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Chapter 20

HOW COULD JERUSALEM, “THAT GREAT CITY,” BE DESTROYED?

David Rolph Seely and Fred E. Woods

Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets. And they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father. (1 Nephi 2:13)

In the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon, Nephi records that his brothers Laman and Lemuel murmured against their father Lehi “because he was a visionary man, and had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things, to perish in the wilderness. And this they said he had done because of the foolish imaginations of his heart” (1 Nephi 2:11). One of the chief complaints the brothers had against their father was that they—like many—did not “believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets. And they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father” (1 Nephi 2:13). The biblical record contains much information that helps us to better understand the attitude of

Laman and Lemuel and many of their fellow inhabitants of Jerusalem and to identify the basis for their fervent belief that their city Jerusalem was invincible and impregnable.

At least six interrelated factors, which will be discussed in this article, contributed to the Judahite belief that Jerusalem could not be destroyed: (1) The historical traditions of the spiritual heritage of Jerusalem, “that great city,” suggested to many that the Lord would naturally preserve this holy place from destruction and desecration by the enemies of the covenant people. (2) The Jews misunderstood some of the Lord’s promises in connection with the covenants that he had made with them. In particular, they misunderstood the promises made to David in the Davidic covenant. (3) The miraculous preservation of Jerusalem and its inhabitants when the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem (2 Kings 18–19) in the days of King Hezekiah (701 B.C.) further reinforced the belief that the Lord would preserve his temple and holy city from the enemy. (4) The city of Jerusalem was fortified and prepared for siege. Hezekiah had heavily fortified the city against the Assyrian siege in 701 B.C. with massive walls and towers (2 Chronicles 32:2–8) and had even prepared a water source inside the city for the inhabitants of the city to endure a long siege (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:4, 30). Thus the inhabitants of Jerusalem believed they could endure a long siege brought about by their seemingly impregnable walls. (5) The recent reforms of Josiah (640–609 B.C.), who had cleansed the temple and led his people in a ceremony of covenant renewal (2 Kings 22–23), had given certain people of Judah an undue sense of self and community righteousness that they believed would surely preserve them from any threatened destruction. (6) Assurances were given by false prophets, who promised Jerusalem and its inhabitants peace, safety, and preservation from the enemy instead of the destruction and

exile prophesied by Jeremiah and Lehi. These false assurances were readily accepted by many since they were the words that they wanted to hear.

1. Historical Tradition

Jerusalem has held a long and exalted place in the biblical tradition. The ancient city Salem was the holy city of the righteous high priest Melchizedek, who blessed Abraham (Genesis 14:18–19; cf. Hebrews 7:2). The Psalmist identified Salem with Jerusalem and with Zion (Psalm 76:2), and in Jewish tradition Jerusalem became known as the “city of peace” (Hebrews 7:2). Jerusalem was also known as Zion—perhaps in remembrance of the city of Enoch, also identified as Zion (Moses 7:19). Under Melchizedek, the “people wrought righteousness, and obtained heaven, and sought for the city of Enoch which God had before taken” (Genesis 14:34 JST). In Genesis 22 the Lord commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on one of the mountains in the land of Moriah. The Bible links this sanctified place with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem—called Mount Moriah—“where the Lord appeared unto David” (2 Chronicles 3:1), the same place where David had purchased the threshing floor from Araunah (2 Chronicles 3:1; 2 Samuel 24:18). Thus, according to tradition, the temple was built upon the place where Abraham made his dramatic sacrifice. The city was inhabited by the Jebusites at the time of the conquest and was later conquered by David—who made it the capital of his united kingdom (2 Samuel 5). From that point on it became known as the city of David. David eventually moved the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6) and placed it there inside a tent near his palace, making Jerusalem the political and religious center of Israel. Later, his son Solomon built his splendid temple on the site of Araunah’s threshing floor (1 Kings 6–8), which was to stand for over three hundred years as

a concrete and permanent symbol of the presence of the Lord in the midst of his people. At the time of Lehi, Jerusalem had been the capital of Judah for over three hundred years and was the political, economic, and spiritual center of the Jews. As the city of David, Jerusalem is portrayed in the scriptures as being part of the marvelous covenants made with the house of David and, indeed, with all of Israel.

