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Chapter 13

LEHI AND JEREMIAH: PROPHETS, PRIESTS, AND PATRIARCHS

David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely

“For it came to pass in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah, . . . there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4). Thus Nephi begins his record with the call of his father Lehi to become a prophet and to join the other prophets in Jerusalem prophesying the imminent destruction of Jerusalem.¹ Jeremiah was one of these prophets. Lehi in his brief ministry in Jerusalem² would deliver the same message that Jeremiah had delivered for almost thirty years before Lehi’s call, and he would suffer the same rejection and persecution. Their respective lives and records, preserved in the Book of Mormon and the Bible, richly complement each other. Lehi and Jeremiah are first and foremost prophets. They lived and ministered to their people in a pivotal time in the history of Israel. Their records are timely in that they illustrate the perils of the period that led to the disaster of Babylonian conquest and exile for Israel and the departure of Lehi’s family for the promised land. At the same time their



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Jeremiah, by Michaelangelo. Detail from the Sistine Chapel.



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Detail of *Lehi Preaching in Jerusalem*, by Del Parson.

messages are timeless. Lehi and Jeremiah testified of Christ through their deeds and through their words, and both looked forward to the restoration.

Lehi and Jeremiah are an interesting study in contrast. Both were prophets, but Lehi was called to leave Jerusalem and deliver his family from destruction, while Jeremiah was called to stay and witness the destruction and exile of his people. Both were priests—Lehi after the order of Melchizedek and Jeremiah a member of a distinguished Aaronid family. Both were patriarchs—Lehi of a family that would become a people divided among themselves for centuries and Jeremiah of a people who were already divided, taken into exile where they would face the challenge of maintaining their identity.

A brief review of their backgrounds and missions may foster a greater appreciation for these prophets and help illuminate the message they proclaimed. We can learn from the book of Jeremiah what it was like to live in Jerusalem at the time of Lehi, and we get a sober view of what would have happened to Lehi and his family had they not been warned by the Lord to flee.

Lehi was a wealthy family man who was well educated, as evidenced by the instruction he gave his children (see 1 Nephi 1:1–2). Because Lehi was familiar with the language of the Egyptians and with desert life, many have suggested he was a merchant.³ He was married to Sariah, and they had four sons and an unspecified number of daughters. Two more sons were born in the wilderness as they traveled. Jeremiah, on the other hand, was a priest and was commanded not to marry or have children because the deplorable situation in Jerusalem would only result in the deaths of those children. Although Lehi found many challenges in his own family, Jeremiah would face a terrible loneliness in his prophetic calling (see Jeremiah 16:1–4).

Both men came to their people prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem because the people had broken the covenant, and both would contribute to an understanding of the covenant tradition in the future. Lehi and his family would inherit a new promised land in the Americas, given by covenant (see 2 Nephi 1:9); Jeremiah would look to the future when the Lord would give to his children “a new covenant” (Jeremiah 31:31–33).

The lives of these two men are symbolic of different aspects of Israel’s relationship with the Lord. Jeremiah’s life was a symbol of the justice of God and the impending destruction of Jerusalem. He was commanded not to marry and not to have children, lest they die grievous deaths (see Jeremiah 16:1–4), and he was commanded not to mourn for the people because the Lord had taken away his “lovingkindness and mercies” (Jeremiah 16:5–7). Neither was he allowed to participate in the house of feasting and joy because the day was upon Judah when gladness would cease (see Jeremiah 16:8–9). And yet Jeremiah experienced the mercies of the Lord as his life and that of his scribe Baruch were spared. Jeremiah sought solace and comfort in his relationship with the Lord and prophesied the return and restoration of his people (see Jeremiah 30–31).

Lehi’s life illustrated the “tender mercies of the Lord” (1 Nephi 1:20; 2 Nephi 1:2). He was commanded to deliver his family from destruction, to leave Jerusalem, and to inherit another promised land. His family was chosen to be a remnant of the house of Israel that would be preserved from destruction (see 2 Nephi 3:5). And yet Lehi underwent severe trials in the wilderness and experienced the justice of God as he witnessed the apostasy of his sons and looked into the future and saw the terrible destructions of his people. Both prophets rejoiced in their visions of the coming of the Messiah. Jeremiah saw him in terms of justice: he “shall execute judgment and justice in

the earth” (Jeremiah 23:5). Lehi saw him coming in mercy and justice (see 2 Nephi 2:8, 12).

