

# TEACHINGS OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

HUGH NIBLEY

**Semester 1, Lecture 6  
1 Nephi 1; Jeremiah 29  
Souvenirs from Lehi's Jerusalem**

They also take their troubles, their attitudes, their feuds, their prejudices, and everything else. Lehi had full baggage. Remember, his people were especially prepared to transfer the culture from one world to the other. We want to find out first what happened to Jeremiah because that's very much in the story of Lehi. They were quite closely connected, but this is what was happening in Jerusalem. The reason we are bringing this up is that there are some marvelous documents that have appeared "out of the blue" right from Lehi's day (we will see what they are).

But first, continuing from where we were, we learn that Jeremiah sent letters around everywhere (Jeremiah 29:1). He sent letters from himself to all the captives in Babylon telling them they might as well settle down for a long stay; they were going to be there for seventy years. He was sending other letters around, and we learn in verses 25 and 29 of this chapter that the high authorities were simply enraged by the liberties he was taking just sending letters to people, hither and yon. He was enjoying full freedom of the press here, and it made them mad. Right at the beginning of chapter 30, Jeremiah was ordered next (by the Lord) to write a whole book and send it around. The theme there is that everyone pays for his own sins. They were in bad times, and things were not going well. But in the end the Lord will reward you, and you will answer for your own sins. This is very important, of course; it's one of our Articles of Faith ("not for Adam's transgression"). Then we go on, and we are told at the beginning of chapter 32 that it was in the tenth year of Zedekiah that Jerusalem was besieged. For safety reasons (for security) Jeremiah was thrown in jail, but it was in the palace. The king was rather afraid of Jeremiah. He wanted to get on his good side, but he couldn't do it without prejudicing the princes. Everybody was very tense here and very suspicious of everybody else.

Notice it was in the tenth year. When does the Book of Mormon begin? In the first year of King Zedekiah. This was ten years after that. Jerusalem didn't fall (it's going to be a couple more years) until after Lehi left. He got out in time, but just in time because it fell in 597 B.C., but only for a short time. Nebuchadnezzar went on and tried to get into Egypt, but Necho was able to keep him out. They were having troubles in Babylon, so he went back. Then the Jews felt the trouble was over, but it wasn't over. Jeremiah said it was coming back, and it did come back. We talk about a "Jeremiah" as someone who preaches nothing but doom, gloom, and horror. But that wasn't so with Jeremiah at all. Remember, the last thing he said to Hananiah was, "Well, I hope you're right; nothing would please me better than for you to be right, but I'm afraid you're wrong." But you'll notice this when you read Jeremiah: if you match the verses equally, it's fifty-fifty doom and gloom to joy (you're going to return; the Lord will bless you; eventually, you will repent and everything is going to be good). That's the same with all the prophets; they all say that. Their messages are of "the apocalypse of bliss" and "the apocalypse of woe." They balance each other all the way through the Bible. You have to have them both; the one goes with the other.

When Jerusalem was besieged, Jeremiah was kept in palace detention for purposes of security. But to show his confidence, he bought a farm on the land and said, "We are going to be here." He bought a land of his inheritance. Remember, Lehi had a land of his inheritance, which was a farm where the brothers went down to fetch all the rich things and bribe Laban for the plates. A land of inheritance is a very important thing. This has come out in another batch of documents that has miraculously come out in the last few years. All of these have come out since I've been here at BYU (amazing documents), except the ones I'm going to talk about. They came out just shortly before that when I was down at Claremont. That was sensational! But the new documents that have come out have thrown all kinds of light on Lehi, his world, and his family too.

