

# The Prophet's Remnant Theology

## A Latter-day Saint Perspective

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For many reasons, Latter-day Saints tend to be more familiar with the Book of Mormon than with the Old Testament. A curious consequence of this fact is that we are sometimes aware of Old Testament *ideas* but unaware of the *sources* for and the *contexts* of those ideas. Readers of the Book of Mormon thus know from the volume's title page that it was "written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel." But without substantial familiarity with the Old Testament, we might not feel the full force of this claim. The fact is that the Book of Mormon's emphasis on Israel's remnant is something it consciously borrows from the Israelite prophets. Thus, if we wish to understand better the basic purposes of the Book of Mormon, we would profit from deeper understanding of the Israelite prophets from whom the Nephite prophets drew inspiration. That is, because the first listed purpose of the Book of Mormon—again on the volume's title page—is "to show unto the remnant of the house

of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers,” we committed readers of the Book of Mormon would do well to become much more familiar with what the writings of the prophets have to say about the remnant idea.

Essential to understanding the larger implications of both the Bible’s and the Book of Mormon’s remnant theologies is the way they differ from what might be called *replacement* theologies. Replacement theologies—often called “supersessionist”—claim that Israel, although once God’s chosen covenant people, was at some point replaced by another chosen covenant people, usually the Christian church. According to this viewpoint, the covenant with Israel was either temporary or transferable.<sup>1</sup> But according to most remnant theologies, God’s covenant with Israel was inviolable, and so God can be expected to continue to work with Israel.<sup>2</sup> Rather than eliminating or replacing Israel as the covenant people, God consistently focuses on just the part of Israel—the remnant—that exhibits or might be taught true faithfulness. Israel *itself* is to be redeemed, beginning with whatever remnant of it remains.

My purpose in this essay is to outline the remnant theology the Nephites seem to have found in the Old Testament, albeit without giving direct attention to how the Book of Mormon interprets particular passages.<sup>3</sup> Because the Book of Mormon, in its development of the remnant theme, draws primarily on the books of Micah and Isaiah (see, of course, “the Isaiah chapters” of 2 Nephi 11–24, but also the uses of Micah in 3 Nephi 20–21), I will focus on them, as well as on the book of Amos, which interpreters have generally taken to provide a major source for Micah and Isaiah. Further and by way of preparation, I will look briefly at references to the remnant idea in the books Israel produced to explain its history and its prehistory. Seeing how this theme is developed in key places in the Hebrew Bible’s prophetic books should help Latter-day Saints see how the Book of Mormon is part of a long history of prophetic reflection on the idea of the remnant.

## Laying a Foundation

The idea of the remnant can be found already in the stories ancient Israel had to tell about its own prehistory—that is, about Abraham’s predecessors—and a theological reading of these stories can prepare for a study of what the books of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah have to say. Israel seems to have inherited the theme of the remnant in large part from its neighbors in the ancient near east, where notions of a divinely-saved remnant appear in various forms in different cultures and contexts.<sup>4</sup> Israel often inherited its basic view of the world from the larger cultural context in which it found itself, and this seems to have been the case with the idea of the remnant. But, as it often did with ideas it borrowed from its neighbors, Israel developed the remnant theme in unique and—as the Book of Mormon insists—importantly inspired ways. These developments are what deserve theological attention, and they are found in a kind of foundational form in the stories Israel told about its origins.

Every reader of the Bible is familiar with the story of Noah, through whom God preserved life on earth. In one summary description of the flood, Genesis describes Noah’s survival by using the verbal form of the Hebrew noun (šĕ’ār) that is later consistently used by Micah and Isaiah to speak of Israel’s remnant: “And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive [yīšā’er], and they that were with him in the ark” (Genesis 7:23). In this passage, D. M. Warne interprets that the author of Genesis “has made the concept of the remnant an integral part of primitive history.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, from the point of view of Genesis, the whole of humankind can be understood to be a remnant, just a fragment of what *might* have been. Human beings as we know them after the flood are, in their very being, *survivors*.<sup>6</sup>

This idea—that all human beings since the flood are part of a divinely delivered remnant—is of peculiar theological significance.<sup>7</sup> Inasmuch as I recognize that I live only because of God’s goodness in the past, I am prepared to recognize my weakness as a human being and my consequent dependence on divine grace at every moment. Significantly, according to Genesis, God’s action immediately following the flood was to give to surviving humanity not only a well-known covenant but also a new law that focused them on the fragility of life (see Genesis 9:1–17). On one reading, the story thus indicates that it is only as humankind is reduced to a remnant that it might be prepared to live according to divine laws. If human beings see themselves as survivors, preserved from destruction only by God’s grace, they might prove humble enough to receive guidance from their Creator.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, as the stories in Genesis that follow after that of the flood suggest, human beings quickly forget their dependence on God. They find supposed strength and pretended sufficiency in their national identities, propped up by their national deities. Thus, after the flood, Genesis recounts the rise of the great nations (see Genesis 10:1–32), with the chief of them organized around a misguided form of worship (see Genesis 11:1–9). The result, it seems, is a world full of human beings who seek not God but “a name” for themselves. They appear to find strength only in numbers, and what they seem to fear above all else is the possibility that they might “be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” And yet, despite their fears, they exhibit what seems to be remarkable arrogance, seeking to produce a human construction with its top near heaven (see Genesis 11:4)! Disregarding the lesson of the flood, humankind refuses to see its life and preservation on the earth as a gift of God. We fail to see that we are only a remnant of humankind, just as we consistently fail to live the law God has given to us all.

