Eastern empires went into a period of decline. By the eleventh century these empires had regained some of their power, and their increasing encroachment into Israel pushed the tribes to unite under a monarchy. It is in this context that we see the earliest of Israel's prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha.

By the eighth century BCE Assyria had risen as the dominant empire, and the small, divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah were essentially powerless against it. By 722 BCE the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to Assyria, and by 701 BCE the southern kingdom of Judah had survived only because it submitted as an Assyrian vassal state, paying tribute and homage to the emperor. This is the context in which prophets such as Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, and Amos operated. Their books are suffused with the threat of Assyrian conquest, "See, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, destroying them utterly. Shall you be delivered?" (Isa. 37:11).

As the seventh century wore on, Babylonia came to power. Within a few short years it would destroy the Assyrians and establish an empire stretching from modern-day Iran to Egypt. Accordingly, Israelite prophets changed their focus to the new Babylonian threat. It is in this context that Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Nahum were active, and it is here that the Book of Mormon places Lehi. The prophets of the Babylonian period focused on the temple, on God's promises at Sinai and to David, and on what a life in exile would mean. In 586, King Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, captured it, and carried the people off to Babylon, thus ending ancient Israel's brief period of political autonomy.

The Persian King Cyrus captured Babylon in 539 BCE and allowed the Jews to return to the land of Israel and rebuild the temple. This return was initially met with euphoria. Prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah prophesied a return of the Davidic monarchy and the reestablishment of an independent Jewish state. But, as we saw in Chronicles, within a few decades that hope had largely died. Soon apocalyptic prophecy arose, the book of Daniel being one of its most popular examples.

Prophecy, Then and Now

With all this in mind, how should we approach these books of prophecy?

Should we treat prophetic oracles like the words of a fortune-teller—interesting, but not inspired? Did prophets see the future clearly, or did they only get impressions? Did the prophets predict the coming of Christ? Did they foretell the Book of Mormon? Do their words reveal hidden meanings to those who plumb their depths?

To answer these questions, let us consider a prophecy from Isaiah that is often interpreted to refer to Christ:

> Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman[1] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. (Isa 7:14–16)

The connection to Christ seems fairly straightforward. The young woman in question is Mary, and the name Immanuel means "God is with us." So Jesus' birth as the Son of God would be the literal fulfillment of the idea of God being with the people.

While this interpretation is uplifting to Christians, there is good reason to believe that if you were to ask Isaiah about it, he would not understand these words as referring to Jesus. This is simply because prophecy as a genre was not meant to be clear.

Regardless of if you believe Israelite prophets could see the future, there were plenty of diviners from Egypt to Babylonia who most certainly could not. How, then, did diviners stay in business? They made sure that their predictions were vague enough that they could be considered true no matter what happened.

For example, one Mesopotamian divination text reads, "If there is an eclipse of the moon in Nisannu and it is red—prosperity for the people."[2] This sounds straightforward enough, but how can you tell whether the people are prospering, and thus whether the prediction has come true? Short of a major catastrophe, such as a famine or having your city burn to the ground, almost any circumstance could

1. The King James Version translates this as "virgin," but it does so primarily due to the influence of Christian tradition. The Hebrew word here, עלמה (*'almah*), simply means "young woman."

2. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, *The Context of Scripture* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:423–24.

be seen as prosperous. Another text tells us, "A prophet of Marduk stood at the gate of the palace, proclaiming incessantly, 'Išme-Dagan [the king] will not escape the hand of Marduk. That hand will tie together a sheaf and he will be caught in it.'"[3] Again, this prediction is fairly safe. Everyone dies eventually, and in a time when kings rarely had long and prosperous reigns, it was only a matter of time before war, rebellion, palace intrigue, or sickness would bring this particular king down. These kinds of predictions are impossible to disprove, and if one believes that the diviner can actually see the future, one tends to look for evidence that confirms the prediction while ignoring any evidence to the contrary.

