The Imprisonment of Jeremiah in Its Historical Context

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The narrative of the imprisonment of Jeremiah gives us helpful insights into the world of the Book of Mormon and the world of Lehi and his sons.

The book of Jeremiah describes the turbulent times in Jerusalem prior to the Babylonian conquest of the city. Warring political factions bickered within the city while a looming enemy rapidly approached. Amid this complex political arena, Jeremiah arose as a divine spokesman. His preaching became extremely polarizing. These political factions could be categorized along a spectrum of support and hatred toward the prophet. Jeremiah’s imprisonment (Jeremiah 38) illustrates some of the various attitudes toward God’s emissary. This scene also demonstrates the political climate and spiritual atmosphere of Jerusalem at the verge of its collapse into the Babylonian exile and also gives insights into the beginning narrative of the Book of Mormon.

Setting the Stage: Political Background for Jeremiah’s Imprisonment

In the decades before the Babylonian exile in 587/586 BC, Jerusalem was the center of political and spiritual turmoil. True freedom and independence had not been enjoyed there for centuries. Subtle political factions maneuvered within the capital city and manipulated the king. Because these political
groups had a dramatic influence on the throne, they were instrumental in setting the political and spiritual stage of Jerusalem. The Assyrian Empire had ruled much of the ancient Near East for hundreds of years. Both Manasseh and Amon ruled Judah vassals under the Assyrians. Both kings were wicked according to the author of Kings (2 Kings 21:1, 16, 19–22). Amon’s reign ended abruptly after only two years, at which point his servants assassinated him (2 Kings 21:23). At the time of his death, Amon was only twenty-four years old (2 Kings 21:19; 2 Chronicles 33:21), leaving his eight-year-old son Josiah to rule (2 Kings 22:1; 2 Chronicles 34:1). This means that Amon was sixteen years old when his son was born. Securing a natural heir as early as possible was critical.2

In 640 BC, King Josiah was placed on the throne by a profoundly influential group called “the people of the land” (2 Kings 21:24).2 Little is known about this group, but it is clear that its members wielded a tremendous amount of influence upon the young king and were able to manipulate the future of the kingdom in very significant ways. Josiah’s rule would prove to be a turning point in the religious history of Judah, and few kings would garner as much respect and admiration (2 Kings 22:2).

Josiah’s marriages would play a significant role in the future of Jerusalem and were probably arranged.3 In order to obtain an heir to secure the royal Davidic line, the woman who would become the mother of a future king would wield an enormous amount of power and so must be chosen carefully.4 These crucial decisions could not be left to a youth. Josiah’s first wife was Zebudah, the daughter of Pediah of Rumah (2 Kings 23:36). Their first-born son was named Jehoakim and was probably born when Josiah was fourteen.5 By age sixteen, Josiah married a second wife, Hamutal of Libnah (2 Kings 23:34; 24:18). Hamutal’s first-born son was named Jehoahaz. In the same year that Jehoahaz was born, sixteen-year-old Josiah began to “seek after the God of David” (2 Chronicles 34:3). Four years later, he began to purge the land of all alternative forms of worship, eliminating “high places,” “groves,” and “images” (2 Chronicles 34:3).

During the eighteenth year of his reign, he ordered the high priest Hilkiah to use state taxes to renovate the temple (2 Kings 22:3–4; 2 Chronicles 34:9). During this renovation “the book of the law” was discovered (2 Kings 22:3–10). These scriptures had a dramatic impact on Josiah (2 Kings 22:11; 2 Chronicles 34:19).6 As a result of this discovery and of hearing the text read aloud, a reform began in the city. Josiah purged the land of all pagan practices and closed all local shrines, centralizing the worship of Jehovah to the temple in Jerusalem.7 Because Josiah’s spiritual awakening was so closely associated with Jehoahaz’s birth, both Jehoahaz and his mother were identified as the catalyst for this reform movement.8

