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Politics in Jerusalem

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Politics in Jerusalem

Nephi tells us a great deal about conditions in Jerusalem in his day. Lessons 8, 9, and 10 take a closer look at the city on the eve of its overthrow. From Nephi we learn that the elders of the Jews were running things and that these elders hated Lehi. From other sources it is known that Jerusalem at the time actually was under the control of the *Sarim*, an upstart aristocracy that surrounded and dominated the weak king and hated and opposed both the prophets and the old aristocratic class to which Lehi belonged. This accounts for Nephi's own coldness towards "the Jews who were at Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 2:13). Among the considerable evidence in the Book of Mormon that identifies Lehi with the old aristocracy, the peculiar conception and institution of "land of one's inheritance" deserves special mention. Also the peculiar relationship between city and country has now been explained, and with it the declaration of the Book of Mormon that Christ was born in the land of Jerusalem becomes a strong argument in support of its authenticity. Another significant parallel between the Book of Mormon and the political organization of Jerusalem in Lehi's day is the singular nature and significance of the office of judges. The atmosphere of Jerusalem as described in the first chapters of the Book of Mormon is completely authentic, and the insistence of Nephi on the greatness of the danger and the completeness of the destruction of Judah has recently been vindicated by archaeological finds.

The peculiar social organization of Jerusalem and the social and political struggles that racked the city at the time of its fall have been the subject of a good deal of recent investigation. Let us consider the newer finds on each particular topic, after first seeing what the Book of Mormon has to say about it.

The Rule of the Elders

Nephi tells us casually but emphatically that things at

Jerusalem were controlled by “the elders of the Jews,” who were holding nocturnal meetings with the powerful and influential Laban (1 Nephi 4:22-27). Poor Zedekiah plays no part at all—his name occurs half a dozen times in the Book of Mormon, but only to fix a date. These elders were no friends of Lehi; for if they had been, his life would never have been in danger. As it was, he “was driven out of Jerusalem” (Helaman 8:22; 1 Nephi 7:14) by the only people who could have driven him out, the important people, those responsible for the “priestcrafts and iniquities” that were to be the ruin of them at Jerusalem (2 Nephi 10:5).

Bible students recognize today that affairs at Jerusalem were completely under the control of the “elders.” The word “elders” has been understood to mean the heads of the most influential families of a city.¹ In 1935 in the ruins of the city of Lachish, 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem, a remarkable body of documents was found. They were military reports written at the very time of the fall of Jerusalem and saved from the flames of burning Lachish by being covered with rubble when the watchtower in which they were stored collapsed. Lachish was the last Jewish town to fall before Jerusalem itself went down, so here, in the fragments of some eighteen letters, we have a strictly first-hand, if limited, account of what was going on.²

Now in the Lachish letters we learn that the men who are running—and ruining—everything are the *sarim*, who actually are the elders, the term *sarim* designating, according to J. W. Jack, “members of the official class, i.e. ‘officers’ acting under the king as his counsellors and rulers.” In these priceless letters “we find the *sarim* denouncing Jeremiah to the king and demanding that he be executed because of his bad influence on the morale of the people.” In accusing the prophet of defeatism, the leading men of Jerusalem were supported by the majority of the people and by a host of popular “prophets” suborned by the court, by whose false oracles “Judahite chauvinism” was “whipped

to a frenzy."³ To oppose this front, as Lehi did, was to incur the charges of subversion and defeatism.

The Old Aristocracy and the New

How did "the elders of the Jews" get such power over the king? It was not entirely Zedekiah's weakness that was to blame, for the real showdown had come in the days of Hezekiah, whose every attempt at reform had been systematically frustrated by the *sarim*.⁴ As in other ancient states of the time, including those of Greece and Rome, the king was traditionally a member of the old landholding aristocracy, to whom he was obliged to defer on many points: he ruled by and with the consent and advice of a council whose nature and composition are still recalled in our own word "senate," meaning "council of elders." Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lehi were themselves members of this ruling class.