Jeremiah, in his ministry, longed to flee into the wilderness: “Oh that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men; that I might leave my people, and go from them! for they be all adulterers, an assembly of treacherous men” (Jeremiah 9:2). On one occasion in his tent in the wilderness, Lehi began to murmur against the Lord because of his afflictions (see 1 Nephi 16:20), and his family forever remembered Jerusalem with nostalgia.⁴

Historical Setting

Jeremiah and Lehi were both descendants of Israel. Jeremiah was from the tribe of Levi through Aaron (see Jeremiah 1:1) and was descended from the priestly family of Abiathar. Abiathar, one of the two high priests that served under David, had supported the rebellion of David’s son Adonijah; consequently, Solomon exiled Abiathar to the little town of Anathoth, two and a half miles to the northeast of Jerusalem (see 1 Kings 2:26–27). Centuries later Jeremiah was born and lived in Anathoth but spent much of his ministry in Jerusalem.

Lehi descended from the tribe of Joseph through Manasseh (see Alma 10:3), which had been assigned territory in the north when Israel entered the promised land. Nephi tells us that Lehi had lived his entire life at Jerusalem until he was called by the Lord to flee into the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 1:4). We do not know when or under what circumstances Lehi’s ancestors left the land of their inheritance in Manasseh and moved to Jerusalem, but several times in the Old Testament mention is made of members of different tribes residing in Jerusalem. At the time of Asa (898 B.C.; see 2 Chronicles 15:9) and later during the days of Hezekiah (715–687 B.C.; see 2 Chronicles 30:25), there is mention of descendants of Manasseh in Jerusalem. Perhaps they had

moved there to participate in the religious reforms of these two kings, or perhaps the latter group had fled from the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. Archaeological evidence suggests that Jerusalem grew dramatically during the reign of Hezekiah, probably because of the influx of refugees from the north. This growth in population was accommodated with the construction of two new residential and commercial quarters in Jerusalem called the Mishneh (where Huldah resided; see 2 Kings 22:14) and Makhtesh (see Zephaniah 1:10).⁵

David established the capital of the united kingdom in Jerusalem around 1000 B.C., and his son Solomon built the temple there. In 922 B.C., at the beginning of the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam, the kingdoms divided between the ten northern tribes and the two southern tribes. In 722 B.C. the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed and the ten tribes were taken into captivity by Assyria. Although many cities in the southern kingdom were destroyed by the Assyrians in 701 B.C. (see 2 Kings 18:13), Jerusalem was miraculously preserved because the people repented under the direction of the prophet Isaiah and the righteous king Hezekiah (715–687 B.C.; see 2 Kings 18–19; Isaiah 36–37). Hezekiah was followed by Manasseh, known in 2 Kings as the most wicked of all the kings of Judah. He established idolatrous worship throughout the land, even in the temple, and shed much innocent blood (see 2 Kings 21). We do not know exactly the dates of the births of Jeremiah or Lehi, but it is very likely that they were born either during or immediately after the reign of the wicked king Manasseh (687–642 B.C.) and that they were very close to the same age. Jeremiah was called to be a prophet as a young man in 627 B.C. (see Jeremiah 1:6).⁶ Lehi was called to be a prophet in 597 B.C., already a man with grown sons and daughters.

Jeremiah and Lehi lived their early years during the reign of King Josiah, known as one of the most righteous of Judah's kings. He came to the throne at a young age and was instrumental in cleansing the temple and reestablishing the covenant. Both Lehi and Jeremiah must have been encouraged by the repentance of the people. As the Assyrian Empire was beginning to weaken, there were great hopes of nationalism, but Josiah was tragically killed at Megiddo in 609 B.C., after which two decades of tumult began. Josiah was replaced by Jehoahaz, who was shortly taken into exile to Egypt and replaced by his brother Jehoiakim (609–587 B.C.). At the Battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C., Babylon decisively defeated Assyria. Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon, which led to the exile of a select group of Jews to Babylon in 598 B.C. Jehoiakim died and was replaced by his son Jehoiachin, who was promptly exiled to Babylon after ruling only three months. The Babylonians next put Zedekiah, a son of Josiah, on the throne. All of these events combined to shape the world of Jeremiah and Lehi in which the beginning of the Book of Mormon takes place.