Then what happened? How did he buy a farm if he was in prison? He did it through his secretary, Baruch, who was a famous man. We have the books of Baruch, and he was an important man. Later on, they said, "The trouble is you are letting Baruch lead you around by the nose. He is the one who is giving all these prophecies really. Jeremiah really just represents Baruch." But Jeremiah himself was an influential man. You notice he got around. He wrote these letters and was very bold. He went in and out of the palace and had property everywhere. It was the same thing with Baruch. Like Lehi, these were important men. These prophets were not just the characters in the long night robe that go around holding up a placard that says "the world is about to come to an end" (a favorite cartoon of *The New Yorker*). No, they weren't that kind. These men knew what they were doing. Jeremiah was an important man. His daughter had married into royalty. So to show his confidence he bought a farm, a land of his inheritance. But he was enraged by the dirty deal they gave the servants. The first time Nebuchadnezzar came there, they did the usual thing. When everything dissolves, you don't want to be responsible for anything. You don't want to be responsible for your servants—their protection and food. So they let them all go, every man for himself. They released all their servants and slaves and let them go. When the danger passed, they immediately sent out the police to round them up, brought them all back home, and put them into service again (in slavery in most cases). Of course, this was against the law of Israel anyway. But Jeremiah was furious at that. He really raised something at that. This is the sort of dirty trick that went on. Speaking of the Jeremiad, he said, "The deal with the servants shows what's wrong." The essence of wickedness is meanness. There's the passage from John Donne that John F. Kennedy used to like to quote: "A dog starved at his master's gate portends the ruin of the state." If a man lets his dog starve, he's that kind of person. Or as Heraclitus would put it: "A man's character is his fate." You can tell what's going to happen if you know who the man is and what kind of character he has. It's going to lead to a tragic end or a happy end as the case may be. This is it; it's the character. We read the passages. That's the kind of people they were. That was what was wrong. It wasn't the Babylonians or the Egyptians that worried them; it was the people themselves. As Solon said, "These people themselves have brought this ruin upon their state." They are full of lust; they can never get enough. They rob each other and steal from the state like bandits, etc. It's the same thing here in our world. It's that kind of world. Notice, it's a world prosperity and it's a world civilization too. Just as today, no matter what city you go to in the world now, how disappointing. Wherever you go, you land in the same airport, you see the same high-rises, and you get in the same traffic jams if you are a little late (it's the darndest thing). That's a world civilization. It was very different when I was young. When you went to China or to the islands, it was so different, it was just another world. People wrote travel books about that sort of thing. But now it's all the same, and it was the same thing in Lehi's day too. Wherever you went, they would speak Aramaic or Egyptian. At this time every important ruler or king had two secretaries. He had an Aramaic secretary to write

Aramaic, which was universal (it was spoken in Egypt and all over this area), and he had an Egyptian secretary who would write Egyptian because there was the Egyptian Empire too. This was the great twenty-sixth dynasty which was a great commercial empire. So these things were going on, and they begat this spirit of greed and meanness, etc. This is reflected all through Jeremiah.

Well, what happened to Jeremiah? I mentioned that he dictated and circulated a book. Then in chapter 35 he tested the integrity of the Rechabites who were very important people. Chapter 35 tells us how he dealt with the Rechabites (they come out earlier in the history of Israel). This tells us that he set them up to the Jews as an example of integrity. The Rechabites were given a permanent position in the temple. Lehi and his family were Rechabites; they joined that particular movement. They were the people who went out into the wilderness and tried to live the gospel in its purity out there. Chapter 35 of Jeremiah is the official history, you might say, of the Rechabites. “The word which came unto Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah, saying [this was before the days of Zedekiah, the earlier time], Go unto the house of the Rechabites, and speak unto them, and bring them into the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink.” So he brought the Rechabites into the house of the Lord and offered them wine, but they refused to drink wine because they had made a covenant that they wouldn’t drink wine. Verse 5: “And I set before the sons of the house of the Rechabites pots full of wine, and cups, and I said unto them, Drink ye wine.”

Incidentally, we have here a very important aspect of history at this time that has always been neglected until very recent years; namely, the formation of societies, cults, sects, and conventicles. Like-minded people would form groups to preserve their existence, sometimes from the police, etc., and they would become secret. The early Roman Republic history, after this, is full of it. But it’s true of the Greeks too. They were suspicious of such societies, and the emperors always ordered them to be broken up. The famous Prescript of Hadrian is about the Christians. Rulers are suspicious of that sort of thing because these groups hold meetings and don’t allow other people in. They have sacraments, and people don’t know what goes on there. Notice the Rechabites in verse 4: “And I brought them into the house of the Lord, into the chamber of the sons of Hanan.” This was a separate room in the temple, reserved to a certain society that met there, these sons of Hanan. This is common. We get this from the *New Temple Scroll*, just discovered in 1950: “. . . which was by the chamber of the princes, which was above the chamber of Maaseiah the son of Shallum, the keeper of the door.” The doorkeeper of the temple was in charge. You notice here three separate chambers of the temple reserved for families or groups for their particular use—just as we have sealing rooms in the temple and special rooms for certain things. The Rechabites were Israelites, but not Levites. They served in the temple, but they were not of the priestly line at all. Verse 6: “But they said, We will drink no wine: for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us, saying, Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye, nor your sons for ever [with integrity they had preserved that rule]: Neither shall ye build houses, nor sow seed.” They didn’t sow wheat because they said that was what Adam did after he fell. He sowed the field, and by the sweat of his brow he raised his crops. They wished to return to the state of man in his innocence. There have been sects and groups in every age that wanted to do this—go back and live the way man was in his state of innocence before he fell. They would not cut their hair. John the Baptist was identified with one of these groups out along the Jordan, according to the Dead Sea Scrolls. So they didn’t cultivate wheat, and they didn’t live in houses. They didn’t live in the *bayt al-hajar*; they lived in the *bayt al-shaʿr*, the houses of hair—goat’s hair houses.

