

Lehi's Jerusalem: Bible vs. Book of Mormon

By A. Chris Eccel, Ph.D.

www.gptouchstone.org

The Book of Mormon professes to be the history of the peoples of the Americas for over one thousand years, from c. 597 BCE to 421 CE. These are claimed to have descended from Hebrew settlers who had been commanded by God to leave Jerusalem before His wrath should be visited upon it. To this end, a prophet was raised up, Lehi, to take two families by divine guidance out of Jerusalem to a new land, choice above all others, and reserved empty just for them, to preserve a branch of Israel to be gathered in the Last Days unto Christ Victorious.

The destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the destruction of the Temple of Solomon, Solomon's Palace and the walls of Jerusalem, are all events of epic proportion, and figure prominently in Judeo-Christian Biblical commentary and sermonology. There seemingly would be no better time for Lehi's mission than shortly prior to this destruction, when, traditionally, Israel was carried off to Babylon.

The problem is, there were two disasters of epic proportion, the sack of Jerusalem, and the destruction of Jerusalem. The sack of Jerusalem ended the reign of Jehoiachin, whose brief time on the throne (only three months) followed that of his father, Jehoiakim. The sack is described as follows:

“And he carried out thence all the treasures of the king's house and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the Lord, as the Lord had said. And he carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valour, even ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths: none remained, save the poorest sort of the people of the land.” (2 Kings 24: 13-14)

The sack of Jerusalem is documented independently in cuneiform texts regarding Nebuchadnezzar's campaigns, and, interestingly, by a rations list for his captive, King Jehoiachin, found by archaeologist Robert Koldewey, and translated by Ernst Weidner. Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, king, and changed his name to Zedekiah (his throne name). He rebelled against Babylon, and in his ninth year Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem again, slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, gouged out his eyes, took him into captivity, and destroyed the temple, the palace and the walls. (2 Kings 24:20 & 25:1-21)

The account in the Book of Mormon of Lehi's vision and departure from Jerusalem, in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, gives curious details:

For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of Zedekiah, king of Judah, (my father Lehi having dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days); and in that same year there came many prophets prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city of Jerusalem must be destroyed. (1 Nephi 1:4)

Actually, the most remarkable prophet to warn Jerusalem was Jeremiah, who dictated his vision/warning in his prison cell to Baruch to read it in the House of the Lord, and to the Judeans, which he did. Jehoiakim ordered that the scroll be brought to him, and hearing part of it, he burned it. When Jeremiah was released from prison is unclear, but he was again imprisoned by Zedekiah. Given Jehoiakim's treatment of his scroll, he probably remained in prison until the sack of Jerusalem.

Lehi's family must have resided with their father in Jerusalem for much if not most of their life. That Lehi was a man of great means is indicated by his possessions outside Jerusalem. In order to have the means needed to purchase a copy of the Hebrew scriptures translated into ancient Egyptian, inscribed on brass plates, from their owner, Laban, Nephi says, "therefore let us go down to the land of our father's inheritance, for behold he left gold and silver, and all manner of riches." (1 Nephi 3:16) It is clear from this that Lehi was not one of "the poorest sort of the people of the land." At the beginning of the first year of Zedekiah, he and his household would already have been carried off to Babylon in the sack of Jerusalem.

Laban meets two of the criteria to have been deported as well: he was wealthy, and a military leader in Jerusalem. Nephi takes from him his breastplate (which he inexplicably was wearing at a drinking party) and his sword: "the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceeding fine, and I saw that the blade thereof was of the most precious steel." (1 Nephi 4:9) Of his power, Nephi says, "he [the Lord] is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands." A servant, Zoram, has a key to Laban's treasury, where the brass plates were kept. Certainly no such wealthy and mighty elite would have remained in Jerusalem after its sack.

Zoram "spake unto me concerning the elders of the Jews, he knowing that his master, Laban, had been out by night among them." (1 Nephi 4:22) In the sack, just prior to the elevation of Zedekiah to the throne, the elders of the Jews had been carried off to Babylon.

There is a reference to Jeremiah being in prison, without the time being specified. But since it is probable that he had been released during the sack of Jerusalem, one might expect some reference to that fact.

The total chaos and destitution in the first few months of the reign of Zedekiah must have made it very difficult to outfit a caravan for two families to travel all the way across or around Arabia to the Indian Ocean, on route to the New World. Such a party would constitute a very large caravan, with mounts, most probably camels, canopied sedans for the women, and as many camels to carry the tents, food, and of course the water. To provision themselves along the way, they would need trade goods, especially to secure fresh water. The sack of Jerusalem, and these challenges, were worth at least a mention. On the contrary, the Book of Mormon assumes it has not yet happened. Only months after the sack of Jerusalem, Laman and Lemuel, two rebellious sons of Lehi, murmured against their father: "Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed..." (1 Nephi 2:13)

It is clear that the BOM authors were so steeped in popular sermons regarding the destruction of the temple and palace of Jerusalem that they did not carefully review the scriptural account, detailed in the Second Book of Kings.