The narrative sequence of Genesis suggests that it was in part to solve this problem that God called on Abraham and Sarah,

promising to make of them a nation that might serve as a light to other nations (see Genesis 12:1–3). Through Abraham and Sarah there thus came into the world a nation apparently meant to be unlike the other nations: a nation fully aware of the true God and therefore attuned to its own weakness (a nation that exists only inasmuch as it remains bound to God by covenant). Abraham's and Sarah's experiences certainly seem tailored to teach them their absolute dependence on God—for example, through the impossible but promised birth of Isaac or through the impossible but real commandment to offer Isaac in sacrifice (which Isaac survives and so himself becomes a remnant). If their example of care for divine instruction, coupled with recognition of their dependence on God, could be put on display before the world, then it might be that “all families of the earth” could “be blessed” (Genesis 12:3).<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, however, it took only a few generations for Abraham's descendants to fall in with other traditions. At one point they explicitly sought to be “like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:5), and from almost the beginning they “served other gods” and hoped that the true God would “not reign over them” (1 Samuel 8:7–8). Eventually, then, there arose an Israelite prophet who could lament before the Lord in utter despair: “The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away” (1 Kings 19:10).

These last words are those of the prophet Elijah, uttered, according to the biblical text, a hundred years before Amos, Micah, and Isaiah.<sup>10</sup> Significantly, the text presents the Lord as gently rebuking Elijah for his despair. “Yet I have left me [*hiš'arti*] seven thousand in Israel,” the Lord says to the frustrated prophet, “all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18). It is true enough that the covenant people fall short of their responsibilities. They too seldom see their weakness, too seldom acknowledge their dependence on God. Those bound by

the covenant spend much of their time seeking to be like the nations from among which they are summoned. Yet, as God's words to Elijah make clear, even at the worst moments in history, there is at least a part of Israel—a remnant—attuned in the right way to the Lord's intentions. In this passage, as in the flood story, the noun used in Micah and Isaiah to describe the Israelite remnant (*šē'ār*) appears in verbal form. But here it seems to mark something new. In the Lord's word to Elijah, he does not refer to the remnant of *all* humanity (as in the Flood); he refers to only a remnant of *Israel*. As Gerhard Hasel notes, "We meet in this passage for the first time in the history of Israel the promise of a future remnant that constitutes the kernel of a new Israel."<sup>11</sup>

This narrowing of emphasis—from the Flood story's emphasis on the remnant of all humanity to an emphasis on the remnant just of Israel—opens onto the books of Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. These books concern themselves primarily with the remnant of Israel, rather than with the remnant of humanity. And yet the larger history from the Flood to the time of Elijah helps to clarify the theological stakes of the remnant theme in these books. In narrowing Israel down to a preserved remnant—a group of Israelite survivors finally fully prepared to live the divine law—God brings the covenant people to see their weakness and dependence. And inasmuch as God succeeds in bringing Israel to see its true relationship to him, he makes it possible for the Israelite remnant to bring the remainder of humanity to see its own weakness and its dependence on God. It is perhaps only as Israel becomes a mere remnant of itself that it can earnestly call the rest of humankind to a recognition of the fact that all human beings are survivors, the beneficiaries of God's goodness and grace.

In light of these precedents, on the reading outlined here, it is possible to consider what the prophets on whose books the Book of Mormon draws have to say about Israel's remnant.

## The Book of Amos

Amos, originally a shepherd from the small Judahite village of Tekoa (see Amos 1:1), is a fiery prophet with an uncomfortable message for the northern kingdom of Israel. Although the book of Amos occasionally speaks of hope and redemption, it much more consistently condemns the prophet's hearers. And the style with which it does so is devastating. Amos deploys theological themes of Israel's historical self-understanding (they are the elect to whom God has bound himself, and therefore they will be delivered from their enemies). But he provides these themes—the theme of the remnant's deliverance included—with “a radical reinterpretation.”<sup>12</sup> “You only have I known of all the families of the earth,” the Lord says through Amos; but the consequence of this special relationship with God is a unique sense of responsibility and therefore a unique judgment: “*Therefore* I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2; emphasis added). Readers are meant to understand that where Israel had come to trust that its covenantal relationship to the Lord would secure its preservation, Amos announces that this promise is unstable.

