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**Title** On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah's Prophetic Call

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**Abstract** This article illustrates that for Latter-day Saints, the Book of Mormon can function as an interpretive guide to Isaiah's writings. The analysis explores some ways in which the Book of Mormon can aid in identifying textual meaning in the story of Isaiah's prophetic commission, especially on the topic of Christ and covenants. Lehi's call narrative in the Book of Mormon shares much in common with Isaiah 6. Based on analogy with Lehi's comparable dream, LDS readers can connect the seraph that interacts personally with Isaiah to Jesus Christ—that is, the Being with great luster who descends out of heaven to meet with the Book of Mormon prophet.

# ON CHRIST AND COVENANTS: AN LDS READING OF ISAIAH'S PROPHETIC CALL

David E. Bokovoy

Isaiah can be an intimidating book. Few compositions feature such a multifaceted array of religious and literary symbolism. Yet the book of Isaiah holds special significance within the canon of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—Isaiah's writings appear in all four books of LDS scripture. In the Book of Mormon, Christ himself appears and places a divine stamp of approval on Isaiah's words by commanding his people to diligently search the writings of the Old Testament prophet (3 Nephi 23:1). Though Isaiah's complexities cannot be overstated, the Book of Mormon can function as an interpretive guide for Latter-day Saints. The following analysis illustrates some of the ways in which the Book of Mormon can aid in identifying textual meaning in the story of Isaiah's prophetic commission.

For students of Isaiah who demonstrate a willingness to seriously engage his writings, such as the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi, the book of Isaiah can evoke considerable delight: "And now I, Nephi, write more of the words of Isaiah, for my soul *delighteth* in his words" (2 Nephi 11:2). Throughout his commentary on Isaiah 2-14, Nephi appears to adopt a biblical-like *leitwort*, or "theme

word,” as a means of conveying his intense joy in Isaiah’s words.<sup>1</sup> “My soul *delighteth* in proving unto my people the truth of the coming of Christ,” states Nephi in 2 Nephi 11:4.

And also my soul *delighteth* in the covenants of the Lord . . . ; yea, my soul *delighteth* in his grace, and in his justice, and power, and mercy. . . . And my soul *delighteth* in proving unto my people that save Christ should come all men must perish. (vv. 5-6)

Nephi’s apparently intentional repetition of the theme word *delighteth* might suggest a familiarity on the part of the Book of Mormon prophet with one of the literary motifs reflected in Isaiah’s writings via the original Hebrew. Though not apparent in the English version of the King James Bible, Isaiah uses the Hebrew word *hāpēs*, “delight,” with considerable frequency, beginning with the statement “I *delight* not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats” (Isaiah 1:11, emphasis added throughout).<sup>2</sup> Though the King James translation presents Isaiah’s statement that God does not *delight* in the blood of sacrifices, it also states, translating the same Hebrew word in a less emphatic sense, that the Lord is merely “*well pleased* (*hāpēs*) for his righteousness’ sake” (Isaiah 42:21). By incorporating this Hebraic theme into his introduction to Isaiah 2-14, Nephi shares with his readers the fact that he takes delight in three topics: Isaiah, Christ, and covenants. Following the inherent literary logic in Nephi’s comments, the Book of Mormon prophet

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1. For an introduction to this important literary technique, see Martin Buber, “Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig; trans. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 114-28. As literary scholar Robert Alter notes in his analysis of the convention, “This kind of word-motif, as a good many commentators have recognized, is one of the most common features of the narrative art of the Bible.” Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 92.

2. The root appears most frequently in the book of Psalms for a total of twenty-seven occurrences. Isaiah features the next largest number at twenty, for a rounded average of eight appearances per one hundred words. In contrast, the other two major prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, use *hāpēs* a combined total of only eight times, the same number, coincidentally, attested for the root in all the Minor Prophets combined.

delights in Isaiah, since from Nephi's perspective, Isaiah teaches the two themes in which Nephi takes considerable delight, namely Christ and covenants.

This observation perhaps reveals one of the basic reasons Isaiah assumes such a prominent role throughout the Book of Mormon. According to its title page, the Book of Mormon features two very specific purposes directly connected with Nephi's editorial commentary. The Book of Mormon exists

to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers . . . that they may know the covenants of the Lord. . . . And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ.