The Jerusalem of their time was a city of about 125 acres and a population of between 25,000 to 30,000 people.⁷ It had expanded beyond the original Jebusite city that David conquered to include the temple and its surroundings built by Solomon, the citadel with the palaces, as well as the quarters called the Mishneh and Makhtesh. The city walls had been expanded and repaired by Uzziah, Hezekiah, and Manasseh to encompass much of the hill to the west of the city. Jeremiah, who lived in a village outside of Jerusalem, spent much of his time in and around the temple precincts because of his duties as prophet and priest. Lehi may have lived in one of the new quarters of Jerusalem or even outside the city.⁸

Lehi and his family certainly knew of the prophet Jeremiah. Some of his prophecies up to the time of Zedekiah had already

been copied onto the brass plates (see 1 Nephi 5:13). Furthermore, Nephi made note of Jeremiah's incarceration (see 1 Nephi 7:14). These observations raise an important question of whether Lehi and his family departed early in the reign of King Zedekiah, perhaps within the first year of his reign (597–596 B.C.), or whether the party left Jerusalem just before the final Babylonian siege some ten years later. Randall Spackman has brought forward reasons for the later dating that are based largely on Nephi's reference to the imprisonment of Jeremiah (see 1 Nephi 7:14) and the fact that, according to Jeremiah's book, he went to prison in the tenth year of Zedekiah's rule, only months before the Babylonians captured the city (see Jeremiah 32:1–2; 37:15–16, 21; 38:6–13, 28).⁹ The book of Jeremiah is silent about Jeremiah's activities during the first year of Zedekiah's reign. If Jeremiah was imprisoned at that time, as suggested by the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 7:14), we would not expect to find a reference to this imprisonment in the Bible. But two passages in Jeremiah's book may refer to earlier imprisonments. In 605 B.C. Jeremiah declared "I am shut up," referring to the fact that he was restricted from going into the temple area (Jeremiah 36:5). The Hebrew word he used (*atsur*) is ambiguous. It can mean "imprisoned" or "in custody." In fact, it is the word in Jeremiah 33:1 that refers to his imprisonment. Later, in 601 B.C., Jeremiah was punished by being put in "the stocks" (Jeremiah 20:1–6). The Hebrew word used here is also not clear; some translations take it as meaning "imprisoned." Hence, Jeremiah's celebrated imprisonment just before the city fell to the Babylonians in 587 B.C. was not the only instance in which the prophet had been officially restrained.¹⁰

Lehi and Jeremiah may have known each other, and it may well have been through the priesthood that they shared association. We may assume that those commissioned by the Lord

to prophesy in Jerusalem were acquainted with each other. Orders of the prophets known as the “sons of the prophets” were known in ancient Israel from the time of Saul and Samuel (see 1 Samuel 10:5; 19:20) and at the time of Elijah (see 1 Kings 18:4) and Elisha (see 2 Kings 2:3; 3:11; 4:1, 38; 6:1–2). (False prophets were also apparently organized [see 1 Kings 22:6; 2 Kings 23:2; Jeremiah 26: 7–8].) It is possible that a group of legitimate prophets also existed in Jerusalem shortly before the exile. Joseph Smith taught that all the prophets, presumably including Jeremiah, had the Melchizedek Priesthood.¹¹ Lehi and his family certainly had the Melchizedek Priesthood, as evidenced by Alma 13, which describes the Nephite priesthood as Melchizedek. It is likely that Lehi and Jeremiah were part of a Melchizedek Priesthood community in Jerusalem, and it is not unlikely that one even received his priesthood authority from the other.

The Records

Lehi kept a record, although we only know it through the writings of his sons. Nephi used his father’s record in his own account on the large plates and the small plates.¹² In the small plates, Nephi and Jacob give us portions from the record of Lehi interspersed in their own writings (see 1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 4; Jacob 2:23–24; 3:5). Nephi tells us he did not make a “full account of the things which [his] father hath written, for he hath written many things which he saw in visions and in dreams; and he also hath written many things which he prophesied and spake unto his children” but that he made an “abridgment of the record of [his] father” (1 Nephi 1:16–17).

A collection of the writings of Jeremiah was preserved on the brass plates and another passed down—now found in the Old Testament. The Book of Mormon records that the brass

plates contained “the prophecies of the holy prophets, from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah; and also many prophecies which have been spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah” (1 Nephi 5:13).¹³ Although we do not know the process by which the keeper of the brass plates acquired and wrote the prophecies on the plates, the book of Jeremiah is the only book in the entire Bible that tells us how it originated.