Jeremiah entered the scene during Josiah’s reform. Jeremiah came Anathoth, the home of an exiled priestly family and had moved to Jerusalem to assist in Josiah’s temple renovations (Jeremiah 1:1).9 As a young man, Lehi too was a firsthand witness of Josiah’s reform.10 Later in his life, Lehi may have “stood as a second witness” to Jeremiah as they preached to the citizens of Jerusalem.11

By 612 BC the Assyrian Empire was clearly declining. The Babylonians and the Medes destroyed Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, and the end of Assyrian domination was imminent. Josiah took the opportunity to declare independence from the oppressive Assyrian regime, trying to take advantage of the declining Assyrian influence.12 He attempted to follow in the footsteps of his ancestor King David13 by making efforts to unify the remaining Israelites and to gather them under one unified monarchy to amass the strength of Israel.

In the spring of 609 BC, the Egyptian pharaoh Necho II14 led a sizable military force north to aid the Assyrian ruler Asshuruballit II in Carchemish in a frantic effort to retake Haran from the Babylonians. Josiah attempted to block the advance of Necho’s forces at the valley of Megiddo, some sixty miles north of Jerusalem. He hoped to eliminate Assyria’s support and to ensure the Assyrian defeat.15 Amid the conflict with the Egyptian army in June 609 BC, Josiah was killed (2 Kings 23:29–30; 2 Chronicles 35:23–24),16 and Necho pressed on toward Haran.

Necho ultimately failed at the battle at Haran and retreated to Egypt. On his return march, Necho found that Josiah’s second oldest son, Jehoahaz, sat on the throne in Jerusalem (2 Kings 23:31)—the second-born son was chosen over the firstborn.17 Curiously, it was the “people of the land” (2 Kings 23:30) who placed Jehoahaz on the throne, probably to help support the reforms Josiah had begun. Necho immediately released Jehoahaz, who had ruled for only three months, and imprisoned him in Egypt, replacing him on the throne with his more compliant older brother, Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:34; 2 Chronicles 36:5–4).18 It could be viewed that Necho restored the natural order of things by placing the firstborn on the throne. Jehoiakim ruled as a vassal of the pharaoh and would prove to be a supporter of Egypt.
Necho levied a high tax on Jerusalem. This tax was not paid with the royal coffers, but rather the penalty was passed along to the people of the land at the explicit command of Pharaoh Necho (2 Kings 23:35). The people who put Jehoahaz on the throne were ultimately punished.

Once Jehoiakim was placed on the throne, he became a ruthless tyrant who disregarded his subjects’ needs and reversed the recent religious reforms of his father, Josiah. Jehoiakim put down all opposition, and the moral status of the kingdom rapidly declined (2 Kings 24:3–4). Because of this, Jeremiah was quick to criticize the new king (Jeremiah 7, 22).

As Jehoiakim began to rule Judah, Babylon was beginning to expand its borders toward Egypt. The Babylonian forces came down on Jerusalem following the battle at Carchemish in 605 BC (Jeremiah 46:2, 13, 22; 2 Kings 24:7). Jehoiakim quickly buckled before Babylon and pledged allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar and became his vassal. Nebuchadnezzar’s forces returned to Babylon to regroup, and Jehoiakim saw this retreat as an opportunity to rebel against Babylon (2 Kings 24:1–2).

Jehoiakim’s revolt against Babylon in 598 BC indicates that Jehoiakim still acted as a loyal ally or vassal of the Egyptians who put him on the throne, and it resulted in a Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:10–11). It was toward the beginning of this three-month siege that Jehoiakim passed away. He was replaced by his eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:6–9), who reigned in Jerusalem for just over three months before the siege ended. Jehoiachin’s speedy submission to Nebuchadnezzar saved his life but unfortunately lost him his crown and his freedom. Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin captive along with his entire household, his royal court, and thousands of his citizens (2 Kings 24:11–16; 2 Chronicles 36:9–10). In the end, Zedekiah was placed on the throne at age twenty-one by Nebuchadnezzar after swearing an oath of allegiance to Babylon (2 Kings 24:17–18).