Thus, from Nephi's perspective, Isaiah shares the Book of Mormon's dual focus in professing the importance of Christ and covenants.<sup>3</sup> Elder Jeffrey R. Holland recognized this concentration. Concerning the writings of Nephi, Jacob, and Isaiah on the small plates, Elder Holland wrote:

After reading these three witnesses from the small plates of Nephi, the reader knows two things in bold relief: that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and that God will keep his covenants and promises with the remnants of the house of Israel. These two themes constitute the two principal purposes of the Book of Mormon, and they are precisely the introductory themes addressed by Nephi, Jacob, and Isaiah.<sup>4</sup>

For Latter-day Saints interested in identifying the theme of Christ and covenants in Isaiah, a careful study of Isaiah's prophetic call narrative featured in Isaiah 6 (chapter 26 in 2 Nephi) proves

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3. For an analysis of these objectives in the title page, see Victor L. Ludlow, "Covenant Teachings in the Book of Mormon," in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 2000), 67-71.

4. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 35.

especially inviting.<sup>5</sup> In an effort to explore the manner in which Isaiah 6 can be seen to address the dual theme identified in Nephi's commentary, the following study presents one possible LDS reading of Isaiah's prophetic call narrative using insights from contemporary biblical scholarship and the Book of Mormon. While the following survey does not seek to uncover the original meaning of the text, this analysis presents a fresh interpretation of Isaiah 6 by illustrating some of the ways in which Isaiah's prophetic call narrative can be understood to reflect the theme of Christ and covenants.

In preparation for the Book of Mormon's use of Isaiah 6, Nephi instructs his readers that he will send forth the words of Isaiah to Nephi's descendants because, like Nephi himself, Isaiah saw Christ, the Redeemer (2 Nephi 11:2). As is the case with the word *delighteth* in Nephi's introduction to Isaiah 2-14, the term *send* appears as a prominently repeated literary motif in this segment of Nephi's Isaianic commentary: "And my brother, Jacob, also has seen [Christ] as I have seen him; wherefore, I will *send* their words forth. . . . Nevertheless, God *sendeth* more witnesses" (2 Nephi 11:3). Nephi's emphasis that Isaiah, Jacob, and other witnesses had been sent to teach of Christ reflects the famous imagery in Isaiah's prophetic call narrative, where Isaiah responds to God's query "Whom shall I *send*?" with the dutiful reply "Here am I; *send* me" (Isaiah 6:8). The dual repetition of the verb *to send* in Isaiah's account signifies that Isaiah was commissioned by God to serve as a messenger to the house of Israel.

From both a secular and a religious perspective, messengers appear in Old Testament passages to be directly linked with the Hebrew verb *šālah*, "to send." In his own writings, Isaiah illustrates the relationship between messengers and *šālah* through his comments regarding the land beyond the rivers of Ethiopia that

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5. For previous Latter-day Saint explorations of this chapter, see especially Paul Y. Hoskisson, "A Latter-day Saint Reading of Isaiah in the Twentieth Century: The Example of Isaiah 6," in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2005), 193-25; and David Bokovoy, "The Calling of Isaiah," in *Covenants, Prophecies, and Hymns of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 128-39.

“*sendeth* ambassadors by the sea, . . . saying, Go, ye swift *messen-gers*” (Isaiah 18:2). Similar imagery appears throughout the entire Old Testament. When Jacob, for example, sought for reconciliation with his brother Esau, the book of Genesis draws upon this matching pattern, stating that Jacob “*sent messengers* before him” (Genesis 32:3). As messengers, it was important for Jacob’s servants to preface their speech with the traditional messenger formula expressed in verse 4 with the phrase *thy servant Jacob saith thus*. In ancient Israel, this standard introduction to indirect speech served as a meaningful reminder that the spoken word did not originate with the messenger, but instead with the sender. In the words of biblical scholar Claus Westermann, “The formula authorizes the message, which is repeated by the messenger before the addressee, to be the word of the sender, corresponding, therefore, to the signature in our letter form.”<sup>6</sup> Old Testament prophets like Isaiah were specifically viewed as messengers sent by God and his council to declare the divine word.<sup>7</sup> For Isaiah, the commissioning of this role is described in Isaiah 6.

As servants of God who spoke the Lord’s word, Israelite prophets like Isaiah often employed the secular messenger formula in their religious discourses. This observation provides meaningful insights into various prophetic statements similar to those issued by Isaiah concerning God’s chosen people: “But now *thus saith the Lord* that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine” (Isaiah 43:1). Isaiah also illustrates the Israelite cultural tradition of identifying prophets by the Hebrew word *mal’āk*, translated as either “messenger” or “angel” in the King James Bible: “I am the

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6. Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. Hugh C. White (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 100; see also James F. Ross, “The Prophet as Yahweh’s Messenger,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 98–107.

7. For an introduction to the topic of the divine council, including the role of prophets, see David E. Bokovoy, “Ye Really *Are* Gods’: A Response to Michael Heiser concerning the LDS Use of Psalm 82 and the Gospel of John,” *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 267–313.

