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Jeremiah’s Imprisonment and the Date of Lehi’s Departure

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When introducing his account on the small plates, Nephi pens the following chronological note: “For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah.” This note raises several questions. Let us explain. Nephi goes on to say that “in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they

must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4). Next, Nephi records the call and prophetic ministry of his father, Lehi, apparently as one of the “many prophets” who came to Jerusalem prophesying its destruction (1:4). Nephi then writes that his father prophesied to the people but was rejected and that the Jews in Jerusalem “sought his life” (1:5–20). Therefore, the Lord commanded Lehi to take his family into the wilderness, which Lehi did (2:1–4).

Since Nephi never explicitly specified the period of time between the call of Lehi in the first year of Zedekiah’s reign and the moment when Lehi and his family left Jerusalem, most readers of the Book of Mormon have assumed that Lehi led his family into the wilderness in the opening year of the reign of Zedekiah. This view finds evident confirmation from no less an author than Mormon, who declares in the heading to the book of 3 Nephi that Lehi “came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah” (3 Nephi, heading). But this picture is not as clear as it looks on the surface. Another piece in this chronology of events adds complexity to the precise dating of this period.

While in the wilderness, Lehi dreamed a dream that led him to prophesy that “six hundred years from the time that [he] . . . left Jerusalem, a prophet would the Lord God raise up among the Jews—even a Messiah, or, in other words, a Savior of the world” (1 Nephi 10:4). On this basis, one seems justified in assuming that Lehi left Jerusalem six hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Although the internal chronology of the Book of Mormon is carefully kept, which dates events from Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, these two notes concerning the first year of the reign of Zedekiah and the prophecy of the coming of the Messiah in six hundred years are the only concrete chronological evidences in the Book of Mormon that help to correlate Book of Mormon chronology with established biblical chronology.

Based on Babylonian records that can be correlated with astronomical events, biblical scholars date the first year of the reign of Zedekiah to 597 B.C.¹ Therefore, six hundred years after 597 equates to A.D. 3 or 4. No scholarly consensus exists on the birthdate of Christ; scholars usually argue for several dates ranging from 8 B.C. to 1 B.C.² Because Herod most likely died in 4 B.C. and because he is a major figure in the narratives of the birth of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, most scholars argue for a date of 5–4 B.C. for the birth of the Savior. This dating allows for only 593 or 592 years between the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah and the birth of the Messiah. This discrepancy between the first year of the reign of Zedekiah in 597 B.C. and the prophesied six hundred years to the birth of the Messiah remains an issue that has not been solved. A.D.

In 1993 and 1998, Randall P. Spackman published two important studies³ on this question in which he hypothesized that the best way to explain the six-hundred-year prophecy is to assume the Nephites adopted a lunar calendar (of about 354 days) that did not adjust itself through intercalation—that is, through adding a thirteenth month every three years or so—to catch up to the solar year (of about 365 days). Thus, the seventy-two-hundred lunar months of the six-hundred lunar years would equal 592 solar years, and this would fit with a birthdate of Jesus in 5 B.C. If scholars are to make this calculation fit the evidence in the Book of Mormon, however, they must postulate that Lehi and his family left Jerusalem between 588 and 587 B.C.—ten years later than the first year of the reign of Zedekiah and during the period of the Babylonian siege and capture of Jerusalem.

Spackman identifies two significant Book of Mormon passages that give evidence for his argument.⁴ The first passage is 1 Nephi 7:14 in which Nephi noted an imprisonment of Jeremiah, after Lehi and his family had left Jerusalem, when Nephi and his brothers were

escorting the family of Ishmael from Jerusalem to the first camp of Lehi and Sariah near the Red Sea. According to Spackman's reading of the biblical evidence, Jeremiah went to prison once and once only, and this imprisonment occurred in the tenth year of the reign of Zedekiah. (See Jeremiah 32:1-2; 37:4, 12-21.) Thus, the timing of Jeremiah's imprisonment should illumine the date of departure for the family of Lehi and Sariah, who had fled to their camp from Jerusalem.

The second passage is found in 2 Nephi 25:10, where Nephi prophesies that the destruction of Jerusalem should occur "immediately after my father left Jerusalem." Spackman appeals to both of these passages as evidence (1) that Lehi prophesied for almost a decade in Jerusalem before he finally went into the wilderness, (2) that the imprisonment of Jeremiah noted in the Book of Mormon is the same one mentioned in the Bible in the tenth year of the reign of Zedekiah, and (3) that the word "immediately" refers to the imminence of the Babylonian destruction in 587.

