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New Information about Mulek, Son of the King

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NEW INFORMATION ABOUT MULEK, SON OF THE KING

Mosiah 25:2 “There were not so many of the children of Nephi, or so many of those who were descendants of Nephi, as there were of the people of Zarahemla, who was a descendant of Mulek.”

Mulek, the son of Zedekiah, is mentioned several times in the Book of Mormon (see *Mosiah 25:2*; *Helaman 6:10*; *8:21*) but not in the Bible—at least not in a way that people have recognized, until just recently. Biblical scholarship now bears out this Book of Mormon claim: King Zedekiah had a son named *Mulek*.

In the summer of 586 B.C., when the troops of King Nebuchadnezzar breached the walls of Jerusalem, King Zedekiah of Judah and a large company of warriors attempted to escape by night to the East. Babylonian troops caught up with them in the plains of Jericho. Many presumably escaped, but Zedekiah himself was seized and taken to Nebuchadnezzar’s operational headquarters at Riblah (on the Orontes River, just south of Kadesh, in what is now Syria). There, as punishment for breaking his sacred oath of fealty to King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians forced Zedekiah to witness the execution of his captured sons, had his eyes put out, and took him in bronze fetters to Babylon (see *2 Kings 25:4–7*; *2 Chronicles 36:13*).

According to the Book of Mormon, that was not the end of the matter. One son named Mulek escaped (see *Omni 1:15–16*; *Helaman 8:21*), even though the details remain shadowy. Since he landed first at the land of Desolation on the east coast (see *Alma 22:30–31*; *Helaman 6:10*), he probably journeyed to Meso-

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america via the Mediterranean, Atlantic Ocean, and Caribbean, perhaps with Phoenician help.

The first clue of the existence and escape of Mulek, son of Zedekiah, can be found in 2 Kings 25:1–10, which reports that Nebuchadrezzar and “all his host” scattered “all the men” and “all [the king’s] army” and burnt “all the houses of Jerusalem,” and with “all the army” they destroyed the walls. In the midst of all this, however, 2 Kings 25:7 omits the word *all* when it reports only that “the sons” of Zedekiah were killed, leaving open the question whether all of his sons were slain.

Biblical scholars have recently had interesting things to say about a person named *Malchiah*. Jeremiah 38:6 speaks of a “dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech . . . in the court of the prison.” But the Hebrew name here, *MalkiYahu ben-hamMelek*, should be translated “MalkiYahu, son of the king,” the Hebrew word *melek* meaning “king.”

Was this MalkiYahu a son of King Zedekiah? Several factors indicate that he was. For one thing, the title “son of the king” was used throughout the ancient Near East to refer to actual sons of kings who served as high officers of imperial administration.¹ The same is certainly true of the Bible, in which kings’ sons ran prisons (see 1 Kings 22:26–27; Jeremiah 36:26; 38:6) or performed other official functions (see 2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chronicles 28:7). Moreover, in view of the fact that the name MalkiYahu has been found on two ostraca from Arad (in southern Judah), the late head of the Department of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University, Yohanan Aharoni, said that “Malkiyahu is a common name and was even borne by a contemporary son of king Zedekiah.”²

But was this MalkiYahu the same person as Mulek? Study of these names tells us he may very well be. In the case of Baruch, scribe of Jeremiah, for example, the long form of his name, BerekYahu, has been discovered on a seal impression by Nahman Avigad of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.³ The full name has been shortened in Jeremiah’s record to Baruch.

In view of this shortening, as in many other biblical names,

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there is no reason why a short form such as Mulek might not be possible. Indeed, the archaic Hebrew *qutl*-form could account for it, and *mulk* actually appears in Ugaritic and Phoenician, meaning "royal, princely-sacrifice; tophet-vow" (= Punic *mol*k/ Hebrew *molek* [see Leviticus 18:21; 2 Kings 16:3]; child-sacrifice [see Acts 7:43]), and in Arabic meaning "reign, sovereignty, dominion" (Amorite *Muluk* = Akkadian and Eblaite *Malik*). One might, incidentally, be led to compare this with Mayan *Muluc*, the red-Bacab of the East, whom David H. Kelley correlates with "blood" and "devourer of children."⁴

A prominent non-Mormon ancient Near Eastern specialist declared recently of the Book of Mormon's naming "Mulek" as a son of Zedekiah, "If Joseph Smith came up with that one, he did pretty good!" He added that the vowels in the name could be accounted for as the Phoenician style of pronunciation. He found himself in general agreement that "MalkiYahu, son of the King" might very well be a son of King Zedekiah, and that the short-form of the name could indeed be *Mulek*.

Based on research primarily by Robert F. Smith, February 1984 and supplemented by Benjamin Urrutia in Insights, February 1985. For the latest statements about Mulek and the Mulekites, see the entry on Mulekites by Curtis Wright in Macmillan's Encyclopedia of Mormonism (1991) and the article by John L. Sorenson, "The Mulekites," BYU Studies 30 (Summer 1990): 6-22.

Notes

1. Anson Rainey, "The Prince and the Pauper," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 7 (1975): 427-32.
2. Yohanan Aharoni, "Three Hebrew Ostraca from Arad," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 197 (February 1970): 22.
3. Nahman Avigad, "Jerahmeel and Baruch: King's Son and Scribe," *Biblical Archeologist* 42 (Spring 1979): 114-18.
4. David H. Kelley, "Calendar Animals and Deities," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 16 (1960): 317-37.