Lord that . . . confirmeth the word of his servant [the prophet], and performeth the counsel of his *messengers*” (Isaiah 44:24, 26). From Nephi’s perspective, Isaiah served as an inspired witness of the Savior sent to declare an eminent message concerning both Christ and covenants.

When as a part of Isaiah’s call narrative the high god called for volunteers from the council to address the crisis created by Israel’s apostasy with the formulation “who will go for [the all-inclusive] *us*,” Isaiah responded as a newly inducted member of the assembly, “Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:8).<sup>8</sup> Each book of the Major Prophets contains examples of the symbolic use of the mouth as an allusion to prophetic participation in the divine council (Isaiah 6:7; Jeremiah 1:9; Ezekiel 3:1-3). The motif makes sense, for as Gregory Glazov explains, “a messenger is actually a spokesperson and the biblical metonym for this concept is ‘mouth’ (*peh*), as in: ‘Thou shalt be as my mouth’ (*k<sup>e</sup> pi tihyeh*) (Jer. 15:19, MT, LXX; cf. Hos. 6:5).”<sup>9</sup> The seraph’s act of purifying the prophet’s mouth in Isaiah 6 features important symbolic elements reflecting this insight. Through the act of a sacred mouth-cleansing ritual, Isaiah appears to have received a religious rite similar in purpose to the traditional Mesopotamian *mīs pi*, or “opening of the mouth,” ritual. As Victor Hurowitz has noted, a comparative analysis between *mīs pi* and Isaiah 6 suggests a common motif. “A large portion of the [Mesopotamian] sources,” writes Hurowitz, “raise the possibility that the washing of the mouth or the purity of the mouth has independent significance as a characteristic granting or symbolizing special divine or quasi-divine status to the person or object so designated. The pure mouth enables the person or object to stand before the gods or to enter the

8. S. B. Parker identifies the following motifs as apparent in most Near Eastern council stories, each of which one could associate with Isaiah 6: (1) crisis, (2) the high god calls for volunteers, (3) a winning proposal is made, (4) a savior/messenger is commissioned. See Simon Parker, “Council,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 204-6.

9. Gregory Y. Glazov, *The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 28.

divine realm, or symbolizes a divine status.”<sup>10</sup> By analogy, through a mouth-cleansing ritual at the altar, Isaiah received a divine status as one fully capable of participating in God’s council and eventually of speaking his message. This use of traditional Near Eastern imagery connected with the deification of an idol as a representation of Isaiah himself becoming a “god” in the assembly works well in the context of Isaiah’s message regarding Israel’s violation of sacred covenants by means of idolatry.

The textual imagery in Isaiah’s story of prophetic commission reflects the prophet’s role as a messenger sent from God. In the Old Testament, the noun *mal’āk*, or “angel/messenger,” frequently appears as the title associated with these representatives from the divine council. In a statement that illustrates the synonymous parallel between angels and the *šaba’*, or “host” (one of the biblical terms for the divine council), the Psalmist declares:

Bless [praise] the Lord, ye his *angels*. . . .

Bless [praise] ye the Lord, all ye his *hosts* (Psalm 103:20-21)

Throughout the Old Testament, divine messengers, or angels, often appear indistinguishable from human beings (see especially Genesis 19:1-22; 32:25-31; Judges 13:3-23). Therefore, the use of the term *mal’āk* for both human and divine messengers “results in some passages where it is unclear which of the two is intended if no further details are provided.”<sup>11</sup> Following his interaction with the seraph in the story of his prophetic call narrative, Isaiah had become a *mal’āk*, or messenger of God, an angel delivering a dual message concerning the importance of God’s covenants and Jesus Christ the healer.

10. Victor Hurowitz, “Isaiah’s Impure Lips and Their Purification in Light of Akkadian Sources,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 60 (1989): 54. Tzvi Abusch has drawn a similar conclusion in his analysis of the antiwitchcraft compilation Maqlu, where the human speaker in the text “must become a member of the company of the stars, the heavenly host or retinue of the gods of heaven Anu and Antu, for only then can he serve as their emissary.” “Ascent to the Stars in a Mesopotamian Ritual: Social Metaphor and Religious Experience,” in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, ed. John Collins and Michael Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 22.

