isaiah 6:9, where the prophet commands Judah to hear and to see, but they apparently elect of their own free will neither to understand nor to perceive what the prophet points out to them. But then Nephi's willingness immediately thereafter to attribute the long history of Jewish persecution to the divine will echoes the nonvariant text of Isaiah 6:10 as it appears in the Book of Mormon, where God expresses his intent to prevent any short-term return of Judah to its God. Destruction and diaspora are apparently supposed to intervene before real redemption takes place—as in the point of view of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament as they develop their remnant theologies. (Further, once again, the Book of Mormon expresses no interest in the post-Pauline Christian development of the idea that Jews were to be replaced by non-Jewish Christians as the true Israel.) In all this, the Book of Mormon confirms its complicated position somewhere between the earliest Jewish and the earliest Christian appropriations of Isaiah 6:9–10.

---

Christ's death to Jews involved in "priestcrafts"—presumably the Sadducees. Worries about Mormonism's ethical relationship to Judaism have been expressed on occasion in connection with the Book of Mormon—although I personally remain unsatisfied with the treatments that have been as yet made available on these questions. The most widely read discussion of the topic is Steven Epperson, *Mormons and Jews: Early Mormon Theologies of Israel* (Salt Lake City: Signature Press, 1992). See also the extensive bibliography in Seth Ward, "A Literature Survey of Mormon-Jewish Studies," in *Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism*, ed. Raphael Jospe, Truman G. Madsen, and Seth Ward (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), 195–211.

Nephi's commentary of sorts on Isaiah 6–12 thus seems clearly to underscore the consistency of the Book of Mormon's perspective on Isaiah's prophetic commission. And this is not the only corroborating evidence that can be brought to bear on the question. Elsewhere in the Book of Mormon—both within and without the boundaries of Nephi's record specifically—one can find direct and indirect textual echoes of Isaiah 6:9–10. A consideration of these intertextual echoes should help to demonstrate still more convincingly the Book of Mormon's consistency in its approach to Isaiah's commission.

### Intertexts

Twice, quite late in the Book of Mormon, the careful reader notices echoes of Isaiah 6:9–10. Both of these appear at the volume's climax—that is, in connection with the eventual visit of the resurrected Christ to Israel in the New World some six centuries after Nephi's time. Both allusions to Isaiah 6:9–10 at this later point in the text are, moreover, attributed directly to Jesus Christ: once as he speaks from the heavens before his actual physical arrival in the New World, and then once during his sermonizing after his arrival.

Unfortunately, however, several factors make these later allusions to Isaiah's commission less than helpful for making sense of the Book of Mormon's general approach to Isaiah 6:9–10. First, both of Christ's allusions to the passage are arguably formulaic—rather than substantive—in nature. That is, rather than using the language of Isaiah 6:9–10 in contexts where questions about remnant theology or Israelite history are at issue, Christ alludes to Isaiah's commission in the context of relatively private or individual instances of potential repentance. In the first of them, Christ speaks from heaven to ask the survivors of a devastating calamity whether they are prepared to repent: “Will ye not now return unto me and repent of your sins and be converted, that I may heal you?” This is followed immediately by a promise of “eternal life” to all those who “come unto” Christ, since his “arm of mercy” is extended (3 Nephi 9:13–14). A similar context prevails in Christ's second allusion,

where he provides instructions to the leaders of his newly established church. The unrepentant should not be “cast . . . out” of their “places of worship,” since, he explains, “Ye know not but what [such persons] will return and repent and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them, and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them” (3 Nephi 18:32).

That these passages allude to Isaiah 6:9–10 is relatively obvious, but that they have anything interpretively significant to offer is unclear. Neither alludes to the text for which Nephi provides a variant (the allusions allude to verse 10, not to verse 9, of Isaiah’s commission). Moreover, the noncovenantal contexts of the two allusions are quite significant given the fact that the visiting Christ of the Book of Mormon dedicates much of his sermonizing in the New World to an exposition of, quite precisely, remnant theology and the themes first developed by Nephi.<sup>49</sup> That Christ has much to say about themes deeply relevant to Isaiah’s commission elsewhere during his visit, but that he alludes to Isaiah’s commission only in these less-relevant places, suggests that these allusions have no light to shed on the interpretation of Isaiah 6:9–10 in the Book of Mormon.