In 605 B.C. the Lord commanded Jeremiah to recite to his scribe Baruch all the words of the Lord from the time of Josiah down to that moment (see Jeremiah 36:1–4). Jeremiah then commanded Baruch to take this scroll and read it to the people in the precincts of the temple (see Jeremiah 36:8). This Baruch did, but, when King Jehoiakim heard about it, he ordered Baruch to deliver the scroll to the king. Jehoiakim had a servant read the scroll to him, and as he heard the words of the Lord read to him, he took his knife and cut the scroll in pieces and burned it (see Jeremiah 36:20–26). The Lord then commanded Jeremiah to take a fresh scroll and give it to Baruch and to dictate again the prophecies. Baruch wrote down all of the prophecies that had been lost, together with many similar words (see Jeremiah 36:32).

From this account we learn many significant things about the book of Jeremiah, and several possibilities emerge as to how Jeremiah’s writings were preserved on the brass plates. First, it seems clear that Jeremiah maintained the prophecies in his memory for a long time. Jehoiakim’s destruction of the scroll of Jeremiah may have provided the impetus for the keeper of the record on the brass plates to acquire a copy of the prophecies of Jeremiah. The keeper of the brass plates could have had Jeremiah dictate the prophecies directly to him to be recorded on the plates; possibly Baruch loaned him the scroll; or perhaps

the keeper of the brass plates copied the record from the second scroll as a backup in case the scroll was again destroyed. It is interesting that the Book of Mormon does not specify that the prophecies of Jeremiah up to the time of Zedekiah were preserved. Perhaps this is an indication that the sayings of Jeremiah were copied onto the brass plates in conjunction with the attempt to destroy the prophecies of Jeremiah during the reign of King Jehoiakim (see Jeremiah 36).

Prophetic Calling

Both prophets began their records with an account of their call. Jeremiah was called in his youth. In 627 B.C. the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and called him to be a prophet to the nations, delivering messages of destruction—“to destroy, and to throw down”—and of restoration—“to build, and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:10). The Lord revealed to him, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). Jeremiah was overwhelmed and replied in language rather like that of Enoch and Moses, “Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child” (Jeremiah 1:6). The Lord commanded him to “be not afraid” (Jeremiah 1:7) to go where he was sent and to deliver the message, which was given symbolically to Jeremiah by the touch of the Lord’s hand to his mouth (see Jeremiah 1:7–10). The Lord reassured him that “I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar” against the kings, princes, priests, and people, and “they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee” (Jeremiah 1:18–19; see also 1:11–17). His entire life’s mission consisted of delivering the word of the Lord and witnessing the calamities that befell those who would not respond.

Lehi, on the other hand, received his visionary call as a mature man, while praying “with all his heart, in behalf of his people” (1 Nephi 1:5)—behavior already suggesting prophetic stature. Because we do not have his complete record, we cannot be certain that this is the first time he received divine instruction, but it is the first vision that we have record of, and it is reminiscent of the vision in Isaiah 6, where that prophet saw the Lord upon his throne at the time he received his prophetic call (see Isaiah 6:1–13). Lehi recorded that “he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne” with the angels singing and praising God. He then saw one whose “luster was above that of the sun at noon-day” and “twelve others following him” (1 Nephi 1:8–10). Lehi was also given a book to read, from which he learned of the abominations and destruction of Jerusalem and that many would perish and many would be taken to Babylon in captivity. He did not respond with fear but with rejoicing because the Lord is “merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!” In fact, “his whole heart was filled, because of the things which he had seen, yea, which the Lord had shown unto him” (1 Nephi 1:14–15). Lehi then “went forth among the people, and began to prophesy and to declare unto them concerning the things which he had both seen and heard” (1 Nephi 1:18).

Types of Moses and Types of Christ

Although Jeremiah and Lehi were both prophets and both delivered similar messages, their lives were quite different. Each of their ministries manifested the will of the Lord and testified of the Savior, but in very different ways.

Lehi and his family would relive the exodus.¹⁴ Lehi received his call when he went before the Lord in the tradition of Moses as mediator for his people (see Exodus 32:30–32), praying “in

behalf of his people” (1 Nephi 1:5). The Lord appeared to him just as he appeared to the children of Israel in the wilderness—as a “pillar of fire” (1 Nephi 1:6). Lehi became like Moses as he gathered his children, delivered them from the apostate and idolatrous world of Jerusalem, and led them into the wilderness. There they were tested and tried, as were the children of Israel. At the same time they were guided and protected by the Lord. Nevertheless, his family, like the children of Israel, responded by murmuring. Just as Moses suffered from the hardheartedness, stiffneckedness, and rebellion of the children of Israel, at one point including members of his own family, Aaron and Miriam, so did Lehi suffer from the rebellion of his own children. Furthermore, the children of Israel rebelled against Moses and sought to kill him; Laman and Lemuel, along with the children of Ishmael, rebelled against Lehi and attempted to kill him (see 1 Nephi 16:13; 17:44).