2. Misunderstanding the Promises of the Lord

In connection with the covenants of Abraham, Moses, and David, the Lord had made great promises to the covenant people—most of them conditioned on their righteousness. When the children of Israel emerged from their captivity in Egypt, the Jebusites possessed the land and city of Jerusalem (Judges 1:21). Because the Israelites had broken their covenants with the Lord, they were unable to drive out the Jebusites following the death of Joshua (Judges 2:20–21). Israel did not gain possession of the city until King David and his men conquered the Jebusites after selecting Jerusalem as the capital (2 Samuel 5:6–9).

Later, David desired to build a house “unto the name of the Lord,” but he was directed not to do so because he had been a man of war (1 Chronicles 22:7–8). Instead, the Lord told David that his son Solomon would build the temple. The Lord made David this promise: “I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them anymore, as beforetime” (2 Samuel 7:10).

The Lord promised David: “Thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16; see Psalm 89:3–4). This promise is called the Davidic covenant and unconditionally promised that kingship would reside in David’s seed forever.

As history unfolded, the unconditional part of this covenant turned out to be a prophecy and promise that the Messiah would come through the house of David. This of course was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ—from the lineage of David (Matthew 1:1–17).

The people, however misunderstood this promise. Passages in Psalms connected the Davidic covenant with Jerusalem, the city of David, and identified Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God: “For the Lord hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever; here will I dwell; for I have desired it. . . . There will I make the horn of David to bud: I have ordained a lamp for mine anointed. His enemies will I clothe with shame: but upon himself shall his crown flourish” (Psalm 132:13, 17–18). Likewise, Isaiah prophesied that the Lord would fight on behalf of his people and preserve his holy city and the temple: “So shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for mount Zion, and for the hill thereof. As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also he will deliver it; and passing over he will preserve it” (Isaiah 31:4–5).¹

The blessings of protection promised in the covenants of Moses and of David were conditional. In Deuteronomy the Lord warned that disobedience to the covenant would be followed by invasion, siege, destruction, death, and scattering (Deuteronomy 28:45–68). When construction of the temple began, the Lord, speaking to Solomon, further clarified the conditions of the promise made to David: “*If* thou wilt walk in my statutes, and execute my judgments, and keep all my commandments to walk in them; *then* will I perform my word with thee, which I spake unto David thy father: And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel” (1 Kings 6:12–13, emphasis added). Following Solomon’s dedication of the temple, the Lord again emphasized that the blessings were based on

obedience and that disobedience would lead to disaster: “But if ye shall at all turn from following me, ye or your children, and will not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods, and worship them: Then will I cut off Israel out of the land which I have given them; and this house, which I have hallowed for my name, will I cast out of my sight” (1 Kings 9:6–7).

Israel, however, constantly broke the covenant through disobedience. The united kingdom was divided into the northern and the southern kingdoms, Israel and Judah, and in 722 B.C. the Assyrians took the Israelites from the northern kingdom into captivity to Assyria from whence they were scattered and lost. Two decades later, the Assyrians, led by King Sennacherib, returned and took possession of much of the southern kingdom of Judah. But many of the people in Judah apparently preferred to put their trust in the temple, both because of the promises of the Davidic covenant and because they perceived that they themselves were righteous. Jeremiah warned these people, “Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, are these” (Jeremiah 7:4). They still did not believe Jeremiah, and eventually the temple was destroyed.

3. The Miraculous Preservation of the Jews from the Assyrian Siege in 701 B.C.

Throughout their history, the covenant people Israel had been preserved through many crises, one of which occurred during the reign of King Hezekiah (715–687 B.C.). Hezekiah was a righteous king; upon surveying the idolatry that had grown up in Judah, he set about to remove the high places in Judah and destroy the images of idolatrous worship. In the course of his religious reform, Hezekiah revolted against the

Assyrian masters by refusing to send tribute (2 Kings 18:4–8). In 701 B.C. Sennacherib responded to the revolt of Hezekiah and invaded Judah. “Now in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah did Sennacherib king of Assyria come up against all the fenced [walled] cities of Judah, and took them” (2 Kings 18:13) and exiled many of them. Indeed, archaeological excavations have documented Sennacherib’s capture and destruction of the walled cities in Judah. The savagery of the siege and capture of Lachish and the execution and exile of its inhabitants are dramatically portrayed in Sennacherib’s reliefs in his palace in Nineveh, now preserved in the British Museum. But Jerusalem, saved by Sennacherib for last, was miraculously spared from the Assyrian armies. An Assyrian prism inscription of King Sennacherib sheds further light on this biblical account: “As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity, and conquered (them) by means of well-stamped (earth-)ramps, and battering rams. . . . Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage.”²

The Bible says King Hezekiah, who had returned righteousness to Judah, consulted with the prophet Isaiah, who in turn promised Hezekiah that the Lord would intervene on behalf of Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:1–13). Hezekiah thus went to the temple to plead with the Lord for protection. In answer to his prayer, the Lord told Hezekiah that his petition would be granted: “For I will defend this city, to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David’s sake. And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the Lord went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand” (2 Kings 19:34–35). While Judah had been punished for

her sins, Jerusalem was preserved—in part because of the righteous reforms of Hezekiah and the mercy of the Lord.