They were utopians, and many utopians have tried to do that very same thing, like in America (Robert Owen, etc.). We have splinter groups in the Church all the time going out like that and living by themselves. I'm very well acquainted with Glendenning and the Order of Aaron. I haven't heard from them recently (very fine people). They went clear out by Baker and thought they would live in their primitive simplicity.

Verse 7: "Neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days ye shall dwell in tents; that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers." They were strangers on earth because the earth is in its polluted state. Man has fallen, and they didn't want to share in that way of things. They were emphasizing the yawning gulf that exists between life on earth as it should be and life on earth as it is. These people are always trying to use a direct method to get back. But the Rechabites had integrity. Verse 8: "Thus have we obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab. . . . Nor to build houses for us to dwell in: neither have we vineyard, nor field, nor seed: But we have dwelt in tents, and have obeyed, and done according to all that Jonadab our father commanded us." Now, Jeremiah said, "Here's an example for you." And Lehi's going to do that too. When they went out, they weren't intending to cross the sea, or anything like that. They thought they would be living in the desert the rest of their days (we'll get that pretty soon, I hope, if we ever get them out of town). Lehi was, no doubt, a friend of the Rechabites because he was close to Jeremiah. He was in the Jeremian party, you might say. Verse 14: "The words of Jonadab the son of Rechab, that he commanded his sons not to drink wine [repeated again; this is Jeremiah speaking], are performed; for unto this day they drink none, but obey their father's commandment: notwithstanding I have spoken unto you, rising early and speaking; but ye hearkened not unto me." Verse 16: "Because the sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab have performed the commandment of their father, which he commanded them; but this people hath not hearkened unto me." This wasn't the commandment of the Lord. It was their father's idea, but they at least kept that. For that reason he said he would bless them, and they would always have a place in the temple. So they became servants in the temple.

The reason they were in town on this occasion is here in Jeremiah 35:11, "When Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up into the land, that we said, Come, and let us go to Jerusalem for fear of the army of the Chaldeans, and for fear of the army of the Syrians: so we dwell at Jerusalem." They came within the walls because they would have been wiped out if they had stayed out in the desert; the armies were going through. For safety, they made a temporary flight to Jerusalem, and there they were given a permanent job in the temple. As I said, Jeremiah made an example of them. Verse 19: "Therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not want a man to stand before me for ever."

Jeremiah dictated a book this time, and it was read before all the people in the temple. Notice, the man got around and had access. They were always trying to stop him or discourage him, but he had influence and friends. We are told a little later on that the king was afraid of the people, and he was also afraid of Jeremiah (just like in the New Testament, they were afraid of Jesus). The princes were out to get him. Jeremiah dictated the book and read it to the people. Then he took the same book to the palace and read it before a group of princes; they wanted to hear it. These princes were the *sārîm*. This is an interesting thing. They are always called the princes in the King James translation, but the word *sārîm* (the plural) is the "elders." It is used in all Semitic languages for "great and old." In Egyptian, if you see a man with a staff, like this (a great man), he is a *sr*. He is a

great man, or he is a *wr* (Indo-European, *wer*), or he is a *smsw*. He is one of the elders. Our word “sir” is related to it—a term of respect. They were the important men, the chiefs, the big men. As I say, in the Book of Mormon it is translated correctly, “elders.” In the King James, it is translated as “princes.” They were not necessarily princes; they were influential land holders. There was quite a body of them, and they were not of royal blood (except a few). They were the *sārîm*, the ones that Zoram was out with by night, holding secret sessions, when Nephi met him and took him out to their camp. They swore him in to be a member of their society out in the desert, and he decided to stay there the rest of his days.

Anyway, he took it and read it before the princes, and they didn’t like it at all. Jeremiah’s representative was Jehudi. Jeremiah was in prison a good deal of the time, but he always had men who would run errands for him. Jehudi took his letter and read it to the princes. They didn’t like that at all (they wanted to hear a special reading). Baruch then explained it to them and gave a lecture. They reported to the king and said, “We can’t go on with this (chapter 36). When they heard what Jehudi had to say, they said, “Forget the book.” Then the king wanted to hear the book. They told the king, “We think you should hear this.” So Jehudi went and read the book to the king. Then there’s a very moving and very convincing picture. If any of you have been to Masada, you know the lower palace is the king’s winter palace there. If you have been to Jericho, there’s a big mound there that was Herod’s winter palace. The warm air of Jericho was much warmer than Jerusalem. The two cities are just a few miles apart, but Jericho is much lower. The deserts were popular places for winter palaces. The king was in his winter palace there when this was read to him. There was a fire burning in the fireplace on the hearth. He heard the book read and said, “Give it here.” He took a knife and cut it to bits, threw it in the fire, and burned it up. That’s the way he was going to treat it. They were enraged by the liberties that Jeremiah had taken. So what did Jeremiah do? He made a duplicate and continued to circulate it around. He was irrepensible; no wonder he was asking for trouble. You say, “How is he going to survive here? Well, he’s the only one that did survive (a very interesting lesson in survival).