There is evidence, according to Graetz, that the Talmud is right in reporting that King Hezekiah actually married Isaiah's daughter after the Assyrian danger was over,⁵ and Winckler has shown how the king at Jerusalem sought the advice and counsel of Jeremiah as a wealthy and powerful man with important connections — though they were mostly Babylonian connections, highly obnoxious to the ruling clique at Zedekiah's court.⁶ That clique had come into power in the days of Hezekiah, at which time "the aristocrats possessed such extensive power in the state of Judah that it almost surpassed that of the king."⁷ These aristocrats were a new, upstart faction, however, and not that to which Lehi and the prophets belonged: "The natural nobility, that descended from the patriarchal conditions of old, was, so to speak, pushed aside by an artificial nobility of courtiers." Under Hezekiah, that is, the old-fashioned "elders" of the first families were supplanted by the new crowd, composed of the younger sons of the kings and their families, an

“appanage,” along with the families of the favorites of favorites of former kings.⁸

But how do we know that Lehi was a member of the old aristocracy? His probable association with Jeremiah, his education, his noble ancestry that could be traced back to Joseph and related him to Laban himself, the fact that a family record had been kept from very ancient times on expensive bronze plates, his close and long-standing cultural ties with Egypt and Sidon (rather than Tyre, which was favored by the ruling group), the quantity and nature of his possessions – all tell the same story; but the key to the situation is to be found in the frequent mention by Nephi of “the land of his inheritance,” which was both the source of his wealth and the place where he kept it. The pronounced distaste with which Nephi so often refers to “the Jews . . . at Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 2:13) as a group to which his own people definitely do not belong makes it apparent that he is speaking of the Jewish faction that controlled Jerusalem, both the government and the populace, and also implies that Lehi’s family did not think of themselves as living in the city. They are apparently the old landed aristocracy that do not go along with the crazy ways and policies of the new rulers.

“The Jews at Jerusalem”

The worst thing Nephi can say about his brothers is that “they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 2:13). “Those who are at Jerusalem,” he says, “shall be scourged by all people” (1 Nephi 19:13), and he tells how when he thinks of what is to befall them “all my joints are weak, for those who are at Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 19:20). According to him, God takes the righteous away “from the knowledge of those who are at Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 22:4), while “because of priestcrafts and iniquities, they at Jerusalem will stiffen their necks against him” (2 Nephi 10:5). Nephi refuses to preserve among his people

“the manner of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:1-2), which he knows first-hand (2 Nephi 25:5-6) but of which he strenuously disapproves. There is something distinctly patronizing in his announcement: “I have charity for the Jew—I say Jew, because I mean them from whence I came. I also have charity for the Gentiles” (2 Nephi 33:8-9). That is, he has charity for the Jew because he is a Jew and has charity for everybody anyway! But when his brother Jacob says, “Behold, the Jews were a stiffnecked people” and proceeds to expatiate upon their vices, he obviously excludes himself and his own people from their number (Jacob 4:14-15).

Incidentally, one should explain here the use of the term “Jew” as applied to Lehi. The word was not used to designate all Israelites before the exile, but it *was* used to designate any citizen of the *state* of Judah, and it is in *that* sense that the Book of Mormon specifically employs it.⁹

“The Land of Our Inheritance”

The old aristocracy had always—as in other ancient societies—been landholders and cultivators, and the reliable source of their wealth remained the land.¹⁰ Yet at the same time the organization of these old families remained a nomadic one, with families entering covenants of protection and blood relationship with each other. Galling has described how the old desert system was adjusted to a settled and localized patriarchal order in which the “elders” ruled because of their wealth, which wealth had to be derived in turn from “the lands of a man’s inheritance.”¹¹ We have shown elsewhere at considerable length how the constitutions of the earliest civilized societies all rested on a feudal order. Whenever the promised land is occupied by an invading host, the king’s heroes and supporters are rewarded with lands, and these become the lands of their families’ inheritance and the title of their nobility. So far as is known to date, there is no ancient civilization whose records do not open with the description of a feudal order of society,

and every feudal aristocracy is both a migratory and a landed nobility. Though their wealth is in "the lands of their inheritance," they never cease to travel, hunt, and trade.¹²