Whereas Moses led his people to Sinai, where they received the law on tablets of stone and built the ark and the tabernacle, Lehi led his people into the desert with the law safely preserved on plates of brass. After many trials the children of Israel entered Canaan, a land of milk and honey, under the direction of Joshua. Lehi led his family to the promised land—a land of great abundance given to them by covenant (see 1 Nephi 18:24–25)—with the same conditions given to the children of Israel as they entered Canaan: if they were righteous, they would prosper; if they were wicked, they would be destroyed (see 2 Nephi 1:20).

Moses, before he was taken away from his people,¹⁵ gathered the children of Israel and pronounced a series of blessings and curses upon their heads and prophesied that in the future the children of Israel would be scattered by their enemies and then gathered (see Deuteronomy 27–30). Likewise, Lehi, on his

deathbed, gathered his posterity around him and pronounced upon them conditional blessings and curses. Lehi saw his seed both blessed and cursed, depending on their acceptance of the Holy One of Israel, and their eventual destruction, scattering, and gathering (see 2 Nephi 1:1–4:12).

Lehi would be remembered by his descendants as the deliverer and the founder of their community (see Mosiah 7:19–20), and the divine deliverance of Lehi and his family was understood as a type and a shadow of the divine deliverance from sin and death that would be provided in the future by the atonement (see Alma 36:28–29). Lehi was a patriarch over a family that would build, plant, and establish a covenant community that would last for more than a thousand years. They would write a book that would contain the fulness of the gospel and would be one of the keystones of the restoration. This book would be restored in the latter days to bring Lehi's descendants back to a knowledge of the covenants and to Christ.

The course of Jeremiah's life tragically turned out to be a reversal of the exodus. Whereas Moses led his people away from idolatrous Egypt and presided over a people that wandered in the wilderness for forty years until they had purified themselves to enter the promised land, Jeremiah ministered for forty years (627–587 B.C.) to a people who became increasingly wicked until they were expelled from the promised land. Jeremiah was a prophet whose mission can be seen as opposite to that of Moses.¹⁶ Moses openly contested the gods of Pharaoh and demonstrated the power of God to deliver his people at the Red Sea. Jeremiah called the people to repent of their worship of idols but openly urged them to surrender and taught them that it was the Lord's will for them to submit to wicked and idolatrous Babylon. Although Moses heroically interceded for

his people at Sinai, Jeremiah was commanded not to intercede for his people (see Jeremiah 7:16–20; 15:1–4). Moses was the intermediary who established the covenant with Israel at Sinai and brought to his people the law inscribed on stone. Jeremiah looked forward to the establishment of the new covenant when the law would be written on the fleshy tablets of the heart (see Jeremiah 31:31–34). Moses left his people at Nebo on the threshold of the promised land; Jeremiah was forced by his friends to leave the promised land and, crossing the wilderness, to enter Egypt. His final words were prophecies foretelling the destruction of those from Judah who would return to Egypt and resume the practice of idolatry (see Jeremiah 44).

An overlooked role of Jeremiah's life was that he presided over the exile from afar. Many of the righteous among Israel were exiled to Babylon, and Jeremiah, although he had no direct descendants that we know of, was a patriarch over Israel in exile. He wrote a letter to the exiles urging them to build and to plant (see Jeremiah 29:5) and to raise their families where they were. Jeremiah advised his contemporaries to submit to Babylon, for the Lord was in charge. He told them that Israel would only be restored and gathered in the time of the Lord. The children of Israel emerged from the exile strengthened against idolatry. Jeremiah was remembered by his people as providing the model of living in the exile, of patiently submitting to the political rule of other powerful nations until the Lord again would gather and restore them to their homeland. In a sense, Jeremiah was the father of the Jews in exile. The model authored by Jeremiah has been followed by the Jews until the twentieth century, when they again established a homeland in Israel and began to exercise political independence.