The book contained a denunciation (the usual things we’ve read) of the ways of the *sārîm*, and especially that they are not to put their trust in Egypt. It said that they might just as well go along with Nebuchadnezzar because that’s their only hope (that’s the best thing that can happen to them). So Jeremiah made a duplicate, and sure enough, what happened? Necho’s army returned from Egypt, and the Babylonian force, which was camped at the walls, took to their heels to escape. Necho had really built up a reputation; he was a powerful man and king of Egypt. He was coming in again, and the Babylonians took off. So they said, “Ha, ha, the Babylonians are gone; Jeremiah was wrong after all. We trust in Egypt, and that’s the right thing.” (That’s Laman and Lemuel; they were on the Egyptian side.) But in chapter 37, verse 8, Jeremiah said, “Don’t worry, they will be back.” It was the Egyptians that accused him of treason. They complained that he was weakening the people. So then the *sārîm* put him in prison, in a dungeon this time. It was a real beauty, but this wasn’t the worst dungeon (they have their private dungeons). The king brought him out and consulted with him in secret. He said, “Don’t let the people and the princes find out about this.” Everybody was sort of “shining up to” Jeremiah but didn’t want the others to know about it. Everybody was getting nervous; nobody felt secure (changing sides, etc.). They put him in a dungeon, we are told here, because he was guilty of “weakening the hands of the people.” And this is the very same expression used in the letters that were discovered about what was happening. The record says, “He

weakened the hands of the army, he discouraged the military, and he was spreading discouragement and dissension among the common people in the country.”

The king kept Jeremiah under palace arrest, but the princes (notice the intrigue here) had him dragged out secretly and put in a dungeon (what a dungeon it is now). It was full of sewage, we are told. He sank down into the mud and filth (that was terrible). They didn't give him anything to eat. It was very low down. They had to lower him by ropes down a deep cistern. At the bottom it was filled with sewage, mud, and filth. The record says, “He sank into it.” What a place to be! He nearly died. If he hadn't been snatched out of there in time, he would have died (that was as low as you could go). That's the greatest act of contempt possible. And who was it that protested? It was a person named Ebedmelech who was a black man and a eunuch. He was an Ethiopian servant in the palace there. That black man had the courage to go to the king and rebuke him (verse 9). He said, “What are you doing to Jeremiah? That's no way to treat any human being.” The king was ashamed of himself and ordered Jeremiah brought out because this black man said, “We don't do that to people.” They let down the ropes and threw down all sorts of dirty rags for him to stand on. Then he put the rags under his arms because he was so skinny, and they pulled him up out of the hole. He would have starved or frozen in a short time if that had gone on much longer. Immediately thereafter, the king had a secret session with Jeremiah, and he told Jeremiah that he was afraid of the people because things were looking bad here (verse 19). He was also afraid of the princes (*sārîm* is a better word for them). Now the princes came to consult Jeremiah. They said, “Things are beginning to look serious.”

Then Jerusalem fell and Zedekiah fled. It's a tragic story there in chapter 39. He fled to Jericho (right over here), and they caught up with him there. (There is nearly a 4,000-foot drop from Jerusalem to Jericho.) He was caught there and taken up north to Riblah on the Orontes. There he was forced to see all his sons put to death before his eyes. After that was over, he was blinded and taken away to Babylon (he couldn't have been more reduced). Nebuchadnezzar's commander took the king to Riblah because that was the headquarters. He had made his winter headquarters at Riblah in the Orontes. This was a favorite place because it was central to the area. Remember, Babylon was not just concerned with Jerusalem. They were concerned with all of Syria here and keeping the whole western empire. It was the same thing with the Egyptians. Necho had made Riblah his center too when he was in power there. So at Riblah they put all the king's sons to death except one. Nebuchadnezzar came in and immediately started correcting abuses. The Lord said that was going to happen. They used to think he just took away a few of the aristocrats; that's not so. He took away a tremendous number of people. He left a lot of poor people on the land. They distributed it and started working it among themselves. He gave Jeremiah a free hand to go wherever he wanted. He said, “You go where you want and do what you want [chapter 40].” So Jeremiah joined Gedaliah at Mizpah. Gedaliah was the one among whom the remnant of the Jews left behind were being organized. He was Nebuchadnezzar's man in charge back in Jerusalem. He organized the people in the country. The people were out here.