This miraculous display of divine intervention had a tremendous impact on future generations, particularly on those who dwelt securely in Jerusalem, from the time following this deliverance in 701 B.C. until the Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. Jerusalem's deliverance led to the erroneous belief that the holy city was impregnable. The Jews believed the city enjoyed divine protection, even if they did not abide the law of the covenant. Isaiah observed, "They call themselves of the holy city, and stay themselves upon the God of Israel" (Isaiah 48:2). So while the people counted on divine intervention on their behalf, they failed to realize that the situation presented by the Babylonian invasions in 597 and 586 B.C. had changed from that of 701 B.C. Then King Hezekiah had consulted with the prophet Isaiah and had received divine assurance of the deliverance of Jerusalem. Thus Hezekiah commanded his people to stand fast against the Assyrians. Later, at the time of Lehi, when King Zedekiah consulted with the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the Lord was different—to submit to Babylon in order to preserve Jerusalem (Jeremiah 38:14–28). In addition to the wickedness of the people in Jerusalem, they also failed to heed the word of the Lord delivered through his prophet Jeremiah.

4. Jerusalem's Fortifications and Water Source

After capturing Jerusalem from the Jebusites ca. 1000 B.C., David further fortified the city known as "the strong hold of Zion" (2 Samuel 5:7). The later Judahite kings followed his example and continuously updated the fortifications of the capital city. The Bible notes that Uzziah "built towers" (2 Chronicles 26:9) and that his son Jotham continued the fortifications (2 Chronicles 27:3). In 701 B.C., in the face of the impending

Assyrian invasion and siege, Hezekiah once again heavily fortified Jerusalem against attack and siege: “He . . . built up all the wall that was broken, and raised it up to the towers, and another wall without, and repaired Millo in the city of David, and made darts and shields in abundance” (2 Chronicles 32:5). Remnants of these walls have been found in archaeological excavations in Jerusalem. In ancient warfare, cities’ walls were often too strong for an invading army to scale. In many such cases a protracted siege could gain the surrender of a powerful city. In order to avoid this situation, Hezekiah even went so far as to devise a sophisticated tunnel system to make sure his city had an internal supply of water (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:3–4, 30). This water system was excavated and studied by archaeologists. Later, Hezekiah’s son King Manasseh “built a wall without the city of David . . . and raised it up a very great height” (2 Chronicles 33:14).

Thus in the recent memory of the people at the time of Jeremiah and Lehi, the city of Jerusalem had not fallen to the enemy. As they looked around they could see the splendid fortifications: towers, gates, and walls that could protect them from the mighty armies of their enemies. In addition they had the added confidence that they could endure a long siege, if necessary, since they had access to a continuous water source inside their city through Hezekiah’s tunnel. This illusion of invincibility was rudely destroyed by the Babylonian siege and capture of Jerusalem in 597 B.C. that resulted in the Babylonians putting Zedekiah on the throne (2 Kings 24:1–18). Laman and Lemuel, as well as many of the other inhabitants of Jerusalem, should have paid attention to this turn of fortunes. Nevertheless, it appears that some still continued to trust in their fortifications instead of in the Lord—for Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon

again in 587, resulting in the Babylonian siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 24:20–25:21).

5. Josiah's Reforms

Two kings in Israel recognized the sins and idolatry of the people and attempted a series of religious reforms. The first was King Hezekiah, who reigned during much of the ministry of Isaiah and threw down the high places and the idolatrous images Israel had set up throughout the temple (2 Kings 18:1–7). Hezekiah's reign was followed by the reign of his son Manasseh, a wicked king who promptly turned Judah back to the worship of idols and all forms of wickedness, including the sacrifice of children (2 Kings 21:1–9).