11. S. A. Meier, “Angel I,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, 48.

Isaiah accepted God's sacred commission "Whom shall I send?" by volunteering to serve as a prophet/*mal'āk*. The account of this commissioning begins with the prophet's testimony, "I saw . . . the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (Isaiah 6:1). With these words, readers learn that as part of his prophetic commission, Isaiah experienced a throne theophany, or vision of God seated upon his throne. From an ancient Near Eastern perspective, a throne theophany signified that a divine judgment was about to be rendered, either against an individual or a nation/group.<sup>12</sup> The prophet Micaiah, for example, learned of a judgment about to be rendered against the wicked King Ahab via a throne theophany: "I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left" (1 Kings 22:19). In Isaiah 6, the judgment would occur against the kingdoms of Judah and Israel as a direct response of their violation of sacred covenants (vv. 10-13). This important theme appears connected with throne theophanies throughout antiquity.

Like Isaiah 6, the Book of Mormon features a throne theophany that prepares Old Testament readers familiar with the symbolic meaning of such events for a judgment rendered against the city of Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> The account confirms the thematic meaning behind this traditional Old Testament occurrence when Nephi writes that on this sacred occasion his father Lehi learned that the holy city "should be destroyed" (1 Nephi 1:13). In a direct reflection of ancient biblical imagery, Lehi's prophetic call narrative denotes the impending judgment against the inhabitants of Jerusalem by presenting the prophet's vision of deity "sitting upon his throne" (1 Nephi 1:8). The Book of Mormon account of Lehi's prophetic commission has much in common with Isaiah 6. Reading Isaiah's call narrative in connec-

12. See Rolf Knierim, "The Vocation of Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 18 (1968): 54-56.

13. For a previous analysis of Lehi's vision as a throne theophany, see Blake T. Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," *BYU Studies* 26/4 (1986): 67-95; and also John W. Welch, "The Calling of a Prophet," in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 35-54.

tion with Lehi's experience provides important insights into Isaiah's commission.

First Nephi 1 states that Lehi was "carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of *angels* in the attitude of *singing* and *praising* their God" (1 Nephi 1:8)—that is, two actions that specifically involve the mouth. Having read from the book that revealed information regarding the destruction of Jerusalem, Lehi, like Isaiah, accepted a commission to serve as a messenger of the council testifying of Christ and covenants. In the words of Nephi, Lehi "began to prophesy and to declare unto them [the inhabitants of Jerusalem] concerning the things which he had both *seen* and *heard*" (v. 18). From a biblical perspective, the joint use of the verbs *to see* and *to hear* throughout Nephi's portrayal of the event often refers to the prophet's vision of the council (see, for example, Jeremiah 23:18).<sup>14</sup> Reading the introductory chapter of the Book of Mormon through the lens of Old Testament tradition, Lehi appears, like Isaiah, as a messenger sent to represent the assembly that had convened in order to pass judgment upon Jerusalem for a violation of God's holy covenants. Nephi's account may represent this subtle biblical motif through a reference to Lehi assuming the traditional role of council member, praising the high god of the assembly.

As noted, 1 Nephi 1:8 specifically identifies the members of the council "singing and praising their God" like the seraphim in Isaiah 6. Granted, Lehi's experience seems to occur on earth rather than in heaven; however, from a Near Eastern perspective, the line between these two spheres was not rigidly defined in terms of the divine assembly.<sup>15</sup> Scholars have long recognized that the word pair *heaven and earth* serves as merismus (in which two parts of a thing, sometimes polar opposites, stand for the whole) in ancient Near

14. See David Bokovoy, "The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon: Still Losing the Battle," *Farms Review* 18/1 (2006): 8.

15. Note that in his dream Lehi is on earth and the council members specifically come down out of heaven (see 1 Nephi 1:9-11).

Eastern sources referring to all of the gods of the assembly who occupy the two realms.<sup>16</sup> Northwest Semitic mythology concerning the divine assembly presents the high god El and his council meeting to govern the cosmos at the “sources of the two rivers,” in the “midst of the fountains of the double-deep,” and in the “domed tent” of El located on the earthly mountain of El, Mount Şapanu.<sup>17</sup> Thus the fact that in Lehi’s vision the council appears to occupy both earthly and heavenly realms accords with traditional Near Eastern conceptions.

Following his interaction with the council mediator, Jesus Christ, Lehi could perform the very same act identified with the “numberless concourses of angels” (1 Nephi 1:8). Given the way biblical prophets like Isaiah were seen as official members of the council, Nephi’s account may suggest that Lehi had become one of these angels, or messengers, praising God:

Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty!  
Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and, because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish! (1 Nephi 1:14)

In this statement, Lehi fulfills the assignment specifically given the *şaba’*, or “host,” in Psalm 103:20-21 to “praise/blest” the Lord. In what is perhaps an apparent attempt to deliberately highlight the analogy, Nephi returns to the same verb in his account that first described the action of the council: “And after this manner was the language of my father in the *praising* of his God” (1 Nephi 1:15). Hence, in a way quite comparable to Isaiah’s experience, Lehi

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16. See, for example, G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1950), 2:36; and Loren R. Fisher, “Abraham and His Priest-King,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81/3 (1962): 267.

17. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 36; Marjo C. A. Korpel, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990), 370; Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 98-160. See KTU 1.4; 1.2.III; 1.3.V.5-7; 1.6.I.32-34; 1.101.2; 1.3.III.29.

appears to have become a fully inducted member of the *mal'akim* to bear witness of the Book of Mormon's great dual focus. Like Isaiah, Lehi has seen God seated in council judgment upon his throne.

Though Nephi identifies Isaiah as an eyewitness of Christ, technically, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, the *specific* identity of the Lord who sat upon the judgment throne in Isaiah's vision (as well as in Micaiah's) remains somewhat of a mystery. Latter-day Saint commentators, including the authors of the LDS scriptural footnotes, have typically connected the enthroned deity with the premortal Jesus rather than God the Father.<sup>18</sup> For Latter-day Saints, this view would of course make doctrinal sense. Moreover, interpreting the Lord seated upon the throne as Jesus certainly works well with Nephi's observation that, like the rest of Isaiah's writings, Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16) provides a powerful testimony of Christ. Still, notwithstanding this possible reading, when Isaiah's call narrative is interpreted in harmony with Lehi's comparable dream in the Book of Mormon, a case can also be made for interpreting the Lord in Isaiah 6:1 as a reference to God the Father, with a symbolic allusion to Christ appearing later in the narrative.<sup>19</sup>

The impression that the divine being in Lehi's vision represents God the Father is quite clear via the fact that one of the praising angels surrounding the heavenly throne, whose "luster was above that of the sun at noon-day," descends in order to interact personally with Lehi (1 Nephi 1:9). That this angelic being is specifically Jesus Christ is apparent from the fact that twelve disciples follow

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18. Donald W. Parry, Jay A. Parry, and Tina M. Peterson seem to reflect the general consensus on this matter by following the proposal in the LDS footnote stating "Jesus, who is called 'King of kings' (Rev. 19:16), sits on the throne in the throne room of the heavenly temple," in *Understanding Isaiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 66.

19. Isaiah 6:1 uses the basic Hebrew word *'adonai*, or Lord, to refer to God rather than the divine name *Jehovah*. However, as Keith H. Meservy notes, there are occasions in the Old Testament when, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, the name *LORD* (*Jehovah*) is applied to God the Father, not Jesus Christ; see Keith H. Meservy, "LORD = Jehovah," *Ensign*, June 2002, 29 n. 3. In verse 5, Isaiah proclaims, "Mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD (Yahweh) of Hosts"; however, again, the contemporary LDS standard of identifying Jehovah/Yahweh as "Jesus" cannot always be applied retroactively to LDS scripture; see, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 109:34, 42, 56, where Joseph Smith prays directly to Jehovah.

him, the brightest angel; like their impressive leader, they possess their own unique luster. According to the account, however, the brightness of the twelve following Christ exceeded only “that of the stars in the firmament” (v. 10). The comparison of the heavenly host with stars reflects traditional conceptions associated with the divine council in Near Eastern sources. Job 38:7, for example, connects the gods of the assembly with the “morning stars” via synonymous parallelism. Deuteronomy 4:19 refers to Yahweh’s council as “the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven,” and Northwest Semitic mythology identified the council as “the sons of God/El” (*bn il*) and the “assembly of the stars” (*phr kkbm*) (see KTU 1.10.I.4). Identifying Christ in Lehi’s vision as the council being whose luster was above that of the sun at noonday parallels the Book of Abraham, which uses the brightest star in the universe, that is, Kolob, as a type for Christ:

And I saw the stars, that they were very great, and that one of them was nearest unto the throne of God; and there were many great ones which were near unto it; And the Lord said unto me: These are the governing ones; and the name of the great one is Kolob, because it is near unto me, for I am the Lord thy God: I have set this one to govern all those which belong to the same order as that upon which thou standest. (Abraham 3:2-3)

By analogy, Isaiah, who experienced a similar vision to Lehi and whose narrative of prophetic commission can be shown to have had a direct literary impact upon Nephi’s account, may have likewise witnessed God the Father as the “Lord” seated upon a throne. Clearly, as Nephi suggests, the account of Isaiah’s prophetic commission bears witness of the importance of Christ and covenants, but it may do so in a manner not typically recognized by contemporary readers unfamiliar with certain technical biblical/Near Eastern conceptions. The symbolism in Isaiah’s call narrative suggests that Isaiah experienced a sacred encounter very similar to the event described in 1 Nephi 1. A proper understanding of ancient conceptions con-

cerning Israelite prophets interacting with God and the heavenly council enhances this interpretation.