This is Amman. At that time it was called Rabbath, but it is Amman. This is the land of the Ammonites. The king of the Ammonites (this shows the intrigue) saw a chance, now that Nebuchadnezzar was gone, to strike at the Babylonians by having Gedaliah murdered. He sent a terrorist squad. They were really terrorists; they were high nobles though. They were invited to a banquet (this is the normal procedure). Elishama and Ishmael invited Gedaliah to a diplomatic banquet where they murdered him. Then they

felt nervous, and Ishmael fled for safety to Mizpah. He went back and joined with the Ammonites. The king of Ammon was responsible for that. He planned this assassination and sent the nobles down to perform it. There was terrorism; it has always been the pattern here (this is old stuff). This Ishmael was in charge of it. He not only moved out of Mizpah, but he forced the remnant of the Jews to go with him, as many as he could. Another story: Gedaliah had an aide whose name was Johanan. He was right-hand man to Gedaliah, and he wanted to punish the murderers of Gedaliah. He took after them, so they fled to the court at Ammon where they would be safe. He caught up with them, freed the people, and led them all back south heading for Egypt. Just six miles south of Jerusalem is Bethlehem, and they made a big camp at Bethlehem. (It was like one of these displaced-person camps. They have tremendous ones now—those east of the Jordan, up here. I visited the ones at Jericho, at Ammon, and in the desert out here.) At this time they had these huge camps of displaced persons. Israel was all displaced persons, all living in tents like the Rechabites now. There was this huge camp at Bethlehem. Then Johanan asked Jeremiah, “Well, we’re on our way to Egypt; isn’t that the safe place to go? Jeremiah said, “Don’t go to Egypt. You will be despised. There is all sorts of tension there. Don’t go to Tanis.” (This is Raphia right on the border here. This is Sais, the Saitic dynasty. But at Tanis there was another dynasty that was very hostile.) He said, “You will be despised; they will give you a bad time. You are as good as dead if you go into Egypt.” But they insisted on going. They went down into Tanis, and he was right. Jeremiah kept saying, “Stay here; everything is all right if you will just stay here. Egypt is going to be destroyed later [as it was], and they will all hate you when you go there.”

They said, “This is just Baruch who has put you up to this. We are going to Tanis anyway.” So Jeremiah went to Tanis with them. He ended up in Egypt too. Many of them went way up the Nile. Jeremiah then sent a letter to the Jews in Egypt (he’s always sending letters around, circulars). The emphasis in these last chapters (44–47) is that they haven’t given up their old Isis cult. He said, “You were practicing your Egyptian religion back in Jerusalem. That was the thing the Lord rebuked you for. Now that you are in Egypt, you are really throwing yourselves into it.” But it was always the women who were doing it. The women were preparing the cakes, burning the sacred lights, and going through all the rites. We have some very interesting records. We have a marvelous writing by the daughter of King Semicus II, Nefer Ibibrei, a hymn to Isis and a ritual account of certain doings in the cult of Isis (it’s interesting that this is written by the king’s own daughter). This was the king in Lehi’s day (this is a later time now). Jeremiah’s last word to them in chapter 47 was, “Your mercenaries are not going to be any help to you at all.” So they were beaten.

Now, we have to move along here. Imagine that in order of battle you are going to try to give a data report on what the enemy’s strength and position is. They are right nearby. Things are under pressure, so you have to do some interrogating. They bring in an officer who is in Zedekiah’s army, but he is a mercenary. (They were nearly all mercenaries, anyway, so they were always changing sides.) This man would be a Carian who had rented himself out with some Greek troops under him. He is not under any particular obligation of loyalty to the king, except the oath he took with the contract to get paid. You offer to pay him more. So you won’t worry about the Geneva Convention too much, and you are going to start asking him questions. This is the Lachish Letters I’m talking about here.

This is what it is now. We have letters in the Bible, etc. We have eight thousand texts of the New Testament, but none of them is earlier than the third and fourth century A.D. There are tiny fragments from the second century, but that’s all there is. The oldest text

we have of the Old Testament, the Torah, is the Ben Asher Codex from the ninth century. Then with the Dead Sea Scrolls we found a complete Isaiah a thousand years older than any other text known. Now we can see what kind of changes have been made, etc. But what if you found some letters from the time of Lehi that weren't copies of copies of copies? That's the only way the scriptures or any ancient literature comes down to us. Mostly fourteenth- and fifteenth-century documents, they are copies from earlier copies. If you can get a tenth or eleventh-century copy, that's great stuff. But what if we had a collection of letters, personal reminiscences of troubles, etc. from Lehi's own time and place (the original letters from Jerusalem)? Between 1935 and 1938 these were discovered at Lachish. (This is Lachish here; this is Jerusalem; it's not too far down. The whole thing should have been a little higher up here. This is Jerusalem; this is Azekah, and this is Lachish. It's pronounced Lachish in the Old Testament. Lachish was the most important center in all of western area. It was on the main road to Jerusalem. (This is Jerusalem over here; I keep thinking I have it too far from the Dead Sea, but I haven't. These places are so close together it fools you. You can stand out here and see the whole length of the Dead Sea. This is Hebron over here.) They would take the road down to Gaza here. Then they would follow what they called the sea road. This is Joppa, this is Ashkelon, and this is Ashdod (these were the Phoenician centers). This is the Gaza Strip down here with Gerar, the capital of Gaza from ancient times. Remember, Abraham's wife Sarah was coveted by the king of Gerar. So you take the coast road. From here down, it's only 93 miles. It's flat coast all the way, and you are in Egypt before you know it. Here these Lachish Letters were discovered, these priceless documents from the time of Lehi. They were written in Lachish, the most important fort on the road between Jerusalem and Egypt.