Zedekiah’s Pressures

Zedekiah came to the throne at a time of great spiritual, economic, and political turmoil. The previous kings had made “disastrous choices.” The city was caught between two external political powers since both Egypt and Babylon vied for power. Over the past decades, loyalties had shifted and allegiances had waned as Jerusalem was continually controlled by one side or another. Egypt had heavily taxed the people (2 Kings 23:33), and Babylon had pillaged the temple and national coffers and had exiled a portion of the inhabitants, leaving the state in financial ruin (2 Kings 24:13). Zedekiah had witnessed the murder of his father, Josiah, and the exile of his brother Jehoahaz. He had seen his brother Jehoiaikam mismanage Jerusalem, which had caused the might of Babylon to come down on the city for a three-month siege, resulting in the death of Jehoiakim and the exile of his son Jehoiachin. Thousands of people were deported, and both the city’s economy and defenses were in shambles. Civil unrest prevailed, and various political groups competed for power.

Zedekiah inherited a city in which the spiritual climate was deplorable. Adultery was rampant (Jeremiah 5:7–8; 9:2), corruption and dishonesty permeated almost every group (Jeremiah 5:1; 6:13; 9:2–4), and false and perverse religious practices began to reappear (Jeremiah 7:31; 11:13; 19:5; 32:35). Many divinely commissioned ministers began preaching in the holy city at this time (2 Chronicles 36:15–16; 1 Nephi 1:4). Prophets active during this era included Jeremiah (ca. 626–587 BC), Zephaniah (ca. 640–609 BC), Obadiah (ca. 587 BC), Nahum (ca. 612 BC), and Habakkuk (ca. 609–605 BC). The Book of Mormon reports that Lehi was called to the ministry at this time (1 Nephi 1:5–20). Lesser-known prophetic figures were also preaching repentance, including Urijah, Huldah the prophetess, Ben-Yohanan ben Igdaliah (LXX Jeremiah 35:4), and possibly many others. This increased number of prophets in the city was accompanied by an increasing wave of imitators (Jeremiah 23:13–32). While true prophets warned of the impending war and desolation, false prophets lulled the people with their messages of reassurance and idleness. As a result, the people rejected the true prophets and were often personally aggressive toward them (Jeremiah 5:31; 6:13–14; 8:9–11; 14:14–15; 20:2; 23:11–17, 21, 25–38; 27:1–18; 1 Nephi 1:20).

For the next few years, Zedekiah maintained a quiet reign. The Babylonians had successfully cowed him. Few would have dared to question the might of Babylon after their armies had just sacked the city. Over his eleven-year reign, Zedekiah realized he needed to rebuild without provoking the ire of either Babylon or Egypt. Zedekiah was a well-intentioned leader (Jeremiah 38:14–16), but he was weak, vacillating, and fearful of public opinion (Jeremiah 38:5, 19).

Throughout Zedekiah’s reign, various political groups pressured Zedekiah to break his oath of allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar. Rumors began to arise that Egypt would assist in a rebellion against Babylon. News of civil unrest
in Babylon reached Jerusalem; Zedekiah gave in to the pressures and joined an alliance with Egypt to rebel against Babylon (2 Kings 24:20). And so the countdown to Jerusalem's destruction began.

In January 588 BC Nebuchadnezzar caught wind of the rebellion and moved quickly against Jerusalem, laying siege to the city. The blockade ultimately lasted over eighteen months. In the spring or summer of 588 BC, Judah became hopeful when the Egyptians began to march toward Jerusalem (Jeremiah 37:5–7). Nebuchadnezzar briefly left the siege of Jerusalem to smash this Egyptian resistance, and then he quickly returned Jerusalem. Zedekiah was in a desperate situation.

### The Imprisonment of Jeremiah

During the siege of the city, Jeremiah once again prophesied, "He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live" (Jeremiah 38:2). Jeremiah had frequently and repeatedly forewarned of the impending Babylonian victory (Jeremiah 37:6–10, 16–17; 38:1–3, 18, 22–23). He clearly outlined the three options left to the people: they could (1) leave the city by escaping the siege, (2) remain in the city and face the consequences of the terrible end of the siege, or (3) surrender and hope that becoming the "prey" of war would somehow result in survival. The implied message was that "the Babylonian invader is the Lords' instrument. To resist him is to resist the Lord." Jeremiah connected politics and faith, which led to a remarkable and predictably unpopular pronouncement: "obedience to God equaled surrender to Babylon."