This irrelevance is compounded when one notes that the wording of the allusions seems in important ways to draw on New Testament versions of Isaiah 6:10, rather than directly on Isaiah 6:10 itself.<sup>50</sup> It would seem almost as if the point is to draw on formulaic language familiar from the New Testament rather than on Isaiah’s actual words. Moreover, it is quite clear that both allusions are woven with starkly

---

49. See especially 3 Nephi 15–16, 20–26. Note that the first of the two allusions appears *before* these sermons on remnant theology, while the second appears *between* them. One might object that at least the first of these two allusions presents itself as an address specifically to the New World remnant of Israel, but the text never belabors this point. For the connections between Christ’s sermonizing and Nephi’s teachings, see Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 164–69.

50. For details, see the discussion in Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 2:699–700. On the difficulties surrounding New Testament language in the Book of Mormon more generally, see Nicholas J. Frederick, “Evaluating the Interaction between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon: A Proposed Methodology,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 1–30.

Christian theological language (with talk of “eternal life” and “coming unto Christ” with “full purpose of heart”), and this language only further distances the allusions from the original context of Isaiah 6.

Much more relevant than such distant allusions to Isaiah 6:9–10, then, is the handling in the Book of Mormon of Isaiah 29:10, a passage closely related to Isaiah’s commission both in theme and theological provocation.<sup>51</sup> This verse from elsewhere in Isaiah is also reproduced in the Book of Mormon; significantly, it is quoted (like Isaiah 6:9–10) by Nephi relatively early in the volume. Crucially, like Isaiah 6:9–10, this passage contains interpretively significant variants in Nephi’s reproduction. Passages quoted by Nephi from Isaiah 29 are more heavily revised than any other Isaiah texts that appear in the Book of Mormon, and readers are to understand that many—if not all—of the variants in Isaiah 29 in the Book of Mormon are the intentional work of Nephi himself.<sup>52</sup> But whether or not the variants in Isaiah 29:10 are to be understood as deliberate or received, they closely corroborate the implications of the variants in Isaiah 6:9–10 earlier in Nephi’s record.

In the biblical version of Isaiah 29:10, one finds the now-familiar theme of divine hardening. Isaiah tells Judah that “the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes: the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered.” In the Book of Mormon, however, this passage is revised to read as follows: “For behold, the Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep—for behold, ye have closed your eyes, and ye have rejected the prophets and your rulers—and the seers hath he covered because of your iniquity” (2 Nephi 27:5).<sup>53</sup> Several revisions made to the text here emphasize that human sin begins with human beings rather than with any divine initiative. It

---

51. See Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 404.

52. For a helpful analysis of the ways in which Isaiah 29 is molded to Nephi’s purposes, see Heather Hardy and Grant Hardy, “How Nephi Shapes His Readers’ Perceptions of Isaiah,” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah*, 37–62.

53. There is some ambiguity about how this text should be punctuated. Is “and your rulers” to be included with “the prophets” as what has been “rejected”? Or is “and your rulers” to be regarded as the beginning of the next clause, such that rulers and seers have together been “covered”? Note that Skousen punctuates the text differently than I do.

is not God who has closed anyone's eyes; rather, human beings have elected to close their own eyes. Further, other revisions make clear that, from the Book of Mormon's perspective, the divine acts of pouring out a spirit of deep sleep on people and of covering their seers are direct responses to human iniquity.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the passage, the idea that God hardens his people in response to their own elective hardening replaces any suggestion that God hardens his people for his own sovereignly determined reasons.