“The Manner of Prophesying”

There was a sophisticated tradition or style of prophecy among the ancient Israelites called by Nephi “the manner of prophesying among the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:1). The word of the Lord was communicated to the prophets through dreams, visions, or sometimes through the spoken word. It was often presented in poetry, replete with dramatic and vivid imagery and symbols. Sometimes the prophets communicated the word of the Lord orally, sometimes in writing, and sometimes through symbolic acts. Jeremiah and Lehi are both prime examples of prophets within this tradition. They were both visionary men whose lives and prophecies were full of graphic symbols and images.

Many of Lehi’s divine communications came through dreams and visions. At the outset of his ministry he saw God on his throne and the coming of the Savior, and he read a book containing the abominations of his people. He then saw the marvelous vision of the tree of life that represented the quest for eternal life (see 1 Nephi 8). In this vision Lehi saw his family following a path, holding to a rod of iron, and moving through the mist of darkness toward the tree of life to partake of the fruit. Laman and Lemuel would not partake of the fruit, and Lehi used his account of this vision to exhort his sons to hearken to his words and seek the mercy of the Lord. Nephi, desiring to “see, and hear, and know of these things,” prayed to the Lord for help in understanding. In response, he was told that “the mysteries of God shall be unfolded . . . by the power of the Holy Ghost” (1 Nephi 10:17, 19). Laman and Lemuel were not able to understand the symbolism of Lehi’s vision and complained, “We cannot understand the words which our father hath spoken,” and Nephi asked them, “Have ye inquired of the Lord?” (1 Nephi 15:7, 8). On another occasion in the wilderness, Lehi named the river Laman and the valley Lemuel in a dramatic attempt to teach his sons through symbolic acts.

Jeremiah too had visions—frequently they were occasions when the Lord used ordinary objects such as an almond rod (see Jeremiah 1:11–12), a seething pot (see Jeremiah 1:13–14), a basket of figs (see Jeremiah 24), and a cup of wrath (see Jeremiah 25:15–38) to teach divine truths. Throughout his ministry Jeremiah was called upon to perform a series of dramatic symbolic acts to teach his people: burying a linen girdle as a symbol of the exile (see Jeremiah 13), watching a potter at work as a symbol of the destruction and restoration of Israel (see Jeremiah 18), breaking an earthen flask as a symbol of destruction (see Jeremiah 19), wearing a yoke as a symbol of captivity (see Jeremiah 27:2–28:17), purchasing land in Anathoth as a symbol of return and restoration (see Jeremiah 32:6–44), and bringing the Rechabites before the king as an example of a people faithful to their covenants.

Message: Repent or Be Destroyed

The prophecies of Jeremiah and Lehi have four common and central themes: repentance and the impending destruction and exile by the Babylonians; the coming of the Messiah; the future scattering and gathering of Israel; and the eventual restoration of the gospel in the latter days.

In the years preceding Lehi's departure from Jerusalem, King Josiah had cleansed the temple and renewed the covenant between the Lord and his people. What should have been the best of times, however, had become the worst of times. Lehi testified to Jerusalem of her "wickedness and . . . abominations" (1 Nephi 1:19), and Jeremiah spelled out what they were. At the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim (609 B.C.), Jeremiah delivered a powerful sermon at the temple (see Jeremiah 7; 26). He warned his people that the temple would not save them from destruction if they did not repent. Although the sacrificial system of the law of Moses was faithfully being carried out at the

temple, it masked the hypocrisy of the people who broke the Ten Commandments and worshipped idols. Jeremiah accused his people of stealing, murder, swearing falsely, all manner of idolatry (see Jeremiah 7:9), and of oppressing the stranger, the fatherless, and the widows (see Jeremiah 7:6). The people, on the other hand, trusted that the temple made them invincible. They probably looked back to the reign of Hezekiah when they were delivered from the Assyrian destruction in 701 B.C. by the miraculous destruction of the Assyrian army (see 2 Kings 19).¹⁷ The people thought that the Lord would deliver them from the Babylonians. This attitude is reflected in the Book of Mormon by Laman and Lemuel, who never did “believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed” (1 Nephi 2:13; see also Helaman 8:21).