The message was too much for the leading councils of the city to accept. A group referred to as "the princes" (Jeremiah 38:4), officials or officers of the king, had the prophet arrested. Princes could refer to military officers, commanders of military units, or the whole army; or it could refer to civic officials or royal advisers (1 Kings 4:2–6; 20:14; see also the Hebrew text of 1 Kings 2:26; 2 Kings 23:8). The princes "and not the king appear to be the shapers of policy. They embody the bureaucracy which is impervious outside its own ideology." They appear to have been able to influence the king so effectively that one wonders who was really running the state's affairs.

The charges that the princes brought against Jeremiah appear to have been either of treason, claiming that he "weaketh the hands of the men of war" (Jeremiah 37:4) by undermining the military, or of false prophecy (Deuteronomy 13:1–5) by predicting a false outcome of the conflict. The princes' primary concern seems to be the morale of the soldiers, supporting the conclusion that the princes were indeed military commanders. Regardless of the charges, they wanted Jeremiah silenced! Their repeated efforts to silence him in the past had failed (compare Jeremiah 26; 36), but this time these pro-Egyptian/anti-Babylonian courtiers planned to kill Jeremiah, silencing him permanently.

Zedekiah had already promised Jeremiah that he would spare his life, but because the king lacked "the power to resist [the princes'] designs," Zedekiah was caught in a dilemma. According to Jeremiah 38, the king knew the difference between right and wrong but was too weak to make his private support of Jeremiah public. William McKane labels Zedekiah as guilty of "moral cowardice"; he is a "helpless tool" in the power of the princes, whom he calls "brutal terrorists."

Although weak, Zedekiah still controlled Jeremiah's fate. Charges—including a verdict against Jeremiah—were brought before the king for ratification. Zedekiah is framed as the final judge in the case. The exact role of the king's judicial function is unknown but in the early monarchal period, the king functioned as a primary and final judge in all kinds of cases. During the seventh-century Deuteronomic reform, many of the day-to-day civil or criminal matters were delegated to other officials (Deuteronomy 16:18; 17:8–13). Ultimately, it was the king's responsibility "to guarantee the true administration of justice throughout the land." The king relinquished all responsibility in the case against Jeremiah, claiming that "he is in your hand; for the king is not he that can do any thing against you" (Jeremiah 38:5). The princes took Jeremiah and "cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah" (Jeremiah 38:6), believing that he "would not be supported by God and would die." Empty cisterns were sometimes used as prisons, or holding cells (Jeremiah 38:6; Lamentations 3:53; Psalms 40:2; 69:15). Most "domestic cisterns were shaped like a bottle, with a small opening in the top, often covered by a stone." Because it was in the month of July, presumably either the now-empty water cistern had only mud at the bottom (Jeremiah 18:6), or the cistern was cracked and could not hold significant amounts of water. Once again, Jeremiah was imprisoned; but this time instead of being under house arrest, as he had been before (Jeremiah 37:17), he sat in the "mud of hopelessness, a place of abandonment and death." Leaving Jeremiah in those
conditions would ultimately kill him, while sparing the princes the task of actually charging him with a crime or personally killing him.66