Significantly, these revisions are once again consistent with the variants in the Book of Mormon's quotation of Isaiah 6:9–10. The revision of Isaiah 29:10 exhibits a certain aversion to the idea that God would intentionally harden his people's hearts against their will—at least before they make any show of rebelliousness on their own part. At the same time, however, the revision does not excise from the text its several references to the Lord nonetheless pouring out a spirit of deep sleep on his people or covering their seers for a time. The Book of Mormon's Isaiah understands God to have orchestrated a larger history within which Judah's conversion and healing are deliberately postponed, even as the prophet refuses to believe that God would send messengers to command the covenant people to turn aside from righteousness in order to launch such an unfortunate history.

Here once again, then, it seems best to see the Book of Mormon's treatment of Isaiah's hardening theme as drawing both on early Jewish worries about some of the implications of the prophet's strong notion of sovereignty and on still-Jewish Christian interest in a divine mystery through which a temporary prevention of some Jews' conversion would help to produce the long-promised remnant, a winnowed people ready to assume the divinely granted assignment of redeeming gentiles alongside the remainder of Israel. Similarly, yet once more, the Book of Mormon shows no commitment to the later Christian notion that Jews were somehow to be replaced by gentile Christians as the true

---

54. It should be noted that the preceding verse in Isaiah 29 is also revised to make clear that this larger passage is addressed to "all" those who "do iniquity." See 2 Nephi 27:4, and compare Isaiah 29:9.

Israel. Indeed, Nephi goes so far as to apply Isaiah 29:10 to *both* Jews *and* gentiles—to “all the nations of the Gentiles and also the Jews” (2 Nephi 27:1). The consistency of the Book of Mormon’s approach to this passage is striking, to say the least.

## Conclusions

Over the course of this paper, I have provided the beginnings of an argument that the Book of Mormon exhibits a consistent theological perspective relative to the provocation contained in the biblical version of Isaiah 6:9–10. This theological perspective, moreover, appears consistent across a variety of contexts—not only in various passages in the Book of Mormon, but in distinct sorts of settings (direct manipulations of Isaianic texts, summary comments on the history outlined by Isaianic prophecy, and scattered references throughout the text). This consistency is suggestive, indicating a kind of program of interpretation that deserves closer and more exhaustive attention. The Book of Mormon, it seems, does not haphazardly quote from well-worn passages of Isaiah without any probing investigation of their implications. Rather, at least in certain places within the text, it organizes its presentation of themes around specific Isaiah passages that it then probes in theologically interesting and strikingly consistent ways.

Moreover, I have demonstrated that the position the Book of Mormon comes to inhabit in its treatment of at least one particular Isaianic passage (or perhaps one more general Isaianic theme) is relatively novel. It suggests a certain closeness to the use of the same Isaiah text in the New Testament while nonetheless simultaneously exhibiting a consistent point of difference in interpretation from New Testament interpreters. Interestingly, that point of difference places the Book of Mormon in rather close proximity to early Jewish interpretation, and in a suggestive way. That the Book of Mormon carves out a space that is at once irreducible to classic early Christian interpretations and irreducible to classic early Jewish interpretations while nonetheless drawing on both deserves further development. This pattern is indicative of the Book of

Mormon's rather general conflation of Jewish and Christian perspectives—most visible, perhaps, in the volume's portrayal of a pre-Christian Jewish Christianity.

Beyond these more localized conclusions, however, I hope that this exercise has made clear the advisability of pursuing closer and more extended treatment of biblical texts in the Book of Mormon. By looking with care at the inventive use of the Bible in Mormon scripture, one might begin to develop a clearer sense for the ways in which Mormonism intervenes in the larger world of religion. How does the interpretive use of Isaianic texts in the Book of Mormon compare to other uses in the larger history of Isaiah interpretation? How does it distinguish itself in the setting of its emergence in nineteenth-century America? How does it compare to virtuosic treatments of biblical texts in other traditions more removed in time and space? Are there productive ways of placing Mormonism's often-audacious theology into a variety of religious contexts that might reveal more about the meaning of this particular biblical tradition? These are, I think, questions especially worth pursuing in a deliberately Latter-day Saint subdiscipline of biblical studies.

**Joseph M. Spencer** is visiting assistant professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.