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New Book Offers Views of Jerusalem as Lehi Knew It

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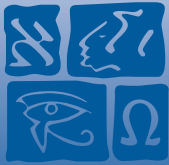
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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 23 | 2003

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New Book Offers Views of Jerusalem as Lehi Knew It

Nephi and his brothers referred to Jerusalem as “that great city” (1 Nephi 2:13). Their opposing views about it became a point of contention that tore Lehi’s family in two, and their memories of it influenced the cultural perspective of their descendants in the New World for dozens of generations. The people known as Lamanites longed after it as a lost paradise and named one of their lands of settlement in its honor (Alma 21:1). Among the Nephites it exemplified the dire consequences of unbelief (Helaman 8:20). But what was the Jerusalem of Lehi’s day really like?

In its 22 essays, the new volume *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, examines this question. This anthology gathers the penetrating insights of 19 scholars from varying fields on the political, religious, social, cultural, economic, and legal situation of Jerusalem, Judah, and the nations surrounding them in the decades before the city’s destruction by the Babylonians in 587/586 BC. Setting the stage, the first three articles present a cultural capsule of Jerusalem at the time, the cast of biblical characters Lehi might have known, and a photo essay of the city and its surroundings. From there, a multitude of scholarly tools are brought to bear on the topic, resulting in a composite picture that brings Lehi’s Jerusalem vividly alive.

The reader is presented with a picture of typical home life in Jerusalem for those in the wealthier stratum of society, to which Lehi and his family belonged, with special emphasis on a woman’s life at this time and on the economic concerns of men in its primarily agrarian economy. The book examines the extent and nature of literacy, with particular attention given to inscriptions from this era. These reveal a surprising degree of influence from Egypt that is

not clearly documented in the Bible. Apparently, Lehi’s facility with Egyptian, as well as Hebrew, was not uncommon for educated people in his time and of his social standing. Such conclusions as this from archaeology, paleography, and linguistics enrich the historical record and, more than incidentally, disarm those critics of the Book of Mormon who find no biblical basis for its claims of Egyptian language combined with Hebrew learning. Other influences from Egypt are also evident in the material culture of Judah emerging from archaeological digs dating to the seventh and early sixth centuries BC.

All this portrays Jerusalem as prosperous and cosmopolitan as Laman, Lemuel, and many of its inhabitants could wish, a city favored by heaven and secure enough to stand against any enemy. In contrast, as the first chapters of the Book of Mormon reveal, Lehi and his fellow prophets saw Jerusalem as a hotbed of contention, turmoil, and change—a city rushing toward its doom. Little Judah lay in the midst of the superpowers of its day—Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia—and maintained its relative freedom through a blend of carefully crafted diplomacy and divine aid.

The book introduces the institutions that preserved this delicate balance: the intricacies of Judaic politics and law under the kings on the one hand and, on the other, obedience to the will of God as voiced by the prophets.

in this issue


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- Project Report: Chiasmus Archive
- Clues to New World Volcanism
- Reader’s Edition of the Book of Mormon
- Hebrew Law in the Book of Mormon

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BYU Journal Explores Hebrew Law in the Book of Mormon

In February 2001, a conference titled “Hebrew Law in the Book of Mormon” was held at Brigham Young University under the sponsorship of FARMS (see “BYU Conference on Hebrew Law a Success,” *Insights* 21/4 [2001], available on the FARMS Web site). Among the papers presented there were studies by seven BYU students on aspects of ancient law that might be reflected in the Book of Mormon. These papers are now available in a special issue, copublished by FARMS, of the student journal *Studia Antiqua*. They treat such topics as slavery, the Noachide laws (minimum standards of social and moral conduct revealed through Noah and thus binding on all humanity), false prophecy, blasphemy and reviling, the status of women in ancient

Jewish law, and legal protections for widows and the fatherless.