Accordingly, in the first allusion to the remnant in Amos, the prophet addresses the wealthy in ancient Samaria with a creative refashioning of the well-known<sup>13</sup> remnant theme: “As the shepherd rescueth from the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear; so shall the children of Israel be rescued that dwell in Samaria, only with the corner of a bed, and with the foot of a couch” (Amos 3:12, translation modified).<sup>14</sup> While this prophecy might seem at first to indicate that wicked Israelites can look forward to a partial deliverance from their enemies, one possible reading suggests that Amos uses the remnant theme *against* Israel. According to Hans Walter Wolff, Amos's “example presupposes a specific statute drawn from the laws governing shepherds,” in which physical evidence of a wild beast's attack excused a domesticated animal's caretaker of any responsibility for the loss of property. “Two thin splint-bones or merely the tip of an ear

would constitute admissible pieces of evidence.” But, of course, Wolff goes on to point out, “those little bits of ‘rescued’ evidence” legally serve only as “proof that *total loss* was unavoidable.”<sup>15</sup> In parallel, the bits of furniture in Amos’s prophecy—“the corner of a bed,” “the foot of a couch”—serve not as symbols of Israel’s survival but as tokens of their eradication. Amos’s readers know of the promises that God will preserve a remnant from Israel, but Amos predicts that the only remnant one can expect will be material possessions left behind in death.

Similarly negative prophetic words regarding an Israelite remnant appear in Amos 6:9–10 and 9:1–4. In the latter,<sup>16</sup> more or less at the conclusion of the book,<sup>17</sup> Amos provides his most extreme statement. Elsewhere, Amos concedes the promise of a remnant while criticizing those who use it to justify their wickedness and corruption. But in Amos 9:1–4, the prophet suggests the possibility that Israel might ultimately be left without any remnant at all. “He that fleeth” and “he that escapeth,” Amos says, referring to those who could constitute a preserved remnant of Israel, are both to end up dead. “I will slay the last of them with the sword,” the Lord says through the prophet; although some might “go into captivity before their enemies,” the Lord announces that he will “command the sword, and it shall slay them” as well (Amos 9:1, 4).<sup>18</sup>

This worry, expressed at the close of the book of Amos, seems to lie at the root of the indecision Amos expresses in his most explicit statement regarding Israel’s remnant—a key passage where he employs the term used more consistently by Micah and Isaiah to describe the remnant (*šē’ērīt*). Tying promises to commandments (to “seek” and to “love” the good), Amos hopes that “the Lord God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:14–15). But he expresses this hope as just a possibility: “It may be [*ʾûlay*, perhaps] that the Lord God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15).<sup>19</sup> Paul Noble points out that Amos’s “perhaps” focuses less on the “existence” of the remnant than on “whether or



not it will enjoy God's favor"; Amos "in fact takes it for granted that there will be a remnant."<sup>20</sup> This seems right, but of course any continued existence for a remnant of Israel *without* God's gracious attention would be *mere* survival—not *life*. Amos's "perhaps" thus underscores the prophet's "extremely paradoxical notion of a remnant: Its unconditional survival is immediately juxtaposed to equally unconditional images of total destruction."<sup>21</sup>

It is this paradox that the book of Amos ultimately presents in connection with the remnant. It draws on an idea that readers are led to see as already developed into a well-known theme, but it expresses inspired skepticism that the promises associated with the remnant should be used by Israelites without fear and trembling. Amos exhibits confidence that God will be true to his word, but he simultaneously despairs of Israel being true enough to their word to see the promises fulfilled as popularly anticipated. What good would it do to reduce Israel to a preserved remnant if it were no more committed to living the divine law than those whom it survives? Before Micah and Isaiah, prophets whose books are more naturally optimistic with respect to the remnant, Amos sounds an important note of caution regarding the theme.

## The Book of Micah

Where the book of Amos arguably exhibits a relatively loose organization, the book of Micah reads as rather tightly ordered, especially in light of the remnant theme. The book divides into three sequences (chapters 1–2, chapters 3–5, and chapters 6–7), each concluding with a reflection on the theme of the remnant.<sup>22</sup> Where Amos either expresses ambivalence or outlines a paradox concerning the remnant, Micah provides a near-systematic theology along with a theological perspective consistently rooted in hope for Israel. But Micah's hope focuses primarily on just a *part* of Israel: the southern kingdom of

Judah. During the period of Micah's prophecy, the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed while the southern kingdom, Judah, survived. For Micah, then, Judah itself comes eventually to serve as a kind of remnant of Israel, the focus of promise and hope.

The first two chapters of Micah present a devastating prophecy of doom and destruction. "The Lord cometh forth out of his place," the prophet announces, "and the mountains shall be molten under him . . . as wax before the fire" (Micah 1:3-4). Samaria, the capital of Israel's northern kingdom is to become "an heap of the field" (1:6), and Jerusalem, the parallel capital of Israel's southern kingdom of Judah, is to receive a "wound" that "is incurable" (1:9). And this announcement distresses the prophet. "I will wail and howl," he cries out; "I will go stripped and naked" in mourning (1:8). Naturally, what Micah condemns in Israelite and especially Judahite culture is what all the prophets of the eighth century condemn: obsession with wealth and gain, mistreatment of the marginalized and underprivileged, and a tendency toward substance abuse (see Micah 2:1-11). It is for all these clear wrongs, amounting to systematic abandonment of the Abrahamic heritage, that the covenant people deserve Micah's strong rebuke. But there follows a word of hope from the Lord: "I will surely assemble, O Jacob, all of thee; I will surely gather the remnant of Israel" (2:12).<sup>23</sup> The passage even promises that the remnant either will be large from the beginning or will grow, since "they shall make great noise by reason of the multitude of men" (2:12). Leading the remnant, moreover, is "their king," and at their head stands "the Lord" himself (2:13).<sup>24</sup>