The traditional throne theophany that both Isaiah and Lehi experienced included a vision of the great heavenly council or assembly. As is typical for the Book of Mormon, the heavenly host described in Lehi's vision appears designated by the English word *angels*.<sup>20</sup> Relying upon an important Old Testament symbol, Isaiah, in turn, describes members of the heavenly host witnessed in *his* throne theophany as *seraphim*, a word that derives from the triliteral Hebraic root *šrp*, meaning “to burn.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, Isaiah's description of the heavenly host as “fiery/burning beings” reflects the description of the heavenly host in Lehi's vision, but it also echoes an insight shared by the Prophet Joseph Smith concerning the status of those who dwell in God's presence. On one occasion, the Prophet taught that those who abide with the Lord “are able to *dwell in everlasting burnings*, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.”<sup>22</sup> The term *seraph* appears as a designation for the members of God's premortal assembly “before the world was made” in Doctrine and Covenants 38:1. This would suggest that *seraph* in LDS theology appears as a literary allusion to the sons of God. The fact that Isaiah describes the members of the assembly/host as “fiery beings” provides an important literary link with the Book of Mormon, which, as noted, specifically places emphasis upon the inherent luster of the heavenly host Lehi witnessed surrounding God's throne.

In his council vision, Lehi observed the “angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God” (1 Nephi 1:8). The account therefore parallels Isaiah's encounter, which depicts the members of the

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20. See, for example, 1 Nephi 11:14 and 3 Nephi 17:24, which depict the heavens opening with angels descending from the midst, as well as 3 Nephi 11:8, where those gathered around the temple witness a man descend from the open heavens and assume the being is an angel.

21. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, study edition (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2:1360.

22. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 347, emphasis added.

heavenly assembly surrounding the Lord's throne singing praises to God with such vigor that "the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried" (Isaiah 6:4). Though the Book of Mormon refers to members of the heavenly host by the English word *angels* and Isaiah describes the beings in his vision as *seraphim*, from an Old Testament perspective, both these terms can apply to members of the assembly serving in the council that surrounded God. As one biblical scholar has explained, "The conception of a host of heavenly beings, Yahweh's *entourage*, was always present in the faith of Israel; it never clashed with monotheism, but in fact emphasized Yahweh's majesty and uniqueness."<sup>23</sup> Under the direction of the high god, this divine council served an important judiciary role in ancient Semitic thought, including the writings of the Old Testament.<sup>24</sup>

As messengers commissioned by God, Israelite prophets like Isaiah are identified in the Old Testament as functioning participants in the celestial arraignments of the divine council.<sup>25</sup> The explicit connection between Israelite prophets and the assembly provides the conceptual background for Amos's declaration: "Indeed, my Lord God does nothing without having shown his council (*sôd*) to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7).<sup>26</sup> That a legitimate prophet participated in God's council, or *sôd*, is also apparent from Jeremiah's condemnation of false diviners: "who has stood in the council (*sôd*) of the Lord and has seen and heard his word" (Jeremiah 23:18).

23. C. J. Labuschagne, *The Incomparability of Yahweh in the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 82-83.

24. See David E. Bokovoy, "שמעו והעידו בבית יעקב": Invoking the Council as Witnesses in Amos 3:13," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127/1 (2008): 37-51.

25. See Martti Nissinen, "Prophets and the Divine Council," in *Kein Land für sich allein: Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palästina und Ebirnâri für Manfred Weippert*, ed. Ulrich Hübner and Ernest A. Knauf (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 4-19; for an analysis of Isaiah 40 as an example of a prophetic commission in the divine council, see Frank M. Cross Jr., "The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12/4 (1953): 274-77; for an exploration of the role of prophets as mediators and messengers in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon, see David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible* (Tooele, UT: Heritage, 2003), 30-38.