So you are outside with the Babylonian army. This officer comes in, and you are going to quiz him about the Lachish Letters. You say, "Look, I hear there are some military documents at Lachish, aren't there?"

He says, "Yes, I've heard about them. In fact, I was an intelligence clerk in the office there."

"What kind of an office?"

"Well, it was the guardhouse."

"Where were these letters kept?"

"They were kept in the guardhouse; well, it was really the gate-house."

"Well, will you describe this gatehouse to me [we had pictures of it]."

"It was a sturdy building, the size of this room—two stories. Upstairs were officers' quarters; downstairs were offices."

"Offices for what?"

"Oh, for questioning people going in and out. We have to do this. These are dangerous times."

"Do you have records there?"

“Well, we were keeping letters there. They are not the regular . . .”

“Do they contain military material?”

“I don’t need to talk about that.”

“Well, after all, you are a Greek. Zedekiah’s finished, and we can make it worth your while.”

“Yes, there were military documents, but they were letters.”

“What were they doing there?”

“They were being kept there for evidence in a trial that was coming up.”

“Who was being tried?”

“It was Hosha’yahu.”

“By the way, who was in charge of this guardhouse?”

“It was Jaush.”

This is rendered by Torczyner, who is the editor of the letters here, as “Jaush.” This is an interesting thing; these touches come up all the time. This is from Lehi’s time, and the name is “Jaush” or “Josh.” We learn in Moroni that there was a Nephite commander by the name of Josh who commanded ten thousand men in the field up at Cumorah. Everybody laughed. They said, “Well, there’s the hick from the sticks.” The name “Joshua” was “Josh.” But the name is not found in the Bible; this is the point. Here we have a commander in the Lachish Letters whose name was Jaush. There’s another score for the Book of Mormon. You say, “Who was this Hosha’yahu? Where does he come from?”

“He comes from Qiryat Ye’arim [it is up here].” *Qiryat* means a settlement or village, and Ye’arim was the founder. This village is a very important settlement on the way. Azekah is a little farther out.

You say, “Well, how did he get into it?”

“He is a commander in that village up there. He is suspected of having opened some secret military information that was being sent to the commander at Lachish.” The commander at Lachish was Jaush, and this man Hosha’yahu was in charge of this other fortress between here and Jerusalem. He was charged with reading these letters.

“Well, why shouldn’t he read them?”

“Because they were top secret.”

“Why did he have them?”

“As the commander of the fort halfway, he was supposed to send them through, that’s all. He was just supposed to transmit the letters and get them sent on their way.”

“How were the letters sent?”

“They were taken by courier, sometimes by little kids from one place to another so they wouldn’t be suspected. They were carried to Qiryat Ye‘arim, and then he was just supposed to forward them without reading them.”

“What makes you think he was reading them?”

“Because somebody tipped off the prophet Uriah.” The prophet Uriah is mentioned in chapter 26 of Jeremiah—how he was chased to Egypt, etc. He’s mentioned here by name; here’s Uriah. He left Qiryat Ye‘arim and went to Egypt.

“Well, where was Uriah from?”

“He was originally from Qiryat Ye‘arim. We know there was hanky-panky going on because he was tipped off and took off for Egypt.” His father (this we get from the Lachish Letters) went off from Qiryat Ye‘arim with the adjutant general and the principal inspector of military fortifications to the palace in Jerusalem for a special audience with the king. Well, obviously he had gone off to plead for leniency for his son. We are told that they chased him clear down to Egypt, brought him back, and put him to death in the palace. Here his father goes up to plead for him. So we have contemporary letters telling about this from the very time it was going on. (Incidentally, I have a rather lengthy summary of this material in the December 1981 *Ensign*.)

Continuing with the interrogation: “Well, now wait a minute. I’ve heard that the guardhouse there was burned.”

“Oh yes, it burned; it collapsed.”

“Well, I guess that’s ‘good-bye records’ isn’t it? They’re gone.”

“No, they’re not destroyed.”

“Well, did you take them out? Did you rescue them?”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Well, how could they be preserved?”

“We wrote them on potsherds.”

“Are you crazy? These big, clumsy potsherds? You don’t keep records on them. Why not on papyrus?” (This is all in it).

“Because we couldn’t get papyrus.” (He wanted to say “dummy” at that point.)

“Why not?”