Such was the old aristocracy of Israel. Eduard Meyer says that all their power and authority went back originally to the first land-allotments made among the leaders of the migratory host when they settled down in their land of promise. Regardless of wealth of influence or ability, no one could belong to the old aristocracy who did not still possess "the land of his inheritance."¹³ This institution—or attitude—plays a remarkably conspicuous role in the Book of Mormon. Not only does Lehi leave "the land of his inheritance" (1 Nephi 2:4) but whenever his people wish to establish a new society they first of all make sure to allot and define the lands of their inheritance, which first allotment is regarded as inalienable. No matter where a group or family move to in later times, the *first* land allotted to them is always regarded as "the land of their inheritance," thus Alma 22:28; 54:12-13; Ether 7:16—in these cases the expression "land of *first* inheritance" is used (Mormon 2:27-28; 1 Nephi 13:15; Alma 35:9, 14; 43:12; Jacob 3:4; Alma 62:42; Mormon 3:17). This is a powerful argument for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon both because the existence of such a system is largely the discovery of modern research and because it is set forth in the Book of Mormon very distinctly and yet quite casually.

The City and the Country

Along with this nomadic-agrarian background, there is yet a third element in the picture, for from their very first settlement in Judea the Israelites entered into close and constant contact with the *city* economy of the Canaanites, which they imitated and adopted. The imposition of a feudal pattern on city organization produced, we are told, the peculiar arrangement expressed in the formula: "the city

of N . . . and her daughter-cities.”¹⁴ In each city the elders were the ruling body and represented the voice of the free and traditionally independent citizenry as against the king’s representative or the *Rabu*; in the capital city they were a check on the king himself, and in Jerusalem no king could be crowned without their approval or pass important laws without their consent.¹⁵

One important aspect of the early land organization and control remains to be mentioned, and that is the control of an area, already noted, by a “mother city,” to whom the other cities were “daughters.” Rome was originally the name of a city and nothing else, yet at all times all land under control of that city was called Roman and its inhabitants if they were free at all had to be citizens of Rome and had to go to Rome every year to vote, just as if they lived there. Finally all the civilized world became Rome and its inhabitants Romans. It is only in scale and not in nature that this differs from other cities. Socrates, Sophocles, and Euripides were all Athenian citizens and described themselves as men of Athens—yet they were born and reared and lived in villages many miles apart—none of them actually in the city. In the same way, while the Book of Mormon refers to the city of Jerusalem plainly and unmistakably over sixty times, it refers over forty times to another and entirely different geographical entity which is always designated as “the land of Jerusalem.” In the New World also every major Book of Mormon city is surrounded by a *land of the same name*.

The land of Jerusalem is *not* the city of Jerusalem. Lehi “dwelt at Jerusalem in all his days” (1 Nephi 1:4), yet his sons had to “go down to the land of our father’s inheritance” to pick up their property (1 Nephi 3:16, 22). The apparent anomaly is readily explained by the Amarna Letters, in which we read that “a city of the land of Jerusalem, Bet-Ninib, has been captured.”¹⁶ It was the rule in Palestine and Syria from ancient times, as the same letters show, for

a large area around a city and all the inhabitants of that area to bear the name of the city.¹⁷ It is taken for granted that if Nephi lived at Jerusalem he would know about the surrounding country: "I, of myself, have dwelt *at* Jerusalem, wherefore I know concerning the regions round about" (2 Nephi 25:6; italics added). But this was quite unknown at the time the Book of Mormon was written – the Amarna Letters were discovered in 1887. One of the favorite points of attack on the Book of Mormon has been the statement in Alma 7:10 that the Savior would be born "at Jerusalem which is the *land* of our forefathers" (italics added). Here Jerusalem is not the city "*in* the land of our forefathers"; it is the land. Christ was born in a village some six miles from the city of Jerusalem; it was not in the city, but it was in what we now know the ancients themselves designated as "the land of Jerusalem." Such a neat test of authenticity is not often found in ancient documents.¹⁸

The Rule of the Judges

In Zedekiah's time the ancient and venerable council of elders had been thrust aside by the proud and haughty *judges*, the spoiled children of frustrated and ambitious princes, who made the sheet anchor of their policy a strong alliance with Egypt and preferred Tyre to Sidon, the old established emporium of the Egyptian trade, to which Lehi remained devoted. The institution of the judges deserves some attention.