Chapters 1-2 establish the pattern for the book of Micah. Chapters 3-5 also present prophecies of doom and destruction but then work their way toward anticipations of the remnant's redemption. And then chapters 6-7, with a rather different tone and style, do the same. In the last section, the plight of Israel is presented more personally than it is in Micah 1-5, through a series of laments about the impossibility of commending the covenant people to God. These

conclude with the question of whether there is any God like Israel's God "that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage" (Micah 7:18). The book of Micah thus concludes on a particularly hopeful and worshipful note, with confidence in God's "mercy to Abraham" (7:20). But it is in the central portion of the book, in chapters 3–5, that the most remarkable of Micah's treatments of the remnant theme appear. And what is especially significant is the way that, in these chapters, Micah attempts to discern a previously unrecognized divine purpose for the winnowing of Israel down to a remnant.

In Micah 3, the prophet again focuses on the sins of Judah but now with an intense focus on corruption, both in Judah's political institutions (especially in the courts) and in Judah's religious institutions (thanks especially to false prophets). Micah describes the judicial system in Jerusalem as cannibalistic, with judges who not only "hate the good, and love the evil" but who also "eat the flesh of [God's] people, and flay their skin from off them" (Micah 3:2–3). He then condemns "the prophets that make [the Lord's] people err" because they falsely cry "peace" when they have "no answer of God" (3:5, 7). All this amounts to a building up of Jerusalem "with blood" and "with iniquity" rather than with truth and justice (3:10), and the prophet announces that the city will consequently "be plowed as a field" and "become heaps" (3:12). But then, as before, Micah interrupts these harsh words with a prophetic message of promise. Destruction will serve to purify the covenant people by reducing them to a remnant that might be gathered and finally prepared to do God's real work. But what, according to Micah, is this work?

The message of promise opens with Micah's famous words regarding the establishment of "the house of the Lord . . . in the top of the mountains" (Micah 4:1). To this place where the true God might be worshiped Micah sees "many nations" gathering, "beat[ing] their

swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks” (4:2–3).<sup>25</sup> Here the prophet begins to indicate the purpose of singling out a band of Israelite survivors for divine purposes. Producing a remnant requires that Israel come into contact with non-covenantal peoples—that is, with *gentiles*. (The Hebrew word translated “nations” in the passage just cited, *gōyīm*, is the same often translated as “gentiles” in the King James Version. The gentiles *are* the nations.) It is in the wake of Israel’s winnowing that it is possible for the covenant people to serve as a light to non-covenantal peoples, at last implicitly inviting them to live “the law” that “go[es] forth of Zion” (Micah 4:2). (Presumably this is in part because the winnowed remnant of Israel is itself finally prepared to live quite fully the law gracefully given to it.) Seeing themselves as a remnant dependent on God’s goodness for their survival, and forced by history to be in contact with non-covenantal peoples, the remnant of Israel can serve as instructive examples for gentiles of what it might mean for them to understand their own dependence on the true God.<sup>26</sup>

Thus Micah next prophesies of what Israel’s remnant will do “in that day” (Micah 4:6), that is, in the day when the nations might be summoned to worship in “the house of the Lord” (4:1). God promises to “make her that halted a remnant, and her that was cast far off a strong nation: and the Lord shall reign over them in mount Zion from henceforth, even for ever” (4:7). God gathers the survivors of Israel’s difficult history as a remnant over which he might finally rule in righteousness—as Hans Walter Wolff puts it, “the Lord is still king over the heap of ruins”<sup>27</sup>—and they are therefore prepared to receive the gentiles that are to “flow” in God’s direction (Micah 4:1). But then, as Micah continues his prophecy, he uses two related images to describe the negative consequences to come upon all gentile peoples who do *not* give up their warfare against God and each other. Both images are meant to describe Israel’s place “in the midst

of many people" (5:7–8), though they seem at first to differ drastically in nature.<sup>28</sup>

The first image is that of dew: "And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord, as the showers upon the grass, that tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men" (Micah 5:7). Most commentators have assumed that this image is a positive one,<sup>29</sup> but some more astutely note a possible negative meaning, one more in line with the obvious meaning of the second image. The remnant, Micah says in presenting the second image, will also be "among the Gentiles . . . as a lion among the beasts of the forest, as a young lion among the flocks of sheep: who, if he go through, both treadeth down, and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver" (Micah 5:8). Aligning the two images, Delbert Hillers points out that the image of dew appears in a military context in 2 Samuel 17:12, which concludes with the complete eradication of an enemy: "So shall we come upon [the enemy] in some place where he shall be found, and we will light upon him as the dew falleth on the ground: and of him and of all the men that are with him there shall not be left so much as one."<sup>30</sup> Micah's two images of dew and lion, which at first appear opposed or contrasting, then seem in the end to serve as closely parallel ways of envisioning the unfortunate end for all who oppose God's work. Micah imagines Israel as visiting divinely appointed destruction on those who insist on perpetuating violence.