The second was Josiah, who must have been the king while Lehi's children were growing up in Jerusalem. Josiah came to the throne at the age of eight and early on was influenced by those around him to clean up the religious apostasy left by Manasseh. Like his great-grandfather Hezekiah, Josiah set about to reform the religious practices of Judah. And just like Hezekiah, Josiah's reforms included revolt against the ruling Assyrian empire. Josiah cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, tore down the high places, and began to implement the laws in the newly discovered book of the law, which included the centralization of worship in Jerusalem. From that time forth, according to Josiah's program, all sacrifices, and hence most of the aspects of the religious festivals, were to be offered and observed only at the temple in Jerusalem. This had the dramatic effect of strengthening the power and influence of the temple and its attendant priesthood. In connection with his reforms, Josiah gathered the people together in a ceremony of covenant renewal and pledged to obey the law of Moses as contained in

the book of the law, and then he led them in the celebration of a solemn passover (2 Kings 22–23).

The reforms of Josiah—in conjunction with Judah’s perception of the invincibility of their city promised in the Davidic covenant and the miraculous deliverance of the city during the reign of Hezekiah—reinforced the people’s belief that the great city of Jerusalem could not be destroyed. Their hope of deliverance from the Assyrians was buoyed at this very time by the fact that the Assyrian empire was destroyed by the Babylonians and Medes. In 612 Nineveh fell, and in 605 the final defeat of Assyria occurred at the Battle of Carchemish. In 609 Josiah, attempting to stop the Egyptians from marching to assist the Assyrians against the Babylonians, was killed in battle at Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29–30). What happened to Josiah was a frightening foreshadowing of what would later happen to Judah. In addition, the Babylonians soon conquered the west, and Judah was forced to pay tribute. But King Jehoiakim and later King Zedekiah attempted to follow in the footsteps of Hezekiah and Josiah not in religious reform but in resistance, if not revolt, against the governing empire. Their refusal to pay tribute eventually brought the might of the Babylonian empire to bear on Judah and her capital Jerusalem.

In order to counter the public sentiment of confidence that emerged during the Babylonian threat, the Lord sent prophets to warn the people: “There came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4). Prophets like Lehi and Jeremiah were threatened with death when they spoke what many Jews considered to be blasphemous words against the holy city (1 Nephi 1:20; Jeremiah 26:12–15; 38:4). In fact, the prophet Urijah was put to death by King Jehoiakim

for delivering the same message of destruction that Lehi and Jeremiah did (Jeremiah 26:20–23).

Jeremiah delivered a dramatic sermon at the temple that addressed this issue. Isaiah had specifically promised that Jerusalem would be protected from the Assyrians (Isaiah 37:33–35), and apparently the people of Jeremiah's day believed that the Lord would likewise preserve them against the Babylonians. He warned the Jews against believing that the temple was enough to deliver them from destruction: "Trust ye not in lying words, saying The temple of the Lord" (Jeremiah 7:4). Apparently, although Jeremiah observed that the people worshipped the Lord at the temple in the proper fashion, this seemed to be an outward observance since the people still had not repented of their sins. He enumerated their sins, starting with the breaking of the Ten Commandments: murder, adultery, swearing falsely, and walking after other gods (Jeremiah 7:9), as well as not executing justice between themselves and of oppressing the poor (Jeremiah 7:5–6). In short, the Judahites were hypocritically worshipping the Lord outwardly and yet breaking the commandments. Jeremiah repeated the word of the Lord to Judah: "Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?" (Jeremiah 7:11)—a passage from Jeremiah that Jesus would later quote in Herod's temple in a similar situation in which he prophesied that the hypocrisy of the people would not save that temple from destruction either (Matthew 21:13).

In order to make his point, Jeremiah turned to the sacred history of his people in the past to remind them that a similar situation had been faced at Shiloh: "But go ye now unto my place which was in Shiloh, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel" (Jeremiah 7:12). In the days of Samuel, the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant dwelt at Shiloh, and the people faithfully

brought their sacrifices there; however, the people had also been disobedient, and the Lord had allowed the Philistines to destroy the holy place and capture the ark of the covenant for a time (1 Samuel 4–7; Psalm 78:56–67).

The public cry was to put Jeremiah to death. Priests and false prophets said of Jeremiah, “This man is worthy to die; for he hath prophesied against this city, as ye have heard with your ears” (Jeremiah 26:11). Jeremiah responded, “The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city all the words that ye have heard. Therefore now amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and repent, and the Lord will turn away the evil that he hath pronounced against you” (Jeremiah 26:12–13 JST).

