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Left: Portrait of King Hezekiah generated by Midjourney.  
Right: Portrait of Jesus Christ by Heinrich Hofmann.

## WHY DID ISAIAH PROPHECY OF A SUFFERING MESSIAH?

*“Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.”*

*Isaiah 53:10*

### THE KNOW

Few prophetic passages in the Old Testament rival Isaiah 53 (known as the Song of the Suffering Servant) in beauty, power, and enduring impact among devout Jews and Christians around the world. Naturally, given its importance to people of differing religious backgrounds, its meaning has been hotly contested through the centuries, and today scholars offer a wide variety of different interpretations for this inspiring text.<sup>1</sup> In antiquity, however, both Christians *and* Jews understood this powerful prophecy to be about the Messiah, with Christians naturally applying it to Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>2</sup>

The Nephite prophet Abinadi likewise knew Isaiah 53 and read it messianically, using it to bolster his own prophecies of the coming of Christ (see Mosiah 14–16).<sup>3</sup> Thus, Latter-day Saints today join with other Christians in recognizing Isaiah 53 as a powerful prophecy of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, since revelations, including

prophecies, are typically inspired by specific questions and circumstances,<sup>4</sup> some have wondered just what inspired Isaiah’s vivid revelation of the future Messiah’s suffering, death, and ultimate triumph.

Scholars have posited a variety of theories about the origins of Isaiah 53. Some suggest it was inspired by “the intercession and suffering of certain prophetic figures.”<sup>5</sup> Prophets such as Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 11:19) and Abinadi who suffered and even risked their lives for delivering the Lord’s message no doubt found personal resonance and solace in the poetically powerful description of a suffering servant in Isaiah 53.<sup>6</sup>

Others have proposed that the Suffering Servant was inspired by some calamity of a royal figure.<sup>7</sup> In this vein, Margaret Barker has suggested that Isaiah 53 was inspired by Hezekiah’s miraculous recovery from being “sick unto death” during the Assyrian invasion around 701 BC (2 Kings 20:1–11; Isaiah 38:1–8, 21–22).<sup>8</sup> Based on the description

of his boil being treated by “a lump of figs” (2 Kings 20:7), Barker argues that Hezekiah had the plague, which was considered a “sign of divine wrath” in the ancient Near East.<sup>9</sup> In such a context, Isaiah’s initial pronouncement that Hezekiah would “die, and not live” (Isaiah 38:1; 2 Kings 20:1) could be understood as meaning that Hezekiah had been cursed by God to die for some sin or transgression. That is to say, some would have perceived him as “stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:4).

But then Hezekiah “turned his face to the wall,” reminiscent of the people turning their faces away from the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53:3),<sup>10</sup> “and prayed unto the Lord,” rehearsing his righteous deeds and pleading with the Lord to spare his life (2 Kings 20:2–3; Isaiah 38:2–3). God then inspired Isaiah to return to Hezekiah and declare:

Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the Lord. And I will add unto thy days fifteen years; and I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for mine own sake, and for my servant David’s sake. (2 Kings 20:5–6; compare Isaiah 38:4–6)

The addition of fifteen years onto Hezekiah’s life is reminiscent of the promise that “he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand” (Isaiah 53:10). According to Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, it was during these final fifteen years that Hezekiah’s son Manasseh, who would become the next king, was born.<sup>11</sup>

After recovering from his illness,<sup>12</sup> Hezekiah went before the Lord at the temple and offered an intercessory prayer on behalf of the people (2 Kings 19:14–19; Isaiah 37:14–20). Then, according to the biblical account, “the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians,” forcing them to depart back to their homeland (2 Kings 19:35–36; Isaiah 37:36–37). Other biblical and historical sources suggest that the Lord may have sent a plague upon the Assyrian army.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Hezekiah recovered from the deadly plague at the very time when it was decimating the Assyrian forces.