In contrast to those who accept a date for the departure of Lehi and Sariah from Jerusalem within the first year or so of Zedekiah's reign,⁵ Spackman opts for a later date. He concludes that Lehi's prophetic ministry lasted about ten years, beginning early in Zedekiah's reign (1 Nephi 1:4) until nearly its end. He further suggests that, even though the Babylonian army had begun its siege of Jerusalem before Lehi and Sariah left, an opening of at least five months allowed them not only to flee but even to send their sons back to the city twice. How so? The Babylonians had been forced to lift their initial siege when an Egyptian army moved up the Mediterranean coast to assist the beleaguered city (Jeremiah 37:5). The frame of Spackman's views rests on the observation—apparently solid—that Jeremiah suffered imprisonment only once, occurring very late in Zedekiah's reign. Spackman appeals both to Jeremiah's record and to the evident five-month hiatus in the siege noted by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 29:1–16; 30:20–26; 31:1–

18)—as well as to a notation of Nephi that reads: “Wherefore, it hath been told [the people of Judah] concerning the destruction which should come upon them, *immediately after my father left Jerusalem*; nevertheless, they hardened their hearts; and *according to my prophecy* they have been destroyed” (2 Nephi 25:10; emphasis added).

In Spackman’s reading, two key elements are found in this passage. The first is the phrase *immediately after my father left Jerusalem*, which evidently points to an imminent destruction of the city. Presumably, this would not have been the case if Lehi and Sariah had left early in Zedekiah’s reign and if the destruction were an event several years in the future. The second consists of the phrase *according to my prophecy* (2 Nephi 25:10), which Spackman attaches to 1 Nephi 7:13–14 where Nephi declared the following: “[Nephi’s brothers and others] shall know at some future period that the word of the Lord shall be fulfilled concerning the destruction of Jerusalem. . . . For behold, the Spirit of the Lord ceaseth soon to strive with them [the inhabitants of the city]; for behold, they have rejected the prophets, and Jeremiah have they cast into prison.”

For those who may hold the view of a late departure for Lehi and Sariah, the emphasis in this passage rests on the word *soon*. As we hope to show, however, these key passages do not introduce all the evidence that bears on the subject. Indeed, other passages in the Book of Mormon apparently point to an earlier departure of Lehi and Sariah, the emphasis in this passage rests on the word *soon*. As we hope to show, however, these key passages do not introduce all the evidence that bears on the subject. Indeed, other passages in the Book of Mormon apparently point to an earlier departure of Lehi and Sariah. Moreover, other observations based on the text of Jeremiah tend in a similar direction.

Spackman exhibits acquaintance with a passage in 3 Nephi where Mormon writes that Lehi “came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah” (3 Nephi, heading). But Spackman concludes that this must be an error on Mormon’s part, as Mormon did not have access to all the records of the Jews at the time and assumed, like many modern readers, that Lehi left Jerusalem in the same year that he received his prophetic calling—in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah. Spackman has produced a well-wrought work of scholarship arguing for his ingenious solution to the six-hundred-year problem. We believe, however, that a considerable amount of evidence exists, regarding these passages and other passages as well, that has not been considered and that argues for Lehi and his family leaving Jerusalem in the first year rather than during a later year of Zedekiah’s reign.

The Imprisonment of Jeremiah: 1 Nephi 7:14

Evidence exists that the imprisonment of Jeremiah noted in the Book of Mormon may not be the one mentioned in the Bible in the tenth year of Zedekiah’s reign but rather may be an earlier imprisonment. Let us make some important observations.

First, prophecies and narrative sections in the Book of Jeremiah are not organized chronologically. Many prophecies and some of the narrative are difficult to date. It is relevant to our discussion that “there are 2 periods of roughly 7 years each, 604–597, and 594–588 [B.C.], during which we have no definite knowledge of Jeremiah’s activities.”⁶ Therefore, if there were an imprisonment either at the end of the reign of Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.) or at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah, a period that would agree with an earlier departure date for Lehi and Sariah, we would not expect to find record of it in the book of Jeremiah. Even so, we note the following.

We recall that Jeremiah had nothing good to say about King Jehoiakim. Jeremiah condemned the king for building luxurious quarters for himself, for fostering violence and dishonesty, and for not caring for the poor (Jeremiah 22:13–17). Jeremiah also prophesied a shameful death for Jehoiakim that would not be mourned in Judah (22:18–19). In this connection, there are two accounts of Jehoiakim “restraining” Jeremiah. Moreover, as an example of Jehoiakim’s vicious response to opponents, he executed the prophet Urijah, who had prophesied against Jerusalem as Jeremiah did (26:20–23).

In the case of King Zedekiah, Jeremiah was critical of him as well. In a prophecy dated to “the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah the son of Josiah” (27:1),⁷ Jeremiah warned the king against mounting a revolt against Babylon. This warning would be an early spark in the conflict that grew up between Zedekiah and Jeremiah and would have offered the king an excuse to punish the already intractable Jeremiah at the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign. Although it appears, in fact, that Zedekiah did not pursue the revolt against Babylon, this incident reveals conflict between Zedekiah and Jeremiah that could easily have resulted in imprisonment of the prophet.