“Don’t you know your army cut the road to Egypt? We can’t get anything over the Egyptian road anymore, so we wrote on potsherds. That’s a good way. They’re convenient; people always write on potsherds.” They were kept there, and when the tower collapsed, instead of wiping these out it baked them and made them permanent. These are permanent records now. They will last as long as the fossils up in the hills—the trilobites and brachiopods that you find up in Rock Canyon. They are millions of years old and yet the fine details are still on them. So it will be with these Lachish Letters. They are on burnt, baked clay now, and they will last as long as anything. So we have them, and we don’t have to worry about that. Now, how can I get hold of these?

J. L. Starcky started excavating in 1935. In 1938 he had business to go back to in Jerusalem. On the way he was held up by bandits and killed. This is typical of life in Palestine in the 1930s. (It has never been secure; everybody is out for himself. It’s a dangerous place and always has been. As you know, it is today; daily murders go on in Israel now.)

So these letters were written in Lehi’s time. Well, what about them then? Being written on potsherds, they survived. They were in the guardhouse being kept as evidence pending the military trial of this Hosha’yahu. He was being court-martialed and was suspected of treason because he may have read the letters. Somebody tipped off Uriah. They didn’t know whether he did or not; that’s why they were going to have the court-martial. Uriah was really in danger. The king’s soldiers were put on his trail, and he was fleeing to Egypt. He was fleeing because he was wanted by the police in Jerusalem because he had been “weakening the hands of the military and the people in the country,” it says.

That’s exactly what happened, you remember, at the beginning of the Book of Mormon. “And in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4). Now that was the message of doom and gloom that was regarded by the king, of course, as treasonable: Saying they should take sides with Babylon, and they were going to be destroyed. That’s what Uriah was guilty of: “weakening the hands, spreading dissension, spreading disinterest and discouragement both in the country and the city.” That’s exactly what Lehi was charged with. At an earlier time, a couple of years before this, he went out and tried to preach, and he had to skip out of town to save his life. The police were after him. It tells us that the police sent out by Laban tried to overtake him, but he got away from them. All this is in the Book of Mormon too, but these Lachish Letters fill in the picture here. They were considered subversive because they were opposing the official policy and undermining morale by their preaching. As Jeremiah puts it, “Therefore the princes [that’s really the *sārîm*] said unto the king, We beseech thee, let this man be put to death: for thus he weakeneth the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words unto them” (Jeremiah 38:4).

Lachish letter number six tells us: “The words of the prophet are not good. They are liable to loosen the hands.” The Book of Mormon adds this other one: “That same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed” (1 Nephi 1:4). This was the disheartening news that discouraged people and was regarded as subversive. We can date the letters with perfect

accuracy by the layers. The place burned down and caved. We go on questioning the officer: “Where were these records kept?”

“They were kept in the lower room.”

“Well, the roof caved in and smashed everything, didn’t it?”

“No, we stored them under the benches around the sides of the room so they wouldn’t be in the way. We had these benches for people to sit on when they came to be examined, have their passports stamped, etc.” So that’s where they were—under the benches. One time they found eighteen letters, and a little later on they found six letters. So here were these letters telling us everything that was going on. News like this: “Something terrible has happened; we can no longer see the signal fires of Azekah.” That city was almost halfway between Lachish and Jerusalem. They sent messages by signal fires, by code. When the messages stopped coming from Azekah, they knew something terrible had happened. Lachish was the very last city to fall; it fell after Jerusalem and all the others. It hung on longer than any others, so this gives us an eye-witness account of what was happening right up to the end as things got worse and worse.

Letter four tells us that Uriah’s father, Shema’yahu, went up from Uriah’s village to Jerusalem on urgent business accompanied by the chief inspector of military outposts. Torczyner said it was, without any doubt, to use his influence with the king in behalf of his son. These prophets weren’t aged men with long beards. They were young, vigorous men. Lehi was in the prime of life at this time. Furthermore, the scribe of Jeremiah keeps assigning the Uriah episode to the time of Jehoiakim (608–597). The scribe said that it’s in the early period, contemporary with Lehi. Scholars are agreed now that Jeremiah 27 belongs not to Jehoiakim’s reign, but actually to the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah. So the Book of Mormon is right after all. They used to think it was wrong chronologically because Uriah appeared in the time of Jehoiakim and not of Zedekiah. But it is in the time of Zedekiah that he appeared. The Lachish Letters show that.