Since the king no longer sat in judgment, the ambitious climbers had taken over the powerful and dignified – and for them very profitable – "*judgment seats*," and by systematic abuse of their power as judges made themselves obnoxious and oppressive to the nation as a whole while suppressing all criticism of themselves – especially from recalcitrant and subversive prophets.¹⁹ It was an old game. In 1085 B.C. one Korihor, the chief priest of Ammon, had actually seized the throne of Egypt, where for a long time

the priests of Ammon ran the country to suit themselves in their capacity as judges of the priestly courts. These courts had at first competed with the king's courts and then by murder and intrigue quite forced them out of business.²⁰ This story reads like a chapter out of the Book of Mormon.

But it is in the New World that we see the old institutions revived in full force. When King Mosiah suggested an improvement on the monarchical system (by which a king, no matter how unrighteous, had to remain in office until his death), the one alternative that presented itself was rule by judges. "Let us appoint judges," he says (Mosiah 29:11), and everyone seems to know exactly what he means, for in his speech, which is given in full, he does not have to explain the system to his hearers at all, and they adopt his suggestions quite readily and without any of the confusion and jamming that always goes with a shift from one type of government to a wholly different one. If Mosiah and his officers "newly arrange the affairs of this people" (Mosiah 29:11), it is certainly along familiar lines. This is definitely indicated in the case of Korihor, who was able to gain a great following in the land by charging that "the high priest, and also the chief judge over the land" under the new system were simply reviving "ordinances and performances which are laid down by *ancient priests*, to usurp power and authority" (Alma 30:21-23).

That there was a real danger of reviving an ancient priest-rule is apparent from the fact that the new system had no sooner been established than a certain Nehor, in the first case to be tried by the new chief judge, is charged with being first to introduce priestcraft "among this people." The chief judge on this occasion observes that such a business if allowed by the people "would prove their entire destruction" (Alma 1:12). So the abuses of the system and its ties with priestcraft were still vividly remembered from the Old World. The Nephites in fact regarded themselves as fugitives from the "priestcrafts and iniquities" of

Jerusalem (2 Nephi 10:5); and while the Nephites “did not reckon after the manner of the Jews who were at Jerusalem, neither did they measure after the manner of the Jews” (Alma 11:4). They *did* continue to build their sanctuaries, and also their synagogues, after the manner of the Jews. That is, they retained certain sacral aspects of the older civilization. The manner of Nehor’s execution in itself is an illustration of the unbroken ties between the cultic legal practices of the Old and New World (Alma 1:15).

Mosiah’s system of judges worked well for many years, but with the increase of unrighteousness, crime and lawlessness became so general that several chief judges were murdered; the high office became an object of intrigue and manipulation by political cliques and finally by criminal gangs, with the “Gadianton robbers filling the judgment seats” in the end (Helaman 7:4). The extreme prominence of judges and judgment seats in the Book of Mormon, apparent from a glance at the concordance, is a direct and authentic heritage of the Old World in Lehi’s day.

Foreign Policy

As to foreign policies, the Amarna Letters show at great length how the corrupt and ambitious lords of Palestine and Syria lost everything many centuries before Lehi by counting too much on Egyptian aid that never came. In the time of Hezekiah, Judah had preserved a delicate and precarious neutrality.²¹ She would have preferred continuing free of entanglements with either side in Zedekiah’s time as well, but the pressure was too great. The geographic and strategic location of Jerusalem constantly forced its people to make decisions which they would gladly have avoided. For two and a half centuries, since the conquests of Assurbanipal, every state in the East had been constantly involved in endless underground activities, plots and intrigues, espionage, revolts, punitive expeditions, and secret alliances. The division of Jerusalem into two parties

was thoroughly typical, the same division existing in Tyre and Damascus at the time.²² Judah had to choose between Babylon and Egypt; both were at the peak of their splendor and prosperity which was actually a fool's paradise built on a wartime boom economy. Who would have guessed that within forty years both of them would be under the rule of a nation of simple nomads that hardly anyone had ever heard of! This was Babylon's last fling, as it was Egypt's.²³

Chaos and Destruction

When the bubble burst, everything went at once. Wiedemann sees no reason for doubting that the prophecy of Jeremiah about Apries of Egypt was literally fulfilled and that the king lost his life in a revolution.²⁴ When the blow fell on Judah, it was far more catastrophic than scholars have hitherto been willing to believe, with "all or virtually all, of the fortified towns in Judah . . . razed to the ground."²⁵ It was not until 1925 that we learned that "Tyre actually fell" at that time.²⁶ It is now believed, in fact, that in 586 B.C. southern Judah was "so frightfully depopulated" that the Arabs simply moved into the vacuum and occupied the southern country without opposition forever after.²⁷