Word of Jeremiah's imprisonment was not kept secret and spread quickly. Ebed-Melech67 the Ethiopian, one of the king's officials,68 heard the news (Jeremiah 38:7). He found the king “sitting in the gate of Benjamin” (Jeremiah 38:7)69 and pleaded with him, saying, “These men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the pit; and he is like to die in the place where he is because of the famine; for there is no more bread in the city” (Jeremiah 38:9).70 Ebed-Melech could have acted independently and rescued Jeremiah on his own, but he sought the king's permission and tried to spur Zedekiah on to action. He had his master's true interests at heart, “helping him to reach relative levels of justice and spiritual perception he would otherwise not have attained.”71 However, the king remained passive, bending to the request of both the princes to condemn and Ebed-Melech to rescue. He granted Ebed-Melech an escort, declaring, “Take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die” (Jeremiah 38:10). It would seem an excessive amount to get one man out of a pit, and “no reason is given for so many, perhaps the idea is some protection from those who resist the rescue.”72 Jeremiah was rescued but remained in a type of house arrest or in “the court of the prison” (Jeremiah 38:13). This house arrest might have been to ensure Jeremiah's safety or to curb his message from being spread.

Zedekiah later met with the prophet in private. Jeremiah declared that the king's feet too would sink in the mire (Jeremiah 38:22), and he compared his own imprisonment to the siege of Jerusalem. As Leslie Allen and Jennifer K. Cox wrote, these “two crises are linked as cause and effect. The rejection of the prophetic message that resulted in Jeremiah's dire predicament, despite the partial amelioration granted by the king, was to land Zedekiah himself in a comparable predicament.”73 The imagery seems to mirror Jeremiah's incarceration in a muddy cistern: “Zedekiah rescued Jeremiah from mud, but the king's friends had abandoned him to it.”74

Zedekiah was caught between different groups as he tried to appease everyone. The princes pushed him to oppose God's messenger under the guise of national independence; Jeremiah commanded him to surrender and face the consequences of leading his people into peril; Ebed-Melech tried to inspire, with his own example, the need to make correct moral choices.

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**Book of Mormon Connections**

The context of the situation in Jerusalem gives insight into the early events of the Book of Mormon. These connections shed greater light on the context of 1 Nephi, which can help the reader gain greater insight.

Josiah's reform must have had an impact on Lehi and his family75 since it had some aspects that resonate with the teachings found in the Book of Mormon. Both emphasize a belief in central temple worship76 and devotion to religious law (see Deuteronomy 28:15, 45, 61; 30:10, 16; 2 Nephi 5:10; Mosiah 2:31) as well as a belief in opposing priestcrafts (see Deuteronomy 13:16; 16:16; 2 Nephi 10:15; 2 Nephi 26:29; Alma 1:16) and reunifying Israel (see 2 Chronicles 30:6–8, 18–19; 2 Nephi 3:13; Jacob 5). The scarcity of scripture within the first year of his reign, there is some debate as to when Lehi and his family left the city. Zedekiah ruled for approximately ten years. Did the small group of refugees depart early in the reign of King Zedekiah, perhaps within the first year of his reign (597–596 BC), or did they leave Jerusalem sometime later, possibly just before the final Babylonian siege and the fall of Jerusalem some ten years later? S. Kent Brown and David Rolph Seely argue that Lehi and his family left Jerusalem soon after he received his call as a prophet in his first year of Zedekiah's reign.77 On the contrary, Randall Spackman argues that Lehi preached for almost a decade before the climate in Jerusalem became so violent that he was prompted to leave.78 Part of the argument hinges on Jeremiah's imprisonment. Nephi acknowledged that he is aware of Jeremiah being “cast into prison” (1 Nephi 7:14). Brown and Seely show that Jeremiah was imprisoned or restrained several times (in one way or another) throughout his ministry (Jeremiah 20:2–3; 32:2; 36:5; 37:21).79 Of these instances in which Jeremiah was bound or incarcerated, only one describes Jeremiah as being “cast” (Heb: שָׁלַך šalak) into prison (compare Jeremiah 38:6; 1 Nephi 7:14). The Hebrew verb is not used to describe the stocks Jeremiah wore (Jeremiah 20:2) or the house arrest that he was forced to endure (Jeremiah 37:15, 18). Nephi must have had Jeremiah's being “cast into the dungeon” (Jeremiah 38:6) in mind when he wrote that Jeremiah was “cast into prison” (1 Nephi 7:14).
Nephi also compared Jeremiah’s imprisonment to the fact that people sought his own father’s life. The imprisonment described in Jeremiah 38:6 was explicitly designed to kill Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38:9, 16). Nephi’s concern that people “sought to take away the life of [his] father” (1 Nephi 7:14) is parallel to Jeremiah’s imprisonment that was intended to result in Jeremiah’s death.⁸⁰