The journal features an introduction by John W. Welch, a BYU professor of law who organized the conference and spoke at two of its three sessions. He summarizes the proceedings, highlights important issues, and provides helpful context for understanding the approaches taken in the student papers. He observes: “Law was extremely important in the ancient world, especially among the Israelites. Although it is often difficult to know exactly what the substantive and procedural rules of Israelite courts might have been in the seventh century BC and how much of that jurisprudence was carried over into the New World on the plates of brass and through the customs of Lehi and his descendants, reasonable reconstructions of Hebrew law in biblical times can be made, and those studies shed interesting light on possible meanings of many words and deeds reported in the Book of Mormon.” 


New Book [continued from page 1](#)

Through the examination of key aspects and events, the growing imbalance between those elements during Lehi’s lifetime becomes clear. The bearing of international politics on Judah’s situation, the calling and authority of the prophets and the Judahites’ expectations of them, Israelite religion as practiced before the exile, the importance of the temple, the effects of the religious reforms enacted by King Josiah and the Deuteronomists, the trial of Jeremiah—all are part of the panorama in which the prophets foresaw disaster. The destruction decreed by heaven came, but not before Lehi and his family had escaped their city’s fall by fleeing into the wilderness (an action not without precedent in that time period) and traveling to southern Arabia along well-used commercial routes to continue their epic journey to the New World land of promise.

Given that this volume examines a time of significant complexity—a crucial moment in the history of the world documented only by ancient

writings that sometimes contradict each other and the serendipitous findings of archaeology that represent only a small fraction of the whole picture—the writers have constructed a remarkably full and detailed picture of life in Jerusalem as Lehi might have known it. As one might still expect, the incompleteness and ambiguities inherent in the evidence surface in the occasionally differing opinions expressed in these essays. For example, some take at face value the seemingly approving descriptions of Josiah’s religious reforms found in the book of 2 Kings; others note the less flattering comments about Josiah in 2 Chronicles and Jeremiah and wonder if the reforms added to the tension in negative ways. The reader therefore becomes a discernor, participating in the exciting task of reconstructing Jerusalem before the exile and deciding which aspects and events may have shaped the contrasting viewpoints of Lehi’s family members as they recalled their former home.

As the first book ever to deal exclusively with life in Jerusalem in the days of Lehi, this work is [continued on page 8](#)

a welcome and timely publication for Latter-day Saints as they begin a year's study of the Book of Mormon. However, its value will certainly extend beyond a few weeks of supplementary reading as it continues to present solid, scholarly context for the words of Nephi, Jacob, and subsequent Book of Mormon prophets in reference to their Israelite origins. It will add depth and perspective to Old Testament studies as well, and its list of suggested readings provides a starting point for further research of a fascinating yet understudied period of scriptural history. As in the metaphors of Joseph of Egypt, it will enhance the reader's understanding of both the branches that run over the wall and the root from which they sprang (Genesis 49:22). 

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

The FARMS Review (vol. 15, no. 2), edited by Daniel C. Peterson, features reviews and articles on DNA issues, the Mountain Meadows massacre, and secret combinations, as well as responses to a so-called insider's view of Mormon origins. Available February 2004.

Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann Seely, will help readers to imagine what Jerusalem was like around 600 BC, before much of the city was obliterated by the Babylonians in fulfillment of prophecy a few years after Lehi's departure. Subjects include culture, family life, agriculture, politics, religious practices, inscriptions, law, and international relations. Available February 2004.

FROM OTHER PUBLISHERS

Dead Sea Scrolls Reader, edited by Donald W. Parry and Emanuel Tov, presents all of the nonbiblical Qumran texts along with English translations. Published by Brill Academic Publishers of the Netherlands, this six-part edition of the nonbiblical scroll fragments is an outgrowth of the FARMS Dead Sea Scrolls database. Parts 1 (religious law), 2 (exegetical texts), and 4 (calendrical and sapiential texts) are available now; parts 3 (parabiblical texts), 5 (poetic and liturgical texts), and 6 (additional genres and unclassified texts) will be available in spring 2004.

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FARMS is part of Brigham Young University's Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. As such, it encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. Under the FARMS imprint, the Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at FARMS include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

FARMS makes interim and final reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications. As a service to teachers and students of the scriptures, research results are distributed in both scholarly and popular formats.

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