26. The translations in this paragraph are mine from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

In a thematically related narrative, Zechariah records a vision in which the high priest Joshua attends a meeting of the celestial court (Zechariah 3:1-7). Joshua receives a divine promise that through obedience to the Lord of Hosts, God will allow his prophet/priest to specifically “move among these attendants” (v. 7). Another text, Psalm 25, appears to indicate that any righteous human being could receive this unique privilege: “The *sôd* of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant” (Psalm 25:14). According to the Psalmist, the Lord is “a God dreaded in the council (*sôd*) of holy beings” (89:8). Therefore, “the members of this *sôd* around YHWH,” notes H. J. Fabry, “are kept clearly on the terminological periphery, and finally their designation as *q̄dôšîm* [saints/holy ones] even opens up the possibility that human beings also belong to this *sôd* (cf. Job 15:8; Ps. 89:8[7]), though this involves primarily the prophets (1 K. 22:19-22; Isa. 6; 40:1-8; Jer. 23:18,22; Am. 3:7).”<sup>27</sup> While each of these biblical sources proves important in analyzing the evidence concerning the conception of Israelite prophets interacting with the divine council, scholars have long recognized that the throne theophany in Isaiah 6 provides one of the most important narrative examples of this ancient tradition.

Since, as noted, prophets served as the mouth of God and his assembly, on occasion the Old Testament suggests that ethical purity of the mouth, like the type Isaiah received via the seraph, served as a prerequisite for entry into the heavenly council/temple, or the “holy hill” of the Lord: “Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?” asks the Psalmist. And the answer: “He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart. He that backbiteth not with his tongue” (Psalm 15:1-3).<sup>28</sup> Isaiah’s initial expression of “woe” reflects the absolute seriousness of entering the presence of God in a state of worthiness (Isaiah 6:5).

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27. H. J. Fabry, “*sôd*,” in *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 174.

28. See Glazov, *Bridling of the Tongue*, 122-23.

In part, Isaiah's reference to the fact that his experience occurred in "the year king Uzziah died" may have been intentionally designed to highlight the intense precariousness of Isaiah's situation. The account of Uzziah's death presented in 2 Chronicles associates the king's demise with a punishment from God on the occasion when Uzziah illicitly entered the presence of deity by means of the holy temple:

But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against the Lord his God, and went into the temple of the Lord to burn incense upon the altar of incense. And Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him fourscore priests of the Lord, that were valiant men: And they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the Lord, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the Lord God. Then Uzziah was wroth, and had a censer in his hand to burn incense: and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead before the priests in the house of the Lord, from beside the incense altar. (2 Chronicles 26:16-19)<sup>29</sup>

As one living among apostate people, Isaiah describes himself as "a man of unclean lips . . . [who] dwell[s] in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). Therefore, in order to join the council, Isaiah first needed to receive sanctification at the temple altar. Isaiah describes the event with these words:

Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath

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29. See Alexander Zeron, "Die Anmassung des Königs Usia im Lichte von Jesajas Berufung. Zu 2. Chr. 26,16-22 and Jes 6,1ff," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 33 (1977): 65-68.

touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. (Isaiah 6:6-7)

Though the literal identity of this fiery angelic being is ambiguous in the text, one possible LDS reading would interpret the seraph who cleanses Isaiah as an allusion to Christ. Additional support for this interpretation appears in Jeremiah's comparable story of prophetic commission, where it is the Lord Yahweh himself who assumes the role of Isaiah's seraph: "The Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth" (Jeremiah 1:9).

Interpreting the Lord seated upon the throne as God the Father and the seraph who heals Isaiah as an allusion to Christ would allow the chapter to serve as an illustration of Isaiah's role as an eyewitness of Jesus who, as Nephi observed in his commentary, had been sent to testify of the Redeemer. In addition, this proposal strengthens the tie between Isaiah's and Lehi's call narratives, for as illustrated, Lehi's throne theophany specifically included a vision of God the Father seated upon the throne, followed by a personal interaction with Christ, one of the angelic host in the heavenly assembly. Moreover, interpreting the fiery being who interacts personally with Isaiah as a reference to Christ works well with the fact that the seraph that cleanses Isaiah, helping the Israelite prophet to become worthy to stand in God's presence, may function as a symbolic allusion to the seraph in Numbers 21:8 that heals the children of Israel. According to the account in Numbers, "The Lord *sent* fiery serpents (*hanḥāšîm hasĕrāpîm*) among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died" (Numbers 21:6). From a literary perspective, God's sending of the serpents described as seraphim to inflict judgment upon Israel links with God's question "Whom shall I send?" in Isaiah's call narrative. Hence, an LDS reading of this chapter, which associates God the Father with the Lord seated upon the throne, still allows for Isaiah to serve as an eyewitness of Jesus and for the call narrative itself to convey an important, albeit symbolic, message concerning Christ.