Labor could have been one of the princes mentioned in Jeremiah 38:7 who were directly involved with Jeremiah’s imprisonment⁸¹ since Nephi mentioned that Laban had been meeting with “the elders of the Jews” (1 Nephi 4:22), and some Bible passages connect the elders with the princes (Judges 8:14; Lamentations 5:12; Ezra 10:8). As mentioned above, the term princes also refers to military captains and officials. The fact that Laban was meeting with this group “by night” suggests that this was some sort of conspiratorial meeting.⁸² Because the princes plotted to silence Jeremiah from repeatedly “weakening” the military with his prophetic message (Jeremiah 38:4),⁸³ they could have been part of the group that Laban was meeting with late into the evening (1 Nephi 4:22). If Laban was working closely with “the elders” (1 Nephi 4:22), he must have been among the military leaders of Jerusalem. The fact that Laban was regaled in armor when Nephi found him supports this theory (1 Nephi 4:19). In further evidence, Laman and Lemuel described him as an influential leader in Jerusalem, “a mighty man” (1 Nephi 3:31; 4:11), a title that has military connotations.⁸⁴ Laban was also shown commanding large groups of soldiers when Laman described him as being able to command at least fifty men, possibly even of tens of thousands of men (1 Nephi 3:31; 4:1). Referring back to the Jeremiah text, Zedekiah’s order for Ebed-Melech to take thirty men with him to rescue Jeremiah appears to be a reasonable rescue force (Jeremiah 38:10), especially if any of the princes mentioned in Jeremiah had the ability to command a military force of “fifty” like Laban (1 Nephi 3:31).

Summary and Conclusions

Understanding the social and political context of the biblical text helps illuminate the plight of the people described and the pressures they faced. Understanding the historical context of the political climate of Jerusalem and the social pressures the king of Judah was under adds greater insight into Jeremiah’s plight. The prophet was in a desperate situation as he preached to the inhabitants of a city who were set on the edge of exile. King Zedekiah is framed in a near hopeless position with a dominant military force at his gates and military advisers who strongly opposed the message of Jeremiah. The king tried to play both sides, and he gave in to requests to both execute and rescue the prophet. The narrative of the imprisonment of Jeremiah also gives us insights into the world of the Book of Mormon and of Lehi and his sons. The writings of Jeremiah illuminate the conflict from which Lehi was trying to escape, the climate in which he was commanded to send his four sons, and the dangers of having to face Laban to retrieve the brass plates. The political climate of Jerusalem over the previous decades prior to its fall sets the stage for a dramatic episode where Jeremiah was cast into a miry pit for foretelling the victory of the Babylonian siege.

Notes

1. The nations of the Levant had become vassals to the Assyrians as early as during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC).
3. In contrast to the book of Kings, Chronicles describes King Manasseh as repenting before his death (2 Chronicles 33:11–13).
7. Bathsheba is the first to achieve this elevated status (1 Kings 1:19; see 2:12–20), but others also sat in this position, namely Maachah (1 Kings 15:9–13) and Athaliah the daughter (or granddaughter) of Ahab (2 Kings 11).

8. Wilcoxen, “Political Background,” 154.


10. Josiah was ordained king at age eight and ruled for thirty-one years (2 Kings 22:1). Jehoiakim began to rule at age twenty-five (2 Kings 23:16), putting Jehoiakim’s birth when Josiah was fourteen.

11. Libnah was a small military outpost south of Jerusalem near Lachish (2 Kings 19:8). The outpost was designed to thwart attacks from the south, specifically from Egypt. Considering that Jehoahaz’s father was killed by the Egyptians and his mother was from the decidedly anti-Egyptian town of Libnah, one would assume that Jehoahaz would have bitter feelings toward the Egyptians and would not make the best vassal for Egypt. In contrast, Jehoahaz’s mother was from the city of Rumah (2 Kings 23:36), a military outpost to the north that held specifically anti-Babylonian sentiment.