This timing, Barker interestingly argues, invited comparison between Hezekiah and the royal high priest figure of the Day of Atonement rituals, whom she argues symbolically bore the sins of the people and offered his life (symbolically through the sacrifice of a goat) to cleanse the people and the land.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Hezekiah’s plague did not represent a curse for his own sins but rather the burden of the people’s sins (compare Isaiah 53:4–6), and his healing and recovery coinciding with the deliverance of the city symbolized their atonement and reconciliation: “Hezekiah took the people’s

punishment on to himself, he withstood the wrath, and then deflected it to their enemies. The king recovered from his ordeal but the enemy did not.”<sup>15</sup>

This, Barker argues, inspired the original composition of Isaiah 53: “The original poem was probably written as a result of King Hezekiah’s recovery from the plague, which explains the historical details in it, but the overall theme is drawn from the Day of Atonement.”<sup>16</sup>

## THE WHY

Barker’s theory is only one of many among scholarly attempts to explain the origins of Isaiah 53, and thus it should not be considered the definitive explanation of this powerful prophetic poem. Yet it is a theory that possesses some intriguing possibilities for Latter-day Saints and others to ponder carefully.

First, it is noteworthy that this interpretation dates the content of Isaiah 53 to the time of the original Isaiah of Jerusalem. Many scholars question or reject Isaiah as the author of the latter part of the book that bears his name (specifically, chapters 40–66), and argue that it was actually written by anonymous writers from the time of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC or even later.<sup>17</sup> The Book of Mormon, however, indicates that several of these chapters—including Isaiah 53—were already on the plates of brass *before* the exile and attributes these writings explicitly to Isaiah.<sup>18</sup>

Barker’s theory on the origins of the Song of the Suffering Servant would thus agree with the presence of that text in the Book of Mormon (see Mosiah 14). Similarly, Gary V. Smith has also argued that several passages within the block of Isaiah 40–55 suggest that these prophecies were given by Isaiah around the time of the Assyrian invasion (ca. 701 BC).<sup>19</sup> If Barker and Smith are correct, then much—and perhaps even all—of Isaiah 40–55 could well have been available to the Nephites on the plates of brass in some form and can thus be understood within the broader cultural and religious contexts of prophecies given in response to that crisis instigated by the Assyrian invasion.

Second, and more importantly, while the circumstances of Hezekiah’s recovery from the plague and the withdrawal of the Assyrian army may have *motivated* the writing of Isaiah 53, this does not necessarily mean it was ultimately *about* those events. King Hezekiah was merely a type and a shadow of Jesus Christ—the true Messiah and great high priest who was to come (see Hebrews 4:14). As Andrew C. Skinner explained, “Hezekiah was a Davidic king, anointed in similitude of the Anointed One. . . . He became

Judah's earthly deliverer and acted in similitude of the great Deliverer, Jesus Christ."<sup>20</sup>

Some of Isaiah's other messianic prophecies also received partial fulfillment through Hezekiah.<sup>21</sup> Thus it is possible that Isaiah likewise saw a partial fulfillment of the Suffering Messiah's role in Hezekiah's suffering from the plague and being delivered from death along with his people (Isaiah 38:6). Nonetheless, only the Savior's atoning sacrifice fully satisfied all that Isaiah had predicted of the future Messiah. For example, Latter-day Saint scholar Donald W. Parry has identified four key themes in Isaiah 53, each of which clearly applies to Jesus Christ:

1. The Messiah's sufferings. These pertain to what He suffered during the persecutions of His mortal ministry but more especially to the sufferings of the last twenty-four hours of His life.
2. The Messiah's assumption of our burdens and sins. Isaiah provides great details regarding this subject with his use of specific words such as "iniquities," "transgressions," and "sins." Note that in addition to bearing our sins, Jesus also bore our griefs and sorrows.
3. The Messiah's death. Note again Isaiah's specificity with his words that prophesy of Jesus's death—"slaughter," "cut off from the living," "his grave," and "death" (twice).
4. The Messiah's reward. Isaiah provides six separate prophetic statements about the Messiah's reward. Note that the reward does not pertain to gold, silver, or treasures but to eternal blessings.<sup>22</sup>

As Kerry Muhlestein has also noted, "The image of the servant has other fulfillments. . . . The most important fulfillment, however, is Christ."<sup>23</sup> Only Jesus Christ truly "hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows," and only Jesus Christ was truly "wounded for our transgressions" and "bruised for our iniquities." And it is only through the Lord Jesus Christ's suffering that we are healed (Isaiah 53:3–5). All other prophets, priests, and kings are to be seen as types and shadows that point very poignantly toward Him, our Heavenly King, and His great atoning sacrifice.

