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KnowWhy #48 - How Does Nephi use Isaiah to Teach Us to Avoid Pride?

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Abstract: One of the major themes that appears in the writings of the prophet Isaiah is that of pride. Isaiah warns against pride and its dangers in many prophetic passages. Nephi quoted many of these passages and expanded on Isaiah's original message in order to liken it both to his day and ours. By understanding this, we can learn from Nephi's and Isaiah's warnings against pride and hopefully avoid its many pitfalls that the ancient Nephites and Israelites fell into.



Laman and Lemuel struggled with pride, which kept them from fully accessing the Spirit. Image courtesy of Joseph Brickey

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How Does Nephi use Isaiah to Teach Us to Avoid Pride?

“Wo unto the wise in their own eyes and the prudent in their own sight!”
2 Nephi 15:21; Isaiah 5:21

The Know

One of the many themes found in the writings of Isaiah is that of pride. A universal sin, pride overcame the ancient Israelites of Isaiah’s day just as it overtakes many in our day. It likewise infected Nephi’s people, and so he incorporated warnings against pride by quoting Isaiah, who spoke of its dangers, and then offering his own commentary.

As BYU professor David Rolph Seely wrote, “Pride is a central theme of the prophecies of Isaiah that Nephi quotes and also of Nephi’s own prophecies. Recognizing this theme can help us better understand and appreciate these passages and to identify the metaphors used by Isaiah and Nephi to warn us against pride.”¹

Seely identified the theme of pride in the following Isaiah chapters that are also quoted in the Book of Mormon:

- Isaiah 2:11–12; 2 Nephi 12:11–12
- Isaiah 3:16–17; 2 Nephi 13:16–17
- Isaiah 5:15; 2 Nephi 15:15
- Isaiah 6:10–11; 2 Nephi 16:10–11
- Isaiah 10:13–15; 2 Nephi 20:13–15
- Isaiah 14:14–15; 2 Nephi 24: 14–15

Per his explicitly stated method, Nephi “likened” these scriptures (originally about the destruction of Judah, Syria, Assyria, and Babylon) to his situation and the situation that would befall his descendants, who would likewise become proud and thus reap God’s judgment.

Commentary by Nephi

- And the gentiles are lifted up in the pride of *their eyes*, and have stumbled, because of the greatness of their stumbling block, that they have built up many churches; nevertheless, they put down the power and miracles of God, and *preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning.* (2 Nephi 26:20)
- They may get gain and *grind upon the face of the poor.* (2 Nephi 26:20)
- Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man, or maketh flesh his arm, or shall harken unto the precepts of men, save their precepts shall be given by the power of the Holy Ghost. (2 Nephi 28:31)

Source from Isaiah

- *Wo unto the wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight!* (2 Nephi 15:21, parallel to Isaiah 5:21)
- What mean ye? Ye beat my people to pieces, and *grind the faces of the poor.* (2 Nephi 13:15, parallel to Isaiah 3:15)
- Their land is also full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made. (2 Nephi 12:8, parallel to Isaiah 2:8)

But as Seely elaborated, besides merely quoting Isaiah passages with the theme of pride and likening them to his descendants, Nephi also developed his prophetic commentary on this subject in his subsequent prophecies about the last days. For example, Nephi utilized Isaiah 3:15 (2 Nephi 13:15) and Isaiah 5:21 (2 Nephi 15:21) in his commentary on the pride of latter-day Gentiles in 2 Nephi 26:20. Likewise, Nephi utilizes the language of Isaiah 2:8 (2 Nephi 12:8) in his warning against relying “on the arm of flesh” in 2 Nephi 28:31.

Thus, Nephi’s extensive commentary in 2 Nephi 25–30 can be seen as a reflection on and adaption of many of the Isaiah chapters quoted earlier. Nephi can thus be seen as first introducing his readers to the theme of pride with these selections from Isaiah and subsequently developing a prophetic warning against this sin in later chapters.

As Seely explained, “Isaiah looks into the future and sees the destruction of a series of nations and peoples, and in each case he cites pride as the cause of their rejection of the Lord and of their eventual scattering and destruction. In his prophecy about the history of the Jews, Lehitites, and Gentiles, Nephi also identified, often in the language of Isaiah, the main challenge that each of these groups faces as pride.”²

The Why

Since pride is a sin that affects everyone to varying degrees, it is understandable why Nephi would be inspired to include a warning against it in his writings. The ultimate manifestation of pride is rejection of the Savior and his commandments, a course Nephi was keenly and tragically aware that his people would follow.

“Nephi [described] how the Messiah will present himself to [the Jews, Nephites, and Gentiles] and how in each case the main reason for their rejection of the Messiah and his gospel is pride,” Seely explained. “Ultimately, however, through the revelation of the Book of Mormon to the Gentiles, each group will repent of its pride, be brought back to a knowledge of the Messiah, and enter into a covenant with the Lord.”³ Nephi’s writings thus act as a prophetic precaution against pride for latter-day readers.

Additionally, “on a more personal level, Nephi identifies pride as one of the main reasons that his brothers Laman and Lemuel reject the teachings of their father and of Nephi,”⁴ Seely remarked. Nephi himself struggled with pride (2 Nephi 4:17–18), but, as Seely reminded us, overcame that by humbly submitting to the Lord (1 Nephi 2:16).⁵

Besides describing the dangers of pride, the Book of Mormon also teaches that humility, faith, patience, and charity are antidotes to fight this chronic sin. “As we read the warning against pride pronounced with eloquence by Isaiah and in plainness by Nephi, and as we study their other prophecies,” we can liken their words to our lives and benefit from their wisdom and guidance (2 Nephi 11:8).⁵

Further Reading

David Rolph Seely, “Nephi’s Use of Isaiah 2–14 in 2 Nephi 12–30,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 151–169.

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NOTES

1. David Rolph Seely, “Nephi’s Use of Isaiah 2–14 in 2 Nephi 12–30,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 156–157.

2. Seely, “Nephi’s Use of Isaiah 2–14 in 2 Nephi 12–30,” 164.

3. Seely, “Nephi’s Use of Isaiah 2–14 in 2 Nephi 12–30,” 158–159.

4. Seely, “Nephi’s Use of Isaiah 2–14 in 2 Nephi 12–30,” 165.

5. Seely, “Nephi’s Use of Isaiah 2–14 in 2 Nephi 12–30,” 168.