The unsurpassed destruction of Judah was preceded by an unparalleled atmosphere of terror and gloom that still speaks to us in the Lachish Letters. The country was divided into two factions: "the two parties, pro-Egyptian and pro-Babylonian, existed side by side in the land," each accusing the other of bad faith and bad judgment. It was a time of "dissension and heart burning, when divided counsels rent the unhappy city of Jerusalem,"²⁸ and, as things became ever worse in an atmosphere "charged with unmingled gloom . . . Zedekiah . . . stubbornly followed the path to ruin by conspiring with Pharaoh."²⁹ Other cities were divided by the same faction and strife, "but it was especially at Jerusalem that passions ran high."³⁰ The vivid and im-

aginative description of a French scholar tells how towards the end, "in Jerusalem things were desperate. All the cities of Judah, except Lachish and Azekah, had fallen to the enemy; the country of Benjamin was a mass of ruins among rivers of blood. . . . At the six gates of the city the guards had been doubled, but desertions became more numerous every day. Passions were at their height. The crowd disputed at the street-corners day and night, and their discussions were always accompanied by the steady hammering of the Chaldean battering rams."³¹ The false prophets continued their foolish and mercenary activities to the end, while the elders charged the true prophets with treason and "the *sarim* . . . were in permanent session in the Palace" sitting day and night to try cases of defection — a hysterical attempt to run down "subversives" when it was all too late.³²

For years scholars insisted that the "destruction" of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. was not a real destruction at all but just the taking away of a number of noble hostages. Today they know better. The Book of Mormon was quite right after all in insisting on describing that event as a complete destruction: "For I know that the day must surely come that they must be destroyed, save a few only, who shall be led away into captivity" (1 Nephi 17:43). What the Book of Mormon describes with particular clarity and power is the atmosphere of tension and gloom in the city leading up to the final catastrophe. Nowhere is the dissension and heart-burning that rent the unhappy city of Jerusalem more clearly shown forth than in those impassioned scenes within Lehi's own household. Two of his sons supported him, but the two eldest, taking the part of the Jews at Jerusalem, resisted and protested in the bitterest terms; they beat their younger brother, they exerted influence on their mother, and they finally went so far as to try to put their father out of the way: "The Jews also sought to take away his life; yea, and ye also have sought to take away his life;

wherefore, ye are murderers in your hearts and ye are like unto them" (1 Nephi 17:44). These are terrible words to be spoken in a family, and they plainly show what the conflict was about. While Lehi "truly testified of their wickedness and their abominations" the Jews simply laughed at him (1 Nephi 1:19), and his older sons went along with them, protesting to their father that "the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes . . . according to the law of Moses; wherefore, we know that they are a righteous people" (1 Nephi 17:22). So Lehi's family was incorrigibly split right down the center, even as Jerusalem itself and all the cities surrounding it.

Questions

1. Who were "the elders of the Jews"?
2. To what did they owe their power?
3. How does the role of Zedekiah in the Book of Mormon agree with what is now known of the man's character and history?
4. What was the composition of the "new aristocracy"? Of the old?
5. What indications are there that Lehi was a member of the old aristocracy?
6. What is Nephi's attitude towards "the Jews at Jerusalem"? How can that attitude be explained?
7. Is it correct to call Lehi a "Jew"?
8. What is designated by the expression "the land of one's inheritance" in the Book of Mormon? What is the significance of the concept as evidence for the authenticity of the book?
9. How does the statement in Alma 7:10 that the Lord would be born at Jerusalem actually support the authenticity of the Book of Mormon?
10. How is the institution of judges in the Book of Mormon related to conditions in Israel in Lehi's day?
11. How does the situation within Lehi's family as de-

scribed in the Book of Mormon compare with conditions in Jerusalem at the time, as scholars now describe them?

12. How does the "atmosphere" at Jerusalem as described by Nephi agree with that depicted in such recent finds as the Lachish Letters?