“As to the writing, notice they contain ninety lines of clear writing, beautiful language, and highly important context. The language is pure Hebrew, most closely resembling that of the books of Jeremiah and Kings.” It’s important that the writing on the gold plates was in Egyptian because the king at this time had an Egyptian secretary too. “They show, to everyone’s surprise, that in 600 B.C. writing was almost common knowledge and not a secret art known only to a few. They also show the Egyptian scribal tradition at that time exerted a major influence in the official record keeping of the Near East. The king who attacked Jerusalem from the East at this time brought two scribes with him, as he did on every expedition [as we learn from A. T. Olmstead’s work]. The chief with his stylus and tablets and his assistant with a papyrus roll [or Egyptian parchment and Egyptian pen].” They would write all records in two languages, one in Egyptian and one in Aramaic. The Egyptian, of course, would take up only about a third the space to write as the Aramaic. Aramaic was clumsy, and you would have to take up a lot of space. But right in the twenty-sixth dynasty (at that time only), Demotic became the official court writing. It’s very short shorthand; it beats our shorthand. You can get things in little space. We see those Anthon transcripts, etc., looking like shorthand. Well, it was that. In the Book of Mormon they keep telling us, “We would write in Hebrew if they had room on the plates, but we are using this special script. We are using the Egyptian way of writing so we can get all this stuff in.” Since it was translated by the gift and power of the Lord, there are no

philological questions raised at all. That's nice. Imagine, if we had the plates, how we would argue until the end of time about what made what. We could never agree on anything. We would be fighting until the cows came home, and there would no point to it at all. Fortunately, the angel took the plates back, so we can't fight about them. But he gave us the text. We can fight about that if we want, but it is a very clear, very lucid text.

So they found it necessary to have an Aramaic scribe to deal with the one and an Egyptian scribe to deal with the other. The proper names are interesting. They nearly all end in *iah*. There was King Josiah who began this line (the great-grandfather of Zedekiah). He was the one who reformed the law. Moses was the first reformer of the law, and Josiah was the great restorer and reformer of the law. All the names at that time suddenly begin to end in *iah* which means they belong to the Yahvist the party of reform, the old Jewish party. So you get these *iah* names with these very interesting endings. Now, we are going back to the original text and these names that end in *yahu* and *iah*. For example, the Lachish name *Mattanyahu* also appears at Elephantine, at the same time that the Jews went up the Nile, just as *Mtn(i)*. The forms *Mathonihah* and *Mathoni* both appear in the Book of Mormon. In the Lachish Letters you get *Mattanyahu*. After the Assyrian conquest they dropped the *H*. But in Lehi's time, they still kept that, so there are plenty of *ihah* endings in the Book of Mormon.

Harry Torczyner was the one who edited the letters. He was the son of the first discoverer of the Dead Sea Scrolls. He said, "These *yahu* are certainly the token of a changed inner-Judaean relationship to *Yahweh*. These reforms in some way parallel the first reformation of Moses." He finds these *yahu* names a reflection of the act of general reformation inaugurated by King Josiah. Now, who is the great reformer of the constitution and the giver of the new law in the Book of Mormon? It's King Mosiah. His name combines *Moses*, the first reformer of the law, and *Josiah*, the second reformer of the law. King Benjamin called his son *Mosiah*. That's just the thing to name him as the great reformer of the law. These *iah* names are characteristic of Lehi's time, showing that he belonged to Jeremiah's party. So we go on about the names and the activities of the prophet.

What we see in the Lachish Letters and the Lehi story is relatively narrow circles of friends, relations, and clandestine flights. (Oh, dear, the time is up now.) The most exciting story of all is how little Mulek escaped and how the Mulekites took off after all the rest of them had left. The Mulekites' king was the lonely survivor from the king's family. Were the Mulekites ever heard of again? Yes, they turn up in the Book of Mormon, of course. We will mention them the next time. (Things never go as fast as we hope they will.) The portrait of Laban is absolutely marvelous. Notice this, *Jaush* or *Josh* was the military governor of Lachish at this time. It was the second largest city as well as a strongly fortified place. He was in charge of everything as the military governor, and the records were kept in his office. Who was Laban? He was military governor of Jerusalem, we are told. They were out by night, remember, in secret council with the elders (the *sārîm*) and he was in his ceremonial armor when he met with them. Laman and Lemuel said, "He's in charge of fifty men in the city and ten thousand men in the field." He was in charge of the city police. He was the governor of the city, and the records were kept at his house. They were family records, and he was related to Lehi. That was where they knew they could get their records because they were kept in the house of Laban, the military governor. Not a likely place to keep the genealogy of the people, but that's where it was. It was the same thing in Lachish. In a time of alarm, they were put there for safekeeping. That was the safest place to keep them. And sure enough, we learn from the Copper Scroll

that when Jerusalem was threatened, they took all the documents they could and hid them in various places around the city. They were quick to get them to a safe place; that's what happened. That's probably why the brass plates and all the genealogy were being held under guard—kept under lock and key by Laban. Laban wouldn't let the brothers have them unless they paid him plenty, so they paid him plenty and he said, "April fool." This is typical of the intrigue. Everybody was playing dirty; everybody was out for everything. It's such a marvelous picture of life in the world we live in, isn't it. You can't beat the good old Book of Mormon.