This is, in many ways, an unfortunate note upon which to end Micah's reflection. It nonetheless underscores the seriousness of the Lord's intervention in the history of the world, as envisioned in the Israelite prophets. Those who refuse to see their fundamental dependence on God cannot be allowed to hold sway forever. However it might have to be achieved, universal peace is that toward which the writings of the prophets look. This is true of the book of Micah. It is truer still of the book of Isaiah.

## The Book of Isaiah

Scholars working on the book of Isaiah have increasingly come to see how much it is shaped by theological concerns. A major theological concern throughout the book—but most forcefully in the first twelve chapters, where this discussion will be focused—is the theme of the remnant.<sup>31</sup> But before whatever processes the book may have undergone in reaching its final form,<sup>32</sup> Isaiah himself took the remnant theme seriously, the clearest indication being simply that he named one of his sons Shear-jashub, “The Remnant shall Return” (Isaiah 7:3). Thus, while it might be that some passages from Isaiah focused on the remnant are editorial additions rather than the prophet’s own words (but this remains a point of controversy), all interpreters agree that Isaiah himself had important things to say about the remnant theme, and thus that any potential editorial additions to the book are essentially developments of Isaiah’s own prophetic views.<sup>33</sup> For their part, Latter-day Saints, with their own unique faith commitments, might respond to Isaiah scholarship in a variety of ways, even raising questions about certain conclusions regarding authorship.<sup>34</sup> But whatever one decides about the authorship of Isaiah, the Book of Mormon clearly draws on long stretches of Isaiah as they are found in the received biblical text, and it is the biblical text in its final form that interests me here.

The theme of the remnant appears already in the first chapter of Isaiah, which serves as a kind of introduction to the whole book. There, in the wake of terrible devastation in Israel, the prophet says, “Except the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.” He then calls on the “rulers” and “people” of the devastated Israelite cities to “hear the word of the Lord” and to “give ear unto the law of [their] God” (Isaiah 1:9–10). This passage announces to the reader of Isaiah in advance that the remnant theme is a major feature of the book—Edward Kissane calls it “the most characteristic feature of [Isaiah’s] teaching”<sup>35</sup>—and that the

remnant theme is to be found in Isaiah's preaching in the form found elsewhere in the prophets. A remnant of Israel has been spared, and it is to them that the divine law is ultimately addressed.

Isaiah's prophecies proper begin in his second chapter, with the vision of "the mountain of the Lord's house" (Isaiah 2:2) analyzed previously in connection with its appearance in the book of Micah. In the book of Micah, this vision follows prophecies of destruction and devastation and draws the reader's attention to the promise of a preserved remnant of Israel, a remnant that will assist in the redemption of the gentile nations during the promised "last days" (Micah 1:1). In the book of Isaiah, however, this vision *precedes* prophecies of destruction and devastation, such that it poignantly contrasts Israel's prophetic future with their sinful state at the time of the prophecy. Thus, where the book of Micah uses the vision to mark a transition from destruction to promise, the book of Isaiah uses it to highlight the distance between present difficulties and future redemption. Nonetheless, the Isaiah text does come eventually to dwell on the remnant theme as well. At the end of the textual unit that begins with the vision, a prophecy predicts the day when "he that is left [*ha-niš'ār*] in Zion, and he that remaineth in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem" (Isaiah 4:3).<sup>36</sup> From Isaiah's perspective, the remnant is to be regarded as holy, and he explicitly notes that their names are to be written—"written among the living" in the King James rendering, but "recorded for life" according to a more literal rendering of the Hebrew.<sup>37</sup> Commentators routinely note the likelihood that "the registry of names, which preserves the identity of the holy ones, may refer to God's book of life."<sup>38</sup> From early in the book of Isaiah, therefore, the remnant is regarded as holy and foreordained, prepared for a divinely appointed responsibility in history. As Gerhard Hasel notes, this remnant is not made up of "those who are left behind after the ruin of the city" but of "those who remain after the purifying judgment."<sup>39</sup>

This last point is clarified further along when Isaiah reports on the experience in which he was commissioned to pursue his prophetic task. After seeing the Lord and being cleansed by a seraph (see Isaiah 6:1–8), the prophet receives a commission to preach to a people who will reject his message (see 6:9–10). When he asks “how long” he should pursue this task (6:11), he is told to preach “until the cities be wasted without inhabitant . . . and the Lord have removed men far away” (6:11–12). Isaiah’s message is to serve as God’s word to Israel through a period of destruction and exile. But then the Lord makes clear that this period of destruction and exile is also one of purification, because he promises Isaiah (in a very difficult passage) that at least a portion of those taken away “shall return.” This remnant of Israel, which Isaiah pictures as a stump (suggestively translated as “substance” in the King James Version), is a “holy seed” that can sprout again to give new life to Israel (6:13).<sup>40</sup> And just a few chapters later, the book of Isaiah indeed predicts the moment when “a branch” does “grow out” of these once-dead “roots” (11:1).