#### FURTHER READING

Donald W. Parry, "The Messiah in Isaiah 53: Four Recurring Themes," in *The Jesus Christ Focused Old Testament: Making Sense of a Monumental Book* (Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central, 2022), 37–38.

Kerry Muhlestein, *Learning to Love Isaiah: A Guide and Commentary* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2021), 327–328, 433–438.

Margaret Barker, "The Great High Priest," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 42, nos. 3–4 (2003): 65–80.

John W. Welch, "Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 293–312.

John W. Welch, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 423–437.

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#### NOTES

1. For a summary of the various scholarly interpretations, see R. E. Clements, "Isaiah 53 and the Restoration of Israel," in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, ed. William H. Bellinger Jr. and William R. Farmer (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 39–54.
2. See the following citations of Isaiah 53 in the New Testament for Christian application to Jesus: 53:1 in John 12:38 and Romans 10:16; 53:4 in Matthew 8:17 and 1 Peter 2:24; 53:7–8 in Acts 8:32–33; 53:9, 11–12 in 1 Peter 2:22, 24; 53:12 in Mark 15:28 and Luke 22:37. Margaret Barker, "Isaiah," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 534, noted that the Jewish targums apply Isaiah 53 to the Messiah, "showing that it was not only Christians who read this as a messianic prophecy." John Gee, "How Not to Read Isaiah," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 37 (2020): 37–39, makes a similar point regarding how the targums interpret Isaiah 7–12. For more on the messianic interpretation in the Isaiah targums, see Jostein Ådna, "The Servant of Isaiah 53 as Triumphant and Interceding Messiah: The Reception of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in the Targum of Isaiah, with Special Attention to the Concept of Messiah," in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 189–224. For additional discussion of pre-Christian Jewish messianic interpretations of Isaiah 53, see Martin Hengel with collaboration of and Daniel P. Bailey, "The Effective History of Isaiah 53 in the Pre-Christian Period," in *Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, 75–146.
3. For more on Abinadi's interpretation of Isaiah 53, see John W. Welch, "Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 293–312.
4. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, "Revelation almost always comes in response to a question, usually an urgent question—not always, but usually." Jeffrey R. Holland, "Cast Not Away

