



Type: Magazine Article

The Boy, Nephi, in Jerusalem

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley

Source: *The Instructor*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (March 1961), pp. 84-85

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: Historical fiction about the possible thoughts on a day in the life of the twelve-year-old Nephi in Jerusalem.

The boy, Nephi, in Jerusalem

by Hugh W. Nibley



EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is the author's concept of what might have been in the Jerusalem of about 600 B.C. While not scriptural, the details of trade and politics, and the general background indicated herein are supported by the author's extensive research and by artifacts of the period.

WE can best imagine what life was like in Lehi's Jerusalem if we visit the city, not during the frightening days just before it fell, but in happier times a few years earlier, when Nephi was a boy of, say, 11 or 12.

The elegant Syrian sundial in the courtyard showed just "half-past four" in the afternoon (for in those days at Jerusalem they counted 24 hours to a day and 60 minutes to an hour—exactly as we do!), and Nephi had just finished his lessons. His teacher, a clever old Hebrew who had joined his father's employ at the big (mostly ruined) market town of Zoan in Egypt, had given him a bad time. He was now making Nephi put all the books and pens and tablets back in their proper places among the scrolls, inkpots, and writing plates (the ones used for important contracts) in the big book closet. Nephi deserved the extra disciplining, for his mind had wandered during the lesson. He had been quick enough in arithmetic and had had no trouble with Hebrew, which even the poor country people read and wrote in those days; but that cramped and squiggly Egyptian stuff was awful. Nephi's father, like every educated man of his day, knew all about the great centers of learning that stretched from Egypt to India, where even Jews had to go to study if they wanted to become important men — priests, physicians, scholars, statesmen — and he was determined that his sons should not lack learning.

But today Nephi had other things to think about, for that morning in the kitchen he had

learned that Uncle Ishmael was coming down from Sidon with a load of goods. Last year his uncle had promised to bring Jonadab with him next time — and now it was next time. Of the same age, Jonadab and Nephi had had wonderful times together the summer they manned the watchtower in Father Lehi's vineyards. The caravan should arrive, as usual, about sundown; and poor Nephi was in agony during the last hour of the lesson. Once released, he raced down the winding, narrow streets like a skillful quarterback carrying the ball, barely missing dirty children playing tag or King-of-the-Mountain, servant girls with huge jugs of water, poor peasants peddling loads of firewood, donkeys burdened with dried fish from Galilee or cheese from Bethlehem.

Nephi always liked to visit the big square at the West Gate where most of the caravans unloaded. The little shops under the wooden arcades around the sides of the square were always interesting. Sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued storekeepers skillfully, but not too honestly, manipulated their little hand scales amid piles of textiles or sandals or dried figs or pots and pans or skins or herbs or watermelons. But even they could not compete with the wonderful bales and crates of stuff that the camels brought in from goodness knows where — much of it so valuable that it was only opened in the presence of great merchants such as Nephi's father. Sometimes a drove of splendid horses, pampered like princes by their drovers, would spend the night in a corner of the great square. One could even see huge, gray brahma bulls for sale. Originally from India, these great beasts were very popular in Egypt and Babylonia. Every visit to the big *suq* held some surprise.

But this time, the surprise was Jonadab. For just as Nephi burst panting into the square, there

(For Course 9, lesson of May 21, "Lehi and His People"; for Course 3, lesson of March 12, "Nephi Was a Prophet"; and for Course 15, lesson of March 26, "Nephi, a Statesman.")

was Jonadab tugging away at the halter of a stately yellow camel to get the beast into position for unloading. With a glad cry of greeting, Nephi jumped over a huge pile of Cappadocian rugs and rushed to join his friend. But before he could reach him, he had to stop short, for there right in front of him was Uncle Ishmael, an impressive figure in his big, floppy traveling cap and his long, red robe with its lordly array of dusty fringes and tassels. Nephi went down on his knees and bowed so low that he almost touched the ground with his head — for that was the proper way to salute a respected person. His uncle asked him how things were at home and why he happened to be in town when tomorrow was a holiday.

"I came to take Jonadab with me," said Nephi; and, reminding Ishmael of his promise, "We'll stay here tonight and go out to the country the first thing in the morning."

Ishmael released the happy boy after promising Nephi that he would follow along later for dinner. It was an exciting place where the boys were going tomorrow: Father Lehi's "inheritance," or big family estate, was right on the edge of the desert. Here a boy could become really handy with a bow and arrow and learn to track things almost as well as the desert people themselves.

As the two boys toiled upward through the streets carrying Jonadab's things, Nephi remembered that if they were going to leave in the morning, he would have to show his cousin the wonders of the new wall right now. So he veered off toward the northwest corner of town. Soon the boys were looking up with interest and admiration at the huge, idle derricks and soaring scaffoldings. Nephi set his bundle down amid a great litter of stone chips and started up a ladder; Jonadab hesitated only a second and then followed.

"They're always building these walls," Jonadab panted as they climbed, "and now they are working even harder than they were the last time!"

"I know," said Nephi. "Laman says it's silly because Necho is our friend, and Egypt is stronger than anybody in the world. Next year or perhaps the next they are going to beat the daylights out of the Babylonians, so we have nothing to worry about. Father's not so sure, though. He says the prosperity of Jerusalem can pass away just as quickly as it came."

"Well, anyway, the temple is the same as ever," Jonadab observed as he reached the top of the wall and looked around.

"Yes," Nephi rejoined, "they say it hasn't changed much since King Solomon built it over

300 years ago. But there was a man who visited us last week who said that even the temple can be destroyed if the people aren't more righteous."

"Oh, I know; one of those crazy prophets. They're always saying things like that." Jonadab shrugged his shoulders.

"This one's different. He isn't one of the poor ones who live in little rooms in the temple. His name's Jeremiah, and he is an important man. He even knows the King of Babylon — they say he's related to him, or something like that. So Laman says it's all just politics, because Laman's for Egypt. But father talked with the prophet all night long. Look out there. There's going to be a storm."

Against a darkening, stormy sky to the south and east, the temple stood out in the rays of the setting sun like dazzling gold.

"Let's go up to the end of the wall. The guard won't care. It's the highest point in the city except for the temple. Do you know that you can see the great sea from the top of the temple? And that's the way to the south desert, over those hills. My father has been there lots of times, clear down to Elath on the Red Sea! I wonder if I'll ever get that far. . ."

Nephi chattered on until they reached their goal and the city lay beneath them: Jerusalem, one of the very oldest cities in the world, was an intricate jumble of square stone houses, broken here and there by the dark little canyon of some street. The bright plaster of the buildings was quiet and subdued in the dusk under the thin pall of blue smoke. The broad litter of flat roofs (the rugs, couches, and screens were gone, for the warm season was over) gave way here and there to a cluster of little cupolas or the looming mass of some public building. In the background, the lines of the battlements and gate towers of the city wall stood out in sharp silhouette against the evening sky. To the east, the Mount of Olives caught the full benefit of the sunset; but it was the temple that made both boys cry out in wonder as it changed from gold to deep coppery red. From the southeast came a rumble of thunder; and with the nightfall, a desert wind began to blow.

"It's kind of scary, isn't it?" said Jonadab as they started back to the ladder. "I wonder if the prophet was right — about the temple, I mean."

"There's lightning out there in the desert. I wonder what it is like there. They say there are places there where nobody has ever been. Maybe mother will let us go camping."

Back on the ground, the boys picked up Jonadab's luggage and trudged across town to dinner.