12. The discovery of this text not only had an impact on Josiah personally but also on the way scriptural texts were viewed, redacted, and produced in the future. This event became a “fundamental linchpin” in the production of future scriptural text. Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 3–20.

13. Josiah’s reforms included the centralization of worship to the temple in Jerusalem. Second Kings 23:19–11 illustrates Josiah inviting the priests of the various high places in the countryside to come in from the countryside to serve in the temple in Jerusalem, but these priests declined the offer.


15. Anathoth was the place where the priestly line was exiled that supported Adonijah instead of Solomon after the death of David (1 Kings 2:26–27).

16. John Welch places Lehi as being close to Jeremiah’s age, placing his birth at 650 BC. See John W. Welch, “They Came from Jerusalem,” Ensign, September 1976, 28. However, we cannot be sure of that because Lehi might have been born a little later than 650 BC. Depending on a number of variables, he could have been born as late as 625 BC. Regardless, Lehi was a witness of Josiah’s reform.


18. The nation of Israel and the subsequent nation of Judah had been overshadowed by stronger foreign entities for centuries. With the death of Ashurbanipal, the last powerful king of the Assyrian Empire, it appeared that the oppressive rule over Judah was over. Nadav Nāʿāman has argued that there was no political vacuum that gave Josiah opportunity to try to found a new Davidic empire. Rather, the declining Assyrian power in the west was matched by the growing power of Egypt; indeed, there may have been an orderly transfer of territorial control by mutual agreement. The nation of Judah was an Egyptian vassal during Josiah’s entire reign. See Nāʿāman, “The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah,” in Good Kings and Bad Kings, ed. Lester L. Grabbe and Marvin A. Sweeney (London: T & T Clark International, 2009), 210–17; James Maxwell Miller and John Haralson Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah (London: SCM Press, 1986), 383–90; Lester L. Grabbe, Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It? (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 204–1.

19. Josiah is the only king described as one who “walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (2 Kings 22:12). The Deuteronomic Historian singles Josiah out as one who best emulates King David.
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31. It was probably during this time that Ezekiel and Daniel were brought into exile. Barbara Green, Jeremiah and God’s Plans of Well-Being (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2013), 126.

32. Some have dated Habakkuk to the years 609–605 BC, contesting that Habakkuk views the Babylonians as an impending threat against the Egyptian-supported rule of Jehoiakim. Alternatively, others date Habakkuk to 605–597 BC, contending that the Babylonians are not a potential threat but an actual threat against the Judean kingdom. See Sweeney, King Josiah of Judah, 107–8.

34. Urijah “prophesied against this city and against this land,” and as a result, Jehoiakim tried to kill him. This places Urijah’s ministry during the reign of King Jehoiakim, ca. 608–598 BC. Urijah fled to Egypt for safety, but the king had him extradited and then “slew him with the sword” (Jeremiah 16:20–23). Not long after the death of Urijah, Lehi was called to this prophetic office (1 Nephi 1:5–20).

35. Elder Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal his feelings that Huldah was an authentic prophetess: “May they influence the daughters of Zion to deeds of virtue, Holiness, Righteousness and truth. May thy Blessings of Sarah, Huldah, Hannah, Anna, & Mary the Ancient Prophetess and Holy women rest upon them.” See Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1985), 7309.

36. This prophetic figure is mentioned in the Greek Septuagint but is absent from the Hebrew Masoretic text. Ben-Yehoanan ben Igdaglah was a prophet who preached during the reign of Jehoiakim (ca. 608–598 BC).

37. Jeremiah warned against an alliance with Egypt (Jeremiah 2:13–18; 36:37; 37:5–10; 41:7–19; 43:2; 44:12–14, 30; see Ezekiel 17:12–21), knowing that Egypt was either too feeble to help or would have ulterior motives in assisting Judah.