Between the report of Isaiah’s commission and the later prediction concerning the remnant-stump sprouting new life, one of Isaiah’s best-developed discussions of the remnant appears. It finds its original setting during the dangerous approach of the Assyrian empire during the late eighth century—a situation during which Judah’s survival was seriously threatened.<sup>41</sup> Due to the Judahite king’s lack of faith, the nation faced serious danger, namely “the king of Assyria,” who would “pass through Judah” like a flood; Assyria would “overflow and go over” and “reach even to the neck” (Isaiah 8:7–8), as another passage puts it. Judah, Isaiah thus predicts, would be ravaged by Assyria until the Lord has “performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem,” at which point he would “punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria” (10:12). Then the prophet announces, “The remnant shall return, even the remnant of Jacob, unto the mighty God” (10:21).<sup>42</sup> The remnant in question is to be made up of



those who “are escaped of the house of Jacob,” and they “shall stay upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth” (10:20). Isaiah here does not hesitate to announce a “consumption” that has been “determined,” one that shall bear consequences for “all the land” (10:23), yet he firmly states also that “the consumption decreed shall overflow with righteousness,” since “a remnant of [Israel] shall return” (10:22). Destruction and devastation for the covenant people eventually give way to the existence of a winnowed remnant fully prepared to receive instruction from the Lord.<sup>43</sup>

It is *as* this finally holy remnant returns that the remnant-stump from Isaiah’s prophetic commission springs forth with new life (see Isaiah 11:1).<sup>44</sup> The stump or “root” in question, according to the prophet, “shall stand for an ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious” (11:10). Here Isaiah echoes the prophet Micah, anticipating the role Israel’s remnant is to play in the redemption of the whole world and of all its peoples. Further, Isaiah now predicts a “second time” of recovery for Israel: “The Lord shall set his hand again the second time to recover the remnant of his people, which shall be left” (11:11).<sup>45</sup> As in Micah’s prophecy, the still-rebellious nations are to be destroyed: “They shall spoil them of the east together: they shall lay their hand upon Edom and Moab; and the children of Ammon shall obey them” (11:14). But above all, the time of the remnant’s full redemption is a time of immense peace. “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (11:6). In Brevard Childs’s words, “the remnant will experience all the terrors of judgment, but the promise of new life through the destruction is affirmed,” and this new life comes in the shape of “an age of universal peace.”<sup>46</sup>

Thus, the book of Isaiah, rather like Micah and more optimistically than Amos, develops in its opening chapters a near-systematic theology of the remnant. Isaiah is, interestingly, not averse to more

traditional formulations of the remnant idea (formulations of the sort Amos seems to have set about to criticize).<sup>47</sup> But the first twelve chapters of the book of Isaiah develop the traditional notion of the Israelite remnant rather far beyond such traditional formulations. Further, what in Micah's book remains a prophetic *idea* becomes in Isaiah's prophecies a fully developed prophetic *history*. The book of Micah anticipates the *role* the remnant is to play in redemption, but the book of Isaiah outlines a long and detailed *story* about how that remnant-based redemption is to unfold.<sup>48</sup> Isaiah shares with Amos a certain skepticism about Israel's self-honesty in understanding the promises given to it as a covenant people, and he shares with Micah an interest in more fully formulating a better understanding of what those promises might really mean. But it is Isaiah, perhaps uniquely, who sees how the remnant lies at the center of God's intentions in world history.

## Conclusion

Both prophets and Jesus Christ himself recommend to the Book of Mormon's readers that the words of the Israelite prophets be taken seriously—Isaiah chief among them (see 2 Nephi 11:2, 8; 25:1–8; 3 Nephi 23:1–2; Mormon 8:23). And among the themes the Nephite prophets and the Savior draw consistently from the Israelite prophets is that of the remnant. When the resurrected Lord appeared among Lehi's descendants anciently, he used his pierced hands to point his people to the writings of Isaiah and Micah, among others (see 3 Nephi 20–26). And he highlighted passages addressed to and focused on the fate of Israel's remnant. Similarly, when Nephi decided to place at the very center of his second book a lengthy quotation from Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 11–24), he decided to copy down the chapters in which the book of Isaiah develops the historical importance of the Israelite remnant. If we are to understand these choice

teachings, brought to our attention by the miraculous coming forth of the Book of Mormon, we would do well to search the ancient Israelite prophets. Amos, Micah, and Isaiah provide an important place to start.

## Notes

1. For an overview of replacement theology, along with a critical assessment, see Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel? A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2010).
2. For a good study of early Jewish thought with sustained reflection on the remnant theme, see Mark A. Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000).
3. Methodologically, I follow the lead of two related subdisciplines within the field of biblical studies. First, both because I work and write as a philosopher and theologian and because the Book of Mormon interprets biblical texts in a theological fashion, I read the biblical text from the perspective of biblical theology. For helpful explanations of the history and current situation of biblical theology, see James K. Mead, *Biblical Theology: Issues, Methods, and Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); and Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012). Second, both because I see as important the distinction between the Bible as text and the Bible as scripture and because the Book of Mormon consistently draws on certain biblical passages as these are couched in their canonical contexts, I follow the lead of canonical criticism. For a good introduction to canonical criticism, see James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Because I borrow from these two methodologies, I refer often to biblical *books* and *texts*, rather than to specific prophetic *persons* (although I do that as well). This is meant to draw attention to the final