Unlike Isaiah's account of prophetic commission, the story of judgment in Numbers 21 allows for Israel to repent and become saved through a symbolic representation of the seraphim that caused their affliction: "And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent (*śārāp*, singular of seraphim), and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live" (Numbers 21:8). Significantly, in terms of the symbolism featured in Isaiah's account, this fiery serpent that possessed the ability to save those who would look upon the image with faith appears specifically designated as a seraph, the singular form of the seraphim in Isaiah's vision.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the seraph that heals Isaiah may function as a symbolic allusion to the seraph that saves Israel in Numbers 21. Both New Testament and Book of Mormon authors refer to this seraph as a type for Christ (see John 3:14; Helaman 8:14-15). Through parallelism, the seraph in Isaiah's vision can be read by Latter-day Saints as an allusion to Jesus, the heavenly being who possesses the power to make one holy in the presence of God. The seraph therefore may function as an allusion to one of the two themes Nephi identified in the writings of the Old Testament prophet.

In addition to its witness of Christ as purifier, the specific message the Lord gave Isaiah in his prophetic commission to share as his word illustrates the connection between Isaiah 6 and the importance of honoring covenants, particularly those connected with proper worship. After Isaiah volunteered to represent the assembly as messenger, the Lord informed Isaiah that as a result of covenant violations, Israel would be destroyed:

And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with

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30. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1360.

their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. (Isaiah 6:9-10)

Hence, as one responsible to symbolically afflict Judah/Israel with his words, Isaiah served a similar role as the fiery serpents in Numbers 21.

From a symbolic perspective, Isaiah's commission, which states, "hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not" (Isaiah 6:9), suggests that by violating their covenant not to participate in idol worship, the people were to be treated like the images they had chosen to worship.<sup>31</sup> As witnessed in Psalm 135, imagery such as hearing yet not *truly* understanding and seeing while not *really* perceiving represents a typical prophetic taunt raised against Near Eastern idols:

The idols of the heathen are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; they have ears, but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths. They that make them are like unto them: so is every one that trusteth in them. (Psalm 135:15-18)

Similar imagery connecting these weaknesses with idols appears explicit in Isaiah 42:17-20:

They shall be turned back, they shall be greatly ashamed, that trust in graven images, that say to the molten images, Ye are our gods. Hear, ye deaf; and look, ye blind, that ye may see. Who is blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger that I sent? who is blind as he that is perfect, and blind as the Lord's servant? Seeing many things, but thou observest not; opening the ears, but he heareth not.

An idol representing a false god did not truly possess the ability to see or to hear. In essence, Isaiah's message in chapter 6 is that the

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31. G. K. Beale, "Isaiah VI 9-13: A Retributive Taunt against Idolatry," *Vetus Testamentum* 41/3 (1991): 257-78.

people have symbolically become what they worship, a fact supported by Isaiah chapter 1, which tells Israel she shall become an oak, or terebinth, that is, the material used in the production of an idol:

For they shall be ashamed of the oaks which ye have desired, and ye shall be confounded for the gardens that ye have chosen. For ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no water. (Isaiah 1:29-30)

The direct literary allusion to this imagery in Isaiah 6 appears in verse 13, which speaks of Israel's remnant as a "tenth" that will return and be burned again as a "terebinth and as an oak whose substance is in them." As G. K. Beale has noted:

Expressions describing Israel as "having ears but not hearing" (6:9-10) and "like a burning tree" (6:13) are best understood as metaphors of idolatry which are applied to the disobedient nation in order to emphasize that they would be punished for their idol worship by being judged in the same manner as their idols.<sup>32</sup>

According to the book of Deuteronomy, God placed his chosen people under covenant to avoid the illicit worship of these foreign images. The biblical commandment concerning the way Israel was to treat these idols was very specific:

Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree: And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place. (Deuteronomy 12:2-3; compare 7:24-26)

Deuteronomy also specifies the death penalty for those Israelites who violated this sacred covenant (Deuteronomy 17:2-5). Deutero-

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32. Beale, "Isaiah VI 9-13," 272.

nostic law specifically mandated the entire destruction of a city seduced into worshipping idols by means of burning (Deuteronomy 13:12-18). Hence, this legal background provides the justification for Isaiah's severe message of impending judgment. Israel had broken her covenant with the Lord and would be treated like the idols she worshipped. No doubt it was a difficult, yet important, message for Isaiah to share.

As witnessed through this essay, Isaiah 6 features a number of profound religious and literary symbols. These motifs play an especially important role in terms of defining Isaiah's prophetic call narrative and the message he would impart. Though Isaiah's complex use of Near Eastern conceptions can prove challenging for the modern interpreter, Latter-day Saints can take considerable delight in Isaiah's words through insights offered via contemporary biblical scholarship, together with religious truths obtained through the Book of Mormon. Using the Book of Mormon as a guide, Isaiah can be seen to present a remarkable message concerning the themes of Christ and covenants.

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