Both men were persecuted for their prophecies, and the Jews sought their lives. Jeremiah was repeatedly arrested, tried, and eventually put into a pit. Lehi’s life was threatened in Jerusalem, and in the wilderness he had to face the murmuring and the persecution of his own sons (see 1 Nephi 2:13). That the threat to their lives was real is illustrated by the story in the book of Jeremiah of the prophet Urijah, the son of Shemaiah, who prophesied against Jerusalem during the reign of King Jehoiakim according to all the words of Jeremiah. When the king heard his words, he sought his life; Urijah fled to Egypt but was forcefully extradited and taken back to Jerusalem, where the king had him executed with a sword and thrown into a common grave (see Jeremiah 26:20–23).

Lehi was able to escape the destruction of Jerusalem that he witnessed in vision (see 2 Nephi 1:4). Jeremiah witnessed with his own eyes the disaster that he had attempted for forty years to avoid—the destruction of his people and the exile of the remainder. Jeremiah’s record contains a sobering description of

what would have happened to Lehi's family had they remained in Jerusalem. Jeremiah describes the Babylonian siege that lasted two and a half years and tells us that famine ravaged the city; when the city fell, many were slain, the temple was sacked and burned, and most of the survivors were taken into exile (see Jeremiah 39; 52). In the book of Lamentations Jeremiah describes young and old, virgins and young men, lying dead in the streets (see Lamentations 2:21); the famine became so intense that "pitiful women" cooked and ate "their own children" (Lamentations 4:10).

Message: Coming of Christ

Both prophets saw and prophesied the coming of the Messiah. Lehi saw a vision in which he read from a book things that "manifested plainly of the coming of a Messiah, and also the redemption of the world" (1 Nephi 1:19). Lehi further described a detailed dream in which he saw the coming of John the Baptist, John's baptism of the Messiah, and the ministry of the Savior, his rejection and crucifixion on earth, and his resurrection (see 1 Nephi 10:4–11). Most important, Lehi, in a masterful sermon directed to his son Jacob, taught the doctrine of the fall and the atonement and how the plan makes eternal life possible (see 2 Nephi 2).

The prophet Nephi (son of Helaman) taught his people that many Old Testament prophets, including Jeremiah, had seen the day of the coming of the Messiah and the redemption that he would bring (see Helaman 8:20, 22–23). The writings of Jeremiah in the Bible indeed contain two such prophecies about the coming of the Messiah (see Jeremiah 23:1–8; 33:15–18)—perhaps there were more on the brass plates that are no longer preserved in the Bible. Both prophecies foresaw the day when God will "raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King" who

will “reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth” (Jeremiah 23:5; see also 33:15). Interpreters have variously seen these prophecies as pointing to either the first or the second comings of Christ or both.

Message: Scattering and Restoration

Jeremiah and Lehi are central to the restoration. Not only did they see and prophesy the events of the restoration, but their records played a significant role in the reestablishment of the covenant in the fulness of times. In 1823 Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith and read to him a series of Old Testament prophecies to be fulfilled in the restoration. Among these prophecies were Malachi 3–4; Isaiah 11; Acts 3:22–23; Joel 2:28–32 (see JS—H 1:36–41). Oliver Cowdery recorded that Moroni also had read a series of passages from Jeremiah including 16:16; 30:18–21; 31:1, 6, 8, 27–28, 32–33; 50:4–5.¹⁸ In these passages Jeremiah saw the day when the “hunters” and “fishers” would be sent forth to gather Israel (Jeremiah 16:16); when God would gather Israel to be his people (see Jeremiah 31:1); when “the watchmen upon the mount Ephraim shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto the Lord our God” (Jeremiah 31:6); when the Lord would “sow” again the land with the seed of the house of Israel and Judah, who would then build and plant (Jeremiah 31:27–28); and when the Lord would “make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31)—in the words of the Lord, “Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers” in Egypt, which was written in stone, but a “law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:32, 33).¹⁹

Lehi delivered to his family a prophecy given by the Lord to Joseph of Egypt that a “righteous branch” of the house of Israel, not the Messiah (2 Nephi 3:5), would be broken off, and in the future a choice seer would be raised out of this lineage

(see 2 Nephi 3:6), who would bring many to the knowledge of the covenants made with the fathers (see 2 Nephi 3:7). He continued that the descendants of Judah and the descendants of Joseph would both write records that would “grow together, unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions, and establishing peace among the fruit of thy loins, and bringing them to the knowledge of their fathers in the latter days, and also to the knowledge of my covenants, saith the Lord” (2 Nephi 3:12).