- form of the text, rather than to what can be reconstructed, historically, of the actual persons behind the biblical text.
4. See the helpful survey in Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (Berrien Spring, MI: Andrews University Press, 1974), 50–134.
  5. D. M. Warne, “The Origin, Development, and Significance of the Concept of the Remnant in the Old Testament” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1958), 45. Interestingly, a similar interpretation of the passage can be found anciently among the writings of the Qumran community. See the discussion in Dorothy M. Peters, *Noah Traditions in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Conversations and Controversies of Antiquity* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 70.
  6. This idea of humanity as remnant is developed in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002).
  7. Gerhard Hasel develops the theological significance of the flood’s remnant theme by arguing that it indicates “a union of judgment and salvation.” See Hasel, *The Remnant*, 138.
  8. “The catastrophe purges the community of its impurities, and the remnant is called to exemplary life. . . . Thus, the appointment and rescue of the remnant, making possible the continuation of the life of the community, may be viewed as themselves constituting the saving activity of Yahweh [Jehovah].” Lester V. Meyer, “Remnant,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:670.
  9. Such a connection is made explicitly in the Book of Mormon, in 1 Nephi 22:10. There, Nephi says to his wondering brothers that “all the kindreds of the earth cannot be blessed unless [the Lord God] shall make bare his arm in the eyes of the nations.” (In addition to alluding to Genesis 12:3, this passage alludes to Isaiah 52:10.)
  10. For a good outline of the relevant chronology, see Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of*

*the Old Testament: An Illustrated Reference for Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), 246–61, 278–97.

11. Hasel, *The Remnant*, 172. Hasel overstates his point by speaking of “a new Israel.”
12. James Luther Mays, *Amos: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 8.
13. As mentioned before, the remnant theme seems to have been known well throughout the ancient near east. Given its popularity across a variety of cultural contexts, it seems clear that Amos’s words assume familiarity with the theme—and likely even familiarity with its application to Israel.
14. Unfortunately, the King James Version of this passage is almost incomprehensible, in large part due to the difficulties of the underlying Hebrew. In altering it, I have here drawn on the translation in Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 115. For some discussion of the difficulty of the Hebrew text, see Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Amos: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 408–10.
15. Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, trans. Waldemar Janzen, S. Dean McBride Jr., and Charles A. Muenchow (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 197–98. For the legal texts in question, see especially Exodus 22:9–12.
16. The former text is problematic and obscure. For some helpful commentary on its general meaning, see Andersen and Freedman, *Amos*, 573–74; and on its message concerning the remnant, see Hasel, *The Remnant*, 183–84.
17. Jörg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 158, suggests that the book of Amos originally ended with this devastating announcement. In final form, Amos contains another eleven verses.
18. This may, of course, be primarily overheated rhetoric, used principally for effect. Just a few verses later (in what may well be a later addition), the text

- claims just that “all the sinners” of the covenant people “shall die by the sword,” thanks to a process of “sift[ing]” (Amos 9:9–10).
19. Mays nicely underscores the implications of this “perhaps”: “‘Perhaps’ characterizes the prospect of Yahweh’s [Jehovah’s] gracious help as a matter beyond human control and guarantee. The Lord is no national god of Israel; he will be gracious toward whomever he wills to be gracious (Ex. 33.19). He is not bound to Israel by any kind of cultic or legal guarantee; rather, Israel is completely in the hands of his sovereignty.” Mays, *Amos*, 102.
  20. Paul R. Noble, “The Remnant in Amos 3–6: A Prophetic Paradox,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology: An International Dialogue* 19, no. 2 (1997): 129.
  21. Noble, “The Remnant in Amos 3–6,” 138. Noble’s words are overly strong here. There is reason to think that Amos’s more extreme statements are primarily for rhetorical effect. Jeremias notes that Amos’s “‘perhaps’ has undergone a significant history of influence within the Old Testament,” citing passages in Zephaniah, Joel, and Jonah, along with rabbinical teachings. Jeremias, *The Book of Amos*, 96.
  22. See Kenneth H. Cuffey, *The Literary Coherence of the Book of Micah: Remnant, Restoration, and Promise* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 153–63, 215–345.
  23. As James Luther Mays notes, because this note of hope seems out of place in Micah 1–2, “There is general agreement that the oracle [of 2:12–13] is a late addition to the Micah collection.” James Luther Mays, *Micah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 74. Certainly, the placement of the passage in the book of Micah is suggestive of theological shaping.
  24. Some interpreters have suggested that this passage should be read either as an awkwardly worded prophecy of doom or as a quotation of the false prophets against whom Micah contends. None of these arguments is ultimately compelling. See Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *Micah: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 104–105.
  25. This same passage, with a few differences, appears also in Isaiah. Scholars have long debated which prophet borrows from which, but there has