Like their non-Israelite counterparts, Old Testament prophets also tended to utter vague predictions that were difficult to falsify. For example, in the Isaiah passage above, is he describing a young woman who will one day give birth, or one who is currently pregnant? The Hebrew verb is ambiguous, hence the reason the NRSV translates it as "the young woman is with child" while the King James Version translates it as "a virgin shall conceive." Immanuel means "God is with us," but in this context is that a good thing or a bad thing? We are inclined to read it positively, but you do not want an angry or judgmental god to be with you, as seen a few verses later, when Yahweh brings the king of Assyria in judgment upon the people. What does it mean that the child will "eat curds and honey"? In verses 21–22 we read that "one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey." This seems to be an oracle of salvation, but the very next verse describes a deserted land that "will become briers and thorns." So maybe the curds and honey are signs of how desolate the land will become after the Assyrian invasion. We do not even know the identity of the woman who stands at the center of this prophecy. Regardless of whether the Assyrian invasion goes well or poorly, Isaiah could claim that this prophecy was fulfilled.

Isaiah is not trying to pull a fast one on us. He is simply following Near Eastern prophetic conventions. Almost every prophecy in

3. Marti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Peter Machinist (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 73.

the Old Testament was designed to be ambiguous enough that even their immediate meaning would not always be clear, much less any secondary or tertiary meanings. Whether it be the famine of the word of the Lord (Amos 8:11), the star that arises from Jacob (Num. 24:17), or the gathering of Israel (Isa. 66:20), these prophecies were meant to be vague. If a reader had only the Old Testament and no knowledge of subsequent history, they would not be able to identify the famine as referring to the Great Apostasy, the star as a Davidic Messiah, or the gathering of Israel as LDS missionary work. These prophecies were designed to resist such concrete interpretations.

There is a second reason why Isaiah is almost certainly not referring to Jesus in the passage quoted above. Archeologists have uncovered thousands of prophecies from the ancient Near East, and across the board, these prophets did not foretell events in the far future. The whole purpose of a prophet was to provide a glimpse into what would shortly happen. If a prophet said the gods were about to unleash catastrophe, the people rushed to repent and offer sacrifice. If a king was about to wage war, he needed to know whether he would win. And if a merchant was beginning a venture, the prophet could tell him how to prepare.

This prophetic role is seen throughout the Old Testament. Before going to war, Ahab "gathered the prophets together, about four hundred of them, and said to them, 'Shall I go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?' They said, 'Go up; for Yahweh will give it into the hand of the king'" (1 Kgs. 22:6). When Saul searches for his father's lost donkeys, his servant says, "There is a man of God in this town; he is a man held in honor. Whatever he says always comes true. Let us go there now; perhaps he will tell us about the journey" (1 Sam. 9:6). When Jeremiah writes to the captives at Babylon, he says that "only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will [God] visit you" (Jer. 29:10).

In all these examples, and in practically every other prophecy in the Old Testament, the timeframe is either implicitly or explicitly short. Prophets foretell what will happen today, tomorrow, or at most within the span of a lifetime, but not what will happen thousands of years from now. Long-term predictions were not part of the prophets' job.

In the case of Isaiah and the Immanuel prophecy, we can actually see the context and immediate time frame clearly. At the beginning of the chapter, we learn that Judah is being attacked by both Aram and the northern kingdom of Israel (which was also known as Ephraim). Isaiah 7:1 reads, "King Rezin of Aram and King Pekah son of Remaliah of Israel went up to attack Jerusalem." When Ahaz, king of Judah, hears about Israel's alliance with Aram, he is terrified (Isa. 7:2), so Isaiah comforts him, saying, "Do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and the son of Remaliah ... thus says the Lord Yahweh: It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass" (Isa. 7:4, 7).

Kingdom	King
Judah	Ahaz
Israel (also known as Ephraim)	Pekah, son of Remaliah
Aram	Rezin

Isaiah exhorts King Ahaz to be faithful and to trust in the Lord. He even predicts that "within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered" (Isa. 7:8). That is to say, Ahaz does not need to fear being attacked by these two kings, for their attack will not be successful; and the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim will be destroyed within sixty-five years. Ahaz is skeptical of Isaiah's prophecy (Isa. 7:11–12), so Isaiah offers him a sign that what he has prophesied is true: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ... For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted" (Isa. 7:14–16).