Another point has to do with several passages in Jeremiah that may be interpreted as references to imprisonment either before or during the early stages of the reign of Zedekiah. One early instance occurred in 605 B.C. when Jeremiah declared, “I am shut up” (36:5), referring to the fact that he was restricted from going into the temple area. Although the Hebrew word he used, *ʾas.ûr*, is ambiguous, it is usually rendered “imprisoned” or “in custody.” Significant for our discussion, this same word appears in Jeremiah 33:1, referring to the prophet’s imprisonment in Zedekiah’s tenth year “while he was yet *shut up* in the court of the prison.” We should note, not incidentally, that Jeremiah suffered two kinds of imprisonment during the tenth year of

Zedekiah's reign—in a dungeon and “in the court of the prison” (32:2; 33:1; 37:16, 21). When Jeremiah was “shut up in the court of the prison, which was in the king of Judah's house” (32:2), he may have been under a kind of protective custody, as he retained some privileges. But in 37:16, the situation was different. Jeremiah was put into a “dungeon” from which the king delivered him to the “court of the prison” (37:21). A further factor is the statement itself, “I am shut up” (36:5). Even though this expression could mean that Jeremiah was merely “debarred” from the temple, it may instead have involved some kind of formal or informal imprisonment. In this light, the imprisonment of the prophet in Zedekiah's tenth year may not have been the first and only such occasion.

A later instance occurred in 601 B.C. Jeremiah was punished by being put in “the stocks” (20:1–6). The Hebrew term here is also rather unclear. Some translators take it to mean “imprisoned.” The Hebrew word is *mahpeket*, and it occurs in the Bible only in Jeremiah 20:2, 3 and 29:26 and 2 Chronicles 16:10. In the Chronicles passage, the phrase “house of stocks” suggests that stocks were associated with a prison. The Greek translation renders this term *katarraktēs*, which means “trapdoor,” possibly leading to an underground chamber for confinement (see 2 Kings 7:2). The Aramaic Targum reads *kephta*, which can mean either “vault,” therefore “prison,” or “ceiling,” or some kind of wooden “collar” for confinement.⁸

To conclude, although we cannot solve the issue at hand simply on the basis of other probable confinements of Jeremiah, it is clear that the prophet did not get along with two kings. On two occasions, when the Babylonians were politically on the rise and threatening Jerusalem, Jehoiakim had Jeremiah restrained in some way. We think it likely that Jeremiah, who was accused of being pro-Babylonian, was imprisoned during the last year of the reign of Jehoiakim, who by then had revolted against the Babylonians. Jeremiah's imprisonment would have been

for the same reasons that he was imprisoned later by Zedekiah when that king revolted against the Babylonians (Jeremiah 37–38). In this light, it is possible that Nephi was referring to an imprisonment that began during the last year of the reign of Jehoiakim and continued into the early months of Zedekiah’s reign. As we have seen, because evidence exists for conflict between Zedekiah and Jeremiah at the commencement of Zedekiah’s reign, that conflict may well have also resulted in imprisonment, as happened late in Zedekiah’s kingship. However, because we do not possess a record of Jeremiah’s activities during this critical period, we cannot demonstrate decisively an imprisonment in the first year of Zedekiah. Even so, elements are in place that would not contradict and, indeed, that would support the possibility that Jeremiah had been imprisoned late in Jehoiakim’s kingship or early in Zedekiah’s. These elements are the forceful repression of public dissent by the two kings, open conflict between the prophet and the kings, and occasions when Jeremiah suffered official restraint. The Book of Mormon, therefore, may be referring to an early imprisonment. Let us next examine the second relevant passage from that work.

“The Spirit of the Lord Ceaseth Soon”: 1 Nephi 7:14

The declaration of Nephi, “The Spirit of the Lord ceaseth soon,” matches a key statement uttered by the Lord to Jeremiah. And the date of the Lord’s statement to Jeremiah may add a piece to solving our puzzle. The essential details are as follows.

After King Jehoiakim had destroyed the first version of Jeremiah’s prophecies by fire (Jeremiah 36), the Lord responded by issuing a blueprint for the destruction of the kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. Heretofore, the Lord had been warning the royal house and the citizens of a distant devastation if they did not repent. After the burning of the scroll, matters hardened. We note not only the tenor of the Lord’s words but also their devastating content:

“Thus saith the Lord of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David. . . . And I will punish him and his seed and his servants . . . and I will bring upon them, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the men of Judah, all the evil that I have pronounced against them” (Jeremiah 36:30–31).