- emerged a kind of consensus that there are more interesting questions to address concerning the place of the prophecy in each of the two books, regardless of which (if either) prophet first uttered the words. See the helpful discussion in Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 28–31.
26. One peculiarly Latter-day Saint interpretation of Micah 4:11–13 might suggest this, despite the passage's transparent war imagery in the Hebrew text. See the discussion in Joseph M. Spencer, *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 81–94.
  27. Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah the Prophet*, trans. Ralph D. Gehrke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 163.
  28. Philip Jensen notes “the almost identical repetition of the first lines” in the two verses, but he concludes that this repetition is meant to highlight “the contrast” between the two images. Philip Peter Jensen, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah: A Theological Commentary* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 161.
  29. Daniel Smith-Christopher, for instance, follows the tradition in noting simply that “‘dew’ is always a positive image” in the Hebrew scriptures. In somewhat compelling support of his position, he notes “the similar contrast of dew and lions in Prov[erbs] 19:12.” Smith-Christopher, *Micah*, 177–78.
  30. See Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah*, eds. P. D. Hanson and L. R. Fisher (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 71. Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Gary Stansell (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), 156, notes other occasions in the Israelite prophets' writings where dew can “mean something negative.”
  31. I limit this discussion to Isaiah 1–12 because it is there that the theological theme of the remnant appears most consistently and in its most developed form. The theme is arguably developed further, but without direct reference to “the remnant,” in Isaiah 40–55, major portions of which appear in the Book of Mormon. But because these later chapters do not directly address the remnant idea, I have left them out of this discussion.

32. The formation of Isaiah has become a major focus for researchers working on Isaiah. For a representative and particularly important work, see H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
33. See, for instance, the discussion in E. W. Heaton, "The Root  $\Psi\aleph\gamma$  and the Doctrine of the Remnant," *Journal of Theological Studies* 3.1 (1952): 27–39. As can be seen in the notes for the following discussion, many passages that have been generally regarded as late additions have been reevaluated in important recent work—especially that of J. J. M. Roberts—and the possibility of their having originated with Isaiah himself has been defended.
34. For a traditional approach to Isaiah authorship from a Latter-day Saint perspective, see Sidney B. Sperry, *Answers to Book of Mormon Questions* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 73–97; or, more recently but in a similar vein, 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 and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, 2016), 69–78. For an enumeration of a wider range of possible approaches to Isaiah authorship from a position of faith, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 291–92.
35. Edward J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah: Translated from a Critically Revised Hebrew Text with Commentary*, 2 vols. (Dublin: Richview Press, 1941), 1:10.
36. Commentators almost universally recognize the whole of Isaiah 2–4 as a larger literary unit, albeit made up of several oracles. See, for instance, the helpful discussion of literary units in Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39 with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 44–46. Although there has long been general agreement that the oracle of Isaiah 4:2–6 is a late addition to the text, J. J. M. Roberts has recently outlined an argument for its being original to Isaiah. See J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 67–68.
37. This is how the passage is rendered in Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 202.



38. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2007), 157–58.
39. Hasel, *The Remnant*, 266.
40. According to Hasel, *The Remnant*, 240, this passage outlines a destruction “in two stages,” since a *first* remnant—described in the text as “a tenth”—will be reduced even further upon its return to its lands. The holy Israelite remnant may thus be understood best as a remnant of a remnant. A similar interpretation can be found in Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 141. Here again there has been a general consensus that the word of hope in the Isaiah text is a late editorial addition. But also here again J. J. M. Roberts has recently made an important case that the text might be traced back to Isaiah himself. See Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 101–2.
41. For an introduction to the relevant historical events, see Edward F. Campbell Jr., “A Land Divided: Judah and Israel from the Death of Solomon to the Fall of Samaria,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 206–41. For some discussion of the dating of the passage, see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 257–58.
42. John Oswalt finds significance in the fact that Assyrian texts use the remnant motif “in a wholly negative sense to describe the thoroughness of their conquest.” He consequently sees Isaiah as deliberately repurposing the Assyrian use of the image: “Isaiah takes the Assyrian term, agreeing with their estimate of the situation, but then shows that even a remnant, in God’s hand, is more enduring than all Assyria’s might.” John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1–39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 269–70.
43. I have provided a much more detailed analysis of Isaiah’s account of the production of the Israelite remnant in Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 191–201.
44. Numerous dates have been assigned to the oracles in Isaiah 11, some of them very late (for a recent argument for a later date, see Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 263–64; for a recent interpretation that places the oracle

within Isaiah's own lifetime, see Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 177–83). On the whole, however, Brevard Childs seems right that “the importance of precisely dating 11:1–9 needs to be greatly relativized” because “the movement of the text within the larger context of the preceding chapters” presents itself as organized “in theological terms.” Childs, *Isaiah*, 100–101.

45. This passage especially has generally been regarded as a late addition to the book of Isaiah. See, however, the important rebuttal in Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 188–89.
46. Childs, *Isaiah*, 95, 103. See his discussion also on p. 102: “Chapter 11 has been editorially positioned to form the culmination of a theological direction that commenced at chapter 6.”
47. See references in Isaiah 14:22, 30; 15:9; 16:14; 17:3; 37:4, 31, 32; and 46:3.
48. Isaiah most fully develops this long and detailed story in passages that do not directly refer to Israel's remnant—at least by that term. These are to be found, significantly, much later in the book of Isaiah—especially in chapters 40–55, the portion of the book often called Second Isaiah.