Notice the immediate time frame of this prophecy. The child Immanuel is not going to be born 700 years in the future; Immanuel is going to be born shortly after Isaiah gives the prophecy; and before the child is even old enough to know right from wrong ("before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good"), both Israel and Aram will be defeated ("the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted"). The child Immanuel is meant as a sign

to Ahaz that the Lord will protect him from this foreign invasion, though as we saw above, Isaiah is vague about whether this child also signifies the destruction of Judah at the hands of the Assyrians.

So did Isaiah foretell the coming of Jesus? His words *can* be applied to Jesus—a young woman giving birth to a child whose name signifies that "God is with us"—but the prophecy does not apply equally well to both Ahaz and Jesus. If we want to say that this prophecy is about Jesus, we have to deliberately ignore the references to the king of Assyria, to the eating of curds and honey due to the desolation of the land, to the fall of Israel and Aram, and to the whole purpose of the sign in shoring up Ahaz's resolve. But that is precisely what we do in Sunday school, quoting only the verse about Immanuel and never touching the rest. Saying that this is a prophecy about Jesus also goes against everything we know about how prophecy worked in Israel and the Near East.

Everything we know about the Immanuel prophecy suggests that if we look to the Old Testament prophets for proof of Jesus or the latter-day Restoration, we do so at our own peril. To take just one more example, consider Ezekiel's prophecy of joining together two sticks. The prophecy reads: "The word of Yahweh came to me: Mortal, take a stick and write on it, 'For Judah, and the Israelites associated with it'; then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with it'; and join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand" (Ezek. 37:15–17). Latter-day Saints have long held that these verses predict the coming forth of the Book of Mormon: the stick of Judah is the Bible and the stick of Ephraim is the Book of Mormon. Both come together to establish the whole gospel.

This interpretation, however, fits the prophecy poorly for two reasons. First, according to the Book of Mormon, Lehi and his family were descendants of Manasseh, not Ephraim (Alma 10:3), so they would not have written a "stick of Ephraim." The second and more serious problem is that this prophecy is clearly about the unified tribes of Israel, not their writings. "Stick" here most likely refers to a scepter, and Ezekiel is clearly talking about the reunification of Israel and Judah under a single monarch, as shown in the text itself. Ezekiel continues,

> And when your people say to you, "Will you not show us what you mean by these?" say to them.... I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms.... My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. (Ezek. 37:18–24)

The political meaning of this text could hardly be more explicit. Ezekiel is participating in a long tradition of prophets foretelling such a unification (see Hosea 1:11, Jer. 3:18).

Readers may object that a prophecy can have multiple meanings. But if we want to interpret this passage as prophesying the Book of Mormon, we would have to deliberately misread the text, ignoring the mention of David, the misalignment between Ephraim and Manasseh, and the broader context of Israelite prophets foretelling the reunification of Israel and Judah.

The Prophetic Call to Repentance

One of the most striking characteristics of biblical prophecy is how frequently the prophets lambast the Israelites for their sins. They are constantly proclaiming, "Repent and turn away from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations" (Ezek. 14:6), which leaves modern readers with the impression that Israel was particularly depraved. Such an impression is false.

We have to keep in mind that in ancient Israel there were two dominant ways of conceptualizing the relationship between Yahweh and his people: the covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai and the covenant with David on Mount Zion. These covenants were not mutually exclusive, but individual prophets tended to use only one in their preaching. Hosea, for example, was a northern prophet, and thus did not adhere to the promises attached to Zion and the Davidic monarch of the southern kingdom. Rather, his preaching draws from the exodus—for example, when he describes God's judgment on Israel as resembling the east wind drying up the Red Sea (Hosea 13:15). He also subscribes to the Sinaitic notion that no mediator stands between God and Israel. In line with this theology, Hosea