6. False Assurances from False Prophets

At the same time that the Lord sent his prophets to warn the people and call them to repentance, there appeared a host of false prophets prophesying the deliverance of Jerusalem from the Babylonian threat. The Lord told Jeremiah, “The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so” (Jeremiah 5:31). In spite of the obvious and visible unrighteousness of the people around them, these prophets came forth and delivered words the people loved to hear. The Lord described this message to Jeremiah: “Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, the prophets say unto them, Ye shall not see the sword, neither shall ye have famine; but I will give you assured peace in this place” (Jeremiah 14:13).

The Lord accused these false prophets before Jeremiah of immorality, dishonesty, and supporting the wicked: “I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing: they commit adultery, and walk in lies: they strengthen also

the hands of the evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness” (Jeremiah 23:14). The Lord accused these prophets of representing themselves and not the Lord, “I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied” (Jeremiah 23:21). And he accused them of delivering words and visions not from the Lord but from themselves, “Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:16). Since many of the people believed in these lies and did not repent, many perished in the destruction of the great city of Jerusalem or were taken into exile. At least two of the people who thought the city was invincible—namely Laman and Lemuel—were saved because of their father Lehi.

Summary

Judah did not repent. The books of Kings and Chronicles describe how King Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonian armies to Jerusalem and besieged and burned the great city and the holy temple and exiled many of its people. In his book, Jeremiah, in lamenting the destruction, describes how the Lord fought with the Babylonians against the people rather than fighting for them (Lamentations 2:3–4; cf. Jeremiah 21:5).

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision in which he learned how in fact the temple at Jerusalem—the house of the Lord—could be destroyed. He records that the presence of the Lord at his temple—which he refers to as “the glory of the God of Israel” (Ezekiel 9:3)—gradually withdrew from the temple, first leaving the cherubim to go to the gate of the temple and then to proceed to the Mount of Olives where the Lord would watch the destruction of his house (Ezekiel 9:3–11:23).

It is not clear if Laman and Lemuel or their descendants were ever convinced that the "great city" of Jerusalem had been destroyed according to Lehi's prophecy. In their murmuring in the wilderness, Laman and Lemuel even expressed that they believed, like the false prophets, that the people in Jerusalem had been righteous: "And we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all the commandments, according to the law of Moses" (1 Nephi 17:22). The tradition of the Lamanites that passed from generation to generation was not that their forefathers had been delivered from destruction but rather that Lehi and his followers "were driven out of the land of Jerusalem because of the iniquities of their fathers" (Mosiah 10:12).

Both Lehi and Jacob confirmed that Lehi's prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem had taken place. After arriving in the promised land, Lehi reported that he had "seen a vision, in which I know that Jerusalem is destroyed" (2 Nephi 1:4). Jacob later added that the Lord showed him that those in Jerusalem were killed and taken captive (2 Nephi 6:8).

Nephi, son of Helaman, later said that the destruction of Jerusalem was common knowledge among the Nephites: "And now we know that Jerusalem was destroyed according to the words of Jeremiah" (Helaman 8:20). He cites as evidence the contact with the people of Mulek, who confirmed the historical reality of the destruction of Jerusalem: "Will ye say that the sons of Zedekiah were not slain, all except it were Mulek? Yea, and do ye not behold that the seed of Zedekiah are with us, and they were driven out of the land of Jerusalem?" (Helaman 8:21; cf. Omni 1:15).

Thus the city of Jerusalem and the splendid temple within were destroyed. The chosen people chose not to repent of their

sins and failed to follow the words of the prophet Jeremiah to submit to Babylon. In short, they forgot that the Lord is bound only when they do what he says (see D&C 82:10). In their program to consolidate and regulate the regime of sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, they should have remembered the spirit of the Lord and the commandments of righteousness that infused those offerings with meaning, as they should have known from the story of Saul and Agag where the prophet taught that “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22; cf. Jeremiah 7:21–23). The peace that prevailed in Salem during Melchizedek’s day and the divine intervention Jerusalem enjoyed during the reign of Hezekiah were conditioned on full obedience to the principles and stipulations of the covenants between God and Israel. And the breaking of those covenants produced the prophesied result of destruction and exile.

NOTES

1. A concise discussion of Israel’s reliance on the unconditional covenant given to David in conjunction with Jeremiah’s temple sermon in Jeremiah 7 can be found in Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 462–63.

2. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 288.