38. Walter Brueggemann claims that “the princes advocate a policy of go-it-alone and resistance which sounds like a militant kind of patriotism.” Brueggemann, To Build, to Plant: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26–52 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 146.


41. This section is almost a direct quote from Jeremiah’s previous declaration found in Jeremiah 2:19. Linguistic parallels connect this to Deuteronomy 30:16, which states that whoever is faithful in “walking in the ways of the Lord will obtain life. Geoffrey H. Parke-Taylor suggests that living in Jeremiah 38:3 appears “to imply more than mere survival.” Geoffrey H. Parke-Taylor, The Formation of the Book of Jeremiah: Doubts and Recurring Phrases (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 201.


43. Douglas R. Jones, Jeremiah (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 460. This is a different situation and different message than the one given over a century earlier when the Assyrians, led by Sennacherib, encroached on Jerusalem.
60. The Hebrew version of this verse emphasizes the king’s weakness, while the Greek version emphasizes the strength of the princes. Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah, Volume 1* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 678.

61. Malchiah is identified as “the son of Hammelech” in Jeremiah 38:6. But Hammelech might reflect a translator’s error since ben-hammelek means “son of the king” and is not a proper name—a fact confirmed by the Septuagint (LXX Jeremiah 41:6). William L. Holladay suggests, “If Malchiah was Zedekiah’s son, he could be approximately fifteen years old, own a cistern and function as a guard; but, on the other hand, ‘king’s son’ may simply mean ‘of the royal family.’” Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 2:289.


67. The term Ebed-Melech simply means “servant of the King.” This phrase could refer to a person or an office, but to a physical person, but to a court official (compare Jeremiah 19:15–18). See Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah*, 26–52, 221.

69. It is unknown what the king was doing there. It is possible that he “may well have been fulfilling his judicial function by sitting in the gate; rendering decisions in cases of legal dispute.” Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah*, 26–52, 224. See Lundbom, *Jeremiah among the Prophets*, 128. He might have been “inspecting the defenses.” See also McKane, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 964.

70. “If there is no bread left in the city, Jeremiah would find that situation no better out of the cistern than in it.” Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah*, 26–52, 224. The danger must have been more dire than simply the lack of food. Lamentations 4 describes the famine. Robert P. Carroll suggests that “a curious explanation when Jeremiah’s plight is one of suffocation rather than lack of food.” If the bread supplies in the city had been exhausted, hauling him from the cistern would not have had made him any less hungry.” Carroll, *Jeremiah, Volume 1*, 682.


72. Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah*, 26–52, 224. Jack Lundbom writes, “some commentators and Bible translations (e.g., RSV) change the number 50 to the number 3, the argument being that it would only take three men to pull Jeremiah up from the pit. Maybe so, but the change has virtually no textual support (only one Hebrew manuscript reads ‘three’) and betrays a painfully unimaginative reconstruction of what was going on. Sending 50 men to rescue Jeremiah makes for a dramatic public event.” Lundbom, *Jeremiah among the Prophets*, 129.


74. McKane, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 960.


76. Josiah eliminated other forms of worship that were performed outside the temple in Jerusalem (*2 Chronicles* 34:1). This allowed him to maintain the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of the liturgy and maintained the centrality of the temple in religious rites. Although Lehi sacrificed a three-day journey from Jerusalem (1 Nephi 2:6–7), it appears that the temple remained the central focus of religious life among the Nephites (2 Nephi 5:16; Jacob 1:17; Mosiah 1:18; 3 Nephi 1:11).


80. Admittedly, this was not the first attempt to kill Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 18:18, 21).


84. The Hebrew term “גִּבּוֹר” is sometimes translated as “mighty man” (Judges 6:12; 11:1; 1 Samuel 9:1; 2 Samuel 10; 1 Kings 11:18; 2 Kings 5:12; Jeremiah 9:13; 14:9; etc.). This term has military connotations and can be translated as “warriors fit for war,” “elite troop,” or “bodyguard.” See Ludwig Kochler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Brill, 1994–2000), 172.