As William Holladay has pointed out, this divine decree represented “a crucial change” in the Lord’s relationship with His people. Although the dating of this utterance depends on which manuscript of Jeremiah one appeals to, it came to Jeremiah by at least November/ December 601 B.C., clearly before Zedekiah’s accession to the throne and before Lehi’s call.⁹

As we return to Nephi’s statement about the Lord’s Spirit ceasing “soon to strive with” the inhabitants of Jerusalem, it seems reasonable to place it closer in time to Jeremiah’s prophecy in Jeremiah 36:30–31 than farther away. If we say it another way, the messages from the Lord to Jeremiah and to Lehi or Nephi are similar both in content and in timing. It does not seem reasonable that the Lord would tell Jeremiah something in 601 B.C. and then wait more than ten years to inform Lehi and Nephi.

Nephi’s Prophecy: 2 Nephi 25:10–11

We first turn to the issue of Nephi’s “prophecy” in 2 Nephi 25:10, which reads in part: “Wherefore, it hath been told [the people of Judah] concerning the destruction which should come upon them, immediately after my father left Jerusalem; nevertheless, they hardened their hearts; and according to my prophecy they have been destroyed.”

Spackman tied reference to this prophecy to Nephi’s much earlier warning that Jerusalem and its inhabitants would suffer destruction (1 Nephi 7:13–14). This proposal exhibits an attractive side, chiefly because both passages warn of Jerusalem’s approaching horrible fate. But

we consider the connection only tentative at best because Nephi clearly marks out his prophecy and because it stands entirely within the book of 2 Nephi, not in 1 Nephi 7.

We do not know when Nephi received inspiration for this prophecy. He may well have copied it from his fuller record on the large plates. But whether it came from the large plates or was a fresh prophetic statement that he added to the small plates, its date of composition remains unknown. Nephi opens it in 2 Nephi 25:4 by declaring that “I give unto you [those in his colony] a prophecy, according to the spirit which is in me.” He immediately emphasized his point by restating his intent: “I shall prophesy according to the plainness which hath been with me from the time that I came out from Jerusalem with my father.” Significantly, this prophecy consists of the rest of 2 Nephi 25 and all of 2 Nephi 26–30. How do we know this? Because Nephi opened 2 Nephi 31 with these words: “And now I, Nephi, make an end of my prophesying unto you, my beloved brethren” (31:1). Hence, his prophecy occupies almost the whole of six chapters, 2 Nephi 25–30. And the chief topics focus on the futures of “our children” (25:26, 27), the Gentiles, and the House of Israel. Only one tiny part has to do with the pending destruction of Jerusalem (25:10–11). And Nephi’s prophetic assurance of this devastating event seems to form the opening of his discussion of the future and thus serves mainly as a jumping-off point. Of course, we hasten to add that one should not minimize the importance of Nephi’s words about the fate of Jerusalem simply because of the broader themes of Nephi’s extended remarks. Even so, one must see them for what they are—that is, the beginning point for discussing everything in the following six chapters of 2 Nephi.

We now turn back briefly to Nephi’s statement of emphasis. As we have seen, he said, “I shall prophesy according to the plainness which hath been with me from the time that I came out from Jerusalem with my father” (2 Nephi 25:4). On the face of it, Nephi’s reference to “my

father” is odd. The expression seems to indicate that Lehi was not among the listeners. If so, he may already have been dead,¹⁰ thus hinting that the date of composition of this “prophecy” of Nephi fell after Lehi’s family arrived in the New World. If so, the language of 25:10—“immediately after my father left Jerusalem”—loses some of its importance for dating Lehi’s departure from the city. But the case is not completely firm one way or the other.

Because the date of the original composition of this long prophecy is unknown, we cannot appeal to it to solve the issue of when Lehi’s party left Jerusalem. It is tempting, of course, to seize on Nephi’s words and see them saying that Lehi and Sariah had fled virtually on the eve of the destruction of the city. But because many details surrounding the composition of 2 Nephi 25–30 remain unknown (for example, its date of composition and the occasion that brought it forth), we must resist making this text agree with any predispositions. This is particularly true because of the way that Nephi opens his prophecy, referring to his father as if Lehi had already passed away. Hence, we cannot rest much weight on Nephi’s statements here when seeking to solve our dating dilemma.

Laban as Record Keeper

Laban, a distant relative of Lehi, was the custodian of the plates of brass until Nephi took them, as the Lord had directed. After Nephi and his brothers arrived back in camp with the brass plates in hand, Lehi and Nephi went carefully through the record and apparently made an inventory on the spot, as Nephi’s summary hints (1 Nephi 5:10–16). The summary of the contents of the plates is important because not only did Nephi mention that it included “many prophecies . . . of Jeremiah” but also twice he wrote that the record was complete only “down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” (5:12–13). The key phrase—repeated—is *to the commencement of*, meaning “to the beginning of.” The two parts of the record that had been

completed “down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” were “a record of the Jews” and “the prophecies of the holy prophets.” These two sections of the record were evidently open ended—that is, they were being added to as time went on.¹¹

At this point, one naturally asks whether Laban had been a faithful keeper of the record. If he was, then the double notation of Nephi about the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign surely carries implications for the date of his father’s departure from Jerusalem. On this view, the record would have been complete up to the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign, and nothing further had been recorded because nothing further had yet occurred. This explanation is the simpler of two alternatives. Let us explain.