Lehi and Jeremiah both participated in the fulfillment of these prophecies. Lehi, a descendant of Joseph, founded the people that would author the Book of Mormon. In 1827 Moroni delivered the gold plates, containing a record of Lehi’s descendants, to Joseph Smith, fulfilling the prophecy of Joseph of Egypt. For Joseph Smith was “a choice seer” from the loins of Joseph (2 Nephi 3:7) with the power to bring forth the word of the Lord to Lehi’s seed (see 2 Nephi 3:11). He was named after Joseph of old and after his father Joseph (see 2 Nephi 3:15). The Book of Mormon would be an instrument in the hand of the Lord to bring his children to Christ through the restoration and to bring about the gathering of Israel and Judah in the latter days.

Jeremiah died in obscurity in Egypt, but his words were passed down through the ages in the Bible, the writings of the Jews. In 1830 the Book of Mormon was published, and with the publication of the Book of Mormon the records of these two peoples were joined, fulfilling the prophecy of Joseph of Egypt that these records “shall grow together” to bring many to the knowledge of the covenants (see 2 Nephi 3:12). Although the will of the Lord was manifested very differently in their lives and writings, Lehi and Jeremiah in their prophetic callings proclaimed to all their witness of Christ.

NOTES

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1. Besides Jeremiah and Lehi, from this period we know of the prophetess Huldah and the prophets Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Urijah of Kirjath-jearim (see Jeremiah 26) in Judah, and Ezekiel and Daniel in exile.

2. Some interpret the Book of Mormon evidence that Lehi left Jerusalem within a very short period after his call. Others have argued that he may have prophesied for ten years in Jerusalem before he left. See Randall P. Spackman, “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 57.

3. See Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 34–42. See also John A. Tvedtnes, “Was Lehi a Caravaneer?” in *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 77–98.

4. S. Kent Brown, “What Is Isaiah Doing in First Nephi? Or, How Did Lehi’s Family Fare so Far from Home,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 12–17.

5. Nahman Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem* (Nashville: Nelson, 1983), 54.

6. Some scholars believe this date represents the birth of Jeremiah, who was called from the womb—in which case he would be almost thirty when the Book of Mormon opens, younger than Lehi.

7. Magen Broshi, “Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 4/2 (1978): 12.

8. When Nephi and his brothers were sent back to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates, they found it necessary to “go down to the land of our father’s inheritance” (1 Nephi 3:16) in order to retrieve their property and “up again unto the house of Laban” (1 Nephi 3:23) to bargain with Laban for the plates (see 1 Nephi 3:22–24). Some Latter-day Saint scholars believe this language indicates Lehi and his family lived “outside” of Jerusalem. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 7 n. 12. See also Lynn

M. Hilton and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 34–35.

9. Randall P. Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Principal Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1993), 6–14; and “Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” 57–59.

10. See W. L. Holladay, *Jeremiah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 1:1–10, for a chronology of events in Jeremiah’s prophetic career.

11. See *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 180–81.

12. The translation of Mormon’s abridgment of the large plates for the period from Lehi to Mosiah was part of the 116 pages lost by Martin Harris (*History of the Church*, 1:20–28; D&C 3, 10). For a discussion of Lehi’s record, see S. Kent Brown, “Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*, 28–54.

13. The writings of several prophets that are preserved on the brass plates are not found in the Old Testament: Zenos, Zenock, Neum, and Ezias (see 1 Nephi 19:10; Helaman 8:19–20).

14. Important articles discussing the exodus typology in the Book of Mormon include George S. Tate, “The Typology of the Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *Literature of Belief: Sacred Scripture and Religious Experience*, ed. Neal E. Lambert (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981), 245–62; S. Kent Brown, “The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon,” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*, 75–98.

15. Although the biblical text implies that Moses died, the Book of Mormon makes it clear that he was actually translated (see Alma 45:19).

16. Some scholars have even called him an “anti-Moses.” See, for example, Luis A. Schokel, “Jeremías como anti-Moisés,” in *De la Torah au Messie, Mélanges Henri Cazelles*, ed. M. Carrez, J. Doré, and P. Grelot (Paris: Desclée, 1981), 245–54.

17. See Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Lehi’s House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance,” in this volume, pages 81–130.

18. Oliver Cowdery’s report is found in the *Messenger and Advocate* 1/5 (1835): 78–80; 1/7 (1835): 108–12; and 1/10 (1835): 156–59.

A convenient list and important discussion of these passages can be found in Kent P. Jackson, “The Appearance of Moroni to Joseph Smith (JS—H 27–49),” in *Studies in Scripture: Volume Two: The Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 339–66.

19. See *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 14–15.