Solomon's magnificent temple in Jerusalem was approaching its bicentennial anniversary in 760 B.C. when a young lad named Isaiah first walked through its courtyards. The venerated structure with its long porches, spacious courts, and numerous auxiliary buildings must have strongly impressed the boy. Around the temple, large crowds dressed in fine robes and jewelry displayed the prosperity of a resurgent Judah, and Isaiah was undoubtedly proud to be a citizen of such a strong, noble nation. His own name, which meant "Jehovah's salvation," reflected the Lord's protection and blessings which seemed to flow unceasingly upon the people.

Isaiah's associations with the temple continued, culminating twenty years later in a vision of the Lord seated upon a high throne within the celestial temple. (Isa. 6.) After receiving his prophetic call, Isaiah visited the temple courtyards often to deliver the Lord's messages to the people. His visions penetrated the apparent prosperity of the people and condemned their prevailing unrighteousness. He declared how and why the Lord's long-suffering was coming to an end, and he prophesied of impending destruction, declaring that Jehovah's salvation would have to wait until his people were chastened and humbled.

Isaiah's warnings of judgment and promises of hope were transmitted to later generations in both oral and written form. The collection of his writings became one of the most important books of the Old Testament. Indeed, his words are so significant that he is quoted more in the New Testament, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Dead Sea Scrolls than any other prophet. His prophecies became the Lord's word for later generations of Israelites as they studied his writings and anticipated their fulfillment.

In spite of the comparatively large collection of Isaiah's writings, very little information was recorded about the
man and his family life. Isaiah was born about 770 B.C., and it is known that his father's name was Amoz (not the Old Testament prophet Amos; see Isa. 1:1), that he lived in Jerusalem, was married, and had at least two sons. (Isa. 7:3; 8:3.) Ancient Jewish tradition says Isaiah was related to the royal family of Judah, and the scriptures record that his ministry spanned the reigns of four Judean kings—Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. (Isa. 1:1.) He received his prophetic call near the end of Uzziah's reign (about 740 B.C.) and served for almost half a century until Hezekiah's death (about 692 B.C.). Jewish tradition states that Hezekiah was Isaiah's son-in-law, and some works record that Hezekiah's son, King Manasseh, had Isaiah encased within a tree trunk and sawn asunder with a wooden saw. (See Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 10:3; L. Ginsberg, Legends of the Jews 4:279; and the Talmud, Yebamoth 49b.) Christian tradition also supports the idea that Isaiah was sawn asunder and that he was among those martyred prophets mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 23:37 and by Paul in Hebrews 11:37.

Although little is recorded about the personal history of this great man, through his writings his noble character, sensitive compassion, political astuteness, and prophetic insight become apparent. The key to knowing the man Isaiah is the careful study of his words.

Isaiah as a Prophet

One valuable step in understanding Isaiah is to evaluate his unique prophetic role and teachings. He was the last major prophet to teach all the Israelite tribes before they began to scatter from the Holy Land. His words went with them to the four corners of the earth to instruct, inspire, and comfort them throughout following generations. However, as their descendants and other readers study his messages today, they experience difficulty in comprehending them because of the varied and complex nature of the prophecies. Most readers also lack an understanding of Isaiah's terminology, symbolism, imagery, phraseology, and style.

As people become more familiar with Isaiah's writings, they gradually begin to recognize and understand Isaiah's dominant key words and central ideas. They see how Israelites throughout the ages can receive inspiration from his messages. They also see how his prophecies can be expanded from an ancient Israelite setting to a latter-day universal context. This universality is especially evident in the last half of Isaiah's book, although many of his early pronouncements also have at least a double fulfillment, with application to his own time and also to a later age. Nephi recognized that many of Isaiah's teachings could be applied to his own people, so he "likened" or compared Isaiah's messages to his generation for their "profit and learning." (1 Ne. 19:23.) Modern readers continue to learn from Isaiah as they study his gospel insights and witness the fulfillment of many of his prophecies.

According to his own writings, Isaiah did not perform many great miracles, although he did promise a miraculous deliverance to Jerusalem (ch. 37), and after prophesying health to Hezekiah, he gave a sign or miracle by having the sun's shadow recede (ch. 38). His greatest power came not as a law-giver (like Moses) or a miracle worker (like Elijah) but as a prophet and seer who foretold many future events in the history of the world. Isaiah's warnings and prophecies cover almost three thousand years of Israelite history. They also foretell the first and second coming of the Messiah, the restoration of the gospel, the gathering of the house of Israel, the events and leaders before the Millennium, and some characteristics of the Millennium. As Christ said about Isaiah, "surely he spake as touching all things concerning my people which are of the house of Israel." (3 Ne. 23:2.)

Isaiah As a Poet

Few English readers realize that over ninety percent of Isaiah's writings are in poetic form. Isaiah was an eloquent master of the Hebrew tongue, and his vocabulary exceeds that found in any other Old Testament book. Some of the extensive vocabulary is due, no doubt, to the length of the book and the variety of subject matter, but much of it results from Isaiah's development as a poet. He delivered his prophetic messages in such sophisticated and exalted poetry that his writings attain heights of spiritual, intellectual, and artistic expression almost unparalleled in world literature.

Scholars are undecided as to whether his book is a collection of carefully prepared compositions by the prophet himself, or whether his inspiration was simply so intense that his poetry is an expression of the mind of God. After comparing his works with the writings of numerous other prophets, most students of the scriptures would agree that Isaiah's style is unsurpassed. Other inspired writers may reach similar heights of expression, but they can rarely sustain such a constantly high level or mastery of form and poetry as does Isaiah. It is granted that his prophetic insights and much of his power of speech were divinely inspired, but these talents must have been polished and refined by his personality, intelligence, and communication skills.

The Writings of Isaiah

Considering the length of Isaiah's ministry, it is probable that he gave many more messages than those recorded in his book. Old Testament prophets usually delivered their messages orally at the city gates or in a public assembly place, such as the temple courtyards in Jerusalem. Their important warnings and prophecies were written down by the prophet, his scribe, or one of his disciples. These written prophecies had only a limited circulation, however, and most ancient Israelites did not have any prophetic writings or scrolls in their own homes. They learned of the prophetic messages as they were repeated and discussed orally. Because of this oral transmission, prophets, poets, and psalmists organized their material into forms that could be easily remembered
and transmitted. The written copies of their literature were primarily used to verify the correct oral transmission and, especially in the case of the prophetic works, to serve as a witness or record of the Lord's counsel and promises to the people.

It is assumed that Isaiah personally recorded his prophecies or at least supervised their recording. At least twice, he was commanded to preserve his messages as a testimony for later ages. (Isa. 8:16; 30:8.) His works were not only passed on to later generations, but they also became a prophetic foundation used constantly by later prophets and apostles. Without a doubt, the writings of Isaiah constitute the most important prophetic discourses of the Old Testament. As mentioned earlier, Isaiah is quoted more in the New Testament, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Dead Sea Scrolls than any other Old Testament prophet. Jesus quoted Isaiah throughout his ministry. (For example, compare Isa. 61:1-3 with Luke 4:16-21.) Jesus also promised that all of Isaiah's prophecies would be fulfilled, and he commanded his followers to search Isaiah's words (3 Ne. 20:11-12, 23:1-3.) It is also significant that Christ chose the words of Isaiah to open our dispensation (compare Isa. 29:13 with JS-H 1:19) and to instruct the boy Joseph Smith (compare Isa. 11 with JS-H 1:40).