The second possibility is to see Laban as a slothful keeper of the record. That is, he and/or his scribe(s) had been derelict in his/their duties to keep a more or less up-to-date account of events and prophecies that affected citizens of Jerusalem. If this were the case, we could urge that Lehi and Nephi found themselves examining a record that was rather out of date in the two sections where additions might be expected. And if this is true, there are immediate consequences for our discussion here. For the door would be flung open to understanding that Lehi and Sariah had left well after the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign, perhaps as much as ten years later, as Spackman suggests. But this view is the more complex of the alternatives to reconstruct and thus is harder to accept if one uses the rule of seeing a simpler explanation as more likely. Moreover, there is another key consideration. When Nephi and his father inventoried the plates of brass, Nephi recorded no surprise at a presumed lapse on the part of Laban as record keeper. And one must assume such a lapse to sustain a later date for the departure of Lehi and Sariah. However, there is every appearance that Lehi and Nephi were satisfied with the state of the record as they found it on the plates.

Thus far, the weight of the evidence rests on the side of an early departure rather than a later one simply because the two ongoing parts of the record on the plates of brass were complete only “down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah” and no further.

There is an ancillary issue that may or may not bear in the larger question before us. It takes the following form. When Nephi noted that the plates of brass included “many prophecies *which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah*” (1 Nephi 5:13; emphasis added), his emphasis seemed to rest on the *oral* basis of the recorded prophecies rather than on a written source for them. As a result, it is our view that we cannot know whether the source of these prophecies was oral or written. For example, a scribe in the employ of Laban, or Laban himself, could have written down Jeremiah’s prophecies based on what one or both of them had heard directly (or indirectly) from Jeremiah. Alternatively, Laban or his scribe could have copied from the second, already extant, written record of those prophecies dictated by Jeremiah to his friend and scribe Baruch—the first record had been burned by king Jehoiachim (Jeremiah 36). In either case, however, we would have to see Laban as a faithful keeper of the record. For, in this role, he would have either sought out those who had heard Jeremiah preach to write down the prophet’s words, or he would have made the effort to find Baruch or Jeremiah himself to obtain a written copy of Jeremiah’s prophecies.¹² Either case points to an active, attentive record keeper.

Jeremiah’s Record

Dating Jeremiah’s record seems inconclusive for the purposes of trying to date the departure of Lehi and Sariah from Jerusalem. The initial command from the Lord for Jeremiah to write his prophecies came to the prophet “in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah” (Jeremiah 36:1). The year was 605 B.C. Jeremiah was to obtain “a roll of a book, and write therein all the words that I [the Lord] have spoken unto thee against Israel, and against

Judah, and against all the nations . . . unto this day” (36:2). The tone of those words is decidedly negative. In one of the most famous passages in prophetic literature, Jeremiah then “called Baruch the son of Neriah: and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord” (36:4). About a year later, during a national fast in the winter, Baruch read aloud “the words of Jeremiah” in the temple, “at the entry of the new gate of the Lord’s house” (36:10). The year was 604 B.C. Later, after “all the princes” heard what Baruch had read in the temple, for he read Jeremiah’s words again for them, the princes advised Baruch to hide himself and the prophet, while they reported the existence of the book to king Jehoiakim. The king, perhaps out of curiosity, asked a man named Jehudi to read the words written on the roll. As Jehudi “read three or four leaves” of the roll, the king “cut it with a penknife, and cast it into the fire,” thus destroying the initial copy of Jeremiah’s prophecies (36:12, 15, 19, 23).

But the Lord would not be put off by a mere king. He then commanded Jeremiah to dictate “all the former words that were in the first roll” (Jeremiah 36:28). So Jeremiah “gave” another roll “to Baruch the scribe” and then dictated “all the words of the book which Jehoiakim king of Judah had burned . . . and . . . added besides unto them many like words” (36:32). It was in this way that Jeremiah’s prophetic book, as we know it, was born.

It is possible, perhaps even probable, that Laban or his scribe had copied this version of Jeremiah’s prophecies onto the plates of brass, which was incomplete because more prophecies were to come. But we must also remain open to the possibility that the version on the brass plates was a different copy. For when Nephi mentioned the work on the brass plates that bore Jeremiah’s name, he spoke of “many prophecies . . . of Jeremiah” (1 Nephi 5:13), almost as if the book were incomplete or not properly arranged. In any event, there are more questions than answers.