- Therefore Your Confidence,” Brigham Young University devotional, March 2, 1999, online at [speeches.byu.edu](http://speeches.byu.edu).
5. Hermann Spieckermann, “The Conception and Prehistory of the Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament,” in *Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, 8. See also Clements, “Isaiah 53 and the Restoration of Israel,” 45–47.
  6. On Abinadi’s experience and how it relates to Isaiah 53, see Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Abinadi Talk about the Suffering Messiah? (Mosiah 14:4; Isaiah 53:4),” *KnoWhy* 91 (May 3, 2016). On Jeremiah, Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 21A (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 636–637, notes the similar verbiage in Jeremiah 11:19 and Isaiah 53:7–8.
  7. See Clements, “Isaiah 53 and the Restoration of Israel,” 44–45.
  8. Margaret Barker, “Hezekiah’s Boil,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 95 (2001): 31–42; Barker, “Isaiah,” 534–535. Although the report of Hezekiah’s illness comes after the report of Assyria lifting the siege, 2 Kings 20:6 and Isaiah 38:6 suggest that it was during the siege that Hezekiah fell ill and that he was prophesied to recover *simultaneously* with the city being spared from the Assyrian attack. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 19 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 482, 484; Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary, vol. 15A (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2007), 635.
  9. Barker, “Hezekiah’s Boil,” 31–32, 34–35.
  10. Barker, “Hezekiah’s Boil,” 39, suggests that Isaiah 53:3 should be read as saying that “he hid his face from us” rather than that the Servant is the one from whom people hide their faces.
  11. Barker, “Isaiah,” 535.
  12. On the chronology, see Barker, “Isaiah,” 523.
  13. See Barker, “Hezekiah’s Boil,” 32–34; Barker, “Isaiah,” 523. Antti Laato, “Assyrian Propaganda and the Falsification of History in the Royal Inscriptions,” *Vetus Testamentum* 45, no. 2 (1995): 222, suggests that 2 Kings 19:35 “is most likely a theological portrayal of destruction caused by a plague, as indicated in 2 Sam. 24:15–16 and Ps. 78:49–50.” Siegfried H. Horn and P. Kyle McCarter, “The Divided Monarchy: The Kingdoms of Judah and Israel,” in *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, 3rd ed., ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 363n144, makes a similar argument.
  14. See Margaret Barker, “The Great High Priest,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 42, nos. 3–4 (2003): 74–78; Barker, “Isaiah,” 494, 534–535.
  15. Barker, “Hezekiah’s Boil,” 40.
  16. Barker, “Great High Priest,” 76.
  17. See Richard L. Shultz, “The Origins and Basic Arguments of the Multi-Author View of the Composition of Isaiah: Where Are We Now and How Did We Get Here?,” in *Bind Up the Testimony: Explorations in the Genesis of the Book of Isaiah*, ed. Daniel I. Block and Richard Schultz (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2015), 7–31, for a summary and review of such scholarly theories. For Latter-day Saint points of view, see n18.
  18. For helpful discussions of this issue in relation to the Book of Mormon and other Latter-day Saint beliefs, see John W. Welch, “Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 423–437; Kent P. Jackson, “Isaiah in the Book of Mormon,” in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2016), 69–78; Daniel T. Ellsworth, “Their Imperfect Best: Isaianic Authorship from an LDS Perspective,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 27 (2017): 1–27; Joshua M. Sears, “Deutero-Isaiah in the Book of Mormon: Latter-day Saint Approaches,” in *They Shall Grow Together: The Bible in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Charles Swift and Nicholas J. Frederick (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2022), 365–391. Forthcoming studies by John Gee and Donald W. Parry will also be addressing this issue.
  19. Gary V. Smith, “Isaiah 40–55: Which Audience Was Addressed?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 4 (2011): 701–713; Gary V. Smith, “Cyrus or Sennacherib? Historical Issues Involved in the Interpretation of Isaiah 40–55,” in *Bind Up the Testimony*, 175–193. Smith’s views are most comprehensively argued for in Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary, vol. 15B (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2009). Alternatively, some Latter-day Saint commentators have suggested that Isaiah 40–66 consists of the post-700 BC prophecies given by Isaiah in response to the aftermath of the Assyrian invasion. See, for example, Kerry Muhlestein, *Learning to Love Isaiah: A Guide and Commentary* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2021), 327–328; Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “The Great Jerusalem Temple Prophecy: Latter-day Context and Likening unto Us,” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, Matthew J. Grey, and David Rolph Seely (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2013), 368–371. Chadwick’s theory is explained in more detail in Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “The Insights of Third Isaiah: Observations of a Traditionalist,” in *The Unperceived Continuity of Isaiah*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 76–80.
  20. Andrew C. Skinner, *Prophets, Priests, and Kings: Old Testament Figures Who Symbolize Christ* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005), 91.
  21. See the comments (and sources cited) on Isaiah 9:6–7 in Book of Mormon Central, “How Did Isaiah Prophecy of the Savior? (Isaiah 40:3),” *KnoWhy* 647 (September 20, 2022), for another example of a prophecy partially fulfilled by Hezekiah.
  22. Donald W. Parry, “The Messiah in Isaiah 53: Four Recurring Themes,” in *The Jesus Christ Focused Old Testament: Making Sense of a Monumental Book* (Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central, 2022), 37.
  23. Muhlestein, *Learning to Love Isaiah*, 434.