Mormon's Note in the Heading of 3 Nephi

One of the key ingredients in Spackman's reconstruction consists of an adjustment, this one having to do with a notation written by Mormon at the beginning of 3 Nephi. Such adjustments, we must admit, are often part of attempted reconstructions of historical events. In a way, these adjustments also form an admission that the evidence one can assemble is somehow incomplete or contradictory and does not all lead to a definitive conclusion.

The statement in question is the following: "Lehi . . . came out of Jerusalem in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, the king of Judah" (3 Nephi, heading). At issue is Mormon's reliability on this point because he was not an eyewitness to this event and depended on earlier sources, which he could have misread or not remembered correctly.

We happen to agree with Spackman that Nephi is a better witness than is Mormon, who lived a thousand years after the founding family fled Jerusalem. Nephi, after all, wrote of his personal experiences and was thus a witness of the first rank. Even so, one must not discount the fact that Mormon had access to the large plates of Nephi on which Nephi wrote "the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness" (1 Nephi 19:2). Hence, presumably Mormon had read a fuller account of the family's flight into the desert, including something akin to the actual date.

Circumstantial Considerations

We now turn to considerations based on how Nephi expressed certain features of his experience and how those features match what we know about both the situation of his family and that within the country. The first has to do with the five months when the Babylonian army lifted the siege of Jerusalem to face the Egyptian force approaching from the south. Spackman theorizes that it was during this five-month period, almost in the Babylonians' dust, that Lehi's

family left the city, set up camp near the Gulf of Aqaba, and saw the sons go back to Jerusalem twice, initially for the record on the plates of brass and again for the family of Ishmael.

On the face of it, such an explanation presents more difficulties than an explanation theorizing that the family left early in Zedekiah's reign when there was no Babylonian threat. Let us clarify.

The first difficulty is the period of five months. Although it is possible that all the business described in 1 Nephi 2–15 (the flight, the camp, etc.) took place within five months, it may have consumed more time. Although we are inclined to agree that it was only a short period of several months that passed between the family's departure from Jerusalem and their movement south from the first camp,¹³ not all students of the Book of Mormon agree. Moreover, to postulate that the family must have experienced all they did within a specified time—five months—that was filled with military conflict near their home asks readers to make too many assumptions. The following considerations are relevant.

After Lehi had sent his sons back to the city from the camp the first time to obtain the plates, their mother, Sariah, grew worried as she waited for her sons' return that they "had perished in the wilderness." Moreover, in a pointed complaint against her husband, she accusingly said that he had "led us forth from the land of our inheritance" (1 Nephi 5:2). In contrast, when the sons went back to Jerusalem a second time to convince Ishmael and his family to join them, Nephi recorded no such worries or complaints from his mother. What might all this mean? From what Nephi has recorded, his mother's anxieties were not connected to the close proximity of a foreign army, such as the Babylonians. If, in fact, the Babylonians had just broken off their siege of the city before she and her family fled to the neighborhood of the Red Sea and if the subsequent clash between the Babylonians and Egyptians was not yet settled (on this view,

it would have been ongoing while the family of Lehi and Sariah were in their camp), we would expect Nephi to record a different set of anxieties for his mother. Furthermore, since there was no guarantee that the Babylonians would not return to Jerusalem to create havoc there, why would she agree to her sons' returning to the family home only to face possible danger at the very heart of the conflict? In addition, if the Babylonians had already once surrounded the city and if the family estate was not within the walls,¹⁴ the Babylonian army would probably have already destroyed the family property as soldiers took control of the neighboring countryside. After all, both archaeology and the Lachish letters demonstrate that the Babylonians systematically destroyed all settlements within fifty miles of Jerusalem before beginning the initial siege.¹⁵ If so, what would any members of her family return to?

This question raises to view an important pair of responses from members of Lehi's family about their property at or near Jerusalem. After the family, now in company with Ishmael's family, had trudged off into Arabia and had reached "the place which was called Nahom," certain members of the party threatened to return the fourteen hundred or so miles back to the city (1 Nephi 16:34, 36). Later, after they had all arrived in their land of Bountiful, which was even farther away from home, some of the same persons bellowed that "we might have enjoyed our possessions and the land of our inheritance; yea, and we might have been happy" (17:21). If, in fact, the family estate of Lehi and Sariah had been destroyed or had even narrowly escaped destruction, when the Babylonian army showed up at Jerusalem to begin the siege, why would people in the party think they could return? Why would they believe that their "possessions" and their "land of . . . inheritance" were somehow still intact? The simplest answer is they had no reason to believe that all was not well at home. They had evidently departed while

affairs in and around Jerusalem were reasonably peaceful rather than on a war-time footing. And they had heard nothing different.

This observation leads us to the evident lack of news of Jerusalem's fall. It is certain that party members met people as they traveled from their first camp deeper into Arabia. They could not have avoided such contacts for the entire trip. One of the most important proofs that they met others is the phrase "the place which was called Nahom" (1 Nephi 16:34). Unlike all the other place names noted by Nephi in his narrative, which his father conferred on those spots, Nahom already had a name when they arrived. And they learned it from someone else.

In this connection, camel caravans had been carrying incense out of southern Arabia into the Mediterranean world and into Mesopotamia long before the fall of Jerusalem. Those caravans carried goods north and brought news back to people in the south. If the Babylonians had captured and ravaged Jerusalem within, say, a few months after Lehi's party had traveled farther into Arabia, we would expect such news to reach the travelers somehow. Even though the party probably avoided contact with others as much as possible, as some details in Nephi's narrative hint (for example, 1 Nephi 17:12), they would certainly have learned of events connected to the wider world, including Babylonia's military actions. In fact, news of Jerusalem's fall would eventually have even traveled by boat around Arabia as far as Bountiful, which lay on the southeast coast.¹⁶ But Nephi offers no hint of such news before the party departed on its ship for the New World. Because the fall of the city had formed an important part in Lehi's prophetic ministry (1:13, 18) and because it was also a part of Nephi's prophesying (2 Nephi 25:9–10), it would be an omission of first magnitude if Nephi had failed to record the moment when party members heard the news of Jerusalem's destruction.

Another issue centers on the ages of Sariah and her eight children. The matter attaches initially to two claims of Nephi about himself. First, he assured readers that he wrote his record “according to my knowledge” (1 Nephi 1:3). Thus, we can reasonably conclude that Nephi was old enough to pay attention to events at the beginning of Zedekiah’s reign, the starting point of his record (1:4). Second, after Nephi’s family had set up camp near the Red Sea and he and his brothers had gone back to Jerusalem for the brass plates, he described himself as “exceedingly young, nevertheless . . . large in stature” (2:16; cf. 4:31).¹⁷ If Nephi had indeed been old enough to pay close attention to matters when Zedekiah came to power and if ten years had then passed before his family traveled to the Red Sea, his remark that he was “exceeding young” would make little sense. Let us explain.

In an important study on the family of Lehi and Sariah, John Sorenson has plausibly suggested that Nephi was no older than seventeen when his family went to the Red Sea, a point in accordance with the fact that none of his older brothers were yet married.¹⁸ Furthermore, Sariah’s child-bearing years also come into play here. Her situation takes the following form. If her fourth son, Nephi, were, say, in his early teens when Zedekiah became king of Judah and if the family had remained in Jerusalem for another ten years, Nephi would have been in his early twenties when the family departed to the Red Sea. Such a view would mean that Nephi’s oldest brother, Laman, was close to thirty years of age when the family went to the Red Sea. (We do not know whether Laman was Sariah’s oldest child because she also gave birth to at least two daughters [2 Nephi 5:6], and we do not know where they fit in the order of Sariah’s births.) If Sariah had borne Laman when she was, say, fifteen or sixteen years old, a plausible age, she would have been in her mid forties when she and Lehi departed Jerusalem, assuming they had remained there for ten years after Lehi’s prophetic ministry began. The problem at this point

becomes obvious. She eventually gave birth to two more sons, Jacob and Joseph. But if she were already, say, forty-three or forty-four when she moved to the Red Sea, her biological clock would have almost expired. Hence, it is simpler, more plausible, to postulate an earlier departure when Sariah was a younger woman.

As a final note, we want to point to another pair of details in Nephi's narrative that evidently support the earlier departure date. Both details tie to the fateful night when Nephi entered Jerusalem to seek the brass plates and later exited the city with both the plates and the man Zoram (1 Nephi 4). The two details concern the apparent ease with which Nephi at first entered and then left the city after dark. Let us explain. If we accept the later date for Lehi's departure and hypothesize that the first Babylonian siege had just been lifted a few weeks before so that the Babylonian army could meet the Egyptian army threatening from the south, we would expect that Jerusalem authorities would have still been worrying about a possible return of the Babylonian forces. Therefore, at night, the gates of the city would have been shut—or at least carefully watched. But Nephi offers no hint that he encountered difficulty at the gate where he entered. To be sure, he writes that he “crept into the city” (4:5). But Nephi's caution seems to grow out of the two recent altercations with his kinsman Laban and that man's henchmen rather than a need to avoid sentries at the gate (see 3:10–14, 22–27).

The second detail, that of Nephi's exit from the city, offers a similar picture. In fact, when he writes of leaving Jerusalem with Zoram, it is as though the two of them strode out of the walls without sentries challenging them. They certainly were conversing in a way that guards would have heard them (see 1 Nephi 4:22–27). In addition, the two of them would have been quite visible in the strong light of the moon whereby Nephi had earlier examined the unusually fine features of Laban's sword (see 4:9). In light of the evident laxness at the city gate, therefore,

we are inclined to see Nephi's nighttime entry and exit as occurring during a period of relative peace—that is, early in Zedekiah's reign.

Lehi's Vision

On balance, it appears that members of Lehi's party possessed no firm knowledge of the fall of Jerusalem while they were on the trail in Arabia—or even after they had reached Bountiful. Such an observation weighs against a view that Lehi and Sariah left Jerusalem late in Zedekiah's reign. Rather, it was evidently only through a vision, after they had reached the New World, that they learned of the fulfillment of prophecies about the city's destruction. The receiver was Lehi.

On the occasion of his last blessings to his children and grandchildren, he announced, "I have seen a vision, in which I know that Jerusalem is destroyed; and had we remained in Jerusalem we should also have perished" (2 Nephi 1:4).¹⁹ Presumably, Lehi meant that they would have perished either when the Babylonian army was ravaging the countryside before beginning the siege or after the Babylonians had penetrated the gates of the city and slaughtered people who had fled within the walls for protection. Indeed, because it came as a vision, Lehi may have actually seen the fall of the city as the prophet Nahum did the fall of Nineveh. Further, from Lehi's words, it seems clear that neither he nor anyone else in the party had known for certain that the city had fallen until this announcement from the Lord. This observation, too, weighs against a notion that Lehi's prophetic ministry had lasted ten years, to the end of Zedekiah's reign, virtually on the eve of Jerusalem's fall.

Conclusion

This review, as far as it has gone, inclines us to believe that Lehi and Sariah left Jerusalem early in King Zedekiah's reign rather than near its end. The reason? There are fewer

problems if one accepts the earlier date. To be sure, each position faces challenges. But there seem to be fewer such challenges if one postulates an earlier departure.

Notes

¹ Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, rev. ed. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1998), 257–60.

² *Ibid.*, 291–302.

³ Randall P. Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Principal Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates,” FARMS Preliminary Studies (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1993) and “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no.1 (1998), 48–59.

⁴ Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology,” 6–14; “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” 57–59.

⁵ For example, George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1955), 57; Lynn M. and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi’s Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 48.

⁶ Jack R. Lundbom, “Jeremiah,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman et al., eds., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:689.

⁷ The King James Version following the Massoretic Text reads “reign of Jehoiakim.” But the context and the manuscript evidence weigh in favor of “reign of Zedekiah.” See William L. Holladay in *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26–52* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 112–13.

⁸ See the discussion of these passages by William L. Holladay in *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 542–43.

⁹ Ibid., 4–5.

¹⁰ Consult the references to “their fathers”—that is, the generation that came out from Jerusalem, which makes one think that this generation had died off among the Lamanites (Jacob 3:7, 9; also cf. Enos 1:18; Jarom 1:2, 9; etc.).

¹¹ Nephi hints that he—or perhaps his father Lehi—updated his own record annually, a feature that John Sorenson has pointed out in private correspondence. This explanation solves the rather awkward notations of dates that are joined in 1 Nephi 1:4: “in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah . . . in that same year.” If Nephi and/or Lehi by custom updated records each year, this might offer a clue to the frequency of Laban’s scribal activity.

¹² The first written record of Jeremiah’s words is termed “the words which Baruch wrote *at the mouth* of Jeremiah,” perhaps underscoring the oral base of the dictated text (Jeremiah 36:27; emphasis added).

¹³ For example, see S. Kent Brown, “A Case for Lehi’s Bondage in Arabia,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (fall 1997): 206. 14. Hugh Nibley estimates between one and three years, see *Lehi in the Desert, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Deseret Book, 1988), 5:60. Lynn and Hope Hilton estimate between two and three years (*In Search of Lehi’s Trail*, 50).

¹⁴ The family estate seems to have been located outside the walls of Jerusalem because Nephi wrote as if it were some distance away (1 Nephi 3:22–23).

¹⁵ For a brief rehearsal of the fall of the city, including the ravishing of the countryside, see John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 327–30.

¹⁶ Although no written records exist of ancient Arabs sailing around the Arabian Peninsula, no less an authority than George F. Hourani concludes that they were doing so centuries before

Hellenistic culture reached Arabia in the third century B.C. (*Arab Seafaring* [Princeton: Princeton University, 1951], 11). Further, references to Solomon's navy in the Red Sea point to ancient seafaring activity along Arabia's coasts (1 Kings 9:26–28; 2 Chronicles 8:17–18).

¹⁷ The importance of these two passages and the ages of family members were pointed out by John Sorenson in private correspondence.

¹⁸ John L. Sorenson, "The Composition of Lehi's Family," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 2:174–96, esp. 175–79.

¹⁹ Later, Jacob, Lehi's son, also received a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem in 2 Nephi 6:8.